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Use of online space in Pakistan targeting women, religious minorities, activists and voices of dissent

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Question

How and by whom are online spaces being used in Pakistan targeting women, religious minorities, activists and voices of dissent? What are the trends on hate speech and spreading of disinformation targeting these groups?

Contents

1. Summary

There is ample evidence that online hate speech in Pakistan is directed against women, religious minorities, journalists, voices of dissent and activists. The targeting of many of these groups is an expansion online of the traditional hostility and abuse they face offline. However, the internet has made such abuse easier and online hate speech is growing as internet use rises in the country. Those responsible vary somewhat: women and religious minorities are typically targeted by religio-political parties and their followers, while journalists and activists are often targeted by government/the military. In all cases, online hate speech can have a serious offline impact, including physical violence, and restrictions on people's freedom/ability to work/post online.

This review, looking at online hate speech in Pakistan in relation to particular groups, draws largely on reports by think-tanks/NGOs as well as media articles and blogs. Relatively little academic literature was found on the subject, but grey literature was quite extensive, especially on certain religious minorities (Ahmadis) and women. No literature was found on online hate speech targeted at persons with disabilities. This report focuses on online hate speech directed at these groups, and does not look at censorship of or restrictions on online content posted by such groups – but it should be noted that this is significant (DRF, 2021).

Key findings of the review are as follows:

- **Online hate speech targets groups in Pakistani society who traditionally face abuse and discrimination offline**: i.e. women, religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslim sects). However, the internet makes it easier to direct hate speech at such groups (in terms of access, as well as providing anonymity), and as internet use spreads in Pakistan, so online hate speech is growing.

- **Women suffer more because of their gender:** Pakistani society is characterised by patriarchy, with misogyny and gender-based violence (GBV) common. Women in general, women from religious minorities, and women in the public eye (in politics, in entertainment, journalists, activists) all face 'additional' online abuse because of their gender. Online GBV is growing rapidly in Pakistan. Typical themes in online hate speech are attacks on women's attire, on their behaviour, and threats of sexual/other violence (including rape, acid attacks).

- **Religious minorities (and especially Ahmadis) are one of the main targets of online hate speech in Pakistan:** Typical derogatory terms used include *kafir* (infidel), *choora* (untouchable) and *wajib-ul-qatl* (deserving to die). Religious minorities are often accused of blasphemy, an offence which in Pakistan can carry the death sentence. Ahmadis appear to be the religious minority most attacked online, possibly because they claim to be Muslim but are seen by the rest of society (and under Pakistani law) as non-Muslim.

- **Journalists and other voices of dissent face an online backlash because of their reporting/writing:** particularly when it is critical of the government/military. Again, this represents a continuation of offline threats (arrest, torture, etc.) that journalists/critics have traditionally faced in Pakistan. Common features of such online hate speech are accusations of being pro-Indian/funded by India/threatening national security. The country's ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) party has been especially active in orchestrating online hate campaigns against critics of the government. This includes

coordinated online social media campaigns against women journalists, who are attacked not only for their work but also their gender.

- **Human rights activists face online hate speech:** this typically features elements found in hate speech targeting religious minorities and journalists/critics, i.e. accusations of being un-Islamic/blasphemy, as well as of being pro-West/pro-India/undermining national security. Activists lauded by the international community appear to face correspondingly greater online vitriol in Pakistan, as seen most notably with Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai.

- **A range of platforms and perpetrators are involved in online hate speech**: The most common platforms appear to be Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Perpetrators vary depending on the target group: religio-political parties especially go after religious minorities online, while the government/PTI/army have been responsible for attacks on journalists/other voices of dissent/political rivals. However, while these entities might initiate online hate speech, they then find a very receptive audience in the Pakistani public.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in online hate speech in Pakistan:** Lockdown and other measures/restraints caused by the pandemic led to more people spending time online, and hence to a corresponding rise in online hate speech. However, certain groups have been disproportionately affected, most notably women and Shias – ethnic Hazara Shias returning for pilgrimage in Iran were blamed for the virus.

