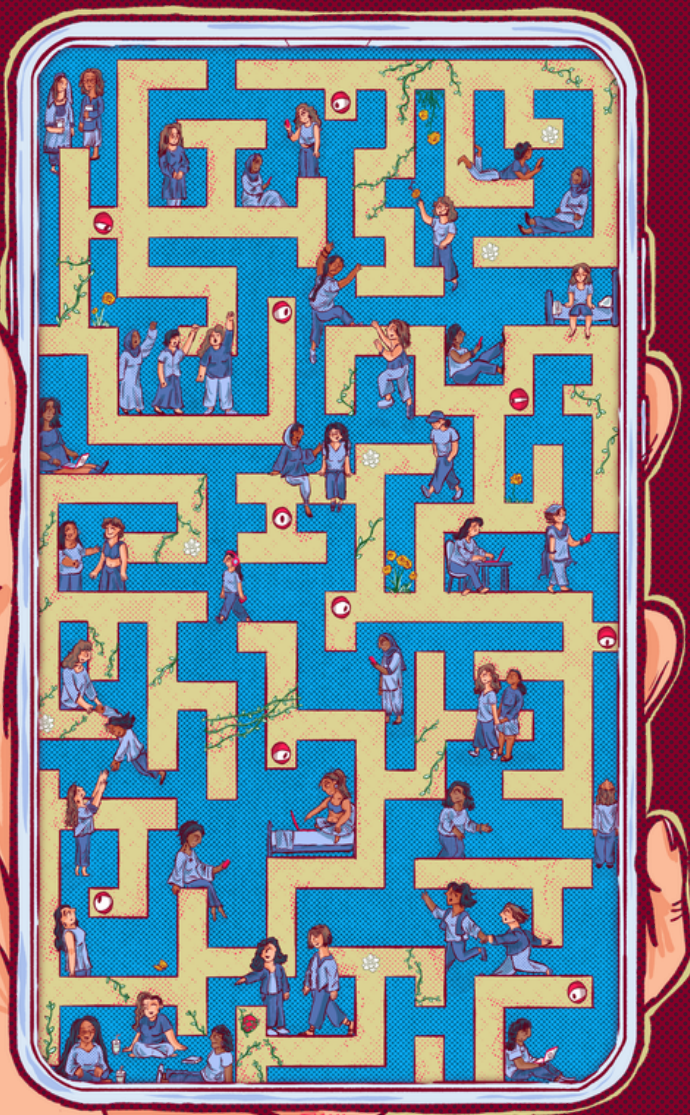




CHAYN RESEARCH — IMAGE-BASED ABUSE IN PAKISTAN · MARCH 2026

Taxonomy of images and content women consider private, intimate, or harmful if shared without consent



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How to read this taxonomy

Developed from qualitative interviews with 60+ women, gender minorities, survivors, legal experts, law enforcement officers, civil society organisations, and platform representatives in Pakistan and the diaspora. What constitutes a “private” or “harmful” image cannot be understood through Western or standard legal definitions of intimate content. The harm is determined not only by what an image shows, but by what it can be made to mean, and what consequences follow.

1 — Appearance and the body

How clothing, body, and physical presentation can be read as intimate

3 — Who appears in the image

How who appears in a photo can transform its meaning

5 — Digital traces and non-visual content

Non-visual content and AI-generated material that causes harm

2 — Behaviour and self-expression

Activities and self-expression subject to surveillance when documented

4 — Setting and location

How location, time, and digital context shapes risk

6 — Audience and context of sharing

How who sees an image and whether consent was given shapes harm

Note like this = evidence from interviews explaining why this is harmful

* **Purdah** *Purdah is a religious and cultural practice of gender segregation and seclusion observed across parts of South Asia. In its strictest forms it involves full veiling in public and strict separation of men and women in social life. More broadly, purdah shapes norms around female visibility, modesty, and who may see a woman and under what conditions — including in domestic spaces where women relax dress codes only around close family members. Its interpretation varies significantly by region, class, and family.*

This taxonomy is grounded entirely in qualitative evidence collected during a year-long research project. All entries reflect documented experiences and perceptions reported by participants. The taxonomy does not reflect the views of the researchers on what should or should not be considered intimate — it documents the social reality that women in Pakistan must navigate. It does not treat Pakistan, Islam, or South Asian cultures as inherently violent or sexist. The harms described emerge from intersecting systems of patriarchy and power that exist globally but take different forms in different contexts. Where terms such as “honour,” “modesty,” or “indecent” appear, they reflect the language of laws, media, or perpetrators — not our endorsement of them.

