

Digital Violence against Women in Pakistan: Bridging CEDAW Obligations and PECA Act

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies and social media platforms have transformed communication in Pakistan, but they have also created new spaces for violence against women. Online harassment, cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of images, blackmail, hate speech, and technology-facilitated abuse increasingly threaten women's dignity, privacy, freedom of expression, and participation in public life. This research critically examines digital violence against women through the framework of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and evaluates the adequacy of Pakistan's legal and institutional responses. The study adopts a qualitative and doctrinal legal research methodology by analyzing constitutional provisions, statutory laws, judicial decisions, international human rights instruments, and policy frameworks related to cybercrime and women's protection. Particular attention is given to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA), and its effectiveness in addressing gender-based digital violence. The research argues that existing legal mechanisms remain fragmented, enforcement remains weak, and social stigma discourages victims from seeking remedies. It further highlights the need to expand the interpretation and implementation of CEDAW obligations to effectively recognize and combat digital forms of gender-based violence in Pakistan. The study concludes by proposing legal reforms, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and gender-sensitive digital policies to ensure safer online spaces for women.

Keywords: Digital Violence, Women's Rights, CEDAW, Cyber Harassment, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technology and social media platforms has significantly transformed communication, education, business, and social interaction across the world. In Pakistan, increasing internet accessibility and smartphone usage have enabled women to participate more actively in public discourse, professional activities, and online engagement. However, alongside these opportunities, digital platforms have also become spaces for harassment, intimidation, exploitation, and abuse targeting women. Online threats, cyberstalking, blackmail, unauthorized sharing of private images, fake social media profiles, and hate campaigns are increasingly affecting women from different social and professional backgrounds. Digital violence against women has emerged as a serious human rights issue because it not only affects

personal dignity and privacy but also restricts women's freedom of expression and participation in society. The issue requires urgent legal and policy attention, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan where social stigma, weak enforcement mechanisms, and patriarchal norms often discourage victims from seeking justice.

Concept and Forms of Digital Violence Against Women

Digital violence against women refers to acts of gender-based abuse committed, assisted, or aggravated through digital technologies and online platforms. It includes various forms of harmful conduct intended to threaten, humiliate, control, or silence women in virtual spaces. Common forms of digital violence include cyber harassment, cyberstalking, online bullying, doxing, identity theft, revenge pornography, non-consensual sharing of intimate content, trolling, and online hate speech. Such violence may be committed through social media applications, emails, messaging platforms, websites, or other electronic means. The impact of digital violence extends beyond online spaces because victims often experience psychological trauma, reputational damage, social isolation, economic harm, and fear for personal safety. In many cases, online abuse also translates into offline violence and discrimination. Therefore, digital violence is not merely a technological issue but a broader violation of women's fundamental rights and freedoms.

Overview of CEDAW and Women's Rights Protection

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is one of the most important international human rights instruments for the protection and promotion of women's rights. It obligates member states to eliminate discrimination against women in political, social, economic, cultural, and legal spheres. Although CEDAW was adopted before the rise of digital technologies, its principles are broad enough to address emerging forms of gender-based violence, including online abuse and cyber violence. The Convention emphasizes equality, dignity, non-discrimination, and state responsibility to protect women from violence in both public and private spheres. Through its general recommendations and evolving interpretation, CEDAW provides a strong international framework for addressing technology-facilitated violence against women. Expanding the application of CEDAW to digital spaces is therefore essential to ensure effective protection of women's rights in the modern technological era.

Legal and Social Context of Cyber Violence in Pakistan

Pakistan has introduced several legal measures to address cybercrime and online harassment, including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA). The law criminalizes various forms of online abuse such as cyberstalking, unauthorized access to data, and electronic harassment. Institutions like the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) have also established cybercrime wings to investigate digital offences. Despite these developments, significant challenges remain in the effective implementation and enforcement of cyber laws. Many victims hesitate to report incidents due to fear of social stigma, victim blaming, lack of awareness, and distrust in legal institutions. Cultural and patriarchal attitudes further intensify women's vulnerability in digital spaces. Consequently, the existing legal framework often fails to provide timely and adequate remedies to victims of online violence. This situation highlights the need for stronger laws, gender-sensitive enforcement mechanisms, and greater alignment between domestic laws and international human rights obligations under CEDAW.

