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# Fostering Open Spaces in Pakistan

Combating Threats to Women's Activism Online

## **About**

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a registered research-based advocacy non-governmental organization in Pakistan. Founded in 2012, DRF focuses on ICTs to support human rights, inclusiveness, democratic processes, and digital governance. DRF works on issues of online free speech, privacy, data protection, surveillance, and online violence against women. DRF opposes any and all sorts of online censorship and violations of human rights both on ground and online.

**[www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk](http://www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk)**



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### **Acknowledgements**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study for the Digital Rights Foundation aims to improve understanding of the key challenges faced by women journalists and information practitioners in online spaces.

The aim is not only to highlight these challenges but also to develop recommendations and policy suggestions for advocacy around online safety and freedom of expression.

The research is conducted in the backdrop of the overall climate of censorship in Pakistan, where online intimidation and bullying affects not just journalists but also women information practitioners including, human rights defenders, digital rights advocates and social media activists.

The framework of intimidation against them ranges from misogyny to harassment and from stalking to surveillance. The cumulative impact of this is threatened freedom of expression, privacy and activism of women online through threats, harassment and rejection.

While these risks to women information practitioners are fairly well documented, there is little focus on analytical examination of the impact of these risks on rights activism by women in online spaces in Pakistan.

The report draws its findings from the experiences of 60 women — information practitioners pursuing diverse professions — from across Pakistan who have witnessed and/or been affected by online abuse. It also incorporates recommendations and policy suggestions provided by relevant stakeholders on how to deal with the challenges identified in the survey.

The reporting period for the report was between December 2018 to February 2019.

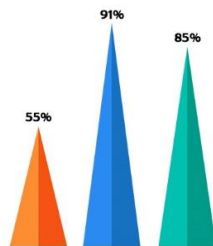
The key findings are as follows;

### **The magnitude and nature of abuse**

55% respondents said they had been subjected to online abuse and/or harassment.

91% women feel abuse is gendered and its nature is rarely professional but mostly personal.

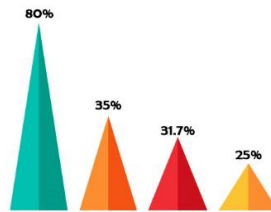
85% women said abuse was mostly hurled by seemingly fake accounts



### The impact of online abuse

80% of the respondents feel online abuse limits their freedom of speech.

35% women witnessed the most abuse on Facebook, 31.7% on Twitter and 25% felt they faced equal onslaught of abuse on both.

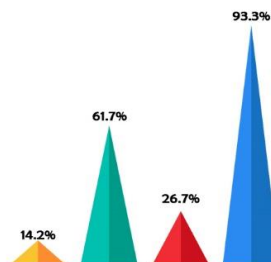


### Dealing with the problem

Only 14.2% women reached out for help when faced with abuse online.

61.7% women don't trust FIA to help. 26.7% said they will report but don't trust the agency.

93.3% respondents think the state has failed to protect the rights of female journalists/activists.



## **Recommendations**

66.7% respondents don't support regulation of online spaces to make them safer.

42% information practitioners call for a journalists' protection law.

Stakeholders called for accountability mechanisms for treatment of harassment cases at FIA.

Call for more representation of women, transgender in policy circles discourse surrounding digital safety, privacy of vulnerable groups.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's internet freedom ranking has been on a decline for the past seven years.<sup>1</sup> Internet shutdowns, a problematic cybercrime law, and cyber attacks against political dissenters have contributed to the ongoing deterioration.

Internet users in Pakistan continue to be arrested and prosecuted for online expression and torture and sexual violence during detention remains a pressing problem. There have also been complaints of detailed technical attacks targeting human rights defenders, their accounts and devices.<sup>2</sup>

The crackdown on information gatekeepers, has in fact, intensified in recent months. Journalists and human rights defenders have been receiving notices from Twitter regarding "official correspondence" the social media platform has received from Pakistani authorities against particular tweets that the government deems in violation of the local laws.<sup>3</sup>

Reports of surveillance and clampdowns online have become frequent after the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf government announced its plans to regulate social media.<sup>4</sup> Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has said that the government wanted to regulate social media, but conceded that it would not be possible without cooperation from operators like Google, Facebook and Twitter. With the authorities taking a critical stance on regulation, rights activists are becoming increasingly fearful of risks to freedom of expression.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1442994/pakistans-internet-freedom-ranking-declined-in-election-year-report>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/pakistan-campaign-of-hacking-spyware-and-surveillance-targets-human-rights-defenders/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/pakistans-twitter-crackdown/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1447134>



However, in terms of cyberbullying, there has been minimal but imperative progress.

