SAFE AND EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN THE MEDIA

Introduction

Freedom of expression, despite being recognised in the Constitution of Pakistan, is not accorded equally to all and is contingent on the identity of the speaker. Religious minority groups have been under-represented in the media where those responsible regularly perpetuate stereotypes rather than amplifying the voices of members from the community. Furthermore, the media perpetuates hate speech against religious minorities, often to the point of inciting violence. The problem is compounded by online spaces where individuals and hate groups target religious minorities, instances which often go unreported, and social media campaigns vilifying minority communities or individual members are commonplace. Despite the existence of hate speech laws (both in the Pakistan Penal Code and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act), guidelines issued by PEMRA and directions by the Supreme Court, these problems persist. Religious minorities are subjected to a torrent of online abuse as clear partisan rivalries have translated to an unprecedented increase in online harassment. These issues have resulted in the systematic silencing of minority groups, particularly women and gender minorities within these communities, and hampered their ability to practice freedom of expression.

This report aims to dissect increased incidence of targeted online harassment and hate speech against religious minority communities, and its implications on real-world threats of physical violence, freedom of speech and the responsibility of social media companies and media stakeholders to provide safety to members of religious minority groups and hold themselves accountable. The report will utilise data from focus group discussions and other interactions with internet rights experts, human rights activists and representatives of religious minority groups.
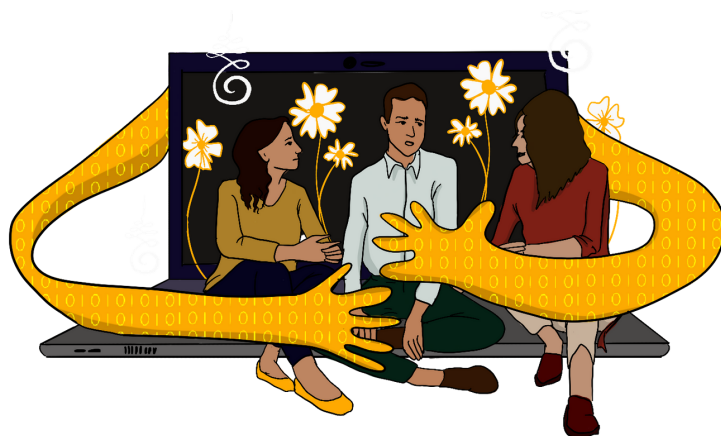
Context

Social media platforms and hostility

In the minority rights index, Pakistan is at ninth from the bottom in the report titled 'Peoples Under Threat 2019'.[1] With the discrimination against minorities in the country increasing, minority groups are not only prone to violence and injury but are also left out from political participation, employment, education and basic necessities.

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1) Peoples under threat 2019, Minority Rights Group International
Retrieved from: https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PUT-2019-Briefing-with-spread.pdf

In both social context and on digital platforms hate speech and a general sense of hostility prevails towards religious minority communities, with some communities facing the greater brunt of this hostility. Hate speech against religious minorities in Urdu, Roman Urdu, English and other regional languages across four widely used social media platforms in Pakistan (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube) is constantly fuelling the already rising societal polarisation in the country. The problem is compounded in online spaces where pages targeting religious minorities often go unreported and social media campaigns vilifying minority communities or individual members are common.

In 2019, the United Nations released a joint letter stating that "the rhetoric of hatred must be countered, as it has real-life consequences. Studies have established a correlation between exposure to hate speech and the number of hate crimes committed".[2] Delving deeper into these dangers, a Propublica report found that Facebook rules on content moderation relating to hate speech were inconsistently applied by contractors, favouring elites and governments over minorities and activists.[3] If such algorithmic inconsistencies are applied to the Pakistani context, the online hatred and persecution of religious minorities becomes explicitly emboldened. For example, a 2020 report by Freedom House, documenting how governments censor and

control the digital spheres, categorised Pakistan as "Not Free" as it fulfilled 7 of the 9 conditions for total internet control.[4]

Tackling hate speech and ensuring diversity in representation on social media is a complex matter with an array of issues that need to be dealt with. International mechanisms, social media platform's regulatory frameworks and national legal regulations all deal with hate speech in their own way, due to which there is a lack of coherence in how hate speech is regulated in an effective manner.

