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## Online Harassment and Systemic Inequality: Experiences of Female Journalists and Activists in Pakistan

Humaira Munir

Mphil Pakistan Studies NIPS QAU/ Lecturer Pakistan Studies at F.G Post Graduate College for Women Kashmir Road Rawalpindi

[humairamunir83@gmail.com](mailto:humairamunir83@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*How do female journalists and activists in Pakistan perceive the nature, causal factors and sources behind the online harassment? Any action that targets others with force or threats is considered harassment. The use of technology has brought a new era of communication and connectivity, but it has also brought new forms of harassment and violence. Journalists and activists use digital spaces to express their opinions and get harassed in the digital spaces in all over the world. Scholars have delved into the incidents of online harassment to female journalists and activists in Pakistan but those studies don't shed light on the traumas faced by those victims caused by online harassment. The present study focuses on the traumas faced by female journalists and activists in Pakistan due to the harassment they face in digital environments during the course of their professional life. The study focuses on the feminism theory using intersectional approach to analyze the traumatic experiences. The study relies on the Primary and Secondary data. 10 Semi-structured open ended interviews were conducted to female journalists and activists of Pakistan who have faced online harassment on different social media primarily on Twitter. The findings emphasize that online harassment is a "symptom and a tool of systemic inequality." This reveals how existing hierarchies of "gender, class, and political power" are replicated and strengthened on digital platforms, which were formerly neutral spaces for free, speech. An intersectional feminist approach calls for a holistic response, one that questions systemic power dynamics, creates digital spaces that are safer and more welcoming, and upholds women's freedom to fully engage in public and political life without worrying about consequences. Significant progress in removing the digital barriers that silence women and uphold inequality can only be achieved by addressing these interlocking aspects of oppression.*

**Keywords:** Online harassment, Journalists, Activists, Pakistan, Feminism, Power, Class, Gender.

### Introduction

Technology has given us a world in which almost anyone can publish a credible-looking Web page. Anyone with a computer or a cell phone can post in online forums. Anyone with a moderate amount of skill with Photoshop or other image manipulation software can distort reality. Special effects make even videos untrustworthy. We have a problem here. (Gillmor, 2004)

Any action that targets others with force or threats is considered harassment. Harassment is a constant global public health concern, and those who engage in it are at a significant risk of developing mental health issues (Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010). It is generally defined as intentional behavior to harm another person, repeatedly, and involving a power imbalance

between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus, 1999). Harassment that formerly only occurred offline or in person has now spread online due to the growth, development and wide use of digital communication systems (Musharraf, 2017). The use of technology has brought a new era of communication and connectivity, but it has also brought new forms of harassment and violence. Cyber harassment, also known as online harassment, is a growing concern globally. Online forums have developed into safe places for harassment. Harassment that involves the use of electronic media is known as online harassment. Email, instant messaging, text messages, and photographs viewed from a phone or computer are all common forms of harassment. Harassment comments and images may also be posted on websites, blogs, chat rooms, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Online harassment is another name for cyber bullying, especially when it includes adults.

The landscape of journalism and activism in Pakistan has seen significant changes in recent years as a result of the advancement of digital technology and widespread adoption of online platforms. This change brought up possibilities and problems for female journalists and activists that must be thoroughly examined. While giving them a strong platform to voice their thoughts, engage with audiences, and promote social change, the internet has also made them vulnerable to the risks of online abuse. Their work life has been disturbed by this prevalent problem, and it has resulted in significant socio-psychological consequences that extend beyond the digital sphere.

Over the years, press freedom and human rights activism have faced major difficulties as a result of these continuous attempts to threaten, discredit, and negatively impact their work. Cyber harassment is a form of psychological violence that can have severe socio-psychological impacts on the victim. Journalists should not have to work in fear due to their job or gender. However, resistance to female journalists in male-dominated industries such as the news media is not a new phenomenon. Feminist media researchers from all around the world have long emphasized the issue of female journalists' safety, particularly the issue of harassment in the workplace and in public (Joseph, 2005; Ross, 2004). Physical assault and threats are common forms of harassment, and some victims have been arrested or imprisoned on false allegations. Their right to privacy and freedom of expression may be restricted by governments and other strong entities through monitoring and spying methods. There have been examples of smear campaigns and defamation to damage their reputations, as well as media limitations and censorship to manage the flow of information.

Many of the techniques employed in online harassment are similar to those used in more conventional types of harassment. In the past, using offensive or threatening statements included using direct verbal insults. Harassment in online spaces typically takes the form of electronic communication (Hunter, 2011). The journalism process and news gathering have always been driven by technology. Audio, visual, and digital advancements over the past century have significantly altered how journalists approach and carry out their daily job (Lasorsa et al., 2011). The ability for journalists to produce, alter, and share material with others using very easy tools has really changed how journalism is practiced since the emergence of new media technology (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018; Pavlik, 2001). Online forums have developed into safe places for harassment, with journalists and activists being frequently the targets of abuse, doxxing, and trolling. The phenomenon of online attacks against female journalists and other communicators – such as writers, bloggers, activists and academics – poses an emerging

challenge to human rights, particularly to the realization of freedom of expression and gender equality (Parmar, 2016).