In 2016, Pakistan’s Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was passed to outlaw cybercrimes. Even though it was excoriated for giving the law enforcement agencies over-arching powers to detain and prosecute individuals, the bill was nonetheless hailed as an important step to ensure that online sexual harassment, stalking and dissemination of private pictures without consent are punishable crimes.

A person convicted of morphing pictures or videos of an individual over any sexually explicit image or video, on an online platform, such as Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp can be sentenced to a maximum of five years in prison. And if the victim is a minor, the jail term can be extended to 10 years.<sup>5</sup>

The Act also includes provisions on cyberstalking. Stalking with “the intent to coerce or intimidate or harass any person” on an online platform is punishable to up to three years, under the law.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the enactment of the law, statistics indicate a grim reality when it comes to online safety of information practitioners, particularly women.

Going by the numbers, in 2018, there were 55 million 3G/4G phone subscribers (who can access the internet on their smart phones) and 58 million broadband Internet users in the country, according to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). The number of social media accounts also crossed 44 million, a majority of which were Facebook accounts.<sup>7</sup>

However, Pakistan’s social media landscape is dominated by males.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of users declared as male on Facebook stood at 77 percent compared to a figure of 23 percent for females. The breakup of users in the age bracket of 13-17 stood at 4 million users with females comprising 3 percent and males 9 percent.



For the age bracket 18-24, female users shot up to 11 percent and male usage rose to 31 percent, indicating this segment of the population was using Facebook the most and were the most tech savvy of the lot. For 25-34 age bracket, the user base stood at 11 million with females constituting 7 percent and males once again dominating this segment.

Instagram usage statistics reveal the total number of active users on the network stands at 5.20 million and active Instagram users as a percentage of the total population were recorded at 3 percent. A significant disparity once again arises in the male vs female demographics of users on Instagram. As per the report, 69 percent of users were males and 31 percent users were females.<sup>9</sup>

For the women who do operate online, their experience is restricted by instances of harassment.

According to the FIA's cybercrime wing, a total of 850 complaints were lodged regarding online women harassment from September 2016 to December 2018. Of the total registered 587 cases, 81 cases were related to online harassment.<sup>10</sup>

In Lahore alone last year, the FIA received more than 5,500 complaints of cybercrimes, involving hacking, identity theft, cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking, financial fraud, digital piracy, intellectual property rights violations, electronic terrorism and extortion.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile in Sindh, FIA officials confirmed that in addition to various complaints over the phone, as many as 3,236 written complaints were received by these centres by the end of 2018.<sup>12</sup>

These figures provided by the FIA are severely underreported as people avoid filing online complaints due to the agency's slow and time-consuming process.<sup>13</sup>

Worse, social media companies have failed to protect women from developing

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<sup>5</sup> s.21 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

<sup>6</sup> s.24 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

<sup>7</sup> <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398599>

<sup>8</sup> <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/04/18/pakistans-social-media-landscape-dominated-by-males-females-lag-behind-report/>

countries because they fail to understand the language and the cultural context in which the harassment takes place. In Pakistan, where online harassment can result in physical violence, this is an inexcusable failure.<sup>14</sup>

These figures provided by the FIA are severely underreported as people avoid filing online complaints due to the agency's slow and time-consuming process.

Given Pakistan's widening digital landscape, and backlog of harassment complaints, the government has been urged to offer protection to journalists and internet users to enable them to navigate online without posing risks to safety.

Only recently, Federal Information and Broadcasting Minister Fawad Chaudhry said that his ministry is planning to present a bill in the National Assembly for protection of journalists.<sup>15</sup> The new legislation will be similar to the one enacted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

While this maybe a step in the right direction, human rights bodies have urged the authorities to repeal discriminatory laws that encourage and enable discrimination and persecution of its most marginalized citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The concern has intensified with the incumbent government's proposal to establish a combined regulatory body to collectively regulate digital media along with electronic and print media.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.6

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.geo.tv/latest/225431-the-unsocial-media-is-online-abuse-silencing-women-in-pakistan>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/11/15/5500-cybercrime-complaints-registered-with-fia-in-lahore-this-year/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/01/3236-written-cybercrime-complaints-were-registered-in-sindh-in-2018/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/11/15/5500-cybercrime-complaints-registered-with-fia-in-lahore-this-year/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/10/social-media-failing-pakistan-women-151011072105188.html>

## WOMEN IN ONLINE SPACES

With the proliferation of the internet and digital technologies, there has been a gap regarding the experience of women who were being targeted in online spaces, and the institutional attention being accorded to it. Extensive research has shown that online harassment can have serious and long-term repercussions on mental health.<sup>17</sup>

The fear in Pakistan always is that the digital hate could quickly become very real. According to a report, every second woman rights activist faces serious threats.<sup>18</sup> Forty eight percent of women human rights defenders received threats at work, mainly because of its nature, but also because of other reasons. Harassment, threats to life and progress of work are more prevalent as intimidation tactics, it was found.

