



DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

MORAL POLICING AND THE PHENOMENA OF 'RAIDS' IN ONLINE SPACES

ABOUT

The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a non-governmental organization, established in 2012, working on the intersection of human rights with technology, with a particular focus on freedom of expression, right to privacy and protections against gender-based violence in online spaces.

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Contact information:

info@digitalrightsfoundation.pk
www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was motivated by the continued and growing clampdown on freedom of speech and expression in online spaces under the guise of moral panic and moral corruption in society. Moral panic is a fear, often an irrational one, that something or someone threatens the moral fabric of society, including its social values, norms and interests.¹ Similar to the way in which individuals have been censored and deterred from speaking out about potentially inflammatory issues in public spaces in Pakistan, such as the print and electronic media, online spaces too have become the site for such moral policing. In these cases, both in offline and online spaces, moral panic is triggered to silence and control those who choose to express their opinions that run contrary to prevailing ‘values’.

The impact of this moral policing on women and gender minorities is far greater as compared to other sections of society. Here the social constructs of honour and modesty and how they apply to women creates a vastly different lived experience, as has been attested by some of the subjects of this study, and the tools used for moral policing are disproportionately used against gendered bodies in society.

In an attempt to unpack these dynamics, this research explores the various ways in which moral policing occurs online and the ways in which those it targets deal with such acts. Through this research we wish to destabilise the very tools and framing used to morally police these bodies, critically examining social and legal constructs of ‘morality’, ‘decency’ and ‘Western’. This research is done in the hopes that creating awareness and literature around these themes will invite discourse that seeks to dismantle the negative practices and impact of moral and ethical policing.

Main objectives

- Exploring the phenomenon of moral policing in the online spaces in Pakistan, particularly with respect to the attitude towards women and non-binary individuals in these spaces
- Understanding the ways in which individuals face a curbing of their self expression online under the guise of moral corruption and panic
- Contribute to literature of the weaponization of notions of honour, chastity, respect and morality as gendered tools of control
- Use the research as a baseline study to design advocacy campaigns, policy briefs and consultations with policymakers to make the legislation governing online spaces pro-gender
- Map issues women and gender minorities face online to enable the design of customised trainings for enhancing the skill-set of individuals to use online spaces effectively to express their right to free expression and also educate them on data privacy and protection

Key findings

The findings of this report show that moral policing is an escalating problem for online spaces, particularly for women and gender minorities. Both groups face continued barriers to self expression and freedom online. They are regularly subjected to threats of violence, hate speech and hacking in an effort to curtail their online presence. They are victimised in this way by the use of notions of honour, chastity and respect, deployed by strangers as well as their own families. Therefore, a majority of our respondents felt they were treated differently because of their gender in online spaces.

However, interestingly, while men elaborated that they felt they were treated more favourably online and given space due to their gender, women complained of being hacked, doxxed and policed online due to their gender. In response to another question, a majority of respondents, predominantly

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/moral-panic-3026420>

Definitions

Though definitions of such terms are largely contextual and subjective, this study takes them to mean the following:

- i. Shaming: the enforcing and imposing negative thoughts, opinions and feelings about one's behaviour and presence online in an effort to evoke guilt]
- ii. Controlling [reinforcing negative consequences of online behaviour in an effort to curtail one's presence and activities online; threatening victim of this behaviour with said consequences]
- iii. Morally policing [condemnation of behaviour because it is deemed it as unfit for and unsuitable for the culture and traditions of society]
- iv. Moral Panic [Moral panic is a fear, often an irrational one, that something or someone threatens the moral fabric of society, including its social values, norms and interests]

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the digital age brought with it the promise of a more equitable world; one where people from all backgrounds and subsections of society would have access to information.² In addition, the internet would allow those on the margins of society - due to their gender, sexual orientation, religion or other factors - to stake a claim to the public domain and carve out a safe space for self-expression that was not afforded to them in the physical world. However, the reality has been much bleaker than expected. In particular, vulnerable groups have found themselves targeted in online spaces in a manner similar to that of offline spaces. As they are relegated to the peripheries of society in offline spaces, they are silenced, abused and censored in online spaces. For example, while the internet ushered in an age of increased trans-visibility and activism, the attention has led to increased online harassment, doxing and abuse from far right, conservative and anti-trans groups.³

Far from the equal access and opportunity it once promised, the internet has the potential to reproduce hegemonic structures and in fact, provides new avenues for their reinforcement. Structures of patriarchy are reinforced online through the control of women's internet usage, restricting their ownership of devices, surveillance over their online activities and finally, the policing of their self-expression online.⁴ We are seeing that the imposition of established moral and ethical standards on individuals deemed to be in defiance of them is not new, it has existed in the physical world since the beginning of society as we know it. However, the expansion of the digital age in the last two decades has signalled a similar extension of social norms and values into online spaces.

² <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/37/inequality-and-the-internet/>

³ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/12/27/21028342/trans-visibility-backlash-internet-2010>

⁴ <https://itforchange.net/how-online-space-for-women-a-crisis-and-what-needs-to-be-done-about-it>

In Pakistan, concepts such as 'honour', 'decency' and shame are often used as tools for censorship, surveillance and control to morally police individuals into abiding by the dominant standards of society. This report investigates the ways in which these concepts are deployed online to police individuals into adhering to the dominant moral framework of society.⁵ It asks: How does the act of moral policing, as seen in the physical world, translate into online spaces in Pakistan? Also, how do vulnerable groups, who are frequently targeted by these attacks, negotiate and navigate through these instances?

Methodology and Structure

This report has been written on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative data, collected through an online survey and interviews. The primary source was an online questionnaire*, hosted on Google Forms, proliferated across various online platforms. This questionnaire provided the basis for examining the experiences of individuals in online spaces. The quantitative data was further corroborated through follow up interviews with selected participants. Of the 109 respondents of the questionnaire, 49 provided their contact details and agreed to an interview over Zoom. We conducted 13 semi-structured one-on-one interviews around issues of moral policing, shaming and controlling behaviour online. Finally, data from the questionnaire and interviews was compiled and analysed. The insights from these findings are provided in this report and supported by a literature review. In addition to our first data set, we also closely investigate the phenomena of 'raids' using three case studies from prominent social media bloggers who have experienced this form of online abuse. Their individual cases help us zoom in into the individual impact of such forms of violence in the digital arena.

⁵ <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/moral-policing-on-the-internet-is-rooted-in-patriarchal-ideas-of-controlling-womens-bodies/>

This report will begin with a brief overview of the digital landscape and sociopolitical context in Pakistan, in which issues of moral policing arise. This will be followed by a literature review, mapping out the existing discourse and debates on the matter. Finally, a discussion of our findings will be mapped out, including a specific section of a new online phenomenon known as ‘raids’. The report will be concluded with our recommendations for various stakeholders and concluding remarks.

Positionality

It must be noted that this study does not claim to capture the experiences of all victims of moral policing across Pakistan. It does not assert that respondents are representative of the entire demographic of individuals living in Pakistan. Indeed, there are experiences of online moral policing that are not represented in this original data. Therefore, to make generalizable inferences based on the data set would be an error. Furthermore, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, data-gathering was hindered due to limited availability of participants, inability to perform close field-work and internet connectivity problems. With a greater data set and increased respondents, the findings may be substantiated and strengthened further.

⁶ *Questionnaire link is included in the Annex A to this study

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral Policing: definitions and global overview

There is limited research on the theme of online moral policing, particularly in mapping what the term refers to specifically and what actions fall under its definition. For the purposes of our research, we define moral policing as the enforcement of social norms and values as accepted by the majority, on those people its dominant actors deem to be transgressive of said established social values. These norms and values can be guided by a moral framework that is derived from an authoritative source, such as culture or social traditions. Though moral policing is not solely reserved for women, the majority of acts associated with moral policing, controlling and shaming are directed towards women, particularly those existing in online spaces. For that reason, this study focuses largely on their experiences and the particular dynamics of gendered moral policing. For the purposes of this study, therefore, gendered moral policing can be defined as the deployment and weaponization of moral values to enforce patterns of behaviour on those deemed to be transgressive of established patriarchal gender norms. This occurs primarily due to the fact that women's general presence and expression in the public arena is considered transgressive and thus, justifies moral policing, shaming and controlling.

However, when assigning a definition, the problem with defining in general becomes apparent: who does the work to define what is and is not moral? Who decides what actions count as policing? It is precisely the subjective nature of the term that allows it to be dismissed upon critique. Nonetheless, moral policing, when enforced by a society as a whole, exists and can be deeply damaging to individuals' freedom of speech and expression.