Developed by Dr Abigail Bentley, Lead Researcher — March 2026

The categories

1 Appearance and the body

Strict modesty norms mean that images showing hair, skin, body contour, or ‘Western’ clothing, even when not sexually explicit, can be read as evidence of immodesty, disobedience, or sexual availability. Nudity is only the most extreme end of a much wider spectrum of harm.

HEAD AND FACE COVERINGS

- Without hijab, dupatta, or head covering — where hair is visible to unrelated men

Includes images where a woman who wears hijab is seen without it, even at home or with female friends

- Without face covering — in contexts where purdah* is strictly observed

In the most conservative settings, even a woman's face or hands visible to unrelated men is considered intimate

CLOTHING AND DRESS

- Revealing or informal clothing: tight, sleeveless, gym wear, pyjamas, swimwear, short or low-cut
- Western clothing: jeans, t-shirts, dresses

Read as aligning with Western values, which are often considered immoral or culturally threatening

- Clothing showing arms, legs, ankles, collarbone, or neck
- Clothing that reveals body contour or shape, even if traditionally styled
- Visible underwear or bra strap
- Dress or styling that signals queer or LGBTQ+ identity
- Dressed-up photos or selfies — a woman presenting herself confidently

Read as inviting male attention; even women who are otherwise comfortable sharing photos would edit or withhold these

BODY AND MOVEMENT

- Images of the body in motion — the way movement makes the body visible, expressive, or physically prominent, e.g. dancing, stretching, yoga

This entry concerns how bodily movement appears in an image. For the social transgression of women exercising in public, see Category 2

- Sleeping or resting

Women report being taught from childhood that photos of them sleeping should never be taken

- Images taken from angles that sexualise body parts — from behind, or emphasising physical features
- Nudity or sexually explicit images

2 Behaviour and self-expression

Certain activities, from dancing at a wedding to attending a feminist march, become grounds for punishment when documented, because they can be reframed as evidence of immorality, disobedience, or the rejection of gender norms.

SOCIAL AND EXPRESSIVE ACTIVITIES

- Singing, dancing, or performing — especially in public or mixed-gender settings

In some areas, singing alone can be grounds for violence in the name of honour

- Laughing, clapping, or visibly enjoying oneself

Women appearing carefree or uninhibited can be reframed as immodest once photographed

- Partying, attending raves, nightlife, or social events

Normal within some circles but almost never posted publicly — photographing these environments introduces serious risk

- Celebrating other religions or cultures, e.g. participating in Holi

Can trigger blasphemy accusations or community retaliation

RESTRICTED BEHAVIOURS

- Smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs

These may be common in certain social circles but are “hidden”. Being photographed is understood as dangerous

- Eating food associated with religious prohibition (e.g. pork)

- Exercising or being physically active in public or mixed-gender spaces — gym, outdoor exercise, yoga

Women doing yoga in a park were told by security they were being “vulgar.” This entry concerns the social transgression of women exercising in public; for how movement appears in images, see Category 1

- Travelling alone or without a male chaperone e.g. solo trips, road trips, travel abroad

POLITICAL AND CIVIC EXPRESSION

- Expressing political opinions or feminist views

May be labelled as anti-Pakistan or anti-Islam

- Being photographed at protests or demonstrations — including protests for human rights and feminist events

Women described carefully managing whether and how they were photographed; the label “feminist” is used “like a slur”

ONLINE VISIBILITY AND PRESENCE

- Having a public online profile — being a content creator, activist, or public figure

A woman's online visibility has been cited to justify violence against her

- Posting content that expresses personality, opinions, or private life

- Being “viral” or widely circulated — regardless of image content

Becoming a “trend” is itself considered reprehensible for a woman, even if as a result of having images shared non-consensually

3 Who appears in the image

The people visible in a photograph can be as consequential as what the image shows. Being seen alongside men, queer or trans people, or individuals from different social backgrounds can transform an innocent image into evidence of moral failing or sexual impropriety.

