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Women Journalists in Pakistan under Digital Siege: A Human Rights Law Analysis of Platform-Enabled Harassment

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ABSTRACT

Digital harassment of women journalists in Pakistan is not a marginal online problem but a pervasive violation of fundamental human rights that reshapes who can speak, what can be said, and at what cost. This paper situates such harassment within Pakistan's volatile media environment, characterized by censorship, political pressure, and entrenched misogyny, where the rapid uptake of digital platforms has expanded women's visibility while simultaneously deepening their exposure to gendered abuse. It argues with reference to international human rights instruments, including the ICCPR, CEDAW, ICESCR, and their interpretive General Comments and Recommendations, that technology-facilitated attacks on women journalists directly threaten rights to freedom of expression, privacy, and dignity, equality and non-discrimination, freedom from violence, and the right to work in conditions of safety. The analysis traces how specific forms of online violence, such as doxxing, deepfakes, and other sexualized imagery, rape and death threats, and coordinated disinformation or trolling campaigns, produce tangible chilling effects on speech and participation, restricting the professional horizons and everyday security of women journalists. It then turns to Pakistan's domestic legal and policy framework, examining constitutional protections, Articles 14, 19, and 25, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, and the Journalists Protection Act 2021 to show how formal guarantees are undercut by weak implementation, patriarchal institutional cultures, and limited access to effective remedies. In parallel, the paper interrogates the role of global technology companies whose inadequate local language moderation, opaque engagement-driven algorithms, and minimal safety infrastructure in Pakistan create enduring accountability gaps. Building on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the paper clarifies the complementary responsibilities of the state to protect and of corporate actors to respect and support human rights in digital spaces. On this basis, it advances a set of forward-looking proposals rooted in feminist and human rights-based approaches to digital governance, gender sensitive reform of cybercrime and media law,s stronger institutional accountability and independent oversight platform commitments to algorithmic transparency and robust local language moderation, and structured collaboration between state agencies, media organizations, and civil society. Conceptually, the paper frames online attacks on women journalists as a form of structural gender injustice that polices women's presence in the public sphere and erodes the conditions for pluralistic democratic debate. It concludes that building safe, egalitarian, and enabling digital spaces for women journalists in Pakistan is not only a matter of occupational safety but a prerequisite for meaningful press freedom and substantive gender equality.

Keywords*:* Women Journalists; Human Rights; Platform-Enabled Harassment; Digital Siege

1. Introduction

The digital age has transformed journalism worldwide, offering unprecedented opportunities for connectivity, visibility, and the democratization of voices[1]. Yet, for many women journalists, particularly in Pakistan, this visibility has become a double-edged sword[2]. As digital platforms expand the reach of journalistic work, they also expose women in media to intensified forms of gender-based violence online. The targeting of women journalists is not incidental; it is deeply tied to the intersection of gender, visibility, and political vulnerability. In Pakistan's often volatile media landscape, women journalists occupy a complex position: they are visible symbols of professional

independence in a male-dominated field yet simultaneously subjected to patriarchal scrutiny amplified by digital technologies[3]. Their visibility makes them easily identifiable and accessible online, blurring the line between professional criticism and gendered abuse. Women reporters covering politics, human rights, or military affairs often face especially severe attacks, as their work challenges both power structures and societal gender norms[4]. The backlash is thus not merely personal but structural it seeks to silence women's voices, reassert patriarchal hierarchies, and deter other women from public participation. Unlike many of their male peers, women journalists often navigate online spaces saturated with sexualized threats, character assassination, and explicit intimidation. Troll networks weaponize gender to question women's credibility and morality, employing tactics that exploit cultural stigmas linked to femininity and honor[5]. The result is a form of digital violence that reinforces offline marginalization and renders the journalistic sphere less accessible to women. In this sense, visibility for women journalists, once seen as a marker of professional success now functions paradoxically as a site of vulnerability.

