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Course Code: 874

Program: BS/MSc

Semester: Autumn 2026

ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

Course: Women and Media (9165/874) • Level: BS/MSc

Semester: Autumn 2026

Assignment No. 2 (Units 5–9)

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

(For Study & Reference)

Note: This guide is prepared for study and reference purposes. Students are advised to read the relevant units of the course book, understand the concepts, and then write the assignment in their own words. Total marks of the assignment are 100; each question carries the marks shown with it.

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Question 1: ICTs, Women's Empowerment and the Digital Divide (20 Marks)

Discuss the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on women's empowerment. How does the 'digital divide' create new forms of gender-based exclusion?

Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies — mobile phones, the internet, computers and the social media, messaging and payment platforms built upon them — have changed where women learn, earn, organise and speak. For a woman whose mobility, time and contacts are

restricted by custom or poverty, a phone in her own hand can be a school, a bank, a marketplace and a public square combined. Development agencies therefore speak of ICTs as a great leveller for women. The evidence supports real optimism, but with a major qualification: access to the new technologies is itself distributed unequally, and the resulting 'digital divide' threatens to reproduce old gender inequalities in a new technical form. This answer uses Naila Kabeer's well-known understanding of empowerment — expanded resources, agency and achievements — to assess what ICTs have genuinely changed for women, and then analyses the digital divide at three levels and the new exclusions it creates.

How ICTs Empower Women

The first impact is informational. ICTs break the monopoly that geography and gatekeepers once held over knowledge. A woman in a village can now reach health information, examination material, agricultural prices, legal rights and religious or vocational instruction without asking permission or travelling — matters of special weight where women's mobility is watched. Mobile health services, recorded lessons, YouTube tutorials and distance-learning programmes, including those of open universities, put self-education within reach of women whose schooling was interrupted by marriage or work. Information is a resource in Kabeer's sense: it widens the choices a woman can even imagine making.

The second impact is economic. Mobile banking and digital payments allow women to receive wages, remittances and welfare transfers into accounts they personally control, reducing dependence on intermediaries who may appropriate the money. Home-based women producers — of clothing, food, crafts and tuition — use WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram

pages as shopfronts, reaching customers far beyond their neighbourhoods without renting premises or violating norms about mixing in markets. Freelancing platforms and remote work similarly convert a spare room into a workplace. Studies of mobile money and women's micro-enterprises repeatedly find gains in income, savings and bargaining power inside the household, because earnings that a woman controls change how her preferences are weighed.

The third impact is social and political voice. Social media give women a publishing platform that traditional media never offered them: women journalists, activists, teachers and ordinary citizens build audiences, document harassment, run campaigns and correct their own representation. During crises — floods, epidemics, incidents of violence — women's networks organise relief and information faster than official channels. Politically, ICTs lower the cost of organising: study circles, professional associations and rights campaigns that once needed offices and printing now need only a group chat. This is agency in Kabeer's terms, the ability to define goals and act on them, exercised publicly and collectively.

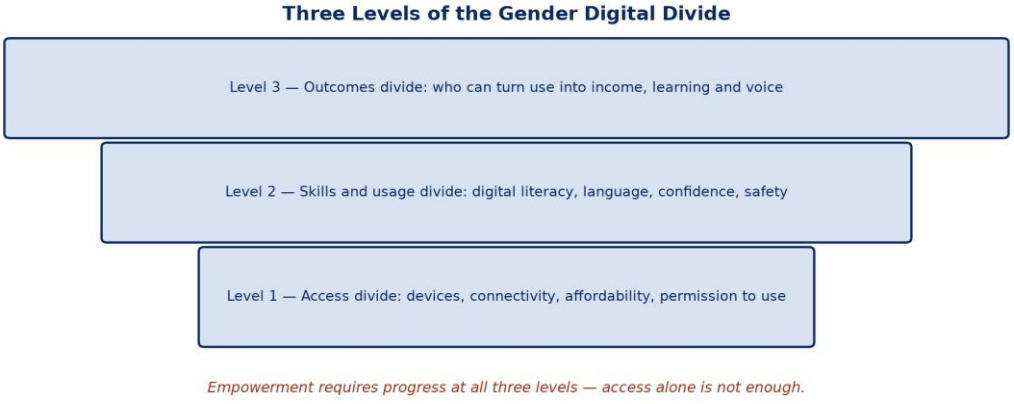


Figure 1: The three levels of the gender digital divide — access, skills and usage, and outcomes.

