

# WOMEN DISCONNECTED

Feminist Case Studies on the  
Gender Digital Divide Amidst COVID-19



MediaMatters  
for Democracy  
Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative



# WOMEN DISCONNECTED

## Feminist Case Studies on the Gender Digital Divide Amidst COVID–19

### Research Authors

Zoya Rehman  
Hija Kamran  
Zoha Batool Khan

### Field Data Collectors

Razia Mehsud  
Nasreen  
Zoha Batool Khan

### Review & Editing

Sadaf Khan  
Aimun Faisal  
Zoya Rehman

### Design

Aniqa Haider

Published by Media Matters for Democracy in January 2021 under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> Some rights reserved

# Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude towards our interviewees who shared their valuable insights and experiences to direct this research. We are particularly thankful to Nasreen and Razia Mehsud for helping us in collecting data for the study.

This research would not have been possible without the support of our partners at Association for Progressive Communication (APC), who have time and again supported us in advocating for an inclusive, open and safe feminist internet in Pakistan.

# Table of Contents

	<b>PAGE</b>
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	8
Methods and Methodology	9
Theoretical Framework	12
Literature Review	13
Survey Findings and Analysis	15
Case Study 1	26
On The Peripheries, Women Die Because of the Gender Digital Divide	27
Case Study 2	39
Uneven Experiences: The Digital Divide for Women in Marginalised Communities of the Federal Capital	40
Case Study 3	54
Chadar and Char Deewari meet Classrooms and COVID-19: the Gender Digital Divide and Women's Experiences of Online Education	55
Additional Reflections	66
Conclusion	69
Bibliography	71
Annexures	79

“

Many people see technology as the problem behind the so-called digital divide. Others see it as the solution. Technology is neither. It must operate in conjunction with business, economic, political and social system.

---

CARLY FIORINA



# Executive Summary

Almost a year after the first case of the novel coronavirus was detected in Pakistan, the country continues to function in a hybrid offline / online mode - Most of the educational institutions are still operating virtually. Smart lockdowns and SOPs to contain the spread of the virus continue to restrict access and mobility. The economic impact on public, both in terms of massive lay offs and increase in cost of living, continue to hamper the usual way of life, And of course, technology continues to be a vital element in the equation.

Never before have we seen a more stark and more direct demonstration of the extent and impact of digital divide in Pakistan. The lack of access, meaningful access, that includes not just the presence of infrastructure but also the ability to effectively connect, afford and utilise the internet is present across various faultlines including class, geography and gender among others. For women, facing this divide, cultural and social attitudes create further hurdles.

This is an exploratory study that explores these factors in detail through a series of case studies and examines the issue through data exploring how gender digital divide impacts women personally and professionally.

The research focuses on addressing three key questions:

1. Which factors exacerbate the digital gender divide in Pakistan?
2. How does the gender digital divide impact the marginalised on a personal and societal level?
3. What have been the implications and impacts of the gender digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in technological dependence?

A mixed methods methodology has been applied to this research. At the onset, a qualitative dataset, based on a survey, explores access to information and communication technologies, patterns of internet usage, attitudes and perceptions about women's use of technology and impact of COVID-19. Then, the study explores these issues more in depth through three qualitative case studies, that take a feminist approach to exploring the experience of women from different communities, including women in newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a region that has traditionally faced both information and technology darkness, three women from the minority Christian community in Punjab and a body of students taking online classes due to COVID.

For both data collection and analysis, a feminist approach, rather than a gendered approach has been taken and information from Global South, particularly the South Asian region has been privileged. The study situates women in an active position, seeing them as active agents deliberately making decisions about their own use of technology, rather than passive beings suffering from deprivation of technology.

The main findings of the research study are as follows;

1. 4 in 10 of the 215 respondents who took the survey use the internet everyday. 2 in 10 respondents do not use the internet at all. Half of the respondents who use the internet daily, come from families with over 60,000 monthly income while 7 in 10 of those who do not use the internet come from families with below 30,000 monthly income. This shows that the financial ability to access the internet is directly linked to women's use of the internet.

2. The gender divide is also affected by the region in which women are residing. Among the respondents who do not use the internet, 8 in 10 belong to the newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
3. A significant majority of the respondents said that the internet is expensive to varying degrees - collectively, a total of 76% respondents held that the internet is either beyond the reach of the average person or is a bit expensive. Only about a quarter of the respondents i.e 24% found the internet to be reasonably priced.
4. Mobile appears to be the main mode of connection for women. 88% of the respondents who use the internet said that they are accessing the internet through their own devices and 78% of those using their own devices are using mobile phones.
5. When asked about the familial attitudes towards women using the internet over 5 in 10 respondents (54%) either said that women's use of the internet is either considered bad or there are some concerns about their usage. Only 2 in 10 (21%) respondents said that women's use of internet is considered good while the remaining 25% said that their families didn't have any opinions on the subject
6. Over 6 in 10 respondents (65%) indicated that they face some sort of restrictions when using the internet, 3 in 10 (32%) are only allowed to use the internet for certain tasks like taking classes or connecting to family members and another 3 in 10 (33%) are allowed to use the internet only for a restricted period of time.
7. Around out of 10 respondents said that they felt an increased need to use the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even though the need to use the internet has increased, respondents are also facing increased difficulty in accessing and using the internet. Many women, who previously accessed the internet outside of their homes, like at educational institutions and in workplaces, libraries, etc. are unable to do so due to the lockdown and mobility restrictions that have been put in place due to the coronavirus.
8. In newly merged districts of FATA accessibility continues to be a challenge for both men and women. However, while men have a few options of access, at internet centres set up by the Pakistan Army during the pandemic, women are barred from using these centres and those who have an urgent need to use the internet have to travel great distances to connect.
9. There have been various fatalities in the region due to women's inability to reach emergency health services in time. Expectant women, facing complications in child birth are severely effected, Interviewees from the region recounted multiple incidents of death or severe bodily harm resulting from their inability to call for emergency healthcare.
10. In the newly merged districts, the lack of mobile and internet connectivity continues to effect opportunities for education and employment.
11. While cultural barriers, including the belief that the internet is unsafe or that the use may expose women to outsiders continues to create hurdles in women's use of technology, however, it appears that affordability, lack of access to devices and connectivity and domestic responsibilities at home that leave women with no time of their own are as big (or perhaps bigger) hurdles for women.
12. Women users of the internet, including those from vulnerable and marginalised communities continue to asses safety of different online spaces and platforms and continue to make personal decisions about altering their usage to counter those threats.

13. Interviewees talked about changing patterns of usage of applications to ensure that they are not becoming a subject of the male gaze and limiting activity when they felt like they may be getting unwanted attention. This lends weight to the idea that some Pakistani women feel surveilled online and observe a kind of 'digital purdah'.
14. An important aspect of the use of technology that has been highlighted is leisure and entertainment. Interviewees talked about using TikTok for entertainment and mentioned accessing different kinds of content that they found entertaining, humorous or engaging.
15. While technology enables various women who are not allowed to step out of home for work, to find remote and online work opportunities, the questions of surveillance [including on payments and earnings] and the often questionably low cost of digital labour continues to be pose a challenge.



# Introduction

The fact that a digital divide exists in Pakistan, much like in the rest of the world, cannot be denied. However, it would be folly to see this divide merely as an absence of access. The discourse on ‘bridging the digital divide’ needs to be nuanced and focused on the different aspects of this divide within the Pakistani context. The issue should ideally invite theoretical and methodological approaches that allow people to study the organisation of social relations and positionalities that are deeply embedded in digital technologies. The question of tackling digital divide cannot be answered without understanding how power relations are reified through technological exclusions, including those embedded within the very infrastructure of internet governance. There needs to be more focus on different types of inequalities that exist in Pakistan’s digital spaces, with the intention of bringing to the surface trends, gaps, emerging areas, and critical questions in the field.

By looking at the broader socio-political context and the different intersections that amplify the Pakistani digital divide, we can delineate a clearer picture of the ways in which Pakistan’s digital spaces are classed and gendered, and also skewed in terms of who is geographically and linguistically represented in these spaces. Hence, the ways in which differing access to technology exacerbates social and economic stratification or inclusion is a pressing issue that will be discussed throughout the study, beyond the mere physical availability of technological devices.

The increase of internet usage during the coronavirus pandemic has made the gender disparity even more evident across online platforms. There have been increased attacks of gender-based violence against women and gender and sexual minorities that force them off these platforms, further widening the gender digital divide. Surveillance within homes, coupled with threats of domestic violence, also restricts women’s presence on the internet. The restrictions on offline mobility during the lockdown along with those inflicted upon them by their family members and society at large that further impacts women’s access to the internet, especially in cases where the only avenue to use the internet was and happens to be the places outside of homes. In addition to this, the infrastructural, geographical, economic and social barriers in accessing the internet add to the challenges that make up and contribute to the gender digital divide in Pakistan.

This research explores these factors in detail through a series of case studies and examines the issue through data exploring how gender digital divide impacts women personally and professionally. The research focuses on addressing three key questions:

1. Which factors exacerbate the digital gender divide in Pakistan?
2. How does the gender digital divide impact the marginalised on a personal and societal level?
3. What have been the implications and impacts of the gender digital divide during COVID-19 and the subsequent increase in technological dependence?

# Methods and Methodology

This research documents the impact of the gender digital divide on women in Pakistan, and examines how this impact has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed methods methodology, combining quantitative data sets and qualitative analysis through case studies, has been used.

## Methods

### 1. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the quantitative data for the study, a closed-ended survey was designed. The survey instrument was designed to gather data regarding internet use and access, infrastructural and other restrictions around access including economic and social constraints, attitudes towards the internet and identification of any difference in attitudes towards the use of the internet by men and women. The survey also explored the impact of COVID-19 on internet access and usage. In particular, the research team tried to gauge whether the barriers to access the internet were exacerbated during the lockdown, if they existed before the pandemic, and how the habits and attitudes towards women's internet access have changed during this time. To examine how and if the experiences of the gender digital divide and its impact varied among women, two qualifiers, **family income** and **geography**, have been used.

A total of 220 respondents from different parts of the country have undertaken the survey. Survey data has primarily been collected through in-person community interventions. The community based data collection has been done through the direct engagement of female members of various communities, specifically two members who were also a part of the data collection team for the research project. Some of the data has also been collected through the social media channels of Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD).

### 2. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the qualitative data, three case studies, based on in depth, comprehensive interviews with three women from different parts of the country, and belonging to different communities, have been drafted. These interviews have been conducted to record how gender digital divide affects women in these communities, and explore various nuances within their experiences. The respondents were identified through the research team's past experience of working with local communities.

The first case study is based around the experience of Razia Mehsud, a journalist from South Waziristan.<sup>1</sup> As a resident and a reporter, Mehsud is intimately aware of the challenges of women in the region. The case study examines the impact of the gender digital divide on the healthcare of women in the disconnected tribal areas, whereby women's well-being as well as the priority for a functioning healthcare system has taken the backseat for various reasons.

The second case study is based in Christian settlements across Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The case study is constructed through an in-depth interview with Nasreen, a domestic worker who has some experience

1. South Waziristan is a part of former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, currently a newly merged district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The region has been marred by extremist terrorism and discriminatory state policies and is considered one of the regions that are most severely affected by a lack of technological infrastructure, regressive state policies and conservative tribal culture that severely restrict the rights and freedoms of women.

working in the field on behalf of Corona Solidarity Campaign,<sup>2</sup> a mutual aid initiative that was initiated soon after a lockdown was imposed in Pakistan. The case study examines how income and economic status of women, from a community that is traditionally marginalized in Pakistan, affects their experience and use of technology.

The third case study the impact of the gender digital divide was amplified during the COVID-19 lockdown, as the university and its hostels were shut down for students, and how this impacted the lives of female students at a private university, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), which serves a significant out-of-city body of students. The case study is an autoethnography, authored by Zoha Batool Khan, a final-year student at LUMS, who uses her own experiences to highlight how geographic and economic aspects of accessing the internet affects women's access to education and employment. Khan also did the majority of the survey data collection in relation to this study, and approached women students from across Pakistan to fill out the survey.

