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## Cyberspace is becoming unsafe for women in Pakistan

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*Master of Science in Journalism*



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# **CYBERSPACE IS BECOMING UNSAFE FOR WOMEN** **IN PAKISTAN**

This survey report is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of  
Masters of Science in Journalism degree

by

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Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Pakistan

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## **Cyberspace is becoming unsafe for women in Pakistan**

A teary-eyed, 20-year-old broke into tears as she began sharing her ordeal. Saima faced still trembles while recalling her struggle through cyber harassment.

Her unpleasant facial expressions further testify to what she describes as a chain of ‘life-changing’ events.

“The incident which happened in my life, was not cyber harassment, it was mental torture,” she said.

Sharing details, the victim started by saying that the perpetrator saw her walking on a street while visiting her aunt’s house. Her aunt was getting married to her harasser’s friend. “My aunt, her fiancé and the harasser were living on the same street. The harasser sent me a friend request on Facebook with a fake profile. I accepted his request; he saved all my pictures.”

She said that the harasser was trying to show his interest to form a relationship, “He asked me to meet him many times, but I refused. After that, he started blackmailing me that he would upload my pictures online. Out of fear, I blocked him; he approached my aunt and talked to her on Skype. He used inappropriate words about my character and tried to show my involvement with him in the relationship.”

According to Saima, this incident disturbed her routine activities and affected her health. She felt hopeless to get out of the situation, her abilities were affected, she lost her interest in the studies and was losing her appetite. “I felt as if I have lost everything in my life. I was getting weaker day by day and was not able to focus on studies.”

The girl blamed how children were brought up in a complex environment, “I think, one of the major reason behind such cases of online harassment is culture, because of culture, one cannot openly express and share feelings with family members.” (Saima, 2019)

The most embarrassing moment for the victim was when her aunt, and her family members started blaming her. She was depressed and feared the worst. “Everyone was blaming me, I was already depressed, but later, my family started trusting me and that

gave me strength to overcome my fears.” Saima said that she did not know that how she escaped from the situation, she considers trust as an important factor that helped her to survive.

She said that problem starts when a person gets afraid, it is important to be strong; one should accept and have the courage to fight back.

She said that if a girl is harassed online, most people think that she must have been in a relationship with the perpetrator. However, it is not necessary that the harasser has been in a relationship, he could be a stranger who is looking to benefit from the situation.

According to Saima, in the society, there is an unhealthy competition among the boys at a very young age to get into a relationship. The competition becomes a matter of egotism. “Boys are frustrated, they compare themselves with their friends who are married or in a relationship and use different ways to get in it.”

Nighat Dad, founder of Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), also considered the patriarchal culture responsible for such cases. She said that a patriarchal society, where happiness of a man matters more than a woman is the reason for growing cyber-harassment. “Men are given importance in every aspect of life. Even on special occasions, men take care of their entertainment and leisure activities; women stay at home.”

She said that a woman is blamed for each wrong, which has befallen to her; there is victim blaming and slut shaming.