A major problem occurs when platforms' artificial intelligence-driven content moderation is poorly adapted to local languages and companies have invested little in staff fluent in these languages, or well-versed with the local context. There have been instances where requests were made by local organisations or individuals to take down content that was harmful towards

2) OHCHR, "Joint Open Letter on Concerns about the Global Increase in Hate Speech," OHCHR, 2010,
Retrieved from: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25036.
3) Tobin, A Varner, M and Anguin, J (2017) "Facebook's Uneven
Enforcement of Hate Speech Rules Allows Vile Posts to Stay Up" ProPublica.
Retrieved at: https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-enforcement-hate-speech-rules-mistakes
4) Freedom House, Internet Freedom Report, 2020
https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-net/2020

marginalised communities and could also threaten their lives, but the content was apparently not against the community standards of the platforms and hence, was not removed. Sensitive issues like false allegations of blasphemy can lead to trending hashtags which can result in an offline mob attack or an individual losing their life, as has been seen in Mashal Khan's mob attack in 2016 and other similar incidents.[5] In such cases, it is important to act in real time, and have platforms be available immediately to tackle such abuse. Virality of hashtags of hate in cases of blasphemy can be life-threatening for people and has been so. Focus group discussion members have also highlighted that in a particular vilification campaign, a counter-hashtag campaign was initiated by rights activists and it was quite alarming to see that the twitter account of one of the rights activists who was trying to manipulate the algorithms by an alternative hashtag campaign was suspended for a few hours rather than action being taken against the hate spewing hashtag.

According to a survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation, 57.5% respondents mentioned that they have had some sort of negative experience on the digital platforms, including backlash or threats on the basis of religious affiliation and/or a combination of factors such as threats to life, bullying, harassment, daily abuse, derogatory speech and negative comments. In the same survey, 34.5% percent respondents confirmed that they feel uncomfortable expressing their religious identity online.

Digital Rights Foundation conducted two rounds of focus group discussions in December 2020 with religious minority groups with participants elaborating that they fear hacking of their accounts, abuse of their information and mishandling of their personal details. The community members also fear that if their accounts are hacked and sensitive information is posted from their accounts they might be falsely accused of having committed blasphemy. This was also supported by the survey conducted as part of DRF's study in which around 42.5% of the respondents stated that they or someone in their community had experienced a breach of their online privacy or their private safe groups in online spaces being infiltrated. Some participants from the focus group discussion also mentioned real life consequences including stalking, receiving threatening notes and getting threatening visits to their homes.

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5) Ahmed, J, Pakistani student accused of blasphemy beaten to death on campus, Reuters, 13 April 2017
Online: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-blasphemy-idUSKBN17F1ZL

Participants also stated that there exist hate groups or individuals who target minority communities on a regular basis. Despite some action from the PTA in taking down a number of these pages, minority communities highlighted that some of the hate content continues to be spread through pages that are ostensibly made for spreading religious education but perpetuate harmful hate speech directed towards minorities in actuality.

Similar insights can be drawn from a study, which was conducted in 2018 by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA), to examine the experiences of religious minority communities in online spaces as both private individuals and online information practitioners.[6] The study found that almost all respondents faced hate speech and harassment for their activism online with threats, abuse, trolling, stalking and hacking as the most common forms of bullying to their social media activities coming from various threat actors. The main discussion themes that attract the most hostile reactions online were identified as religion, religious minorities, human rights, security agencies and gender. The female respondents highlighted facing an additional layer of discrimination or hostility due to their gender. Most respondents stated that they simply ignored any hostility they faced with regards to their social media activity, some others said that they block any person who is abusive while a few said they responded back to counter the hate speech and abuse.

Trends in online hate speech

Hate speech against religious minorities in Pakistan has been increasing in frequency, this was especially evidenced during the coronavirus lockdown. A cursory glance at the most significant instances of hate speech against religious minorities shows the extent of how hostile online spaces can be.

In May 2020, a hate speech spike was recorded against the Ahmadi community,

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6) 'Hate Speech versus Free Speech – Shrinking Space for Minority Voices Online', IRADA

which was particularly concerning due to the involvement of senior public figures. MRG and CREID responded with strong advocacy efforts which reached the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, who subsequently wrote a letter to Pakistani government officials condemning the incident.[7]

In July 2020, the Prime Minister Imran Khan approved a grant for the construction of a Hindu temple in the capital city Islamabad but after much backlash referred the matter to Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology. Even when the council of islamic ideology approved of the construction of the mandir there were widespread protests and campaigns online against the decision.[8] Hashtags like #MandirNahiBanega with several tweets and the video of a young boy emerged warning the Prime Minister that he would 'kill[7] all Hindus' if the temple is constructed. There was hate speech against the Hindu community, which resulted in a counter-campaign by a handful of people who started a counter-hashtag #MandirTauBanega to provide an alternative perspective.

In July 2020, a man accused of blasphemy was shot dead in a district courtroom in Peshawar. The man who shot the accused in Peshawar with hashtags #PeshawarMardeMujahid and #قادیانی_کافر all over Twitter. According to Al Jazeera's tally 77 people have been killed since 1990 in connection with the accusation of blasphemy in the country.[9]

The Pakistan Hate Speech Monitor documented a massive wave of anti-Shi'a hate speech online specifically between August and September 2020. On a sentiment algorithm, the overall conversation was negative at 46 per cent, far higher than the positive conversation (10 per cent). There were three major spikes in hate speech during that period. The Urdu word for 'infidel' was particularly prevalent. All three spikes collectively reached millions of social media users in Pakistan, with the top influencer's reach exceeding 500,000.[10]

Mainstream media organisations and hostility

According to a recent report by International Media Support (IMS), 'Narratives of Marginalisation - Reporting Religious Minorities in Pakistani Media, 2018', the coverage of religious minorities is generally low in quantum terms across all dominant

7) CREID concerned over Twitter campaign against Pakistan's Ahmadi community, including tweet by senior Minister, Institute of development studies May 2020
https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/creid-concerned-over-twitter-campaign-against-pakistans-ahmadi-community-including-tweet-by-senior-minister/
8) Islamabad demonstrators support construction Hindu temple
Retrieved from: https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamabad-demonstrators-support-construction-hindu-temple
9) Man shot dead for blasphemy in Pakistani courtroom
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/29/man-shot-dead-for-blasphemy-in-pakistan-courtroom
10) Shias become the largest target of hate speech, Minority Rights Group International. Retrieved from: https://minorityrights.org/2020/10/20/shia-statement/

media channels.[11] The report found that TV and Radio carry little to no coverage of religious minorities and the little coverage that these channels do carry, focuses only on Hindus and Christians while other minority communities remain mostly invisible.

The report also noted that the representation of religious minorities is generally stereotypical and is linked to sensitive themes such as blasphemy. There is complete invisibility of their views, opinions or perspectives which renders them voiceless. While tonally a significant size of the coverage about religious minorities is inclusive and non-hostile toward them, most news stories and images are about them, not for them or by them. Almost all news coverage about religious minorities is reactionary or event-related, and rarely cover stories about their achievements and contributions.[11]

11) Narratives of Marginalisation – Reporting Religious Minorities in Pakistani Media, 2018, International Media Support

# Impact of online hate speech and abuse against minorities

The online information ecosystem has become increasingly hostile against religious minority groups. These issues have resulted in a systematic silencing of minority groups, particularly women and gender minorities within these communities, and hampered their ability to practice their freedom of expression.

In an already stifling civil space, lack of equal online participation makes it further difficult for the members of the community to exercise their fundamental digital rights. They are also at a greater risk of offline violence, such as mob attacks for false allegations of blasphemy and life or rape threats to victims of forced religious conversion.

The structure of online platforms and the algorithm-fueled leads to further polarization as hateful content often gets more engagement and is actively promoted by these algorithms, further complicating the nature of online hate speech.