The situation of freedom of expression in Pakistan has been a source of worry in recent years. Pakistan ranks 150th out of 180 nations in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index, reflecting a dramatic deterioration in freedom of the press in recent years (Asfandiyar, 2013). In Pakistan, journalists and activists encounter a variety of problems, including threats of assault and harassment. Pakistan is a country where journalists and activists are fighting for their rights and freedom of expression. The country has a history of gender-based violence, and the internet is no exception to this. Female journalists and activists in Pakistan are vulnerable to online harassment, which can range from online trolling to severe forms of harassment, such as stalking and threats.

Digital media have become an important aspect of journalism. Journalists are using social media to find news sources, share news stories, and to engage with audiences (Koirala, 2020). The rise of cyber harassment against female journalists and activists in Pakistan has become a major concern for human rights organizations, media houses, and the government.

### **Literature review**

The internet has developed with a remarkable speed over the last decade. It has brought revolutionary changes in the field of communication. With the ability of the connectivity of the world, internet has turned the world into a global village by reducing the distances and by making people able to communicate with each other in the blink of an eye.

The rapid growth of internet attracted the cyber offenders to plunge into cyber world, where victims can be easily targeted without any obvious risk. This has resulted to rise in the number of cyber threats to an alarming rate. Cyber communication crimes are hidden threat to the both developed and developing countries.

Internationally there have been many debates about online harassment. Bailly Poland discussed cyber harassment in his book *Haters* (2016) as Cyber sexism as a significant issue on the internet, causing women to feel alienated and unsafe. To make the internet more accessible for women, websites, ISPs, and web developers must prioritize usability. However, there is a lack of data on cyber sexist online abuse, and in-depth research is needed to understand motivations, impact, and strategies to reduce prevalence. He argues that cyber sexism requires sensitive research, addressing nuances of online harassment, and giving voice to women who are often ignored. The Internet can improve if we make a serious effort to alter the status quo.

Kevin Veale in his book *"Gaming the Dynamics"* (2020) explored the relevance of social media platforms and online spaces to harassment and their social contexts. The technology industries' blindness towards harassment and weaponization can be resolved by involving a greater diversity in decision-making. The rise of unionization in technology and creative industries presents a promising opportunity, but it requires accountability from unions on diversity and representation. The status quo is untenable and harms people, and change requires people's action.

Jacqueline Vickery and Tracy Everbach in the book *"Mediating Misogyny"* (2018) argues about the prevalence of online harassment and critique systems and ideologies that perpetuate misogyny. The authors emphasize the need for holistic, structural, and systemic change, addressing a white supremacist patriarchal culture. Four stakeholders, digital platforms,

journalism, the law, and universities, have the power to influence practices and contribute to structural cultural change.

The same sexism that encourages various types of harassment and abuse of women in "real life" also underlies gender trolling. Karla Mantilla in her book "Gender trolling: How Misogyny Went Viral" (2015) intends to educate the general public about a pervasive and harsh type of harassment towards women. She describes the problem, how it could affect women's life, and how to put a stop to it. She raises the debate of important insight into this Internet phenomenon. She offers legal and legislative ideas for enhancing the environment for women online while also differentiating this violent kind of trolling from others. She also addresses the legal boundaries around the issue, such as privacy, anonymity, and free expression online.

A clear and concise introduction to the world of cybercrime and the need of cyber awareness for everyone may be found in the book "Cybercrime and Preventive Measures", a book written by Priyanka Tomar and Sanjay Gautam (2021). Major debates of the book are centered on email-related cybercrimes like phishing, spamming, spoofing, email bombing, etc., as well as the tactics used by cybercriminals to lure victims.

Robin Kowalski in his book "Cyber Bullying" (2008) discussed the means of cyber bullying through which the harassment has increased a lot. By the use of email, instant chats, and other digital messaging platforms, cyber bullying has increased in frequency. He argues particular difficulties. Information regarding the type and frequency of cyber bullying through the use of email, messages, chat rooms, and other digital messaging systems is provided in this empirically-based website, investigates the function of anonymity in cyber bullying consists of parent and student interviews as well as focus group responses provides a resource with advice on how to prevent and stop cyberbullying for teachers, parents, psychologists, and policymakers.

The first clearly international and multidisciplinary view of hate speech online is presented in the book "Digital Hate: The Global Conjuncture of Extreme Speech" by Sahana Udupa, IGINIO Rdone and Peter Hervik (2021). Beyond Euro-American accusations of "fake news," the authors highlight regional idioms and customs and investigate the fundamental ramifications for how community is envisioned, actualized, and harshly upheld throughout the world.

Zoya Rehman in her article "Online feminist resistance in Pakistan", (2017) argued that Digital media is being used by feminist activists in Pakistan to counter limits on public space. Online spaces do, however, come with hazards and difficulties, such male-dominated internet security narratives and unfavorable government discourse. Language hurdles and the movement's perceived exclusivity are major obstacles to its success. Feminist collectives must defend online spaces, create varying material, and use the power of the internet to combat efforts to suppress women's voices online.

Sadia Jamil in another article "suffering in silence: the resilience of Pakistan's female journalists to combat sexual harassment, threats and discrimination" (2020) explores that Pakistan's journalists confront severe safety risks across the country and impunity to crimes against them allows the perpetrators to go unpunished. The country is recognized as one of the deadliest places for working journalists in the world. She argues that Pakistani female journalists are more vulnerable because they are not only prone to safety risks and sexual harassment, but also they face gender discrimination when it comes to their recruitment and equal pay-scale.