While cyber harassment is pervasive, remedies offering counsel are limited in Pakistan.

The Digital Rights Foundation Cyber Harassment Helpline was launched on December 1, 2016 and it is Pakistan's first dedicated helpline that addresses issues of online abuse and violence by providing a free, safe, gender-sensitive and confidential service. It provides legal advice, digital security support, psychological counselling and referral network to victims of online harassment and abuse.

The toll-free helpline (0800-39393) received a total of 2,781 complaints from Dec 1, 2016, till Nov 30, 2018, with an average of 91 calls each month. Out of the 2,781 calls, 2,190 were first-time callers whereas 591 calls were classified as follow-ups, made by people who were either seeking additional assistance or providing updates regarding the status of their cases.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1457756>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/17/pakistan-uphold-rights-speech-dissent>

<sup>17</sup> <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Booklet-Helpline.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1292335>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1455173/women-in-pakistan-most-vulnerable-to-harassment-on-facebook-whatsapp-report>

Most of the cases reported were related to non-consensual usage of information. These cases involve using, sharing, disseminating, and manipulating data such as photographs, phone numbers, contact details, and other personal information on social media platforms or other websites such as classifieds or networking sites without consent of the individual which violate right to privacy. The second most common segment of calls involved blackmailing, which often entail using an individual's personal information

While the FIA has been making considerable efforts to expand its resources when it comes to dealing with harassment,<sup>20</sup> awareness about these initiatives remains a problem.

According to a report, a staggering 72% of women in the country have no awareness about the cybercrime laws dealing with online harassment on the internet, including social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.<sup>21</sup>

In a conservative society like Pakistan, reporting becomes a challenge given that the case for online harassment is particularly gendered as women are more at risk online than men.

This was reflected in a research which found that 72% of female journalists reported having experienced digital insecurity as opposed to 61% for men, noting that harassment was more tied to the gender.<sup>22</sup>

To make matters worse, around a third of journalists surveyed did not know what to do when subjected to a digital crime or harassment. For those who knew that they had to contact law enforcement, 62 per cent said they did not know just how they would contact them.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1436379>

<sup>21</sup><https://www.geo.tv/latest/143464-40-of-women-face-harassment-on-internet-says-pakistans-first-online-violence-study>

<sup>22</sup><https://tribune.com.pk/story/1626396/1-digital-security-online-harassment-silencing-journalists/>

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study's findings are based on primary sources of data, which was collected using qualitative methods of research.

In the first phase of the reporting period (five days), a qualitative questionnaire was circulated online using Google Forms amongst journalists and activists practicing across Pakistan. The questionnaire comprised a total of 17 questions which were divided into four sections; experience, the digital environment, dealing with the problem, and recommendations.

The concerns raised in the questionnaire were very specific but required detailed responses that helped understand individual experiences from a close lens.

The online survey generated a total of 60 responses from women in the information workforce, across professions and industries. Although a good number of respondents agreed to share their experiences in detail, only four were interviewed further based on the relevance of their input that highlighted common trends observed in online abuse and harassment cases — similar to those underlined in the survey responses. The two interviewees, besides Imaan Mazari and Faiza Yousuf, desired to remain anonymous.

### **Seminars**

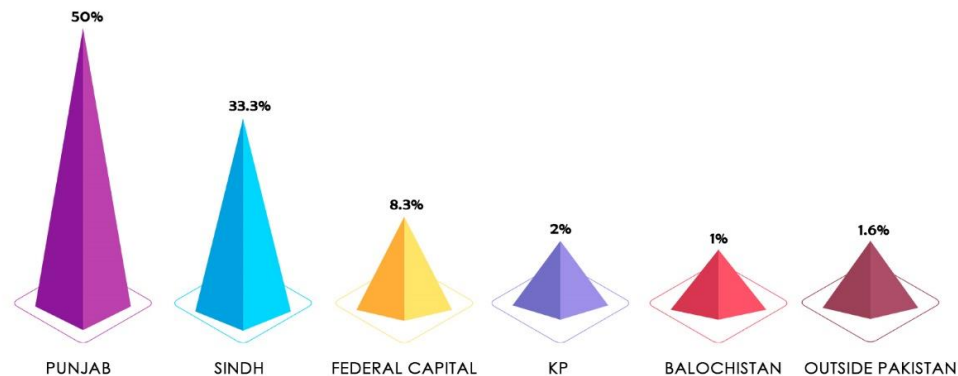
After compilation of the questionnaire responses, the findings were shared with relevant stakeholders in a series of seminars held in five major cities of Pakistan; Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta.

