

CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE

ANNUAL REPORT 2022



DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

© February 2023 Digital Rights Foundation

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a feminist, not-for-profit organization based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened.

Digital Rights Foundation believes that a free internet with access to information and impeccable privacy policies can encourage a healthy and productive environment that would eventually help not only women but the world at large.

Contact Information:

info@digitalrightsfoundation.pk
www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk

Gender-sensitive, confidential & free helpline:

0800-39393
helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk

Our gender-sensitive, confidential, free of charge helpline aims to provide callers with a safe space where they can easily share their problems regarding online harassment. We can be reached through phone, social media and emails 7 days a week from 9 am to 5 pm.

This report has been Researched and Authored by: Hyra Basit
Reviewed and Edited by: Nighat Dad, Shmyla Khan
Assisted by: Zoya Dawar, Farheen Jamil
Design and Layout: Ahsan Zahid & Talha Umar
Cover illustration credits: Bushra Saleem

CONTENTS

Online Harassment and the Helpline's Journey	01
Six Year Review	02
Cyber Harassment Helpline Year in Review	04
Age	08
Geographical Distribution	09
Gender Distribution	13
Platform Distribution	18
Vulnerable Occupations	20
Types of Complaints	21
Services Provided	25
Case Studies	27
• Case study #1 Phishing of woman journalist	27
• Case study #2 Censorship by social media	28
• Case study #3 Difficulties in cross-border cases	29
Impact and Feedback	31
Policy Recommendations	37
• Recommendations for Policy makers	37
• Recommendations for Law Enforcement	39

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND THE HELPLINE'S JOURNEY

Pakistan is ranked as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women,^{1, 2} and as internet penetration³ has grown over the years with mobile broadband penetration reaching 52.8%, the phenomena of violence against women has seeped into the online realm as the same patriarchal and misogynist values dictate interactions there. Gender minorities and vulnerable identities are at greater risk of an unsafe online environment partly because of the anonymity cover that the internet provides.

According to a GSMA report, women's mobile internet use stood at 19% in 2019 and research on women's device and internet accessibility suggests that one of the biggest challenges to women owning a cellphone and accessing the internet is family disapproval.⁴ This factor is important to consider when assessing why online harassment is used as a tool against women, and how they respond when facing such a threat. When owning a cell phone device is considered as gaining access to the 'outside world' in a society where honor (izzat) is tied to the women of the family and society, and women's participation in public is generally discouraged, it becomes difficult for women and girls to own a tool that could empower them. Added to that, illiteracy also presents itself as a hurdle to women, so when they face online harassment, it is understandable that they would have little to no idea on how to protect themselves.

1 "Factbox: Which Are the World's 10 Most Dangerous Countries for Women?," Reuters, June 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-women-dangerous-poll-factbox/factbox-which-are-the-worlds-10-most-dangerous-countries-for-women-idUSKBN1JM01Z>.

2 "Pakistan's Performance on the Women, Peace, and Security Index." 2021. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/pakistan/>.

3 "Telecom Indicators." 2023. PTA. <https://pta.gov.pk/en/telecom-indicators>.

4 GSMA. 2021. "Addressing the Mobile Gender Gap in Pakistan." <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Addressing-the-Mobile-Gender-Gap-in-Pakistan.pdf>.

Digital Rights Foundation's research on the occurrence of online harassment in Pakistan also presents a grim reality. According to a survey of women working in the media and information field, 55% of respondents reported being abused or harassed online, however only 14.2% reached out for help.⁵ According to another research by DRF, 70% of respondents feared that their pictures would be misused if posted online, while 40% reported that they had experienced being stalked and harassed on messaging apps.⁶

Two events in 2016 cemented the intent to start the Cyber Harassment Helpline. First, during DRF's Hamara Internet project, the team noticed a significant number of young women approaching them via social media and in person, seeking advice about online harassment they were facing. Secondly, the tragic murder of Qandeel Baloch highlighted the dangerous impact of online harassment; when individuals voiced their opinions in support of her, they in turn, received similar threats. This highlighted the urgent need for a service that provided stronger support mechanisms for women online.

Additionally, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 was passed at a time when the Helpline was already in the pipeline and we were able to gather support from partners that helped us make it operational. The Act recognized cybercrime as a punishable offense, including online harassment, and established measures to address these crimes. The Helpline was able to provide more concrete legal advice and assistance with the passing of the Act, providing a crucial service for those in need of legal and emotional support. Since its launch, the Helpline has continued to expand, providing a range of services and support mechanisms to its callers, including an expanded legal team, and referral system.

The establishment of the Cyber Harassment Helpline in December 2016 highlights the growing need for a safe and secure online environment, particularly for women, children and people who work in vulnerable occupations, who often face online harassment and abuse at a greater rate. It also shows how organizations like DRF are taking proactive measures to fill in the gap to provide support and assistance for those impacted by these crimes.

⁵ Digital Rights Foundation. 2019. "Fostering Open Spaces in Pakistan." <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/IMS-Study-Report.pdf>.

⁶ Digital Rights Foundation. 2017. "Measuring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Online Violence." <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Hamara-Internet-Online-Harassment-Report.pdf>.

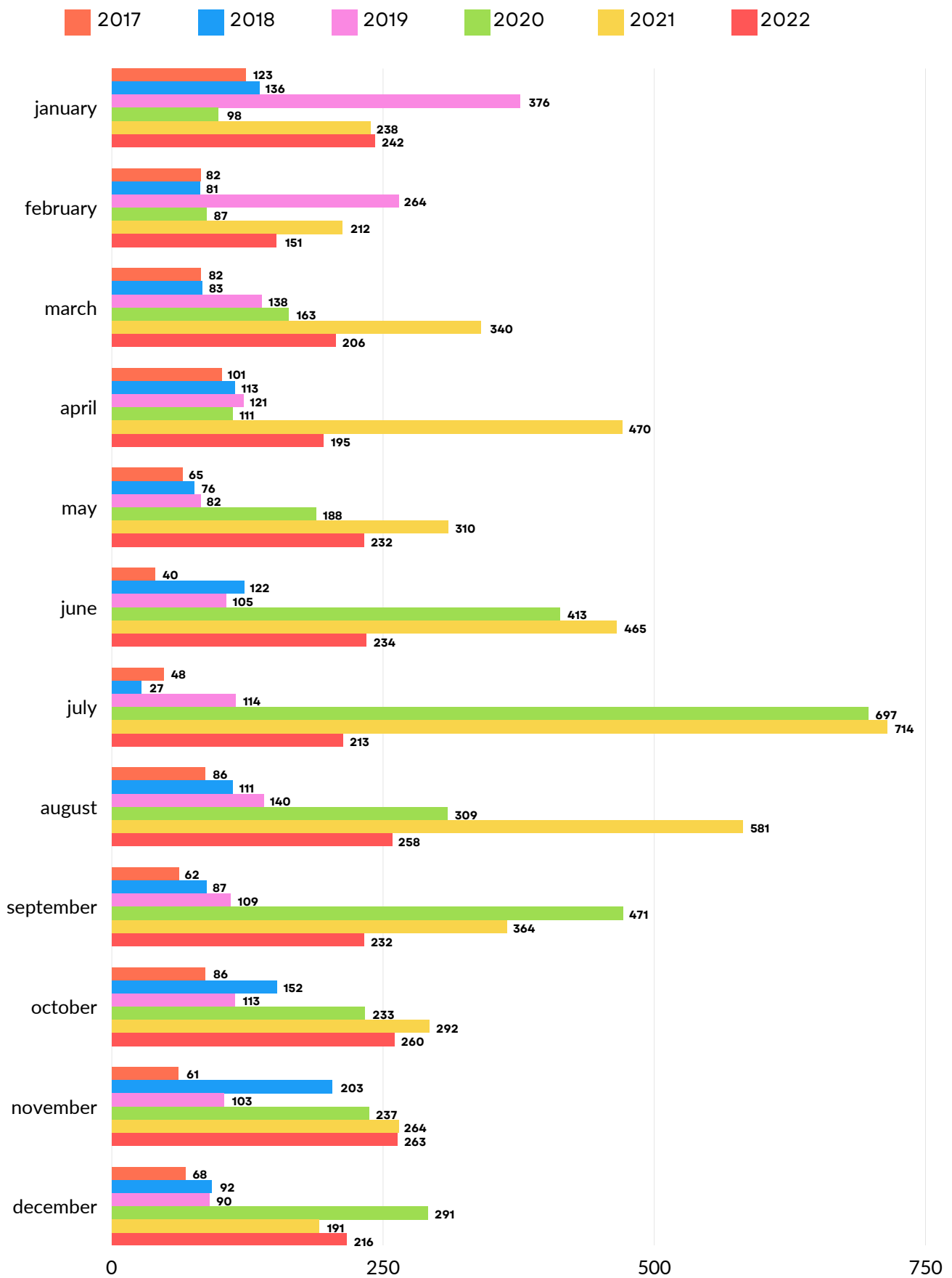
SIX YEAR REVIEW

Over the course of six years, the Helpline has received and responded to 14,376 cases. Consistently, women have been the largest group to report instances of online harassment, and overall, they make up 59% of the people we have assisted.

14,376
CASES

We observe trends and record data at the Helpline in order to be able to adapt and bring forward changes that can further benefit our callers. Our aims for next year are to:

- Reach out and provide specialized services to marginalized communities,
- Expand our referral systems,
- Collect and organize our data to make our advocacy efforts for safer and open digital spaces more effective,
- Make greater use of our social media presence as an educational and awareness platform,
- Provide improved mental health services,
- Continue advocacy with major social media companies and developing relations with social media companies where there are none

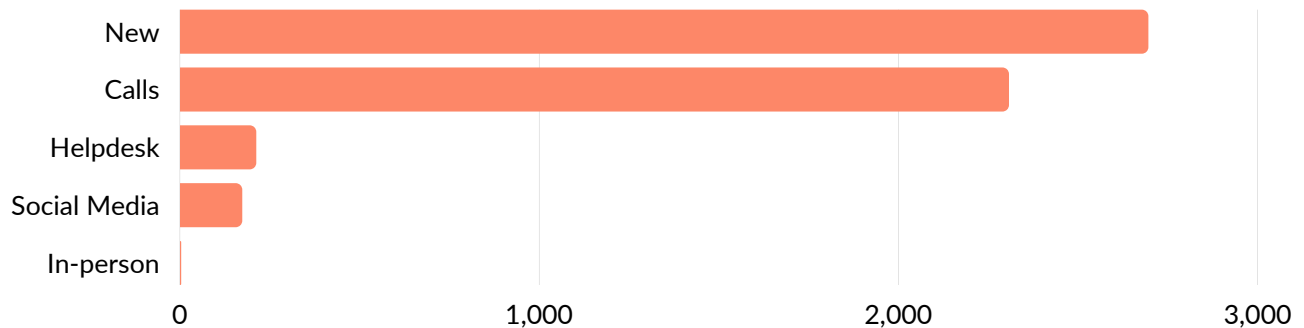


Total number of cases received each year since the Helpline's initiation

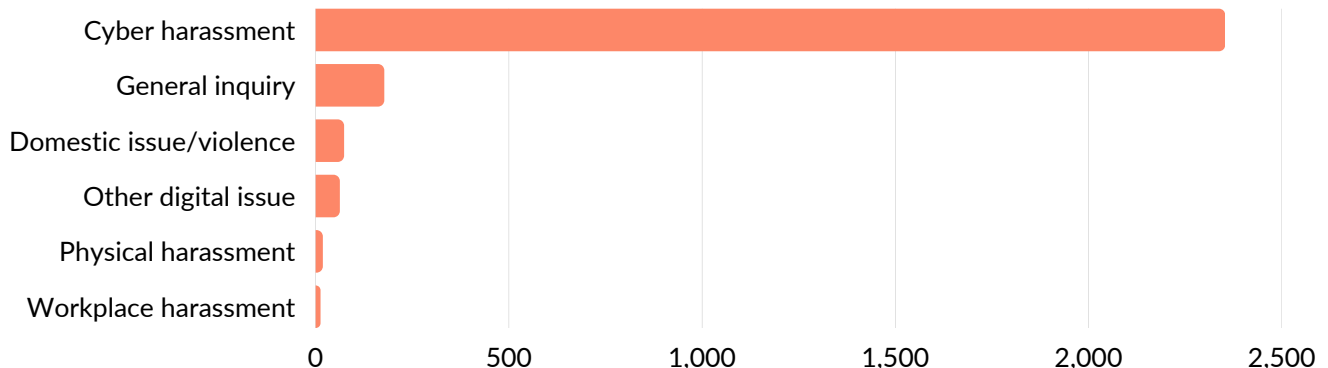
CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE YEAR IN REVIEW

The Cyber Harassment Helpline receives cases primarily through three mediums: the helpline phone number, DRF's social media channels, and the Helpdesk email.⁷ In 2022, a total of **2695** new cases were brought to the Helpline through all three mediums combined. The main Helpline is the primary mode of communication, with **2307** new callers. While the focus of the Helpline is cases of online harassment, depending on capacity, other complaints are also entertained given the intersection of online harassment with other forms of violence. An average number of **224** new cases were received each month, with November being the busiest month. In May, the Helpline expanded its operations to 7 days a week to cater to a growing number of requests over the weekend. A full summary of the cases received is given below.