Cases of moral policing have been seen around the world. Groups in several countries have collectively organised to enforce their will against actions they deem to be 'immoral' or against the culture of the society they belong to. For example, the crisis of moral policing in India is manifested in the actions of groups like the Hindu Sena, who have publicly expressed outrage against celebrations on Valentines Day and public displays of affection in India.⁷ They have repeatedly asserted that such acts are 'Western imports' and go against the 'moral fibre' of Indian society. Similarly, the creation of an 'Anti-Romeo Squad' in India resulted in the storming of public parks, colleges and roadsides looking for unsuspecting couples to humiliate publicly.⁸ Collectively, these groups have come to be known as India's 'moral police'.⁹

This problem stretches beyond South Asia and is found in other parts of the world as well. In 2013 in East London, a group known as 'Muslim Patrol' was heavily criticised for harassing passers-by and members of the public they deemed to be behaving in 'unislamic' ways.¹⁰ Members were subsequently arrested and jailed for causing public disturbance. Other examples include the 'modesty squads' in Israel¹¹ and the 'guidance patrols' of Iran.¹² This vigilante style of moral policing can be considered a natural extension of the paternalistic policies of the state, which often sanctions such acts and frames it under the label of patriotism and nationalism. This pattern is also found in the context of Pakistan.

⁷ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hindu-sena-workers-delhi-valentines-day-obscenity-police-1645824-2020-02-12>

⁸ [https://amity.edu/UserFiles/aibs/59afArticle-V%20\(Page%2050-53\).pdf](https://amity.edu/UserFiles/aibs/59afArticle-V%20(Page%2050-53).pdf)

⁹ <https://www.theage.com.au/world/indias-moral-police-declare-war-on-decadence-20061111-ge3jot.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/imam-speaks-out-against-muslim-vigilantes-8468870.html>

¹¹ <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3587654,00.html>

¹² <https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2013/05/05/-fashion-police>

Gendered moral policing in Pakistan

Acts of violence, harassment and abuse against women are a widely accepted norm in the Pakistani society, borne out of and legitimised by a combination of patriarchal customs, norms and family traditions.¹³ Furthermore, male dominance of the public sphere, religious conservatism and social stratification based on gender, class and religion intensify women's exclusion from public spaces and violence against those who exercise agency outside the private domain.¹⁴

The concepts of "honour", 'shame' are critical to gendered social relations and the moral framework of Pakistani society. In the case of honour, the term roughly translates into two words in the Urdu language, 'ghairat' and 'izzat'. Ghairat can be understood as defensive honour and izzat as prestige, respect and status.¹⁵ Honour is understood as a combination of family respect, individual chastity and social prestige.¹⁶ Those who value honour are not only concerned with attaining and maintaining it but also avoiding the shame associated with its loss.¹⁷

Shame, in this sense, refers to the absence of honour, respect and decency in society. Largely attached to the deeply patriarchal family system in Pakistan, shame is deeply tied to social value as embedded in the family. Women are therefore considered the repositories of shame and honour in the family, and it is their actions that remain the focal point for loss of shame. In essence, humiliation or embarrassment is seen to be caused mostly by women, and retained and regained mostly by men.

¹³ Shirkat Gah. (2001) "Karo Kari, TorTora, Siyahkari, Kala Kali: "There is no 'honour' In killing" National Seminar Report" Special Bulletin 2002, Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.

¹⁴ Jafar, A., (2005) "Women, Islam, and the State in Pakistan." Gender Issues 22(1) 35-55.

¹⁵ Shah, N., "Honour and Violence: Gender Power and Law in Southern Pakistan" Berghahn Books, 2016. ISBN 978-1-78533-081-0

Morality & media representation:

The impact of the Zia military regime that Pakistan saw from 1977-88 emphasized the lack separation of the proverbial church & state in terms of formal avenues like rearrangement of the legal structure. However the spread of Islamization was not just limited there and was also evident in the way TV content - which at that time was one of the few sources of information and entertainment for Pakistanis - saw a shift in the subject of content that was being created.

A prime example of this was the dress code restriction, as quoted by veteran news personality Mahtab Rashidi:

"PTV received a directive from Zia-ul-Haq that on TV men should wear sherwanis and all female anchors must cover their head." ¹⁸

Rashidi, as per her own admission, ended up quitting her job as a TV show anchor after she refused to cover her head on the say-so of the government, inadvertently causing a ruffling of feathers and pressure being put indirectly through the TV channel management. She came back to the world of television eight years later, when she was asked to cover the election transmission to vote in a new government.

¹⁶ Shirkat Gah. (2001) "Karo Kari, TorTora, Siyahkari, Kala Kali: "There is no 'honour' In killing" National Seminar Report" Special Bulletin 2002, Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.

¹⁷ Wikan, U., (2008) "In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame" trans. Patterson, Anna. University of Chicago Press. ISBN 9780226896908

¹⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/671576/flashback-the-cover-story>

Similarly,

*“Aabginey was a TV serial written by Fatima Surriya Bajiya which narrated the rich history of Islam with stories of Muslim conquerors. The play indirectly helped to motivate respect amongst the public for Islamic clerics who were gaining power through General Zia’s regime (1977-1988).”*¹⁹

This excerpt from the Citizens Archive of Pakistan represents a wider transformation in the arts and culture across the seven decades of Pakistan’s history. The content of the dramas and shows mentioned here as well as the difference in optics with reference to how female actors and presenters dressed in them, over the years, is telling of how the certain decades appear more regressive than the ones before or after them. However, what remained consistent was the way in which such moral policing in the media manifested in the control of women’s bodies.

Pre-1977 the content being created for television was aimed at addressing social issues, especially marital stereotypes regarding a young couple living independently. In *Ghar Chota Sa* (A Small Home) starring Bushra Ansari and Rehan Azhar, the show looked at the daily life of a married couple and used that lens to talk about pertinent related issues.

This did not entirely stop after the derailing and then return of democracy in Pakistan post-1988, as is evidenced by the drama *Sangchoor* (1990) depicting a young wife realizing her worth to her husband is only through her social status and subsequently leaving him, however it did leave an imprint of regression that has almost dominated the screen content that was available to the masses.

¹⁹https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/pakistan-media-and-culture-through-the-ages-the-citizens-archive-of-pakistan/wRiyZF_?hl=en

Fast forward to four decades later when the impact of commodifying entertainment and making what sells, TV dramas have been covering storylines that appear to justify adultery, physical and emotional abuse²⁰ and honour the female roles which fall within the claustrophobic box of ‘dutiful women upholding Eastern values’.²¹ These values now unfortunately have taken on the shape of subservient acquiescence to patriarchal norms and have impacted the understanding of morality for some, while reaffirming the deeply held beliefs of others.

A show of particular note here is *Dunk*,²² which focuses on a false accusation of sexual harassment. In a country where the MeToo movement is facing strong backlash and a prominent case on the matter of harassment is subjudice, it is irresponsible at the least for the flipside whataboutery to be given this much focus and prime screen time.

The fact that Pakistan ranks in the bottom most percentile²³ of the World Economic Forum’s Gender Parity Index and has now slipped down to the world’s four worst countries²⁴ sheds light on how regressive and compellingly in need of positive change, the situation is. Social movements and even basic common sense needs to be augmented with TV, entertainment and social media content instead of finding its basis in the regressive sense of morality that has stemmed from the time of pre-Partition colonialism.²⁵

²⁰<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2141702/problematic-tv-content-catastrophe-making>

²¹<https://images.dawn.com/news/1186807/will-we-ever-get-over-the-the-bitch-and-bichari-conundrum>

²²<https://runwaypakistan.com/fahad-mustafas-dunk-nothing-but-problematic/>

²³http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

²⁴<https://www.dawn.com/news/1615651>

²⁵<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/07/22/colonial-past-indias-regressive-laws/>

Recent instances of mass moral policing in Pakistan

It is no surprise therefore that both government sanctioned and individual cases of moral policing have been common in Pakistan. A notable case was in late 2020, when the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) banned dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, for “immoral” and “indecent” content.²⁶ Such bans are representative of the general stigmatisation around these applications, which can be seen in the way reporting is done around the issue of online dating in Pakistan, as it can be a contentious and sensitive topic. A piece featured in the daily publication the News, for instance, used pseudonyms to record the experiences of young women who had engaged in online dating as having identifiable information that could lead back to them is a risk most sources cannot undertake.²⁷

This is not the first time Pakistan has gone on a spree of banning content it considers indecent. In January of 2016, the federal government initiated a mass blocking spree of over 400,000 websites in order to counter the “phenomenon of obscenity and pornography that has an imminent role to corrupt and vitiate the youth of Pakistan.”²⁸ Included in the list of banned material was Disney cartoon websites, online shopping websites and more prominently, blogging website Tumblr. It seems that the moral panic instigated by pornography gave the government a free rein to blanket ban other content it deemed vulgar, regardless of proof or evidence.