The participants of the seminar were women belonging from various professions, including policy makers and digital activists. The purpose of the seminar was to develop recommendations and policy suggestions and reflect upon issues faced by women while navigating online.

The average number of participants was 20.

## The demographic

Of the 60 women surveyed and interviewed, a majority of them belonged to the populous Punjab province (50%). From Sindh 33.3% information practitioners participated in the study, followed by 8.3% from the federal capital, 2% from Khyber Pakhthunkhwa and only 1% from Balochistan. Women residing outside Pakistan made up to 1.6% of the responses.



To make the study more representative, respondents from various age groups and professions were included — as proportionate to their presence in the national population as could be possible.

In terms of age-wise distribution, most of the respondents were aged 26-35 (58.3%), followed by women aged between 36 and 50 (25%). Women between 25 and 50 witnessed the most experiences in terms of online abuse and harassment as they were at a relatively stable stage of their professional lives and thus prominent online. This was demonstrated further when only 11.7% of the younger age group (25 and below) — which is said to be the internet generation — contributed to the study. Similarly, only 5% of the respondents were aged above 50, indicating that they were comparatively the least active online.

The sample was diverse in terms of occupation as women besides journalists and writers also participated in the study. The respondents who identified as activists were practicing as lawyers, teachers, development workers, business owners, technologists, artists and even housewives.

## **Limitations**

The qualitative study was conducted within a period of two weeks, which limits the scope of its findings. Given the short data collection period, traditional reporting mechanisms that require groundwork were compromised and the research was largely done using online resources.

In addition to that, the participants of the study were reached out using snowball sampling and thus, the representativeness of the study is limited.

Consequently, the findings touched the tip of the iceberg when it comes to online abuse and only reflect the observations of 60 women and may not apply to the information industry at large.

However, the addition of feedback from stakeholders through seminars was done to make the study as inclusive as possible.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Understanding online abuse**

In order to examine the dynamics of a problem, it is important to first identify it. Online abuse or cyberbullying often involves harassment, cyberstalking, denigration (sending or posting cruel rumours and falsehoods to damage reputation) and threats.

A majority of the 60 respondents described online abuse as “slurs, hateful terms, slut shaming, fat shaming, abusive words, theft of photos, spamming with pornographic images, stalking, mass trolling, misinformation campaigns and unsolicited messages”.

One of the many respondents also raised the concern of invasion of privacy. “Deliberately invading my online space and attacking or threatening to attack online through embarrassing, cruel, uncomfortable and undesired content.”

“Threats to reveal your private information, using available information about you from social media/the internet against you or manipulate it to target you,”



wrote a lawyer.

Overall, testimonies from women suggest most view online abuse as any communication — whether public or private — that deliberately makes the victim feel unsafe, threatened, or in distress, especially when the victim is targeted for their gender.

It is important to highlight that all 60 women who answered the questioned expressed familiarity with the concept, indicating that the problem is widely prevalent in online spaces.

This observation was further validated as 33 out of 60 women (55%) said that they had been subjected to online abuse and/or harassment. Another 31% said that they had not experienced abuse online but had witnessed it.

In terms of the nature of abuse, 91% women felt that as compared to criticism received by men, women were subjected to bullying on personal level. “The subject of abuse is never the woman's opinion, but the woman herself. Abuse is never professional, but personal when it comes to women,” shared a technologist.

“The form of harassment and surveillance faced by women journalists often tends to be gendered as they are subjected to sexualised threats and intimidation, ranging from gendered insults and threats of rape and death. Perpetrators attempt to tarnish the reputation of women information practitioners and raise questions about their moral character,” wrote a lawyer.

Analysis of the responses led to the consensus that the extent of online abuse varied from verbal harassment to rape and/or death threats, inappropriate comments on social media profiles to blackmail and hacking.

The most common means of abuse observed was the use of profile pictures of the victims — which led to a lot of women opting to not upload their pictures on public platforms.

“Pervasive harassment and abuse on Twitter led to me deleting my account making a private one without my face/location. Currently have one account

with profile picture of self and now I instinctively avoid saying anything controversial,” said a journalist.

