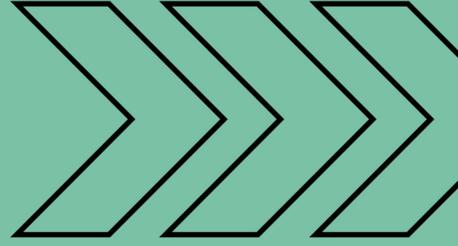
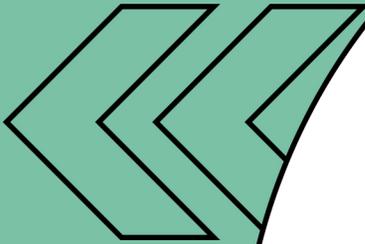


2021

# **ANNUAL REPORT**

CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE

**0800-39393**



DigitalRightsFoundation  
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

© February 2021 Digital Rights Foundation

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a feminist, not-for-profit organization based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened.

Digital Rights Foundation believes that a free internet with access to information and impeccable privacy policies can encourage a healthy and productive environment that would eventually help not only women but the world at large.

**Contact Information:**

info@digitalrightsfoundation.pk  
www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk

Gender-sensitive, confidential & free helpline  
**0800-39393**

**helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk**

Our gender-sensitive, confidential, free of charge helpline aims to provide callers with a safe space where they can easily share their problems regarding online harassment. We can be reached through phone, social media and emails 7 days a week from 9 am to 5 pm.

This report has been Researched and Authored by: Hyra Basit  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**01** The Helpline's Journey

---

**03** Introduction to Online Harassment

---

**05** Introduction to the Cyber Harassment Helpline

---

**06** Cyber Harassment Helpline Year in Review

---

**09** Gender Breakdown

---

**11** Age

---

**12** Geographical Distribution

---

**15** Source of Contact

---

**17** Platform

---

**19** Referrals

---

**20** Types of Complaints/Harassment Faced

---

**23** Services Provided

---

**26** Journalists Case Study

---

**36** 5 Years Down the Line

---

**38** Survey Responses

---

**43** Recommendations

---

**50** Appendix

---

**54** Bibliography

---

# THE HELPLINE'S JOURNEY



The idea for Digital Rights Foundation's (DRF) Cyber Harassment Helpline came about in 2016 during the course of the Hamara Internet project.<sup>1</sup> While presenting and disseminating digital literacy and awareness about online harassment in colleges and schools, the DRF team was inundated with questions about situations that the audience was facing. Soon, through word of mouth, people were reaching out to DRF's social media pages asking for advice about the online harassment they were dealing with. The numbers became large enough that the need was felt for a team tasked especially with assisting victims of online harassment.

That same year, another incident reinforced the need for greater awareness and help for victims of online harassment: the murder of Qandeel Baloch exemplified the grave and deadly effects that continued and different forms of online harassment can have.<sup>2</sup> The online space soon went from being a place where she could express herself freely on her own terms to a space where she was doxxed, threatened and where the lines between online harm and physical abuse became blurred. Following this, feminists who were voicing their opinions and defending Baloch online were also harassed and it was clearer than ever that women in particular needed stronger support mechanisms to be able to continue taking up space online confidently and safely.

With this intention in mind, when Nighat Dad, Executive Director of DRF, won the Dutch Tulip Award in 2016,<sup>3</sup> the proceeds from the award were used to set the idea in motion. The Cyber Harassment Helpline was officially launched on 1st December, 2016 and has now completed its 5th year, which goes to show both the need for a service that caters specially to this issue as well as the immense trust that our callers and donors place in us.

Since 2016, the Helpline has grown and responded to the need of the time by expanding its legal team, modes of service, and referral system. Over time, we have learned from our experience and constantly tried out solutions in order to provide the best possible service to our callers.

# INTRODUCTION TO ONLINE HARASSMENT



With the increasing intermixing of the physical and virtual spaces, online harassment is also a phenomenon that is becoming more and more of a serious and persistent threat. The evolution of digital spaces gives the violence and abuse present in the real world a platform to spread its web, where at the same time, the inherent features of the digital space allow for a more pervasive outreach making the effects just as catastrophic.

From some of the world's most modern tech platforms - Meta's virtual reality platform, Horizon Worlds, that is still in beta testing, already has examples of online harassment in the form of a female avatar being groped<sup>4</sup> - to simple apps developed by teenagers - an 18 year old in India was arrested for developing an app that used pictures of Muslim women and put them up for auction<sup>5</sup> - the misogynistic and abusive practices against women make their way into digital spaces in different forms. While the anonymity that online spaces and ICTs provide make it easier to target anyone, there is a gendered nature to online harassment. Politicians all over the world, for example, may be attacked because of their profession on social media and other platforms, but the nature of the attacks that women face and the enduring effect it has on their personal and professional lives is significantly different from what men face.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, while online platforms can serve as an arena for other minorities and vulnerable groups to express themselves, form strong community ties, and organize, they also tend to mirror the physical world by magnifying the threats that these groups face. The limits on their freedom follow them onto online spaces<sup>7</sup> and so greater surveillance can mean more censorship and invasion of privacy, or even restrictions on freedom of expression.<sup>8</sup>

In Pakistan, online harassment was most recently criminalized under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. The Act mentions certain types of harassment and punishments and assigns the investigative authority, namely the cyber crime wing of the Federal Investigation Authority (FIA).<sup>9</sup> While covering these crimes by law and laying down a procedure for their investigation is a good step, there are still major hurdles to get over in order to make improvements to Pakistan's ranking of the digital gender divide and violence against women. DRF has published a separate report analyzing PECA while giving recommendations.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years the FIA has increased the number of offices which has made it slightly more accessible but nowhere near where it should be.<sup>11</sup> The number of investigation officers is still not adequate enough to keep up with the number of complaints that come in,<sup>12</sup> and the lack of forensic labs in the country add to the time it takes to complete an investigation, which needs to be expedited simply because of the nature of online violence against women.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE



The Cyber Harassment Helpline was conceptualized to serve as a dedicated helpline to bridge the gap in the increasing number of online harassment cases and the legal and digital solutions available to the public, especially women in Pakistan. While generalized support helplines are available, there was a clear lack of support for women and other vulnerable communities when it came to online gender based violence and abuse.

In response to this, the foremost aim of the Helpline is to provide a safe and confidential environment for vulnerable communities to explore their options and seek counsel when facing online harassment. Through our experience, we know that one of the most pressing concerns expressed by women is the need for privacy so that their reputations aren't damaged and further restrictions aren't placed on them in an already conservative society. The Helpline's policies were developed keeping in mind the safety and privacy needs of our callers.

The Helpline is the region's first dedicated service dealing with cases of online harassment and online gender based violence. It operates from 9AM to 5PM, Monday to Friday and provides services through phone, email (Helpdesk) and through DRF's social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The Helpline associates are joined by a legal team and digital security expert who provide specialized services when needed. Through the years, the forms of assistance have adapted to the callers' needs, such as providing in-person legal services to people in the same city as DRF's office. While the Helpline aims to provide a safe space for everyone, special consideration is given to minors, women and other gender minorities, religious minorities and people in vulnerable occupations.

# CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE YEAR IN REVIEW - 2021

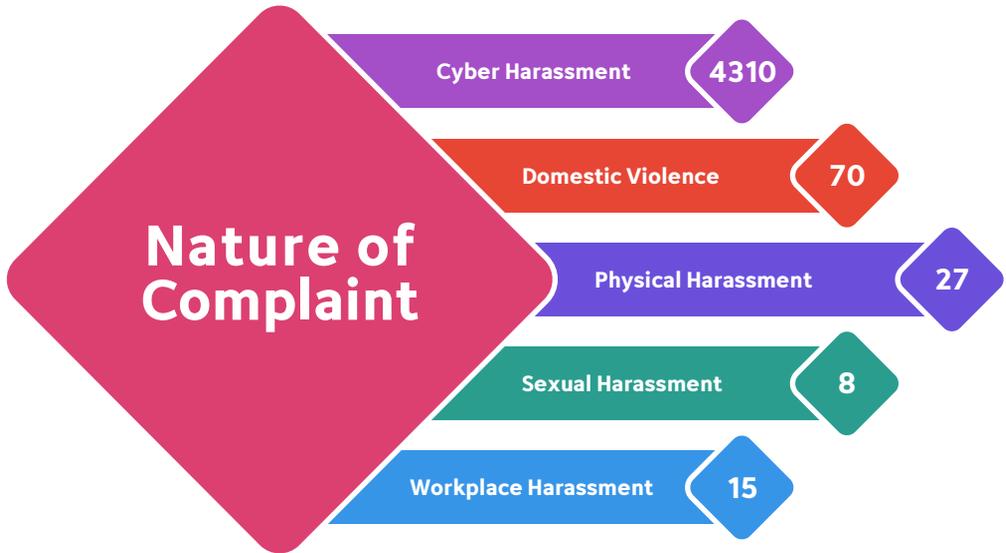


The Helpline's policies on maintaining caller confidentiality when translated into practice mean that we do not ask for nor do we maintain a record of the caller's name or other personal information, with notable exceptions expanded on later. However, whenever appropriate, we do ask for non-personally identifiable demographic information, such as their age, gender, city in which they are based - none of which can be used to identify exactly who the caller might be. This information is partly collected in order to be able to guide them better and partly for research purposes so we can advocate for the Pakistani citizens' rights to greater digital freedoms and security.

We maintain a record of non-personally identifiable information of the complainants who reach out to us to produce this report and advocate for people's online privacy rights. The numbers for individual categories provided in this report may not match the total number of cases, however, because it is not always appropriate to ask for that information, given the nature of our correspondence with the complainant.

In the year 2021, the Cyber Harassment Helpline received 4441 total new cases. 4310 of these cases were related to online harassment, but as a rule, for other cases the Helpline connects callers to more appropriate resources whenever possible. These numbers account for cases received through the main Helpline, Helpdesk email, and social media accounts.

Helpline Calls	Helpdesk Emails	Social Media	Total number of cases
3381	693	367	4441



On average, we received 370 cases per month but there was a significant rise in the number of cases received between March and September. July was the most significant month, peaking at 712 cases received. In response to this, the Helpline expanded its services to 7 days a week from May to September. This expansion consequently led to even more cases being recorded because of increased accessibility during these months. No definite research was conducted to ascertain the reason for the initial increase in complaints, but most complainants during this time reported hearing about the Helpline through social media. During this month, two significant cases of violence against women were highlighted by the media.<sup>1314</sup> In response to these shocking incidents, the Cyber Harassment Helpline number was among the resources for help shared widely by social media users to raise awareness, which could help explain the rise in the number of cases. It cannot be said for sure whether incidents of online harassment actively increased during these months, or whether complainants felt more compelled to seek help.

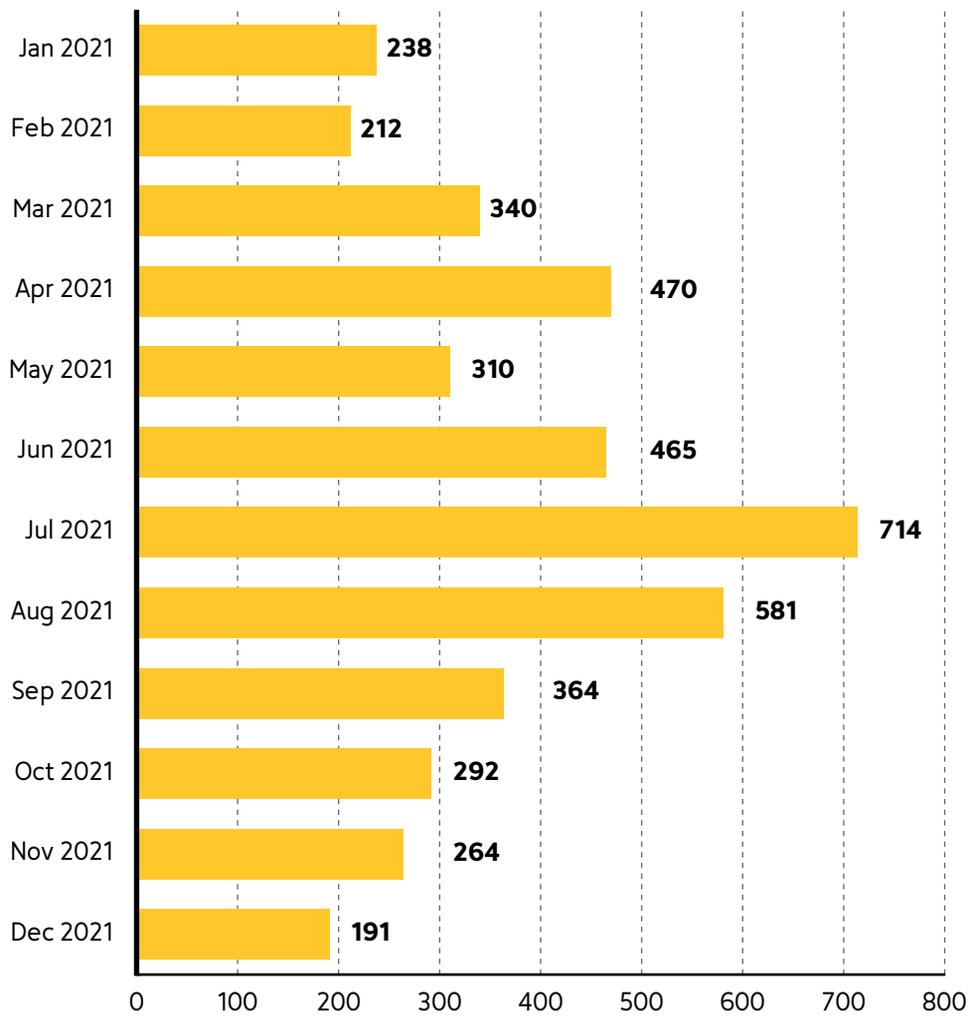
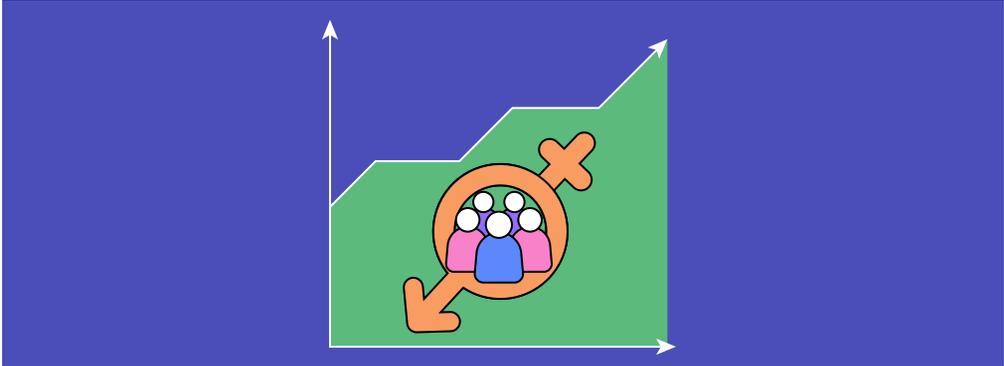


Figure 1: Number of cases received by the Helpline each month

# GENDER BREAKDOWN



The Helpline strives to be a safe and confidential space for women and gender minorities to seek help if they face online harassment, but we cater to complaints from all genders and backgrounds. Contrary to prior research<sup>15</sup> which finds that more men report facing online harassment,<sup>16</sup> our statistics reveal that in approximately 68% of the cases, women are the targets. Less than 1% of the complainants who reach out to the Helpline belong to a gender minority. This however, cannot be taken to reflect the general pattern in which different genders face online harassment in Pakistan considering that many cases go unreported<sup>17</sup> and that this Helpline is just one resource available in the country which includes law enforcement mechanisms as well. Furthermore, many people might not know about the Helpline or willingly decide not to reach out. The numbers and breakdown provided below reflect the callers who reached out to the Helpline:

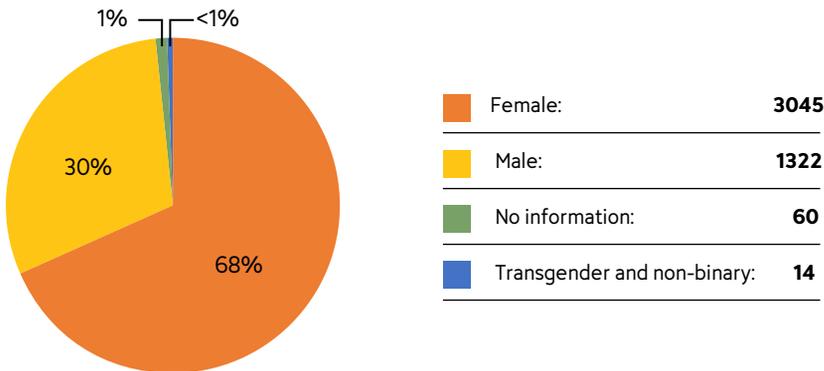


Figure 2: Gender distribution of complainants

Not all people who were targeted contacted the Helpline directly; approximately 13.5% of the people who contacted the Helpline were doing so on behalf of someone else. Of these, most of the callers reached out on behalf of a friend or immediate family member. Despite these numbers, a more significant feature in our calls, especially where people discuss their own predicament, is the need for privacy, especially from people in their immediate circle. Women in particular are hesitant in seeking support from their friends or family, fearing their reputations will be tarnished and they will be punished instead.

# AGE

The majority of people, around 69%, who sought guidance were between the ages of 18 and 30. Of this age group, approximately 78% were women. These numbers hint that younger women are more likely to be targeted through online harassment, while at the same time suggesting that these same women may be more likely to seek help, given the right resources and awareness.

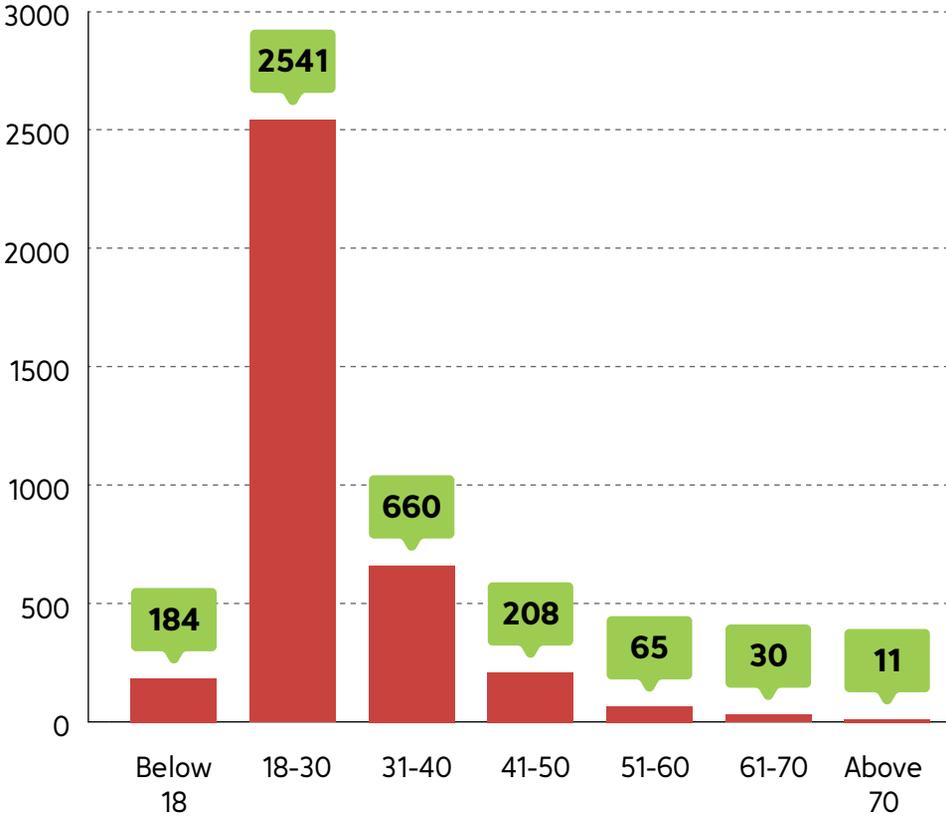


Figure 3: Age distribution of complainants

# GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

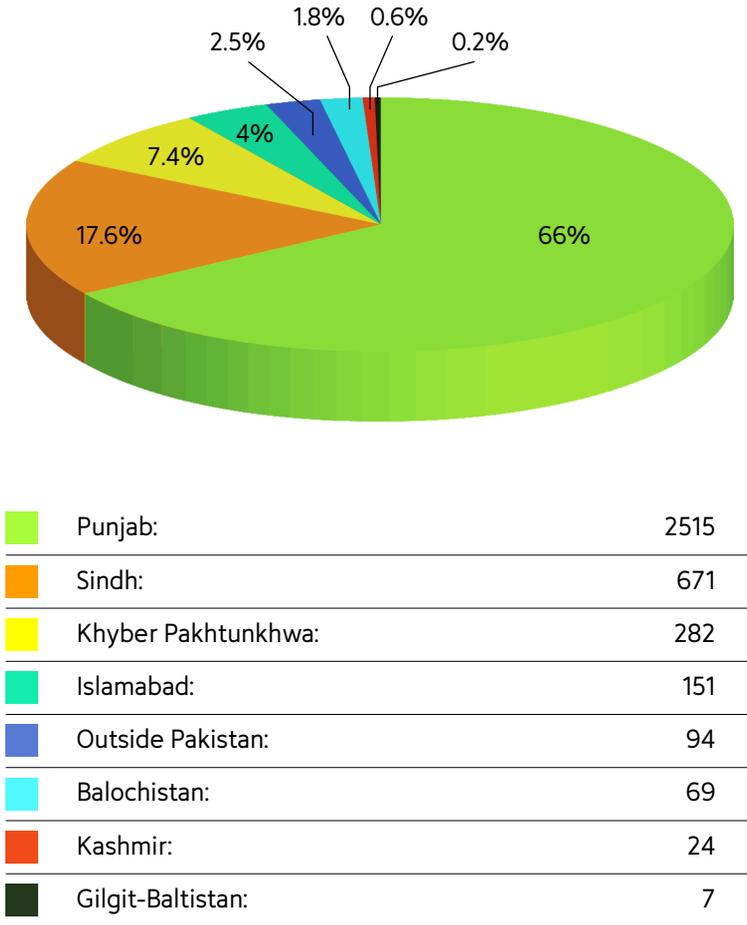


Figure 4: Provincial distribution of cases received

The designated law enforcement agency for cyber crimes in Pakistan is the FIA. While there is an option to start the registration process for a complaint online, they require anyone wishing to pursue the complaint to physically visit their office for verification of the complaint. The FIA has cyber crime wings in only 15 locations across the country, however, making it an arduous process to go through. 32.5% of the complaints we received were from an area without an FIA cyber crime wing, indicating that a significant percentage of complainants would have to travel outside of the confines of

their town just to initiate the process. The Helpline collects data on the city that callers contact us from and categorizes them on the basis of whether there is a relevant FIA office in their vicinity.

As mentioned before, women and girls are already hesitant to seek help from within their immediate circles. Our callers have also mentioned the conservative culture, particularly in smaller towns, lack of safe and reliable transportation facilities, lack of financial independence, and lack of freedom of movement as reasons that make it extremely difficult for them to travel alone to a different city simply to register a complaint. It should be noted that these gendered barriers prevent reporting even in areas where FIA offices are located, though felt more acutely in uncovered areas. The graph below shows the number of callers from each city where an FIA Cyber Crime Wing is located; not everyone opts for or even needs legal recourse but there were a considerable number of complaints received from people who would have had to travel to do so. The inaccessibility of the law enforcement agency also creates a hindrance in the reporting of such crimes, and thus the extent to which policy makers pay attention to such crimes and how much resources they devote for reforms.