At the time of writing, Pakistan has already undergone two bans on the entertainment platform TikTok, in a span of six months. The first ban was implemented in October of 2020 citing the hosting of ‘immoral’ and ‘indecent’ content being hosted on the app. The ban was conditionally lifted after 10 days with reassurances from the platform that measures will be taken to ensure content removal “in accordance with societal norms and the laws of Pakistan.”²⁹ The second time, the app was

banned in the country on the direction of the Peshawar High Court during the hearing of a case.

The notification³⁰ to this effect was issued by the PTA on the 11th of March.³¹ The ban was lifted³² on the 1st of April, 2021 on the directions of the same court, conditional upon Tik Tok management ensuring that no ‘vulgar and objectionable’ content would be kept available on the platform.³³

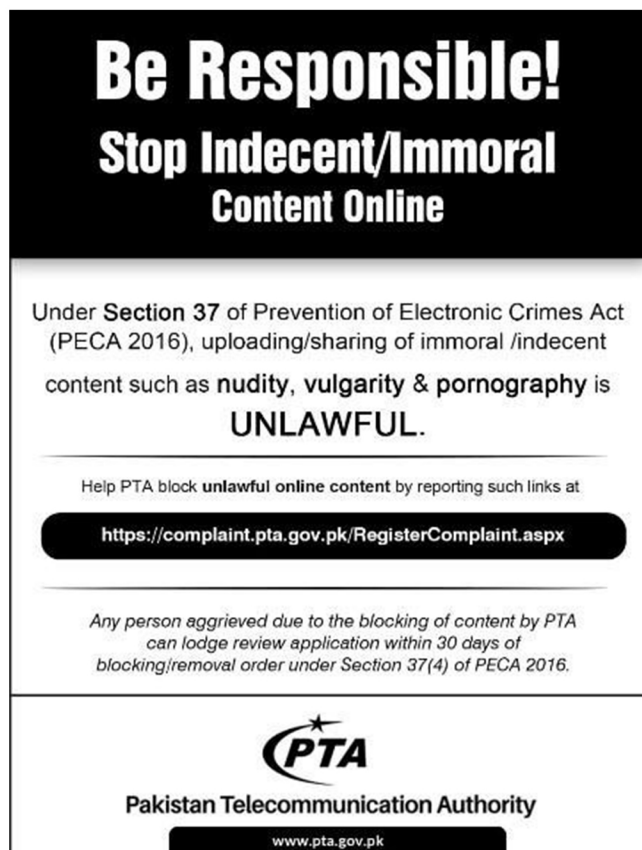
This latest act is not anomalous; the banning of entertainment platforms by governmental authorities has become routine, since s.37 of PECA has come into effect, as evidenced among many instances, by the PTA’s ban on the live streaming app Bigo. The problematic section is vaguely phrased and allots arbitrary powers to the PTA that have been borderline abused by the Authority.

The press release that announced the ban on Bigo stated that ‘complaints had been received from different segments of the society against immoral, obscene and vulgar content on social media applications particularly Tik Tok and Bigo, and their extremely negative effects on the society in general and youth in particular.’³⁴

More recently, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) issued a notice against the television serial “Dil Na Umeed Tou Nahin” for ‘inappropriate content’. The serial, known for raising the issue of human trafficking and child abuse, was sanctioned by PEMRA and given five days change its storyline to edit out objectionable content.³⁵ This isn’t the first time a TV show has been sanctioned or banned in Pakistan. In 2016, ‘Udari’ a drama on child sexual abuse, was issued a show-cause notice by PEMRA,³⁶ citing public disapproval and the apparent probability of viewers following suit when watching such content being played out. In 2020, a Pakistan web-series called ‘Churails’ faced extreme social media backlash for its portrayal of women drinking alcohol, swearing and wearing what they considered indecent clothing.³⁷ Overall the pattern that PTA is following appears to highlight that falling in line with the arbitrary standards of morality as per their authority may be the only way for digital entertainment

platforms to survive in Pakistan.

As of March 1, a public notice has been put up on the PTA's website encouraging internet users to "Be Responsible: Stop Indecent/Immoral Content Online" by reporting it to the PTA, citing Section 37 of the PECA as the basis for this action. This wave of morality-based regulation is only serving to fuel a mentality that is a far cry from what a progressive and balanced internet governance regime should look like.³⁸



Be Responsible!
Stop Indecent/Immoral
Content Online

Under **Section 37** of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA 2016), uploading/sharing of immoral /indecent content such as **nudity, vulgarity & pornography** is **UNLAWFUL.**

Help PTA block **unlawful online content** by reporting such links at

<https://complaint.pta.gov.pk/RegisterComplaint.aspx>

Any person aggrieved due to the blocking of content by PTA can lodge review application within 30 days of blocking/removal order under Section 37(4) of PECA 2016.

PTA
Pakistan Telecommunication Authority
www.pta.gov.pk

It is pertinent to note what exactly counts as immoral or indecent to those authorities that seek to ban these media programs and apps. In 2012, PEMRA attempted to define the term 'obscurity'³⁹ with consultation from the Council of Islamic Ideology and Parliament. They concluded that "any content which is unacceptable while viewing with the family transpires obscenity". Indeed, as explained before, the inextricable link between the family system and patriarchy in Pakistan is undeniable. By attempting to define obscenity as a transgression on the family system, PEMRA asserts a return to a patriarchal system that dictates what is and is not appropriate based on gendered

ideas of social relations and identity. Bokhari (2020) notes that "obscurity is anything that the state wants it to be, and our experience shows that it is almost always patriarchal in nature."⁴⁰

The rise of the internet and social media is also tied to the escalation of moral policing cases. The democratisation of information caused by the rise of the internet means women and other vulnerable groups, such as gender and religious minorities now have space to express themselves more widely. This increased visibility results in a backlash from society and terms such as 'indecent' and 'vulgarity' are used to restrict and censor those groups back into the peripheries of society.⁴¹ This can be corroborated by the increase in women-only groups such as Soul Sisters and Soul Bitches on social media which offer safe spaces to women who are restricted in the public domain.⁴² Bokhari states that "the hyper-visibility of women in the public sphere, as well as any expressions of sexuality has been known to cause anxiety amongst society and the many governments that have ruled the country, resulting in a whole host of content regulations."⁴³

Instances of moral policing are not only reserved to the state. Institutions such as colleges and universities are known to impose restrictions on their students in the name of promoting decency and morality. Recently, two University of Lahore students were expelled for a public proposal on university grounds.⁴⁴ In this case, the Federal Ministry of Human Rights was quick to condemn the expulsion and in fact, termed the act a case of moral policing.⁴⁵ In another recent case, KP's Kohat University made the black abaya mandatory for all female students - a move news portal Naya Daur referred to as a case of moral policing on campus.⁴⁶ In light of these recent cases, the question this report asks is: what does moral policing look like in online spaces? Does the same weaponization of societal values and the protected moral fabric of society occur in online spheres? Or is there another dynamic at play, with more outspoken and vulnerable communities pushing back on their censorship and silencing? How do such groups navigate through precarious experiences of moral policing online?