“They made a cartoon of me with another body and my face with RAW agent written on it,” shared a human rights activist.

The testimonies establish that the vulnerability of women offline is mirrored online as well. “This is because of the societal set up that makes it easier to restrict women and harm their repute. This is why it is easier to silence women by blackmailing or emotional torture,” answered a writer to a question inquiring why women information practitioners were more likely to be bullied than their male counterparts.

Besides emotional stress, online abuse also brings along unnecessary attention to the victims, shifting the focus of discourse entirely.

In an interview, blogger and activist Imaan Mazari shared that the “hostile environment” limited critical debate.

“When I am attacked personally for expressing this view, the focus of the debate shifts to discussing the attack on my person, and whether that is justified or not, instead of analysing and engaging in a healthy debate on the substance of what I had said.”

## **2. Abuse as a process**

After establishing the prevalence of cyber bullying, the next step in understanding its dynamics is to deconstruct it as a process. The responses to the questionnaire and interviews revealed that while abuse may vary in terms of severity, in online spaces it follows a pattern, and is, in fact, very predictable in approach.

When asked if the participants had observed any common trends when it comes to online abuse, 85% women said abuse was mostly hurled by seemingly fake accounts.

“Due to specific political views some months ago, I received 13 to 18 abusive messages per day. They all were fake accounts,” said a journalist.

The participating women identified that mostly young people's accounts were more abusive. These accounts often used the same tweets over and over again, alluding that they were pushing a certain Twitter trend or narrative forward. These women observed that the accounts were mostly anonymous, and those with profile pictures of girls also seemed suspicious. The nature of tweets sent out by these accounts was hyper-nationalist, misogynist and sexist.

A majority of the women surveyed, also pointed out that abuse was often coordinated. "It's not about one account. After one person attacks, dozens other similar accounts join in and criticise you," observed a lawyer activist.

### **2.1 The red lines of debate**

Apart from the use of suspicious accounts, another trend highlighted by women information practitioners was the choice of topics that were more likely to trigger abuse.

#### *Feminism*

Almost all respondents shared that feminist views are always attacked by men in large numbers. From Aurat March (a women-led march initiated last year on the occasion of International Women's Day), to the #MeToo movement, voicing anything related to women rights is often treated with backlash. Consequently, accounts of women journalists and activists supporting feminism as a cause are drowned in abusing posts on almost a daily basis.

"My coverage of MeToo has witnessed the most traffic on my social media profiles. Unfortunately, the traffic was negative and during those days it became very difficult for me to operate online. In Pakistan, covering harassment leads to harassment as well," shared a journalist.

A lawyer and women rights activist shared that she faced the worst form of abuse when she supported Oscar-winning filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's claims of her sister being harassed, when she condemned Qandeel Baloch's murder, and recently when she posted a video of a man scratching his private parts while sitting next to her.

*Blasphemy, secular views*

The participants of the study are all part of the information circle and so often indulge in public discourse on topics of national interest.

The respondents spoke about being labelled anti-Pakistan, anti-Islam and liberals for supporting any cause that the hyper-nationalist trolls deemed “western”.

“I raised the issue of a yoga centre that was burnt in Islamabad and was called Hindu and *wajibul qatal* (worthy of being murdered) in return, posing a threat to my life,” shared an academic activist.

Another activist was of the view that discussions on the military establishment’s role in politics, the blasphemy law and the rights of minorities, particularly Ahmadis was bound to trigger harsh criticism.

*On women for being women*

The women belonging from different professions all agreed that one of the most common criticism was that if a woman is supporting a certain cause it is because she was paid to do so or has a personal relationship with the person leading it.

“Everyone asked Asma Shirazi how much did Nawaz Sharif pay her. Majority was of the sentiment that Meesha Shafi accused Ali Zafar for personal vendetta. It’s always about the woman protecting her interests, and not the other way around,” wrote a business owner.

These observations also reflect the power dynamics of the patriarchal society that hinders women’s professional growth on ground as well.

“Men think we are not fit to have an opinion because of many reasons, including our lack of exposure, our inability (as per them) to have the exposure or knowledge they have as professionals, as according to them our place is in the kitchen,” shared a technologist.

Subsequently, whenever women say something against a particular man in power — even if it is factual and authentic — they tend to receive a lot of hate.

### 3. The impact of online abuse

Of the women surveyed, 48 out of 60 (80%) think cyberbullying limits their freedom of speech and has led them to reconsider what they post online.