## Ethos

We locate this research project within intersectional feminist work that has been done in relation to information technologies<sup>3</sup> and align with the concerns of fellow feminist scholars who have pointed out the limits of traditional methodology to adequately capture the lived experiences of women.<sup>4</sup> The reason why we worked so closely with two of the interviewees and also engaged them for the survey data collection in their respective communities was to ensure that the experience is documented through the eyes of the community itself and to avoid, as much as possible, looking at their experience through a lens that was not primarily their own.

Moreover, we tried our best to avoid creating hierarchical relationships between the researcher and the researched.<sup>5</sup> This was a crucial consideration as the writing team consisted of feminists holding a tenuous outsider/insider position.<sup>6</sup>

While this created some distance between the researchers and the communities of the interlocutors, we wanted to avoid creating additional hierarchical relationships and infiltrate communities as privileged 'outsiders' during a pandemic. We also did this to highlight the diversity of women's struggles in Pakistan today. We realize that the research project illuminates the contradictions found between the potential political gains of speaking about the shared experiences of a marginalized group, and the impacts of the erasures that speaking for those in that group inevitably entails.

We also recognize that academic research involves speaking for others from a position of privilege. Research, while potentially liberatory, can also have harmful consequences. These include the effects resulting from research claims that erase diversity in women's experiences, and the potential to marginalize those about whom the research is conducted by positioning the researchers as all-knowing experts in contrast to less knowledgeable 'subjects'. We recognize that the data collectors know more about the experiences of the women they engaged with than we do. Moreover, we wanted the women who filled out the surveys to do so on their own terms, without their agency being hampered in any way. This is how we

2. Corona Solidarity Campaign. (2020). Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://coronasolidaritypk.org/>

3. Losh, E., & Wernimont, J. (2018). *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctv9hj9r9>

4. Nandagiri, R. (2017). Why feminism: some notes from 'the field' on doing feminist research. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://blogs.lsc.ac.uk/gender/2017/10/12/why-feminism-some-notes-from-the-field-on-doing-feminist-research/>

5. Yost, M., & Chmielewski, J. (2013). Blurring the Line Between Researcher and Researched in Interview Studies. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 37(2), 242-250. doi: 10.1177/0361684312464698

6. Parikh, A. (2019). Insider-outsider as process: drawing as reflexive feminist methodology during fieldwork. *Cultural Geographies*, 27(3), 437-452. doi: 10.1177/1474474019887755

tried to practice feminist reflexivity:<sup>7</sup> by recognizing that we are ultimately studying power relations and identifying ways to mitigate their abuse in the real world when we, as researchers, are simultaneously participating in the projection of power through knowledge claims.<sup>8</sup>

## Limitations

1. There is no official data available with regards to the actual number of men and women using the Internet and other ICT tools. There is only limited information available, such as how, according to the GSMA's 'Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019', only 50 percent of Pakistani women owned a mobile phone as compared to 81 percent of men in the country.<sup>9</sup> None of this data is from the official telecommunication regulator, Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA), or local service providers. The lack of data thus necessitates a reliance on anecdotal evidence. There is a possibility that the impact of gender digital divide is underestimated in the findings given the lack of any official data to represent the entire gap.

2. There has not been much work done to record the extent of the gender digital divide in the country. Therefore, the researchers have had to rely on anecdotal evidence and reported incidents to design this study and subsequently collect survey data.

3. The researchers wanted to collect data from rural, tribal and disconnected areas of the country to record the impact of gender digital divide on women in those regions. However, owing to the lack of on-ground access due to the spread of COVID-19, the research team did not have access to these communities and regions. Hence, the research findings may not depict the true extent of the implications of the digital divide on women in all the disconnected areas in Pakistan. Nevertheless, to ensure representation, we engaged data collectors who helped us bridge this gap by contributing to recording data from select disconnected communities.

4. There were constraints in relation to language, and it was generally difficult to translate digital rights concepts both in the field and during in-person interviews. We believe that some survey respondents on the ground may have struggled to comprehend certain questions fully as a result. Even in interviews, some of the questions had to be explained at length through examples, as the researchers felt constrained in their ability to communicate digital rights concerns and internet governance issues in local languages. It must also be noted that only literature in English was available to the team due to the general paucity of literature pertaining to Pakistan as well as other countries in the Global South.

5. The research does not engage effectively with generational differences and experiences of elderly women are underrepresented. In hindsight, women who are middle aged and elderly should not have been clumped together, particularly in the survey.

7. Ackerly, B., & True, J. (2008). Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations. *International Studies Review*, 10(4), doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00826.x

8. Ibid.

Ayub, M. (2021). Digital Gender Divide: Internet is essential for women to access important information. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from

9. <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/digital-gender-divide-internet-is-essential-for-women-to-access-important-information/>

# Theoretical Framework

This research project is informed and guided by shared understandings around feminist approaches and speaks broadly from a feminist and Global South<sup>10</sup> perspective. It adopts a feminist standpoint approach,<sup>11</sup> and privileges forms of knowledge that critique dominant social attitudes, and structures itself in relation to the oppression of marginalized groups. It simultaneously adopts an intersectional mode of analysis,<sup>12</sup> as expounded by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Instead of looking at gender in isolation, the researchers examine gender's intersection with other identities such as socio-economic class, location, age, educational background, religion etc. The research team also considers economic justice and gender justice concerns together,<sup>13</sup> by weaving local stories with digital rights narratives to shed more light on structural inequalities in Pakistan.

The research project purports to move away from Western scholarship regarding the issue, to expand the feminist discourse in Pakistan and uses the voices of women whose stories have previously been excluded from digital rights discourse. It aims to eschew neoliberal and depoliticized formulations of information technology and women's empowerment, where access is reduced simply to the assimilation of women into the free market, as either consumers or invisible workers in the digital economy.<sup>14</sup> We have seen that increasing reliance on collaborations with private corporations and development initiatives to tackle issues related to access has promoted neoliberal models that rarely address structural issues of exclusion.

The analytical approach is also cognisant of the limitations of seeing digital divide as a simple 'problem' can be solved, merely through technological advances and interventions. The research thus pays attention not only to the issue of access, but also to internet governance structures and how technology has been designed and conceived in the first place, and considers unequal social relations as being coded within technologies.<sup>15</sup>

10. Mohanty, C. (2003). "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society*, 28(2). doi: 10.1086/342914

11. Marjorie L. DeVault

12. MacKinnon, C. (2013). Intersectionality as Method: A Note. *Signs*, 38(4), 1019-1030. doi:10.1086/669570

13. Gurumurthy, A., & Chami, N. (2017). *A feminist action framework on development and digital technologies* [Ebook]. Association for Progressive Communications. Retrieved from <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FeministActionFrameworkOnDevelopmentAndDigitalTechnologies.pdf>

14. Rehman, Z. (2020). *Feminist Digital Labor in Pakistan, Feminist Movements Go Online* [Ebook] (2nd ed., p. 23). Lahore: Digital Rights Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.canva.com/design/DAELhTurzIE/KcxIHSRsSzVV1ahcO5q9Hw/view?utm\\_content=DAELhTurzIE&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_source=publishsharelink#2](https://www.canva.com/design/DAELhTurzIE/KcxIHSRsSzVV1ahcO5q9Hw/view?utm_content=DAELhTurzIE&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink#2)

15. Franklin, M. (2017). Whose internet is it indeed! Internet governance feminism as political praxis. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.genderit.org/articles/whose-internet-it-indeed-internet-governance-feminism-political-praxis>

# Literature Review

The primary literary guide for this research project is ‘Mapping Research in Gender and Digital Technology’ by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).<sup>16</sup> Based on the learnings from this guidebook, the researchers have focused specifically on inquiries linked to feminist research in Pakistan, rather than doing an exhaustive search on how the gender digital divide manifests itself. The glut of research reports from international NGOs served no purpose in understanding the gender digital divide in Pakistan from a feminist perspective. As the APC report notes, “The study of digital technology, including ICTs, has to encompass an understanding of infrastructure, state power and hegemony, technology, society, culture and gender. While a gendered analysis might point out the differences in impact in relation to men and women (or other gender expressions), what a feminist analysis seeks to show is how power and regulation operate around sex and gender.”<sup>17</sup>

## Gender and Technology

The internet is seen by many as a grand equalizer, and in a way this has been true, particularly for people at the margins.<sup>18</sup> Women and marginalised groups have benefited from a space where they could have a say and express themselves and use online information to move forward and succeed in their lives, which might not otherwise be possible ‘offline’ because of the patriarchal restrictions they face.<sup>18</sup> However, the notion that the digital space has provided freedom to many, has also been criticized.<sup>19</sup> Many scholars and activists have critically engaged with the idea of the internet as an ultimately empowering agent, primarily because they believe that hegemonic social norms of gender and class, that exist in our patriarchal and capitalist world, are reified in the digital space.<sup>20</sup> This manifests itself in the form of restrictions on access to online spaces, whether it be low connectivity issues, limited and/or dysfunctional devices, or simply families’ restrictions on or surveillance of women using the internet.

## What is the Gendered Digital Divide?

The term “digital divide signifies unequal access to information technology and has been used across academic literature, to investigate not just the cause of, but also to explore ways to overcome this glaring disparity.

A report by Alliance for Affordable Internet (2020) lays out an extensive meaning and criteria for “meaningful connectivity”,<sup>22</sup> which according to them is the standard for the average person’s use of the internet.

16. Spuy, A., & Aavriti, N. (2018). Mapping research in gender and digital technology [Ebook]. Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Retrieved from [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC\\_Mapping\\_0323\\_0.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC_Mapping_0323_0.pdf)

17. Ibid.

18. Klain, R. (2015). Inequality and the Internet. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/37/inequality-and-the-internet/>

19. Metri, N. (2017). Beyond the Net Journal: Leveling up Pakistani Women | Internet Society. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2017/05/internet-chalao-patriarchy-dabao-leveling-up-pakistani-women/>

20. Morozov, E. (2011). Two decades of the web: a utopia no longer - Prospect Magazine. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/morozov-web-no-utopia-twenty-years-short-history-internet>

21. Fuchs, C. (2017). Capitalism, Patriarchy, Slavery, and Racism in the Age of Digital Capitalism and Digital Labour. *Critical Sociology*, 44(4-5). doi: 10.1177/0896920517691108

22. Meaningful Connectivity — unlocking the full power of internet access. (2020). Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity/>

The report states that “meaningful connectivity” has four main pointers which should be met:

- Regular internet use - minimum threshold: daily use
- An appropriate device - minimum threshold: access to a smartphone
- Enough data - minimum threshold: an unlimited broadband connection at home or a place of work or study
- A fast connection - minimum threshold: 4G mobile connectivity

This criteria makes it possible to effectively chart the disparities present in the digital space. Nowhere is this divide more apparent than in the intersection of gender and race. It is women of the Global South who face the brunt of this divide, due to the socio-economic disparities present on ground.

Writing from an African feminist perspective, scholar Assata Zerai says, “in some well-endowed contexts, information technology promises to contribute to enhanced availability of some kinds of knowledge. But in these spaces, I continue to see disparate access, especially along the lines of educational background, language, and age. Some drivers of innovation aim to provide open source materials, while others seek to capitalize on what they see as their intellectual property. In emerging markets, where centralized landline systems are virtually nonexistent, mobile technology has gotten ahead and the principles of neoliberal market- driven expansion trump any efforts to rein in, centrally manage, tax, or ensure nondiscrimination in terms of access to what potentially could be a public good.”<sup>23</sup>

A significant way in which patriarchy works is through limitation of access. This access in already conservative and segregated spaces just repeats the same pattern regardless of the potential freedom of the space. Zerai offers an alternative to this, which according to her is an involvement of African feminism with its commitment to social justice and equity in the affairs of the public management administration. She believes this not just furthers the argument for a more equitable use of the online space but also, to her, this paves a way for a more fruitful fulfilling of democratic processes.