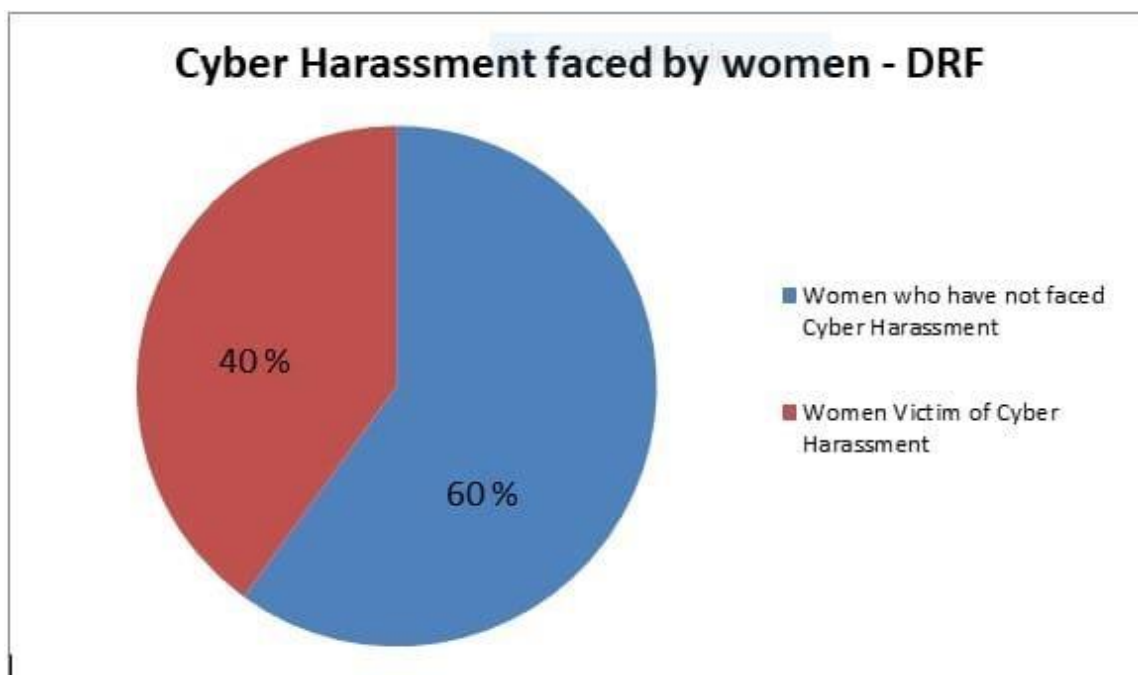
Dad said that a vague concept of consent is another reason. Proper knowledge of consent should be given to girls and boys at a young age to strengthen women’s rights in the country. “The concept of consent is blur in Pakistan, people do not understand the difference between one time and for a lifetime.” (Dad, 2019)

Farieha Aziz, journalist and co-founder BoloBhi, considered paternalism, toxic commentary and internalized patriarchy responsible for such cases. Aziz said that most of the women in Pakistan are disrespected, they are not allowed to interfere in the discussions from the domestic level. The behavior of husbands and in-laws also leaves a negative impact on the minds of the children.

She said that a patriarchal mindset is also responsible for making a man a cyber-harasser. The child started growing up with a thought that he is male and he deserves

respect. “Children learn what they see, a male child from the young age learn to dominate on a woman.” (Aziz, 2019)

According to a recent report published by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), 40 percent of women face cyber harassment with 45 percent of complaints made related to harassment on Facebook. A survey of the DRF helpline center showed an increase in the average number of calls from 82 in the first six months to 123 by November 2018. (Digital Rights Foundation, 2017)



Dad not only blames culture, but also a weak government system which has failed to control such cases. “It is not the fault of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), there is a lack of resources, a proper team of IT experts, lack of latest machines and no proper gender sensitization training.”

Aziz said that the FIA should work along with the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to hold perpetrators accountable. She said that the FIA should carry public service messages. “To solve such cases, it is important for the Cyber Crime Wing and NGO’s to investigate that what had happened between the perpetrator and the victim.”



Aziz suggested that there should be proper training for the public, informing about how to report online. “People do not know how to report on social media site for example, Facebook. There is a report bar on Facebook which requires a lot of time for the website to respond.” She further said that people should be aware of the social media tools and privacy, they should know the role of FIA, Cyber Crime Wing and some NGO who are working to solve such cases.

Dad said that it is important to know about cyber safety and different types of online harassment like doxing, cyber harassment, cyber bullying, cyber stalking, hate speech and misusing personal data without consent, “The misuse of intimate images and videos is the most common type of online harassment.”

“There are cases where husbands are misusing the images of their wives, making a folder of the images and showing it to the relatives and friends of the women,” The digital rights activist added.

In another survey conducted by DRF, 34 percent of the women said that they have faced online harassment while 55 percent said that they know other women who were being harassed online. In 2018, 59 percent of the calls received by the foundation were from women. The data showed online harassment as the most common type of cyber- crime.

Dad said that she has organized training sessions in different universities to counter the problem of online harassment. The sessions were arranged to inform students about their rights and a safe use of the internet.

## **Psychological Impact**

Psychologist at the COMSATS Psychological Society, Hajra Akbar, said that the harasser actually wants to dominate on the victim to get the benefit. “Every man is seeking for power, whatever a person does is to seek the pleasure of to get rid of pain.”

