

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN DIGITAL SPACES: EXPLORING CHALLENGES, AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN.

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Article Info**Abstract**

Digital gender-based violence (GBV) poses a serious challenge for young adults, especially for university students in Pakistan. The speedy rise in online engagement has increased risks of harassment, abuse, mistreatment and exploitation within digital sitting room. This study explores key definitions, societal dynamics, and fundamental factors driving digital GBV, together with potential strategies to reduce its impact. Proposed solutions include policy development, awareness campaigns, and the implementation of technological protections to foster safer online environments. By analyzing the interplay between societal norms and evolving digital interactions, this study aims to guide future research and inform comprehensive interventions. The findings are expected to support the creation of evidence-based strategies that enhance positive digital engagement while addressing the vital need for protection against online abuse. Through a multidisciplinary perspective, this effort highlights the importance of collaboration to combat digital GBV and promote a safer digital culture for students.



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Keywords: Digital gender-based violence (GBV), Victim-Blaming, Abuse, Bullying, stigmatization, Cyber Harassment.

Introduction

The integration of digital technology into everyday life has changed communication, education, and social engagement worldwide. However, it has also brought up new kinds of harm, particularly in the form of gender-based violence (GBV) in digital spaces. Digital GBV includes a range of damaging harmful behaviors facilitated by technology, such as online harassment, digital stalking, and image-based abuse, targeting people based on their gender or sexual identity (United Nations, 2023).

In Pakistan, the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms and rigid gender roles amplifies the dangers of digital GBV. University students, who are typically active participants in digital spaces, are especially on risk to these threats (Digitalization and Women in Pakistan, 2023). The fear of stigma, societal backlash, and limited support mechanisms contribute to the complexity of the issue, demanding a nuanced approach to understanding and combating digital GBV (Sheikh & Rogers, 2023).

This paper purposes to explore the definitions, challenges, and societal factors influencing digital GBV in Pakistan, while proposing actionable strategies to address this critical issue.

2. Defining Digital Gender-Based Violence

Digital Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to various abusive behaviors conducted through digital platforms and technologies (United Nations, 2023). These incidents often involve conflicting and overlapping forms, including:

- **Cyberstalking:** The practice of repeated monitoring or harassment of an individual through online networks, which may involve threats, inappropriate contact, and other behaviors (McCall, 2004).
- **Online Harassment:** The use of digital channels to send harmful, threatening, or humiliating messages (McCall, 2004).
- **Image-Based Abuse:** The illegal sharing or alteration of direct images without the individual’s consent.
- **Doxing:** Exposing personal information publicly with the intention to threaten or harm the victim (Barkauskaitė, 2024).
- **Impersonation:** Creating fake accounts to deceive, harass, or damage a person's reputation (Barkauskaitė, 2024).

These forms of abuse disproportionately affect women, girls, and unprivileged groups, contributing to aggressive and unsafe digital environments.

3. Challenges in Addressing Digital GBV in Pakistan

3.1 Sociocultural Barriers

Victim-Blaming Culture: The victims, especially women, are frequently held responsible for the abuse they face online, which discourages them from reporting incidents (Culda, Opre, & Dobrin, 2018).

Stigmatization: The social stigmatization attached to being a victim of harassment prevents individuals from seeking support (Culda, Opre, & Dobrin, 2018).

Gender Norms: Traditional societal expectations reinforce silence and discourage women from opposing offenders or seeking justice (European Institute for Gender Equality).

3.2 Legal and Reporting Challenges

Tackling digital Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Pakistan faces significant legal and reporting challenges, limiting the effectiveness of both legal recourse and victim protection. Key barriers include:

Underreporting:

Fear of victim-blaming and social stigmatization often stops victims from reporting digital abuse. Many victims face hesitation from law enforcement officials, further deterring them from pursuing legal action. Cultural norms and a lack of awareness about digital rights exacerbate the issue. As a result, digital GBV cases frequently go unreported, and hence victims may be deprived of justice (European Institute for Gender Equality).

1. **Inadequate Legal Framework:** Pakistan's **Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016** was introduced to combat cybercrime and provides a legal basis for addressing certain forms of digital violence, including cyberstalking, image-based abuse, and online harassment. However, the act falls short of fully surrounding the unique challenges postured by digital GBV. It lacks clarity on critical aspects such as non-consensual data sharing and impression targeted at women and marginalized groups. Additionally, provisions designed for general cybercrime often fail to address the gendered shades of these crimes (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2016).
2. **Enforcement Gaps:** Despite the legal framework provided by PECA 2016, enforcement remains weak. Police and investigative authorities often lack the necessary training and drill to manage cases involving digital platforms more effectively. Limited technological expertise, insufficient resource provision, and delays in judicial procedures further delay justice. Victims frequently report experiencing dismissive attitudes and inadequate support from law enforcement agencies, contributing to the perception that reporting such crimes is useless. (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2016).

3.3 Technological Challenges

Addressing digital Gender-Based Violence (GBV) requires overcoming numerous technological hurdles that complicate efforts to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable. These challenges include:

Anonymity:

Digital platforms offer users with the ability to maintain anonymity, allowing criminals to harass or threaten others without revealing their true identities. The ease with which individuals can create anonymous accounts or use virtual private networks (VPNs) to conceal their locations makes tracking and identifying offenders challenging for law enforcement agencies. This anonymity encourages perpetrators, knowing they can act without immediate consequences (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA]).