Aroosa Shaukat and waqas Naeem in their research document "Women Journalists and the Double Bind", (2020) explored that Pakistani women journalists face challenges such as sexual

harassment, social media attacks, and religious and cultural factors that target them based on gender. These factors affect their safety and mental well-being. Despite these challenges, they continue to carry out their professional duties and fight against online violence. Documenting threats and factors that silence women journalists is crucial for addressing these challenges and supporting their freedom of expression and access to information.

The literature review covers in detail the existing literature on the online harassment on female journalists and activists in Pakistan. It discusses in detail the ways in which gender inequalities and power imbalances contribute to the experiences of women in society. In the context of online harassment, it is found in the literature that the online harassment faced by female journalists and activists in Pakistan is rooted in patriarchal values and norms that seek to silence women's voices and limit their power and influence.

Major debates in the literature relate to the harassment incidents that the female journalists and activists face but this article specifically intends to explore the experiences of online harassment by female journalists and activist in Pakistan through a intersectional approach through feminism. This article will explore the various forms of cyber harassment faced by female journalists and activists in Pakistan, including online trolling, cyberstalking, doxxing, and threats. It will examine the frequency and severity of the harassment.

This study aims to investigate the traumatic experiences of online harassment faced by female journalists and activists in Pakistan through intersectional approach in feminism. Online harassment involves the harassment on social media like Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter etc. This research is based on the harassment experiences of the female journalists and activists in Pakistan primarily focusing on their experience on Twitter and other forums like Facebook and Youtube.

This study primarily focuses on the experiences of female journalists and activists in order to add to the body of knowledge already available on digital harassment in Pakistan. The study aims to broaden the comprehension of the complex effects of online harassment on these women's lives by using intersectional approach in feminism. In the end, the findings will not only increase awareness of the problem but also guide the creation of focused interventions and assistance programmes that mitigate the negative consequences of online harassment and provide a secure online environment for female journalists and activists. The findings of this study will help to understand how the women journalists and activists perceive the nature, causal factors and sources behind the online harassment. This article is a significant step towards raising awareness about the traumas faced by the female journalists and activists of Pakistan in the form of cyber harassment and its impacts on their lives and freedom of expression in general.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study to examine the online abuse of Pakistani women journalists and activists is intersectional feminism. First articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the idea of intersectionality highlights how overlapping and intersecting systems of power, including class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and professional identity, influence women's experiences of oppression in addition to gender. Because it emphasizes that diverse groups of women experience different and multiple types of marginalization based on their social status, intersectional feminism challenges mainstream feminist philosophy for universalizing women's experiences.

Intersectional feminism offers a critical perspective through which one can analyze the reasons behind the disproportionate targeting of female journalists and activists in digital spaces in Pakistan. Their harassment emerges in the "intersection of patriarchy, political polarization, and cultural conservatism" and is not just the result of gender-based discrimination. For instance, politically motivated attacks that designate them as "traitors" or "foreign agents" coexist with gendered harassment of female journalists, including slut-shaming, sexual threats, and character assassination. Similar to this, campaigns that use misogynistic remarks along with charges of immorality, anti-religious attitude, or treason to the country frequently suppress female activists who speak out on issues like gender equality, democracy, or minority rights.

Additionally, this approach highlights the "differentiated nature of harassment." Intersecting types of abuse that combine sexism with cultural or religious intolerance are experienced by women from marginalized ethnic or religious communities, as well as those who support delicate subjects like LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, intersectionality aids in exposing how digital harassment functions as a "multifaceted tool of control" intended to delegitimize women's political positions, professional authority, and activist causes in addition to punishing them for their gender.

This paper argues that digital harassment in Pakistan should be viewed as a "systemic phenomenon" as opposed to an isolated set of online behaviors by using the intersectional feminism. In order to silence women's voices in public discourse, it is rooted in interlocking institutions of "patriarchy, authoritarian politics, and cultural norms." Understanding this complexity is crucial to creating effective plans to eradicate online harassment and safeguard women's involvement in politics and the digital sphere.

Fundamentally, feminist philosophy emphasizes how patriarchal power structures that uphold gender-based discrimination and subordination are oppressive. It recognizes that women are disproportionately affected by online harassment, which is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. This is because it reflects and reinforces social norms that aim to suppress and silence women's voices. In order to marginalize and frighten women who question traditional gender roles and norms, online harassment serves as an expression of patriarchal control, as this article demonstrates.

An intersectional approach within feminist theory further illuminates the complexity of the experiences faced by female journalists and activists in Pakistan. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals hold multiple intersecting identities, such as gender, race, class, and religion, which contribute to their experiences of oppression and privilege. In the context of online harassment, intersectionality helps to understand how different forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and religious bias, intersect and compound the harm inflicted upon these women. It underscores the importance of considering the intersecting dimensions of identity and power when analyzing the impact of online harassment.

Feminist theory also acknowledges the existence of a digital gender divide, which refers to the unequal access, representation, and participation of women in digital spaces. The digital gender divide encompasses issues such as limited online presence, digital literacy gaps, and gendered online norms that contribute to the vulnerability of female journalists and activists to online harassment. Through this lens, it is possible to examine how gendered power structures and discriminatory behaviors continue to exist in online spaces, restricting women's freedom of speech and increasing already-existing gender inequalities.