Overall:



Category:



⁷ Complaints can be made to helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk

During the coverage period, there was a worrying rise in digital hate speech against the transgender community. In August, a transgender activist was removed from the speakers panel of a Tedx event at a school⁸. The incident then triggered an online hate campaign not just against the activist, but the transgender community as a whole. According to our Helpdesk records, there was a significant rise in online attacks and hate speech against the transgender community from August to November. The response, or lack thereof, by social media platforms, where the campaign was orchestrated, is another aspect of the trend. The Helpline team was in touch with representatives of various social media platforms to help explain the context of the campaign and request more immediate action, and while they displayed a willingness to listen, the steps taken to resolve the matter were not satisfactory and resulted in harmful content remaining on the platforms.

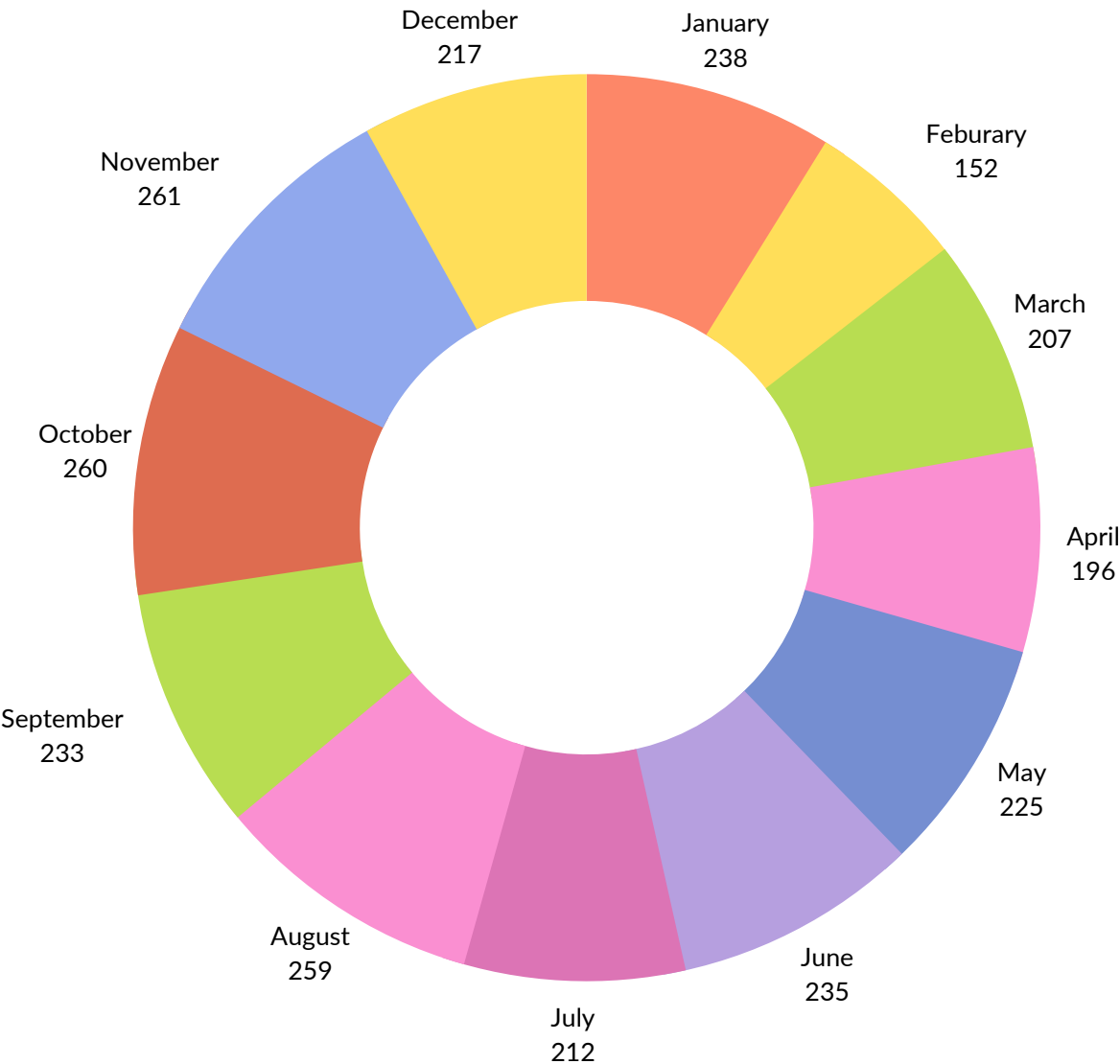
There has also been an upsurge in the number of cases related to financial fraud. There is no fixed pattern as to the people victimized by these scam attempts, but there has been an increase in the number of cases reported to the Helpline since February. Presumably, the increase is parallel to the rise in hyperinflation in the country, but that cannot be ascertained. It was also noticed that once public awareness of one type of scam gained traction, a new form of scam would arise, and so there have been 5-6 waves of types of financial fraud scams over the year.

The data recorded at the Helpline is strictly non-personally identifiable information as per Helpline policies.⁹ The exception is when some personally identifiable information, such as name and phone number, is required to follow up or connect complainants with our legal team. Furthermore, because we ourselves do not follow up with callers unless we have their express permission because of necessity, and rely on callers to maintain communication with us, we cannot give an exact number of the cases that we have helped resolve. That being said, some degree of feedback and accounting of success rate was collected for us to continue improving our system and advocate on behalf of survivors.

8 “Academic and activist Dr Mehrub Moiz Awan decries transphobia after being removed from TEDxISL speaker roster.” 2022. Dawn Images. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1190686>.

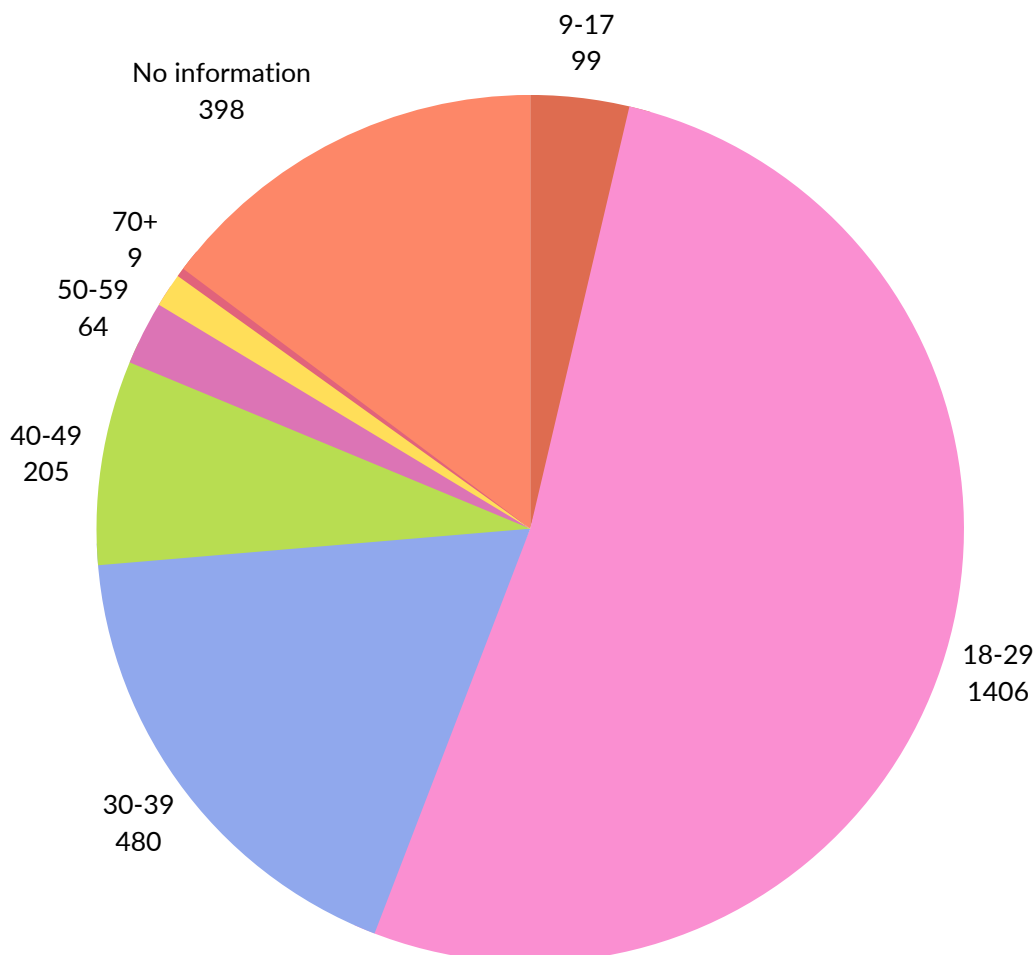
9 “Cyber Harassment Helpline Policy.” 2020. Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/DraftPolicy_1.8_02.06.2020.pdf.

Monthly breakdown of number of cases received:



AGE

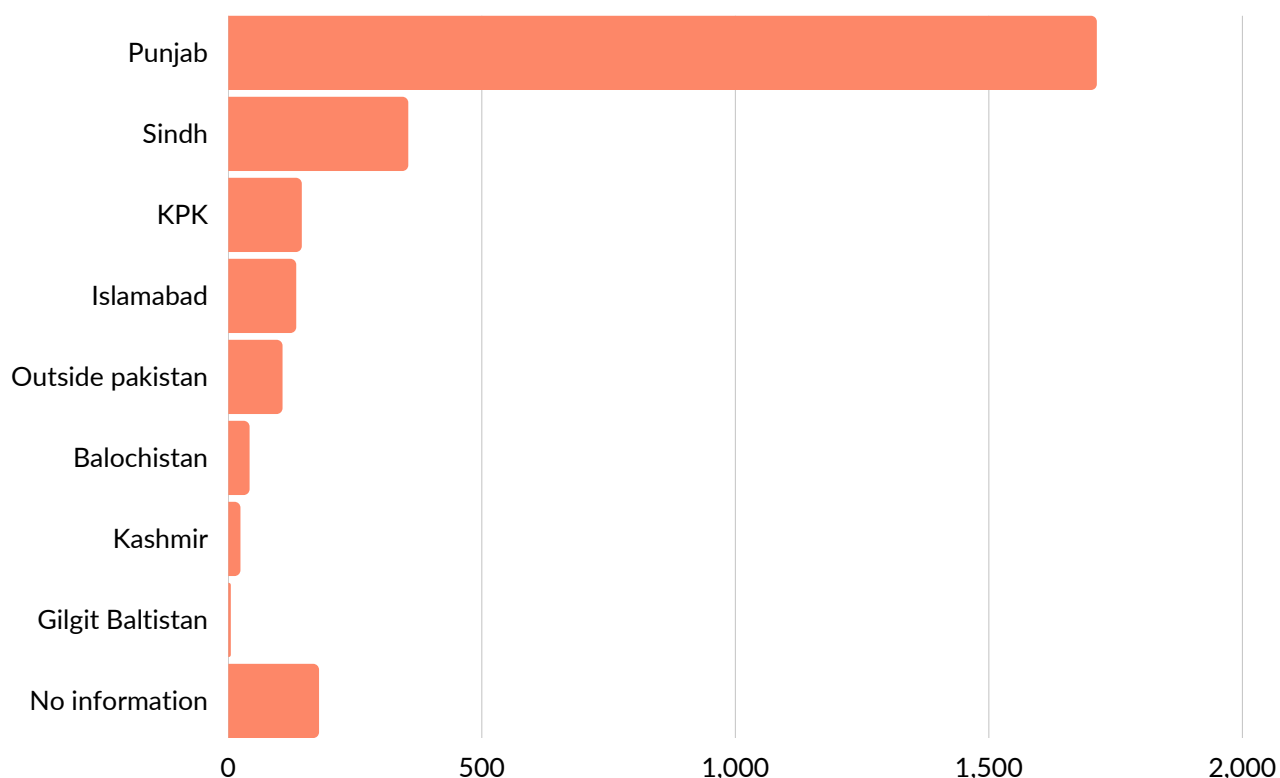
This year, the Helpline provided services to people from as young as 9 years old, to senior citizens who were more than 70 years of age. The minors we provided assistance made up approximately 3.6% of the cases received. However, people between the ages of 18 and 30 were approximately 52% of the complainants who reached out to the Helpline this year. Within this age group, 69% of the complainants were women. The higher incidence within this age group can be attributed to multiple factors, such as greater use and/or ownership of mobile devices and internet, greater awareness of reporting mechanisms, different age groups being targeted with different types of online attacks, etc. DRF's research has previously found that 81% of the respondents who were aware that there were laws that protected them from cyber crimes were from the 18 to 25 age bracket; greater awareness of laws and rights may have contributed to a greater willingness to report.



GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

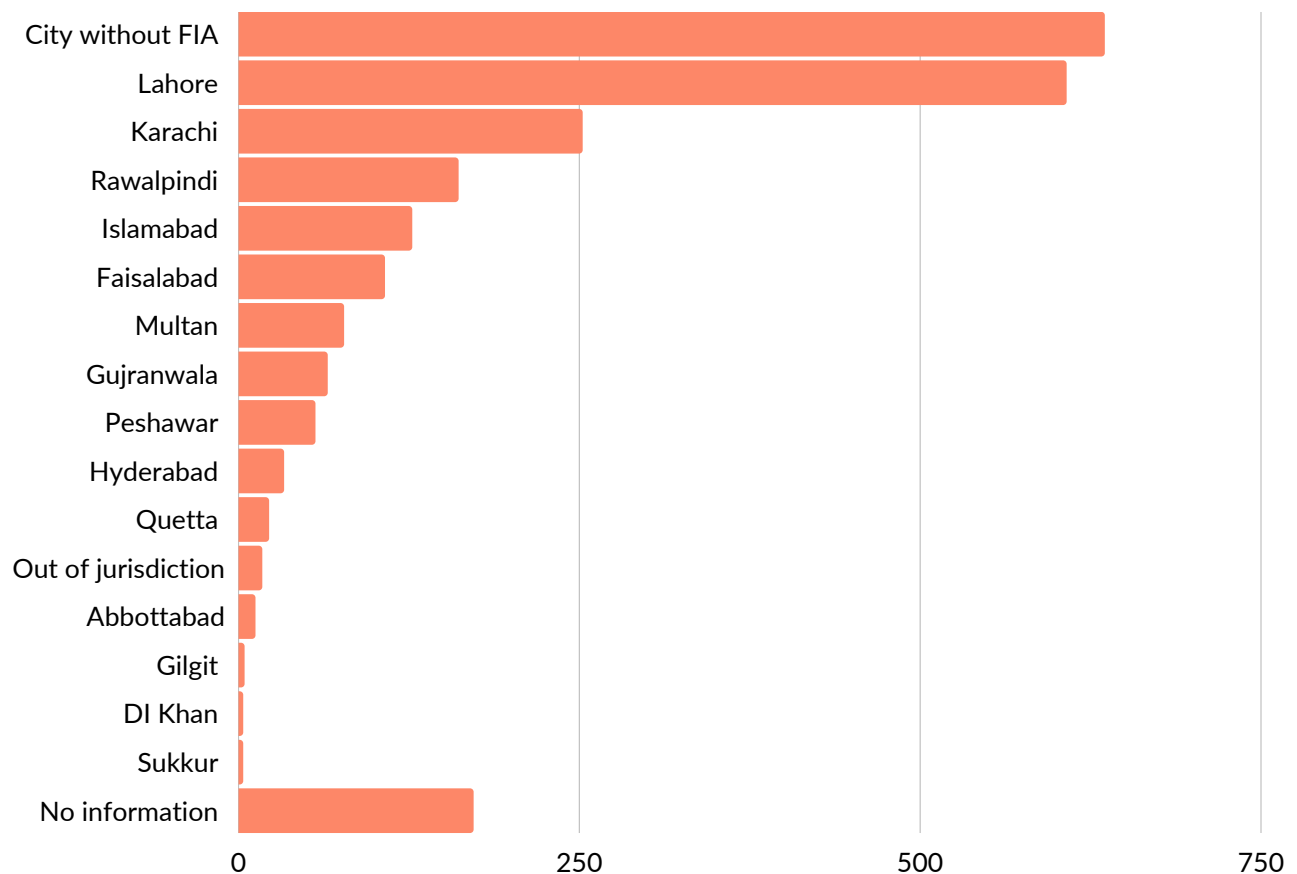
We ask our callers about the city and region they are contacting us from in order to advise them better about their options, but this information is also helpful in mapping the accessibility of law enforcement and other remedial resources, which eventually enables us to better advocate for people facing online and other forms of harassment.

Number of cases received from each province/area:



We received complaints from people residing in Kashmir as well, but it is important to mention that since the region does not come under the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) jurisdiction, there is limited legal recourse in these cases. Furthermore, we occasionally receive complaints from people outside of Pakistan, both Pakistani and non-Pakistani citizens, where the challenge is lack of physical presence or a representative within the country to file a case with the FIA. This poses a significant problem for women outside the country whose intimate images are being spread on the internet without their consent by someone within Pakistan, but the difficulty in access prevents them from taking conclusive legal action.

Geographical distribution of cyber harassment cases:



The FIA which is the designated law enforcement agency under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, has cyber crime wings in only 15 cities. While reports can be submitted through their helpline and online complaint form, we have received feedback from multiple complainants that these methods are not reliable. The most efficient way to submit a complaint and get the process started is by registering a complaint in person.

However, the dearth of cyber crime wings means seeking legal help is not an ideal solution for everyone. This applies especially to women and girls, whose biggest concern is keeping their situation private from their families because they anticipate restrictions on their autonomy as a result of victim blaming. Furthermore, financial constraints also play a role in discouraging people from traveling to file a complaint with the FIA; the cost of traveling out of the city, perhaps finding a place to stay, is sometimes too great for people to bear, especially when multiple visits have to be made. In Pakistan, many women lack financial independence, often requiring permission from their family to be able to leave the house, and feel unsafe moving in public spaces because of the rate of gender-based violence. Learning that they would have to travel for any legal solution instantly discourages many callers.

In order to gain a more holistic insight into the legal remedy available for victims of online harassment in Pakistan, we have further divided the geographical data. The data is presented in two sets: first, accounting for cyber harassment cases that have been reported from within Pakistan, and second, a total number of cyber harassment cases, where either the origin is Pakistan, or it is unknown. Geographical data for each complainant could not be recorded, either because of the method of communication or because it was not suitable to inquire at the time.

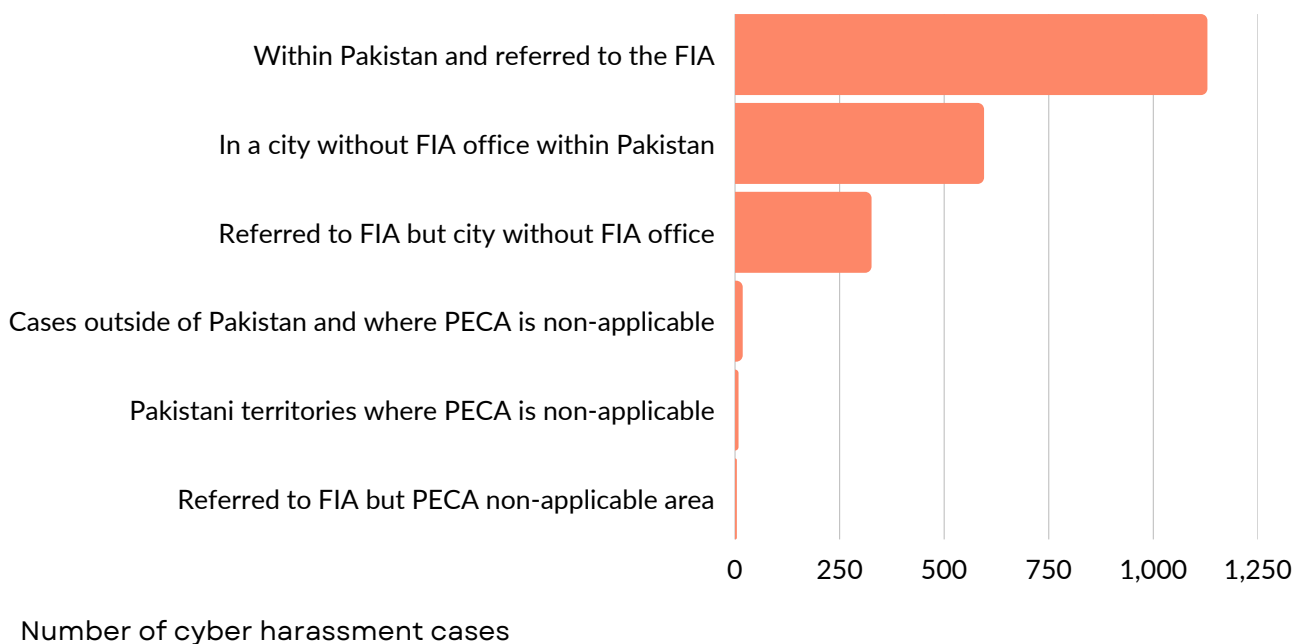


2133

**Cyber Harassment
cases in Pakistan**

The total number of cyber harassment cases recorded by the Helpline are **2273**. Out of these, **2133** were confirmed to be from within Pakistan. **594** (28%) of the cases from within Pakistan were from a city or town where there was no FIA office, i.e. if the complainant wanted to opt for legal action, they would have had to travel to another city just to file the complaint. **7** cases were from a location where the FIA does not have jurisdiction, which accounts for less than 1% of the cyber harassment cases.

1128, or 53%, of the cyber harassment cases were referred to the FIA, which means that the helpline deemed that taking legal action would have been the best possible solution or was the preference of the complainant. 29% of these referrals were made to people living in a city without an FIA office, but it should be noted that these referrals were made keeping in mind the necessity of law enforcement intervention in that situation. For others, where an assessment was made by the Helpline team that the cost of traveling, financial or otherwise, to report to the FIA would be too high relative to the gravity of the situation, we made the complainant aware of the option in addition to the hurdles they might face. Our responsibility at the Helpline is to educate our callers and give them as much information as possible to help them make an informed decision.

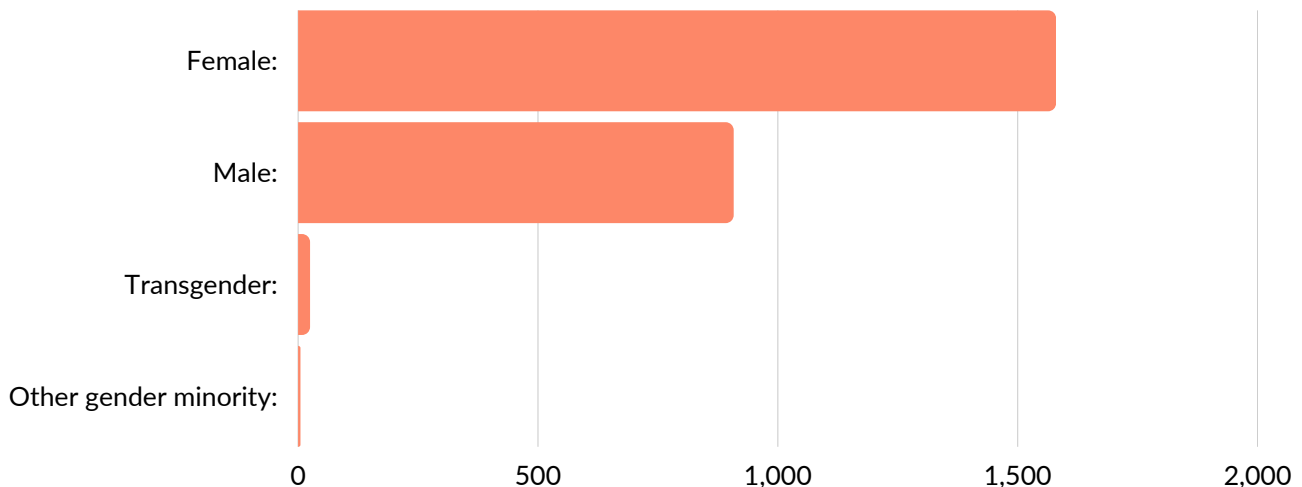


GENDER DISTRIBUTION

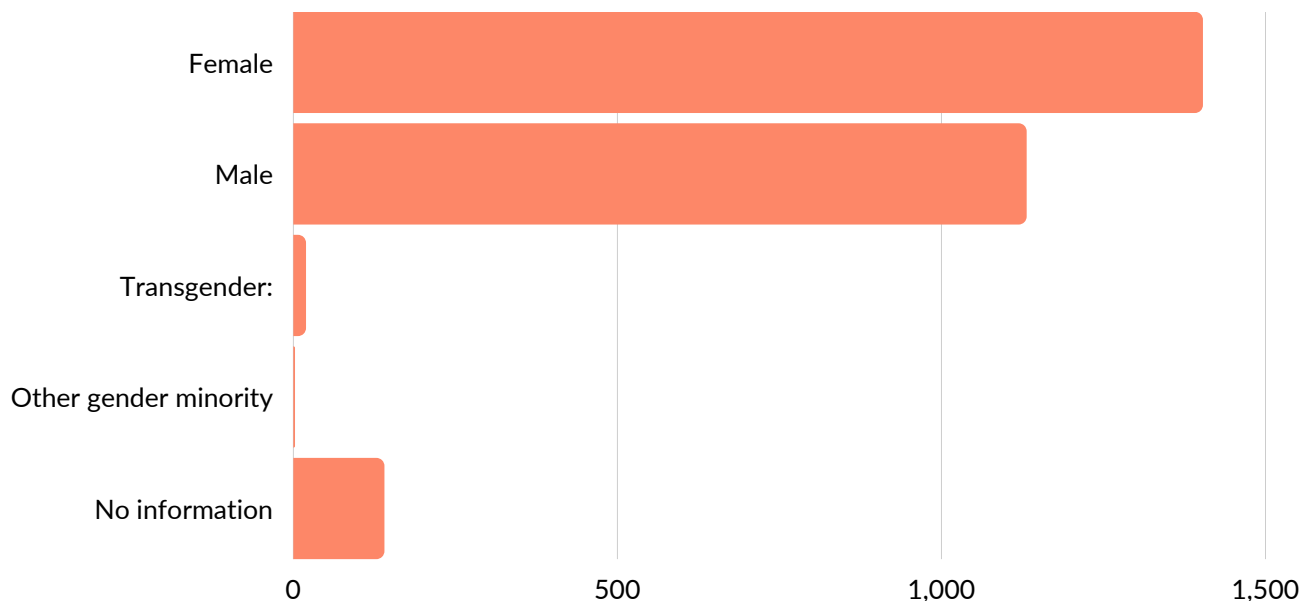
The Cyber Harassment Helpline was launched in order to provide specialized assistance primarily to women and young girls, because of the grave ramifications of technology-facilitated abuse they have to face. Our conversations with women indicate that hesitation in reporting stems from a fear of victim blaming and misdirected self-blame, a lack of awareness, and lack of confidence in the state and law enforcement's services. In order to provide an effective solution to these concerns, the Helpline considers the privacy, confidentiality, and education of our callers to be paramount.

In line with past years' trends, women were the highest reported victims of online harassment at 58.6%. The transgender community, subjected to an orchestrated online hate campaign this year, still made up approximately 1% of the complainants who reached out to us. The gender distribution noted at the Helpline, however, cannot be considered to be exactly representative of the way online harassment manifests in the country. It has to be considered that many incidents of harassment, whether online or otherwise, go largely unreported. Furthermore, the Helpline is just one resource available in the country where complaints can be recorded, and it is possible that people reach out to other avenues instead.

Gender distribution of victims:

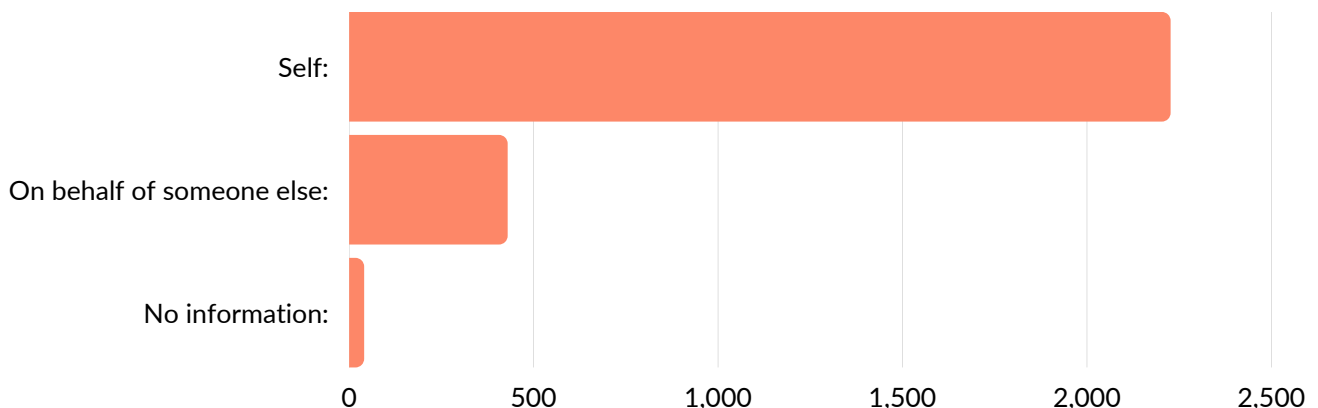


Gender distribution of callers:

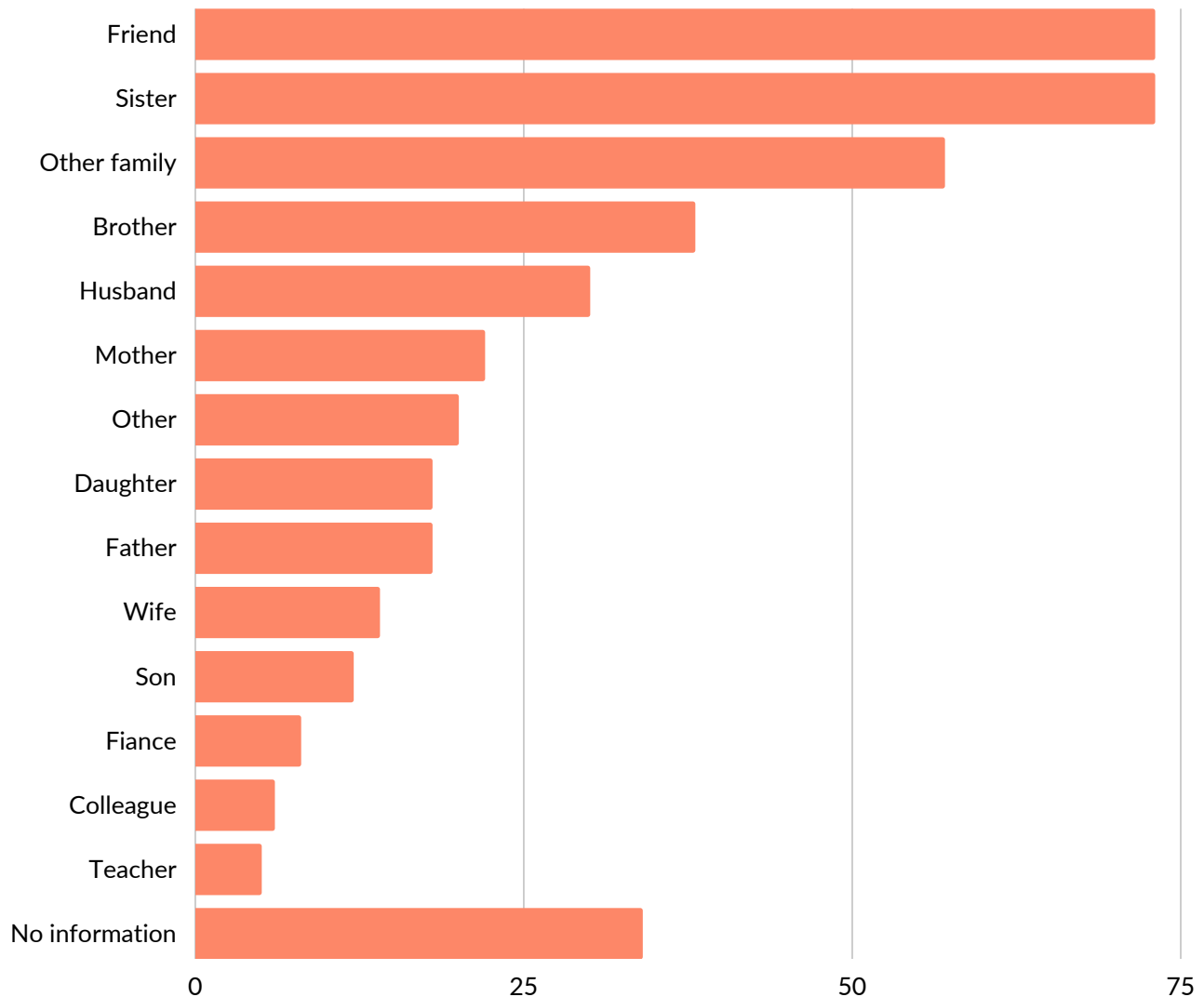


The number of callers who are women, interestingly, is lower than the number of women who were recorded as victims; this is because people very often call on behalf of someone else. Approximately 57% of the people who were calling on behalf of someone else were family members, and 20% of them were friends. That said, one of the biggest concerns expressed by female complainants in particular is that they would not want their families to be aware of what they are going through because of possible backlash, especially when the woman is in a relationship, but not yet married.

Type of caller:



Relation to survivor:

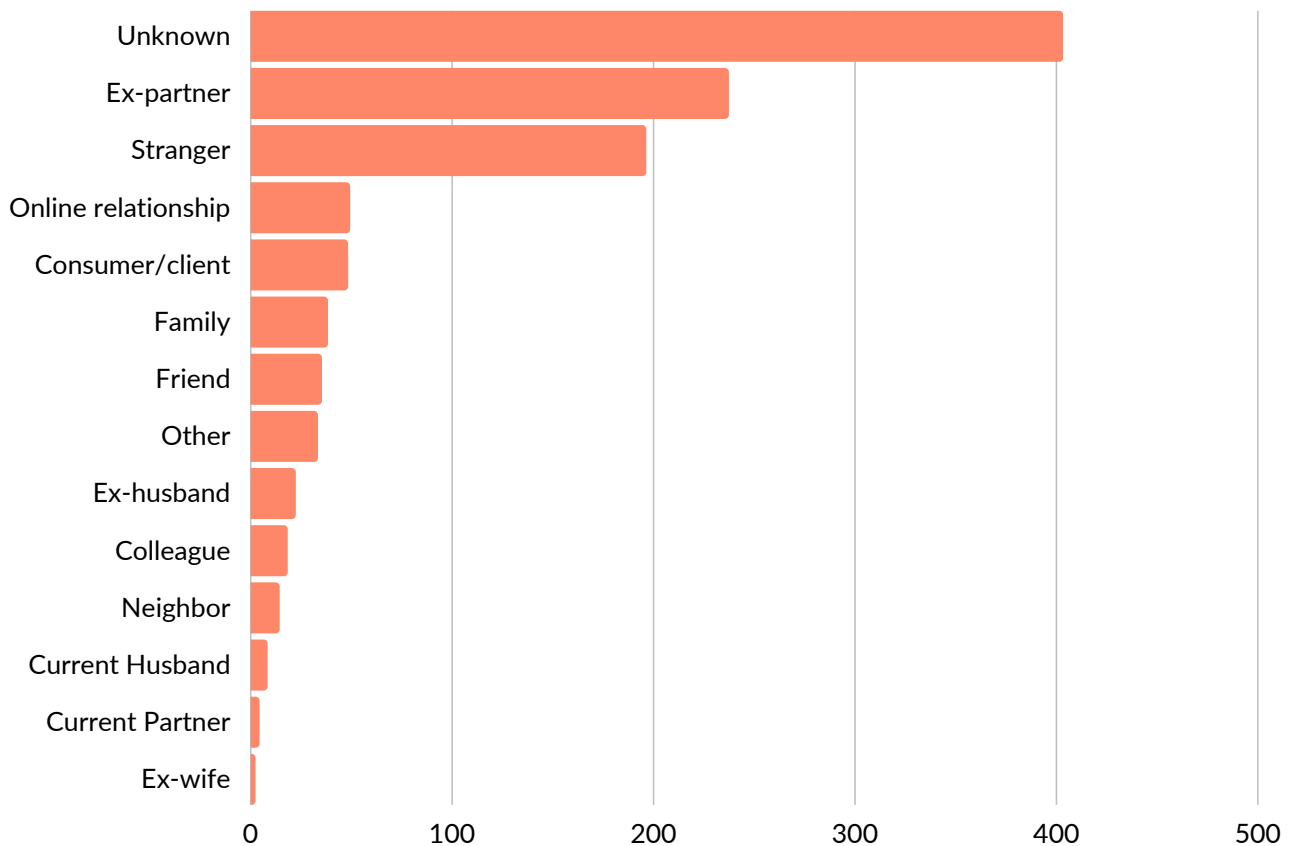


Number of cases brought forward by people who were calling on behalf of survivor

Relation with harasser:

From our data on the survivors' relation to the harasser, approximately 30% were or currently in at the time of calling a romantic relationship. This included relationships that originated online. We have also separated the different types of romantic relationship categories, in order to better understand the type of influence that the particular relationship would have on the resolution of their case. We gather this information because it affects what tactics the harasser uses to intimidate the victim.

Relation with harasser:

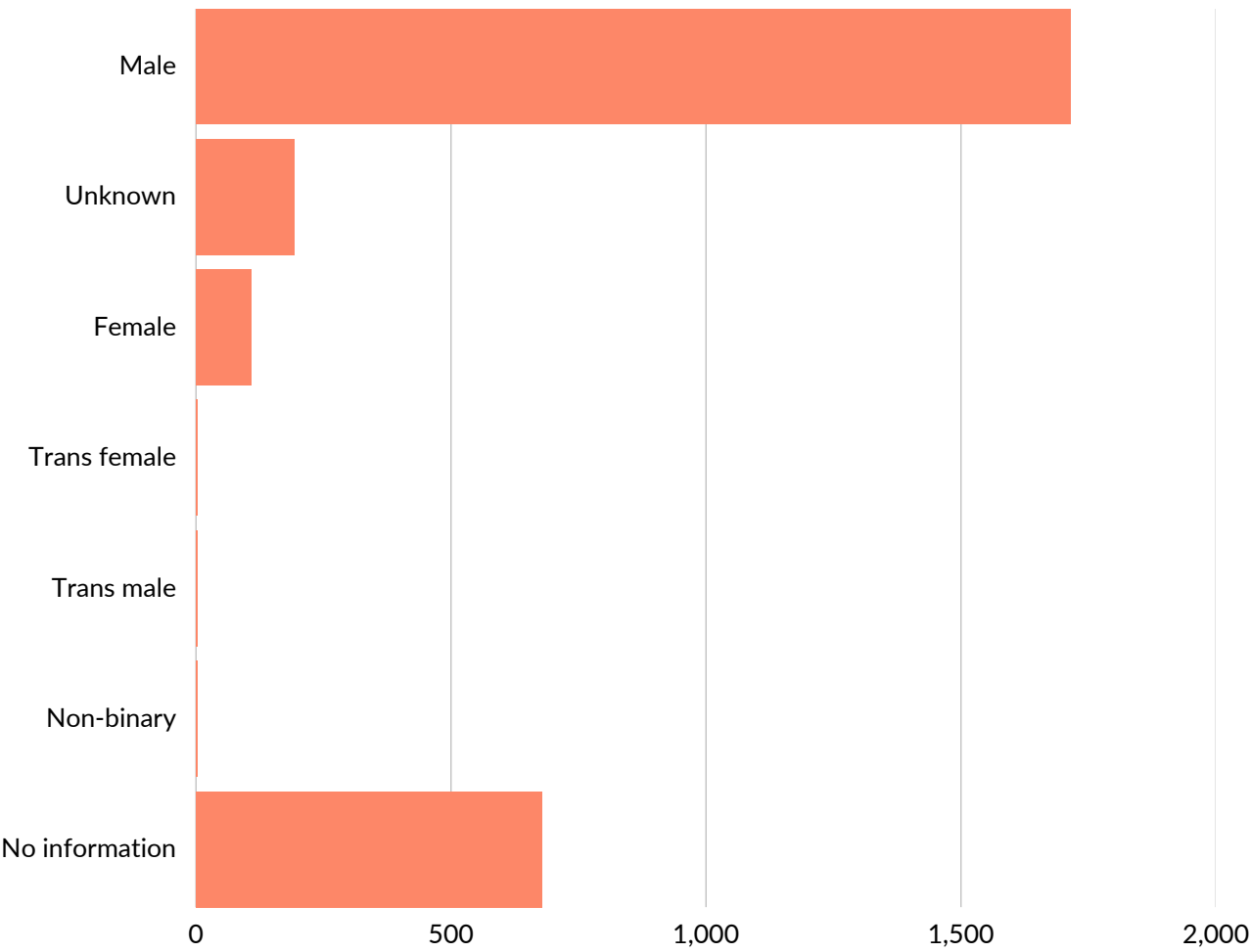


Number of cases according to the relationship of the harasser with the complainant/survivor.