The Digital Divide: A New Form of an Old Exclusion

Against these gains stands the digital divide, the systematic gap between those who can use ICTs effectively and those who cannot. Research, notably by Jan van Dijk, distinguishes successive levels of the divide, and at every level women in countries like Pakistan are disadvantaged. The GSMA's annual Mobile Gender Gap Reports have repeatedly found Pakistan among the countries with the widest gaps in mobile ownership and mobile internet use between men and women, which means the divide here is not a detail but a defining feature of the digital landscape.

- Level 1 — Access: women are less likely than men to own a phone or SIM in their own name; devices are shared and monitored, data is rationed, and in many families a daughter's unsupervised phone is treated as a moral risk while a son's is a necessity. Cost bites harder because women's independent income is smaller.
- Level 2 — Skills and usage: lower literacy, less schooling in English and computing, and less free time leave many women able to receive calls and videos but unable to search, verify, transact, protect privacy or produce content. Use is confined to family-approved entertainment and communication, supervised in practice.
- Level 3 — Outcomes: even connected women convert use into income, credentials and public voice at lower rates, because platforms, employers and audiences import offline prejudices — harassment drives women off public platforms, and online earnings still require bank accounts, mobility and documents that women disproportionately lack.

The divide creates genuinely new forms of exclusion, not merely copies of old ones. As services migrate online — admissions, examinations, job applications, banking, government schemes,

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telemedicine — being offline stops being an inconvenience and becomes ineligibility: the unconnected woman cannot apply, register or appeal at all. A surveillance divide grows alongside it, since shared and monitored devices deny women the privacy that makes ICTs liberating for others; a phone can become an instrument of control, its call logs inspected and its contacts policed. Online harassment adds a further exclusionary tax: women who do speak publicly face abuse, blackmail with images and character attacks designed to drive them back offline. Finally, the data divide means women's needs are under-recorded in the datasets that now guide policy and product design, so services are built around the connected male user and fit women worse.

Balancing the Assessment

Two cautions keep the analysis honest. First, technology is not automatically empowering: the same platforms spread misinformation, unrealistic beauty standards and exploitative work, and a woman can be connected and still powerless if household and market structures are unchanged. Empowerment depends on the surrounding conditions — literacy, income, law, safety and social permission — which is why the most successful programmes combine devices and connectivity with training, local-language content, women-only access points and protection from harassment. Second, women are not passive victims of the divide: across Pakistan women run businesses from phones registered in a relative's name, share skills in women-only groups and steadily close gaps cohort by cohort, especially among urban students. The divide is a policy problem, not a destiny.

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Conclusion

To conclude, ICTs have delivered real empowerment to millions of women — knowledge without gatekeepers, income under their own control, and a public voice that traditional media denied them. Yet because access, skills and beneficial outcomes are all unequally distributed, the digital divide converts an old subordination into new exclusions: ineligibility for digitised services, surveillance instead of privacy, and harassment as the price of visibility. Closing the gender digital divide — through affordable devices and data, digital literacy in local languages, safe platforms and women's own names on accounts and assets — is therefore not a technical accessory to women's empowerment; in an increasingly digital society, it is one of its central battlegrounds.

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Question 2: Women in the Media Industry — Barriers and the Glass Ceiling (20 Marks)

Evaluate the participation of women in the media industry. What are the institutional barriers and 'glass ceilings' that women face in media organizations when striving for decision-making roles?

