



Policing Women's Voices: A Critical Discourse Study of Gendered Harassment and Linguistic Strategies on Social Media in Pakistan

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Abstract

The digital public sphere in Pakistan has grown so quickly that today social media has become a space of active contestation and an alarming increasing trend of gender-based violence (TFGBV) facilitated by technology. This study examines online misogyny, not as individual instances of interpersonal relations, but as a decentralised and systemic form of social control. This is a qualitative study and an attempt to combine the concepts of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Foucault's disciplinary power and "digital panopticon" to map out the specific language and discursive strategies used to police, intimidate and silence Pakistani women and gender minorities online. A de-identified set of data shows that there are five main tactical processes: moral policing, character assassination, weaponization of religious norms, doxxing and linguistic trivialization. The study illuminates how they are selectively put into practice on the targeted groups, which include female journalists, feminist activists, digital influencers and transgender public figures to ensure compliance to postcolonial patriarchy. Moreover, it challenges the weaponization of state laws, in particular the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and points to massive geographical obstacles in the justice process. Finally, this paper introduces a localised qualitative coding schema and urges systemic solutions such as localized platform moderation, decentralized judicial solutions and extensive institutional backing to defeat the digital panopticon.

Keywords

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), Digital Panopticon, Cyber Harassment, Pakistani Social Media, Postcolonial Patriarchy, Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA).

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The digital public sphere has revolutionized the communication context in Pakistan due to its fast pace of growth. Internet access is shared by both urban and rural people with 53.6% penetration rate in mobile broadband services (Wali et al., 2025). But social media have become a very contested space of ideology rather than a solely democratizing space for voice by marginalised actors. This digital ecosystem has seen a surge in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) over the last few years and is a source of worry. Digital spaces have turned into hostile environments, in which postcolonial patriarchal structures are constantly digitalised, magnified and made use of to constrain the visibility of women (Kaur, 2015). These statistics help to illustrate the gravity of this situation – the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) helpline received 5,041 new cases of digital intimidation between May 2024 and December of 2025, with an unprecedented 3,012 complaints in 2025 alone (DRF, 2026). This never-ending trend is a reflection and amplification of Pakistani women's vulnerabilities in offline worlds.



1.2. Problem Statement

Although the number of cyber harassment incidents has continued to rise, there has been a tendency for public discussion to dismiss the incidents as interpersonal conflicts. By situating this misogyny in its context, one can see that online harassment in Pakistan is not a problem of individuals, but one that is decentralised and algorithmic, with the aim of penalising women for 'misbehaving' by transgressing cultural norms related to their domestic role. The underlying issue is the production of a "digital panopticon" of the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure, which is fed by particular linguistic strategies and the use of the state law, like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). This very orderly digital policing aims to create an environment of ubiquitous self-censorship, cishnormative compliance and curtailment of female agency. As a result, the body and the voice of women become arenas of ideological struggle, and women are torn between conflicting demands for visibility and extreme psychological and physical vulnerability in the digital world.

1.3. Research Objectives

The critical discourse study set forth the following main objectives that are in line with the research questions:

1. To explore how the discursive strategies are used and affect differently different typologies of targets, in this case female journalists, feminist activists, digital influencers, and transgender public figures.
2. To chart the way these co-ordinated online discourses can contribute to the creation of a 'digital panopticon' that can end up in systemic self-censorship, professional withdrawal, and offline psychological distress.

1.4. Research Questions

In order to systematically explore the phenomenon of gendered digital policing in Pakistan, the study is guided by following two main research questions:

1. How are the women and gender minorities policed, intimidated and silenced linguistically and discursively on the Pakistani social media platforms?
2. What is the point of this overlap between these linguistic practices, offline socio-cultural fears, state legislation (e.g. PECA), and digital panopticism, and how do these operate to secure continuous patriarchal control?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it will provide the basis for the implementation of the CLT. This study holds a great significance in the fields of digital ethnography, feminist linguistics and media studies as it offers a localized study on cyber harassment in South Asia. The study brings together complex coding schema from the western world, relevant to the regional context as it is exclusively conducted in the digital realm with qualitative data, and de-identified. This schema will not only help future qualitative researchers and discourse analysts recognize toxic linguistic manoeuvres, but also actionable insights for policy makers and global social media companies that seek to tweak their content moderation architectures for cultural coding of misogyny.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is a specialized type of CDA that focuses on examining power dynamics within the discourse. This study is based upon Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to explore in-depth the interplay of language, gender and power in Pakistani digital discourse. Language is not passively mirroring social reality, FCDA claims, it was originally conceptualised by Michelle Lazar (2017). Rather, media texts and digital media