*Ex-partner denotes a relationship where the couple is not or was not married.

**Online relationship is used to define a relationship where the couple initiated and continued the relationship via internet and never met in person

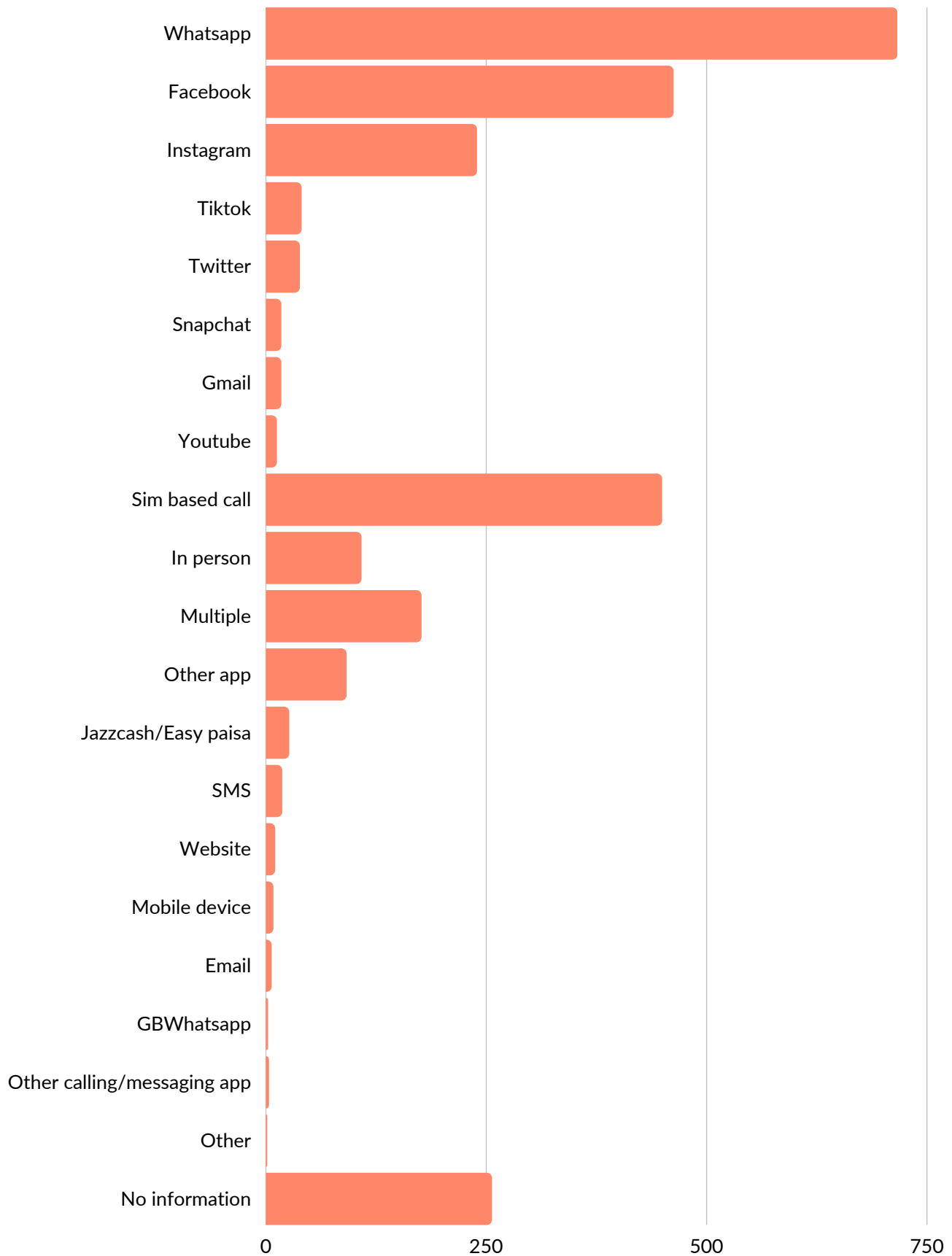
Gender of harasser:



PLATFORM DISTRIBUTION

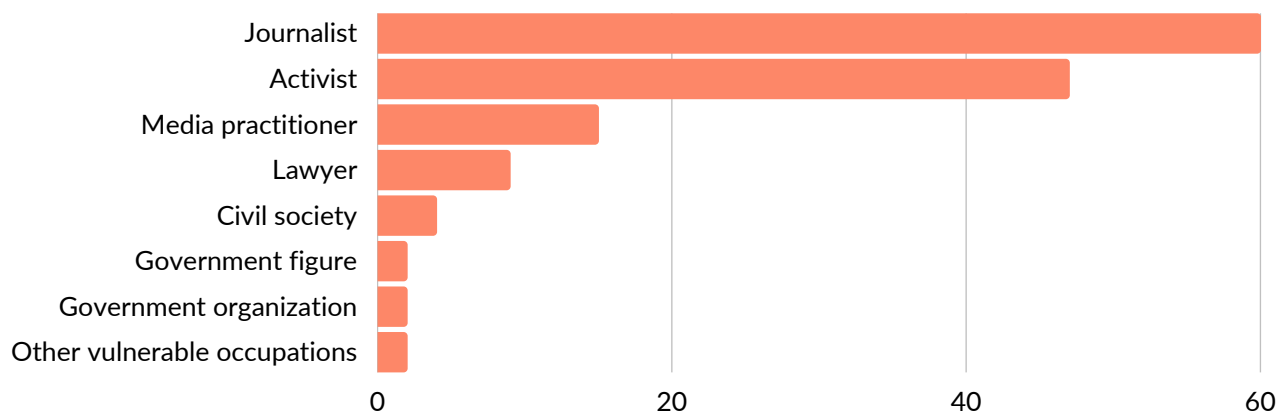
Maintaining a record of the platforms where complainants face an issue or online harassment enables us to keep an eye on rising trends of online harassment. We then use this data to run public awareness campaigns through our social media platforms and educate callers on preventative measures. In addition, it also helps us in our advocacy efforts with state authorities, and social media and tech companies to point out the ways in which platforms are being abused and how they can adjust their policies and safety initiatives to counter growing threats to users.

WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram remain the platforms where complainants faced the most online harassment and other digital issues, collectively accounting for a 52.6% share. Keeping this in mind, the Helpline has established trusted partner relationships and escalation channels with a number of platforms, in order to bridge the gap between the West-centric community guidelines and policies and the use and abuse of these platforms with context-specific consequences in Pakistan. Continuous efforts are made to explain to platforms that a blanket policy application system, relying on automated systems to vet reports, can often lead to over or under content moderation for cases from the global south/majority and in non-English language contexts. We regularly maintain communication with these companies in order to alert them to any rising trends and preemptively control trends that may hurt the most vulnerable communities.

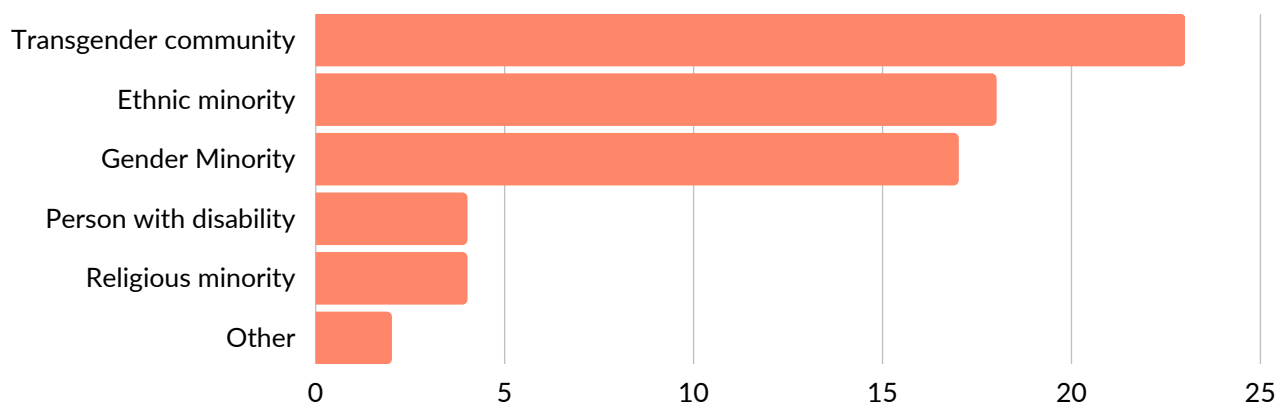


VULNERABLE OCCUPATIONS

Some segments of society are more vulnerable to online harassment, either because of their identity or their profession. The Helpline makes it a priority to recognize and assist these groups in order to protect them from the heightened threat that they face. Specialized assistance is necessary because of the lack of institutional protections that these individuals can turn to. As mentioned before, this year saw an orchestrated online hate campaign against the transgender community that consisted of online threats, abuses, and misinformation proceeding to instigate physical harm and legal threats to the minority community. In response to this wave of hatred that was damaging the safety and standing of transgender folks, the Helpline made efforts to flag cases to social media companies, and hold meetings with them in order to push them to recognize the dangerous way in which their platforms are being used. Additionally, women journalists are particularly susceptible to online harassment due to their gender, often being subjected to misogynistic and sexually explicit comments. In addition, they may also face censorship and professional attacks, which can have significant personal and professional repercussions. As such, it is crucial to provide tailored assistance to individuals facing such complex and intersecting forms of vulnerability.



Vulnerable Communities:

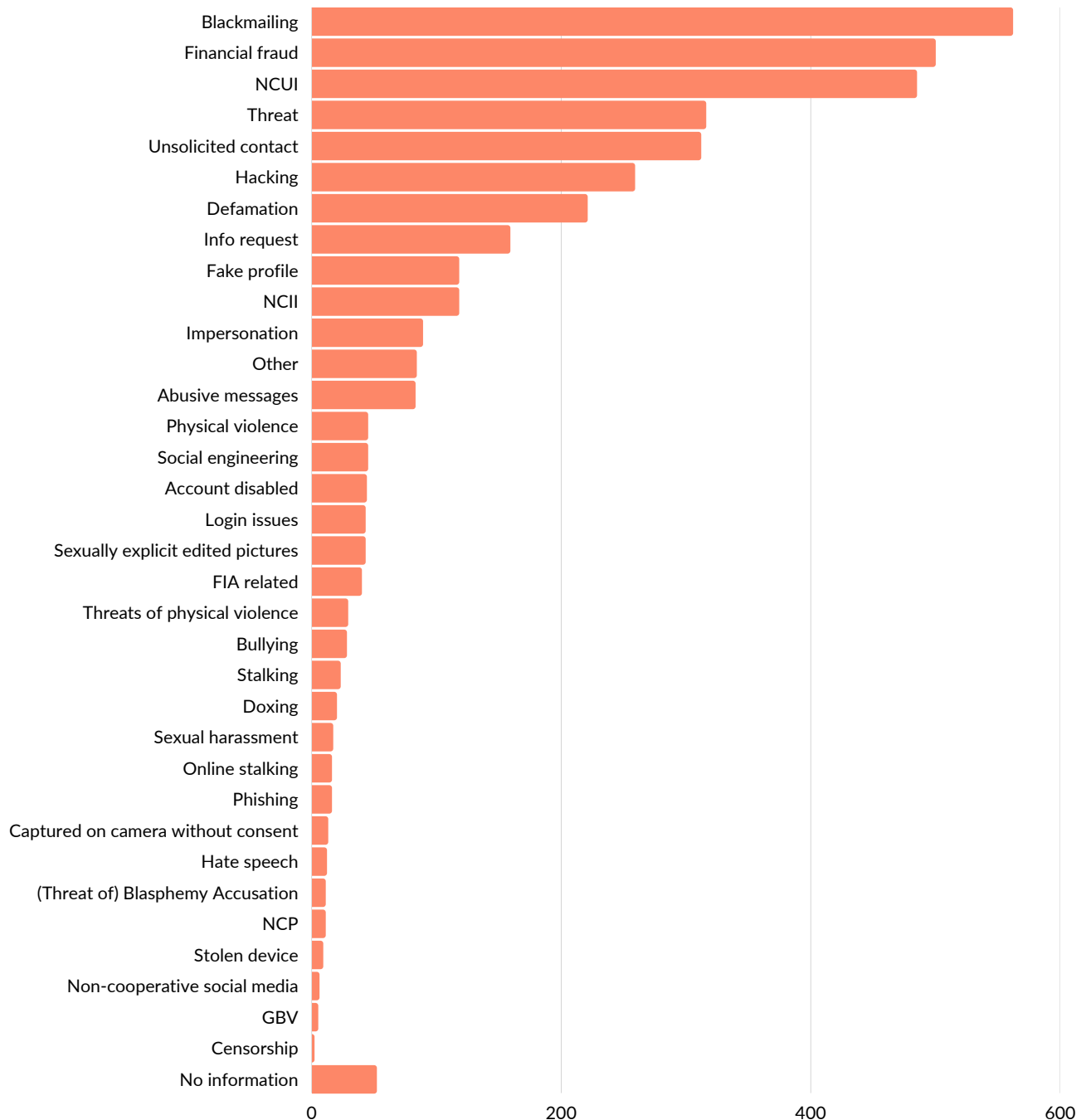


TYPES OF COMPLAINTS

The types of complaints received by the Helpline can be quite diverse, and as demonstrated by the data below can be gendered in nature. Blackmail, hacking, threats and unsolicited contact feature as some of the top complaints brought to the Helpline by both men and women.