While some cited instances where they voluntarily deleted their social media accounts due to the hostile digital environment, others shared that trolls had gone to great lengths to silence their voice by hurling death and/or rape threats and even reporting their account to Twitter, that sometimes led to temporary suspension.

One of the respondents narrated how a coordinated campaign to silence her on social media involved threats to her family and use of doctored images. “It made me feel so insecure that I made two suicide attempts,” she confessed.

Journalists spoke about self-censorship under the current stifling digital climate, where they had become more cautious about mobilising online.

“I have become more cautious of the choice of posts I make and like. I have also stopped joining large groups on Facebook because that has also been used against journalists in the past to associate them with propagandists,” said one.

Most of the women talked about how they had to reconsider what they posted online and had become increasingly fearful of facing backlash.

“I think a hundred times before posting anything online, because what if someone doesn't like what I'm posting? What if they hurt me or people associated with me? What if they manipulate my words and label me "anti-state" or worse, a blasphemer? The fear is always there and it does affect the way I navigate online spaces,” said an activist.

While the prevailing sentiment was that raising one's voice online was a difficult choice, and in most cases, not met with positive consequences, 20% of the participants said that through abuse they had developed a culture of gendered support online.

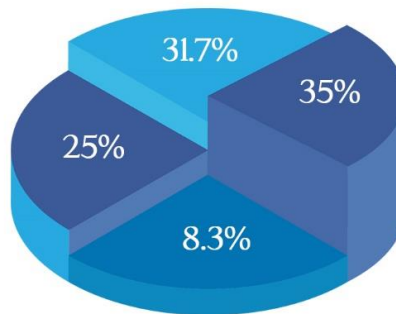
“Take the #MeToo movement in Pakistan, for example. While the women who first shared their experiences of harassment faced extreme level of abuse online for coming forward, it did inspire other women to share their stories as well,”

shared a respondent.

They were of the view that the internet had given rise to unprecedented platforms where women could be heard, galvanise support, and stimulate protest. Despite its communal implications, women are being self-critical, and forced to rethink the battles they pick online.

### 3.1 The digital environment

In terms of which social media platforms enabled abusive behaviour, 35% women shared that they had witnessed the most hostility on Facebook, while 31.7% chose Twitter. The other 25% said that harassment of women was pervasive on both social media giants. Another 8.3% spoke about similar experiences on LinkedIn.



“Facebook is definitely the leading platform because people share more personal content there and there is a lot of history to dig up. On Twitter, abuse is less direct - as in trolls can hide their identity or seek support of anonymous accounts,” said a journalist.

When it comes to the platforms’ response rate to abuse and harassment-related complaints, a majority of the participants said it was easier to report comments/posts on Facebook to group admins or the page owners but on Twitter it required more effort and numbers.

Due to the increase in cyberbullying cases, women said they found themselves blocking and reporting content to the social media companies more than ever. But even then, as per the findings of the questionnaire and interviews, while 40% of the women had reported content to social media companies, 50% said they did not. Instead, they chose to temporarily suspend their own account.

#### 4. Dealing with the menace

Despite occasional blocking of content on social media, women are reluctant to reach out for help when it comes to dealing with cyberbullying. Only 14.2% of the participants said that they had launched official complaints.

A major reason behind the lack of action on their part is the lack of awareness on the subject. As established earlier, women appear to be familiar with what constitutes cyberbullying but when it comes to dealing with it, there were few responses.

“Having worked extensively and globally on countering online gendered violence, I was still clueless how to deal with the abuse when I was subjected to it. My first line of defence was to block the person and delete their message. I had all the knowledge about how to deal with online abuse, and yet I was scared,” said a lawyer.

This was further reflected when the participants were inquired about options available in Pakistan to deal with cyber harassment and abuse.

90% women mentioned Digital Rights Foundation and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in their responses but were not aware of any other remedies.

They instead shared their experiences on women-only Facebook groups, or with friends and peers — who mostly advised victims to block or ignore the abusers.

The bigger concern, however, is women’s lack of trust in the FIA to take prompt action. At least 61.7% women said they did not trust the FIA with harassment complaints. Another 26.7% said that they would report to FIA but that they did not trust the agency.

“These agencies have a track record of intimidating people with their hectic protocols and not to mention, gender insensitivity that results in victim blaming, people are usually hesitant in going to the FIA for help,” said an activist.

Another issue raised by these women was that the agency had a huge backlog of unaddressed complaints and so their response was not immediate.

“In terms of social media abuse, the action should be immediate. But FIA takes longer and by then harm has already been done,” said a lawyer.