## The Gendered Digital Divide in Pakistan

Simplistic narratives of technology either being “good” or “bad” for women are prevalent in Pakistan. In his thesis, Emrys Schoemaker recalls conducting a telephonic survey of 900 mobile data users in three cities from Punjab, Pakistan’s most populous province. He found out that 85% of the male respondents reported that they mostly use Facebook, compared to only 47% of female respondents. By contrast, 45% of women said that they used WhatsApp, compared to only 13% of men. The author narrates the example of an interviewee who sees WhatsApp as “ghar ki baat” (‘of the house’ -- a family matter) and says that WhatsApp is favored among women as it allows private communication among them and “hinders connections between unknown users, unlike Facebook, which allows friending those we do not know.” The author sees women’s preference of WhatsApp as an observance of ‘Digital Purdah’ and holds that technology can also lead to the reinforcement of social norms, rather than dismantling them, and reify the very gender inequity that it is supposed to change.<sup>24</sup>

23. Zerai, A. (2018). *African women, ICT and neoliberal politics*. University of New Mexico. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328100267\\_African\\_Women\\_ICT\\_and\\_Neoliberal\\_Politics\\_The\\_Challenge\\_of\\_Gendered\\_Digital\\_Divides\\_to\\_People-Centered\\_Governance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328100267_African_Women_ICT_and_Neoliberal_Politics_The_Challenge_of_Gendered_Digital_Divides_to_People-Centered_Governance)

24. Schoemaker, E. (2015). Pakistan’s ‘digital purdah’: How gender segregation persists in social media. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://blogs.lsc.ac.uk/southasia/2015/08/03/pakistans-digital-purdah-how-gender-segregation-persists-in-social-media/>

# Survey Data Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of data collected through a survey of 215 respondents from different communities across Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Out of the 215 responses, two individuals identified themselves as non-binary, whereas 213 individuals identified as women. The survey was circulated online and in person in English and Urdu languages.

## Limitations in Data Collection

1. During the analysis, it was noticed that there were a few discrepancies in the collected data. For instance, some respondents who said that they do not use the internet or use it less because it is expensive later hold that the Internet is reasonably priced. Similarly, some who indicated that they use the internet daily later said that they do not have time to use it. The researchers looked at these responses independent of each other to formulate the findings.
2. It was noticed in some of the responses that the respondents did not fully understand the question, and answered it based on their own understanding. This was most evident in the question about income where the respondents were asked to indicate the monthly household income but some of them indicated their personal income. There is a possibility that these responses have impacted the findings that look at the relationship of usage of the internet and household income.

## Survey Findings

### Respondent Demographics

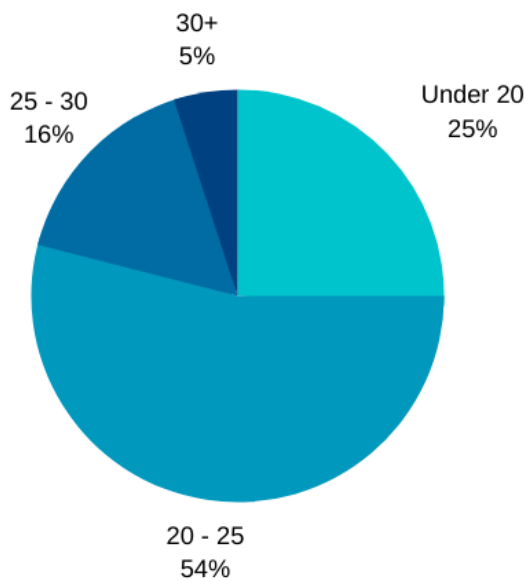
Almost 1 in 2 respondents (53.5%) belonged to the age group of 20-25 years. Whereas, 1 in 4 respondents (24.7%) were below the age 20 years. Around 16% respondents were between the ages 25 and 30, and the remaining 5% respondents were above 30 years of age. The survey collected responses from around the country, with most respondents, 39.9%, belonging from Punjab, 36.2% respondents were from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), 12.2% respondents from Sindh, 8.9% respondents from the capital territory of Islamabad, 2.3% from Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), and 1 respondent from Balochistan.

Most of the respondents from Punjab belonged to Rawalpindi, whereas majority of the respondents from KP belonged to the newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and South Waziristan. South Waziristan is one of the seven agencies of the formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that were merged with KP in 2018. The whole of South Waziristan continues to not have access to the internet that was disconnected during the decade long military operations under the War on Terror in the region. This has been discussed further in Case Study 1.

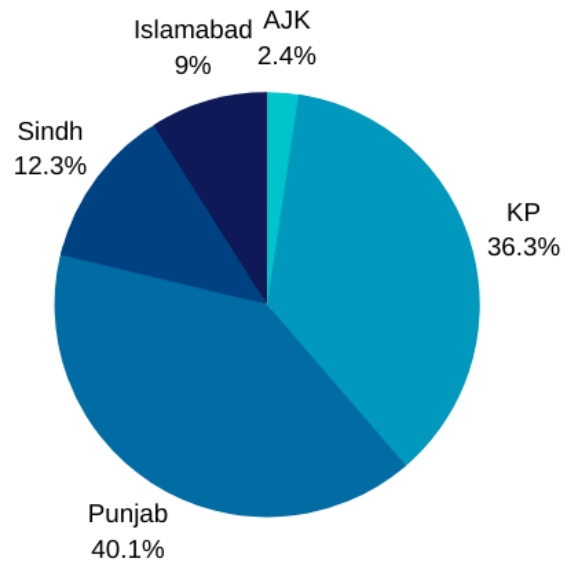
25. A total of 220 respondents took the survey, however, 5 of the respondents identified as male and those responses were thus removed.



## Respondents' Age Distribution



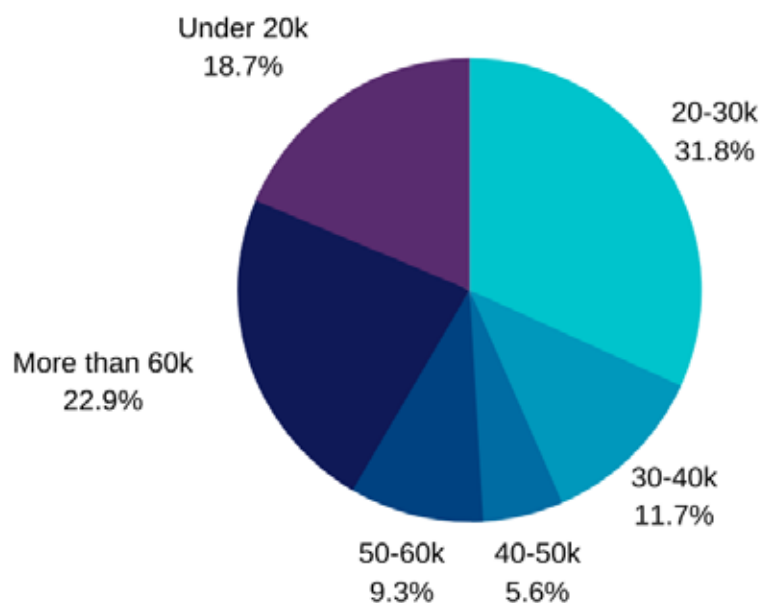
## Respondents' Regional Distribution



## Income

Another qualifier used in the study was the income of the respondents. While respondents were not selected based on their income, the income has been used as a category of analysis to understand how the experience of gender digital divide varies based on the economic class that individuals belong to. The questionnaire enquired about the respondents' household income based on which further findings are analysed in this section. The income brackets of the respondents were as follows;

## Income Brackets of Respondents



It is also imperative to consider the number of people in each household, which also determines the potential number of people contributing to that income or benefitting from it. The survey asked the respondents the number of people in their household, and where the responses varied with each individual, some of the significant answers were indicative of the situation of internet access in the household.

## Internet Usage

### KEY FINDINGS

**4 in 10**  
respondents use the internet everyday

**2 in 10**  
respondents **do not use** the internet

**Half**  
of those who use the internet daily, belong  
to families with over 60,000 monthly  
income

**7 in 10**  
of those who **do not use** the internet, belong  
to families with below 30,000 monthly  
income

The first set of inquiries in the survey dealt with the frequency of internet usage of the respondents. The survey enquired the frequency of internet usage by the respondents. 43.7% of the respondents said that they use the internet everyday, whereas, 27% said that they use it sometimes, 22.3% of the respondents said that they do not use the internet at all, whereas, 7% of the respondents said that they often use the internet.

## Age and Usage

Almost 38% of the respondents who said that they use the internet everyday belonged to the age bracket of under 25 years. Interestingly, most respondents - around 16% of the total number - who said that they do not use the internet also fell under the same age bracket. The varying factor in their profile was that out of the total number of individuals who said that they use the internet daily (45), 84.4% belonged to the

income bracket of above 60,000 PKR, and 91% of those who used internet daily and had household income of more than 60,000 PKR were based in regions with working internet connectivity i.e. Islamabad, Punjab and Sindh.

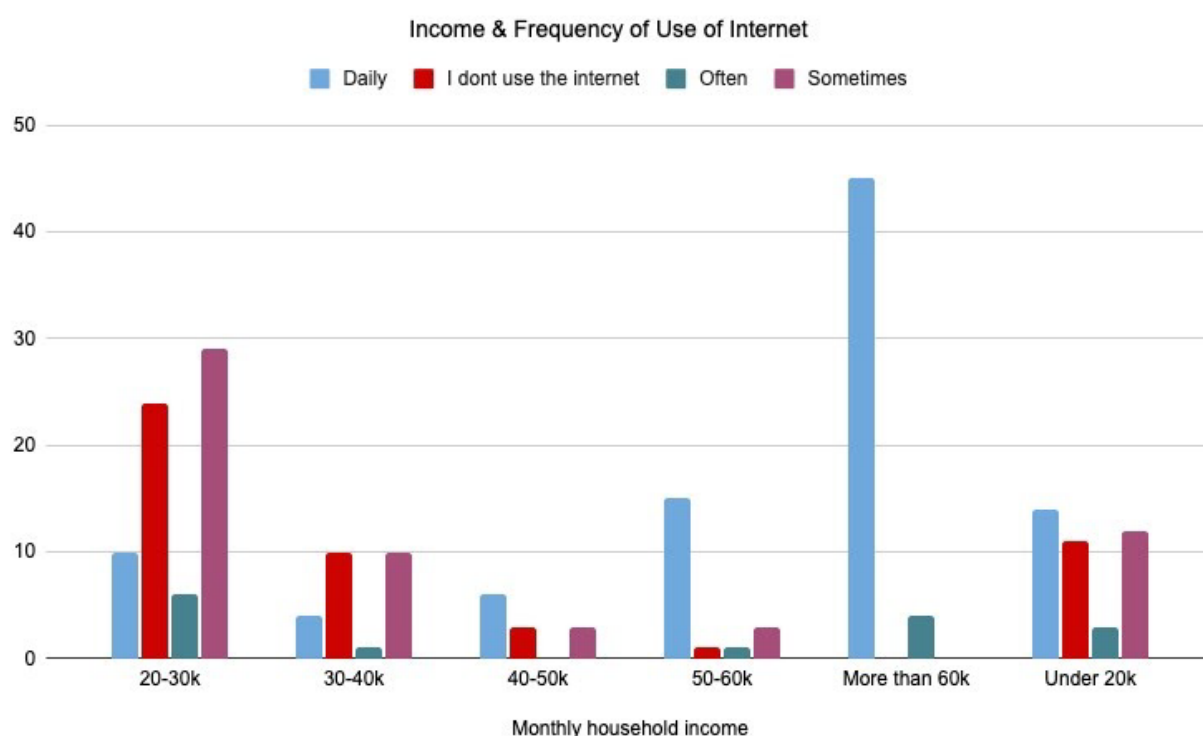
Similarly, out of those (34) who said they do not use the internet and belonged to the age bracket of under 25 years, 70.5% belonged to the income bracket of under 30,000 PKR. 76.5% of the under 25 years old individuals who did not use the internet and belonged to the household income group of under 30,000 PKR were based in KP, whereas, 23.5% were based in Punjab.

It is evident from these findings that only those who had economic capital and had infrastructural connectivity were able to access the internet frequently. This further highlights that where the internet is unaffordable for many people, their area of residence also plays an important role in their pattern of internet usage.