interactions are dynamic, politically invested, and sometimes oppositional spaces that constantly sustain, perpetuate and sometimes challenge the patriarchal power, gender hierarchies and heteronormative ideologies. To answer this question, Lazar's theoretical approach is especially appropriate because it specifically focuses on the subtle and overt discursive practices that are important for maintaining systemic gender inequality.

This study adopts Norman Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse model consisting of a three-dimensional model to operationalise the concept of FCDA. A comprehensive level of mapping of harassment is possible with Fairclough's model by connecting the micro-level textual structures (e.g., vocabulary, grammar and Roman Urdu phonetics) and mid-level discursive practices (that is, how the tweets and comments are created, viralized and consumed). Lastly, it relates these layers with macro level social practices, that is the systemic gender oppression and institutional laws of offline Pakistani society.

This analytical approach is further developed by the use of Sara Mills' (2008) structural linguistic framework that will look at the mechanics of sexist constructions. Mills' model provides an important way to illustrate how generic, "othering," and highly specific semantic choices through cisnormative and patriarchal attitudes can reify marginalized bodies and dehumanize them with the use of dismissive pronouns. This analysis reveals the strategic weaponization of seemingly innocuous language use that challenges the intellectual and professional legitimacy of women and perpetuates a binary and submissive gender paradigm in the digital world, using Mills' framework.

2.2. Foucauldian Panopticism & Disciplinary

Understanding the successful silencing of women without the constant presence of physical violence, the theories of Michel Foucault (1977), in particular those of disciplinary power and the Panopticon are used in this study. The Panopticon, which was originally conceived by the 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham as a design for prisons, consists of a tower in the middle with cells lined up around it that are lit by backlights. This design became a metaphor for Foucault to show how modern disciplinary institutions work through subtle and pervasive means of control. The essence of the Panopticon is that the prisoner is never completely visible in his cell, and thus does not know whether he is being watched at any given moment; this means that he is constantly under surveillance and is responsible for his own continued self-surveillance.

In the Pakistani social media environment this jail design has turned into a 'digital panopticon'. The central tower is no longer the seat of a single state official, but of a decentralized, extremely alert and vigilant digital mob, which constantly monitors and judges the conduct of women. Women's visibility on the internet is a permanent one, which in turn triggers the automatic operation of the disciplinary power. Hence, the women internalize the gaze of the patriarchy in the form of the digital mob, and become the guard of themselves, managing to regulate their own behavior in order not to be targeted by a backlash online and violence in real life.

Moreover, Foucault points out that the effects of surveillance are permanent but its action is not necessarily continuous. It is manifested on the digital space via "structural spectacles" (very visible, tragic act of digital violence), including the coordinated defamation of journalists, or the offline murder of the social media star Qandeel Baloch in 2016. These spectacles are powerful reminders of the penalties of social misdeeds. They help keep the digital gaze internalised, make sure the populace is compliant to patriarchy and undergoes self-censorship without the direct use of the state's force.



3. Literature Review

3.1. Digital Patriarchy & Postcolonial Realities in Pakistan

With the rise of digital technologies in Pakistan some new clashes are brought to life between global and digital platforms and local and localized cultural fears. There is ample scholarship on depicting technology as a double-edged sword for women in South Asia as it concerns digital patriarchy. The Internet, on the one hand, is a place of unprecedented agency, economic opportunity and space for feminist solidarity (Bachayo, 2026). Conversely, this new visibility directly confronts traditional, postcolonial, patriarchy that tries to restrict women to the private and domestic realm. Public visibility for women is tightly controlled in Pakistan in terms of culture and constructs of public modesty/haya and family honor/izzat. As women are brought into the public sphere in digital ways, these offline cultural codes are digitized and used as weapons against them as revealed in literature. The digital agency of women, their embodiment of femininity and their acts of resistance to their relegation to invisibility are all highly moralized, and any violation of the culturally prescribed model of the submissive woman is subject to a concerted repressive response (Zubair et al., 2025).

3.2. Targeted Harassment- Media, Activism, and Influencers

Literature review found that digital harassment in Pakistan is very much segmented on the basis of professional identity of the target and the extent to which he/she is visible in public sphere. Women journalists are especially targeted regarding delegitimization through gendering from a political perspective. The nationwide findings by DRF (2026) reveal that 72% of the female journalists were digitally insecure, while 61% of the male journalists were digitally insecure. Importantly, 71% of the female respondents say they were targeted because of their physical appearance, while 68% of respondents say they were targeted because of attacks on their personal lives, both as opposed to male journalists who were targeted for their political views (Tahir & Qayyum, 2025).

In the same way, feminists and human rights activists are subjected to heavy ideological attacks that often come in the form of existential threats to the state and Islamic societies. A major flash point is the annual Aurat March for the right to autonomy of the body and rights for women workers. The slogans of feminists like Mera Jism Meri Marzi (My Body, My Choice) have been misunderstood, misrepresented and politicised by conservative opposition, who see it as a “Western agenda” for moral licentiousness instead of safeguarding against marital exploitation and marital rape (Qayyum, 2025). Linguistic analysis of these events showed that there is a systematic hijacking of activists hashtags and that the trends like #AuratAzadiMarch were made difficult to be heard by these highly toxic and abusive alternatives, like #SlutShaming etc., by coordinated networks. In the meantime, female content makers and influencers are subjected to immense visual policing of their bodies with grave consequences such as technology facilitated blackmail and non-consensual intimate image (NCII) distribution (Munir & Gondal, 2017).

3.3. State Regulation and the Weaponization of Law

The literature also critically looks at how the state infrastructure contributes to the increasing of digital gendered violence. The active reinforcement of the digital panopticon is being carried out by the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, Pakistan's main internet legislation. Although the law was originally presented as a way to shield women from cyber harassment, some legal experts have come out to criticize the implementation of the law, stating that it has been veering far off course from its intended purpose. Rather, PECA has been used as a tool to crack down on political dissent and to criminalise independent news reporting (Mills, 2008).



The state's regulatory control has been steadily tightened over the years, with several updates since 2010 authorizing blocking of offensive content, such as the 2020 Rules, which give the state the power to block content it deems as violating the values of "decency" or "morality", and the Ordinance of 2022, which sought to extend jail terms for defamation (Kiani & Zahoor, 2025; NOOR, 2025). The latest one is the 2025 Amendment which imposes the creation of the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA), with severe penalties for the dissemination of "false information". (DRF, 2026). Scholars pointed out that there is a paradox in the use of PECA at the institutional level: on the one hand, the state uses PECA to prosecute human rights defenders and political critics under loose, vague moral conceptions, on the other hand it does not ensure access to justice and geographicality to ordinary female victims of severe cyberstalking and digital blackmail, and the time protection is granted is quite long (Memon et al., 2022).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The research design followed in this study is strongly qualitative that is underpinned by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). With the required theoretical framework, FCDA enables the critical analysis of how the everyday digital language is infused, normalised and reinforced with patriarchal ideologies and cisnormativity (Gill et al., 2025). The study aims, use a digital ethnography approach, to explore these phenomena empirically. By using digital ethnography, one can immerse and observe an online community in context, thus mapping in detail the linguistic manoeuvres, metaphoric work and grammatical structures used in the Pakistani social media space. This approach does not attempt to put a number on how much abuse occurs, but rather examines the mechanics of language, how the micro-level choices of language (localised slang and Roman Urdu phonetics) correspond with the macro-level power issues in the society. This qualitative design addresses the complex manner in which linguistic strategies are used as mechanisms of disciplinary action to control the visibility of women in public and to police rigid, postcolonial, gender conformities in virtual space, while viewing the public commentary and viral post as active sites of ideological struggle.

4.2. Data Collection and Sample Selection

The data collection was conducted using purposive sampling of the social media comments and viral posts of prominent female figures found in four main social media platforms namely Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. The sample particularly focused on public figures who are in contested digital spaces, such as women journalists, feminist activists, lifestyle bloggers and transgender activists. Data was collected when the political and cultural climate was ripe, for example, during national election and the Aurat March event which is held annually, to capture a coordinated discursive campaign. A structured qualitative codebook was created to systematically analyse this rich source of textual data. This coding schema was used to classify harassment in terms of discursive typologies, using labels like POL_MORAL (Moral Policing), POL_HONOR (Honor-Based Weaponization) and POL_BRIBERY (Political Delegitimization). This methodological tool enabled researchers to isolate and translate as well as simulated textual snippets and establish a rigorous and replicable framework for Feminist CDA.



Table 1 *Categorization of Linguistic Harassment Strategies and Discursive Mechanisms*

Discursive Tactic	Primary Lexical Choices & Tropes (Roman Urdu / English)	Discursive Mechanism	Socio-Cultural Implications & Systemic Impact
Moral Policing	<i>Be-haya</i> (Shameless), <i>Fahashi</i> (Vulgarity), <i>Nangi</i> (Naked), <i>Maghribi-zada</i> (Westernized).	Uses evaluative adjectives to judge a woman's clothing, behavior, and physical appearance against conservative modesty (<i>haya</i>) codes.	Establishes a collective public gaze that pathologizes female visibility, framing personal autonomy as an index of societal decline.
Character Assassination & Slander	<i>Bad-kirdar</i> (Loose character), <i>Ghar se bhagihui</i> (Runaway), <i>Awaara</i> (Wanderer), <i>Tawaif</i> (Prostitute).	Deploys highly stigmatizing, sexually explicit nouns to target a woman's sexual reputation and family background.	Disqualifies women from public and professional spaces by rendering their presence morally offensive and socially unacceptable.
Weaponizing Religious & Cultural Norms	<i>Deen-se-door</i> (Distant from religion), <i>Kafir</i> (Infidel), <i>Anti-family</i> (Against family values), <i>Izzat</i> (Honor).	Frames demands for basic human and bodily rights as a foreign, Western agenda that threatens Islamic values and the family structure.	Aligns digital mobs with communal defense, transforming harassment into a moral duty and legitimizing offline violence.



Doxxing & Physical Threats	<i>Pata pata hai</i> (We know your address), <i>Ghar se nikal</i> (Step out of your house), <i>Sabaq sikhayenge</i> (We will teach you a lesson).	Leverages the leakage of personal information (phone numbers, addresses) to threaten sexual or physical violence.	Erases the boundary between virtual and physical spaces, inducing extreme psychological trauma, paranoia, and forced withdrawal from public life.
Linguistic Trivialization & Submission	<i>Bechari</i> (Poor thing), <i>Kamzor</i> (Weak), <i>Majboor</i> (Helpless), <i>Masoom</i> (Innocent), <i>Larki jaat</i> (Just a girl).	Uses patronizing, passive adjectives and diminutive nouns to discursively construct the female subject as fragile and lacking agency.	Normalizes male authority and female submission, framing women as entities who require patriarchal protection and lack intellectual capacity.

Note. Adapted from qualitative mapping of digital interactions in the Pakistani digital public sphere. This continuum spans from psychological moral policing to direct physical threats

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Digital ethnography of GBV requires strong ethical protection measures. To ensure privacy and digital security of targeted individuals and the Internet users in the sample, this study uses a "De-identified Qualitative Coding Dataset. Anonymisation, paraphrasing or simulating the structure of the abuse in terms of the linguistic and grammatical mechanisms of the abuse has been done for all direct quotes and snippets of text to prevent them from being reverse searchable. In addition, highly toxic textual data (such as explicit death threats, coordinated character assassinations and sexualized slurs) have a tremendous psychological strain on qualitative researchers. Recognising this second trauma, the research team adopted trauma informed research practices including regular debriefing sessions and temporal limits on the data immersion with a view to minimising emotional distress and promoting ethical sustainability of the methodological process.

5. Analysis & Discussion

5.1. Strategies to Unpack Linguistic Harassment

The application of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) framework shows that gendered online harassment in Pakistan is based on five main discursive tactics, all of which are underpinnings of a disciplinary tactic that 'polices' female identity and limits public agency. The most widespread approach is to constantly 'moral police' women's visibility using evaluative adjectives (POL_MORAL). Phrases like "be-haya" (shameless), "fahashi"



(vulgarity), "nangi" (naked) and "maghribi-zada" (Westernized) are mobilized to make the physical body and clothing of a woman the location of the civilizational decay. As evidenced in FCDA, these adjectives aren't just insults, but they also create a kind of collective public scrutiny for compliance with conservative modesty (*haya*) rules, and which situates personal autonomy as inherently transgressive.

Table 2 De-identified Qualitative Coding Schema for Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Code Category	Primary Linguistic Trope (Urdu / Roman Urdu)	Literal English Translation	Metaphorical & Grammatical Mechanism	Simulated Contextual Textual Snippet
POL_MORAL (Moral Policing)	<i>Be-haya, Fahashi, Nangi, Maghribi-zada.</i>	Shameless, Vulgar/Obscene, Naked, Westernized.	Uses moralizing adjectives to construct the woman's body and choices as a site of societal and civilizational decline.	"Green cord-set suit pehen kar chali gayi. Yeh hamari deeni aur iqdari tabahi ki nishani hai. In jesi aurton ne mulk tabah kar diya."
POL_HONOR (Honor-Based Weaponization)	<i>Izzat, Khandan, Baap bhai, Ghar se bhagi.</i>	Honor, Family, Father/Br other, Runaway from home.	Targets family honor (<i>Izzat</i>) to bypass the woman's individual agency and trigger	"Iske baap bhai ko pata bhi hai ke yeh internet par kya nanga naach kar rahi



			offline parental or fraternal control.	hai? Khandan i larki aisi baatein nahi karti."
POL_BRIBERY (Political Delegitimization)	<i>Lifafa, Biki hui, Anti-state, Gustaakh.</i>	Envelope (Paid agent), Sold out, Anti-state, Blasphemous.	Combines political trolling with moral slander to frame professional journalism or human rights activism as corruption or treason.	"Yeh lifafa journalist aurat apne jism ki tarah apna zameer bhi bech chuki hai. Iska kaam sirf mulk ko badnaam karna hai."
POL_SUB_COGN (Submissive Social Cognition)	<i>Bechari, Kamzor, Majboor, Masoom, Jee, Maaf kijiye.</i>	Poor thing, Weak, Helpless, Innocent, Yes/Polite agreement, Please forgive.	Uses passive adjectives and polite markers to normalize male authority, constructing the ideal woman as silent and obedient.	"Main ek kamzor aurat hoon, main bhala kya kar sakti hoon? Jo aap kahenge, main wahi karungi, bas mujhe maaf kar dein."



<p>POL_RESIST (Feminist Resistance / Agency)</p>	<p><i>Mazboot, Bekhof, Khudmukhtar, Mera Jism Meri Marzi.</i></p>	<p>Strong, Fearless, Self-determined, My body, my choice.</p>	<p>Uses active adjectives and interrogative phrasing to challenge naturalized inequality and assert bodily autonomy.</p>	<p>"Main chup kyun rahoon? Mera haq kyun cheena gaya? Mera jism meri marzi hai, aur main apni khudmuktari par samjhota nahi karungi."</p>
<p>POL_DOXX (Doxing & Intimidation)</p>	<p><i>Pata pata hai, Hum jante hain, Bahar nikal, Sabaq sikhayenge.</i></p>	<p>We know your address, We know you, Step outside, We will teach you a lesson.</p>	<p>Uses direct verbs and spatial indicators to threaten physical and sexual violence, erasing the digital-physical boundary.</p>	<p>"Humein pata hai tum kis office mein baithti ho. Apne ghar se bahar nikal kar dikhao, hum tumhe aisa sabaq sikhayenge ke yaad rakhogi."</p>



<p>POL_OTHER (Cis normative Depersonalization)</p>	<p><i>Yeh, Iska, Teesra gender, Neutral (with incorrect grammatical agreement).</i></p>	<p>This, Its, Third gender, Neutral terms of detachment.</p>	<p>Employs grammatically incorrect pronouns and depersonalizing terms to strip transgender public figures of their gender identity and humanity.</p>	<p>"Yeh jo khud ko anchor kehta hai, iska ashar dekho. Yeh log humare samaj par bojh hain, inhein screen se hata dena chahiye."</p>
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Note. This coding schema is designed to assist discourse analysts and ethnographers in mapping how patriarchal control is linguistically constructed and resisted in Roman Urdu and localized socio-linguistic contexts.

Character Assassination & Slander (POL_HONOR)

As women begin to move into the public and/or professional world, the linguistic assault changes to focus on the women's family and sexual honor. The use of words that are highly stigmatizing and explicitly sexualized, such as tawaif (prostitute), bad-kirdar (loose character), awaara (wanderer) and ghar se bhagi hui (runaway), is an attempt by perpetrators to socially disqualify women. Such lexical selections elide the woman's personal will, and instead use the traditional notions of family honour (izzat), making her public presence repulsive and unwelcome, which therefore engenders offline control by the brothers/parents.

One of the discursive strategies put into practice against feminist advocacy and demands for basic human rights is to weaponize religious norms by representing women as existential threats to the traditional Islamic household. The terms "deen-se-door" (distant from religion), "kafir" (infidel) and "anti-family" are used to make decentralized digital mobs a matter of "communal defense". Such weaponization of cultural norms makes the cyber harassment seem like a moral obligation and in that way legitimates the violence exercised offline, elevating the woman target as a dangerous foreign agenda.

Physical intimidation (POL_DOXX)

The digital panopticon is based on the threat of violence, that is realized by the spatial linguistic indications, which break the barrier between the virtual and material space. The very fact that the personal information is leaked in phrases like "sabaq sikhayenge" (we will teach you a lesson), "pata pata hai" (we know your address) and "ghar se nikal" (step out of your house) causes the extreme psychological trauma and paranoia. This is one way to bring online rhetoric to real-life consequences and compel people to stop participating in public life.

Another aspect of disciplinary power plays out in the trivialization of language and its submission to the norm of male guardianship, by way of the passive adjectives and diminutive nouns. The use of such terms as bechari, kamzor, larki jaat etc. discursively produce the female



subject as a fragile one with low intellectual capacity. On the other hand, women's use of resistant vocabulary (mazboot [strong] and meri jism meri marzi [my body my choice]) is in contrast to this submissive social cognition (POL_SUB_COGN). The virulent response to these 'active adjectives' demonstrates the extent to which the Patriarchal system is based on trivialising women through language to make them subservient.

5.2. Target Group typology and Differential policing

The use of such linguistic and discursive strategies is quite nuanced, and tailored especially to the professional identity, public persona and political stance of the target. This digital ethnography exposes four different typologies of targets, each of which is linguistically policed in a different way to neutralise the different types of social influence.

Journalists & Political Commentators: Women working in the space between the political and the public are subjected to a very well-organized and sexualized campaign. A striking method is the gendered use of the word lifafa (POL_BRIBERY) which means an "envelope" or paid agent. This political delegitimation is closely related to moral corruption accusations for women. In April 2026, the television news anchor of GTV, Gharida Farooqi, made headlines for wearing a green cord-set suit to a diplomatic event in Islamabad. Coordinated accounts flooded social media with fake videos and images, and accusing the summit of being a "brothel program", likening her westernised clothes to the decline of Islam in society. This is a way to gradually delegitimize professional Journalism and shift public attention and gaze to the female body in an aggressive manner.

Feminist Activists: Women's rights advocates, especially those participating in the annual Aurat March, are described as "human rights defenders" and attacked as "ideological enemies," who are "destroyers of the family household (ghar ka nazaam tabah karne waliyan). Discursive strategies towards these activists vary and are dependent on the local political landscape. But in Karachi, it is the inclusivity-oriented discursive emphasis on bodily autonomy that is under attack; in Islamabad it is the legal and constitutional claims; and in Lahore, it is transnational feminist solidarity. The common message in all the cities is an attempt to systematically misread the slogans and depict the feminist collective action as a direct threat towards domestic order.

Harassment for Influencers/Content Creators is focused specifically on the visual policing and moral behavior of the lifestyle vlogger, celebrity, etc. on a highly-visual platform (TikTok, Instagram, etc.). Moral policing, which is based on the assumption that one can tell what is and is not "modest" from what one sees, is extremely risky and high stakes and is dangerously coupled with technology enabled blackmail. In view of the catastrophic offline consequences of perceived loss of chastity (izzat), perpetrators make use of non-consensual intimate images (NCII) and sextortion to establish absolute control. The lethal fallout of this digital policing was tragically reflected in the suicide of Muzammil Shahzadi, 22, in Kasur, after being rudely shaken up mentally and also threat of extortion over private videos, a clear example of how private videos have a direct impact on real lives.