She further said that it is important to be aware of the law. The victim accepts online harassment because of not being aware of the law. “Those who are even aware of the law, gets afraid to register a complaint because of not being sure that whether the agencies or government would solve the case.”

“Another reason of women hesitant to report is because of the backlash, fear of losing proposals or relationships and anticipation of the future,” she added.

According to Akbar, the victims undergo isolation. It becomes difficult for them to trust again to anyone. Such incidents affect the overall personality of the victim. The victim becomes less confident and depressed.

She said that cyber harassment means that a person is degrading another person. In such case, the victims should communicate, it is important to disclose to anyone of the family member. She suggested that the victim should take her partner in confidence to avoid conflict, “Man care about the past of a woman who is in his life, it is important to observe the nature of the partner and then to take him in the confidence.”

Akbar said that when she dealt with two similar cases of cyber harassment, the woman who discussed with her mother stood strong as compared to another woman, who was terrified and had not discussed with any member of the family. (Akbar, 2019)

The report, published by DRF in 2017 showed that the organization has received almost 1551 complaints in a year, with 67 percent of callers were female and 33 percent were males. In some cases, males have reported on the behalf of females.

## **Another Victim**

Bakhtawar, a 17-year-old girl, with short curly hair and innocent face shared her story. There was anger on her face, her nose and ears turned red when she recalled her past. “Unfortunately, is the unforgettable incident of her life which affected me emotionally and physically,” she said.

The girl was a student of second year, Pre-Engineering, when she faced cyber harassment. She said that she saw the changed behaviour of her professor. Her professor tried to get close to her during class lectures, “My professor used to give examples during the lecture mostly by using my name. In the lab, he used to come close to me and whisper on my ears.”

Bakhtawar was afraid and helpless, “He used to grin while staring at me during the class lecture.” She said that her professor used to call her in the Lab to help her with the lectures, “When my professor used to call me in the lab, I asked my friend to go with me.”

“He used to write messages on Facebook saying me beautiful and appreciating me physically,” she added.

She was astonished when her professor said that he could leave his wife and children for her. “He used to force me to get with him in the relationship by saying that if I respond positively, he would leave his family to marry me.”

“I did not know what will happen next; I was afraid that I might be asked to leave the academy,” she said.

Bakhtawar said that the perpetrator used to call her on cell phone, he used to make a video call on Facebook and used to send porn videos to her through messenger. She was disturbed and helpless, “I was afraid that if I respond harshly, he would deduct my marks in the exams.”

The victim on the other part, was thinking about how her family members would react. “I was afraid that they might blame me and would regret on their decision to allow me to study.”

Bakhtawar said that she used to discuss with one of her college friends to whom she trusted. She said that she was restless and was unable to sleep at night with different type of fears in her mind. “His eyes and his face always used to come in my mind because of which I was not able to focus on my goal of life.”

She said that her professor still calls her. In the society, she said that the biggest problem is that parents are not close to their children. There is a communication gap between parents and children. Parents do not try to understand the psychology of their child, how they feel and why the behavior of the child has changed.

According to Bakhtawar, another major problem is that the age difference between the partners is encouraged by the society. “It is appreciated by the family and relatives if a man is 8 - 12 years older than the woman.”

She said that when men see such type of cases in the society, where male partners are much older than females, it becomes difficult for them to understand that psychology of the young girl, how she thinks and what are the aims in her life.”

Bakhtawar said that the parents search for young and pretty girls for their sons to get marry, this affect the psychology of both men and women. “Men among their friends and other groups feel proud to marry a young girl,” she added. (Bakhtawar, 2019)

### **Podcast 1 – Victim Bakhtawar**

<https://soundcloud.com/sara-tanveer-509654690/pod-1>

Mannal, a friend of the victim said that her friend used to share everything with her. She said that Bakhtawar’s professor used to observe me spending time with her all the time, he asked the receptionist about me because he wanted her to be alone.

Mannal said that she suggested her friend to share the problem with her family but Bakhtawar was afraid. She said that she used to go with the victim in the lab when her professor used to call her to explain the lectures to protect her from any kind of abuse. “My friend was disturbed, she was a girl with socializing nature, but those days, she did not talk much with her fellows and used to eat less.”