Introduction

Who produces the media is inseparable from what the media produce. The previous units of this course show women under-represented and trivialised on screen and in print; this question turns to the other side of the camera and the desk, asking how far women participate in the media industry itself and what stops them reaching the positions where content decisions are

made. The pattern found by research across many countries is consistent: women enter journalism and media work in growing numbers, often forming a large share of students and junior staff, but their share falls steadily at each higher level of seniority, until ownership, editorships and executive boards remain overwhelmingly male. Feminist scholars call the invisible barrier behind this pattern the glass ceiling. This answer evaluates women's participation, then analyses the institutional barriers — in recruitment, assignment, pay, promotion, workplace culture and ownership — that build and maintain that ceiling.

The Pattern of Participation

The global benchmark remains the International Women's Media Foundation's Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media (2011), covering more than five hundred companies in fifty-nine countries: women held roughly a third of full-time journalism jobs but only about a quarter of senior management positions and an even smaller share of top governance and ownership roles. Later national studies tell the same story in different proportions: newsrooms feminise from the bottom while power stays male at the top — a pattern sometimes called vertical segregation. Horizontal segregation accompanies it: women cluster in presenting, features, lifestyle, health and education beats and in public-relations and production support roles, while politics, economics, crime, sport and foreign coverage — the beats that lead to editorships — remain male territory. In Pakistan, women anchors and reporters are highly visible on television, and women journalists have distinguished themselves in every medium, yet editors, bureau chiefs, directors of news and media owners remain predominantly men, and women form a small minority of the press-club and decision-making bodies of the profession.

Institutional Barriers

The glass ceiling is built from institutions and routines, not usually from a written rule excluding women, which is precisely what makes it hard to break. The first barrier is recruitment and the pipeline myth: organisations claim women are unavailable for senior roles, yet their own assignment practices manufacture the shortage by reserving the high-profile beats and foreign postings that build an editor's CV for men. The second barrier is the structure of media work itself: unpredictable hours, night shifts, emergency calls and constant travel are organised around a worker with a wife at home. Without childcare support, safe transport or flexible arrangements, women are pushed out at exactly the life stage when promotion to senior roles occurs — the leaky pipeline — and their departure is then misread as lack of ambition.

- Pay and contract inequality: women journalists are more likely to be on casual, stringer or lower-paid contracts, to be paid less than male colleagues for comparable work, and to lack the financial security that sustains a long climb to senior office.
- Old boys' networks and sponsorship: promotions in media run on informal recommendation, shared socialising and mentorship by senior men, from which women are partly excluded; without sponsors, talented women are overlooked when editorial chairs fall vacant.
- Harassment and unsafe conditions: sexual harassment in offices and in the field, sexist newsroom banter, and vicious online abuse aimed at women journalists raise the personal cost of visibility and seniority; weak complaint mechanisms teach women that endurance, not redress, is the rule.

- Tokenism and the glass cliff: the few women who do break through are watched as representatives of their sex, given less margin for error, and are sometimes appointed to leadership in failing organisations — set up, critics note, where the risk of failure is highest.
- Ownership and capital: media ownership requires capital, political connections and advertising networks from which women are structurally excluded, so the final decisions about a channel or newspaper's line almost never rest with women.

Table 1: Barriers to women's advancement in media organisations and practical remedies

Barrier	How it works	Practical remedy
Beat segregation	Women confined to 'soft' beats that do not lead to editorships.	Rotate prestigious beats openly; audit assignments by gender.
Care-unfriendly work structure	Night shifts and travel demands collide with assigned family duties.	Childcare support, safe transport, flexible and parental arrangements for all staff.
Informal promotion networks	Sponsorship flows through male social circles.	Transparent promotion criteria, women's mentorship and leadership programmes.
Harassment and abuse	Office, field and online harassment raises the cost of staying.	Enforced anti-harassment policies, safety training, legal and digital protection.
Ownership gap	Capital and licences concentrated among men.	Support for women-led media ventures; gender criteria in public advertising and licensing.

Why the Ceiling Matters for Content

It might be asked whether the sex of editors matters if professional standards are followed. The evidence of this course suggests it does. Seniority decides which stories lead, which sources count as authoritative, whose harassment complaint is believed, and whether a sexist advertisement or script is challenged before broadcast. Women in decision-making roles are no automatic guarantee of feminist content — commercial pressures bind everyone — but

newsrooms with more women in senior positions do, on average, source more women, cover more issues affecting women and sustain more internal challenge to stereotypes. The glass ceiling is therefore not only an employment injustice to individual journalists; it is one of the production mechanisms behind the symbolic annihilation and trivialisation examined in Unit 1. Representation behind the camera and representation in front of it rise or fall together.

Progress and Its Limits

Progress is real but uneven. Media schools graduate large numbers of women; digital media have lowered entry barriers, letting women launch channels, podcasts and online magazines without asking a proprietor's permission; professional bodies of women journalists have formed to mentor members and campaign against harassment; and some organisations now publish gender audits and adopt formal equality policies. Yet the seniority pyramid has flattened far more slowly than the entry base has widened, and economic crises in media tend to expel the most recently arrived — disproportionately women — first. In Pakistan, safety threats and social disapproval add extra weight: families may accept a daughter's media job but resist the travel and late hours that promotion demands, so institutional reform must be matched by public respect for women journalists' work.

Conclusion

To conclude, women's participation in the media industry is wide at the base and narrow at the summit, and the glass ceiling that produces this shape is built from ordinary institutional materials: segregated beats, care-blind work structures, unequal contracts, informal male networks, tolerated harassment and male ownership of capital. Because decision-making roles

shape public representation, breaking the ceiling is a media-reform issue as much as a labour issue. Transparent promotion, enforced safety and harassment policies, family-supportive structures and support for women-owned media would not merely be fair to women journalists — they would change what the whole society sees, hears and believes about women.

Question 3: Media as an Advocate — Women's Rights, Campaigns and Social Change (20 Marks)

Analyze the role of media in advocating women's rights and social change. Provide examples of media campaigns that have successfully raised awareness about gender-based violence or legal rights for women.

Introduction

Most of this course examines media as a problem for women: stereotyping, erasing and trivialising them. This question examines the other side of the ledger, media as an instrument of reform. The same reach, emotional power and agenda-setting capacity that spread stereotypes can be turned to spreading rights: naming violence that was hidden, teaching women laws made for their protection, shaming institutions into action and shifting what a society considers acceptable. Advocacy through media — by governments, non-governmental organisations, journalists and citizens themselves — is now a standard part of every serious campaign for gender equality. This answer analyses the functions media perform in such advocacy, gives concrete examples of campaigns on gender-based violence and legal rights that achieved

measurable awareness or change, and closes with a balanced note on the limits of media advocacy.

How Media Advocate: Four Functions

First, media set the agenda and break silence. Gender-based violence flourished for centuries behind the doctrine that it was a private family matter. Investigative reporting, survivor testimony in talk shows and sustained coverage of landmark cases move such issues from the private to the public agenda, where policy must respond. Second, media inform: many women do not know that laws protect them — against workplace harassment, domestic violence, forced marriage or denial of inheritance — and radio spots, dramas, helpline publicity and now short social-media videos carry that legal literacy into homes that no lawyer or official will enter. Third, media model alternatives: entertainment-education, the deliberate embedding of social messages in popular serials, shows audiences new behaviours — a father educating his daughter, a husband sharing housework, a community reporting abuse — performed by characters they already love and trust. Fourth, media mobilise and monitor: campaigns convert awareness into action through marches, petitions, donations and votes, and continuing coverage holds police, courts and governments to their promises after the first headline fades.

Examples: Campaigns Against Gender-Based Violence

The Pakistani drama serial Udaari (2016) is a textbook case of entertainment-education. Broadcast on a mainstream entertainment channel and made in consultation with child-protection activists, the serial placed child sexual abuse — a subject Pakistani television had treated as unspeakable — at the centre of a popular family story, portrayed the survivor's

struggle for justice with unusual realism, and publicised support pathways. It provoked national debate, drew both praise and a regulatory complaint that itself widened discussion, and is widely credited with helping parents and children speak about abuse and with strengthening the climate in which child-protection legislation was pursued. Its lesson is that a fictional story, honestly told, can do advocacy work that a hundred pamphlets cannot.

- White Ribbon Campaign: begun by men in Canada in 1991 and active in Pakistan through White Ribbon Pakistan, it asks men to pledge never to commit, excuse or stay silent about violence against women — reframing violence as a men's issue and using media spots, celebrity pledges and community events.
- UNiTE and the 16 Days of Activism: the United Nations' annual campaign (25 November to 10 December), with its orange symbolism, floods television, print and social media with coordinated messages, helpline information and survivor stories, and Pakistani channels, universities and civil-society groups take part each year.
- Bell Bajao (Ring the Bell), India: Breakthrough's award-winning campaign taught bystanders a simple act — ringing the doorbell when they hear domestic violence — and its short films reached tens of millions, making neighbourly intervention discussable across South Asia.
- #MeToo (from 2017): a survivor-led social-media movement in which millions of women published experiences of harassment, forcing resignations, inquiries and legal reform debates worldwide, including in Pakistan, where it broke the silence around harassment in media, education and workplaces despite strong backlash.
- Legal-rights awareness in Pakistan: sustained media coverage and NGO campaigns around the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, provincial

domestic-violence and child-marriage laws, and the Zainab Alert law (2020) — named after a murdered child whose case media coverage turned into national legislation — taught the public both the rights and the reporting mechanisms involved.

Why Some Campaigns Succeed

Comparing the successful examples reveals common ingredients. They tell stories, not statistics: one named survivor moves audiences more than a national rate. They repeat a simple, memorable action or symbol — a white ribbon, an orange day, a rung bell — that lets ordinary people participate. They work across media at once, so the message met in a drama is reinforced in news, talk shows and the phone screen. They involve credible and unexpected messengers, especially men speaking to men. And they connect awareness to a concrete doorway — a helpline number, a police desk, a protection committee, a bill before the assembly — so that aroused feeling has somewhere to go before it cools. Campaigns that lack the last element raise awareness that curdles into helplessness, a recognised failure mode of advocacy media.

Limits and Risks of Media Advocacy

A balanced analysis must note the limits. Media attention is episodic: a horrific case dominates for a week and is displaced, while the slow work of shelters, courts and budgets goes uncovered. Commercial media can trivialize the cause they adopt, converting feminism into a marketing flavour — sometimes called femvertising — or broadcasting a rights message in the bulletin and a degrading one in the drama that follows. Coverage can also harm: careless reporting identifies survivors, sensationalises violence, or provokes moral panic that results in

restrictions on women rather than on perpetrators. Digital campaigns face trolling, misinformation and the harassment of the very women who speak. Finally, awareness is not the same as change: knowledge of a law does not guarantee a responsive police station. Media advocacy works best as one arm of a wider movement that includes lawyers, shelters, legislators and women's own organisations.

Conclusion

To conclude, media advocate for women's rights by breaking silence, spreading legal literacy, modelling new behaviour and mobilising publics, and the record — from Udaari and White Ribbon to the 16 Days of Activism, Bell Bajao and #MeToo — shows that well-designed campaigns can shift national conversation and contribute to real legislation. Their success depends on story, repetition, participation and a practical route to help or justice, and their limits warn us not to mistake visibility for victory. Used deliberately and ethically, however, the media's agenda-setting power is among the strongest peaceful instruments available for social change in favour of women.

Question 4: Media Regulation, Censorship and the Objectification of Women (20 Marks)

Explore the issues of media regulation and censorship regarding the portrayal of women. Should there be stricter codes of ethics to prevent the objectification of women in advertisements? Justify your answer.

Introduction

Every society regulates its media somehow; the argument is never between regulation and no regulation, but between kinds of regulation, exercised by whom, against what harms and at what cost to free expression. The portrayal of women is one of the longest-running battlegrounds of this argument. On one side stand those who point to advertisements and programmes that reduce women to bodies and ornaments, and ask why a practice recognised as demeaning should enjoy unlimited commercial freedom. On the other side stand those who warn that censorship, especially in the name of morality, has historically been used to silence women themselves and to police their clothing, movement and speech rather than their exploiters. This answer explores the regulatory landscape and the censorship dilemma, and then gives my justified position: yes to stricter, clearly defined codes of ethics against objectification in advertising, enforced mainly through independent regulation and sanctions on advertisers — and no to vague state censorship of content in the name of protecting women.