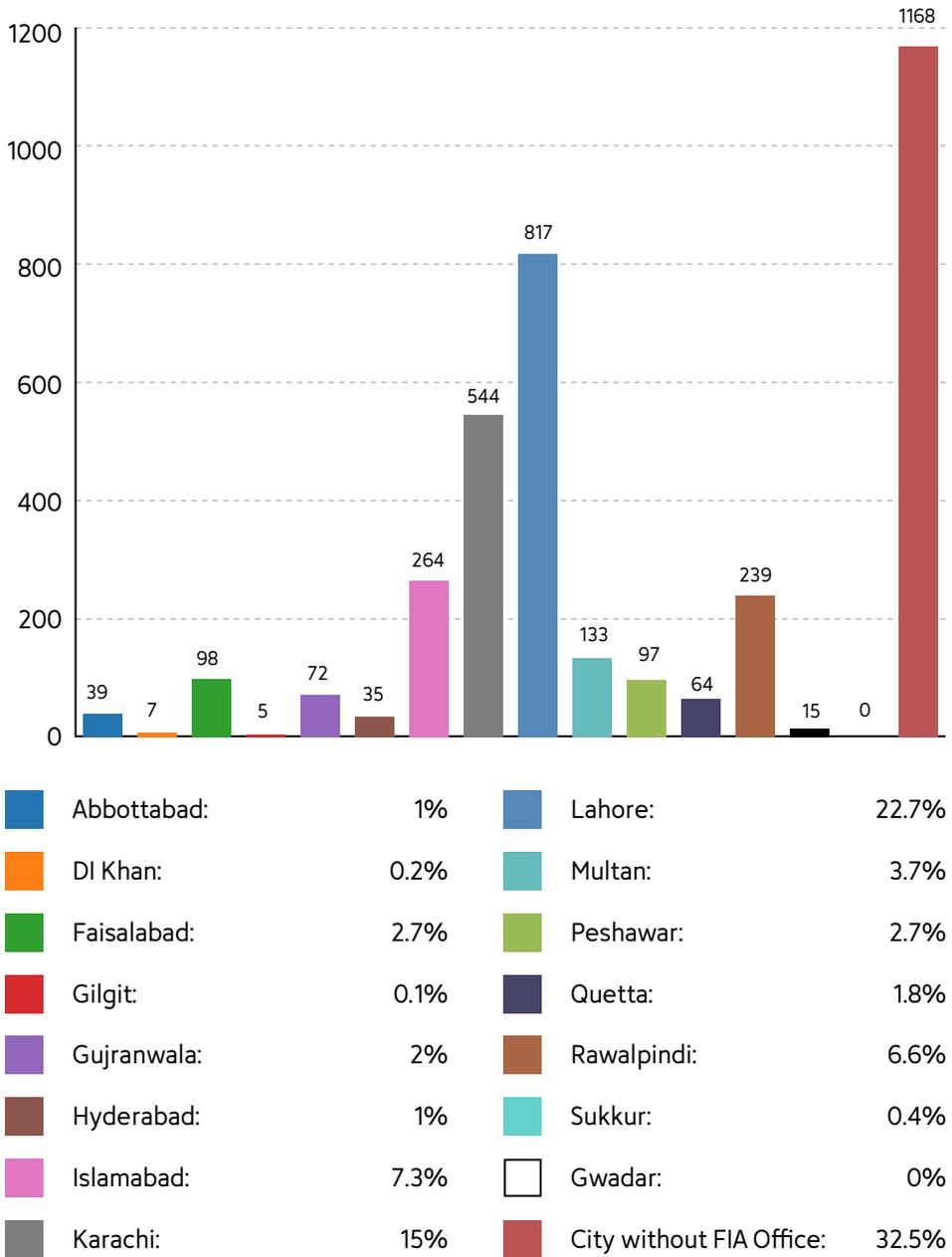
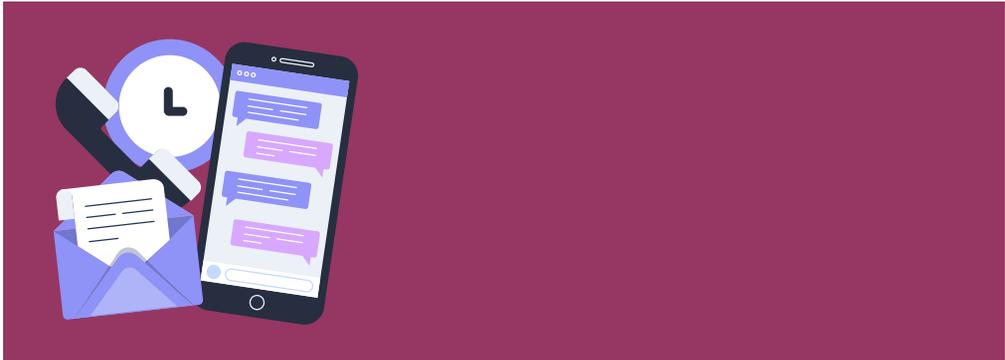


Figure 5: These numbers correspond only to the number of people calling to discuss a cyber harassment case. In certain situations, there is no information regarding the complainants' location, so the total number here does not equal the number of total cyber harassment complaints.

# SOURCE OF CONTACT



In order to expand our outreach to the wider public, we ask our callers how they were directed to the Helpline whenever it is appropriate to do so. The question is treated as optional if, for example, when the caller is under extreme emotional distress we do not burden them by asking such questions.

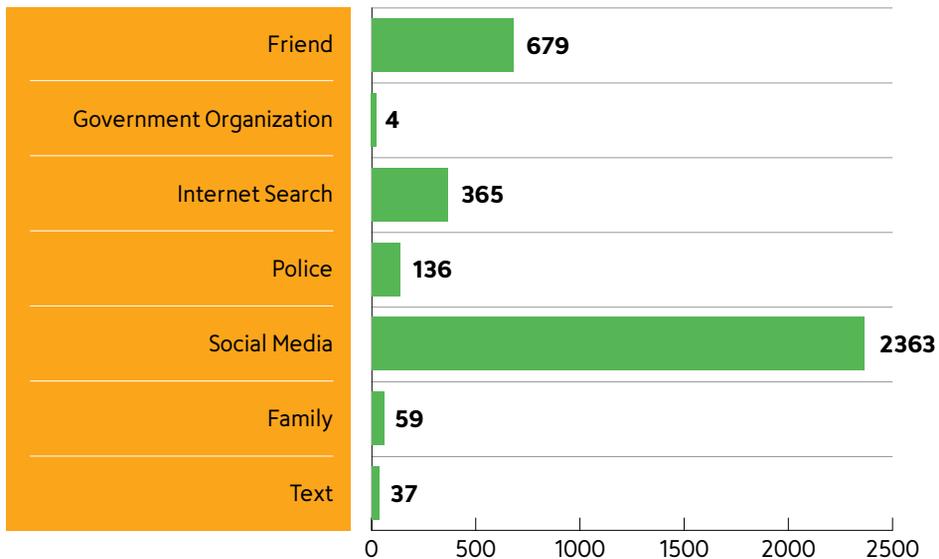
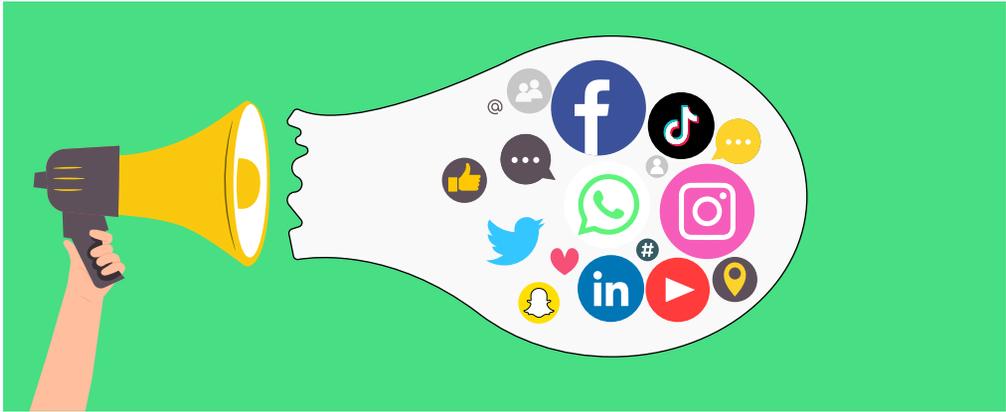


Figure 6: The different sources through which people learn about the Helpline. Note that only the sources that were most frequently quoted have been included in this graph.

Collecting this information helps us to understand what forms of outreach work best and for greater awareness raising as well. We have seen that direct referrals from friends and family, especially through social media,

influences people to contact the Helpline the most. A few government organizations also refer complainants to our Helpline, whereas 'text' refers to an awareness text message circulated among DRF's network of journalists.

# PLATFORM



We maintain data about the platform where the complainants face harassment in order to prepare ourselves to provide them with immediate redressal options, as well as provide solid data to tech companies and government agencies so they can adapt policies and safety mechanisms accordingly.

Online harassment isn't restricted to social media; as digital platforms and interconnected networks take over the systems that run our daily life, they also increase the opportunities and forms of harassment. Even so, harassment faced on social media platforms and direct messaging apps constitute about 60% of the reported incidents. Many of the tech companies that own these platforms have not invested adequate resources in understanding and adapting their policies and practices to diverse cultural norms that affect users of their product from varying contexts. There is a significant gap between their community guidelines and reporting policies and the cultural norms that dictate what can be considered as harmful for people, especially women, in South Asia. DRF tries to bridge that gap by escalating certain cases and explaining the context behind them, but it remains that these companies have not adapted themselves to the needs of global south countries despite raking in an increasing number of users. Over-reliance on automation and lack of thought given to specific contexts is emerging as a major issue for effective content moderation.

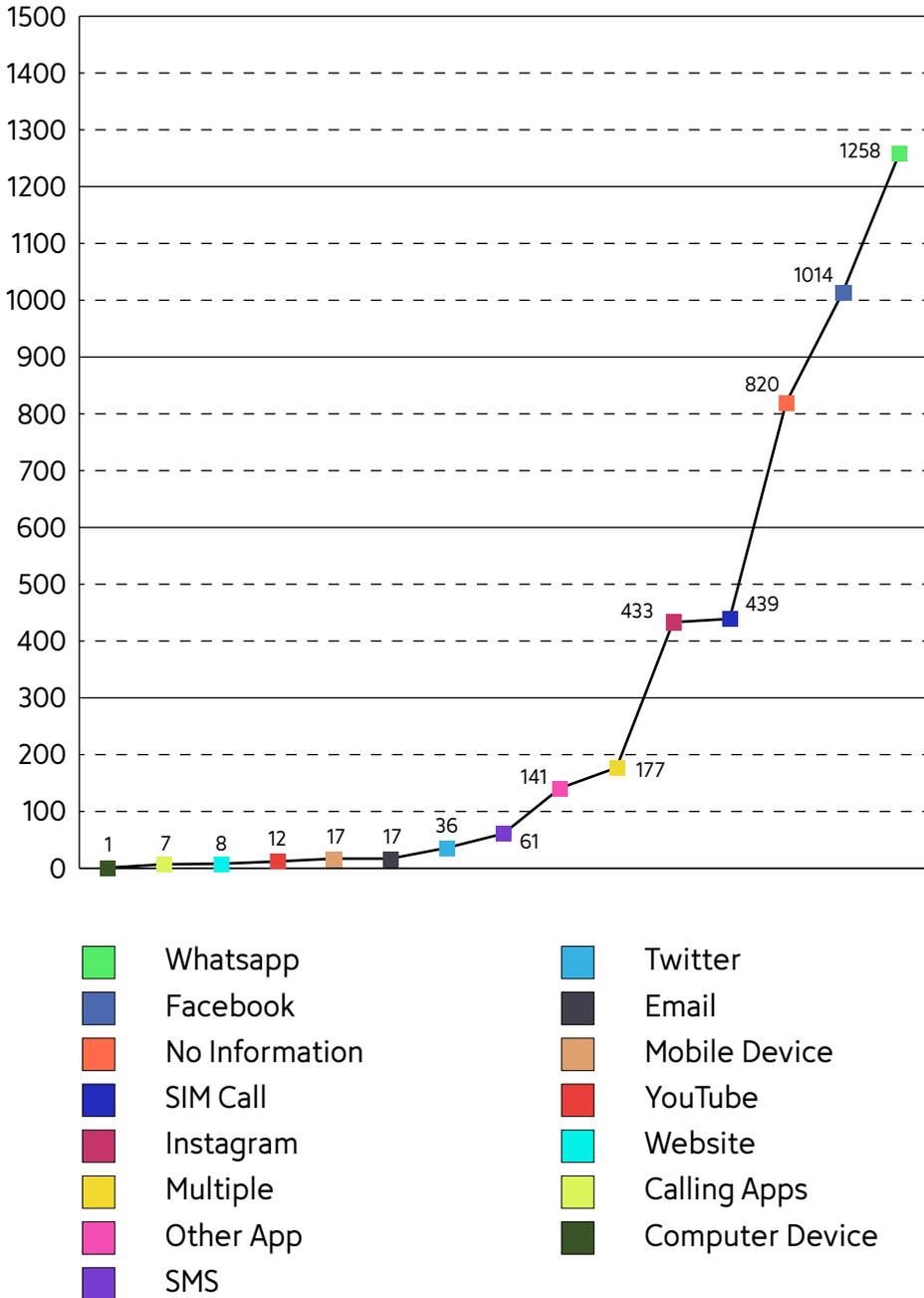


Figure 7: Most frequently mentioned platforms where complainants faced harassment

# REFERRALS



The Helpline provides legal assistance and digital security advice to callers, but callers are sometimes in need of additional services that we cannot provide. In those cases, we refer them to relevant government agencies assigned to provide relief to citizens, to trusted private legal and mental health services, and to social media companies. These records are kept to keep track of what kinds of services callers are most in need of and what is actually available to them. This also helps in cross-checking which cities these services are required in and where they are not available in the country.

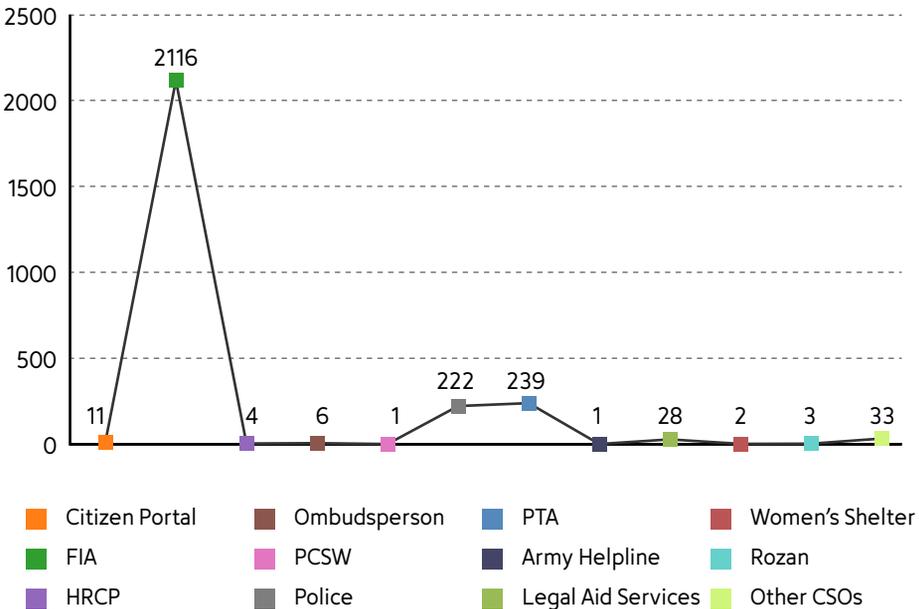


Figure 8: Organizations and resources that the Helpline further referred complainants to.

## TYPES OF COMPLAINTS/HARASSMENT FACED

As mentioned before, prior research on the subject<sup>1819</sup> suggests trends that men are more likely to report having experienced online harassment, which is contrary to the data collected at the Helpline which suggests that women are more likely to experience online harassment. However, the other aspect of the aforementioned research was that women are more likely to report instances of online sexual harassment and have their personal information, including pictures, distributed and edited.

In the Pakistani context, the Helpline data from 2021 shows that on average, men are more likely to report cases of fake profiles and hacking attempts, whereas women are targeted more with blackmailing and non-consensual use of their information, including but not limited to their pictures, videos, and phone numbers, which makes them considerably more vulnerable. However, even with fake profiles and hacked accounts, women are more likely to be severely affected emotionally and have their reputations damaged in society than men. The patriarchal nature of society does not simmer down in an online space, and in a culture where the presence of women and their occupation of public spaces is looked down upon, digital spaces and social media are only considered as even wider public arenas. Generally, when women lose control of their presence online, they have much more to lose than men.



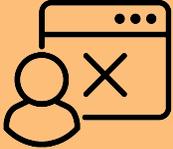
General Inquiry

**270**



Fake Profile

**283**



Account Disabled

**78**



Financial Fraud

**319**



Blackmailing

**893**



FIA Related

**23**



Bullying

**50**



Hacked Account

**330**



Defamation

**244**



Hate Speech

**39**



Impersonation

**45**



Physical Violence

**28**



Login Issues

**18**



Social Engineering

**116**



NCUI

**727**



Stalking

**17**



Unsolicited Contact

**423**



Stolen Device

**7**



Online Stalking

**13**



Threats

**291**



Phishing

**15**



Abusive Comments

**22**



No Information

**81**

## SERVICES PROVIDED



The Helpline aims to provide legal assistance, digital security advice and basic counseling services to our callers. The Helpline Associates are supported by a legal advisory team and digital security experts to attend to callers' needs. Over the years, responding to the need of the time, we have expanded our services to provide in-person counsel and legal support to complainants wishing to file a legal complaint with the FIA cyber crime cell in Lahore. In such situations, we do collect and often store more personal information about complainants in order to understand their case better and therefore advise them better. This personal information, such as name, phone number, pictures which form part of evidence, etc., are stored during the period in which the Helpline lawyer is following up on the case and is not shared with anyone outside of the Helpline team.

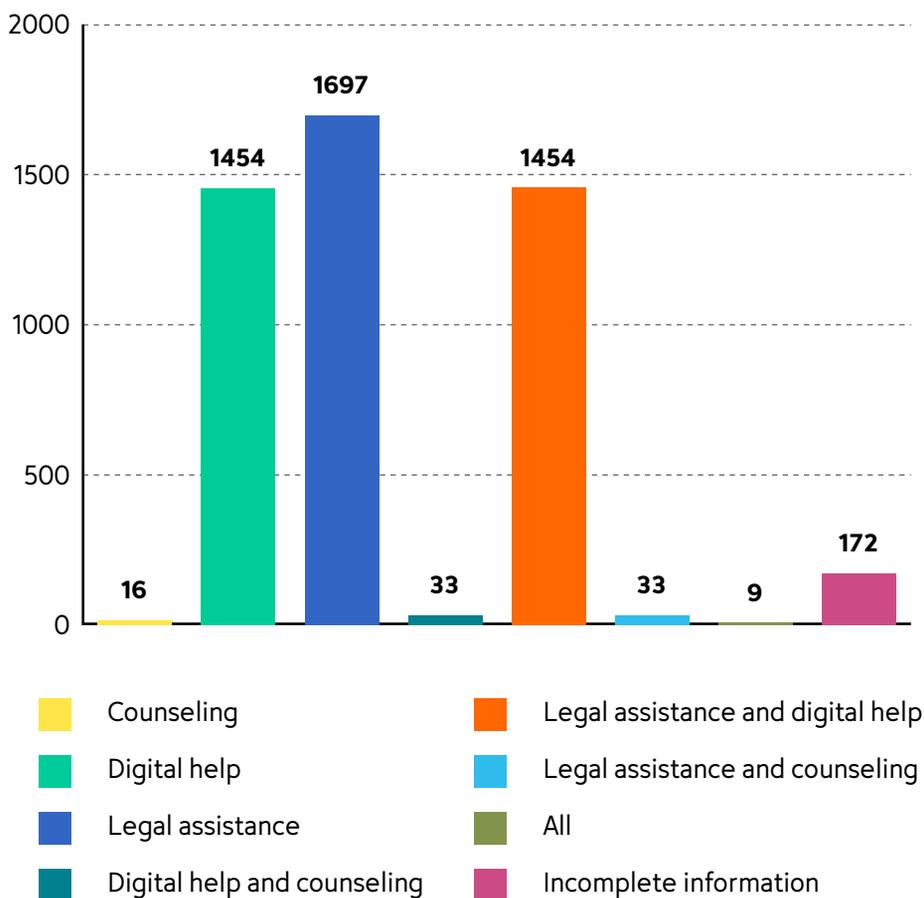


Figure 9: Type of immediate assistance provided by the Helpline to each complainant.

The Helpline also provides specialized assistance to vulnerable professionals and minorities at risk. The heightened threat that they face due to online attacks when combined with a lack of institutional protections makes this specialized assistance necessary, especially when an individual lies at the intersection of two or more of the vulnerable categories we have assigned for our record. Women journalists, for instance, face a certain degree of misogynistic and hypersexualized remarks because of their gender but also face censorship and professional attacks, causing adverse effects on their personal and professional lives. In the next section, four journalists recount the online harassment they faced, its effects on their motivation and mental health, the obstacles in career growth they had to face and what steps they took to overcome them.

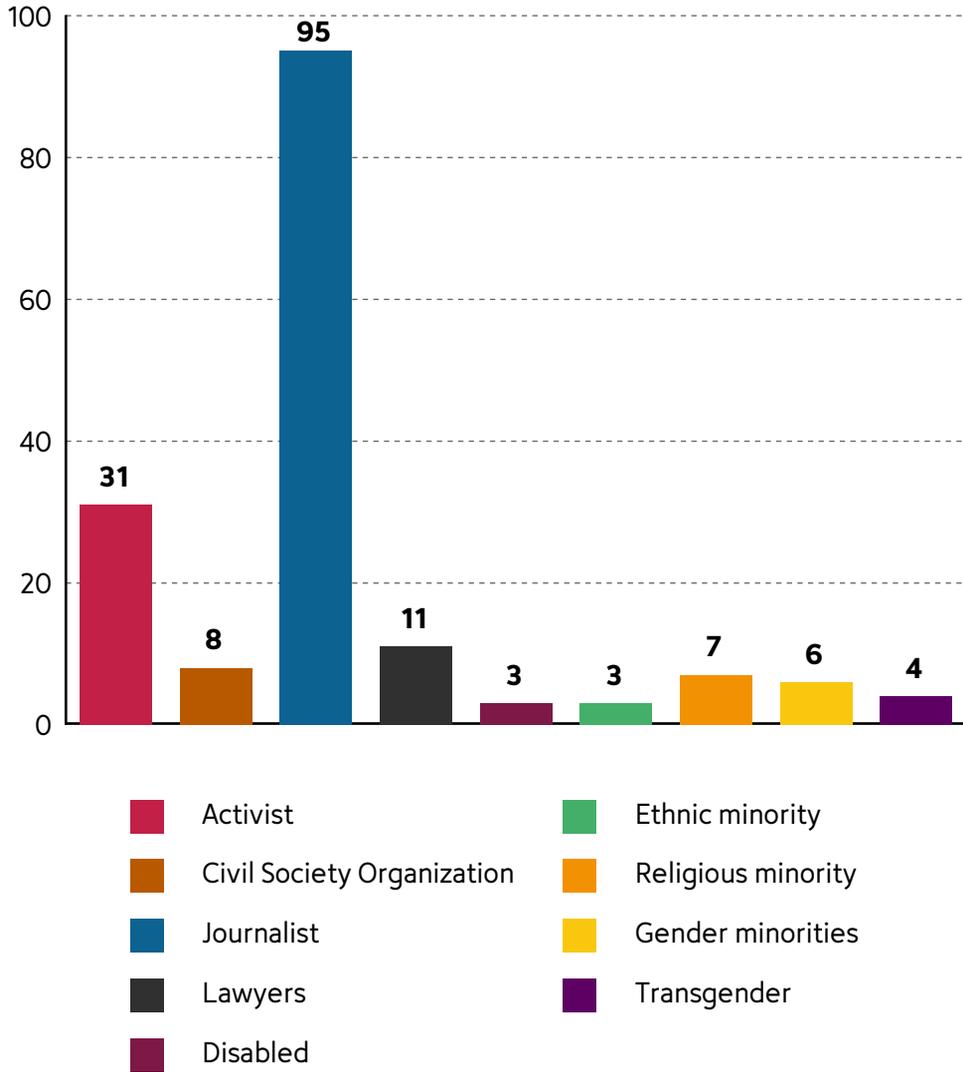


Figure 10: Vulnerable groups assisted by the Helpline

# JOURNALISTS CASE STUDY



## Ambreen Shabbir

Ambreen is a freelance e-journalist and researcher with over five years of experience.