She said that when Bakhtawar's professor used to teach her in the class, she was unable to understand the lecture. "Whenever she saw professor on the ground during break looking at her, she used to get more confused."

Mannal said that it is important to educate boys more than girls. She said that boys should know how to treat girls, what are their rights and how to behave with them. They should be given education about the psychology of girls of different age groups and their changing behaviour.

The digital and social media marketing statistics and facts from Pakistan in 2018 shows that 77 percent of the internet users are male, which does not help making the online space safer for women.

## **Cyber Harassment Law**

Advocate Muzammil Hussain said that the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, defines different types of cyber-crimes and its punishment. According to the act, a person shall be punished for three years or more, or shall be charged with a fine of one million rupees or more if found guilty of the cybercrime. (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016)

He claimed that one of the most dangerous type of cyber harassment is misuse of pictures and video and spreading in on the online space. “If someone makes video of another person, and update it on social websites without the consent of that person, in that case section 24 D implies to the person. But, it is also investigated that whether it has bought any damage or harm. The court looks that whether one’s reputation was at stake or not.”

The lawyer said that the act also punishes the perpetrators who forward intimate videos of their partners to the porn websites and other social media applications, “If the leaked data includes pictures or videos that are ‘unethical’ and cannot be shown to the public, then it is a non-bailable offence with five to seven years’ imprisonment according to the law.”

Hussain highlighted the dangers of cyber harassment, he said that when harassment comes at cyberspace, it becomes more dangerous because in most of the cases, the victim does not know who is the harasser and what harm he could bring to the victim. He said that there are different stages of harassment; some are ethical harassment, for example, sending friend request which is not legally wrong.

He said that according to the law, if a victim does not want a person to text or contact and then also the person does through any social websites; he/she is then liable for three years of imprisonment. Hussain described cyberspace as all social applications, emails, and blogs.

He said that in case of fake profiles, Section 16 implies. He also explained that Cyber Visualizations Division (CVD) in the PTA, is used to report the fake profile cases, the CVD after receiving a complaint, blocks the fake profile.

Hussain pointed out ways to remove pictures and videos from google that have been posted by the perpetrator. He said that that the victims should contact google to remove the pictures and videos from the social media by telling them about the case that has been subjugate or in process. “The victim should write an email showing documents and telling that the news was fake, in that case, it is removed from google. The same process applies to Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat.”

He said that if a child feels uncomfortable to report with parents, the child can report to FIA with any other person, whom the child trusts. The advocate said that if a child is minor and suffering from harassment, and if the child has not informed to any member of the family, anyone whom the child trust can report on the behalf of the child’s parents.

Hussain said that only 10 to 15 percent of the people know about cyber harassment laws. He said that it is important to make people aware about the laws and its punishment. (Hussain, 2019)

Assistant Director, Asif Iqbal at FIA said that after investigation of such type of crimes, the FIA team has found astonishing results, he said that in most of the cases, the harassers came out to be close family relative or family member.

Iqbal said that the harasser could be anyone, he could be educated or uneducated, “After investigation, we have caught a hawker and have also caught an officer. The harassers are mostly teenager or in their early twenties.” He further said that cyber-crime on social media is the most reported type of cyber-crime in the past 9 years.

He suggested that by spreading messages on social media tools, one can spread awareness related to cybercrime. “I think social media is the most powerful tool which can be used positively to spread awareness about the law.” (Iqbal, 2019)

According to Hussain, one should keep privacy on the phone and other applications to avoid such cases, “Parents should teach children about how to maintain online safety before purchasing smartphones and laptops for their children.”

Iqbal said that parents should take care of their children, they should keep an eye on the activities of their child. In such cases, children first get isolated, parents should understand the behavior of the child. He said that in the society, parents get happy after seeing their children using gadgets, but they do not explain them about cyber safety. Iqbal

focused on the importance of holding workshops at institutions to inform students about safety.”

Iqbal suggested the need to make changes in PECA act, “Many offences under PECA, are non-cognizable, bailable and compoundable because of which, there is a lack of effective investigation and successful prosecution.”

