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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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PAKISTAN

Shaping ICTs in Pakistan using women's empowerment principles



Bytes for all

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Introduction

This report seeks to provide a broad overview of the status of women's rights in Pakistan, to identify unique areas peculiar to Pakistan, and to contextualise them in terms of the impact and potential of information and communications technologies (ICTs). It will seek to highlight current challenges posed to women's rights in Pakistan by ICTs as well as identify the benefits already evident. The report will conclude with recommendations aimed at changing the current harm-benefit ratio when it comes to gender and ICTs, moving away from the violation of rights, towards the protection of rights.

Background

Cultural and societal diversity in Pakistan is extensive compared to most developed/Western nations. In practice, women's rights, apart from those enshrined in law, vary widely depending on geography, education levels, and sometimes ethnicity. The case of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs) in Pakistan is unique in that they are not governed by the same set of laws applicable to the rest of Pakistan, which impacts adversely on all genders in those areas. Women's rights in FATAs (as defined and recognised by international human rights conventions and organisations) suffer more acutely because of the nature of tribal societies. It is therefore important to note that the incidents mentioned in this report do not necessarily reflect the condition of *all* Pakistani women, but may typify the condition of many belonging to a certain geographical, ethnic or religious space. Likewise, observations of societal attitudes in this report will reflect threads developed from reported incidents across the country that may or may not apply in all instances.

Women's rights issues: The spectrum at a glance

On average, Pakistani society may be described as conservative and patriarchal in the social and religious areas. Over the past 30 years, this

conservatism has increased both qualitatively and quantitatively. That is, cultural and religious practices have, over time, become visibly more conservative, and a larger number of people adhere to them. As an example, while the hijab (Islamic head cover) was unknown in Pakistan 20 years ago, it is a common sight in urban centres today. There is also evidence of some elements of tribal culture seeping into small pockets of urban areas too.

One major aspect of this phenomenon is how it affects women's human rights in the country. Control over women is a significant element of tribal and religious values, giving shape to cultural practices. Separately, it is generally recognised in human rights and educated civil society circles that many female-subjugating cultural practices (whether arising from tribal/feudal customs or religion) aim to control women economically as well as to control their sexuality. For example, the practice of "marrying" a woman to the Quran¹ in some feudal families is in reality a means of keeping her portion of the inheritance from falling out of the control of male members of the family. Upon death, the inheritance of the unmarried woman passes on to the male family members of the deceased (brothers, nephews, uncles).

Given this, we see the manifestations of fiercely patriarchal/conservative/feudal/tribal practices affecting almost all areas of women's life such as the right to education, right to work, freedom of association, freedom of choice (in marriage, movement, clothing, etc.), and freedom of speech.

Whether triggered by a woman's resistance to the infringement of her rights or some other factors/motivations, these violations are often criminal in nature. One typical and recurring example is the parading of women naked or rape (to dishonour them) to requite male members of their families for real or perceived grievances.²

ICTs mirror society

With the advent of ICTs it has become evident that these technologies, especially the internet and mobile telephony, have become additional ways to violate, harass, threaten, subjugate or dishonour

1 www.islamawareness.net/Marriage/Quran/married.html

2 www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-o85-2013

women. Many times these attacks through ICTs are as concrete, and with consequences as serious, as those that take place in real life. To illustrate the point we present later in the report a case study of three women killed in 2013 in Chilas, a remote town in the north of the country, as a result of the electronic dissemination of an audio recording of a woman in a romantic conversation with a man. Another example, from 2012, is of four women killed in the remote northern village of Gizar Alitray, for being exposed as having a good time (clapping to a song, humming) at a wedding function.³ A mobile phone recording of the event was put out in the public space over the internet to “dishonour” them and their families. As a result, the women were murdered to recover family/tribe “honour”. These cases are illustrative of the growing vulnerability of women in the face of the expanding teledensity and internet penetration in the region.

Further, more common challenges arising from the misuse of ICTs are exemplified by incidents rewarding male chauvinism and punishment of women who rebel or exercise their legal rights to mobility, thought or expression. Multimedia mobile phones and the internet have been used to record rapes and circulate videos of the crime to either “punish” and humiliate the victim, or as revenge for ransom demands unmet by the families.

Law enforcement is severely lacking, and does not support the nuances that the internet requires in terms of protecting women online. This extends to the use of mobile phone technology. Only in rare cases are such crimes taken to court and the perpetrators punished.⁴

Therefore, women remain at a constant risk of harassment through the use of bullying tactics, exposure and threat of character assassination in the cyber world where such punishment is considered by some as an inevitable outcome of “stepping out of the chador (veil) or chardevari (four walls).”

While on the one hand ICTs are often used by men against women in such cases with disastrous and sometimes fatal consequences, on the other hand ICTs are seen as a threat to the established order and women are prevented from using them. Illustrative of this reality is the case of the woman found using a mobile phone after the local jirgas (tribal courts of male elders) banned women

from using them. She was stoned to death for her “crime”.⁵

Clearly, the tribal/feudal societies and religious lobbies within Pakistan understand the potential of ICTs to empower and protect women, thereby reducing their own control.

Honour, crime and punishment of women in Pakistan

The statistics of violence against women in Pakistan reveal that an astounding 80% have been victims of domestic violence, and one in three experience some form of violence such as rape, honour killing, immolation, acid attacks and verbal or psychological abuse.⁶

Against this bleak landscape, cyber crime against women in Pakistan often carries very serious consequences. And a significant portion of cyber crimes against women relate to “honour” – the definition of which is broad, vague and all encompassing. So ingrained is the concept of “honour” with the sanctity of life that if, for example, the digital identity of a woman from a conservative family or area is exposed, it can become life threatening. If this happens, the woman can be thought to have brought shame upon herself. In extreme cases, the only means of redress considered by the family is to kill the woman to regain honour and acceptability in their society. Unfortunately, such honour killings are not limited to remote areas only (where they are more common) but also evidenced sporadically in urban centres, and even amongst the Pakistani diaspora in Europe.

Pakistan’s history of honour killing is a long and bloody one with almost 900 women murdered annually,⁷ usually by their male relatives. Women on whom suspicion has fallen are usually not allowed to defend themselves, and with the growth of technology both the flare-up and the retribution are explosive.

One consequence of the threat of dishonour is women being paralysed by the *fear* of retribution, remaining cautious, restricted and fearful, limiting their potential.

The role of ICTs in creating a conformist, claustrophobic environment

Total teledensity in Pakistan is about 74%⁸ and internet penetration around 15.3% (30 million users,⁹

3 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/9315872/Pakistan-orders-investigation-into-suspected-honour-killings.html

4 www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/pakistan/2013/07/130724_rape_video_sentence_25.shtml

5 www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-128-2013

6 tribune.com.pk/story/125993/four-in-five-women-in-pakistan-face-some-form-of-domestic-abuse-report

7 www.rferl.org/content/pakistan-honor-killings/24948795.html

8 www.pta.gov.pk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=269:telecom-indicators&catid=124:industry-report&Itemid=599

9 tribune.com.pk/story/567649/30m-internet-users-in-pakistan-half-on-mobile-report

with Pakistan's internet ranking at 27th¹⁰ in the world), with a high growth rate amongst developing nations. However, these ICTs have unfortunately assisted in glorifying notions of women's piety, chastity and honour. Facebook groups such as "My Beauty is for my husband to see and not the world" promote among both genders the narrow view of what women are religiously permitted to do, reinforcing the weight of centuries of oppression and fear. Obscurantist attitudes towards women have spread to the extent that even moderate/liberal political parties now avow support of women's rights as long as the women stay "within the culture".

With such implicit renunciation of women's rights, these political parties automatically make acceptable retribution towards women who do not follow the social construct of "culture" – be it stepping out of the veil, travelling without a male guardian, working for a living, voting, being educated, etc. The definition of what encompasses culture can be narrowed infinitely and choke existing spaces for women in society.

However, successful campaigns such as Take Back the Tech!¹¹ have questioned these attitudes and perceptions and fought harassment of women by reporting these offences, although much more work is required.

The Chilas honour killing case

In the recent case of honour killing in Chilas, two young women were murdered along with their mother when an audio clip was shared among the conservative community in this remote town in the north of Pakistan. The audio clip contained evidence of a romantic interest between the mother and a man other than her husband. In that audio conversation, there was mention of her two daughters. In a bizarre twist, her stepson obtained the clip, and apparently pushed by a grotesque cultural feeling, he murdered all three women to protect the family honour.

Interestingly, the Chilas story was entirely misreported by the national and international press, based on a video that had gone viral of two women dancing in the rain. It was claimed their murders were committed due to that video being released on the internet.¹² The misreporting happened despite the fact that the first investigative report by the police mentioned the audio clip. The facts were

uncovered by an investigative team from Bytes for All that went to Chilas on a fact-finding mission.¹³ The mission uncovered that the family honour was a guise for trying to keep money and property within the family.