**Methods:**

This research is feminist in nature as it focuses on the narratives of the victim female journalist and activists of Pakistan and analyzes the experiences through intersectional approach through a feminist perspective. As a researcher I was curious to know how they perceive the nature, causal factors and sources behind the online harassment. I have chosen a qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) to give my respondents enough space to give their responses through open ended questions and later note down their responses regarding the nature, causal factors and sources behind the attacks. I did not choose the quantitative method because I was exploring the real life experiences of online harassment their opinions which is difficult to quantify.

This qualitative research approach involved the collection of the primary data through semi-structured in-depth ten interviews. The respondents of my research involved famous journalists and activists of Pakistan whose opinions were recorded with the consent of the respondents. Female journalists and Activists belonging to different parts of the country were included in the sample just to make sure the data reflects the accurate picture of the situation.

The interviewees are Respondent A (Socialist-Feminist, Political Leader from KPK, President of Women Democratic Front(WDF), General- Secretary of AWP and a leading member of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM).), Respondent B (Lawyer, Human Rights professional and news analyst, legal advisor for international commission of Jurist, Human Rights activist & columnist, Respondent D( Human Rights Activist, working for Human Rights Commission of Pakistan since 2007), Respondent H ( Director Mohsinini Resource Centre, Activist, Analyst on the issues of social Justice with special focus on Gender), Respondent G (Human Rights Activist), Respondent F ( Project coordinator Violence Against Women( VAW), Human Rights Defender), Respondent C (Journalist, Anchor, Trainer, communication specialist, writer, Rights activist and Advocacy Manager at Coalition for Women in Journalism (CFWIJ).), Respondent J (Joint Secretary National Press Club Islamabad), Respondent I (Journalist, Columnist & Photographer), Respondent E (Multimedia Journalist, Researcher).

The sample was designed in a way to include equal number of the respondents from both categories.

The interviews were conducted both in-person and on zoom depending upon the busy schedules of the respondents.

Along with primary sources, the data collection for this research also includes the secondary sources too. The opinion and experiment based research data has been collected through open-ended semi structured qualitative interviews using primary sources. The secondary research data has been collected using secondary sources such as books, news paper articles, reports in electronic media, research papers in journals, and documents from websites, etc. available on the topic.

**Data analysis and discussion**

- **Data analysis**

In the literature, there is a widespread belief that female journalists and activists all over the world face harassment when it comes to the use of social media whether it is Twitter, Face book, YouTube or Instagram. Online spaces are fraught with the abuse of women (Poland, 2016). This study examined the online harassment experiences faced by the female journalists and activists in Pakistan when it comes to their experiences at social media primarily on twitter. Women are

often considered as a weak entity of the society but the courage and determination while fighting for their cause, regardless of their background turns the table for them.

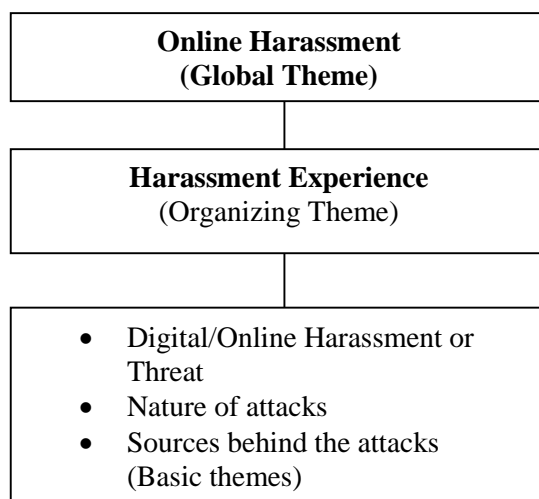
Online harassment promotes power disparities and gender-based discrimination that already exist in society. Threats of sexual assault, objectification, and sexist remarks are frequently used for female journalists and activists. This is a reflection of deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs and an effort to frighten and silence women who question societal norms or promote gender equality. The internet turns into a struggle for maintaining gender inequality and improving societal control over the words and bodies of women. As a result, there is a hostile environment that limits women's involvement and representation in public discourse, which has an effect on the quality of democratic participation as a whole and the realization of women's rights.

The effects of online harassment on Pakistani female journalists and activists go beyond the level of the individual and have an influence on the larger environment of free speech. Online harassment has the effect of suppressing not just individual voices, but also the diversity of viewpoints and the capacity of the media and civil society to hold the privileged answerable. When female journalists and activists are targeted, it sends a terrifying message to others who might worry about similar consequences, which can result in self-censorship and a restriction of the public sphere. This weakens the foundational values of a strong democracy and obstructs the advancement of human rights and gender equality.

- **Qualitative Thematic Analysis**

To analyze the collected research data, I have used "Thematic Analysis" method. It is widely used as a fundamental method for analyzing qualitative data. Thematic data analysis consists of six steps (Guest, et al., 2012). The first step is familiarization; first I familiarized myself with the data by reading it repeatedly. The second step is coding in which I generated initial codes. In the third step, I organized codes based on similarities to generate themes. In the fourth step, I reviewed the emerging themes. The fifth step included defining and naming the emerged themes. In the sixth step, the presentation and elucidation of themes then helped me answer my research question.

#### **Table of Thematic Analysis**





### Harassment experience

Harassment is a form of discrimination. It includes any unwanted behavior that offends or humiliates a person. When I asked my respondents about their experiences of online harassment, the data revealed the Basic Themes of 'digital/online harassment or threat', 'nature of the harassment', 'sources or factors behind the attacks'.

