

ONLINE FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN PAKISTAN

Zoya Rehman

- *How online spaces help the feminist movement in Pakistan reclaim civic space* •

ABSTRACT

This article examines women's access to civic space in Pakistan, particularly with the help of digital media in recent times. Despite the emergence of an overtly feminist consciousness in Pakistan in response to the discriminatory laws that began to be passed during Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation regime, the movement remained unknown to many in the country. Now, with the internet on its side, Pakistan's feminist movement is more visible than ever, with numerous collectives and activists using online spaces to highlight their work. Online spaces have undoubtedly made organising easier, but have also introduced serious challenges for the movement, including attacks of hate speech online and charges of elitism. This article examines this reality and also how the Digital Rights Foundation has launched the Hamara Internet programme to support the work of Pakistani feminists in online spaces, by envisioning the possibility of a feminist internet in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

Feminism | Human Rights Movement | Strategies | Pakistan | Digital Rights Foundation | Online Space

1 • Introduction

Feminists in Pakistan have struggled persistently to fight for women's access to an open and free civic space across the country. Women have been making political demands in relation to their freedom of expression, assembly and association since the country's inception in 1947, with a "feminist consciousness" emerging more prominently in the 1980s.¹

The internet has recently become an important tool for the feminist movement to renovate itself and to counter the paternalistic rhetoric of "security" that is used to silence women and narrow the spaces in which they can operate.

This article explains how the feminist movement is responding to Pakistan's challenging political environment with the help of digital technology. It examines how the use of the internet is accelerating traditional forms of grassroots activism and resistance. The article then addresses the unique challenges that the internet presents for Pakistani feminists. Women and non-binary individuals are offered no respite from violence and the male gaze in online spaces, given the gendered use of technology,² with the larger structural issues being replicated online.³ The article ends by exploring how the Hamara Internet Project, an initiative of the Digital Rights Foundation, is being used to respond to these challenges.

2 • Feminist resistance going online

The Women's Action Forum (WAF) – a feminist conscious-raising group known for enabling Pakistani women to fight for their rights – was formed during 1980s.⁴ Its formation was a response to the repressive legislation introduced under General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation agenda, which placed excessive focus on women as the guardians of state, family and religious "honour".⁵ Dress codes and conservative social practices – many of which continue to this day – were strictly enforced to restrict women's freedoms and confine them to the *chaadar and chaar dewari*.⁶

Until recently, the feminist movement used traditional strategies – such as demonstrations, correspondence campaigns and petitions – to oppose the draconian measures established by the state in the 1980s. Eyewitness accounts of the protests in 1983 recall the illegitimate force of the government used against the female protesters at the Mall in Lahore. Methods such as teargas and *lathi* (baton) charges were used against the 200 to 250 women,⁷ much like the reaction of state forces towards legitimate protests that we see today in Pakistan and beyond.

Despite its efforts, until recently WAF was largely unknown to the general public in Pakistan. However, by taking ownership of online spaces the group has gained increasing recognition. Social media presence and email threads help the members of the forum issue strongly worded statements regarding relevant feminist and social issues in the country.

In addition, WAF's increasing online presence⁸ has helped it publicise its work as a lobby and pressure group on legislation regarding violence against women in the country.

Moreover, younger people are joining WAF, which also owes its success to the online presence of the group. WAF is considered by many to be a symbol of feminist resistance across Pakistan, and remains united against repressive Islamic and state laws that continue to restrict the spaces in which women can operate. The forum represents the thriving feminist movement in the country that has succeeded in placing women's issues on the national agenda.

WAF's online presence is an indicator of how the feminist movement is utilising the opportunities that digital spaces provide. For many groups and collectives in Pakistan, the internet has become an important strategic tool to organise protests and to mobilise people rapidly. Activists are coordinating themselves online more and more, for example through Facebook, Whatsapp, Signal and Twitter. Such platforms and messaging apps allow instant, free communication and profiles that help in dissemination of information.

The growing presence of feminist collectives online proves that online spaces have become important, and sometimes challenging, sites of political resistance themselves. They lend support to communities and causes that not only receive little traction in offline spaces but which are actively being restricted. Such online spaces have the potential to produce and celebrate a range of politics and identities, and for individuals to become more visible to shun the marginality they experience offline.

Girls at Dhabas is one of Pakistan's most well-known feminist collectives that owes its popularity primarily to online spaces. The collective focuses on the reclamation of public spaces by women and non-binary individuals.⁹ What started as a picture posted of one of the members sipping tea at a *dhaba* (roadside café)¹⁰ soon became a movement that began to define the right of women and non-binary individuals to enjoy Pakistan's public spaces. This is done through various creative public space interventions, such as cricket matches, bike rallies, mural painting, and meetups in parks and *dhabas*, all of which the collective promotes through its online presence. Feminists from all over Pakistan are increasingly sharing their experiences anonymously through the collective's online pages to shed light on the patriarchy Pakistani women experience in their day-to-day lives.

The collective recently launched bilingual podcasts that highlight issues of feminist concern, in order to make a widespread impact in a more creative way.¹¹ It is also using its online space to reach out to parallel movements such as 'Why Loiter?' in India in order to strengthen its feminist ethos and raise new questions regarding movement building for local audiences.¹² This is key for the collective to bring feminists based in urban contexts together through sharing examples from across South Asia, to sensitise them and make them an active part of the feminist advocacy movement in the country.

Another collective that owes its membership to online spaces is the Feminist Collective (TFC),¹³ which was created as a response to sexism in the left.¹⁴ The collective emphasises women's negative experiences of working with men in the left, and envisions the creation of a powerful socialist feminist movement in the country. The members of the collective routinely discuss ways for feminists and queer activists to organise across Pakistan with the help of digital media. TFC is an important tool to enable feminists to collaborate whenever an issue of concern arises, particularly that of the shrinking of leftist spaces for women. Additionally, the group also provides a support system and a safe space for feminist activists who cannot express themselves freely in public given Pakistan's restrictive political environment.

3 • Key Challenges in Online Spaces

Despite the clear benefits that the use of online space brings, feminists with an online presence have become increasingly vulnerable to online attacks and worse – disappearance or death.¹⁵ Such attacks represent another way in which civic – albeit online – space for feminists is being restricted. For example, the events leading up to the murder of Qandeel Baloch,¹⁶ a social media celebrity and provocateur known for her bold videos, are indicative of the backlash women experience as result of partaking in online spaces on their own terms. Such stigmatisation also results in women and non-binary individuals falling under increased state control and scrutiny,¹⁷ both on and offline. The monitoring and policing that used to take place in offline spaces is now happening online, with the government shaping the narrative of who the public should rally against and call anti-state. This rhetoric often results in feminists being stalked online, receiving threatening messages or having their mobile phone numbers culled from their profiles. These feminists are then re-victimised when they challenge their online abusers, which can be seen by the backlash against them in the online spaces where they voice their grievances.

It must also be noted that while online spaces have made a plethora of voices available through feminist commentary and activism, this often takes place at the expense of larger, more intersectional issues, which is a challenge we must overcome.¹⁸ The movement is often accused of being elitist and exclusionary with many online initiatives being predominantly in English and catering to urban classes, particularly the call to protests online. These calls only reach a certain section of society and result in the same few activists showing up to protest. Both WAF and Girls at Dhabas, for example, have been criticised constantly over these issues and are often labelled as 'Western' initiatives by the state as an attempt to discredit and silence them.¹⁹

Not only is this a typical rallying cry by powers that seek to restrict civil society by discrediting it as representing foreign values, but for the feminist movement such a label is akin to being accused of propagating "white feminism".²⁰ This results in the movement being seen as neither culturally relevant nor accessible for women from working class or rural backgrounds.²¹ To overcome these criticisms, the movement is now trying to ensure that more content in Urdu

is created to improve online outreach, especially with the help of podcasts and bilingual study circles initiated by Girls at Dhabas and the Awami Workers Party²² to sensitise Pakistani audiences and resist being discredited by the state and their own constituency.

Class representation can also be achieved through online collaborations with labour and peasant movements across Pakistan, particularly those led by women. The social media “boycott” campaign targeting Khaadi, a local clothing franchise, is a good example to learn from in this regard. The boycott, initiated by the National Trade Union Federation,²³ occurred because of the company’s exploitative labour practices²⁴ and which underscored the routine structural violence that factory workers – including female ones – experience at the hands of the local fashion industry. Feminists could initiate similar campaigns in order to help the movement gain legitimacy and counter the discourse that it is elitist and representing western values.²⁵

4 • The Response : Hamara²⁶ Internet – A Feminist Internet?

Recognising on the one hand how important the internet has become for the feminist movement in Pakistan in its efforts to fight back restrictions on civic space for women, yet on the other the severe challenges that the medium presents, the Digital Rights Foundation established the Hamara Internet (which translates as “Our Internet”) project to “build a movement to promote a free and secure digital environment for women”.²⁷

The Hamara Internet project was conceptualised as a platform for reaching out to young women in colleges across Pakistan, to inform them as to how the internet can be used against them by their oppressors, be it the state, their families or men in their midst. The project teaches feminist activists how to utilise digital tools for security, such as privacy and encryption features available to them for secure communications, and conducts workshops on holistic security,²⁸ thus enabling online dissent to continue in a safe manner. Activists in DRF also work with various stakeholders – lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists – to highlight how national security policies, including the National Action Plan,²⁹ can clash with civic freedoms, and what can be done to circumvent this.

In addition, the project is mapping how Pakistan’s online spaces can potentially encapsulate a feminist ethos, in order to bring such movements together in feminists’ collective fight against patriarchy. In this sense, it is using online spaces to facilitate alliance building in order to combat restrictions of civic space. The project encourages collaboration with feminists by organising protests, advocacy efforts, fundraising, legislative advancements, and drafting joint statements. Such efforts help determine effective ways of bringing intersecting voices and activism together to work on issues that should be of concern for all feminists.

Under the project, the Digital Rights Foundation launched a toll-free helpline³⁰ in late 2016, responding to the realisation that women and non-binary individuals in Pakistan were not comfortable taking their complaints to law enforcement agencies. This is the first

helpline in the region that specifically caters to cases dealing with online harassment and abuse, and relies on a referral system³¹ to ensure that cases are forwarded in a nuanced, gender sensitive way. The helpline seeks to highlight problems women experience while forwarding their complaints to government agencies by providing a safe space and ensuring confidentiality for those experiencing any form of abuse online.

A feminist Internet manifesto was drafted recently under the Hamara Internet initiative, with significant contributions from feminist activists across Pakistan. The manifesto is a statement on how the country's online spaces must work towards building a feminist ethos in relation to movement building, data protection, accessibility and inclusivity, freedom of expression, and economy. The purpose of the manifesto is to merge the work of feminist activists with the digital rights discourse, to begin conceiving the possibility of a feminist internet in the country that can be a truly safe and free place for feminists to operate.³² It is important for feminists in Pakistan to frame this conversation on their own terms, given the unique political context they operate in, in order to consciously change the landscape of internet politics in Pakistan. Ultimately, Hamara Internet aims to highlight how online activism in Pakistan – with the help of feminist politics and resistance – shapes our experience of being citizens on the internet.

Feminist perspectives are incredibly positive forces that should be a prominent part of the internet rights debate. Narratives on digital rights – especially now that we are seeing the offline civic space moving online – cannot exist without recognition of feminism, social justice and the activist communities that form around them.

5 • Conclusion

These observations show how feminist activism in Pakistan is responding to the restrictions on civic space – which have long been present in the country – with the help of digital media. However, online spaces have their own risks and challenges. Internet security narratives are predominantly male-dominated, and in many cases, led by the government. It is this narrative which defines online space in Pakistan and generates a backlash from the Pakistani population due to religious and nationalist rhetoric pushed by the state. Despite our collective achievements, the threats we face offline are increasingly present online. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that feminist online activism is just not inclusive enough, thereby allowing negative rhetoric by the government to gain traction. The language barrier is a real problem with the movement that is seen more visibly in Pakistan's online spaces, all too often being considered inaccessible, 'western' and elitist.

These challenges need to be countered by feminist collectives. We must better maintain online spaces and develop more content that caters to all Pakistanis, in different languages, and from diverse contexts to ensure that social hierarchies are not replicated online, particularly to overcome conservative social discourses. We must truly harness the power of the internet in Pakistan, and resist attempts to silence voices of women online.

NOTES

- 1 • As documented by Dr. Rubina Saigol, "Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies." Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/12453.pdf>.
- 2 • Emrys Schoemaker, "Digital Purdah: How Gender Segregation Persists Over Social Media." Dawn, July 30, 2015, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1197345>.
- 3 • Urooj Zia, "She's Begging to be Raped – Twitterverse for Feminists in Pakistan!" GenderIT, December 17, 2012, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/shes-begging-be-raped-twitterverse-feminists-pakistan>.
- 4 • WAF was formed as a response to the laws on adultery, otherwise known as the Hudood Ordinance of 1979, enacted during General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, which lasted from 1977 until his death in 1988. The Zina Ordinance saw adultery and rape as the same crime, and exonerated perpetrators of the latter, thereby making rape almost impossible to prove by putting the burden of proof on the victims. Moreover, violence against women began to be seen as a private matter by the state, especially under the Qisas and Diyat laws, which made the exoneration of the murderers (mostly family members) of women possible. The Law of Evidence was also promulgated to reduce a woman's testimony in a court of law as half of that of men's. Such laws even permitted the public flogging of women. For context, see I.A. Rehman, "40 Years of Zia: How Zia Redefined Pakistan." Dawn, July 2, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1342697>.
- 5 • Shahnaz Rouse notes that "the regime ideologically relies on Islamic fundamentalism, including its anti-female tenets..." and then links this to Pakistan being a fascist state that produces "a traditionally oriented intelligentsia supportive of the state and the political right" that is "no respecter of women". See Shahnaz Rouse, "Dossier 3: Women's Movement in Pakistan: State, Class, Gender." Women Living Under Muslim Laws, June/July 1988, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.wluml.org/node/241>.
- 6 • Roman Urdu, meaning "the veil and confines of the four walls of their house".
- 7 • "'My Years with WAF' – Zohra Yusuf on the Pakistani Women's Movement » LathiCharge on WAF-Lahore-1983," Journeys to Democracy, February 13, 2013, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://beenasarwar.com/2013/02/13/my-years-with-waf-zohra-yusuf-on-the-pakistani-womens-movement/lathicharge-on-waf-lahore-1983-2/>.
- 8 • One example of this is that of the online presence of the Lahore regional 'chapter': "Women's Action Forum Lahore's Facebook Page," Women's Action Forum Lahore, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/WAFLahore/>.
- 9 • Javaria Khan, "Girls at Dhabas is Reclaiming Public Space for Women in Pakistan." Muftah, April 29, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://muftah.org/girls-at-dhabas-women-pakistan-public-spaces/#.WdS3-tOCw2x>.
- 10 • Ameera Iqbal, "Girls at Dhabas: A Much-needed Campaign." The News on Sunday, September 13, 2015, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/girls-at-dhabas-much-needed-campaign/>.
- 11 • The podcasts go by the name of "Behenchara Diaries": "Behenchara Diaries' Soundcloud Page," Behenchara Diaries, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/behenchara-diaries>.
- 12 • Bhaskar Chawla, "Why Loiter: A Movement to Reclaim Public Places for Women in South Asia." Vagabomb, January 4, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.vagabomb.com/Why-Loiter-A-Movement-to-Reclaim-Public-Places-for-Women-in-South-Asia/>.
- 13 • The activities of the group are documented on

its public Facebook page: "The Feminist Collective's Facebook Page," The Feminist Collective, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/tfclahore/>.

14 • Sonia Qadir, "Why the Left is (Still) Sexist." Tanqeed, December, 2015, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.tanqeed.org/2015/12/why-the-left-is-still-sexist/>.

15 • "The Pakistani Government Must Release Zeenat Shahzadi from Custody," Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, November 16, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, http://www.cjfe.org/the_pakistani_government_must_release_zeenat_shahzadi_from_custody.