## Income, Geography and Usage

Almost 50% of the total respondents who indicated that they use the internet everyday belonged to the monthly household income bracket of above 60,000 PKR, and none of the respondents in this income bracket said that they don't use the internet, further confirming that access to the internet becomes easier when financial resources are available. Whereas 7 in 10 (71%) of those who do not use the internet people belonged to the income bracket of less than 30,000 PKR.



“

**Geographical limitations**

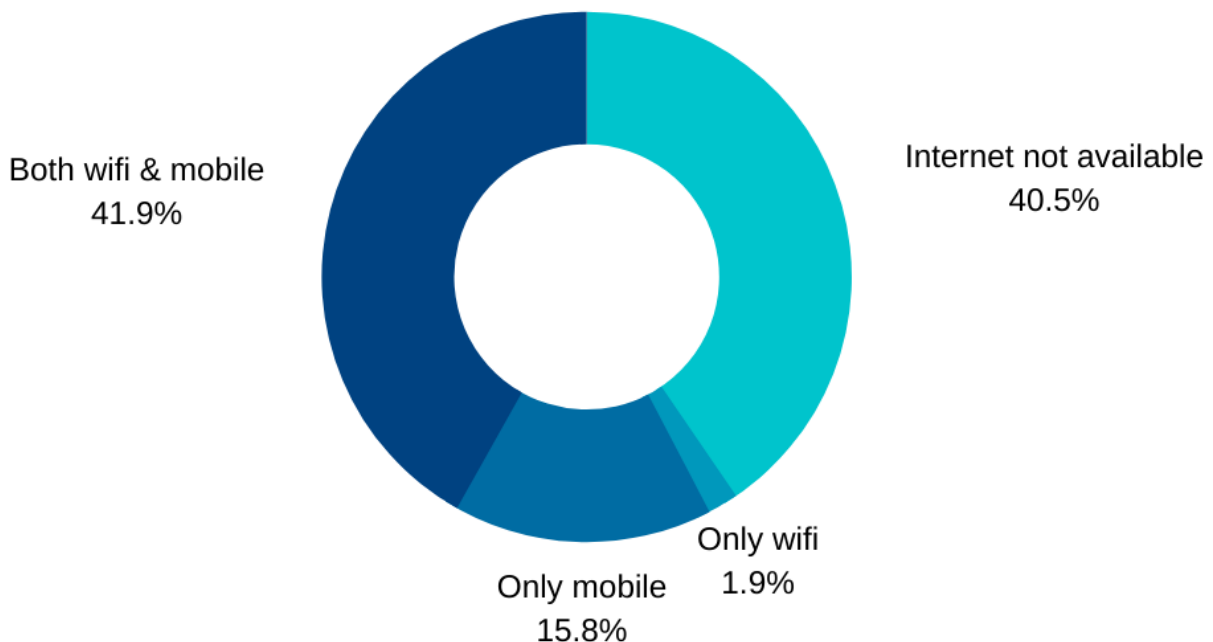
**8 IN 10** of those who do not use the internet are from South Waziristan region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

A significant majority, over 8 in 10 of those who said that they did not use the Internet belonged to South Waziristan. A part of the newly merged districts, formerly the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), the region suffers from discriminatory policies that, combined with various political and safety concerns, has resulted in an almost total lack of infrastructural access.

The remaining respondents who do not use the internet were based in Punjab and belonged to the working class community, that deals with limited access to communication technology due to lack of resources .

Infrastructural restrictions are another reason that many respondents identified as a barrier towards internet access. Among the 215 respondents, around 4 in 10 respondents said that they did not have access to either broadband or mobile internet within their regions.

### Availability of the internet



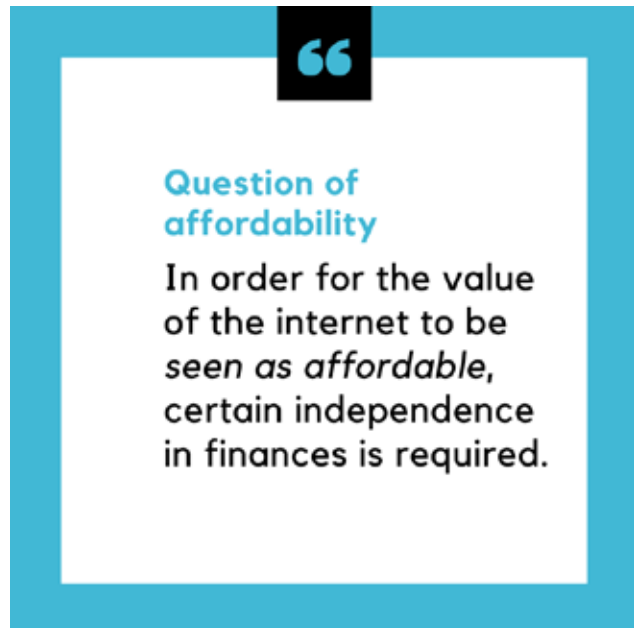
When asked about the ways that are available for them to access the internet in their region, 40.5% respondents (87) said that the internet is not available in their area, whereas, around 42% people (90) said that both WiFi and mobile internet connectivity is available where they live. 15.8% respondents said that only mobile internet is available in their area, and almost 2% said that only WiFi is available.

Where the availability of the internet is a crucial factor to determine the level of access people in any region have, another important attribute is the quality of this connection. For any internet connection, it is important for it to be meaningful. And for a connection to be meaningful,<sup>26</sup> it is imperative that the connection offers a reasonable speed and does not disconnect often.

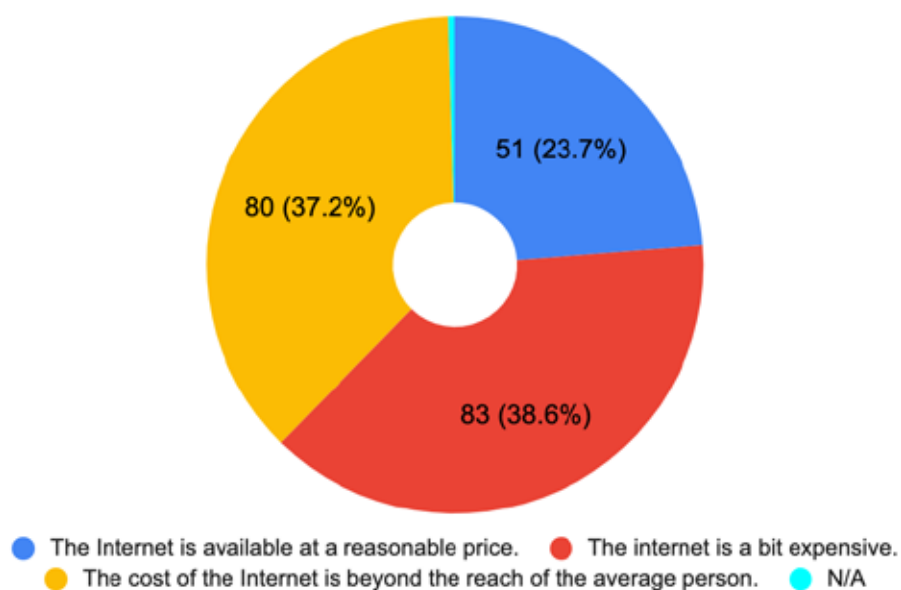
We asked the respondents whether they face challenges of speed and quality with the internet connectivity in their regions. Among those respondents who do have internet connections in their regions, 51% said that the internet disconnects sometimes, 14% said that it disconnects often while 35% held that they did face frequent internet disconnections.

## Affordability

A significant majority of the respondents said that the internet is expensive to varying degrees - collectively, a total of 76% respondents held that the internet is either beyond the reach of the average person or is a bit expensive. Only about a quarter of the respondents i.e 24% found the internet to be reasonably priced.



What is your opinion about the value of internet in Pakistan?

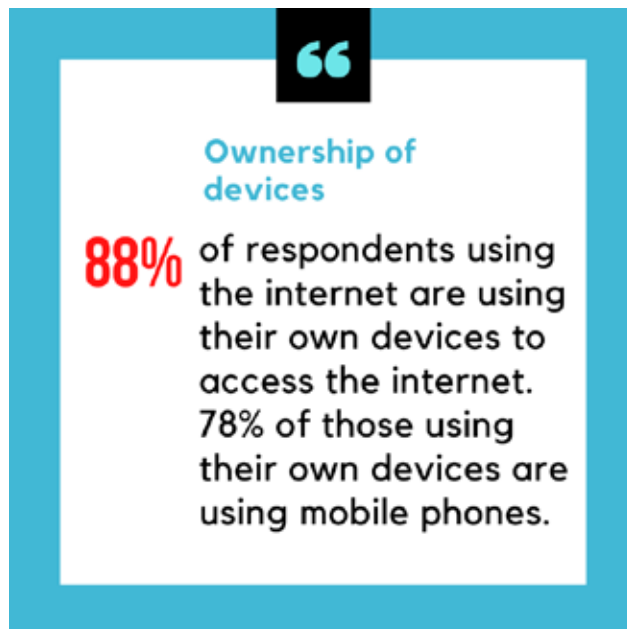


26. Meaningful Connectivity — unlocking the full power of internet access. (2020). Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity/>

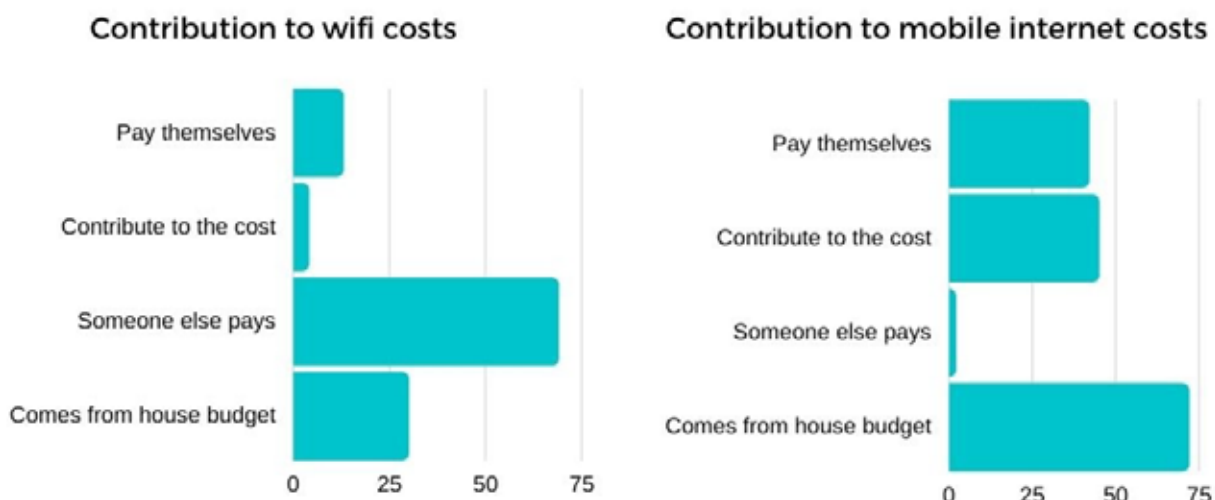
Among those 24% respondents who said that the internet is available at a reasonable price, 45% (23) respondents belonged to the income group of more than 50,000 PKR and did not contribute any part of their income in the household; whereas, 19% (10) of them contributed some amount in the monthly household income. Around 16% (8) of the respondents who belonged to lower income brackets did not contribute in the household expenses, and 25% (13) respondents contributed a little bit in the household income. This points towards the understanding that in order for the value of the internet to be seen as affordable, certain independence in finances is required.

### Contribution in cost of the internet

Respondents were then asked whether they contribute to the cost of the internet that is used in their homes. This question was divided into two parts to understand whether the pattern varies between their contribution in mobile internet and WiFi internet consumption. Around 3 in 10 respondents said that someone else pays for both wifi and mobile internet. Among the 161 respondents, who use mobile internet at home, the majority, 45% say that someone else in their house pays for their mobile internet, 26% pay for their own mobile internet while 1% contribute to the cost and 28% say that the budget for mobile internet comes from the collective household budget.



Among the 118 respondents who have wifi internet in their home, 11% pay for the wifi themselves, 3% contribute to the wifi costs, 59% say that wifi is paid for by someone else in the house and 26% said that the wifi cost is covered by the collective household budget.