Social media and online platforms have redefined journalism's operational and ethical boundaries[6]. For Pakistani journalists, digital technologies enable real-time reporting, public engagement, and transnational solidarity. Yet they also create what can be described as "harassment ecosystems," where offenders exploit algorithmic amplification, anonymity, and weak moderation to perpetuate gendered abuse. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube become spaces where orchestrated attacks spread rapidly, magnified by coordinated networks and political actors seeking to delegitimize critical reporting. The lack of robust content regulation and accountability mechanisms compounds the problem[7]. Women journalists frequently report that abusive content remains online despite complaints, forcing them to self-censor or withdraw from digital spaces entirely[8]. In a landscape where online identity is integral to professional credibility, this retreat translates into material losses, diminished visibility, fewer opportunities, and exclusion from the public conversation. Digital violence thus transcends individual suffering; it reshapes who gets to participate in knowledge production and public discourse[9].

Analyzing these environments through a socio-legal lens reveals how harassment, when left unaddressed, normalizes gendered subjugation in digital spaces[10]. The online sphere becomes a continuation of patriarchal power, merely translated into algorithmic form. This raises urgent questions about the adequacy of domestic and international legal frameworks in protecting women journalists as both workers and rights-holders in the digital era. Understanding online violence against women journalists requires more than a policy or security response; it demands a rights-based approach grounded in international human rights law. Freedom of expression, equality before the law, and the right to security are all directly implicated. Instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obligate states to ensure both freedom of expression and protection from gender-based violence, including online forms[11-13]. The UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO have repeatedly emphasized that digital violence against women journalists constitutes a breach of multiple rights simultaneously: it restricts freedom of the press, violates dignity, and suppresses gender equality[14].

In Pakistan, however, the implementation gap between international commitments and domestic practice remains significant. While the country's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 nominally addresses online harassment, enforcement is inconsistent, often weaponized against dissenters, and lacks a gender-sensitive framework[15]. The absence of effective mechanisms to investigate digital abuse against women journalists reflects a broader institutional neglect of both women's rights and freedom of expression[16]. So, Pakistani women journalists operate within a legal paradox: theoretically protected by both domestic and international law yet practically exposed to systematic violations[17].

By bridging human rights law and digital gender-based violence, this research contributes to an emerging field that connects media freedom, technology regulation, and feminist jurisprudence. It exposes how digital spaces in Pakistan operate as contested arenas of rights realization and denial, where women journalists embody the broader struggle for equality, safety, and voice. Through a critical reading of both legal doctrine and digital realities, the study illuminates how addressing online violence is not only essential for women's empowerment but also fundamental to preserving press freedom and democratic participation in the digital age. This study seeks to address three key questions:

- How does platform-enabled harassment affect women journalists in Pakistan?
- Which human rights are violated in such digital violence?
- How do Pakistan's legal frameworks align or fail to align with international human rights standards?

2. Women Journalists in Pakistan

Women journalists in Pakistan occupy a contradictory space in the national media landscape, visible as symbols of modernity and democratic progress, yet deeply vulnerable to misogyny, harassment, and structural exclusion[18]. Their participation has expanded over the past two decades, driven by private news channels, digital platforms, and the rise of social media as a journalistic frontier. But visibility has come at a cost: with greater public engagement comes heightened exposure to political attacks, online hate, and gendered violence. Their experiences reveal how entrenched patriarchy intersects with media precarity and shrinking press freedom, creating a landscape that is both promising and perilous. Pakistan's media operates under chronic threat[19]. The country consistently ranks among the most dangerous places for journalists, where physical attacks, intimidation, and abductions remain common. Political pressures come from multiple fronts: state agencies, political parties, religious groups, and even corporate lobbies that use coercion or censorship to silence dissent. Although constitutional protections exist for freedom of expression, informal restrictions are enforced through red lines on reporting sensitive topics like the military, religion, or separatist movements.