Transgender Figures (POL_OTHER) is a crucial aspect of digital policing that is cis-normative targeting of transgendered (khwajasira) public figures. However, with the growing visibility of trans people, there is a particular way of excluding trans people through the generic depersonalization of their language. Using Sara Mills' structure, we notice that cisgender people have used grammatically incorrect pronouns and neutral, distancing things such as yeh, iska and teesra gender in order to dehumanize and deny gender to trans people. This grammatical violence, and the often-sexualised death threats, make gender-variant visibility aggressively policed to maintain the binary, patriarchy-based society order.



5.3 The Digital Panopticon at Work: Institutional and Individual Effects

The weight of the Panopticon is not just an empirical one, but a logical, physical, and convincing one. The success of the digital panopticon can't just be measured by the number of attacks against female internet users, but by the kind of behavioural changes and psychological conditioning it imposes on them. A complete understanding of this 'inner policing' of language would require an examination of its actual effects on behaviour in Pakistani society. In the digital world, it is clear that the disciplinary power is most effective when the subject becomes the principle of his/her own subjection, as Foucault says. Nationwide statistics clearly reflect this fact; a staggering 70% of the women who participated in a survey across Pakistan say that they are paralysed with fear about posting pictures online. This fear stems from the very real possibility of their images being morphed, misused or turned into derogatory memes to publicly shame them and encourage violence offline (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2026). This "fear of visibility" is widespread and serves as an extremely powerful and decentralized social control mechanism, compelling women to minimise their digital presence.

The impact is even more damaging in a structure for professional women. 45.5% of female journalists practice severe self-censorship due to a persistent and constant specialized linguistic harassment, character assassination and weaponization of deep fake. To preserve their physical safety, family honor and professional credibility, these reporters regularly are pushed off beats deemed to be too controversial, content on their websites is periodically removed, and in some cases they are completely disengaging from public life and the journalism profession. Thus the digital panopticon operates automatic and women, in order to not be caught in the digital gaze, systematically silence themselves, thus enforcing a strict code of behaviour in patriarchy without the state having to use direct force on women.

Geographic and Judicial Barriers: This all-pervading culture of digital surveillance and self-censorship is not a natural social phenomenon, but is rather actively promoted and endorsed by a sheer lack of institutional care and access to justice geographically. The state's laws say they are to protect the women, but things are not working out for them in the infrastructural world. The statistics of the newly-formed National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), a successor to the cybercrime wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), for the year 2025 are quite depressing. In 2025 alone, the NCCIA received an impressive 8,357 queries which resulted in 670 being turned into active PECA cases, but the distribution of these queries across geographies shows a staggering systemic inequality (DRF, 2026).

DRF Helpline data actually reveals a significant percentage of cases of cyber harassment referred for formal legal action were very local in nature (79%). The distribution of access to justice also is quite skewed towards cities, with 51% of reported cases coming from cities with operational cybercrime offices. This means that the state leaves the victims of the services, especially in rural or marginalized areas. The figures bear this out: the more urbanized province of Punjab had 69.5% of the total reported cases while the other marginalized and remote regions like Balochistan 3%, Azad Kashmir 0.6% and Gilgit-Baltistan 0.26% reported almost negligible figures.

Exercising the right to go to another city far away to verify a cybercrime complaint on person – a requirement in the procedure – is often cultural, social and financial out of reach for a survivor living in a remote or highly conservative area. This structural/geographic oversight is complicated by a long-held, historically ingrained mistrust of state agencies, and victims often face moral policing and victimization at the hands of police. In sum, this is an institutional failure on a broad scale, that is, it in effect tells the aggressor, "coordinated campaigns of linguistic violence have an extremely low risk of detection, prosecution or penalty, for you,"



and tells the victim, “digital violence must be suffered in silence or you must avoid online existence.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1. Analytical Conclusions

In conclusion, this critical discourse study clearly shows that the phenomenon of gendered online harassment in Pakistan is definitely not a series of unconnected, random or only interpersonal conflicts. Rather, it functions as a very structured discursively coordinated system of social control to actively reproduce and perpetuate postcolonial patriarchal power, both virtually and physically. The decentralised digital mob, using a specific, systematic and culturalised approaches of linguistic tactics (including relentless moral policing, aggressive character assassination, doxxing to a maximum level, and the weaponisation of religious/cultural norms), effectively monitors, regulates and seriously limits the public presence of women.