### Harassment and its effects

Some people created fake accounts to abuse and harass me under my online feature stories on Facebook. My sister's account also got hacked around that time. I am an active user of Facebook and my experience with Twitter is better than the former platform in regards to engagement with the audience.

*"I wanted to pursue the case legally but the sheer amount of accounts harassing me and the long procedure of FIA compelled me to think otherwise."*

The abuse and constant online bullying affected my mental health adversely and the hacking of my sister's account made us more cautious about our online presence, which also made the atmosphere at home tense. As a result, it reduced my professional productivity and I started to self-doubt. I used to counter check facts several times in my reports to avoid any backlash. I wanted to pursue the case legally but the sheer amount of accounts harassing me and the long procedure of FIA compelled me to think otherwise. The whole process infuriated me for a long time and I believe the laws are there but not implemented properly.

The perception of people regarding journalists is not good, especially for women journalists; they hold a lot of unfair biases against them. Male colleagues are also doing the same stories but they don't face the same extent of online violence as female journalists receive.

### **Experience of the Helpline**

I am a researcher and when we write about cyber security and digital rights, the name of Nighat Dad and DRF is the first one that appears in our search bars. For the Helpline, there is a lot of social media coverage and I got to know about the process from there as well. As far as my case is concerned, I received very efficient and informative support from the helpline officer who attended my call instantly unlike my previous experiences with other helplines. The support officer also guided me patiently about the legal process in case I want my case to be investigated and provided digital security help.



*“Most people recommended that I should not legally investigate it because according to them this is the most common form of online violence that happens with everyone in this field.”*

I think there should be dedicated helplines at the Government level for the public which should be accessible, efficient and trustworthy.

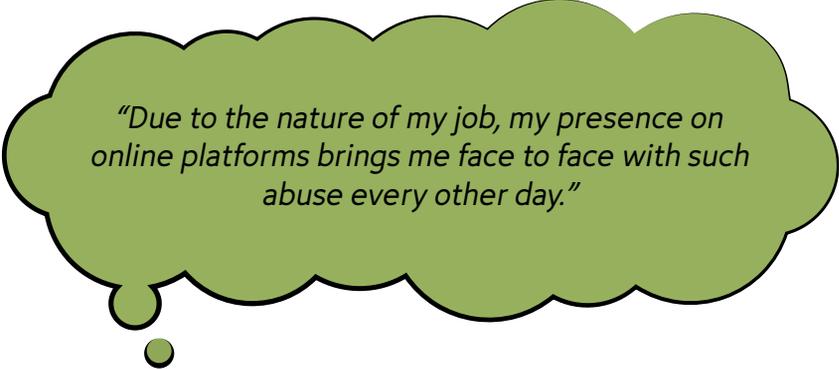
This kind of online abuse has been normalized in our society and most people recommended that I should not legally investigate it because according to them this is the most common form of online violence that happens with everyone in this field.

## Asma Shirazi

Asma Shirazi is a senior journalist and political commentator. She won the Peter Mackler Award of Courage and Ethical Journalism in 2014.

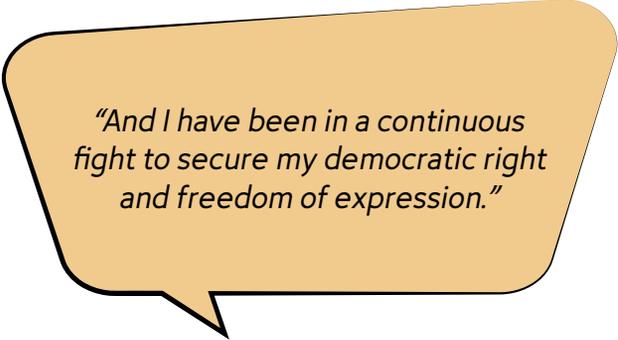
### Harassment at a Mass Scale

I have been a soft target of extreme organized online violence, bullying and fake propaganda both about my professional and personal life for the last four years. Due to the nature of my job, my presence on online platforms brings me face to face with such abuse every second day and I have been in a continuous fight to secure my democratic right and freedom of expression. Nighat Dad always supported me to escalate the abusive posts on social media platforms and gave me legal assistance to counter these attacks.



*“Due to the nature of my job, my presence on online platforms brings me face to face with such abuse every other day.”*

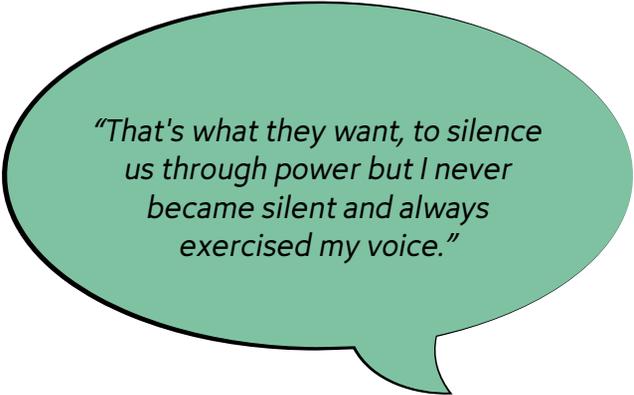
Recently, as a response to my column about the policies of the Government, I received massive and violent online propaganda against me which was trending on Twitter for several days. My character was assassinated, I was declared a foreign agent and also received filthy abuse against both myself and my family. These were coming from multiple accounts, so how much can we fight with them especially when they are sitting behind their keyboards? Nighat Dad again supported me during these violent campaigns and gave me legal and digital assistance to pursue my case.



*“And I have been in a continuous fight to secure my democratic right and freedom of expression.”*

### **Deleterious Impact**

I am a very composed and strong-headed woman but this cycle of continuous violence gave me mental stress and resulted in self-censorship. I have never restricted comments on my posts but recently I started doing that due to highly abusive and lethal comments by various accounts. The never-ending online abuse eventually gives you mental stress especially when you are unable to express your fury and counter-narrative against all the allegations because you cannot respond to every other account and abuse. I somehow composed myself but there are a lot of other women journalists who have gone through extreme mental trauma and left online platforms entirely for their own sanity. That's what they want, to silence us through power but I never became silent and always exercised my voice. My husband is a journalist too and he understands the kind of abuse I am receiving though he has left Twitter long ago.



*“That's what they want, to silence us through power but I never became silent and always exercised my voice.”*

I have never thought of myself as a woman professionally but as a human. However, recently after facing sheer character assassination, gender-based abuses, allegations using the religious card and legal cases against me for being a traitor, now I believe this is not only due to my profession but another

layer of gender-based violence on a woman journalist is involved in such organized propaganda. Women are soft targets for such violence because society never supports them and I know such examples where they leave this profession due to pressure or suppress their voices. But other than gender marginalization, I think being a democratic journalist who voices their concerns against the state or agencies makes me a core target.

There is a huge lack of awareness about digital rights and laws in Pakistan. Many organizations are working for the rights but I think we need more courage to fight with the system and power.

## **Gharida Farooqi**

Gharida Farooqi has been in the journalism field for the past 18 years and is currently a senior anchorperson with a prime time TV show.

### **Gendered Disinformation**

A few months ago I gave a critique against the ruling Prime Minister on his incorrect usage of historical facts and corrected them on Twitter with a video of his original speech in the United Nations. After this tweet, a non-consensual and private video of a leader of the opposition party went viral on social media platforms, but the vitriol was targeted towards me as well by trending fake propaganda that the lady in the video, who was barely visible in the clip, was me. Different clips from my news programs with the concerned politician were also altered with obscene language and abuse and I was accused of having a romantic affair with him based on the spurious logic that I had interviewed him often. Moreover, they also took pictures and videos from my personal account and programs to compare my jewellery and clothes with the lady in that viral video. Some accounts also edited and tampered my pictures and accessories to manipulate the audience. The campaign went on for several days. I have been a victim of online violence and targeted harassment since 2014. It happens with me more often because I speak up against the ruling party or law enforcement agencies. My name was top trending on Twitter for a couple of weeks and clicking on the trend led towards porn images, obscene language and abuse.

### **DRF's Assistance**

In all of this online chaos, Nighat Dad approached me and DRF released a statement for my solidarity and support. She always supported me throughout this journey and before that as well. DRF also escalated some of

the posts and tampered images with social media channels to have them removed.

*“Some accounts also edited and tampered my pictures and accessories...The campaign went on for several days. It happens with me more often because I speak up against the ruling party or law enforcement agencies. My name was top trending on Twitter... clicking on the trend led towards porn images, obscene language and abuse.”*

### **Impact of Relentless Abuse**

These violent attacks impact your mental health, physical well being and personal life as well as professional productivity. I am fortunately very strong-headed and I don't give much importance to these attacks because my family is also very supportive. But generally, this type of damage can destroy the lives of women in our society and many of them go through this ordeal. However, this bullying and harassment have affected my professional work immensely. It binds you to do self-censorship due to the fake allegations, especially for a woman journalist. For example, another campaign led by a member of the ruling government against me alleged that I had a romantic affair with another prominent politician from the opposing party. I went to the FIA and won the case<sup>20</sup> but due to the influence of the ruling party, the guilty minister got away with it. Now, unconsciously, whenever I interview these politicians my mind keeps censoring my words and questions to avoid any public fury due to the fake propaganda created against both of us. The affected male politician on the other hand also gets conscious to secure his public image while giving any details to me. The nature of our job demands meeting with politicians on a daily basis but when these kinds of rumours are circulating on social media they refrain from meeting that particular woman journalist or start omitting information from her which causes damage to her work. Also, they will prefer meeting male journalists to avoid such scandals. These reasons gradually reduce work opportunities, stories and financial position of female journalists when such organized campaigns, harassment and violence take place against them.



*"It binds you to do self-censorship due to the fake allegations, especially for a woman journalist."*

There are so many laws and more than enough legislation has been done on cyber harassment but there is no enforcement of these laws. Seven of my applications are still pending with the FIA but those in power can manipulate and force the authorities in order to avoid any punishment. Ensuring the enforcement of these laws in Pakistan is required and lacking. They need to enforce those laws ruthlessly and quickly to ensure justice for women, and especially women journalists.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

My nerves are very strong and I never let these trolls affect my mental health because I have created a defence mechanism after all these years of online violence. I never read and go through the comments to save my mental well being. I want to give this advice to every other female journalist to avoid giving importance to such comments of random people. Secondly, talk to the people who are close to you for the catharsis. I talk to my siblings for my own relief. Thirdly, I report these attacks and legally pursue them. I have 6 to 7 cases pending in FIA and this step is to ensure that we are not getting silent or afraid after these attacks and fighting for our rights both legally and socially. This is important for mental and physical well being.

### **Laiba Zainab**

Laiba graduated in the Digital Media Program at the Center for Excellence in Journalism from IBA Karachi. She has worked as a reporter with different media outlets and is currently associated with Justice Project Pakistan as a Communications Officer.

### **Being a vocal woman online**

I shared a rant video on my social media account which was an analysis after the Aurat March in Pakistan and how people misinterpreted the slogans

raised in the march. However, after that, I received extreme online backlash from multiple accounts who threatened me with rape, abused me and my family and created fake propaganda against my character. The cycle didn't end there and keeps following me even now on my posts, both on Facebook and Twitter. If I am speaking about any political issue regarding the responsibility of the ruling party, their followers and members would target me and other women journalists. They use the tool of character assassination for women journalists to defame them and injure the concept of modesty in this patriarchal society.