The general audience lacks knowledge about minority social groups unless they have personal relationships with them, and the lack of visibility in the media further divides communities and fails to inform the public about the different social groups that exist in the society and the challenges they face.
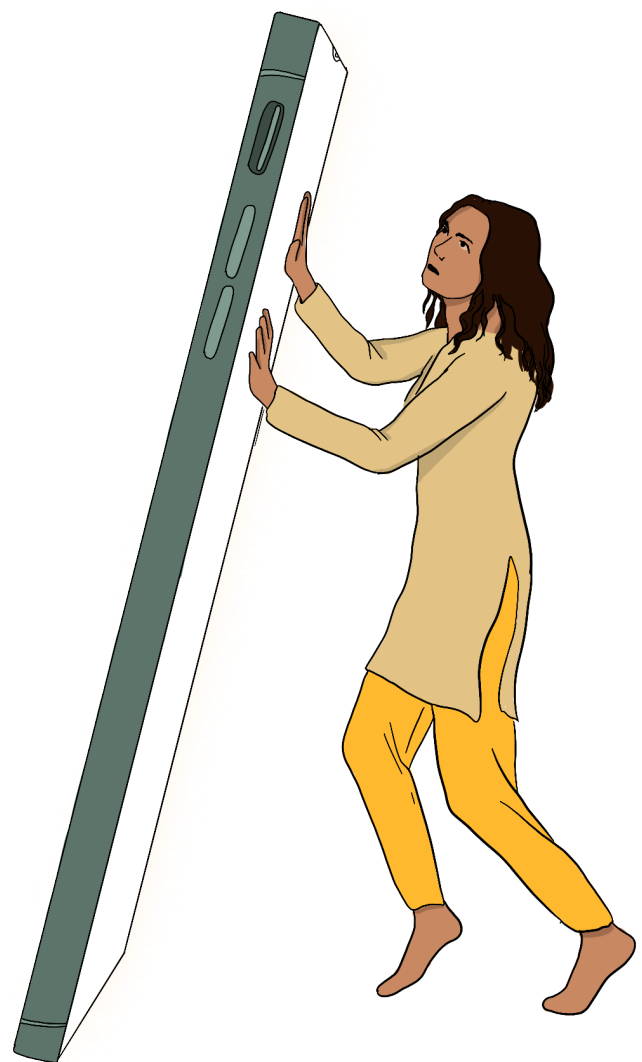
14 Lewis, R., Rowe, M., & Wiper, C. (2017). Online abuse of feminists as an emerging form of violence against women and girls. British journal of criminology, 57(6), 1462–1481.
15 John, A., Glendenning, A. C., Marchant, A., Montgomery, P., Stewart, A., Wood, S., ... & Hawton, K. (2018). Self-harm, suicidal behaviours, and cyberbullying in children and young people: Systematic review. Journal of medical internet research, 20(4), e129.
16 Rafay, Muhammad. 2020. "Cyberbullying | The Express Tribune". The Express Tribune.
17 Luavat Zahid, and Shmyla Khan. 2020. Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Surveillance-of-Female-Journalists-in-Pakistan-1.pdf.
18 Backe, E. L., Lilleston, P., & McCleary-Sills, J. (2018). Networked individuals, gendered violence: a literature review of Cyberviolence. Violence and gender, 5(3), 135–146.

Legal landscape

Pakistan is bound to enforce the right of freedom of religion and belief of religious minorities, who as equal citizens are entitled to the same protections and rights as the majority.

Article 20 of the Constitution of Pakistan grants all citizens the right to profess religion and to manage religious institutions and article 25A grants equality to all citizens. Article 22 provides all citizens safeguards in educational institutions with respect to religion. Article 36 grants protection to all minorities.

Section 11 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA 2016) classifies hate speech as an offence punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine or with both for whoever prepares or disseminates information, through any information system or device, that advances or is likely to advance interfaith, sectarian or racial hatred. In addition, section 153 (A) of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) punishes for a term up to five year and with fine to whoever promotes or incites disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial, language or regional groups or casts or communication and section 502 (2) punishes for a term upto two years and with a fine to whoever sells or offers for sale any