In recent years, increasing digital surveillance and draconian cybercrime laws have further constrained independent journalism. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) has been used to target critical voices on social media[20]. Women journalists who use these platforms for commentary or accountability reporting face not only state scrutiny but also organized harassment campaigns designed to silence or discredit them. The risks faced by women journalists are not simply additive to those of their male colleagues; they are qualitatively different. Attacks against women often draw from deep reservoirs of misogyny and social conservatism. Female reporters and anchors are routinely subjected to moral policing, accused of violating "cultural values," or demeaned through sexualized insults. Their credibility is attacked not through professional criticism but through character assassination: suggestions that they have "improper" relationships with sources or that their professional success stems from personal compromise.

Such gendered targeting serves a dual purpose: to punish women for entering a public sphere historically dominated by men, and to deter others from following. The harassment is not only verbal but can include doxing, threats of sexual violence, and the circulation of doctored images intended to shame or intimidate. Unlike men, women journalists must constantly negotiate between personal safety, family honor, and professional duty, a balancing act that exhausts emotional and creative energy. While digital media has opened new avenues for journalistic expression, it has also magnified danger[21]. Online platforms sustain a 24/7 news cycle and demand constant visibility what some scholars call "always-on labor". For Pakistani women journalists, this perpetual exposure translates into permanent vulnerability. Every tweet, article, or video becomes a potential flashpoint for abuse.

3. Platform-Enabled Harassment

Digital platforms have transformed journalism, giving women reporters unprecedented visibility and access to audiences[22]. Yet, these same technological infrastructures have enabled new, insidious forms of harassment that threaten not only the safety of women journalists but also press freedom itself. Online abuse is not an isolated or trivial phenomenon; it reflects and reinforces systemic gender inequalities. This section explores how digital platforms facilitate harassment, the architecture that sustains it, and why it must be understood as a gendered human rights concern rather than "mere online abuse." Digital harassment encompasses a spectrum of threats that range from invasive privacy violations to coordinated disinformation campaigns. While men in media also face trolling, women journalists are subjected to distinct, gendered forms of harm that exploit social stigma, sexuality, and cultural norms.

3.1 Doxxing and stalking

One of the most common and dangerous tactics is doxing, the deliberate exposure of a journalist's personal information, such as home addresses, phone numbers, or family details, on public forums. Once exposed, women become vulnerable to stalking, blackmail, and even physical attacks[23]. In deeply patriarchal contexts, doxxing carries an additional layer of menace[24]: it transforms the digital sphere into a conduit for real-world control, where threats to "come to your house" are not dismissed as online theatrics but as plausible dangers. Many women journalists develop defensive online habits, locking their profiles, using pseudonyms, or deleting their digital footprints to conceal their identities[25]. But such self-protection often limits their professional visibility and mobility, constraining what they can safely report or publish.

3.2 Deepfakes and sexualized imagery

The rise of artificial intelligence has introduced another dimension of abuse through the fabrication of deepfake pornography, realistic yet manipulated videos and images that place a journalist's face or body onto sexual content. For women, this represents not only a professional weaponization of technology but also a form of psychological violation[26]. Deepfakes rely on the cultural logic of shame and honor: they intend to destroy credibility, instill fear, and silence women by making them appear complicit in their degradation. Even when proven false, these images circulate widely, leaving lasting reputational scars.

3.3 Threats of rape, death, and violence

Direct threats of sexual violence and murder remain routine for women journalists who express critical or oppositional viewpoints[27]. These threats often spike after political commentary or investigative reporting that challenges powerful actors. The goal is intimidation through fear, asserting that a woman's voice carries a physical cost. Many of these messages combine misogyny with nationalism or religious invective, accusing women of being immoral, Westernized, or agents of foreign powers. Unlike spontaneous trolling, such patterns often suggest organized coercion meant to silence dissenting narratives.

