



DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

Cyber Harassment Helpline Policy Brief 2022



Introduction

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. The brief proposes recommendations for key stakeholders on online and offline safety of the journalist community in Pakistan.

Introduction to Cyber Harassment Helpline

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 Sunday on toll-free calls, emails and social media platforms.

In July 2022, DRF collaborated with Pakistan's National Commission of Human Rights to establish a Complaint Cell for Journalist Protection, particularly dedicated to resolving human rights issues that arise from the targeting of women journalists, to ensure the freedom of the press.



Context

(Trigger Warning)

Pakistan is known to be one of the most dangerous countries to practice journalism. According to the World Press Freedom Index 2022 report, Pakistan dropped 12 points in the index, from a rank of 145 in 2021 to 157 in 2022.¹

Additionally, Freedom Network, Pakistan-based media rights watchdog, in its Press Freedom Report 2021-2022, documented at least 86 cases of attacks and violations against journalists and media practitioners in the one year between May 3, 2021 and April 10, 2022 across all territories of Pakistan, including the four provinces, Islamabad, Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. This is an average of over seven cases of violations a month.² Of the 86 cases, at least 12 violations were perpetrated against digital media practitioners during the review period, with at least 3 victims being women. The documented cases of violations are much lower than the actual cases of online harassment and violence faced by journalists in Pakistan which can be gauged from the research Digital Rights Foundation conducted in 2019, 'Fostering Open Spaces', draws findings from the experiences of 60 women journalists and information practitioners from across Pakistan, highlighting that 55% of those

surveyed had witnessed and/or had been affected by online abuse and 91% stated that the abuse was gendered and personal in nature.³

In August, a malicious campaign, #GforGhasti, had been trending on the Twitter panel (amassing 128K tweets) directed at journalist Gharida Farooqi. Different spelling of the same hashtag were used as a tactic. The tweets in the hashtag were extremely disturbing, claiming Gharida was featured in a leaked sex video of a politician (she was not) and calling her a ghasti (prostitute). This was not the first time Gharidah Farooqi became the target of such malicious and targeted hateful campaign. Many other instances of harassment were experienced by women journalists during the year.

In September, at the 27th meeting of the Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and Federal Investigation Authority briefed on the increasing rates of cyber crime by 83% within the past three years. The members of the committee expressed concern on the rise in propaganda propagation against journalists, politicians and institutions on social media is concerning.⁴

1. Ahmed, U., 2022. 'Pakistan drops 12 points on World Press Freedom Index 2022', 12 May 2022. Available at: <https://globalvoices.org/2022/05/12/pakistan-drops-12-points-on-world-press-freedom-index-2022/>

2. Freedom Network 2022 'Pakistan Press Freedom Report 2021-2022'. Available at: <https://www.fnepk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/FINAL-Pakistan-Press-Freedom-Report-2022.pdf>

3. Jahangir, R. 2021. 'Fostering Open Spaces'. Available at: <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/IMS-Study-Report.pdf>