The participants’ lack of trust in the government to deal with the matter is evident as 93.3% women were of the view that the state has failed to protect their rights as the gatekeepers of information.

“The state is concerned about defamation of politicians by citizens but it does not protect journalists and activists from the same,” said a journalist.

Women lawyers talked about the problematic cyber crime law and its vague provisions. “The law should offer protection. But instead we are asking for protection from the law itself.”

Since the government is turning to regulation of social media to curb its negative use, the participants were asked if they supported the decision. However, 66.7% women said they did not see regulation as a solution, fearing increased control of speech and activity online.

“Regulation should be limited to identifying and dealing with those persons engaging in hate speech or incitement to violence. But now is not the right time for that unfortunately because such regulation is very likely to be a tool for further oppression of dissenters,” said an activist.

A majority of the women said that the process of regulation should be more transparent and non-partisan in its approach.

“Social media regulation in terms of strong legislation that benefits the citizens and does not give sweeping authority to people in power, is good,” said a journalist.

Besides demanding legislation that protects journalists, they also called for policy for recovery of missing persons. Overall, a sentiment of neglect, disappointment and distrust was voiced in the responses pertaining to the state’s role in making online spaces safer.



## ABUSE IN SPOTLIGHT

*The young activist who refuses to be scared into silence*

Imaan Hazir Mazari, a YouTube blogger and lawyer, has often found herself in hot waters for voicing her political views.

Despite being the daughter of the Federal Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari, Imaan too has been in the grip of the vicious cycle of online abuse. Recalling one of the worst online attacks she has faced, Imaan says that she was emailed death threats and the same threats were posted on her YouTube channel.

“I was informed by several people that I should not return to Pakistan as there was a plan to register a case against me and confiscate my passport. There was a full-blown campaign launched against me — with my private pictures being circulated, filthy abuse being hurled against me, and videos taken off the internet of other girls dancing were shared claiming one of them to be me,” she says.

The accounts from which I received death threats were reported by me to the FIA. There was a YouTube video posted from an account in Europe, she added, where the person in the video was inciting people of violence against her.

“I reported the accounts hurling abuse at me to the FIA. However, since I was in Vienna at the time for my Masters, it was difficult to follow-up on so many fronts,” Imaan shares, while highlighting that the experience caused her a significant amount of mental anguish.

On more than one occasions, Imaan has been forced to suspend her Twitter account. “There have been times I have had to think twice about what I say, not out of fear for my own security but out of concern for my family. While I have been dealing with it for a very long time, it is indeed painful to read threats and abusive language directed at myself and my family,” she regrets.

Ultimately though, Imaan realises that these attacks will continue till she chooses to speak up on national issues that are considered ‘sensitive’.

“If someone with my background and privilege is scared into silence, then I am sending a discouraging message to those who don’t come from the same

background; that they shouldn't be vocal on issues they feel strongly about," says the young activist.

*The technologist standing tall against men*

\* the interviewee requested anonymity

For Karachi-based F\*, there is no surviving without the internet. Being the administrator of three IT-related Facebook groups, and an active user of Twitter for networking — F's days go by interacting with people she barely knows.

F assists people of the IT industry with finding jobs and training opportunities. But the male-dominated tech community has other (unpleasant) things to offer.

"I have switched off comments on LinkedIn. On Twitter, I have open DMs because that's where I connect with people for professional means the most but every day, I received dozens of inappropriate messages and pictures from men of the industry," she says.

But as disturbing as the messages maybe, for F, it is "part of the job".

"Once I called out a guy for spamming my inbox and posts. He threatened to spread rumours about me in the small software industry so that no one would work with me. He had nothing on me, but somehow he had the power to threaten me," F wonders.

F has frequently received password reset requests from her mail accounts and is too afraid to log into her social media when at work. "Seven guys run these groups with me. But only I get the share of abuse and harassment," she says.

The group members ask for F's contact details and call her at odd hours. "Because of the nature of my work, I take calls from unknown numbers. Once I got a WhatsApp video call, and the guy was naked. I couldn't sleep or work for days after that," she recalls.

Last year, F, reported an account to the FIA for blackmailing her after she refused to work on a project with the "serial harasser". "The person who answered my call was only interested in how the accused harassed girls and

what all did he do. I had all evidence on me, including screenshots of how the person was blackmailing me. But after that one call with FIA, I deleted everything.”

Despite the mental stress, F continues to operate online. “Women are not safe; anywhere and from anyone,” she concludes.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the analysis contained in this report, the conclusion is that women information practitioners in Pakistan face two types of challenges: one, the vulnerabilities associated with being a woman in the conservative society, and two, the insecurity related to being a journalist/activist in the stifling digital environment.