3.4 Coordinated political propaganda

Coordinated abuse frequently originates from political communication networks that weaponize social media for partisan advantage. Women journalists who question state institutions or party leaderships may face blitzes of synthetic outrage: hundreds or thousands of identical posts labeling them "traitors" or "foreign-funded". These brigades use hashtag campaigns to manipulate algorithmic trends, ensuring that the journalist's name becomes synonymous with controversy or scandal. The architecture of digital virality turns targeted harassment into entertainment, with each retweet or comment fueling visibility for the abuse[28].

3.5 Character assassination and disinformation

Digital assaults also exploit misinformation ecosystems. Fabricated screenshots, altered quotes, or misrepresented videos are circulated to portray journalists as biased, unprofessional, or morally corrupt. Female reporters are particularly susceptible to rumormongering about their integrity or loyalty[29].

Such tactics erode professional credibility and undermine public trust not only in individuals but in independent journalism. Once misinformation embeds itself in social networks, correction rarely achieves equal reach, a phenomenon scholars call the “liar’s dividend".

4. International Legal Framework Analysis

Digital harassment of women journalists is not an isolated manifestation of online misconduct; it constitutes a systemic violation of internationally recognized human rights. When women reporters are subjected to digital violence through doxxing, deepfakes, coordinated threats, or reputational assaults the impact extends beyond individual harm[30]. It undermines freedom of expression, erodes privacy and dignity, reinforces gender inequality, perpetuates violence, and compromises the ability of women to exercise their economic and social rights on equal terms[31]. International human rights law, interpreted through treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), provides a coherent framework for analyzing these violations. The UN Human Rights Committee, the CEDAW Committee, and other mechanisms have repeatedly affirmed that states bear positive obligations to prevent, investigate, and remedy gender-based violence—including in digital environments. This section examines these obligations thematically across five key rights domains. At the core of journalism lies the right to freedom of opinion and expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the ICCPR. This right protects not only the ability to express ideas but also the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information. When women journalists are harassed, silenced, or forced offline, this right is directly curtailed. The UN Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No. 34 (2011) provides authoritative guidance on Article 19’s scope. It explicitly states that freedom of expression is indispensable both for individual dignity and societal progress, and that any restrictions must pass strict tests of legality, necessity, and proportionality. Importantly, the Committee underscores that states must create a “safe and enabling environment” for journalists to perform their work, free from threats and harassment. Applying this interpretation, digital attacks that inhibit women journalists’ participation constitute de facto violations of Article 19. Even when the state is not the direct perpetrator, failure to prevent or respond to online violence represents a breach of the state’s positive obligation to safeguard expressive freedoms. In Pakistan and other contexts, the proliferation of online gender-based attacks without effective accountability mechanisms negates women’s equal access to the freedoms Article 19 guarantees.

4.1 Right to Privacy and Dignity

Digital harassment frequently involves the invasion of privacy and the degradation of personal dignity. Article 17 of the ICCPR protects individuals from arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, or reputation. These protections extend fully into digital spaces. Doxxing exposure of home addresses, contact details, or private photographs directly contravenes Article 17’s safeguards. It constitutes an arbitrary interference with privacy because it lacks lawful justification and serves no legitimate public interest. The Human Rights Committee has interpreted Article 17 broadly to include both state and private intrusions where the state fails to provide sufficient legal or practical protection.

Cases of women journalists whose personal data appear online accompanied by threats exemplify the composite nature of such violations: they fuse privacy invasion with gender-based intimidation. The mental distress and fear that follow are inseparable from the structural dimension of the harm. While the ICCPR emphasizes privacy, the CEDAW framework highlights dignity as a central concept. Article 5(a) of CEDAW requires states to modify social and cultural patterns that perpetuate stereotypes of gender inferiority. When digital harassment takes the form of sexualized images, degrading memes, or deepfakes, it violates this dignity norm by portraying women as objects of humiliation rather than subjects of rights. The CEDAW Committee’s General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) explicitly extends its protection to online spaces, clarifying that gender-based violence includes “acts that result in or are likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether

occurring in the public or private sphere." Deepfakes, doxxing, and reputational attacks meet this description.

4.2 Right to Equality and Non-Discrimination

Human rights law is grounded in the principle of equality before the law and protection from discrimination, codified in Articles 2 and 3 of the ICCPR and elaborated in CEDAW Articles 1–2[32, 33]. The targeting of women journalists reveals discriminatory treatment both in frequency and in character: they experience harassment that is inherently gendered, drawing upon sexuality, family roles, and physical appearance in ways male colleagues rarely confront. Data from global organizations such as UNESCO, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and Reporters Without Borders consistently show that women journalists are overwhelmingly more likely to face sexualized online abuse. This constitutes a pattern of discriminatory impact. Such inequality of treatment fulfills CEDAW's broad definition of discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms." Consequently, persistent inaction toward online gendered abuse equates to state complicity in discrimination. States cannot claim neutrality in digital governance while ignoring its gendered consequences.

4.3 Economic and Social Rights

Beyond civil and political rights, online harassment inflicts profound consequences on women's economic and social rights[34, 35]. The ICESCR guarantees in Article 6 the right of everyone "to gain their living by work which they freely choose or accept" and obligates states to ensure safe and healthy working conditions. Persistent online abuse limits women journalists' employment prospects. Some employers, seeking to avoid controversy, may sideline or terminate journalists targeted by harassment campaigns. Others decline to hire outspoken women altogether, considering them liabilities. This is a direct infringement on the right to work and on the principle of equal opportunity under Article 7 of the ICESCR. Moreover, self-imposed retreat from digital engagement, often necessary for safety, restricts professional visibility and income. Freelance journalists, in particular, rely on online platforms for networking, sourcing, and publication; their economic viability depends on maintaining an accessible digital persona. When harassment drives them away from these venues, it jeopardizes their right to livelihood.

4.4 Right to work in safe conditions

Article 7(b) of the ICESCR explicitly provides for safe and healthy working conditions. The notion of workplace safety must evolve to include digital workplace environments, spaces where modern journalism is conducted. For women whose reporting relies on digital communication, harassment transforms the online workspace into one of hostility and danger. States and employers share concurrent obligations here. Media organizations must implement workplace policies addressing online harassment as an occupational risk, offering counseling, legal assistance, and digital security support. States, for their part, should require such standards under labor law and provide accessible remedies when violated. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has long held that the right to work entails both opportunity and conditions that respect human dignity[36]. When online violence forces women from their profession or subjects them to constant psychological strain, it compromises this dignity-oriented standard and violates the covenant's spirit.

5. Pakistan's Domestic Legal and Policy Framework

5.1 The Constitution of Pakistan

The Constitution forms the normative core of Pakistan's human rights architecture[37]. Three provisions Articles 14, 19, and 25 establish the principles of dignity, freedom of expression, and equality that collectively underpin protection from digital harassment.

Article 14(1) declares that "the dignity of man and, subject to law, the privacy of home, shall be inviolable." Although phrased in gender neutral terms, this article grounds constitutional recognition of

dignity as a fundamental right, extending to protection from degradation, public humiliation, and psychological harm. Harassment through doxxing, deepfakes, or sexualized online defamation directly undermines this dignity. Judicial interpretations such as in Benazir Bhutto v. Federation of Pakistan (1988) have linked dignity to the right of every individual to live without fear or humiliation. Thus, when women journalists are targeted online with content that shames or sexualizes them, the state's failure to protect constitutes a constitutional lapse.

The privacy dimension of Article 14 has grown increasingly relevant in the digital age. Unauthorized publication of a journalist's personal data or photos amounts to a constitutional interference. Yet, privacy jurisprudence in Pakistan remains nascent, with courts rarely extending this protection to online contexts, and an interpretive gap that leaves many victims without recourse.