2. Targeting of women

Expansion of misogyny/GBV into online spaces

Pakistani society is highly patriarchal, with misogyny and gender-based violence (GBV) common. The same attitudes to women are seen in online spaces: 'Social media platforms and messaging applications, though recent innovations, often allow for the replication of existing structures of patriarchy through their inadequate community guidelines and reporting mechanisms' (Fazal, 2021: 2). Gendered violence directed at women online includes: 'sexual harassment; surveillance; unauthorised use and dissemination of personal data; and manipulation of personal information, including images and videos' (Fazal, 2021: 4). A 2017 survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) among women in universities across Pakistan found that '70% of the young women surveyed did not feel comfortable posting their pictures online for the fear of them getting misused, depicting the hostility they experience in online spaces' (Fazal, 2021: 1).

As internet use has increased, so has online violence and attacks on women. The *Freedom on the Net 2021* report for Pakistan asserts that, 'Online gender-based violence is becoming a major issue in the country' (Freedom House, 2021). Complaints made by women to the Cyber Harassment Helpline rose from 989 in 2017 to 1,881 in just the first six months of 2020 – given the access issues faced by many women in making complaints (which have to be done in person), the actual scale of the problem is likely far higher (Fazal, 2021: 2). The pandemic has also been a factor in the rise. DRF claims that 'there has been an exponential rise in online gender-based violence in Pakistan, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Freedom House, 2020).

With regard to impact, one key effect of online hate speech and violence is to deter women from participating freely in online spaces: they either come off such platforms or limit what they post/views they express. Online attacks can also lead to physical violence against women; there have been numerous cases of this in Pakistan (Fazal, 2021: 5). And online trolling can negatively affect women's health, e.g. leading to stress, depression.

Women in the public eye are special targets of hate speech. This includes women in politics, those in entertainment, female journalists and women in the media, and female activists. Online attacks on the former two – women in politics and in entertainment – are described below, while hate speech directed at the latter two is covered in the sections on journalists and activists respectively.

Women in politics

Bytes for All (2020a), a human rights organisation and research think-tank focused on information and communication technologies, reported a trend on social media of attacking female members of political families, notably Maryam Nawaz, daughter of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and vice president of his PML-N party, and Bushra Bibi, the wife of current prime minister Imran Khan. It describes 'inappropriate hashtags comprising of abusive language' about these women which started trending on Twitter on 9 December 2020 (Bytes for All, 2020a):

> These hostile trends, designed to undermine the integrity of the political parties' members and their families, were started as a social media political battle/conflict and were among the top ten Twitter trends in Pakistan, on Wednesday. According to Keyhole Analytics, the abusive hashtag targeting Maryam Nawaz (Raiwand ki R****) involved 94 users, 150 posts, engaged 3,254 people, reached 187,058 people and left 228,403 impressions. Whereas, the abusive hashtag targeting Bushra Bibi (Pakpathan ki R****) involved a total of 100 users who posted it, its engagement was of about 10,628 people, reached about 181,597 people, and left 275,036 impressions.

With regard to responsibility, Bytes for All (2020a) claim that such trends are started by 'cyber armies' of political parties: 'teams dedicated to manipulating public opinion over social media for their political agendas', and in which the parties have 'invested greatly'.

Women in entertainment

The two cases below illustrate the challenges women in the entertainment industry can face online. They feature two common strands of online hate speech directed against women: criticism of their attire, and criticism of their behaviour, particularly when these are perceived as violating 'Islamic values'.

Qandeel Baloch was a social media star, considered 'Pakistan's Kim Kardashian': her celebrity derived solely from the videos and photographs she posted on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (Maher, 2020). For a conservative country like Pakistan, the content could be shocking: Qandeel half-undressed in her bed, in provocative poses, a promise to do a striptease dance if the Pakistan cricket team won a match against India, and so on. Baloch built up a significant online following, but also faced massive trolling and abuse online. Maher (2019) lists some of the comments she received:

> "You're a slut and I know it."
> "Horny bitch."
> "Finding a gun send me her address LOL."
> "These rich brats do stuff like this and bring shame to their parents and their country. She's just another spoiled rich girl."
> "Please shoot her wherever you find her."
> "You ugly bitch. People like you should go die."
> "You have no shame so why are you even wearing this bikini? Take it off, you can earn some more."
> "You uneducated bitch … you're giving Pakistan a bad name. Your pimp family won't even shoot you. Your father must be just like you that's probably why he doesn't say anything to you."

Following photographs Baloch released in 2016 which showed her in a hotel room on the lap of a famous religious leader, Mullah Abdul Qavi, she gained even greater notoriety (Maher, 2019). On 15 July 2016 she was murdered by the youngest of her six brothers in a so-called 'honour killing'.

The second case is that of actress Saba Qamar. She appeared in a music video in August 2020, playing a bride in a long white wedding dress, who is twirled by the groom as he sings to her. The video was set in a famous mosque in Lahore. 'As soon as the video emerged, it went viral – but for the wrong reasons. It infuriated religious radicals who inundated social media with claims that Qamar's dancing sullied the historic Wazir Khan Mosque' (Gannon, 2020). In response to the online trolling, Qamar issued an apology on Twitter: 'If we have unknowingly hurt anyone's sentiments we apologize to you with all our heart. Love & peace.' Despite this, both she and the singer in the video were charged with blasphemy (Gannon, 2020).

3. Targeting of religious minorities

Expansion of hate speech into online spaces

Religious minorities in Pakistan face numerous forms of discrimination, and – as with women - this marginalisation is reflected online. '(T)he expansion of the public sphere into the online dimension exacerbates many of the same tensions found in the daily lives of religious minorities living in Pakistan' (DRF, 2021: 13). The Digital Research Foundation conducted a study looking at the experiences online of religious minorities, including experiences with online negativity. Key findings in relation to these aspects included (DRF, 2021: 3):

> (R)eligious minorities in Pakistan exist under precarious and vulnerable conditions in online spaces. In our survey responses, a majority of respondents mentioned having experienced online negativity, including backlash or threats on the basis of religious affiliation and/or a combination of factors. Forms of online negativity ranged from receiving negative comments and derogatory language to daily abuse and threats to their life. A majority also mentioned being subject to abusive language and death threats for posting their opinions online. Out of those that chose to reveal their religious affiliation online, most had experienced online abuse as a result.

Freedom Network Pakistan's annual 'State of Digital Rights in Pakistan Report' for 2020 (FNPK, 2020) found that:

Religious minorities, security agencies, human rights, gender, politics and development are identified as the main discussion themes online that elicit the most hostile reactions from detractors online….. online news media platforms reported facing hate speech, hostility and organized targeting for their content related to religion, religious minorities and human rights and face threats, abuse, trolling, hacking, blocking and charges of treason from various threat actors including individuals, political parties, religious groups, unknown organized groups and even official sources.

Bytes for All carried out an analysis of social media posts on Twitter and Facebook between September 2019 and June 2020, looking at the nature and scale of hate speech directed towards religious minorities in Pakistan (both non-Sunni sects of Islam, and non-Muslims). It notes that, while hate speech directed towards such groups has long been pervasive in Pakistani society, 'when it comes to online spaces where more and more people are joining different social media platforms to express their views and share their opinions (or those of others whom they support), these labels, titles and stereotypes get hugely amplified, attracting widespread attention across whole communities' (Bytes for All, 2020b: 3).

Women from religious minority groups face persecution both as women and as members of minority religious communities. Half of the respondents in the DRF study reported that women received more threats online than men (DRF, 2021: 20). As one female respondent noted: 'Women do face more online violence at the hands of these keyboard jihadi men. We are becoming more and more scared of the outside world and men in general. And no, we are not able to talk about these issues or any issues freely' (DRF, 2021: 20).

This review focuses on nature, scale and trends in online hate speech towards marginalised groups in Pakistan. It does not look at the causal or enabling factors behind this. But it is relevant to note here that the literature stresses the difference in response to hate speech directed at minority religious groups, and that directed at 'mainstream' (Sunni) Muslims. While little action is taken to stop the former, content that is derogatory of Islam/Muslims is heavily censored and controlled, including by law. 'Some of the laws are protecting only one religion and no law is for the protection of other religions. This gives an open platform for hate speech' (Rai, 2021). A social activist commented: 'I've observed that a Muslim can abuse any religion openly and some of the events in the past are proof of that, but Hindus, Christians or Ahmadis can't reciprocate with the same type of hatred language' (Sorath Sindhu, cited in Rai, 2021). Gannon (2020) cites a history professor, Hasan Javid, who 'blamed the government for its silence and for allowing rampant abuse on social media'.

Terminology

Hate speech directed towards religious minorities uses a range of derogatory terms, notably *kafir* (infidel). This is particularly sensitive when used against Shias and Ahmadis, since both regard themselves as Muslims (Bytes for All, 2020a). A related term is *fitna*, which means 'chaos', 'unrest' or 'rebellion'; an example of how this is used is, 'we want Pakistan free from the Qadiani[1] *fitna*' (Bytes for All, 2020b: 16). There is another worrying term featured on social media posts (Bytes for All, 2020: 17):

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[1] Another term for Ahmadis – but one that is used as a slur.

Wajib-ul-Qatl, literally translated as "deserving to die", is another extreme expression normally used by the Pakistani Sunni majority for alleged blasphemers, those changing religion from Islam to any other, or for non-believers. Ahmadis and Shias would often become victims of this expression, which inherently calls for extreme forms of violence.

The term *choora* roughly translates as 'untouchable', and is particularly used for Christians, who are viewed by wider society as 'low caste' (influenced by the Hindu caste system, even though Islam officially has no such system – indeed, it specifically recognises all people as equal). Sunni Muslims have long used the word for Christians, and this continues online: 'The Pakistani Twitter space was also found to be polluted with this derogatory expression' (Bytes for All, 2020b: 20).

Ahmadis

Ahmadis believe that Mirza Ghulam Ahmed was a prophet, thereby going against the core tenet of Islam that Muhammed was the final prophet. While they claim to be Muslim, they are regarded by others as non-Muslim, and in Pakistan a 1974 law declares them as such. Forming around 0.09% of Pakistan's population, Ahmadis face widespread discrimination and intolerance in Pakistan (Azeem, 2021). Those targeting them fall into two groups: one, people who genuinely oppose Ahmadi beliefs and ideology; and two, people who want to gain popular support by taking a strongly anti-Ahmadi stance (Azeem, 2021). The hate speech that used to be found in traditional media 'has moved to social media where it has found a wider support base' (Ehsan Rehan, cited in Azeem, 2021). Azeem (2021) notes:

> Social media platforms in Pakistan are flooded with anti-Ahmadiyya content. There are videos on YouTube in which Islamic scholars discuss whether Muslims can reply to the greetings of Ahmadis, or befriend them or do business with them, or let them live in the same community. Some of these videos have thousands of views and their comment sections are full of hate speech against the members of the Ahmadiyya community.

The Bytes for All study found that Ahmadis were the only group against whom online hate speech was directed in every month of the analysis period (Sept. 2019 to June 2020) (Bytes for All, 2020b: 19). The study also looked at geographic distribution, finding that most anti-Ahmadi hate speech was in Punjab province, and among cites the most was in Rawalpindi (in Punjab), followed by Peshawar, Karachi and Lahore (Bytes for All, 2020b: 19).

With regard to who is posting such content, *Rabwah Times*, an independent Ahmadi digital news website, monitors social media content daily and found (Ehsan Rana, cited in Azeem, 2021):

> Over the last 12 months, we have seen anti-Ahmadi Twitter trends shoot up to number 1 on Pakistan's Twitter trend list. From what we have seen, most of these Twitter trends are started by social media cells of different religio-political parties. Similarly, clerics and madrassas are using their Facebook pages and YouTube channels to spread their extremist propaganda against Ahmadis. With many of them racking up millions of views on their anti-Ahmadi posts and videos.

Online targeting of Ahmadis increased during the pandemic, part of a wider trend of rising internet use and internet trolling. 'Minority rights activists and social media trackers say they've seen a sharp rise in online sectarian attacks, hate speech and cries of "Blasphemy!"' (Gannon, 2020). Again Ahmadis were particularly targeted: an analysis (cited in Kohari, 2021) found that,

'During March and April of 2020, in the first five weeks of lockdown alone…there were at least 12 anti-Ahmadi trending hashtags on Pakistani Twitter'. Saleem Uddin, an Ahmadi community leader, claimed, 'Since the (COVID-19) lockdown began…there have been over half a dozen concerted hashtag campaigns against the community, either describing the community as worthy of death, or non-Muslim or traitors to Pakistan' (cited in Gannon, 2020). An indication of the scale of online attacks on Ahmadis can be gauged from the following figures: in a single day in August 2020 '#AhmadisAreNotMuslims registered 45,700 tweets; #QadianisAreInfidel 50,600 tweets; #QadianisAreTheWorstInfidelsInTheWorld 32,600 tweets while #Expose_Qadiani_ProMinisters had 50,600 tweets' (Gannon, 2020).