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- ²⁶<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/708595-tinder-other-dating-apps-blocked-in-pakistan-over-immoral-indecent-content>
- ²⁷<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/566919-lots-of-desire-but-little-love>
- ²⁸<https://scroll.in/article/808769/on-pakistans-absurd-list-of-over-400000-porn-sites-to-ban-disney-cartoons-and-spice-girls>
- ²⁹<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/p-ta-conditionally-restores-tiktok-services-201020>
- ³⁰<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/ban-on-tiktok-120321>
- ³¹<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/p-ta-blocks-tiktok-in-pakistan-091020>
- ³²<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/tiktok-app-unblocked-in-pakistan--020421>
- ³³<https://nation.com.pk/01-Apr-2021/phc-directs-government-to-unblock-tiktok>
- ³⁴<https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/p-ta-issues-final-warning-to-tik-tok-and-blocks-bigo-app-210720>
- ³⁵<https://www.samaa.tv/culture/2021/03/yumna-zaidi-disappointed-after-pemra-issues-notice-to-her-drama/>
- ³⁶<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1102619/pemra-sends-show-cause-notice-to-udaari>
- ³⁷<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54629439>
- ³⁸<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/806753-tiktok-ban-the-sequel>
- ³⁹<https://tribune.com.pk/story/426935/council-of-islamic-ideology-parliament-to-define-obscenity-for-media>
- ⁴⁰<https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/moral-policing-on-the-internet-is-rooted-in-patriarchal-ideas-of-controlling-womens-bodies/>
- ⁴¹<https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/moral-policing-on-the-internet-is-rooted-in-patriarchal-ideas-of-controlling-womens-bodies/>
- ⁴²<https://images.dawn.com/news/1175858>
- ⁴³<https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/moral-policing-on-the-internet-is-rooted-in-patriarchal-ideas-of-controlling-womens-bodies/>
- ⁴⁴<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/803231-two-lahore-university-students-expelled-after-movie-like-proposal>
- ⁴⁵<https://nayadaur.tv/2021/03/human-rights-ministry-terms-expulsion-of-lahore-university-couple-moral-policing-seeks-their-readmission/>
- ⁴⁶<https://nayadaur.tv/2021/03/moral-policing-on-kps-campuses-continues-unabated-kohat-university-makes-abaya-mandatory/>

Legal Context of Moral Policing

The conversation around the intersection of legality and morality is not a recent phenomenon by any measure. In a long-standing discussion between legal scholars H.L.A Hart and Lon L. Fuller, popularly known as the Hart-Fuller debate, Hart from the legal positivist viewpoint contended that the law ‘is what is’ and morality ‘is what ought to be’ and the focus should be on the separation between the two. Fuller, the natural law theorist argued that law should be based on something beyond the legal system, which is morality.

In the context of Pakistan, this debate has implicitly played out in the area of law-making, often yielding to Fuller’s conception the law and apparent in a long history of mortality-driven law-making which has remain unchecked given the lack of strong jurisprudence defining terms such as ‘morality’.

The political era of the 1970s and 80s demonstrates a persuasion within the legal system of the religiously motivated conception of morality. This began with the Nizam-e-Mustafa Movement⁴⁷ and the declaration of the supremacy of Islamic principles over all other laws and the Constitution of Pakistan.⁴⁸ The creation of the Federal Shariat Court, which would decide, amongst other matters, whether any law of the country was in contravention of Islamic principles, signalled this shift. During the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, the use of the law to morally police women’s bodies and freedoms was most apparent.

⁴⁷ Defined by the Oxford Islamic Studies website as: The System of the Prophet Muhammad. Nine-party popular movement in Pakistan was begun by the Jamaat-i Islami in 1977 to overthrow the secular government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and establish an Islamic system of government in Pakistan. The movement was eclipsed after the military coup of Zia-ul-Haq.

⁴⁸<https://www.grrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2LALJouq9hkR/YxFmikmkcM.pdf>

Morality & Law

a. Concept of Morality under the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973

The legal landscape of Pakistan, took its cues from the above mentioned influences of colonialism, in some senses quite literally as the structure of the legal systems of India and Pakistan are almost identical to that of the United Kingdom. Additionally it also took in what was the colonial masters’ outlook on how their subjects, especially female ones, should be treated and should behave.

“The laws and policies imposed by the British in India changed the notion of morality and ‘righteous behaviour’, that was created through the lens of a Victorian conservative society. Although the British helped abolish female specific social evils such as ‘Sati’, with Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, their own idea of women in society was at best orthodox and misogynist.

The ideal woman in the Victorian era was to be at home, domestically inclined and ‘kept away’ from public spheres. The concept of “Pater Familias”—the patriarchal hierarchy within a family where the man is seen as the head of the family and the woman inferior to him, was preached in the society.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/07/22/colonial-past-indias-regressive-laws/>

Within the Pakistani Constitution the word ‘morality’ alone occurs in Articles 17 (1) and 20 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 as well as in Article 19 where it has been used along with the term ‘decency’. The important point to raise is that the rights assured by these Articles are subject to ‘reasonable restrictions’ however the reliance on vague language and concepts such as decency and morality give leeway to those in power to interpret as they deem fit.

These Articles, when read with Article 31 in Chapter 2 of Part 1 of the Constitution (“Principles of Policy”)⁵⁰ which provides, inter alia, that the State shall endeavor, as respects the Muslims of Pakistan, “to promote unity and observance of the Islamic moral standards”, show that the Constitution is both a political and a moral charter. Since the word “morality” occurs in the Constitution, it follows then that the judges are given the task to define and interpret what morality is.

b. Instances of Articles outlining the abstract concepts of morality and decency

Article 17 - Freedom of association:

“Every citizen shall have the right to form associations or unions, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, public order or **morality**.”

Article 19 - Freedom of speech, etc:

“Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, **decency or morality**, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence.”

Article 20 - Freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions:

“Subject to law, public order and **morality**, —
(a) every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion; and
(b) every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions.”

⁵⁰ The Principles of Policy differ from the Articles of the Constitution in the manner of their impact and how they bind the legal system, in that the Articles are a much stronger legal source comparatively.

c. Concept of Morality under the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860

The Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 (PPC) is one of the core legal instruments in Pakistan outlining criminal offences. Some of its sections, particularly sections 292 to 294 of the PPC provide instances where restrictions of freedom of speech have been imposed through the criminalisation of concepts such as decency and morality and particularly using the term ‘obscenity’ to curtail certain content being created and circulated:

Section 292⁵¹ prohibits the sale, etc., of obscene books, etc

Section 293⁵² pertains to Sale, etc. of obscene objects to young person (defined as anyone below the age of twenty years)

Section 294⁵³ highlights the penalty for reciting obscene acts and songs in public, to the annoyance of others.

These sections and articles highlight the multiple instances in which instruments of governance have attempted to define the subjective concepts of decency and morality.

S. 294 in particular, rests the barometer of an offense on the ‘annoyance’ of others, thus lending to the law the subjectivity of people’s opinion. This section has reportedly been misused by the police⁵⁴, who have been booking women suspected of adultery under s.294 instead of the relevant section of the Criminal Procedure Code as it allows for direct arrest instead of having to acquire permission from a court of law, as is mandated under due procedure when applying CrPC as per the Offence of Zina Ordinance.

⁵¹Section 292 – Sale, etc., of obscene books, etc.:

“Whoever__

(a) sells, lets to hire, distributes, publicly exhibits or in any manner puts into circulation, or for purposes of sale, hire, distribution, public exhibition or circulation, makes, produces or has in his possession any obscene book, pamphlet, paper, drawing, painting, representation or figure or any other obscene object whatsoever, or

(b) imports, exports or conveys any obscene object for any of the purposes aforesaid, or knowing or having reason to believe that such object will be sold, let to hire, distributed or publicly exhibited or in any manner put into circulation, or

(c) takes part in or receives profits from any business in the course of which he knows or has reason to believe that any such obscene, objects are, for any of the purposes aforesaid, made, produced, purchased, kept, imported, exported, conveyed, publicly exhibited or in any manner put into circulation, or ... ”

⁵² **Section 293 - Sale, etc. of obscene objects to young person:** “Whoever sells, lets to hire, distributes, exhibits or circulates to any person under the age of twenty years any such obscene object as is referred to in the last preceding section, or offers or attempts so to do, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months, or with fine, or with both.”

⁵³ **Section 294 - Obscene acts and songs:**

“Whoever, to the annoyance of others,

(a) does any obscene act in any public place, or

(b) sings, recites or utters any obscene songs, ballad or words, in or near any public place, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.”

⁵⁴<https://www.dawn.com/news/156278/police-flouting-law-to-detain-women#:~:text=Section%20294%20of%20the%20PPC,to%20three%20months%2C%20or%20with>

d. The Concept of ‘Online Morality’ under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016

Section 37 – Unlawful Online Content:

“The Authority shall have the power to remove or block or issue direction for removal or blocking of access to an information through an information system if it considers it necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court or commission of or incitement to an offence under this Act.”

This arbitrarily and vaguely phrased section of PECA has been hailed as a particularly problematic provision and calls for its removal and for the law to be amended have been widely made by the civil society of Pakistan.⁵⁵

Not only that, but the erstwhile Citizens Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules of 2020 which have now been replaced by the ‘Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules’ which have been drafted under the powers of PECA whose s.37(2). These Rules include sections from the PPC⁵⁶ as part of the criteria to remove content and allows for arbitrary regulation of online content at the will of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). At the time of writing this report, the Rules are under challenge at the Islamabad High Court (IHC) and the Prime Minister has constituted an inter-ministerial committee to review the Rules.⁵⁷

⁵⁵<https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/digital-rights-foundation-is-gravely-concerned-by-the-removal-and-blocking-of-unlawful-online-content-procedure-oversight-and-safe-guards-rules-2020/>

⁵⁶Sections 292-294 and s.509 of the PPC apply here in how they define ‘decency and morality’, as set under s.4 (4) of the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules

⁵⁷<https://www.dawn.com/news/1615596>.

