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Gendered Online Harassment of Female Journalists in Digital Spaces in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered online harassment faced by female journalists in Pakistan's digital media landscape. The objective of this study was to identify the forms of online harassment and abuse that female journalists face daily, their emotional and professional impact, and to assess the effectiveness of existing legal mechanisms and their responses. A qualitative research methodology was used; data were collected through purposive sampling by conducting ten semi-structured interviews with female journalists across the provinces of Pakistan. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis to find recurring patterns and to explore shared experiences. The findings of this study show that gendered online harassment is widespread across digital platforms and beats. Participants shared their experiences of having sexualized comments, rape threats, body shaming, doxing, and political trolling as common ones, and honor-based harassment. This harassment also had a serious effect on their mental health and professional lives, including anxiety, insomnia, fear of visibility, self-censorship, reduction of social media use, and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from journalism. Journalists from minority identities and backward regions faced more severe harassment because of cultural and honor-based norms. The conclusion states that gendered online harassment is a structural problem, which reflects patriarchal authority and male-dominated fields. Weak newsroom policies and responses, their ineffectiveness, and the operational inadequacy of the PECA Act further increase women's vulnerability. Strong legal enforcement, institutional accountability, and digital safety measures, especially digital safety training should be made compulsory to ensure a free press and the protection of female journalists.

Keywords: Gender, Online Harassment, Journalists, Digital Spaces, Pakistan

Introduction

Gendered online harassment of female journalists has emerged as a pervasive and recurrent phenomenon in today's digital world. It has posed serious threats to the freedom of expression and the professional integrity of female journalists. Gendered online harassment often refers to actions of abuse towards a person based on his/her gender, and it has been a widely prevalent phenomenon in the global media landscape, including Pakistan. The targeted sexist comments and threats of violence, body-shaming, doxing, and constant cyber stalking of female journalists have been witnessed by Amnesty International

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(Amnesty International, 2018). In this context, a report by Digital Rights Foundation reveals that during the 2024 elections in Pakistan, 42 out of 225 digital posts contained misogynistic verbal attacks directly targeted at female journalists. Such discourses have become an accepted norm across online platforms in Pakistan. Resultantly, many women have restricted themselves to raising voices on different issues and have even been forced to permanently quit the profession of Journalism (Jamil, 2020). A global study conducted by UNESCO (The Chilling, 2021b) shows that one out of seven women journalists across the world has been a victim of online violence, including sexualized threats and defamation. According to the International Federation of Journalists (2021), online abuse suppresses the voice of women, reduces the diversity of the press, and undermines democratic discourse.

This research aims to explore the effects of gendered online harassment on female journalists of Pakistan and how the abuse influences their mental health, participation in work, and freedom of expression. Harassment is not an isolated act; it is a structural and universal reality within the professional lives of women. The most reported forms of harassment are the sexualized insults, threats of rape, objectification, doxing, and ethnic/sectarian slurs. Several journalists have experienced telephonic harassment and intimidation in person due to online-leaked personal information. Other political journalists have also been trolled during the 2018 and 2024 elections, which effectively serves as the silencing of critical female voices in online spaces. Lumsden and Morgan (2017) argue that the digital environment reproduces the hierarchies of patriarchy, punishing women journalists with humiliation and fear. Their credibility is not only insulted by the abuse, but their dignity and their sense of security are also breached.

The psychological and professional cost of this perpetrated aggression is huge. Women have reported increased anxiety, paranoia, sleeplessness, and emotional fatigue. Most of them cut their social media usage, write on non-controversial matters, or fully dropped journalism. These experiences mirror the chilling effect described by UNESCO (2018), where women are deterred by the presence of online harassment from engaging in any of the publicly accessible debates, thus making journalism less diverse in terms of voices and less effective in promoting democratic dialogues. One of the significant aspects emerging from existing literature is that harassment is intersectional. Women, especially in the minority regions and conservative areas, experienced compounded abuse, which was a combination of gendered hate with ethnic and cultural policing. Gender-based online harassment in Pakistan is interrelated with regional, cultural, and religious notions that aim at regulating the visibility of women on the internet and offline. Then the lack of institutional and legal protection is now equally disquieting. Freelancers, especially, were not very safe, since there was no organizational support, reporting line or anyone backing them up. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA, 2016) was aimed at solving cyber harassment, but most of the participants believed that it was irrelevant or abused.