A majority of the women surveyed believed that a separate legislation that protects journalists or amendments to the existing cybercrime law, and its effective implementation could resolve the problem to a large extent.

Stakeholders voiced several concerns about the accountability mechanism of the FIA in dealing with cases of harassment. The lack of trust in the federal agency was further exacerbated due to lower representation of women and transgenders, absence of gender sensitivity and shortage of staff at the FIA.

Overall, women information practitioners involved in this study expressed disappointment at the treatment of activists, particularly women, on a federal and provincial level.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping in view the findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward to the government departments regulating online spaces, social media companies, media houses and policymakers:

**Amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to account for trolling and mass harassment:** The sections relating to harassment (section 21 and 24 of PECA) do not cover abusive comments through electronic devices for blackmail and monitoring. These provisions do not allow for a remedy against abusive comments and mass trolling--forms of harassment

primarily faced by women in the public eye. This lacuna in the law prevents reporting of such forms of abuse and harassment.

**Effective legal redress for harassment by law enforcement agencies:** Given the volume of harassment experienced by women information practitioners and the potential the harassment has for silencing political speech, the capacity of law enforcement agencies (in the case of online harassment, the FIA) be enhanced to provide redress to journalists and activists who face cyberbullying. It is important that this be done in gender sensitive manner and that harassment not be used as a tool to silence political speech.

**Capacity building of FIA staff:** There should be gender sensitisation trainings of law enforcement agencies and more recruitment of women in the FIA. The FIA should also improve its complaint processing mechanism and establish a complaint tracking system. The government's citizen portal can be used as a model example.

**Enact laws authorising safety and protection of journalists:** A separate law for journalists that offers them legal remedies and prosecution for their harassment on both online and offline platforms, particularly with a gendered focus.

**Transparency about content regulation process:** Government authorities, particularly FIA and PTA, should make the blocking/reporting content process more transparent. Journalists should be informed before their posts are reported for removal to social media companies.

**Representation of women in policy circles:** A special committee should be established, consisting of female parliamentarians and women from the private and public sectors, to work on women rights, as well as transgender rights. The committee should also have at least two members to check if the implementation is actually taking place or not.

**Appoint ombudsperson in KP, Balochistan:** In the absence of a provincial authority committed to dealing with issues of harassment and women in KP and Balochistan, there is an urgent need to make the appointment.

**Strengthen digital education with the aim of creating awareness about online safety:** Government, NGOs, policymakers and users of social media should be made aware of the consequences of online harassment, repercussions

of vigilantism, and legal implications for perpetrators. Awareness about dealing with harassment and cyberbullying be made priority as well.

**Enact data protection bill:** The data protection bill should be tabled on priority to ensure the privacy of personal data.

**Cooperation with social media companies:** Government should involve social media companies in formulating policy that is in line with the country's cultural context. Initiatives like Facebook's Not Without My Consent is an example of mutual cooperation measures to fight harassment.

**Government should involve media stakeholders on regulation:** Media, particularly women journalists, should be involved in the consultation process on the proposed Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA), which is likely to restrict free speech further.

**Media houses and press clubs should hold digital safety trainings:** Specialised training workshops on digital security, encryption, and safety should be organised to train the gatekeepers of information to protect confidential and personal data which may be hacked/manipulated.

**Encourage discourse on ethical journalism:** Given the politicisation of fake news and consequent crackdown on journalists, repeated discourse on issues faced by journalists in the post-truth information age will help streamline more important concepts such as fact-checking and fighting misinformation.

## **DIGITAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION'S HAMARA INTERNET APPLICATION**

Digital Rights Foundation's one-of-a-kind application - "Hamara Internet" was developed to create awareness regarding cyber harassment and educate individuals regarding the law and the precautionary measures they can opt for in case they encounter cyber harassment. The application provides tips and tidbits for online safety to its users and also provides a directory for relevant personnel and contact information of LEAs and organizations such as the FIA, PTA, PCSW and any other relevant resources available for the public.



**DIGITAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION'S  
CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE**

Digital Rights Foundation's Cyber Harassment Helpline is Pakistan's first dedicated toll-free Helpline for victims of online harassment and violence. The Helpline provides a free, safe and confidential service. It provides legal advice, digital security support, psychological counselling and a referral system to victims of online harassment. It provides a judgement-free, private and gender-sensitive environment for all its callers. Journalists from across the country can reach out to our Helpline in case of any online harassment or violence.

**CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE: 0800-39393,  
everyday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm**

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