## Devices and Connectivity

When respondents were asked what device they use to access the internet, 24.2% said that they do not use the internet connecting it with the various restrictions imposed on this access. Among those who do use the internet, 78% said that they use it on their mobile phone, 10% said that they use it on someone else's mobile or computer at home, and 12% said that they access the internet on their own laptop/PC.

It is interesting to note that 88% of the respondents who are using the internet are doing so on their own devices, with the majority relying on mobile devices. Among the total respondents, 67% are using their own devices.

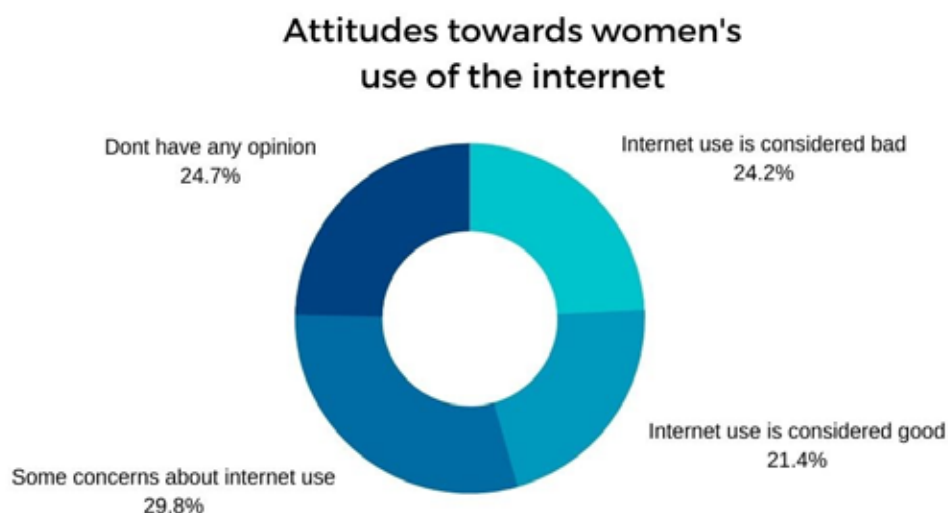
Considering the increased availability of WiFi and mobile internet in connected areas, the respondents were asked what kind of connection they use the most to access the internet. Around 23% of the respondents reiterated that they did not use the internet. Among those who use the internet, equal numbers, 47% each said that they use the wifi or mobile internet at home, whereas 6% said that they use wifi in other places like office, workplace, school, etc. Looking collectively i.e. including those who do not use the internet, the percentage of those using the internet outside their home is 4%, which is significantly low.

In these responses, the researchers noticed that some of the respondents who did not have access to the internet in their region also indicated here that they use the internet sometimes. This could potentially be because many people residing in the disconnected regions access the internet when they visit areas with working internet.

For instance, 37 individuals who said that they sometimes use the internet belonged to the regions of the newly merged districts of KP and some regions of Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) - regions that do not have working internet connection. Residents can only access it when they go to the places and cities that have working connections. This further becomes apparent in Case Studies 1 and 3 where the interviewees indicate frequent migration to nearby cities to access the internet.

## Gendered restrictions

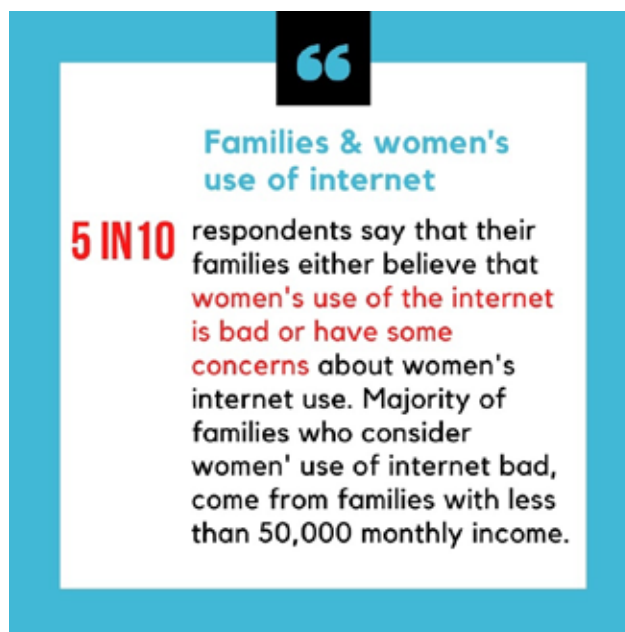
When asked about the familial attitudes towards women using the internet over 5 in 10 respondents (54%) either said that women's use of the internet is either considered bad or there are some concerns about their usage. Only 2 in 10 (21%) respondents said that women's use of internet is considered good while the remaining 25% said that their families didn't have any opinions on the subject



The fact that the majority of respondent's families harbour at least some concerns about women's use of the internet is indicative of the belief that public spaces are unsafe for women and should not be frequented by them. An in-depth analysis of the data suggests that this insecurity is considerably lower in the group with household income above 50,000 PKR where families consider girls' access to be good, and negative connotation towards their access has been recorded to be more common in those coming from the challenging financial situations.

These stats reveal a certain privilege that access to the internet requires in order to deal with any unsafe situation that a girl would encounter online, and is a hint towards visible power dynamics.

There is also a marked difference in the way the use of the internet is regulated for men and women by families. In response to a question inquiring about the differences in which boys and girls within the family use and can use the internet, the majority of respondents, 52% indicate that girls are either not allowed to use the internet or have more restrictions than the boys. The remaining 48% say that there is no difference in the way boys and girls in the family can use the internet. In many households, especially those from lower income groups, girls' use of the internet is discouraged and they are refused access to it as also seen in the analysis of the data collected for this research. Majority of the respondents who said that girls are not allowed to use the internet belonged to the monthly household



income group of less than 30,000 PKR. Girls in many households depend on the male heads of the household to make decisions about their lives, and many are unable to break this cycle unless they move away from their house for work or studies, as further explored in Case Studies 1 and 3.



Over 6 in 10 respondents (65%) indicated that they face some sort of restrictions when using the internet, 3 in 10 (32%) are only allowed to use the internet for certain tasks like taking classes or connecting to family members and another 3 in 10 (33%) are allowed to use the internet only for a restricted period of time. Around 13% of the respondents indicated that while they do not face any restrictions in internet usage, they need to inform elders and /or men in the family about internet use. The chance of family surveillance thus, can be seen as another form of indirect restriction that may be affecting women's use of the internet. Around 34% of the respondents were able to use the internet without any restrictions or conditions by family members.

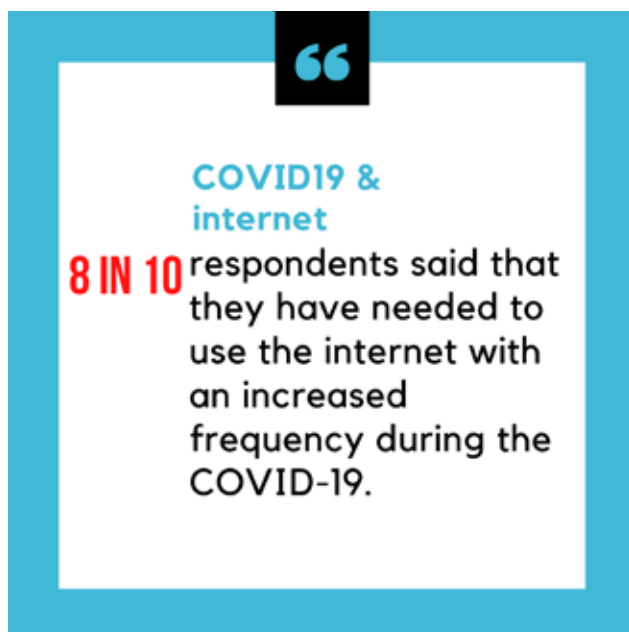


In other questions, respondents also indicated other hurdles that affect their usage of the internet. Out of the 98 respondents who said that they do have access to the internet in their area, 29.5% said that they do not have a mobile phone or a laptop to use the internet, 25.5% said that they do not have time to use the internet, 20.4% said that the internet is very expensive so they can't afford it, 14.2% said that they don't like using the internet, 8.16% said that their families have put restrictions on their access, whereas, only 2% respondents said that they do not know how to use a mobile phone or a laptop.

Where the internet is a luxury for most people in Pakistan, it comes with added restrictions when gendered access is involved. In light of the findings, it is imperative to consider the cultural connotations of some of the responses with respect to why some respondents choose not to use the internet despite having internet connectivity in their area. According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020,<sup>27</sup> the gender gap in mobile ownership in Pakistan is the widest among the surveyed countries and stands at 38%. Where 81% of the surveyed male population owned a mobile phone, only 50% women owned a device. This is further evident in the findings of the survey for this research as well where most respondents who do not use the internet suggest that the primary reason for their disconnection is nonavailability of a device of their own to access it.

In addition, even though the internet is cheaper in Pakistan compared to the countries in the Global North, it remains unaffordable for local communities given the low wages and large financial responsibilities that come with the family model of the society. Hence, 20.4% of respondents who said that the internet is very expensive only use the internet sometimes, and choose not to use it everyday despite having infrastructural connectivity.

Where mobile ownership and affordability of the internet is one issue, digital literacy and knowing how to use a technological device is also a barrier in women's access to the internet or technological platforms. Although only 2 respondents said that they do not know how to use a mobile phone, this is a significant hurdle among Pakistani citizens in accessing technological devices that merit a different study altogether to examine the extent of the gap in digital literacy.



As education, work, entertainment and communication moved completely online during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, it became evident that the internet's usage had increased. Even though the internet penetration and access in Pakistan is fairly limited compared to the size of the population, it still witnessed an increase of 15% usage during the first month of the lockdown.<sup>28</sup> And despite all the gendered restrictions that the respondents shared they experience while accessing the internet, 8 out of 10 respondents said that they felt an increased need to use the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic.

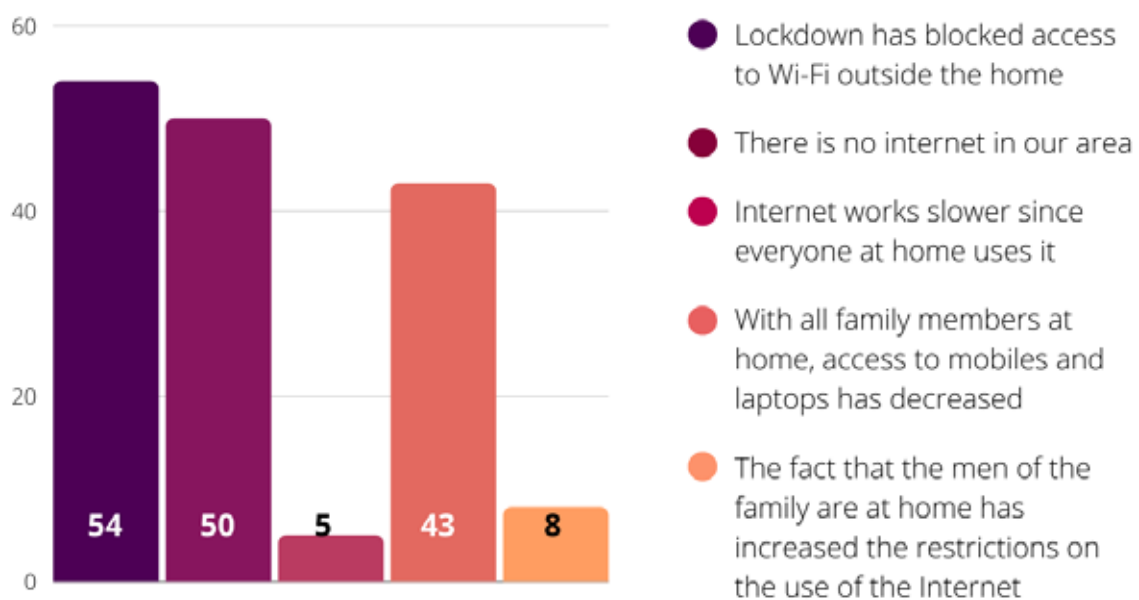
27. GSMA. (2020). *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report* [Ebook]. Retrieved from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

28. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Media Center | PTA. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/internet-usage-increases-by-15-in-pakistan-270320>

However, other data indicates that even though the need to use the internet has increased, respondents are also facing increased difficulty in accessing and using the internet. Many women, who previously accessed the internet outside of their homes, like at educational institutions and in workplaces, libraries, etc. are unable to do so due to the lockdown and mobility restrictions that have been put in place due to the coronavirus.