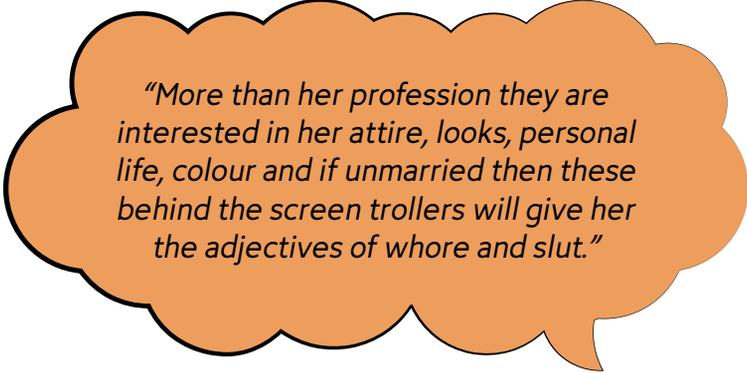


*"I received extreme online backlash from multiple accounts who threatened me with rape, abused me and my family and created fake propaganda against my character."*

All of this violence gave me extreme emotional stress. The impact of mental health was so much that I restricted comments and notifications under my posts. I contemplated discontinuing talking about social issues online because along with online abuse, there were offline threats as well. I received threats such as **"we know where your family is living and what they are doing"** to make me afraid for their lives. This even compelled me to think about whether I should pursue my career or not. There were patches of anxiety where I was deleting my accounts and my passion. But gradually I realized that this is what they want and I won't let them silence my voice.

As a journalist and activist, I believe this profession is a frontline target for such online campaigns but a woman journalist especially becomes a soft target in this gender marginalised society. If you are abusing, it will also come with the name and relation of a woman. For male journalists, if they are uploading pictures with female colleagues, it is fine for society but for the women journalists, it will start another cycle of trolls. More than her profession they are interested in her attire, looks, personal life, colour and if unmarried then these behind the screen trollers will give her the adjectives of whore and slut.

My father is deaf and mute by birth and I wrote something about him and the fears associated with it. A random person on Twitter called me “daughter of the deaf”, as a derogatory term. In other words, they just want to ridicule me for the sake of doing it because they think of a woman as a commodity and do not want to see women in any profession.



*“More than her profession they are interested in her attire, looks, personal life, colour and if unmarried then these behind the screen trolls will give her the adjectives of whore and slut.”*

### **Helpline Intervention**

My experience with the Digital Rights Foundation is always very helpful and they supported me a lot. During all of these online attacks on me, my mother’s account was hacked. She is also a social media activist and expresses herself through satires and writings on Facebook. I contacted the Cyber Harassment Helpline and not only did they give me emotional support but also recovered her Facebook account within a few days. Also, the network of women journalists of DRF is very beneficial for us professionally as well as emotionally. It is really empowering the women journalists as a collective community.

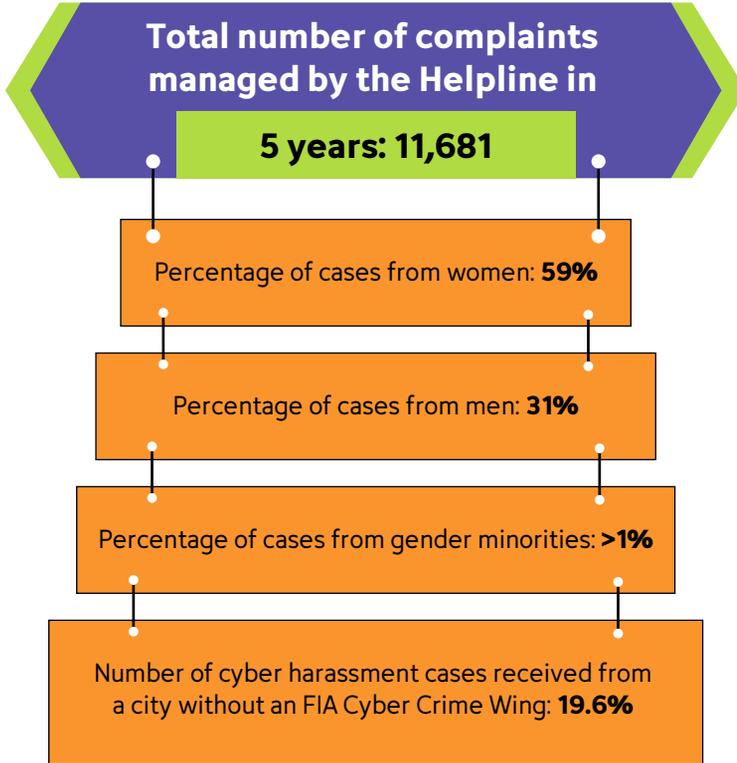
Whenever we think about cyber harassment and reporting it, the first name [that] comes to our minds is DRF and I think it should be FIA because it is the concerned authority by the state. But have to turn to DRF to learn about the procedure of FIA due to the lack of awareness by the state and the irresponsibility of its departments. Also when we report to FIA, the process is so slow that we never receive a response from them for days and if fortunately, we get the response somehow the justice is delayed for years. Not every woman can wait for many years and struggle to get the cases resolved and as a result, they avoid [...] pursuing it legally which gives freedom to these online harassers.

I never spoke about my traumatic online experiences but the first time I ever did that was on the retreat for the women journalists by DRF. I received an

overwhelming response from the women and I felt the courage to speak about my fears from that safe space. However, when I started speaking about it in different professional spaces, I felt a clear difference in the response which was demeaning and casual. Most of the people even asked me to ignore such comments rather than speak about them because they are a part of routine and quite normal in this profession for a woman.

# 5 YEARS DOWN THE LINE

## Executive Summary:



**While we have made changes and adapted ourselves over these years, we are constantly examining how we can do better by:**

- Reaching out more to marginalized communities,
- Developing better referral systems,
- Streamlining our data collection and therefore research more in order to advocate to make internet usage and digital spaces a safer and open space for all,
- Developing a better online presence to educate the public as well as to immediately make people aware of any trends in scams,
- Providing improved mental health services,
- Continue advocacy with major social media companies and developing relations with social media companies where there are none

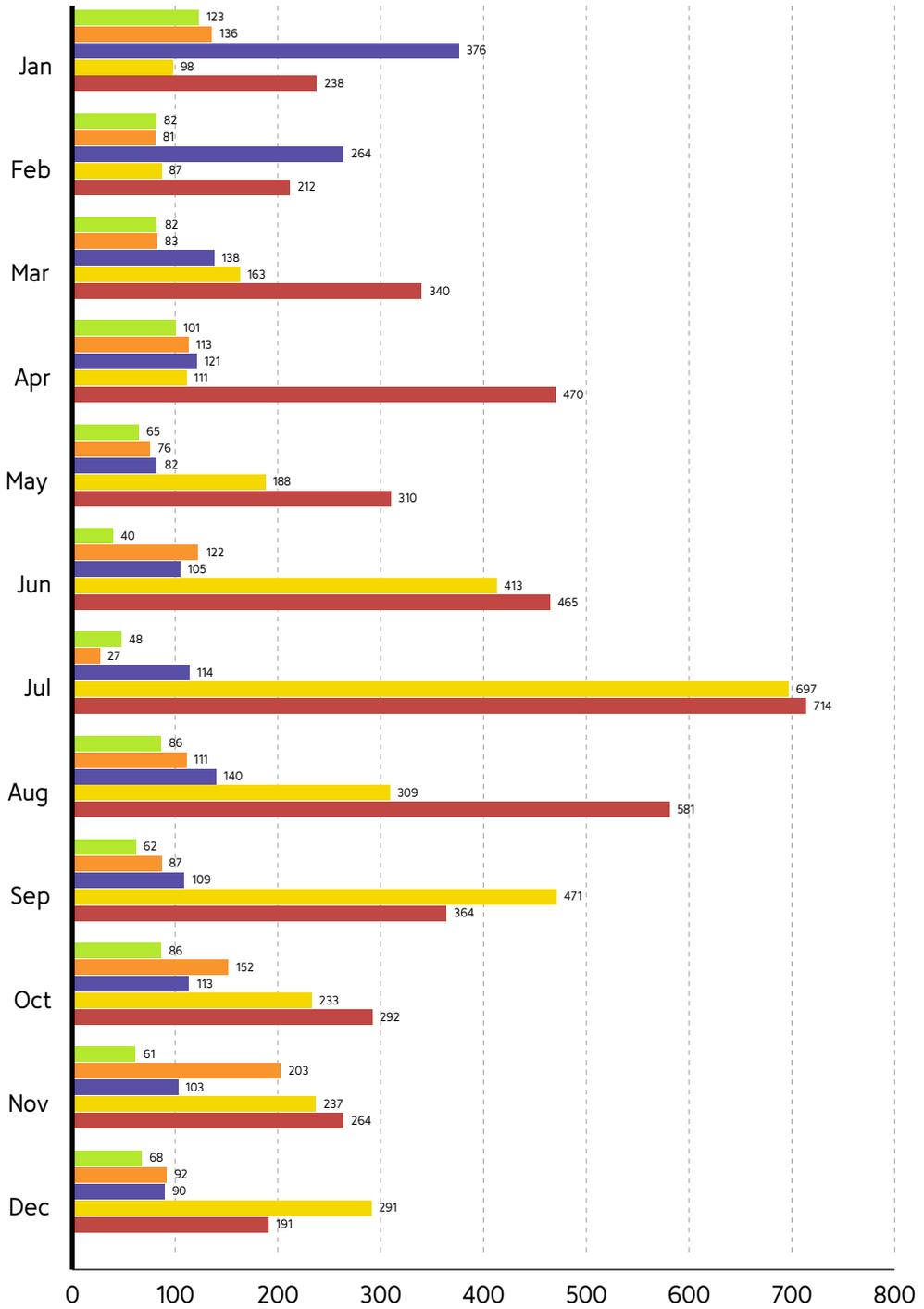
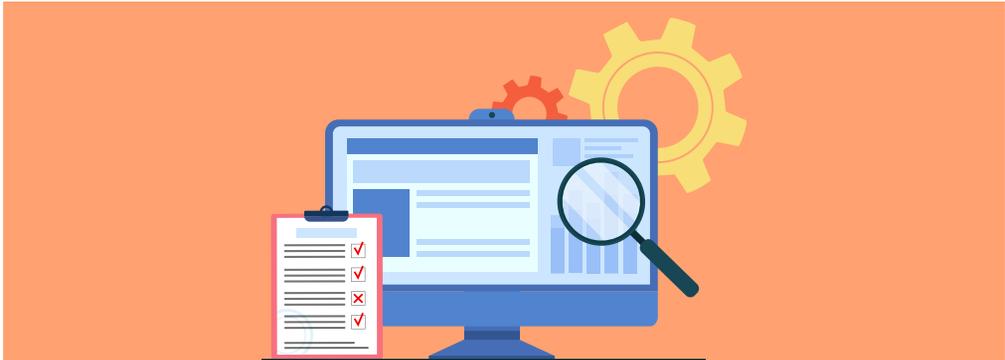


Figure 11: Total number of cases received each year since the Helpline's initiation

## SURVEY RESPONSES



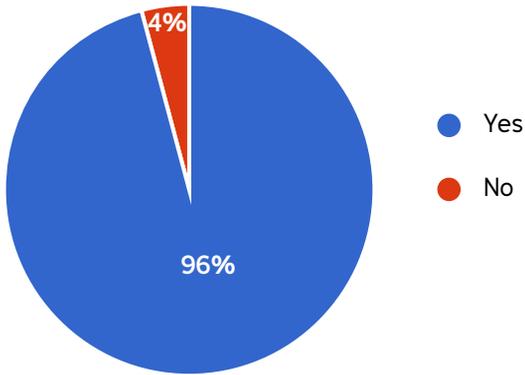
This year, DRF found it was important to start documenting some form of feedback on the Helpline. This includes measuring how many cases were brought to a formal conclusion and the effectiveness of the digital security support provided. Because of the nature of the work of the Helpline, we cannot and do not ask every complainant for feedback, whether immediately or as part of the follow up communication with them. Often, the severity of the case or the emotional state of the beneficiary makes getting feedback from them seem insensitive. This leaves our sample group too small to obtain a complete picture of the impact we have had on our beneficiaries. Furthermore, the definition of a 'resolved' case was found to be very subjective while following up with some of our beneficiaries.