Acts such as the Chilas women's murders continue to go unpunished for several reasons, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this report. However, the jirga system of justice is part of the problem. Set up to be like a town meeting, this collective group of local elders comes together to decree on issues of importance. Prevalent mostly in FATAs, the jirgas have historically spelt bad news for women, who are typically blamed and punished for crimes against them.

The Chilas incident highlights the manner in which cyberspace becomes a resonant chamber for a manufactured story, especially in areas where internet penetration is low, investigative journalism is difficult, and law enforcement authorities are protective of local cultural practices.

The positive aspects of ICTs *vis-à-vis* women's rights in Pakistan

There is a body of evidence that demonstrates the role of ICTs in shaping positive outcomes for women's rights in Pakistan. One of the most notable incidents in the recent past (early 2009) was of a woman being flogged in public in Swat (a northern Pakistani city) by the Taliban for an alleged honour crime.¹⁴ The degrading and painful treatment inflicted on her, pinned face down to the ground by men, and flogged repeatedly by another man while she screamed piteously and helplessly, was recorded on a mobile phone and released on the internet. The video eventually had to be noticed by the mainstream media, generating furious debate and outrage in the country.¹⁵ It may be safe to assert that that video became one of the major catalysts for the country's political and military leadership's decision to conduct a military operation in Swat to clear out the militants and regain the writ of the state over the region, thereby bringing relief to the general population and especially women in the region.

Other examples of women's empowerment through ICTs include the world famous case of Malala Yousafzai, the teenage girl from Swat who wrote a regular blog for the BBC, diarising the

10 www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2013/Individuals_Internet_2000-2012.xls

11 www.takebackthetech.net

12 www.nydailynews.com/news/world/sisters-killed-pakistan-video-dancing-rain-article-1.1386938

13 tribune.com.pk/story/576737/chilas-town-saving-honour-or-family-riches

14 www.theguardian.com/world/video/2009/apr/02/swat-valley-flogging

15 news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7984958.stm

Taliban's oppression during their period of control over the region.¹⁶ She used the internet to speak for the rights of girls to education, which the Taliban had banned in Swat. She now stands recognised internationally with several peace awards.

Less famous, but no less significant, are examples of large numbers of women who have found ICT platforms to voice protest, opinion and advocacy to bring positive change. ICTs made it possible for these women to become a significant part of the national debate generated by the Swat flogging incident.

Conclusion

The use of technology can be, and has been seen to be to a certain extent, catalytic in shifting gender roles in Pakistan. However, an acceleration of the process can only happen if technology is increasingly claimed and used to empower women with information and know-how on the processes of securing their rights, lives and livelihoods. It is imperative, therefore, to allow the internet to be democratic and provide amplification to progressive ideals/voices. A vocal civil society can help achieve women's empowerment, protection, and advocacy of their rights via ICTs. Through campaigns such as Take Back The Tech! activists must create avenues for monitoring, reporting and documenting abuses. Over time, raised awareness and a trail of evidence should lead to enhanced accountability and justice for women.

Bytes for All runs the successful Take Back The Tech! campaign in Pakistan, as well as Vawmap.pk where it monitors and reports cases of violence against women. Women are emboldened as a result of this work and have come forward to not just report violations, but to exert pressure on law enforcement agencies to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Action steps

- A campaign to assert pressure on the government to urgently constitute the independent National Human Rights Commission. This commission is an international obligation for the government of Pakistan and will help provide remedies for women's rights abuses.
- Efforts to change the objectified perception and treatment of women to their treatment as individuals with equal capabilities, rights and responsibilities as men. The media and local authorities should be engaged to propagate the merits of households/communities where women are empowered.
- More investment is needed for initiatives to promote the education of the general public, and women themselves, on women's fundamental human rights, especially the right to access information (on legal protections, reporting violations of rights, effective legal recourse, etc.).
- Strengthen the voices of different networks and women's groups online, especially in cases of violation of their rights, enabling them to congregate quickly and effectively and exert pressure on the government and justice system to work for their rights.
- Encourage activism to promote the introduction of punitive legislation to protect women from ICT-based libel, propaganda, breach of privacy, harassment and other forms of violence.
- Introduce and strengthen sustainable technology platforms to establish mechanisms which women under threat can use to seek help. This can be a multi-stakeholder programme with nationwide reach, including international donors and local, national and regional partners. ■

¹⁶ www.theinternational.org/articles/447-malala-yousafzai-and-the-fight-for-young