As per a report submitted by the PTA to the IHC in January 2021,⁵⁸ over 980, 000 links have been banned by the Authority as a measure to block ‘hate speech, controversial and objectionable material’ under the ambit of the powers granted to PTA by s.37 of PECA.

e. Concept of Morality as interpreted by the judiciary

In the seminal case⁵⁹ of Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan, Chief Justice Muhammad Haleem explained the concept of ‘morality,’ particularly in the context of a Muslim society as follows:

““In common parlance the word “morality” ... is far more vague than the word decency. The difficulty of determining what would offend against morality is enhanced by the fact that not only does the concept of immorality differ between man and man, but the collective notion of society also differs amazingly in different ages. All that can be said is that the antonym of the word ‘morality’ according to the existing notion depends upon acts which are regarded as acts of immorality by the consensus of general opinion. However, it may be pointed out that owing to ethnic, cultural and even physiological differences it is not possible to formulate a universal standard of morality. Thus notions of morality vary from country to country and from age to age and the international community has not yet been able to settle any common code of morality.”

⁵⁸<https://www.dawn.com/news/1604622>

⁵⁹Miss Benazir Bhutto v The Federation of Pakistan and Another PLD 1988 SC 416

f. Crown v Saadat Hasan Minto

The basis of this infamous case against the author is that Saadat Hassan Minto authored a story entitled “Thanda Gosht” which was published in an Urdu Magazine called “Jawed.” After the publication, Saadat Hassan Minto, the editor and publisher of the Urdu magazine, were all tried for publishing obscene material.

There are only two characters in the story, Ishar Singh and his mistress Kulwant Kaur. The prosecution argued that the details of the story and the words used by Ishar Singh in his conversation with Kulwant Kaur were obscene. The Chief Justice Muhammad Munir, agreeing with the prosecution, remarked that, “the most objectionable scene, however, is that where on his second visit to Kalwant Kaur, Ishar Singh attempts to prepare her and himself for the sexual act. The technique of a debauch is described there in plain terms. The passage is full of references to Kulwant Kaur's naked body and describes in full details what he did to her in order to bring her to the pitch of a boiling kettle.”

In the seminal judgment in the criminal trial of Manto, Crown v. Saadat Hassan Minto,⁶⁰ Muhammad Munir, CJ, while considering the meaning of the words ‘morality’ and ‘obscenity’ held:

“‘Morality and obscenity are comparative terms and what is obscene or immoral in one society may be considered to be quite decent and moral in another. While considering the question whether certain words or representations are obscene or not, one has to apply standards that are current in the society in which those words have been uttered or representations made. In the present state of society in this country or anywhere else in the civilised world, there can be no doubt that a description of the acts preparatory to sexual intercourse, however graphic or lifelike that description may be, would be considered obscene.’”

For Muslims, the Holy Quran itself, as was held by the Chief Justice, is the guide for eliciting the meaning of the word “morality.” In that connection, he referred to Al-Quran 6:152 which reads:

“Draw not near to shameful deeds, that which be apparent and that which be concealed.”

The Chief Justice then added:

“This being the moral code, every Muslim is enjoined to obey it. This verse is the touchstone of what is moral and what is immoral. Necessarily, morality is part and parcel of Islamic Ideology of Pakistan and included in the expression “Integrity of Pakistan”. Therefore, not only individually but also collectively Muslims have to live within an exclusively moral framework as enjoined by the Holy Quran and the Sunnah. No civilised society can deny this standard of morality.”

It was also held that “one test of obscenity has always been whether the tendency of the matter charged is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall and that the motive, or intention in publishing the work does not prevent it from being obscene if the descriptions in it are in themselves obscene. The passage in the story, to which special reference has been made earlier in this judgment, is full of grossly indecent and sexual details of a sexual episode and would undoubtedly suggest to the minds of the young of either sex, and even to persons of more advanced years, thoughts of lewd and libidinous situations. It is wholly immaterial what the intention of the author in writing the story was; what matters in such cases is the tendency and not the intention.”

⁶⁰Crown v Saadat Hassan Minto and Two Others PLD 1952 LHC 384

g. Mehtab Jan v. Municipal Committee Rawalpindi.⁶¹

The case, Mehtab Jan v. Municipal Committee, concerned the prohibition of prostitution in a specified part of a town. It was so held by Chief Justice M.R. Kayani that, *“in the interpretation of fundamental rights, we have to enable the Muslims of Pakistan to order their lives in accordance with the teachings of Islam, and this should be done not individually alone, but also collectively; secondly, that the fundamental rights should be guaranteed “subject to law and morality.”*

CJ Kayani, later on in the judgement highlighted his opinion that decency and morality are as fundamental as the fundamental rights themselves. The High Court highlighted the subjective nature of morality and stated that the inability to separate the importance of core human rights, granted through potent documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and inculcated in national law through the writ of the Constitution, from concepts such as morality that differ as per varying perception, is a disservice to the importance of the former. The court held that seeing both through the same lens, or even equating them, have the potential to cause confusion. The clear result in this situation must always be the primacy of fundamental human laws guaranteed to the citizens, and not the perception of the parameters of morality.

⁶¹Mehtab Jan v Municipal Committee Rawalpindi PLD 1958 WP (LHC) 929

FINDINGS

Participant demographics

Our survey received a total of 120 responses, out of which 117 were considered valid upon deleting invalid or repeat submissions. Of those, 50% of respondents were from the 25-35 age range, while 36% were 18-24. Therefore, it can be stated that a majority of respondents were between young adults and adults, with little input from participants from older generations. 9% of 35-45 year olds responded, 2 were over 55 and 1 between 46-55. 3 respondents were also under the age of 18 so their responses were carefully vetted and included after considering they had consented online.

70% of respondents were self-identified women, 26% were men, 3% non-binary and 2% preferred not to state their gender. As the majority of responses were from women, the data is being treated as representative of women's experiences of online spaces, though the discussion takes into account the specific responses given in submissions from male and non-binary individuals.

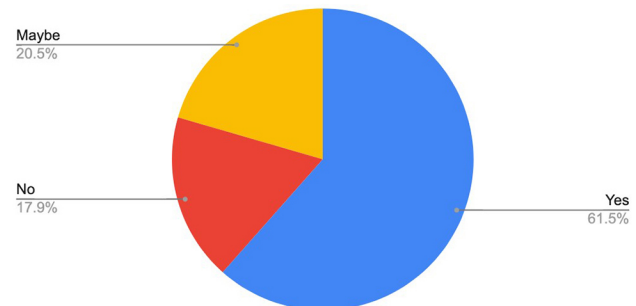
Usage and networks

The most common usage combination of social media networks were Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, with 23 individuals selecting that option. In addition, 16 individuals selected this option with the added use of Snapchat. Internet usage was split between 2-3 hours and 5-7 hours daily, at 37.6% and 28.2% respectively. After that, 15% of people said they use the internet for 8-10 hours, followed by 14% of individuals who used it for more than 10 hours. About 5% of individuals said they only use the internet a few times a week.

Gender and online spaces

Participants were asked whether they think they are treated differently in online spaces due to their gender. 62% of individuals said they feel they are treated differently due to their gender while 20% selected 'Maybe'. 18% of respondents said they are not treated differently. Another specific question asked whether they thought women and gender minorities experience online spaces differently, to which 86% of individuals responded in the affirmative. 9% said maybe, while only 5% said no. In follow up questions, participants were given the option to elaborate on their answers if they wished to.

Do you think you are treated differently because of your gender?



Female respondents alluded to several areas in which they felt they were treated differently. One participant said they felt “held to a higher standard of “morality” that does not apply to my male peers or internet users.” A male respondent corroborated this assertion by stating that they were treated differently because they were “given more credibility and questioned less.” Another female participant drew the connection between the reality of her offline experience with that of her online one:

“Women are seen the same way in online spaces as they are in the offline spaces. Either they're commodified, or they are harassed. Their opinion is taken with a pinch of salt and it's even easier for them to be called out for any and every opinion they give online.”

