

Harassment of Women in Pakistan: Analyzing Factors Influencing Women's Digital Safety.

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Abstract:

Harassment has emerged as a critical threat to women's participation in workplaces and digital spaces globally. In Pakistan, rapid internet penetration, smartphone proliferation, and misuse of social media through fake identities have expanded opportunities for women in education, employment, and civic engagement while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV). Forms of TFGBV including cyberstalking, cyberbullying, online threats, identity theft, image-based abuse, non-consensual dissemination of intimate content, and coordinated harassment campaigns are rising. Despite PECA 2016, digital abuse continues to undermine women's psychological well-being, confidence, freedom of expression, and public contribution. This study examines factors influencing women's online safety in Pakistan through social, cultural, technological, legal, and institutional lenses. Using qualitative desk research of National Police Bureau data, Ministry of Human Rights reports, Digital Rights Foundation helpline data 2022-2025, FIA cybercrime statistics, Federal Ombudsperson records, and academic literature, the study analyzes the multidimensional nature of digital harassment. Findings show 173,367 cases of violence against women registered 2021-2024 with a 101% increase over four years. Cyber harassment complaints rose from 2,695 in 2022 to 3,171 in 2024. Women in journalism, politics, activism, and public advocacy face disproportionate abuse. While PECA 2016 provides legal recourse, implementation gaps, low conviction rates below 2.5%, institutional capacity constraints, and limited public awareness reduce effectiveness. Emerging threats from AI, deepfakes, and automated abuse compound risks. The study concludes that improving women's digital safety requires multidimensional action: stronger legal enforcement, enhanced digital literacy, platform accountability, victim support mechanisms, gender-sensitive policymaking, and collaboration among government, civil society, educational institutions, and technology companies. This research contributes to TFGBV scholarship and offers evidence-based recommendations for safer digital environments in Pakistan.

Keywords: Digital Harassment, Women's Online Safety, TFGBV, Cyber Harassment, Digital Rights, Gender Equality, Pakistan, Cybercrime, Social Media

Introduction:

Global social, economic, and political connections have changed as a result of digital technologies. Artificial intelligence, social media, mobile communication, and the growth of the internet have all produced previously unheard-of chances for civic engagement, education,

and communication. (Williams 2025). This digital transformation made it possible for Pakistani women to engage more in activism, journalism, entrepreneurship, and political discourse. (Hngokchai 2025). But these developments also made it possible for new kinds of violence. Acts against women and girls that are perpetrated, aided, or exacerbated by digital technologies are referred to as TFGBV. This covers identity theft, image-based abuse, doxing, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and organized harassment campaigns. (Gulati 2025). Such practices violate individual rights and undermine democratic participation and gender equality. The context of Pakistan is crucial. With more than 50 million TikTok users and extensive usage of Facebook and WhatsApp, digital platforms provide women with visibility and revenue, especially considering that less than 25% of them are employed. (Mmari 2025). However, cyberstalking, abusive messaging, false profiles, blackmail, and non-consensual image sharing are commonplace for women. These mistreatments are a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal standards that control women's conduct and limit their ability to participate in public life. (Dhesi, 2025).

Problem Statement:

In Pakistan, women now have more access to public areas, work, and education because to digital expansion. (Majid & Mustafa 2022). TFGBV and digital harassment both substantially grew at the same time. On social media, women experience threats, impersonation, cyberstalking, and image-based abuse. Despite the existence of PECA 2016 and the FIA's Cyber Crime Wing, harassment continues. Social stigma, victim-blaming, worries about one's family's reputation, ignorance of reporting procedures, and a lack of faith in institutions are the main causes of underreporting. As a result, the majority of cases are still unrecorded. The problem is made worse by patriarchal systems. Targeted harassment is used to suppress women who express political views, support gender equality, or have a prominent online presence. (Haciyakupoglu 2022). AI and deepfakes are examples of emerging technologies that pose concerns that are not sufficiently addressed by existing legal systems.