However, the way in which these four types of complaints present themselves can be gendered, for example, as women may have to face more sexualized comments or threats that target their reputation specifically. Furthermore, some of the other most frequently reported complaints by women are defamation and non-consensual use of intimate images/information, which weaponise patriarchal honor-based language. Women, therefore, bring forth more complaints that have to do with sexualized threats and comments, actions that attack their reputation, particularly in front of their family and friends, or simply the fear of their family might find out about their online presence. Men, on the other hand, may face the same type of complaints, but those threats will not necessarily be sexual in nature or attack their character.

Types of Complaints:



*GBV: Gender based violence

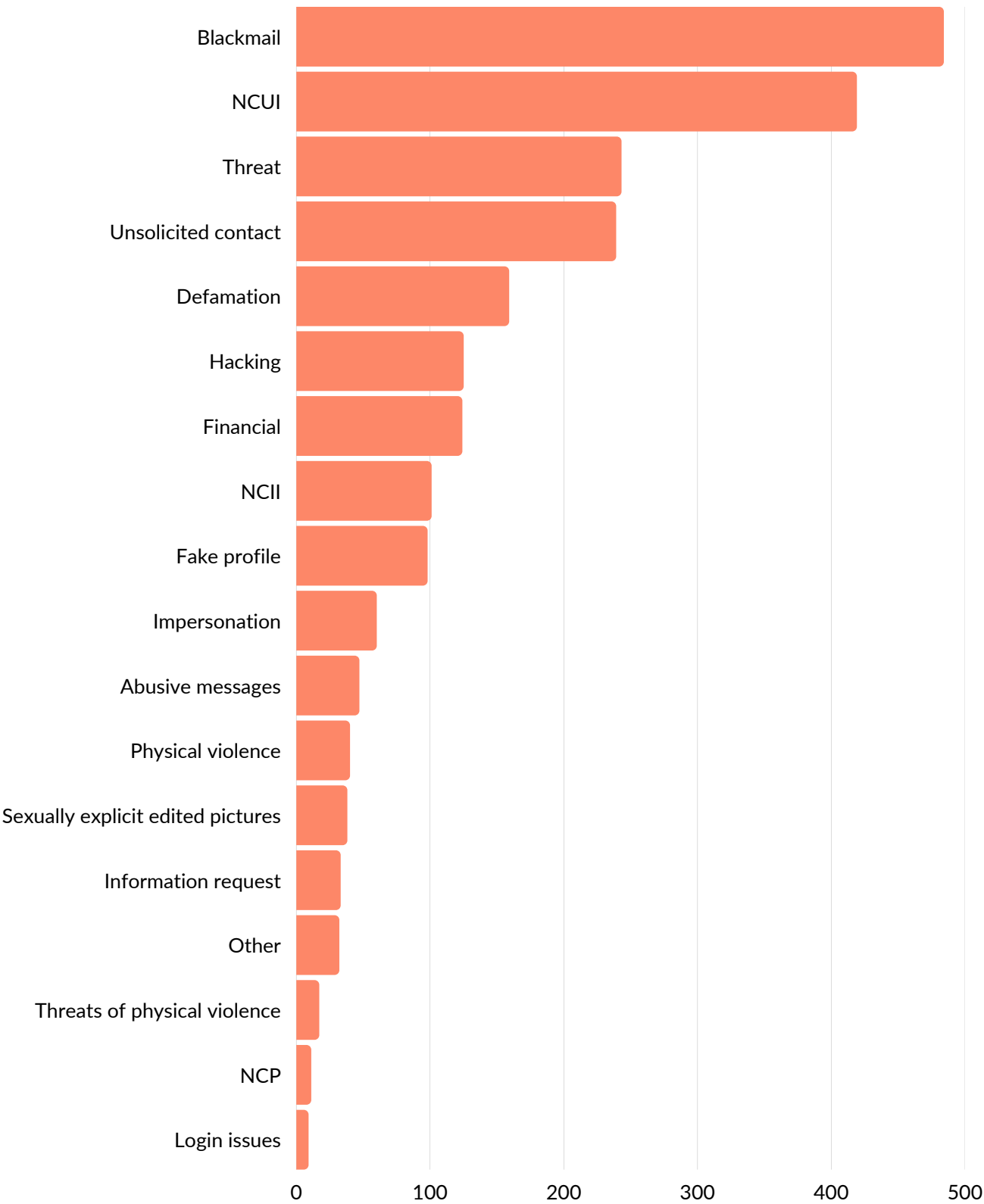
NCII: non-consensual intimate images

NCP: non-consensual pornography sent

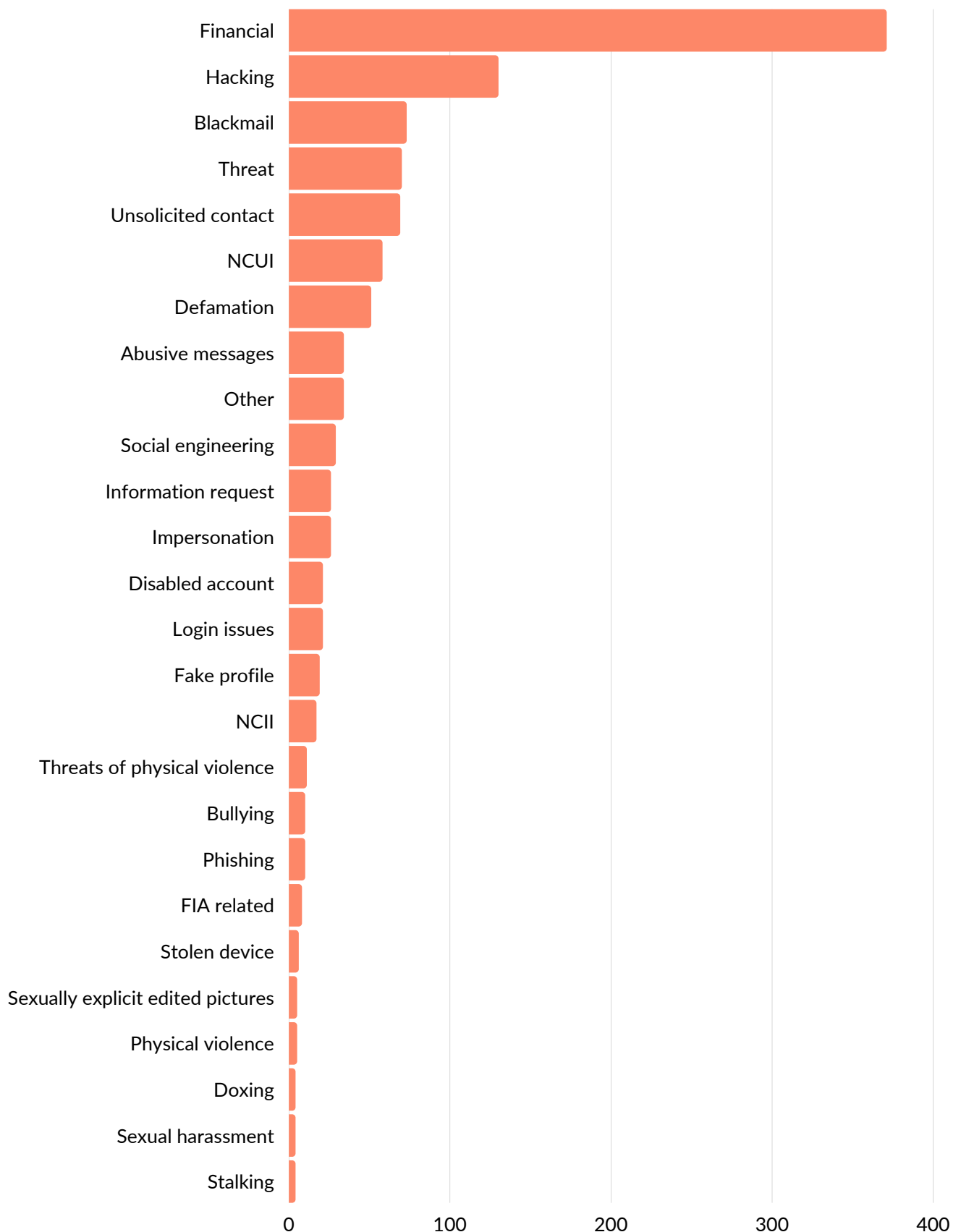
NCUI: non-consensual use of information

'Blackmailing' may refer to asking for sexual or monetary favors in exchange for not distributing or tampering with a survivor's intimate images, or contacting the survivor's family

Types of cases for female victims:



Types of cases for male victims:



SERVICES PROVIDED

The Helpline was established with the primary objective of providing legal assistance, digital security advice, and basic counseling services to our esteemed callers. The Helpline Associates are ably supported by a legal advisory team and digital security experts who are dedicated to addressing the needs of our valued callers.

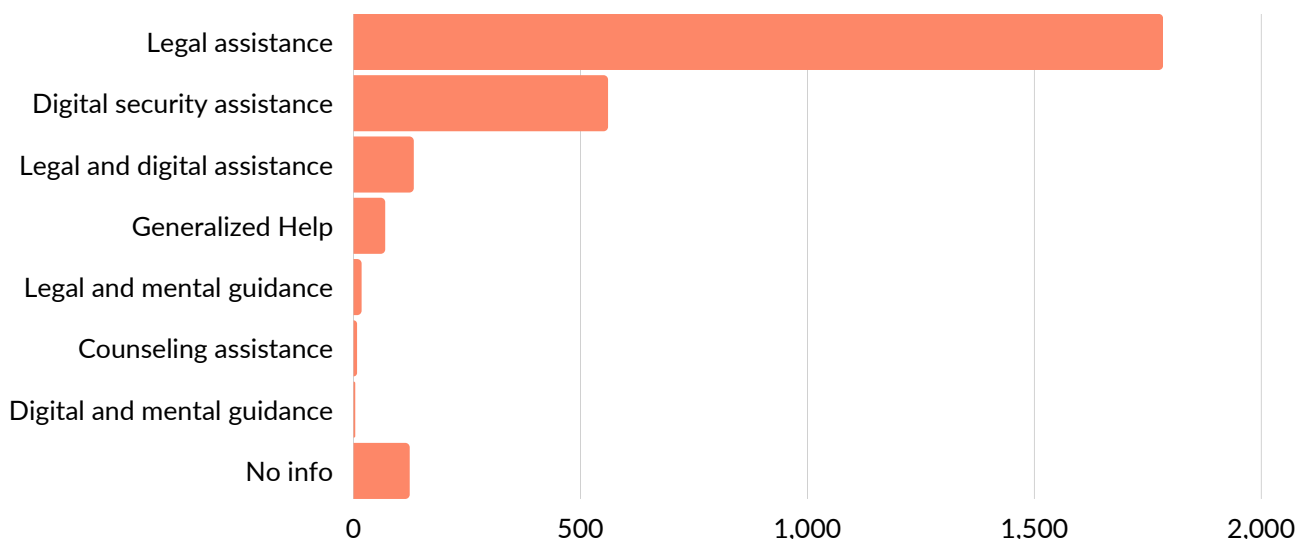
The digital services we provide consist of digital security and best practices advice, which is meant to deter or reduce the impact of future instances of online harassment. We also have escalation channels with major social media and tech platforms that allow us to mediate between them and local users and their concerns, especially when automatic report channels are not responsive. We also utilize these channels to flag dangerous and abusive trends targeting minority communities and public figures which has previously helped in calming their mental distress and threats to safety. Where we do not have established escalation channels, but content removal is crucial as in the cases of intimate image abuse, we independently conduct thorough research of all websites hosting the violating images, and report them through the host site. For instance, one complainant's images were published on more than 500 different websites, making it necessary for the entire Helpline team to take on the task of getting the images removed as soon as possible.