Other issues brought up included receiving lewd photographs, hacking and unsolicited texts and DMs from members of the opposite sex. Female respondents also complained that they “can’t have opinions on serious topics like current affairs and politics. These are met with vile comments and attacks on my sexuality and my family and ‘honor’”. Interestingly, male respondents corroborated these accounts with several submissions:

“Treated as a privileged netizen, i.e. no unsolicited DMs or pictures”

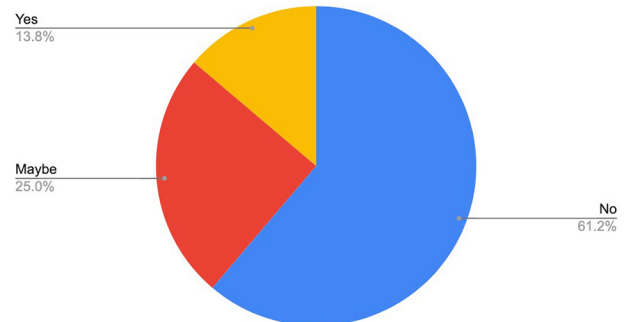
“As a man, I don’t face the level of trolling, haming and thirsty comments that I see non-males dealing with.”

“Men don't have to worry about being potentially slut shamed or harassed. I have to be mindful of everything I post or say in online public spaces”

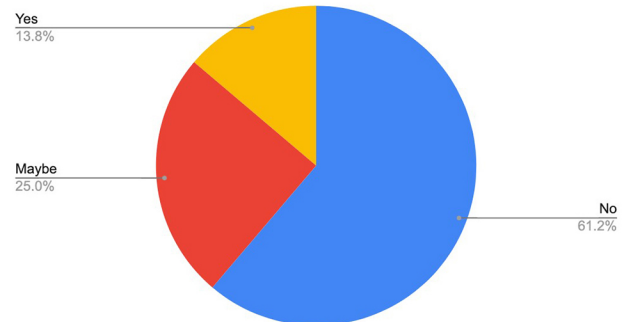
Safety and privacy

A second set of questions investigated the level of safety and privacy that participants felt they had online. 61% of respondents said they do not feel safe to express themselves freely while 26% said maybe. 14% said they feel safe. In addition, 79% of respondents said they did not feel that their privacy is protected online. 16% said maybe, while only 5% said they felt protected online. Participants were also asked whether they believe it is important for women to feel safe and free to express themselves online. 91% of respondents said it was very important, while 7% said it was somewhat important. 2% said they were neutral. None of the participants stated that it was not important.

Do you feel safe to freely express yourself online?



Do you feel safe to freely express yourself online?



Regarding the first question, several respondents, predominantly those who self-identified as female, noted fearing lack of privacy and safety from their families. This is also tied to the close relationship between offline and online spaces. Fear related to lack of privacy and safety were directly linked to real world consequences, such as dishonouring the family name.

"I don't want someone in my extended family to find out about my opinions, views and my life outside of the false image they have created of me. I hang out with all sorts of people and it would not be received well. I support LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, it would not be received well. I have to act docile in front of them"

"One can't discuss politics, religion, current affairs, minority rights, women rights without having an army of trolls attacking you from every angle. This is far worse for women because families suddenly start feeling threatened and put gag orders on the women."

The sense of a lack of safety and privacy was also directly linked with fear of direct violence in the physical space. Respondents reported being threatened with death and rape when they did not abide by societal norms and values.

"I am often scared to express myself and my beliefs online. I fear that a misunderstanding can lead to my death"

"On the original account, I have to carefully craft my opinions, or not express them at all so that the people I know might not kill me for my beliefs/orientation/opinions."

"There are certain things and topics I will not touch mostly out of fear for my own safety."

"It is exhausting to live with the knowledge that one slip up, one joke that can be contorted could lead to you being lynched in the streets or thrown into jail, driven around for a couple of days, or never to be seen/heard from again."

Moral policing and its impact

Participants were given brief definitions of moral policing, shaming or controlling and then asked if according to those definitions, they felt they had experienced any or some of those. 31% said they had experienced all of them. 25.5% said they had been morally policed, while 11% said they were shamed and morally policed, as well as solely shamed. 9.8% said they were controlled, 5% said they have experienced moral policing and controlling, 3% were shamed and controlled. Only 4% said they had not experienced any of the three options. In response to a question about how often they felt morally policed, shamed or controlled, 63% of respondents felt morally policed, controlled or shamed online occasionally. 12% said they experienced those issues rarely and 11% said they experienced them a few times in a week. 7% felt morally policed, shamed and controlled online daily and 8% said they never dealt with those issues.

In follow up questions, participants elaborated on feeling morally policed, shamed and controlled by their own families in real life and online. Female participants recalled stories of being controlled and shamed by the male members of their family into censoring and limiting their presence online:

"I've been told by my family that I brought shame upon them for posting photos of myself."

"My account was hacked into by my own brother to take hold of sensitive information that was private. It was later used to control my actions and to 'curb' my behaviour which seemed dishonourable or not chaste."

“My father tried to tell me I can’t be posting vile things for people to see - what will they say and then I stopped posting altogether for a very long time”

Another question investigated whether participants felt morally policed by the state. 56% said they felt morally policed by the State, 21% said maybe and 23% said they did not feel morally policed by the state. 53% said they had been mentally or physically impacted while 14% said maybe. 33% said they had not been impacted in those ways.

“I constantly fear being charged under a certain constitutional clause (I’m too terrified to even name it so please make due of the allusion). Pakistan has a weird mob mentality and I fear a casual expression of self online can lead to physical harm. I may be irrational in this belief but It’s just how I feel.”

“The authority [PTA] believes that women having the right to lipsync is obscenity which does fall under censorship and moral policing. They are trying to take away all the platforms which we can use to express our freedom of speech.”

We also asked participants if they felt like being subjected to moral policing had an impact on their mental or physical health and the ways in which they felt impacted. Most participants who had said they felt morally policed also noted some type of mental and physical toll it had taken on their lives. A majority of respondents reported being subjected to threats, policing and enforced censorship resulting in feelings of anxiety, depression and frustration.

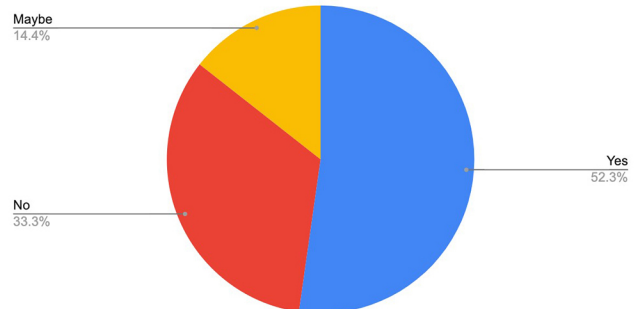
“Body image issues. Doubt in your own capabilities. Being unhappy with life. Feeling like maybe I am not doing enough.”

“I fear I gaslight myself. I doubt my experiences and wonder if I am even right for having the opinions that I have.”

“It takes a huge mental toll. After the instance of the technocrat threatening me with a lawsuit, I couldn’t sleep for days. For many weeks after, I felt a sudden gush of anger but also anxiety. I felt insulted and helpless.”

“I feel like I’m not understood. It plays with my self esteem”

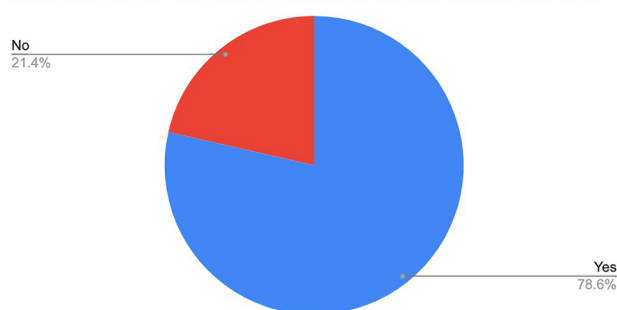
Has moral policing, shaming and controlling of your online space impacted you, physically or mentally?



Usage and networks

The survey asked participants if they had, or ever have, limited their use of the internet as a result of what they had experienced online, vis a vis moral policing, shaming and controlling behaviour by others towards them. 79% said they had limited their use of the internet in some way as a result of others' behavior towards them online, while 21% said they had not.

Have you or someone you know ever had to leave or limit their use of the internet because of others' behaviour to...



The final question asked what steps individuals had taken to secure themselves online and to avoid moral policing, shaming or controlling behaviour online. Respondents mentioned ignoring messages, blocking those who morally police them. Others mentioned self censoring in order to evade any physical consequences of their self expression online. Many also stated that they were no longer morally policed because they had chosen to make their social media private and limited to only close friends and those they knew in real life.