He said that the investigation of these time critical crimes demands an immediate response of the FIA to limit such crimes and to avoid further harm by the offenders. The in-time response from the FIA may help to detect the perpetrators and to punish them. The successful prosecution may help in reducing such type of crimes and will also develop trust on the FIA and government.

Hussain said that the judges and lawyers do not know how to behave with the victims in the court. He said that FIA should provide proper training to the judges and lawyers about how to behave. “There should be speedy courts that should fasten the process of cases and hearings with taking minimum time.”

Hussain further said that it is important to teach students properly who are studying law. Admission should be on merit basis; the concepts of the students should be clear. Students should be taught that how to maintain discipline and how to behave with the clients. The FIA data shows high figures since the PECA act came into force. The data showed that 90 percent of cyber-crime victims are women and minor girls.

Out of the cases registered, 70 percent of the cases involve pornographic content. The cyber-crime unit had conducted 2,295 inquiries, registered 255 cases and made 209 arrests as of October 2018.

Iqbal said that 95 percent of the people do not report to FIA, those who report, take it as a last option from where they have a hope, He said that the process to report at FIA is simple. The victim can write a complaint in English and even in Roman Urdu. The FIA after receiving the complaint, forward it to the relevant department within 48 hours.

“FIA asks the victim to visit the office once only after a complaint. When the case is taken to the court, the victim has to appear in the court once or twice; the process is not time taking,” he added.

He said that the victims are afraid because they do not know the harasser. The FIA

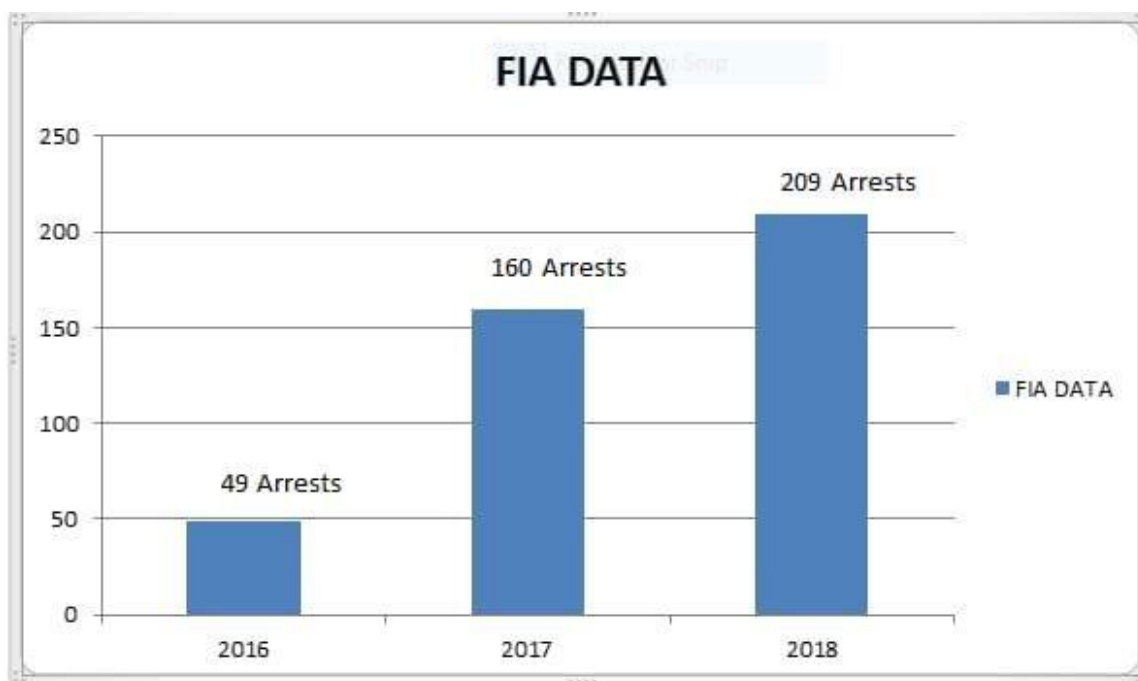


team first have to do the proper counseling of the victim.