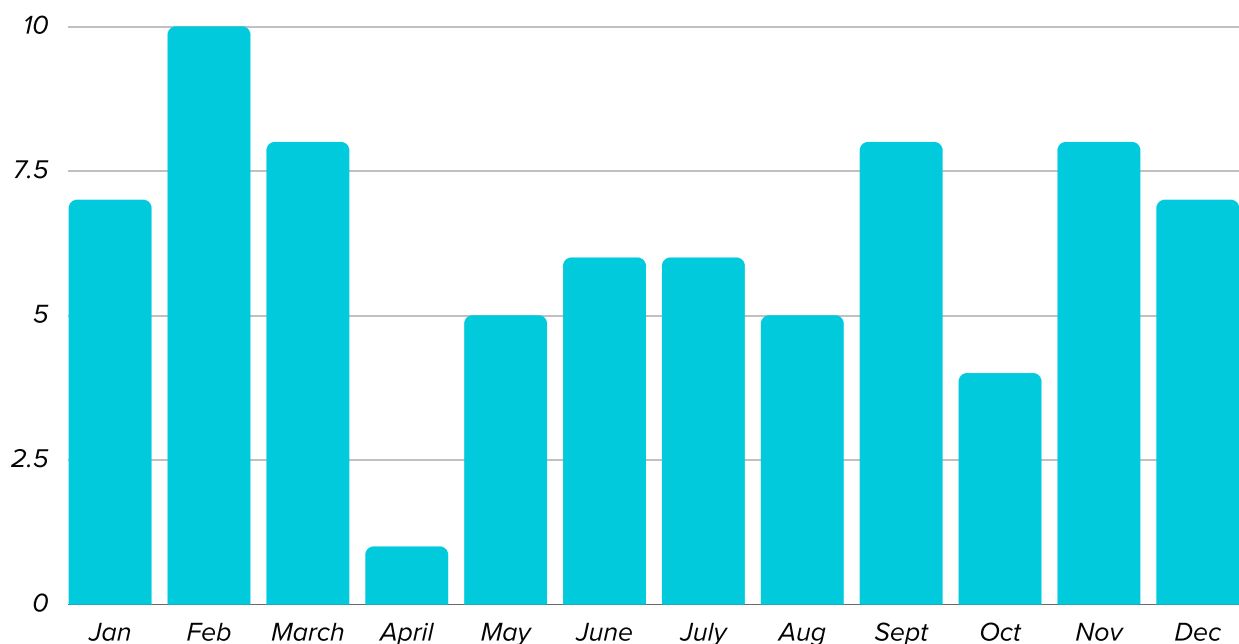
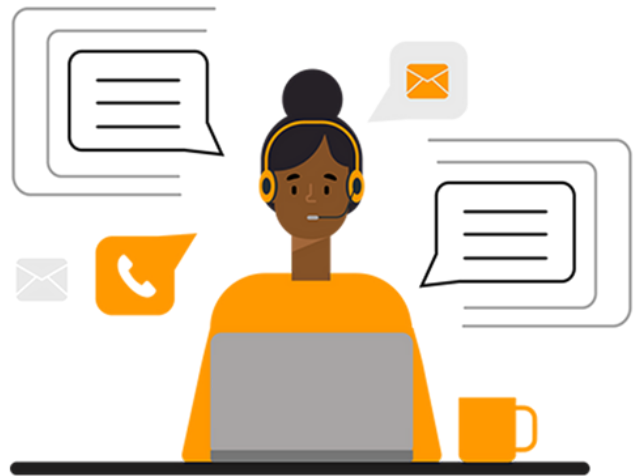
4. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1001261/fia-cyber-crime-increases-83/>

Two years ago, on 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. 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. A hashtag campaign, #AttacksWontSilenceUs, on social media was also launched to condemn the increase in cyber- attacks against them. Two years ahead, the situation seems to have only worsened with pervasive and persistent online trolling and harassment faced by women journalists in Pakistan being a huge challenge.

A threatening and hostile environment for media freedom has implications on society's access to information and effective reporting, especially pertaining to abuse and power, accountability, legislative insights, governance and corruption. In the midst of the festering issue, the key stakeholders, including digital media organisations, media houses, legislators, social media platforms and policy makers feebly respond to the problem at hand which allows abuse and violence against journalists to continue unabated.

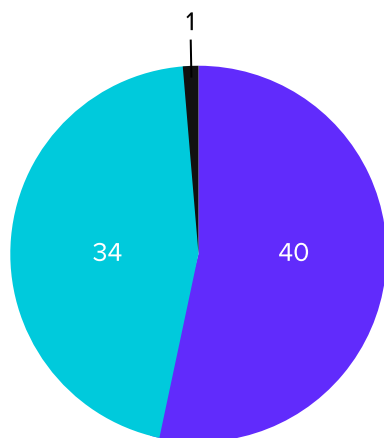
Nature of Complaints

In 2022, the Helpline received a total of 75 complaints from journalists and media practitioners with 34 female, 40 male and 1 trans journalist. 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. The Helpline provides crucial to provide tailored assistance to individuals facing such complex and intersecting forms of vulnerability.