Shias

The majority of Muslims consider Shias as a sect of Islam, but extremist groups/ideology regard them as non-Muslim in the same way as Ahmadis. As with Ahmadis, Shias in Pakistan face discrimination in their daily lives, which extends online. Mirza (2021) highlights an 'alarming' rise in online hate speech:

> Between August and September 2020, the Minority Rights Group reported that a sentiment algorithm documented an increase in negative tweets about Shias, which "collectively reached millions of social media users in Pakistan." Fully 46 percent of social media mentions of Shias examined during that period were negative. The most frequent word used to refer to the community was the Urdu word for "infidel."

Nizamani (2022) describes the use of social media by extremist group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) to propagate its ideas, which include strong opposition to any attempt to roll back Pakistan's blasphemy laws. He argues that 'social media has been a crucial tool for the TLP to expand its political base' and that it has 'gained a strong foothold in digital spaces' (Nizamani, 2022). 'The use of social media platforms, especially YouTube, has become a potent instrument for pushing its message to domestic users' (Nizamani, 2022). As well as YouTube, TLP makes use of Twitter and Facebook. Abid et al (2021: 458) claim that TLP have exacerbated Shia-Sunni and intra-Sunni differences through social media: 'By using media they motivated Barelvi Sunni youth to fight for their cause. They motivate them to spread hatred for other sects, as they are superior from others'.

Hazaras are a distinct Shia ethnic group in Pakistan. Gannon reported in August 2020:

> Toxic trending on Twitter has also taken aim at minorities, blaming the ethnic Hazaras for allegedly bringing the coronavirus to Pakistan from neighbouring Iran. Like most Iranians, Hazaras are Shiites and traditionally make pilgrimages to holy sites in Iran, which has the deadliest virus outbreak in the region. Some Pakistani pilgrims returning home were among the first reported cases of COVID-19 in Pakistan. After #Shiavirus began trending on Twitter in April, Hazaras say they were denied jobs, service at stores – even treatment in medical facilities.

This blaming of Hazaras for allegedly bringing COVID-19 into Pakistan is echoed elsewhere in the literature, including the Digital Research Foundation study (DRF, 2021). In other reports COVID-19 is blamed on Shias in general (i.e. not confined to Hazaras). Rai (2021) writes that, as well as many Pakistanis on social media blaming the return of Shia pilgrims from Iran for

spreading COVID-19, 'Some even said that more than China, the country where the deadly virus originated, Shias are responsible, and the Chinese virus should be called "Shia Virus"'.

4. Targeting of journalists/media

Journalists and voices of dissent

Journalists in Pakistan face considerable challenges in their work, in particular when their articles/broadcasts are seen as critical of the government or army. Again, the long-standing problems that journalists face offline (threats, intimidation, arrest, torture, etc.) have continued online. Mehmood (2017) claims that 'dissent or critique of state policy is not only not tolerated but snubbed in a way that an example is set for others', adding that with the spread of the internet over the past decade, this trait has expanded to cyberspace. 'A pattern exists of hate-filled online activity against activists and journalists whose lives either ended or changed after violent attacks' (Mehmood, 2017). She cites the experience of four bloggers and an activist who disappeared from the capital Islamabad and Punjab province between 4 and 7 January 2017:

> A pro-Pakistani military page with over seven million followers called "Pakistan Defence" framed the critical writing of the disappeared bloggers as blasphemy by an "atheist secular group". This is not the first time this page has incited violence against people supposedly harming national security.

> Pakistan Cyber Force, a Facebook page with over 400,000 likes, in addition to posting against the bloggers, has accused them of taking funds from the Indian intelligence agency. It is an established propaganda move to blame dissent on Indian funding.

> A stream of tweets, Facebook posts and YouTube videos are asking for blasphemy cases to be filed against the missing bloggers. Queries of the key hashtags and terms used by the pro-state and conservative religious users show thousands of tweets calling for physical attacks on the disappeared.

Mehmood (2017) describes how the online attacks on the bloggers fall into the wider pattern referred to above, linking them to attacks on two anti-establishment journalists:

> accounts and pages that are tweeting against bloggers in the name of religion also posted against leading journalist Cyril Almeida when he was put on the Exit Control List for reporting a story critical of the military in 2016 and broadcast journalist Hamid Mir in 2014, when he survived an assassination attempt and accused Pakistan's primary intelligence agency of responsibility.