Article 19 guarantees the right to freedom of speech and the press, albeit subject to "reasonable restrictions." For journalists, this article is the constitutional foundation of their professional activity. Digital harassment, however, produces the same chilling effect as legal censorship; it coerces silence through fear. The constitutional right to expression, therefore, imposes not only a negative duty on the state to refrain from censorship but a positive obligation to ensure that all persons, including women, can exercise this right safely.

In practice, however, state authorities have often invoked Article 19's restrictions to suppress dissent rather than to protect victims. Women journalists critical of government policies have been accused of "anti-state" activity or subjected to online vilification from official or party-affiliated accounts. The contradiction between formal guarantees and their selective application reveals the fragility of constitutional protections in politically charged digital environments.

Article 25(2) affirms that "there shall be no discrimination based on sex," forming the bedrock of constitutional equality. The state also holds an affirmative obligation under Article 25(3) to make "special provision for the protection of women." These clauses create a compelling legal basis for addressing gender based online abuse. Yet courts and enforcement agencies have been reluctant to treat digital harassment as discrimination, viewing it instead as a technical offense rather than part of gender inequality. Bridging this conceptual gap is essential to realizing constitutional equality in the digital sphere.

5.2 The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)

Enacted to regulate cybercrime, PECA 2016 stands as Pakistan's primary legislative instrument addressing digital offenses. It criminalizes behaviors such as unauthorized access to data, cyberstalking, transmission of offensive content, and the non-consensual use of personal information or images. In principle, these provisions could protect women journalists from precisely the abuses they face.

5.3 The Journalists' Protection Act 2021

The Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act 2021 marked a milestone by explicitly acknowledging journalists' safety as a state responsibility[38]. It obliges the government to prevent violence, intimidation, or arbitrary arrest of journalists and to provide assistance where violations occur.

5.4 Institutional Weaknesses

The gap between legislation and implementation lies largely in institutional design. The FIA's Cybercrime Wing functions as the principal enforcement body under PECA, but its capacity to respond effectively to gender-based harassment remains limited.

6. Reforms

6.1 Legal reforms

Amending the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) through a gender lens is a central step. Current provisions address cyberstalking, unauthorized access, and online harassment, but they do not clearly capture the gendered and coordinated nature of attacks against women journalists, including deepfakes, political dogpiling, and networked disinformation. Explicit recognition of technology-facilitated gender-based violence covering threats of sexual violence, non-consensual image use, and

targeted campaigns would help investigators and courts treat these cases as serious rights violations rather than minor "online issues". Institutional accountability mechanisms also need strengthening. Cybercrime units and the Federal Investigation Agency should be subject to clear performance benchmarks on response times, victim support standards, and case outcomes in complaints involving women journalists. Regular public reporting disaggregated by gender and type of offense would create pressure for improvement and allow civil society to monitor whether laws are functioning as intended. Independent oversight bodies, such as an ombudsperson or a multi-stakeholder digital safety commission, could review complaint handling, recommend disciplinary action where officials fail victims, and advise on necessary procedural reforms.

6.2 Platform responsibility reforms

Given the central role of social media and digital platforms, reforms must also focus on corporate practices[39]. Algorithmic transparency is essential: platforms should be required to conduct and publish human-rights impact assessments that examine how their recommendation and ranking systems affect women journalists, particularly in contexts where political trolling is common. Such assessments can reveal whether outrage-driven ranking is systematically amplifying misogynistic abuse and suggest changes to reduce the visibility of coordinated harassment without suppressing legitimate criticism. Improved local-language moderation is equally critical. Platforms need substantial investment in Urdu and regional-language content review, including partnerships with local experts who understand slang, dog whistles, and political context. This should be matched with clear, accessible safety tools tailored to journalists: prioritized reporting channels for accounts at risk, options to limit replies or mentions during pileons, easy evidence-preservation tools, and rapid review of threats that include sexual or physical violence. These features already exist in limited forms in some jurisdictions, but they are often unavailable, invisible, or under-resourced in Pakistan.