The Issues: What Regulation Exists and Where It Fails

In Pakistan, electronic media are licensed and regulated by PEMRA, whose code of conduct contains provisions on decency, dignity and the portrayal of women, while the advertising industry also professes self-regulation and print media answer to the Press Council and general law. In practice, enforcement against objectification is weak and inconsistent. Advertisements continue to use women's bodies to sell products with no conceivable connection to them, fairness and slimming products market insecurity as aspiration, and song-and-dance sequences treat women as decoration. Complaints are slow, penalties are trivial compared with campaign profits, and regulators act more energetically against political content than against commercial

sexism. At the same time, when regulation does strike at gender content, it has repeatedly struck at the wrong target: dramas have faced objections and bans for showing women resisting abuse or seeking divorce, and women's public speech is policed under elastic ideas of obscenity and national or religious values. The regulatory failure is thus double — under-regulation of commercial objectification, over-regulation of women's own voices.

Objectification: What Exactly Is the Harm?

Objectification, in the analysis developed by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and confirmed by content studies, means treating a person as a body or a collection of body parts, valued mainly for appearance and for use by others, denied agency, voice and individuality. In advertising its standard forms are familiar: the cropped body with no face, the woman draped over a car or motorcycle, the model whose only line is a smile, the before-and-after narrative in which an un-fair or un-slim woman is unlovable. The harms are not speculative. Experimental research links exposure to objectifying imagery with women's self-objectification — habitual body monitoring — and downstream with shame, anxiety, disordered eating and reduced confidence; cultivation research links the steady diet to men's perception of women as less competent and more legitimately treated as objects; and children absorb the equation of female worth with appearance before they can spell it. Objectification is also commercially unnecessary: the same products are sold successfully, in markets that restrict it, with creative, non-degrading advertising.

The Case Against Stricter Censorship

The opposing arguments deserve to be stated at full strength, because my conclusion accepts part of them. First, freedom of expression — protected in Pakistan by Article 19 of the Constitution, subject to reasonable restrictions — is the oxygen of every other reform, including feminism; a state empowered to ban 'demeaning' portrayals today can ban 'immodest' women journalists, rights campaigns and sex-education content tomorrow, and the history of morality regulation suggests it will do so selectively against the weak. Second, definitions are slippery: modesty standards vary by class, region and generation, and a code written in the language of dignity can become a dress code for women rather than a duty for advertisers. Third, bans drive content to unregulated digital platforms while punishing the regulated media that employ women and can be held accountable. Fourth, audiences are not passive; education and media literacy may protect better than prohibition, without its dangers.

My Position: Stricter Ethical Codes for Advertising — Yes; General Censorship — No

I support stricter codes of ethics against objectification in advertisements, for four reasons. First, advertising is commercial speech, made by identifiable companies to sell products; regulating its methods is like regulating false health claims — it does not touch journalism, art or political debate, where freedom must be widest. Second, the harm falls on a defined group, women and girls, who did not consent to be the raw material of the imagery and cannot individually refuse a billboard. Third, workable models exist: the United Kingdom's Advertising Standards Authority, for example, introduced rules in 2019 prohibiting harmful gender stereotypes in advertisements and has upheld complaints against ads presenting women as decorative or incompetent — proof that standards can be specific, evidence-based and applied

without general censorship. Fourth, codes shift costs: when the penalty for a degrading campaign is withdrawal plus publicity, creativity moves to competing on quality instead of on women's bodies.