16 • "No Country for Bold Women," (statement regarding Qandeel Baloch's murder), Action for Progressive Pakistan, July 16, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://progpak.wordpress.com/2016/07/16/no-country-for-bold-women/>.

17 • Shmyla Khan, "Surveillance as a Feminist Issue." Privacy International, December 1, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.privacyinternational.org/node/1007>.

18 • Despite advances, the digital divide in the country remains an issue. By mid-2016, Pakistan's internet penetration was 18 per cent, although it is expected to rise, given the advent of mobile internet (3G and 4G). "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2015," International Telecommunication Union, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

19 • "To make matters worse, understanding and tolerance for feminism in Pakistan and other Muslim countries remains low, limited to a narrow continuum between eastern and western ideologies. Feminism is generally regarded as unnecessary; a construct of the West which deserves no importance in the Islamic structure." Mehreen Ovais, "Feminism in Pakistan: A Brief History." The Express Tribune, September 23, 2014, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/764036/feminism-in-pakistan-a-brief-history/>.

20 • "In their essay 'White Women, You Need to Talk About Racism' for Bitch, writer Margaret Jacobsen observes and describes the behavior of white feminists, women who "become fragile...complain, and blame, and refuse to recognize that there needs to be a change to what we call feminism." Jacobsen goes on to define "peak white feminism" as "doing what it does best, looking out for the white female while stepping over and on top of women of color.... White feminism, white women who believe themselves to be just and 'well-meaning,' are also contributing to white supremacy." Allison McCarthy, "Get Out and Ineffectiveness of Post-Racial White Feminism." Bitch Media, March 1, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/get-out-movie-white-feminism>.

21 • "Traditional criticism of the women's movement has tended to focus on its ineffectiveness at bringing about radical, visible progress for women, particularly working-class women. This external critique has focused on the upper-class background of women activists and the non-governmental organizations (NGO) culture that has encouraged activists to be donor-driven rather than independent or 'indigenous' in drawing their agendas; often the criticism has been directed at the personalities of women activists and their 'western' outlook." Afiya Shehribano Zia, "The Reinvention of Feminism in Pakistan," *Feminist Review* 91, no. 1 (February 2009): 29-46, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan051005.pdf>.

22 • "Laal ReMarx's Facebook Page," Laal ReMarx, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/LaalReMarx/>.

23 • "National Trade Union Federation – NTUF's Facebook Page," NTUF, 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/National-Trade-Union-Federation-NTUF-1594302000818483>.

24 • Fawad Hassan, "Exclusive: Khaadi Ripping Off Workers of Over Rs100 Million Every Year." The Express Tribune, August 11, 2017, accessed

December 2, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1479056/exclusive-khaadi-ripping-off-workers-off-rs100-million-every-year/>.

25 · Sara Jaffri, "Working Class Power & Feminism: An Interview with Alia Amirali | VOICES," Tanqeed, September, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.tanqeed.org/2016/09/working-class-power-feminism-amirali-interview/>.

26 · Roman Urdu, meaning "our".

27 · More information about the project can be found at: "Hamara Internet," Digital Rights Foundation, April 8, 2015, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/work/hamara-internet/>.

28 · Physical, psychosocial and digital security.

29 · The National Action Plan is an action plan that

was established by the Government of Pakistan in January 2015 to crack down on terrorism and to supplement the ongoing anti-terrorist offensive in North-Western Pakistan.

30 · "Cyber Harassment Helpline," Digital Rights Foundation, November 30, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/cyber-harassment-helpline/>.

31 · In case the caller wants to pursue a legal case, or when specialised services are needed that can best be provided by another non-governmental organisation.

32 · For more information about the concept of the feminist internet, see: "About," The Feminist Principles of the Internet, August 15, 2016, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://feministinternet.org/en/about>.



ZOYA REHMAN – *Pakistan*

Zoya Rehman is a lawyer, independent feminist researcher and activist based in Islamabad, Pakistan. She has been working on gender and legal issues from a multidisciplinary approach through her practice and research. She was previously working at Digital Rights Foundation, and has clerked at the Supreme Court of Pakistan in the past. She is also a part of numerous urban feminist collectives in Pakistan.

email: zoeyarehman@gmail.com

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