



Explicit Harms of Non-Explicit Images: Defining Image-Based Abuse in Pakistan and the Diaspora



CHAYN

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Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	5
About This Research	5
What This Research Found	6
What Needs To Change	10
Background	13
What Is Image-Based Abuse?	16
The need for a cultural map of intimacy	18
The Gap in Existing Research	21
Who's Logged On, Who's Left Out, Who Gets Hurt: The Pakistani Context	24
Technology Use	24
Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)	27
Legal Landscape	28
Findings	30
1. Cultural and Social Norms Shape Understandings of Gender and Privacy	30
2. Intimacy Has No Fixed Definitions in Pakistan	44
3. Image-Based Abuse is Broader Than "Nudes Without Consent"	51
4. Harm is Collective: The Central Role of Family and Community	84
5. The Consequences of Image-Based Abuse Are Far-Reaching and Long-Lasting	88
6. Perpetrators of IBA and Their Motivations Are Diverse	93
7. Images Circulate Through a Dense Web of Platforms and Channels	100
8. Experiences Seeking Help Are Diverse. A Broken System With Bright Spots	102
9. The Barriers to Seeking Help Are Structural	113
Fighting Back: How Survivors Resist and Reclaim Power	128
Seven Ways Women Resist and Rebel Against Harm and Societal Pressure Caused by IBA	128
A Framework for Understanding IBA: Intent, Consent, and Harm	141
Intent	142
Consent	143
Harm	144
Recommendations	144
Hopes, Demands and Imagined Futures: What Survivors Want to Change	145
How This Research Can Be Used By...	158
Tech Platforms	158
Legal and Policy Actors	159
Civil Society and Support Services	159
Narrative and Media Change	160
Appendix	160
Methodology	160

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Content warning:

Please note that this report contains explicit descriptions of violence and abuse. Please take care of yourselves whilst going through it and take breaks when needed.

Executive Summary

In many of the countries where major technology platforms are based, image-based abuse is defined as being of a sexual nature.¹ The laws, the content moderation systems, and the reporting tools that exist to protect women were subsequently built around a specific kind of harm: the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexually explicit images. But our research finds that for millions of women around the world, almost any photograph can be weaponised, and harm is determined more by what the image can be made to mean, than what it actually shows.

A photo of a woman sitting next to a male classmate. A video of her dancing at a party. Even an ordinary selfie in the wrong person's hands. For women in Pakistan, and many other parts of the world, images like these can trigger punishments including forced marriage, loss of work or education, community ostracisation, violence, and in extreme cases, death. Images that would not even raise an eyebrow under more "Westernised" definitions of harm. The harm in these cases comes from who holds the image, who sees it, and what meaning is imposed on it, not its content.

This research exists because there is a gap in what platforms, policies and legal systems define as harmful, and what many women around the world – including in Pakistan – experience as harmful. And that gap needs closing.

About This Research

Chayn conducted 64 qualitative interviews between July 2025 and February 2026. These included 32 survivors of image-based abuse, 18 community participants (women and gender minorities from Pakistan and the diaspora), and 14 experts including lawyers, representatives of the criminal justice system, civil society actors, social media platform representatives, and activists working in the gender-based violence and digital rights spaces.

Participants spanned every major region of Pakistan as well as diaspora communities in the UK, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, the UAE and Kuwait. Interviews were conducted in English, Urdu, and Punjabi. The sample included cisgender, transgender, heterosexual, and queer women, as well as religious and ethnic minorities, sex workers, celebrities, students, activists, and women from both liberal and conservative backgrounds.

¹*Country Factsheets – End Cyber Abuse*, n.d. <<https://endcyberabuse.org/country-factsheets/>> [accessed 17 May 2026].

This research was conducted by a team that has Pakistani and other South Asian heritage, with experience of living in Pakistan and also growing up as part of the South Asian diaspora. We also worked alongside Digital Rights Foundation, the Jugnu Project, and Pakistani women's rights activists like Amneh Sheikh Farooqi and Ramma Shahid to support our research and analysing our findings.

For a full methodology, see the appendix.

What This Research Found

1. Cultural and Social Norms Shape Understandings of Gender and Privacy

Across interviews, participants described a social landscape where judgements about what is "intimate," "private," or "inappropriate" cannot be separated from the cultural, religious, and political forces that shape everyday life in Pakistan. Women navigate intersecting systems of patriarchal control, honour-based accountability, religious policing, and constant social surveillance. What counts as a "private" image is shaped by who is watching, what family honour demands, how religion is interpreted, and the ever-present fear that visibility itself can trigger punishment.

2. Intimacy Has No Fixed Definitions in Pakistan

What counts as a "private" or "harmful" image shifts with values, geography, age, gender, class, and who is making the judgement. An image of a man dancing at a wedding may carry no consequences for him, but the same image of a woman could potentially be catastrophic for her. Perceptions of intimacy are shaped by the specific household and social circle in which a woman was raised, and can differ substantially even between women with similar backgrounds.

Women do not navigate images alone. They navigate them under the weight of a real, and imagined, audience. An internalised permanent censor that shapes what they wear, where they go, what they post, and what they allow to be photographed.

3. Image-Based Abuse is Broader Than "Nudes Without Consent"

Participants described a wide range of images they considered private, intimate, or potentially dangerous if shared without consent: hair visible without a hijab or head covering; Western clothing, revealing clothing or anything that shows the contour of the body; a photo dancing or laughing at a social event; being photographed alongside a

man who is not a husband or a close family member; a photo taken at night, in a bedroom, or at a location with a certain reputation; a voice note; a screenshot of a fabricated conversation; or an AI-generated image created from a photograph of someone's face.

None of these contain nudity or explicit material, but the possibility of recontextualisation, misinterpretation, and the ease with which any image placed in the wrong hands or viewed with the wrong framing can be made to tell a different story, is where the harm lies. Across accounts, participants returned again and again to the refrain that it is not what an image shows that makes it harmful, it is whether the woman gave consent for it to be shared.

4. Harm is Collective: The Central Role of Family and Community

A leaked image does not just affect the woman in it. It lands on her entire family, and sometimes community. Participants described fathers who were unable to work, sisters whose marriage prospects were destroyed, mothers who were shunned from the community and households that were looked at "in a shameful manner" by everyone around them. Honour is collective and the threat of collective shame is itself a tool of control.

"[Intimacy is not just the] face you keep to the people around you, but also the face your family has kept to the people around them."

This collective dimension shapes who women tell when something goes wrong, where they go and whether they seek help at all. Disclosure of abuse can compound the damage, bringing shame on the family, triggering punishment from within the home, or exposing a woman to community-sanctioned 'justice'. The architecture of harm and the architecture of help-seeking are in direct conflict. And yet, when families do stand by survivors, participants were clear that it makes a material difference.

5. The Consequences of Image-Based Abuse Are Far-Reaching and Long-Lasting

Once an image or video existed and others had seen it, participants described losing jobs and being pulled out of education, being forcibly married or prevented from marrying, being disowned by family and community members, facing physical violence from family members, and experiencing suicidal crisis.

Participants described somatic responses to the trauma including prolonged bleeding, fainting, severe weight loss, and chronic insomnia. They described serious implications

on their mental and emotional health. Families paid blackmailers what they could, sometimes escalating from small sums to life-changing amounts, because formal help felt inaccessible or too dangerous.

And in some cases, survivors described fearing for their lives, repeatedly referencing honour killings. In this context, the possibility of a leaked image is inextricably linked to the possibility of death, creating a climate of fear.

Women who are LGBTQ+, from religious minorities, from highly conservative backgrounds, or who occupy public-facing roles have compounding risk. For a transgender woman, pre-transition images carry the same or greater danger as sexually explicit material. For religious minorities, images can be fed into blasphemy narratives with life-threatening consequences. Even when images are removed, the knowledge of who has seen what, the shift in how others look at you and the fear that more might surface simply does not disappear.

6. Perpetrators of IBA, and Their Motivations, Are Diverse

Intimate partners and ex-partners are common perpetrators, but so are male relatives, classmates, neighbours, strangers, political opponents, and even institutions. Organisations like the Digital Rights Foundation have noted a shift over time, with anonymous accounts and organised networks playing an increasingly significant role, including perpetrators who are transactional, operate across borders, and disappear after extracting what they want.

Motivations are equally varied and range from financial extortion to punishment for perceived disobedience or romantic rejection to organised harassment designed to silence women in public life. This research identifies seven distinct ways image-based abuse is used to cause harm: silencing women from speaking out; shrinking their confidence or public presence; shaming them through reputational damage; shunning, by isolating them from family, friends, and colleagues; strong-arming, using images as leverage to force compliance or continued contact; financial extortion; and sexual gratification. These motivations frequently overlap and reinforce one another. Effective responses must account for this range, rather than treating all perpetrators as a single type.

7. Images Circulate Through a Dense Web of Platforms and Channels

Images do not stay in one place. Women described content moving across global social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X; encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp; cloud storage; dating apps including Tinder, despite being banned; and

sometimes into offline circulation where images are printed out and physically delivered to parents. Images found their way to family members, peers, universities, or police stations, and were presented as "evidence of immorality". Perpetrators ensure that families and communities are reached, regardless of how digitally connected a woman is.

8. Experiences Seeking Help Are Diverse. A Broken System With Bright Spots

Help-seeking in Pakistan spans a surprisingly wide ecosystem including cybercrime units, NGOs, women's police stations, university administrators, regulatory bodies, families, friends, and informal community networks. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), now operating as the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), was the most commonly referenced formal route, and some participants described ultimately effective outcomes through persistent engagement with it. Organisations like the Digital Rights Foundation and the Aurat Foundation emerged as trusted, specialist sources of support. They were valued because they were women-led, non-judgmental, and able to act as intermediaries with platforms and authorities when survivors could not or would not go directly.

Families and close relationships were central to how women navigated these experiences, for better and worse. These bright spots, however, sit within a system that too often failed survivors. The barriers to help-seeking were structural, pervasive, and frequently compounded the original harm.

9. The Barriers to Seeking Help Are Structural

Across platforms, law enforcement, and legal frameworks, participants described a consistent pattern of dismissal, victim-blaming, and structural inadequacy. They talked about platforms that require mass reporting thresholds before acting, that take days to remove content while images spread, that dismiss non-sexual images as falling outside of community guidelines, and that provide no local language support or culturally informed moderation. They talked about re-traumatising experiences with the police and legal systems where they would be forced to re-tell their story repeatedly, fill out endless paperwork, be questioned as to why they had such images in the first place, and be told that their images are not explicit enough to act on. In all cases, participants talked about a system that was slow and resistant to respond. This slowness could be the difference between a contained harm and a public catastrophe and was seen as an important factor in whether a woman's situation could be recovered.

This failure is not unique to Pakistan. In the UK, for example, where IBA law exists, it still only covers nude or sexually explicit images. At present, 110 countries have no laws against image-based abuse at all.² Victim-blaming, dismissal, and slow, unresponsive systems are a feature of survivor stories worldwide. The narrow, Western-centric definition of what counts as an intimate image is a failure that affects women across the Global South and in diaspora communities everywhere. Pakistan's specific cultural context can make the consequences more acute, but the nature of the problem is global.

10. Resistance and Rebellion Against Harm and Societal Pressure Caused by IBA

Women are not passive in the face of this harm. Across the research, participants described navigating, defying, and actively fighting back. They described a spectrum of resistance that ranged from the internal to the collective. This research identifies seven distinct modes of resistance and rebellion that women resorted to: questioning and refusing to internalise the shame; denying that they had shared images; defending, by holding ground in digital and public spaces; going on the offensive through legal action, platform reporting, or direct social pressure on perpetrators; retreating and returning – withdrawing from digital and public life before finding a way back on their own terms; healing alone through the slow internal work of separating self-worth from what was done to them; and healing together, turning personal experience into advocacy, peer support and collective action.

What Needs To Change

The participants in this research were clear about what they wanted. Their demands, grounded in lived experience, are addressed to four main audiences. You can read more about them in the recommendations section of this report.

² 'Adult Image Based Abuse Model Response | SWGfL', n.d.
<<https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/adult-image-based-abuse-model-response/>> [accessed 19 May 2026].



For tech platforms

- Shift from defining image-based abuse as only sexual or nude content to a consent-based framework, where removal requests based on lack of consent are granted.
- When a user attempts to post a photo online, introduce a prompt asking them to confirm that they have obtained consent from all identifiable people in the image before sharing.
- Offer an easily accessible face-blurring option and actively encourage users to use it before posting images.
- Suspend reported images while a decision is made about whether they should be removed.
- Ensure moderation teams are culturally informed, with additional training on intersecting experiences such as sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, caste, and other factors affecting survivors' risk levels.
- Allow third-party reporting, including for WhatsApp and Instagram Stories to a Private List.
- The shift to consent-based content take-down should also be reflected in transparency reports.
- Liaise with law-enforcement agencies at the request of survivors, including preserving evidence that content existed even if later removed.
- Offer survivors an active role in reporting and feedback processes.
- Create flexible reporting mechanisms that allow people to describe their own experience and requested remedies rather than forcing reports into rigid categories.
- Design reporting mechanisms to be accessible and suitable for different literacy levels.
- Develop cross-platform collaboration systems to identify serial offenders who engage in repeated abuse across multiple services.

- Provide adult users with trauma-informed user-empowerment toolkits that allow them to tailor preferences and reduce exposure to unwanted content.
- Invest in developing, maintaining, and promoting trusted partner channels, with sufficient funding to provide additional survivor support such as therapy sessions.
- Make trusted partner channels more transparent and clearly display the logos of participating organisations.
- Direct survivors to external resources that can provide additional support.

For legal and policy actors:

- Introduce image rights and consent-based protections modelled on France and Denmark.³
- Criminalise threats to share images as a standalone form of image-based abuse.
- Strengthen specialist training for police, prosecutors, and judges.
- Create survivor-centred reporting pathways and fast-track mechanisms.
- Ensure accessibility and clarity of policy language.
- Enable free access to civil courts and civil remedies for tech abuse cases.
- Extend limitation periods for bringing cases.
- Introduce penalties for companies that fail to remove unlawful content within statutory timeframes.
- Encourage cross-platform enforcement and coordinated takedown mechanisms.

For civil society and support services:

- Use plain, explicit language and phrases that can reach women who are searching for support in crisis.
- Create safe physical and emotional spaces where survivors can speak without fear of judgement.
- Run prevention and awareness programmes that reach girls in schools before harm occurs and engage boys directly in conversations around consent and accountability.
- Acknowledge the wider social context: education and support that ignores patriarchal norms and community dynamics will remain superficial.

For narrative and media change:

- Tell stories that centre consent, not content. Public understanding of image-based abuse must shift beyond nude photos.
- Challenge the persistent framing that places responsibility on women's behaviour rather than the perpetrator's choices.
- Name the cultural systems that make image-based abuse so powerful, without treating those systems as uniquely Pakistani or Islamic. These dynamics exist globally.

³ See in France Article 226-1 of the criminal code: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000049312755 and the Act Amending the Copyrights Act in Denmark ([will take effect in July 2026](https://technical-regulation-information-system.ec.europa.eu/en/notification/27420)) <https://technical-regulation-information-system.ec.europa.eu/en/notification/27420>

“The responsibility lies solely with the person who violated my consent”

64 women and experts gave their time to this research because they believed it could change something. They described experiences that were painful, often still unresolved, and sometimes difficult to share. What they asked for in return was to be believed, to be taken seriously, and to see the systems that failed them respond differently.

Background

Discussions about image-based abuse often focus on explicitly sexual content. But the experience of many survivors reveals how this narrow lens misses the complex ways technology can be weaponised against women when patriarchal definitions of womanhood follow them across the diaspora and into different cultural and legal contexts.

When 20-year-old Huma (alias) got married in Pakistan, the controlling behaviour began immediately, escalating over ten years into multiple forms of violence including non-consensual recording – a form of technology-facilitated abuse.

She wasn't allowed to pursue her education, or visit her parents and relatives, especially male cousins. After she had two sons, the abuse worsened. As they moved from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia to the United States – her husband escalated his abuse and surveillance. He started by downloading a sound-monitoring app on their son's iPad, then began recording their arguments and eventually installed hidden cameras throughout the house. Technology became one of his central tools of control.

“Please be very careful. I have a library full of your videos. You will lose these children... If you try getting out, just remember one thing: you are not getting the children, because I am going to show these videos to everyone.”

He wasn't bluffing. In court, she found out that he had been secretly recording her for the duration of their ten year relationship and he made a montage of her worst moments to be shown in court. The recordings were admissible because the custody battle took place in a one-party consent state in the U.S., where only one person needs to agree to being recorded. The secret recordings that her husband used to threaten and control her would have been illegal in both Pakistan⁴ (where their marriage began) and Saudi Arabia (where they later lived).⁵

⁴ 'Wayback Machine', 10 February 2026

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20260210231516/https://pakistancode.gov.pk/pdf/files/administrator6a061efe0ed5bd153fa8b79b8eb4cba7.pdf>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁵ Salama Samir, 'Saudi Arabia: Jail Time, SR500,000 Fine for Filming People', Gulf News: Latest UAE News, Dubai News, Business, Travel News, Dubai Gold Rate, Prayer Time, Cinema, 20 April 2021

Though she is now divorced and has shared custody of the children, Huma is worried about all the videos her husband may have recorded during their time together, especially in intimate situations. “All my life, the camera might be there recording it. Now I’m divorced, what is he doing with those videos?” she wonders.

This is a story you may have heard before. We shared this in our [Orbits report in 2022](#) which was a field guide to advance intersectional, survivor-centred, and trauma-informed interventions to technology-facilitated gender-based violence. This harrowing story of Huma is sadly all too familiar, and new generative AI technology is making it even easier to create more nefarious ways to abuse women – whether they are known to you or not – and to evade any accountability for it.

Huma’s experience reflects a broader pattern that has prompted increasing global action on image-based abuse. According to United Nations data, nearly 1.8 billion women and girls still lack legal protection from online harassment and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse around the world, and we are increasingly seeing a digital world where online abuse is no longer hiding within the dark corners of the web.⁶ From deepfakes targeting celebrities like Taylor Swift to Grok, an AI chatbot integrated into X (formerly Twitter), openly encouraging users to “nudify” images, there have been political reforms, campaigns and calls for technology accountability has been actioned at national, regional, and global levels.

However, both public and policy conversations tend to treat image-based abuse primarily as the non-consensual sharing of ‘nude’ or ‘sexual’ content. Conversations often focus on ‘revenge porn’ or ‘image-based sexual abuse,’ but this narrow framing of what counts as harm leaves out a multitude of survivor experiences, like those of Huma.

In this report, you will find accounts from survivors of how they have faced blackmail and abuse for being photographed without a hijab, dancing at a wedding, with men who were not their husbands, in clothes that became inappropriate once they became wet and clung to their bodies, or wearing Western clothes, or gym attire.

Wider patriarchal attitudes towards women’s bodies and roles in society influence which images are considered “intimate”. Women had pictures of themselves in these contexts shared online without their consent. Those pictures did not violate the policies of tech companies, because to the Western gaze there was nothing wrong with these seemingly innocent pictures. Yet, they caused real harm to those women. Beyond the violation of their privacy, they also faced reputational damage and threats from their families. On top of this, women had to fight an additional battle to make companies understand and recognise the harm these images caused.

<<https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-jail-time-sr500000-fine-for-filming-people-1.78618999>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁶Ana Carmo, ‘AI and Anonymity Fuel Surge in Digital Violence against Women’, *UN News*, 20 November 2025 <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/11/1166411>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

Who was Sana Yousaf, Pakistani TikTok star shot dead by a gunman?

The 17-year-old TikTok star was killed in her home in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, on Monday.

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Sana Yousaf [Screengrab/Social Media]

[Al Jazeera](#). A man who repeatedly attempted to contact TikTok star Sana Yousaf shot her dead in her home upon her refusal to respond.

From physical assault, losing jobs, being forcibly married, taken out of education, taunts, public shame, and suicidal feelings – survivors described feeling helpless as well as anger, pain, shame and grief.

Synthetic images or artificially generated images also trigger unique harms in the South Asian context. AI-generated fan art showing fake sequences of actors kissing might be considered sweet by many in the Western world, but the same videos in Pakistan become fodder for so-called “honour-based” witch hunts leading to fatalities. These videos are increasingly seen on YouTube.

This crucial gap in cultural awareness is what this report seeks to fill.

What Is Image-Based Abuse?

Image-Based Abuse (IBA) is a type of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) which covers a wide range of harms that can be carried out through digital tools. Gender-based violence is not new, with global estimates showing that one in three women will experience violence in their lifetime.⁷ However, as technology evolves, so do the tools people use to cause harm. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is violence and abuse against women, girls, and gender minorities that is committed, assisted, or amplified through digital means. In our previous [Orbits report](#),⁸ we mapped this landscape in detail, offering a taxonomy of the many ways technology can be used to control, threaten, or abuse.

The term Image-Based Abuse is sometimes used interchangeably with phrases like *intimate image abuse* or *the non-consensual sharing of intimate images*. At Chayn, we deliberately avoid the word *intimate* in this context. The meaning of intimacy shifts across cultures, communities, and even individuals, and understanding what it means in Pakistan is a central aim of this study.

In our definition, image-based abuse refers to the taking, sharing, or threat of sharing an image or video of someone without their consent. The legal language varies across countries, but most definitions include nude, semi-nude, or sexually explicit images or videos – whether they are real or artificially created or manipulated, such as in the case of deepfakes.

Technology-facilitated image-based abuse is regulated differently across jurisdictions. In many countries there is no single 'IBA law' and prosecutors rely on a combination of offences (e.g., intimate image offences, harassment, privacy/data protection, child sexual abuse material, defamation), depending on the facts.

⁷Swipe Left, 'Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women', UN Women – Headquarters, 19 November 2025

<<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

⁸'Orbits: A Global Field Guide to Advance Intersectional, Survivor-Centred, and Trauma-Informed Interv', Chayn on Notion, n.d.

<<https://chayn.notion.site/Orbits-a-global-field-guide-to-advance-intersectional-survivor-centred-and-trauma-informed-interv-8d8dc6a1436543b8b25af63ddafaa409>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

Country	Laws	Includes Deepfakes	Penalties for offenders	Penalties for online platforms
UK	Online Safety Act of 2023 + Sexual Offences Act of 2003	Yes	Offenders can face unlimited fines and/or up to 2 years in prison.	Platforms are required to proactively remove and prevent non-consensual intimate content before it's posted. Non-compliant platforms can be fined up to £18 million GBP (\$24m USD) or 10% of annual global turnover, whichever is higher.
Australia	Crimes Act 1900 No 40 + Criminal Code 1995 (Cth) + Online Safety Act 2021	Yes	Offenders can face up to 100 penalty units (equivalent to \$22,000 USD / £16,500 GBP) or and/or up to 3 years in prison.	Non-compliant platforms can be fined up to 500 penalty units (equivalent to \$557,000 USD / £415,600 GBP).
US	Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2022 + Take It Down Act of 2025	Yes	If prosecuted as a federal crime, offenders can face up to 2 years in prison (up to 3 years if the survivor is a minor). Survivors can sue for up to \$150,000 USD (£112,000 GBP) in damages.	Online platforms must remove the content within 48 hours from a valid demand and make reasonable efforts to remove identical copies.
Germany	No specific law for IBA yet, but the German Criminal Code (StGB) , some EU laws (GDPR and DSA), and the Right of erasure form the legal framework.	Not yet (expected after the EU directive combating violence against women and domestic violence is adopted into German law).	Germany doesn't have a single dedicated law for IBA, so prosecutors typically rely on a combination of laws.	The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) ensures the right to obtain the erasure of personal data, including pictures. Non-compliant platforms can be fined. The EU directive combating violence against women and domestic violence states that the non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material is a criminal offence. This directive will be adopted into German law by June 2027.
South Korea	Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes of 2018	Yes	Offenders can face up to 7 years in prison or a fine of up to ₩50 million KRW (\$33,000 USD / £25,000 GBP).	South Korea's approach to platform accountability is still developing but the Korea Communications Standards Commission can request platforms to remove content.
Pakistan	Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016	Yes	Offenders can face up to 5 years in prison (up to 7 years if the victim is a minor) or a fine of up to 5 million rupees (\$18,000 USD / £14,200 GBP).	Individuals can request the removal of intimate content.
India	Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)	Not at present, but both IT Act and the BNS address non-consensual sharing of intimate images.	Up to 2 to 7 years in prison and 2-10 lakhs based on the crime and the laws applied	Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules 2026

Despite the growing recognition of this harm, global legal protections remain inconsistent. At present, 110 countries have no laws against intimate image abuse. Sixty-seven countries have what are considered “sufficient” laws – meaning they align with Article 16 of the UN Cybercrime Convention – while eighteen have laws that fall short of this standard, including the United States, Japan, and Nepal.⁹ So far, Australia appears to be the only country that explicitly recognises images of a person without clothing of religious or cultural significance as intimate images.¹⁰

The Need For a Cultural Map of Intimacy

Chayn has been working across the globe to fight technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) or tech abuse since 2013. A significant part of this work is ensuring that our understanding of tech abuse is culturally-aware and represents the experiences of women and non-binary people in the Global South or Global Majority.

We’ve created resources with and for survivors, as well as conducted culturally-aware research into tech abuse. Our [DIY Online Safety Guide](#), our guide on building a case without a lawyer, our [Tech vs Abuse](#) and [Orbits report](#), as well as our [Healing from Image-Based Abuse course on Bloom](#) all have the common thread of naming all types of abuse, supporting survivors to heal from them, and creating survivor-centered systems response.

As part of our policy engagement with the private sector, we share survivor-centered stories. Many representatives from these companies listened and realised that there is a blind spot in Western policymaking. Before they act, companies working on content moderation want to be confident that there is a problem to solve at scale.

In response to this demand, in 2025, Chayn launched this long-term research project to create a [cultural map](#) of what “intimate” means around the world. To ensure we’re getting a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the nature of the harms and the tactics used by those who perpetrate image-based abuse, we are starting the project with a few countries in a region and their diasporas abroad, before moving on to other regions. This report is an in-depth analysis of experiences of survivors with Pakistani heritage in Pakistan and elsewhere.

While we began with Pakistan, our aim is to extend this research to other countries and regions, thereby showcasing how a nuanced understanding of what intimate means to people worldwide can help us shape better policies on image-based abuse to better serve survivors everywhere, not just in the West.

⁹ SWGfL, ‘Adult Image Based Abuse Model Response | SWGfL’, n.d.
<<https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/adult-image-based-abuse-model-response/>> [accessed 17 May 2026].

¹⁰ ‘Legal Guide to Image-Based Abuse Legislation in NSW’, *TechSafety*, n.d.
<https://techsafety.org.au/blog/legal_articles/legal-guide-to-image-based-abuse-legislation-in-nsw/> [accessed 18 May 2026].

We chose to begin with Pakistan for several reasons. Chayn grew from this community: our founder is Pakistani and wanted to create resources for her community before the project went global. We also found that stories of South Asian women consistently drew the most interest from policymakers in global discussions, precisely because they are so rarely told. We also have an extensive network of partners there who are able to actively contribute to this research.

Pakistan is said to have the world's sixth largest diaspora, which means that policies inclusive of survivors with Pakistani heritage matter not just within the country, but also in the West – where their experiences are often hidden and neglected. Though not identical, many challenges faced by Pakistani women resonate across South Asia and beyond, extending into Central Asia, Iran and the Middle East. Pakistan, like many of its neighbours, has a young population that is pushing against traditional norms, and technology plays an important role in that shift. While traditional media channels tend to cater to traditional moral codes, social media and digital platforms offer a gateway to a world where those boundaries are more flexible.

Despite cultural differences, many women around the world experience image-based abuse in similar ways – ways that may not centre around nudity – and the solutions that protect Pakistani women can also protect women globally. Our hope in using Pakistan as our first stop on this cultural map is to demonstrate that creating safer platforms and systems benefits all survivors, regardless of where they are.

Through all of Chayn's work, we have found that wealth, social status, fame, caste, religion, skill or profession do not protect women and gender minorities. There are many shared feelings and consequences for survivors who find themselves grappling with TFGBV. And there can be significant differences in support systems, protection offered by legal and public institutions, threat to life, and recovery.

Recent high-profile cases demonstrate why this research is both timely and necessary. In the last few years deepfakes and manipulated images have been weaponised to target high-profile leaders in entertainment and politics.¹¹ In 2024, a district and sessions court in Karachi sentenced a man to nine years in prison for posting “indecent” pictures of his wife on social media and her brother and using them to blackmail her,¹² one of the heaviest sentences ever seen in image-based abuse cases. British Pakistani actor Kubra Khan won a defamation case in Pakistan and the UK against an ex-serviceman, Adil Raja, for creating and sharing a video claiming top actresses were having illicit affairs with top army generals. In 2026, after several viral news reports of women facing image-based abuse and deepfakes spread, the nonprofit organisation

¹¹ 'Deepfakes Weaponised to Target Pakistan's Women Leaders', *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 December 2024

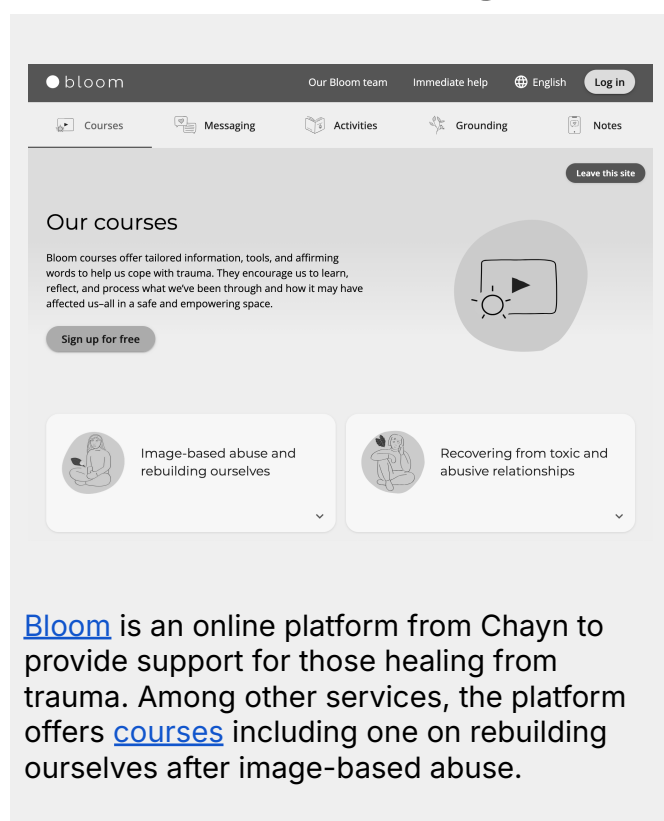
<<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/deepfakes-weaponised-to-target-pakistans-women-leaders>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

¹² Sumair Abdullah, 'Karachi Man Sentenced to 9 Years in Jail for Sharing Indecent Images of Ex-Fiancée', Pakistan, *Dawn*, 07:15:53+05:00 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1878358>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

Kashf Foundation created a TV series, Aik Aur Pakeeza, to raise awareness about non-consensual imagery and its devastating impact.

This report does not consider or suggest Pakistan, Islam, or South Asian cultures as inherently violent or sexist. The harms described here emerge from intersecting systems of patriarchy, power, and unequal access to justice – flawed systems that exist globally, but take different forms in different contexts. We use cultural context not to excuse abuse, but to explain how harm is experienced, interpreted, and intensified. Where terms such as “honour,” “modesty,” or “indecentcy” appear, they reflect the language of laws, media, or perpetrators – not our endorsement of them. Our analysis centres survivors’ lived realities and argues that technology platforms, policymakers, and institutions must design responses that account for cultural difference without reproducing stigma, moral judgement, or racialised narratives of blame.

The Gap in Existing Research



When Chayn began in 2013 as a digital volunteer-run community, one of the biggest gaps we came across was digital safety support for TFGBV. It became a strategic focus for our resources for survivors, including our [Do It Yourself Online Safety](#) guide, and our Bloom course [“Image-based abuse and rebuilding ourselves”](#), our many research projects including the [Orbits report \(2022\)](#) but also for our advocacy and policy work.

Image-based abuse has been studied with growing urgency over the past decade, largely through research conducted in high-income Western countries – Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and to a lesser extent Canada and parts of Europe. This body of work has been

foundational. It has established that image-based abuse is widespread, that more than one in five adults globally report an experience of it, that women bear disproportionate harm, and that perpetrators are most commonly current or former intimate partners.¹³

¹³ Rebecca Umbach, Nicola Henry, and Gemma Beard, 'Prevalence and Impacts of Image-Based Sexual Abuse Victimization: A Multinational Study', *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York, NY, USA), CHI '25, 25 April 2025, pp. 1–20, doi:10.1145/3706598.3713545.

It has documented the psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, social withdrawal, and the structural failures of law enforcement, platforms, and legal systems to adequately protect survivors.¹⁴ And many cross-company and country initiatives to tackle this issue have been founded, including the [Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse](#)

But this research has a geography. Its definitions of what counts as an "intimate" image are rooted in Western legal and cultural frameworks, and its findings reflect the social contexts in which it was conducted. When the term *intimate image* appears in statute, it almost universally refers to images that are nude, partially nude, or explicitly sexual. When prevalence surveys ask whether someone has experienced image-based abuse, they ask about that narrow category. And when platforms build their content moderation systems, they are largely calibrated to detect it. This matters, because that definition excludes a great deal of what this report describes.

Research on technology-facilitated abuse in South Asia has begun to close this gap. A landmark qualitative study by Sambasivan and colleagues, conducted across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh with 199 women and NGO staff, found that online abuse in South Asia is materially different from abuse documented in other contexts.¹⁵ Even minor infractions – a stranger downloading a profile photo, a name leaked to a family group – carried severe consequences including reputational harm, romantic coercion, and physical violence. The study identified personal content leakages as the most severe category of digital abuse, and noted that its prevalence estimates were likely to be significantly underreported because of the stigma and trauma of disclosure. Critically, it also found that South Asian women consistently turned to informal channels rather than platform reporting tools or law enforcement, which were widely experienced as inaccessible or unsafe. These are findings that run throughout this report.

More recently, research published in 2025 drawing on qualitative interviews and surveys with women in Pakistan specifically has confirmed that digital harassment, including non-consensual image sharing, produces anxiety, depression, stress, fear, guilt, self-blame, embarrassment, and sleep disturbance, and that these harms are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, weak legal enforcement, platform failures, and deep social stigma around disclosure.¹⁶ Studies from a feminist lens on online victimisation of women and young people in Pakistan remains scarce – a gap this report directly addresses.

¹⁴Md Mamunur Rashid Sheikh and Michaela M. Rogers, 'Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25.2 (2024), pp. 1614–29, doi:10.1177/15248380231191189.

¹⁵ Nithya Sambasivan and others, "'They Don't Leave Us Alone Anywhere We Go': Gender and Digital Abuse in South Asia", *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York, NY, USA), CHI '19, 2 May 2019, pp. 1–14, doi:10.1145/3290605.3300232.

¹⁶ Rabia Ali, 'Silenced Online: Women's Experiences of Digital Harassment in Pakistan', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 110 (2025), p. 103090, doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103090.

Scoping reviews of technology-facilitated sexual violence in low- and middle-income countries more broadly have found that women across the Global South face forms of digital harm that produce reputational damage, loss of arranged marriage opportunities, educational exclusion, economic consequences, and the threat of physical violence in ways that are not equivalent in Western research contexts.¹⁷ A South Asian study cited in this literature found that reputational damage arising from image-based abuse was rooted specifically in the suspicion of women's complicity in sexual or premarital contact, a dynamic our own research also documents.¹⁸ A further scoping review focused specifically on South and Southeast Asia found that vulnerability to technology-facilitated abuse is not evenly distributed even within these already under-researched contexts. Women who are LGBTQIA+, from lower castes, from ethnic or religious minorities, or who occupy public-facing roles are at significantly heightened risk, frequently targeted through organised harassment campaigns designed to silence their participation in public life.¹⁹ This report documents the same pattern, with forms of image-based abuse shaped specifically by those identities, in ways that compound and intensify the harms faced by all women in this research.

Work by Amina MWRC, a Scottish organisation supporting Muslim and Black and minority ethnic women, has arrived at parallel conclusions from a diaspora perspective. Their *Exposed* campaign, which documents the experiences of Muslim and BME women in Scotland, found that for these women "intimate images" routinely include images without hijab, images showing legs or arms, and images taken in private domestic settings, none of which meet the current legal definition of intimate imagery in Scotland, and none of which would be acted upon by platforms.²⁰ Their casework shows that perpetrators use these images to control and manipulate women, to damage their reputations, and to apply pressure through family and community networks; that fear of honour-based consequences deters women from reporting; and that women describe being "disowned" as the expected outcome of a leaked image. The pattern Amina documents among Muslim women in Scotland closely mirrors what this report finds in Pakistan and across the diaspora. It suggests that these dynamics travel, embedded in culture and community, and are not confined by geography.

The same South and Southeast Asia review notes that a lack of definitional and terminological consensus across researchers, governments, and platforms creates ambiguity that directly compromises prevention and reporting. This is a finding that resonates throughout this report, which documents in detail how platforms' narrow definitions of harmful content leave survivors without recourse, and how survivors themselves cannot always find the language to seek help.²¹

¹⁷ Sheikh and Rogers, 'Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries', 2024.

¹⁸ Sambasivan and others, 'They Don't Leave Us Alone Anywhere We Go'.

¹⁹ Vaiddehi Bansal and others, 'A Scoping Review of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries Across Asia', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 25.1 (2024), pp. 463–75, doi:10.1177/15248380231154614.

²⁰ 'Exposed', n.d. <<https://mwrc.org.uk/vawg/exposed/>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

²¹ Bansal and others, 'A Scoping Review of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries Across Asia'.

Taken together, this body of evidence points to a significant structural problem. The research base, the legal frameworks, and the platform systems that currently govern image-based abuse were all built around a Western-centric, narrowly sexual definition of intimate imagery. That definition fails Muslim women, South Asian women, and women in the Global South more broadly, whose experiences of harm do not fit neatly into it.

This problem has been acknowledged from within the Global South feminist research community itself. A 2024 overview of non-consensual intimate imagery published by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) notes explicitly that the meaning of what constitutes an intimate or sexually explicit image "changes vastly with social and cultural norms and contexts in different parts of the world", and that in jurisdictions where shooting or sharing intimate images is itself considered immoral or illegal, victims face compounded harm, where they are blamed for the existence of the images as much as for their distribution.²² The APC overview puts it plainly – when responses to image-based abuse are rooted in morality rather than consent, they gloss over "the realities of violation of consent, breach of privacy... and the far-reaching impact on the life and wellbeing of the victim".

This report is a contribution to correcting that imbalance. Drawing on 64 original qualitative interviews conducted with women, gender minorities, survivors, legal experts, civil society organisations, law enforcement, and technology platform representatives in Pakistan and the diaspora, it asks a question that the existing literature has not yet answered at this scale or with this depth: what does *intimate* actually mean to women in Pakistan, and what does image-based abuse look like when you start from their answer?

Who's Logged On, Who's Left Out, Who Gets Hurt: The Pakistani Context Technology Use

Understanding technology use in Pakistan is essential to understanding how image-based abuse unfolds, and who is most at risk. Pakistan has one of the world's youngest populations. Roughly 36% of the population is under 15 and 60% falls within the 15-64 working-age group.²³

²²Rohini Lakshané, *Non-Consensual Intimate Imagery: An Overview* (Take Back The Tech, n.d.), doi:0.5281/zenodo.10980144.

²³ United Nations Population Fund, 'Pakistan Population 2025 - United Nations Population Fund | United Nations Population Fund', n.d. <<https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/PK>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

The country's digital landscape has expanded rapidly in recent years. As of October 2025, Pakistan recorded 196 million mobile cellular subscribers, representing almost 79% of the population.²⁴

In reality, though, these numbers tell only part of the story. According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) 2024 Annual Report, Pakistan struggles with a digital gender divide. Men make up the vast majority of users. In 2024, 38% more men than women were reported to own mobiles and use mobile internet. Pakistan consistently ranks among the lowest countries globally for gender parity in digital inclusion, and the barriers shaping this divide are layered, structural,²⁵ and pronounced. The PTA recently felt compelled to act to combat the sweeping exclusion of women from online spaces. In collaboration with UNESCO and the Ministry of IT and Telecom, the PTA developed a Digital Gender Inclusion Strategy with a three-year action plan²⁶ aimed at bringing women from all segments of society into the country's digital transformation.

The reason for that exclusion is multifaceted. Women face limited digital literacy opportunities, unequal access to financial services, and high costs for devices and broadband. Nearly a quarter of adult women do not have a national identity card (CNIC) which is often required to purchase SIMs or open mobile accounts, and obtaining one can itself be out of reach for women whose mobility depends on a male relative, or Mehram (a family member with whom marriage is permanently prohibited), accompanying them or giving their permission. Local-language content remains scarce, and online spaces are widely seen by conservative families as unsafe gateways to "obscenity". Subsequently, many women's technology use is restricted, monitored or controlled by family members through family and patriarchal controls because they offer the opportunity for women and girls to discover literature, content, and people unsupervised. Women continue to have limited access to mobile phones because families fear that men will pursue them for dating, or that they themselves will use the phone to seek relationships.²⁷

Women are often limited to supervised use of their brothers', husband's or father's phone. More than a third of women mobile internet users rely on borrowed devices (35%), compared with just 6% of men.²⁸ This reliance introduces another layer of vulnerability through limited privacy, shared or monitored devices, and heightened exposure to control or surveillance, a situation Chayn staff say is often made light of in movies and TV serials: a giggling girl looking at her phone is immediately suspected of dating, and her male relatives check to ensure that is not the case.

²⁴ Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, Telecom Indicators Overview, 2025'Home', Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, Telecom Indicators Overview, 2025, n.d.

<<https://www.pta.gov.pk/#telecom-indicators-info>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

²⁵ *Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Annual Report 2024*, (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, n.d.) <https://www.pta.gov.pk/assets/media/2024-12-16-pta_annual_report.pdf>.

²⁶ DIGITAL GENDER INCLUSION STRATEGY, (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, n.d.) <<https://www.pta.gov.pk/category/digital-gender-inclusion-strategy-1520570539-2024-07-13>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

²⁷ DIGITAL GENDER INCLUSION STRATEGY.

²⁸ GSMA – *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025*, 2025.

When women do have phones, Chayn staff say they are expected to share passcodes with their male relatives so they can “check” their phone at any time – focusing on their call history and messages. When women and girls are suspected of pushing family boundaries, a common punishment is to take away their mobile phone. Though such attitudes are becoming less common, the change is slow. Together, these conditions create a digital ecosystem where access is unequal by design.

Even so, change is happening. Data from GSMA's 2025 report shows a significant rise in women's mobile internet use, from 33% in 2023 to 45% in 2024, driven largely by rural women. The gender gap in mobile phone usage also dropped by 13% in 2025, reaching a historical low and there are several government and private sector programmes to boost women's participation in technology.²⁹ But the gap has not yet closed. Men's mobile internet use still far outpaces women's at 60% in 2024, and access does not always mean ownership. These disparities are also visible on social media. Pakistan had tens of millions of users across major platforms in 2024: 60.4 million on Facebook, 71.7 million on YouTube, 54.4 million on TikTok, and 17.3 million on Instagram.⁸ Yet women are significantly underrepresented on all of them. The overall gender gap in social media use stands at 59%, with the divide varying by platform: 68% on Facebook, 59% on YouTube, 71% on TikTok, and 41% on Instagram.³⁰

Share of Social Media Users (Jan 2024)

Social Media	Total Users (Millions)	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Facebook	60.4	77%	24%	68%
YouTube	71.7	72%	28%	59%
TikTok	54.4	78%	22%	71%
Instagram	17.3	64%	36%	41%

Source: Pakistan Telecommunications Authority Annual Report 2024

These figures reveal a digital environment where millions of people participate, but not equally. They also help explain why image-based abuse takes the shape it does in

²⁹ GSMA – *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025*.

³⁰ *Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Annual Report 2024*.

Pakistan, and why understanding who has access, who controls that access, and who is left out is essential to the conversations that follow.

Technology–Facilitated Gender–Based Violence (TFGBV)

Digital Violence In Pakistan: From Online Abuse To Real-World Danger

Digital platforms have amplified women's voices, but they have also exposed them to new forms of intimidation designed to silence those very voices

Yumma Hina Khan

Editor's Picks, Features,
Technology

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[The Friday Times](#). The killing of a famous TikTokker sparks national outrage, and forces Pakistan to confront an uncomfortable reality.

As technology adoption has grown in Pakistan, so has its use for harassment, abuse and violence. Yet technology has also offered a platform for ordinary Pakistanis, especially those without family connections and wealth, to build wealth of a new kind: influence. This is most interesting when it comes to women, who – despite a stark digital gender divide and moral policing – continue to consume technology and use platforms to speak freely, engage in entrepreneurship, build communities and share their work.

But women's bodies have always been a battleground for patriarchy, and their presence and power to self-express in the media is a constant threat to patriarchal power structures.

Perhaps the country's most daring, well-known woman on social media was

[Qandeel Baloch](#), whose provocative videos defied social norms: from “revealing” outfits to “suggestive” dancing. [Her most explosive act](#) was exposing Mufti Abdul Qavi, a senior cleric and political figure, by posting selfies and videos from a hotel meeting that showed him smoking during Ramadan and, she claimed, attempting to [be intimate with her](#). The video went viral, costing him his seat on Pakistan's moon-sighting committee and his political party membership. In retaliation he publicly condemned her and set his followers against her. The media uncovered her real name and village origins, unravelling the persona she had carefully constructed, likely to protect herself and her family. A witch hunt followed on social media, drawing the attention of her village, where residents taunted her brother for allowing his sister to bring shame on the family. The public shaming and deliberate honour-bating ultimately cost Qandeel her life when she was murdered by her own brother. The message to Pakistani women was clear: no amount of fame or wealth can protect you if you cross the line of so-called morality.

Qandeel's story is an appropriate metaphor for telling the story of women in Pakistan, where women have some freedom to self-express through digital and broadcast media.

To sing, dance, run a business, gain wealth and fame, own their sexuality, but not to cross arbitrary male-drawn lines of immorality.

Legal Landscape

In 2016, Pakistan introduced the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) – the first comprehensive attempt to address a broad spectrum of online harms. PECA establishes the legal basis for responding to cybercrime, including several provisions relevant to image-based abuse.

Two sections (Section 20 and Section 21) are most often cited in cases involving the non-consensual sharing or manipulation of images. Section 20 deals with “offences against the dignity of a natural person”. It criminalises the intentional sharing of false information – which can include fake images and fake social media accounts – that harms someone’s reputation or privacy, with penalties of up to three years in prison or a fine of up to one million rupees (\$3,500 USD / £2,760 GBP). It also allows individuals to request the removal or blocking of harmful content through the regulatory authority.

Section 21 addresses “offences against the modesty of a natural person and minor”. It includes a range of scenarios: superimposing a person’s face onto sexually explicit imagery, sharing actual images or videos of someone engaged in sexual conduct, threatening someone with sexualised content, or coercing them into creating such material. Penalties here are higher under this section – up to five years’ imprisonment or a fine of up to five million rupees (\$18,000 USD / £14,200 GBP).

A third provision, Section 24, focuses on cyberstalking. It covers persistent unwanted contact, online monitoring, and surveillance that causes fear or distress. Crucially, subsection (d) criminalises taking, displaying, or distributing photographs or videos of someone without their consent in a way that harms them.

Together, these sections form the backbone of the country’s legal response to Image-Based Abuse. But as our conversations with legal experts made clear throughout this research, significant gaps remain, particularly when it comes to protecting people from the non-consensual sharing of *real* images, or those that are not sexually explicit.

As Rida, an independent legal expert explained:

"In Pakistan, we have the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 – PECA – and it was amended recently as well in 2022. There are two specific sections within this law that apply to images of a natural person. Section 20 covers offences against dignity, but it only applies when someone shares something false. So this section is only applicable to a photo that's photoshopped, superimposed, AI-generated – which is good, but it completely lacks the part where actual pictures are shared.

Then there's Section 21, which deals with offences against modesty. It covers intentionally sharing a sexually explicit picture or video. But again, the picture has to be sexual in nature for the offence to apply. And that is where the confusion lies, because the courts have not yet defined what a 'sexually explicit' image actually is."

The following reflections were shared by a senior Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)³¹ official who highlighted that **whilst there are some provisions under the PECA laws for non-nude images, the problem often lies in everyday images that can still be used to harm, for which there is limited legal protection:**

پیکا میں کچھ حد تک پروویژنز ہیں۔ مگر مسئلہ یہ ہے کہ ہمارے ہاں "غیرت" اور کلچر کی وجہ سے نارمل چیزیں بھی جرم یا سکنڈل بن جاتی ہیں۔ شادی میں ڈانس کی ویڈیو بھی مسئلہ بن سکتی ہے۔ سوات میں ایک بڑا کیس مشہور ہوا تھا۔ وہ پولیس کا کیس تھا۔ ہمارے پاس نہیں آیا۔ لیکن ویڈیو شیئر ہونے کے بعد لڑکیوں کو قتل کر دیا گیا۔ صرف اس بنیاد پر کہ وہ شادی میں موجود تھیں اور ڈانس دیکھ رہی تھیں۔

"PECA has provisions to some extent. Offences against the modesty of a person or minor. Modesty is different between Western culture and here in Pakistan. But the problem is that because of the "honour" culture here, even normal things can become a scandal or trigger violence. A dance video from a wedding can become an issue. A major case in Swat became famous. It was a police case, not ours. But after a video was shared, girls were killed by their tribe, simply because they were at a wedding and watching a boy dance."³²

These gaps reflect a wider challenge. While Pakistan has laws that can be applied to image-based abuse, the legal framework does not yet fully reflect the realities of how harm is experienced, or how vulnerability is shaped by gender, culture, and technology. This ambiguity shapes reporting, legal interpretation, and ultimately the protection available to those affected.

Pakistan is not the only place where we see the limits of judicial systems when it comes to offering redress to survivors of image-based abuse. For example, for Pakistani diaspora communities in the UK, similar barriers persist. A [2023 report by Refuge](#) showed that in only 4% of all offences recorded across 24 police forces from January 2019 to July 2022, was the alleged offender charged or summoned.

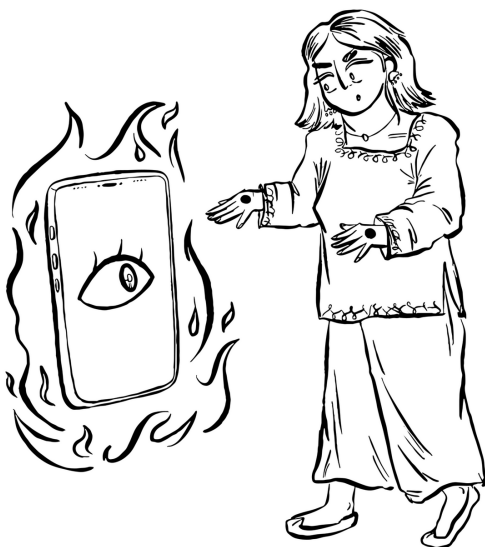
³¹ The FIA was the regulatory body that was responsible for cybercrimes in Pakistan in its cybercrime wing up until 2024 and was later replaced by the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency (NCCIA)

³² 'Kohistan Video Murders: Three Guilty in "honour Killing" Blood Feud', Asia, BBC News, 5 September 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-49592540>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

Despite laws criminalising image-based abuse, women were too often faced with police forces incapable of adequately responding to the crimes they were reporting. Women reported experiencing victim blaming, cultural insensitivity, lack of understanding of the impact and implications, and failure to collect evidence. The current legal framework in the UK would offer no protection to any woman whose experience of image-based abuse did not involve nudity or sexually explicit content, but the reality on the ground also shows that it is not enough for laws to change. Training and incentives must be there for the police to actually investigate these crimes and give them the attention they deserve, or we will carry on seeing survivors failed by a system that does not understand or protect them.

Findings

1. Cultural and Social Norms Shape Understandings of Gender and Privacy



Across interviews, participants described a social landscape where judgments about what is “intimate,” “private,” or “inappropriate” cannot be separated from the cultural, religious, and political forces that shape everyday life in Pakistan. These perceptions do not emerge in a vacuum. They are produced, and constantly reinforced, through patriarchy, family authority, class, caste, religion, sects, tribal justice systems, and a pervasive sense of being watched. Women described growing up in environments where these norms feel both omnipresent and inescapable, even as some younger people push back or

reinterpret them. What constitutes “intimacy” is therefore not simply a personal preference, it is the product of a value system that is deeply layered, heavily gendered, and often policed with real consequences.

Even when Pakistani families leave Pakistan for other countries, these conditions and beliefs persist. One participant described experiencing these norms held even more rigidly in diaspora settings – enforced in opposition to a local culture that affords women greater freedom and independence, as a means of preserving what is framed as a Pakistani domestic environment, even when those boundaries are out of sync with evolving values back home. Diaspora communities often enforce these strict boundaries on women and girls in the name of Pakistani culture, when in reality they can be out of step with a country that is itself opening up.

Patriarchy and the status of women

Pakistan is a country with many different perspectives on the role of women, and seeing women in leadership is not unheard of. Women occupy prominent spaces in broadcast media, teaching professions, medicine, fashion, and increasingly, political parties.³³ Pakistan's first female head of state, Benazir Bhutto, was elected in 1988. The United States, Japan, Spain, Egypt and China have still not had one. However, all of these signs of gender progress do not negate the tight control of women's clothing and physical presence in public spaces.

For many of our research participants, the starting point for understanding what is seen as intimate, private or "inappropriate" is the wider position of women in Pakistan. They described growing up in a deeply patriarchal society in which, as one participant put it, women's agency is "defined" by the patriarchal head of the household. Where women's lives are tightly shaped by male authority and where patriarchy filters into almost everything. While young boys also face restrictive gender moulds they are supposed to stay within – young girls are "told what [they're] supposed to do", how to behave, who they may speak to, and where they can go.

Several participants stressed that in many communities, women are seen primarily as homemakers and peacekeepers, with little right to public voice or decision-making. Even when women push back, there is a strong sense that "these cultural things replicate into our households" and are passed down "from generation to generation." They described areas, especially in rural and tribal regions, where literacy among women is very low,³⁴ where "very few women are able to complete their high school and secondary school," and where access to education or healthcare is withheld "just because they are women".

Education, or the lack of it, becomes part of the mechanism through which restrictive norms endure.

Zarghuna, a survivor we spoke with based in Balochistan, recalled a prominent religious scholar declaring that "there are two core women in Pakistan...a dead woman and a woman in a home."

She found this "pathetic" and psychologically devastating, because it captured how women are imagined, with their "best place" understood to be either the grave or domestic confinement, not in classrooms, workplaces or public roles.

Control over women's lives is described as early, intimate, and pervasive. Women talked about needing permission to study and work, including where and in what capacity. One participant, herself a teacher, said her parents allowed her to work at a school but did

³³ JournalismPakistan.com, 'Women in Media', Journalism Pakistan, n.d.
<<https://www.journalismpakistan.com/women-in-media/>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

³⁴ Statistics from the 2023 Pakistan National Census Report show that women's literacy rates in urban areas were 69.4%, compared with 47.5% in rural areas [[Source: Gallup](#)] and the [2024-2025 Economic Survey](#) showed that literacy rates in the general population were 74.09% in urban areas compared with 51.56% in rural areas.

not allow her to become a lawyer or exist in spaces where there were too many men. Others described contexts where they are expected to seek permission from “a lot of people, not only from their parents, but also their relatives” before sharing their thoughts or pursuing opportunities. In some provinces, one woman said she does not show her face even to the watchman outside her home, and men “never allow their ladies to go outside” freely.

Participants described systems of purdah³⁵ taken “to the extreme level,” where women are fully veiled and expected to go out only when accompanied by fathers, brothers, or other male relatives. Going out alone was described as very difficult, bringing predictable harassment from strangers and even from male relatives such as cousins and uncles. One woman said that in her province “all women...face this thing,” from shopkeepers to neighbours.

Others pointed out that women are harassed even when “completely covered,” leading them to reject the idea that safety depends on dress: “it’s not a matter of what you are wearing...no woman should ever be held accountable for that” – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad).

Participants were clear that the consequences for stepping outside these controls can be extremely serious. They spoke about honour killings, femicide, rapes, and acid attacks as ongoing realities. One woman described hospital cases in which women arrived with severe bruises, head injuries, and other trauma but still insisted they had “fallen,” too afraid to say they had been beaten by husbands, brothers or parents, especially while those men were present. Others recounted incidents in which rumours or images of women dancing, clapping at a wedding,³⁶ or holding a boy’s hand³⁷ were followed by their murder in the name of honour. Interviewees referenced hundreds of women killed in reported honour killing cases in a single year³⁸ and stressed that behind these numbers sit reputational anxieties and “the ego of our elder men,” defended at women’s expense.

While the actual number of honour killings is impossible to determine – given that families often do not report such crimes and police forces frequently fail to investigate them³⁹ – the repeated references to honour killings in our interviews paint a bleak picture. **They reveal a context in which the possibility of a leaked image is**

³⁵ a religious and cultural practice of segregation between men and women

³⁶ AFP, ‘Outrage as “Honour-Killing” Whistle-Blower Shot Dead in Pakistan’, Al Jazeera, n.d. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/8/outrage-as-honour-killing-whistle-blower-shot-dead-in-pakistan>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

³⁷ ‘4 Arrested in “Honor Killing” of 18-Year-Old Pakistani Woman after Doctored Photo with Her Boyfriend Goes Viral - CBS News’, 1 December 2023 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/honor-killing-pakistan-doctored-photo-woman-boyfriend-goes-viral-arrests/>> [accessed 18 May 2026]; ‘4 Arrested in “Honor Killing” of 18-Year-Old Pakistani Woman after Doctored Photo with Her Boyfriend Goes Viral - CBS News’.

³⁸ Farah Zia, *2025-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2024-REV* (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2025) <<https://hrcp-web.org/hrpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2024-REV.pdf>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

³⁹ Zia, *2025-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2024-REV*.

inextricably linked to the possibility of death, creating a pervasive climate of fear in which the internet can become a lethal environment.

This dynamic, in which the same platforms that offer women connectivity and opportunity become vectors for control and harm, is not incidental to women's digital lives in Pakistan. It is structural. Research on women's experiences of digital harassment in Pakistan confirms that online spaces reproduce and amplify the same gender hierarchies that organise offline life: the systemic nature of online abuse is embedded within existing cultures, systems, and policies that produce and sustain gender inequality.⁴⁰ What our research adds to this picture is the specific mechanism through which that inequality operates in relation to images.

Culture, religion and morality

Participants repeatedly emphasised how culture and religion are blurred in everyday discourse. "When the word culture comes," Muneeba in the UK observed, "it is unconsciously interchanged with religion". This fusion allows social norms to be framed as sacred obligations. If a woman is criticised for her behaviour or appearance, it is often said that she is "not following religion," and therefore "not following our culture".

While Pakistan does not have a mandatory hijab or body covering law or morality police like neighbouring Islamic Republic of Iran,⁴¹ the expectation of being modestly dressed prevails across every facet of life.⁴² Historically, South Asian women covered their heads or bodies loosely with a dupatta leaving other body parts like their midriff uncovered when wearing Sari.⁴³ This reflects ancient cultural practices that clash with the more conservative interpretations of Islam which arrived in the Indian sub-continent in waves, beginning with the Arab conquest of Sindh in 711 CE and consolidating more substantially through the Ghaznavid and Mughal periods between the 11th and 16th centuries.^{44,45}

Muslims now constitute more than 600 million people across the region,⁴⁶ and more conservative interpretations of Islam have grown more strongly since the 1980s, accelerated by state-sponsored Islamisation programmes and transnational religious

⁴⁰ Rabia Ali, 'Silenced Online: Women's Experiences of Digital Harassment in Pakistan', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 110 (2025), p. 103090, doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103090.

⁴¹ Iran: New Hijab Law Adds Restrictions and Punishments | Human Rights Watch, 14 October 2024

<<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/14/iran-new-hijab-law-adds-restrictions-and-punishment>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁴² 'Advancing Muslim Modest Fashion Clothing', *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, 20.1 (2024), doi:10.4018/JCAD.346369.

⁴³ 'Dressing the Indian Woman through History', Magazine, *BBC News*, 6 December 2014 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30330693>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁴⁴ Ghulam Abbas, *Evolving Islamic Styles of Dressing in the Punjab, Pakistan*, 2021.

⁴⁵ 'CLOTHING', n.d. <<http://char.txa.cornell.edu/islamicclothes.htm>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁴⁶ Nuraisah Nuraisah and others, 'Modern Islamic Civilization in South and Southeast Asia', *International Journal of Educational Narratives*, 1.5 (2023), pp. 211–30, doi:10.55849/ijen.v1i5.338.



The Women's Action Forum (WAF) and Pakistan Women Lawyers' Association (PWLA) in 1983 during their historic march to Lahore High Court to challenge the law of evidence.

© Azhar Jaffery

networks.⁴⁷⁴⁸ When the military dictator [Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq \(Zia\)](#) enforced Martial Law in 1978, the decade that would follow would see the most repressive gendered laws and policies in Pakistan where, according to an [academic](#), "religion and culture were amalgamated in such a way that it became impossible for common people to distinguish between the two". His policies included a "Hudood ordinance" which introduced strict punishments for adultery, a term the law made indistinguishable from rape, meaning a woman reporting rape could find herself charged with adultery instead, since in doing so she had admitted to sex outside marriage.⁴⁹⁵⁰ It also introduced mandatory head coverings for women in public, including on television, where actors were absurdly expected to be shown sleeping with their heads covered, much to the ridicule of viewers.⁵¹

This cultural and legal precedent lasted many decades and resulted in a coordinated women's rights movement, one that faced state brutality for many years.⁵²⁵³ The narratives set by the clergy and political figures in Zia's time have been difficult to shake and the clergy remain a formidable norm-shaping force in Pakistan.

Several participants were clear that many of these practices are *not* rooted in Islamic teaching as they understand it. One woman described it as "*patriarchal society using culture and religion*" to keep women confined, while insisting that Islam itself is more

⁴⁷ Aliva Mishra, 'Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh', *India Quarterly*, 68.3 (2012), pp. 283–96, doi:10.1177/0974928412454606.

⁴⁸ Ishaq Ahmad and Shahida Aman, 'Women's Rights in Pakistan: A Study of Religious and Alternate Discourses Regarding Women's Participation in Politics', *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 5.1 (2021), pp. 123–38, Pakistan, doi:10.47264/idea.lassij/5.1.9.

⁴⁹ Martin Lau, *Twenty-Five Years of Hudood Ordinances- A Review*, n.d.

⁵⁰ Mohammad Omar Farooq, 'Rape and Hudood Ordinance: Perversions of Justice in the Name of Islam', SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 1525412 (Social Science Research Network, 1 December 2006), doi:10.2139/ssrn.1525412.

⁵¹ Muhammad Ali, *Political Influences on Sartorial Trends in Pakistani Television Drama | The Karachi Collective*, 13 March 2023

<<https://thekarachicollective.com/political-influences-on-sartorial-trends-in-pakistani-television-drama/>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁵² Rahat Imran and Imran Munir, *Defying Marginalization: Emergence of Women's Organizations and the Resistance Movement in Pakistan: A Historical Overview*, 19.6 (2018).

⁵³ 'The Pakistani Woman's Crusade against the System', Dawn, 00:00:00+05:00

<<http://beta.dawn.com/news/879183/the-pakistani-woman-s-crusade-against-the-system>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

egalitarian and protective of women than local practice suggests. Another spoke of the dissonance in living in a “religious country” where women are still not safe, despite religious teachings about their protection and dignity.

“Islam, in its essence, is a very liberal, very modern, very rational religion. But when it comes to culture and the traditional norms that people have been living by since centuries, those are man made. Those are specifically policed and made by men. I think that distinction is not there anymore in our society....I think the interpretation of Islam is [as it is because] we don't have many Muslim women scholars in Pakistan. So we don't have that feminist lens of looking at religion and that interpretation. Men will talk about how women should be at home. They should be housewives and look after their children and everything, but they don't talk about the various different role models that have lived before us” – Warda, Faisalabad, Survivor.

Within this context, concepts like *purdah* (gender segregation and veiling), *haya* (modesty), and *sharam* (shame) become everyday tools for judging whether a woman is “within bounds” or has crossed a line, even when there is no consensus on where that line actually is.

Several women drew attention to the selective way that men invoke culture and religion to keep this control in place. One participant described men who present themselves as feminists in public or who socialise freely with women with different value systems, yet would never want their own sisters or wives to behave or dress the same way. Culture, she suggested, is often used “for their convenience,” allowing men to appear progressive when it benefits them while upholding conservative rules at home. Others described similar double standards around women’s work, clothing or mobility, reinforcing the sense that women’s visibility is always conditional and always open to judgement, while men’s behaviour is granted far more leeway.

For religious minorities in Pakistan, an image or photograph shared out of context can trigger serious consequences. Blasphemy laws contain no precise definition of what counts as blasphemous, and they often prescribe the death penalty or life imprisonment.⁵⁴ Through the lens of these laws and sectarian suspicion, they can destroy not just a reputation but an entire community. Christian women are also seen to be more proximate to Western society and for many men, this comes with the unwarranted assumption that they are more sexually open. This makes them a target for repeated sexual harassment, one where the stakes for them to report Muslim men can be deadly.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *PAKISTAN Use and Abuse of the Blasphemy Laws*, (Amnesty International, 1994) <<https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa330081994en.pdf>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁵⁵ ‘What’s Wrong With Blasphemy Laws?’, *End Blasphemy Laws*, n.d. <<https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/whats-wrong-with-blasphemy-laws/>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁵⁶ *Pakistan Full Country Dossier*, (Open Doors International, 2024) <https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Pakistan-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf> [accessed 18 May 2026].

As a result, the Christian women we interviewed described navigating images and privacy in ways that would sound familiar to any Pakistani woman. One participant spoke about spending years barely putting her face online at all out of fear that photos could be edited, taken out of context, or used to blackmail her. When she did use Facebook, she kept her friends list tightly controlled, reasoning that if a picture were ever misused, she could trace it back to its source. Another described the exhausting arithmetic of any photo taken in mixed-gender company: who is standing next to whom, whether arms are showing, whether someone might start asking questions about what she was doing there.

While Christians face religious violence, they occupy a complicated but partially protected status as "People of the Book" within Islamic theological frameworks. Hindus are afforded no such theological recognition, and are frequently cast as "Indian adjacent", with their presence in Pakistan refracted through the lens of partition, suspicion, and national belonging.⁵⁷

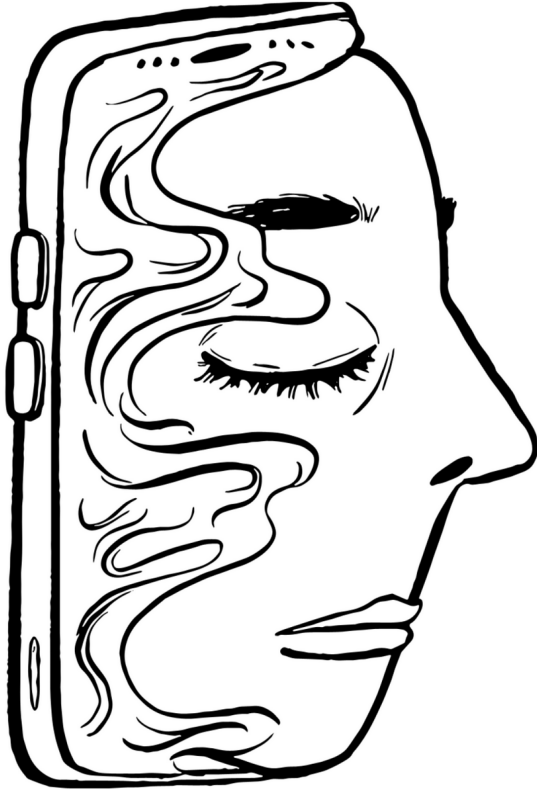
In one account shared during our research, a university student described taking part in Holi celebrations, something she described participating in to make Hindu classmates feel welcome, not because of any religious affiliation. Someone posted a photograph on a public Snapchat story. The backlash was immediate, framing the students as enemies of Pakistan's culture and Islamic values. "They will really cleverly put in the religious side," she observed, "just to play with people's emotions".

The result is a particular kind of self-erasure. For religious minorities in Pakistan, choosing what to share online is an act of community risk management as well as a matter of protecting personal reputation. It is a constant, exhausting awareness that visibility itself can have consequences that extend far beyond the individual.

The accusation that progressive values are "un-Islamic" or "imported Western culture" – weaponised against individual women, religious minorities, and transgender people – is also deployed at scale to delegitimize entire movements for women's rights. Nighat Dad, the founder of Digital Rights Foundation, described how her work on women's digital rights and her involvement in the Aurat March, one of Pakistan's largest feminist mobilisations, made her institution a target. "They [the establishment] were just so scared...why are these women on the road?" Her organisation was accused of importing Western values, undermining Islamic structures, and provoking women into independence. When #MeToo cases emerged in Pakistan, she noted, they were dismissed as propaganda: "for Western money, for funding", rather than recognised as a legitimate response to abuse.

⁵⁷ *DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN PAKISTAN: AN ANALYSIS OF FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL LAWS*, (All Party Parliamentary Group APPG FoRB International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2014)
<<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/RESEARCH-DOCUMENT-1-discrimination-against-religious-minorities.-Analysis.pdf>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

Honour, family reputation, and collective accountability



A strong theme across interviews was the idea that a woman is rarely seen as an individual. Her choices and her visibility are read as reflections on her family, clan, or community. Nida, a survivor based in Lahore, captured this by saying that intimacy is not just the “face you keep to the people around you, but also the face your family has kept to the people around *them*.”

This plays out as intense pressure to avoid anything that might bring shame on the family, especially in relation to gender, sexuality, and marriage. Participants spoke about women being prevented from choosing partners, blocked from love marriages, or pressured into cousin or child marriages to preserve caste and family alliances. Defying these expectations can be seen as dishonouring the wider group, with serious social or even physical consequences.

ہمارے کلچر میں مذہب اور ثقافتی روایات یہ طے کرتی ہیں کہ عورت کے لیے “عزت” اور “وقار” کیا ہے۔ اسی طرح، ٹرانس خواتین اور ٹرانس مردوں کو جب وہ پبلک گروپس میں ہوتے ہیں تو کہا جاتا ہے: “تم ٹرانس جینڈر نہیں ہو سکتے۔ تم میرے بھائی ہو۔ اگر تم اس طرح کے کپڑے پہنو گے تو میری عزت پر سوال اٹھے گا۔ اور اگر تم نے کوئی تصویر یا ویڈیو ڈالی تو تم قتل کے قابل ہو جاؤ گے

“In our culture, religion and cultural practices shape what is considered “honor” and “dignity” around women. In the same way, trans women and trans men in public groups are told: “You can’t be transgender. You’re my brother. If you dress like that, it raises questions about my honor. And if you post a picture or video, you could become ‘worthy of being killed.’” – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender woman

In some regions, tribal and jirga⁵⁸ systems sit above the formal justice system, deciding what is right or wrong and who should be punished. Participants described these councils as male-dominated bodies where women’s voices are absent and where

⁵⁸ A jirga is a traditional council of male elders used to settle disputes in Pashtun and other tribal communities across Pakistan and Afghanistan. Operating outside the formal legal system, jirgas hold significant social authority but their rulings are not legally binding. Gul Hasan, Ali Azeem, and Jalal Faiz, ‘Jirga: A Historical Institute’, *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 4.1 (2023), pp. 159–68, doi:10.47205/jdss.2023(4-1)15.

decisions can include extreme penalties, including femicide and [honour killings](#).⁵⁹ In such environments, anything that challenges prescribed gender roles, perceived modesty, or family honour becomes high-risk.

Fear of constant scrutiny

Across the interviews, women described a cultural atmosphere in which being watched is a deeply embedded social expectation. Participants spoke about an internalised “constant person in everybody’s head” – an imagined audience they consult before doing anything.

They described editing themselves in anticipation of judgement, downsizing their hopes, or moderating their public presence to stay within what one woman called “the standard of basic decency that we all understand”. This internalised gaze operates as a kind of socially-inflicted moral compass, shaping what is understood to be intimate, and this appeared to be the same for women from a range of backgrounds, including those in the public eye. Ayesha Omar, a Pakistani actor and one of the country’s most popular performers, described the psychological toll of this constant self-monitoring:



“There’s a constant weighing [about how you will be perceived]. There’s a lot going on inside my head all the time...it does create constant pressure and constant anxiety inside you about how you’re going to be perceived and seen, but I have worked on my self state and how other things affect me, how my nervous system reacts to things. So I am reacting better to all those feelings and emotions, but they still exist. It takes a lot of inner work, and it takes a lot of resilience, to get through it.” – Ayesha Omar

This constant surveillance, both real and anticipated, forms part of the broader value system that shapes what is considered private in Pakistan. In this context, privacy is never just personal. It is relational, layered, and tied to the standing of the wider family. Crucially, the anticipation of being watched, including imagining how an image might be interpreted, misread or condemned, was described as almost as powerful as actual surveillance. Participants spoke about censoring themselves in advance, withdrawing from public spaces or avoiding visibility altogether because harm *might* happen. This

⁵⁹ Frances Mao, Kelly Ng, and Muhammad Zubair, ‘Pakistan: Woman Killed after Being Seen with Man in Viral Photo’, Asia, *BBC News*, 28 November 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-67551554>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

internalised fear operated as a form of control in its own right, shaping what women feel safe to share, how they inhabit digital and physical spaces, and what must remain hidden in order to preserve psychological and social safety.

Over time, this anticipatory self-monitoring narrows women's sense of safety and autonomy, producing harm even in the absence of direct intervention or punishment.

"I think we were designed to think this way, because all of the people that are following us on our Facebook or Instagram, Twitter, wherever on social media, whoever is part of our group, they're going to look at us in a certain way. And we're always very aware of the way they're looking at us. So before they look at us the same way, we're going to inspect ourselves in that manner." – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

Together, these beliefs, norms, and value systems form the backdrop against which women decide what feels intimate, private, or risky. They are not merely individual preferences but reflections of a social order that closely regulates women's visibility, imposes collective accountability, and defines what is permissible through deeply rooted cultural and religious narratives. The perceptions described in later sections of this report emerge directly from this context.

Social background, class, and region

Social background, class, caste, and region weave into this contextual landscape of beliefs and norms, shaping what different groups view as intimate and how strictly norms are enforced. Participants emphasised that there is no single "Pakistani culture," but multiple, overlapping worlds whose value systems vary dramatically. Urban centres like Karachi and Islamabad were described as spaces where attitudes can be more flexible, whereas rural and tribal areas were portrayed as far more restrictive, with limited education for women and stronger adherence to traditional norms.

Class shaped perceptions too. Some women noted that self-identified middle-class communities (educated, urban families spanning a wide income range) can be highly conservative, with strong notions of shame and propriety, while certain lower-income communities were perceived as more practically open. Caste and ethnic background added further layers, dictating who one can marry, what constitutes dishonour, and how families respond to transgressions. In places like Balochistan, some participants linked local attitudes to Afghan cultural influences, noting that these cross-border traditions continue to shape ideas about women's visibility and conduct.

LGBTQ+ stigma and intimacy

Transgender, queer, and nonbinary people have a rich history in South Asia, historically holding respected roles across South Asian culture,⁶⁰ from Hindu mythology to Mughal

⁶⁰ Anushka Sisodia, 'The (Dis)Continuity of Colonial Era Legislation on Gender and Sexuality in India', CJLPA, 10 March 2026
<<https://www.cjlp.org/post/the-dis-continuity-of-colonial-era-legislation-on-gender-and-sexuality-in-india>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

courts where Khwajasiras (a respectful term for third-gender or transgender people) occupied positions of power. British colonialism introduced Victorian moral codes that criminalised and stigmatised gender variance and embedded them into laws like Section 377,⁶¹ which to this day criminalises all sexual acts "against the order of nature". In Pakistan, conservative interpretations now frame transgender identity as "un-Islamic," despite its deep historical roots, making Khwajasiras targets for violence.⁶²

That is why for transgender women, the intersection between religion and culture carries even greater risks and challenges to navigate, particularly in more conservative areas, as one participant explained:

"Trans women in KP [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa], make sure that, if they are public figures especially, if they're activists, they would make sure that they're always covering their head. They're wearing very traditional feminine clothing... They would make sure that they're being as culturally sensitive as possible, just to make sure that nobody can come and point it out and say 'this isn't something that aligns with our values, that this is an imported "culture" that you're bringing into our society'....[In these places] you have to be a lot more mindful about these things, and have to wear the headscarf, for instance. Not necessarily the hijab, which is a religious practice, but just generally covering your head, because even going too much into a religious practice is something that can be used against trans people. A lot of people use the argument that you guys are fundamentally against our religion, so don't do anything associated with this religion, because that would be blasphemy, and we will persecute you for it. So safety in this manner is such a tricky, complex, interlayered subject that we have to navigate every day." – Afireen, Karachi, Survivor

For queer and queer-presenting participants, social norms further altered what is defined as intimate or private. Being visibly queer, or simply perceived as such, was described as inherently risky. Here, "intimacy" becomes less about closeness or privacy and more about marking someone as deviant. It collapses gender, sexuality, and respectability into a single label that can justify exclusion or punishment.



Across interviews, participants described how this social stigma reshapes what is treated as intimate or private, because visibility itself is seen as provocation. A transgender woman described how images she posted on her private account were taken and circulated publicly as a

77&oldid=1342787063> [accessed 18

Bullets": Pakistan's Trans Community
The Guardian, 27 January 2026
 !026/jan/27/pakistan-transgender-attacks

form of humiliation – turned into memes, framed as spectacle, and used to deny her personhood. *“They just can’t conceptualise the idea of there being a trans woman in the society”*. That risk was described as relational as well as individual. One participant explained that even cisgender friends often only felt comfortable appearing on her private account because of the backlash they could face if their families or communities discovered they were friends with a transgender person. Association alone could trigger suspicion, and with it, safety concerns:

“People have this very weird perception that just because... you’re friends with a queer person... you yourself might be queer as well.” – Afreen, Karachi, Survivor

Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that intimacy is produced by context and audience. One described how queer people manage their online presence through aggressive blocking and curation because “just one photo” can move through WhatsApp groups and into family hands. Another described a case where a friend lost their job after their images were shared in a WhatsApp group. What is defined as intimate here is not the image itself, but the social meaning imposed on it.

This meaning was also described as geographically and politically influenced. One participant reflected on the heightened sexualisation of transgender women in places such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where transgender identity is widely presumed to signal sex work, regardless of a person’s actual life or intentions. In that context, even an ordinary public-facing image could attract sexualised harassment and solicitation, because it is perceived through a pre-existing script. Another participant connected this to organised scapegoating where conservative political actors were described as actively villainising transgender people as a “Western insurgency,” making their visibility an easy target because the community is “not empowered enough to actually fight back”. Images can become powerful tools of incitement of public outrage when dressed up as an affront to culture and religion with deadly results.

Several participants gave recent examples of how quickly public visibility can be framed as unacceptable intimacy. One cited the backlash against a DJ after their public set in Lahore was well attended by the LGBTQ+ community. An event where she was “literally just being herself and DJ’ing” was followed by “so many death threats online”. Others noted that within queer circles there can be heightened sensitivity because images are understood as potential leverage where people may intentionally take “dangerous pictures” to expose someone’s political or sexual identity.

These dynamics also shaped how participants perceived institutions. One interview highlighted a gap between how transgender people understood the privacy of self-expression and how officials may interpret it. For some, images that reflect their real expression such as wearing women’s clothing and the opportunity to present as their true selves were described as private content – images that should not be shared without consent. Yet, some officials may dismiss complaints of these images being shared non-consensually saying things like *“you are already like this, so what is the issue?”* Participants described law enforcement judging gender expression itself, questioning

whether it is “real” or “fake”, which then affects whether cases are taken seriously, how they are recorded, and whether transgender people report at all.

In these accounts, the social response to LGBTQ+ identity not only intensifies stigma, but actively redraws the boundaries of what counts as intimate or private. For queer and transgender people, and even those associated with them, “intimacy” can become a label imposed from the outside – one that converts visibility into alleged sexual deviance and private life into public evidence.

Language and literacy

Language itself emerged as a critical site where education, literacy, and interpretation intersect. One participant explained that while educated generations may be more accustomed to words carrying multiple meanings, particularly in English, this flexibility does not always translate across languages or audiences. Reflecting on the term *intimate*, she noted that English words often contain layers of meaning. For her, in Urdu, the meaning around sensitive words can feel more fixed and explicit, and provide greater clarity, while English risked ambiguity and misinterpretation. This gap in semantic understanding matters, because when a word is read narrowly, or through a sexualised lens, it shapes how images and interactions are judged.

These risks were amplified by reliance on automated translation tools. Participants noted that when *intimate* is translated through platforms such as Google Translate, it is often rendered as words like *mubāshrat* (intercourse). This collapses the concept of intimacy into sex alone, erasing emotional, familial, intellectual, spiritual, or non-sexual forms of closeness. As one senior official explained, once intimacy is understood only as sexual, any discussion involving the term becomes suspect, and potentially dangerous. Even intellectual intimacy, or the sharing of ideas, can then be seen as transgressive.

This linguistic ambiguity has practical consequences. We even noted in our research that the word *intimate* itself became a barrier at times. Not everyone understood it in the way intended, and in some contexts it actively narrowed the conversation. As a result, we increasingly shifted to using the word *private* instead – which emerged as less ambiguous, less sexualised, and more readily understood across educational and linguistic divides. This is one reason why Chayn favours the term *image-based abuse* rather than *intimate image-based abuse*, as the former avoids unintended meanings, misinterpretation, or a narrowing of understanding to a very specific experience.

Education, in this sense, is not just academic. It is linguistic and a gateway to alternative interpretations of propriety and morality. It shapes how words are understood, how images are perceived, and how quickly behaviour is sexualised or framed as dishonourable.

Women who had studied in larger cities or abroad described seeing attitudes shift. Exposure to different ideas, different people, different languages and different norms allowed some families and individuals to rethink what should be considered intimate or

inappropriate. Yet even in these settings, education does not always erase the weight of cultural expectations. Women with university degrees or professional experience still described monitoring themselves, anticipating judgement, and feeling accountable to extended family. Across the interviews, education shaped how tightly communities held to traditional ideas about shame, honour, and female visibility, and how open they were to reinterpreting them.

2. Intimacy Has No Fixed Definitions in Pakistan

When we asked people in Pakistan and the diaspora what “intimate” meant, we did not get a single, stable definition. Instead, we observed that survivors thought of intimacy as a spectrum. Their interpretations of intimacy ranged from nudity or sexual acts, to emotional vulnerability, to anything that could put a woman in danger under local norms. It is clear that there is a shared awareness in Pakistan and Pakistani culture that the meaning of “intimate” is both deeply personal and heavily policed.

Across interviews, most participants didn’t introduce image-based abuse as a new or niche phenomenon. They described it as something people already talked about in families, online, and in their communities. They referenced high-profile cases and other local or community examples, with many stories instilling fear, and some reinforcing blame.

Participants described generational, class and socioeconomic differences, alongside varying degrees of conservatism and traditional mindsets. Amna, a survivor originally from Punjab but living in the UK, noted that what her aunt considers “*the highest level of indecency*” in Pakistan is seen as perfectly “*decent*” in her UK context. Her sister, born and raised in Britain, posts photos that would cause conflict back home, but which feel normal to her. Another survivor, Ifrah, based in Canada, pointed out that what counts as intimate in Karachi varies “*along class lines*,” even within a single city.

At the same time, many participants pointed out that how people define “intimate” is very much dependent on their individual situation and the family and home environment in which they were raised. They spoke about how large differences in what is considered to be appropriate, private or intimate can exist even within groups of people with similar demographic backgrounds. It seemed that individual perceptions of what counted as “intimate” was influenced by the norms, values, and world views that people were exposed to within their own circles.

Many women highlighted the sharp disconnect between Western definitions of intimate and the vastly broader Pakistani reality. A woman without a headscarf, a woman sitting in her home, or a woman standing near an unrelated man would not be flagged as intimate by Western definitions, but all can carry severe consequences in Pakistan. One interviewee described this as “a 180-degree difference,” a gap so wide that international definitions fail to protect those most at risk.

It is worth noting that nearly every participant emphasised that intimacy is gendered. Men can appear in photos, post gym pictures, hold hands with other men, and travel at night, without triggering moral scrutiny. Women doing the same things are quickly labelled “loose,” “bad,” or “disrespectful” no matter how benign the image itself is. As Muneeba, a participant originally from Faisalabad but living in the UK put it: “When the conversation of having photos online [comes up], it’s always associated with the female. It’s never thought, oh, a man’s [photo] is going to be online – they wouldn’t care”. Supporting this, one participant shared a powerful reflection that was shared with her by a family member:

“Man and woman are like a black and white dress. A black dress can take the biggest of stains and not show. The littlest of dirt will show up as a stain on the white dress.”

Within this variation, a number of threads kept reappearing around the meaning of “intimate”, including **consent**, **sexual/cultural transgression**, and **personal closeness**. Many participants also drew a distinction between what is **private**, and what is intimate. Each understood differently depending on who was speaking, where they lived, and how tightly they felt bound to religious, social or cultural rules. As one participant explained, context is not background, it is the whole interpretation.

For some, it begins with consent

What makes an image “intimate” or “private” is not only what is shared, but whether its owner chose to share it. “Nothing should be shared without consent” said Ifrah.

Muneeba, in the UK, said her own definition of intimate was more to do with “some personal...video, photograph or personal space that shouldn’t be shared with others without your permission”. For her, the words ‘personal’ and ‘consent’ sit at the centre of intimacy. If something happened “in my own personal space... and I wouldn’t want anyone else to know about it,” then it is intimate.

This logic also shaped how some women think about risk. Muneeba went on to explain that even a photo that is not culturally appropriate stops feeling intimate or threatening if everyone in it knowingly consents to posting and accepts the possible consequences:

“If all four people in the picture are okay...that if there is a picture going online, it might reach anyone...if they’re okay with it, then I wouldn’t say it’s intimate anymore...Maybe before sharing it, it was intimate. But once you share it with hundreds of people, how is that intimate?”

Here, intimacy is about audience as well as content, suggesting that once something is willingly made public, it stops being “intimate” in the same way.

At the same time, others stressed that **the lack of consent alone should be enough to bring the law into play, whether or not the content is sexually explicit**.

Rida, an independent legal expert, argued that the definition of image-based abuse in Pakistani law should be rewritten to criminalise “any picture shared without the consent of a person” where it harms their “privacy, dignity, modesty” or causes psychological distress. In her view, Pakistani society is so diverse that “what I might not define as intimate, somebody else could” and so the safest legal anchor is consent plus harm, not a narrow list of sexual images.

For others, it means sexual or cultural transgression

Alongside this emphasis on consent, there is a powerful, more conventional understanding of intimacy as sexual, nude, “indecent” or “immodest”. Several people said that when the word *intimate* is used in Pakistani public discourse, especially online, it is rarely taken in a neutral way:

“When the word intimate is thrown around...anyone would instantly think that it has to be either nude, or [public displays of affection], or...something that’s not culturally appropriate.” – Muneeba, UK, Survivor

Others defined intimate images explicitly as sexual acts or sexualised closeness, such as a woman “about to have sex,” someone “straddling” a partner even when fully clothed, or a couple “very, very close...heads together...sitting on his lap”.

So while some participants wanted the legal definition of intimacy expanded, others were wary of making everything intimate, especially where that might reinforce moral policing rather than reduce harm.

For many, it reflects emotional vulnerability, connection, and closeness

At the same time, several women pushed back against the idea that intimacy is only, or even mainly, about sex. Amna, a survivor based in the UK, described intimacy as “something very personal...almost like a secret, because it holds a deep meaning to you”. She talked about intimacy in terms of emotional exposure:

“Intimacy could boil down to shared experiences...a traumatic experience that I share with someone...that moment...is a moment of intimacy for me...because I’m literally being very vulnerable to you.”

For her, intimacy is “a deep sense of closeness”. Holding hands, for Sakina, a survivor in Lahore, was “the most intimate thing”. In some cases, “greater than actually having sex,” because of the vulnerability it represents. Another woman said that for her, true intimacy is about being fully seen:

"Intimacy...is where it's literally witnessing somebody, and...being fully, completely witnessed by somebody. I'm very intimate in my friendships...If I allow the other person to fully see me...that's what true intimacy is." – Tahira, Lahore, Survivor

Intimacy, in this sense, can also attach to objects. Sakina described her son carefully keeping a parcel box and small items in it. To her, it looked like clutter. To him, it was precious:

"For him...that's his intimate objects. So I'm learning to...respect a lot of it, actually."

These definitions show that for many women, intimacy is not only about what the outside world sees as scandalous. It's about what holds deep meaning for a particular person, even when nobody else understands why.

Some participants spoke about intimacy in explicitly relational terms, using the Urdu notion of **qurbat** قربت (closeness) as a reference point. Intimacy here is about closeness to someone or something. How near you are to them emotionally, physically, or socially, and how that closeness gets interpreted by others.

One interviewee said that in the Pakistani context, intimacy is "literally just the word closeness," and that images become intimate when they give others access to that closeness:

"It's just that personal access of intimacy where somebody can gauge what kind of relationship you have with the person sitting next to you, or the relationship you have with yourself" – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

In her account, intimacy is also about what others infer about your relationships and self-presentation from an image that shouldn't have been theirs to see, especially in a context where those inferences can cost you a job, a reputation, or safety. She gave an example of a queer-presenting teacher friend who lost their job after images of them were shared in a parents' WhatsApp group. The same pictures, she said, would not have caused a problem if the person had been a foreigner. Their perceived queerness made the images "intimate", and punishable.

Amna, a survivor in the UK, applied this logic to the home, describing it as an intimate space explicitly because of who is allowed to see you there. At home, she said, "there is no crime" in removing the hijab or wearing relaxed clothes around family. The problem begins when that space is captured and shown to strangers, who "see what should be protected".

For many others, private and intimate carry different stakes

Many women also drew a distinction, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, between what is private and what is intimate. For some, the dividing line was danger. Anything that could “cause [a woman] damage” or put her at risk should be treated under an expanded notion of intimacy. Zarghuna, a survivor based in Balochistan, said the definition of intimate images “should widen...to that level that even any woman, if she felt a little bit danger from that image, should be able to remove it from social media”.

Others located the difference less in content and more in relationship and audience. One woman, Maida, in Lahore, described “intimate” images as those shared only with “close relations” such as parents, siblings, or a partner, while “private” images might be shared within a wider but still bounded circle, like friends or social acquaintances. In her framing, both are restricted, the difference is the size and closeness of the allowed audience. An image appearing on a friend’s social media might feel private-but-contained – something she wouldn’t choose for public visibility, but also something she would not experience as shocking in the same way as an image intended only for family or a partner.

Several women also described intimacy as something produced through intent and vulnerability, not necessarily sex. Samina – a survivor based in Karachi, explained that an image can become intimate because it is taken *for someone’s gaze*, framed with a particular person in mind, whether a romantic partner or someone she is dating. As previously stated, another survivor (Tahira, based in Lahore) described intimacy even more broadly as the experience of being witnessed and allowing someone to fully see you – something she associated strongly with friendships as well as romance. In these accounts, intimacy is about access and who is allowed to see particular versions of you.

At the same time, many women stressed that in Pakistan an image can become intimate because of the social and cultural lens through which it is viewed. An image depicting a fully clothed woman in a car with a man, a hijab removed at a party, or a woman holding someone’s hand can all be treated as intimate, and therefore scandalous, even when nothing sexual is happening. Others said that anything to do with themselves and their identity, anything that they wouldn’t want to share, regardless of whether it is romantic or not is considered private:

میرے خیال میں 'ذاتی' ہونے کا مطلب لازمی نہیں کہ کوئی رومانوی یا جنسی بات ہو۔ اس کا مطلب صرف یہ بھی ہو سکتا ہے کہ کوئی چیز جو صرف آپ کی ہو، آپ کی اپنی ذات۔ میرے لیے، میری اپنی ذات، میری پہچان، ایک ذاتی چیز ہے۔ یہ اس بارے میں ہے کہ میں کتنا دوسروں سے شیئر کرتی ہوں، اور ہو سکتا ہے میں اسے اپنے تک ہی محدود رکھنا چاہتی ہوں۔“

I think 'private' doesn't have to mean romantic or sexual, it can just mean something that belongs to you, your own self. For me, my own being, my identity, is private. It's about what I share of myself, and even that can be something I want to keep to myself." – Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

The distinction between intimate and private was also referenced by a senior FIA official who acknowledged how different cultural perceptions can alter what is considered to be private versus intimate:

ہمارے ہاں اکثر اس بات کو غلط سمجھا جاتا ہے۔ لوگ 'انٹیمیٹ' ہونے کا مطلب صرف جنسی لیتے ہیں۔ جبکہ 'ذاتی' یا پرائیویٹ' کا دائرہ بہت بڑا ہے۔ مثال کے طور پر، اگر میں نے اپنی بیٹی کے ساتھ ایک تصویر اپلوڈ کی، تو بہت سے لوگوں نے یہ سمجھ لیا کہ میں نے دوسری شادی کر لی ہے۔ یہاں کچھ علاقوں میں، اپنی بیٹی کے ساتھ تصویر کا بھی غلط مطلب نکالا جاتا ہے۔

"This is often misunderstood here. People take 'intimate' to mean only sexual. Whereas 'private/personal' is much broader. For example, If I uploaded a photo with my daughter, many people assumed I had married again. In some areas here, even a photo with your daughter is interpreted wrongly."

Several participants described how the words themselves shift meaning depending on context. Komal, originally from Thatta but living in Malaysia, explained that while she personally understands "private" as something she would not even share with close family – something that is simply hers, but not necessarily explicit – she felt that when the phrase "private video leaked" appears in local media, it is widely understood as referring to something explicitly sexual. In other words, *private* can operate as a euphemism, and the label can carry assumptions that shape public reaction before anyone even sees the content.

What emerges across these accounts is a hierarchy of exposure and harm, depending on how privacy and intimacy are understood. "Private" was often referred to as a person's right to control their image and avoid social fallout. "Intimate" sometimes described a smaller subset of private material with higher stakes such as images tied to vulnerability, romance, family honour, or interpretations that invite harsher moral judgement. One woman, Laila, who was living in Scotland but originally from Islamabad, put it bluntly – a photo shared of her smoking might lead others to label her "cheap" or "not brought up well," but an image of her with a man that could be viewed as intimate could trigger more severe accusations, and more dangerous consequences. Both felt damaging but the difference was the intensity and the kind of judgement attached.

This is where the tension between individual definitions and social norms becomes most acute. One participant summed it up:

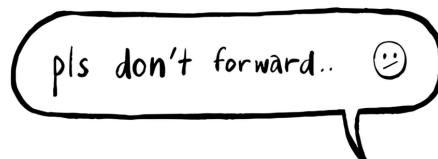
"Intimacy...is very personal, and it's different for everybody." – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

Yet the same women also acknowledged that in practice, it is often families, communities, employers, and courts that get to decide what counts as intimate, and what consequences follow.

And many note that what is “intimate” or “private” isn’t up to them

A recurring theme across interviews was the sense that women do not fully control how their images are perceived, or even which parts of their lives count as “private”. One participant described sharing perfectly ordinary photos on a public platform, only to receive them back with a completely different, sexualised meaning:

“I wouldn’t mind sharing those pictures...There was nothing private in that sense, which is why I shared them on a public platform. But when someone is sending those pictures to me and the meaning they attached to those pictures [changed]...those pictures could be sexualised, that just felt...horrific. It’s not even up to me to decide what is [private]...someone took that choice and autonomy from me.” – Tahira, Lahore, Survivor



Others repeated this experience that everyday images can be sexualised. Ifrah, in Canada, described how photos that happen to capture your clothes, or a bra, just on the bed can feel, in her family’s eyes, “almost equal to if it had been me...making out with someone”. Although the photo itself may be innocent, the imagined implications attached to it are not. While reviewing the research findings, South Asian members of Chayn’s community shared stories of mothers measuring the length of half sleeves or being okay

with traditional trousers but banning jeans because it carried the association with being more independent and sexual, relatives asking the breasts of teen girls to be hidden by looser clothing and dupattas, strangers in the street pointing out if bra straps were showing, and parents requiring tops and dresses to cover hips and policing the minute details of clothes throughout their lives in Pakistan and the West.

Other research participants talked about angles and framing. Images taken from behind, shots that make a body part look “peachy,” – rounded or exposed in a way that feels sexualised – or photos that make someone “look fat” were details, they said, that can change how an image is interpreted and whether it feels acceptable to share. The loss of control over the existence of such images is something that was repeatedly raised. Several women described how friends, acquaintances, or strangers post photos or videos without asking. Images that may not represent them in a way they are comfortable with. In addition, participants described the amount of images that can appear online sometimes even without their knowledge:

"It happens a lot...people post pictures of friends or groups on social media without telling them...A few girls were at a dhaba having chai, in an all-women group, and a group of guys were making videos...'of the place'...but they were in those videos...without consent. They confronted them: 'Why are you making our videos? Are you going to post it? I need to see it before you post it.'...He wouldn't show the video, but he deleted it." – Tahira, Lahore, Survivor

Another woman described how in certain areas, such as "if you go to Defence Raya⁶³, you are probably in one of the videos" made by TikTokers, captured as background content in someone else's social media post, without permission. In these examples, intimacy is also about the erosion of control as well as consent.

In the end, the content women label as intimate or private is less a reflection of their own values and more a reflection of the social penalties they are forced to navigate. The boundaries are externally imposed, shaped by family honour, moral surveillance, social expectations, heteronormativity, and the threat of violence or control. While many women follow these rules to protect themselves, many also resent them.

3. Image-Based Abuse is Broader Than "Nudes Without Consent"

Across the interviews, women drew highly nuanced boundaries around what counts as a private or intimate image. These boundaries rarely map onto Western or legal definitions of "intimacy", nor do they rely solely on nudity or explicitly sexual content. Instead, they emerge from the intersection of cultural expectations, family norms, religion, gendered surveillance, and the lived consequences that can follow.

The research produced a detailed taxonomy of six categories of image that women considered to be harmful if shared without consent: appearance and the body; behaviour and self-expression; who appears in the image; setting and location; digital traces and non-visual content; and audience and context of sharing. This taxonomy is published as a companion document and [can be accessed here](#).

The following section brings together the different ways women described these boundaries, including how clothing, space, relationships, behaviours, and digital traces shape whether an image feels harmless, compromising, or dangerous.

⁶³ Defence Raya is a golf and country club in DHA (Defence Housing Authority), Lahore, with walking paths, restaurants and cafes that have made it a popular social destination. In this context, it represents a broader category of urban leisure spaces frequented by younger, relatively liberal crowds – places where people are comfortable in Western dress and where content creation is common. The participant is using it as shorthand for any such space where being filmed as background content in a stranger's social media post has become an ordinary risk.

It might involve clothing that breaches local norms of modesty

Women are visible in Pakistan in all kinds of dress: models in edgy outfits on fashion runways, news presenters without headscarves, shoppers in Western attire at malls and cafes, shop attendants in burqas, and influencers posting revealing outfits on Instagram and TikTok. Yet, across the interviews, clothing is one of the main ways women draw the boundary between images they might share and images that feel intimate, private, or risky. What counts as “private” is rarely about nudity alone. Instead, women described a sliding scale of exposure. Hair, face, arms, collarbones, legs, body contour, or a visible bra strap can transform an otherwise ordinary photograph into something deeply compromising once it's online or in the wrong hands.

At the same time, there is no single standard. The data show a constant negotiation between social and cultural norms, patriarchal values, religious teachings, family expectations, and women's own comfort.

Head coverings

“I used to cover my head. We call it hijab, to properly cover all of your head. If someone shares my photos without my dupatta, I used to not feel comfortable.” – Sana, Islamabad, Survivor



For many participants, especially those in more conservative regions of Pakistan, the first and most fundamental boundary is whether a woman is pictured without hijab, dupatta, or burqa, and whether her hair, or sometimes even her face, are visible to unrelated men.

خیبر پختونخوا کے کئی علاقوں میں خواتین اتنا سخت پردہ کرتی ہیں کہ ان کی آنکھیں بھی نظر نہیں آتیں۔ ایسے ماحول میں، کسی خاتون کی مرضی کے بغیر برقعے میں بھی اس کی تصویر انٹرنیٹ پر ڈالنا اس کی پرائیویسی کی خلاف ورزی ہے۔ یہ معمولی سی بات بھی وہاں کسی کی جان لے سکتی ہے، اور پھر الٹا اسی خاتون کو قصور وار ٹھہرایا جاتا ہے۔“

“If you go to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in many areas you can't even see a woman's eyes, such strict covering exists. There is so much strict covering. How can you say that in such places “private” wouldn't include even a photo in a burqa being posted without consent. Even this can lead to someone being killed, and then she will be blamed for it.” – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Several women described how a photo without a headscarf or veil, even if fully clothed, becomes harmful once shared beyond a small trusted circle. As Hajra from Balochistan framed it, showing her face, hair or “even any part of my body” would be harmful not only for her, but also for her family. In her account, an image of her without a hijab does

not need to be sexual to be damaging. The harm comes from the act of sharing it without consent and from the social context in which such exposure is judged. Another woman also explained:

میرے خیال میں وہ تصاویر یا ویڈیوز جن میں میرا چہرہ نظر آتا ہے - جہاں کوئی مجھے پہچان سکتا ہے - وہ پرائیویٹ ہیں۔ کوئی بھی ایسی چیز جس سے میری پہچان ظاہر ہو، وہ میری ذاتی بات ہے۔ اگر لوگ یہ پہچان سکتے ہیں کہ یہ میں ہوں، تو وہ تصاویر پرائیویٹ ہیں۔

"I think the photos or videos where my face is visible - where someone can recognise me - are private. Anything that could reveal my identity is personal to me. If people can identify that it's me, then those images are private." - Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

Others gave concrete examples of what happens when that boundary is crossed. One woman described what could happen if a photo from a wedding, where she wasn't wearing a scarf, went viral in her community. Male relatives and neighbours would confront her father asking why "is your daughter showing her face", and she feared he might force her to leave education as a result. In another case, a photo of a girl's face on Facebook prompted an uncle to call her mother to say she was "showing her beauty to everyone" and bringing shame on a "prestigious family". In these stories, exposed hair or an uncovered face operates almost like a private body part - something that must not circulate publicly, and that, if exposed, triggers reputational damage and restrictions on women's movement and opportunity.



However this boundary is also contested. One survivor from Balochistan, Zarnaz, acknowledged that a woman showing her face online can carry dangerous consequences, but did not inherently agree with this restriction.

Nisa, a survivor based in the UK, also pushed back against the idea that not wearing a headscarf should automatically be classed as intimate. Drawing on Islamic teachings about different states of dress around *mahram* (family members) and other women, she argued that equating uncovered hair with intimacy is

"problematic", especially when it

spills into potential legislation in non-Islamic countries. For her, an image without hijab might be something "God doesn't like", but that did not make it comparable to explicit sexual content.

These competing views show a key tension in the data. For some women, an image without hijab is itself a form of exposure that can be weaponised. For others, the danger lies more in how the image is used and regulated than in the absence of a headscarf alone. Even for those who do not wear a hijab, the idea of showing their face online was still exposing. Some talked about how, for example, they would only upload pictures that don't include their full face, or how they would style their hair with long bangs so as not to expose all of their face to strangers. These differences in response, as discussed in earlier sections, centered around women's family backgrounds, the contexts in which they were raised, and how they have been socialised to scrutinise their own and other women's bodies. The extent to which women preferred to conceal their hair and faces was influenced by the social norms of their family, relatives, and local community and was individualised based on that context.

Revealing clothes

"If anyone is wearing shorts, if anyone is wearing sleeveless, if anyone is wearing slightly deep neck or backless...it is basically like an invite for the male gaze in Pakistan, which is always justified...it is always said that, 'oh, they are men'" – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad)

Beyond head coverings, women returned to a more granular question about exactly how much skin, shape or contour could be visible before an image felt too revealing to be shared.

Participants listed a whole spectrum of clothing details that could tip a photo into the "intimate" or "not for public" category, including shorts, sleeveless tops, deep necklines, backless outfits, tight clothes, visible collarbones, ankles or arms. Muneeba also described images of a girl in a tank top and leggings circulating on social media with comments asking "Why is she wearing this?", as if the outfit itself were a provocation.

Several women emphasised that they might be comfortable wearing certain outfits in person, such as to dinners, parties or among friends and partners, but not comfortable posting images in those clothes. One participant described carefully cropping photos to hide legs in a dress, making sure cleavage doesn't show and checking that a bra strap isn't visible. For her, there is a shared, unspoken standard of "basic decency" that most women understand and pre-emptively edit around, especially when their social media followers include family and people from their hometown:

"I make sure that the kind of image I'm posting is not too revealing, even if I'm wearing revealing clothes...and by the way, I wore them. I wore them out, I wore them to a dinner, I wore them to a party, and it's fine with me, and it's fine with my friends, and it's fine with my husband, actually. But the kind of picture I'm posting should not show that." – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

Others broke this down into 'tiers' of comfort. Some women might be fine with a t-shirt and jeans but never sleeveless; another group would accept sleeveless tops but not halter necks or tank tops; a third group would be comfortable in more revealing crop

tops. Sakina went on to argue that the old binary of “Western vs traditional” clothing had shrunk and that many women now move between shalwar kameez and jeans depending on context. What matters more, she suggested, is how much the outfit reveals or accentuates the body:

“As far as the traditional versus Western is concerned, I think that's pretty much [disappeared] now, because everyone who's wearing traditional is also wearing Western, it just kind of depends on where you're going or what you're feeling that day. And I think that's a very personal fashion or comfort choice.”

Another participant, based in Canada, described how social class and location has an impact on the type of clothes that women are comfortable wearing. She also noted how the diaspora experience plays into this:

“I grew up in what is known as the elite class in Pakistan, the upper class. So, a lot of us back home wear whatever we want to wear, and our families certainly don't object to that. It's not a conservative class, it's a very Westernised, liberal, upper class. So I guess that it is really class based. I think if you're from a more religious, conservative, middle-class background, there would definitely be issues with maybe wearing sleeveless or wearing tight clothes, things like that. And the diaspora, I think is definitely more forgiving, because you're in the West, you can't really control someone in that way, like you could back home where patriarchy is extremely embedded in everything. So I think it's a bit more nuanced.” – Sahar, Canada, Survivor.

Whilst this view was shared by others, it sat in direct contrast to the views of some participants who highlighted that norms around clothing were often dictated by conservative perspectives but that these didn't always directly align with social class: “Even if somebody might be from a higher class, that doesn't mean that they are non conservative” – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

When questioned further about the diaspora experience and how that influences conservative mindsets, Sahar elaborated further:

“That's also very nuanced...for example, when people immigrated in the 70s and the 80s, I think a lot of them wanted to assimilate, for example, in Canada. Canadian multiculturalism, embodying open-minded progressive beliefs. But I have witnessed, and I'm sure it's very similar in the UK, a lot of families who are so afraid of losing their cultural, religious, and national identity that they actually end up being a bit more oppressive in some way than they would have been if they had actually remained in Pakistan. Because they're coming here with the mentality of the 80s, which was during the time of the really oppressive dictatorship by Zia-ul-Haq. And they've kept that mentality, when Pakistan has actually changed so much...people from Pakistan will be like, ‘Oh my God...this family of mine, these relatives of mine in Canada, are actually more “backwards” than we are, like, we've evolved more?’”

Once again, the boundaries around clothing are not universal. Sakina in Lahore said she is personally “very okay with posting sleeveless and all that”, while explicitly recognising

that “there are girls who are not okay with that”. The definition of what counts as too revealing is “defined for everybody in a different manner”, yet everyone still faces the same social risks if an image is judged to have crossed the line. Sometimes, a decision about what to wear became more about acceptance than about a woman’s personal beliefs, particularly for those in the public eye.

“And at the end of the day, everybody wants to be seen and accepted and respected as well. And if something as small as me wearing half sleeve or a tank top is going to [invite criticism] then I would rather not do it, it’s that simple....with our industry, the acceptance part is very important unfortunately, and we have to abide by – not rules – but set ways that have been made for us.”

Another thread in the interviews is how even fully covered bodies can become classified as “explicit” once the shape of the body is visible. One participant described how any dress that shows your contour can be viewed as obscene. She had specifically seen people declare that even a burqa is unacceptable if it has a tailored shape that reveals the figure, accusing the wearer of “exhibitionism” despite being covered from head to toe:

“I have seen people who [say] that you cannot even wear a burqa that shows your contour...a burqa is something that covers you from your head to toe. But if it has any belt on it, or anything that [alters the shape] it would be considered explicit. [It would be said that] you are doing an exhibition.” – Zarghuna, Balochistan, Survivor

Zarghuna went on to describe a school picnic where she and classmates played near a pond. She was fully covered, in traditional clothing, but after she went swimming with all of her other classmates, her wet clothes clung to her body and revealed her outline. Months later, a male classmate projected that photo on a large screen at a school event. The room laughed and she felt humiliated and exposed. The issue wasn’t nudity, it was that an ordinary outfit became humiliating once it revealed her figure and was put on public display.

Similarly, some women described discomfort with the idea of exposure itself, and not only exposure of skin, particularly when dressed up and captured in photographs. Even when an outfit fell well within what they considered acceptable, photographs taken at moments of preparation or presentation felt private. One participant explained that images where she appeared “dressed up” were not meant for public view at all:

جو تصویریں میں نے کھینچی ہیں، وہ جن میں میں تیار ہوئی ہوں یا اچھے کپڑے پہنے ہوئے ہوں – وہ پرائیویٹ ہیں۔ میں نہیں چاہتی کہ وہ میری اجازت کے بغیر شیئر کی جائیں، دوست بھی ایسا نہ کریں۔ میں نہیں چاہتی کہ میرے دوست انہیں پوسٹ یا شیئر کریں۔ مجھے یہ بالکل پسند نہیں ہے۔

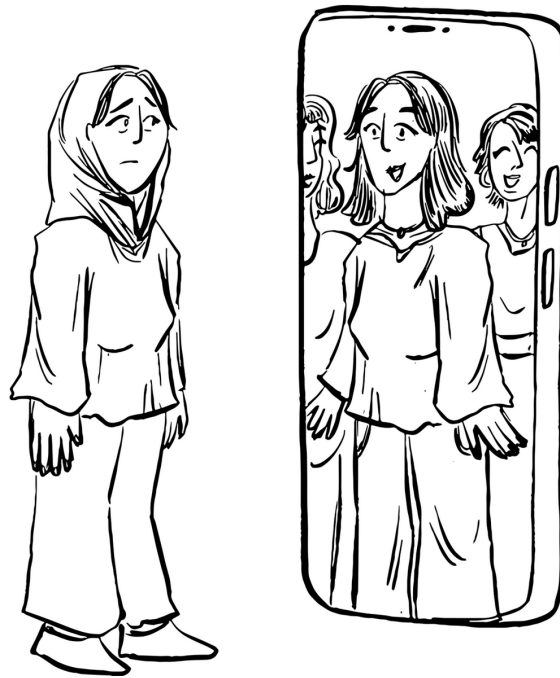
"The pictures I've taken, the ones where I appear ready or dressed up – those are private. I don't want them shared without my permission, not even by friends. I don't want my friends to post or share them. I don't like that." – Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

These examples show how fragile the line is between "acceptable" and "explicit" imagery. Even women who meticulously follow dress codes can find their bodies reclassified as obscene if their contour becomes visible.

'Western' clothing

For some participants, wearing Western clothing would be seen as a moral transgression. Wearing jeans, shorts or tight clothes was described as "wrong" and "not accepted" by both culture and religion. Muneeba in the UK explained how, in the eyes of traditionalists, Western clothes are seen as "an invite for the male gaze". A form of active provocation that supposedly justifies men staring or harassing. This perspective has often been reinforced by popular media. Television dramas, for example, frequently cast women who wear Western clothing, use make-up, have piercings, or pursue careers as the villain, portraying them as ill-mannered, selfish, or morally

'loose'. One high-profile celebrity we spoke with talked about how this spilled over into people's perceptions of her more generally, particularly women's perceptions:



"Something as small as if I wear shalwar kameez I'm a good girl, right? If I wear trousers and a tank top, I'm probably not a good girl. Unfortunately, the kind of human that I am, the kind of Muslim that I am, the kind of person that I am, or the kind of daughter, sister, wife that I am, would be defined by the kind of clothes that I wear...So this is something that we do have to deal with. But the saddest part is that whenever I've gotten hate, it's from women. Women who've had their norm set for them, by society, by culture, by their family or by religion. They have their norms, and as soon as my shoulders are revealed, they feel like because what they're doing is right, they have the right to tell you what you're doing is probably going to land you in hell. And that's the sad part, that, yes, we get hate from men as well, but honestly speaking, I would say it's 70/30 with 70% being women. It just breaks my heart. I feel this is something that all the women in the industry would actually vouch for, that while we get a lot of love from women as well – a lot of love from women – but the majority of the hate we get is actually another woman trying to break us down."

Other participants talked about how choosing to present themselves in certain ways that could be read as alignment with 'Western' values, such as having coloured hair or presenting as queer, can spark controversy and retaliation. One participant described attending the Aurat March – a feminist march – with "really long coloured hair," a look that others immediately saw as "a very big queer thing". A newspaper printed her image with "problematic, controversial language," and the photo was then shared online in ways that eventually reached her mother through relatives:

"It's not safe here being queer, right? So...that image was shared online...with a tagline to implicate that..." – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

This logic shows up most clearly in victim-blaming narratives. Muneeba (originally from Faisalabad and based in the UK) also described how if a woman is harassed or assaulted, people immediately ask what she was wearing, and then scrutinise the details: "Was her shalwar kameez sleeveless? Was the shirt short? Were her ankles or collarbones visible?" Participants described how responsibility for violence is routinely pushed back onto women's clothing choices.

At its most extreme, this policing of dress is enforced with violence. Hajra, a participant from Balochistan, described a viral case where a girl was badly injured by a man because she wore Western clothes. Afterwards, people praised the incident because it supposedly "convinced" her, and many other women, to wear a veil or burqa. Hajra was horrified not only by the violence itself but by the public approval it received.

There is, however, a strong counter-current in the data. Muneeba pointed out that in some villages, women are covered head-to-toe in burqas that only show their eyes, yet harassment continues. For her, this proves that "it's not a matter of what you are wearing" but of men's intentions and wider cultural attitudes. Similarly, Hajra insisted that "hiding your body is not the problem"; the problem lies in "our culture, our mindsets, our negativity". The move towards more Western attire was framed as both a pushback to existing cultural norms, particularly by younger generations from more

urban centres, and as a sign of increased education, awareness, and exposure to other parts of the world through social media. As one participant explained:

"It's very acceptable in the metropolitan cities like Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore [to wear Western clothing]. In Balochistan and KPK the big cities are good, but in the rural areas it is still taboo to wear jeans and not have a dupatta...I have seen three generations. Even if I compare my parents to the parents now, they are more liberal than ours were....[that influence comes from] education, from media, from awareness, from exposure to social media. Families are sending their daughters to other provinces for higher studies...it gives a lot of awareness." – Sarah, Punjab, Expert in GBV Programming and Advocacy

Clothing that should be 'hidden'

Smaller details of clothing, like visible underwear or bra straps, also become loaded symbols in images. One survivor, Ifrah, originally from Karachi but living in Canada, described a situation where her bra strap had slipped down accidentally, and people asked why the bra was a bright colour, implying that visible straps or a brightly coloured bra mean a woman wants to be seen, is sexually active, or has bought nice underwear for someone.



delete.



TOO PROVOCATIVE M

Women described partners telling them not to post photos where a bra strap is showing, or urging them to delete images that could invite this kind of scrutiny. One participant, Sakina from Lahore, who is otherwise comfortable in "revealing clothes" offline, still edits photos to make sure these details are invisible before posting. In these examples, the intimacy of the image is about catching tiny glimpses of

what is meant to stay under clothes, rather than full nudity. These fleeting slips become moments of vulnerability that women anticipate and try to manage, because they know how easily others might sexualise or judge them.

Across all these examples, context and consent are as important as the clothes themselves. The same outfit can feel appropriate in one setting and profoundly intimate in another.

Women described outfits they happily wear at home or with friends such as tank tops, shorts, gym clothes or pyjamas, but would never want photographed or shared more widely. Amna in the UK said she would not tolerate someone taking her picture in a tank top and shorts at home. It would feel "diminishing" to her, and she believed most women in her family would feel the same. Sakina also described how she kept bikini

photos in her Google Drive that she would “never upload,” even though she wore the bikini on holiday.

Trust and audience also matter. A woman might send a photo without a head scarf to a best friend, believing it will stay between them. Others talked about private Instagram groups where cousins share photos in sleeveless clothing they would not want older family members to see. Some women worry less about what their parents will think and more about how people in their hometown might twist the narrative and “show it around” to gossip or shame them. While clothing is the visible marker of what makes an image sensitive, the deeper message is around who is allowed to see a woman in that state, and whether she chose for that moment to be captured and circulated at all.

“What I have found, in my experience and possibly with others, is that going out in pyjamas, or anything that is pyjama-adjacent, that's also considered to be intimate...I can hear the words in my head of people saying things...you're just not in the right state. This is not the right state to be out and seeing people...You have to be private when you're wearing something like pyjamas. Maybe it's because also in those scenarios, you're not wearing a dupatta, you're wearing something which is older, maybe something which is comfy, or slightly see-through. Some people would not wear a bra to sleep. And maybe that can look indecent. I think intimacy ties in with decency, where it's like you're dressed in a way that you should only be dressed in an intimate setting, where it's only people who are mahram [close family members] or if you're a woman, then your girlfriends. My parents even had an issue, to a certain extent, of how I was dressed, even in an intimate setting around my girlfriends, because it would be a sense of... they're not your family. They should not see you like that.” – Laila, Scotland (originally from Islamabad)

Taken together, these accounts show that for Pakistani women and those in the diaspora, “intimate” or “private” images involving clothing include a spectrum of everyday appearances that can carry enormous social risk once photographed and shared. While some narratives frame clothing as the key trigger of harm, others reject that framing and locate the problem firmly in patriarchal norms and male behaviour. Women are forced to navigate daily between these two stories, both of which shape how their images may be judged online. They are constantly calibrating their dress, their self-presentation, and their online sharing against a landscape of family honour, community surveillance, cultural expectations and their own sense of comfort, with different women drawing the line in different places, but all acutely aware that images of what they wear can be turned against them.

“Unfortunately, dress has really defined our mentality, our morals, our mindsets, and that's not how it should be. I don't think your clothing should define that for you.” – High-profile British Pakistani actor

It might involve being in a specific space

When women in Pakistan talk about images and what feels safe, what feels private, and what crosses a line, ‘spaces’ and ‘places’ emerge as another strong determinant of

whether a photo or video is considered harmless or compromising. What counts as a “private” or “inappropriate” space is not fixed. Instead, it reflects layers of cultural expectations, family norms, religious beliefs, and above all, the social consequences attached to being seen in particular environments.

Across the interviews, people described a spectrum of spaces, from bedrooms to restaurants, gyms to festivals, each carrying its own risks and moral weight. It quickly became clear that an image’s meaning is shaped as much by where it is taken as by what it shows.

Being seen where you “shouldn’t be”

For many women, the danger can lie in accidentally appearing in a photo rather than posing for one. Rida, an independent legal expert we spoke with described how a girl caught in the background of a video at a school festival (an event she did not have permission to attend) could face serious repercussions if her family or siblings saw it online. Simply being present in a space deemed inappropriate was enough to invite judgment, suspicion, or punishment.



This theme echoed across accounts of mixed-gender or public environments. Gyms, for example, were described as morally contested spaces for women, particularly where men were also present. One participant recalled how co-education itself, particularly at secondary level, had been treated as “chaos” in her conservative hometown, with relatives warning her father that boys and girls studying together would inevitably lead to inappropriate images appearing online:

"Even the exercises are gendered. If a man is going to the gym, that's his space. If a woman goes to a gym, then why is she there?...someone's grandfather or someone's parents would say, don't go there. Why? because there are going to be guys [there]. Even co-education still is not looked upon well...I remember clearly, I was in Faisalabad...there were all segregated schools from the very start and the first time [co-ed came in] it was a total chaos...people having this thought that, oh, guys and girls are gonna study together – how would that happen? ...[my extended family] judged a lot. They were pushing my father – don't send them into co-education. And their main concern was that there are going to be girls, yes, but there are going to be boys. And what if it's raining and the girls are going out. What if someone captures something of them...and throws it online, then what?" – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad)

Another woman talked about how she was explicitly not allowed to sit in spaces where there are a lot of men, and others highlighted how they should not be found at mixed gatherings. Being seen in such a space could be taken as evidence of improper behaviour.

Participants also described how entire venues acquire reputations that shape how women's presence within them is interpreted. In Lahore, for example, places such as popular bowling alleys or coffee shops were widely understood as "date spots". Even where families did not explicitly forbid attendance, they treated such venues with suspicion. Zoya, who lives in Lahore, recalled that when she wanted to go bowling with her friends, her mother insisted she be accompanied to contain the risk of how her presence might be perceived, given what the location signified socially. "Everybody knew...these are the places where people go to find dates, or they go on dates to meet new people," she said. If an image from there circulated online it could invite assumptions about her character.

Other women described clubs, dance classes, or venues associated with alcohol or drugs as similarly precarious. In some families, women were not permitted to attend at all. In others, attendance was possible, but risky if it was documented. Even being seen in a certain part of the city, particularly areas perceived as empty, unsafe, or linked to criminal activity or sex work, could prompt objections from family. Shaista, from Rahim Yar Khan, noted that if a woman were photographed on a quiet road or in a sparsely populated area, questions would follow: "Why were you there? What were you doing?"

Across accounts, it became clear that various public spaces all carry social codes. If an image surfaces from the "wrong" place, the location itself can be used as evidence of a woman's character.

Private domestic environments

Spaces within the home, especially bedrooms, appeared repeatedly as sites where an image becomes instantly intimate, regardless of clothing or context. Participants described deep discomfort with photos taken in bedrooms, even when fully dressed

and simply standing next to a bed or a couch that *could* become a bed.



For some, this was framed as a clear cultural and religious boundary: “sitting or lying on her own bed... is intimate... it shouldn’t be shared” said Muneeba in the UK. Others described it as a space inherently linked to family privacy and therefore off-limits to public view.

Muneeba also explained that a photo taken in a home garden feels acceptable, but the “same picture in their bedroom” would raise questions about intent: “Why have they put that? What are they trying to show?”. A story about her newly married sister underscored this tension. A mirror selfie taken in a bedroom where she was with her husband, fully clothed, and on the way out for the evening, was interpreted by extended family as inappropriate solely because it was taken in the bedroom. The identical image taken in a restaurant, she noted, would be perfectly acceptable.

These distinctions reflect broader cultural ideas about gendered privacy shaped by *Purdah* (a religious and cultural practice of segregation between men and women). For many women, the home is intimate because it is a place where one removes hijab or dupatta/chadar, relaxes dress codes, and exists outside the gaze of strangers.

Personal space is, then, not an abstract or individualised concept. It is understood in culturally specific and spatial terms, rooted in ideas of modesty, innocence, and protection that shape everyday life in Pakistan. Personal space might mean a woman’s bedroom, her home, or a college dormitory – places assumed to be shielded from public view and therefore morally neutral, or *ma’soom* (innocent). What makes these spaces intimate is the expectation that they are not subject to outside scrutiny.

Purdah is often reduced to clothing or veiling, but participants' accounts echoed a broader interpretation, and one that includes architecture, spatial design, and social norms governing who may see whom, and under what conditions.

Traditional South Asian architecture offers a useful illustration. Elements such as the *jaali* – a perforated stone or wooden screen – and the *jharoka*, a projected window incorporating such screens, were designed to allow women to observe and participate in public life without being fully visible. These structures created a form of gendered privacy where women could see out, communicate with neighbours, and remain socially connected, while still being protected from the public gaze. As one [architectural account](#) notes, the *jaali* functioned as a spatial equivalent of the veil, preserving modesty while enabling engagement beyond the home.

This spatial logic mirrors how many women described intimacy in the digital context. Images taken in private spaces such as bedrooms, homes, and dormitories are assumed to carry an implicit expectation of non-exposure. When such images are shared without consent, the violation is cultural, as well as personal.

For some, anxiety therefore arises the moment a camera enters that environment with the risk that “*a stranger could see what should be protected*,” either through accidental upload or through someone gaining access to the device.

This framing helps explain why women often described non-consensual image sharing as profoundly destabilising, even when images appeared “normal” or non-sexual to an outside observer. The harm lay in the absence of consent and the movement of something from a protected, private sphere into public circulation, rather than the content itself.

Bars, parties, restaurants

When women discussed bars or party environments, the tone shifted from privacy to social judgment. Amna, who lives in the UK but is originally from Punjab, said she had been taught to see such spaces as “indecent,” and therefore any image showing her in a bar would “speak a lot about me”. Here, the harm was reputational, tied to moral codes about where a woman should or shouldn't be.

For many women that we spoke with, the idea of being in a bar or a party was not a possibility for them. However, others – particularly those based in urban centres such as Lahore – admitted that these are spaces that women frequent, but would be unlikely to share publicly:

"Alcohol is banned. It's still available. Raves, I don't know how they end up doing them, because you need to get a license...but still, they happen. People go. I've been to a few, and everything is there. You have Molly, you have ecstasy, and everything is available now...it's not something they'll advertise, that we're doing all of this." – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

Even where attendance was relatively normalised within certain university or elite circles, being photographed there introduces risk. In 2025, [police filmed young people](#) during a rave party raid. Though officers were suspended for the violation, the footage had already gone viral, exposing participants to public scrutiny. Several participants described Friday night raves or campus parties as a routine way to start the weekend. Spaces where students might sit, chat, play games, or listen to music. "It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to dance," Parveen from Sindh explained. "You can just sit there...play Ludo". Yet she described how if you were photographed in that environment it wouldn't matter what you were actually doing, the environment itself and the people around you would trigger scrutiny. As she put it, people "really go into the depth of one picture, even if it's just the background, and judge".

A party where boys and girls stood close together, where dancing was taking place, or where someone in the background was wearing a short shirt could render everyone in the image suspect. Even those who felt personally comfortable attending such spaces described managing their visibility carefully – stepping out of the camera range, positioning themselves defensively, or maintaining what one participant called "a position of deniability" whenever phones were raised.

Consent was also fragile. Women described attending open events, conferences, or house parties only to later discover their images had been uploaded without their knowledge. One participant in Lahore, Sabah, recounted being questioned by acquaintances who had seen her in the background of a publicly posted photograph. The event itself was not secret, she said, but she had not wanted certain people to know she was there. The image invited "so many unwanted questions" about her movements and intentions.

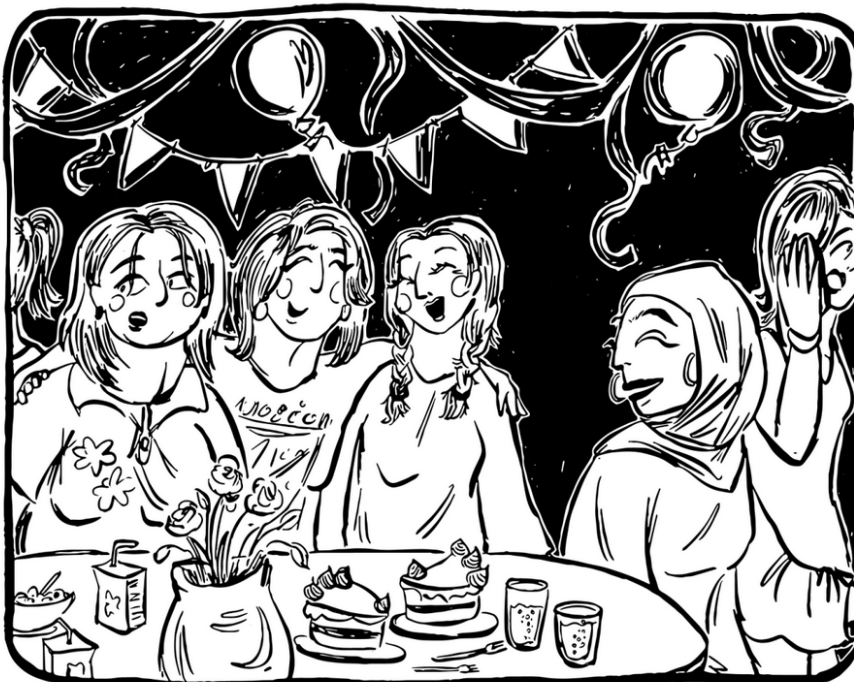
Yet Amna in the UK offered a different perspective. If she was comfortable being in a bar physically, she argued, she should also be comfortable with a photo of her in that bar: "Eyes can see... the mind is also like a camera". In her view, there was no meaningful difference between people seeing her in person and people seeing her through an image. However, she drew a sharp line between public and private spaces, accepting images in public environments, but rejecting images taken inside the home.

For some women, party spaces were unequivocally unacceptable and appearing in such an image would be deeply damaging. For others, attendance might always be frowned upon but not necessarily catastrophic – particularly among more affluent or urban groups, where social norms are shifting and certain forms of nightlife are more visible. As Ghazala, a participant based in Lahore observed, elite circles may attract criticism online but often retain the social power to withstand it. "They would still do what they want to do," she noted. The consequences are not evenly distributed. With that being

said, women in the public eye also told us about situations where their presence at a party was used as ammunition against them:

"There was a tiny little three second video clip that was circulating this entire year of me from a party, which was somewhere in Europe. I think the person whose party it was put it on her private Instagram. Somebody took it out, and it was just circulating everywhere. So anytime that any work of mine was coming out, or there was some kind of trailer or a drama clip...If there was any conversation, that [video] would come up. It's like, oh, now this is what defines me at the moment. Whereas that was something which was a part of my personal life, not for public viewing. Somebody put up something without my consent. I didn't even know that I was being recorded in that minute and something was being put up. It just kind of overshadows everything else that you're doing at that time, and that's all that you're being seen as or judged as. And I feel like, obviously, in our part of the world and in Pakistan, it's even more so, because it's all about what women are wearing right?" – Ayesha Omar, Pakistani actor

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Restaurants appeared as a more ambiguous middle ground. Several women noted that whether a restaurant image feels harmful depends on social context. Are you alone with one person? Is it mixed-gender? Are you somewhere you told your family you weren't? For many young women at college living in hostels, even being photographed eating out with friends could be dangerous if the photo reached family members who believed they were elsewhere.

At the same time, participants were clear that reputational harm is not exclusively gendered. Young men, too, could face consequences if images of partying or drug use reached their families. But across interviews, women described a narrower margin for ambiguity for themselves. In party or bar settings, the line between “having fun” and being marked as morally suspect was thin and often drawn by where they were seen to be and not what they were doing in that space.

Work versus social settings

Another recurring theme was how the same image could feel acceptable, or inappropriate, depending on the setting. Overlapping with aspects of clothing, Tahira, a survivor based in Lahore, reflected on how a sheer top worn while clubbing felt risky to post, but a similar top worn in a professional or wellness-related context felt more neutral. As Sarah, an expert in GBV programming and advocacy based in Punjab commented, she maintains different “personas” depending on context, and that images from nightlife or social settings belonged to a more “private” version of herself she would not share publicly.

Similarly, participants talked about how photographs captured in a work context with male colleagues would often be acceptable, but photographs with men or in mixed-gender spaces in social settings invited criticism and judgement.

What emerges from these accounts is a landscape full of nuance and contradiction. Some women insist that the problem is where an image is taken, others argue it is who sees it. Some believe a public place is already a “seen” place and therefore less risky, others believe that being photographed in such spaces can fundamentally alter their meaning.

Across all these differences, what remains consistent is the idea that an image is often not just an image. It carries with it the social, moral, and familial weight of the space in which it was taken, and the potential for that space to be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or used as evidence against the woman pictured.

Weddings

Weddings in Pakistan were described as expansive, multi-day events – “Desi Met Galas”, as Zoya, a survivor based in Lahore, put it – where fashion, choreography, and spectacle take centre stage. They are also, increasingly, digitally saturated environments. Professional photographers, videographers, catering staff, guests, and extended family members all carry smartphones. In gatherings that can involve hundreds of people, control over images becomes almost impossible.

Several women described weddings as spaces where visibility is both expected and precarious. Participants repeatedly pointed to the blurred boundaries around consent. Hiring a photographer does not mean agreeing to public circulation, yet many described an implicit assumption that wedding media belongs to the production company. Images and videos are uploaded to social media pages without consultation. As Zoya recalled, a

video of her dancing at a friend's wedding was uploaded by the photographer. The footage itself was not problematic but she described how the derogatory, degrading, and sometimes sexualised comments underneath the video were distressing.

Several participants referenced cases in which wedding videos had been leaked or circulated beyond their intended audience, sometimes with severe consequences. In these accounts, women dancing, clapping, or laughing together became subjects of public scrutiny. Images were forwarded on WhatsApp groups, reposted in "shady" online forums, or reused for sexualised purposes unrelated to the original contexts.

The scale of weddings compounds the vulnerability. "Everyone's phone is out", one participant (Komal, based in Malaysia) noted. Even the bride cannot fully control who records her. Women described remaining hyper-aware of camera angles, positioning, and background framing, and highlighted the risk of being captured in such large mixed-gender gatherings.

Weddings are not inherently forbidden spaces – they are referenced as culturally central and joyous occasions, but they were also described as sites where celebration intersects with surveillance and where images or videos captured in those spaces can increase a woman's vulnerability.

It might involve what a woman was doing

If certain *places* expose women to risk, then so do certain *actions*. Not because the actions themselves are harmful, but because they are watched, interpreted, and judged through restrictive social, cultural, and religious norms. Over and over, women described how certain behaviours can be reframed as violations when witnessed by others, and particularly when captured on camera.