The use of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) along with Foucauldian approaches shows that this gaze is purposefully intended to put the body in a constant state of gaze and exposure. The linguistic structure of the Pakistani internet is the main disciplinary apparatus and weapons against the socio-cultural fears of family honour (izzat) and public modesty (haya). This structure is a sort of continuous internalized digital gaze that replaces the traditional constant and physical presence of patriarchy, and produces high levels of psychological suffering, job discrimination and a generalized practice of self-censorship for women and gender minorities. Moreover, the state's legislation, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), is a double-edged sword, criminalizing the expression of female feminist voices, while not providing any means to break the institutional barriers in the way of ordinary victims obtaining justice.

6.2. Strategic Recommendations

A series of systemic, multi-stakeholder interventions are urgently needed to effectively confront the prevailing digital panopticon and create a safe, inclusive and democratic digital space for women and gender minorities in Pakistan.

- Platforms must immediately and comprehensively localize their content moderation architectures in the region, including the top three global social media platforms: Meta, TikTok and WhatsApp which are responsible for more than 53% of the cyber harassment reported in the region. The algorithms and human review teams need to be well-trained to understand Roman Urdu phonetics and languages spoken in Pakistan as well as highly context-specific cultural idioms. Platforms need to be able to create more sophisticated tools to distinguish between the fine-grained implications of family honour (izzat) and modesty (haya) and to determine how these are discursively weaponised to incite offline physical violence and social ostracism. In addition, platforms need to implement “anti-amplification safeguards” to substantially restrict the viral spread of reported NCII and of AI deepfakes during the formal complaint handling process, so as to avoid any irreparable reputational harm to victims.
- **Decentralization & Sensitization of Judicial Mechanisms** - The state needs to urgently reform the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) in order to overcome glaring geographical inequities in access to justice; a radical decentralisation and sensitisation of judicial mechanism is required to overcome these shortcomings. There is an urgent need to setup up operational and fully staffed cybercrime offices in remote and marginalized areas of the country especially Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan



and Azad Kashmir so as to eradicate the unavoidable inconvenience of travelling long distances. Importantly, the antiquated in-person verification process for reports of harassment cases must be forever removed and replaced by safe, easily accessible and legally binding digital verification systems. In addition, all NCCIA staff need to be trained in gender sensitivity in mandatory, regular trainings in close collaboration with digital rights organisations. This is crucial to ensure that complaints of technology-enabled gender-based violence (GEBV) including sextortion and NCII sharing can be dealt with efficiently, without the institutional victim blaming and state-sanctioned moral policing of survivors.

- **Reform of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA):** The Pakistani legislature should urgently act to reform PECA and make it a more effective tool to protect the vulnerable, rather than a tool of state censorship. Fuzzy, overly broad and highly subjective interpretations of “fake news,” “decency” and “morality” must be urgently disambiguated and/or abolished to prevent the abuse of the law by state authorities to crack down on independent journalists, feminist activists and political critics. The law enforcement focus needs to be adjusted by law to prosecuting more serious cases of cyberstalking, blackmail (an alarming trend on the Internet) and protecting the interests of marginalized communities.
- As for now, a whopping 60% of media outlets in Pakistan have no proper internal procedure to deal with or report digital threats and female journalists are left to deal with life-threatening digital violence on their own. Media houses, journalist unions and civil society groups need to set up solid well-funded support systems within their organisations. This entails the creation of compulsory digital security and privacy training, the creation of legal aid cells, the provision of quick responses and interventions to digital security and the provision of fully funded mental health counselling specific to targeted professionals.

6.3. Concluding Thoughts

The persistence of the digital panopticon is from a Foucauldian point of view in its ability to isolate the individual, leaving the self as if there were a lone female subject to bear the brunt of surveillance, self-regulation and psychological trauma. The structural burden of the safety of digital women has to be removed from the individual woman, and spread over collective, institutional and state levels. With systemic changes in language, with local changes in judges, and with strong networks of professionals in place, online spaces in Pakistan can once again be liberated from the male gaze and become places of democracy, citizenship and unhindered professional growth.



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