DIGITAL GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

International Perspectives on Digital Gender-Based Violence

Digital gender-based violence has increasingly become an important subject of international legal and academic discourse due to the rapid growth of digital technologies and online communication platforms. Scholars and human rights organizations have recognized that online violence against women is not separate from traditional forms of gender-based violence but rather an extension of existing discrimination and inequality in society. International studies emphasize that women across the world face cyberstalking, online harassment, sexual exploitation, hate speech, identity theft, revenge pornography, and threats of physical violence through digital platforms. These acts are often aimed at silencing women, restricting their participation in public spaces, and reinforcing patriarchal power structures. Researchers argue that digital violence disproportionately targets women journalists, activists, politicians, students, and professionals who actively engage in online discussions and social media activities (Baianstovu et al., 2025).

International human rights bodies have increasingly interpreted violence against women to include technology-facilitated abuse. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been widely discussed as a significant instrument capable of addressing online gender-based violence despite being adopted before the digital era. Legal scholars highlight that CEDAW's principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination create state obligations to protect women from violence in all forms, including violence committed through digital means. International literature further stresses that states must ensure effective legal remedies, preventive mechanisms, victim support systems, and accountability for perpetrators of cyber violence. The United Nations and other international organizations have also recognized online violence as a human rights concern because it affects women's freedom of expression, privacy, security, and equal participation in social and political life (Ahmed, 2025).

Comparative studies from different jurisdictions demonstrate that several countries have attempted to strengthen their cyber laws to address digital violence against women. Developed legal systems have introduced specific provisions criminalizing cyber harassment, online stalking, image-based abuse, and electronic intimidation. Researchers emphasize that effective legal responses require gender-sensitive policies, specialized cybercrime units, digital literacy programs, and cooperation between governments and technology companies. International literature also points out that legal measures alone are insufficient without social awareness and institutional commitment. Many scholars conclude that the global response to digital violence remains fragmented because technological developments evolve faster than legal frameworks, leaving many women inadequately protected in online environments (Majid et al., 2025).

Review of Pakistani Cyber Laws and Women Protection Mechanisms

In Pakistan, the issue of digital violence against women has gained increasing attention with the expansion of internet usage and social media engagement. Pakistani legal scholarship largely focuses on the adequacy and effectiveness of existing cyber laws in addressing online abuse and harassment. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) is considered the primary legal framework governing cyber offences in Pakistan. The law criminalizes several forms of online misconduct, including cyberstalking, unauthorized use of personal information, electronic fraud, identity theft, and online harassment. Legal commentators acknowledge that PECA represents an important step toward regulating cybercrime; however, many researchers criticize the law for its weak implementation and procedural limitations (McLennan, 2025).

Scholars examining women's protection under Pakistani cyber laws argue that despite legal recognition of online harassment, victims often face practical barriers in obtaining justice. Studies reveal that women are reluctant to report digital abuse due to social stigma, fear of reputational damage, lack of family support,

and distrust in law enforcement agencies. Researchers also point out that many victims are unaware of their legal rights and available complaint mechanisms. The role of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) cybercrime wing has been widely discussed in academic literature, with mixed opinions regarding its effectiveness. While the establishment of cybercrime units is viewed positively, critics highlight issues such as delays in investigations, lack of trained personnel, insensitive attitudes toward victims, and inadequate technological resources (Chaubey, 2025).

Pakistani literature further emphasizes the intersection between cyber violence and deeply rooted patriarchal social norms. Women who express opinions online, participate in political discussions, or challenge traditional gender roles are frequently targeted through harassment campaigns and character assassination. Researchers argue that online violence is often normalized in society, making it difficult to create an effective culture of accountability. Legal scholars also examine the constitutional dimensions of women's digital rights, particularly the rights to dignity, privacy, equality, and freedom of expression guaranteed under the Constitution of Pakistan. However, the literature suggests that constitutional protections remain ineffective without stronger enforcement mechanisms and institutional reforms. Overall, existing scholarship indicates that Pakistan's legal framework is still evolving and requires substantial improvement to effectively address technology-facilitated violence against women (Saxena & Pathak, 2025).

Judicial and Institutional Responses to Online Harassment

Judicial and institutional responses to online harassment in Pakistan have gradually developed in recent years due to increasing public concern regarding cyber violence against women. Pakistani courts have addressed several cases involving cyberstalking, blackmail, unauthorized sharing of private images, and online defamation. Judicial decisions generally emphasize the importance of protecting women's dignity, privacy, and constitutional rights in digital spaces. Courts have also acknowledged that technological misuse can seriously harm victims psychologically, socially, and professionally. Legal scholars appreciate the judiciary's recognition of cyber violence as a serious issue; however, they argue that judicial responses remain limited because only a small number of cases reach the courts (Kamal, 2025).