Another aspect that makes it difficult to gauge the extent of the impact we have had is that because we do not always ask for or get permission to keep following up with everyone who contacts the Helpline - it depends on the beneficiary to contact us if and when their matter is resolved. Once we refer someone to law enforcement, for example, we only intervene if they want further assistance with the legal process or if they choose to use the services provided by our law officer, which we can only provide to people living in the same city.

Despite these limitations, we asked some of our more recent beneficiaries to fill out a survey to gauge the impact of the Helpline. This survey is of course limited by the sample size, the educational and professional background of the respondents, as well as their access to technology which determines their ability to fill out the survey easily and their grasp of the English language. We have made note of all these restrictions and are working on making the feedback process more inclusive.

**Did the digital help you received reduce the risk you were facing?**

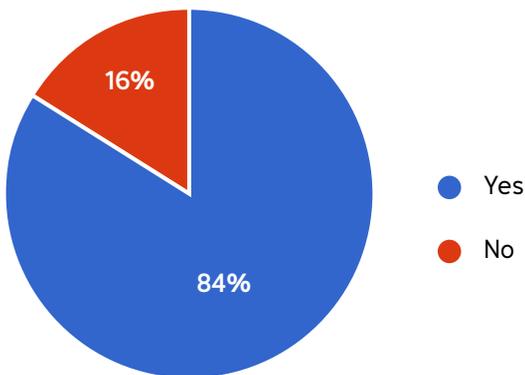
23 responses



Out of 23 respondents to this question, 22 people (96%) responded that the risk they faced had been reduced.

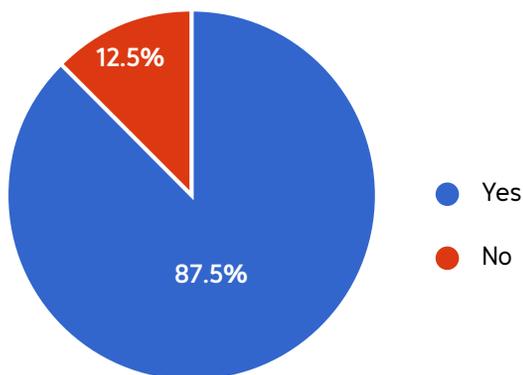
**Did the digital assistance you received help in building short or long term capacity to protect yourself online?**

22 responses



Out of 22 people who responded to this question, 19 responded that they were able to build upon the capacity to protect themselves online.

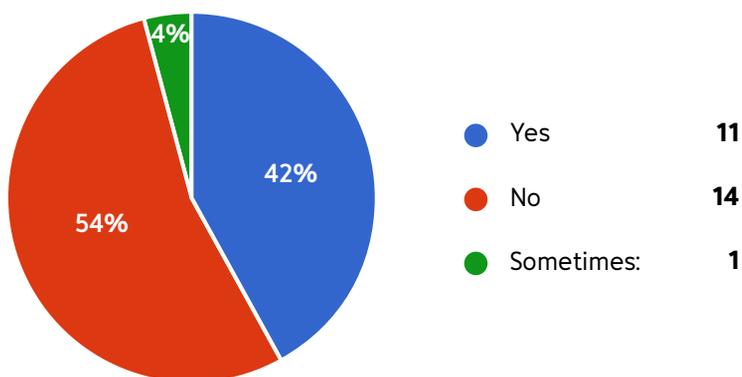
**Did you receive digital advice beyond what was required at the time, e.g. tips to protect yourself in the future?**



Out of 16 people who chose to respond to this question, 14 responded that they had received digital safety tips beyond what was required at the time from the Helpline.

**Did you choose to pursue legal action, if necessary?**

26 responses

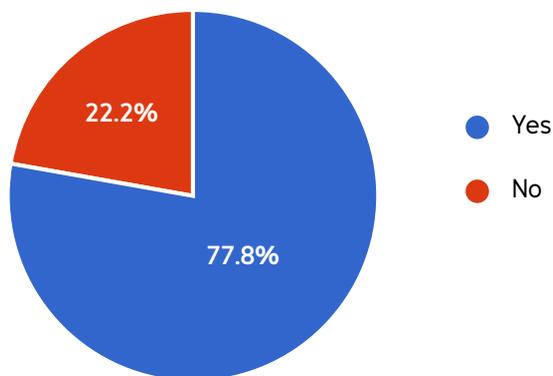


Generally, the confidence in law enforcement agencies is low in Pakistan, especially for women. While the cyber crime wing FIA leaves much to be desired, it does operate in a more convenient way for women than other law

enforcement agencies, and so we encourage our callers to report crimes. The survey also asked respondents whether they felt more confident in seeking legal recourse after speaking with the Helpline and 77% of the respondents replied affirmatively.

### **Did you feel more confident seeking legal help after speaking with the helpline?**

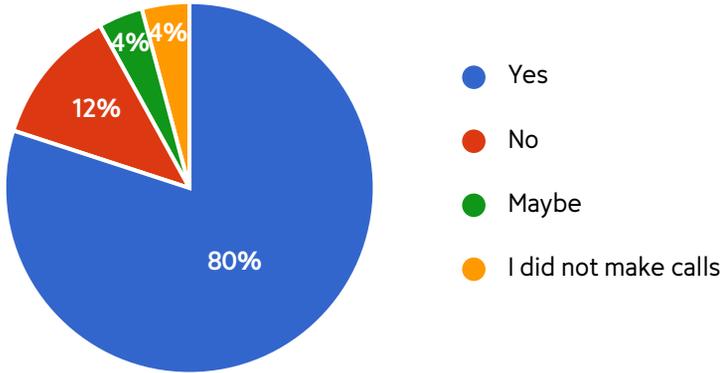
27 responses



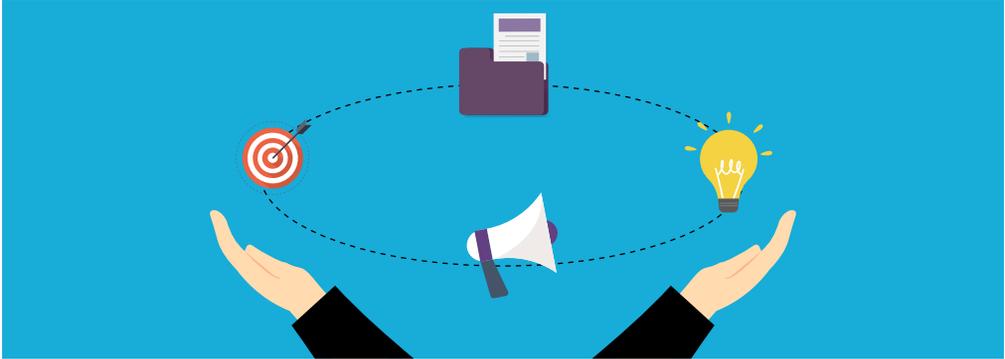
One of the goals of the helpline is to provide the beneficiaries with a safe space to talk about their experience and to provide help and emotional support to people who don't feel comfortable speaking up in a society that looks down on women and minorities taking up space in public. The emotional support and confidential and judgment-free space that the Helpline provides is especially important for gender minorities who usually cannot turn to the law and have limited alternate avenues to seek help. 82% of the respondents of the survey answered that they felt emotionally supported when talking to a representative at the Helpline. Of these respondents, 15 (68%) were either journalists, activists, gender minorities, or part of the civil society.

**If you spoke on the phone with a helpline associate, did you feel emotionally supported?**

25 responses



# RECOMMENDATIONS



## **For Policy makers:**

The state of Pakistan needs to take concrete steps to root out online harassment. We recommend the the following steps in achieving that:

### **1. Regular reporting in accordance with Guidelines:**

Ensure that the 6 months report by the FIA, required under section 53 of PECA, is submitted regularly to Parliament and without delay. In the past, the FIA has failed to submit its report in the first two years of PECA's enactment. This report should be made accessible to the public.

### **2. Public education:**

The government should collaborate with organisations working on gender to conduct gender sensitisation workshops in schools and communities. A focus on gender sensitization should also be worked into the government's public awareness campaigns and official curriculum.

### **3. Improving the Digital Gender Divide:**

In Pakistan, the digital gender divide is among the highest in the world. According to the GSMA "Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021",<sup>21</sup> Pakistan had the widest mobile ownership gender gap as women were 34% less likely than men to own a mobile phone due to economic inequality and patriarchal attitudes. 20% of women report that disapproval from their family is the top barrier to mobile internet usage, while only 1% of men in Pakistan reported this as a barrier at all. Policies should be introduced to address the gender digital gap by removing the financial, safety and social barriers that women face when accessing digital devices and internet spaces. This includes making internet access more accessible in certain geographical

areas and improving literacy rates, which was quoted as the top barrier to smartphone adoption for both genders in Pakistan.

#### **4. Digital literacy and safety incorporated in curriculum:**

Internet education and safety courses should be included in school curriculums. Topics such as consent, social media ethics, safety practices and what is unlawful will help the younger generation become more confident and aware while exploring the internet rather than give in to the fear of an unknown space.

#### **5. Gender sensitisation for law enforcers:**

The government should collaborate with organisations working on gender to conduct gender sensitisation workshops with law enforcement, including police and the FIA, so that staff dealing with complaints of gendered online violence can overcome patriarchal attitudes. DRF has conducted such workshops with the FIA in the past and welcomes all such future collaboration.

#### **6. Data protection:**

DRF urges the government of Pakistan to enact meaningful legislation on digital privacy or data protection after consultation with civil society and the general public. The right to dignity and privacy as guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution of Pakistan for every citizen should also be protected.

#### **7. Decriminalise defamation laws:**

Online defamation is criminalised under section 20 of PECA and has been used to silence survivors of sexual harassment and assault, especially those using social media to share their experiences of harassment. We strongly recommend that the online defamation section in PECA be repealed, and those aggrieved by online speech against their person can seek alternate remedies under civil defamation laws (that too be safeguards for survivors of sexual violence).

#### **8. Support work of civil society:**

DRF urges policy makers to take measures to ensure the smooth functioning of civil society organizations and nonprofits working on digital rights and gender.

## **Recommendations for law enforcement:**

Over the past few years, the FIA has expanded its resources for tackling online harassment by increasing the number of offices for the NR3C. DRF also appreciates the inclusion of civil society groups in the planning stage, which gave the civil society a voice at the table and ensured diverse representation and better decision-making. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go in terms of addressing online harassment, and we hope that the incumbent government continues to see online harassment as a serious and pressing issue.

### **1. Greater resource allocation:**

The increase in resources should neither be limited to meet the current demand nor the current rate of growth of complaints. With the increased access to ICTs and awareness regarding cybercrimes, the FIA will need to respond to an unprecedented number of complaints and a higher future demand. The allocation of resources, thus, needs to take into account these unique circumstances and DRF urges the concerned government departments to increase grants allocated to the FIA. These resources should be dedicated amongst other things to hiring and training more women officers, and to fund the number and capacity of forensic labs all across the country.

### **2. Mechanism to deal with cases in foreign jurisdictions:**

The cyber crime wing lacks the capacity to take action when the accused is located outside despite being empowered to do so under Section 1(4) of PECA. Both the Ministry of Information Technology and Interior Ministry are urged to define “international cooperation” under Section 42 of PECA. DRF recommends that there be at least one officer in each branch dealing with cases in foreign jurisdictions, with specialised training in international law and conflict of laws.

### **3. Increase the functionality of the online complaint portal:**

While the cyber crime wing provides the option to start a complaint process online, they still require complainants to visit the office. The online complaint portal needs to be reenvisioned to better facilitate people, especially women and young girls, who cannot travel long distances to seek justice.