As a responsible organization, we have consistently endeavored to enhance our services in response to the evolving needs of our callers. To this end, DRF's legal department has established an online directory 'Ab Aur Nahin', that lists lawyers who have volunteered to provide pro-bono legal services to complainants all over Pakistan.¹⁰ Moreover, we have expanded our services to include in-person counsel and legal support to complainants who wish to file a legal complaint with the FIA cyber crime wing in Lahore.

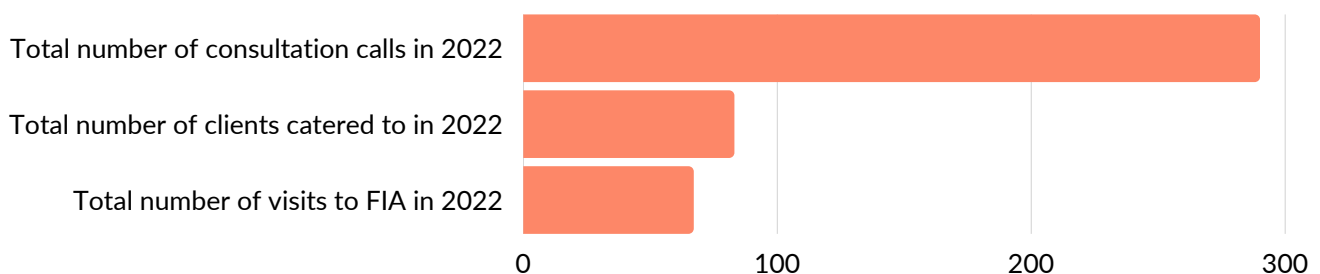
¹⁰ The directory can be accessed here: <https://abaurnahin.pk/>.

In such situations, we may need to collect and store additional personal information about complainants to better understand their case and provide them with informed advice. This personal information may include the complainant's name, phone number, and pictures of evidence. However, we wish to assure our callers that this information is only stored for the duration of time during which the Helpline lawyer is following up on the case and is not shared with anyone outside of the Helpline team.

Our commitment to confidentiality and data privacy is of utmost importance to us, and we take all necessary measures to ensure that our callers' personal information is treated with the highest level of security and confidentiality.



Summary of the Legal Team's engagement with the Helpline:



CASE STUDIES

In order to present a more in-depth understanding and survivor-centric perspective of the different factors involved in online harassment, and the trauma that a survivor goes through, we asked some callers if they would contribute to our report. We thank the following people for placing their trust in us, and willingness to recount their distressing experiences in order to benefit people's understanding of obstacles in the digital space. The following accounts include two statements from journalists who experienced a phishing attack, and unfair censorship because of lack of regional understanding; and one woman's account of intimate image abuse and her difficulties with pursuing legal action.

Case study #1: Phishing of woman journalist

I am a journalist. My Twitter account was verified on 9th July 2022. A few hours after receiving the blue tick, I received an email and message to provide the required information to maintain the blue tick and add the given number. As soon as I followed the instructions, my account was hacked and all the information and instructions were changed to Arabic. This was definitely a targeted attack. Since my account was a verified account which was of course due to my professional work, the hackers needed a similar authenticated account.

As I am a member of Women Journalists Network by DRF, I knew I could get some help in this regard and Nighat Dad's team followed up with me quickly.

Positive response was given by DRF and my case was followed up after that. An IT expert sent a ticket to Twitter and the issue was resolved after one and a half months. My account was recovered with a new email address.

I believe that sending a ticket to Twitter is a method that makes account recovery very easy. I don't know the details but my account was recovered after sending a ticket.

Case study #2: Censorship by social media

We published news about Mullah Umar on our Facebook page. It was a simple report of his car being found in the undergrounds of Afghanistan. The news was abiding by Facebook's community guidelines, however, we still received a strike from Facebook for violating their policies and [allegedly] 'glorifying' terrorist organizations. It severely affected our reach to page followers, even after we deleted the post. We tried to resolve this issue through conventional [appeal] methods. but it was a fruitless effort.

This issue directly affected my organization and my own mental health since I represent Urdu News from Punjab and we run an international organization that is highly credible. Our Jeddah team tried to contact Meta several times but it was to no avail.

Since this issue was not getting resolved from our end, I reached out to DRF. The response from DRF was very quick. I was honestly not expecting it to be so efficient. I would add that the responses were very well mannered and quick. The issue was resolved in a couple of days and I was thoroughly informed by the DRF team what the matter was, how the process was taking place and the case was escalated. We had our fingers crossed but the problem was solved in a few days.

I would recommend everyone facing digital issues reach out to them. Their team is very responsive and cooperative. They show a lot of empathy while dealing with your case, so the process is already very smooth. However, I would like to suggest that DRF should publicize their services to people facing digital issues as we are living in the times of artificial intelligence and communities that are marginalized are specifically being targeted. DRF should spread awareness about their work and how useful it is to the people of Pakistan.

Case study #3: Difficulties in cross-border cases

I faced a lot of problems in my case. There was a person in my neighborhood who took my phone and extracted my personal pictures and videos. I gave my phone to him because I needed to get it repaired and I trusted him with it. Afterwards, he tried to contact me. For about 4 to 5 months I ignored him. Then, he started blackmailing me for money, stating that he has my explicit pictures. I answered back and he started increasing his demands. I thought [that] he was just bluffing about the data he had on me but during an argument, he revealed the data he had about me. Then, he shared my pictures with my in-laws on the day of my Nikkah and he uploaded them on social media.

I gave him money and he eventually fled to Italy. After his departure, he started blackmailing me again. We didn't know anyone whom we could get help from to make him stop. I went to the FIA and got my case registered there, but got no response from them. They didn't update me or keep me in the loop. I went there with my uncle. When he started blackmailing me again, my cousin told me about the Digital Rights Foundation. They relieved my stress by getting my pictures deleted from the internet. I was in touch with them throughout when the FIA wasn't cooperating.

To establish communication with the FIA, they kept asking me to visit their office in Gujranwala. I was reaching out to them from Kharrian and it is not easy for me to commute to another city just to register my case. The FIA should have facilitated me with a phone call but they were not answering the phone. Being a woman in this country, it was extremely difficult for me to commute to Kharrian. I feel that such cases have increased exponentially in our country, so the FIA should do something about it. Women can't go out due to restrictions if something like this happens; the FIA should cooperate with them.

Moreover, when I registered my case with the FIA, they did not maintain communication with me and kept asking me to send them more evidence. I don't blame the FIA for this since I understand that it is hard to catch someone who has fled the country. However, they should've maintained communication with me, especially since the investigation officer had been changed and the new officer kept asking me to come to Gujranwala all over again.

This lack of communication caused a lot of stress. I used to Google the procedures on my own which was very inconvenient. I don't understand why they didn't cooperate with me; if a vulnerable person is coming to them, instead of helping that person, they are being uncooperative. I didn't understand any of their procedures and I am still unaware as my case is still open to investigation but I have no update. I know that money can get things done in this country, but everyone cannot afford it.

Difficult times can come in anyone's life, may it be a woman or a man, everyone suffers but it's relatively more difficult for a woman in our culture. Hence, the FIA should be more approachable in such cases, they should stay in touch with the victim and should be readily available to help whenever a new ID is made or pictures are being posted. Such cases have exponentially increased in our country because the system doesn't help the victims as it should. Firstly, many people don't have awareness about the FIA and what it does, because they don't know if they can even go somewhere with such a complaint for help. Secondly, if someone goes there to seek help, they make the procedure so difficult, especially for the women. They should at least help women in a better way by making things easier for them so that they feel supported.

I can't put into words what I went through. I still remember all of the accusations I received after the spread of my intimate pictures and videos. I remember everyone's words vividly. It felt like my whole world fell apart. No one shouldn't experience what I did, where I felt the world has ended for me and that, except my parents, everyone else wanted me to die. If a woman has made a mistake, to err is human so forgive her and try to make things easier for her. I would like to request the FIA to take women's cases seriously and make things easier for them. That's all I want to say, rest they know well how they can make their system better. I would only like to request the FIA to stay in touch with the complainants, update them regarding their case and not ask them to come in person repeatedly if they can maintain a conversation with the complainants on the phone.

IMPACT AND FEEDBACK

In an attempt to measure impact, we have been relying on various information streams to collect a holistic view of the Helpline's impact. This includes gauging the number of cases that were formally resolved as well as the efficacy and quality of support offered.

Our callers' feedback on how they found out about the Helpline is used as one matrice for measuring the Helpline's impact. When asked about their source, 8% of our callers cited a referral from a friend and the same proportion indicated they found out about it through an internet search. Most of our callers, 66.5%, were made aware of the Helpline through social media. DRF has an active presence on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, but digital word of mouth has been the primary source of promotion of the Helpline. This hopefully, demonstrates the level of trust, quality, and comfort that callers received from the Helpline that led them to recommend the service to others.

The number of new cases that the Helpline received over the year does not reflect the total number of calls fielded by the Helpline associates. Follow up calls make up a significant portion of the Helpline's daily activities, and 837 out of a total of 3532 calls were follow ups, which makes up about 23.7% of the year's calls received. This can be attributed to continuous contact with a Helpline associate, a reassuring attitude and response from our end, and willingness to look for new solutions when problems continue to arise.

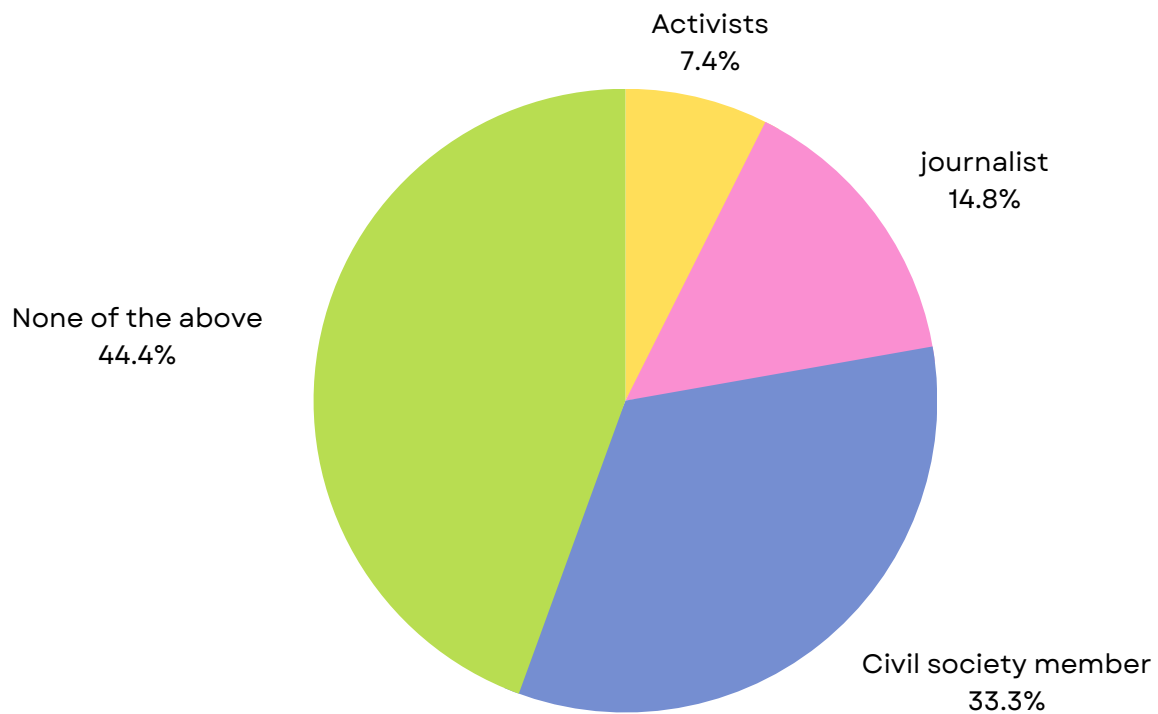
We do not contact our beneficiaries unless we have their express permission in order to protect their privacy and instead, we rely on the callers to reach out to us again if necessary. This serves as a limitation when trying to measure impact because we often do not get to find out if the case has been resolved to their satisfaction unless they contact us to tell us.

Furthermore, while following up with some of our beneficiaries, it was found that the definition of 'resolved' cases is very subjective. It could be that perhaps the issue or harassment they were facing rose up again after some time; or that they were more satisfied with a temporary solution rather than a long-term one. A dilemma also arises if we refer the caller onwards - do we mark the case as resolved from our end or follow through to the end, even when the case is being handled by a different institution. Additionally, it is not always practical for us to ask for feedback immediately or during a follow up call because the nature of the calls can be very emotionally charged or time-sensitive. Therefore, because our sample size is insufficient to provide a comprehensive picture of the impact we have had on our beneficiaries in terms of direct feedback, we have not opted for this method and instead rely on a feedback survey that is sent to select beneficiaries.

