



Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

## **Gendered Violence against Women and Girls on Social Media: A Critical Examination of Online Harassment and Abuse**

Awais Ur Rahman (Corresponding Author)  
Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.  
Email: [sultanawais4344@gmail.com](mailto:sultanawais4344@gmail.com)

Aneela Hakeem Rajpar  
University of Karachi, Pakistan. Email: [aneelahakeem@gmail.com](mailto:aneelahakeem@gmail.com)

Nimra Abbas  
National Univeristy of Medical Science, Pakistan.  
Email: [Nimraabbas64@gmail.com](mailto:Nimraabbas64@gmail.com)

Komal Saleem  
Bahria University Karachi Campus, Pakistan.  
Email: [Komalsaleemawan21@gmail.com](mailto:Komalsaleemawan21@gmail.com)

Rida Qureshi  
Jinnah University for Women, Pakistan. Email: [ridaq0270@gmail.com](mailto:ridaq0270@gmail.com)

Rubia Batool  
Psychology Lecturer at Capital University of Science and Technology, Pakistan.  
Email: [rubiabatoolrubia@gmail.com](mailto:rubiabatoolrubia@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

In this study, we examined gendered violence against women and girls on social media – the types of violence, the consequences of such violence, and the response approach taken by the platforms. The objective of our research was twofold: first, to understand the different forms of aggressions on the net, like cyber stalking, sexually harassing, or using hate speech; second, to discuss the impact of those behaviors on the psychological, emotional and the social aspects of the victim. The data for this paper was gathered through two-focus group discussions and one- hundred respondents were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. research revealed that 72% of respondents reported that they had faced sexual harassment; of them 40% expressed a direct impact of this abuse with upshot among which were anxiety and depression. Additionally, 65% of participants expressed their discontent with specific actions taken by social platform confessing that they did not respond properly to abuse. It is for this reason that this research calls for the need to enhance the observation and execution of the platform polices and intercedings against gendered violence online and related social consequences, including perpetuating gender inequalities and suppressing women’s voices online.

Keywords: Gendered Violence, Social Media, Harassment, Abuse



Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

## **Introduction**

Hate speech with especial regards to gendered violence against women and girls is on the rise with increased use of social media where women and girls are harassed, abused and expressed in misogynist ways (Jane, 2017). Violence directed on women encompasses threats, stalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate pictures and women remain high risk users online. Cyberviolence is aggravating gender-inequitable norms and affects the psychological wellbeing of those experiencing it (Lewis, Rowe & Wiper 2017). While 73% of women reported experience of increased risk of online violence it remains a poorly coordinated, addressed problem, with platforms not adequately shielding users (UN, 2015; Henry & Powell, 2018). Converting the present research focus, it explores the variety of violence that women and girls experience on social media and how the services facilitate such maltreatment.

## **Research Problem**

Nonetheless, social media that should facilitate communication and people's self-identification is a primary platform for the manifestation of gendered violence. Female and girl users receive more harassment, hate speech, and abuse on social media than male users. According to Plan International, they conducted a survey and saw that 58% of young women have been harassed online or threatened sexually (Plan International, 2020). This abuse not only results to emotional effect but also leads to exclusion of women on the internet (Citron, 2014). However, since human identity is usually concealed in social media platforms, the abusers are equally not easily apprehended (Powell & Henry, 2017). It still seems that regulatory efforts and platform policies are insufficient in effectively preserving women from continuous abuse (Ging & Siapera, 2018).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Feminist Theory**

Vulnerability theories derived from the Feminist theory then offer the best framework for analyzing GBV. It proclaims that violence against women and girls on the Internet is a further expansion of patriarchal patterns and offline misogyny; here these processes are carried out in the new space of digital platforms. The use of violence in cyberspace and in other areas of interaction continues to maintain male dominance over females (Kelly, 1988). They enable the critique of how cybermobbing is implicated in systemic gendered abuses that exist online and offline.

### **Cyberfeminism**

Like any other branch of feminist theory, Cyberfeminism examines the opportunities and risks of the digital realm to women. As a source of free speech and social communication the internet provides a platform for the voice of feminism and women but it also puts them at new risks of abuse and harassment (Daniels, 2009). But this theoretical framework emphasise on twofold use of social media as liberatory and oppressive tool and analyse the importance of technology to explain Gender Relations (Harraway, 1991).

### **Social Learning Theory**

According to Bandura (1977) social learning theory argues that aggression and



## Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

harassment behaviour are imitated from other people mainly when the same behaviour of imitating is rewarded or not punished. Another decisive point connected with social media is that participants in gendered violence might be provoked by anonymity Internet offers and absence of punishment which become precursors to disclose rigorously other participants in online harassments (Powell & Henry, 2017). This theory goes a long way in making sense of the cyclic pattern of abuse on the social media platforms.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality theory was initiated by Kimberle Crenshaw; the author of this theory establishes that not all women are subjected to the same type of violence. It is argued that race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation all influence an individual's experience of online harassment (Crenshaw 1989). For instance, the interactions seen women of colour and the lesbian communities suffer more acute and precise expressions of abuse such as racism and homosexuality (Lewis et al., 2017).

### **Cultivation Theory**

Cultivation theory set by Gerbner states that, over a period of time, the media that a person is exposed to molds that persons' perception of reality (Gerbner et al., 1986). In social networks, people are subjected to violent and misogynistic content regularly, thus making such actions and words acceptable and familiar to people which means they cease perceiving online abuse for what it really is, a form of gendered violence.