This institutional negligence strengthens the nature of abuse in the Pakistani media sector, where women must endure the abuse silently instead of pursuing justice and help. Social media has turned into a place of control, aggression, and isolation instead of empowering female journalists. All this results in a virtual world in which women are perpetually made to make the difficult decision between professional and personal security. Present research in this regard intends to unfold the intersection of gender, technology, and culture in the digital media in Pakistan. It brings to the limelight the pressing importance of effective institutional responses, such as PECA, newsroom safety, and a psychosocial support system, and their implementations on the subject matter. The online harassment issue has expanded globally, and research gaps are seen regarding the understanding of the nature of digital harassment experienced by Pakistani female journalists. Cyber harassment is generally discussed, but limited data is available about women who are targeted in digital spaces. The existing research did not cover all the aspects, such as professional, psychological, and safety-related issues. The studies lack empirical evidence and analyses of the patriarchal attitudes, legal framework, and dynamics of the workplace. Therefore, it is recommended to explore the issue holistically to identify the forms and impact of cyber harassment of women in media and journalism fields in Pakistan (Iqbal, Faizal & Chinnasamy, 2024).

Research Objectives

1. To examine the nature and forms of gendered online harassment experienced by female journalists in Pakistan across different digital platforms.
2. To understand how online harassment affects the mental health and emotional well-being of female journalists.
3. To analyze the coping strategies adopted by female journalists in Pakistan when dealing with online harassment through semi-structured interviews.
4. To explore the personal experiences of female journalists in Pakistan who have faced online harassment.

Research Questions

1. What are the prevalences, patterns, and sources of gendered online harassment faced by female journalists in Pakistan, and how do they experience demographic factors such as ethnicity and religion?
2. How do existing legal frameworks, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), and other institutional policies in media organizations, impact the ability of female journalists in Pakistan to address gendered online harassment, and what are the barriers that prevent effective implementation?

Significance of the Study

This study has focused strongly on the depiction and negotiation of gendered experiences within South Asia. By using an intersectional approach, it digs deep into the complexities of representing gender, class, and cultural norms. It provides context-specific perspectives and enriches feminist discourse and media studies, along with the understanding of power and social dynamics. Online harassment of women journalists in Pakistan is significant to study because it raises several important questions with reference to freedom of the press, gender equality, and democratic expression. This issue offers more challenges in the national context, where a well-established patriarchy and political clashes tend to exacerbate the situation in the country. This study brings to light an issue that is not fully addressed: the sexist maltreatment that women in the media go through when working their jobs. Women journalists are extremely disadvantaged by the cultural and political pressure in an environment where expressing their opinions freely can be risky. This study involves an analysis of the impact of online violence on the mental well-being, safety, and nature of stories reaching people. It expands the existing body of literature by studying the topics that remained unexplored, including the emotional cost of the issue over time, the role of newsroom policies, and the experience of women in the rural regions of the nation.

Review of the Literature

The development of digital communication technologies has definitely offered more opportunities to journalists around the world, yet it has brought new vulnerability, especially to women. Women, especially journalists, are becoming more subject to gender-based abuse online, such as harassment and defamation, doxing, and even physical threats. The available literature and international descriptions of the same topic confirm that this type of harassment affects freedom of the press, silences the voices of women, and adds to their psychological and professional burdens. A few international studies have reported the alarming rate of internet violence against women journalists. According to UNESCO (2021a) and the International Centre of Journalists (ICFJ), about 73 per cent of women journalists all over the globe have endured web-based violence, such as sexual threats, doxing, and hate campaigns (Posetti et al., 2022). Such attacks can often escalate to offline bullying, and this demonstrates the increased grey area between the digital and physical damages. At the same time, in a report by Amnesty International (2018), Troll Patrol, women in the public domain, particularly journalists, are perceived to face abuse that targets and attempts to destroy their speech and threatens them (Amnesty International, 2020).

