

# ADDRESSING ONLINE ATTACKS ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN PAKISTAN

POLICY BRIEF



Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a feminist, not-for-profit organisation based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women and gender minorities, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened.

DRF believes that a free internet with access to information and impeccable privacy policies can create safe online spaces for not only women but the world at large.

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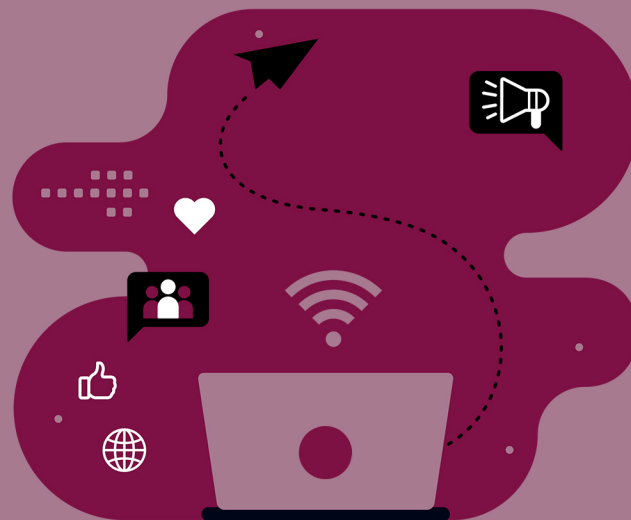
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# INTRODUCTION

Online spaces and digital media platforms have increasingly become occupied by journalists, academics, human rights activists, and government officials - all of whom have gained significant clout in the process. Unfortunately, dissenting voices (especially those critical of the ruling party but not limited to them) have been subjected to a torrent of online abuse, especially women, as clear partisan rivalries have translated to an unprecedented increase in online harassment - inhibiting any constructive debate over the state of democracy, civil liberties, and governance in the country. In a recent session of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Human Rights, chaired by Pakistan People's Party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, prominent journalists such as Benazir Shah, Aima Khosa, and Asma Shirazi recounted incidents of online harassment that they have faced over the course of their careers, and described how partisan politics fuels the sort of online abuse they are being subjected to.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in a recent statement by a collective of female journalists, it is stated that they have been targeted online on the basis of the views, the nature of their reporting, and specifically their gender - posing questions pertaining

to journalistic freedom, and politically tainted accountability.<sup>2</sup>



This report aims to dissect the increased incidence of targeted online harassment against female journalists, and its implications on real-world threats of physical violence, freedom of speech (especially in terms of dissenting views), and the responsibility of the government to set the tone of the discourse and hold its officials accountable. Furthermore, this report will utilise both quantitative and qualitative data to make a series of recommendations for legislators, policy-makers, digital media organisations, and media houses; in an effort to not only recognise the gravity of the problem at hand, but also to make constructive interventions to alleviate it.

<sup>1</sup> "Parliamentary Body Hears Complaints of Women Journalists." Dawn. Dawn, August 19, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1575116>.

<sup>2</sup> Shah, Benazir. "Joint Statement by Women Journalists." Twitter. Twitter, August 12, 2020. [https://twitter.com/Benazir\\_Shah/status/1293450054309744646](https://twitter.com/Benazir_Shah/status/1293450054309744646).

# GENDERED ONLINE ABUSE

According to a survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation, it was noted that 78% of the respondents (58% of which were female) have faced abuse, derogatory comments, personal attacks, and threats of physical violence online - all of which can be classified as various forms of harassment.<sup>3</sup> Online abuse can have multiple manifestations, which can include threats of sexual violence, abusive language, and a general disregard of the reputation and stature of the journalists in question - and it is important to understand that online harassment, especially that with violent and sexual connotations, is intended to silence, smear, and intimidate any dissenting voices, through the implied use of force and power. Furthermore, abuse can also manifest in a manner that inhibits effective reporting, as countless stories have gone untold and unreported by women, due to the insurmountable psychological (and potentially physical) risk of telling them.

