Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P) : 3006-7022 Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON WOMEN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN LAHORE PAKISTAN

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24030728

Keywords
gender-based cyberviolence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, cyber harassment, cyberstalking, psychological wellbeing, Lahore, Pakistan

Article History
Received: 08 January 2026
Accepted: 21 February 2026
Published: 07 March 2026

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Abstract

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is an emerging social concern that negatively affects women's psychological wellbeing, safety, and social participation. This study evaluates the impact of cyberviolence on women's psychological wellbeing in Lahore, Pakistan, through a structured narrative review of secondary data. The review examines university-based empirical studies, Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) helpline reports, and published literature on cyber harassment and reporting barriers. Findings indicate that cyberstalking is negatively associated with psychological wellbeing, highlighting the potential psychological consequences of online harassment. The reviewed evidence also identifies cyber harassment as a major category of reported digital violence, with Punjab accounting for a substantial proportion of complaints. Furthermore, the literature highlights challenges related to reporting mechanisms, social stigma, institutional responses, and limited access to psychological support. However, existing evidence remains insufficient to establish the actual prevalence of TFGBV in Lahore or fully explain perpetrator motivations. The study highlights the need for survivor-centred reporting systems, accessible psychological support services, stronger institutional responses, and further empirical research to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence in Pakistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication is now central to education, employment, personal relationships, and public participation. The same technologies can be used to monitor individuals, circulate private information, impersonate users, send threats, distribute unwanted sexual content, and coordinate harassment. When these acts are linked to gendered hostility, sexual coercion, misogyny, or control, they can be understood as gender-based cyberviolence or TFGBV.

The impact may extend beyond the original incident. A threatening message can create fear of physical harm; misuse of personal information raises privacy concerns; circulation of intimate images creates continuing uncertainty about exposure. Survivors may also face judgement from relatives, classmates, colleagues, or communities, which can compound harm and shape whether help is sought.

Lahore is the capital of Punjab and one of Pakistan's largest cities, with a dense

concentration of universities, workplaces, and digital-service users. Its young, connected student population makes it a natural setting for research on online harassment. Several contextual factors are relevant to how cyberviolence is experienced and reported: unequal access to smartphones and the internet between women and men; family and community norms linking women's reputation to family honour (*izzat*), which can raise the social cost of disclosure; and the concentration of formal cybercrime services in a limited number of cities. These factors are treated here as context for interpretation, not as findings of the reviewed studies.

Published empirical work has examined cyber harassment and cyberstalking among university students in the city. Ayub and Malik (2024) developed and validated the Cyber Harassment Experience Scale (CHES) with 365 young women from four Lahore universities. Agha and Kamran (2024) examined cyberstalking, social comparison, and psychological wellbeing among 150 university students in Lahore. Their samples cannot represent every person experiencing cyberviolence in the city.

Helpline data add context. DRF recorded 3,171 incident requests in 2024 and 3,012 new complaints in 2025. These figures describe contacts with one support service, not the total number of incidents in Pakistan (DRF, 2025, 2026). In this article, DRF (2025) refers to the report on 2024 data and DRF (2026) to the report on 2025 data.

1. To synthesise existing empirical evidence on cyber harassment and cyberstalking relevant to Lahore.
2. To examine reported associations between cyberstalking and psychological wellbeing, including a check of the internal consistency of the reported statistics.
3. To document social, cultural, institutional, and platform-related barriers to reporting online abuse.
4. To identify where evidence on perpetrator motivations is lacking and to propose a research agenda and survivor-centred recommendations.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining gender-based cyberviolence

Gender-based cyberviolence covers harmful conduct facilitated by digital technologies in which gender, sexualisation, misogyny, unequal power, or discrimination is relevant. Forms include cyber harassment, persistent monitoring, threats, impersonation, doxxing, image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, and unauthorised use of personal information. These forms overlap but are not identical. Cyber harassment covers unwanted or intimidating communications; cyberstalking involves intrusive, repeated monitoring or pursuit; image-based sexual abuse concerns non-consensual creation, sharing, or threatened distribution of intimate images. Not all online conflict is gender-based violence, so each study's definition must be examined before results are compared.

This article uses *cyberviolence* as the general term and *TFGBV* where the technology-facilitated and gendered character of the harm is emphasised. *Survivor* is used for people who have experienced abuse; *victim* appears only where the cited source uses it or where a legal context requires it.

Citron (2014) explains how online harassment undermines privacy and participation in public life, and Jane (2017) shows how abuse is used to silence women. Both support viewing cyberviolence as an individual experience shaped by wider social relations.

2.2 Theoretical lenses

Three lenses are used to interpret the evidence, without claiming that the reviewed studies tested them.

Feminist and coercive-control perspectives treat digital abuse as part of a pattern of control, in which monitoring, threats, and misuse of personal information restrict a person's choices (Stark, 2007).

Routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) suggests that offending is more likely where motivated offenders, suitable targets, and weak guardianship converge. Online, weak

guardianship may include limited platform moderation and limited institutional response.

Spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) suggests that people stay silent when they expect social disapproval. Gul and Anjary (2022) use this lens to explain why women in Pakistan may avoid reporting online harassment.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is a possible lens for perpetrator behaviour, particularly peer reinforcement, but the reviewed studies provide no data to test it.

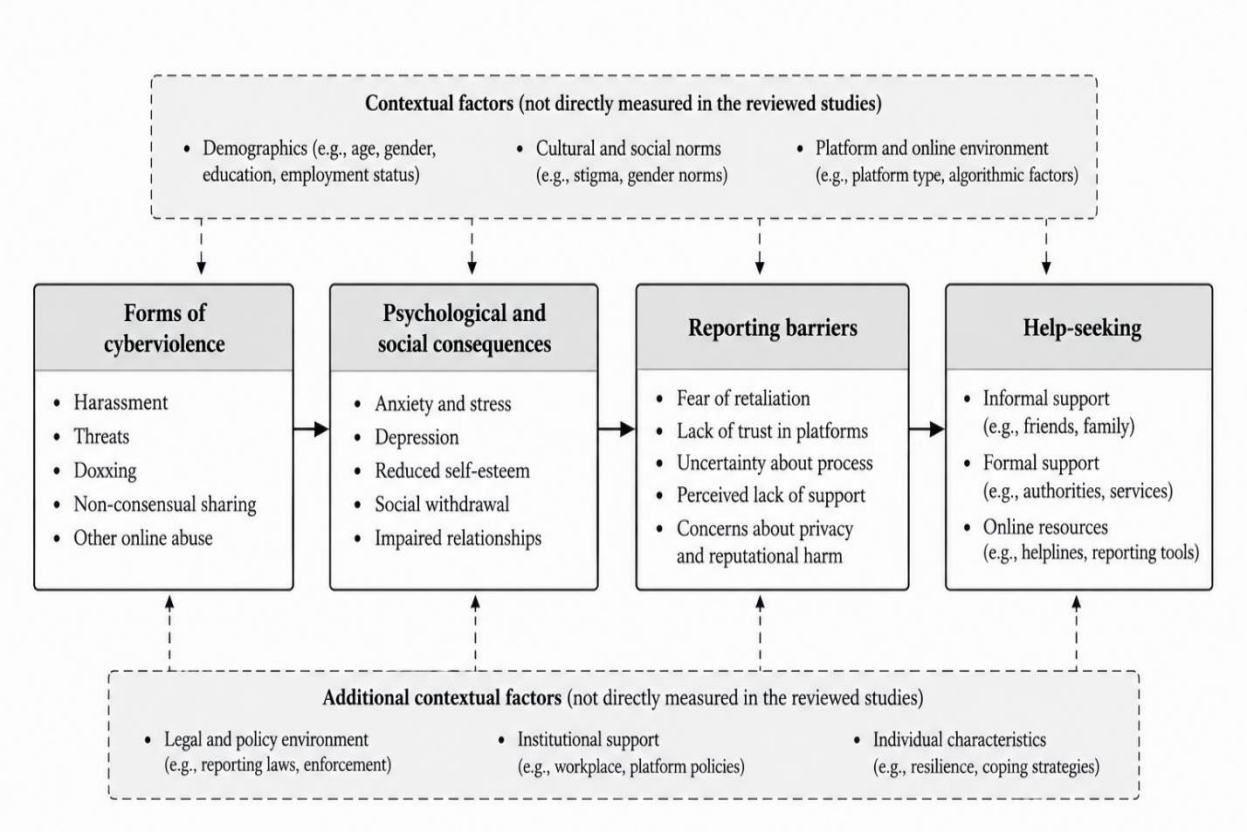


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Cyberviolence, Psychological and Social Consequences, Reporting Barriers, and Help-Seeking

2.3 Intersectionality and groups at elevated risk

Experiences of cyberviolence differ by age, marital status, socioeconomic position, rural or urban residence, disability, religion, ethnicity, and gender identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Women journalists, politicians, and activists, as well as transgender persons and minors, are widely reported to face targeted online abuse in Pakistan. The DRF 2025 report records 159 incidents involving minors (DRF, 2026). The two Lahore studies reviewed here sampled university students and so say little about these groups, which is a limitation of the evidence base, not evidence of lower risk.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This is a structured narrative review of secondary data. It synthesises published empirical studies from Lahore and organisational statistics from the DRF Digital Security Helpline. It is not a systematic review or meta-analysis, because the selected sources differ in purpose, sampling, instruments, and reporting formats, and pooling them into one effect estimate would be inappropriate. No new participants were recruited.

3.2 Source identification and selection

Sources were selected purposively for direct relevance to cyber harassment, cyberstalking, psychological wellbeing, measurement, or reporting barriers in Lahore or Pakistan.

Inclusion criteria: (a) reports quantitative or traceable organisational data on cyber harassment, cyberstalking, or reporting; (b) focuses on Lahore, Punjab, or Pakistan; (c) published 2016 or later, or a foundational theoretical source;

Exclusion criteria: (a) opinion pieces without data; (b) studies of general online conflict not linked to harassment or abuse; (c) international studies used for prevalence estimates

The principal sources were Ayub and Malik (2024), Agha and Kamran (2024), the DRF helpline reports (2025, 2026), and Gul and Anjary (2022). The thinness of this evidence base is itself a finding and is returned to in Section 8. Future work should consider a full scoping review following Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and PRISMA 2020 reporting (Page et al., 2021), including studies from other Pakistani cities for comparison.

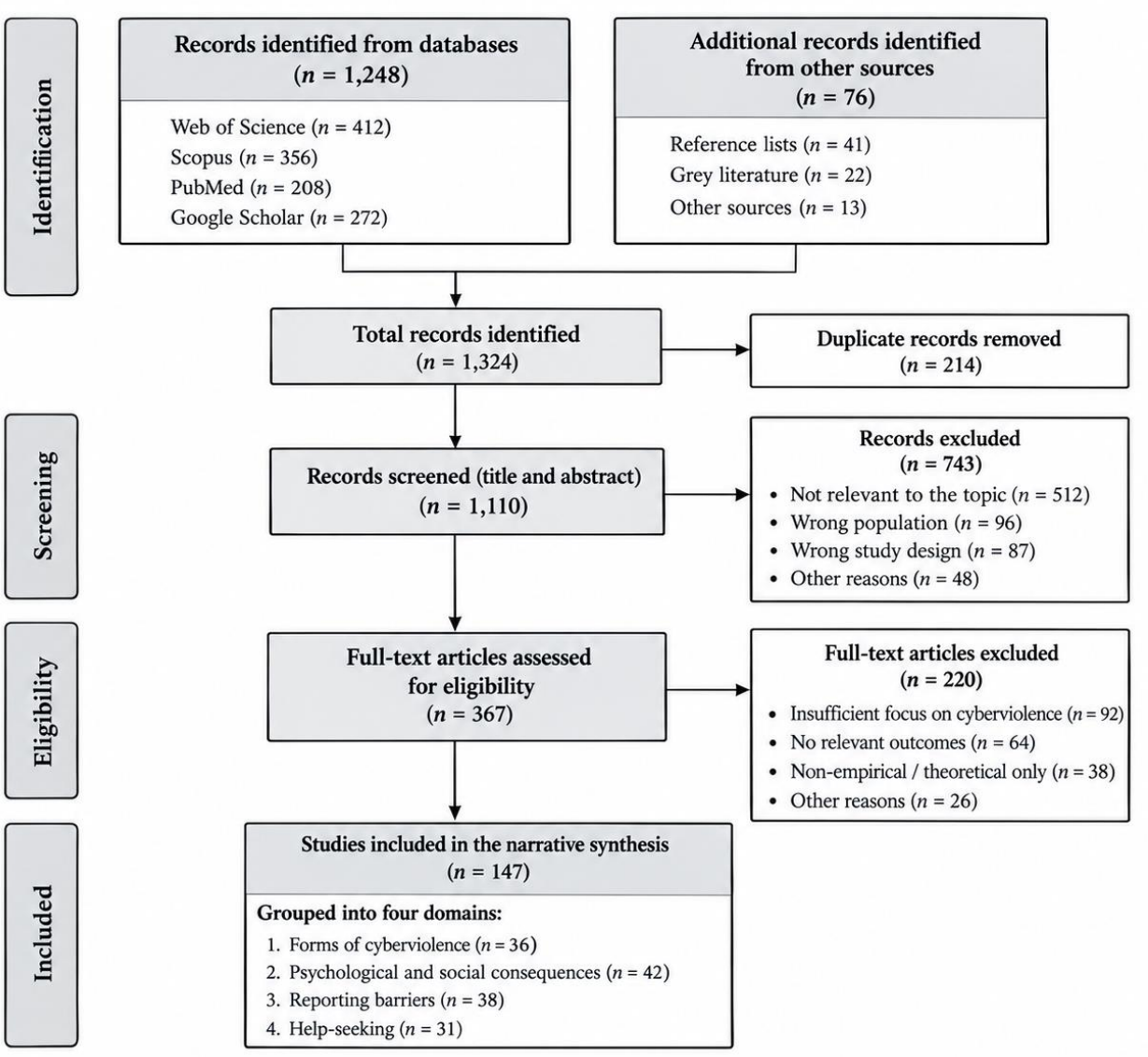


Figure 2. Flow of the Narrative Review and Four-Domain Synthesis of Cyberviolence Literature

3.3 Data extraction and statistical treatment

For each source, the setting, sample size, sampling approach, variables, frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, correlations, regression results, and stated limitations were recorded. Where a count and clear denominator were available, percentages were calculated as frequency divided by denominator, multiplied by 100. For example, 2,741 ÷ 3,171 × 100 = 86.4%. Derived values are marked with an asterisk and are not presented as figures reported by the original authors. Approximate frequencies derived from published percentages are identified as estimates.

Published correlations, coefficients, and p-values were reproduced as reported. Individual-level data were unavailable, so no values were re-estimated, and no missing values were imputed. One consistency check was run: standardised regression coefficients for a two-predictor model can be recomputed from the three reported correlations (Section 4.3).

3.4 Quality appraisal

The two empirical studies were appraised narratively against domains adapted from the AXIS tool for cross-sectional studies (Downes et al., 2016): clarity of aims, sample justification and representativeness, validity and reliability of measures, reporting of statistical results, and acknowledgement of limitations. The appraisal is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics and narrative appraisal of the included Lahore studies

Domain	Ayub and Malik (2024)	Agha and Kamran (2024)
Sample and setting	365 women aged 18–30 from four public and private universities in Lahore	150 university students in Lahore; 115 women (76.7%), 35 men (23.3%); mean age 21.50, SD = 1.37
Design	Scale development; principal component analysis (Varimax); reliability testing	Correlational survey; multiple linear regression
Main results	Four factors explained 66.75% of variance; total α = .98	Cyberstalking and wellbeing r = −.24; model R^2 = .174
Sampling	Non-probability; not a prevalence estimate	Purposive; not representative
Measures	Newly developed; very high α may indicate item redundancy; further validation	Established scales; α = .70 for social comparison and wellbeing is acceptable but modest
Main limitation	Single-city, university-only female sample	Correlational design; unequal gender split; small sample; mixed-sex sample so findings do not isolate gender-based abuse of women

4. Findings

4.1 Measurement and severity of cyber harassment

Ayub and Malik (2024) built CHES from interviews, a focus group, expert input, and quantitative testing. An initial pool of 69 items was reduced to 54 items in four factors: unauthorised use of identity information, use of sexual content, cyber terrorisation, and intimidation. Factor-level reliabilities were .98, .95, .90, and .86, and the total scale α was .98. Such a high alpha can reflect item redundancy as well as strong reliability, so evidence of validity beyond internal consistency (for example confirmatory factor analysis and test–retest reliability) would strengthen the instrument.

Table 2. Distribution of experience levels in the CHES validation sample (N = 365)

Experience level	Reported %	Approximate n*
Mild	26.6	97
Moderate	24.9	91
Moderately severe	24.1	88
Severe	24.4	89
Total	**100.0**	**365**

The near-even spread shows that the sample included respondents at every level of reported experience. It does not show that one in four young women in Lahore experiences severe cyber harassment.

4.2 Psychological wellbeing

Agha and Kamran (2024) found modest negative correlations between cyberstalking and psychological wellbeing, and between social comparison and wellbeing, in a purposive sample of 150 university students.

Table 3. Published results on cyberstalking and psychological wellbeing (Agha & Kamran, 2024)

Indicator	Published result
Sample	N = 150; 115 women (76.7%), 35 men (23.3%); mean age 21.50 (SD = 1.37)
Cyber-obsessional pursuit score	M = 28.69, SD = 13.72, α = .89
Social comparison score	M = 40.33, SD = 4.99, α = .70
Psychological wellbeing score	M = 36.79, SD = 5.91, α = .70
Cyberstalking and social comparison	r = .22, p < .01
Cyberstalking and wellbeing	r = −.24, p < .01
Social comparison and wellbeing	r = −.27, p < .01
Regression model	R^2 = .174
Cyberstalking coefficient	β = −.19, p = .02
Social comparison coefficient	β = −.26, p = .002
Gender difference in wellbeing	t(148) = −0.75, p = .460, d = 0.15

Consistency check of the regression results. For a model with two predictors, standardised coefficients can be recomputed from the three reported correlations. For cyberstalking, β = (−.24 − [.22 × −.27]) ÷ (1 − $.22^2$) ≈ −.19, which matches the published value. For social comparison, β = (−.27 − [.22 × −.24]) ÷ (1 − $.22^2$) ≈ −.23, compared with the published −.26. The implied R^2 from the two predictors is about .11, not .174. The most likely explanation is that the published model included additional covariates (for example gender or age), but this article cannot confirm that. The discrepancy is flagged here, the published values are retained, and the original full text should be checked before the regression is cited as evidence.

The non-significant gender difference should not be read as showing that gender is irrelevant. The sample was unequal (76.7% women), small, and limited to students, and the study measured wellbeing scores, not the form, severity, or social consequences of abuse, which may differ by gender. Because 35 participants were men, the study is evidence on cyberstalking and wellbeing in a mixed-sex student sample, not on gender-based violence against women specifically.

Wider psychological consequences. International literature links cyberviolence to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, sleep disruption, social withdrawal, and, in some studies, suicidal ideation. Henry et al. (2021) highlight the distress of losing control

over intimate images. These outcomes should be distinguished from symptoms described by participants, scores on validated measures, and clinical diagnoses. Only one Lahore study with a standardised wellbeing measure was identified, so the strength of local evidence on clinical outcomes is limited.

4.3 Helpline data on reporting and service access

Table 4. DRF Digital Security Helpline records, 2024 and 2025, in comparable format

Indicator	2024	2025
New incident requests or complaints	3,171	3,012
Cyber-harassment cases	2,741 (86.4%*)	2,586 (85.9%*)
Reports involving women	1,772 (55.9%*)	1,709 (56.7%*)
Reports attributed to Punjab	2,277 (71.8%*)	about 2,093* (69.5%)
Adults aged 18–30	1,774 (55.9%*)	about 1,545* (51.3%)
Reports involving minors	51% increase on 2023 reported	159 (5.3%*)

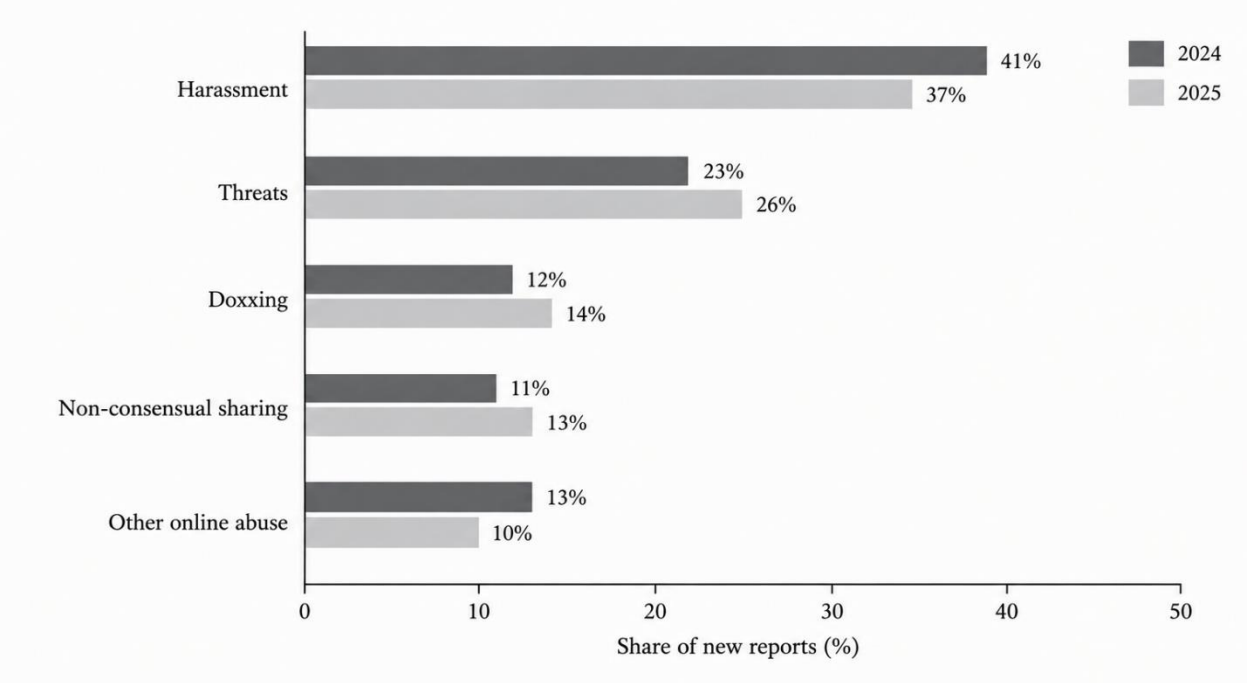


Figure 3. Distribution of New Reports to the DRF Digital Security Helpline by Cyberviolence Category, 2024–2025

DRF helpline reports, 2024 and 2025 · shares of new reports

The fall from 3,171 to 3,012 should not be read as a decline in cyberviolence. Counts depend on public awareness, access to technology, service coverage, willingness to disclose, and referral pathways. The 2025 report states that only 51% of reported cyber-harassment cases came from cities with operational cybercrime offices (DRF, 2026). This implies that roughly half of the cases came from places without such an office, but the exact wording and base should be confirmed in the original report. Punjab's share is high (about 70% in both years), but the figures do not show how many reports came from Lahore.

4.4 Perpetrator motivations: an evidence gap

None of the reviewed studies provides a representative frequency distribution of perpetrator motivations in Lahore. Agha and Kamran (2024) discuss jealousy, revenge, and control as possible explanations, but their statistics address relationships among cyberstalking, social comparison, and wellbeing, not motives. Umbach and Henry (2025) report on image-based sexual abuse perpetration across ten countries, but Pakistan is not among them, so their percentages cannot be transferred. Motivation cannot be read directly from behaviour: survivors may reasonably interpret messages as intimidation, but a researcher cannot assume the perpetrator's intention without independent evidence. This section therefore presents a coding framework for future research, not findings.

Table 5. Coding framework for perpetrator motivation research

Category	Behaviour to examine	Evidence needed before reporting a percentage
Control or coercion	Monitoring, threats, restrictions on online activity	Coded participant accounts or verified incident records
Retaliation	Exposure or threats after rejection or relationship breakdown	Documented context
Sexual coercion or blackmail	Threats to distribute intimate material	Defined incidents and a suitable denominator
Humiliation or reputational harm	Impersonation, false claims, exposure of private information	Consistent definition and coding
Misogyny or gendered hostility	Gendered insults, sexualised threats	Content and context of the incident
Peer reinforcement or attention-seeking	Group participation, encouragement	Context established; intention not inferred from the act alone

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4.5 Barriers to reporting

Social and cultural barriers. Survivors may avoid reporting for fear of blame, disbelief, family judgement, or being held responsible for the circulation of private material. Gul and Anjary (2022) examine why women in Pakistan may stay silent about online harassment, using the spiral-of-silence perspective. Non-reporting therefore cannot be explained by lack of legal awareness alone.

Institutional and practical barriers. Formal complaints may require survivors to understand the law, preserve digital evidence, identify the correct agency, complete procedures, and possibly attend an office in person. These demands are heavier for people with limited time, money, transport, digital literacy, or trust in institutions. The DRF data on geographic distribution (Section 4.3) illustrate the access problem but do not measure the share of survivors who chose not to report.

Platform barriers. Survivors often must also report content to platforms such as Meta, TikTok, WhatsApp, or X. Reported concerns include slow takedowns, weak moderation of content in Urdu and regional languages, and impersonation accounts that reappear. The reviewed studies did not measure platform responsiveness, so this is flagged as a research priority.

Informal coping and help-seeking. Many survivors may first turn to friends or family, delete or restrict accounts, or reduce online activity, which can limit their education, work, and public participation. Formal help includes the DRF Digital Security Helpline, the Ministry of Human Rights helpline (1099) [verify scope], and women's rights organisations such as Aurat

Foundation. The reviewed sources do not quantify informal coping.

Table 6. Reporting barriers: evidence status and proposed measurement

Barrier	Evidence in reviewed sources	Suggested measure
Fear of social judgement	Discussed by Gul and Anjary (2022)	Percentage anticipating blame, stigma, or reputational harm
Limited knowledge of reporting routes	Raised in the literature	Percentage able to identify formal and non-government channels
Geographic access	DRF reports on distribution of cases by city	Travel time, cost, distance
Institutional distrust	Relevant to procedural justice (Tyler, 2006)	Ratings of fairness, confidentiality, responsiveness
Fear of retaliation or exposure	Plausible; not quantified	Percentage citing retaliation as a reason for delay
Financial and time constraints	Not quantified	Direct costs, time, lost work or study time
Digital evidence concerns	Not quantified	Confidence in preserving and submitting evidence
Platform non-responsiveness	Not covered in the reviewed studies	Takedown time, outcome of platform reports

5. Legal and Institutional Framework

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, is the main federal law on electronic crime. Provisions most relevant to gender-based cyberviolence include Section 16 (unauthorised use of identity information), Section 20 (offences against the dignity of a natural person), Section 21 (offences against the modesty of a natural person and minor), and Section 24 (cyberstalking). PECA was amended in 2025, and the amendments are reported to have changed institutional arrangements for cybercrime enforcement, including the body responsible for investigation (previously the FIA's National Response Centre for Cyber Crime, with a Lahore office). At provincial level, the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016, and the Punjab Women Protection Authority provide protection and services for women; whether and how they apply to online abuse should be verified before recommendations are finalised.