Interacting with men, public displays of affection, and the policing of closeness

Several participants mentioned hugging, "making out," hand-holding, or "sitting with somebody very near" as obvious transgressions according to social norms. Photos that show physical intimacy – whether romantic or simply close, or affectionate contact, such as lying on a bed with friends – are understood as almost guaranteed to "get you in trouble". This policing of closeness has been performed publicly and on a national platform. In 2012, Pakistani morning show host Maya Khan led a camera crew into a public park in Karachi to confront unmarried couples sitting together, demanding they produce marriage certificates to prove they were not committing an act of immorality. Couples who asked for the camera to be switched off were filmed covertly anyway. The segment sparked widespread outrage and complaints to Pakistan's media regulator, but the fact that it was broadcast at all illustrated how thoroughly the surveillance of mixed-gender proximity had been normalised.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ 'Why "vigil Auntie" Caused Pakistan Media Storm', Asia, *BBC News*, 2 February 2012 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16809139>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

The same logic appears whenever women are seen interacting with men. One participant explained that even at a bus stop, just making eye contact with a man can invite judgment:

"If I am looking to him, or he is looking to me, the people will think...She is a bad girl...a loose character." – Zarnaz, Balochistan, Survivor

She goes on to contrast this with men's freedom to marry multiple times and love openly, whereas women, she says, "cannot love anyone" and are expected to remain emotionally tied to one man alone. Another survivor, Nabiha from Lahore, described how for her conservative family, "the idea of talking to a male is a taboo," even at age 25. The act of conversation itself takes on a moral charge, especially if captured in an image.

Singing, dancing, and "having a good time"

Some activities become risky simply because they are associated with pleasure, self-expression, or women taking up space in public. One interviewee drew a stark line around singing:

"There's also a cultural aspect, but then there's also a religious aspect to what women can and can't do. So singing is something that's not tolerated in some areas...even that is something which could lead to a woman being murdered in the name of honour." – Rida, independent legal expert

Dancing was described in more ambivalent terms. Amna, who lives in the UK, noted that there are "dance steps that I can do at home," but she would "not be so comfortable being caught on camera" doing them. Another survivor, Tahira in Lahore, said that when she shares images with friends, they show "the setting" but "never where I'm having fun, or if I'm dancing". The problem becomes about recorded movement, especially if women appear carefree, joyful, or uninhibited.

Weddings illustrate this tension clearly. Dance performances are often meticulously choreographed and socially sanctioned within the event itself. Families may rehearse for weeks. Yet once the dance is captured on screens, the meaning can shift. Participants described managing themselves carefully at weddings, moderating how energetically they move, scanning for cameras, and stepping aside when videos are being recorded.

In some severe cases, even something as seemingly minor [as clapping along to music](#)⁶⁵ – as previously referenced – was described as having led to women being killed. Being visibly happy, physically expressive, or absorbed in music can be reframed as impropriety once detached from context. The line about what is and isn't accepted is also not uniform. In some families, dancing at weddings is fully accepted – and expected. In others, it is permitted only in women-only spaces, and without cameras.

⁶⁵ Mao, Ng, and Zubair, 'Pakistan'.

Outside of weddings, dancing was seen as even more controversial, particularly in more conservative families. As one participant explained:

"Normally we are not encouraged to dance, because dance here is not seen as an art, it is seen as a crime sometimes. Girls can dance in their own rooms or in their own houses, but they can't dance somewhere outside. So if a girl goes out to learn dance it is seen as a bad thing." – Shaista, Rahim Yar Khan, Survivor

Even the idea of "partying" or "just having a good time" becomes loaded once it is documented. Going on "road trips or solo trips, or...graduate trips" was mentioned as another cluster of activities that may be hard to justify or explain if photos circulate beyond trusted circles.

Opinions, protests, and political visibility

Linked to the idea of women taking up space in public, for some women it is not only their bodies but their opinions and independent thoughts that can be framed as dangerous by others, particularly when captured online. One participant put it plainly:

"Anything that involves women and...their stance over controversial things...like having an opinion in religion or politics, that is also not looked well upon, culturally." – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad)



Examples from the data show how quickly political visibility can escalate into collective consequences. In Balochistan, it is alleged that security forces have detained civilians without due legal process, taking men from their homes and communities and holding them without charge. In many cases returning them dead or not at all.⁶⁶ Hajra, from Balochistan, described how women in the region, who were fully covered, stood outside of their homes and protested the disappearances of their male relatives. They were filmed and circulated on social media, and she highlighted how the backlash was swift. The visibility of Baloch women "shown in such a way on social media and everywhere" became a "taboo for the girls of Quetta". Schools and buildings closed, and families told girls they were "not allowed to go outside anymore". The women were "absolutely right," she insisted, but their appearance in protest footage still triggered a clampdown that affected many others who had not joined the demonstration.

⁶⁶ 'Paank Report Flags Enforced Disappearances, Torture and Killings across Balochistan', n.d. <<https://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/World/20260316/4427969.html>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

The Aurat March is a key event happening each year in multiple cities across Pakistan around International Women's Day. Beginning in Karachi in 2018, it emerged when women decided to expand the feminist movement beyond upper-class circles, with early support from the Lady Health Workers Association.⁶⁷

By 2019, the march had spread to Lahore, Islamabad, Hyderabad, Quetta, Peshawar, and Faisalabad. What started as an organic, grassroots movement has become a lightning rod for national controversy. Participants have received death and rape threats, alongside intense online trolling and misogynistic abuse. Posters and murals have been vandalised, and organisers face fears of acid attacks, bomb threats, and doxxing. In 2020 a legal petition was filed to stop the march, arguing it aimed to spread "blasphemy and hatred" of Islam, though the court ruled it could proceed.⁶⁸

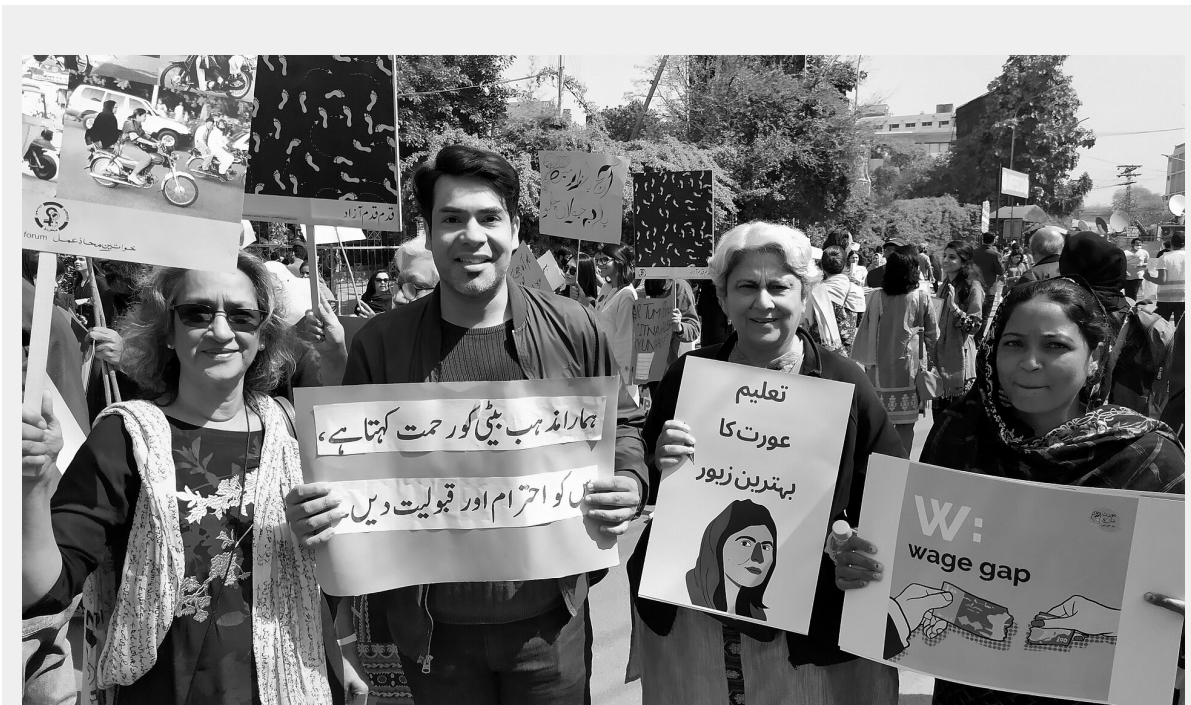


Photo: Nawab Afridi, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Women described weighing the cost of being photographed at the Aurat March. Some attended openly, posting images from the march themselves. Others were far more cautious, aware that any photo of them could travel quickly, reaching fathers, cousins, university administrators, or communities in other provinces. Participation in the march could prompt the label "one of those," with the title "feminist" used, as one participant put it, "like a slur". Even posters created for the march calling for women to be able to "sit the way that they want to" – including one depicting a woman sitting with her legs

⁶⁷ Alia Chughtai, 'Pakistani Women March for Equality, Gender Justice', Al Jazeera, n.d. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/8/pakistani-women-hold-aurat-march-for-equality-gender-justice>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁶⁸ 'Aurat March: Pakistani Women Face Violent Threats Ahead of Rally', Asia, BBC News, 7 March 2020 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51748152>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

open – were circulated as evidence of moral decline. Each year, participants said, footage and photographs are pulled out of context and folded into a familiar narrative that the march is foreign-funded, anti-Islamic, or pushing a “Western agenda”.

For some, the consequences were institutional as well as social. Afreen, an activist and survivor living in Karachi, described how images of her speaking at protests were used by university authorities to threaten her degree, despite constitutional protections for freedom of assembly. For queer and transgender participants in particular, visibility at the march intensified online targeting, with their photographs reposted and captioned as proof of supposed “Westernisation”.

In some years opponents have circulated doctored videos and social media posts that deliberately misrepresent protesters’ chants and banners as blasphemous, prompting accusations that the marchers insulted Islam – allegations that in Pakistan can carry deadly consequences and forced some organisers into hiding⁶⁹.

Exercise, body motions, and “appropriate” movement

Questions about women’s “appropriate” movement surfaced around gyms and exercise as well. As previously described, one participant, Muneeba (*UK, originally from Faisalabad*), reported that people ask: “Why is she in the gym? Why is she doing that?”. She recalls being told that if a woman needs to get fit, she “can do it in her own room” and should stick to “female exercise, like pilates or yoga”. **The idea of women’s bodies moving, sweating, or stretching in public, even for health, remains contested, and images of that movement can become proof of crossing a line.**

“Some of my friends who went and did yoga at a park once were being called out by security and being told that ‘you guys are being vulgar’, which was a shocking concern to me. So it’s very difficult to find spaces where you can do recreational activities, you can connect with people, connect with nature.” – Afreen, Karachi, Survivor

Another participant spoke more broadly about “body motions,” saying that intimacy can be tied not just to specific body parts but “anything to do with my body and how it moves or what it does”. Sleeping, changing clothes, the way one sits or positions their legs were all described as being under scrutiny in photos.

Even sleeping was described as inherently intimate, and historically policed. Participants said they had been instructed since childhood that pictures of them sleeping should never be taken, because sleep itself was viewed as private and potentially sexualised. In the time of military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, female actors were required to cover their heads at all times, even when shown falling asleep or waking up.⁷⁰ Though no longer the case,

⁶⁹ Mariya Karimjee, ‘A Coordinated Online Attack Has Forced Some Organizers behind Pakistan’s Women’s March into Hiding’, Rest of World, 17 March 2021
<<https://restofworld.org/2021/a-coordinated-online-attack-has-forced-some-organizers-behind-pakistan-s-womens-march-into-hiding/>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁷⁰ Maliha Rehman, *Pemra’s Ban on ‘intimacy’ between Married TV Couples Is Hampering Filmmakers’ Creativity, Say Directors – Culture – Images*, 10 November 2021
<<https://images.dawn.com/news/1188768>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

the cultural taboos persist and any scenes depicting romantic gestures like touching a face, or allusions to sexual activity like waking up close to each other can invite public scrutiny. Here, especially “if you’re a woman, of course”, the body itself is framed as intimate and the problem is the implied sensuality, even when there is no explicit nudity.

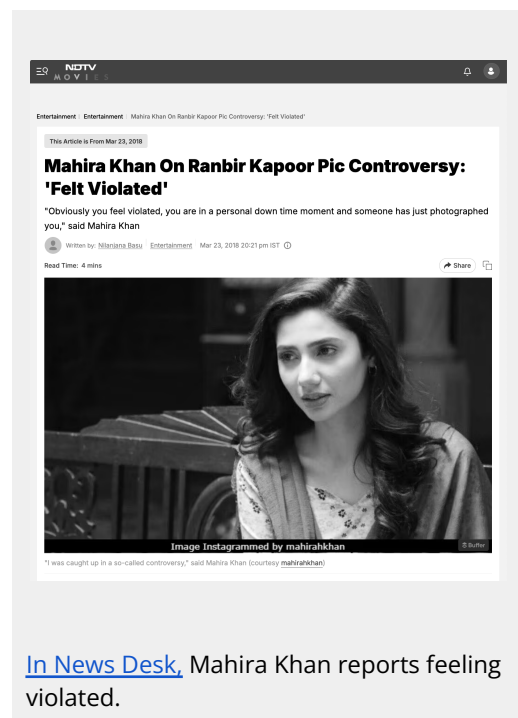
Parties, substances, and the hidden normal

One example of how an everyday, but ‘culturally hidden’ act can spiral into crisis came from a story about a student caught smoking on campus. Another girl, with 10,000 Instagram followers, filmed a video and “by mistake...captured her in her video”. When the clip went viral and the father of the student who was smoking saw it, the consequences were immediate and severe:

“That girl just abandoned all of her studies, then she never came to the University again.”
– Hajra, Balochistan

Smoking, in this account, became a public statement about character, respectability, and obedience. The visibility of the act being recorded and shared turned it into something incompatible with continuing as a student in the eyes of her family. This dynamic is not confined to private individuals.

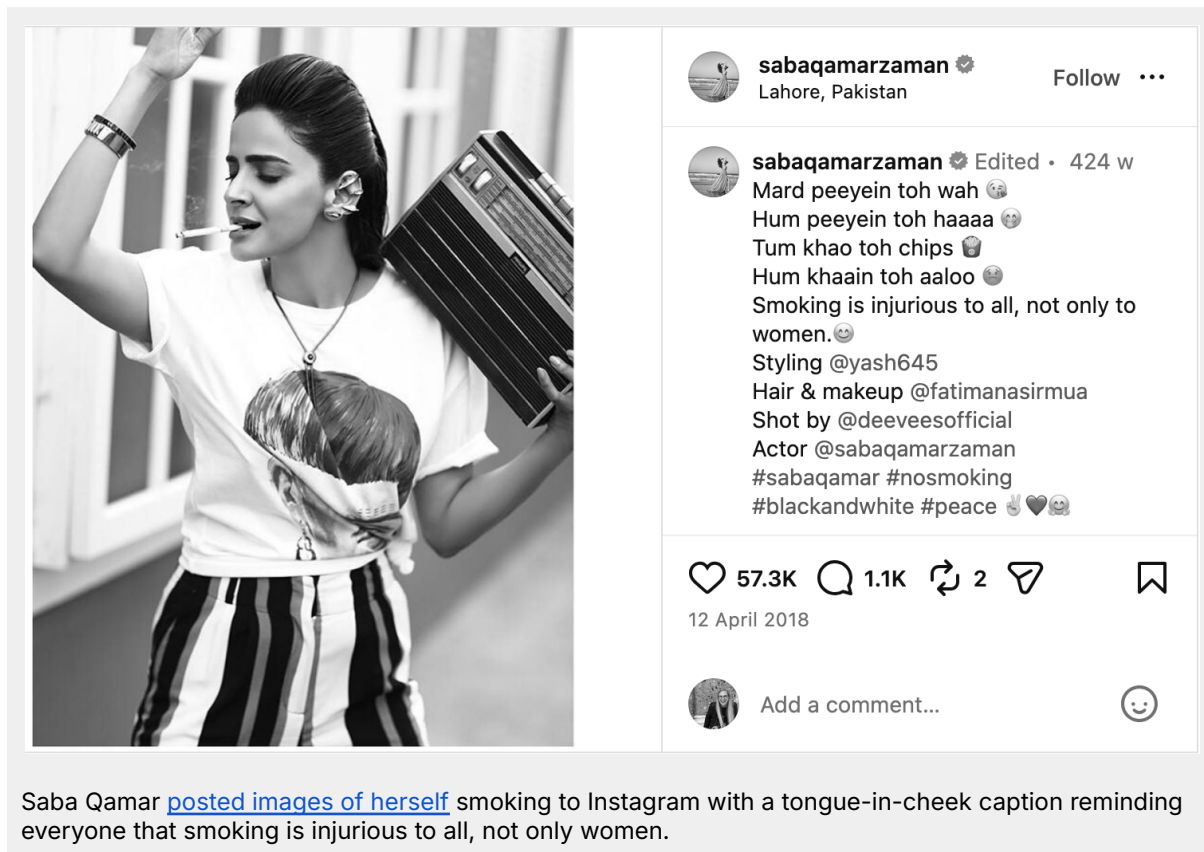
When paparazzi photos of actress Mahira Khan smoking on a New York street went viral in 2017, the backlash was severe enough that she later said she believed her career was over, and described the photographing of a private moment as a violation.⁷¹



When actress Saba Qamar posted an image of herself smoking to Instagram, it triggered similar responses. Qamar's caption, asking why men who smoke are applauded while women are condemned, captured the same gendered logic that participants in this research described.⁷²

⁷¹News Desk, 'Mahira Khan Opens up about Emotional Toll of Viral Photos with Ranbir Kapoor', The Express Tribune, 17 December 2024
<<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2516588/mahira-khan-opens-up-about-emotional-toll-of-viral-photos-with-ranbir-kapoor>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

⁷²our.correspondent, 'Saba Qamar Delivers Powerful Message about Smoking in Latest Instagram Post', The Express Tribune, 13 April 2018
<<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1684863/saba-qamar-delivers-powerful-message-smoking-latest-instagram-post>> [accessed 18 May 2026].



Perhaps the clearest contradictions emerge around drugs, alcohol, and nightlife. These accounts come largely from urban, middle, and upper-class participants – women with access to social and economic mobility, but they remain no less vulnerable to the consequences of exposure within conservative families and communities. One participant described how, in particular segments of Pakistani society, certain behaviours are simultaneously widespread and unspeakable:

“Basic things that are not allowed but are very, very actively still done, like drugs...so common, literally...at every other person’s house...” – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

She emphasised that these activities are “kind of hidden”. They may be normal within particular social circles, but they are almost never posted about directly:

“You never post it...there will be some people who will still do it...we’ll sort of laugh, and...applaud it...But still, it’s not going to be advertised like that, so you are not going to be allowed to post about it”.

Photos from parties or raves, she noted, are strategically curated – maybe a “music video,” perhaps a shot that doesn’t reveal alcohol, drugs, or the intensity of the atmosphere. Even at small gatherings in someone’s home, people are “very careful to post” if everyone looks “kind of drunk,” knowing that viewers will infer what was happening.

Others gave specific examples of what would be unthinkable to show. “It could be me eating pork, it could be me drinking, it could be me wearing a dress, I could be sitting with my friends on the roof...it ranges from that to literally anything” [Ifrah, Canada, Survivor]. These are shorthand for behaviours that violate religious or cultural norms in ways that can carry serious social consequences if captured on camera.

These accounts show that what is policed is often the simple fact of women enjoying themselves and taking up space – laughing, dancing, travelling, experimenting, or expressing opinions. Many of the actions described are not illegal, some are not even explicitly forbidden within families, yet once they are photographed or filmed, they can be seen as evidence of disobedience, shame, or a “loose character”. **The result is a constant negotiation. What can you do, what can you share, and what must remain invisible?**

Women highlighted the contradiction again and again that the same behaviours that men engage in without consequence become grounds for shame, family punishment, or withdrawal from public life when performed by women. In this context, documented images of women can weaponise a complex moral code where almost any visible action can be used to question a woman’s character, loyalty, or worth.

Or who appears in the image

Across the interviews, one message is clear: In Pakistan, the people who appear in a photo or video can be just as consequential as the action or location. Women described a social environment where simply being seen next to certain individuals can transform an innocent moment into something heavily scrutinised, moralised, or punished.

Men and mixed-gender friendships

Multiple women explained that images with men, whether strangers, colleagues, or longstanding friends, are among the most heavily policed. One participant put it bluntly:

“Standing closely next to somebody as a man and a woman...even that could be considered intimate”. – Rida, independent legal expert

Others echoed this. Walking next to a man, taking a photo with him, or even appearing in the same shot can be taken as evidence of a romantic or sexual relationship, even when nothing of the sort exists. This scrutiny can produce severe consequences. Several women said that photos “going viral with men” carry “harsh consequences,” including violence or being forced to leave education or work. Amna, who lives in the UK, described an aunt who “would not even be in the photo with a man that is not her husband or like family,” because the social implications were too risky. Sadia, a survivor based in the Lyari district of Karachi and who came from a particularly conservative background, described how in her community, even being seen talking to her own brother outside the home was considered a risk. She explained that this is because not everyone would know they are related and would simply see a scandalous scene of a young woman talking to a man.

Another participant explained how a photo with a long-time male friend where their heads were touching slightly was considered inappropriate:

"There was nothing obviously sexual, but it would be immediately assumed we were dating...even now we could end up in trouble". – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

The gendered double standard was clear. As Nabiha, another survivor from Lahore who we spoke with noted, in many households "just standing with a male...or shaking hands even can be threatening for a woman". Men face no comparable consequences. Several women described the normality of mixed-gender friendships, and the equally normal necessity of hiding them. As Nida from Lahore explained:

"People lie to have their own space...this is not about romantic relationships. But hanging out with boys...if that's not allowed in the household, and somebody has pictures of that, that's going to get you in trouble".

One participant recounted a conversation with an aunt who had already decided on the implications of a photo saying:

"She's in a car with a man, she might as well be [having an affair]". – Nisa, UK, Survivor

Participants described a meaningful distinction between photos taken in groups versus photos taken one-on-one. Being pictured alone with someone, especially a man, heightens the potential for misinterpretation. Even neutral activities like eating together can become problematic, and coded as intimate when only two people are present, especially if they are of the opposite gender:

"Is it just you two? That shifts the social context and how it's viewed". – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

Group photos can also be risky. Families may question why a woman was present, who she was with, and what the image "proves". The presence of a man, therefore, overwhelms the actual content of the image regardless of context.

LGBTQ+ contexts: additional layers of risk

Queer presenting women described an additional, compounding layer of risk. Their presence in images (alone or with others) could provoke assumptions about their sexuality, leading to hesitation even from female friends:

"There are females who are hesitant to sit with me...or be more affectionate in public...even though they're comfortable with their straight friends". – Nida, Lahore, Survivor

Others noted that friends and family sometimes refused to take photos with them or share them online, fearing how viewers might interpret the association. This is not because the women themselves were doing anything wrong, but because a photograph

can trigger homophobic assumptions and put both people at risk. As one transgender participant recounted:

سوشل میڈیا کے حوالے سے میں آپ کو ایک ذاتی مثال دیتی ہوں؛ میرے بھائی کی بیٹی ہے، جس کے ساتھ میں نے عید پر ایک تصویر (انٹرنیٹ پر) اپ لوڈ کر دی تھی۔ انہوں نے مجھ سے تو کچھ نہیں کہا، کیونکہ وہ مجھ سے تھوڑا کتراتے بھی تھے۔ پولیس (میں ہونے) کی وجہ سے اور کچھ ویسے بھی۔ لیکن انہوں نے بیٹی کو سختی سے منع کر دیا کہ آئندہ خیال رکھنا اور ان کے ساتھ تصویر مت بنانا۔ وہ ایک چھوٹی بچی تھی، جو ابھی اپنی نوعمری (Teenage) میں ہے۔ اب اس کے ذہن پر اس بات کا کیا اثر ہوا ہوگا کہ وہ اپنے ہی فیملی ممبر کے ساتھ ایک تصویر تک نہیں کھنچوا سکتی؟ حالانکہ میں نے تصویر پوسٹ کرنے سے پہلے خود اس سے پوچھا تھا کہ 'یہ تصویر ڈال دو نا؟' تو اس نے کہا تھا کہ 'تصویر کا تو کوئی مسئلہ ہی نہیں ہے، آپ اپ لوڈ کر دیں، اس میں کیا ہے؟' لیکن مجھ سے یہ غلطی ہوئی کہ میں اپنے بھائی کی کلچرل انٹرسٹینڈنگ (ثقافتی سوچ) کو سمجھ نہ سکی۔ ہمارے ہاں پرائیویسی کا معیار الگ ہے؛ ضروری نہیں کہ معاملات بہت بڑے ہوں، یہاں چھوٹی چھوٹی باتیں بھی بہت بڑے بڑے مسائل پیدا کر دیتی ہیں۔

"Regarding social media, I'll give you an example: my brother has a daughter. I uploaded an Eid photo with her. They didn't say anything directly to me because they were somewhat afraid – partly because of my police background – but they warned the girl - "In future, be careful and don't take pictures with her". She was a small child – early teens. Imagine what mindset that creates. Whether she can even be in a photo with a family member. And I had asked her before posting it, and she said, "there's no issue, you can post it aunty". But my mistake was that I didn't understand the cultural understanding my brother holds. In our context, "private" doesn't always mean something big. Small things can become huge and create very serious problems." – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Reem also highlighted how the risk for them came less in photos that involved nudity, revealing clothing, or singing or dancing on camera, and more in images that revealed or attacked their gender identity and expression:

ٹرانس جینڈر افراد کے لیے تصاویر اور ویڈیوز کے ذریعے تشدد کا تجربہ مختلف اور انتہائی تباہ کن ہو سکتا ہے، خاص طور پر جب ان کے ٹرانزیشن سے پہلے کے جسم یا ان کے جینڈر ایکسپریشن کو نشانہ بنایا جائے۔ ایسے واقعات، جیسے کہ وگ کے بغیر تصاویر یا بال کاٹنے جیسی ویڈیوز کو رضامندی کے بغیر سوشل میڈیا پر شیئر کرنا، ان کے لیے شدید خطرہ اور جان لیوا ثابت ہو سکتے ہیں۔

"Image- and video-based violence is experienced differently for a transgender person; it may not be as dangerous if a nude image is shared. But it is devastating if images of their pre-transition body are shared, or if their gender expression is targeted. Transgender people often say that the greater danger is not someone filming them dancing or wearing short clothes, but if a picture without our wig is uploaded. The real harm is when someone records something like cutting their hair and uploads it to social media without consent because that attacks their gender expression directly. This can take lives". – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Protecting loved ones: family members, children, and friends

For many women, privacy, risk, and personal photos extended beyond themselves to the people they appeared with. One described avoiding posting photos with friends because:

"The idea of intimacy is so high that if in a group setting, if it's a bunch of my friends and I'm taking a picture, it's very rare that I'd share it online without asking them. It's very rare because someone might be like, 'I don't know if my parents knew I was there', or 'I know my husband. I was not supposed to be wearing this'". – Ifrah, Canada (originally from Karachi), Survivor

Others avoided sharing photos of their children. One mother described how deeply protective she felt:

"Any image of me holding my kid...I make sure, with the little one, I still haven't uploaded anything on social media". – Sakina, Lahore, Survivor

Even when the images were "beautiful" or "Instagrammable," she avoided posting because, as she put it: "Even if they're friends, you don't know with what [intention] they're looking". This becomes about more than privacy, it is about shielding children from being exposed to unknown harm online.

Across these accounts, women described living in a landscape where their social connections are constantly monitored and moralised, and where being seen with the "wrong" person can produce real harm. A story emerges of how ordinary relationships and interactions become weaponised through images in a context of strict gender norms, heteronormative assumptions, and pervasive surveillance.

For some women, any image, recording, or personal detail can be "intimate"

Not all of the content women described as private, intimate or harmful fits neatly into categories like place, clothing, or action. For many participants, *any* digital trace, such as a casual photo, a voice note, a screenshot of a conversation, could become deeply personal and high-risk once it is recognised, circulated, or reinterpreted. This section

brings together these “other” forms of media – outliers that show just how far the boundaries of “private” can stretch.

When any photo can be used against you

Several participants stressed that the most dangerous images are often the most ordinary. One participant who had volunteered with some women’s organisations estimated that “about 80%” of the cases they see involve non-nude photos:

“Some images are taken with your friends...in your classroom, in a restaurant, and you do not know about it. And eventually...a text message comes to you on WhatsApp asking for sexual favours...saying ‘I have your image, I can make it public...make a deepfake from it’...I’m telling you, 80% of [cases] are that. ...These cases are more prevalent where the woman is not actually nude...It’s basically a simple image where she is just [going about her everyday life]...But for them, this picture is quite harmful. They [perpetrator] can get money...sexual favour...an unwanted relationship from the victim”. – Zarghuna, Balochistan, Survivor

In these situations, the problem is who holds or has access to the image, not what it shows. Any image of a woman can become “intimate” once it is in the wrong hands. As Zarghuna went on to say:

“These are normal images, but the problem is that some man who is not her husband or...family member has those images, and that’s where the problem comes from”.

For other women, particularly those from more conservative cultures, the idea of any photo being taken at all is considered to be inappropriate, and showing them to anyone outside of the family is a big no:

آج کل، ہم تصویروں کا غلط استعمال کرنے کی اتنی کہانیاں سنتے ہیں۔ اور پھر، ہم پشتون بھی ہیں، اس لیے دوسری برادریوں کے مقابلے میں ہمارے ہاں یہ چیز الگ ہے۔ ہمارے خاندانوں میں، جیسے میری کزن اور دوستیں ہیں، ہمیں ہمیشہ یہی سکھایا گیا کہ گھر سے باہر کسی کو اپنی تصویریں نہیں دکھانی۔ یہاں تک کہ اپنی تصویریں کھینچو ہی نہ۔ اگر ہم تصویریں لیتے بھی تھے، تو وہ صرف بھروسے مند لوگوں کے لیے ہوتی تھیں، آگے بھیجنے کے لیے کبھی نہیں۔ خاص طور پر لڑکیوں کی حوصلہ افزائی نہیں کی جاتی کہ وہ زیادہ تصویریں لیں۔ بس شاید ایک یا دو تصویریں میری امی کے فون پر ہوں، وہ بھی ان لوگوں کے ساتھ جن پر ہمیں یقین ہو کہ وہ آگے شیئر نہیں کریں گے۔ لوگ ان تصویروں کے ساتھ کچھ بھی کر سکتے ہیں۔ لیکن اپنی تصویریں آگے بھیجنا ہمارے کلچر میں بہت غلط سمجھا جاتا ہے، خاص طور پر لڑکیوں کے لیے۔

"These days, we see so many stories about people misusing photos. And also, we're Pashtun, so it's different for us compared to other communities. In our families, like with my cousins and friends, we were always taught not to show our pictures to anyone outside the home. Don't even take your pictures. Even when we took pictures, it was only for trusted people, never to send around. Girls, especially, aren't encouraged to take many photos. Maybe one or two on my mother's phone, with people we trust not to share them. People can do anything with them. But sending your pictures around is considered very wrong in our culture, especially for girls". – Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

Women repeatedly described the fear not of their own reputation as such, but of how parents and other family members such as brothers might react if they discovered that "some man has that image". Over time, this has produced a wider cultural anxiety around images themselves. One woman recalled growing up as digital cameras and camera phones became common:

"There was a whole era...when cameras came, digi-cams came, Facebook came...this idea of pictures being scary also entered our parents' consciousness...when phone cameras came, I remember this was a cultural thinking...Men take pictures with their phones, okay, be careful on the road...you're supposed to shield yourself from pictures...there was something dangerous about them. Something private". – Ifrah, Canada (originally from Karachi), Survivor

میں پرائیویسی (نجی) کے معاملے کی طرف واپس آتی ہوں: ہمارے ماحول میں 'پرائیویٹ' کا مطلب "صرف کوئی ایسی تصویر نہیں ہوتا جس میں کپڑے نہ ہوں۔ ہمارے ملک میں ایسی بہت سی تصاویر ہوتی ہیں جنہیں آپ کا خاندان سوشل میڈیا پر دیکھنا پسند نہیں کرتا—خواہ وہ کیسی ہی تصویر کیوں نہ ہو۔ یہ آپ کے کسی ریسٹورنٹ میں کھانا کھاتے ہوئے کی تصویر ہو سکتی ہے۔ یہ ہمارے ملک میں ہونے والی کسی تقریب یا محفل کی تصویر بھی ہو سکتی ہے۔ ہمارے معاشرے میں لوگ اکثر ایسا رویہ اختیار کرتے ہیں جیسے خواتین کسی کی 'ملکیت' ہوں، بالکل خریدے ہوئے ملازموں یا نوکروں کی طرح۔ اور اگر کوئی ان 'ملازموں' کو دیکھ لے—خاص طور پر خواتین کو—تو پھر 'کیا طوفان کھڑا ہوگا؟' اصل سوچ یہی ہے۔ اس لیے یہ پرائیویسی کی بہت ہی محدود تعریف ہے۔

"Let me return to the issue of privacy: in our context, 'private' does not simply mean an image without clothes. There are many images in our country that your family does not want to see on social media – any image at all. It could be a photo of you eating at a restaurant. It could be from a celebration or gathering in our country. In our society, people often behave as if women are someone's 'property,' like purchased servants. And if someone sees those 'servants' – especially women – then 'what will happen?' This is the mindset. So it's a very narrow definition." – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Intimacy goes beyond images, to voice notes, and screenshots

For some women, intimacy is not only visual. One participant said explicitly:

"Even my voice is considered explicit content...even my recorded voice that is found in someone else's phone would be considered as part of [my] intimate image". – Zarghuna, Balochistan, Survivor

She described how a WhatsApp voice note, if shared or discovered by a father or brother, would feel like a serious violation. In some areas of the country, she noted, "you're not supposed to hear a woman's voice," especially if you are not family. Simply being heard can be intimate. Others highlighted how written conversations have become a source of fear. Screenshots of chats, sometimes real, sometimes fabricated, were described as another form of private media that can be passed around without consent:

"It's also even screenshots...of just a general conversation...this idea of sharing conversations and that being private too. There was a whole thing about, 'Don't talk to men, don't say anything in writing...because those screenshots will go around.' We used to call it 'Gossip Girl culture'...you were constantly vigilant and scared...that someone is listening or...your screenshot [would circulate]". – Ifrah, Canada (originally from Karachi), Survivor

Ifrah recalled how, at university, it was easy to fake messages through changing contact names, rewriting texts, and then screenshotting them:

"It doesn't even need to be you or your body or your face. Saying, 'Let's get a room' in a screenshot, who do you explain it to?"

Here, the risk is the possibility that a woman's words can be edited, taken out of context, or shown to others as "proof".

Intimacy can include personal details

Some women described being equally concerned about images that reveal personal information such as documents, tickets, names, or addresses. One participant avoided posting anything that showed her full name alongside her postcode:

"If my details are there...anyone has access to the internet, and they can go around and find my address...even though that's a very long thinking (ibid). But for me, I live here alone...even if it's just for a few people, it does happen, and I don't want to be counted in those few." – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad)

Others worried that family members could recognise them from a dress, a room, or a house interior, even when their faces were not visible. In these accounts, "personal details" include anything that makes a woman identifiable and therefore answerable to others.

Time and context can change the meaning of an image

Participants repeatedly emphasised that context can change the meaning of an image, even when the content stays the same. Time of day, in particular, emerged as a powerful marker.

One woman explained:

"If there is a picture of a woman...in the daytime, it could still be spared a little, that, okay, she was there for work or any other reason. But if the same picture with the same person in the same background is at night, it would have thousands of questions...especially for the woman: why were you there?" – Aina, Lahore

Being out late, even with female friends, was viewed as suspicious. Muneeba, living in the UK, noted that "anything to do with men after 6 or 7pm...even having them stand next to you" could trigger assumptions about what she was doing and why.

Ayesha, part of the Digital Rights Foundation team, also described how a normal photo paired with a sexually explicit song in the background, or a regular image given a sexualised caption, can become a tool of abuse without the image itself being intimate in any conventional sense. As she put it:

"In some cases, the content itself may not be sexually explicit. It can be a regular picture paired with a sexually explicit song, caption or suggestive emojis. We classify such material as intimate due to the connotations and implied messaging introduced through these manipulations. These additions can significantly alter the meaning of the content and often lead to serious threats and harm in the lives of complainants".

Ayesha also pointed to a related and growing phenomenon: confession pages. These are anonymous online pages, often linked to a particular school or neighbourhood, that target individuals, typically minors, without using their name or photograph. Instead, they use identifying details such as appearance or possessions, alongside sexually explicit and often violent language. She described content that is designed to be recognised by those who know the victim, while remaining just beyond the reach of formal legal complaint, partly due to the limited technical capacity of the law enforcement to trace anonymous social media accounts. Students who contacted her organisation, she said, simply wanted the posts taken down. They felt unable to file a formal complaint, and schools were often doing nothing. These pages sit in a legal and institutional grey zone. They are harmful enough to cause serious distress, but structured to evade accountability.

For many women, simply being visible is dangerous

Some participants pointed out that even just having an online presence can make images risky, especially when linked to activism or a public profile. One woman mentioned "a girl here [who] was killed," and how media coverage fixated on the fact

that she was “a TikToker”. She was Sana Yousaf, a 17-year-old from Chitral who had built a following of over a million on TikTok, where she shared videos of traditional Chitrali music, skincare routines, and her everyday life, in addition to advocating for girls' education. She was shot dead in her Islamabad home in June 2025 by a man who had repeatedly tried to contact her online and been rejected. In the aftermath, comments celebrating her killing appeared across her social media posts. The Digital Rights Foundation noted that such responses dangerously frame a woman's online presence as a justification for violence against her, with her visibility, not her attacker's, cast as the provocation.⁷³

Other participants we spoke with were wary of posting anything that expressed too much of their personality or private life, especially if they had a large following. They spoke about carefully curating what they shared and blocking large numbers of people on social media to limit who could see their content, particularly those within queer communities, because “just one photo” could be enough to trigger gossip, WhatsApp circulation, or family backlash, “even though it's...not anything controversial”.

This was reflected by a high-profile British Pakistani actor we spoke with who talked about the implications of being a person in the public eye and what that visibility means in terms of consent:

“It's funny you use the word consent, because the first time you actually enter the industry, you're told that you're basically giving yourself on a platter to the keyboard warriors, and you can't say anything about it. You're basically now public property.”

For some women, visibility was political, and intentional, but they were very clear about the risk it carried and the impact it had on their lives. Two participants from Balochistan, both long engaged in activism and intellectual work, described how speaking publicly under their own names altered the level of risk they faced. One – Nargis – recalled that in the early days of Facebook, many women used male names to avoid scrutiny. Poetry written under a female pseudonym might be tolerated, she explained. But when she began publishing political analysis and feminist writing under her own name, the response shifted. Her intellect was questioned, her character attacked, and her images manipulated and circulated to provoke ridicule. At times she withdrew from social media entirely, returning later without showing her face, which became her strategy to avoid retreating from the public sphere. Even then, scrutiny continued, extending into her marriage and family life, where online harassment translated into private pressure.

The other participant, Sanam, active for decades in discussions on women's rights and bodily autonomy, described how her visibility in male-dominated political spaces made her a target. When she publicly affirmed that a past relationship had been consensual and no one else's concern, the statement was interpreted as sexual availability and led

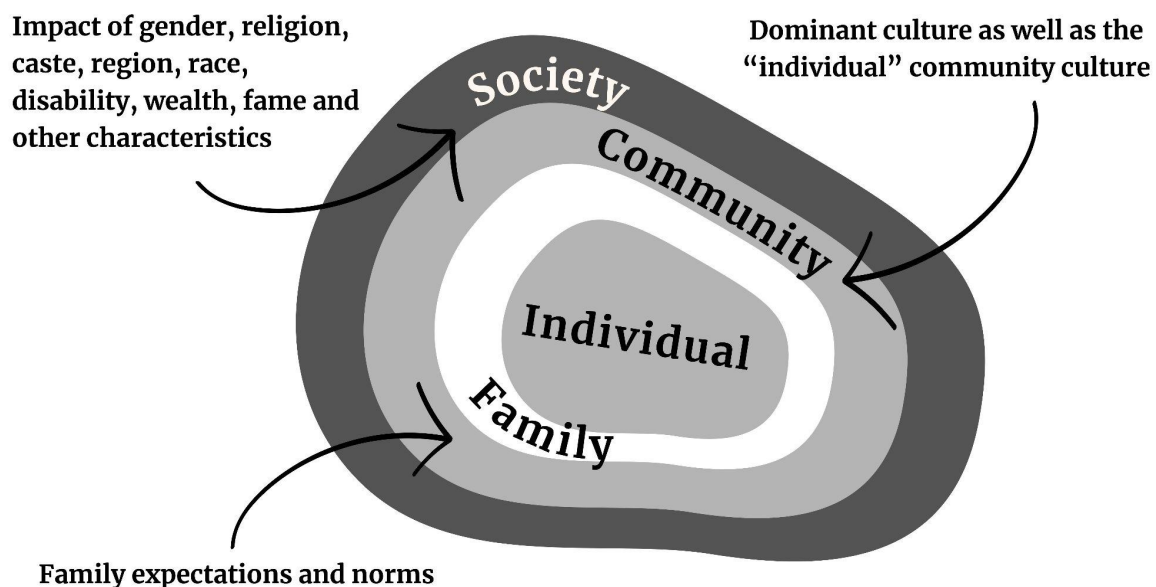
⁷³ Sophia Saifi, ‘Teenage TikTok Star's Murder Leaves Pakistani Women Questioning Whether Any Safe Spaces Exist – Online or on the Street’, CNN, 10 June 2025 <<https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/09/asia/pakistan-teen-murder-gender-violence-hnk-intl>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

to intensified harassment. In both cases, the harm began with authorship and with women claiming voice, ideology, and ownership of their own narratives. This is where visibility itself became grounds for punishment.

In addition to those women who chose to have a social media presence or be visible in some way, there were also implications for those who did not choose such visibility. Women who had experienced their images being shared repeatedly on various sites without their consent – whether that be Facebook, in WhatsApp groups, or even on porn websites – were subject to the same criticism about visibility as those who had shared content intentionally. As Sadia in Karachi described, it was considered reprehensible to become “viral” or a trend, even if it wasn’t the woman’s choice.

4. Harm is Collective: The Central Role of Family and Community

When women’s images circulate without consent, they are rarely dealing with the perpetrator alone. Around them, families, relatives, neighbours, elders, and whole communities mobilise, often to judge, shame, and discipline, rather than support.



Beyond religion, class, caste, region, race, disability, wealth, and fame – the most important determining factor of harm and consequences to survivors was the norms and code of respectability expected and enforced by their family and wider social network. If families stand by survivors, it makes a world of difference in limiting the impact of image-based abuse and supports them in moving forward with their lives.

Several women described how cases of image-based abuse are openly discussed in families and communities by being turned into moral lessons. One participant who wished to remain anonymous said such women are talked about as *ibrat ka nishan* (a walking obscenity; a sign of moral ruin). Their suffering is held up as evidence of what happens if a girl talks to a boy, shares something private, or steps beyond accepted limits.

In these retellings, the emphasis is not on the harm she has experienced but on the supposed mistake she made. The story becomes a tool to police other women and girls, reinforcing the idea that it is their responsibility to avoid bringing shame, rather than society's responsibility to stop abuse.



A number of women distinguished between immediate family and the wider network around them. Some spoke of parents and siblings who were relatively accepting, but said their extended family, including cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws, acted as moral police. These relatives monitored social media, took screenshots, and sent them to parents with accusatory questions: "What is your daughter doing?" Others pressured fathers not to let daughters travel, study, or mix socially as a result. Participants described this as a constant

background pressure. Even if their own household was supportive, they knew that "people outside" were watching, ready to twist narratives and circulate gossip.

Neighbourhoods and local communities also played a central role. Women described their social worlds as "mini hubs" where everyone knew each other's families, and where an image could quickly be shown around, reinterpreted, and weaponised. In some regions, community elders or *jirgas* took on a formalised role, deciding how a family should respond to a woman who was seen as bringing shame. Participants stressed that these decisions were mostly against women, with elders siding with male honour over women's safety.

Across accounts, participants described honour as something carried not just by an individual woman, but by her entire family. A leaked image was seen as a stain on her father, mother, brothers, and sisters. Women worried not only about being judged themselves, but about their father being unable to work, their sisters struggling to marry, their whole family being looked at "in a shameful manner".

This collective gaze made families highly sensitive to how others might respond. Even when parents themselves were relatively open-minded, they feared what neighbours, colleagues, or extended relatives would say, or "*Log kya kahein gay*" which translates



literally as "what will people say?" but functions as a deeply embedded cultural refrain invoking the weight of community judgment and social reputation. It is frequently cited as a reason women do not speak about abuse or seek formal support.

Shame functioned as a powerful tool of control. Mothers warned daughters that reporting harassment or abuse would "bring shame" and make it harder for them or their sisters to marry. Families worried about what people would say if an incident became known. Women described mothers arranging hush-money payments to blackmailers instead of confronting them, advised to comply quietly rather than seek help and risk public exposure, because they believed speaking out would harm the family's honour more than staying silent. This response was framed as an attempt to shield the family from being labelled and ostracised. But for the women affected, it translated into silence, isolation, and a sense that their own suffering was secondary to social respectability.

Women's accounts also revealed a stark moral divide between "good" and "bad" women. Once images were shared or rumours spread, they said, society was quick to reposition them on the "bad" side of that line. This collective decision about which women are good or bad also sometimes appeared along class lines:

"Even when people are talking about my situation, it's just this shock that, 'how could this, educated, upper class woman, do something that only, poor, degenerate women, do. You know, like you're filthy....I don't know, it's very puritanical, I guess". – Sahar, Canada, Survivor

Participants described how girls in these situations were called "loose character," "bad girls," or treated as if any harm they suffered was their own fault. Amna (UK / Punjab) who had been blackmailed and publicly humiliated recalled being grounded by her parents and publicly shamed by school authorities, despite having done nothing wrong. Hajra from Balochistan recounted how her father and mother were "defamed" when a family member saw her image on Facebook – criticising their parenting skills, questioning Hajra's character and misdirecting their own shame and anger onto the family. The degree of sympathy a woman received, participants noted, was sometimes contingent on how religiously observant she was perceived to be. Ifrah in Canada described a telling contrast within her own friendship group from when she lived in Pakistan. When an image of a friend without her headscarf – someone who usually always wore one – was accidentally shared, the response was collective outrage and solidarity. But when the same thing happened to a woman who dressed less conservatively or was seen as less devout, the reaction was different. As she put it, "if you were making out with someone, or wearing a dress, you deserved it". Religious identity, in other words, did not just shape how women were treated after an image was shared. It determined whether they were treated as victims at all.

Women emphasised that once a narrative formed around them, almost anything could be read as proof of their alleged immorality. As Nida from Lahore put it, "If somebody does something like this, then society says, 'Oh, you're this person. You might sleep around. If you're doing this, you might as well be doing all these other things.'"

Underlying this dynamic, some participants argued, is a possessive logic that treats a woman's image as an extension of male honour rather than her own:

"It's this patriarchal narcissism...your wife is basically an extension of who you are. So if your wife has intimate photos that other men have seen, she's tainted, she's not exclusive to you anymore. It's the Madonna-whore binary. They just can't see wives or mothers as full, complex human beings. And my husband, for as much work as he's done, as long as he's lived in the West, gone to therapy...even he struggles with this. So I can't imagine a man who hasn't done any of that work trying to unlearn it". - Sahar, Canada, Survivor

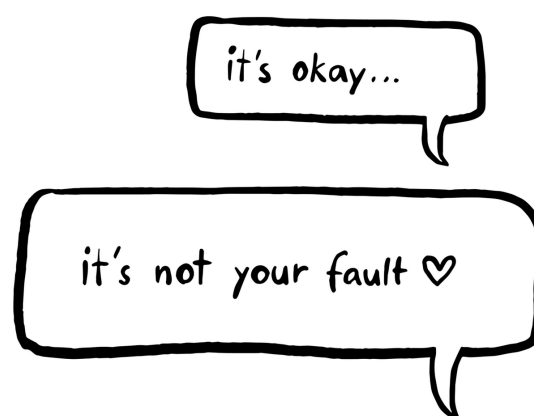
Participants also pointed to a painful pattern, that when something goes wrong, families and communities often believe outsiders more than the women themselves. At the same time, opposing voices did appear in the data. Some women spoke about parents who did not buy into the harshest cultural scripts, who let their daughters "be themselves," or who recognised that blame lay with the person misusing images, not the woman in them. Rimsha, a survivor based in Lahore, described the moment a manipulated image of her was sent directly to her brother as

among the most frightening of her ordeal, and yet it became an unexpected turning point. Rather than turning on her, he came to her directly and listened. "He understood that I had made a mistake," she recalled. "He said it wasn't AI-generated, but even then, he stood by me. He gave me courage. He told me to file a complaint – cybercrime, FIA – wherever needed, and said he would stand with me". Younger generations, especially in some urban areas, were said to be more critical of honour-based violence and more willing to question the idea that a woman's entire worth is tied to her perceived purity.

What runs through all of these accounts is that the severity of social consequences bore little relationship to whether the images involved were sexually explicit. As Ayesha, a member of the Digital Rights Foundation team who works directly with survivors observed, the consequences tend to be the same regardless:

"Their family won't trust them. Their family will stop their education or force them into early marriage. Survivors often experience social isolation and significant ongoing distress that shapes their everyday lives and sense of self. In worst cases, these incidents can also become a lasting mark on their social identity and how they are perceived by others".

She was careful to acknowledge that explicit content brings its own particular distress, but argued that quantifying harm along those lines misses the point: *"the extent of the consequences can be the same regardless of whether it was sexually explicit or not".*



For many women, it is not the content of the image that determines how badly their life is disrupted. It is simply the fact that an image exists, and that others have seen it.

In summary, even if women had supportive families, it is these broader networks that women identified as the loudest judges and the quickest to turn a private violation into a public stain on a woman's character.

5. The Consequences of Image-Based Abuse Are Far-Reaching and Long-Lasting

Women in the study described consequences of image-based abuse that stretched into multiple corners of their lives. Once an image, video or screenshot existed, it could impact their education, work, freedom, safety, mental health, reputation, and relationships with family, sometimes in ways that felt permanent and irreparable.

Several women stressed that the stakes could literally be life and death. Participants talked about honour killings and femicide as a very real backdrop to private, harmful, or "inappropriate" images being shared. Other participants talked about *jirgas* in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan deciding that both women and men should be killed when images hinted at relationships or intimacy. For a woman, "a normal picture can be a big problem... maybe [so much] that it can lead to a femicide... maybe that much that the family is exiled from the society". (Zarghuna, Balochistan, Survivor). The existence of honour-based abuse in South Asia and the link to women's bodies was described powerfully by D'Lima, Solotaroff and Pande (2020):

*"Community honour is located within a woman's body. A woman who exercises agency over herself is seen as violating honour, as it implies that her male guardians have been unable to control her behaviour and make decisions for her that best elevate their status among other men in the community. Honour, then, is redeemable by destroying the body of the woman who caused the dishonour. This system thus directly lays the groundwork for justifying honour crimes and killing."*⁷⁴

Zeba, a survivor based in Lahore, whose own experience of blackmail unfolded while she was living with her extended family, said that she was fortunate she had a supportive family, but she recounted the story of another woman she had supported through her work at the Human Rights Commission. This woman said plainly that if her family ever saw the intimate videos, "they will kill me eventually in the first second of finding it out. And even if they let me live, they will make this house hell for me, and they will cage me here for the rest of my life". Ifrah from Canada (originally from Karachi), reflecting on her own case of image-based abuse, said she had been "scared for my life," not because her parents were generally unreasonable, but because "you see all logic dissolve" in these situations.

⁷⁴ Tanya D'Lima, Jennifer L. Solotaroff, and Rohini Prabha Pande, 'For the Sake of Family and Tradition: Honour Killings in India and Pakistan', *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*, 5.1 (2020), pp. 22–39, doi:10.1177/2455632719880852.

The fear of such extreme outcomes shaped families' responses in more everyday ways too, often by cutting off girls' education and mobility. Participants said that, in many cases, if photos or videos circulated, "immediate consequences will be my education will be discontinued" and they would no longer be allowed to go out or use devices (Zarghuna, Balochistan, Survivor). One transgender participant described a situation where the harassment on campus following the leaking of her pre-transition images led to her needing to leave the university:

"I was left with no choice, and there are precautions of this incident and everything that followed up to it was that I had to leave my university and drop my degree that I had been doing for three years and sort of restart everything from scratch in an entirely different city, in a new place." – Afreen, Karachi, Survivor



[Dawn News](#). In 2019, private pictures of actor and artist Rabi Pirzada were leaked online. The images went viral, exposing her to immense public scrutiny and distress.

Zarnaz, a survivor from Balochistan, imagined her father saying, "you should not go to get education. You should not go alone. You should be married," and arranging marriage as a way to contain the perceived shame. Ifrah, based in Canada, described a friend at a top university in Lahore who was "married off" to her cousin after an incident: "they were like, we don't know how to handle a woman who knows she has a body". Restrictions on movement were described as another routine response. Several women said that after an incident they would "not be allowed to go out," or that in their communities, women were expected to leave the house only if fully covered and accompanied by male relatives. Simply being seen alone with a man, or even "found in a lone setting," could be treated as intimate and lead to abuse or violent punishment at home. Zarghuna in Balochistan talked about how her access to technology would be restricted if she ever had her photos leaked: "I will not have any gadget after that".

Reputation and social standing sat at the centre of many of these consequences. Women returned to words like "reputational damage," "defaming," "social stigma," and "shame". Others described being labelled "not a good girl" and being excluded from family interactions, for example relatives telling their wives and sisters not to speak to them. Zeba, a survivor in Lahore described how her mother decided not to take her to family gatherings "not because I'm embarrassed of you, but because I'm scared for you," in case angry male relatives decided to act. Other high-profile figures described how their families were dragged into the abuse:

"That's one situation that just brought so much heat to my family as well. One day you wake up and you've been dragged into a situation you know nothing about, you have nothing to do with, and they're [perpetrators] vouching for it as well. And so unfortunately, what happened is that my sister was dragged into it because my sister's on social media, so she's dragged into it as well. My family was dragged into it as well, they were AI-d in pictures and all of that stuff. And circulating it through WhatsApp groups and everything. Honestly, I still don't think I processed it properly. At that moment, I went into survival mode". – High-profile British Pakistani actor

Sadia, a survivor from Balochistan, now living Lyari, Karachi, described how her siblings, especially her brother, were taunted and ostracised as a result of the abuse that she faced from her ex-fiance, and that her mother was chided for supporting and enabling her. This reputational damage spilled into schools and workplaces. Amna in the UK recalled how, after a video in which she was only in the background was used to blackmail her, the way her parents handled it meant "the whole school kind of knew what happened". She described being publicly disgraced, having to walk through high school "with my head very low," and classmates bringing up the incident whenever a photo of her surfaced. She described how this experience had a negative impact on her education and her grades. The intense and long-lasting psychological impact of all this was often one of the major consequences described by participants. Women spoke of mental breakdowns, anxiety, depression, helplessness, and trauma. One participant – Muneeba, originally from Faisalabad but currently living in the UK – described seeing her classmate in school after a boy threatened to leak her pictures, locking herself in washrooms, "crying her eyes out," refusing to attend classes. Another said that her own experience was the "first ever" time she understood "how an image can damage a person's mental health". She described that when she was blackmailed at 15 she lay awake for three days, unable to sleep, and learning for the first time "what helplessness is like". – Zarghuna, Balochista, Survivor

Nabiha, a survivor based in Lahore, said that when intimate videos of her were shared, she went into "a state of paranoia," with massive anxiety and panic attacks. "I couldn't eat for like 40 hours... it was hard to breathe, even while thinking about what I had to go through alone in this room". Several participants described feeling "broken," "devastated," and "down to my knees," especially when family members responded with punishment rather than comfort. Amna, now in the UK but originally from Punjab, said the hardest part was "lack of understanding," knowing that a stranger had seen her body and that she already felt regret, yet still being scolded and grounded by her parents instead of being consoled.

For some, suicidal thoughts came up repeatedly. Nabiha from Lahore, whose intimate videos spread widely, described spending nights thinking of "the ways I can take my life," weighing whether to sell her jewellery to pay off the blackmailer or to end her life instead. Sana, a survivor in Islamabad recalled those months when her images were shared without consent as a time when her mind was "full of very suicidal thoughts... I used to think at night I should kill myself," even after a cybercrime unit had helped remove the images, because "the emotional thing" remained. Other participants spoke

of situations where women and girls they knew of had taken their own lives due to the distress caused from having their images leaked.

The case of Naila Rind illustrates what is at stake when those systems fail entirely.⁷⁵ In 2017, Naila, a Masters student at the University of Sindh in Jamshoro, was found dead in her hostel room after months of blackmail by a man who threatened to share her images. The Federal Investigation Agency was geographically inaccessible, and there was no counselling or support available at her university. Digital rights advocates Nighat Dad and Shmyla Khan argued that the PECA law passed in her name had failed to reach women like her. Women we spoke with also described dissociation and blocking out memories as a way of coping. Ifrah from Canada said, "I think I've blocked a lot of it out if I'm honest. It's really hard to access the feelings behind it because it seems more like a story now". Another participant talked about the long-lasting impacts the experience had on her mental health:

میں نے پڑھا تھا کہ خبروں کا چکر اکثر اڑتالیس گھنٹے تک چلتا ہے۔ لیکن ان اڑتالیس گھنٹوں کے دوران، میرا دماغ شدید خوف اور گھبراہٹ کا شکار ہو گیا۔ میرے ذہن میں ایسے خیالات آنے لگے کہ اگر کچھ بہت برا ہوا، اگر لوگوں نے میرے بارے میں باتیں کرنا شروع کر دیں، تو میں اپنی جان لے لوں گی۔ میں خودکشی کرنے کے بارے میں سوچ رہی تھی۔ میں بار بار یہی سوچتی تھی کہ کیا ہوگا اگر لوگوں نے مجھے مرد کہنا شروع کر دیا۔ یہ اتنا تکلیف دہ تھا۔ میں اب بھی اس کے لیے تھراپی لے رہی ہوں۔ میں مستقل سائیکالوجسٹس کے پاس جا رہی ہوں، اور میں ابھی تک اس کے برے اثرات سے پوری طرح باہر نہیں نکل سکی ہوں۔

"I had read that news cycles often last forty-eight hours. But during those forty-eight hours, my mind spiraled into absolute panic. I started having thoughts that if something very bad happened, if people started talking about me, I would take my own life. I was suicidal. I kept thinking what if people call me a man. It was that painful. I am still in therapy for this. I continue to see psychologists, and I have not yet fully recovered from its after-effects." – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

The psychological harm was often mirrored in women's bodies. Several participants linked the stress of image-based abuse to physical changes such as intense menstrual bleeding and spotting lasting for weeks, fainting spells, severe weight loss, and chronic insomnia. Nabiha from Lahore described sitting on the toilet to "let all the blood go because it wasn't stopping," while not eating for days and watching the weight fall off. "I don't know if I slept one night peacefully or not," she said. Mothers and friends also appeared physically overwhelmed, some fainting when they learned of leaked pictures.

Family and community responses often layered additional harm on top of the initial violation. Some women described being beaten by parents and siblings after being seen talking to a boy who was blackmailing them, or accused of being involved in a scandal. Zarnaz from Balochistan recounted how her brother attacked a boy in public for

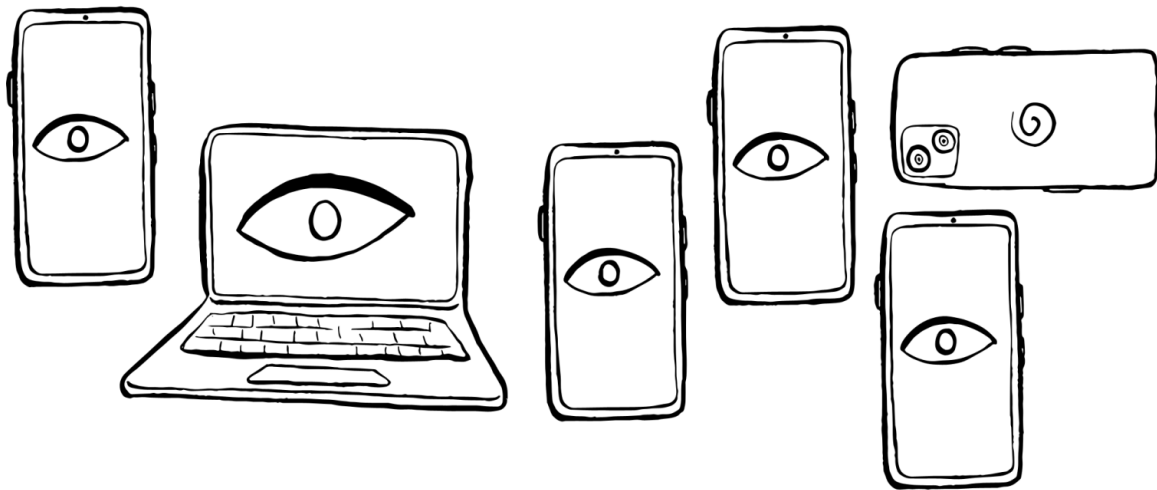
⁷⁵ 'Naila Rind Killed Herself Because Pakistan's Cybercrime Laws Failed Her - Pakistan - DAWN.COM', n.d. <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1306976>> [accessed 18 May 2026].

standing with her in a photo, leading to a violent fight, and how, when she got home, her mother and sister began beating her as well. Zarghunat, who had worked in a hospital in Quetta, Balochistan, spoke about seeing women arrive “beaten so severely” with clear bruises and injuries, yet too afraid to tell doctors that fathers, brothers or husbands had physically assaulted them. In some cases, she believed, the injuries led to death.

Economic and financial consequences also appeared in women’s stories. Blackmailers demanded money and families scraped together what they could pay hoping this would make the images disappear. For one family this was 5,000 rupees (\$50 USD / £40 GBP) at first, then escalating to one lakh (\$1,100 USD / £870 GBP). For those women and families who did not feel they could go to the authorities for support, paying the blackmailers felt like the only solution. Even those who resisted paying often considered how they could gather the money together through selling jewellery and other household items. These economic consequences also extended into longer-term, real and potential impacts. Nabiha worried that if her blackmailer resurfaced, he could destroy not only her job opportunities at a critical moment in her career but also her marriage prospects.

Many women responded to these experiences by withdrawing from digital and public life. Some deactivated their social media accounts, deleted content, or avoided posting photos altogether, even when they knew they needed a public profile for their careers. Sakina in Lahore said she “stayed off social media for a while” after her account was hacked and misused. Tahina, also from Lahore, whose professional work depends on visibility, spoke about still ruminating over building a “big presence” online. Every time she tries to post, she finds herself scanning the image for anything that could be sexualised or read as “asking for negative attention”. For others, the incident reshaped their relationship with technology more permanently: “hypervigilance is there in my own body” now, said Ifrah (Canada). She described how she had become “super private,” trusting people less and less.

For some participants, disappearing felt like the only way to be safe. Tahina eventually left the country “as soon as I could,” after repeated messages from unknown numbers saying “I’m outside your house, can I come over?” Whenever she stepped outside to go for a run, she feared she was being watched.



The consequences of image-based abuse and non-consensual sharing of images were described as cascading through every part of women's lives, threatening their survival, stripping away education and work, constraining their movements, damaging their reputations, draining family finances, and leaving deep psychological and physical scars. Even when the images were eventually taken down, the women emphasised that what remained, the guilt, the fear of what others had seen or imagined, the shift in how they saw themselves and were seen by others, did not simply disappear. As one participant put it, "My pictures are taken down, but the guilt, the emotional baggage, the emotional trauma... how can I let that go from my mind?" – Sana, Islamabad, Survivor

6. Perpetrators of IBA and Their Motivations Are Diverse

Perpetrators of IBA

The stories women told locate perpetrators across a wide social map, including intimate partners, ex-partners, crushes, classmates, friends, relatives, strangers, and even in some cases, other women. The spread of perpetrators identified by women in this study reflects patterns documented in the global literature on image-based abuse, where perpetrators are found across the full spectrum of a survivor's social world, though the weight of evidence consistently places intimate and former partners at the centre.



Many accounts centred on boyfriends or husbands who misused intimate images. Ex-partners shared sexual pictures with family members, with new partners, with mutual friends, or threatened to post them publicly as

retaliation for a breakup or an engagement to someone else. Several women described being groomed with promises of marriage or protection before those same men used the images to control what they wore, where they went, and whether they could leave the relationship. Mahnoor, a survivor based in Multan described how her husband proactively stole her photos, installed her WhatsApp on a second device, and subsequently used her ordinary pictures to abuse her, accuse her of infidelity and send “evidence” to her employer and relatives.

This pattern is consistent with what multinational research has found. Across studies conducted in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and more recently across multiple countries simultaneously, current and former intimate partners have consistently emerged as the most commonly identified perpetrators of image-based abuse, with approximately half of all known-perpetrator cases involving this relationship type.⁷⁶⁷⁷⁷⁸ A scoping review of low- and middle-income countries found that in many cases the images were originally taken within the relationship, often coercively framed as proof of love or trust, and later weaponised for blackmail or control,⁷⁹ a dynamic also described by participants in this study.

Younger women described a different but equally pervasive pattern among boys from school and university. Teenage girls and young women were targeted by boys they had rejected, classmates, and peers. This pattern of covert recording in private spaces extends beyond individual perpetrators. The Digital Rights Foundation has documented a broader trend of surveillance in spaces women rely on for safety and privacy, including hostels, shelters, university campuses, and salons, where cameras installed under the guise of security have been used by staff and security personnel to harass and blackmail women. A 2019 protest at the University of Balochistan drew attention to exactly this kind of abuse by those in positions of institutional authority.⁸⁰⁸¹

The involvement of peers, classmates, and those in institutional roles is also reflected in the global literature, though it tends to appear as a secondary pattern after intimate partner abuse. Research on adolescent and young adult populations has identified peer networks as significant sites of image redistribution, where friends, classmates, and

⁷⁶ Anastasia Powell and others, ‘Image-Based Sexual Abuse: The Extent, Nature, and Predictors of Perpetration in a Community Sample of Australian Residents’, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 92 (2019), pp. 393–402, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2018.11.009.

⁷⁷ Nicola Henry, Asher Flynn, and Anastasia Powell, *Image-Based Sexual Abuse: Victims and Perpetrators* (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2019), doi:10.52922/ti09975.

⁷⁸ Rebecca Umbach, Nicola Henry, and Gemma Beard, ‘Prevalence and Impacts of Image-Based Sexual Abuse Victimization: A Multinational Study’, *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York, NY, USA), CHI ’25, 25 April 2025, pp. 1–20, doi:10.1145/3706598.3713545.

⁷⁹ Md Mamunur Rashid Sheikh and Michaela M. Rogers, ‘Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review’, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 25.2 (2024), pp. 1614–29, doi:10.1177/15248380231191189.

⁸⁰ Kalbe Ali, ‘Alarm over Surveillance of Girls in Private Spaces’, Pakistan, *Dawn*, 07:06:29+05:00 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1838477>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

⁸¹ Sheikh and Rogers, ‘Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries’, 2024.

social acquaintances can also be primary actors.⁸² The use of surveillance infrastructure by those in positions of authority such as staff, security personnel, institutional actors remains comparatively under-researched globally, making the DRF's documentation of this pattern a meaningful contribution to the evidence base.

Family members also appeared repeatedly as perpetrators, particularly male relatives who felt entitled to police women's behaviour. Women spoke about cousins creating multiple accounts to monitor their posts, uncles calling their mothers to complain about a Facebook picture, and relatives delivering printed screenshots to their parents with lectures about family honour. Ifrah, based in Canada, realised that a cousin who "wanted to marry [her]" was anonymously sending her photos to her parents, offering commentary on her movements: "Here, she's doing this now".

Alongside these familiar faces were strangers, scammers, and stalkers who exploited digital vulnerabilities. Some women were deceived by fake profiles on dating apps, including a man posing as a famous figure who used intimate images to sustain a campaign of blackmail over five years. Others were targeted through hacked accounts. Sakina (Lahore) described how she was tricked into giving a verification code to someone pretending to be an acquaintance, giving the hacker access to her Gmail and Dropbox. Other anonymous callers acquired CNIC details, family phone numbers and private images, operating across borders and resurfacing repeatedly with new threats. In one disturbing account, by Tahira from Lahore, a man who first met her at a public talk spent a year collecting her Instagram photos, sexualising them, and tracking her movements. He later confronted her in person with printed copies of her own images, demonstrating an intimate, obsessive knowledge of her body and daily life.

Organisations like the Digital Rights Foundation have noticed that the profile of perpetrators has shifted over time, with strangers and anonymous accounts playing an increasingly significant role:

"We also noticed the profile of perpetrators...changed. In the past [the person] blackmailing and abusing the survivor was often someone known, and survivors usually knew who was behind the abuse. But now in many cases, it involves anonymous accounts, strangers, fake accounts, online groups, and unknown people who appear suddenly and target victims for control and humiliation or financial gain, and then, after blackmailing many in these cases, they just disappear" – Nighat Dad, Founder, Digital Rights Foundation

This observed shift is notable in the context of global research, which has until recently emphasised known perpetrators. Emerging evidence suggests that stranger-perpetrated abuse, particularly financially motivated sextortion, operates through distinct patterns, with perpetrators more likely to be anonymous, transactional,

⁸² Kimberly J. Mitchell and others, 'Identifying Subtypes of Image-Based Sexual Abuse and Their Distinct Incident Characteristics, Victimization Histories, and Personal Correlates', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 55.2 (2026), pp. 465–81, doi:10.1007/s10964-026-02316-x.

and operating across borders.⁸³ Where intimate partner perpetration tends to be sustained and coercively controlling, stranger perpetration is more often episodic and extractive – a distinction with implications for both legal responses and survivor support.

One commonality that many participants reflected on was that the majority of perpetrators were men. As described by Ayesha, one of the Digital Security helpline's incident response analysts at the Digital Rights Foundation:

"The harasser could be your ex-partner, someone you're currently in a relationship with, your friends, family, classmates, colleagues, or in-laws. Ex-partners are the most common, often seeking control or revenge after a breakup, while some men, who were rejected, act out of jealousy or a sense of entitlement. Family members and in-laws appear as perpetrators, particularly in cases involving married women, where private images are used to punish or intimidate during divorce and domestic abuse cases. Usually, we have documented that it is more often than not a man, because they think they can get away with it. And our culture, society, law, and social perceptions enables a man in doing so." - Ayesha, Analyst, Digital Rights Foundation

That being said, not all perpetrators were men. Several women recounted that female friends or classmates had shared images without consent, sometimes under the guise of "fun" or gossip, sometimes for financial gain. Zarnaz from Balochistan discovered that the friend she trusted had passed her photo to a boy who then fabricated nude images and used them to blackmail her. In another case, a photo of Shirin from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa without her hijab was circulated by a female peer, even though Shirin had explicitly asked that any photos be kept private.

Motivations for IBA

These women's stories point to a cluster of overlapping motivations for their images being weaponised, including desires to punish, control, humiliate, profit from, or morally police them. The specific motivations vary, but they repeatedly intersect and reinforce one another.

⁸³Miranda Wei and others, *Understanding Help-Seeking and Help-Giving on Social Media for Image-Based Sexual Abuse*, n.d.

Based on this research and [previous work by Chayn](#), there are seven distinct ways image-based abuse becomes a way to cause harm.

7 ways deepfakes or synthetic image-based abuse is used to control and harm women



Silencing



Shaming



Strong-arming



S/extortion



Shrinking



Shunning



Sexual gratification

1. Silencing: Stay in your lane

For public figures, it can look like a targeted threat to release deepfakes unless they refrain from or change their political actions. With women already a minority in politics, these threats can play a worrying role in discouraging future participation.

For the rest of us, this can be used to stop us from speaking up about our opinions and experiences and stand up for ourselves, whether it's about abuse, sexual assault or any other matter that the abuser disagrees with us on.

2. Shrinking: Who do you think you are?

Chayn's head of survivor services, Francesca Jarvis, finds that this type of abuse is used to systematically diminish survivors. To shrink their world, confidence, and sense of self in order to strip away the survivor's agency and constrict the space they feel safe to occupy, both online and offline.

For politicians, it can look like a targeted attack from within the party or an opposing one to reduce their rising popularity and chances of gaining political clout. For celebrities and public figures, it can manifest as the objectification of their bodies for pornographic purposes, reducing their professional identity to their sexualised image.

For the rest of us, it can be used to communicate that we're worthless beyond being objects for sexual gratification. This abuse often comes from those who feel rejected or threatened by women's confidence, autonomy or success. Often these sorts of actions are described as "a bit of fun", which itself is a tactic to shrink the survivor's experience, diminishing the experience of the violation and the harm it causes. Women in our study

subjected to this kind of abuse described feeling smaller, less confident, and withdrawing from opportunities.

Moral policing and social control also shaped many incidents. Extended family members, neighbours, and anonymous online commentators used images to reinforce cultural expectations about female behaviour. A trans woman's protest photos were circulated as supposed proof of her pushing a "Western agenda". In each of these cases, the images became raw material for shaming, moral judgement or political hostility.

3. Shaming: Watch what I make people think about you

This is perhaps the most nefarious of the ways this tech abuse is used because not only does it eat a survivor from the inside, but it can trigger similar responses in their loved ones and have a devastating and fatal impact if it's weaponised on notions of honour.

For public figures, it can look like an attempt to send someone to jail for breaking immodesty laws or using it to tarnish their character in a way that makes it impossible for them to continue their public role.

For the rest of us, it can be a way to besmirch someone's reputation so they lose their job as a teacher or use cultural shame to trigger male members of a family or community to commit violence against a woman. And this can be fatal.

4. Shunning: No one will want to associate with you

Women in our research described fathers who were unable to work after their daughter's images circulated, sisters whose marriage prospects were destroyed, and mothers who were shunned from the community, with entire households looked at 'in a shameful manner' by everyone around them.

For public figures, it can look like making their allies, supporters, and benefactors walk away from them because it becomes too risky to be associated with someone whose name is linked with nudity and porn – even if found to be fake. For the rest of us, it can be a way to isolate us from our colleagues, friends, and family members.

Several women described situations where rejecting a boy or ending a relationship triggered immediate retaliation. A schoolboy leaked a girl's photo after she refused him, and an ex-partner shared intimate pictures when he learned a woman was engaged to someone else. In another case, a man escalated his threats only after being told to repay money or leave a woman alone following a breakup, turning her images into a tool for retribution.

5. Strong-arming: You will do as I say

Control and coercion were equally common. Whether it's an abuser coercing their target to be involved with them or drop a case against them for child custody,



or asking a politician to change the course of their action or allegiance or asking a celebrity for money — the root is the same threat: give me what I want or else. Abusers know the impact of this will be devastating on a survivor's mental, physical, and material health.

Across many stories, images became leverage to force women back into relationships, negotiate sexual access, or demand ongoing contact. The threats targeted the social structures around them including fathers, brothers, prospective in-laws, and employers. "If you don't come, I'll share your pictures" became a coercive refrain that exploited the real risks women face. Zarnaz from Balochistan described being compelled to meet a boy she had rejected after he threatened to send her photo to her father. Zeba, a survivor from Lahore recounted how she stayed in an abusive relationship for years because her ex-partner repeatedly invoked the threat of sharing her intimate pictures around their university.

6. S/extortion: I will profit of you

Financial extortion was another consistent thread. In Quetta, a male student who secretly photographed girls in the university washroom demanded money from one of them, then returned weeks later asking for 20 times the original amount. Others were told to pay 50,000 rupees (\$180 USD / £142 GBP) or other recurring amounts, always under the threat that their images would be made public. Similar financial entrapment drove Naila Rind, a Masters student at the University of Sindh, to take her own life in 2017 after months of image-based blackmail left her with no way out she could see.⁸⁴ Women recognised the pattern, that paying once rarely ended the harassment, but the fear of family scandal or social fallout often made refusal feel impossible.

7. Sexual gratification: You will be my pleasure

Some perpetrators sought sexual gratification – a way of exerting power and control over someone that may be known or unknown to them. One young man who stalked a woman artist described, in detail, which of her Instagram photos he used for sexual purposes. Another blackmailer demanded recent nudes rather than money, telling a woman to send him new images or he would upload the ones he already held.

7. Images Circulate Through a Dense Web of Platforms and Channels

Women described images moving from global social media to encrypted messaging and offline printouts. The platforms and channels described

⁸⁴ 'Naila Rind Killed Herself Because Pakistan' DAWN.COM'.



below are drawn directly from survivor accounts; where relevant, we have situated these within the broader context of digital technologies within Pakistan.

Social media platforms

Facebook appears repeatedly in women's accounts, including intimate images uploaded to sabotaged accounts, and compromising photos posted shortly before a woman's wedding to reach her in-laws. Others described ex-partners setting up fake Facebook profiles in their name to contact friends, family, and future spouses and to harass women. Instagram features as both a site for public harassment (nude photos uploaded to someone's profile, public stories with leaked images) and a semi-private "fenced" space where women felt safe sharing selfies or private life updates until an ex-partner or stalker used screenshots against them. Twitter/X was where at least one woman found her sexual video gaining "so many views, so many likes" before she even knew it had been posted. Snapchat also appears in accounts of blackmail via disappearing snaps and background captures.

Messaging apps and "private" sharing

WhatsApp is central to the majority of the stories shared by women. Images are forwarded in family groups, alumni groups, and friendship circles, often without the subject's knowledge. Blackmailers send screenshots and links via WhatsApp, threatening broader distribution. Husbands and stalkers use WhatsApp Status (posts that last 24-hours) to display a woman's photos to their networks. Women emphasised how hard it is to respond when content lives only in private channels. They may hear that their picture is on WhatsApp without ever seeing it themselves. The same is true for private Instagram stories – a perpetrator can share a nude image to a small follower list, and unless someone takes a screenshot and warns the victim, she may never know.

Cloud storage and account hacking

Some perpetrators gained access through hacked Gmail accounts, Dropbox links, or two-factor authentication codes. Sakina in Lahore was tricked into sharing a verification code with someone posing as an acquaintance needing tech help, giving the hacker access to her email and linked accounts. Another only realised her Dropbox had been compromised when a man called saying he had her towel and nude mirror selfies.

Dating apps

Tinder and other platforms also featured in the interviews despite Tinder having been banned in Pakistan since 2020.⁸⁵ Apps such as Bumble and Muzmatch are also widely used in the country. A young woman – Nabihah (Lahore) – was catfished on Tinder by a man pretending to be a famous Pakistani figure. Once he had intimate images, he used them to blackmail her for years, shifting across platforms and phone numbers.

⁸⁵ Javed Hussain |. AFP, 'PTA Bans Five Dating Apps Including Tinder Citing "Immoral Content"', Dawn, 18:32:17+05:00 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1577392>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

Offline circulation: screenshots, printing, and physical delivery

The abuse does not stop at the screen.

Women described perpetrators printing out photos and mailing them to parents, dropping anonymous envelopes at homes, or bringing phones loaded with images to police stations and university offices as “proof” of immorality.



In the case of Ifrah (Canada), an ex-partner printed yoga selfies and everyday pictures from her private Instagram account and sent them to her parents. These offline methods mean that image-based abuse reaches beyond the digitally connected. Even women whose families have little or no familiarity with technology are not protected. Perpetrators can ensure that parents, in-laws or community members are made aware of images without anyone needing to open an app or go online.

8. Experiences Seeking Help Are Diverse. A Broken System With Bright Spots

Across the interviews, people described a surprisingly wide ecosystem of potential support, from cybercrime units and NGOs to families, university administrators, and even anonymous Instagram accounts. At the same time, help-seeking was often cautious, partial and heavily shaped by fears of shame, surveillance, and social proximity. The experiences documented in this section draw primarily on accounts from survivors based in Pakistan, reflecting where the majority of survivor interviews were conducted, though the barriers and dynamics described resonate across the diaspora communities who also participated in this research.

Formal routes: police, FIA,⁸⁶ and regulatory bodies

For some participants, the first or eventual response was to go to formal state institutions.

⁸⁶ The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) is the current body within Pakistan responsible for investigating cybercrime. This was previously known as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and sometimes referred to as the cybercrime wing/unit. Most participants respond to the FIA therefore this is the term we have predominantly used throughout this report, but the terms NCCIA, FIA and cybercrime wing are used to refer to the same institutional body.

Several women referenced the cybercrime wing of the [Federal Investigation Agency \(FIA\)](#) (now known as the [National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency: NCCIA](#)) as a key formal avenue for dealing with image-based abuse. Participants described the FIA as the branch that “deals with all of this stuff”, and some spoke about filing complaints with the cybercrime wing online or physically going to the department. Sana, a survivor based in Islamabad, talked about learning, through university seminars, that she could file complaints to the FIA if their images were leaked or they were harassed online. These awareness-raising sessions were framed as crucial moments when students realised there was, at least in theory, a formal place to go.

The police appeared in different ways. In some stories, women approached the police on their own, in others, relatives with links to the police facilitated access, or family members took women to the police station after finding out what had happened. Participants also referenced women’s police stations and special sections of the police for dealing with harassment. They described them as designated spaces where women could lodge complaints while trying to maintain some control over their privacy. Though, as we’ll see in subsequent sections of this report, there were varying degrees of success with approaching the police. The tension between seeing the police as a necessary route and seeing them as an additional risk runs through many help-seeking decisions, even when people end up going elsewhere.

Some participants described turning to regulatory bodies and complaint mechanisms rather than criminal justice. The [Pakistan Telecommunication Authority \(PTA\)](#) was mentioned as a route to get non-explicit images removed from platforms, although one interviewee noted that such cases “will not have a sense of urgency attached to them”. Afreen (Karachi), reflecting more broadly on institutional options, pointed to the [Federal Ombudsperson](#) as a relatively trusted avenue for some people, including trans communities, and mentioned the [National Commission for Human Rights \(NCHR\)](#) as another public body that individuals had approached. These bodies were seen as part of a landscape of formal options, even if people were unsure how they operated in practice or what outcomes to expect.

Sana (Islamabad) whose intimate photos were uploaded to porn sites, recounted a long but ultimately effective process with the FIA. She informed the police and FIA, provided every piece of evidence she had, including the perpetrator’s details, the platforms used, and the images themselves. The process was “kind of very hectic”, requiring months of documentation, but ultimately she received her desired outcome. “I’m very thankful... they really help me... removing all the data from those sites”. The FIA also imposed a financial penalty on the perpetrator. Reflecting back, she was clear that “the only institution that helped me there was FIA”, and that within the agency “the men were helpful and they were more understanding”.

Nabiha, a survivor based in Lahore, who never imagined she would have to enter a cybercrime department, described spending a sleepless night before going in alone. Once there, the assistant director, a woman, persuaded her to “come stand for yourself”, telling her she did not have to “live in the shadows and get scared by it”. That encouragement, coming from someone inside the system, was a lifeline at a point

where she could easily have stayed silent. Zohra Ahmed, a family lawyer working in the domestic violence space and founder of the Jugnu project, reflected that when cases are successfully prosecuted now, the penalties are substantial.⁸⁷

NGOs, helplines, and women's organisations

A prominent set of support sources mentioned by survivors were NGOs and women's rights organisations, particularly those working on digital rights. The [Digital Rights Foundation \(DRF\)](#) appeared repeatedly as a specialist support route. Participants described various interactions with DRF, including calling their helpline when images were leaked or accounts hacked; being referred to DRF by friends or colleagues already connected to digital rights work; using DRF as an intermediary to contact the PTA, FIA or platforms and request the removal of content; and approaching DRF after deciding not to pay blackmail money, treating the organisation as a safer alternative to giving in to demands or navigating the police alone. In some cases, DRF's role extended beyond removal requests. They were also involved in tracing IP addresses and identifying likely perpetrators, which then allowed families to confront or warn them through more informal means. The organisation said that survivors predominantly came to them through word of mouth, Google searches or social media.

In Quetta, Balochistan, participants described the [Aurat Foundation](#) as a key local hub for women facing blackmail and online harassment. Zarnaz recounted going there with classmates to report a group of boys who were blackmailing multiple girls. She spoke about the organisation taking complaints, registering FIRs (First Information Reports – complaints with the police) and liaising with police. They also helped with identifying how many boys and girls were involved in the abuse and explaining some aspects of the help-seeking process, such as not having to disclose the survivor's name in order for action to be taken. The participant made a point of telling neighbours and other women in her community that if anyone was harassed or blackmailed, they should go to Aurat Foundation, emphasising that “the procedure is very easy”.

Women-led and survivor-centred support was seen as particularly welcome. Zarnaz described Aurat Foundation as “very, very beneficial” precisely because “they are

⁸⁷ Web Desk, ‘DG Khan Man Sentenced to Three Years for Sharing Obscene Images of Woman’, *Daily Pakistan English News*, 19 November 2025 <<https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/19-Nov-2025/dg-khan-man-sentenced-to-three-years-for-sharing-obscene-images-of-woman>> [accessed 19 May 2026]; newsdesk, ‘Man Jailed for 9 Years in Karachi for Sharing Explicit Photos of TikTok Star’, *The Express Tribune*, 16 August 2024 <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2488557/man-jailed-for-9-years-in-karachi-for-sharing-explicit-photos-of-tiktok-star>> [accessed 19 May 2026]; Our Correspondent, ‘Man Jailed for Posting “Explicit” Videos, Blackmail’, *The Express Tribune*, 13 August 2023 <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2430508/man-jailed-for-posting-explicit-videos-blackmail>> [accessed 19 May 2026]; *Man Awarded 7-Year-RI for Blackmailing Girl*, *Domestic*, 16 July 2025 <<https://www.app.com.pk/domestic/man-awarded-7-year-ri-for-blackmailing-girl/>> [accessed 19 May 2026]. <<https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/19-Nov-2025/dg-khan-man-sentenced-to-three-years-for-sharing-obscene-images-of-woman>>

females who listen to us". She emphasised that there were "no males sitting", that staff promised not to share information, and that they explicitly framed reporting as "not shameful", directly challenging the idea that seeking help would stain a woman's honour.

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) appears in a similar role. Nabiha, a survivor based in Lahore, who contacted DRF after being blackmailed describes a level of care that stood in total contrast to her dealings with other institutions. DRF responded within 24 hours, asked for the information they needed, and then someone from the team "talked to me for hours, literally... do this, do that", walking her through each step when she "was not aware of anything". Crucially, she noted what *didn't* happen. They didn't ask for money, didn't demand sexual favours, and didn't treat her as disposable. "They didn't want anything from me, like money or my body or anything like the other departments," she said. Instead, they offered practical help, such as a link to get videos removed, the option of a lawyer, regular follow-ups, and emotional reassurance. She began telling DRF "every single detail", because she felt they were "genuine people". Later, she summed it up: "They were very helpful and they were very compassionate and kind to me".

When we spoke to representatives at DRF they acknowledged that women are often very fearful about disclosing cases and as a result have established systems and ways of working that aim to reassure survivors. Some of these include making sure that every part of the process is explained clearly to the woman – including why they might be asking certain questions, working with the survivor to create an action plan for next steps, ensuring all communication is based on empathy and non-judgement, and adhering to strict confidentiality policies.

"We have people saying to us that I was really crushed and I was really stressed, but then after I talked to you, I felt supported, I felt relieved" – Ayesha, Digital Rights Foundation

For queer and trans participants, organisations like DRF also stood out as trusted spaces. One activist and survivor – Afreen in Karachi – described DRF as "a better avenue" than state bodies, precisely because it is led by women and considered safer for queer people to approach. Even when the ultimate goal was to reach FIA or another state institution, going through DRF first was seen as "more practical" and "safer".

This dynamic also surfaced in our own research process. Many participants had not heard of Chayn before being interviewed. On learning that the organisation was established by a Pakistani woman, several expressed relief or increased willingness to speak openly, mirroring the same pattern of trust that participants described with DRF and Aurat Foundation.

Interviewees also referenced women's rights foundations, UN Women Pakistan, and other local NGOs as potential intermediaries that could issue legal notices, coordinate with police, or work behind the scenes to have images deleted before resorting to formal court processes. Friends connected to human rights organisations were another

route. One survivor (Tahira, Lahore) noted that a friend working with a human rights commission's digital harassment unit offered to help her report her case, advising her to keep screenshots, numbers, and chat histories as evidence in case she decided to proceed.

In these accounts, NGOs and rights-based organisations are crucial resources that are discovered through friends, seminars and word-of-mouth, and form an essential part of the support infrastructure.

Educational institutions and workplaces

Schools, universities, and workplaces also appeared as sites where people sought support or intervention. In one case, Muneeba in the UK described how a group of students, when she was at university in Pakistan, approached a female student office representative at their university when a male student threatened to leak private photos. The university used its control over campus infrastructure to intervene. They restricted the perpetrator's access to institutional internet, traced his device, confiscated his phone and laptop, and oversaw the deletion of content. In another story, Zarguna in Balochistan sought help from an organisation she was connected to. Staff there traced the Whatsapp number of the harasser and helped her approach her university. In a subsequent meeting, university authorities agreed that the student would be expelled if he continued harassing women in the class.

Staff also challenged the decision of Amna's parents in the UK to pull her out of school, after images of her were circulated by a male student and used to blackmail her. The school argued it was "absurd" for her to be punished for something that was not her fault. She appreciated that teachers stood by her, even if they "understood literally nothing" about the cultural stakes of the incident and described how they tried to advocate on her behalf with her parents as well as disciplining students who mocked her. These examples show schools and universities functioning as intermediaries. They become more than places of learning, as institutions with technical access and disciplinary power that students can leverage when they do not want to go straight to police or courts. In these cases, educational institutions can become a site of informal protection against image-based abuse.

Workplaces appear less frequently, but when they do, it is often in the form of individual managers or colleagues offering informal support and insisting that an employee should not be penalised for being a victim.