Monthly breakdown of cases of journalists and media practitioners

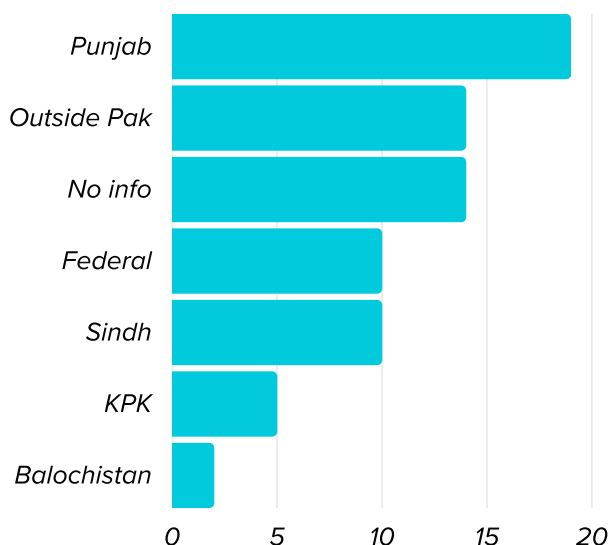
Gender-wise breakdown



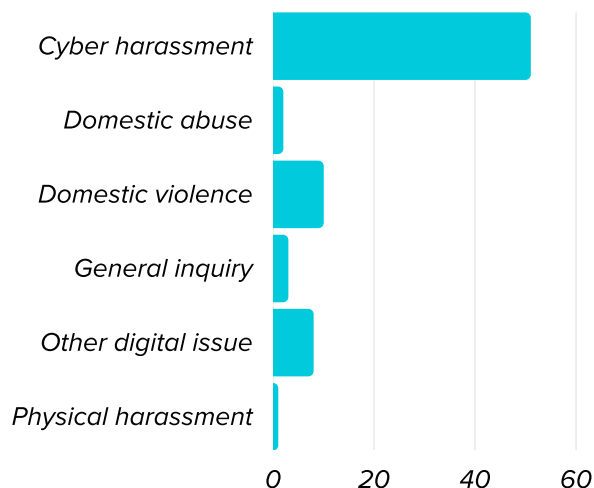
- Male journalists
- Female journalists
- Transgender/transwoman

The highest number of complaints, around 25% of the total, were received from Punjab, followed by 17% from journalists outside Pakistan, predominantly Afghanistan.

Geographical breakdown



Around 51 complaints were received of cyber harassment which account for 68% of the total complaints received from the journalist community during the year 2022.

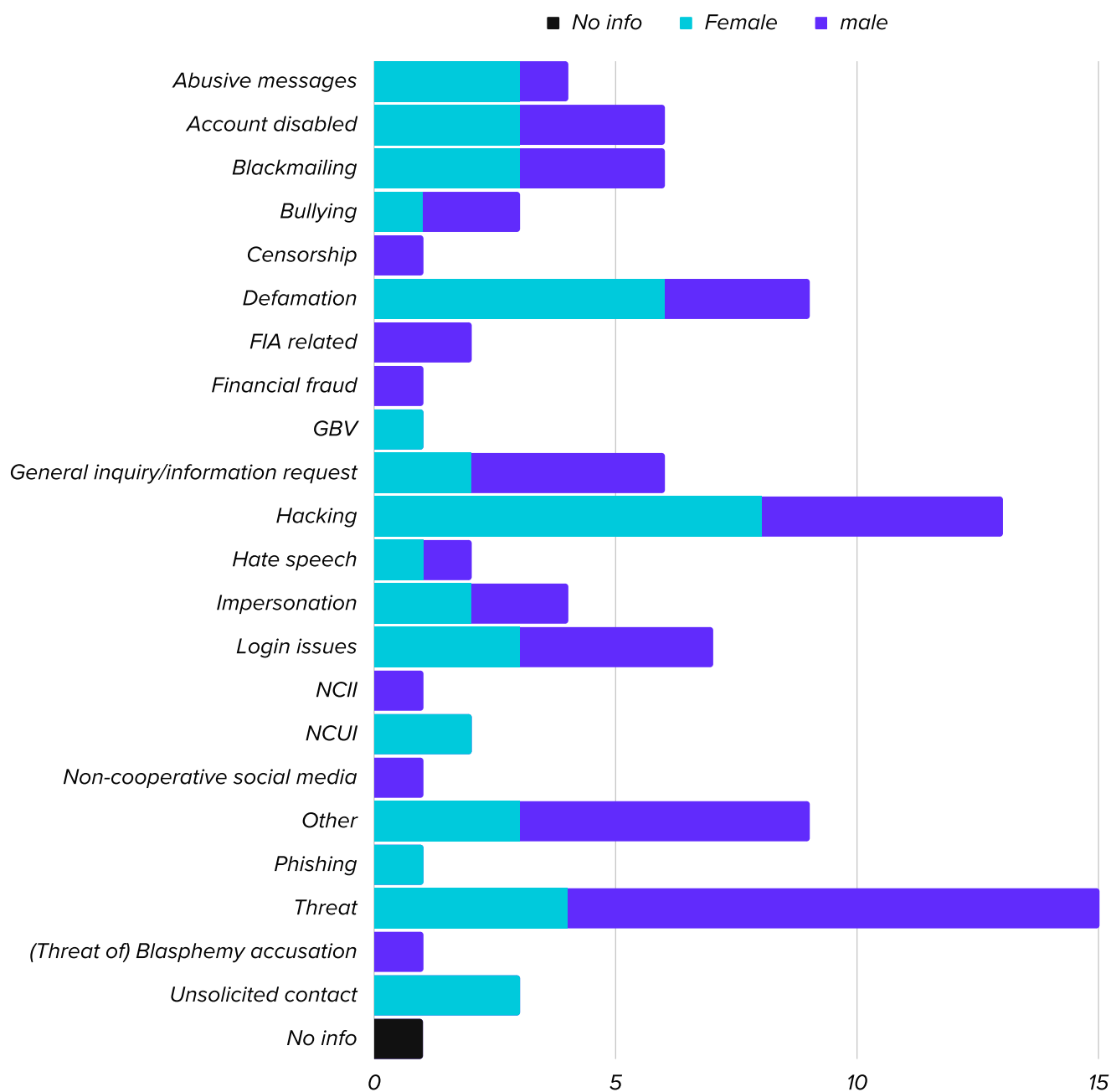


In 2022, 15 out of 51 complaints were of threats received by the journalists which is around 29% of all complaints falling under the cyber harassment category.

A total of 13 out of 51 complaints were of hacking attempts of either the journalists' social media accounts or mass reporting of their account which disrupts their work and leads to a breach of their personal information. 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.

Additionally, defamation has been on the rise with around 18% cases in the cyber harassment category being 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. This was followed by suspension of accounts of the journalists by social media companies. In most 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.

Types of cases:



Work of Helpline with journalists



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.

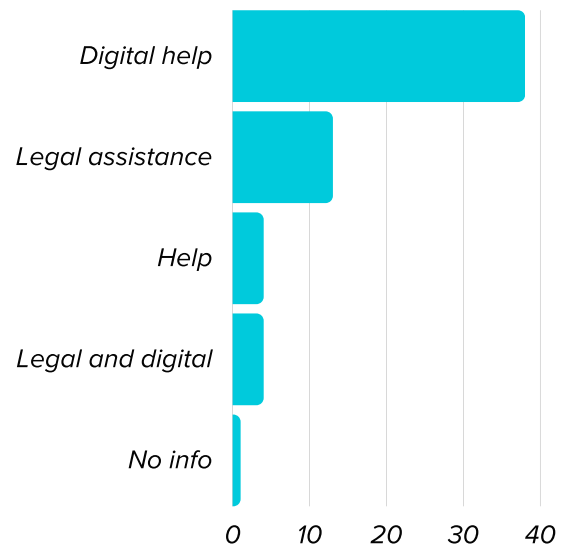
Given the targeted nature of the campaigns, many journalists reported feeling psychological agony along with their digital crisis.

