

CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE: 2022 POLICY BRIEF



INTRODUCTION TO CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE

Digital Rights Foundation's (DRF) Cyber Harassment Helpline is the region's first dedicated helpline dealing with cyber violence and online harassment. It is a confidential and gender-sensitive helpline with a team of trained and qualified support officers who provide assistance on issues of digital security, legal advice and escalations with social media platforms to effectively provide specialized assistance to the gendered marginalized communities, vulnerable professions, women, minors and minorities affected by cyber attacks.

The Helpline started the call services in 2016 to provide online protection and ensure safe online spaces, since then the support officers are dedicatedly working from 9 am to 5 pm, from Monday to Friday on toll-free calls, emails and social media platforms. Since December 2016 DRF's helpline has dealt with 12231 cases of online harassment and violence.

The Helpline team also gives exclusive assistance to vulnerable professions, such as journalists, who are at risk because of their work. Over the past year, the Helpline has dealt with 109 cases from journalists and media professionals. This policy brief aims to analyze the work of the helpline with the cases of online harassment and violence against journalists and media practitioners.

The policy brief intends to locate the motives, nature and effects of such attacks and also analyzes the data on cases reported to the Helpline while assisting the survivors of online violence directed toward media professionals.

The brief further proposes recommendations for the key stakeholders of the state and media houses to give online and offline security to the journalist community.



01

CONTEXT: JOURNALISM AND ONLINE SPACES IN PAKISTAN

With the rise in social media usage, the online attacks on journalists have also escalated to an alarming level in Pakistan and the consequences are not limited to the cyberworld only. In 2021, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reported that its cyber crime wing received an unprecedented 102,356 complaints. Out of the 1,202 cases registered by the cyber crime wing, a significant portion related to online harassment: 267 cases were registered under extortion and blackmailing, 205 under Section 20 (dignity of natural person), “199 cases under Section 21 (rape / modesty of natural person), 76 cases of cyberterrorism / hate speech and 49 cases of child pornography.”¹ This data captures only a portion of the problem as not all forms of online harassment and abuse are reported nor captured under definitions of the law.

Journalists often experience the most visible forms of online harassment given the nature of their work. Journalists and reporters who challenge prevailing discourses of the state, law enforcement agencies, political parties and any other popular narrative often find themselves at the centre of organized online campaigns of trolling, disinformation, harassment, threats of murder and rape.

In some cases this insecurity can translate into offline violence in the form of physical attacks,² enforced disappearances³ and, even, domestic violence for women.⁴

The virtual world is a reflection of its society and thus the patriarchal cultural structure which attacks women offline translates into harassment for women journalists online who are often targeted with organized campaigns to induce fear, shame, and silence which limits their active participation and freedom of expression.⁵ In 2021, the Helpline received 49 complaints from women journalists as compared to 60 from complainants who self-identified as men. As more and more women journalists are speaking out against such harassment, the inaction by the law enforcement and government agencies speaks to the trivialization of issues faced by women and minorities in online spaces.⁶ The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression has categorized online violence as a major barrier to women’s freedom of expression.

Gender of complainant/ victim	
Male	60
Female	49

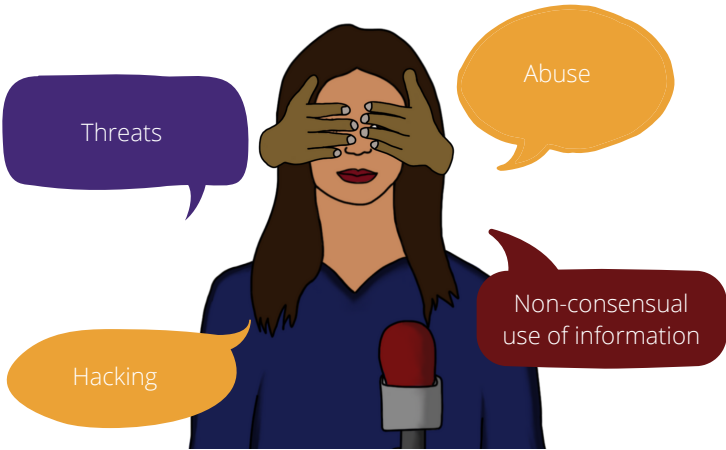
Number of complaints received at the Helpline in 2021
disaggregated by gender

These organized attacks, other than affecting the mental and physical health of the survivor, also reduce their professional productivity, freedom of expression and economic stability. On a structural level, online violence against journalists has implications on a society’s access to information, the ability to form opinions and freedom of expression.⁷

DRF's Helpline observed a rapid increase in the cases of journalists and particularly women journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic. The patterns of online violence can be analyzed in the the major types of cases reported:

Type	Number during 2021
Online harassment	84
Domestic violence	20
Physical violence	2
Workplace harassment	1

Major types of cases reported during 2021



Defamation, bullying and trolling

Instances of organized and targeted campaigns against journalists on multiple online platforms instigating hatred. These campaigns often employed tactics of disinformation to harass their targets.