This effect, according to researchers, is what they call technology-mediated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which is one of the forms of patriarchal dominations, and is applied to the digital realm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Jane (2014) coined the term gendered cyber

hate to illustrate that misogynistic aggression on the Internet is an imitation of cultural patterns of silencing and exclusion. These studies provide grounds to acknowledge the international prevalence of digital misogyny that also encapsulates the lives of women journalists in Pakistan. According to multiple studies, the psychological and professional effects of digital harassment are catastrophic. Ferrier (2021) and Chen et al. (2018) discovered that the continuous experience of threats and humiliation leads to anxiety and fear in women journalists as well as to the loss of confidence. Others resort to self-censorship in order not to get in trouble or even be completely out of the online game forever. The phenomenon aligns with the chilling effect outlined by UNESCO (2018), in which the aggression limits the freedom of speech and democracy of women to engage in the debate. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is the main concept in explaining how big social identities, including gender, ethnicity, religion, and geography, influence the vulnerability of women to online violence. In South Asian studies, including Jamil (2020) and Sheikh et al. (2024), it was noted that female journalists of minority groups or rural origins face increased discrimination, including misogynistic, cultural, and sectarian.

Most recent literature identifies political polarization as a go-to thing for online harassment. According to Gardiner et al. (2016) and Amnesty International (2018), women who express their opinions in politics are often attacked in organized trolling campaigns. The same tendency is observed by Ahmad (2021) and Li et al. (2025) in Pakistan. According to their findings, the female reporters commenting on political parties or sharing their views in elections are abused through organized means, especially via Twitter and Facebook. During the 2018 general elections, journalists who reported on governance or the elections received threats of rape and were accused of being biased in politics. The violence was not spontaneous, but systematic, as it demonstrated the attempts to downgrade the professionalism of women and reject political commentators strongly. The results affirm that digital harassment acts as an instrument of political influence, contributing to the silencing of women in polarized media spaces (Posetti, 2017).

As Jane (2020) and Lumsden (2019) note, online harassment is encouraged when female journalists start believing that being abused often is a part of their job. This internalization strengthens silence and desensitization and makes the harassment unchallenged in the end. Normalization is noted as one of the most serious threats of ongoing digital hostility in the UNESCO-ICFJ study (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022), which destroys both institutional responsibility and personal strength. The gaps in the literature are also institutionally and legally expressed to shield women journalists against digital abuse. PECA (2016) was the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, which was developed in response to cyber harassment in Pakistan. Some research papers state that the implementation of the law is still poor and, most of the time, completely useless. According to the annual report by the Digital Rights Foundation (2021), there is a lack of understanding of the legal procedures and slowness in readdressing the situation.

Jamil (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2020) also add that PECA is occasionally abused to diminish the freedom of speech, instead of for victim protection. The previous literature speaks of a very crucial detail: the boundary between internet and offline violence is nearly blurred now. UNESCO (2021a) and Chen et al. (2018) conclude that Internet abuse frequently leads to the actual stalking, physical threats, or assaults of the relative and themselves. In Pakistan, according to the Digital Rights Foundation (2023), 60 per cent of the women who experienced online harassment also received threats, either by phone or physical threat. Based on the international and country-wide studies, it can be proven that gendered online harassment has a direct negative impact on press freedom and democracy. According to Toor (2020), society misses the crucial views of women that are essential in reporting evenly when women journalists censor themselves or quit altogether. Posetti et al. (2022) refer to this as a democratic deficit where harassment reduces the variety of voices that inform the masses. Although the already existing literature on the topic of online harassment is immense and global, there are limited studies on the qualitative nature of the same in Pakistan. Previous local research primarily measured harassment or evaluated the content of social media, which presented a limited understanding of women's experiences but lacked a comprehensive insight. This gap is addressed in the current study through firsthand reports of ten Pakistani women journalists from different provinces and media outlets.