54 respondents out of those who had access to the internet in their region said that their access outside of their homes was lost. While many face complete internet blackout in their area, 5 respondents who did have access to the internet at home said that because everyone in the household was connected to one network, internet speed got very slow. Additionally, at least 43 respondents said that while everyone is at home their access to mobile phone and/or laptop has decreased because others are also using the same devices. Eight respondents also said that with men constantly in the house, the restrictions on their access to the internet have increased.

**Does Corona cause you any additional problems using the Internet? Tick all the options that are right for you.**



One respondent wrote that due to limited mobility and avenues to step outside the house, she was unable to recharge her mobile credit leading to her decreased access to the internet. Before the lockdown, many women were able to acquire data packages by physically going to mobile recharge shops. However, with lockdown in place and men being constantly in the house, this mobility has been restricted across the board, and in extension, their access to the internet has been reduced due to the lack of mobile phone credit.

# CASE STUDY 1

On the Peripheries, Women Die  
Because of the Gender Digital Divide



# CASE STUDY 1

## On the Peripheries, the Cost of Gender Divide is a Woman's Life

Written by **Hija Kamran**



Razia Mehsud<sup>29</sup> the main interviewee for this case study, is a journalist from Tehsil Ladha, South Waziristan - a marginalised region from the conservative Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Her reporting has been diverse and covers education, tourism, health, and issues related to women in Waziristan. She has written for the Tribal News Network (TNN), Dawn English newspaper, and Independent Urdu.<sup>30</sup> Mehsud also produces video interviews from Waziristan<sup>31</sup> on her Facebook page as part of the stories she covers. During field work, Mehsud is often accompanied by her husband. South Waziristan, Mehsud's home, is the largest of the seven agencies of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, that joined the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 and are now referred to as 'newly merged districts' (NMDs).

29. Interviewed by Hija Kamran

30. Mehsud, R. *Facebook*. Facebook. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.facebook.com/imhsud5/>.

31. Mehsud, R. (2020). *Razia Mehsud - Journalist - south waziristan on Facebook*. Facebook. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.facebook.com/imhsud5/videos/428960031611663>.

## Internet Landscape in the newly merged districts of KP

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas were a semi-autonomous region that acquired this exclusionary status through the colonial Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) - a set of regulations that barred the implementation of Pakistan's laws and criminal justice system in the region. The lack of extension of national laws and protection of legal and constitutional rights, resulted in widespread institutional marginalisation. In 2018, the FCR was abolished and the region was merged in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.<sup>32</sup> The former agencies of FATA, including South Waziristan are now called 'newly merged districts' (NMDs).

In the region, technological and infrastructural development continues to be a challenge. In 2004, the region became a part of the global war on terror and subsequently faced extended periods of extremist militancy and terrorism and multiple military operations. While the internet was partially available in 2005,<sup>33</sup> it was repeatedly cut off on account of security concerns. Mobile internet was not available in the region at all, and broadband internet was not widely accessible<sup>34</sup> until 2014.

Today, mobile internet continues to be unavailable in the entire region, except a few areas closer to the borders of Afghanistan and Peshawar, that get some coverage at certain points. Many residents also own Afghan telecom connections in order to access mobile and internet services near the border.

## The Internet's absence and disruptions

The latest and the longest disconnection of internet services in NMDs began in 2016. Residents staged protests to demand justice from the authorities, and even those protests did not receive the coverage the incident required. The underlying reason for that was the long term internet and mobile network shutdown resulting in affected communities' inability to communicate their reality through a medium that has become a primary source of communication around the world.

The impact of the internet's unavailability in former-FATA is multifold. Residents who relied on providing the internet to communities through internet cafes<sup>35</sup> had to shut their business that had a ripple effect on those using these shared spaces to connect with their families and friends abroad, or for studies and work. Just like everything else that was impacted through the constant unreliability in access to the internet, the June 2016 shutdown also barred students from accessing educational material and opportunities online. Where the internet shutdown has disproportionately affected access to right to education protected under the Constitution of Pakistan for everyone, it has wider implications on women's education that is already challenging in the country.

A student activist from Waziristan, Assad Ullah, said told<sup>36</sup> the Digital Rights Monitor in July 2020, "In my entire village, only I have access to a DSL broadband connection, and even then, the network itself is usually very patchy." In a region of over 8 million people, limited connectivity to broadband internet is another challenge that exacerbates communication blackout in the tribal region, coupled with the lack of telecommunication services and mobile internet.

32. Abbasi, W. (2018). FATA: abolished and merged. *Daily Times*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://dailytimes.com.pk/246758/fata-abolished-and-merged/>.

33. Kamran, H. (2017). The Internet Has Been Shut Down in Pakistan's Tribal Area for More Than a Year. *Slate*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-internet-has-been-shut-down-in-pakistans-fata-for-more-than-a-year.html>.

34. Kamran, H. (2017). *The Internet Has Been Shut Down in Pakistan's Tribal Area for More Than a Year*. *Slate*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-internet-has-been-shut-down-in-pakistans-fata-for-more-than-a-year.html>.

35. Kamran, H. (2017). *The Internet Has Been Shut Down in Pakistan's Tribal Area for More Than a Year*. *Slate*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-internet-has-been-shut-down-in-pakistans-fata-for-more-than-a-year.html>.

36. Waraich, M. (2020). *The Ones We're Leaving Behind: How remote learning is accentuating inequalities at a provincial level*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/the-ones-were-leaving-behind-how-remote-learning-is-accentuating-inequalities-at-a-provincial-level/>.

## Monopoly & Service Provision

The Pakistan Army-run Special Communication Organization (SCO) is the dominant provider of telecommunication service in the peripheral region of the country since 1976<sup>37</sup> when the then-President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto granted a contract to SCO to set up telecommunication instead of the private companies, later formalised through the Pakistan Telecommunication (re-Organisation) Act, 1996. Given the monopoly and lack of competition, the quality of service remains low and mobile-based 3G/4G services remain unavailable.

In February 2019, the Universal Service Fund (USF) - an entity set up by the Ministry of IT and funded by the telecom industry to extend internet services in underserved areas of Pakistan - signed a contract<sup>38</sup> worth 258 million PKR with one of the four telecom operators, Mobilink, to deploy fiber optics in North Waziristan of former FATA. The project was supposed to be completed within 24 months and ensure provision of 3G/4G and voice services to a population of 0.57 million. However, till November 2020 i.e. 21 months on, the areas are still disconnected and there are no updates on the project.

## The internet and the pandemic

Despite acknowledgment of the gap in connectivity, development and provision of internet services remains slow leading to unprecedented inconvenience to the residents that amplified during the COVID-19 lockdown. With the government's announcement of closing down cities to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the country, residents in FATA largely remained unaware of the developments around the virus. An anonymous journalist from the Khyber region of FATA told Slate<sup>39</sup> in April 2020 that most of the information that is being shared around the virus is online and because of the unavailability of the internet in the tribal regions, people do not have this information.

## A legal battleground

Sayed Muhammad, a student at a university in Islamabad, the Federal Capital faced a similar situation when he moved back to his hometown in Parachinar, another newly merged district due to COVID. Sayed filed a petition<sup>40</sup> in Islamabad High Court (IHC) in April 2020, demanding access to the internet in former FATA. In his petition, he argued that despite the United Nations' (UN) declaration of the internet being a human right, people in his hometown are being kept away from this right under the pretext of security. He requested the Court to direct federal and provincial governments to grant access to the internet in his hometown and surrounding areas so the students can attend online classes.

On April 13, The Court ruled<sup>41</sup> that PTA must restore access to 3G/4G internet services in the tribal regions of KP, and ordered the Authority to submit a compliance report by April 20. However, PTA

37. Syeda, M. (2019). The battle for 4G in the North. *Profit*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/11/04/the-battle-for-4g-in-the-north/?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_\\_=5fc4a72ab88d7da7191bdd99ba7941051f8c1d97-1610532985-0-AZAdieJhca4VugB37YE.XEesNWcUZOjPQLW9TYyOV5BAQzskRKHSZ9isfTGHMol5RhrYSvQ2-q7MPhJpWpBaSPutVrqu\\_CBmhD2jh2hKmZJTAfV8q6V7U8XTnd9WByKYGp2GvvQ4vmW7DDjANqDJFvGhUkPQcNTWNNU-r9enENeH-SMCeWksIHmpJHqaARs7E-jnA9dgJ4pYUbHa4dTgX5PDYfsOdfhYsefTwbXb4Gt8wU8mk\\_eic0bEFB\\_mxzuX\\_tVxBKTA7MJOSQ76e9nK5cRSMtPvXG6hY-oHWZ4X1LmFnKbEofegbyZ7Slqg6qAifwoJrqMa5Vwa\\_\\_9uentGCaGvP0z-BQIBkdlV2royK](https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/11/04/the-battle-for-4g-in-the-north/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=5fc4a72ab88d7da7191bdd99ba7941051f8c1d97-1610532985-0-AZAdieJhca4VugB37YE.XEesNWcUZOjPQLW9TYyOV5BAQzskRKHSZ9isfTGHMol5RhrYSvQ2-q7MPhJpWpBaSPutVrqu_CBmhD2jh2hKmZJTAfV8q6V7U8XTnd9WByKYGp2GvvQ4vmW7DDjANqDJFvGhUkPQcNTWNNU-r9enENeH-SMCeWksIHmpJHqaARs7E-jnA9dgJ4pYUbHa4dTgX5PDYfsOdfhYsefTwbXb4Gt8wU8mk_eic0bEFB_mxzuX_tVxBKTA7MJOSQ76e9nK5cRSMtPvXG6hY-oHWZ4X1LmFnKbEofegbyZ7Slqg6qAifwoJrqMa5Vwa__9uentGCaGvP0z-BQIBkdlV2royK).
38. Shahid, J. (2019). USF contracts cellular operator for broadband access to Fata. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1462321/usf-contracts-cellular-operator-for-broadband-access-to-fata>.
39. Kamran, H. (2020). *An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan*. Slate. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.
40. Saeed, A. (2020). *Despite IHC Order, Internet Not Restored In Tribal Districts*. Voicepk.net. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from
41. Reporter, S. (2020). IHC asks govt to explain denial of internet to tribal regions. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1550961/ihc-asks-govt-to-explain-denial-of-internet-to-tribal-regions>.

informed the Court that it was unable to comply with the order due to the failure of the Ministry of Interior to give go-ahead to the Authority to provide services. The Court issued notice to the Ministry to submit a response during the hearing on April 28, when it informed<sup>42</sup> the Court that the Ministry needs more time to work with PTA to restore internet services in tribal regions.

Dawn reports<sup>43</sup> that during the hearing, the Chief Justice of IHC Justice Athar Minallah remarked, “This is not occupied Kashmir, therefore people of these areas are free to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights.”

However, in light of the judgement<sup>44</sup> of the Supreme Court on April 22 that upheld the federal government’s policy to suspend internet services as a security measure, Justice Minallah advised<sup>45</sup> the petitioner’s counsel to review the jurisdiction of IHC to give verdict on the internet restoration in the tribal regions. As a result, millions of citizens of Pakistan continue to live without the internet as their fundamental rights are denied to them.

As the struggle continued, many from around the country took to social media in the following months to directly connect with legislators to demand suspension of online classes due to the unavailability of the internet. A hashtag #WeRejectOnlineEdu started trending<sup>46</sup> on Twitter, where students not only asked for the suspension of online classes but also highlighted the lack of relief offered by the telecom operators in the country with regards to internet packages that remained unaffordable for many. One student wrote on Twitter, “Do we have internet access in all parts of the country? No! Are these online lectures effective like the regular interactive ones? No! Then how can our universities think of imposing such [a] system upon us! It’s our right to ask for what’s best for us and we will. #werejectonlineedu.”

## The Gender Digital Divide in Newly Merged Districts

### Womens’ Education

Umar Wazir, a journalist from Waziristan, covered<sup>47</sup> the Student Solidarity March against internet shutdowns staged by the students who returned to their hometowns from different cities as universities around the country imposed lockdown and closed hostels forcing visiting students to return. As they came back to the tribal regions to their homes, another challenge awaited them - lack of internet accessibility. With lockdown in place, universities moved their classes online, with a disregard towards the geographic and economic limitations that many students faced in the following weeks. Students were unable to attend online classes and demanded suspension of the semester out of fear of missing out on studies, and worse failing the course because of shortage of attendance. Shams-Uddin, a postgraduate student of Zoology from Sargodha University, who participated in the protest, told<sup>48</sup> Wazir, “We are left

42. Asad, M. (2020). Govt seeks time to restore internet in tribal districts. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1553046>.

43. Asad, M. (2020). Govt seeks time to restore internet in tribal districts. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1553046>.

44. Malik, H. (2020). SC upholds govt's policy to suspend mobile services. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2257839/sc-upholds-govts-policy-to-suspend-mobile-services>.

45. Bashir, S. (2020). <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219036/ihc-seeks-clarity-jurisdiction-restoration-internet-services-former-fata>. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219036/ihc-seeks-clarity-jurisdiction-restoration-internet-services-former-fata>.

46. Kamran, H. (2020). *Coronavirus crisis highlights digital divide in Pakistan*. *Digital Rights Monitor*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/coronavirus-crisis-highlights-digital-divide-in-pakistan/>.

47. Kamran, H. (2020). *An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan*. *Slate*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.

48. Kamran, H. (2020). *An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan*. *Slate*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.

with no other choice, because we'll be left behind when the rest of the students are studying online. How do we fill this void?"

Nazil, a student of National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad, Pakistan, told the Digital Rights Monitor<sup>49</sup> in July 2020 that she has only attended two classes since moving back to her hometown in Gilgit, indicating that having internet connection is not enough, in fact, additional expectations from women to be contributing in household work bars them from participating in or prioritising their education. She says, "If you're a brother to a sister, you're probably adding to her weight by not helping her out with housework."

Education takes a backseat for most women in Pakistan. And in the light of limited connectivity to the internet, where preference to use most of the bandwidth is given to men, women are told to not use the internet altogether. Another student Muqaddas Afzal, a student from Lahore, tells<sup>50</sup> the Digital Rights Monitor that, "I can't find much space, I can't attend online study circles, and because it's a joint family system I have to do household chores. I have to be occupied with unimportant things, otherwise I will have to listen to taunts like my parents made a wrong decision sending me to a city for education."

Shazina, a student from Karachi returned to her village during COVID-19 lockdown, told the Digital Rights Monitor<sup>51</sup> in September 2020, "People here don't like the internet for women. They say the internet will ruin you, it will ruin us women." She adds, "My attendance [in online classes] is not being marked. I haven't attended any class since the lockdown. There is an internet connection in my house, but my family says don't use the internet."

As Shazina<sup>52</sup> spoke about her experience with the Digital Rights Monitor, she had her sister on a lookout in case anyone comes and finds her talking on the phone.



Sameena,<sup>53</sup> is a student of M.Phil, who moved back to her hometown due to Covid-19 lockdown says that even though men were able to access some kind of internet through internet centres set up by Pakistan Army, women were categorically refused to enter them. She said, "Our culture does not allow women to go out of the house. And since a lot of the classes were in odd timings, some of them were in the morning,

49. Waraich, M. (2020). *The Ones We're Leaving Behind: How remote learning is accentuating inequalities at a provincial level*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/the-ones-were-leaving-behind-how-remote-learning-is-accentuating-inequalities-at-a-provincial-level/>.

50. Aurangzeb, A. (2020). *For women, access to the internet is more than simply having a device*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/for-women-access-to-the-internet-is-more-than-simply-having-a-device/>.

51. Aurangzeb, A. (2020). *For women, access to the internet is more than simply having a device*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/for-women-access-to-the-internet-is-more-than-simply-having-a-device/>.

52. Aurangzeb, A. (2020). *For women, access to the internet is more than simply having a device*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/for-women-access-to-the-internet-is-more-than-simply-having-a-device/>.

53. Interviewed by Razia Mehsud for this research



and others in the evening, so to go out of the house again and again is not permitted under our customs and traditions. I could not attend any of the (online) classes that happened during the lockdown.”

## Employment Opportunities for Women

The lack of access to the internet has also resulted in a loss of employment opportunities for women. Sameena shares that she is unable to get information about job announcements in time. Even when she did manage to get information about any vacancies, absence of the internet connection led to her not being able to send her application before the deadline. She says that this is not her experience alone, but the reality of many people living in the tribal regions.

Sameena recalls an opportunity for training by UNDP. The training for tribal women was focused on entrepreneurship and included grants to kick start their businesses.

“The news of this training made me very excited and I was very happy that this will help me and other women to be able to do something for themselves. But unfortunate[ly] for us, this training was also online. We don’t get a lot of such opportunities that could help us bring positive change in our lives, and to see that we missed this one because of the lack of the internet was really disappointing,” she says, adding that this particular training could have helped a lot of tribal women in their dreams of starting a business that could not be realised because of the lack of capital. “Even when tribal women do possess the talent and will to start a business or do something productive, poverty restricts them from actualising those ideas,” Sameens adds.

She further states that because of the internet inaccessibility, the majority of people of tribal regions, including students and professionals, have been affected.

Sameena equates the need for access to the internet and mobile services with food to live and oxygen to breathe. She trusts that these services are essential to connect with the world. “Whenever I go back to my hometown [in South Waziristan], I feel like I have come into a dark cave where I can’t see anything, can’t hear anything, can’t understand anything. The information that I miss in that one week or a month feels like a lifetime when I return to the city, and it takes forever to catch up on the new developments that happened while I was cut off from the world.”

## Infrastructure, Access and Gendered Implications

Despite having some form of access to digital technology, the major challenge that remains is the unavailability of mobile connectivity. Razia says that the main Sararogha market in South Waziristan does receive some signals of Ufone - one of the five telecom operators in the country - and no other telecom services work in the area and surrounding locations. This absence of mobile services can and has resulted in fatal consequences.<sup>54</sup>

In times where there is a need to make an urgent call, the network available in Sararogha market proves to be inefficient and many head to mountains through unsafe and dangerous terrain to connect to some signals. Women have been seen going towards these mountains, but as the culture of tribal regions dictates, they have to be accompanied by a male family member. On the mountains, women have a separate area to

54. Rajput, S. (2020). *Lack of cell phone services leads to death for some women in former FATA*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/lack-of-cell-phone-services-leads-to-death-for-some-women-in-former-fata/>.

seek mobile signals to make a call where men are not allowed, and men are designated another area where women can't go.

Whereas, even where some mobile connectivity is available, mobile internet connection or 3G/4G connectivity continues to be unavailable throughout South Waziristan, beyond and around in the NMDs. Razia mentions that some areas do have broadband connection, but because women are not allowed to roam freely in the tribal region, their access continues to be restricted. But men who need to access the internet, can access it by going to army check posts that have WiFi connectivity. All of these avenues remain restricted for women.

As a result, those women who have their husbands, brothers or fathers residing in the Gulf region for work, travel to Tank for 3 hours or 127 kilometers from South Waziristan to talk to them on video call through the internet. Despite having crippling restrictions on mobility for women in former-FATA, the need to connect with family members abroad forces them to travel long distances to another city only to access a facility that most of the world takes for granted.

## Women's access to devices and the internet

According to GSMA Mobile Gender Gap 2020 report,<sup>55</sup> women in Pakistan are 38 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than men, and they are 49 percent less likely to access the internet than men. Women's access to digital technology is often controlled by families and predominantly male guardians. Oftentimes, permission to use technology is restricted due to the belief that technology is the root cause of evil.

Razia echoes this and says that elders in Waziristan consider mobile phones a very negative tool that is impacting the youth. Whereas, young and middle-aged people find it very useful, although according to them, its unhindered access should only be granted to men. Women still have to seek permission from male members of the house to own and maintain a mobile phone and this permission which can be revoked anytime.

Another hurdle that Razia routinely faces is the attitude of men in many households that control women's interactions with strangers. "Where women's ownership of mobile phones is already discouraged, they are also barred from talking about the issues that they face because of the lack of connectivity." Razia says this is a reality of all women in South Waziristan.

However, she says that while conducting research for this study, Razia realised that when women of Waziristan visit cities that have internet connection, they do use it as well. She personally did not think that women who otherwise live a life of disconnection in former FATA would have experienced the internet.

She shares that most of the women who have accessed the internet do not make social media accounts in their own names, instead use the identity of men in their house. This is essentially to protect their own identity, a need again based on the culture of the tribal regions that demand women to remain within the bounds of their house, and their identity invisible.

## Connectivity and Healthcare for Women

Imagine the implications of this complete lack of connectivity on access to healthcare. The quality of

55. Rowntree, O., Shanahan, M., Bahia, K., Butler, C., Lindsey, D., & Sibthorpe, C. (2020). *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>.

telecommunication is so poor in these disconnected and peripheral areas of Pakistan, that women cannot even call an ambulance in times of emergency due to lack of communication devices and services.

Memona Mehsud, a 26 year old girl from Miranshah, South Waziristan who lost her mother three years ago during childbirth because she could not call emergency healthcare services in time to assist.<sup>56</sup> Memona told<sup>57</sup> the Digital Rights Monitor, “I want to ask the government [if we are] less human. If there were better hospitals and if service providers were available in our area, my mother would be alive today.”

She says, “Can you imagine sitting for hours in a corner of the house, just in hope of strong signals. People living in the capital of Pakistan and other provincial capitals are privileged and we are not even able to communicate with each other in the time of disaster.”

The nonavailability of mobile services thus had a role to play in Memona’s mother’s tragic demise.

This is a reality of over 8 million people in newly merged districts, and women, as the most vulnerable and marginalised, have a higher price to pay.

Sobia,<sup>58</sup> a 25 year old housewife from Tehsil Sararogha, South Waziristan, agrees and says that when her cousin got injured in a landmine blast as she went to graze goats on a nearby mountain, the biggest challenge was to get help in time. Because the area does not have mobile phone connection, they usually have to send a person, mostly a man or a male child, to medical aid. For the injured girl who, Sobia says, had incurred serious injuries and was bleeding on the place of the blast, a child had to be sent 12 to 15 kilometer away on foot to bring help. The delay in medical assistance resulted in a loss of a limb and sight for the injured girl, whose eyes had been damaged in the blast. Sobia says that had there been a working mobile phone connection and an efficient healthcare system, her cousin could have sustained less damage to her body.

## Menstruation, Taboos and the Internet

Women’s reproductive healthcare is a taboo in Pakistani society. Parents do not talk about sexual health before marrying their girls off who are often told to ‘let the husband take the lead’ on the day of the wedding. Sanitary pads, which are a privilege for many women in Pakistan, are sold like drugs, wrapped in brown paper bags or sometimes black plastic bags, away from the eyes of male customers. The stigmatisation of aspects of women’s health begins from her childhood. Sex education is barred for both boys and girls, but the implications are drastically different for each of them. Where boys ‘explore’ through pornography, girls are told to let the husband decide what he wants to do with her body as he experiments everything he has learned from watching it. As a result, a bruised and abused woman tries to survive the marriage each night because complaining about these matters is also forbidden.

But before all of this, there comes a day when the girl frantically leaves her bathroom bleeding and thinking that she has contracted a fatal disease, not knowing that this is the result of parts of her body functioning the way they are supposed to. Information about menstrual health is only given to the girls on this day, because every day before this very day, she is thought of as a child. But suddenly, with the onset of her period, she is considered marriage-ready.

56. Rajput, S. (2020). *Lack of cell phone services leads to death for some women in former FATA*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/lack-of-cell-phone-services-leads-to-death-for-some-women-in-former-fata/>.

57. Rajput, S. (2020). *Lack of cell phone services leads to death for some women in former FATA*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/lack-of-cell-phone-services-leads-to-death-for-some-women-in-former-fata/>.