The limited sample size, respondents' educational and professional backgrounds, and their access to technology which affects how thoroughly they can complete the survey, and their command of language (Urdu or English) are all limitations of this survey. All these limitations have been noted and we are trying to make the feedback process more inclusive. The questionnaire received responses from 53 beneficiaries. The answers were compiled as follows:

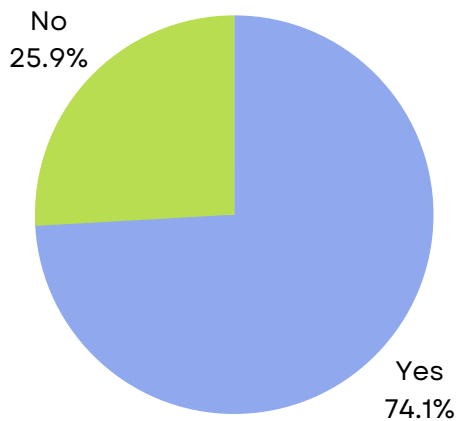
Out of all respondents, 29.6 percent identified themselves as being a part of civil society, 7.4 percent as activists, 14.8 percent as journalists and 3.7 percent as being both, a member of civil society and an activist.

Question: Do you identify as any of the following?



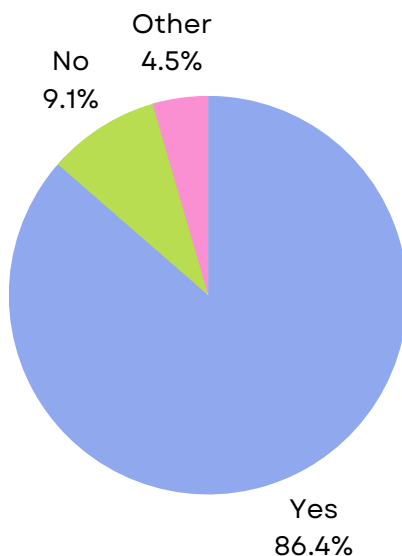
Responding to this question, 74.1 percent responded that they received the relevant digital safety advice or help they needed with digital/social media platforms from the helpline representative.

Question: Did you receive any digital safety advice or help with digital/social media platforms?



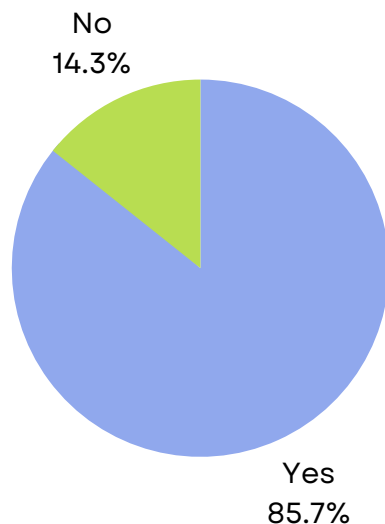
86.4 percent responded that the digital help they received from the helpline reduced the risk they were facing.

Question: Did the digital help you received reduce the risk you were facing?



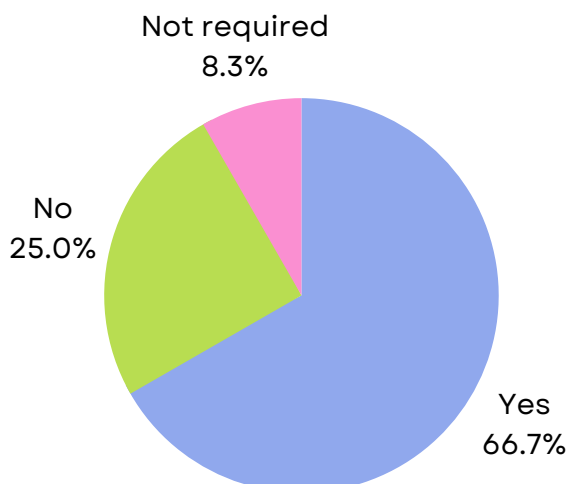
85.7 percent of the respondents responded that the assistance they received from the helpline helped them in building short or long term capacity to protect them online.

Question: Did the digital assistance you received help in building short or long term capacity to protect yourself online?



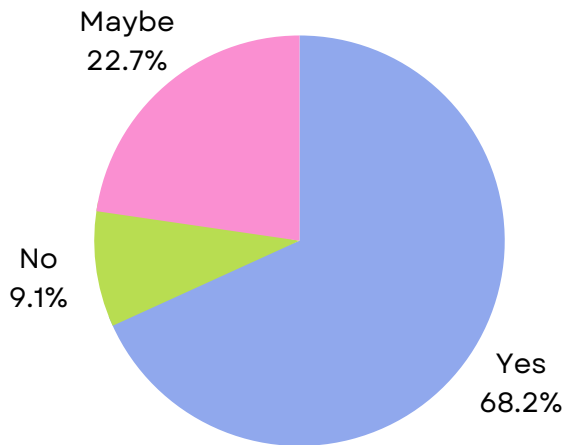
When asked if they received digital advice beyond what was required at the time, 66.7 percent responded with yes.

Question: Did you receive digital advice beyond what was required at the time, e.g. tips to protect yourself in the future?



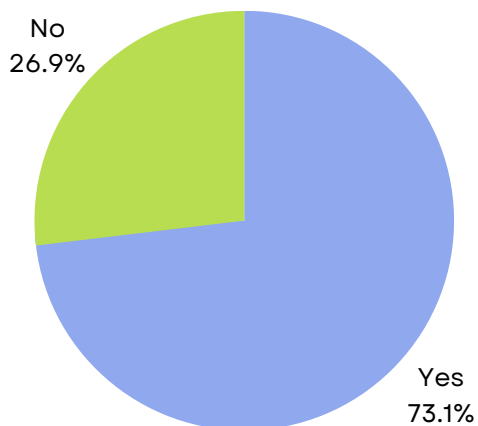
68.2 percent responded that they felt emotionally supported when they spoke to a helpline associate on the phone

Question: if you spoke on the phone with a Helpline Associate, did you feel emotionally supported?



73.1 percent responded that they have recommended the helpline to someone else

Question: Have you ever recommended the Helpline to someone else?



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Policy makers:

The Pakistani government must take decisive action to eradicate online harassment and technology-facilitated gender-based violence. To achieve this, we recommend the following measures:

Public Education:

The government should make use of and collaborate with gender-based organizations to conduct gender sensitization workshops in schools and communities. The government's public awareness campaigns and official curriculum should also incorporate gender sensitization following consultations with these organizations. Furthermore, the government should conduct community-level awareness sessions with women as well as family members to change attitudes around women's use of technologies.

Digital Literacy and Safety Integrated into Curriculum:

Internet education and safety courses should be included in school curriculums. Topics such as consent, social media ethics, safety practices, and what is illegal online must be covered. This will empower the younger generation to be more confident and aware while exploring the internet.

Addressing the Digital Gender Divide:

Pakistan has one of the widest digital gender gaps globally. According to the GSMA "Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022," women in Pakistan are 40% less likely than men to own a mobile phone due to economic inequality and patriarchal attitudes.¹¹ Women report that family disapproval is the second most significant barrier to mobile internet usage, while only a negligible percentage of men report this as a hindrance. Policies must be introduced to eliminate the gender digital gap by removing financial, safety, and social barriers that women face when accessing digital devices and internet spaces. This includes improving literacy rates and making the internet more accessible in geographical areas that lack infrastructure.

¹¹ "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022," GSMA, <https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2022.pdf>.

Gender Sensitization for Law Enforcers:

The government must collaborate with gender-based organizations to conduct regular gender sensitization workshops with law enforcement, including police and the FIA. Staff handling complaints of online gender-based violence must overcome patriarchal attitudes. These workshops should cover expansive issues relating to gender, including the risks and challenges faced by the transgender community. Civil society organizations, such as DRF, have conducted such workshops with the cybercrime wing of the FIA in the past, and are keen to work with law enforcement agencies in the future.

Data Protection:

The government must enact human rights-compliant legislation on digital privacy and protection after meaningful consultations with civil society and the general public. The right to dignity and privacy, as guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution of Pakistan, must be protected for every citizen. DRF's comments to the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MOITT) on the Personal Data Protection Bill 2021 should be taken into account when drafting the law.¹²

Supporting Civil Society Work:

Policy makers must take measures to ensure the smooth functioning of civil society organizations and nonprofits working on digital rights and gender.

¹² "Submission of comments to Ministry for Personal Data Protection Bill 2021," Digital Rights Foundation, September 2021, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/PDPB-2021-Submission-by-DRF.pdf>.

Recommendations for Law Enforcement:

The following recommendations are provided for law enforcement agencies to enhance their capacity to address cyber harassment cases in Pakistan. The FIA has made some progress in this regard by expanding its resources to handle such cases and involving civil society groups in planning stages. However, further action is needed to address the increasing number of cyber harassment complaints, which demands a more proactive approach from the government to take this issue seriously. The following recommendations are made:

Increase resource allocation:

The FIA must receive more funding to meet the growing demand for its services, considering the rising incidence of cyber harassment and increased awareness of cybercrime reporting mechanisms in the country. Additional resources must be allocated to hire and train more female officers, as well as to establish and expand forensic labs across the country.

Establish a mechanism to handle cases in foreign jurisdictions:

Despite being authorized to do so under Section 1(4) of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), the cybercrime wing lacks the capacity to take action against individuals located outside Pakistan. DRF recommends that the MOITT and the Interior Ministry define "international cooperation" under Section 42 of PECA and appoint at least one officer in each branch with specialized training in international law and conflict of laws to handle cases involving foreign jurisdictions.

Enhance the functionality of the online complaint portal:

To facilitate complainants who cannot travel long distances to seek justice, the online complaint portal should be updated and enable identity verification to initiate an inquiry to better serve individuals, particularly women and young girls.

Collect gender-disaggregated data:

The FIA must report the number of online harassment cases and cases registered by women and gender minorities under each section of PECA, particularly Sections 20, 21, and 24. These figures should be publicly available to aid policy-making, research and resource allocation.

Establish a dedicated desk for cyber harassment within the NR3C:

Given the unique nature of cyber harassment cases and the gender sensitivity required for complainants/victims, a separate desk for cyber harassment should be set up within the cybercrime wing. This desk should be staffed by officers with specialized training in the nuances of online harassment, gender sensitivity, and counseling services.

Coordination with Other Departments:

Channels of communication between police stations and cybercrime stations should be established to ensure that cases can be easily transferred and there is clarity as to where a particular case should be registered, investigated and prosecuted. Given the intersecting nature of online and offline spaces, cases often involve both online and offline crimes, and complainants are given contradictory advice regarding the jurisdiction of the police and cybercrime wing. In certain trials, given that challans contain both sections of PECA and PPC, there is often back and forth between different courts and judges. It should also be ensured that each department knows what laws exist, which complaints need to be handled by which agency/department, so that complainants are not sent around when they are already in distress.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

It is observed that many complainants require the assurance of confidentiality to report an incident. Rule 9 of the PECA Rules outlines protections and requirements for confidentiality in cases involving women and intimate images. To ensure that the details of cases, personal information, and evidence are only accessible by authorized personnel, it is recommended that the case management system be reworked under strict SOPs. It is preferable to have a digital system that restricts access to authorized personnel only and has protocols in place for digital security and integrity of data.

Greater Accessibility for Disabled Persons:

To ensure that disabled persons do not face additional hurdles in registering and pursuing complaints, every cybercrime office must meet minimum requirements such as functioning elevators, ramps for wheelchairs, accessible toilet facilities, and in-person assistance in filing applications.

Improve coordination between cybercrime wing branches:

Measures should be taken to ensure that investigations can be carried out swiftly, even when complainants and accused individuals are in different cities. The FIA should evaluate all branches to ensure that they are following the same protocols. This would decrease the pressure on resources for travel, and would ensure faster action on holding perpetrators accountable.

Psychological services:

The FIA should increase and improve the quality of psychological services at cybercrime offices to help complainants deal with the psychological trauma and distress that they experience due to online harassment and violence. All officers, especially those dealing directly with victims, should be trained on how to address trauma and when to refer to more experienced professionals. The cybercrime wing should offer a safe space for victims to help them process their trauma in a constructive and safe manner.

Case management and tracking system:

To improve the transparency and accessibility of the system, complainants should be able to track and receive regular updates on the status of their case through an accessible and easy-to-use case management system/portal. Digital copies of the case file and evidence filed should also be stored on a secure server to ensure reliable duplicates in case the original case file is lost or tampered with.

Enhanced Technical Expertise:

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) is facing a significant investigative delay, and some cybercrime complaints are being dropped due to the insufficient technical abilities of officers and inadequate technology available to the agency. In this regard, the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) has recommended that the agency should be capacitated to address the current and future trends in cybercrime and forensic science, and evidence collection in the next five-year period. This capacity-building process should be continuous and ongoing. Consequently, DRF recommends substantial investment in research at the National Response Centre for Cyber Crimes (NR3C) to cater to the needs of the litigants and complainants.

Training for Judges on Cybercrime Law, Internet Governance, and Online Harassment:

To ensure that judges are familiar with internet law and technology, the provincial judicial academies' curriculum should include internet governance and cybercrime. It has been noted that judges are not only unaware of the law governing the internet and cybercrime, but they also fundamentally misunderstand the internet's governance and infrastructure. This lack of knowledge results in bad jurisprudence and "unimplementable" orders.



DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"



<https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk>



info@digitalrightsfoundation.pk



www.twitter.com/digitalrightsPK



www.instagram.com/digitalrightsfoundation



www.facebook.com/DigitalRightsFoundation



www.tiktok.com/digitalrightsfoundation