7. Discussion

A human-rights-based approach requires that state and industry policies be anchored in principles of equality, participation, accountability, and transparency. National guidelines could clarify the duties of ministries, regulators, law enforcement agencies, and media organizations in preventing and responding to online violence against women journalists. Such guidelines might cover minimum standards for complaint handling, data protection, cooperation with platforms, and the integration of digital safety into journalist protection schemes. Gender-responsive digital safety training should become a core component of professional development in both state and media institutions. For law enforcement and the judiciary, training would focus on understanding technology-facilitated gender-based violence, avoiding victim-blaming, and using digital evidence effectively. For media houses, it should address newsroom protocols for supporting targeted staff, risk assessment for online work, and responsible use of staff social media guidelines that do not penalize women for being visible. Collaboration between NGOs, media organizations, and state agencies can help design curricula that reflect lived experiences and international best practices while remaining locally grounded. Multi-stakeholder coordination is vital. NGOs bring survivor-centered perspectives and monitoring expertise, media houses understand professional pressures and newsroom culture, and state agencies hold regulatory and enforcement powers. Structured forums, such as national task forces or permanent working groups, can enable these actors to share data, evaluate policy impacts, and refine interventions over time.

Feminist frameworks emphasize that digital harassment of women journalists is not a personal failing to be managed through resilience or better "online hygiene," but a systemic gender injustice rooted in power inequalities. Moving from individualized coping to structural protection means shifting the focus from advising women to stay silent, hide, or toughen up, toward transforming the conditions that make harassment effective: platform design, impunity, patriarchal norms, and precarious employment structures. Recognizing online harassment as a systemic problem reframes it as an issue of collective responsibility. This perspective supports demands for binding obligations on platforms, proactive state

regulation consistent with international human rights law, and institutional reforms within media organizations to share the burden of risk rather than offloading it onto individual women. It also validates the emotional and professional harm experienced by survivors, positioning psychological safety and dignity as non-negotiable components of journalistic freedom. Embedding feminist approaches into digital safety policy encourages intersectional analysis, considering how gender interacts with class, ethnicity, language, and political identity to shape risk. For women journalists in Pakistan, this means acknowledging that those from marginalized communities or covering sensitive beats may face heightened danger and therefore require tailored protections. Ultimately, pathways forward must aim not merely to help women endure hostile digital environments, but to transform those environments so that visibility no longer comes at the cost of safety and equality.

8. Conclusion

Digital harassment of women journalists in Pakistan emerges from the intersection of shrinking press freedom, patriarchal norms, and insecure digital architectures, and it systematically undermines their rights to expression, equality, safety, and work. The preceding analysis has shown how online abuse, ranging from doxxing and deepfakes to coordinated trolling and threats of sexual violence, operates as a tool of gendered control rather than random incivility. It exploits existing social stigmas, reinforces harmful stereotypes, and drives women out of digital and professional spaces that are essential to democratic life. Understanding this phenomenon through a human rights lens makes clear that digital harassment is a serious rights violation, not a peripheral "online issue." It impairs women journalists' freedom of expression, invades their privacy and dignity, entrenches discrimination, and contributes to a broader continuum of gender-based violence. International frameworks, particularly the ICCPR, CEDAW, and ICESCR, as interpreted through General Recommendations 33 and 35, confirm that states have positive duties to prevent technology-facilitated violence, address structural inequalities, and ensure access to justice. When women self-censor, leave journalism, or withdraw from online spaces due to fear and exhaustion, the harm is both individual and collective: public debate is narrowed, accountability weakens, and society loses vital perspectives. The urgency of reform lies in the scale and normalization of these harms. Domestic laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act and journalists' protection measures remain under-implemented, prone to political misuse, and largely insensitive to gendered dynamics.

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