Institutional responses primarily involve the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), which is responsible for investigating cybercrime complaints under PECA. The establishment of online complaint portals and cybercrime reporting systems has been viewed as a positive initiative for improving access to justice. Researchers note that awareness campaigns conducted by governmental and non-governmental organizations have also contributed to encouraging victims to report incidents of online abuse. Nevertheless, existing literature highlights several weaknesses in institutional responses, including slow investigation procedures, insufficient female staff, lack of digital forensic expertise, and inadequate victim protection mechanisms (Tiwari et al., 2025).

Academic discussions further emphasize the need for gender-sensitive training for judges, investigators, prosecutors, and law enforcement officers dealing with cyber harassment cases. Scholars argue that many officials continue to approach digital violence as a minor social issue rather than a serious human rights violation. Literature also stresses the importance of collaboration between state institutions, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and technology companies to effectively combat online violence against women. Overall, existing studies conclude that while Pakistan has made some institutional progress in addressing cyber harassment, the current judicial and enforcement mechanisms remain insufficient to provide comprehensive protection and effective remedies for victims (Khan & Irshad, 2025).

Existing literature on digital violence against women in Pakistan mainly focuses on cybercrime laws, online harassment, and social impacts of technology-facilitated abuse. However, limited research critically

examines digital violence through the broader framework of CEDAW and international human rights obligations. Most studies discuss PECA and institutional weaknesses separately without analyzing how Pakistan can expand the interpretation and implementation of CEDAW to address emerging digital threats against women. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the relationship between international women's rights standards, constitutional protections, and practical enforcement challenges in combating online gender-based violence in Pakistan.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

Nature and Impact of Digital Violence Against Women in Pakistan

The findings of the study reveal that digital violence against women in Pakistan has become a widespread and complex social and legal issue due to the increasing use of social media platforms, digital communication technologies, and online networking applications. Women in Pakistan frequently face cyberstalking, online harassment, identity theft, blackmail, unauthorized sharing of personal images, hate speech, fake social media accounts, and threats of violence. These forms of abuse are often directed toward women who actively participate in educational, professional, political, and social activities online. The research indicates that digital violence is deeply connected with existing patriarchal attitudes and gender discrimination within society. Online abuse is commonly used as a tool to silence women, damage their reputations, and restrict their freedom of expression and participation in public life.

The impact of digital violence extends beyond virtual spaces and significantly affects victims psychologically, socially, and professionally. Victims often experience fear, anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and social isolation. In many cases, women limit their online presence or withdraw from digital platforms due to concerns regarding safety and privacy. The study also demonstrates that online harassment negatively affects women's educational and employment opportunities, particularly for those engaged in journalism, activism, politics, and public advocacy. The findings suggest that digital violence is not merely a technological problem but a serious violation of women's human rights, dignity, privacy, and equality.

Effectiveness of Pakistani Laws in Addressing Cyber Harassment

The study finds that Pakistan has taken important legislative steps to address cyber harassment and online abuse through the enactment of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA). The law provides legal recognition to various cyber offences, including cyberstalking, electronic harassment, unauthorized access to personal data, and online intimidation. The establishment of cybercrime investigation mechanisms under the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) also reflects institutional efforts to combat digital crimes. These legal developments indicate that the state has acknowledged the growing threat of technology-facilitated violence against women.

Despite these legal measures, the research reveals that the practical effectiveness of Pakistani cyber laws remains limited due to weak implementation and procedural challenges. Victims often face difficulties in filing complaints, obtaining timely investigations, and securing legal remedies. Institutional shortcomings such as lack of trained personnel, inadequate technological expertise, delays in investigation processes, and insensitive treatment of victims reduce public confidence in the enforcement system. The study further identifies that existing legal provisions are often interpreted narrowly and fail to fully address the gender-specific dimensions of digital violence. As a result, many women remain vulnerable to online abuse despite the existence of formal legal protections.

Expanding the Scope of CEDAW in the Digital Era

The research findings demonstrate that the principles and objectives of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) remain highly relevant in addressing digital violence against women in the modern technological era. Although CEDAW was adopted before the rise of social media and digital communication technologies, its broad framework concerning equality, dignity, non-discrimination, and state responsibility provides a strong basis for addressing online gender-based violence. The study highlights that digital violence directly affects women's enjoyment of fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, privacy, participation in public life, and access to information.

The analysis further indicates that expanding the interpretation of CEDAW to include technology-facilitated violence is necessary for ensuring comprehensive protection of women's rights in digital spaces. States have a responsibility not only to criminalize online abuse but also to create effective preventive, protective, and remedial mechanisms for victims. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating international human rights principles into domestic cyber laws and policy frameworks. It also supports the adoption of gender-sensitive digital policies, awareness campaigns, and institutional reforms consistent with international legal standards.

Challenges in Enforcement, Reporting and Access to Justice

The research identifies several legal, social, and institutional challenges that hinder effective enforcement of cyber laws and limit women's access to justice in Pakistan. One of the major obstacles is the social stigma attached to victims of online harassment, particularly in conservative social settings where women are often blamed for digital abuse committed against them. Fear of reputational harm, family pressure, and lack of privacy discourage many victims from reporting incidents to law enforcement authorities. This underreporting significantly weakens the effectiveness of legal protections.

The study also reveals institutional barriers such as insufficient cybercrime infrastructure, lack of gender-sensitive training among investigators, procedural delays, and limited digital forensic resources. Women from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face additional challenges due to lack of awareness regarding cyber laws and complaint mechanisms. Furthermore, coordination gaps between law enforcement agencies, policymakers, educational institutions, and digital platforms create difficulties in addressing online violence comprehensively. The findings suggest that legal reform alone is insufficient unless accompanied by institutional strengthening, social awareness, victim support mechanisms, and effective implementation strategies aimed at protecting women in digital environments.

RECOMMENDATION

Reform and Strengthening of Cyber and Women Protection Laws

Pakistan should undertake comprehensive legal reforms to strengthen the protection of women against digital violence and technology-facilitated abuse. Existing cyber laws, particularly the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA), should be revised to address the gender-specific nature of online violence more effectively. Clear legal definitions of cyber harassment, online stalking, image-based abuse, non-consensual sharing of intimate content, digital blackmail, and identity manipulation should be incorporated to remove ambiguity in interpretation and enforcement. Legal procedures relating to complaint registration, investigation, and prosecution should be simplified to ensure quick and effective remedies for victims. Stronger penalties and victim protection mechanisms should also be introduced to deter offenders and enhance public confidence in the legal system. Furthermore, legal reforms should ensure that women's

constitutional rights to dignity, privacy, equality, and freedom of expression are fully protected in digital spaces. Special attention should also be given to vulnerable groups of women, including journalists, activists, students, and working professionals who are frequently targeted through online abuse and harassment.

Incorporation of Digital Rights within CEDAW Implementation Framework

The implementation framework of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Pakistan should be expanded to explicitly recognize digital violence as a form of gender-based discrimination and human rights violation. Policymakers and legal institutions should adopt broader interpretations of CEDAW obligations to address emerging technological threats against women. National laws, policies, and institutional practices should be aligned with international human rights standards concerning women's digital rights, privacy, safety, and online participation. The state should develop gender-sensitive digital policies that promote safe online environments and prevent discrimination in digital spaces. Regular monitoring mechanisms should also be established to evaluate Pakistan's progress in addressing online violence against women under international obligations. Furthermore, digital rights education and women's online safety should be integrated into national gender equality strategies to ensure that international commitments are effectively implemented at the domestic level. By incorporating digital rights into the broader framework of women's rights protection, Pakistan can strengthen its compliance with CEDAW and promote greater gender equality in the digital era.

Capacity Building of Law Enforcement and Judicial Institutions

Effective implementation of cyber laws requires the development of strong institutional capacity within law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies. Specialized training programs should be introduced for police officers, cybercrime investigators, prosecutors, and judges dealing with cases of online harassment and digital violence against women. Such training should focus on cybercrime investigation techniques, digital evidence collection, victim-sensitive procedures, and gender-responsive approaches to justice. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and other relevant institutions should be provided with modern technological resources, digital forensic tools, and adequately trained staff to improve investigation efficiency and reduce procedural delays. Establishing specialized cybercrime courts or dedicated legal units may also help ensure timely disposal of cases involving digital violence. Female officers and counselors should be appointed in cybercrime units to create a more supportive environment for victims reporting online abuse. Institutional coordination among law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions, educational bodies, and technology companies should also be strengthened to improve enforcement and accountability mechanisms. These reforms are essential for building public trust and ensuring effective access to justice for women affected by digital violence.

Public Awareness and Digital Safety Initiatives for Women

Public awareness and digital literacy programs are essential for preventing online violence and empowering women to safely participate in digital spaces. Nationwide awareness campaigns should be launched to educate women about cyber threats, legal rights, complaint mechanisms, and digital safety practices. Educational institutions should incorporate digital ethics, online safety, and cyber awareness into academic curricula to promote responsible use of technology from an early stage. Community-based initiatives and workshops should also be organized to address social stigma associated with reporting online harassment and to encourage victims to seek legal remedies without fear or shame.