Platforms, websites, and transnational complaint mechanisms

Another cluster of help-seeking behaviours centred on going directly to the platforms or websites where images were circulating. Participants described using in-app reporting systems and direct contact with social media platforms. In these narratives, platforms are approached as de facto authorities with control over visibility and takedowns.

People turn to them even when they are unsure exactly how to navigate unclear reporting systems, often with the help of siblings or friends who are more tech-confident. The interviews we conducted suggested that tech platforms were the first point of contact for survivors attempting to get their content removed but also often their only avenue for redress when it comes to image-based abuse.

Alongside these formal reporting routes, a far less visible mechanism also emerged – escalation through *trusted partner channels*. Large platforms maintain relationships with selected civil society organisations who can flag harmful content directly to platform teams, bypassing the usual queue. Very little public information exists about how these channels work, who qualifies, or what criteria apply. Yet for many survivors approaching NGOs for support, the first and most urgent request is for their images to be removed. For organisations that are part of these trusted partner networks, escalating content can often be quicker and more effective than survivor-led reporting alone.

The Digital Rights Foundation – one such trusted partner of multiple platforms – described how these relationships were largely self-made rather than formally established. They were built through years of persistent advocacy on the part of DRF, attendance at international conferences, the development of personal relationships and the sheer volume of consistent complaints flowing through their helpline.

Their experience across platforms varied widely. With Meta and TikTok, they maintain active escalation channels and have a near complete response rate with TikTok in particular. They also noted that TikTok shows a greater willingness to remove non-nude but harmful content in the Pakistani context, such as ‘normal’ images of a woman accompanied by suggestive songs or audio. Meta’s automated systems, they said, still produce rejections that require DRF to make a contextual case to a named contact, though DRF credit their sustained advocacy over years with shifting Meta’s policies to recognise a broader range of sensitive images. YouTube was described as a struggle, with labour-intensive escalations and a trusted flagger status that left staff feeling uncertain if it was actually working. X once had a functioning escalation channel, but effectively closed when the platform’s advisory structures were disbanded. DRF now relies on individual contacts there, with inconsistent results. Across all platforms, the DRF team described a common frustration around the need to explain to platforms how content violates their own community guidelines in order to secure a removal.

Although platform responses were uneven, there were some clear positives. Zoya (Lahore), whose videos were reposted on TikTok, described mobilising her network. She and her husband downloaded the app, friends and contacts mass-reported the content, and TikTok removed the video and notified the page that it had been reported. Compared to other companies, she felt TikTok had “a better and a quicker response”.

For leaks hosted on foreign websites, participants talked about filing complaints with bodies in the country where the site was based (such as the Better Business Bureau in the US and Canada), emailing evidence, and waiting weeks for the content to be removed. In other cases, victims submitted specific URLs to national complaint portals such as Pakistan’s National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) in an attempt to

get particular links taken down, even if they remained painfully aware that countless other copies might still exist. These routes illustrate how help-seeking can become a patchwork of national and cross-border reporting mechanisms for those with some digital literacy and time to pursue them.

Some eventually succeeded in getting leaked photos removed from foreign “leaks” websites that host non-consensually shared intimate or sexual images, typically without the knowledge or consent of the people depicted, by using online complaint channels and emailing back and forth. These processes were often described as “a nightmare”, but the fact that content ultimately came down, even after weeks of effort, still counted as a success in a context where many survivors expect nothing to happen at all.

Beyond national portals and platform-specific reporting, a small number of participants referenced specialised cross-industry tools designed specifically for non-consensual intimate imagery. [StopNCII.org](https://stopncii.org), developed by the Revenge Porn Helpline with technology from Meta, works through hashing: a person who has an intimate image in their possession and fears it being shared can generate a digital fingerprint of that image and share only that hash with participating platforms, allowing those platforms to detect and block the image before or as it spreads, without the image itself ever leaving the user's hands. Since its launch in 2021, the tool has grown to include fourteen industry partners and over a hundred civil society organisations.

A platform representative from one of the largest social media companies, who asked not to be named, interviewed for this research described it as “a very powerful prevention piece” while acknowledging it does not solve the problem entirely, and called for greater adoption among smaller and mid-sized platforms who remain less aware of or engaged with cross-industry initiatives. [TakeItDown.NCMEC.org](https://takeitdown.ncmec.org) operates on a similar principle and is specifically designed for images involving minors. DRF uses both tools as part of its safety planning with survivors, recommending them proactively when images have not yet been widely shared. One survivor, Nabiha in Lahore, described being given a link by a DRF caseworker during an acute incident and finding it meaningfully less retraumatising than other routes. She could submit the URLs herself, without having to narrate her experience or navigate multiple bureaucratic steps. However, both tools carry limitations that echo the broader access gaps described in this report. As one expert working in digital wellbeing and online safety in South Asia shared: “you can only create a report with [[StopNCII.org](https://stopncii.org)] if 1) you are in a private setting [i.e. the image was taken in a private setting] and 2) if you are not fully clothed. Those are the two criteria for reporting, and that happens on many platforms where you have to define what kind of a harm it is, and if it does not meet their standard, you cannot report it.”⁸⁸

Case study: how platforms respond to online harms

What lies on the other side of user-facing reporting tools is a universe often populated by platform policy teams, regional trust and safety units, AI classifiers and the small

⁸⁸ [StopNCII.org](https://stopncii.org) specifies on its website that the criteria for using the service are 1) if the image is of you and you have access to the image, 2) if the image is intimate in nature (nude or sexual) and 3) if you are over 18 years of age in the image: <https://stopncii.org/faq/>

number of civil society organisations that act as “trusted partners” to the large platforms. Interviews with survivors, representatives from platforms and the Digital Rights Foundation reveal a system that is both more sophisticated and more fragile than it appears from the outside. A system that is highly optimised in some areas but misaligned in others and that is, by and large, shaped by corporate incentives that rarely centre survivor safety.

Chayn as an organisation is itself a trusted partner for dating app Bumble, as we provide their users with a tailored version of our platform Bloom to support their users who have experienced gender-based violence in their healing journeys and we provide their users who need additional support therapy sessions with licensed professionals.

A former employee of a global social media company, who asked not to be named, described a company racing to retrofit a global platform to local realities. When they joined the company, “we were not following any particular policy for South Asia. We were following global policies,” but they described how bans, threats of bans, and regulatory pressure forced the company to localise. Our interviews with employees of social media companies confirms what is largely known by whistleblowing accounts from Silicon Valley,⁸⁹ that company representatives negotiating with government officials frequently faced demands to hire more local staff and adapt their policies to local contexts.

Policy priorities also shifted year to year. As AI advanced, regulatory pressure mounted for faster content moderation alongside greater scrutiny of tech companies outsourcing human moderation to operators in the Global Majority. These workers faced exploitative conditions and exposure to traumatic content.^{90 91} In response, many companies shifted focus to AI-based moderation to handle the bulk of content review, reducing their reliance on human moderators.⁹²

Where AI content moderation is fast, cheap, and effective for content in European languages that violates platform policies, it often fails to pick up cultural nuance.⁹³ A former employee described it as “you have to feed AI the respective knowledge...you

⁸⁹ *How Big Tech Platforms Are Neglecting Their Non-English Language Users*, (Global Witness, 2023)

<<https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/how-big-tech-platforms-are-neglecting-their-non-english-language-users/>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

⁹⁰ Nuredin Ali Abdelkadir and others, ‘Beyond Content Exposure: Systemic Factors Driving Moderators’ Mental Health Crisis in Africa’, *Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 13 April 2026, pp. 1–18, doi:10.1145/3772318.3791639.

⁹¹ Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew, ‘A Third-World Critique of the International Human Rights-Based Approach to Content Moderation’, *Transnational Legal Theory*, 16.4 (2025), pp. 546–77, doi:10.1080/20414005.2025.2523184.

⁹² The Tech Buzz Team, ‘Meta Replaces Human Moderators with AI in Major Automation Push’, 19 March 2026

<<https://www.techbuzz.ai/articles/meta-replaces-human-moderators-with-ai-in-major-automation-push>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

⁹³ Soorya Balendra, ‘Meta’s AI Moderation and Free Speech: Ongoing Challenges in the Global South’, *Cambridge Forum on AI: Law and Governance*, 1 (2025), p. e21, doi:10.1017/cfl.2025.5.

cannot entirely replace all the human moderators with AI tools because there is a lot of context...that needs to be considered by humans.”

Other industry actors described similar systems across their own platforms. One referenced a multi-stream system for detecting and removing problematic content, including user reports, thousands of human reviewers, machine learning classifiers, and trusted partner escalations. In most cases of child sexual abuse material or NCII (Non-Consensual Intimate Image) abuse, the automated systems act first: “98% of the time, we’re able to remove that type of imagery before a user sees it.”

Trusted partner channels attempt to fill the cultural knowledge gap. The Digital Rights Foundation, which handles the majority of sensitive cases, from non-consensual image sharing to impersonation is one such channel. The former employee of a global social media company highlighted that escalations through this channel are important – “the impact that it had on people’s real life was just tremendous.” But very few survivors knew it existed: “the overall frequency of such reporting was low...primarily I think because hardly two or 3% in Pakistan are actually aware if this...works.”

Frontline organisations were also expected to absorb this labour for free. Former employees of social media companies said the organisations kept the programme deliberately quiet precisely because the partnerships were unpaid: “We never actually promoted those CPCs [Content Partner Channels]...so that we should not overburden these NGOs, plus they should not have any monetary expectation from our side.” Some platform employees were uncomfortable with this arrangement, recognising that offloading the human cost of content moderation onto under-resourced civil society organisations is itself a form of algorithmic injustice – one that extracts care work from the communities least equipped to bear it.

For women who don't even have accounts on the app where their content was uploaded without consent it can be even harder to get the content taken down as they have no means of reporting.

But Pakistan-specific harms often do not fit neatly into the NCII definition held by platforms. As we have seen throughout this report, many cases involve images that would be benign in other parts of the world. A platform representative acknowledged this directly: “sometimes it falls in the area of intimate image abuse...not squarely NCII...but because it’s been posted without her consent, it can be super harmful to her offline.” They highlighted that these borderline cases often require human judgement. “It’s important for people like me...to explain that...this will be really harmful to this particular woman.” The company has even begun discussing an internal category for “sensitive imagery” because the current guidelines struggle to accommodate Pakistan’s offline risks.

This flexibility, though, is not equally accessible to everyone. Ayesha, representing Digital Rights Foundation – a trusted partner to the platform described a rigid system with tight scoping rules.

"Platforms usually have a defined scope when it comes to trusted partner escalations: there are issues we can escalate, issues we cannot, and issues that may be considered on a case-by-case basis. Fake profiles for 'standard users' for example, are typically out-of-scope unless the trusted partner pushes, and explains the offline threat and persuades the platform to make an exception. The community guidelines and platform enforcement mechanisms are not reflective of South Asian cultural contexts, so self-reporting won't work unless we make a case for the vulnerable individual."



Even then, responses can be slow, she said. "Sometimes they get back...after a week, and that's not really helpful in cases of gendered harassment where timely intervention is critical to prevent life-threatening consequences."

Families, partners, and trusted friends

Some of the most powerful accounts of feeling supported came from inside the home. Nabiha (Lahore), who had struggled with long-term mental health issues, described finally telling her father what was happening after a new harassment message triggered a panic attack. Watching her struggle to breathe, he recognised the crisis and told her: "I'll not let anything happen to you... we're not that powerless... we have the resources to shut that blackmailer up." His certainty gave her "so much power" that she returned to social media "with my own picture, my own identity", choosing to own her presence online rather than disappearing in shame. Confiding in him was "a relief" both the first and second time it happened. Some participants framed telling their parents, especially fathers or mothers, as the most important step they could have taken. Nabiha, reflecting back on her ordeal, said "the only person I should have reached out to in the initial stage was my dad," describing him as the person who helped de-escalate her panic and helped her think clearly. Nasreen, a survivor living in the Lyari district of Karachi described how she was able to break off her engagement to the younger brother of her abuser only because of her father's support. This required significant personal risk and emotional labour on both of their parts. Zarnaz in Balochistan explained that after the incident where a boy leaked her images, her father urged her to come to him or her mother if anything like this happened: "My father did not beat me...He said...you should tell me. You should tell your mother." At the same time she noted that in general, girls tend to go to their mother first and are often encouraged to stay silent: "our mother usually says to keep quiet. Don't talk to anyone." Sadia, from the

in-person interviews in Lyari, Karachi, described how her mother was a critical source of support – never blaming her and encouraging resilience, even though she received criticism from her community for supporting her daughter.

In other families, brothers, and uncles took an active role once convinced of the seriousness of online harassment. Warda's (Faisalabad) brother, initially sceptical, eventually said, "let's report it... let's go forward with it" and, alongside a supportive uncle, backed her decision to seek justice rather than worry about reputation.

Similarly, we heard that sons sometimes take action too: "In some cases sons have come forward and complained on their mother's behalf in image-based abuse cases" – Senior FIA official

Others spoke about having a "woman-led house" that had "held that kind of space for me always" [Zeba, Lahore, Survivor], or a partner who simply said "I don't care... you have to do what you have to do to support yourself during that time" [Sahar, Canada, Survivor]. These families were described as educated, non-religiously motivated, and very much not typical. Extended families were also featured in help-seeking pathways, including an aunt with police connections who intervened, uncles who called or confronted a suspected perpetrator once his identity was traced, and brothers who took a case to the police station. For some, a supportive husband or partner was also part of the safety net, explicitly stating that they did not blame the survivor and encouraged her to do whatever was needed to protect herself.

"My husband has been my biggest support...he's the one who's been telling me that if you let social media guide how you should start your day or how you should end your day, even when you're not working, then what's the point of life?" – High-profile British Pakistani actor

At the same time, several participants stressed that they were "lucky" to have such families. As Zeba repeatedly highlighted, such support was unusual: "This is not an average women's experience... not everybody is that fortunate." She said that her experience was not representative of "a very traditional, conventional Pakistani family." The implication is that for many women, family may be the place they fear exposure and blame, which in turn affects whether they seek help elsewhere.

Friends played multiple roles in help-seeking, including acting as first confidants and emotional supports when images were leaked, advising, and encouraging survivors to seek support from NGOs or formal authorities, posing as strangers to engage a blackmailer and gather information that could later be used by authorities or families, and offering practical advice such as encouraging victims to keep records of calls and messages in case they chose to report.

Outside of family, community and activist networks also stepped in. Online peer networks appeared, including a women-only WhatsApp group where members share warnings about men circulating images and discuss what to do next, and an online support community that helped one woman to send mass takedown requests to

Facebook in order to get images removed. These spaces operate as informal early-warning systems and advice hubs, often bridging the gap between private fear and formal reporting.

"My only way to deal with it was just asking and reaching out to friends for help. Asking them to do their part and look up as much as they can and see if they find anything related to me in particular, and just report it and share it with the rest of us, so we can all report it so it gets taken down. So I think my community, at that time of fellow queer people, fellow activists, was the biggest support that I had, and it was the only way that I was actually able to navigate through this and come out of it." – Afreen, Karachi, Survivor

Alternative dispute resolution and community-based action

Not all help-seeking led to formal complaints or prosecutions. Some participants and professionals described deliberately steering cases into alternative dispute resolution processes.

Rida, an independent lawyer we interviewed, outlined how she had taken a case to the Citizens Police Liaison Committee (CLPC) that works alongside the police. There, the boy accused of leaking images was called in, his mother attended, and a mediated agreement was reached. He signed a letter promising to delete the pictures and not repeat the behaviour. For the survivor, the priority was to have her images removed privately, not to see the boy prosecuted in open court. She described this kind of resolution, "resolving your case without letting anybody know," as a less obvious but active system operating alongside the formal criminal justice process.

Beyond institutional alternative dispute resolution, families themselves sometimes organised informal "justice," including sending male relatives to threaten a perpetrator with police action, or negotiating agreements and apologies through community channels. These approaches were often slower and required more exposure to family scrutiny, but they were seen as culturally legible routes that did not involve navigating courts.

9. The Barriers to Seeking Help Are Structural

For most survivors of image-based abuse in Pakistan, the instinct to reach for help collides almost immediately with the reality of what doing so requires. Women described a landscape in which they must navigate a system of barriers that compound, reinforce one another, and ultimately make help-seeking itself a calculated risk.

The evidence trap

One barrier to help-seeking that survivors described is an impossible choice between either allowing the harmful images to remain online long enough for authorities to collect the evidence needed to build a case, or have them removed quickly and forfeit any chance of legal action. Women are told that if the image is deleted, "the evidence is lost."

This tension shapes some of the first decisions survivors have to make after discovering their images online. For nearly all, the instinct is self-protection and to remove the content as quickly as possible. As one participant put it, people are obviously going to say to remove it. The alternative, leaving the image visible, circulating, accumulating comments and screenshots, is intolerable. Survivors who choose removal often do so knowing they are sacrificing any possibility of prosecution. Even professionals with insider knowledge acknowledge the absurdity of this trade-off, remarking that with modern technological tools "these excuses are no longer valid," yet the practice remains entrenched.

This "evidence trap" therefore functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. Women who seek protection lose access to justice, and women who pursue justice must remain exposed. Most choose the former.

In addition to the tensions around preserving evidence, challenges arose around the tension between wanting to seek support and justice through the legal system and wanting to preserve anonymity. As a Senior FIA Official reflected:

ہم نے کوشش کی کہ ہیلپ لائن کے ساتھ این جی اوز اور وومن پروٹیکشن بیورو کو شامل کریں۔ فون پر اور آن لائن سہولت دی جائے۔ ایک ہیلپ لائن قائم کی گئی۔ ایک کمپلینٹ پورٹل بھی ویب سائٹ پر بنایا گیا۔ لیکن تحقیق میں یہ سامنے آیا کہ لوگ سمجھتے تھے کہ صرف ای میل یا پورٹل پر کمپلینٹ ڈالنے سے کیس خود بخود چل پڑے گا۔ ایسا نہیں ہوتا۔ ہمیں وکٹم کی باضابطہ درخواست چاہیے ہوتی ہے۔ عدالتیں خود سے کسی بات کو نہیں مانتیں۔ وہ کہتی ہیں کہ وکٹم کا بیان ضروری ہے۔

قانون موجود ہے۔ ان ایکٹس کے تحت بہت سے کیسز کمپاؤنڈ ایبل (compoundable) ہوتے ہیں۔ اور زیادہ تر کیسز سیکشنل ہراسمنٹ کے ہوتے تھے۔ بڑا اور معروف قانون پیکا۔ یعنی پریوینشن آف الیکٹرانک کرائمز ایکٹ ہے۔ مسئلہ یہ ہے کہ ہمارا نظام اکثر "اوپن" ہو جاتا ہے۔ عورتیں اور لڑکیاں عدالت یا پراسس میں آنے سے گھبراتی ہیں۔ اسی وجہ سے کئی دفعہ وہ معاملہ آگے لے جانے کے بجائے کسی اور راستے سے معاملہ ختم کرانا چاہتی ہیں۔

اکثر ایسا ہوتا تھا کہ پھر ہم وکٹم سے معذرت کر لیتے تھے اور دوسری طرف والا کہتا تھا کہ ٹھیک ہے میرے پاس جو ویڈیوز یا مواد ہے میں ڈیلیٹ کر دیتا ہوں۔ پھر کیس ہمیں بند کرنا پڑتا تھا۔ کچھ ریپ کیسز ایسے بھی تھے جو مکمل ٹرائل تک گئے۔ لیکن کئی خواتین اور بچوں نے آگے نہ بڑھنے کا فیصلہ کیا۔ اس پراسس میں ہمیں کئی دفعہ سپروائزر کے سامنے یہ مسئلہ آتا تھا کہ کچھ انویسٹی گیشن آفیسر کہتے تھے۔ یہ تو خود اس نے بنائی ہے۔ یہ ویڈیو لڑکی کی طرف سے ہے۔ تو ہم اس کے پیچھے جا کر اپنا وقت کیوں ضائع کریں؟

We tried engaging NGOs and the Women Protection Bureau through helplines and online portals. But research showed that people believed submitting an email or complaint would automatically initiate a case. That does not happen. Courts require a formal statement from the victim and cannot act anonymously....The problem is that our system often becomes too "open." Women and girls feel afraid of appearing in court or going through the process. Because of this, many times they prefer to end the matter rather than take it forward. Often what happened was that we would apologize to the victim, and the other party would say, "Okay. I will delete whatever videos or material I have." Then we had to close the case. There were some rare cases that went all the way to trial.

Compounding these challenges is the fact that in some cases, women do not know who the perpetrator is. Images are often circulated through fake accounts, anonymous profiles, or unknown phone numbers, making identification difficult from the outset. While survivors often suspect a current or former partner, suspicion is not proof. For support organisations such as the Digital Rights Foundation, this creates additional complications. Without a clearly identifiable accused, options narrow. The Digital Rights Foundation team described how law enforcement is unlikely to pursue investigations into anonymous or technically obscured accounts, particularly when resources are limited and digital tracing is complex. In one case described by the organisation, a minor's photographs were being shared on TikTok through a fake account. Law enforcement stated they had no means to trace the perpetrator. The Digital Rights Foundation ultimately used its own technical resources to identify the individual and then approached the authorities to intervene. Such cases illustrate how civil society organisations are often required to fill the gaps of work that would ordinarily fall within the remit of the state. The result is another layer of paralysis where women are asked to produce evidence of the person responsible, even when the architecture of online platforms is designed to obscure that possibility, and where accountability often relies on the resources of support organisations.

Systemic victim-blaming

Across interviews, victim-blaming surfaces with such regularity, from police, families, neighbours, teachers, that it appears more as a defining cultural logic than as an attitude held by individuals. Many participants describe almost identical interactions. For example, being asked why they took the photo in the first place, why they sent it, why they met a boy, why they were naïve enough to trust someone, or why they lacked "cyber security awareness." Each question subtly reframes the violence as a consequence of the survivor's behaviour rather than the perpetrator's actions.

پاکستان میں، میں نے دیکھا ہے کہ جب بھی ایسے کیسز ہوتے ہیں، تو پولیس کا پہلا سوال ہمیشہ یہی ہوتا ہے کہ، 'لڑکی نے ایسا کیوں کیا؟ اس نے وہ تصویر یا ویڈیو کیوں بنائی؟' قصور اسی کا ہے۔ مجرم پر الزام لگانے سے بھی پہلے، وہ عورت پر الزام لگاتے ہیں۔

"In Pakistan, I've seen that whenever such cases happen, the first question the police ask is always, "Why did the girl do it? Why did she take that photo or video?" It is her fault. Before even blaming the culprit, they blame the woman." – Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

Some survivors described going to police expecting support, only to be told they were at fault for living "in a Western way," for having male friends, or for participating in relationships outside marriage. In one case, a woman's own psychologist responded judgmentally when told about the intimate photo used against her, reinforcing the idea that the shame belonged to the woman, not the abuser. Others recalled being chastised by older community members and people telling them they were "foolish" or "didn't know cyber security," as though the violations were a lesson rather than an offense.

This moral scrutiny permeates family dynamics, as well. Some women fear telling parents because the shame will extend beyond themselves to the family's social standing. Others describe mothers urging them to stay silent, or relatives insisting that reporting would only escalate the situation and "ruin honour." More threateningly, several participants emphasise that exposure could lead to violence within families, including honour-based harm or even femicide. Komal, living in Malaysia, explained the thought process clearly. **A man spreading her image online was terrifying, but going to the police could be fatal.** The pervasiveness of victim-blaming became a significant barrier to women seeking help, either discouraging them from either attempting, or abandoning their efforts when they were met with scrutiny rather than support.

Dismissive, intimidating, and dangerous institutions

For many women, the first encounter with formal institutions (police stations, cybercrime units, FIA offices) is so hostile or humiliating that it shapes their entire perception of what help-seeking entails.

Participants describe a range of behaviours from law enforcement officials. Some officers flirt with survivors, ask them to meet privately, or demand bribes. Others refuse to register complaints until a senior figure intervenes. This was confirmed by a senior FIA official:

یہ مائنڈ سیٹ ایک بڑا مسئلہ ہے۔ کئی دفعہ ایجنسی سائیڈ سے بھی تعاون واضح نہیں ہوتا تھا۔ اور سوشل میڈیا پلیٹ فارمز سے ڈیٹا لینا بھی مشکل ہوتا تھا۔ کیونکہ وہ ڈیٹا ان کے پاس ہوتا ہے۔ لوگ محنت سے بچنے کے لیے بھی کام نہیں کرتے۔ اور بعض اوقات کلچرل وجوہات کی وجہ سے بھی۔ کیس کو سیریس نہیں لیتے تھے۔ پھر کہتے تھے۔ اگر اس نے اپنی مرضی سے یہ کیا ہے۔ تو پھر یہ "سیکشنل ایکٹ" کا مسئلہ نہیں بنتا۔ حالانکہ حقیقت یہ ہے کہ عورت کی رضامندی کا یہ مطلب نہیں ہوتا کہ بعد میں اسے ڈی سیٹ۔ یعنی نقصان پہنچانے کے لیے بھی رضامندی ہے۔

"This mindset is a major issue. Many times, even from the agency side the support was not clear. And obtaining data from social media platforms was also difficult. Because the data is with them. Police also avoided effort. And sometimes due to cultural reasons they did not take the case seriously. The junior police investigating officers would say, 'If she did it willingly, then it isn't a problem.' I would then explain that the reality is this: if a woman gives consent for sex it does not mean she wants the act disseminated. She has not consented to later harm, misuse, or 'deceit' (i.e., weaponizing it against her)."

Nabiha (Lahore) experienced an authority figure in the FIA reacting with rage simply because she mentioned another support organisation. She apologised repeatedly, because she feared provoking further retaliation from someone who knew her personal details. Another survivor, Warda from Faisalabad, arriving at night, went directly to what she believed was the "female wing" of the police station, which was promoted as a safe place for women, only to find the entire women's police station closed. This absence left her disappointed and unable to seek solutions for her case. A participant who had previously worked with the police confirmed these barriers:

عام طور پر ردعمل بالکل ناکافی ہوتا ہے۔ لیکن اسپیشل پولیس اسٹیشن میں ہمارا کام خاص طور پر ٹرانس جینڈر (خواجہ سرا) لوگوں کا تحفظ کرنا تھا، اور اس کے باوجود ہمیں مسلسل سوالات کا سامنا کرنا پڑتا تھا۔

اگر کوئی خاتون کسی عام پولیس اسٹیشن جاتی ہے، تو وہ آسانی سے رپورٹ درج نہیں کروا سکتی۔ اس پر فیصلے سنائے جائیں گے، اسے ڈراما کرنے کا طعنہ دیا جائے گا، اور رپورٹنگ کے دوران اسے اتنی زیادہ چھان بین اور سخت سوالات کا سامنا کرنا پڑے گا کہ شاید وہ شکایت درج نہ کروانے کا ہی فیصلہ کر لے۔ رازداری کی تو تقریباً کبھی بھی ضمانت نہیں دی جاتی۔

"The response is often completely inadequate. But our work at the special police station was specifically to protect transgender people, and even then we faced constant questioning.

If a woman goes to a regular police station, she cannot report it easily. She will be judged, accused of drama, and face so much scrutiny during reporting that she may decide not to file the complaint at all. Confidentiality is almost never guaranteed." – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Experiences tend to vary between police and the FIA. Some women describe police as dismissive, harassing, or uninterested in pursuing tech-based violence, while FIA officers were, in rare cases, more "helpful" or "understanding." Yet these same FIA offices also routinely tell women that they "cannot do anything", especially if the images are not explicit or do not meet the narrow legal definition of harmful content. Survivors report

being told, in effect, that unless the content fits a particular category, there is no recourse, leaving women whose images were stolen or shared without consent in a legal limbo. Professionals working alongside survivors echoed this, noting that women often leave the FIA because they are told there is no mechanism to pursue their case.

A senior FIA official reflected many of these sentiments and highlighted that the good work that happened was often driven by individuals rather than the institutions themselves:

ہمارے ہاں کوئی باقاعدہ ٹریننگ سسٹم قائم نہیں ہو سکا۔ بس کچھ مخصوص مائڈیولز کے تحت ہی تفتشی افسران کو سائبر کرائم، ڈیجیٹل شواہد اور اس سے متعلقہ کیسز کی ٹریننگ دی گئی تھی۔ ہم نے اپنی ذاتی سطح پر بھی کوششیں کیں۔ پہلے ایک اوپرنس ونگ (awareness wing) کام کر رہا تھا، اور ایف آئی اے (FIA) میں 'نیشنل رسپانس سینٹر فار سائبر کرائم' کے نام سے ایک پروجیکٹ بھی تھا، جہاں آگاہی پھیلانے کے لیے فنڈز بھی ملتے تھے اور لوگوں کی ذمہ داریاں بھی طے تھیں۔ لیکن وقت کے ساتھ یہ کام کمزور پڑ گیا، یہاں تک کہ این سی سی آئی اے میں تو اب آگاہی کا یہ کام عملی طور پر بالکل ختم ہو چکا ہے۔ اب نہ تو قانون میں اس پر کوئی توجہ نظر آتی ہے اور نہ ہی اس کے لیے کوئی فنڈنگ موجود ہے۔ سچ تو یہ ہے کہ اعلیٰ عہدوں پر بیٹھے لوگوں کی اب اس طرف کوئی توجہ ہی نہیں ہے۔ میں نے خود اپنی انفرادی سطح پر لوگوں میں آگاہی پیدا کرنے کی کوشش کی ہے اور کچھ دوسرے آفیسرز بھی ایسا کر رہے ہیں، لیکن یہ سب ہماری ذاتی کوششیں ہیں۔ سائبر کرائم کی اوپرنس کے لیے اب کوئی سرکاری فنڈنگ موجود نہیں ہے۔

"There is no formal training. A fully formal training system could not be established. Some modules did train investigation officers in cyber crime, digital evidence, and related cases. We tried on a personal level. Earlier there was an awareness wing. There was also a project called the National Response Center for Cyber Crime in the FIA. There was funding for awareness and people were assigned responsibilities. But later this work weakened. In NCCIA, the awareness component practically disappeared. The focus is gone and now we don't see it in law. There is no funding either. People in authority positions don't care or focus on this. I did awareness on individual capacity and some officers do it too but that's on an individual basis. Cybercrime awareness has no funding."

For trans people, the risks are even more acute. Afreen, based in Karachi, explained that it is not safe for trans people to approach the FIA at all. They expressed that due to anti-gay laws in Pakistan, reporting can lead to criminalisation, harassment, or further exposure. In practice, this means that an entire category of survivors cannot access the primary state institution tasked with responding to cybercrime.

The expectation that women should bring a male relative to police stations is both cultural and a safety requirement. Several survivors describe being told directly that approaching the police alone is unsafe, that officers may "not leave you" or may use the situation to exert power. Even those who do bring male relatives encounter suspicion. Why was she with this man? Was he the one who leaked the images? The presence of a male protector becomes a new line of questioning. At the same time, a number of participants talk about how, culturally, women cannot be seen to be going to the police alone and therefore must be accompanied by a male family member, or that they need to have a man with them to be taken seriously. Whilst this was not reflected by a senior FIA official who said that women could go alone or be accompanied by any family member, including other women, there seemed to be a gap between what is technically possible and what is culturally and societally possible. For the many women who are not

able to disclose the situations to their families, this social requirement for male protection prevents them from seeking formal support altogether.

A recent legislative change has created a particularly acute barrier for survivors under eighteen. Following amendments to the law, minors who wish to file a complaint are now legally required to be accompanied by an immediate family member – a narrowing of a previous provision that allowed a trusted guardian, such as a teacher or older friend, to fulfil that role. In practice, this change excludes many teenage survivors. Participants working with younger users described how intimate image abuse is prevalent among under-eighteens, yet this group disproportionately does not come forward. The reason is that many cannot trust anyone in their immediate family with the disclosure, whether because a family member is the perpetrator, or because they anticipate that telling a parent or sibling will itself cause harm. As Ayesha, a Digital Rights Foundation representative put it, teenagers weigh the consequences and conclude that involving family "would be really bad", that the adults they are legally required to bring into the process are the people they most need to keep it from. The amendment, likely introduced with protective intent, has in practice removed a route that allowed young survivors to seek help through trusted adults outside the home.

Institutional responses also reveal a deep reluctance to pursue formal action. Officers often advise women to drop cases, "keep quiet," or try to resolve things informally with the perpetrator's family. Some participants suggested that this preference for informal, off-the-record arrangements stems from police unwillingness to take on cases involving women's reputations. Families, too, urge withdrawal, fearing social fallout. And because the FIA frequently states that they cannot act without explicit imagery, or that evidence is insufficient, many survivors internalise the message that the system is not designed for them at all. As Zainab, a lawyer and digital rights advocate based in Lahore shared, current systems often replicate the same power imbalances women face online, leaving them unprotected and unheard.

These pressures contribute to a justice system where outcomes are shockingly rare. Zarghuna, a survivor based in Balochistan who had also worked with various women's organisations reported that out of 11,000 arrests linked to cybercrime cases, there are only 225 convictions.⁹⁴ The statistics echo survivors' lived realities, where cases stall or collapse entirely. Many women report that they start the process but do not finish it because fear, pressure, or exhaustion make continuing untenable. Survivors are intimidated into silence, evidence is declared insufficient, the reporting process itself becomes too hostile to continue, families push victims to drop cases to avoid publicity, police discourage pursuit and institutions delay.

Still, a small number of participants describe supportive officers or a responsive investigator who treats her with dignity. These helpful individuals are anomalies, not indicators of a functioning system. Whether you are treated with respect or contempt

⁹⁴ 'Rising Cybercrime: 1.8 Million Women Fall Victim in Pakistan', The Tribune, n.d. <<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/rising-cybercrime-1-8-million-women-fall-victim-in-pakistan/>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

depends entirely on “how sensitive the person handling your case is.” This was confirmed by Nighat Dad, the Founder of Digital Rights Foundation who acknowledged that in her experience, the system functions on a very ad-hoc basis – successful for some and not for others, and that distinction often depends on a person’s status.

The bureaucratic burden of seeking help

Even when survivors manage to initiate a complaint, the procedural demands placed upon them are overwhelming. Many describe spending days or months filling out forms, supplying documents, compiling screenshots, mapping timelines, and responding to contradictory instructions. Some wait in queues only to be told to return the next day. Others recount carrying folders stuffed with printed evidence or being asked for additional



documentation after they believed the process was complete.

This administrative load is traumatic. The requirement for survivors to repeatedly recount their experiences, reproduce their evidence, or justify their pain becomes its own form of violence. Warda (Faisalabad) described attempting to document three years of abuse on paper, only to abandon it when the writing forced her to relive everything. Another – Nabiha in Lahore – described her hands trembling as she tried to complete a cybercrime form while experiencing panic and disassociation.

The emotional toll is exacerbated by the contradiction between urgency and delay. Survivors are expected to act immediately to gather evidence, file complaints, or confront perpetrators, yet the institutions themselves operate on slow timelines that stretch over weeks or months. In practice, the burden of “quick action” is placed entirely on the survivor, while authorities and platforms do not move with the same pace.

Similarly, the bureaucratic processes involved in seeking support from law enforcement create additional barriers to support, particularly for women from rural areas or low income backgrounds as Hyra, the helpline manager at Digital Rights Foundation explained:

"There are other barriers for women from rural areas, as well as those who are not from the three or four biggest cities in Pakistan – Karachi, Islamabad etc – if they want to take on their case by going to law enforcement. Many of these women would have to travel long distances to actually reach a law enforcement office. So it's not just whether or not they're willing to approach law enforcement, it's also, can they sneak away from their house for such a long time.

If I am a woman who wants to file a complaint, and I have all the evidence available, but I can't leave my house for a few hours, or even two days in some cases – if I'm not allowed to leave the house, or I don't have enough money to travel, because I'm not earning – how am I supposed to go file a complaint?

There might be a willingness to pursue the case, but they might have other barriers....You can start the complaint process online, but eventually you will have to visit law enforcement offices in person. There are only 15 cyber crime offices in all of Pakistan....If you're taking five hours to get to that office and then five hours to get back home, that's 10 hours right there. And if you're not comfortable traveling at night, then you would have to stay there, in that random city. And would you do that alone? Would you go with family members, with friends? There's so much to think about.

How would you get the money to get a bus ticket to go there and maybe stay the night? And then you don't even know, when you get to that office, if they will actually listen to your case. You might have to wait several hours for them to just listen to you. And you might have to take several trips. In one of our case studies...the father [of the survivor] told us: "I was visiting almost every week, and then I was running out of money, so I couldn't [continue]. At one point, I had to let it go, because I couldn't [keep going]. I was skipping work to make it happen".

Similar bureaucratic hurdles are faced when attempting to seek support from platforms who themselves often fail to act. Participants describe reporting tools that are unintuitive, irrelevant, or designed around Western understandings of harm. Reporting categories do not reflect the realities of gendered abuse in Pakistan; women are asked to explain why a post is harmful, or forced to choose labels that do not match their situation. Moderation systems recognise English-language slurs in captions and comments but ignore harassment written in Urdu or other languages:

"If they are using swear words, for example F-word, B-word... then...you can't say this because it is reported. But then people in this part of the world write in Urdu, in their native language ... and there is nothing to [catch] those swear words. ... So it's only flagging English words." – Zeba, Lahore, Survivor

Platform responses were described as slow, inconsistent, or contradictory. The labour of escalation, such as constant emailing, navigating automated systems, and appealing incorrect decisions falls entirely on the survivor. Some describe submitting report after report through automated systems that provide only generic responses, if they respond at all. Nabiha (Lahore) recalled writing a "gazillion" emails to Google, Youtube and

Twitter. Sakina, also in Lahore, described frantically contacting Facebook, uploading her ID card, and later taking a verification photo for Instagram while she was in tears on the floor, then waiting some time before she was able to get her accounts back and feel able to return to social media. Another survivor – Angel – recounted the labour and frustration of repeatedly reporting a fake Instagram account that was using her images. Even after she submitted evidence and friends backed her up by filing reports, the platform kept replying that the account did not breach its rules, leaving her with no clear resolution. These processes require survivors to manage sophisticated digital escalation at moments of heightened distress when they are often panicked, sleep-deprived, or even suicidal.

The lack of clear or timely responses feeds a sense of helplessness. Survivors describe refreshing inboxes, filing duplicate reports, and trying multiple platforms simultaneously, often to be met with silence or irrelevant automated messages. For many, the platforms' failure to act, or to act quickly, creates as much anguish as the initial leak.

Some participants point out that journalists and public figures, or those with access to personal connections inside companies, can sometimes secure faster removals. This inequality produces a situation where "ordinary" women feel the system is not designed for them, and that their suffering holds little value in the eyes of global corporations. Some survivors perceive the platforms themselves as complicit, arguing that profit models reward sensational or harmful content and that the companies therefore have little incentive to prioritise women's safety.

In contrast, a few rare positive experiences were described. Zoya (Lahore) reported that TikTok, for instance, acted "very quickly," removing content and notifying the offending page almost immediately. But such responsiveness is the exception, and survivors emphasise that the dominant experience across platforms is slowness, irrelevance, or indifference.

Silence, secrecy, and the social consequences of speaking out

For many participants, the greatest barrier to seeking help is not the institution itself but the social environment surrounding it. Several women describe hiding incidents from family for years, avoiding therapy because counsellors might not understand, or masking panic attacks and sleepless nights from friends. The pressure to remain silent is both internal and external, reinforced by fears of judgement, rejection, or endangering oneself or others, alongside a lack of belief that speaking up will have any positive impact:

ہمارا کلچر خود رپورٹ کرنے کی حوصلہ شکنی کرتا ہے۔ 'پرائیویسی' یا نجی زندگی (کو چھپانے) کا تصور لوگوں کو آگے آنے سے روکتا ہے۔ اگر کوئی سنگین واقعہ ہو بھی جائے، تب بھی لوگ رپورٹ نہیں کرتے۔ وہ کہتے ہیں، 'اس دفعہ دیکھ لیتے ہیں۔۔۔ شاید اگلی دفعہ۔' ہمارے مذہب میں بھی یہی سوچ رکھی جاتی ہے۔ وہ خاموش رہتے ہیں کیونکہ ان کا ماننا ہوتا ہے کہ 'آخر اس کا کیا فائدہ؟'۔

Our culture itself discourages reporting. The idea of “privacy” pushes people not to come forward. Even if something serious happens, people don’t report it. They say, “Let’s see this time... maybe next time.” The same is in our religion. They remain silent because they believe, ‘what’s the benefit?’” – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

The consequences of disclosure ripple beyond the individual. Women report fearing that siblings’ reputations will be harmed, that fathers will be shamed, that families will be socially ostracised, or that revealing the abuse might trigger violence at home. Some survivors isolate themselves completely, convinced they have no safe confidant. Others test the waters with selective disclosures but retreat when they encounter disbelief, minimisation, or accusations of exaggeration. Even peer support can be fraught. Some friends express solidarity, while others question why the woman was in that situation to begin with.

The combined effect is that many women learn that silence feels safer than seeking help, even as the abuse escalates.

Abuse that cannot be reported: private messages, disappearing content, and technological blind spots

A growing category of image-based abuse takes place through channels that offer no effective reporting mechanisms at all. Women describe Instagram Stories restricted to private follower groups, making them invisible to the survivor themselves, WhatsApp forwards protected by end-to-end encryption, images sent directly to families, or photos circulated within networks the survivor cannot access.

Survivors often cannot even view the images being used against them, let alone submit them as evidence. Some rely on hearsay from friends who have seen the content. Others only learn of its existence when a family member receives it from an unknown number. In these cases, traditional reporting pathways collapse entirely. There is nothing to screenshot, no URL to submit, no post to report.

“I think the real fear was when it started going on to WhatsApp. That’s where we were just totally helpless. If people are downloading this, that’s where you don’t know how to control the dissemination...perpetrators [also] now use the view once feature...So it’s really hard to track and report and stop the abuse.” – Nighat Dad, Founder of Digital Rights Foundation

Added to this is the challenge of knowing, definitively, who the perpetrator is:

"شروع میں، سائبر کرائم کے کیسز میں سب سے بڑا مسئلہ مجرم کی پہچان کرنا تھا۔ یہ کوئی گولی چلانے (فائرنگ) جیسا معاملہ نہیں ہے جہاں سامنے والا بندہ صاف نظر آ رہا ہو۔ یہاں، اکثر متاثرہ خواتین کو یہ معلوم ہی نہیں ہوتا تھا کہ دوسری طرف کون ہے۔ اس وقت انسٹاگرام اور فیس بک ہی اہم پلیٹ فارمز تھے، لیکن بعد میں واٹس ایپ پر شیئرنگ بھی بڑھ گئی۔"

"In the beginning, the biggest problem was identifying the offender in cyber crime cases. These are not like a shooting where the person is obvious. Here, the victim (women) often didn't even know who the other person was. At that time, Instagram and Facebook were the main platforms. Later, sharing on WhatsApp also increased."
– Senior FIA official

In addition, a former employee of a social media platform, highlighted issues around identity verification when reporting content to platforms. She described the near impossibility of reporting impersonation in contexts where women do not maintain public-facing profiles. When a fake account uses a woman's photographs, platforms often require verification through the "real" account, usually by matching images. But in communities where women in pardah, or in parts of the Muslim Global South, do not routinely post personal images online, there may be little or no digital footprint to authenticate against. In such cases, the system effectively locks women out of their own protection. This, she noted, presents particular difficulties for some women in Pakistan – both those who do not have their own accounts, and those for whom sharing personal details or official documents carries its own risks, whether due to family oversight or community norms around privacy.

Mistrust, fear of retaliation, and the danger of being known

Beyond logistical barriers lies the more existential one of the fear of becoming visible. In Pakistan's tightly interwoven social networks, anonymity is fragile. Survivors repeatedly describe feeling trapped by the possibility that the act of seeking help could expose them further. Many worry that the staff member handling their case, whether at an NGO, a helpline, or within the FIA, might know someone in their family, community, or university. The perception that "everybody knows everybody" becomes a silencing force.

Women fear that a disclosure could ripple outward through informal networks, reaching parents, siblings, or neighbours and placing them in deeper danger.

These fears extend to civil society organisations that are, in theory, safer alternatives to the state. Some participants emphasise that DRF and similar groups promise confidentiality, yet survivors still hesitate. They do not know who exactly will see their case, how their data will be handled, or whether someone in the organisation might have overlapping social ties with their own circles. This was confirmed by Ayesha at the Digital Rights Foundation who reflected:

"Usually the very first thing that they talk to us about is if it will be safe. [They ask] what if you reach out to my family and say that I have approached you due to this complaint?."

The absence of visible or widely known success stories compounds this uncertainty. When outcomes remain confidential, as they often must, survivors lack reassurance that others in their position were protected, supported, or kept anonymous. As Nida in Lahore put it, "you don't know who you're dealing with... you don't even know if the person you're dealing with might know somebody else that you know." This produces a

paradox where the confidentiality that protects survivors also obscures evidence that these organisations can be trusted.

Concerns about “paper trails” are similarly pervasive. Many women fear what is left behind when they contact an organisation, fill out a form, or speak to a caseworker. They worry about whose desk the information will pass across, who will remember it and whether it will exist in a file that could one day resurface. Several participants say they would rather approach a random stranger than an NGO because a stranger leaves no record. The fear of documentation, of something written down, typed out, or stored, becomes a barrier to help-seeking in its own right.

This mistrust intensifies when state institutions enter the equation. Survivors describe deep uncertainty about how their information will be handled by police or FIA officers who may hold conservative views, harbour personal biases, or wield institutional power unpredictably. They worry about offending someone who has the power to delay a case, leak information, or misuse sensitive images. A digital rights advocate we spoke with who chose to remain anonymous described entering an FIA cybercrime office to report cases and seeing stacks of files with sexually explicit images visible. She said that simply being able to see other people’s intimate material in this way “takes away any idea of security or safety, or any belief in the institution” handling such data. A senior FIA official confirmed that women often approach with a lot of fear, and highlighted the problem of not being able to remain anonymous in criminal proceedings, which heightens the panic:

“There is a lot of fear. Then there is also the fact that when we summon people, there is a legal procedure, and through it the other party also finds out that a complaint has been filed against them...doing it completely anonymously online cannot happen – if someone wants that, they still have to come to the investigation agency. After that, whatever they claim. There isn’t a clear law that allows someone to remain fully anonymous....There is a strong need for some kind of governmental organisation, or an NGO, or a system where legal support is available, so that if a girl does not want to come forward, an institution can take up her case. There should be provision for this. And some people do already do this.”

The FIA official went on to state that, in his opinion, sexual harassment cases (and particularly cyber-harassment) should be dealt with at a provincial level rather than a federal one. He referenced institutions such as the Women’s Protection Bureau and Child Protection Bureaus that work at the provincial level because this is where most cases are reported, as they are more accessible and trusted. This was in contrast to federal control which can create conflicts, delays, and rigidity. He presented an example of the Women’s Protection Bureau in the Punjab that had been able to set up a hotline for women who did not want to go to the police or the FIA, so that their cases could be reported to them. The responsibility was then shared between the Women’s Protection Bureau and the FIA.

The fears and mistrust suppress reporting. What this highlights is a legal system that is technically available, but socially unsafe for women. Until complaints can be handled

through trusted, protective intermediaries – ideally at the provincial level – many survivors will continue to avoid formal justice, even when laws exist. As Nida, a survivor based in Lahore explained, “there is a lot of mistrust... and people don’t know what trail they will leave behind.” Even when awareness exists, fear often overrides it.

These narratives reveal a tightly interlocking set of moral, institutional, emotional, technological, and cultural barriers that push survivors toward silence at every stage.

Seeking help is not a single decision but a series of thresholds. Each carries the risk of being blamed, judged, exposed, dismissed, or harmed. Even when support exists, it is inconsistent, dependent on individuals rather than systems, and often inaccessible without privilege, education, or personal networks.

Structural exclusion: who the system was never built for

Across the barriers described in this section, a pattern emerges that goes beyond individual experience. The systems that exist to help survivors, including platform reporting tools, legal processes, and in some cases civil society responses, were largely not designed with the most vulnerable users in mind. For women who are rural, low-income, low-literacy, or non-English speaking, the gap between help existing in theory and help being accessible in practice can be insurmountable.

Literacy and language present key obstacles. Participants highlighted how Pakistan’s general literacy rate remains low, and in many parts of the country access to education is still limited. For survivors attempting to navigate platform reporting mechanisms, which are predominantly designed around English-language interfaces and densely written text, this creates an immediate barrier. Platforms most heavily used by people with lower literacy levels, attract users because their interfaces are video-based, intuitive, and visual, requiring little formal literacy or English comprehension to use. Yet when something goes wrong, those same users encounter reporting systems that are text-heavy, English-first, and procedurally complex. The ease of access that drew them to the platform offers no corresponding ease of recourse.

This disparity extends to content moderation itself. Participants described a pattern in which abusive comments written in English are more likely to be flagged and removed than equivalent content written in Urdu. The implication is that moderation systems (whether automated or human) are better calibrated to detect harm in English than in the languages spoken by many Pakistani users. Abuse, as one participant put it, has no language. But the systems designed to catch it appear to operate as though it does.

For women who do attempt to report, the process itself assumes a level of digital literacy, language competency, and cognitive bandwidth that many survivors, particularly those in acute distress, do not have access to at that moment. Community guidelines written as long-form text, reporting pathways that require users to categorise and describe their experience and appeals processes conducted in English create steps that filter out users who lack the education or resources to navigate them.

The consequences of not knowing how to respond can themselves cause harm. Women who discover their images have been shared and do not know how to report, remove, or escalate will often respond by going offline or deactivating accounts, a former tech company employee shared. While understandable, she said, this response can forfeit what little control they had because the content remains and the harm continues. Their absence from the platform removes the possibility of monitoring, reporting or pursuing the perpetrator.

For rural women and those from low-income backgrounds, these barriers compound with the geographical and financial ones described earlier in this section. A woman who cannot read an English-language reporting form, cannot travel to a law-enforcement office five hours away, and cannot afford to take days off work, arrange child care or even have the permission to seek legal support, faces an accumulation of barriers. Together forming a near complete exclusion from the support that usually exists. This was reflected in an interview with Ayesha from the Digital Rights Foundation.

Of those who contact the organisation, she said, based on her professional experience, approximately 70% say their primary need is simply to have their images removed. They see platform escalation as being "the safer and more efficient route."

The roughly 30% who pursue formal legal action through law enforcement tend to share a particular profile, she noted, including relatively higher socioeconomic status, the ability to travel to law enforcement offices independently, greater financial stability, and in some cases the rare advantage of supportive families. Those who take the legal route are also more likely to have internalised that what happened to them is a crime and resist self-blame, instead placing responsibility with the perpetrator – a form of awareness that DRF staff described as part of the psychological work they do with survivors. The choice between removal and legal action, in other words, is shaped by resources, mobility, family dynamics, and psychological support – none of which are evenly distributed.

Across both platforms and law enforcement, participants described a pattern where cases involving public figures attract faster, more serious responses, while 'ordinary' women wait, are deprioritised or turned away. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were all described by DRF team members as acting quickly for high-profile users while remaining slow and inconsistent for other survivors of image-based abuse. Within law enforcement, the disparity was described as being shaped by the Pakistani context. Nighat Dad, the Founder of Digital Rights Foundation described how officers will go out of their way for celebrities for the prospect of a useful connection, the ability to tell others they know someone famous or the gratification of being seen as a powerful protector. The same systems that move slowly or not at all for other survivors find resources and urgency when a recognisable name is involved.

The same legal provisions that women might use to protect themselves have, in some cases, been weaponised against journalists and political opponents, creating a climate that civil society organisations must navigate carefully. As one anonymous civil society actor noted, their organisation routinely advises celebrity service users not to disclose

that they received support from them, because celebrities may have contacts, or even perpetrators, with close connections to law enforcement and visibility can create vulnerability.

The exclusion of disenfranchised survivors from help-seeking support reflects a deeper structural problem in how access to justice is distributed. As one participant shared:

"There is a serious lack of accountability that needs to be addressed urgently. Another very important issue is the depoliticization of access to justice. Many transgender people, low-income women, and women from marginalized or under-resourced areas lack financial means and cannot connect with the system. They feel that if they do not have information or someone to advocate for them with law enforcement, then accessing justice becomes nearly impossible.

In my view, if we move toward depoliticizing access to justice, our systems will become much easier for people to navigate. Processes will be more transparent and clear, people will be able to receive help, and trust in public systems can begin to be rebuilt." – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

The systems that exist – legal, institutional, and technological – were not built with these women at their centre. Until accountability is treated as a structural obligation rather than an individual responsibility, the gap between formal protection and lived reality will remain.

Fighting Back: How Survivors Resist and Reclaim Power



The dominant narrative around image-based abuse tends to focus on what is done *to* women – the violation, the exposure, the harm. But buried within the testimonies of the women and gender minorities interviewed for this research emerged other stories of refusal, resourcefulness, and defiance. Across widely different circumstances, backgrounds, and levels of access to legal or institutional support, survivors found ways to resist. Sometimes those acts of resistance were loud and visible, and others they were quiet and more private.

Their responses do not fall into a single pattern, and they should not be flattened into one.

Instead we see a spectrum of resistance from the internal work of refusing to carry someone else's shame, to going on the offensive against perpetrators, to building movements for other survivors. This section attempts

to map that spectrum. These are not stages in a linear recovery journey, and they are not mutually exclusive. Women move between them, sometimes occupying several at once. They are, rather, different modes of resistance. A repertoire that survivors draw on, often creatively and under extreme pressure, in the absence of adequate institutional and societal protection.

Seven Ways Women Resist and Rebel Against Harm and Societal Pressure Caused by IBA

1. Questioning: refusing to internalise shame

For many survivors, the most fundamental act of resistance is often invisible – resisting the pull of self-blame. The deeply internalised message that the abuse happened because of something she did, something she was, or somewhere she chose to be, was a narrative that many women questioned at various moments. In a social context that ties women's honour to their conduct and their safety to their silence, refusing to accept this logic is neither automatic nor easy, and for many, it is the prerequisite for everything else that follows.

"I realised that what has happened isn't my fault," said one survivor, who described the moment of recognition as a shift from emotional overwhelm into what she called "problem-solving mode":

"The responsibility lies solely with the person who violated my consent...I chose not to internalise the shame and become quiet or let fear dictate my choices. Someone else's violation of consent would not become the foundation of how I see myself." – Nusrat, Abu Dhabi UAE, Survivor

For a younger survivor – Hajra in Balochistan – who had faced harassment while still at school, this questioning turned outward into a direct challenge to the cultural norms being used against her. She had argued with her mother about her right to post photographs of herself online, pushing back against the framing of digital visibility as immodesty. "Which Muslim have you seen that has hidden his or her face and is feeling shame?" she told her mother. It was an argument about a photograph. It was also an argument about the right to exist publicly as a woman. Later, she began researching how society had treated women, and what could be done to change it.

This refusal to accept blame was not limited to one's own situation. Several participants named and dissected the structures producing that blame, highlighting what might otherwise be absorbed as personal failure. Ghazala in Lahore described how Pakistani society treats women as "private property." Another – Aina (Lahore) – observed the double standard between men and women and the scrutiny that falls only on women when, for example, a woman is photographed laughing with male colleagues. These participants were not simply reflecting on injustice, they were questioning it and refusing to internalise it.

Some of the most direct questioning came from women in the public eye, for whom the stakes of self-blame were especially visible. One high-profile British Pakistani actor we spoke with described how she was told by those around her to stay silent after being drawn into an AI-generated image p – that it was an "annual thing," that it would "die its own death." She rejected this entirely. "If it's been happening on a yearly basis, why hasn't anybody else spoken about it?" she said. Her questioning was not only of her individual situation but of the entire cycle of normalised, recurring abuse that silence enables. She also pushed back on the moral logic applied to women's bodies and behaviour across multiple fronts, questioning why a wife being slapped on television becomes "an enabling environment," why a woman's character should be "defined by the kind of clothes that she wears," and why, when she herself received hate, it so often came from other women.

Sana, a survivor based in Islamabad described being told by her university director, after reporting a professor's sexual assault, that it was her own mistake for responding to him and going to his room. She did not accept this framing and instead questioned the institutional response she received. "I was not defaming that person," she said. "I simply asked him to take notice of this thing." In another story shared by Sana, whose intimate images were shared by an ex-partner, was told by police that she had only herself to blame for sharing them in the first place. She rejected and questioned this logic too, describing the sharing of images within a committed relationship as ordinary intimacy, and placing the wrongdoing squarely with him and with the institutions that failed her.

Others framed this questioning in generational terms. "With this generation," reflected one participant, "they are learning these things, and they are standing for it – that it's not our fault. They are having a more clear definition of what's right and wrong." – Muneeba, UK (originally from Faisalabad)

2. Deny: leaning into uncertainty and plausible deniability

A small but striking category of resistance involves neither accepting the reality of what happened nor challenging it head-on, but denying it. Rather than fighting the images or their circulation, survivors in this mode claim the images are fabricated, exploit the plausible deniability that AI-generated content has introduced into public discourse, and turn the perpetrator's weapon back on them. It is, in some respects, the most morally complex form of resistance in this research, involving a deliberate untruth, but in contexts where the truth offers no protection and institutions offer no recourse, it can be the most pragmatically effective.

One story shared in the research was about a woman who works as a house helper in Lahore. The woman had shared intimate images with a man during a relationship. When the relationship ended badly, he circulated the images within their social circle. She faced potential ruin and with nowhere to turn, she went to her employer for help.

Her employer works in AI policy. Her advice was simple – to deny the images were real. "Tell everybody that this man is a liar, and he's used AI to create these images, and they simply never existed." The woman followed the advice, and it worked.

This story illuminates something important. At a cultural moment when AI-generated images are both a genuine and widely understood threat, the uncertainty they have introduced can be wielded defensively as well as offensively. A woman at risk, with no access to legal redress, coached by someone who understood the technology landscape, found in AI's murky reputation a shield that societal responses and formal institutions would fail to provide her. She used the same technological ambiguity that perpetrators exploit, but to protect herself rather than destroy someone else.

The Lahore story is not an isolated incident. Across the research, denial emerged as a strategy that women are actively anticipating, planning for, and sometimes advising others to use. Samina, based in Karachi, described keeping intimate material in a locked folder, having already deleted backups, and knowing that even this may not be enough. She has a backup plan: "If anyone ever tries to say that's me, I'll say it's AI generated, because I'm kind of sick of not being able to live my life." The growing public awareness of AI-generated fakes has, in some contexts, created what Komal in Malaysia called a small but meaningful escape hatch, particularly in rural or more conservative communities: "Sometimes I feel good that this AI thing is reaching rural areas also, because they can claim this thing is AI, they can save their life." She spoke of wanting to educate girls to use this strategy, to buy time, if nothing else.

Others used denial in its most public form. Nafisa – currently based in Berlin but originally from Rawalpindi, whose photographs were stolen and used to create fake social media accounts impersonating her, responded by posting publicly to warn her network: "This is not me. If this person is reaching out to you, be very mindful that this could be a fake account." She also noted a broader cultural shift in how people receive such images now – that the spread of AI has made audiences more sceptical, because "this could be AI, this could be doctored." Denial, in other words, is becoming more available as a strategy, because technological uncertainty is becoming more widespread.

This picture, though, is not straightforwardly empowering. Hina, a human rights lawyer based in Islamabad noted that even images that are clearly fabricated can cause lasting harm, because "a random person seeing it will not really know if it's a real picture or a fake one, and they believe it, and then there will be repercussions for the woman." And Nighat Dad, the Founder of Digital Rights Foundation made an important structural observation: even when the AI explanation is true, it does not always protect women. "Victims and survivors have lost hope," she said, "because they cannot simply say, 'Oh, you know, this is AI produced content', because people like to believe that women are at fault in our society." Denial works in some contexts and fails in others. Its effectiveness depends on whether an audience is willing to extend a woman the benefit of the doubt, which, in many cases, is far from guaranteed.

3. Defend: holding ground

Where "question" is an internal shift and "deny" is a specific tactical manoeuvre, "defend" describes an ongoing, active practice where women choose to stand their ground. They may remain present in digital spaces, maintaining visibility, and refusing to disappear, while managing risk through deliberate, sustained boundary-setting. In a context where the social pressure on survivors to withdraw is immense, and where digital visibility is routinely framed as a cause of abuse rather than a right, defending their position, staying online, and staying visible is itself a form of resistance.

Some women manage this pressure through careful boundary-setting that allows them to stay visible on their own terms. One participant described keeping her social media circle "really small," and others described maintaining tightly controlled "close friends" lists on Instagram. Some described editing themselves for different audiences as a form of navigation rather than defeat. "We're going to post the picture that is socially acceptable." Choosing which version of themselves to make visible, and where was not experienced as self-erasure but as a strategy that kept them online and present on terms they could manage.

For others, staying online required more active defiance of those closest to them. One young woman, Areen based in Kuwait, described being banned from social media by her family entirely, but getting around it anyway. Later, when she posted a photograph on Instagram showing her midriff, she was confronted by her mother. She did not apologise. "Yes, this is who I am now, this is what I'm comfortable with," she told her. When she discovered her mother had been monitoring her private account through a cousin she challenged this directly, asking who had been sending her mother pictures of her, and threatening to report it to the FIA. She refused to denote her own behaviour as the problem.

Defending also meant pushing back against the interpretations placed on images and footage after the fact. One participant described how, after a video of her dancing at a private function was leaked, some relatives used the incident to argue that women simply should not dance. She and her husband both rejected this explicitly. "What you're saying is, okay, me as a victim should have been careful, but the person who did it should not have been," she said. She insisted the issue was not her dancing, her clothes, or who was in the room, it was consent – Zoya, Lahore, Survivor

This refusal to be shamed out of public space was particularly prominent in the story of a high-profile lawyer, recounted by one participant. Years after attending a private party as a student, footage of her dancing emerged and was circulated on social media by political opponents, framed as evidence of her being "loose" or intoxicated. The participant noted that for most women, this kind of exposure could be life-threatening. The lawyer's response was to continue her work, decline to apologise, and treat the attempt at humiliation with open contempt. "I don't give a fuck," she said. "You guys can take this and shove it." The participant admired this response, while acknowledging that most women do not have the platform or protection to respond that way.

Ayesha Omar described a similar, if more constrained, form of defence. She spoke of having trained herself to care less about approval – "I care less about what people say, and I care less about being liked. I care less about being accepted. It's not like I don't want to be, but if someone doesn't understand me, or if I'm not getting X, Y, Z's approval, I'm okay with that, you know?" Another high-profile British Pakistani actor also described building a "mentally protected" environment around herself so that others couldn't get through to her. She was explicit that this was not the same as filtering or altering herself and described her default as offering respect to others, but being prepared to change her tone when it was not returned.

4. Attack: going on the offensive

This category describes the move from defence to offence using formal or informal mechanisms to actively pursue accountability. This includes reporting to platforms, going to police, seeking legal redress, going to media, or using social and community pressure to hold perpetrators to account. It is the most visible form of resistance, and often the most costly, requiring time, knowledge, access, and a willingness to absorb potential backlash. But the stories shared show that when women do go on the offensive, they can often be effective.

One survivor – Sadia based in Karachi, who had reached suicidal crisis before finding a path through, described a total reversal when she finally decided she had nothing left to lose. She had been abandoned by her community, so she went on the offensive. She contacted the perpetrator's family and friends directly, presenting her case. She sent letters to police station heads and district commissioners, naming him and identifying his connections. She sent legal notices through supporters she had found online. "*Mai jaisa kutta gosht keh peechay parta hai, waisay uss kay peechay par gayee*" – like a dog going after meat, she went after him. She had understood that shame, in Pakistan's social landscape, is typically weaponised against women, but it can work the other way too. Eventually, the pressure from within his own family and community forced him to stop.

One high-profile British Pakistani actor, who had faced an extremely public form of abuse, described the moment she decided to speak out publicly and take legal action despite advice to stay quiet. "If I stay quiet," she said, "I won't be able to look at myself in the mirror again. I'd just be really ashamed of myself for not standing up for myself when I had done nothing wrong." Zarghuna, a university student in Balochistan who had tackled harassment within her institution described the value of knowing her rights from the outset: "I was not afraid at that particular moment, which is a very good thing. Otherwise, the consequences would be different." The university's principal ultimately gave an assurance that a repeat incident would result in expulsion and legal action. It was a partial victory, "the university was helpful to some extent," but a victory nonetheless.

Going on the offensive also meant confronting perpetrators and institutions directly, often in ways that required persistence and creativity. Zoya (Lahore) tracked down the

wedding photographer whose company had posted footage of her dancing without her consent. She did not accept his narrative that this was a normal part of his job. "Just because we're paying you to take our pictures, that does not mean that they're public property," she told him. She demanded the video be deleted from every device and platform, with the explicit threat that any reappearance would result in FIA involvement. Areen (Kuwait), whose cousin had seized her iPhone and locked her out – giving him access to her entire private photo gallery – bypassed her mother when she failed to act and went directly to her uncle. The cousin was "shocked that she would retaliate." In a social context where women are expected to respond to such violations as passive victims, the act of escalating was a deviation from the 'norm'.

Women took formal legal routes too, with mixed but sometimes significant results. Sana (Islamabad), after her ex-partner shared her intimate photos on pornographic websites and via WhatsApp, went first to the police, where she was victim-blamed, and then to the FIA. After months of documentation and process, the FIA secured removal of her images and imposed a financial penalty on her abuser. Sundus, based in Almaty originally from Islamabad, raised the non-consensual use of her images in divorce proceedings; the court issued a formal legal warning, and her ex-husband immediately complied. In another case described by Zohra Ahmed, a family lawyer and Founder of the Jugnu project, a husband who had weaponised intimate videos of his wife during separation was taken to court by her family. He was sentenced to fourteen years in prison.

When the formal system was deeply unreliable or perpetuated victim-blaming narratives, some women also went on the offensive here. When an investigating officer contacted Nabiha (Lahore) on WhatsApp and began flirting with her, she did not report him through official channels as she knew she lacked the power to do so safely. Instead, she reported his behaviour to DRF, telling them: "I want to take a stand for other women. This person should not be doing this to other victims."

Despite obstacles to addressing situations of image-based abuse, there are signs of a shift. Hina, a human rights lawyer based in Islamabad observed that, while many women still comply with blackmailers' demands out of fear, more are now choosing to fight: "Some of the girls, they're taking a stand. They're seeking legal help." She credited organisations like Digital Rights Foundation for simplifying the process and making it accessible in local languages. Awareness campaigns aimed at the judiciary and police were beginning to move things, she said – slowly, but visibly. "At least it's a step forward." Several participants had found their way to formal action because someone – a friend, an organisation, a seminar at university – had told them that recourse was possible, and shown them how.

5. Retreat and return: stepping back to move forward

Several women in this research describe a pattern that sits between defending and healing that is neither a stable holding of ground nor a straightforward process of internal recovery, but something more cyclical. They withdraw from digital or public life,

followed in some cases by a deliberate, often difficult, return. The retreat is a recalibration, a pulling back to a place of safety in order to eventually re-emerge on one's own terms. The return, when it comes, is rarely complete or uncomplicated. This category captures the rhythm of resistance over time, rather than a single mode or moment. It also captures the specific nuance of what it means to rebuild a public or digital presence after abuse, including the false starts, the external pressures that may force re-entry before a survivor feels ready, and the slow, non-linear arc toward something resembling wholeness.

Tahira, a survivor originally from Lahore, left the country entirely. The harassment had become so physically intrusive with her abuser messaging her every time she stepped outside her home that departure felt like the only option. She described it as "the path of least resistance," then caught herself: "I guess it's also a trauma response, generational trauma response, to just leave." The leaving bought her safety. The return to herself and to public life has been a longer and more complicated journey. Her account echoes another, in which Nasreen, originally from Balochistan relocated from her village to the city to escape ongoing violence, geography functioning as a survival mechanism in the absence of any institutional protection. Two sisters, whose case was taken to the FIA by an advocate who supported them, eventually left Pakistan altogether for the UK when no action was taken on their complaint. Their departure was not chosen freely, it was the only exit available to them. The retreat, in their case, became permanent.

Retreat and return has also played out in the digital space. Tahira, an artist, described how she had been building momentum before the abuse, posting regularly, without anxiety. She wants to return to that and she expects herself to. Her community of students and supporters expects it of her too. She describes them as "an army of people" urging her to break free of the fear. But the experience rattled something that has not yet settled back into place. Meanwhile, the world has not waited for her to feel ready. She recently had to make her Instagram public again because galleries collaborating with her on projects needed to share her posts. The return to visibility was not chosen freely, it was demanded by professional circumstances. She is back, but not the same as before.

Some retreats go deeper and last longer. Mahnoor from Multan, whose ex-husband had weaponised non-explicit images against her, described a withdrawal from digital life that lasted four to five years. She deleted her Instagram at his insistence during the marriage and never re-established it after the divorce. She stopped posting any images of herself: "I'm so scared now of getting things misused," she said. More recently, something has shifted. She created a new Instagram account. She has posted nothing on it. But she describes thinking, for the first time in years, that she might start again: "I just don't want to hide. I feel like I've hidden myself enough for so long."

Nargis, a poet from Balochistan described one of the most gradual and carefully managed retreats in the research. She had joined Facebook in 2011 and quickly observed that many women in her region avoided social media entirely, or used male names to protect themselves. When she began publishing intellectual and political

writing under her own name, the backlash about the authorship and a woman claiming authority in her own voice was sharp. The cumulative pressure eventually drove her offline for two to three years. When she returned, she did so carefully. She stopped showing her face, shifted her focus from poetry to research and articles on women's issues, and found a way to continue speaking while reducing personal exposure. It was not the return she had imagined. But it was a return.

Perhaps the most sustained account of retreat and return comes from Nasreen, a survivor who had spent years negotiating her right to be seen within her family, within her culture, and online. She had begun, cautiously, posting photographs that showed her face. Her father sharing news of her professional recognition with relatives was a sign of how much ground had slowly been won. But her continued presence online is not effortless or symbolic, it is the result of years of negotiation, adaptation, withdrawal, and return. Her persistence reflects a conscious decision to remain present despite the costs.

What these accounts share is a continuing effort to return to a self and a presence that abuse tried to take away. Sometimes the return is chosen. Sometimes it is forced. Often it is both at once. And sometimes – as with the sisters who now live in the UK, or the woman whose new Instagram account sits empty – the return is still waiting to happen.

6. Heal alone: the internal work

Not all resistance is directed outward. For some survivors, the necessary first move is inward with a period of withdrawal, processing, and rebuilding before re-engagement becomes possible. This can involve leaving digital spaces temporarily, physically relocating, and doing the internal work of separating one's sense of self from what was done to them. It may also involve building knowledge and capability, educating oneself about rights, options, and the landscape of support so that the next encounter, or the return to public life, happens from a position of greater strength.

For others, the withdrawal was less physical and more internal. Tahira, a survivor from Lahore described a process of trying to reconcile competing versions of herself – the authentic self she wanted to project online, and the curated self that safety required. For her, excessive caution was something she wanted to overcome, not simply accept. "I need to overcome this, not necessarily just become more cautious. It's something I need to work through." She framed genuine, unguarded digital presence as a goal and something still ahead of her.

Other accounts of internal healing describe a process of reclaiming the body and the self from shame. Sakina (Lahore) described how, in the aftermath of abuse, she had stopped taking photographs of herself in a mirror, even fully clothed, in private, and for no one but herself. Over time, she worked her way back. "Now as a 33-year-old... I say, like, to hell with you. It's my bloody phone...This is my body, and if I don't consent to [my photos being shared], it is wrong. It is somebody else's fault. This is not my fault. But it took a while to get here."

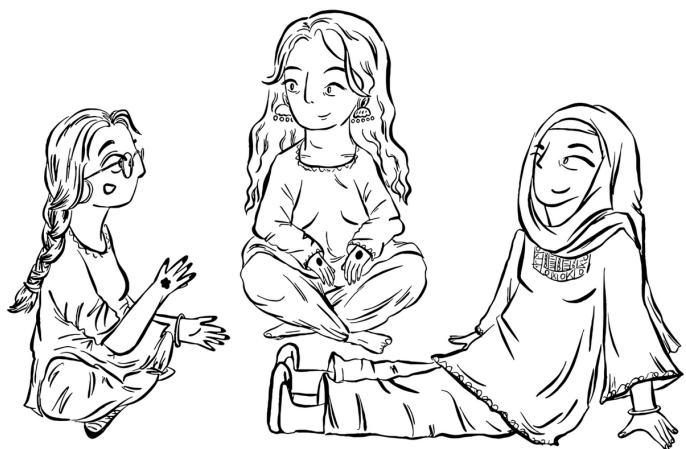
Some participants described initial attempts to seek support that failed, and a turning inward that was partly resignation and partly resolve. Sana from Islamabad withdrew, decided she did not need counselling, and processed the experience through what she called "the silent cry" – alone, at night, with no one else present. "It was just me and my tears and my pillow that was with me in the whole journey," she reflected. "No one is going to come and save me. I have to stand for myself." Some found that time itself, alongside trusted people, did part of the work. "Time is a big healer," said Zakiya from Peshawar now in Islamabad "With passage of time, many things settle into place." Having people around who made room for survival, she said, mattered enormously. But the passage of time was irreplaceable.

For one survivor, Nusrat, the internal work produced something she could articulate with precision years later. "Looking back, I think what I'm most proud of is that I didn't let that experience define my identity or shrink my world," she said. "It wasn't one big moment of strength, it was small moments of strength every day to keep going." She described making a conscious decision that another person's violation of her consent would not become the foundation of how she saw herself. "I'm happy and healthy, and I will not allow anyone to unfairly take the joy away from my life."

The internal work of healing also involved managing relationships with the platforms themselves. One high-profile British Pakistani actor described stopping reading social media comments entirely: "All it does is it just mentally affects you a lot. It brings your confidence down. You start to think that you're just not a worthy person." Similarly, Ayesha Omar described a sustained programme of inner work – working on her nervous system, her reactions, her resilience – that allowed her to stay publicly active without being destroyed by scrutiny. "It takes a lot of inner work," she said. "It takes a lot of resilience to get through it." She described having trained herself to get "excited by challenges," asking herself how to move through difficulty rather than escape it, which included a daily gratitude practice, and a deliberate shift toward a growth mindset.

7. Heal together: solidarity and advocacy

The final and perhaps most expansive form of resistance is one that moves outward, from surviving to helping others survive, from personal recovery to collective action. This takes many forms, including sharing knowledge with other women, standing up for friends or family members who are targeted, becoming a public spokesperson, running campaigns, or building organisations. What unites these responses is a refusal to let personal harm remain purely





personal, and a recognition that the culture enabling this abuse can only be changed if people who understand it from the inside are willing to speak.

Several women interviewed had made the explicit decision to turn their experience into something that could protect or support others. Zarghuna (Balochistan), a young woman who had educated herself about image-based abuse as a teenager, went on to run awareness sessions on harassment and consent in schools and colleges. "I was in school when I faced that problem," she said. "I was in school when I did

not know what image-based abuse was." She wanted to ensure others didn't face the same ignorance: "I really want to help a lot of women out there who are still facing this, but do not understand English, do not understand LinkedIn, do not understand other platforms."

Nusrat, a survivor of repeated abuse framed speaking up as a responsibility that extended well beyond her own situation. "Every time a woman refuses to carry a misplaced shame, it shifts the whole narrative," she said. Her advice to other survivors was to document everything, seek legal and emotional support early, and do not negotiate with someone who has already violated your trust, because speaking up is not only for you. It challenges the culture that allows this to continue. Another participant – Sana from Islamabad – despite carrying visible scars from self-harm and having described suicidal thoughts in the wake of her abuse, chose to speak publicly for this research, not primarily for herself, but for other women. "I personally know how they deal with all these things," she said. "I literally now want to be their voice." She urged every woman facing harassment to speak out: "Please speak up, speak against that. No one deserves this." Her insistence on being visible, on refusing silence was itself a form of collective resistance and a signal to other women that it was possible to survive and to say so.

Some of the most powerful collective responses emerged from friendship groups and peer networks. Parveen, a participant from Sindh described a set of explicit safety rules developed with her close friends. These were ground rules for navigating dating and digital exposure together. No intimate images early in a relationship. Any new man must meet the group before trust is extended. Locations shared when going out. And a clear collective commitment: "Even if the entire world is against you, you have us. We defend you. We can support you." University campuses produced their own forms of collective action. Laila, based in Scotland but originally from Islamabad described a MeToo-style moment at her university in which women began sharing screenshots of abusive or

coercive messages from men, publicly naming what had been done to them and making clear that the person at fault was the one sending the messages, not the women receiving them. "There was a strong sense that if you shared a girl's intimate pictures, you were the asshole. It's not to do with the girl." The normative shift this produced, with shame redirected toward perpetrators rather than victims, was significant.

Others changed institutional cultures from within. Maryam, from Gilgit-Baltistan, shared her experiences of convincing leadership in various workplaces to take workplace harassment seriously. She insisted that the problem was real, and prepared numerous policy drafts until they were accepted. "When I joined, everybody used to tell me, 'No, no, no, we don't have harassment. It's all just fake news.'" Now, she said, reports came in almost every week. She also described challenging sexualised content in a WhatsApp group head-on, publicly objecting when a man shared an explicit image. Instead of leaving the group, she stayed and threatened to respond in kind. Within weeks, the group had apologised and banned such content. She changed the norm by refusing to absorb it.

The most sustained examples of collective healing came from women who had built organisations and movements from their own experiences of harm. Nighat Dad who founded Digital Rights Foundation described entering her first court case thinking of it as a personal battle, then meeting other women and feeling something shift: "I think that was something which sort of ignited rage and anger in me to work for women's rights in general." That rage became an organisation dedicated to helping women with their digital rights, particularly those facing harassment and abuse. Afsheen in Karachi, a trans-rights activist, described becoming a public figure and community connector for queer and trans people facing digital violence – she is now a spokesperson others can reach.

Solidarity also operated in more subtle spaces. Ayesha Omar described friends, colleagues, and even followers offering moral support when she was targeted. She highlighted the importance of women seeing each other's strength and extending it. Another participant – Komal based in Malaysia – described her family and community rallying around a close female relative facing blackmail, pooling contacts, sharing information about Digital Rights Foundation, thinking together about how to help her respond safely. These were not campaigns or organisations, they were the essence of collective care.

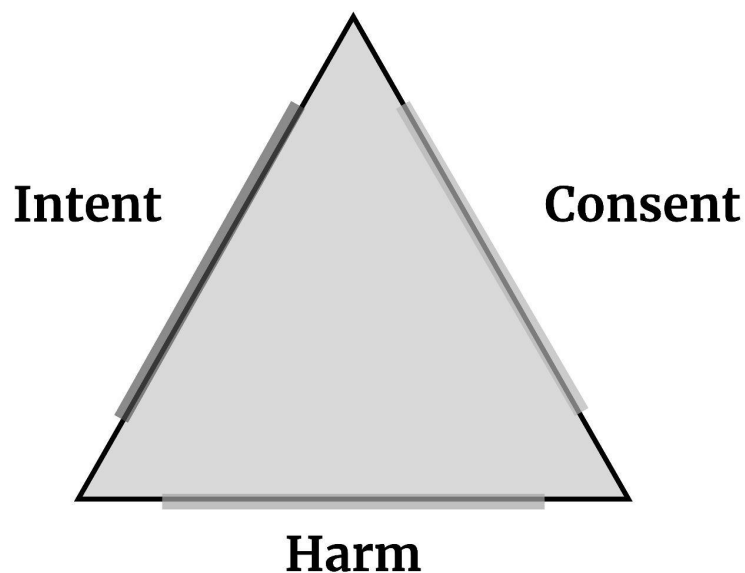
A Framework for Understanding IBA: Intent, Consent, and Harm

What the accounts in the previous sections make clear is that there are many factors beyond the narrow definition of intimate images as nude or sexually explicit that can trigger serious harm. But that harm does not sit in isolation. Through our interviews and

wider research, we found that three concepts sit at the heart of how image-based abuse is understood (and misunderstood) by legal systems, platforms, and public discourse: intent, consent, and harm itself.

Each of these concepts matters, and they cannot be viewed separately. It is the relationship between them, and the cultural context in which they operate, that determines whether a survivor is supported or failed by the systems meant to protect her.

These three concepts can be understood as three sides of a triangle, each one connected to the others, and unable to stand alone. When legal frameworks or platform policies focus on just one, or even two, they may produce outcomes that are both unjust and disconnected from how harm is actually experienced.



Intent

Understanding the intent of abusers is important, but it is only one factor, and it cannot be the determining factor in how cases are prosecuted or sentenced. Harm can befall a survivor irrespective of the abuser's intent. A man who shares an image of his wife to humiliate her acts with clear and documented intent; a man who forwards a WhatsApp message without thinking about the woman in it may not. But the consequences for the woman can be identical.

Similarly, consent is often treated as a timeless and vague concept in public discourse and courts – assumed to have been given without being clearly established, and assumed to persist without ever being reaffirmed. Our research challenges this. Women we spoke with described images taken within relationships or shared in private contexts

being forwarded and recontextualised long after any original consent, if it existed at all, had expired or been exceeded. This research argues that consent belongs to a moment, a context, and an audience. When any of those change, it cannot be assumed to follow.

The consequences of frameworks that prioritise intent over harm have been well documented. Research across multiple jurisdictions has found that women survivors of image-based abuse are consistently assigned more blame than perpetrators, particularly when they took the images themselves. Women who took images that are later shared without consent are widely held responsible for the harm that follows.^{95,96} Where intent must be proven, prosecution frequently stalls because perpetrators can avoid accountability even when harm is clear. As research on policing and legislative responses has found, perpetrators can claim a wide variety of alternative motivations that fall outside the legal threshold.⁹⁷

Pakistan's PECA legislation reflects this problem directly. Section 21 requires that perpetrators not only act intentionally, but that they do so to harm a person's reputation, to take revenge, to create hatred, or to blackmail. Whilst all of these motivations appeared clearly throughout our research, they could be difficult to prove in a court of law. England and Wales recognised an equivalent gap in their own law and removed the intent requirement in January 2024, introducing a base offence of sharing an intimate image without consent regardless of motivation.⁹⁸ Intent-based frameworks place the heaviest burden on survivors and do little to change cultural norms that already blame survivors rather than abusers. They also leave largely unaddressed the full scope of harm felt not just by the survivor but also by her family and community.

A 2024 Karachi district court case illustrates what justice can look like when all three sides of the triangle are taken seriously. A [district and sessions court in Karachi](#) sentenced a man to nine years in prison for posting pictures of his wife online that were described by press coverage as “indecent” or “inappropriate.” He was also fined Rs 90,000 (\$320 USD / £253 GBP). According to the prosecution, he had shared these photos with her brother via social media and used them to blackmail her. In this case, the intent of the abuser was clear – to leverage patriarchal norms and the threat of family shame as a means of coercion. The court observed that “the accused tarnished the dignity of the complainant and her family, violated the complainant’s modesty, displayed obscene videos without her consent, and displayed them publicly”, reflecting the collective nature of harm that women in this research described repeatedly.

⁹⁵ Alison Attrill-Smith and others, ‘Gender Differences in Videoed Accounts of Victim Blaming for Revenge Porn for Self-Taken and Stealth-Taken Sexually Explicit Images and Videos’, *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 15.4 (2021), doi:10.5817/CP2021-4-3.

⁹⁶ Liza Zvi and Mally Shechory Bitton, ‘Perceptions of Victim and Offender Culpability in Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images’, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 27.5 (2021), pp. 427–42, doi:10.1080/1068316X.2020.1818236.

⁹⁷ Antoinette Raffaella Huber, ‘Image-Based Sexual Abuse: Legislative and Policing Responses’, *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 25.3 (2025), pp. 736–52, doi:10.1177/17488958221146141.

⁹⁸ ‘Tackling Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse: Government Response’, n.d. <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmwomeq/911/report.html>> [accessed 19 May 2026].

But intent is rarely this clear. In many cases, perpetrators deny intent entirely or claim they were sharing images as a joke, out of anger, or without understanding the consequences. This is where the addition of consent creates a more stable legal and ethical anchor. As Rida, an independent legal expert we spoke with, argued: the definition of image-based abuse in Pakistani law should be rewritten to criminalise any image shared without consent where it harms a person's privacy, dignity or psychological wellbeing, arguing for a consent-plus-harm standard.

Consent

Consent, however, is often treated in public discourse and in court as though it were fixed and permanent. Consent to share an image in one context is not consent for that image to be forwarded, screenshotted, or recontextualised. This is why the report's taxonomy foregrounds consent as a dimension of every category of image. The harm is located in what is done to the image without the subject's knowledge or agreement, rather than in what it shows.

The Karachi judgment above contrasts directly with legal frameworks that not only fail survivors, but actively penalise them. In Uganda, the Anti-Pornography Act has been used to prosecute women whose images were taken and shared without their consent. Judith Heard, a Ugandan fashion model, [was charged twice under the law](#), in 2018 and again in 2021, after hackers leaked her private images. She had not shared the images herself, and had not consented to their distribution. Yet it was she, not the perpetrators, who faced criminal liability. The law made no distinction between a woman whose intimate images are stolen and shared and a woman who distributes such images herself. In Tanzania, similar legislation operates on the same logic. These are the consequences of legal frameworks built around morality and modesty rather than consent. Where consent is absent from the legal framework entirely, the harm of image-based abuse cannot be named, let alone addressed.

Harm

Harm, the third side of the triangle, is also poorly understood by existing frameworks, particularly because it so frequently extends beyond the individual survivor. As the accounts in this report demonstrate, when an image circulates without consent, it moves through families, neighbourhoods and communities. The harm is not only psychological but social, economic and, in some cases, life-threatening. Nargis and Sanam, two activists from Balochistan whose experiences are described earlier in the report, did not have sexually explicit images shared. What circulated were their words, their political identities, and their visible presence in public life, but the harm was no less severe.

Cultural context is threaded through all three sides of this triangle. What counts as harmful intent, what constitutes meaningful consent, and what registers as harm are all shaped by the social worlds in which images travel. A framework built only on Western legal definitions of intimate content will fail the women whose experiences are

documented in this report. The visibility that put Sana Yousaf at risk was not nudity but TikTok videos of traditional music and advocacy for girls' education. The images that put Nargis in danger were not intimate but political. Understanding how intent, consent, and harm interact, and how culture shapes all three, is foundational to fully understanding image-based abuse and achieving justice for survivors.

Recommendations

Across all the interviews, one tension surfaced repeatedly in connection with the types of images that are considered to be private or harmful. Women in Pakistan understand very clearly which types of photos, videos, voice notes, or screenshots can put them at risk, but many also expressed anger, exhaustion, or frustration that these boundaries exist in the first place. There was a sense that the rules themselves were unjust.

Several women described feeling angry that simple acts could be interpreted as immoral. Others spoke openly about the frustration of having to manage different “personas” depending on context, hiding parts of themselves depending on who might see the image. Some women reflected on the broader system that makes such precautions necessary. A few women made explicit that they dislike these norms, even as they must navigate them. Others, after describing all the images they avoided posting, reflected that it was the moral judgement imposed by others driving her behaviour, not her own discomfort.

This contradiction sits at the heart of women’s experiences with intimacy and visual privacy in Pakistan. They do not necessarily believe that a fully clothed photo in a bedroom is shameful, or that dancing with friends is inappropriate, or that being seen at night makes them suspicious. Yet they know how these images will be interpreted by families, communities, employers, strangers, and most of all, by men who use those interpretations as leverage. They know how quickly an ordinary moment can be sexualised, politicised, or used as evidence against them. And they know that once an image circulates, they have little control over who sees it or what it becomes.

The result is a life of constant calculation. Women described managing their digital footprints in ways their male peers rarely have to consider: curating their social media feeds, scanning the background of photos, declining to post images with loved ones, asking friends for permission before sharing group photos, blocking relatives en masse, or staying off social media entirely. Not because they believe their ordinary lives should be hidden, but because they live in a system where the safest option is to not be seen.

Across the interviews, alongside the exhaustion and the anger, surfaced an account of what survivors wanted to see changed.

Hopes, Demands and Imagined Futures: What Survivors Want to Change

Across interviews, survivors described not only the harm they endured, but also the futures they wanted to see. They talked about systems that respond quickly, laws that reflect their lived realities, institutions that treat them with dignity, and social norms that shift the burden of shame away from women. These visions emerge directly from their experiences and from the systems that have failed them. Together, they form a blueprint for the reforms women want to see and, in many cases, urgently need.

A Cultural shift: belief, empathy and the right to speak without shame

For many survivors, their deepest wish is to be believed. Women repeatedly described the emotional exhaustion of trying to convince others that what had happened was real, serious and dangerous. “I just want them to believe me,” Warda, a survivor from Faisalabad explained. “I started questioning my own sanity.” The disbelief they encounter from families, institutions and even friends often forces them into defence mode at a point when they are most vulnerable.

This longing for belief is intertwined with a broader desire for cultural change. Several participants spoke of wanting a cultural and societal shift away from blaming women to holding men accountable. They were looking for a shift in collective values and a society where women can speak openly without fear of being shamed or silenced.

“When people go there [police] to report, they blame the girl – she might have done this and in return she has gotten this, so her character is not good...we have to change the culture. We have to change the opinions and perceptions of people.” – Shaista, Rahim Yar Khan, Survivor

“In Pakistani society, if a woman is just hanging out minding her own business with her male friends, even if that picture alone is to be shown around to anyone...the blame is always going to be on the woman...the male person, or the colleague...he's sharing an equal moment. He's not going to be blamed in Pakistan society. That's the harsh reality”. – Ghazala, Lahore, Survivor

At the same time, women expressed a desire for there to be a greater understanding of the cultural context in which they exist. An understanding of why certain images carry danger in Pakistan in ways that may be unthinkable elsewhere. They want platforms and decision-makers to stop demanding that they justify why they may be at risk of harm from an image that does not officially violate community guidelines. Survivors insist that the cultural system itself must be understood and acknowledged.