MEN AND PROXIMITY

- Any man who is not a husband or close family member — including colleagues, classmates, friends

Even appearing in the background of the same photo can invite assumptions of a romantic relationship

- Sitting close to, or in physical proximity with, a man — even slight contact or heads touching
- Being photographed alone with a man (one-on-one vs. group)

Eating together, being in a car alone, or any solo encounter heightens risk regardless of what is actually happening

- Any visible interaction with a man — eye contact, smiling, conversation

LGBTQ+ IDENTITY AND ASSOCIATION

- A woman who is queer or queer-presenting

Images can trigger homophobic assumptions and put both subject and those with her at risk

- Anyone who is transgender or gender non-conforming
- Being photographed alongside a queer or trans person

Friends and family sometimes refuse to be photographed with LGBTQ+ individuals fearing how the association will be interpreted

- Pre-transition images of a transgender person

For trans people, this is often one of the most harmful images that can be shared

SOCIAL DIFFERENCE AND STATUS

- Anyone from a different religion, caste, or ethnic group

For religious minorities, this risk is compounded — images can be fed into blasphemy narratives

- Anyone from a different class, education level, or social background
- Anyone perceived as having “socially unacceptable” characteristics such as substance use, political reputation, or associations considered to demonstrate “loose character”

LOVED ONES

- Children — even “beautiful” images are withheld to protect them from unknown online harm
- Friends, especially in settings where their presence could expose them

For example, “someone might not want their parents to know they were there” or a friend said “I was not supposed to be wearing this”

4 Setting and location

Where an image is taken shapes what it can be made to mean. Locations carry social codes and being photographed in the wrong place can function as evidence of moral failing, even when the image itself is entirely innocent.

PRIVATE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENTS

- Inside the home — especially bedrooms or bathrooms

A bedroom image is considered intimate regardless of clothing; the identical photo taken in a restaurant would be acceptable

- Any setting where purdah* is observed — where a woman would relax dress codes around trusted family only

SOCIALLY CODED VENUES

- Bars, nightclubs, and party venues

The location itself becomes evidence — it doesn't matter what was actually happening

- Cafes, restaurants, or venues known as “date spots” — especially if with a man

Specific bowling alleys and coffee shops in Lahore are understood as meeting spots; being photographed there carries assumptions

- Music festivals or events associated with Western or liberal culture
- Locations associated with drugs, sex work, or immorality — certain areas of a city carry these associations

PUBLIC AND MIXED-GENDER SPACES

- Mixed-gender environments: gyms, co-educational classrooms, workplaces (in social settings), public parks
- Being in public spaces alone, particularly in sparsely populated areas

“Why were you there? What were you doing?”

- Protests and political demonstrations — particularly feminist marches

TIME OF DAY

- Any image taken at night — including outdoors, in public, or with others

The same image carries significantly more scrutiny after dark. “If the same picture, same person, same background is at night — it would have thousands of questions”

5 Digital traces and non-visual content

Harm extends well beyond photographs. Voice recordings, text conversations, personal details, and AI-generated content can all become tools of abuse. Any digital trace that documents a woman's words, movements, identity, or communication can be used as evidence or leverage.

VOICE AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

- Voice recordings and voice notes

In some areas, a woman's voice heard by men outside of the immediate family is itself considered intimate; a WhatsApp voice note found by a father or brother is treated as a serious violation

- Screenshots of conversations — real or fabricated

Fake screenshots are easily produced by changing contact names and rewriting messages. "It doesn't even need to be you or your body or your face"

- Any recorded expression of opinion — particularly on religion or politics

IDENTIFYING AND PERSONAL DETAILS

- Personal details in an image: full name alongside address, postcode, phone number, or location
- Images identifying a woman from objects, room interiors, or clothing — even without her face

Family members can recognise a woman from her dress or the interior of her bedroom

AI-GENERATED AND MANIPULATED CONTENT

- Deepfake or AI-generated images: nudified, sexualised, or falsified images created from any source photo
- A normal image paired with a sexually explicit song, audio, or caption

The image need not be intimate at all — the added context creates the harm and the threat

IDENTITY-BASED TARGETING

- Confession pages and identifying descriptions: anonymous posts using appearance or possessions alongside explicit or violent language — without a name or photo

Designed to be recognisable to those who know the victim, while evading formal complaint or platform action

- Content that outs or reveals someone's queer or trans identity

For LGBTQ+ people, images that expose gender identity or sexual orientation carry the same or greater risk than sexually explicit images

6 Audience and context of sharing

Who sees an image, and whether it was shared with consent, can matter as much as what the image shows. The same photograph can be harmless in one context and life-altering in another — depending on who holds it, how many people receive it, and how it is framed.