Several studies apply feminist theoretical perspectives to the topic of gendered online harassment. The following theories appeared to be the most appropriate regarding this research. Cyber feminist theory examines the convergence of gender and technology in digital space, with both the enabling and constraining aspects of the internet for women (Toto & Scarinci, 2021). It claims that, as much as digital platforms can provide women with voice and visibility, they can also reproduce many new forms of patriarchal control, causing online harassment and surveillance. Through this, cyber feminism provides an insight into how virtual persecution is a technological fallout that keeps the gender-related violence alive online (Javed, 2024). It emphasizes the necessity of skeptically evaluating the way Pakistani female journalists negotiate such spaces, where they simultaneously act as content creators and are also subject to frequent abuse. Intersectionality theory was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, which makes us understand the various aspects of identity, i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc, combining and influencing the unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. It demonstrates the impact of female journalists in Pakistan who are harassed online differently depending on their background and connections. Like, take an example, a minority woman can be subjected to sexist abuse and sectarian or ethnic insults. An intersectional lens will prevent our generalizations and allow us to take a thorough look at the lives of female journalists and see what they have to go through daily. It is applied in this study to go beyond the actual harassment and explore the underlying structural and social causes of the same thing.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences of female journalists. The participants in this study were from all the provinces, so that the experiences of journalists across the geographic and cultural environment might be illustrated. The target population consisted of female journalists employed in television news stations, online magazines, freelance jobs, and journalism, particularly using social media. The selection of participants was done according to their first-hand experience and personal exposure to online bullying. The personal contacts and social media groups assisted in finding female journalists who had experienced online harassment. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, i.e., those who personally experienced gendered online harassment and were willing to give their views on the issue. Ten female journalists participated in this research, since it is a qualitative research, therefore ten participants were selected to acquire in-depth data through interviews, and the researcher analysed that interviewing ten journalists would reach a saturation state. Hence, ten interviews were enough to fulfil the research requirement. The primary instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide that was designed to draw in qualitative, rich information and maintain a logical flow of the interviews. In this study, the researcher acknowledged that many factors like cultural understanding, personal experiences, and academic / research background form the phenomena of inquiry and interprevitism. The study highlighted how power relations and gender norms influence women's participation in both digital and public spheres. The researchers have maintained the reflexivity throughout the research by listening to the participants ardently, documenting reflections carefully during data gathering, and finally grounded interpretations instead of self-assumptions.

Data Analysis

The interviews were taken face-to-face, via Zoom, and WhatsApp, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted approximately 40-60 minutes, with due consideration given to privacy and ethical requirements. All the interviews were transcribed manually with detailed field notes to ensure accuracy and minimize recall bias. Transcripts were organized systematically to avoid confusion. The qualitative analysis about gendered online harassment followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. At the first step, familiarization with data was done through repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and becoming familiar with them to get an in-depth understanding of the content, noting that the initial reflections, patterns of misogyny, emotional exhaustion, political trolling, institutional neglect, etc. At the second step, Codes were generated manually. Some of the initial codes were rape threats, body shaming, political trolling, smear campaigns, moral policing, leaked numbers/doxing, fear and anxiety, self-censorship, lack of institutional support, especially for freelancers,

intersectional discrimination, etc. These codes were applied to all the interview transcripts. At the third stage, codes with similar meanings were clustered together to obtain broader categories. Like “rape threats”, “sexualized insults,” and “objectification” were combined into gendered harassment. Then "insomnia", "paranoia", and “distressed episodes” were combined into emotional toll. Another one, like “withdrawing from platforms”, “censoring”, “avoiding controversial topics”, was combined into silencing women’s voices, etc. At the fourth stage, themes were reviewed for proper consistency and alignment with coded patterns. The themes were cross-checked against the entire dataset to ensure clarity and completeness. The final themes were integrated, and interpretations of them were made with the support of coherent narratives connecting the participants’ experiences in a sociological and theoretical context.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were briefed on the nature and purpose of the study, and consent to participate, and an audio recording was taken individually. Full confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. All personal information, like names, cities, and organizations, was removed from transcripts and anonymized, and participants were given codes like (P1 - P10). Given the sensitive nature of the gendered harassment study, the interviews were paused when emotional stress was observed, given them time to answer, and they were not pressured when they didn’t want to answer any question. It was also ensured that these interviews did not put them at further risk. They were further guaranteed that data would be securely stored and only anonymized information would be used for analysis.

