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Countering Online Harassment of Women in Pakistan: Social Media Content Moderation

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By

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Introduction

With violence against women (VAW) being a woefully recurrent dilemma within the Pakistani society, online harassment through social media platforms has further catalysed the plight. Unregulated social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have enabled the manifestation of misogynistic attitudes to seep into virtual reality. The female community is put into an existential threat. The prior thought can be reiterated by referring to online harassment as a mechanism inclusive to the acts of cyberstalking, bullying, extortion, and blackmail[1]- which, in consequence, debilitate women the freedom to express, hence hindering their psychosocial behaviour. Moreover, the acceleration in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has facilitated the creation of deepfake pornography posted on social media platforms-particularly Instagram at plain sight- further triggering insecurity. It is a need for moderating and regulating social media content to ensure online security for females residing in Pakistan.

Since 2022, an approximate of 5,008 complaints pertaining to online harassment had been reported to the office for Federal Ombudsperson Secretariat for Protection against Harassment (FOSPAH); 3,698 of the registered cases were filed by women[2]. This leads to the implication that the female community is largely vulnerable to the danger of harassment inside the online realm, further solidifying the fact that social media facilitates such actions due to their unmoderated nature.

Policy Measures Taken:

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) specifically includes individual sections to counter the impeding threat of online harassment- Section 21 criminalizes

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[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/

[2] https://www.dawn.com/news/1709300

cyberstalking, Section 22 addresses to spamming, Section 24 pertains to electronic harassment, Section 25 to false information and section 26 is relevant to spoofing- the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) attempts to collaborate with PECA; however this has not been optimal in curbing the challenge. The cybercrime wing of the FIA includes a team compromising less than 1,000 individuals; therefore, the measure undertaken is significantly disproportionate to challenge. The agency is male dominated as it was reported that only 2 female employees were present at the desk office; In a patriarchal society ridden with misogyny- women would not feel safe to report any event and would eventually resort to self-censorship.

In order to tackle the impeding harassment cases through social media, the federal cabinet of Pakistan granted approval to two segments of legislation which are expected to bring a far-reaching impact on digital rights through the E-safety bill 2023[3] which aims to criminalize cyberbullying, online harassment and blackmailing. The cabinet has also greenlit the establishment of enforcement known as the 'E-safety authority'. This authority will be responsible for registering and monitoring websites, web channels, YouTube channels and existing media houses' websites. The main objective of this initiative is to protect rights of citizens, especially women, from cyber harassment. Yet, it can be contested that while the expected laws do seek to regulate online content; they are majorly limited to videos. There has been no significant attempt to moderate content in platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

According to Pakistan Today[4], the ministry of Information and Technology (IT) and social media companies anticipate a collaboration; representatives of individual social media platforms would be virtually available around the clock to cater to complaints and are responsible in further informing the government. This will provide an extensive approach to counter online harassment. The government authorised Social Media Rules Committee has further categorised controversial content as lists of red, yellow and green. The 'red list' would contain explicit sexual and pornographic content (images and videos) and profanely abusive jargon and would be removed immediately, whereas the 'yellow list' would include content that would be 72 hours after a complaint has been issued whereas the 'green list' would include complaints or routine content. Through categorising content, it would be convenient for the in-charge forces to cater the content that can put female safety in jeopardy immediately.

Recommendation

While the government seems to have articulated measures that would be effective in negating the prospect of online harassment through social media platforms, it would be beneficial for it to consider the following recommendations:

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[3] https://www.bing.com/search?q=e-safet+bill+2023+pAKISTAN&qs=n&form=QBRE&sp=-1&ghc=1&lq=0&pq=e-safet+bill+2023+pakistan&sc=10-26&sk=&cvid=5C956E6CE8F1466A9C8D677EEAFA740E&ghsh=0&ghacc=0&ghpl=
[4] https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/06/24/social-media-companies-to-set-up-24-7-virtual-offices-in-pakistan/#:~:text=The%20federal%20government%20has%20finalized%20the%20amended%20social,round-the-clock%20at%20the%20virtual%20offices%2C%20according%20to%20officials.

- Implementation of language filters and reporting systems that understand various Pakistani dialects to effectively identify harassment across linguistic diversity.
- Partner with local NGOs such women's rights groups operating against harassment such as the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) and Shirkatgah. They can help shape policies and strategies effectively by providing a more thorough insights and interpretations. Considering these organizations seek to alleviate female plight- women in Pakistan would feel safer in expressing their agony which would allow more apt measures to be undertaken.
- Considering media is crucial in communicating social distresses, online harassment can be represented in T.V dramas and web series to educate the public towards the trauma experienced by women due to online harassment through the device of politico-entertainment.
- Employment of Artificial Intelligence to identify and remove obscene content.
- Developing forums where women can anonymously report incidents of cyber harassment.

Thus, by inculcating the recommendations mentioned- the government will have an extensive, hence more effective, approach in tackling the vice of online harassment through social media platforms.