The stricter code I propose has five features designed to capture the benefit without the censorship danger. Its tests must be objective and narrow — body cropping without relevance to the product, sexualised presentation of minors or school settings (zero tolerance), presentation of women as incapable in domains of ordinary competence, and health claims for beauty products judged as health claims. Enforcement should sit with an independent, mixed regulator including women media professionals and consumer representatives, not with a ministry. Sanctions should fall on the advertiser and campaign — withdrawal and fines scaled to campaign spend — not on criminalising artists or broadcasters. Every decision should be published with reasons and be appealable, so a public jurisprudence of objectification develops. And the code must be paired with positive duties and supports: media literacy in schools, incentives for advertisements showing women competently in varied roles, and protection, in the same code, for women's own expression against morality complaints. Regulation aimed at the advertiser's chequebook rather than the citizen's tongue is the line that separates reform from censorship.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present regime fails women twice — tolerating commercial objectification while intermittently censoring women's own speech in morality's name. The remedy is not more censorship but better-aimed regulation: stricter, precise and independently enforced

ethical codes for advertising, where speech is commercial, harm is documented and alternatives are costless to creativity; combined with firm protection for expression in news, drama and public debate. Such a settlement respects both halves of the evidence this course has assembled — that objectifying images do real damage, and that women's freedom to speak is too precious, and too often the real target, to be entrusted to vague moral bans.

Question 5: Women's Representation in Pakistani Media Today and the Challenges of Gender-Sensitive Policy (20 Marks)

Evaluate the current state of women's representation in Pakistani media based on your present-day observations. What are the key challenges in implementing gender-sensitive media policies at the national level?

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Introduction

Any honest evaluation of women's representation in Pakistani media today must begin by holding two truths together. Pakistani screens are full of women: news anchors open the bulletins, women reporters file from courts and disaster sites, drama heroines dominate prime time, women athletes and singers command mass followings, and on social media women creators reach audiences larger than most channels. At the same time, the power to decide what is shown, the range of roles women are permitted, and the terms on which they appear remain strikingly traditional. This answer evaluates the current state of representation across news, drama, advertising and digital media from present-day observation, and then examines

why gender-sensitive media policies — many of which exist on paper in Pakistan — are so difficult to implement at the national level.

The Current State: News and Current Affairs

In television news, women's visibility has plainly increased: women anchor flagship bulletins, host current-affairs programmes and report from the field, including from difficult and dangerous assignments, and digital outlets have widened these openings further. Yet the hierarchy of voice persists. Expert panels and talk shows remain heavily male; on subjects from the economy to security, women specialists are invited far less than their numbers in universities and professions warrant, and women politicians are still framed through family, dress and temperament more than policy. Women are plentiful as victims and affected persons in news stories — in crime, inflation and disaster coverage — but scarce as analysts of those same events. Sensitivity in reporting gender-based violence has improved unevenly: responsible outlets now protect survivors' identities and avoid graphic detail more often than before, but sensational framing, intrusive visuals and speculation about a victim's character still appear, especially in crime reporting and on social media, where speed outruns ethics.

The Current State: Drama, Film and Advertising

Prime-time drama is the most influential portrait gallery of Pakistani womanhood, and its contradictions are sharp. The dominant heroines remain organised around sacrifice, patience and the joint family: the virtuous daughter-in-law, the suffering wife, the scheming vamp as her foil — with marriage as the plot's sun around which all female lives orbit. Violence within marriage is frequently shown, sometimes condemned and sometimes as routine background

that the heroine's endurance redeems, which critics rightly question. Yet the same industry now produces serials centred on working women, women seeking education or divorce, survivors pursuing justice and fathers learning care, and some of these — building on the path shown by serials such as Udaari — achieve both ratings and serious public discussion. Advertising remains the most conservative sector: fairness, slimming and domestic-perfection appeals persist, women decorate products unrelated to them, and though a minority of brands now show women as athletes, professionals and decision-makers, such campaigns are celebrated precisely because they are exceptions. Morning shows, a major women-addressed genre, mix useful health and legal information with wedding spectacle, beauty instruction and humiliating games, summarising in one programme both the opportunity and the trap of women-targeted media.

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Table 1: Present-day representation of women across Pakistani media — an observational summary

Sector	Visible progress	Persistent problem
TV news	Women anchors, reporters and hosts in flagship roles.	Male-dominated expert panels; women framed as victims or relatives, rarely as authorities.
Drama serials	Working-woman and rights-themed storylines win audiences.	Sacrifice-and-endurance heroines dominate; domestic violence often normalised as background.
Advertising	Some brands portray professional, athletic women.	Beauty insecurity and domestic-duty appeals still dominate; objectification common.
Digital / social media	Women creators, journalists and activists reach mass audiences directly.	Harassment, image abuse and moral policing drive women voices off platforms.
Media workforce	Large numbers of women entrants; prominent women journalists.	Editors, owners and decision-makers still overwhelmingly male.