Results

The Socio-Demographic Profile

The women journalists who took part in this study were in the age bracket of 25-40 years. A majority of them were at their early to middle career levels, with two people who had left this profession. All the participants were master’s degree holders, and two had eighteen years of education along with professional training. Out of these journalists, four were anchor persons, three were reporters, and three were working as freelancers. Geographically, the female journalists represented in the study were drawn from Punjab (n = 4), Sindh (n = 3), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (n = 1), Balochistan (n = 1), and Gilgit-Baltistan (n = 1). This diversity helped to illustrate that harassment was not just confined to one place, but on most occasions, it was manifested in varied ways by different cultures and their traditional mindsets. The employment status was also different, with some employed as reporters in the newsroom, others on short contracts, and most of them freelanced on their own.

Online Bullying and Harassment across Beats and Platforms

Women journalists and reporters face different types of harassment on different platforms. A majority of the respondents said that their reporting beats, as well as the media, had a great influence on the kind of harassment that they encountered. The most hostile area that came out was political reporting. One of the respondents (P1) said that "in the 2018 elections, my inbox was flooded with rape threats. I think it was a case of opening my phone and opening a wound daily." Similarly, another participant (P10) revealed that she received threatening messages from political workers after publishing a story about ghost schools, and she always ended up not sleeping and thinking about the things people said to her. These stories illustrate the fact that women journalists who give any narrative in opposition to political interests bring greater risk to female journalists, which is sometimes done in such a manner that they are silenced altogether. Nevertheless, those who participated also emphasized that they were not the only people who were not immune, as they were working on so-called soft beats. One of the reporters on lifestyle (P4) explained that she posted about fashion, and all she received were remarks that she was shameless or was told that she should get married to total strangers and creeps. And it was not even about her work anymore. To the people in the entertainment sector, the mistreatment may be very personal. The participant (P8) described how the idea of making her face a meme to mock her body was made: "I remember crying and thinking that maybe I do not belong here". Likewise, the health and education reporters were no exception to this harassment. A health reporter (P6) wrote, "I received a label of being immoral during one of my reports on reproductive health. It was as though it was indecent to talk about women's health". Another respondent (P7), who has written about the education of girls, has cited that the community members told her that she was a disgrace to her family.

All these narratives and stories of the participants demonstrate that it is not only the subject of reporting that was connected to harassment. Rather, it was a manifestation of institutionalized misogyny of women speaking in the political arena. The disparagement was directed towards them, whether they dealt with politics, health, education, lifestyle, or entertainment. The point is that it did not matter what they picked as a topic to talk about; the harassment was given because you are a woman. They also appear to be actively attacked on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, just being seen there, proving that the appearance, being a woman, was the main driver of the harassment and not any content.

Online Harassment, Moral Policing, and Character Assassination

The participants said that sexist comments, rape threats, body-shaming, and marriage proposals were common, as well as, in certain instances, doxing and stalking too. One of the participants (P1) recalled her first rape threat quite clearly: "I sat in my room shivering