Research Gap & Objectives:

Existing studies often examine cyber harassment, legal frameworks, or socio-cultural factors in isolation. Limited research integrates these dimensions to analyze women's online safety in Pakistan comprehensively. This study fills that gap.

Objectives:

1. Examine prevalence and nature of digital harassment against women 2021-2025
2. Identify socio-cultural factors driving online harassment
3. Analyze interaction between patriarchal structures and TFGBV
4. Evaluate effectiveness of PECA 2016 and institutional responses
5. Propose evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice

Methodology:

Qualitative desk research using:

1. Government sources: Ministry of Human Rights data to National Assembly, National Police Bureau 2021-2024
2. Cybercrime data: Digital Rights Foundation Helpline Reports 2022-2025, FIA Cybercrime Wing statistics
3. Institutional data: Federal Ombudsperson 2023-2024, Punjab Ombudsperson 2021-2025

4. Academic literature: Feminist theory, TFGBV frameworks, Citron 2014, Jane 2017, Mantilla 2015
5. Media reports: Dawn, Express Tribune, Lokmat Times case documentation 2024-2025

Literature Review:

Conceptual Perspectives.

Digital harassment involves harmful conduct via digital technologies to intimidate or humiliate. Citron 2014 emphasizes its permanence, scalability, and visibility compared to offline harassment. Jane 2017 documents gendered abuse focusing on sexuality and appearance. Mantilla 2015's "gendertrolling" concept explains coordinated attacks on women challenging gender norms.

6.2 TFGBV Global Context.

UN Women and Amnesty International confirm women face higher online abuse, especially in public roles. The "silencing effect" describes women withdrawing from digital spaces due to persistent abuse, reducing democratic participation.

6.3 South Asian Context.

Rapid tech growth alongside patriarchal norms makes South Asia vulnerable. Honor and family reputation norms intensify stigma from image-based abuse. Underreporting is common due to fear of social consequences.

6.4 Pakistani Context.

Studies show Pakistani women face cyberstalking, impersonation, blackmail, and threats. Psychological impacts include anxiety and reduced online participation. Women who challenge norms or maintain visibility are disproportionately targeted.

Findings & Analysis.

7.1 Published Data 2021-2025.

Violence overall: Ministry of Human Rights reported 173,367 VAW cases 2021-2024. Yearly rise: 30,757 → 61,997. Harassment-specific: 445 physical, 182 workplace sexual harassment. Digital harassment: DRF 2024 recorded 3,171 TFGBV complaints, 2,741 cyber harassment. Women filed 1,772 complaints. DRF 2025: 3,012 complaints + 776 follow-ups, avg 250/month. Cumulative since 2016: 23,032 complaints. FIA: 260 daily complaints, 160,000 in 3 years, 22,300 harassment cases 2020-2023. Official data: 1.8M women cybercrime victims 2020-2025, 80% of 2.7M complaints by women/children, only 225 convictions. Workplace/University: Federal Ombudsperson received 1,300+ complaints in 10 months 2025, 73% resolved. Punjab Ombudsperson: 6,654 cases 2021-2024; 1,950 in first 5 months 2025 = 245% rise. HEC: 472 university cases, 53 faculty + 19 students expelled.

7.2 Cases Leading to Physical Violence.

1. Sana Yousuf: June 2024, Karachi. 17-year-old TikToker with 1M followers murdered by man whose advances she rejected
2. Qandeel Baloch: 2016 honour killing by brother after online visibility
3. Lahore PSL: 2022, guards attempted rape near Gaddafi Stadium
4. Sargodha: Aug 2025, husband chopped off wife's leg over dispute
5. Bahawalnagar: Woman chained 12 years by father/brother after forced divorce

7.3 Main Reasons & Factors.

1. Patriarchal norms: Control over mobility and expression
2. Weak enforcement: Conviction rate <2.5% for GBV. Islamabad recorded 0% convictions in 373 VAW cases Jan-Jun 2025
3. Digital literacy gap: 50M TikTok users but limited safety awareness
4. Power imbalance: Harassers often 40+ authority figures

5. Stigma: Cases withdrawn due to family pressure
6. Technology abuse: Deepfakes targeted 6% of women journalists; DRF 2025 recorded 500 sextortion cases

7.4 Trend: Rise or Decline.

Rising:

1. VAW +101% 2021-2024
2. GBV Jan-Nov 2025: 6,543 vs 5,253 in 2024 = +25% YoY
3. Cyber harassment 2,695 → 3,171 → 3,012 2022-2025
4. Punjab workplace +245% in 5 months 2025
5. Minors: DRF cases up 51% 2024, 28% 2025

Rise reflects both more incidents and increased reporting via helplines.

7.5 Vulnerable Spaces & Relatives.

High-risk:

1. Home: 60% of GBV occurs at home. 297 domestic violence complaints Karachi Jan-Apr 2025
2. Workplace/Education: Education, Health, Police, Transport sectors report most cases
3. Public/Transport: Street harassment common
4. Digital: TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook primary platforms. 40% women report online harassment.

Relatives: Not safe. 12% rape cases involve husbands. Domestic violence 9,799 cases 2021-2024. Honour killings 1,553 deaths.

7.6 Harassment vs Blackmailing vs Violence.

Harassment: Unwanted conduct creating hostile environment. Legal basis: Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2010 + PPC Section 509.

Blackmailing/Sextortion: Threat to release private content. DRF 2025: 500 cases. PECA Sections 21, 24.

Violence: Physical harm. Includes beating 8,799 cases, murder 5,948 cases, acid attacks 127 cases 2021-2024.

7.7 Factors Encouraging Harassment.

1. Impunity: 96% women got no justice. Conviction <0.3% nationwide 2025
2. Smartphone/fake ID misuse: Easy creation of fake profiles
3. PECA misuse: Used to silence victims reporting abuse
4. Cultural norms: Victim-blaming and “family honour”
5. Platform gaps: Uneven content moderation

7.8 Male Victims.

Federal Ombudsperson Jul 2023-Jun 2024: 823 cases, 593 women, 230 men = 28% male. DRF 2025: Men 1,279 vs Women 1,709 complaints. Men face more financial fraud; women more sexualized abuse.

7.9 False/Fake Claims.

No institutional data compiled. FIA: 22,300 harassment complaints 2020-2023 with no “false” breakdown. Global research estimates 2-10% false reports, but Pakistan-specific data unavailable. Underreporting is the larger issue.

7.10 Recommendations.

Legal/Institutional: Fill vacant Ombudsperson posts; strengthen PECA implementation; create one-window reporting.

Digital: Expand digital literacy; enforce platform accountability.

Social: Independent harassment committees; more shelter homes; awareness campaigns challenging gender stereotypes.

8. Discussion:

Results show that digital harassment is a reflection of larger social injustices that are replicated online. Digital tools are used by patriarchal structures to control women and limit their freedom of expression. Increased events and reporting are indicated by the 245% increase in workplace complaints and the 101% increase in VAW. There are legal frameworks, however they are not successfully implemented. Although cyberstalking is illegal under PECA 2016, the FIA still has 50,000 outstanding complaints out of 94,000 in 2020. Impunity is made possible by conviction rates below 2.5%. Regulation of AI and deepfake risks is urgently needed. Although it is still rare, male victimization does occur. Policy is hampered by the absence of false claim data, but underreporting is more problematic than false reporting.

9. Conclusion:

Women's engagement in Pakistani internet platforms is severely hampered by digital abuse. Opportunities and new TFGBV risks were brought about by the rapid proliferation of technology. Analysis reveals that harassment is multifaceted and influenced by institutional, legal, cultural, social, and technical elements. Digital experiences are influenced by patriarchal institutions; online harassment is a reflection of offline discrimination. Abuse of visible women is more common. Although access inequalities make rural areas more vulnerable, digital literacy is protective. Legislative change regarding AI and deepfakes, institutional capacity building, digital literacy initiatives, victim assistance, platform responsibility, and public awareness are all necessary for safer digital environments. Collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders is necessary for long-lasting transformation.

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