#### **4. Sex-disaggregated data:**

The FIA, while fulfilling its statutory obligation to report to Parliament under Section 53 of PECA, is requested to produce data regarding the number of online harassment cases and the number of cases registered by women under each section of PECA, particularly Sections 20, 21 and 24. These figures should be public as it will allow for better policy-making and allocation of resources.

#### **5. Creation of a separate desk for online harassment within the NR3C:**

Given the specific and complex nature of online harassment cases and the gender sensitivity required for complainants/victims, DRF recommends that a dedicated desk for cyber-harassment be set up within the cyber crime wing to handle cases under Sections 21 and 24 of PECA. This desk should be the first point of contact for complainants of online harassment and equipped with officers specifically trained in the nuances of online harassment, its various forms and gender sensitivity as well as counseling services.

#### **6. Rapid Response Cell:**

Given the urgent nature of certain cases of online harassment, where leaked information can harm personal safety or cause immediate reputational harm, a rapid response cell that is operational 24/7 should be established in addition to the regular operations of the cyber crime wing. Cases marked as urgent should be expedited and dealt with on a priority basis.

#### **7. Privacy and confidentiality:**

Many complainants require the assurance of confidentiality as a prerequisite to reporting. Rule 9 of the PECA Rules lay out protections and requirements for confidentiality for cases involving women and intimate images. The case management system needs to be reworked under strict SOPs to ensure that case details, personal information and evidence is only accessible by authorized personnel, preferably digitally.

#### **8. Develop safeguards against misuse of criminal defamation:**

Section 20 of PECA is regularly being used to file cases against journalists and women speaking out against sexual harassment. The FIA must not allow the weaponization of its processes to be misused for curbing free speech and dissent. It is recommended that a strict criteria be developed through

clear protocols to prevent the registration of cases that silence the press and survivors. It is also recommended that the provisos for criminal defamation contained in section 499 and 500 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) also be read into section 20.

### **9. Greater accessibility for disabled persons:**

Functioning elevators, ramp for wheelchairs, accessible toilet facilities and in-person assistance in filing applications are minimum requirements that every cyber crime office should meet to ensure that disabled persons do not have to face additional hurdles in registering and pursuing complaints.

### **10. Coordination with other departments:**

Given the intersecting nature of online and offline spaces, cases often involve both online and offline crimes and complainants are given contradictory advice regarding the jurisdiction of the police and cyber crime wing. In certain trials given that challans contain both sections of PECA and PPC, there is often back and forth between different courts and judges. DRF recommends that channels of communication between police stations and cybercrime stations be established to ensure that cases can be easily transferred and there is clarity as to where a particular case should be registered, investigated and prosecuted.

### **11. Improved coordination between cyber crime wing branches:**

In situations where the complainant is in one city and the accused in another, there needs to be better coordination and support between different branches of the cyber crime wing to ensure swift investigation. The Headquarters should also carry out an evaluation of all branches to make sure that each branch follows the same protocols.

### **12. Psychological services:**

DRF urges the FIA to increase and keep improving the quality and range of psychological services at every cyber crime office to help complainants deal with the psychological trauma and distress that they experience due to online harassment and violence. All officers at the NR3C, especially those dealing directly with victims, should be trained on how to address trauma and when to refer to more experienced professionals. The cyber crime wing should offer a safe space for victims and help them process their trauma in a constructive and safe manner.

### **13. Case management and tracking system:**

Complainants should be able to track and receive regular updates on the status of their case through an accessible and easy-to-use case management system/portal. Digital copies of the case file and evidence filed should be stored on a secure server to ensure reliable duplicates in case the original case file is lost or tampered with.

### **14. Gender sensitisation:**

Several female complainants who have approached the NR3C have reported being shamed for their choices and discouraged from pursuing cases by officers at the cyber crime wing. DRF has observed that while higher officials, such as deputy directors and assistant directors, are sensitive to these issues and proactively reassure complainants, this attitude is not always reflected in the behavior of individual investigation officers. Since many cases involve sharing of intimate data and gendered harassment, there is a need to ensure that officers, particularly those directly dealing with complainants, as well as the overall environment of the offices, are conducive to female complainants and provide a safe and judgment-free space. DRF recommends that a quota of at least 33% female investigation officers and prosecutors be instituted, and all officers—including the female ones—be given extensive gender sensitivity training. It is also recommended that women's rights organisations be included and allowed to assist in developing these training sessions. Gender sensitisation does not only mean taking into account the specific needs of women but different genders and marginalized communities. Often gender nonconforming individuals are the most vulnerable to harassment and are subsequently discouraged from reporting the same.

### **15. Check on the performance of investigators and prosecutors:**

Internal mechanisms should be in place to review the performance of investigators and prosecutors. Incompetence and insensitive behaviour on part of officers can lead to a miscarriage of justice in certain cases. Complainants should be able to register concerns and complaints regarding their assigned officers to a senior presiding officer for each regional zone, which should automatically trigger an independent and transparent inquiry. A new officer should be assigned immediately in case of misconduct or failure to perform duties.

**16. Greater technical expertise:**

Several complaints to the cyber crime wing experience a substantial investigative delay or are dropped altogether due to lack of technical abilities of officers and technologies available to the FIA. DRF recommends that measures be taken to capacitate them to not only meet current trends in cybercrime but also keep abreast with developments in forensic science and evidence collection in the five-year coverage period. This capacity-building should be an on-going and constant process. Thus, DRF recommends substantial investment in research at the NR3C to address the needs of litigants/complainants.

**17. Training for judges on cybercrime law, internet governance and online harassment:**

Internet governance and cybercrime should be included in the curriculum of provincial judicial academies to ensure that judges are not only familiar with the law regarding the internet, but also have a thorough understanding of the technologies involved in the process. It has been observed that judges are not only ignorant of the law regarding the internet and cybercrime -- they also fundamentally misunderstand governance and infrastructure of the internet itself, which leads to bad jurisprudence and, at times, “unimplementable” orders.

**18. Collaboration with civil society organisations:**

DRF recommends more public-private partnerships by the government to ensure that public institutions work collaboratively with civil society and academia to complement each other’s work. A mutually beneficial memorandum of understanding (MOU) between DRF’s cyber-harassment helpline and NR3C will be in the best interest of victims and will ensure the complainants obtain timely and comprehensive support.

# APPENDIX

## Types of Cases:

In order to analyse the needs of the helpline as well as general trends of online harassment in Pakistan in greater detail, we categorise the cases according to predetermined typologies. The following are definitions that we use to sort the cases:

### **General Inquiry:**

These are inquiries we receive regarding cyber harassment, digital security and the work of Digital Rights Foundation. This category also includes inquiries that we get outside the realm of digital rights, in which case our Helpline Support Staff redirects the caller to the relevant authorities and organisations through the referral network.

### **Impersonation:**

Complaints under this category involve an individual's identity being appropriated without their permission. This manifests in profiles purporting to belong to someone on social media websites and contacting people through texts or calls pretending to be someone else.

### **Blackmailing:**

This often involves using personal information or psychological manipulation to make threats and demands from the victim. Blackmailing using sexually explicit videos or pictures is criminalised under Section 21 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA).

### **Stolen Device:**

These complaints involve loss of information, data, and identity in cases where digital devices are stolen or misplaced. Assistance provided involves helping complainants in recovering and securing their accounts as well as assisting them in filing criminal complaints about theft.

### **Fake Profile:**

Fake profile on a social media platform or application is an account pretending to be someone or something that doesn't exist.

**Scam Calls:**

Fraudulent calls that pretend to be an individual or from an authority to make a quick profit. Mostly such scam calls lead to a potential financial fraud being committed.

**Abusive Language:**

Using harsh, hurtful, explicit or insulting language to attack another person.

**Unsolicited Contact:**

Unsolicited contact involves unwanted and repeated calls and messages by the accused/abuser, which may include spam, repeated requests for contact, personalised threats, blackmail or any unwanted contact that makes the receiver feel uncomfortable. If this rises to the level of criminal liability, cases in this category can fall under the ambit of Section 24 of PECA.

**Login Issues:**

These involve difficulties in accessing accounts and devices where the user has been locked out or has limited/compromised access due to a known or unknown reason.

**Hacking:**

Gaining unauthorised access to someone's electronic system, data, account and devices, which can result in loss of data, loss of identity and blackmailing.

**Federal Investigation Authority (FIA)-related Inquiry:**

These are queries we get regarding the complaint procedure of the National Response Centre for Cyber Crime (NR3C) of the FIA. These callers often want to file a formal, legal complaint. It also includes individuals who are contacting the helpline after they have dealt with the FIA, either to get advice on their case or to complain about the FIA officials or process.

**Non-Consensual Usage of Information (NCUI):**

This involves using, sharing, disseminating and manipulating data such as photographs, phone numbers, contacts, and other personal information without consent and in violation of the privacy of a person.

**Online Stalking:**

Online stalking is keeping track of someone's online activity in a way that it

makes the subject of the stalking uncomfortable. For the purpose of this report, online stalking also refers to (repeatedly) contacting a person's friends and/or family.

**Doxxing:**

Doxxing is the practice of leaking and publishing information of an individual that includes personally identifiable information. This information is meant to target, locate and contact an individual, usually through social media, discussion boards, chat rooms and the like, and more often than not, is accompanied by cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

**Gender-based Bullying:**

Any actions, statements, and implications that targets a person based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. Evaluations for gender-based bullying take into account the overall connotations attached to actions and verbal communications within the larger system of gendered oppression and patterns of behavior that signify abuse.

**Bullying:**

Any actions, statements, and implications that targets a person in order to intimidate, silence, threaten, coerce or harass them. This category is distinguished from the one above, where the complainant is targeted specifically on the basis of their gender.

**Non-Consensual Use of Pornographic Information (NCUPI):**

This is obtaining, using, distributing or retaining pictures, videos or graphic representations without a person's consent that violate their personal dignity.

**Financial Fraud:**

Intentional actions of deception perpetrated by a person for the purpose of financial gain and profit; this includes using someone's financial data to gain access to accounts and make purchases. For the purpose of our operations, we confine our definition to fraud conducted through electronic means.

**Stalking:**

This category includes monitoring, physical following, and harassment that occurs outside of online spaces. A majority of the cases received by the helpline relate to non-consensual use of information, which include pictures, videos, and personal data. In cases of online harassment, this information is

weaponized by harassers to cause harm, reputational damage or to blackmail victims. This information is also manifested in fake profiles or used on various forums without the consent of the victim. Another major form of harassment experienced by our callers is unsolicited messages, usually containing lewd or threatening content.

**Non-Consensual Photoshopped Pictures/Doctored Pictures:**

The manipulation, distortion or doctored of images without the permission of the person to whom they belong. This is often accompanied by distribution and sharing, or threat to share, of such pictures as well.

**Threats of Sexual/Physical Violence:**

An action or verbal communication that results in a reasonable fear of sexual or physical attack.

**Non-Cooperation from Social Media Platforms:**

These complaints refer to a situation when a person has reported a case of cyber harassment to the relevant social media team but has not received a decision in their favor.

**Threats:**

These are all threats directed at the victim of online harassment that do not fall under the category of gender-based threats or sexual/physical violence.

**Defamation:**

Any intentional, false communication purporting to be a fact that harms or causes injury to the reputation of a natural person.

**Hate Speech:**

Any communication that targets or attacks an individual on the basis of their race, religion, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, disability, or sexual orientation. Hate speech becomes a matter of urgent action when it puts its target in physical danger or the reasonable apprehension of physical danger. However hate speech is not restricted to just incitement to violence, it is hate speech if it leads to the exclusion of or creation of a hostile online environment for its target.

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<sup>20</sup> Author's note: The journalist, Ms. Farooqi, filed a complaint against the politician who made the allegations with the FIA. The accused was granted bail during the investigation and soon after she was appointed as the Minister of Climate Change, after which the case was dropped. Because

the case was still in the trial stage, it cannot be concluded that Ms. Farooqi won the case.

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