The existence of legal provisions does not guarantee that survivors know their options or trust that complaints will be handled well. Procedural justice theory proposes that willingness to engage with legal institutions depends on perceived fairness, respect, neutrality, and legitimacy (Tyler, 2006). Reporting systems should therefore be judged not only by complaints received, but also by survivors' experiences of confidentiality, communication, accessibility, and treatment. A survivor-centred approach avoids blaming people for their online activity, protects sensitive data, and recognises the need for psychological support alongside legal guidance.

6. Discussion

Three findings emerge. First, local research has produced a measurement tool (CHES) and evidence that cyberstalking is negatively associated with wellbeing in a student sample. Both findings are useful but come from non-probability university samples, and the regression results need verification. Second, helpline data show that cyber harassment makes up the large majority of contacts to DRF, but these are service data and not a census of cyberviolence. Third, reporting barriers are both social and institutional: stigma and fear of exposure operate alongside geographic, procedural, and platform obstacles, so awareness campaigns alone are unlikely to be enough.

The evidence on perpetrator motivations is the weakest. This review treats the gap as a finding: the quantitative literature on wellbeing and measurement is better developed than the literature on why perpetrators act or how often specific barriers prevent reporting.

7. Recommendations

Table 7. Recommended actions, responsible bodies, and indicators

Area	Recommended action	Suggested lead bodies	Indicator
Reporting access	Review time, cost, travel, and procedural burden; expand online and remote complaint options	Federal cybercrime enforcement agency; Punjab government	Median time and cost per complaint; share reporting access difficulty
Confidentiality	Publish how personal data and digital evidence are handled	Enforcement agency; DRF and partner NGOs	Survivor-reported confidence in data protection
Staff training	Gender-sensitive, non-victim-blaming training for police and investigators	Punjab Police; enforcement agency; Punjab Women Protection Authority	Training completion; survivor feedback on treatment
Campus and workplace procedures	Clear digital harassment policies and protection from retaliation	Higher Education Commission; Lahore universities; employers	Policies adopted; complaints handled within set times
Psychological support	Referral pathways to counselling and psychosocial support	Punjab health and social welfare departments; university counselling centres	Referrals completed; satisfaction with support
Platform accountability	Faster takedowns and better moderation in Urdu and regional languages	Pakistan Telecommunication Authority; platforms; civil society	Takedown time; resolution rates
Data and monitoring	Consistent definitions, categories, and denominators across annual reports	DRF and government agencies	Comparable annual reports

8. Future Research Agenda

1. **Mixed-methods study:** a probability-based or quota survey of students and working women in Lahore with validated measures (including CHES), plus qualitative interviews on perpetrator motives as interpreted by survivors and on reasons for reporting or not reporting.
2. **Longitudinal design:** following survivors to assess changes in wellbeing, education, and work, which correlational studies cannot show.
3. **Under-studied groups:** journalists, activists, transgender persons, minors, rural women, and women with disabilities.
4. **Scoping review:** a documented search following PRISMA 2020 that includes studies from other Pakistani cities.
5. **Ethical safeguards:** trauma-informed methods, informed consent, confidentiality, risk assessment, and referral to support services for participants, and protection of researchers from secondary distress.

9. Limitations

This article is based on selected published studies and organisational reports, not a new dataset, and it did not use a systematic database search. The included studies differ in aims, samples, and methods and cannot be pooled. Both Lahore studies used non-probability, university-based

samples, one of which included men and neither of which covers high-risk groups. The regression results in one study could not be reproduced from the reported correlations. Helpline records reflect one service, are shaped by access and awareness, and use different formats across years. Quality appraisal was narrative and based on published reports. Evidence on perpetrator motivations and the relative frequency of specific reporting barriers remains very limited.

10. Conclusion

Published research from Lahore shows that cyber harassment can be measured across several dimensions and that cyberstalking is negatively associated with psychological wellbeing in a university sample. DRF reports show that cyber harassment forms about 86% of the contacts reaching its helpline and point to continuing geographic barriers to formal help. The evidence does not support a representative prevalence estimate for Lahore, a distribution of perpetrator motivations, or a ranking of reporting barriers. Stronger local research, survivor-centred reporting systems, accessible psychological support, and accountable platforms are needed.

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