

A CASE STUDY FROM PAKISTAN

GENDER VIOLENCE IN A VOLATILE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Keywords: accessing private data; faking personal photos; repeated harassment; threats of violence; sharing private information; abusive comments; physical harm; emotional harm; harm to reputation; mobility limited; censorship; invasion of privacy; human rights defenders; television; Facebook; Twitter; YouTube; blog; abuser is unknown; abuser is group of people; reported to law enforcement; dialogue with aggressor; leaving platform; reported to platform; platform deems no action necessary; no response from platform; survivor's age is 31-45

THE STORY AND THE VIOLENCE

Baaghi is woman of high social and political status living in Lahore, Pakistan. She works as a human rights activist, and has spoken publicly on TV on several related issues. Her non-Orthodox beliefs are considered by many conservative factions to be “anti-Pakistani”. As a well-known public figure, Baaghi has an active presence across social media platforms, and has been facing technology-related violence since 2006. This has ranged from rape threats to death threats to abusive comments labelling her as a woman with loose morals. It has included people “photoshopping” her face onto the bodies of porn stars as well as creating fake accounts in her daughter’s name.

One of the most violent incidents Baaghi faced was in 2012, when a blog republished Baaghi’s personal documents that she had filed with the educational board when applying for a Master’s degree. These included her National Identity Card, her marriage certificate, and all the addresses where she had resided during the past decade. The blog called on people to shoot and kill Baaghi and her family wherever they were seen. Exactly one month later, as she and her husband were driving home, a car drove up beside them and fired three shots at close range. Baaghi recalls, “The gun [was] not more than a couple of feet from my face. I think that the attack was not meant

to kill, but only to silence.” The attack turned out to be politically motivated and linked to the blog, which has close ties with a well-known ultra-nationalist who had previously declared a “hit list” of human rights defenders and journalists.

The constant online abuse that Baaghi faced led her to become deeply depressed and fearful for her family’s safety. She says, “I had nightmares all the time of being raped by these bastards; of them doing harm to my parents, my husband, or my daughter – because of me. I still get nightmares that they have done something to my daughter, or kidnapped my husband.” As a result of this pressure, Baaghi no longer allows her daughter to move around the city freely. Today, she talks about how the violence has changed her: “I am an angry woman now,” she reflects. “I was a very happy woman [before] – fun loving, easy going, dancing, singing. Now I feel very old compared to three or four years ago. I still sing, dance and laugh, but something has changed inside of me.”

SEEKING JUSTICE

Baaghi, who personally knew the Federal Interior Minister, told him about the mounting online threats. He then directed the cyber crime unit within the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to lend her their assistance. Baaghi provided them with information regarding the blog and the associated social media

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threats. However, *because the blog was based in the UK, the cyber crime unit said they could not press charges.* They said that they could block access to it within Pakistan, but all that happened was that *the blog was made inaccessible for a few weeks through one telecom provider.*

The cyber crime unit said they needed a court order to override the privacy policies of social media platforms, so as to discover who was behind the abusive handles or profiles. *But court orders to compel intermediaries to help with the case were never issued.* Baaghi first reported the case in 2012 and pursued it closely until the end of 2013; however, law enforcement eventually stopped responding to her. Later she learned that *the cyber crime unit was essentially inactive* and existed largely in name rather than in practice. Moreover, there was a complete *lack of awareness amongst law enforcement about the relevant laws* that could have been applied.

Baaghi herself was reluctant to appear in court, given that she perceives there to be *many barriers to women accessing justice in cases of gender violence.* She talks about a *culture of impunity* that exists when it comes to violence against women, and especially when it comes to technology-related violence. She says, “Cyber harassment or bullying is not recognised as a crime as such; it is considered to be a little discomfort for the privileged... So if a privileged woman is harassed on the internet, it is considered [as something that] comes with the territory – not a big thing.”

Baaghi also attempted to approach the internet platforms on which the abuse was taking place. Many of her *followers reported the abusive Twitter accounts* but no action was taken. She then attempted to use Twitter’s reporting mechanism; however, it *requires personal documents to be in English* – something Baaghi did not have. Moreover, *Twitter only accepts such documents through international fax.* Twitter also has *poor policies regarding impersonation*, and required that Baaghi used the *same display picture* as the impersonator, which was unhelpful since there was more than one fake account.

The majority of abuse Baaghi faces on Facebook is in Urdu; however, *Facebook does not accept translations*, but maintains that they cannot suspend an account if they do not understand what the words mean. This then raises *crucial questions about how women can report violence to international platforms across languages.*

Independently from her complaint to the FIA, Baaghi and her husband reported the shooting to the police; however, little headway was made in this case either. In fact, *the only eyewitness was found dead* in mysterious circumstances not long after the incident was reported.

FINDING AGENCY

When the violence online reached its peak, Baaghi *initially closed both her and her daughter’s Facebook and Twitter accounts.* When she finally returned to these platforms, she only posted content but *did not check her mentions or messages.* Baaghi has attempted to address the violence in many other ways. When at one stage what she describes as a “Taliban type of Twitter account” had threatened to rape and kill her, she sought the help of a friend involved in a political party that had an active social media cell. The party successfully had the offending account suspended within three days. Baaghi has successfully had some *offline dialogues with some of her aggressors.* She has also *attempted to get a verified account on Twitter*; however, Twitter has repeatedly refused her requests by saying that they have no more verified accounts to allocate.

Today the strategies that Baaghi has come to use most often are *blocking* and a *certain degree of self-censorship.* She has over 40,000 accounts on her blocked list and is appreciative of the new Twitter rules, which now mean that after you block an account, the people you have blocked can no longer see your tweets. Moreover, she says that while she sticks to her views and opinions, when she puts them up on social media *she no longer names specific people.*



Ministry of Foreign Affairs