Misuse of private pictures and videos

Non-Consensual use of personal pictures, videos, audio or any private document that leads to disinformation campaigns and online violence. In one case this resulted in doxxing of personal information such as home address which put the journalist at heightened risk.

Hacking or mass reporting

Hacking social media accounts or mass reporting their accounts either disrupt this activity or gain access to personal information.

Suspension of accounts/posts

This year there was also a rise in cases of journalists experiencing account suspensions by social media companies.

In some cases there were genuine violations of community guidelines set forth by platforms, but in many cases there were “false positives” where either journalists reporting on issues of violence and conflict were suspended even though they were endorsing the views of those being reported on or instances where content moderation failed to understand nature of posts due to the posts being in the local language and contextual barriers.

Type of online harassment cases	Instances during 2021
Disabled account	14
Hacking	10
Defamation	10
Threats	9
Account/device login issues	7
Unsolicited contact	5
Non-consensual use of info	4
Financial fraud	2
Blackmailing	1
Hate speech	1
Stalking	1
Non-consensual use of	1
General inquiry	1

Types of online harassment cases during 2021



02 WORK OF HELPLINE WITH JOURNALISTS

Having worked with journalists for a number of years and the increasingly worrying situation of online attacks in Pakistan, Digital Rights Foundation appointed a new helpline officer in the existing helpline team in 2021 dedicated to facilitating, accommodating and monitoring the cases of journalists and media practitioners.

The helpline officer directly assists the affected journalists with the help of digital security experts, legal advisors and a referral network according to the requirement of each case. The digital help for the journalists is not restricted to the removal of non-consensual data and retrieving hacked or banned accounts by escalating directly to the respective social media companies but, the helpline team also guides journalists in pursuing their cases legally with FIA to actualize their legal rights.

Moreover, the frontline officer for journalists also assists in arranging various training, campaigns and workshops for the welfare of the media practitioners in Pakistan.

Usually, the cases revolve around targeted, social media-enabled disinformation campaigns and online harassment against the journalists.

Given the targeted nature of the campaigns, many journalists reported feeling psychological agony along with their digital crisis.

During these cyber attacks, their personal data, pictures, defaming material and fake accounts emerge on online platforms to further injure their reputation, professional credibility and emotional health. The Helpline team has provided psycho-social support to them along with connecting them with collective support through our network of women journalists.

The Helpline team also keeps track of these accounts and escalates them directly with the relevant social media channel for the immediate removal of hateful and harmful material. The following is a summary of the nature of assistance provided to journalists and media professionals in 2021:

Nature of assistance provided	No of cases	
Digital security support	69	17 (legal and digital support)
Legal assistance	10	
Digital security support and mental health	1	
Legal assistance and mental health	1	

Nature of assistance provided to journalists and media professionals in 2021



Status of cases	
Escalated	15
Referred	18
Resolved	40
Processing	20
Unresolved	1

Platform	
Facebook	31
Twitter	15
Instagram	11
WhatsApp	7
Multiple platforms	6
Text/SMS	1
Sim-based calls	1

Hacking is a common form of online violence against journalists and the Helpline team aids affected journalists to recover their accounts on an urgent basis while educating them about digital tools to secure their accounts in the future.



The Helpline also assists journalists by providing legal advice with the help of its in-house legal officer. Journalists who do not have financial means to access legal assistance are given priority and our team aids them in registering cases with the relevant law enforcement agency, the cybercrime wing of the FIA.

Sometimes, accounts of digital journalists get incorrectly flagged by social media companies' algorithms, often due to the lack of cultural context leading to a hindrance in their professional work particularly for those journalists who rely on their platforms for a livelihood.

The Helpline team engages with the relevant companies to appeal decisions and provide the missing cultural context. The most commonly complained-about platforms to the Helpline in 2021 have been Facebook and Twitter:



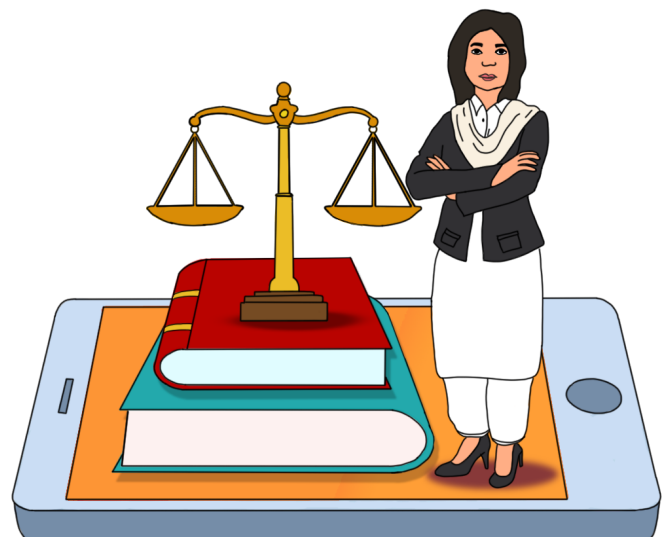
03 RECOMMENDATIONS

The government

- **Legislation on Journalist Safety:** It is essential that the Journalists and Media Professionals Bill be passed with the necessary adjustments to account for human rights concerns of journalist unions and organizations. For instance, section 6 in its current form in the Bill should be removed to ensure there are adequate protections in place to prevent the clause from being used as a tool to harass and silence media professionals
- **Repeal of Section 20 of PECA:** Online defamation should be decriminalized as it has repeatedly been used as a tool to silence, harass and intimidate journalists who are vocal in online spaces. The weaponization of the section through multiple frivolous complaints at the FIA and international consensus regarding the free speech harms of criminal defamation necessitate that the section be repealed immediately.
- **Strengthening and Accessibility of Reporting Mechanisms for Journalists:** Journalists and media professionals who face online harassment and violence are often reluctant to report their cases to law

enforcement for fear that they will not be taken seriously. More resources need to be allocated to the cyber crime wing to increase its capacity to process cases quickly, however at the same time rules and protocols need to be in place to safeguard against the agency from being used as a tool to harass journalists.

- **Collaborative Work With Civil Society:** The government should work in concert with civil society and media literacy organizations to create awareness regarding online harassment and rights of citizens online. Frequent sensitization training of law enforcement led by civil society on the importance of journalist welfare and safety need to be facilitated and supported by the government.
- **Ethical and Responsible Conduct by Political Actors:** Journalists have complained that harassment directed towards them is often at the hands of officials of political parties or implicitly endorsed by them. Internal disciplinary mechanisms must be implemented to ensure that mainstream political parties do not act in ways that harms⁵ or exacerbates harms towards journalists.



Media houses

- **Institutionalized Support Systems for Media Practitioners:** Media houses and organizations should provide holistic assistance⁷ to reporters, journalists, editors or any member of their organization facing harassment online. The online violence and harassment directed towards journalists should be seen as an institutional responsibility given that it arises as part of the job.
- **Organizational Level Digital Security and Safety:** Protocols, training and resources should be provided to media practitioners by their organizations to ensure they can practice digital security, privacy and precautionary measures preemptively.

Social media companies

- **Revising Community Guidelines on Newsworthiness:** There is a dire need for a revision of community guidelines to account for the vibrant ecosystem of digital media outlets and media content that is produced on important subjects. However these content producers often do not fall into the “newsworthy” exception of social media companies. While regulation of news content is important, especially when it is weaponized for hate speech and disinform-

- -mation, over-regulation or regulation without discerning such content from genuine reporting leads to censorship and silencing of critical voices.
- **Better Enforcement of Community Guidelines:** Journalists often complain of either under-regulation of hateful and abusive content directed towards them or over-regulation of content on subjects of public importance. Reliance on automated systems for content regulation has made matters worse, particularly in countries in the Global South where local context and nuance is often overlooked. Social media companies need to invest in economies they are operating by accounting for local context and working with civil society in different contexts to evolve their standards and enforcement.
- **More Accessible and Transparent Appeals and Redressal Mechanisms:** Given the non-transparent and arbitrary nature of content moderation decisions, journalists who are impacted rarely have redressal mechanisms to appeal decisions made against them and little control over how their content is regulated. A transparent, responsive appeals mechanism for content decisions should be implemented by all social media platforms which needs to be adequately resourced to ensure context-appropriate and timely redressal.
- **Greater Awareness of Community Guidelines:** Many journalists and news content producers often are unaware of the community standards regarding copyright, resharing of harmful content and newsworthiness. Social media companies should work towards recreating accessible resources in local languages simplifying these guidelines and their implications while working with local actors to conduct awareness campaigns and sessions.



FOOTNOTES

1) Azfar-ul-Ashfaq, "Cybercrime complaints topped 100,000 in 2021: FIA chief," Dawn, January 3, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1667248>.

2) Asad Hashim, "Pakistani journalist assaulted in latest press freedom attack," Aljazeera, May 26, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/26/pakistani-journalist-assaulted-in-latest-press-freedom-attack>.

3) "Pakistan: Bloggers Feared Abducted," Human Rights Watch, January 10, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/10/pakistan-bloggers-feared-abducted>.

4) Falah Gulzar, "Pakistan: Female journalist in Balochistan shot dead as part of alleged honour killing, police on the hunt for husband," September 07, 2020, Gulf News, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-female-journalist-in-balochistan-shot-dead-as-part-of-alleged-honour-killing-police-on-the-hunt-for-husband-1.1599490023748>.

5) "PFUJ condemns harassment of senior journalist," The News International, October 21, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/901870-pfuj-condemns-harassment-of-senior-journalist>.

6) "POLICY BRIEF: #AttacksWontSilenceUs: One Year On," Digital Rights Foundation, August 2021, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AttacksWontSilenceUs-Policy-Brief-2.pdf>.

7) "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan," July 30, 2021, A/76/258, <https://undocs.org/A/76/258>.



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