### **Routine Activity Theory**

According to Routine Activity Theory, three factors come close together in order for online gendered violence to take place; these are a motivated offender, suitable target and the lack of capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Targets (women and girls) are readily available in the social media platforms, and the currents do not have strong forms of guardianship such as well-developed platform polices or legal consequences.

### **Media Effects Theory**

Media effects theory analyses the impact media holds on people's opinions and actions. The objectification or degrading images of women posted in the various social networks contribute to the worst stereotyping, thus inciting violence online (Stern, 2004). Secondly, continued indulgence in violent and or demeaning content heightens the probability of aggressive behavior being copied in cyberspace.

### **Cultural Violence Theory**

Cultural violence according to Johan Galtung can be described as the ability of culture, including religion, language or art to legitimate direct or structural violence (Galtung, 1990). In social media platforms, cultural beliefs and practices that justify or ridicule cyber sexual harassment of women contribute to the ongoing creation of digital female assaults.

### **Methods**



## Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

This research used descriptive research to assess and understand gendered violence against women and girls in social media platforms. Purposive sampling was used and included one hundred participants from different age range, education level and frequency of internet usage. Data was thus obtained through self administered questionnaires in form of semi structured interviews and focus group discussions to get individual feelings and technical inputs. Small group included participants aged between 18–45; all of them have accounts in Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Special focus was paid to the approaches to data analysis, including the qualitative method of thematic analysis to establish patterns and repetitions of the topics, including cyberstalking, sexual harassment or psychological effects of online violence. This approach was helpful for the investigation of the emotional and social outcomes of gendered violence online.

### Results and Discussion

Low level empirical studies on gendered violence against women and girls on social media, where the data collected from one hundred participants is analyzed.

Table 1: Forms of Online Violence Experienced by Participants

Form of Violence	Frequency (No. of Participants)	Percentage (%)
Sexual Harassment	72	72%
Cyberstalking	58	58%
Doxxing	40	40%
Threats of Violence	35	35%
Image-based Abuse	20	20%
Trolling and Hate Speech	45	45%

**Discussion:** According to the study, the participants reported the highest experience of violence in type of sexual harassment by (72%) and cyberstalking by (58%). Trolling and hate speech were also found by the majority of the participants (45%) as usual. Other encounters were doxxing and threats of violence, which were also rated high as a considerable number of participants said they had faced such kinds of abuse. Another type of abuse identified in the current study was image based abuse which although less common was reported by 15 female and 5 male participants. The current results demonstrate the pervasiveness of gendered violence on SNS.

Table 2: Psychological Impact of Online Violence

Impact	Frequency (No. of Participants)	Percentage (%)
Anxiety and Fear	67	67%
Depression	50	50%
Social Withdrawal	40	40%
Low Self-esteem	35	35%
Anger and Frustration	60	60%
No Significant Impact	10	10%

### Discussion

From the survey research psychological effects can be identified where 67% of



## Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

participants mentioned having anxiety and fear being victims of online violence and 50% had depression. 40% stated they socially isolated themselves and avoided the internet or even public spaces. P > anger and frustration were named by 60% of participants, the second one – low self-esteem was stated by 35% of participants. But 10% said that they were not emotionally disturbed by the harassment.

Table 3: Perceptions of Social Media Platform Responses

Response	Frequency (No. of Participants)	Percentage (%)
No Action Taken by Platform	65	65%
Delayed Action or Response	25	25%
Effective Action Taken	10	10%

### Discussion

Out of sixty participants, only 35% revealed that social media platforms took some form of action after they reported harassment cases. An equal proportion reported that the platforms did reply but the user experienced a significant delay in getting a reply and such responses were deemed as insufficient to mitigate such harm. As few as 10% of participants stated that social media platforms acted effectively, including accounts suspension or quick content delete. This has led to this general discontent with the platforms ability to deal with gender-based violence appropriately and timely.

### Conclusion

In sum, the developed analysis proves that gendered violence in the context of women and girls on social media is critical. About 70% of the participants in our study were exposed to some form of cyber harassment, which include sexual harassment, cyber stalking, and trolling, and it had negative impact on participants' mental health. Some people stated they felt stressed, had low mood, and some even got off social media completely. Our data also show that users are not protected well by social media platforms, as most participants stated they never received little attention after reporting the abuse. This study also reveals that more effective protection facilitate and quicker response from these platforms to avoid such aggression is highly required.

### References

- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Citron, D. K. (2014). *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*. Harvard University Press.
- Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4), 588-608.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.
- Daniels, J. (2009). Rethinking cyberfeminism(s): Race, gender, and embodiment. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37(1 & 2), 101-124.
- Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291-305.



## Vol. 2 No. 4 (November) (2024)

- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on Media Effects* (pp. 17-40). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (2018). Special issue on online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 515-524.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. Routledge.
- Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2018). Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(2), 195-208.
- Hester, M. (2013). Who does what to whom? Gender and domestic violence perpetrators. *European Journal of Criminology*, 10(5), 623-637.
- Jane, E. A. (2017). Misogyny online: A short (and brutish) history. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 1-12.
- Kelly, L. (1988). *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Polity Press.
- Lewis, R., Rowe, M., & Wiper, C. (2017). Online abuse of feminists as an emerging form of violence against women and girls. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), 1462-1481.
- Plan International. (2020). Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment. Plan International Report.
- Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2017). *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stern, S. R. (2004). Messages from teens on the big screen: Smoking, drinking, and drug use in teen-centered films. *Journal of Health Communication*, 9(5), 487-499.
- United Nations (2015). *Cyber violence against women and girls: A global wake-up call*. UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender.