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Article

An Analytical Study of Unveiling Gender-Based Harassment in Cyberspace: An Exploration of Realities and Experiences

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Abstract: This study critically analyses the realities and experiences of gender-based harassment in cyberspace, and aims to unveil the shadows that shroud this phenomenon. It discloses the online spaces that disseminate detrimental attitudes towards women, despite their physical absence. Cyber violence has become a global issue and it causes significant economic and societal consequences. Recognizing and dealing with the adverse effects caused by demeaning cyber gender harassment is essential. The study raises questions to explore the kind of cyberbullying offences that are brought on by misogynistic inclinations in online environments and the experiences of the women who have gone through cyberbullying. This study uses semi-structured interviews and the IPA technique of the analysis of data to thoroughly examine the unique experiences of cyber harassment victims by applying a qualitative research approach. The study looks into various misogynistic cyber harassment offences and analyses women's accounts. Due to obstacles to justice, cyber violence and harassment replicate physical problems like spousal abuse and sexual harassment. A constant assault of intimidation and harassment results from the traditionally male-dominated character of cyberspace, which affects women's social, economic, and psychological well-being. Participants related horrifying tales of families' indifference and law enforcement officials' trivialization. Mental health problems increase isolation and prevent involvement in academic and professional activities. Women's well-being is exacerbated by societal blaming and secondary victimization. This brief analysis clarifies the intricacies of gender-based harassment in cyberspace and emphasizes the urgent need for efficient solutions to address this widespread issue.

Keywords: gender-based harassment; cyberspace; cyber harassment; domestic abuse; law enforcement

1. Introduction

The proliferation of harassment and violence against women is a result of technological advancement. Despite the users' physical absence from work, stereotypical and harmful views towards women are very obvious in online spaces (Stoleru & Costescu, 2014). 'Cyber' violence against women is now emerging as a growing global problem with potentially significant economic and societal repercussions due to the expanding reach of the internet, the quick spread of mobile information, and the widespread use of social media (UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Report, 2015). This is in addition to the pandemic of violence against women and girls that already exists. Citron and Norton (2011) stressed that abuse of women in the cyber world compromised their digital citizenship and is a violation of their civil rights. Halder and Jaishankar (2009) contended that victimizing women on the internet also served the purpose of limiting their presence in cyberspace thereby curtailing and policing their voices. Simultaneously, the trivialization of phenomena that profoundly affect women's basic freedom is nothing new. The refusal to recognize harms uniquely influencing women has an important social meaning - it conveys the message that

abusive behaviour toward women is acceptable and should be tolerated. Grappling with the trivialization of cyber gender harassment is a crucial step to understanding and combating the harm that it inflicts (Citron, 2009).

1.1. Statement of Problem

In Pakistan, 40% of online users who are female report experiencing various types of harassment, with the majority of these reports focusing on harassment on social media platforms. Depending on the severity of the online abuse endured, the impact of this harassment range from modest changes in online behaviour to depressive episodes (Shahid & Zulqarnain, 2018). Even though the vast majority of women use technology and experience discriminatory and abusive behaviour, they are not aware of any potential online rights they may have (Zahid, 2015). This study makes the case that violence against women in cyberspace and harassment of women should be viewed as an extension of violence against women in other settings in society. Online violence includes and is encompassed by offline socio-cultural problems like domestic abuse and sexual harassment. It is also strengthened and made worse by things that prevent women from exercising their right to justice, like a lack of family support and ineffective platforms that can ensure redress. Therefore this study raises these pertinent research questions: I) What type of cyber harassment offences are caused by misogynistic tendencies in online space? II) What are the experiences of women who have undergone cyber harassment of varying degrees?

1.2. Significance of the Study

In recent years, worldwide and in Pakistan alike, the mainstream media has identified online vitriol as a worsening problem which is silencing women in public discourse and is having a deleterious effect on the civility of the public cyber sphere. This research aims to help establish the importance of online vitriol against women as a topic for interdisciplinary scholarly research and to assist in establishing it as a major contemporary world problem where it is barely regarded as an issue. This study will bring into focus the experiences of women who undergo various forms of harassment in cyberspace which are otherwise trivialized so that their physical and mental turmoil can be brought into focus and shed light.

Conceptualizing Gender-Based Cyber Harassment

The context of online harassment, especially of women, must be placed within the greater context of discrimination and hate based on gender (Nussbaum, 2010). The number of hate crimes in the United States motivated by sexism more than quadrupled between 2004 and 2012, from 12% to 26%, with the passage of the Hate Crime Statistics Act (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). Similarly, studies have shown that women experience a higher rate of online harassment than men do just because of their gender. Emails, public chat rooms, social media sites, blogs, and for-profit and non-profit websites used for creative purposes have all provided a new venue for the dissemination of harassing material targeting women. Harassment of women in the digital realm often takes the form of verbal abuse, such as severe sexual harassment, name-calling, anonymous group threats (Citron, 2009), offensive email messages, and disparaging messages, which might also carry outrageous photoshopped pictures of the suspect (Franks, 2012), and publishing personal information about the victim to invite more victimization, all of which can amount to extreme emotional and mental torture.

Cyber Harassment of Women in Pakistan

Pakistan despite being a developing country has become one of the countries with the highest percentages of internet users (International Telecommunication Union, 2017) and consequently, gender-based cyber harassment has become an ever-growing issue in Pakistan (Usman, 2017). A study conducted on the Pakistani internet using youth showed that 36 % of internet users had undergone cyber harassment of one kind or another during their online period. There was a stark difference found in the gender differences of the cyber-harassment victims; 61% of women faced

cyber abuse in comparison to 39 % of men (Hafeez, 2014). In the two years between 2014 and 2015, the FIA received reports of 3000 cybercrime incidents, of which 45% included women being targeted through social media (Prameswari, 2017). Access to the Internet and social media, according to experts, has exacerbated the problem of violence against women in Pakistan (Musharraf & Anis-ul-Haque, 2018a). According to Rasool, (2015), the absence of official government data addressing the online victimization of women in South Asian nations like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh indicates the lack of concern given to such a critical situation. Since males make up between 75% and 80% of internet users, the same oppressive structures in the real world are also present and pose a threat to women when they enter cyberspace (Haque & Popalzai, 2013).

2. Results

Moustakas's (1994) approach to thematic analysis was incorporated to extract the emergent themes. The table below shows the demographic details of the participants who were part of the study. Their real names have been changed and given a pseudonym so that their confidentiality and anonymity can be maintained.

Table 1.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Profession
Ayesha	24	Female	Student
Sara	29	Female	Youtube Blogger
Maryam	27	Female	E-commerce business/content writer
Sidra	30	Female	Social media influencer
Haleema	32	Female	Corporate job
Naureen	28	Female	Housewife
Bushra	31	Female	Journalist
Tehmina	34	Female	Banker

2.1. Research Question 1: What type of cyber harassment offences are caused by misogynistic tendencies in online space?

All such offences done to specifically target the opposite gender through the use of technology are explained through the framework i.e., Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Harassment (Henry & Powell, 2015) The participant's interviews suggested that cyberstalking, cyberbullying and online sexual harassment were the most commonly inflicted offences committed against females on the internet.

2.1.1. Cyberbullying

Umaiza believed that the constant use of abusive language and sending threatening visual images to intimidate the opposite gender was widespread on social media websites. Haleema, 32, a corporate industry professional shuddered while recalling the experience that nearly shook her whole life. She was a team leader at a startup venture initiated by her organization and one of her subordinates, a male three years younger than her was giving a hard time to the other members by invading their boundaries. She stepped up and gave him an earful in the first warning and when he did not alter his behaviour, she reported him and he got exterminated. Since that day, a barrage of insulting and threatening messages started pouring in on her WhatsApp. The perpetrator used to write hundreds of messages on her Twitter and Facebook which termed her as 'bitch', 'whore' and 'attention seeker'. She decided to ignore it initially but then it extended to her professional page: LinkedIn which meant jeopardizing her professional career which otherwise was flourishing. That is when she decided to delete all her accounts which had a digital presence.

Naureen, who was now a housewife, had to face a more severe case of cyberbullying. It had been three years since that experience but while narrating it, her eyes welled up and there was a definite tremor in her voice. During her last year at university, a thread was started on the university's

Facebook group that said 'naureen's mouth stinks'. Underneath there were several other comments that targeted her average grades, her dressing sense and her accent. The admin of the group deleted that thread but it was posted again and a series of humiliating comments ensued. She left that Facebook group however she knew that it had not stopped as the effect of cyberbullying spilt onto real life too as she could hear and see people either giggling or murmuring when she used to pass around them in the university. It became unbearable for her to the point that she had to skip her mid-terms as her mental state did not allow her to take the classes nor study at home. Eventually, she took a semester gap to overcome the ordeal as the series of these mean comments and posts lasted for more than three months.

2.1.2. Verbal online sexual harassment

Ayesha, 24, was a university student and became part of the study after a lot of persuasion and one of the main reasons for her to not agree initially stemmed from her experience of cyber harassment. She did not want her words to be out there for public consumption for fear that they may reach the perpetrator in her case. Her ordeal was a result of the fight that took place between her best friend and her abusive husband. She was a thorough and vocal supporter of her friend and backed her throughout her separation and recovery journey. This irked her friend's ex-husband to no end and he started a defamatory and slandering campaign against her. The content and context of the messages that were sent to her on WhatsApp and SMS were so condescending and vulgar that she did not share them with anyone in the beginning. But as the nature of the messages worsened, she took her friend in confidence. There were rape threats and mention of actions that hinted towards sexual assault in all the messages he did. She shared she used to freeze when a new message popped on her screen and would want to throw away her phone.

Sidra, 30 had a somewhat comparable experience to share. She was a social media influencer and made daily vlogs and uploaded them on Instagram. A middle-aged man used to message her regularly about his feedback on the vlog, in her early vlogging days, she used to thank him for the valuable feedback as a gesture needed for increasing her digital viewership. But after the messages became too frequent and later too personal, she blocked him and that is what triggered the next series of events. There was a bombardment of messages and comments on her vlogs that centred her body. They were rude, demeaning and very raunchy. Despite deleting them as soon as possible, new messages appeared from different accounts that it seemed like a cyber mob was after her. All the messages and comments had a central motive, to make me feel weak and my body just a tool in the hands of the men. She said that she felt gutted and at times questioned her presence on social media and if she was an instigator of vulgarity as the comments and messages suggested.

2.1.3. Revenge pornography

Tehmina, 34 who was a banker broke down while sharing her experience. I as a researcher had to tread very carefully throughout her interview as she still seemed to be in a state of trauma. She had been married for four years but due to irreconcilable differences, she took a divorce. In her words, 'All hell breaks loose after that'. All of her social media accounts passwords were known by her husband and he changed the profile pictures of her account with a screenshot of an intimate video that they had made while they were in marriage. Her ex-husband did not stop changing the profile picture only; he sent many provocative photos and videos of hers (which were from the time they were in a long-distance relationship as husband and wife) to work colleagues too. She shuddered and got teary-eyed remembering the questioning and accusatory tone and looks of her colleagues. Despite her clarification to her immediate supervisor, she was exterminated from the job which further exacerbated her problems of social isolation and financial insecurity.

2.1.4. Doctored Photos

Altering pictures and sending graphic content without consent is another highly harmful inflicting offence done against women on digital media. This action completely catches the victim off

guard because since in many cases they are either very private individuals or do not have any pictures on their social media so to have their photos up for public consumption is already too much for them, let alone those that have been doctored in a highly provocative and vulgar way.

Bushra, 31, who was a journalist, was a victim of this offence which shook her to the core. After the murder of Qandeel Baloch, a renowned but highly notorious social media artist, there was a huge hue and cry over the brutality of the act, on the other hand, there was a large section that felt that her actions led to this day. She shared that the day, she wrote an opinion article that pointed towards a misogynistic angle to the murder, she started getting threatening and humiliating comments under the article. She took a stand for herself and explained that even though she did not condone the actions of Qandeel but her actions did not give anybody the right to take her life in broad daylight. That is when the first doctored photo of hers popped up in her inbox. It was her face clad in hijab plastered over a nude body of a model accompanied by a text that said 'wanna join Qandeel in the deepest pit of hell'. She immediately blocked the user but then there were dozens of such messages creeping up in the inbox from various accounts and usernames. This felt like a cyber-mob was after her since despite reporting all those accounts, new accounts got made and a negative campaign started against her. Initially, this only persisted in the blog sphere but then her Twitter account was also attacked by tagging her in raunchy threads and spreading her doctored photos and sending them specifically to the journalist community to taint her credibility. The graphic visuals accompanied lewd texts branding her as a prostitute and unfit for marriage due to having numerous sexual partners. While narrating her experiences, she started hyperventilating and had to be calmed down after frequent intervals. She shared that those were the most difficult times for her and her family and they started hating her gender and blamed her existence for all the mess at hand.

2.1.5. Cyber Stalking

The data collected through interviews suggested that though online sexual harassment was the most tormenting form of harassment faced by women stalking through digital mediums made them feel the most vulnerable as it gave them the impression that their stalker was all-powerful and could reach them whenever and wherever he wanted. The repetitive and all-knowing nature of the offence made the victims feel completely at the disposal of their offender. Maryam, 27, who was a content writer and had an e-commerce business burst into tears while recollecting the distressing past. She shared how her home address was circulated throughout the Facebook groups of her university and a fitness group. The next day she saw that her friends had shared the message they received which was sent in her name listing the addresses of her gym, doctor's office and workplace asking the friend to be there in the evening. She remembered feeling completely terrified that some hooligans would now be circling her house or when she would go to her gym. The feeling of being under complete surveillance digitally induced an obsessive tendency to check her surroundings every 10 seconds. The turmoil did not end there, all her social media handles passwords got changed and then they were sent to her in her email address with a message saying, 'Hey sweetie, we know you inside out, we are outside your house, outside your gym and even may be right outside your washroom.' She did not sleep for two consecutive nights after receiving that email and deactivated all her accounts despite her finances being dependent on one of them. The thought of her stalkers having uninhibited access to all her private information made her feel completely unsafe.

2.2. *Research Question 2: What are the experiences of women who have undergone cyber harassment of varying degrees?*

The participants who had gone through various forms of cyber harassment shared their tormenting experiences which were at times extremely difficult to process and their expressions and gestures while narration reflected the level of distress those incidents would have caused them. Through the course of an interview, it was evident that there were certain aspects (themes) that were uniform through their experiences; which included: Mental Health Issues

2.2.1. Depression

While interviewing the victims, it was evident that each one of them had gone through mental health crisis albeit of varying degrees. There was not a single individual who did not mention being rattled by the experience of cyber harassment. Sara, 29, and Bushra, 31, had been victims of graphic online sexual harassment and it had left them as patients of clinical depression. Sara while recalling those days was inconsolable. She apologized profusely for her inability to reveal all the intimate details of her ordeal as she believed that they were too vulgar to say up front and that it made her feel less of herself. After some time, she regained her exposure, she added that after the harassment, she would stay awake for days at a stretch and cry for long hours. Her appetite was lost and around 11 kilograms were lost in a month, which was when she decided to go to a psychiatrist who diagnosed her with clinical depression and prescribed her medicines and advised her to take psychotherapy too. Even during our conversations, she went into long deep silences. She was well aware of her lack of composure.

Bushra had also been taking regular psychotherapy sessions from a renowned psychologist after facing the gruesome harassment however the psychotherapy did not help her regain her mental stability as her insomnia worsened and the crying spells would last longer. Therefore, her psychologist advised her to consult a psychiatrist as medicines were needed at that stage. From there on, she was diagnosed with clinical depression and prescribed medications. She remembered being on a guilt trip all the time, she blamed herself for the incident and questioned her morals and integrity.

2.2.2. Anxiety/Panic attacks

All the other female participants who had undergone cyber harassment were now anxiety-prone or had episodes of panic attacks or experienced somatic pains. Some even mentioned having paranoia that somebody was following them. Naureen, 25, who was now a housewife and lived in a posh gated society, shared her vivid apprehensions. She explained that after experiencing the harrowing cyberstalking, she was anxiety-riddled when stepping out of the house and looked around multiple times before going out to make sure there was nobody following or scanning her.

Haleema, 32, had panic attacks whenever she had to go to a crowded place before the harassment incident, she claimed to be an extroverted person but her personality changed drastically after the traumatizing experience. According to her, being around people reminded her of her experience and it led her to a downward spiral. She preferred being on her own to avoid questioning eyes. Sidra, 30, also had a somewhat similar trajectory after the mishap. She felt anxious if she had to give her opinion or her insight on some topic as it reminded her how her words had cost her mental peace and sanity a couple of years back. She even chose to take a break from her career as it was based on her writing skills. The consensus gathered through the interviews of the victims was that those nerve-racking experiences had broken their willpower and mental strength. Some were doing better than others though none claimed nor seemed to be in a completely stable condition.

2.2.3. Suicidal ideation

The most striking and troubling theme that emerged through the data collected of the victims was that the gruelling and nerve-shattering incidences of cyber harassment had led many towards suicidal ideation. Half of the female victims mentioned having recurrent thoughts of taking drastic steps to end the ordeal for themselves and their families. One of them even bought the pills but was stopped in their tracks by the thought of it being forbidden in the religion. She recalled having a conversation with herself, 'This life gave me this pathetic condition and by doing that I am going to hell so might as well avoid hell as that life would be forever.'

2.2.4. Lack of Family Support

The most disappointing aspect of the ordeal that the female victims faced was the lack of support from their families. The families could not digest the widespread scale and nature of the incident. They felt betrayed by their kin and wanted to shun them just like the outside world.

2.2.5. Victim Blaming/Shaming

According to the victims, the worst-case scenario for them awaited when the people they were the closest to choose to distance themselves. They acted like it was the victim's fault that led to the misfortune and therefore they had to be held accountable. Tehmina, 34, started bawling her eye out while narrating her family's behaviour. According to her, it was the most excruciating moment when her mother told her to stay away from her younger sisters as they might be influenced by her 'ill ways'. Her words pierced her to the core and she believed that even after so many years, she had not been able to recover from the hurt and betrayal she felt from her family's attitude.

Similarly, Ayesha, 24, shared the cornering attitude of her parents and siblings. She felt that they saw her as a misfit or an outcast after the incident. The conversations and get-togethers that were a norm in their family came to a halt. The most heartbreaking situation she found herself in was when she used to walk in the living room and seeing her, they would stop talking. All the female participants felt that the feeling of isolation and loneliness was exacerbated by the indifferent yet cruel attitude of most of the family. The harassment was in itself such a big challenge to come to terms with, let alone having the family which you held the dearest turning their back toward them. The guilt, sadness, passive aggression and mental instability got more fuel through this unsympathetic attitude.

2.2.6. Honor associated with a woman's character/body

The female participants who had gone through the graphic online harassment were the ones who were at the brunt of the most extreme reactions from family, friends and society alike. Such graphic exposure through digital space albeit non-consensual was in direct clash with the societal, cultural and religious norms in a conservative country like Pakistan. A woman's body and her character and body were something that seemed to uphold a family's name and God forbid if any of it got tarnished, it meant a spat on the family's honour and name in the society. Sidra, 30, had pent-up anger in her when she talked about her experience. Her sister's engagement was broken by the in-laws because of her harassment case as they stated they did not want to associate their family with a family that was allegedly 'dishonourable'. Their family had to face two crises one after the other, her extremely disturbing publicized harassment ordeal and then the breaking of engagement which in the society was seen as a taboo and acted as an obstacle in getting compatible matches in future.

Sara, 29, had to face a turbulent marital relationship after her doctored and photo-shopped pictures were spread. Her husband was initially supportive but after the widespread reach of the offence, he started questioning and doubting her. The in-law were insistent on leaving as such an individual in the family was bringing a bad name to them and the marriage prospects of their daughter could be dwindled. She was sent back home and separation took place but eventually, he divorced her. The reasons cited in the court were bad character and dishonourable woman which made her case very weak in the eyes of law.

2.2.7. Curtailing of Online Activity

Internet, digital medium and social media are vital needs of this globalized world however the women who faced cyber harassment were either forced to leave cyberspace by their families or the victims themselves distanced themselves from the site of their tragedy.

Maryam, 27, who was a content creator/YouTuber deactivated all her social media accounts and wiped off all of her traces on digital media because she felt too paranoid after having gone through cyberstalking. This was not an easy decision for her as her financial security was dependent on that YouTube channel but the constant fear of being under terrifying surveillance pushed her to take that

action. Similarly, Sara, 29 after the spread of doctored photos, completely distanced herself from cyberspace and has not returned to it even after four years had passed since the fateful misfortune.

On the other hand, Ayesha, 24 was forced by her parents and brother to stay away from social media completely and confiscated her laptop and mobile phone. Despite being a university student who was in the middle of her MPhil degree, she had to follow the enforced curfew which eventually led her to take a semester gap as she could not cope with the trauma that cyberstalking brought upon her nor could she continue her research without the use of technology. The other female victims also had comparable experiences where they restricted themselves voluntarily or were told to do so by their families which invariably were a blow for them as it deviated from the normal, progressive lives they were leading before the harassment.

3. Discussion

Online harassment is a phenomenon that has increasingly become a significant and persistent concern with the blending of actual and virtual spaces. While the fundamental characteristics of the digital realm enable a more extensive outreach making the repercussions equally as disastrous, the evolution of digital spaces offers the violence and abuse prevalent in the actual world a platform to spread its web more profusely (Jewkes, 2010). Although the anonymity and bodiless interaction those ICTs provide lead to ease of commitment of offence in the online space, it is wrong to assume that gender neutrality exists on the internet (Griffith, 1985). The research participants' views corroborated the research by Dorer, 1997; Neverla, 1998; Spender, 1996, as they felt that cyberspaces were gendered and provided unequal ground and opportunities for females. The environment women faced in cyberspace was reflective of the behaviour they encountered in the offline space. However, ironically the debate about the comparison and severity of the tribulations inflicted through digital space and the real world still exists and inadvertently leads to trivialization of the perpetuated harms committed in the digital space.

This reciprocation of the offline antics in the online space is reflected by the way the activities of women are snubbed and controlled by men. The female participants shared that speaking on topics that were seemingly or widely attributed as male-oriented like sports, economics and politics led them to face unprovoked vitriol. They were told to mitigate their opinions or completely exclude themselves from these particular areas, echoing the monopoly the male gender had created on the digital spaces too. This frequently resulted in impeding the professional endeavours of the women that had been curated by them with immense hard work and dampened their dignity and overall well-being (Citron, 2009).

The findings gathered through the interviews were consistent with the research mentioned earlier as the participants shared harrowing incidents of online sexual harassment which entailed; verbal online sexual harassment, online sexual coercion, graphic online sexual harassment, revenge, pornography and doctored photos. Online sexual harassment incidents were found to be the most common when the perpetrators wanted to avenge their malicious grievances and this kind of offence proved to be the most damaging for the women. In addition to that, cyberstalking and cyberbullying came out to be the other two most frequent forms of harassment faced by women in cyberspace.

While comparing this study with the previous research on the experiences of women who undergo harassment, this research points towards the overwhelming similarity in the experiences of women. In most cases, the offender's central motive proved to hyper-sexualize, demean and reduce the woman's existence to her body. These findings were in correspondence with numerous studies that centre around South Asian patriarchal culture and abuse of women that explicitly emphasize how control over women is exercised through institutionalized restricted norms of behaviour and deeply ingrained notions that link family honour to female virtue (Hadi, 2017) (Hadi, 2018) (Tarrar & Pulla, 2014) (Saha & Siristava, 2014). Therefore, when a woman's body and sexuality became a public spectacle in the case of cyber harassment, it brought a myriad of consequential problems for the victims and their families. Pakistan lagged in terms of undertaking extensive research on cyber harassment compared to the Western world (Hafeez, 2014) however, this research study aimed to

add to the body of knowledge specifically concerning bringing the experiences of female victims to the forefront which had otherwise been trivialized.

The participant's responses pointed towards an alarming situation whereby the victims went through major mental health issues ranging from anxiety, and panic attacks to clinical depression. Some of them even reported having suicidal ideation and one of the participants admitted to having attempted the drastic step thrice. It was significant to note that such cases arose especially when the families chose to disassociate themselves from the victims or isolated them by shaming and demeaning them.

4. Materials and Methods

The distinctive set of experiences of cyber harassment victims cannot be understood by quantitative measures alone; as such methods and allied statistics more often than not fall short of effectively capturing the intricacies of such experiences (Barbatis, 2010). Therefore, a qualitative research design was incorporated as it is best suited when the problem at hand needs to be deeply explored and unheard and silenced voices are to be highlighted and brought in front (Creswell, 2013). Eight women from Lahore who had gone through gender-based cyber harassment were selected through a purposive sampling strategy as the sample. The cyber rights activists at Digital Rights Foundation helped in accessing the victims while a semi-structured interview guide was used as the data collection tool. The interview locations were chosen as per the wishes of the participants and each interview lasted for 60-80 minutes. The study participants were assured of confidentiality of data and consent forms were signed by each of them. Throughout the interviews, it was made sure that the victims were at ease, and short intervals were taken if an overwhelming situation arose. The interviews were audiotaped with permission and later transcribed and saved in password-protected files. The data analysis was carried out as an iterative process using the IPA method described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Numerous readings of transcripts were done and three distinct levels of coding were applied that were used to discover emergent themes and subordinate themes across various instances.

5. Conclusions

The dominant hierarchal presence of the male gender in cyberspaces leads to a constant onslaught of harassment of women in the digital spaces which is detrimental to their social, economic and psychological well-being. The violence against women that stems from power structures inherent in the offline world translates itself into the online space primarily in the shape of online sexual harassment, cyberbullying and cyberstalking. The participants shared harrowing experiences of their ordeal, the apathy and disassociation exhibited by most of their families and the trivialization of the issue at the hands of law enforcement agencies. There was a wide range of mental health issues cited by the participants that pushed them towards isolation in, both, the offline and online worlds. This impeded their active participation in academic and professional arenas. The blaming and shaming on religious and moral grounds by the society and particularly family and secondary victimization by the lawmaker/officers acted as a catalyst in their already deteriorating overall wellbeing.

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