

Vile and vicious attacks on women journalists by those affiliated with the government, political parties, their supporters and social media wings, are increasingly impacting our work, mental wellbeing and security. These attacks include but are not restricted to gender-based and sexualized abuse, discrediting, targeting and persecution. We endorse what our fellow colleagues have put on record on 12/08/2020, and widen the scope to reflect the magnitude and degree of trauma being experienced by women in media. The kind of trolling and unfettered vulgarity being experienced subverts every norm of decency with no law enforcement agency, government or any political party taking notice or action of what is clearly transgressing all limits of decency and subverting every ethical standard.

The target of these attacks are women in media, who are often targeted for reporting on issues that are critical of any political party. This may include a journalist differing from the government or a political party's position on any given issue. A journalist's criticism of any given policy of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) or of political parties including Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), religious parties and accounts affiliating themselves with state institutions, may also unleash a barrage of abuse. This is almost always met with indifference and in some cases even encouragement from party leadership which further emboldens trolls and abusers.

Unfounded accusations by government officials and politicians from all parties are hurled at journalists of 'peddling fake news', 'serving political agendas' and 'being on the payroll' of one political party or the other. Such accusations then trigger abusive campaigns targeting journalists. In some instances, our pictures and videos are also used and our social media timelines are then barraged with gender-based slurs, threats of sexual and physical violence. So vicious is the campaign against women that even the women/female members of our male colleagues' families are not spared. Their photographs and videos are doctored, distorted and leaked on social media.

In this context, we demand that we be told what the official mandate of the social media cells of the federal and provincial governments operating on tax-payers money is. Often, it seems like the mandate of these social media cells is to discredit journalists and analysts, without any evidence. We also demand that all other political parties and institutions ensure verifiable transparency regarding the mandate and operations of their respective social media wings. The Election Commission of Pakistan should demand all political parties to submit detailed workings of their social media cells.

These sustained attacks undermine public trust in journalism and go against the basic tenets of democracy. We women journalists now often find it difficult to remain active and engage freely on digital platforms. Out of fear of being hounded and harassed; and our dignity violated through vile abuse, many of us self-censor. Hence, we refrain from sharing information, giving opinion or actively engaging online. We are being prevented from exercising our right to free speech and fully

participating in public discourse. Clearly when we self-censor, the public's rights under Article 19-A are violated as they are prevented from receiving information. The most worrisome and totally unacceptable fact is that when we are under attack, we do not enjoy the protection of the law as guaranteed under Article 4.

We call upon the government and all political parties to:

- 1) Immediately draw up and adopt a code of conduct for social media teams of political parties, public bodies and other public/state institutions.
- 2) Investigate within to identify networks which have been prominently engaged in launching and running coordinated attacks, hashtag campaigns and abusive campaigns against women in the media. We also call upon Election Commission of Pakistan to direct all political parties to have declared and transparent social media setups under the Right to Access to Information Act, 2017.
- 3) Initiate investigation and take action against those officials for whom there is evidence available that they are directly or indirectly engaged in the discrediting and harassing women in media.
- 4) Whenever a journalist lodges a complaint with Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) or the police regarding intimidation, threats and other forms of digital abuse, the case(s) should be processed fairly and efficiently, without any pressure to withdraw or an environment of victim-blaming.
- 5) The Cyber Crime Wing at the FIA must set up dedicated desks to facilitate registration of cases of digital violence against women. Given the fact that digital violence against women has translated to real life and physical violence in the past, the desk should have emergency response mechanisms to facilitate prompt investigations. Every official dealing with cases of digital violence against women must be given comprehensive gender sensitivity trainings.
- 6) The Journalist Protection Bill should be cognizant of the digital threats and violence against journalists and facilitate effective investigations of digital crimes against journalists. All stakeholders and those involved (as mentioned in para 2) should be made to adhere to a culture of no tolerance to digital abuse.

Finally, we urge the government not to use this statement as an excuse to introduce further regulations and curbs for social media. We believe that the PTI, as the ruling party holds primary responsibility to set the tone for progressive, positive and inclusive political discourse and should lead by example.

We call upon the Senate and National Assembly's standing committees on human rights to take notice and ensure compliance by all political parties. Only then can journalists continue to report and disseminate information in a non-threatening environment where neither our work nor our emotional, mental and physical wellbeing and security are compromised.

Signatories:

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Mazhar Abbas, Geo News
Shahzad Iqbal, Geo News
Adil Abbasi, ARY News
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Supporting Bodies:

Karachi Union of Journalists
Women in Media Alliance

Pakistan Federation Union of Journalists
The Coalition for Women in Journalist