In early 2021 an online campaign was launched targeting the Urdu language services of *BBC News* and *The Independent* newspaper. It was carried out as reprisal for a number of editorials and op-ed articles they had published that were seen as 'overly critical of the authorities' (RSF, 2021a). The campaign entailed the following (RSF, 2021a):

> A video posted on 2 January (2021) on *Siasat.pk*, a news and discussion site that supports Pakistan's ruling party and armed forces, attacks the "personal opinions and political inclinations" of *BBC Urdu*'s journalists. Shared by thousands of people on Twitter, it also accuses the *BBC* of pursuing an editorial policy that is "against the army

and the government." The surnames, first names, jobs and Twitter account details of ten *BBC Urdu* journalists were posted online at the same time as the video.

The Independent had come under attack in December 2020, after its Urdu website featured a story about the deaths of four Pakistani soldiers in a helicopter crash. The army wanted the dead soldiers to be referred to as 'martyrs', and not doing so led to online criticism, hate speech and threats directed at the newspaper and its staff. 'Thousands of internet users have been calling for the site to be banned using the #BoycottIndyUrdu hashtag' (RSF, 2021a).

One of the journalists trolled in January 2021 was the target of another online campaign in October 2021. Asma Shirazi writes a weekly column for BBC Urdu, and in a piece that month she expressed concern about the state of the country's economy and the lack of response from the government. This led to the campaign against her, largely carried out by supporters of the ruling PTI but also by senior government officials. Commerce Minister Hammad Azhar tweeted that she had made 'pathetic insinuations' and suggested that she join the opposition PML-N party. Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari went further: '(Mazari) inflamed the Pakistani nationalist Twittersphere by referring to the *BBC* as the "Bharat Broadcasting Corporation" – "Bharat" being the Hindi name for India – and by likening Shirazi to a foreign agent' (RSF, 2021b). Reporters Without Borders note that online supporters of PTI 'have evolved into a formidable government weapon for intimidating critical journalists' (RSF, 2021b).

Women in the media/journalists

Women journalists in Pakistan face especially serious online attacks, including 'grossly sexualized attacks' and rape threats (Butler & Iftikhar, 2020). In a 2016 BBC news report, four Pakistani female journalists described the abuse they faced because of their work. Saba Eitizaz was reporting on the murder of two women, both called Zeenat, one an 'honour killing' by her own mother, the other at the hands of the security services because of her journalism (BBC News, 2016):

> As I tried to tell the story, I found myself in danger of becoming one. Suddenly I was the target of systematic trolling on Twitter and Facebook. The attacks were not critiquing my story. They felt raw and personal. It started off with the usual words of abuse for women - "bitch" and "whore". Then someone posted my phone number with the implicit advice to "teach me a lesson".

A joint statement, signed by 165 female journalists in August 2020, describes the problem (Women journalists, 2020):

> Vicious attacks through social media are being directed at women journalists and commentators in Pakistan…. Women in the media are not only targeted for their work, but also their gender. Our social media timelines are then barraged with gender-based slurs, threats of sexual and physical violence. …. To further discredit, frighten and intimidate us, we are referred to as peddlers of "fake news", "enemy of the people" and accused of taking bribes (often termed as "paid" journalists or *lifafas*)…..

In their August 2020 joint statement, the women journalists 'warned of a coordinated campaign of social media attacks against anyone who was critical of government policies' (AFP, 2020). They blamed the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party and the government: 'The online attacks

are instigated by government officials and then amplified by a large number of Twitter accounts, which declare their affiliation to the ruling party' (Women journalists, 2020). Gannon (2020) cites the example of journalist Marvi Sirmed, who 'was targeted after tweeting about forced disappearances of activists in southwestern Baluchistan province, many believed to be in the custody of Pakistani security agencies. Her Urdu language, "tongue-in-cheek" tweet mentioned Jesus, setting off a flood of threats'.

In 2020 Media Matters for Democracy carried out a survey of 124 women journalists, and conducted in-depth interviews with eight. 'Almost 68 percent of the respondents said they had faced some form of attacks, threats or harassment for their journalism or personal expression, up from 59 percent in 2018' (Media Matters for Democracy, 2020: 6). In addition (Media Matters for Democracy, 2020: 6):

> The women journalists interviewed for the study referred to the 'weaponisation' of social media against journalists and said they regularly faced coordinated online campaigns on social media, especially Twitter, designed to discredit their work and malign their reputation. These attacks included sexualised abuse, rape threats, and death threats.