printed or engraved substance containing defamatory matter knowing that it contains such matter. Some of the laws applicable to the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan have proved to be highly discriminatory in nature, specifically, the PPC sections from 295 and 298 of offences against religion. Furthermore, PEMRA's code of conduct, Electronic Media (Programs and Advertisements) Code of Conduct 2015, also prohibits hate speech and television channels can be penalised by PEMRA if they violate the provisions.
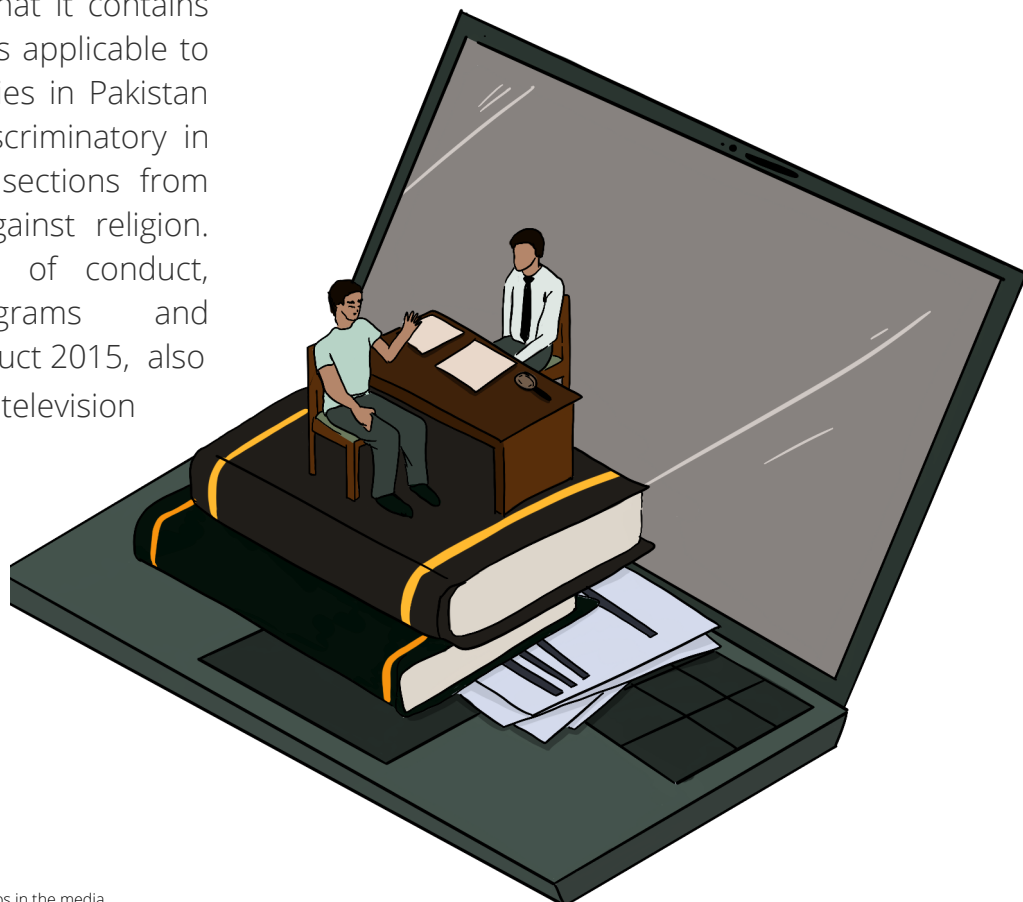
Recommendations

Social media companies

1. Social media companies must be more transparent in terms of the algorithms and tools they are using for content moderation.

2. Social media platforms rely on a combination of artificial intelligence, user reporting, and staff known as content moderators to enforce their rules regarding appropriate content. Moderators, however, are burdened by the sheer volume of content and the trauma that comes from sifting through disturbing posts, and social media companies don't evenly devote resources across the many markets they serve.[12] There is a need to invest in more human content moderators and local language moderators who understand the context in all jurisdictions they operate. Social media companies cannot solely rely on artificial intelligence or humans to monitor and edit their content. They should rather develop approaches that utilize artificial and human intelligence together.

3. Social media companies have a collective responsibility to push back against government requests for censorship.

4. Social media companies need to dedicate more resources to ensure accessible contacts and civil society can help in removing hateful and accusatory content from the platforms.

5. Community guidelines should include context specific and language specific slurs and abusive language in their hate content database, because there have been instances when comments are highly abusive and threatening against religious minorities and commentators but the same are not considered to be against the community guidelines of social media platforms.

6. Prominent social media companies have detailed community standards, and while algorithms and systems have yet to offer fully realized protective measures. Better enforcement of these community guidelines are an effective benchmark that offer some help. Furthermore, input from minority rights activists when drafting community guidelines is an important step towards inclusion and transparency.

7. The community guidelines and standards are incredibly complicated and arduous to read and understand which makes it difficult for users to browse through dozens of pages, as they continue to use these platforms without being equipped with the knowledge of how their data will be handled, where it

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12) Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons
Retrieved from: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons

will be stored and how they can protect themselves against abusive elements online.

8. Social media companies have a collective responsibility to offer short courses in video form or explanatory infographics which explain these regulations in a comprehensible yet concise way.

9. The terminology and focus of the hate speech changes over time, and most fake news articles contain some level of truthfulness in them. Therefore, social media companies cannot solely rely on artificial intelligence or humans to monitor and edit their content. They should rather develop approaches that combine artificial and human intelligence.