According to the recent report by DRF, titled, “Fostering Open Spaces in Pakistan – Combating Threats to Women’s Activism Online”, showed that 90 percent of the women mentioned DRF and FIA on their responses but were unaware of any other remedies to report such cases. The report shows that women lack trust on the FIA because it does not take prompt action. 61.7 percent of the women said that they did not trust FIA with harassment complaints. Another 26.7 percent said that they would report to FIA, but they did not trust the agency.

Iqbal said that if someone tries to destroy data or gain access to sensitive information is arrested. He advised people to not keep their personal data, pictures on their mobile phones, especially if it is something that cannot or should not be shown to someone.

According to the data at FIA, in 2018, there were 7,000 to 8,000 complaints registered and 209 arrests, in 2017 there were 160 arrests and in 2016 there were 49, Cyber Crime arrest. The number of crime reported in 2015 were around 3,000 out of which, 45 percent were of women being targeted at social media.



## **Another Victim**

Najma, another victim of cyber harassment recalled the memories of her past when she posted pictures on her Facebook ID, she still remembers that time when a guy, who was her class fellow comment on her picture saying her “Ugly”. She was emotionally hurt, and she started crying.

She got extremely disturbed and was constantly thinking about her looks. “I got conscious and removed all the pictures from my Facebook, at that moment I removed my profile picture and after a while, I deactivated my account.”

She said that she used to ask her family and close relatives about her physical appearance. “I used to ask my parents and friends about my looks. I was in inferiority complex because of my buck teeth and dark skin.” (Najma, 2019)

### **Podcast 2 – Victim Najma**

<https://soundcloud.com/sara-tanveer-509654690/pod-2-victim-najma>

Fatima, the mother of the victim said that she started observing changes in her daughter’s behavior after her daughter started using social media applications. She said that she has never seen her daughter worrying about her appearance and superfluous things before the university. “During her university, she was mostly busy using Facebook and other applications, she seemed depressed when she used to sit on the dining table with the family.”

Fatima said that she knew what her daughter must be facing, “I used to advise her to study rather than wasting her time on social media.”

“Her behavior was changed, she sometimes used to activate her social media applications, then she used to deactivate it again,” she added.

The victim said that her university fellows used to tease her with different names mostly on her absence. She said that the boys used to text her on her ID for friendship, “The boys used to text me on Facebook asking me to join their group for presentation, when I

used to respond, they used to show my messages in the group and make fun.”

She said that she lost all her confidence, her personality was changed, “Even when my professor used to ask questions during the class lecture, I used to answer in a stammering manner.”

Najma said that she used to observe good looking girls and wished to be like them. “I heard my class fellows calling me dark complexion girl, the words stuck in my mind. I was not able to focus on my studies and to sleep properly.”

She said that there was a change in the behavior of her class fellows when they were chatting with her online on the Facebook and when they were in university. “On Facebook, my class fellows used to chat in a friendly manner, but at university, they used to act like strangers.”

The victim said that she completely isolated herself in the final year. Her parents discussed the matter with the professor, but the professor had not taken any strict action to solve the issue. She thinks that her professor was focusing on to increase the strength of the students to make money.

“At that time, I was worried about my marriage and was hopeless that I would not get a partner in my life. I missed a few of my lectures.”

“I used to scream on my parents, I became psycho, there was no one to help me. Only with time, now I made myself strong,” she added.

She said that in the society, the biggest problem is the obsession with fair complexion and beautiful girls. She said that another issue is that it is not properly taught how to use social media.

She suggested that parents should explain to their children about how to deal with trolling on social platforms. Parents should be close to their child and should try to understand that what is hurting the child.

According to Fatima, advancement of technology and social media websites are the major reason for the increase in the cases of cyber harassment and cyberbullying. “I think, the best way to cope up with this problem is that the girls and boys should study in the coed from the beginning. In this way they will be trained about how to respect the opposite genders.”

She said that the schools play a major role in making the personality of a child, “School should focus on strategies for character building of a child and moral values.” (Fatima, 2019)

Rubina Brohi, human rights activist at Aurat Foundation, said that one of the major problems of the society is that the families do not allow their children to marry the girl of their choice. “Boys want to marry the girl of their choice at the right age, but because of family pressure, they cannot, therefore, they take such steps.”

She said that in some cases, boys take such steps to trap the girl to whom they want to marry. Brohi said that the country is going through an economic crisis, there is unemployment and inflation because of which, boys alone cannot carry out the responsibilities of the family, therefore they look for well-educated girls who can support them.