During these cyber attacks, their personal data, pictures, defaming material and fake accounts emerge on online platforms to

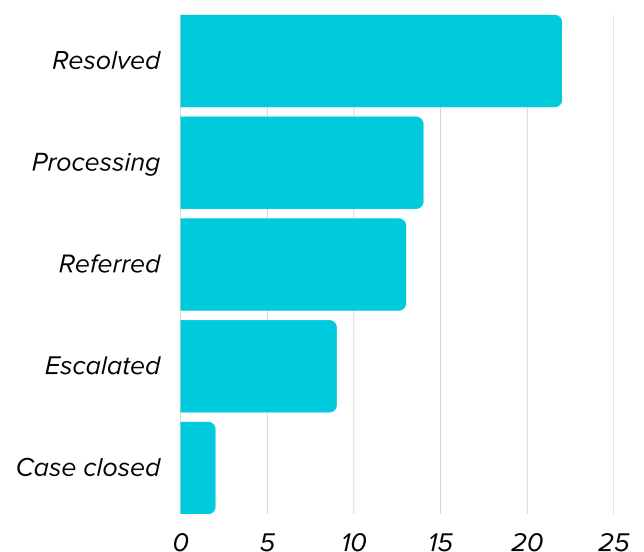
further injure their reputation, professional credibility and emotional health. The Helpline team has provided psycho-social support to them along with connecting them with collective support through our network of women journalists.

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 2022:

Services provided:

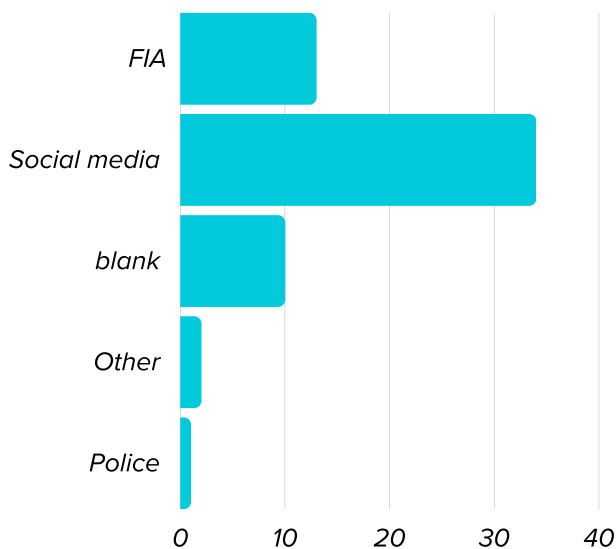


Case status:

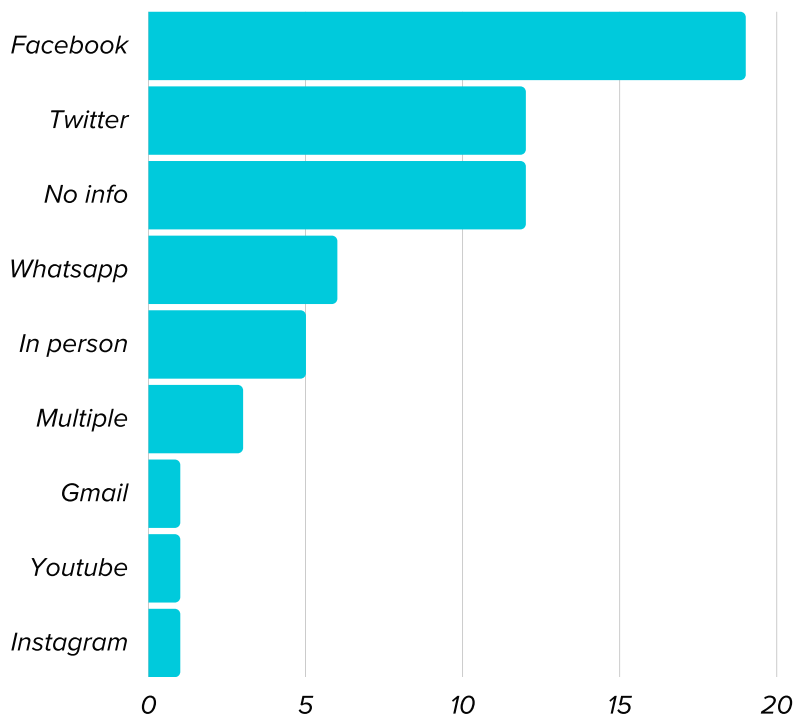


The Helpline team also engaged with the relevant companies to appeal decisions and provide the missing cultural and political context. The platform with the highest complaints received at the Helpline was Facebook in 2022. The Helpline also assists journalists by providing legal advice with the help 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.

Referred to:



Platforms:



Recommendations

The Government

Legislation on Journalist Safety:

In 2021 the Senate approved the 'Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals 2021' as a means of protection for journalists however the law in itself hasn't necessarily provided the relief it should to journalists. While the idea behind the bill is appreciated the bill itself still has many flaws and particularly section 6 of the bill prohibits journalists and media professional from spreading 'false information' and making material that 'advocates hatred' or constitutes 'incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence" with no clear legal definition of what these terms mean and hence being open to interpretation. Failure to comply with these 'obligations' can lead to criminal prosecution for journalists which itself will not be a relief for journalists working on at risk stories. It is essential for policy makers to come with a bill that provides journalists impunity and protections without implicating them. Furthermore laws such as Prevention of Electronics Crimes Act (PECA) or other regulatory bills are used by governments certain times to attack journalists particularly women journalists and policy makers should look into how to address this issue.

Strengthening and Accessibility of Reporting Mechanisms for Journalists

Journalists and media professionals who face online harassment and violence are often hesitant to report their cases to law enforcement for 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 and in a sensitized manner. There must also be rules and protocols in place to safeguard journalists against the agency from being used as a tool to harass journalists.

Collaborative Work With Civil Society

Government and Law Enforcement Agencies should work in concert with civil society and media literacy organizations to create awareness regarding harassment, online harassment and rights around free speech 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

In recent times 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 by political parties must be in place to ensure that mainstream political parties do not act in ways that harms or exacerbates harms towards journalists.

Media houses

Institutionalized Support Systems for Media Practitioners

Media houses and organizations should provide holistic assistance to reporters, journalists, editors or any member of their organization facing harassment online or offline. The online violence and harassment directed towards journalists should be seen as an institutional responsibility given that it arises as part of the job and not as an attack on the individual.

Organizational Level Digital Security and Safety

Protocols, training, tools and resources should be developed to protect media practitioners by their organizations in order to ensure that they can practice digital security, privacy and precautionary measures preemptively particularly in case of a chaotic situation.

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 particularly keeping in mind the regional context when developing these guidelines. Content producers often do not fall into the “newsworthy” exception of social media companies. While regulation of news content is important and in some cases necessary, especially when it is weaponized for hate speech and disinformation, over-regulation or regulation without discerning such content from genuine reporting leads to censorship and silencing of critical voices and dissent.

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 and at times content in different language is also overlooked. Social media companies need to invest in economies they are operating by accounting for local context and language experts 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 and accessible 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 guideline and their implications while working with local actors to conduct awareness campaigns, sessions and video tutorials.

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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:

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Gender-sensitive, confidential & free helpline:

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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.



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