Media organisations

Media organisations have a lot of responsibility on them to ensure safety of vulnerable groups and first of all they need to acknowledge the responsibility & influence that they have in protecting the safety of these groups.

1. Representation of diverse communities is important, but representation should just an eye wash for the sake of aesthetics of diversity without the actual work of dismantling structures that lead to the exclusion of the marginalised groups.

2. Furthering stereotypes and dangerous ideas about minorities can do more harm than good, so care must be taken by media organisations to consider and include, represent and recognise that these communities are not a monolith, and the media must cover all aspects of their lives.

3. Media organisations must ensure that the terminology used to refer to religious minority communities is not derogatory or prejudicial, there needs to be sensitization towards slurs or words that the community is not comfortable with.

4. Covering or commenting on hate speech is a complex and delicate task. When done correctly, hate speech reporting can fight the spread of prejudiced ideas and educate the public. While on the other hand, if it misses the mark, reporting on hate speech can contribute to radicalization and amplify the hateful viewpoints it is meant to condemn[1]. Media organisations need to go back to the basics of journalism ethics when

reporting on minorities and related issues. On social media, it is important to note that we are not increasing the reach of hate content even by re-posting to condemn it. The Ethical Journalism Network 's five-point test of identifying hate speech can help decide how to report potentially inflammatory news.

4. Media organisations must ensure a balanced proportion of time/space and prominence (in respect to prime time or peak hours, front page or feature story) is given to

a) stories featuring religious minorities, with coverage on their lives and achievements other than the abuses and challenges they face and with experts and voices from the communities as sources of information and opinion. It is important to make sure the narrative comes from the community being reported about as sometimes the reporting can lead to more harm than good;

b) stories not directly focusing on religious minorities to acknowledge and highlight that their day to day lives are just like everyone else's and that different social, economic and political news includes perspectives of minority groups as well; and

c) stories that show inter-faith harmony.

5. Ensure visibility is given to women and gender minorities belonging to the religious minority groups who are completely invisible in the mainstream media. Attention must also be paid to include women and gender minorities from diverse backgrounds, such as those belonging to different economic classes, age groups and people with disabilities.

6. Media houses should not be motivated by the breaking news model and need to be less clickbaity particularly when it comes to sensitive issues and vulnerable groups like religious minority groups. They need to be able to report the news as fact or "what-we-know" rather than "what-we-think". Bias, dicrimination and sensationalization of news can fuel hatred, mistrust and also encourage pile-ons the community.

7. Review recruitment policies to encourage adherents of diverse religious backgrounds to enter mainstream media. Media organizations should publish their employment policies openly and not only establish but also communicate clear and quantifiable goals, such as minimum and concrete targets to ensure diversity and representation of the minority communities within the organization, which reflect the make-up of the population. Recruitment does little if proper attention is not paid to the empowerment, advancement and retention of diverse employees.

A guide to covering hate speech without amplifying it. Retrieved from: https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2020/06/29/a-guide-to-covering-hate-speech-without-amplifying-it/

8. Promote or develop training programmes on reporting matters of faith-based violence. Create mechanisms for social dialogue among journalists, media owners and employers to better understand the positive role media can play in confronting intolerance and hateful speech against religious minorities. Dialogue should also be promoted between mainstream media and media organizations that mainly serve the minority communities. Human rights standards should be discussed to respect diversity.

9. Institutionalize media literacy programmes for journalists to promote ethical and responsible creation, and dissemination of information relating to religious minorities. Content that incorporates perspectives of diversity and religious pluralism should be actively encouraged.

10. Media should have specific beats for religious minorities, highlighting the achievements as well as the challenges they face as Pakistanis.

ABOUT US

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is an award-winning, female-led not-for-profit, non-governmental organization working on providing safe online spaces in Pakistan since 2013. DRF focuses on Information and communication technologies to support women's rights, inclusiveness, democratic processes, and digital governance through services like cyber harassment helpline, capacity-building training and direct support via legal aid in online harassment cases to young women and girls. The organization has previously worked on issues of access, digital citizenship, online safety and online harassment against women and children.

Our priority is to empower women and girls, through ICTs. DRF works with young women, children, female journalists, and civil society to provide training workshops and build capacity around digital safety, psycho-social well-being, and knowledge of online laws.

CREDITS

This brief was researched, written and designed by Maryam Saeed, Programme Manager Digital Rights Foundation, reviewed by Shmyla Khan and Zainab Durrani.

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