- **Digital/Online Harassment or Threat**

Because of widespread discrimination based on power dynamics, and deeply rooted gender biases, female journalists and activists are frequently attacked online. Online harassment, threats, doxxing (public publication of private information), and targeted attempts to discredit or suppress them are some of the different ways that harassment can occur. According to most respondents, the person whose voice/views are against the interest of the powerful entities is considered to be wrong and targeted online.

When you are working against the interests of the political entities of the state then there is a greater chance of the harassment as the powerful entities would try to silence your voice so as to avoid any resistance. Respondent B seconded this opinion about the online harassment faced by the entities that are being trolled online in the following words;

*"If you are vocal and you have a strong opinion about anything there is a greater possibility of the backlash online".*

Activism and journalism was very easy before the advancement of the digital age as people only had to defend themselves in the real world but as the time passed and with the rapid growth of internet the cyber crimes paved the way for the harassment of the journalists and activists as they use social media for the expression of their work.

Respondent A, when asked a similar question expressed her views as;

*"Politics was easy before the digital age. Phenomenon of social media was not common at that time like in 80's, because I as a political worker had not to defend myself for my political cause or political activities. After the information revolution the state and entities that were anti socialists made co-ordinate attacks".*

Social norms present in the society play an important role when it comes to the comparison between online and offline world. If we talk about the developed countries who believe in the equality of men and women when it comes to the point of basic human rights then we can say there is possibility of lesser harassment of women as compare to the societal norms present in the Pakistani society which is based on the patriarchal structures.

According to Respondent C Pakistani society does not allow women journalists and activists to express themselves even in the digital spaces. She stated;

*"Online spaces are like reflection of our offline thinking. Whenever a woman is vocal and she tries to express her opinion she is being trolled to stay quiet. People don't like opinionated woman both in online and offline spaces".*

It takes a great courage by an individual to harass someone in the real world but same person can harass someone easily when find a chance in the virtual world as he/she finds himself safe when harassing someone being anonymous or we can say that the anonymity provides them an invisible shield between them and the victim. Respondent D supported this argument in the following words;

*"Every individual (male or female) is at the risk of harassment as people believe that they are at the distance of a click only and can easily harass someone."*

She further stated;

*"Koi news ya Vlog ho gai tou aap ke kaam ko chor kar aap ke 'body part and make up' ko troll kia jata hai."*

Pakistani social media sphere has been a very 'hostile place' for woman journalist, activists and defenders. There are no ethics for the use of social media as people would not mind commenting anything without thinking that their comment can offend someone.

Respondent C shared similar opinion by saying;

*"One thing is to be noted that it is not necessary to be trolled because you write about some specific topic. People would simply come and comment on your DP, your appearance, your dress etc".*

Respondent F agrees with Respondent C as she shared her experience in these words;

*"Few years back, I posted a live video about Hazara Culture. Being the founder of Hazara Culture day I asked people to celebrate and join this day, a person living in Australia said in the comment 'Be Haya, Be Sharam, Dupata Theek Se Nahi Liya Hua'. People don't see what you do, they just don't bother to even think for once what and why they are saying".*

The majority of respondents agree that online harassment is more common when people voice strong opinions against authoritative figures, such as government political institutions. Online harassment is more likely to affect vocal people, and this is because strong forces are working to suppress differences and avoid resistance. The level of harassment that people, especially women, experience is greatly influenced by societal norms and cultural views. Online harassment of women may be less prevalent in Western nations that prioritize gender equality than in patriarchal settings like Pakistan.

Online anonymity offers a cover for harassers, making it easier for them to target and insult people without suffering consequences. Because of this anonymity, both men and women are at risk of harassment. People don't seem to think twice about posting insulting and unpleasant comments on social media in Pakistan, where there appears to be a lack of ethics when it comes to commenting. The personal experiences of the interviewees highlight the severity of harassment experienced by journalists and activists. Beyond attacking someone's opinions and beliefs, online harassment frequently targets one's physical appearance, clothing, or other unnecessary factors. Women journalists and activists in Pakistan struggle to express themselves in both online and offline spaces. Women's opinions are not properly appreciated, which results in harassment and attempts to silence them.

The growth of the digital age and the quick development of the internet have created new opportunities for online abuse and criminal behavior. Attacks of this nature target activists and journalists who use social media to share their work.

Based on the above debates by the respondents, it can be concluded that the data reflect a serious pattern of online harassment experienced by journalists and activists, especially women, who express opinions that are in conflict with established power structures or cultural norms. Social media and the growth of the digital age have made this issue worse by allowing trolls to target and suppress those who disagree. Social media's lack of ethics and respect for limits adds to the hostile environment and presents significant threats to free speech and safety in the virtual world. Now that I have demonstrated digital and online' harassment, the following Basic Theme, 'nature of harassment', will go into further detail.

- **Nature of harassment**

Online harassment refers to a broad variety of criminal behaviors and uncomfortable actions carried out on digital networks. Harassment online can have a multifaceted nature that frequently takes on numerous forms, each of which has negative effects. For instance, online harassment involves the purposeful and repetitive targeting of a person with insulting, hateful, or threatening comments. This kind of harassment is particularly prevalent on social networking sites, where offenders may humiliate and insult their victims through comments, direct messages, or public posts. Cyber bullies may become bolder as a result of the anonymity and cover offered by the internet, making it simpler for them to do emotional harm without suffering immediate consequences. Online harassment has many forms like sexual harassment, blackmailing, hate speech, stalking, identity theft and physical threats. When we talk about the nature of online harassment its severity varies person to person and situation to situation.

When I was in conversation with my respondents during the interview, all of them agreed with each other about the nature of the harassment they face. However there was some variation in their course of work after which they were harassed online. The reason of the online trolling can be political as my respondent B shared her experience in the following words;

*"There was a case relating to Kulbhushan Jadhav in the International Court of Justice. As I work for the very organization I received the judgment and I tweeted about it and gave my opinion in a tweet. The response was unexpected for me as my picture was morphed with Kulbhushan and I received 'rape' and 'death threats'".*

She said that this trolling can be called as harassment because it was very co-ordinated and organized campaign which never leaves you, it follows you everywhere Twitter, Email, Facebook, it has same organized pattern, word by word same abusive language.

Same views were shared by Respondent G When a similar question was asked, she responded;

*"Whenever we express ourselves, paid content start trolling against us and give us different titles as tumhary jaisi 'Gashtiyan' hoti hain jo is tarha ke kaam karti hain"*

Online harassment that targets a person or group based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other personal qualities is known as hate speech. The use of derogatory and biased language can contribute to a hostile and poisonous online environment, marginalizing and silencing specific populations. Hate speech is very common in online harassment; people will simply talk ill about you if they don't like you regardless of your work, gender, class. They will just comment on your post randomly without thinking about the feelings of the other person.

Respondent C agrees over this phenomenon and expressed her views like;

*"Harassment to me is a random phenomenon; people will come and abuse you for no reason. People have threatened me of 'physical assault', 'threats of rape' and 'kidnapping'".*

In a male dominated society like Pakistan character assassination of a woman is common in practice if someone wants to silence the voice of a prominent figure. Same attitude is being faced in the digital spaces by the female journalists in Pakistan; Respondent I agree over this phenomenon and expressed her views when conversing with me;

*"Waqas Goraya(V-logger) had launched the worst campaign against me. He used to say that female journalists take 'perks and privileges for their posts. He morphed my pictures and was later arrested by the law enforcement agency in Pakistan though he took asylum and these days he is living in Netherlands".*

Activism is not easy in a country like Pakistan where activists and journalists are vulnerable to online harassment. Political workers receive threats on daily basis which include death, rape and

physical assault. Life of a female activist is prone to online harassment due to their political journey as they use social media to defend their political cause online. During my conversation with Respondent A regarding this issue she stated;

*"I have been threatened to be shot in my face. They abused me as 'kanjari' and 'gashti', received morphed pictures and other threats like 'baari hai aap ki'".*

Respondents B and G recall incidents of trolling campaigns that were planned and carried out, followed them across different online platforms, and used foul language. The victims' mental and emotional health may be negatively impacted by this type of organized harassment since it may be so upsetting and irritating. Respondent C agrees that harassment can be random and without cause, showing that it is not necessarily connected to a particular act but can sometimes happen randomly, increasing the unpredictability and anxiety related to it.

The responses also stress the common, poisonous environment of hate speech in internet spaces, where people are assaulted regardless of their occupation, gender, or social status. In a male-dominated country like Pakistan, where attempts to suppress powerful individuals are widespread, female journalists and activists, like Respondents I and A, are subject to character assassination attempts. This emphasizes even more how vulnerable women are in online environments and the dangers they run while fighting for political reasons online. The cases of Respondent I and Waqas Goraya show how online abuse may result in real-world repercussions and legal repercussions for offenders.

The responses emphasize how severe and diverse online harassment is in Pakistan, specifically targeting individuals for their political beliefs, activism, and gender. It highlights the urgent need for safer online environments, more knowledge, and the adoption of practical solutions to stop online harassment and safeguard people's rights and well-being, especially women who frequently experience the worst of such abusive behaviors.

Based on the responses from my respondents it can be concluded that the nature of the harassment is usually the same like; hate speech, trolling, texting, sexual threats, blackmailing etc. In most cases, 'death and rape' threats are very common usually these threats are given to silence the voice of a person to forbid him/her from raising his/her voice against the privileged classes. Female journalists and activists in Pakistan are being harassed online due to the nature of their jobs. As they express their views on social media, people harass them, whether for political reasons or general hatred.

After demonstrating the nature of the harassment a female journalist or activist faced, the following Basic Theme, 'sources or factors behind the attacks' will be analyzed in greater depth in the next section.

- **Sources and factors behind the attacks**

Harasser is someone who is involved in harassment to someone. He/She can be anonymous or known to the person being harassed, or he/she can be hired by someone due to political or personal reason for the said cause. When we talk about harassment to journalists and activists we usually refer to the organized campaign by some troll army who is given special task to harass the individual to silence the voice of individual. The integration of cultural, sociological and the political factors in Pakistan are responsible for the online harassment of female journalists and activists.

During my interviews many respondents shared their experiences and expressed their opinions about this issue. They highlighted the factors involved behind the attacks like political, gender discrimination, religious extremism and class.

Respondent B shed light on the political factors behind the attacks while referring to the Kulbhushan Jadhav case in the following words;

*"In the beginning, when the trolling started against me on twitter, I didn't know many people like Dr Sheren Mazari, Malika Bukhari and Dr Shehbaz Gil. They accused me as if I am on agenda, when this statement came out different media persons also followed the trend so as PTI troll army, lawyers and other politicians".*

According to her all this campaign was started against her just to silence her.

Another respondent Respondent G highlighted the 'class' factor behind the harassment to the activist, as to her activists are harassed to silence their voices or they are threatened just to forbid them working against a specific cause.

She expressed her experience as;

*"Once there was case in Jhal Maghsi in which Nadir Maghsi had abducted a minor girl and tortured her for about three months. Her family approached me and when I tried to support her, we were being threatened and the victim's family had to bear the consequences as their houses were bulldozed. I was being threatened like 'Do you know you are a woman, wherever you go you will be followed'".*

Respondent A agrees with Respondent G and stated that it is very difficult for activists to guard their struggle for their cause, as after the information revolution the state and entities who were anti socialists made co-ordinate attacks.

She stated;

*"I am related to 'Socialist Movement' so they declared socialists as 'kufaar'. I belong to 'Pushtoon Nationalist Movement' and they called pashtoon nationalist as 'ghadar', I am a 'Feminist' as well and after the rise of feminist movement the anti-feminism entities blamed us for 'blasphemous acts'".*

Religious extremism is also another factor behind the online harassment to female journalists and activists. If a female journalists or an activist dares to work on a sensitive issue then she can face the consequence in the form of harassment by religious extremist groups as well. In an unpredictable political environment, female journalists and activists who cover delicate subjects like religious extremism and violations of human rights risk being harassed online. As a tool to sabotage these women's credibility and silence their voices, those with interest in holding onto position or authority may try to harass and discredit them. Similar views were shared by my Respondent E who, when asked in this regard shared her experience in the following words;

*"After the murder of Sabeen Mehmood, I expressed my views online and was trolled by people, the attack was so organized that the screenshots of my post were shared on the wall of 'Lashkar-e-Jhangvi' and 'Sipah-e-Sahaba'. It was mainly done to silence us because we were agitating against the murder of Sabeen and the state did not want us to point our fingers to the so called establishment of the country".*

Respondent A when asked a similar question responded in detail and shared her experience in the following words;

*"We have to fight to secure/guard the struggle we do for our cause on social media. As the state has given the authority to politicize the religion against the feminist, so mainstream media is also*

*involved in sabotaging our cause because the religious scholars will claim on the mainstream media that these so called feminists are the cause of all 'behayai' in the society".*

Online harassment to the activists or journalists is also carried out by the privileged classes in the society, people belonging to those classes take advantages and make use of their higher positions in the society. If a crime is done by someone from the elite class then all the administration tries to provide shelter to him/her. My Respondent D agrees to this argument by sharing her experience in the following words;

*"Once I was given the task to bring a story by my mentor Matiullah Jaan, I came up with a story on my friend journalist Shahina Shahin who was murdered in 2020 due to breaking the taboos. I talked to the investigative officer, and came to know that a high profile person was involved in the matter and it was not an easy task to take his name, so when I came up with the story I was threatened and asked that why I highlighted the story as the administration did not want to involve that person".*

Another important factor that emerged after the analysis of the data related to online harassment faced by the female journalists and activists is the prevalence of the gendered norms in the society. Pakistan, like many other countries, struggles with deeply rooted patriarchal norms and gender inequity. Women's rights activists who speak out against established gender norms may experience harsh criticism from those who want to keep things as they are. Women in these positions are viewed as threats to the existing power structures by the patriarchal point of view, which motivates online harassment campaigns aimed at silencing or discrediting them. Gender discrimination is very high in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. People simply don't like the vocal women whether it is in the real world or in the virtual one and they try to suppress their voices by trolling them online or offline. Similar views were shared by My Respondent I who referred to her online harassment experience by Waqas Goraya and stated;

*"He was not known to me, he actually works against those ladies who work for the positive image of the country. He works against all the pro Pakistani females who are getting prominent and are working on the defense issues".*

The above responses shed light on the numerous causes of online abuse directed towards Pakistani female journalists and activists. The interviews with various responders provided insight into the level of complexity and variation in these attacks. The respondents mentioned situations in which they were accused of having hidden intentions or attacked by troll armies and politicians connected with particular ideology. Political issues play a big role in the harassment campaigns. It is clear that internet harassment is used to silence critics and suppress opposing views, especially in situations involving sensitive topics or agitation against influential people or organizations. This demonstrates how the internet is being used as a weapon to silence free expression and frighten individuals who call for justice or change.

The analysis of the responses shows that other elements, such as gender discrimination and religious fanaticism, play a role in the harassment of journalists and activists. Religious extremist groups and people that want to impose their conservative values and dominate the narrative especially target female journalists and activists, subjecting them to threats, abuse, and character assassination. In a patriarchal country like Pakistan, gendered norms are common, and women face criticism for speaking up and becoming prominent in their areas, particularly when acting so in opposition to traditional values or calling for social and political reform. The data also suggests the role of privileged groups in protecting criminals, making it challenging for journalists

to report on such situations without coming under threats or pressure from people in authoritative positions.

Based on the discussion with my respondents it can be concluded that the factors involved behind the attacks like political, gender discrimination, religious extremism and class are responsible for the online harassment to female journalists and activists of Pakistan in which usually the harasser is unknown to the victim as he/she feel secure and strengthen when hidden at the other side of the screen. Sometimes people harass the other person maybe because of the personal disliking and by using hate speech the harasser may feel pleasure.

Journalism and activism are fields where people involved are prone to threats because of their work as well. If you work for the entity in power or you work against the interest of the power dynamics of the state then there is always a chance to be trolled as social media is not a neutral space. What happens in the society is reflected on social media no matter if it is Twitter, Facebook or other social media.

- **Discussion**

The data emphasizes the need to examine online harassment of Pakistani women journalists and activists at the intersections of patriarchy, political power, class privilege, and religious extremism rather than focusing entirely on gender. Feminist intersectionality emphasizes how women who have multiple identities are subjected to various forms of oppression and discrimination, which in online contexts takes the form of gendered violence.

According to the first theme, "Digital/Online Harassment or Threat," women who speak out in public, particularly those who question traditional narratives, are harassed not only because they are female but also because they oppose political and patriarchal power structures. Their professional identities and exposure already challenge cultural norms that dictate women should be quiet and modest. Patriarchal aggression is further facilitated by online anonymity, which gives offenders the power to silence women without facing consequences. Here, women who disagree with expected gender roles are subjected to harassment as a disciplinary measure to re-establish "male and institutional dominance."

Sexual threats, rape threats, and character assassination are examples of the extremely gendered nature of online harassment, as demonstrated by the second theme, "Nature of Harassment." Patriarchal logics that correlate women's morality and respectability with honour in the home and community are the foundation of these types of abuse. At the intersection of women's professional duties, political criticisms, and class positions, these attacks bear the burden of "gendered cultural norms." For example, activists opposing religious extremism are targeted at the nexus of gender and intellectual resistance, while female journalists are assaulted as women and as professionals who work in public spaces. Here, the silencing impact is profoundly "gendered, classed, and politicized" rather than neutral.

The third subject, "Sources and Factors behind the Attacks," illustrates how harassment is a part of "coordinated campaigns" run by troll armies, political actors, and extremist organizations rather than occurring at random. The way power is perpetuated in digital spaces is reflected in this systematic targeting: women who challenge the status quo whether by criticising patriarchal norms, governmental institutions, or religious extremism are subjected to more severe attacks. Intersectionally, women's "gender, political stance, professional status, and perceived rejection of cultural norms" all have an impact on harassment. Online harassment thus turns into a political

tool that upholds gender, class, and ideological hierarchies while reiterating masculine dominance and suppressing opposition.

According to intersectional feminist theory, these findings demonstrate that online harassment is a "structural form of gender-based violence" with roots in patriarchal, political, and religious power dynamics rather than merely being an isolated or individual experience. Because of their gender, line of work, and public prominence, female journalists and activists are in a particularly vulnerable position at the nexus of these forces.

In the end, an intersectional feminist perspective shows that remedies need to be more than just rules. Without addressing the "deeply entrenched patriarchal and political structures" which promote online violence, legal changes and platform accountability are vital but insufficient. Effective interventions must safeguard women's freedom to free expression in digital environments while also taking into consideration the intersecting vulnerabilities based on their "gender, profession, political identity, and social class."

- **Conclusion**

The data drawn from the real-life experiences of Pakistani female journalists and activists indicates that online harassment is not an isolated or random occurrence; it is, in fact, a systemic and structural manifestation of gender-based violence. It is evident from an intersectional feminist perspective that these women experience harassment that is not only based on their gender. Rather, it arises at the nexus of "religious extremism, class privilege, political power dynamics, and patriarchal norms," all of which influence how women are silenced and targeted in digital spaces.

According to the analysis, harassment serves as a "disciplinary mechanism" intended to re-establish authority over women who question conventional hierarchies. Threats, insults, and intimidation campaigns are used against women who express their opinions online, particularly when they challenge patriarchal cultural norms or political structures. Sexualised threats and character assassination are examples of highly gendered types of harassment that reflect broader cultural concerns about women's participation in public life and the perceived disruption of established gender norms. These attacks are intersectionally further influenced by class and professional identity: activists opposing political or religious extremism face increased risks at the intersection of gender and ideology, while female journalists are delegitimised as both women and professionals.

The sources of harassment also demonstrate how organised and political it is. Intentionally using harassment as a "political weapon," troll armies, political opponents, and extreme groups seek to silence specific women as well as suppress alternative voices and uphold broader structures of injustice. This reveals how existing hierarchies of "gender, class, and political power" are replicated and strengthened on digital platforms, which were formerly neutral spaces for free, speech.

Such harassment has repercussions that go well beyond the internet. The toll on one's emotions, mental health, and career highlights how urgently policy and practice need to be reconsidered. However, "legal reforms and social media regulations alone will not suffice," as the intersectional study emphasises. Interventions possess the risk of becoming surface-level if they don't address the entrenched patriarchal, political, and religious systems that justify this kind of abuse. In order to guarantee that women's safety and freedom of expression are not threatened by their gender,



occupation, political beliefs, or social class, sustainable solutions must acknowledge and address the "intersecting vulnerabilities" that they face.

Overall, the data emphasizes that online harassment is a "symptom and a tool of systemic inequality." An intersectional feminist approach calls for a holistic response, one that questions systemic power dynamics, creates digital spaces that are safer and more welcoming, and upholds women's freedom to fully engage in public and political life without worrying about consequences. Significant progress in removing the digital barriers that silence women and uphold inequality can only be achieved by addressing these interlocking aspects of oppression.

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