



# Safe haven from the trolls: A network for Pakistani women journalists

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Many journalists in Pakistan face online harassment and in the case of women, the abuse they get is often sexual in nature. Free Press Unlimited and the Digital Rights Foundation have built a network of female journalists in the country, where members can go for advice and support.

In her four-and-a-half years as a journalist, Umaima Ahmed has heard it all.

“Starting from ‘you’re a bitch’ to ‘you deserve to be killed because you’re against the state’. This is one extreme to another. Everything that goes in between, you can imagine,” she said.

Ahmed, 33, now works for Pakistani weekly magazine The News on Sunday. Since she started in journalism, she has written about sensitive topics including terrorism and gender relations.

And at times, she has seen her Twitter mentions flooded with abuse.

“Even just asking a simple question [on social media] can lead to people following you, they’ll start trolling you and calling you bad names. It can be pretty traumatic,” she said.

Ahmed is far from alone. A survey among Pakistani journalists by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), a partner of Free Press Unlimited, showed that 66 percent of respondents had experienced ‘digital insecurity’. This includes, but is not limited to, being hacked, threatened, blackmailed and being harassed over a sustained period of time.

For women, the number is even higher: 72 percent reported they had experienced digital insecurity versus 61 percent for their male counterparts.

“There is self-censorship not only because of the abuse they face online, but also because there is real fear of that becoming offline abuse” - Nighat Dad

Many women who challenge the status quo face “extraordinary backlash and abuse”, said DRF founder Nighat Dad. Dad is a well-known digital rights defender who won the Dutch government’s Human Rights Tulip award in 2016 and in 2015 was named as one of TIME magazine’s “next generation leaders”.

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“When it comes to women journalists, it’s very sexual in nature. People abuse them not based on their content but based on how they look and their body. They body shame them,” Dad said.

Such online abuse threatens media diversity in a country where women already make up a small fraction of journalists. Nearly half of respondents in the DRF survey said they had applied self-censorship due to online insecurity.

“I have seen a reluctance from women journalists to post content which is sensitive in nature online. There is self-censorship not only because of the abuse they face online, but also because there is real fear of that becoming offline abuse,” Dad said.

## **Women network**

With the support of Free Press Unlimited, DRF has built a growing network of women journalists. The members maintain an active WhatsApp group where they exchange experiences and advice.

Network members have attended trainings on digital security funded by Free Press Unlimited. Together, they also maintain a website called Hamara Internet - “Our Internet” - where they can contribute articles on digital rights issues.

Mariem Saeed is the project manager at DRF who looks after the network. She has seen it grow from 45 to more than 90 members since its inception. On some mornings, Saeed wakes up to as many as 200 WhatsApp messages in the group.



*Network members have attended trainings on digital security. Photo: DRF*

“Women journalists are really excited to join it,” she said. “They find it to be a space where they can openly discuss all sorts of issues ... It’s like a safe haven for them.”

Topics discussed within the WhatsApp group include online harassment and how to deal with trolls, but women also talk about Pakistan’s glass ceiling as well as challenges from their personal lives.

According to Saeed, many women journalists are not aware of safe digital practices. That is why digital security trainers are present within the network to give advice on what to do if, for example, a member’s email account has been hacked. In some instances, members are referred to DRF’s cyber harassment helpline, which fielded 1,908 calls in total in its first 18 months from men and women reporting online harassment.

Besides the advice on how to keep digital communications secure and when to block or ignore trolls, members feel emboldened by the network through the sense of community it fosters.

“Once you share something, other girls will come forward and say that we face the same thing,” said Umaima Ahmed.

“It gives you new ideas, it gives you confidence that there is somebody behind you, you’re not totally alone. It gives you the support that you can fall back on someone.”

## Society evolving

Mariam Saeed notes that sadly, treatment of women in online spaces has deteriorated. “In the beginning when the internet and digital technologies were blooming, it was thought that social media would be a space where women journalists could freely express themselves. But over the years it has changed for the worse,” she said.

Still, there are hopes that change is afoot. The backlash that women get, said Dad, could be symptoms of a change in society.

“Women are coming out of their comfort zones and out of their homes. The more they are reclaiming spaces, the more they are facing challenges,” she said.

“Society is in the process of evolving. But at the same time, I feel that we need to make this process easier for them, so that they don’t get discouraged.”

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