and asked myself why a person could hate me so much that he/she would simply hate me because I spoke." Another (P2) remembered that her personal phone number was leaked and she spent many sleepless nights with all sorts of vulgarity happening on her phone: "I learned to keep my phone in silent mode, but fear could not pass only because the calls were there". Attacks based on the level of appearance and objectification was also common. According to a participant (P4), nearly all the videos that she had shared would receive a flood of marry me comments. They were not considering me as a journalist, but as an object. Another one (P8), who frequently talked about feminism, was frustrated as well: "They created sexist jokes about my body. I wept because I was not a journalist anymore but just a piece of fun". Some of the women also reported that they were morally shamed. One of the health journalists (P6) told me they described me as immoral because I was discussing health. They had made me feel guilty about doing my job. The harassment had an additional aspect of hostility on the part of participants who were representative of minority groups, as they were called sectarian slurs, sexist statements, and one was also called anti-national, just because she was writing about women in her community. Such instances demonstrate that gender-based harassment crossed ethnic and sectarian boundaries, and thus, their experience was a peculiar and isolating one. The combination of these stories infers that the harassment was not a sequence of some separate cases but a gradual effort to make women silent. It aimed at them not only in the context of their professional activities but also their identity, families, and even their dignity. These testimonies expose the negative impacts of online harassment when it comes to personal safety and professional freedom, since it is shaping most women journalists to silence themselves or even leave the profession altogether.

Gendered Harassment as a Universal Experience for Females

In all ten interviews, the respondents stated that gender was the main reason why they were harassed online. Women were targeted merely because they were visible in the digital public, no matter what they were reporting about or their beats, platforms, or whether they were employed or not. Harassment was a common experience for all the participants. The harassment was in the form of obscene insults and body-shaming, threats of rape, marriage proposals that were creepy and not solicited, and moralizing. The reason why it did not matter was explained by one participant (P7), who said, "It did not matter, the abuse never spared me since I was a woman who was speaking in public". This point was reinforced by another participant (P8), who said that they did not attack my work; they attacked me as a woman. These narratives reflected the fact that harassment was not concerned with differences in opinion with the journalistic point of view, but it was more about gender and the profession itself. The observation that all the respondents were sexually harassed by gender highlights its structural aspect. Such universality uncovers a digital space in which female journalists are constantly disrespected, sexualized, and underestimated, not capable of handling the profession or jobs, tasks, and are considered unintelligent just because they are women.

Emotional and Professional Toll and Stress

Most of the participants expressed extreme mental strain because of the constant harassment, with many experiencing insomnia and fear of visibility. Their coping mechanisms were keeping silent throughout this abuse and acting like nothing was happening, not even telling their families about the harassment out of fear that they would ask them to leave journalism. Like one participant said, "I cried after reading the comments, but the next day I still had to work." (P2). Another respondent said, "We just learn to live with it. If you complain, they say you're weak" (P6). These personal stories of participants revealed the extent of trauma these women, especially journalists, go through. Constant harassment with smear campaigns takes a toll on the mental and physical health, which reflects in their personal and daily lives. Fear of being seen, scrutinized for little things, sometimes when the harassment becomes personal and goes offline, it just ruins the whole experience of being a journalist, and quitting this profession totally seems like the most straightforward option. Internal misogyny and patriarchal systems still prevail in Pakistan despite how modern this nation becomes, and the core of this harassment is the same thing that needs to be changed sooner or later.

Intersection of Gender, Culture, Ethnicity, and Local Contexts

Harassment is even more pernicious, according to a few respondents, when gender is combined with other frailties such as ethnic or cultural identity and living in which part of the country, the vulnerability increases. Women reporters who represent minorities or have Balochi origin have the added burden of being attacked both on misogynistic grounds and on ethnic grounds or because of community honour. For example, one participant (P9) said, "One day they accused me of being an anti-national because I used to show women stories in my community". Another rural journalist (P7) confessed, "Even her father does not know she is doing this, does he?" These experiences practically demonstrate how cultural norms and identity politics are weaponised and coupled with gender-based harassment. This stratification of abuse forms particularly unfriendly conditions among women who are already marginal to begin with. This theme shows that although gender is a universal precipitant of harassment, both its severity and form are determined by the local conditions and minority identities, their culture, and status, creating distinctive weaknesses that further alienate such journalists.

Lack of Institutional and Legal Protection

Nearly every participant reported that they were completely alienated by their places of work and the legal system in the context of harassment. No one took it seriously, and people around them just said to let it go, forget the harassment happening, and move on. Individuals in the newsrooms said that the managers and other colleagues tended to disregard abuse as an issue to be left alone, and freelancers claimed that it made them feel even weaker since they

do not have the support of an institution, and literally no one to rely on. Although there were some respondents who were informed of other acts, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), they felt that it didn't protect anyone and was not effective; in fact, it was just useless. One of the newsroom reporters (P2) said that the newsroom instructed her just to ignore it. Another participant (P4) also said that as a freelancer, she had no one to confide in. One other participant (P5) narrated "that PECA is as good as a paper. As a matter of fact, nobody is going to defend you". The fact that women were left alone in dealing with harassment, and no structural assistance was given to them, or was not even considered important. Lack of proper institutional and legal mechanisms strengthens the notion that harassment is a normal practice, and women have to suffer the expenses of this abuse on their own. Such vulnerability in the laws and protection measures makes the harassment unbearable for women in general; it is also an indication of a failure in the system to take care of the freedom of the press and gender equality.

Normalization of Abuse in Digital Spaces

One of the common things that were found among the participants was the view that harassment is a normalized aspect of their workplace life. Most of the respondents confessed that with time, they had internalized the abuse and assumed that it was part of being in the journalism field now. They explained that it was common to be harassed when one reported about literally anything, or if we resisted or censored ourselves while reporting, then we received more backlash and were labelled weak. One of the participants (P6) said, "It is something we have to learn to live with. They tell you that you are weak, in case you complain". One more respondent (P8) admitted that "it was safer to remain silent than to speak". These reflections indicate the integration of harassment into the professional culture, which compels women towards silence and makes them think that abuse is a part of the job. This desensitization of women with harmful experiences, coupled with continuing this culture of hostility, is not only normalization but is also self-perpetuating. This internalization of abuse places emphasis on the fact that structural misogyny trains women journalists to believe that they will be harassed, and it's a part of their job, and restricts their freedom of expression and gender inequality in the profession.

Silencing of Women's Voices in Journalism

The silencing effect was one of the most harmful outcomes of harassment that was commonly reported by the participants. Constant intense abuse made women quit social media, made them censor themselves, or cancel some of the topics, or leave journalism altogether. One of the participants (P1) said that she deactivated her Facebook account several months ago because she could not handle it anymore. Another respondent (P6) said, "The maltreatment had driven me out of journalism. I chose silence over abuse." These narratives revealed how women are severely affected by harassment in journalism.

Compelling women to self-censor or leave the profession altogether is the result of harassment, which not only impacts the female victim but also suppresses press freedom and encourages a narrow range of viewpoints to be expressed in the public. Silencing of women journalists is a larger democratic price because when half of the population is not given the freedom to engage in the media and civic life, their functioning is impaired to no end.

Discussion

This study used thematic analysis to examine the nature, type, and experiences of female journalists related to the gendered online harassment that was experienced by female journalists in Pakistan. The findings of the study demonstrated that harassment is not incidental but is deeply structural and is shaped by the gender norms, the political polarization, and overall weak institutional protections. The first objective in the research was to examine the nature and forms of harassment. It was revealed that participants faced a wide spectrum of digital abuse, including sexist remarks, rape threats, body shaming, objectification, doxing, and political trolling. These patterns closely mirror the forms of technology-facilitated violence identified by Dragiewicz et al. (2018), who stated that digital platforms advance misogyny. Posetti et al. (2022) mentioned that online violence against women journalists is more serious, gendered, and personal than the violence faced by male journalists. The participants commonly reported anxiety, insomnia, self-doubt, and isolation as an outcome of harassment. Some of them also talked about being emotionally exhausted and going offline completely, which is similar and consistent with the (Ferrier, 2021) results indicating that online bullying makes the woman journalist self-censor and reduce the professional activity; participants also experienced long-lasting psychological well-being issues. The mentioned phenomenon of the chilling effect in literature is also outlined by UNESCO (2018) and reflects the personal narratives of people on how they avoid controversial issues and report less or even stop journalism altogether.

