



Freedom of Expression and the Gender Dimensions of Disinformation

Civil Society Submission by Media Matters for Democracy, Pakistan

Submitted to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the Gender Dimensions of Disinformation

1. This submission by Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) offers an examination of the consequences of gendered disinformation with a specific focus on its impact on women and gender minorities in Pakistan. While the submission primarily offers a local perspective on the issue, it reflects broader concerns surrounding the gender dimensions of disinformation and their implications for vulnerable individuals and communities at large.

A. About Media Matters for Democracy

2. Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) is a Pakistan-based non-profit organisation working on media development and digital rights advocacy. MMfD's primary areas of focus include media and information literacy (MIL), freedom of expression, digital rights, internet governance, and mis/disinformation. MMfD routinely conducts capacity building activities across the country, in addition to building its vast portfolio on research and advocacy. It even provides legal support to journalists and human rights defenders on issues related to freedom of expression, progressive media, and safety of journalists. MMfD also monitors and provides coverage to media freedom and internet governance issues through its initiative Digital Rights Monitor (DRM), which is Pakistan's first digital rights news website.
3. Over the years, MMfD has produced extensive research and investigative reports examining the implications of disinformation in a South Asian country like Pakistan, where lack of digital literacy, political economy and market power further exacerbates the overall situation for information disorder on leading social media platforms. MMfD's work not only highlights the concerning patterns of gendered disinformation on online platforms, but also calls for

effective strategies and offers recommendations on potential measures to tackle harmful online content. These research publications and reports can be accessed through the 'Publications' section on MMfD's website ([Publications – Media Matters for Democracy](#)) and the 'Features' section on DRM ([Features Archives - Digital Rights Monitor](#)).

B. Introduction

4. Misinformation is not a challenge unique to Pakistan, its rampant spread especially on social media has, however, poses a threat to social and political developments, public discourse and democratic values in the country.
5. In Pakistan, at least 64% of the news consumers revealed that they rely on social media platforms for news and information about political affairs. A majority of them, however, indicated social media sites to be the biggest spreader of misinformation in Pakistan; a self-contradiction¹. While both physical and cyberspaces remain susceptible to disinformation, the spread of false news online has garnered more attention because of increase in the use of social media in the past decade---at least 71.7 million social media users (30% of the population) were recorded in Pakistan in January 2023²--- and Big Tech companies generating revenue through targeted advertising and algorithmic systems³ which disincentives them to take stringent steps to counter disinformation online. It has been estimated that at least \$235 million in revenue are generated every year from advertisements running on extremist and disinformation websites⁴.
6. Developing countries such as Pakistan remain particularly vulnerable because of the fragility of institutions and limited access to data. A key challenge has been the use of misinformation to manipulate political discourse in online spaces and use of coordinated campaigns to artificially populate a politically motivated hashtag on Twitter for its better visibility. An

¹ Mindeel, M. (2023, February 15). Fact-Checking and Verification: Navigating the Misinformation Landscape in Pakistani Newsrooms and Beyond. Media Matters for Democracy. <https://mediamatters.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Fact-checking-and-verification-low-res.pdf>

² Kemp, S. (2023, February 13). Digital 2023: Pakistan - DataReportal – global digital insights. DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-pakistan>

³ Biddle, E. R. (2022, November 21). *It's the business model: How big tech's profit machine is distorting the public sphere and threatening democracy*. Ranking Digital Rights. <https://rankingdigitalrights.org/its-the-business-model/>

⁴ Ad-funded COVID-19 Disinformation: Money, Brands, and Tech. GDI. (2020, March 1). <https://www.disinformationindex.org/disinfo-ads/2020-3-1-ad-funded-covid-19-disinformation-money-brands-and-tech/>

examination of the trending hashtags about the 2018 General Elections in Pakistan showed that there was a high level of bot-activity, and accounts being used for amplification of disinformation and hate speech⁵. The rise in misinformation in online spaces is increasingly leading to political polarisation, lack of trust in news media, proliferations of hate speech, manipulation of social media conversations, and difficulty in accessing verified and credible news sources.

C. Gendered Disinformation in Pakistan

7. Gendered disinformation in Pakistan frequently serves as a trigger for both online and offline violence against targeted individuals and vulnerable communities. In the context of Pakistan, the annual Aurat March (women's march) is a primary example of how coordinated disinformation campaigns online jeopardise the lives of both organisers and participants.⁶ In 2021, an organised disinformation campaign against Aurat March, women's march, organisers led to the registration of a blasphemy case against them⁷. An MMfD research revealed that misleading titles were the most common form of misinformation on YouTube to discredit the Aurat March⁸. The march and its organisers are actively discredited with coordinated campaigns which aim to incite hatred and hostility against the women rights movement in Pakistan⁹.

⁵ Trends monitor. Digital Rights Monitor. (2022, November 27). <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/trendsmonitor/>

⁶ Ghani, A. (2022). Misinformation on YouTube: Use of misleading titles to promote hateful narratives against Aurat March in Pakistan. Media Matters for Democracy. <https://mediamatters.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2-Misinformation-on-YouTube.pdf>

⁷ Hashim, A. (2021, April 17). Pakistan Police File "blasphemy" case against feminist marchers. News | Al Jazeera. [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/16/pakistan-police-file-blasphemy-case-against-feminist-](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/16/pakistan-police-file-blasphemy-case-against-feminist-marchers#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%93%20Pakistani%20police%20have,charges%20as%20having%20no%20grounds.)

[marchers#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%93%20Pakistani%20police%20have,charges%20as%20having%20no%20grounds.](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/16/pakistan-police-file-blasphemy-case-against-feminist-marchers#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%93%20Pakistani%20police%20have,charges%20as%20having%20no%20grounds.)

⁸ Ghani, A. (2022, August 30). Misinformation on YouTube: Use of Misleading Titles to Promote Hateful Narrative Against Aurat March in Pakistan. Media Matters for Democracy. <https://mediamatters.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2-Misinformation-on-YouTube.pdf>

⁹ Shahid, U. (2023, March 30). Aurat March: A symbol of women empowerment and target of disinformation in Pakistan. Digital Rights Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/aurat-march-a-symbol-of-women-empowerment-and-target-of-disinformation-in-pakistan/>

8. In addition, women journalists continued to be targeted in online spaces. They even published a joint statement in August 2020¹⁰ against online coordinated attacks, and appeared before a parliamentary committee to record their testimonies¹¹. They said that abuse against them was being instigated by supporters of the ruling party. Three years later, no action has been taken and women journalists continue to be prime targets of vile hashtags. An analysis of an August 2022 vile online trend against journalist Gharidah Farooqui showed substantial inauthentic activity¹², similar observations were made in the Twitter trend against journalist Asma Shirazi¹³.
9. Within Pakistan and other regions in the Global South, gendered disinformation campaigns are primarily deployed to silence dissenting voices, eliminate critics, promote or incite violence against marginalised communities such as transgender people,¹⁴ and target religious minorities.¹⁵ In 2022, the Government of Pakistan moved to make amendments to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018. The progressive law was, however, heavily criticised by far-right religious parties and led to spread of coordinated misinformation against the transgender community and the law¹⁶. Activists even denounced the misinformation against the transgender community in the country¹⁷. Such campaigns frequently result in self-censorship, declining capacity for critical engagement, and reduced visibility for vulnerable individuals who rely on online platforms as a means of expression.
10. In Pakistan, the gender dimensions of disinformation largely remain sidelined in mainstream discussions. Hence, government and tech companies have yet to demonstrate effective

¹⁰ Nadeem, R. (2021, August 12). Statement by Pakistani women journalists over online harassment, one year later. Digital Rights Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/statement-by-pakistani-women-journalists-over-online-harassment-one-year-later/>

¹¹ Parliamentary body hears complaints of women journalists. DAWN.COM. (2020, August 19). <https://www.dawn.com/news/1575116>

¹² Constructed narratives. Digital Rights Monitor. (2023, January 1). <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/constructed-narratives/>

¹³ Ali, R. (2021, October 26). صحافی عاصمہ شیرازی کے خلاف ٹوئٹر پر منظم مہم کیسے چلائی گئی؟. Independent Urdu. <https://www.independenturdu.com/node/82531>

¹⁴ Ghani, A. (2023). Pakistan: Twitter no longer a space for discourse. Digital Ris Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/pakistan-twitter-no-longer-a-space-for-discourse/>

¹⁵ Anwer, Z. (2021). Dual difficulty: Being a Pakistani Shia woman on the Internet. Digital Rights Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/dual-difficulty-being-a-pakistani-shia-woman-on-the-internet/>

¹⁶ Activists debunk myths associated with transgender law. Voicepk.net. (2023, June 9). <https://voicepk.net/2022/09/activists-debunk-myths-associated-with-transgender-law/>

¹⁷ Ali, K. (2022, October 2). Activists criticise disinformation about Transgender Persons Protection Act. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1712988>

measures to address this growing challenge, which is influenced by various factors. Civil society actors and rights activists actively engage in wide-ranging dialogues on the issue, however. In April and May 2023, MMfD raised concerns about gendered disinformation at two major international digital rights events: Digital Rights Asia-Pacific Assembly¹⁸ and RightsCon.¹⁹ The discussions pointed out how Big Tech platforms profit off harmful content, including disinformation, as it attracts broader engagement on online platforms²⁰.

D. Tech Giants and Disinformation

11. For tech giants, countering disinformation — let alone gendered disinformation — on their online platforms has been a challenge due to various reasons, including lack of adequate allocation of regulatory resources for developing markets and understanding various cultural and political nuances specific to those regions. ²¹Corporations have failed to ascertain the need for specific moderation resources for South Asian markets as well as to gauge the potential impact of their digital products when it comes to gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence.²²

12. The transparency reports issued by tech firms also lack clarity and detail regarding the content that is removed from online platforms, either in response to government requests or through internal moderation.²³ Tech companies should invest in robust content moderation systems that specifically address gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence. This includes allocating adequate resources, developing culturally and regionally sensitive guidelines, and training moderators on recognising and addressing gendered disinformation.

¹⁸ MMfD critically examines Elon Musk’s radicalised Twitter at DRAPAC23 Assembly. (2023). Media Matters for Democracy. <https://mediamatters.pk/mmfd-critically-examines-elon-musks-radicalised-twitter-at-drapac23-assembly/>

¹⁹MMfD deconstructs Big Tech’s role in hindering progress of digital newsrooms at RightsCon 2023. Media Matters for Democracy. <https://mediamatters.pk/mmfd-deconstructs-big-techs-role-in-hindering-progress-of-digital-newsrooms-at-rightscon-2023/>

²⁰ Popli, N. (2021). The 5 Most Important Revelations From the 'Facebook Papers'. Time. <https://time.com/6110234/facebook-papers-testimony-explained/>

²¹ Athar, A. (2022). Let’s face it: Content moderation policies are discriminatory. Digital Rights Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/lets-face-it-content-moderation-policies-are-discriminatory/>

²² Haider, N. (2022). Facebook’s Metaverse will amplify online gender-based violence in Pakistan. Digital Rights Monitor. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/facebooks-metaverse-will-amplify-online-gender-based-violence-in-pakistan/>

²³ MMfD calls for transparency after TikTok’s removal of over 12 million Pakistani videos. (2022). Media Matters for Democracy. <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/mmfd-calls-for-transparency-after-tiktoks-removal-of-over-12-million-pakistani-videos/>

E. Free Speech and Media Industry

13. According to the World Press Freedom Index, Pakistan's ranking has fallen from 142 in 2020 to 150 in 2023²⁴. The Government's initiation and implementation of legislative measures has yielded concerning outcomes, as authorities have repeatedly misused these laws to target journalists and impose blanket bans on the media. Many journalists and information practitioners have been targeted in the recent past. On May 11, 2023 Pakistani Youtuber Imran Riaz Khan, who has over three million subscribers, was detained by the police and since then has not been seen publicly, which has raised concern about his wellbeing²⁵. The disappearance and subsequent recovery of journalists such as Sami Abraham²⁶, Zubair Anjum²⁷, Nafees Naeem²⁸ among others have been reported too.
14. The media industry continues to face regulatory challenges, political pressure and direct bans. In 2022, the transmission of one of the biggest news channels in Pakistan, ARY News, was suspended twice on August 9²⁹ and August 25³⁰.
15. While the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) frequently issues warnings to TV channels to refrain from airing 'disinformation' — which is often vaguely framed. It is, however, always in favour of preventing news organisations from spreading false news against state institutions. There have not been any concrete measures to address its gendered dimensions in either mainstream or digital media on a federal level.

F. Conclusion

²⁴ Pakistan. Bienvenue sur le site de Reporters sans frontières. (2023, May 23).

<https://rsf.org/en/country/pakistan>

²⁵ Pakistan: YouTuber and TV anchor forcibly disappeared: Imran Riaz Khan. Amnesty International. (2023a, June 30). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/6890/2023/en/>

²⁶ Report, D. (2023, May 25). Journalist Sami Abraham "picked up", family claims. DAWN.COM.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1755611>

²⁷ Desk, W. (2023, June 6). Geo News journalist picked up from residence in Karachi's Model Colony. Geo

News. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/491463-geo-news-producer-picked-up-from-residence-in-karachis-model-colony>

²⁸ Correspondent, O. (2022, June 14). Journalist "picked up" in Karachi. thenews.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/966095-journalist-picked-up-in-karachi>

²⁹ Ali, K. (2022, August 9). ARY News "pulled off Air" in parts of Country. DAWN.COM.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1704056>

³⁰ Desk, W. (2022, August 8). ARY News Transmission suspended across Pakistan. ARY NEWS.

<https://arynews.tv/ary-news-transmission-suspended-pemra/>

16. The Pakistani government's repeated attempts to enforce draconian regulations in order to take hold of citizens' personal information for surveilling and incriminating dissenting voices impedes the space for a productive dialogue on digital policymaking that also takes into consideration gendered disinformation. These repressive legislations tend to divert the focus from the core issue of discussion and create additional obstacles for rights activists and organisations striving to repeal them. The existing laws should be reviewed and amended to ensure they do not infringe upon freedom of expression and are not misused to target journalists or silence victims. Effort should be made to involve women and gender minority representatives in decision-making processes related to disinformation. This could include establishing advisory panels or engaging with civil society organisations working on gender issues.