She said that it is important to see that whether the girl is interested in marrying that boy. “Boys propose girls of their choice but in some cases, girls do not accept the proposal boy then adopts such strategies to blackmail and pressurize the girls.”

She further said that in the society, boys get respect if they are in relationship with girls. “Boys are now enjoying having relationships and exploiting girls have now become a competition.”

She said that whenever there is a misunderstanding in the relationship, and when a guy considers a girl responsible for that, the boy ends up saying he would share their messages and pictures on online platform.

Brohi suggested that the parents and school teachers should explain to the children about how to keep themselves protected in different ways. “It is also important to hammer gender equality in children from the start.” (Brohi, 2019)

According to the Human Rights report 2018, since 2004, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has recorded more than 6,000 cases of sexual violence and 2,200 cases of domestic violence against the women. The violence is mostly connected with the online harassment in the form of abuse and blackmail. (UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE, 2018)

Brohi suggested that the media should also carry out its responsibility to

spread awareness about the law and protection of women.

According to Brohi, women should be made bold enough to give a shut-up call to whosoever is trying to disturb her, but sadly in the society, women are not given that type of confidence. “The #MeToo movement was also taken as a joke by some people, which says that victim too was involved and that she must have provoked her harasser in some way.”

Brohi further said that there are cases where middle aged men are also responsible, therefore, girls should be trained from the young age about how to protect herself. “Even married women should keep an eye on their husband’s online activity.”

Harassing people is not normal, there is need to create awareness that a society, where such kind of cases exists can never flourish. Harassment is not the issue of a woman, it is the issue of human rights, security, health and economics which in turn, affected the society. “When women succeed, society and nations succeed,” she added.

She said that there is a lack of awareness, people do not know about cyber-crime and do not know that it is the violation of human rights. The Human Rights Ministry has no sense of urgency to work on the issue.

Zarqa Hussain, an educationalist said that in the society worldwide, parents are considered as the one who do not educate their children about cyber safety. “They do not know how to enable safe technology and cannot help effectively in a crisis because they are not aware of what solutions are available.”

Hussain said that she has seen many students in her school who has become the victim of cyber harassment, sometimes by someone in university and sometimes by others. She said that such cases of online harassment are mostly faced by youngsters.

She said that it is the responsibility of parents to discuss with the children, especially male child about cyber harassment and how it can affect the life of a girl. Parents should maintain positive relationship with children so that children should also learn how to respect.

She further said that students should be trained about how to protect social media platforms and messaging apps so that they do not get hacked. How to set up passwords for the website.

According to Hussain, one of the problems is that the teachers do not consider themselves as cyber expert. They have little knowledge about internet safety. Hence, it is important to train few teachers as well with the cyber experts so that the teachers can become capable of holding sessions at primary level.

She said that it is also important to explain the parents about the importance of internet safety and its impact on the child. It is important to make parents realize that social media can affect the habits and behavior of a child. It can leave a psychological impact on the minds of the children. “Parents should not allow their children to use social media applications from a young age.”

Hussain said that a child’s abilities are also not discovered when he/she starts using social media applications. “Children from the young age, get involved in various activities and lose interest in studies and their families.”

The report title Pakistan Internet Landscape 2018, formulated by Bytes for All, stated that the overall internet penetration continues to increase in the country. The Pakistan telecommunication authority reports a total of 154 million cellular subscribers out of which 62m are 3G/4G subscribers forming 29.55 percent of internet penetration.

## **Cyber Safety Expert**

Imran Mahmood, software engineer and cyber-crime expert, CEO at Axis Dynamics said that the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NECTA), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and Ministry of Information Technology should work together to form cyber safety policy.

He said that people are not aware about the digital world, they do not know the steps to be taken when using social websites. He said that there is digital illiteracy today, it is important to create awareness to the people about the digital world.

Mahmood said workshops should be organized at the university level, telling people about how to maintain cyber safety. One should understand the concept of digital literacy and digital hygiene. He claimed that university students often become targets of cyber bullying and harassment. (Mahmood, 2019)

**Note: The names have been changed to protect the identity of the victims.**

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