"I find myself self-censoring as what I say may be spread around in my family. It also keeps "trolls" away and people who want to debate on inherent human rights."

"Blocked people, muted certain words, I have removed geotags from all my pictures, taken down ones that have recognisable landmarks or are "vulgar" according to society. I have also removed a lot of family members from my private socials - as I don't use my public account anymore."

Not posting personal pictures online. Not using original names, even on Facebook. Keeping everything that has even an ounce of personal information private. Security settings are set to "only friends can message. Not posting something that might upset or goes against societal norms. Posting very little updates on social accounts. All personal accounts are private."

It is clear from these findings that individuals, particularly women and gender minorities feel little safety in online spaces and are subjected to all forms of abuse, including enforced censorship through moral policing and threats of physical violence from within their families and beyond. In order to secure themselves, such individuals have no choice but to retreat back into their safe spaces so as to not disturb societal norms and values that are being imposed on them. This is, in every sense, a violation of their right to privacy, freedom of expression and freedom of speech. These findings were only further corroborated by the follow up interviews we conducted.

THE PHENOMENA OF RAIDS

“I’m in the middle of an online troll attack right now, I just realised”

The origin of the concept of ‘raids’ cannot be pinpointed specifically due to its being a relatively new phenomena on Pakistani social media. However, this study understands them to be targeted attacks that have been strategically planned to direct mass harassment towards an individual. Common elements of the phenomena as observed thus far are that the intended victim is someone who has spoken against the belief system or caused some offence to those partaking in the attack or their designated ‘leader’. These beliefs are generally misogynist, sexist and fundamentalist in nature. The modus operandi includes the posting of hate filled, harsh comments, spamming by multiple accounts posting the same content as if copy pasting from each other and doxxing the victim and thus endangering their safety. These attacks are digital in nature and use the strategy of descending on a particular online account, en masse/in unison, in an attempt to intimidate the victim of the raid.

To investigate individual experiences of ‘raids’, we interviewed three female bloggers who have, in the past year, been subjected to coordinated attacks online by hundreds, if not thousands, of social media accounts. Their reasons for being raided were varied but had one specific element in common: they were publicly expressing their opinion about a controversial issue in society. In speaking to these women, we learnt the nature of such attacks, the impact it has on their perceptions about safety and privacy in online spaces in Pakistan and the toll they take on them.

P1: Coordination and The State

P1 is an avid twitter user, who garnered a large following on the platform recently. Initially, several individuals, from different political and social allegiances were following and supporting her. However, upon expressing support for certain controversial elements and movements in Pakistan, she was subjected to a hoard of abuse and moral policing from the same users. In our interview, she expressed why semi-public figures such as herself as easy targets:

“You kind of become noticeable like, you’re recognised as someone who may be critical of the state or a feminist or like you know, people know you, so you become one of those people who is, I don’t know, easy to target, I guess? I don’t know why they target people; they could just live their lives but yeah”

Later on, she explained how she was alerted to the notion of ‘raids’ and the orchestration behind it. Though not verifiable, partly given the lack of transparency from the state in this regard, her claim suggests that the nature of a raid is not only backed by careful curation, but is executed with planning and intention to harass members of particular groups. The intended outcome was simply to overwhelm P1, causing her to retract her opinions and presence from the public sphere. The coordinated nature of such an attack is not surprising given reports of all-male groups of Facebook and Instagram that regularly proliferate information and images of women they believe are transgressive of social norms and moral standards.⁶²

“I don’t really engage with political Twitter, so I just sit here and give my opinions on things and then a lot of people will attack me and then someone told me that they have a WhatsApp group! and I didn’t know. They said, “yeah they

⁶²<https://www.dawn.com/news/1474960>

have a WhatsApp group and if your tweet reaches them then they will come and attack you". They have WhatsApp groups monitoring your kind of tweets and activity online and that's why they come after some people."

She believes that the nature of such raids is gendered in that her gender identity and the patriarchal norms of society inform the nature and extent of harassment she faces:

"They're not doing this because they believe there's a morally right to be...It also comes out in misogyny because you want women to act a certain way because you don't like outspoken women... And If she starts speaking out, she becomes a threat. So they say a good woman is a woman who doesn't do things like these. And that's kind of how it translates offline, you know what kind of a woman are you?"

In response to a question about her personal opinion about whether she felt morally policed by the state, P1 expressed everyone has learnt this behaviour from the state. In her opinion, it was the State's continued censoring and surveillance of its vulnerable citizens' expressions online that had led others, more powerful than minority groups, to take on the mantle of policing as well.

"Every institution weaponizes morality to suit what they want you to do, and the state is the primary institution that's doing that"

She also highlighted the inherent contradiction of a State that promised to safeguard those it itself was persecuting. Moral policing is a way of making state protection conditional and contingent on 'good behaviour' by citizens; those who transgress these moral lines are undeserving of the state's protection. Engaging in moral policing its citizens through bans on ads, serials, protests and curbing online backlash through violence or threat of violence, it would be a near paradox to expect protection and change from the State on the matter.

"Your state backs a hostile online space for women and minorities. People you are actively persecuting, you can't also give them safe spaces."

"You'll find that the dramas that were written by a generation that did not grow up in the 80s and 90s is very different from the ones that were written by people who grew up in the 80s and 90s, because the state redefined what morality for women is and now you have a different interpretation of it... so that State is the primary institution defining what morality is for us and how its weaponizing religion to define what morality is to us and how all of us internalise those behaviours"

P2: The Consequences of Self-Expression

P2 was asked whether she felt, as a public profile, her online presence was generally safe or censored, to which she stated that she generally felt safe but that coordinated attacks and general abuse directed towards her for speaking about certain issues, such as feminism, made her fear for her physical safety. Here, the link between online violence leading to fear of offline violence was clear and direct. In spite of this, P2 was determined to continue her work.

"Coordinated attacks are extremely difficult to handle because it's so extensive, definitely doesn't make me feel safe"

"I have feared that those online threats and violence will transpire into something physical, but change, revolution and fear are not reconcilable...- so you hedge your bets"

We later asked what impact raids had had on her online presence, to which she reiterated what we had noticed in our initial data set: individuals second-guessed and gaslit themselves into either believing those that were morally policing them, or curtailed their own online presence and expression in an effort to secure themselves out of fear.

"Sometimes I put something on twitter and then delete it ten minutes later because I feel like I'm crossing a line, something defined by other people and how they'll perceive it. So yeah, there's always that language of constantly navigating that line between censorship and safety"

She spoke about the mental health impact of such harassment and the mechanisms she developed to survive online:

"I have a coping mechanism where I don't remember much negativity because if I started to remember it, I wouldn't be able to continue with my work"

Interestingly, however, P2 expressed that her fear of being morally policed and its consequences stem less from coordinated raids online but instead, by "cancel culture". It is the betrayal from what she sees as a progressive safe space on social media that she fears most. This is an interesting revelation, as it reveals that policing and censorship can also occur within the open spaces that vulnerable groups create for themselves. In the case of P2, she claims to be particularly fearful of being rejected by younger, more radical feminists who don't see her as going far enough. This suggests that the issue of moral policing is both an intra and inter group phenomenon that is found in online spaces, and perhaps may require further investigation to find nuances in the way it's conducted within groups online.

"My worst experience on twitter has been being converged upon by people who seem like they should be on your side, your allies. It's actually fears of cancellation from your own people that's the greater, well catalyst, for censorship for social media spaces, especially twitter. You fear that those you consider to be your allies actually might hate you for what you say. And that's why I've sometimes felt like deleting my twitter app or not check twitter"

Finally, we asked what P2 felt would make online spaces safer in terms of moral policing, controlling and shaming. In contrast to P1, her primary focus was the social media platforms that in spite of having vast amounts of wealth, have not established proper cultural and linguistically contextualised content moderation and reporting mechanisms. This, in P2's opinion, creates a sense of insecurity and helplessness amongst those who might want to challenge acts of violence and policing online.

"[Social] media platforms have so much money. They should have people who can parse this abuse in other languages. People say such vile things and are horrible, but I feel I cannot report them because they are doing it in Urdu, and I know no one on Facebook will respond to it because of that"

"There was someone the other day who was essentially justifying honour killing online. And I thought well, if they are justifying honour killing, shouldn't they be under some kind of radar? But who do I report it to? It's not that easy. We need a mechanism to report particularly dangerous people."

P3: Distraction tactics

During the interview with P3, it was clear where she thought such coordinated attacks of moral policing arose from and what their intended effect was. Contrary to P1 and P2's assessment, P3 believed that the primary purpose of raids was to distract audiences away from the initial subject of discussion. If it was criticism towards a policy, a party or the production of a TV serial, the purpose of a raid was to coordinate attacks that distracted those who were criticising.

"It's a tactic to shut us up and I hate that even for a second I thought 'maybe I shouldn't call this out'"

"The reason these bots or agents or people flood the internet is because its so smart because then everyone gets directed that way. Everyone gets distracted. If you attack a bunch of feminists, who are outspoken, then we become responsible for curtailing freedom of speech. We become the enemy. That's the tactic and it's very smart. It's manipulative. It works. It's a bunch of mobs".

Pertinently, it was P3's recent encounter with a raid that led her to believe that while there was coordination and calculation behind these attacks, there were often more powerful coordinators orchestrating from behind the scenes for their own interest. This orchestration may be intentional, or could possibly be the byproduct of what happens when you speak out against the status quo that works in the interests of powerful people and institutions. One can only speculate regarding such claims but the assertions do provide fodder for thought regarding who directs and produces the tools necessary for such extensive cases of moral policing, and importantly, who benefits from it?

"Quite recently when the drama [name redacted] came out, I tweeted about it and me along with, I believe 7 other women - in seconds, our Instagram was flooded with phrases like "landay ki feminist". It was very much a targeted attack...and the attack on our social media stopped when we directly tweeted at the actor and producer of the show. We just said 'hey, do you see what your people are doing?' And then it suddenly stopped."

"This is purely speculation but I think because they were getting such bad press, they hired a company to immediately start bot-spamming. I have to believe that it was directly sanctioned by them"

Finally, P3 briefly discussed the impact such attacks have had on her personal and professional life. She discussed how difficult coping with such incidences has been, given her own history of abuse and harassment, both online and offline. In addition, she expressed the very real fear in having her face be publicly seen and known, while having

little knowledge of the identities of those who harassed her.

"The mentality of raiding people and flooding them with hate, and the fact that maybe sometimes it's not bots, but literally people who want to put you down. It really messed me up. I cannot imagine the mentality of enjoying doing that to a person"

"I do fear that a lot of people know what I look like or know who I am. I have no idea who they are."

Though the lived experiences and online lives of the three women interviewed were largely varied, their reasons for being raided were varied but had one specific element in common: they were women expressing their opinion online. In speaking to these women, we learnt the nature of such attacks, the level of coordinated and the extent of abuse and threatening language used during such attacks, the impact it has on their perceptions about safety and privacy in online spaces in Pakistan and the toll such attacks take on them. They each expressed who they believed to be the most dangerous coordinator of moral policing and what they believed would help make online spaces safer for others. Their input has been incorporated into our Recommendations section.

CONCLUSION

The present study was initiated to understand the ways in which moral policing, as seen regularly in offline spaces in Pakistan, is enforced in online spaces. In particular, we wanted to investigate the nature of moral policing as it is used in online spaces and the impact it has on the everyday lives of those it is directed towards. More specifically, we set out to investigate the dynamics behind a recent phenomenon called ‘raiding’ in online spaces that has been used against several prominent bloggers and social media users to curb their online presence and self expression. Through the study, we have found that women and gender minorities face a significant barrage of online attacks centred on issues of shaming, controlling and moral policing. In particular, the notions of honour, respect and morality are often used to silence women and gender minorities. Interestingly, it is found that a combination of familial surveillance and threats of violence often caused women and gender minorities to feel unsafe and unprotected in the online sphere. Other common themes included censorship in the media and surveillance as causes of anxiety and moral policing online. These assertions were corroborated by our brief investigation into the phenomena of ‘raids’. The findings allowed us to understand the dynamics and intentionality behind the orchestration and execution of raids on individual personalities online. It is our hope that these findings will contribute to a greater understanding of how moral policing unfolds in online spaces, and what can be done to protect those it targets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These sets of recommendations have been issued taking into consideration the suggestions given by our participants.

The State

- Recognition of Pakistan's international human rights norms, ratification and ensuing international obligations must be taught to the judiciary and law enforcement agencies that deal with cases of moral policing and threats of violence and abuse against anyone.
- Ensure proper enforcement of the Prevention Against Electronic Crimes Act (2016) by making reporting and complaint filing mechanisms for online harassment are easier, with more gender-sensitivity adopted by law enforcement. Investing more resources to report and prosecute online harassment complaints through speedy due process.
- Human rights-compliant monitoring of online spaces for sexist, misogynistic or other forms of hate speech. This includes the threat of / incitement of violence against anyone based on their gender, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, class, etc.
- Proper regulation of online profiles related to government officials and other bodies, ensuring they act in accordance with the law and do not misuse platforms to direct abuse towards critics.
- Inclusion of digital literacy and digital safety on school curriculums to ensure responsible use of the internet and social media.
- Amending section 37 of PECA to replace vague language and terms such as morality, decency and vulgarity, to focus on more harms on vulnerable groups as the criterion for content removal.
- Partnerships with civil society organisations working on digital rights and gender-based violence to develop awareness material and understand these issues.

Civil Society Actors

- Awareness raising campaigns on the online abuse, violence and harassment faced by vulnerable communities online, such women and gender and religious minorities. These can include counter-campaigns to target misinformation and defamation campaigns against women who are subjected to raids.
- Urge the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression to take up the issues of online abuse and violence against women and gender minorities and the weaponisation of moral and social values to silence and censor them.
- A coalition of civil society organizations interested in working towards curbing the instances of raids and moral policing must be formed so it can serve as an effective and substantial platform to rally around any instances of violations and enforced censorship in online spaces.

Social Media Platforms

- Investment of resources in comprehensive content moderation, including monitoring, regulation and removal of online hate speech, misinformation and violent/graphic images and videos that take into account the local context.
- Understanding cultural and linguistic complications tied to the abuse, hate speech and threats faced by vulnerable groups online. Much of the hateful content posted online is in languages other than English, and therefore, take longer to report and remove. More must be done to ensure that all forms of hate speech in all languages are being treated with the same urgency. More invest in local language content moderators.
- Drafting community guidelines in consultation with local civil society, particularly women and minorities, in each country to ensure that the rules governing speech on these platforms are representative of the diverse contexts they are applied to. Furthermore, taking into account power dynamics when

designing guidelines, taking into account how speech directed at women and minorities has a disparate impact given these inequalities in power.

- Adopt preventative measures such as actively initiating and bringing attention to issues tied to policing, censorship and digital violence against individuals in the online sphere. This could include providing resources and tools for further awareness and education on platforms where such problems are common.
- Increased protection and privacy for vulnerable groups and online communities, ensuring privacy settings are accessible and understandable. More control on how data is collected, process, used and shared should vest with users.
- More transparency regarding their actions and measures being taken to ensure data safety and security of social media users, including ways in which their data is being used and who has access to it

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ANNEXURE

A. Google Form used to procure data from subjects

1. Do you consent to the use of the information provided in your responses for use in our research analysis?

2. Gender?

3. Age?

4. What social media platforms do you use?

5. How often do you use social media?

6. Do you think you are treated differently because of your gender?

7. Do you believe that men, women and gender minorities experience the online space differently?

8. Do you feel safe to freely express yourself online?

9. Do you feel that your privacy is protected online?

10. Have you ever been shamed, controlled or morally policed online? [please tick all relevant boxes] In this case, shaming can refer to the enforcing and imposing their negative thoughts, opinions and feelings about your behaviour on you and your presence online in an effort to evoke guilt, controlling is the reinforcement of negative consequences of your online behaviour in an effort to curtail your presence and activities online; threatening you with said consequences and moral policing is any form of condemnation of your behaviour because others deem it as unfit and unsuitable for the culture and traditions of society.

11. Who are you shamed, controlled or morally policed by online?

12. Do you feel morally policed or censured by the State (by way of rules and regulations introduced by government authorities such as PTA and PEMRA to regulate online spaces)?

13. If yes to the above question, how often do you think you get morally policed, shamed and/or controlled online?

14. In what ways have you or someone you know been shamed, controlled or morally policed online?

15. Has moral policing, shaming and controlling of your online space impacted you, physically or mentally?

16. Have you or someone you know ever had to leave or limit their use of the internet because of others' behaviour towards you online?

17. How important is it for women to feel safe and free to express themselves online?

18. What actions have you or someone you know undertaken for protection online and ensure safety in online space? [This can be in the form of adjusting privacy settings, blocking people, limiting your content online, not posting pictures etc.]

Link to form:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe-Br-DgZ7URZshIkRnWUIXmQ0lkR0UYrr9vEy2HIQd0dfV_Tw/viewform



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