The online abuse faced by female journalists impacts their ability to do their work (Butler & Iftikhar, 2020):

> From shying away from sharing their work, to being forced out of jobs, to declining to pursue stories, they (women) say they feel prevented from fully participating in the profession. The online attacks, they say, further undermine their ability to thrive in a tough profession.

The Media for Matters for Democracy survey found that the fear of online violence was the main reason why women journalists self-censored. 'The share of women journalists who said they self-censored their journalism work showed a slight increase to reach 90 percent in 2020 from 87 percent in 2018. Out of these, 38 percent said they restrained their work frequently' (Media Matters for Democracy, 2020: 6).

Online abuse also leads to women journalists limiting their engagement on social media: 'Women in the media, especially those on social media platforms, are finding it increasingly difficult to remain on these platforms and engage freely. Many now self-censor, refrain from sharing information, giving their opinion or actively engaging online' (Women journalists, 2020).

5. Targeting of activists

Human rights activists

Human rights activists in Pakistan face the same kinds of online abuse as that experienced by the groups already described in this review. The treatment of JIbran Nasir is typical. Nasir is a lawyer and rights activist, who came to prominence in December 2014. Nasir joined a civil society protest against the authorities in Lal Masjid, a controversial mosque in Islamabad, after they refused to condemn the killing of 142 school children and staff at a school in Peshawar on 16 December 2014 by the Pakistani Taliban. In response, an online campaign was launched against Nasir accusing him of being an Ahmadi – a falsehood, and something that could be life-threatening for him (Dawn, 2014). 'Posts on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook featuring photos of Jibran participating in Holi celebrations are being used as 'proof' of

his anti-Muslim allegiances' (Dawn, 2014). As Nasir has continued his activism, he continues to be targeted by a range of online hate speech: 'He has been called an anti-Islam agent of the Indian, US and Jewish lobby, member of the MQM, a Hindu-loving Holi-celebrating traitor and an Ahmadi, the ultimate enemies of the state and the root of all evil in the universe' (Riaz, 2014).

Women activists

Women activists can be the targets of especially virulent online hate speech. This is clearly seen in the case of Malala Yousafzai. As a young girl, Yousafzai campaigned for girls' education in Swat when it was under Taliban rule. The Taliban attempted to assassinate her in 2012, shooting her in the head, but she survived and was flown to Birmingham, UK, for medical treatment. She subsequently resumed her education at a school in Birmingham, and then graduated from the University of Oxford. In 2014 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work to promote female education worldwide. While lauded across the globe, public opinion in Pakistan towards Malala has been negative to a considerable extent. Michael Kugelman (2017) described the online hostility that followed her first tweet on 7 July 2017:

> Many on Pakistani Twitter decried her as shameful and traitorous…..The criticism boiled down to this: There's nothing special about Malala. Many Pakistani children suffer worse fates than Malala. What has Malala ever done for Pakistan? Why does the world love Malala so much? And if Malala really cares about Pakistan, why doesn't she come back? The vitriol also included a bizarre but common conspiracy theory: Her shooting was staged.

The above trolling fits into a common theme when attacking liberals/activists: that they are pro-West/serving a Western (implicitly anti-Pakistan) agenda, etc. Malala's case exemplifies what appears to be a pattern: those Pakistanis lauded by the international community (especially for promotion of human rights/liberal values) attract correspondingly greater online vitriol in Pakistan. Malala was also trolled online after a photograph appeared showing her wearing jeans (Western clothes rather than the traditional Pakistani *shalwar kameez*) in Oxford. '(S)ome Facebook users compared her to Lebanese-American porn star Mia Khalifa….Another user asked, "How long before the scarf is off too?"' (McIntyre, 2017).

Similar treatment is meted out to NGOs and civil society groups working for women's rights. Freedom House (2020) report that: 'Organizers and participants of the 2020 Aurat (Women's) March, which celebrated International Women's Day, were subjected to intense online attacks, including death and rape threats'. Within hours of uploading a poster calling for people to help organise/participate in the 2020 March, the Aurat March post had (Express Tribune, 2019):

> received thousands of comments with the overwhelming majority being vile and sexist in nature. "The troll army consisted mostly of misogynist, sexist men who made rape, death and various attack threats towards the organising committee of the Aurat March 2020 and to the women joining the organising team," one of the organisers told *The Express Tribune*…. Among those making the threats included two accounts belonging to Rubeel Khan and Kamran Ali. Both openly posted about their intention to rape 'feminists' in the comments section of the Aurat March 2020 poster.

6. References

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