WHO HOLDS THE IMAGE

- Any image in the possession of a man who is not a husband or close family member

"These are normal images — but the problem is that some man who is not her husband or family member has those images. That's where the problem comes from."

- Any image seen by strangers or untrusted people — regardless of content

For some women, any photo of them seen by those outside the family circle carries risk

SCALE AND METHOD OF DISTRIBUTION

- Images shared in WhatsApp groups including family groups, alumni groups, friendship circles

Women often hear their image is circulating on WhatsApp without ever seeing it themselves

- Images posted publicly on social media without consent
- Images printed and delivered physically e.g. to parents, universities, or police stations as "evidence of immorality"

CONSENT AND RECONTEXTUALISATION

- Any image captured or shared without consent — including being caught in the background of someone else's post

In urban leisure spaces, women describe being routinely captured as background content in TikTokers' videos without awareness

- An image recontextualised by a new caption, edited framing, or different audience — changing meaning without changing the image
- An image taken in a trusted context (private account, close friends) and moved to another without consent
- An ordinary image sexualised by the receiver — the subject loses control of what the image means

"It's not even up to me to decide what is private — someone took that choice and autonomy from me"

ABSENCE OF CONSENT AS THE HARM

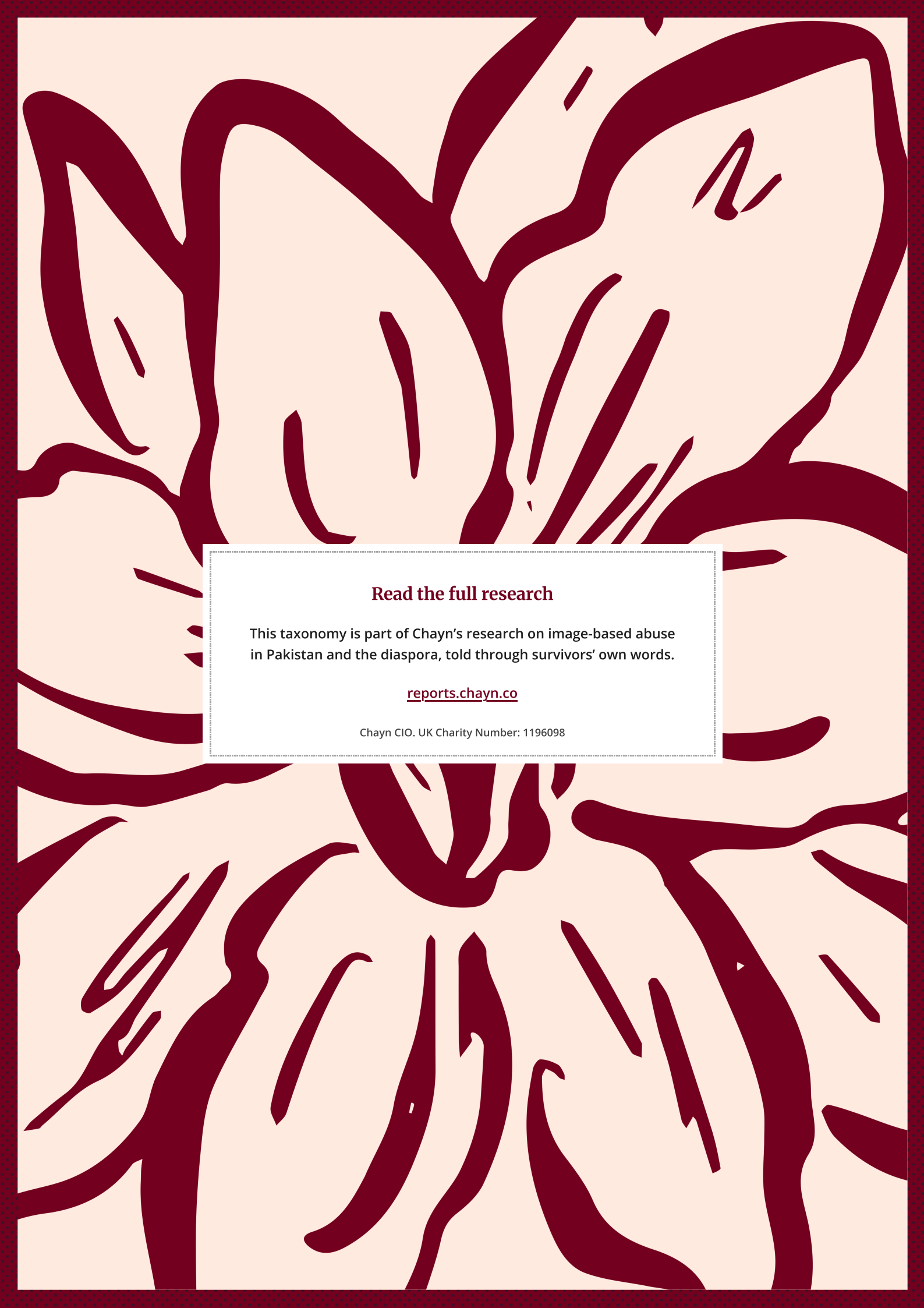
- Private Instagram stories, close-friends lists, or direct messages — content shared privately that is screenshotted and redistributed
- Hacked cloud storage, email accounts, or device access used to obtain images
- Images captured covertly — during arguments, through hidden cameras, or by recording an intimate partner

