

THE FUTURE OF WORK IN THE MOUNTAINS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FREELANCING LANDSCAPE IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan faces significant economic challenges, including high unemployment and limited job creation, particularly in remote and underdeveloped regions like GB. This mountainous region, bordering China, is characterized by limited arable land, a lack of industrial infrastructure, and economic isolation from major urban centers, hindering traditional job creation despite its potential in sectors like tourism and mining. While GB claims a high literacy rate, employment opportunities beyond the public sector, private banking, and a few NGOs remain scarce, leading to rising unemployment among educated youth and an urgent need for alternative economic opportunities.

The gig economy and online freelancing have emerged as promising employment options across Pakistan, offering educated youth the chance to engage with the global economy by leveraging their digital skills (Raza, 2023). In the context of GB, freelancing is increasingly viewed as a vital opportunity for young people who wish to remain in the region rather than migrate for work. However, despite many interventions in this sector, GB lacks a structured, evidence-based approach to promoting freelancing as a sustainable livelihood option for educated youth. While some organizations and programs are working to impart freelancing skills, their effectiveness is uncertain, often misaligned with market demands, and focused on few typical skills at the expense of other globally in-demand opportunities. Furthermore, government interventions, financial support mechanisms, and donor-funded programs often lack strategic direction and evidence-based interventions, leading to unsatisfactory outcomes.

No formal and concerted research has surfaced to date that assesses the viability of existing programs on freelancing, their impact on promoting freelancing in GB, analyzes the existing ecosystem or determines the most effective framework for promoting freelancing as a viable economic opportunity in this isolated and economically underdeveloped region. In this context, this study aims to address this critical research gap by systematically evaluating the impact of the NFTP, the first, most significant, and successful formal initiative to promote freelancing in GB. Through this evaluation, the study seeks to understand the regional context, real-time challenges, and existing freelancing ecosystem to identify effective strategies and policy measures for supporting and scaling freelancing in GB. Ultimately, this research aims to ensure that future interventions are evidence-based, contextually relevant, and aligned with global freelancing trends.

To achieve this overarching goal, this research focuses on the following specific objectives:

- To assess the impact of the National Freelance Training Program in promoting online freelancing in GB.
- To explore the current freelancing landscape in GB.
- To propose policy recommendations for promoting freelancing in GB.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively investigate the freelancing landscape in GB and evaluate the impact of the NFTP. The research was conducted in two distinct phases. Phase one consisted of a quantitative survey designed to assess the impact of the NFTP. The target population comprised the 813 individuals who had officially graduated from the NFTP, fulfilling all program requirements. While the NFTP had trained over 1400 individuals, only these 813 graduates were included in the survey, as their data was readily accessible. Survey questions were developed in close collaboration with the NFTP team. Data enumerators contacted all 813 graduates via mobile phone to administer the survey. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and are presented in the form of tables and graphs. Phase two involved qualitative data collection through focused group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. The qualitative part aimed to triangulate the quantitative findings from the survey and provide thorough insights into the freelancing landscape in GB. Participants were selected based on their expertise and involvement in the NFTP and the broader GB freelancing ecosystem. A total of two FGDs, each with 6 to 8 participants, and eight in-depth interviews were conducted. The qualitative data collected were explicitly designed to explore key insights emerging from the survey data, allowing for a deeper understanding of GB's contextual challenges and broader freelance ecosystem. The insights gained from this qualitative data have been integrated into the study's findings and discussion section, providing a more context-focused and comprehensive analysis of the research findings.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The section uses a research triangulation approach, integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions. Findings were categorized into four themes, presented to participants for further discussion and contextualized through supporting questions and relevant literature. This rigorous approach cross-verified survey outcomes, refined interpretations, and captured the real-world dynamics of GB's freelancing landscape. The resulting analysis provides a nuanced understanding of NFTP's impact, identifies key factors influencing GB's freelancing ecosystem, and informs evidence-based policy recommendations for strengthening and expanding freelancing opportunities. The key findings are as under:

- Freelancing appears to an array of hope for the educated GB's youth as evidenced by NFTP's high graduation rate (58%). Given the limited traditional employment opportunities, it's seen as a socio-economic equalizer, especially given the underperformance of sectors like tourism and mining. While NFTP's success is clear, many graduates initially pursue freelancing part-time due to market instability. Long-term success often necessitates entrepreneurial skills and transitioning from individual freelancing to building businesses. Therefore, while freelancing offers opportunity, sustained success requires entrepreneurial approach to be developed among freelancers.
- NFTP's success stems from expert trainers with real-world freelancing and entrepreneurial experience, offering practical platform exposure. However, GB's broader training landscape is problematic. Despite numerous programs, quality control and standardization are lacking. The trainers themselves are not formally trained and programs failing to impart practical, job-oriented skills. Mentorship, platform navigation, client acquisition, and real-time project execution are often missing.
- While majority of the responses support government prioritization of freelancing, some question its long-term viability. Freelancers face challenges like limited access to finance, networking, and digital infrastructure. They want the government for greater recognition, targeted skills development, and improved digital infrastructure, including reliable internet, financial assistance, and co-working spaces. Government initiatives, such as soft loans and high-tech training have limitations in scope and inclusivity. Infrastructure problems, including limited internet and power outages, hinder freelancer success.
- Strong support exists for incorporating freelancing courses into regular academics in HEIs to equip students with basic and advanced freelancing skills to improve the chances of employability at an early stage which is particularly important in regions with limited opportunities like GB. While beneficial, integrating these courses raises concerns about micro-credentials reshaping higher education, potentially prioritizing job alignment over broader learning. There are concerns that universities will be transformed in to job-training centers. However, ignoring the great potential of gig economy particularly in youth-dominated countries, will have economic consequences. Therefore, a balanced approach is necessary, integrating freelancing courses without sacrificing broader academic learning.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant potential of freelancing to address youth unemployment in GB. The high NFTP graduation rate underscores the growing interest in this alternative economic career path. However, translating this potential into sustainable livelihoods requires addressing several key challenges found in the current freelancing ecosystem. These include improving the quality and relevance of freelancing training programs, nurturing entrepreneurial skills, and providing comprehensive support systems, including mentorship and access to resources. Likewise, overcoming digital infrastructure limitations, particularly regarding internet connectivity and power supply, is essential. Government intervention is vital for creating an enabling environment through targeted policies, financial support, and digital infrastructure development. By strategically

addressing these challenges, GB can leverage freelancing to empower its youth, boost economic resilience, and integrate the region into the global digital economy.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government should establish a Freelancing Board to govern and promote the freelancing ecosystem. This board, linked to national and international organizations, will certify training providers, streamline freelancing initiatives, assess program effectiveness, maintain a freelancer database, connect freelancers with platforms and funding, and act as a liaison between freelancers and policymakers.
- Government in collaboration with other stakeholders should establish Smart Freelancing Hubs across GB, focusing on demand-driven skill development and hands-on mentorship. These hubs will prioritize training in high-demand skills, adopt an apprenticeship model, utilize blended learning, and include job search strategies and client engagement training. Importantly, they will address infrastructure challenges like internet connectivity and power supply. Existing government facilities should be utilized to minimize costs.
- Government should introduce a special loan and grant scheme for individual freelancers and aspiring freelance entrepreneurs. The scheme will provide support for basic equipment (smartphones, laptops, etc.) for individuals and funding for office space, equipment, and team building for companies. Financing should be accessible through simplified banking methods, including low-interest loans and grants supported by donor-funded programs.
- **The institutions of higher learning in the region should consider** replace traditional IT courses with a foundational and advanced courses on digital skills and freelancing, particularly in social sciences and humanities. These courses will provide proficiency in digital platforms, remote work tools, online job hunting, and freelancing marketplaces, enhancing students' employability and offering alternative career paths.
- Special arrangements to be made for inclusion or marginalized youth chunks like students from Islamic madaris into the freelancing ecosystem through a specialized training program. This program will equip them with freelancing skills, IT literacy, and English language proficiency, expanding their economic opportunities and contributing to their social and financial empowerment.