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The Current State: Digital Media — Opening and Backlash

Digital media have changed the terms of representation more in a decade than broadcast policy did in a generation. Women who would never be given a channel now run channels: teachers, doctors, cooks, comedians, religious instructors, entrepreneurs and political commentators, alongside women-led digital news platforms that report gender issues the mainstream skips. For women audiences, especially younger and urban ones, the phone has become the primary screen, and representation there is more varied in class, language and opinion than television allows. The backlash is part of the same picture: women online face coordinated trolling, doctored images, blackmail and threats, and public controversies repeatedly erupt over women's visibility itself — over a slogan, a dance, a dress — revealing how contested women's presence in the symbolic public sphere remains. Coverage of the annual Aurat March has become an annual referendum on exactly this contest, with media alternately amplifying, distorting and debating women's demands.

Challenges in Implementing Gender-Sensitive Media Policies

Pakistan does not lack paper commitments: the Constitution guarantees equality, PEMRA's code addresses dignity and decency, harassment law covers media workplaces, and successive national policies and international commitments, including the Beijing Platform for Action's media section, endorse balanced portrayal. Implementation fails on identifiable obstacles. The first is enforcement weakness: regulators are under-resourced, politically exposed and complaint-driven, so gender provisions sleep while political provisions are vigorously used; penalties are too small to change commercial calculations. The second is vagueness: policies speak of dignity and national values without workable definitions, so they chill bold content

about women's rights while doing nothing about objectifying advertisements — the worst combination identified in Unit 8's discussion of regulation.

- Commercial structure: channels and platforms earn from the very stereotypes policy asks them to drop — beauty advertising, melodramatic formulas, sensational crime framing — so compliance is priced as loss, and owners resist collectively.
- Workforce imbalance: with few women in decision-making roles, gender guidelines have no internal constituency; training reaches junior reporters while commissioning editors, advertisers and owners — the real decision points — stay outside it.
- Social and political contestation: gender reform is publicly framed by opponents as a foreign or immoral agenda, so officials avoid enforcing it; moral-panic cycles periodically push policy towards policing women instead of protecting them.
- Fragmented jurisdiction: broadcast, print, film and digital platforms answer to different regulators and laws, while content migrates to the least regulated space; social-media platforms are governed from abroad and respond slowly to Pakistani complaints, especially in local languages.
- Measurement gap: without regular national monitoring of representation — of the GMMP type — policy flies blind; violations and progress alike go uncounted, so no institution can be held to a target.

What Would Make Policy Work

The obstacles suggest their own remedies. Monitoring must come first: an annual, published audit of women's representation and media employment would give every other reform a

factual basis. Gender clauses in codes should be rewritten in the precise, harm-based language discussed in the regulation unit — aimed at objectification, survivor identification and discriminatory advertising rather than at undefined decency. Enforcement incentives should be commercial as well as punitive: eligibility for government advertising, a significant revenue source, can be tied to compliance records. Investment in the supply side — women journalists' safety, leadership training, women-led production houses — addresses the constituency gap. And policy should protect the digital opening, treating online harassment of women as the free-speech issue it is: every woman driven offline is a representation statistic worsened in real time.

Conclusion

To conclude, women's representation in Pakistani media today is best described as expanded visibility without equivalent authority: women are everywhere on screen and still marginal in the roles that carry power, respect and authorship, while digital media offer genuine liberation shadowed by organised backlash. Gender-sensitive policies exist but fail in implementation because enforcement is weak and politicised, definitions are vague, commercial incentives point the other way, women are absent from decision-making, jurisdiction is fragmented and nothing is regularly measured. None of these obstacles is immovable. With monitoring, precise harm-based codes, commercial incentives, workforce reform and protection for women's online presence, policy could move from paper to practice — and representation, on the evidence of this course, would eventually move the society that watches it.

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