"All my life, the camera might be there recording it. Now I'm divorced — what is he doing with those videos?"

Context modifiers

Definitions of what counts as “private,” “intimate,” or “harmful” are not fixed. They shift substantially depending on who is making the judgment. The categories above document what can be harmful — the spectrums below show why the same image can be treated very differently depending on context. Platforms and policymakers need to account for both.

Conservative — liberal <i>Mindset and value system</i>	 More types of images seen as shameful or risky Fewer types of images seen as shameful or risky <i>Stricter or more traditional mindsets interpret a wider range of images as harmful — a photo that causes no concern in a progressive household can trigger severe consequences in a conservative one</i>
Urban — rural <i>Geography and environment</i>	 Rural: stricter norms, more severe consequences Urban: more permissive views, greater ambiguity <i>Cities (Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad) described as more diverse and faster-moving. Rural areas and conservative provinces (Balochistan, KPK, Gilgit-Baltistan) carry higher stakes — “it could be life or death”</i>
Age and generation <i>Who is making the judgment</i>	 Older generations: stricter, traditional expectations enforced Younger people: questioning norms, more open <i>In joint family settings, older relatives hold significant power to define what counts as appropriate. Younger women described “a constant divide” — and expanding their own definitions over time through education and exposure</i>
Gender <i>Whose image is being judged</i>	 Women: harshly judged, wide range of “intimate” Men: same actions carry little or no stigma <i>The double standard is explicit and pervasive. “The word intimate is always associated with women. Hardly ever with men.” Men can post gym photos, travel at night, be photographed with women — without comparable scrutiny</i>
Country of residence <i>Pakistan vs. diaspora</i>	 ‘Normal’ images in the West can be harmful in Pakistan Western context: narrower definition of intimate <i>Women in the diaspora described feeling liberated enough to wear what they want — yet still shrinking “when I see an auntie who looks like home.” Even thousands of miles away, a single image sent back can carry life-changing consequences</i>
Socioeconomic status <i>Class and income</i>	 Higher income Lower income <i>Unlike other dimensions, class does not follow a simple spectrum. Conservatism and openness vary unpredictably across income levels — elite circles may absorb scandal that would destroy someone with less social power. The consequences of the same image are not evenly distributed</i>
Online — offline <i>Medium of the image</i>	 Online: more heavily policed, harder to contain Offline: greater ability to manage visibility <i>Behaviours or clothing acceptable in offline settings often become unacceptable once posted online — where images are scrutinised by family, community, and strangers. Once online, a woman loses control of who sees what, and when</i>
Life stage <i>Roles and social expectations</i>	 Younger / single: relatively more flexibility Marriage, parenthood, in-laws: new constraints <i>What once felt harmless becomes risky as professional reputations, marriage, and new family expectations expand the imagined audience. Having in-laws on social media, for example, described as a significant inflection point</i>



Read the full research

This taxonomy is part of Chayn's research on image-based abuse in Pakistan and the diaspora, told through survivors' own words.

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