1. **Platform Accountability:** Many social media companies and digital service providers lack comprehensive apparatuses to combat harassment and abuse more effectively. Despite community guidelines and reporting systems, enforcement is often varying or slow, allowing abusive content to remain accessible for extended periods. The absence of transparent policies and sufficient misunderstanding frequently leaves victims without adequate support or recourse. Moreover, the

global nature of these platforms makes it difficult for local authorities to impose legal obligations for prompt action against criminals (United Nations Population Fund).

- 2. **Limited Digital Literacy:** A significant number of internet handlers, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, are unaware of essential privacy settings and reporting tools designed to promote online safety. This lack of knowledge increases their vulnerability to digital threats, as they may inadvertently expose personal information or fail to recognize signs of online abuse. Limited awareness of cybersecurity best practices further worsens the problem, reducing the effectiveness of existing tools to protect digital identities and fight harassment (United Nations Population Fund).

Addressing these technological challenges requires collaborative efforts involving government agencies, digital platforms, and civil society organizations. Initiatives to improve digital literacy, strengthen channel accountability, and promote cybersecurity measures are important steps toward creating safer digital environments.

4. Proposed Solutions to Address Digital GBV

4.1 Policy and Legal Reforms

- 1. **Strengthening Legal Protections:** There is a need of develop and refine laws to broadly address all forms of digital GBV, ensuring that sufferers have clear avenues for redress (UN Women & UNTF).
- 2. **Effective Enforcement Mechanisms:** Law enforcement personnel needed be trained to handle cases of digital harassment with understanding and ability (UN Women & UNTF).
- 3. **Victim-Centered Reporting Systems:** Accessible and authentic anonymous reporting channels should be established to encourage victims to come forward.

4.2 Educational Initiatives

- 1. **Digital Literacy Programs:** There is a need to teach students about safe online behavior, through the Implementation of educational campaigns to recognizing harassment, and knowing their digital rights (United Nations Population Fund).
- 2. **Awareness Campaigns:** Initiative should be taken to create awareness to promote societal awareness of digital GBV and challenge the stigma surrounding victims.

Gender Sensitization Workshops: To conduct workshops to foster respect and accountability in digital meetings and interactions (Loyola University Maryland, n.d.).

4.3 Technological Interventions

- 1. **Enhanced Platform Regulations:** Advocate for social media platforms to reinforce their content control policies.
- 2. **Safety Features:** Develop and promote advanced privacy settings, content moderation tools, and reporting mechanisms.
- 3. **AI-Based Monitoring:** The use of artificial intelligence can detect and flag abusive content for review.

5. Collaborative Framework for Action

Addressing digital GBV requires cooperation among different relevant stakeholders:

- **Universities:** Establish comprehensive anti-harassment policies and provide counseling services for affected students (Loyola University Maryland, n.d.)
- **Law Enforcement:** Enhance capacity for dealing cyber harassment cases through specialized training.
- **Civil Society:** Engage advocacy groups to support affected individuals and drive societal change.
- **Technology Companies:** Collaborate with educational organizations and policymakers to create safer digital environments (World Economic Forum, n.d.).

6. Future Directions for Research and Policy

To effectively address digital Gender-Based Violence (GBV) demands continuing research and strategic policy development. Identifying gaps in understanding and developing evidence-based interventions are vital to combating this evolving issue. Key areas for future exploration include:

1. **Understanding Perpetrator Behavior:** Investigating the motivations, psychological profiles, and behavioral forms of digital GBV perpetrators is important for crafting effective prevention strategies. Understanding the social and technological environments that allow such behavior can inform the development of targeted educational initiatives and legal frameworks (TEDIC, n.d.).
2. **Victim Impact Studies:** Comprehensive research is needed to assess the psychological, social, and academic consequences of digital GBV, especially among susceptible populations such as university students. Understanding the degree of harm caused by online harassment and abuse can help form trauma-informed support systems and advocacy efforts for affected persons (Coffey, 2023).
3. **Evaluating Intervention Effectiveness:** Systematic assessment of existing policies, educational programs, and technological solutions is essential to determine their success in mitigating digital GBV. Evaluating intervention effectiveness will guide improvements and highlight best practices for creating safer digital environments. This includes analyzing reporting mechanisms and the role of bystander interventions in reducing online abuse.
4. **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Exploring how digital GBV manifests across diverse cultural contexts can uncover transferable solutions and shared challenges. Comparative studies will provide insights into cultural aspects influencing digital harassment and identify global strategies that can be adapted for local application. Understanding regional disparities will also help policymakers develop culturally fitting interventions that resonate with affected communities (Sidayang, Sumanta, Putri, & Mokodenseho, 2023).

These research directions can inform holistic policy-making, promote protective mechanisms, and contribute to a broader understanding of digital GBV. Collaboration between academic institutions, government bodies, and technology companies is vital to ensure comprehensive solutions for this pervasive issue.

7. Conclusion

Digital GBV presents a significant threat to university students in Pakistan, with profound social, psychological, and academic consequences. By exploring definitions, challenges, and culturally informed solutions, this paper offers a foundation for actionable strategies and further empirical research. A

collaborative effort involving educational institutions, policymakers, and technology companies is important to foster safer digital environments and empower victims to reclaim their digital spaces.

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