The government, civil society organizations, media institutions, and technology companies should collaborate in promoting safe online environments and combating harmful online behavior. Social media

platforms should be encouraged to adopt stronger reporting systems and preventive measures against online abuse targeting women. Awareness initiatives should particularly focus on rural and marginalized communities where access to legal information and digital literacy remains limited. In addition, psychological support services, counseling facilities, and victim assistance programs should be developed to support women affected by digital violence. Through education, awareness, and collective institutional efforts, Pakistan can create a safer and more inclusive digital environment that protects women's rights, dignity, and equal participation in society.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Major Findings

The study concludes that digital violence against women has emerged as a significant human rights and legal challenge in Pakistan due to the rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms. The research findings demonstrate that women are increasingly subjected to cyberstalking, online harassment, identity theft, blackmail, non-consensual sharing of personal content, hate speech, and various other forms of technology-facilitated abuse. These forms of violence are not isolated digital incidents but are closely linked with existing gender discrimination, patriarchal attitudes, and social inequalities present within society. The study further reveals that digital violence affects women psychologically, socially, professionally, and economically by restricting their freedom of expression, participation in public life, and access to digital opportunities.

The research also finds that although Pakistan has introduced legal measures such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA), the practical implementation of these laws remains insufficient. Weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of institutional capacity, social stigma, underreporting of incidents, and limited awareness regarding cyber rights continue to undermine the effectiveness of legal protection available to women. The study further highlights that existing legal frameworks often fail to adequately address the gender-specific dimensions of online violence and therefore require broader interpretation and stronger implementation.

Evaluation of Pakistan's Compliance with CEDAW Obligations

The findings of the study indicate that Pakistan has taken certain legislative and institutional measures that reflect partial compliance with its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The enactment of cybercrime legislation and the establishment of cybercrime investigation mechanisms demonstrate recognition of the state's responsibility to address technology-facilitated violence against women. Constitutional guarantees relating to dignity, equality, privacy, and freedom of expression also provide a legal basis for the protection of women's rights in digital spaces.

However, the study concludes that Pakistan's compliance with CEDAW obligations remains incomplete due to gaps in implementation, enforcement, and policy development. CEDAW requires states not only to enact laws but also to ensure effective remedies, preventive measures, institutional accountability, and protection from all forms of discrimination and violence against women. The research demonstrates that digital violence continues to restrict women's equal participation in society and limits their ability to safely access digital platforms. The lack of gender-sensitive enforcement mechanisms and insufficient victim support systems indicate that existing state responses are still inadequate in fully meeting international human rights obligations under CEDAW.

Impact of Digital Violence on Women's Rights and Equality

The study establishes that digital violence has serious implications for women's fundamental rights and equality in Pakistan. Online abuse violates women's rights to dignity, privacy, security, and freedom of expression, while simultaneously creating barriers to educational, professional, political, and social participation. Women who actively engage in public discussions, journalism, activism, and advocacy are particularly vulnerable to targeted online harassment and intimidation. As a result, many women limit their online activities or withdraw from digital spaces altogether to avoid abuse and social humiliation.

The research further reveals that digital violence reinforces traditional gender inequalities by creating an environment of fear and exclusion for women in online spaces. Technology, which should function as a tool for empowerment and social participation, is often misused to perpetuate discrimination and silence women's voices. The study therefore concludes that digital violence is not only a cybercrime issue but also a broader issue of gender justice, equality, and human rights protection. Addressing online violence is essential for ensuring women's equal participation and empowerment in the digital age.

Overall Assessment of Legal Protection Mechanisms in Pakistan

The overall assessment of the study indicates that Pakistan's legal protection mechanisms against digital violence remain limited and require substantial improvement. While the existence of cyber laws and institutional frameworks reflects positive legal progress, practical enforcement remains weak due to procedural inefficiencies, inadequate technological resources, lack of specialized training, and social barriers affecting victims. Existing legal mechanisms often operate reactively rather than preventively, resulting in delayed justice and inadequate victim protection.

The study concludes that effective protection against digital violence requires a comprehensive and gender-sensitive legal approach that combines strong legislation with institutional reforms, public awareness, and international human rights standards. Expanding the scope of CEDAW within the context of digital rights can provide an important framework for improving women's protection in online spaces. Greater coordination between legal institutions, policymakers, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and digital platforms is necessary to combat technology-facilitated violence effectively. Overall, the research emphasizes that ensuring safe digital environments for women is essential for achieving gender equality, human dignity, and meaningful access to justice in Pakistan.

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