"If a picture of you is shared from any account that you do not consent to, there shouldn't be a debate on that...No one should have the right to post anything without accountability, and they must have to take it down. And policies should be trained in such a way that protect people who can be more vulnerable in digital spaces." – Afreen, Karachi, Survivor

"Do not downplay what we think is important...if it's a problem to me, it's a problem to me. I don't need to explain to you why it's a big deal. I don't need you to bring your reasoning into what I think is logical, because we're two different people, and we have two different cultures." Amna, UK (originally from Punjab), Survivor

Many women also described the need for safe physical and emotional spaces. Places where they can talk without judgement, even from other women. They imagine counselling departments in universities, women-friendly community spaces and environments where survivors can tell their stories and seek support without being policed. "We need spaces where we can talk," said Sana from Islamabad. "We need counselling." The desire for a society where honour is not weaponised against women in the first place was clear across multiple accounts.

Legal reform: closing loopholes, creating new offences, and prioritising safety

Survivors were clear that the law, as it stands, does not protect them. Several noted that Pakistan has no legal framework that reflects the realities of online gender-based violence, including no mechanisms for the non-consensual sharing of images that fall outside Western definitions of "intimate". Women emphasised that the current standards do not map onto Pakistan's cultural norms. Others noted that legal systems outside of Pakistan often fail those whose lives are shaped by specific cultural and social constraints.

Not all survivors agreed on how to fix this. Some argued for new laws that make *any* non-consensually shared image of a woman, sexual or otherwise, an actionable offence. Others worried that expanding the definition of "intimate" too broadly could lead to over-criminalisation, especially in contexts outside of Pakistan. Nisa in the UK warned that placing non-sexual images "on the same scale or level as intimate" could create unintended legal consequences, and instead recommended introducing a distinct offence that recognises the harm of non-consensual image sharing even when content does not include nudity, semi-nudity or sexually explicit material.

Survivors also stressed that legal reform without enforcement is meaningless. Several criticised a system in which platforms simply remove content while perpetrators remain anonymous and unaccountable. Rida, an independent legal expert, argued that technology companies should be required to work with local institutions so that there is a collaborative model to trace, investigate, and prosecute those who misuse digital platforms. For her, justice meant more than takedowns. It meant perpetrators being identified, arrested, and punished, so that women could trust that harm would be

followed by consequences rather than silence. Without this, she argued, offenders disappear, and the burden of harm continues to sit with women alone. For another woman in the public eye, legal reform also needed to centre on fabricated information about a person, regardless of the content or form of media:

"It is so damaging for women, it is so unsafe. Because, in our country, people even bring in the religious aspect. They start saying stuff which is just so untrue, and then there's a lot of anger and violence that they're inciting, and it's very, very dangerous. So I think really strict laws and regulations need to be put in place. Otherwise, I think that social media is going to become a really tough place to exist for humans. It's not normal human behaviour to be constantly wary of who's saying what and what's coming out. We need to be at peace, and we need to live life, just focusing on what we're doing without constantly worrying... 80% of our worry is about what's coming out on social media – who's saying what? We wake up and go to sleep with that worry, especially women in Pakistan." – Ayesha Omar, Pakistani actor

Participants further located these failures of the legal system within a broader structural critique. Pakistan's digital laws, they argued, are rooted in a "colonial perspective" designed to control citizens rather than protect them. Survivors called for a shift toward a rights-based legal environment – one that safeguards freedom of expression, privacy, and safety, and that prioritises accountability for harm over the policing of women's behaviour. The demand was for meaningful protection, and not greater surveillance.

Transforming public institutions: fast, serious, survivor-centered responses

Women spoke repeatedly about what they wish institutions such as the police, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), government bodies, and even spaces like universities would do differently. Many described wanting immediate action when they report harm, rather than protracted processes that require retelling trauma in exhaustive detail. "I want them to take action quickly," one said. Several compared image leaks to "digital sexual assault" and argued that survivors should be able to have content removed "not in days, but in hours", and that perpetrators should face serious penalties for distributing images without consent. Others emphasised the need to feel safe approaching police stations, to know they will be "taken seriously and not pushed aside".

When asked what advice she would give to governments or tech companies to make things better for women and girls, one survivor responded:

سب سے پہلے تو ان لوگوں کے لیے کچھ کریں جو اس واقعے سے متاثر ہوئے ہیں، ایسا دکھاوا نہ کریں جیسے کچھ ہوا ہی نہیں ہے۔ ہمیں یہ دیکھنے کی ضرورت ہے کہ ذمہ داروں کا احتساب کیا جائے گا۔ ہماری حفاظت کو یقینی بنانے کے لیے کچھ عملی قدم اٹھائیں، صرف باتیں نہ کریں۔ اگر کل کو ہمیں کچھ ہو جاتا ہے، تو میں یہ جاننا چاہتی ہوں کہ میری حکومت اور ادارے میرے حق میں آواز اٹھائیں گے۔ ہمارے کلچر میں ان مسائل پر بات کرنا یا آواز اٹھانا اچھا نہیں سمجھا جاتا، لیکن جو خواتین اور لڑکیاں آواز اٹھاتی ہیں، ان کی مدد ہونی چاہیے۔ میں یہ سب کچھ صرف باتوں میں نہیں بلکہ حقیقت میں ہونے ہوئے دیکھنا چاہتی ہوں، تب ہی مجھے یقین آئے گا۔

"First and foremost, take action for the people who were impacted in the incident, don't pretend nothing happened. We need to see that those responsible will be held accountable. Do something to ensure our safety, don't just talk. If anything happens to us tomorrow, I want to know that my government and institutions will speak up for me. In our culture it is not considered to raise or talk about these issues but there should be support for women and girls who do speak up. I want to see this in action only then I'll believe." – Shirin, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Survivor

Survivors imagined institutions where frontline officers are gender-sensitised and not dismissive, where female officers are present, respected, and empowered, where survivors are believed and not interrogated, where reporting systems are simple, predictable, and confidential, where investigations stop perpetrators from sharing images further and where cases do not take months or years to resolve.

Those who work closely with survivors were equally clear about what needs to change. Ayesha at the Digital Rights Foundation described law enforcement's online complaint management platform as "basically ineffective" – a system where survivors of online harassment and TFGBV file reports and simply are not assisted in the manner that they need to be. For women who cannot travel to their relevant cyber crime office, or their mobility depends on a male family member, and for whom involving a male family member carries severe consequences, that online portal represents one of the only potentially safer routes into the system. When it fails to respond, they are left without any effective state recourse at all. She was clear that the legal authorities must strengthen their online complaint system so that it registers complaints, processes them, and generates real follow-up rather than a dead end.

She also pointed to persistent problems with how officers respond when images are not explicitly sexual. In those cases, she said, officers tend to "brush off" complainants, telling them there is nothing to be done. "Intimate is not always sexual," she said, underscoring the need for state institutions to recognise the broader spectrum of online harm when assessing and responding to complaints. Alongside the systemic issue, she also noted the prevalence of victim blaming within law enforcement, which further deters survivors from seeking justice.

Reem, a trans woman activist with experience working both in policing and government, offered a detailed vision of what meaningful institutional reform would look like in response to these challenges. Training, she argued, is the central issue, but it must go far deeper than box-ticking. She called for mandatory gender-sensitisation workshops, with a clear rule that only officers who complete the training should be assigned to handle these cases. That training should be trauma-informed, teaching officers what trauma is, how it presents, and what its consequences can be. Critically, she argued that government officials alone should not design these modules – civil society experts must be involved, and the training should incorporate the lived experiences of women and transgender people, told in their own words.

She also identified a structural gap that cuts across institutions. For image- and video-based abuse cases, standard operating procedures (SOPs) simply do not exist.

She called urgently for SOPs to be developed, formally introduced and actively monitored for compliance. And she returned to a point she described as crucial – that transgender people and women must be actively recruited into cybercrime units:

“When a transgender woman comes seeking help for image- or video-based abuse from a government institution, having a transgender officer available to handle the case would make things much easier.” – Reem, Ministry of Human Rights, Survivor and Activist, Transgender Woman

Amna, a survivor living in the UK, emphasised that police should not just process complaints, they should actively act to stop ongoing harm. Others described wanting helplines or delegated units that are confidential, streamlined, and responsive, so that survivors feel heard rather than abandoned. The importance of being heard appeared repeatedly. Even when women understood that not every incident could be solved immediately, knowing that someone validated the harm mattered. “The scariest thing is when you’re not heard,” explained Ifrah, based in Canada. This desire for recognition reflects a broader truth: survivors want institutions that treat them with dignity and respect, as people in need of protection rather than moral transgressors or administrative burdens.

Reimagining technology’s role: accountability, speed, and cultural competence

Perhaps the most detailed and urgent demands were directed at tech platforms and companies. Where survivors want discreet and confidential support, they turn to platforms to receive it in a timely and empathetic manner, but many survivors are clear that platforms are currently failing them.

Women want more timely responses, stronger detection systems, and culturally aware moderation. They questioned why platforms can identify a user’s hair in a photo to change its colour, but cannot detect intimate exposure quickly enough to prevent viral spread. Their proposals were practical and detailed. Survivors described a future where platforms take responsibility for the harms that happen to them. Based on the proposals we heard from survivors and our ongoing policy engagement with stakeholders, both in government and the private sector, Chayn would like to propose the following recommendations for adoption by companies and governments.

Recommendations for tech companies

Helping prevent harm

1. When a user attempts to post a photo online, introduce a prompt asking them to confirm that they have obtained consent from all identifiable people in the image before sharing.

This recommendation would address harm caused unintentionally by users who post without seeking consent. Introducing a “think before you post” point of friction would promote a stronger culture of digital consent, reduce privacy violations and interpersonal conflict, and enhance user trust in the platform as a socially responsible and privacy-conscious service.

2. Offer an easily accessible face-blurring option and actively encourage users to use it before posting images.

This recommendation would facilitate blurring faces and democratise its use when consent has not been obtained, strengthening user privacy, reducing risks of harassment or misuse, and supporting safer image-sharing practices.

3. Suspend reported images while a decision is made about whether they should be removed.

Harmful images can continue to spread and cause distress during review processes. Temporary suspension limits further circulation while maintaining due process.

Building cultural context into moderation

1. Ensure moderation teams are culturally informed, with additional training on intersecting experiences such as sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, caste, and other factors affecting survivors’ risk levels.

Content moderation decisions can be undermined by limited cultural awareness or misunderstanding of how different communities use profiles and images. Training is therefore essential for content moderation teams. A percentage of companies' profits should be invested in local and regional trust and safety teams to support such efforts. This recommendation would lead to fairer moderation outcomes, greater protection for vulnerable groups, and increased trust in reporting systems.

2. Allow third-party reporting, including for WhatsApp and Instagram Stories to a Private List.

Our research suggests that survivors of abuse are often not the ones seeing or receiving the harmful content. Instead, it is flagged to them by friends and family members. Trusted third parties are often better placed to identify and report abuse quickly. This recommendation would widen access to safeguarding mechanisms, improve detection of harmful content, and better support survivors.

Develop consent-based reporting pathways

1. Shift from defining image-based abuse as only sexual or nude content to a consent-based framework where removal requests based on lack of consent are granted.

Non-consensual harm can occur through many kinds of images, not only explicit ones. Legislation in place in France and Denmark⁹⁹ shows that we can move away from an understanding of image-based abuse as sexual or nude to a consent-based framework where each individual has a right to their own image, and therefore no image can be shared without consent. A higher threshold should be in place for public figures to account for the right to information, freedom of expression, and artistic and cultural freedom. Even within those cases, the dignity of the photographed person must be respected. Our research has shown that even in a country like Pakistan, there can be as many different definitions and perceptions of intimacy as there are individuals. This change of approach would allow everyone to use the internet safely without fear of their image being used against them, regardless of their own personal definition and perception of what counts as intimate.

2. The shift to consent-based content takedown should also be reflected in transparency reports.

Transparency reports shape public understanding of platform enforcement priorities. Current categories fail to capture the scale of non-consensual image abuse if definitions are too narrow. This would improve accountability, provide clearer data on abuse trends, and demonstrate commitment to user safety.

3. Liaise with law enforcement agencies at the request of survivors, including preserving evidence that content existed even if later removed.

Law enforcement often refuses to investigate image-based abuse once the content has been deleted or taken down. Companies should therefore offer the option to provide law enforcement with certified reports that the content existed, even after it has been removed. This recommendation would allow survivors to no longer have to choose between getting abusive content taken down and going to the police, strengthening survivor access to justice while ensuring support is only provided where requested.

Design survivor-centred processes

1. Offer survivors an active role in reporting and feedback processes.

⁹⁹ See in France Article 226-1 of the criminal code: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000049312755 and the Act Amending the Copyrights Act in Denmark ([will take effect in July 2026](#))

Survivors often feel excluded from decisions about cases that directly affect them. Participatory reporting systems improve procedural fairness and user satisfaction. This would empower survivors, improve trust in moderation systems, and lead to more responsive outcomes.

2. Create flexible reporting mechanisms that allow people to describe their own experiences and requested remedies rather than forcing reports into rigid categories.

Standardised reporting forms may not capture the complexity of abuse experiences or the remedies users need. Open-ended reporting options provide richer contextual information. In particular, users should be able to report why a specific image is harmful to them. They should also be able to share their reporting journey with another trusted person so an additional person can keep a record and receive updates on the reporting journey. This would enable more accurate assessments, tailored remedies, and a more user-centred reporting experience.

3. Design reporting mechanisms to be accessible and suitable for different literacy levels.

Complex forms, technical language, and text-heavy systems can exclude users with lower literacy, disabilities, or limited digital confidence. Inclusive design improves accessibility and uptake. In particular, we recommend providing resources and information in multiple formats, such as captioned videos alongside written materials. We would also encourage providing a clear timeline for when users can expect content to be removed or receive a response. This would increase equitable access to support systems and ensure more users can report harm effectively.

4. Develop cross-platform collaboration systems to identify serial offenders who engage in repeated abuse across multiple services.

Harmful actors often move between platforms when enforcement action is taken, exploiting gaps between moderation systems. Without coordination, repeat offenders can continue abusive behaviour undetected. This would improve early identification of high-risk users, reduce repeat victimisation, and strengthen overall platform safety.

Report:

- ☐ spam
- ☐ nudity
- ☐ minor
- ☐ hate
- ☒ other

5. Provide adult users with trauma-informed user-empowerment toolkits that allow them to tailor preferences and reduce exposure to unwanted content.

[Research by Ofcom](#), the UK communications regulator, highlights that user empowerment and content-control tools can help individuals better manage online experiences when designed in accessible and effective ways. Trauma-informed controls such as content filters, muting tools, and custom exposure settings can reduce distress and increase user agency. This would give users greater control over their online environment, reduce harmful exposure, and promote safer and more personalised platform experiences.

Strengthen trusted partner channels

1. Invest in developing, maintaining, and promoting trusted partner channels with sufficient funding to provide additional survivor support such as therapy sessions.

Survivors often require specialist assistance beyond what platforms can directly provide. As [the partnership between Chayn and Bumble shows](#), trusted external organisations have the expertise to offer trauma-informed support, counselling, and advocacy, but require stable funding to do so effectively. This would create stronger support pathways for survivors, improve wellbeing outcomes, and demonstrate meaningful platform commitment to user safety.

2. Make trusted partner channels more transparent and clearly display the logos of participating organisations.

Users are more likely to engage with support systems when they recognise credible and trusted organisations. Clear branding and transparency about partnerships can increase confidence and legitimacy. This would improve awareness and uptake of support channels, strengthen trust, and make resources easier for users to identify.

3. Direct survivors to external resources that can provide additional support.

Survivors of online abuse may need legal advice, counselling, crisis support, or specialist advocacy beyond platform moderation processes. Signposting to appropriate services can address needs platforms alone cannot meet. This would provide more holistic survivor support, improve recovery outcomes, and ensure users receive help beyond content takedowns alone.

Recommendations for policy makers

Moving beyond sexual content: the right to one's own image

1. Introduce image rights and consent-based protections modelled on France and Denmark.

As we spoke to survivors, we observed that there can be as many different definitions and perceptions of intimacy as there are individuals. However, all survivors agreed that consent should be the necessary condition for sharing a picture, as any image can lead to image-based abuse when shared without consent. We therefore encourage governments to adopt a legal framework similar to France and Denmark¹⁰⁰ that centres the right to one's image. Such frameworks require explicit, informed, and written consent for the sharing or publication of a person's identifiable image. Limitations should be in place for the right to information, freedom of expression and artistic and cultural freedom, however even within those cases the dignity of the photographed person must be respected.

2. Criminalise threats to share images as a standalone form of image-based abuse.

Threats are frequently used as tools of coercive control, extortion, domestic abuse, and ongoing intimidation. Victims often experience severe fear, anxiety, behavioural restriction, and psychological harm from threats alone. We therefore encourage governments to recognise threats to distribute intimate or private images, even where no image is ultimately shared, as a standalone offence within image-based abuse legislation.

Improving reporting pathways for survivors

1. Strengthen specialist training for police, prosecutors, and judges.

Introduce mandatory and ongoing training for police, prosecutors, and judges on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), including digital evidence, coercive control, gender sensitivity, intersectional harms, and trauma-informed responses to survivors.

2. Create survivor-centred reporting pathways and fast-track mechanisms.

Establish accessible, survivor-centred reporting mechanisms and fast-track

¹⁰⁰ see in France Article 226-1 of the criminal code: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000049312755 and the Act Amending the Copyrights Act in Denmark ([will take effect in July 2026](#))

procedures for urgent tech abuse cases, including immediate safety risks, ongoing image-sharing, stalking, impersonation, or harassment. In particular, set up a single multi-disciplinary online hate task force to avoid survivors having to deal with multiple layers of reporting and law enforcement.

3. Ensure accessibility and clarity of policy language.

Review and revise policy frameworks, reporting systems, and public guidance to ensure language is clear, accessible, inclusive, and understandable to diverse users, including people with disabilities, migrants, young people, and those with limited legal literacy.

4. Enable free access to civil courts and civil remedies for tech abuse cases.

Develop policy frameworks that provide survivors with free or low-cost access to civil courts and civil processes for technology-facilitated abuse cases, including injunctions, takedown orders, damages, and anonymity protections.

5. Extend limitation periods for bringing cases.

Extend statutory time limits for criminal and civil claims relating to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, recognising that survivors may need substantial time before they are able or willing to report abuse.

6. Introduce penalties for companies that fail to remove unlawful content within statutory timeframes.

Introduce clear legal duties requiring online platforms, hosting services, and digital intermediaries to remove unlawful image-based abuse content within timelines established under national legislation. Where companies fail to comply, impose proportionate penalties, including fines, regulatory sanctions, and repeat-offender enforcement measures.

7. Encourage cross-platform enforcement and coordinated takedown mechanisms.

Develop legal and regulatory frameworks that encourage or require cross-platform enforcement, enabling confirmed abusive content removed from one platform to be rapidly identified and removed across other major services through trusted flagger systems, hash-matching tools, and coordinated reporting protocols.

Acknowledging the possibility of malicious reporting

When we presented our policy recommendations to relevant stakeholders, we were often met with a question: what about the false reports? It is a question we are familiar with in the gender-based violence sector, especially when we talk about trusting survivors. As such, it is an important one for us to respond to.

The first scenario we want to take a closer look at is one in which a woman who has been photographed reports a picture even though it is not causing her any harm. It could be that she is doing so simply because she does not like the picture or the way she looks in it. At Chayn, we would argue that this is a good enough reason to take down the picture. The argument behind supporting legislation framed around consent and the right to one's own picture is that women should not need to prove harm. In fact, it should not matter if there is any harm at all – if a woman wants her picture taken down, it is her right and that right should be respected.

The second case is when a report is made by a third party. In this case, a possible way to avoid malicious reporting is to request that when a user reports on behalf of another person, they identify that person. If the person is a user of the platform on which the content is reported, the next step is to contact them to confirm whether they want the picture taken down.

We also believe that AI and pattern recognition can support the identification of malicious reports. When trolls engage in malicious reporting, they will most likely do this at a large scale, reporting many pictures from many unrelated individuals. It is therefore worth analysing the reporting history of an account. Are they making a report for the first time or have they only done it a few times? Or is the activity happening on a mass scale? Is there other suspicious activity coming from the account? We believe those data points can be used to weed out malicious reporting while still allowing women and their loved ones to report images they legitimately want taken down.

Awareness and education

Another strong theme was the desire for widespread education: not just general cyber-safety advice, but specific, real-life scenarios that reflect what actually happens and give women concrete examples they can relate to and learn from. Survivors wish organisations would use explicit language or terms such as “nudes leaked online” so that survivors searching online for support in panic can find accurate, relatable information. They suggested that when support pages use language that is not known to many women, such as “non-consensual sharing of intimate images”, those searching for support will not know what terms to search for and may miss vital information.

Generic phrasing does not help, participants explained. It hides the situations people need to see reflected. “Words hold a lot of shame” Nida, a survivor from Lahore, said, “but being explicit helps someone recognise... this is what happened to me.”

Women also want accessible workshops that reach girls in schools and colleges, especially because many first experienced image-based harm as teenagers without even knowing the term. Raising awareness, they argued, helps to normalise help-seeking and dismantle silence. Survivors also emphasised the importance of knowledge, including where to go, what to do, what rights they have, and how to act quickly. Lack of information, money, and access continue to prevent many from reporting at all. More knowledge, they argued, would reduce harm and empower girls, hopefully before crises occur.

Saida, a survivor from Karachi, broadened the conversation further. She argued that any meaningful prevention effort must name the wider social context in which image-based abuse occurs. Without acknowledging patriarchal norms and the community dynamics that shape women's lives and reputations, she suggested, education risks becoming superficial. Women are not navigating these harms in isolation; they are doing so within families and neighbourhoods where honour, silence, and blame often determine what is possible.

She strongly advocated for greater public awareness of cybercrime laws and clear reporting mechanisms, alongside preventive education that genuinely empowers women online. But she was equally clear that knowledge for survivors alone is not enough. Support systems, particularly support from mothers and trusted peer networks, were described as central to resilience and also sites for education and awareness-raising. Without that backing, she reflected, many women "cannot even begin" to confront what has happened to them, let alone seek justice or redress.

In this framing, education is also about shifting the social conditions that make image-based abuse so powerful, and so silencing, in the first place. That shift, participants argued, cannot rest on women and girls alone. Several women were clear that prevention requires engaging boys directly. If patriarchal norms, entitlement, and peer dynamics underpin much of the harm, then those who circulate, trade, or threaten to leak images must also be part of the conversation.

As One high-profile British Pakistani actor, explained:

"Boys – they're going to be the ones handling and making the deals. And when they see that this is not right – you don't sell your mother, you don't sell your sister, you don't sell your daughter. When they see that, and they see the right and wrong... they won't make the wrong decisions... So I feel like education is just so important. And when I say education, I'm not talking about Pythagoras theory or mathematics or science. I'm talking about general knowledge... relationship education. Knowledge comes in many forms... The one thing that I really hope to see more in the world is empathy. And when people start to empathise with everybody around... when you have that filter, or when you have that mechanism that keeps yourself in check and that self-reflection... because people have lost track of what's good and what's not right. Once you have that, I feel like generally, things can change so much."

A future where women have someone to turn to

Across all stories, one simple recurring wish stands out: women want someone they can turn to without fear. They want a person who listens, an institution that protects, a platform that responds, and a society that understands.

In many ways, the demands are modest. Survivors are asking to be heard, respected, and taken seriously. They want systems that respond quickly rather than doubting them, laws that protect rather than criminalise or dismiss, and technologies that mitigate harm rather than amplify it. They want the ability to report without endangering themselves, to remove harmful images without needing to spell out their trauma in long and repeated descriptions, and to live without fear that a single photo could destroy their lives.

These hopes reveal that women are not passive victims waiting for protection. They know exactly what needs to change. They have already mapped the failures and they have articulated the path forward.

How This Research Can Be Used By...

Tech Platforms

As Chayn has engaged with tech actors over the past decade, we have often highlighted that image-based abuse is not limited to Western definitions of what is intimate, and that other types of pictures need to be taken into account for content moderation. Tech companies have encouraged us to conduct this research and pushed us to go beyond anecdotal evidence and document how this issue manifests itself at a large scale in a country like Pakistan.

We therefore hope that decision-makers within tech companies will take the time to read this report and consider how their company policy can be changed to better support survivors of image-based abuse wherever they are in the world and regardless

of what one sees in the picture. We have made a list of recommendations for tech companies. Some of those recommendations are ambitious and require a real mindset change when it comes to content moderation; others (like offering an easily accessible face-blurring option and other recommendations in the “Helping prevent harm” subsection of the recommendations for tech companies) can be easily and quickly implemented. Chayn has engaged with many tech companies as part of writing this report. We hope those conversations will carry on as we support you in implementing these recommendations.

Legal and Policy Actors

Meaningful change cannot happen for survivors of image-based abuse without changes in the law. While this report focuses on Pakistan, we are clear that it is not just Pakistan that needs a change in its legal framework. Online harm is cross-jurisdictional. Perpetrators and survivors can be spread across borders. The reality of migration and diaspora means that the harm we document in this report does not just happen in Pakistan but across the world, as the stories of women in Canada, the UK and the US who were interviewed in this report demonstrate. It is also important to note that good legislation sets an example for the rest of the world. As such, we encourage policymakers, wherever they are in the world, to look into our policy recommendations for governments and consider how those could be adopted in their country. In particular, at Chayn, we would like to see a global shift away from definitions of image-based abuse as sexual or nude content towards legislation that promotes the right to one's own image and allows all users to be protected when an image is shared without their consent.

Civil Society and Support Services

Other civil society organisations have been researching and recording the very issues that we document in this report. Some focus on Pakistan; others are working in different parts of the world. We hope that this research can become an asset for them in their advocacy and campaigning work as they demand the changes they want to see. We also hope that it will help those supporting survivors of image-based abuse in Western contexts better understand the needs, challenges and realities of survivors from the Pakistani diaspora. Chayn is a small non-profit organisation and we know changes do not happen when organisations work in silos. If you are working and campaigning on similar issues in your country, please reach out to us. We would love to hear from you and explore how we can support you.

Narrative and Media Change

As the stories in this report show, survivors of image-based abuse often understand the harm that has happened to them through the lens of media, social media and culture, as similar stories are told and shared, often when harms happen to celebrities. It is therefore essential to show and document the many forms that harm can take.

Image-based abuse is not always about sexualised or nude content, yet it is almost exclusively represented this way in media and cultural representations of image-based abuse (IBA). We hope this report will allow journalists and storytellers to see and understand a new side of IBA, one they will be able to report, document and represent in their own work. This way, survivors will have different narratives to relate to and see that when it happens to them, they are not alone.

Appendix

Methodology

Research methodologies

Overview

We used a qualitative research approach to understand how “intimacy” and “privacy” are understood in Pakistan and across the Pakistani diaspora, and what this means for image-based abuse (IBA). Our core data came from 64 individual online qualitative interviews, complemented with voice note conversations where relevant to keep the process participatory and accessible.

Insights were gathered between July 2025 and February 2026. Most data were collected online, and we held four in-person interviews in Lyari, Karachi (November 2025).

Recruitment and data collection

Who we spoke to

The study included 64 interviews in total conducted with women and gender minorities from Pakistan and the diaspora, alongside a smaller group of key informants with professional expertise relevant to image-based abuse, digital harm, and gender-based violence.

	Number	%
Survivors of image-based abuse	32	50%
Community participants	18	28%
Experts	14	22%
Total	64	100%

Survivors and community participants

The majority of participants were women with lived experience, including 32 survivors of image-based abuse. Survivors included women from a range of socio-economic, ethnic and geographic backgrounds as well as gender minorities including trans and queer women. Two participants were public figures, whose experiences of image-based abuse carried distinct risks and consequences due to visibility and public scrutiny.

Participants were based across multiple regions of Pakistan including Punjab (Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Rawalpindi), Sindh (Karachi – including the Lyari district – Badin and Thatta), Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, and Gilgit-Baltistan. Several participants were part of the Pakistani diaspora, living in countries including England, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Kuwait, the UAE and Scotland, while maintaining strong social, cultural or familial ties to Pakistan.

The sample included women from diverse social positions, including sex workers, women from conservative and rural contexts, women from higher social classes and urban locations, and participants from minority ethnic groups (including Pashtun and Baloch women).

We made active efforts throughout the research to reach participants from under represented groups and geographies. We approached women from Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, South and Central Punjab, and Sindh. Although we were ultimately able to speak to women from all provinces, including more conservative and tribal areas, we were not able to speak to many women based in rural areas. Some participants had grown up in rural settings but had since relocated to cities, and their perspectives were invaluable. The voices of women currently living in rural Pakistan remain nonetheless underrepresented in this research.

We also made deliberate outreach efforts to include religious minority women. Recognising a gap in our sample, we reached out specifically to minority communities and were able to speak to two Christian women. Despite repeated efforts, we were unable to speak to any Hindu women. We acknowledge this as a limitation of the study.

Expert participants

In addition to survivors and community participants, we interviewed 14 experts, including professionals working in: law and legal advocacy (including family law, digital rights, and domestic violence); gender-based violence services including NGO helplines and survivor support organisations; law enforcement and government including the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR); technology platforms including trust and safety and regional safety policy roles at major social media companies; and those working in community-based activism around gender, peace and social justice.

Expert participants included 11 cisgender women, 1 transgender woman, and 2 cis men, and were based predominantly in Pakistan, with some based internationally for their work.

How we conducted interviews

Approach and design

Interviews were semi-structured, meaning we followed a guide to ensure key topics were covered while keeping conversations open so participants could tell their stories in their own words. Most interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. We used a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling to reach people with relevant experiences and expertise, and to allow as wide a geographical and demographic reach as possible. Convenience sampling allowed us to connect with individuals already within our networks or those easily reachable. Purposive sampling helped us identify and approach specific people whose experiences or professional roles were central to our research, such as survivors, legal advocates, and platform representatives. Snowball sampling involved participants recommending others within their networks who might also wish to contribute.

We shared an open call for participants through our social media channels and through partner organisations, including Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) and several well-known activists and influencers. We also reached out directly to targeted individuals and organisations working on related issues.

Language and interview modalities

Interviews were conducted in English, Urdu, and Punjabi, depending on participant preference and comfort. Several interviews, particularly with high-profile participants, were conducted bilingually.

Interviews in English were conducted by our lead researcher, who has over a decade of experience in gender-based violence research and is skilled at conducting trauma-informed conversations on sensitive topics. When interviews were conducted in Urdu or Punjabi, discussions were led by an Urdu- and Punjabi-speaking member of the research team with extensive experience facilitating difficult conversations, including around gender-based violence. We intentionally chose this approach instead of using live translation, as it allowed for more natural communication and rapport-building during conversations that often touched on sensitive and emotional experiences.

Interviews took place predominantly over video conference. A small number were conducted in person in the Lyari district of Karachi, where participants were invited through a community organiser and their involvement was entirely voluntary. Conducting these interviews in a familiar, trusted environment was essential. At the outset, trust was built gradually – the research team shared Chayn's website and staff profiles to establish credibility and by the end of those sessions, participants were independently navigating resources on their own phones. Holding the discussions in a familiar setting helped ensure participants felt comfortable engaging on sensitive topics such as privacy, reputation, and online safety.

For a smaller number of participants, we used an asynchronous voice note format. We sent questions in advance and participants responded with voice notes in their own time, rather than committing to a scheduled interview. This approach proved particularly valuable for busy participants, including some experts and public figures, who were keen to contribute but unable to set aside a fixed block of time. It also gave participants more control over the pace and conditions of their participation, which mattered for a sensitive topic like this.

Interviews followed trauma-informed and participant-led approaches throughout.

What we discussed

The topics discussed varied depending on who we were speaking with. Survivors reflected on what kinds of images felt private or intimate to them, their experiences of image-based abuse (if they chose to share), how their families and communities responded, any experiences of help-seeking, and what would make it easier or safer to seek help. Community participants shared their views on privacy, shame, and harm; how image-based abuse is talked about; and what they believe platforms and governments should do to address it. Experts discussed patterns of harm, how cultural ideas of privacy and intimacy shape experiences of abuse, how current laws and platform definitions align (or don't) with local realities, how moderation and reporting processes work for Pakistan, and what changes they believe are most needed.

In the in-person interviews in Lyari, participants also spoke about how their communities respond when women's images are circulated, what forms of help or support they feel are available, and what stands in the way of seeking that help.

Recording and transcription

With participants' consent, the majority of interviews were audio recorded. English interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and checked manually for accuracy. Urdu and Punjabi interviews were transcribed using Sonix, reviewed by a bilingual team member, and then translated into English. Voice note responses were transcribed and handled in the same way as recorded interviews.

The in-person interviews in Lyari were not audio recorded, to protect participants' comfort and confidentiality. Instead, the facilitator and research team took detailed handwritten notes, capturing the key stories, insights, and reflections shared.

Following the interviews, Chayn provided participants with practical tools and knowledge to stay safer online, showing a direct, positive outcome of their contribution to the research through resources of Digital Rights Foundation and Chayn.

Analysis

All qualitative material, including interview transcripts, voice notes, and notes from the in-person interviews, was analysed using thematic analysis – a structured approach for identifying and interpreting patterns in people's words and experiences. Thematic analysis allowed us to move from detailed notes and transcripts to clear, evidence-based themes that convey how participants collectively described, understood, and experienced image-based abuse.

The process involved several stages:

- **Familiarisation:** The research team began by reading and listening through all interviews and written material to gain an overall sense of the content and tone.
- **Open coding:** Each piece of text was manually reviewed line by line in [ATLAS.ti](#) (a qualitative coding software), and meaningful ideas or observations were tagged as individual "codes".
- **Theme building:** Related codes were then grouped together into broader themes that captured recurring patterns, tensions, and shared meanings across participants.
- **Refinement:** Themes were refined through an iterative process, returning to the data to check how well they fit, simplifying or renaming where needed, and selecting illustrative quotes that reflected participants' voices accurately and respectfully.
- **Team synthesis:** Although one researcher led the coding process, the team came together for a synthesis session to review emerging themes, challenge assumptions, and ensure the final framing reflected the full range of perspectives gathered.

Post-interview process and participatory analysis and dissemination

Throughout the research, we aimed to make the process as transparent, collaborative, and respectful as possible. Rather than treating participants as one-off contributors, we kept them informed and invited their input as the analysis developed.

As the research progressed, we checked in with participants to update them on progress and re-confirm their consent to use their contributions. Before including any quotes in the final report, we re-contacted participants to confirm their preferences. Those who were happy for their quotes to be included could choose between being identified by their real name, using a self-chosen pseudonym, or remaining fully anonymous. All participants were also offered the option of reviewing their quotes prior to publication. This process gave participants full agency over how their stories were shared and how closely they were connected to them publicly.

We also wanted to give participants an opportunity to reclaim the medium of photography – the very medium at the heart of this research. We invited them to share a photograph of something that brings them joy: not necessarily of themselves, but anything that holds meaning for them, whether a favourite cup, a plant, a pet. This was entirely voluntary, but it was important to us to open up that space. It was a small act of reclamation, and a way of holding onto the fact that images can be a source of connection and joy, not only harm.

Beyond participants, we involved the wider Chayn community in making sense of what we had found. Before finalising the report, we invited Chayn team members, volunteers, and the research team to read either the full draft or an executive summary and share their initial reactions. This fed into a three-hour online sense-making session with around 30 people – a community learning journey – in which we worked through the research together.

The session had several aims. We checked in on understanding: what were the main themes that had jumped out, what stayed with people, and what felt underexplained or needed more unpacking? We examined where the report might inadvertently stigmatise the people it was written to support, and discussed specific words and framings that warranted scrutiny. We also talked through what felt overemphasised and what had been underweighted. Finally, we opened up questions of dissemination: who are the right audiences for this research, what would an appropriate title look like, and how might the report be adapted or presented for different readers and contexts. The session was generative and grounding, and a reminder that research on harm, done carefully, can itself be a practice of solidarity.

In order to shape policy recommendations that would be relevant and applicable to those they are addressed to, we held a series of “co-learning sessions” to present our research findings and policy recommendations to tech companies, policymakers, and civil society organisations.

We held five closed-door sessions designed for specific tech companies during which we presented the research findings and sought feedback on the recommendations we had drafted for tech companies. There was an additional publicly advertised session

designed for trust and safety professionals. Only participants working on trust and safety in the tech sector were selected to participate to present them with the research findings and seek feedback on the recommendations for tech companies.

In addition to the sessions designed for the tech sector, we held a session for policy professionals and civil society organisations to share both the recommendations we made to the tech sector and those addressed to governments and policymakers.

Policy recommendations were edited based on the inputs provided during those sessions.

Ethics and safeguarding

The project was conducted in line with strong ethical and safeguarding standards suitable for sensitive research involving survivors and marginalised communities.

Informed consent and participant choice

Before taking part, all participants received a clear information document outlining what participation would involve, how their data would be used, and how confidentiality would be protected. They were encouraged to ask questions or request clarification before agreeing to take part. Written consent was collected online prior to each interview, and verbal consent was reconfirmed at the start of every recorded session.

Participants were reminded throughout that they could skip any questions, pause, or stop the interview at any time. Survivors, in particular, were reassured that there was no expectation to share distressing or detailed personal experiences if they did not wish to.

Participant comfort and safety

All conversations were designed to take place in a safe and supportive environment. The research team included individuals with many years of experience conducting gender-based violence research, familiar with trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches. Interviews were conducted with care, sensitivity, and awareness of potential emotional triggers, and participants' wellbeing was prioritised at all times.

The Urdu-language facilitator was trained in research interviewing and supported by the lead researcher during each session. Together, they ensured that participants felt comfortable, respected, and in control of their participation. This collaborative approach helped create a space where people could share their experiences and perspectives safely, without pressure or judgement.

Anonymity and data protection

All interviews were conducted pseudonymously. Audio recordings and transcripts were anonymised and assigned a participant ID number, with names and contact details stored separately in a restricted-access file. Survey responses were fully anonymous. For respondents who provided an email address to express interest in an interview, this

information was stored securely against an ID number, separate from their survey responses.

Support and compensation

Participants were compensated £50 for their time. In recognition of the sensitive nature of the topic, survivors were additionally offered £30 to put towards a therapy or wellbeing session of their choice.

After each interview, participants received a list of support resources, including contact details for counselling and wellbeing services, information on how to report harmful content to social media platforms, and links to Chayn's Bloom courses, including those specifically focused on image-based abuse. Together, these measures aimed to prioritise participants' comfort, autonomy, and safety at every stage of the research process.

Data management and security (GDPR)

All data collected for this project were handled and stored in line with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and best practices for data security, confidentiality, and ethical research involving sensitive topics.

Data storage and access

Audio recordings and interview transcripts are stored within a restricted team workspace on [Otter.ai](#) and in a private Google Drive folder accessible only to the core research team. Access follows a least-privilege principle, meaning that only team members directly involved in the project can view or handle the data. All accounts are protected with strong passwords and two-factor authentication to prevent unauthorised access.

Encryption and backup

Raw audio files remain in the restricted Otter workspace, while some audio and de-identified transcript files are stored in Google Drive. Google Drive encrypts all data at rest and in transit, providing an additional layer of security. Access is limited to named team members within a private shared drive, and backups are managed automatically by the platform. The linkage file connecting participant ID numbers to contact details is stored separately in a secure, access-restricted location, ensuring that identifying information cannot be linked to the research data without authorisation.

Retention and deletion

We will retain de-identified transcripts and analysis files for one year to allow for potential audit, synthesis, or future analysis related to this research. Raw audio files and the ID-contact linkage file will be permanently deleted within six months of publication to minimise any risk of re-identification. Once the retention period has elapsed, all

remaining files will be securely deleted from cloud storage and local devices, in line with GDPR requirements and data minimisation principles.

Design principles

At Chayn, every aspect of our work is anchored in our eight [trauma-informed design principles](#): accountability, agency, equity, hope, plurality, power sharing, privacy, and safety. Based on a decade of work, they are foundational to everything we do. From our HR processes to content writing to user research to product and service design, these principles ensure our practices are centred around the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence around the world. This research was no exception and at every step of the design of this project, our trauma-informed design principles helped us make decisions about the way we conducted this work. Here are some examples of the ways each principle helped guide the process behind this research, and what we learned.

Accountability

The principle of accountability first of all led us to acknowledge our biases on who we were reaching and whom we might be struggling to reach. As the research unfolded we constantly asked ourselves how to ensure we would be able to hear the voice of non-English speaking survivors, survivors from working-class backgrounds, survivors from rural settings, and survivors who were also sex workers. While we recognise that our research could never cover the full spectrum of Pakistani society and we acknowledge our limitations and detail whom we interviewed in the methodology, the principle of accountability prompted us both to acknowledge this reality and to find creative ways to reach out to an ever-growing number of survivors from different backgrounds.

Accountability also shaped how we introduced ourselves to research participants. We introduced them to all the team members they would meet, and clarified the role each would play. They also received communications which outlined exactly what we wanted to do, why, and what they could expect, as well as how much compensation they would be offered, how long it would take to arrive, and the support we could offer.

Agency

The principle of agency shaped how we communicated with survivors. First of all, we remained open to interviewing through different formats. We acknowledged that not everyone would be comfortable or able to join a Zoom call. This is why we offered many different interviewing options: via WhatsApp messages, in-person interviews with local representatives, or simply collecting testimonies using an online form.

Even with participants who joined us on Zoom calls, we ensured they could choose whether to have the camera on or off, whether they were comfortable with the

presence of an AI notetaker, and whether they consented to the session being recorded.

They were invited throughout the call to push back, change topics, or choose to refrain from answering questions they were uncomfortable with.

We offered survivors total flexibility to choose the interview date and time, so they could take part whenever was most convenient and accommodate personal schedules and mental/emotional wellbeing.

Equity

The principle of equity guided us in how we decided to compensate participants. We had to balance our ambition to conduct as many interviews as we could with our firm belief – grounded in the principle of equity – that participants needed to be compensated meaningfully, and equally, wherever they were based. This is why all participants received £50 for their participation.

One of the tensions we had to navigate in this project was about how to maintain a framing that honoured both the “inside” and the “outside” gaze. Our report had to be illustrative enough for a Western audience to develop a better understanding of the experience of harm, without that being the only message they walked away with. It also had to be grounded in reality, so Pakistani and South Asian women could feel seen and heard. We have not shied away from representing what we heard, but we have provided more cultural context so that people can appreciate how a culture is expansive and rich enough to hold contradictions.

Hope

The principle of hope guided the questions we asked and the campaign around the launch of this report. We have asked survivors not just about the trauma-inducing reality of image-based abuse, but also about what helped them throughout and brought them hope during their experience. It has been essential for us to hear about this aspect of their stories, as we want to tell survivors – but more importantly their friends, family, tech companies, and policymakers – that there are actions that can be taken to help and alleviate the harm they experience.

We also wish for this research to be a beacon of hope for survivors, giving them the assurance that their voices and stories can reach policymakers and decision-makers within tech companies, and thus potentially help future survivors.

Plurality

This principle was at the very root of this project, as we realised Western perceptions of what “intimate” and image-based abuse meant were preventing some women – including in Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora – from having their own experience properly acknowledged and addressed by tech companies and policymakers. We also

made space to capture the different cultural nuances and attitudes to modesty within Pakistan as well, from women who wanted to cover more of their body than others. We intentionally included Pakistani and South Asian diaspora members of our team and community throughout the project so we could do justice to their experiences.

Power sharing

Power sharing is one of Chayn's core trauma-informed design principles. In the context of research, part of what it means is acknowledging the fundamental power imbalance between the researchers and the research participants. We addressed this imbalance by using language that is meaningful for participants, encouraging them to do the interviews on their own terms (take breaks, skip questions, decide the format and time of the interviews). We had initially planned for a collective exchange among research participants to be held in Pakistan, but as participants did not want to engage in group discussions, we reverted to traditional one-to-one interviews. As one of the main intended audience for this is people who are not familiar with Pakistani culture, we involved our volunteers from across the world in helping synthesise and sense-check our findings, as well as the way we represented them.

Privacy

Privacy is the principle that guided how we handled participants' data and the question of anonymity. All the steps taken for this research are described in the previous section of this report.

Safety

Safety was a central principle in how we handled our interactions with survivors, researchers, and intermediaries who worked on this project. Many of the adjustments we allowed interviewees to make (e.g., choosing WhatsApp exchanges instead of Zoom call) were made for safety reasons. We also had discussions with researchers and intermediaries on the ground to ensure their safety and to identify steps we could take – such as buying SIM cards so they would not have to use their personal numbers – to help protect them.

This work wouldn't have been possible without our partner organisations in Pakistan, who work tirelessly to support survivors of tech-facilitated gender-based violence in Pakistan, the Digital Rights Foundation and Jugnu Project. Their expertise and knowledge have been our compass, as we conducted the research and working with them and benefitting from their understanding and support has been a privilege.

