

#ATTACKSWONTSILENCEUS - ONE YEAR ON



Context

Pervasive and persistent online trolling and harassment faced by women journalists in Pakistan remains a challenge. According to the International Federation of Journalists, Pakistan was the second most dangerous country in which to be a journalist in 2020. In Pakistan, out of the total number of journalists, only 5% are women, which is roughly 20,000 but the barriers, threats and risks that they face on the basis of their gender are innumerable and provide a grim picture. A report by DRF 'Fostering Open Spaces', which draws findings from the experiences of 60 women journalists and information practitioners from across Pakistan, shows that 55% of those surveyed have witnessed and/or have been affected by online abuse and 91% stated that the abuse is gendered and personal in nature.

In 2020, in what can be called a coordinated campaign, brutal attacks through social media were carried out against women journalists and commentators in Pakistan, which was adding to the difficulty of carrying out their professional work. The targets of such attacks were women with differing opinions and those critical of the sitting government's policies, especially the handling of the pandemic and lockdown strategies.

One year ago today, August 12, 2020, a joint statement was issued and signed by more than 150 women journalists and activists condemning the online attacks against them for performing their role as a journalist. A hashtag campaign, #AttacksWontSilenceUs, on social media was also launched to condemn the increase in cyber-attacks against them.

The statement had highlighted that these attacks are a threat to their physical and digital safety and push them to self-censor. The sustained threats are a grave violation of their rights under Articles 4 and 19-A and also undermine public trust in journalism and their right to access accurate and reliable information. The statement also pointed out that many government officials used abusive language against women journalists which discredits them and also fosters an enabling environment for the government supporters to continue harassing and trolling women journalists without any accountability.

The demands from 2020

1. Immediately restrain its members from repeatedly targeting women in the media
2. Send out a clear message to all party members, supporters and followers, to desist from launching these attacks, whether directly or indirectly
3. Hold all such individuals within the government accountable and take action against them

We also call upon the Standing Committees on Human Rights of the upper and lower house of parliament to take notice and hold the government accountable by ensuring they acknowledge, apologize and list the actions they will now take to put an end to such a threatening environment.



The past year: Progress or Stagnation?

After its release, the statement garnered a lot of attention from the media and government. While the issue of violence against women journalists had been discussed before, this was an unprece-

-dented coming together and show of solidarity by women within the field.

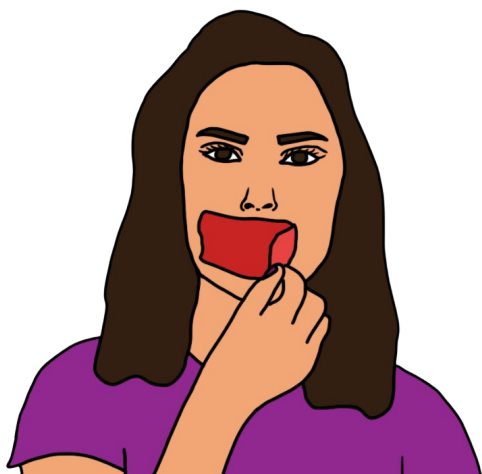


A year on, the authors and signatories reflect on the response they received. Mehmal Sarfaraz felt that the "overall response from the government was negative apart from the Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari who tweeted in the statement's favour initially." Other members of the ruling party sought to diminish the gendered aspect of the abuse as well as the role of their party."

The Minister for Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, Asad Umer, for instance, tweeted:

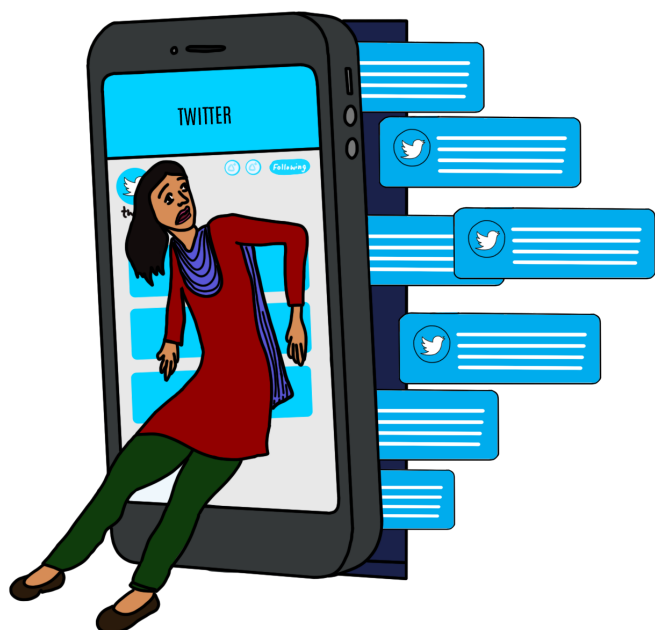


The signatories felt that the response of the government was quite disappointing, "there was an attempt to gaslight and the idea was that these women are not credible journalists and we have nothing to do with it and we cannot control social media trolls and campaigns."



On the other hand, the signatories felt that other political parties were sympathetic but there was no concrete follow-up on their part, particularly since a central demand of the joint statement was for political parties to develop a code of conduct for their social media wings and membership. One factor for the support was because the first statement was specifically naming the government in power to address this issue within their ranks.

In the immediate aftermath of the statement, ironically, there was a massive increase in trolling and harassment experienced by the women journalists at the forefront. The muted response of the government emboldened attacks and campaigns online.



The harassment experienced by those who are part of the mainstream media has remained unabated.

National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights

On August 18, 2020, the Standing Committee on Human Rights at the National Assembly headed by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari held a hearing on the issue in light of the statement. According to the authors, "it was a great space to make our statements, talk about the problem and share testimonies and feel like we were heard." However, when the journalists pressed for follow-up and issued a second statement (in September 2020), nothing came of it. The journalists feel that the initial support was politically motivated as the opposition parties were keen to throw rhetorical and performative support.

What next?

1. Include provisions for protection from online-based harassment and violence in the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, 2021.
2. Set a minimum quota for inclusion of women and gender minorities in the 'Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals' constituted under the Bill.
3. Repeal section 20 from the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 and decriminalise defamation which is weaponized target journalists.
4. Digital safety, security and welfare policies and protocols to be developed by media houses and organisations to provide institutional support to women journalists.
5. A code of conduct publicly issued by parties to discourage hate speech and online gender-based harassment, while still ensuring freedom of expression for all.