As one of the objectives of the study was an exploration of lived experience in social and cultural contexts. The findings revealed that journalists from Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit Baltistan documented honour-based harassment, ethnic slurs, abuse, body-shaming, and bringing shame to the community. This corresponds to the framework provided by Aksar et al. (2020), who claimed that patriarchy in Pakistan overlaps with ethnic and regional power structures and also increases the availability of women to online and offline hostilities. The results revealed that women primarily had to depend on personal reactions like blocking accounts, limiting their comments, or not identifying with platforms or engaging in emotional support with friends. Not even telling their families about their problems in fear that the family members would ask them to leave the profession (Vitak et al., 2017). These findings confirm the sayings of Jane (2017) that women tend to internalize harassment as the natural condition of being publicly visible. That makes toxicity normal and conceals the absence of institutional responsibility.

Another theme discovered was institutional neglect. It is compatible with the criticisms of (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and the (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023), which reported the lack of PECA implementation and the lack of newsroom processes and policies. Underreporting the issues of digital safety, the testimonies by the participants revealed that being harassed was the order of things and was like a part of their job, and was completely disregarded. This supports Ferrier's (2021) argument that apathy on the institutional level is encouraging inequalities of genders in the media environment. The research explains that online harassment is a cross-cutting phenomenon in terms of age, peers, platforms, and experience levels. All the female journalists reported that sexist abuse, threats, moral policing, and doxing were considered very normal, whereas sources were anonymous trolls and political actors as well as members of the local community (Posetti & Storm, 2018). Differences also emerged across regions and identities, which fulfilled the objective of understanding that the harassment varies by context (Chen et al., 2018).

The research also talked about the effect of legal frameworks and institutional policies. Results indicated that PECA is perceived to be ineffective, absolutely useless, and unavailable (Haider et al., 2023). There were no police on digital safety of newsrooms, and the freelancers were not protected by any institution at all. There was hardly any digital safety and media training, which is a must for female journalists now. These observations support the fact that poor legal and organizational frameworks are a major constraint to the freedom of the woman journalist to take action against harassment, and therefore, there is a need to have systematic reforms and better and stronger laws.

Conclusion

Online harassment of most Pakistani female journalists is not an isolated or individual event, but it is a deeply embedded, systematic issue. Harassment was experienced by female journalists irrespective of beats, platforms, provinces, and seniority. Regardless of whether they covered politics, lifestyle, education, or health, they all came out in the Open digital space, which generated extreme hatred and harassment. It was not about the content they created, but their gender. It erases the distinction between the virtual and the real world, which places the journalists and their families into a state of insecurity. This culture of abuse was incorporated into the work, and it made aggression a normal practice and drove women to silence and self-censorship; it was like a part of their job. To a lot of women, silence was irreparable, causing them to abandon social media or leave the journalism profession altogether. Poorly enough, there was no institutional and legal protection. The newsrooms did not consider the abuse as a serious matter, and freelancers were not supported by any organization. They were completely on their own, and legislation such as PECA was seen as ineffective and useless. This carelessness put the edge in the survival of the women themselves, who reacted primarily by keeping quiet, withdrawing, being emotionally resilient, stepping away, and putting the entire burden on

themselves. It undermines the psychology and the professionalism of media women's voices in the arena and creates an exclusionary culture. Personal coping strategies are not enough to rectify this. The government organization must act effectively. With a strong assortment of laws and regulations that can be enforced, this should be addressed as a common issue. People should be more aware and provide institutional solutions that will enable women journalists to work in a safe environment.

Recommendations

Coordinated efforts are required, initiated by stakeholders, to address online harassment issues faced by female journalists. There should be clear policies to protect women from abuse, and a proper legal assistance procedure should be formulated. Women should get digital security training and awareness. The reporting mechanism should be very efficient and effective to ensure women's freedom and safety. Awareness campaigns and training programs should be organized regularly to educate female journalists.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study also has certain limitations, which should be acknowledged. Since the sample size is small, it cannot be generalized. And the issue of digital harassment is not fully captured. Since the platform policies and online harassment patterns are continuously changing due to the evolution of social media and technology, they may hamper the findings over time. Based on these limitations, future research should investigate gendered online harassment by using a large sample size of female journalists from different areas of Pakistan to conduct a deeper analysis of gender patterns in online harassment.

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