The incidence of online harassment stems from a variety of factors, most notably that of anonymity, which in turn can impact how users tend to exhibit unrestrained and unimpeded regressive



behavior online, reflective of the “Online Disinhibition Effect” - as it is a well known fact that individuals tend to behave differently in the cyberspace, than they would in the real world. Toxic disinhibition can often materialise as harsh criticisms, explicit references, abusive behavior, and even threats of real-world violence; and there have been countless tragic examples of online abuse spilling over as physical violence. Unfortunately, it can be seen that women are more often at the receiving end of various forms of abusive online behavior, and that can be exacerbated by the fact that the male demographic far outweighs women in terms of social media penetration, as the majority of users across major social media platforms are men (as shown in Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>“Digital (In)Security of Journalists in Pakistan.” Digital Rights Foundation, n.d. <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Report-Digi-Insecurity-of-Journos.pdf>.

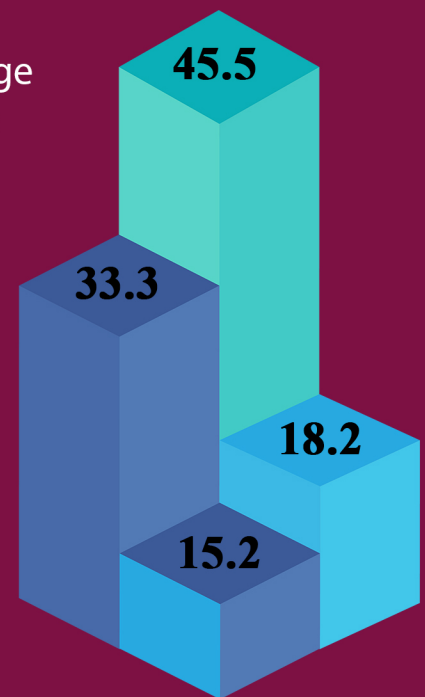
<sup>4</sup>Kemp, Simon. “Digital 2020: Pakistan.” DataReportal. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 18, 2020. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-pakistan>.

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Total Users</b>	<b>Male(%)</b>	<b>Female(%)</b>
Facebook	33,000,000	64%	36%
Twitter	1,830,000	77.2%	22.8%
Instagram	6,400,000	64.1%	35.9%
LinkedIn	6,000,000	83.7%	16.3%

These disparities in terms of social media penetration and internet access not only serve to inhibit women's access to online spaces (making it less equitable), but also makes these spaces increasingly patriarchal in nature - as women's voices, opinions, experiences, and perspectives, already in the minority, are crowded out amongst a torrent of abuse. It is important to note that the internet was conceived as a neutral space, irrespective of one's gender, race, caste, class, and other social indicators, making it all the more important to ensure that women from all socio-economic backgrounds are granted equal access to online spaces, otherwise the same physical systems of oppression and structures of inequality in the real-world would continue to perpetuate online.

# IMPACT OF ONLINE HARASSMENT AGAINST JOURNALISTS

It must be understood that this is to the detriment of the general public, as the threatening and hostile online environment acts as an impediment to effective reporting, especially pertaining to abuse of power, accountability, legislative insights, governance, and corruption. In another survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (across a sample set of journalists) which addressed how online abuse and insecurity can adversely impact their careers, a significant chunk of the respondents (45.5%) stated that it resulted in self-censorship, as they are coerced and intimidated into avoiding stories that could be potentially controversial.<sup>5</sup> 18.2% of the respondents stated that they confined themselves to “safer” and less controversial topics, 33.3% stated that they drastically decreased their social media activity, and 15.2% even deactivated their social media accounts out of fear of online backlash and abuse<sup>6</sup>. There is also a partisan dimension to these issues, as reporting divisive political issues can draw the ire and outrage of individuals, public officials, and even voters affiliated with the aforementioned party; which in turn can translate into further abusive behavior online, with online “bot” accounts, and even public officials involved in the toxic discourse. Clearly the online ecosystem has become increasingly hostile, especially towards women, who are forced to compromise on their journalistic integrity and the foundational principles of good reporting, out of fear of immense partisan backlash.



<sup>5</sup>“Digital (In)Security of Journalists in Pakistan.” Digital Rights Foundation, 9.

<sup>6</sup>“Digital (In)Security of Journalists in Pakistan.” Digital Rights Foundation, 11.

# LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Article 14 of the Constitution of Pakistan grants all citizens the right to privacy, irrespective of their gender (as stated in Article 25), with the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (which was enacted in August 2016) extensively addressing many aspects of online harassment, abuse, and threats of physical violence. Section 21 of PECA classifies “offences against modesty of natural person and minor” as abuse, especially in terms of the misuse of pictures and videos online which are meant to purposefully degenerate and humiliate individuals (especially women) in online spaces, with Section 24 dealing specifically with issues pertaining to cyber-stalking. In addition, the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (enacted in 2010), which specifically addresses issues pertaining to abuse of authority and hostile working environments, can also be invoked as protective measures when it comes to dealing with online harassment and abuse in an individual’s professional sphere. However barriers to reporting harassment for women remain given the lack of gender-sensitisation of the legal system and onerous evidentiary requirements in place. Furthermore offences relating to harassment are geared towards individualised harassment as opposed to the mass trolling and targeted campaigns that women journalists in Pakistan.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Unfortunately, in the midst of this festering issue, digital media organisations, media houses, legislators, and policy-makers continue to feebly respond to the problem at hand, which in turn allows online abuse to continue unimpeded. A concerted and structural policy reform is needed in order to address the issue and make online spaces a safe space for women, particularly women journalists.

## *Awareness and Training on Digital Security and Privacy:*

- Training on digital security and privacy are vital in ensuring that journalists and human rights defenders (especially women) are not only made aware of their rights on digital spaces, but also ensure that they are able to protect themselves against abuse and threats online through digital safety training. Online spaces are increasingly an extension of the workplace for many media practitioners and media houses need to take proactive measures to ensure that their employees are safe in these spaces.
- Furthermore, media houses have a collective responsibility to have a constructive and comprehensive discussion on laws pertaining to cyber harassment, in a manner that seeks to enlighten and educate viewers, rather than to subject them to more heated partisan debates.
- It is clear that most internet and social media users are not fully aware of the laws and terms of conditions in place to protect user privacy, and to uphold the fair usage of the aforementioned platforms.

## *Interactive Community Guidelines by Social Media Companies:*

- While prominent social media platforms have detailed community standards, and while their algorithms and systems have yet to offer fully realised protective measures. Better enforcement of these community guidelines are an effective benchmark that offer some help and certain instances of online abuse and harassment. Furthermore input from journalists in countries like Pakistan when drafting community guidelines is an important step towards inclusion and transparency.



- However, the caveat here is that these community guidelines and standards are incredibly complicated, arduous to read, and vague - making it difficult for users to browse through dozens of pages, as they continue to use these platforms without being equipped with the knowledge of how their data will be handled, where it will be stored, and how they can protect themselves against abusive elements online.
- Social media companies have a collective responsibility to offer short, but interactive courses (in video or infographic form), which explain these regulations in a comprehensive yet concise way.

### ***Legislative Action and Accountability:***

- The Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Ministry of Human Rights should proactively conduct an impartial investigation into this repeated pattern of online intimidation, which impedes a healthy and productive exchange of ideas.
- Furthermore, this pattern of systemic online abuse against dissenting voices is a reflection of the government's inability to lead by example, by showing restraint, setting the tone, and upholding the fabric of the country's legal system. Measures should be taken to ensure that the code of conduct developed for their social media wings are effectively enforced and those responsible for abuse are held suitably accountable.
- The Protection of Journalists & Media Professionals Bill 2020, prepared by the Ministry of Human Rights, needs to be presented in parliament and passed through an inclusive consultative process that includes journalists' unions and civil society.
- The use of public tax money for the establishment of a dedicated digital media wing for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting should not be used to prioritise rhetoric-building over actionable change.
- On that note, the government and all political parties must introspect and hold its representatives accountable, as public officials have a responsibility to the general public, to inculcate a culture that encourages constructive discourse, rather than targeted abuse and intimidation.

## REFERENCES:

“Digital (In)Security of Journalists in Pakistan.” Digital Rights Foundation, n.d. <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Report-Digi-Insecurity-of-Journos.pdf>.

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