58. Interviewed by Razia Mehsud for this research

Razia echoes this and adds that many girls in the tribal regions are not given this information even when they get their first period.

She says, “The stigma attached to women’s menstrual health prevents even the mother from talking about normal bodily functions with her daughter because she feels shy. They don’t prepare daughters beforehand for when they get their first period. So when it finally happens, their friends or elder sisters inform them of what has happened to them and how to manage it.”

Razia, talks of the lack of information and the hesitance to acquire information from family, friends and healthcare workers. In absence of these avenues, the internet could have been a good source of basic knowledge. Razia says that the internet could have allowed them to be able to access information about menstruation, fight the stigma around their own health, and be more accepting of taking care of their bodies. The effectiveness of internet and period tracking applications as a way of getting information about periods has been mentioned in an article on period trackers that recounts the story of Rimsha, a teenager who only realised that cramps and mood swings during her period were not related to an undetected illness when she started using an app on her 14 birthday.<sup>59</sup> In the NMDs, the lack of connectivity and access for young girls, deprives them of the chance to acquire this information.

### Childbirth, mortality and internet access

The implications of lack of internet and mobile access get far worse than just not understanding what is happening to the body during menstruation. While the knowledge about menstrual health could have led tribal women to have better management of their overall health, mobile phone services and the ability to connect to a working healthcare system would have helped women survive the complications that many of them face.

Memona Mehsud’s experience of losing her mother during childbirth because of the lack of mobile connectivity is not unique.

In 2014, Razia was part of a healthcare related development program in Tehsil Sarwakai. During her time working on the project, the staff of the hospital where she was employed received a woman in labour. The husband of the woman left her at the hospital since it was late at night; she had a few hours before delivery, and her husband had to return to the six unattended children at home. The woman faced complications during childbirth and passed away as a result.

“The woman was alone in the hospital, and now that she had died, the doctors did not know who to contact and how to inform her husband about the death since there was no mobile connection. We did not even have her address that could have helped us in reaching her husband,” Razia informs.

Many such incidents have instilled a sense of fear in Razia’s mind as well. When she visits an area where internet and mobile connectivity are limited, she constantly worries about experiencing similar incidents where she would find herself in the midst of an emergency and will not be able to contact her husband for help. These issues are particularly stressful in cases of pregnancy and childbirth, “Since there have been countless incidents where women have died during the process, and there was no way to inform men of the house,” Razia adds.

59. Khan, S. (2019). *Data bleeding everywhere: a story of period trackers*. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://deepdives.in/data-bleeding-everywhere-a-story-of-period-trackers-8766dc6a1e00?gi=b5f66e11f8e8>.

## COVID-19 and emergency healthcare

During COVID-19 lockdown, the lack of emergency services was felt even more acutely as OPDs at hospitals were closed and doctors were not attending patients.

Even as the internet use soared across the country during the pandemic, people in the newly merged districts continued to rely on printed brochures and radio to get information about the virus. The delayed information about COVID-19 could have been fatal for those who would have contracted it, and lack of information about it would have promoted its spread as well. Not only were people barred from accessing crucial life-saving information, now their routine access to healthcare was also restricted.

Owing to the inability to visit hospitals for regular treatments during COVID-19 lockdown, many people set up telehealth services online where patients would be able to connect with doctors without the need to visit a clinic. Telephonic and video consultations began to accommodate patients based on their condition and need for a treatment. Various telehealth services including, OlaDoc and DoctHERS that existed even before the pandemic, collaborated for a Facebook group<sup>60</sup> titled “CoronaVirus - Doctors Consultation & Health Advice” directed to assist people with all kinds of illnesses. In just two weeks of setting up of this group, it surpassed 50,000 members<sup>61</sup> comprising 52.3 percent women and 47.4 percent men. The number of women is indicative of their roles as the primary caregivers in Pakistani cultures and households.

Mehwish Rana, one of the co-founders of the group told the Digital Rights Monitor<sup>62</sup> in April 2020, “We felt that with the lockdown, it would get difficult for people to reach clinics and hospitals, and owing to the paranoia in the air, it would provide them guidance from their homes. We also wanted to debunk many myths about the virus, and conduct live sessions with doctors with different specialisations to answer queries. Awareness is also crucial during this time and we aim to do that as much as possible.”

The avenues to this awareness and subsequent assistance were restricted from women and men of newly merged districts.<sup>63</sup>

Razia says that in instances like this, the absence of the internet and mobile services in addition to no facilities of telehealth in the region aggravated the lack of functioning healthcare system for women in the region who were still facing the same health related issues that existed before the pandemic.

Sobia,<sup>64</sup> a resident of South Waziristan, agrees and says that there are countless such instances where women have died before they could reach the hospital.

Razia informs us that when she was working on the healthcare development program, the hospital received many pregnant women who passed away on the way to the hospital because they could not receive emergency healthcare support in time which could save their lives. As a result, their children were stillborn. Razia believes that the provision of healthcare via telehealth services through the internet and mobile phone connection in former FATA could lend considerable support to women facing medical issues.

60. *CoronaVirus - Doctor Consultation & Health Advice public group* | Facebook. Facebook.com. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/oladoc.healthforum/>.

61. Anwer, Z. (2020). *Online Communities: COVID-19 lockdown is changing the way people seek human connection*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/online-communities-covid-19-lockdown-is-changing-the-way-people-seek-human-connection/>.

62. Anwer, Z. (2020). *Online Communities: COVID-19 lockdown is changing the way people seek human connection*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/online-communities-covid-19-lockdown-is-changing-the-way-people-seek-human-connection/>.

63. Kamran, H. (2020). *An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan*. Slate. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.

64. Interviewed for this research by Razia Mehsud

Sobia,<sup>65</sup> a 25-year-old housewife from Tehsil Sararogha, says that men of the house who own a smartphone are not always home, so the access to a device is already limited for her. “In cases of emergency when we have to access the internet in the absence of a man, we prefer that an elderly woman goes to the army check post to request access as no one points fingers at them. But even then, our tradition and customs are such that the presence of an elderly woman is also not appreciated by the officials at the checkpost”.

65. Interviewed by Razia Mehsud for this research

## The first woman journalist in South Waziristan

*The bulk of this case study is based on an interview and contributions by Razia Mehsud, who calls herself the first women journalist from South Waziristan.*

Razia decided to become a journalist in a male dominated profession after the military operation was concluded in her region, because she felt that there was a need for the issues of residents to be communicated. She says, “I saw that there were so many issues after the operation ended that should be highlighted. I could not wait for someone else to come and take our voices forward.

So instead of waiting for someone else to report on them, I decided to join the media myself, and highlight the problems of the region.” Razia particularly focuses on bringing forth women’s issues in the newly merged districts.

Razia’s efforts have brought to light the plight of tribal women from NMDs and also inspired “other young women from the tribal region [of South Waziristan] were also encouraged to join journalism and the field of media. A woman, holding a job, appearing on camera and operating an active social media profile is not taken kindly by the tribal culture and thus, for Razia, challenges remain.

After an interview with a 78-year-old woman who, after taking permission from her sons, had shared her life’s experiences and challenges with Razia went viral, Razia found herself to be the target of a hate campaign. “When I shared that interview on social media, our people took it very negatively, and made it a matter of honour. People started uploading hateful posts about me,” Razia says, adding, “This got very serious. During that time I was attending a training in Peshawar, I started getting calls from people asking if I was ok, because a post went viral about how I have died in an accident. I was really shocked, and my family went through hell reading that news”.

She has been labelled ‘foreign funded’, and was accused of being paid by some NGO so she could convince the women of Wazrisitan to rebel against their customs and beliefs, to force them to be bey-parda, and to exhibit them in the media.

Most of Razia’s work happens on the internet. To gain better access to the internet and work opportunities, she had to relocate to Dera Ismael Khan, another NMD. For Razia, who works primarily with multimedia content, acquiring a good bandwidth and connection is important.

Thus, despite a considerable financial cost, she continues to subscribe to multiple sources of internet. The Internet has helped her bring the voices of disconnected people of former FATA to the outside world.

# CASE STUDY 2

Uneven Experiences: The Digital Divide  
for Women in Communities of  
the Capital District





## CASE STUDY 2

### Uneven Experiences: The Digital Divide for Women in Marginalised Communities of the Federal Capital

Written by [Zoya Rehman](#)

Data collection by [Nasreen](#)

*Trigger Warning: sexual violence, harassment, domestic abuse.*



#### Introduction

The internet, a primary digital infrastructure for knowledge, exacerbates existing inequities experienced by marginalized communities across the world,<sup>66</sup> even as and when it promises to be emancipatory and democratic. Empirical studies clearly show that women in the developing world have significantly lower technology participation rates than men. This is a result of entrenched socio-cultural attitudes regarding the role of women in society. However, as studies are beginning to show, when those women are able to engage

66. Bonfadelli, H. (2002). The Internet and Knowledge Gaps. *European Journal Of Communication*, 17(1), 65-84. doi: 10.1177/0267323102017001607. Meaningful Connectivity — unlocking the full power of internet access. (2020). Retrieved 14 January 2021, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249720563\\_The\\_Internet\\_and\\_Knowledge\\_Gaps](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249720563_The_Internet_and_Knowledge_Gaps)

with Internet technology, a wide range of personal, family and community benefits become possible.<sup>67</sup>

In the broader discourse of ICTs for development and especially access, women have historically been perceived as passive recipients of information, rather than active information agents, users and communicators. Therefore, in this case study, I centre a feminist standpoint that privileges women as active agents of their own development. This study aims to draw upon personal anecdotes, and then link them to academic research and feminist theory around the themes of the gender digital divide and gender-based violence. It was drafted around the time when cases of the coronavirus were increasing steadily across the country and reports of gender-based violence, both online and off, were increasing side by side. Moreover, the study should be placed within research and knowledge production in the field of gender and digital technology, outlined in the literature review, particularly in Pakistan.

## Engaged Communities and interlocutors

This study focuses on the women of Christian settlements in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. It relies primarily on interview data. Three interviews were conducted for the purpose of the study with women of different age groups: with Nasreen, Muneeza\* and Bilquees\*. Two of the three names have been anonymized; however, Nasreen's first name is being used, because she also worked as a data collector for this research and it is important to acknowledge her labor. She approached 60 women from Christian settlements in Rawalpindi and Islamabad to fill out the surveys. 50% of the survey respondents concerning this case study were Christian women, the other 50% being Muslim. She collected the data before her interview was conducted; therefore, her experiences of getting the survey filled out by the women in the communities she went to also inform this study.

Nasreen is a middle aged woman, Muneeza is a young adult, and Bilquees is an elderly woman. All three interviewees are Christians.

The method chosen for this part of the research is a mini-ethnographic case study; the study is supplemented by the survey data discussed above.

## Insights and Limitations in Data Collection

All interviews were conducted in Urdu. Due to the fact that knowledge around digital rights is primarily available and consumed in English, it was difficult for me to translate some of the digital rights concepts in Urdu while speaking to the interlocutors. Similarly, because we could not explain the survey to the respondents on phone, Nasreen reached out in person. Still, some of the responses ended up being skewed due to confusion and a general lack of digital literacy.

Another major limitation of this study though is the fact that it was conducted in an urban setting, and therefore is not cognizant of the extent of the digital divide in rural contexts across Pakistan. The field of gender and digital technology is relatively nascent in the global South. The research team tried to make a concerted effort to connect with and include a few people outside of the usual digital rights community. At the same time we are aware that we have omitted certain familiar voices from the interviews (though they are present in the literature review) and this was done so as to identify emerging areas, gaps and challenges in this field.

67. GSMA, Alliance for Affordable Internet, World Wide Web Foundation, Association for Progressive Communications. (2018). GSMA - A toolkit for researching women's internet access and use [Ebook]. Retrieved from [https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GSMA-Women-and-Internet-Research-Toolkit\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GSMA-Women-and-Internet-Research-Toolkit_WEB.pdf)

## Three Women Under Lockdown

### A Young Adult Under Lockdown: The Story of Muneeza\*

Muneeza is 19 and works at a call center, while simultaneously pursuing higher secondary education privately at a distance learning institute called Allama Iqbal Open University. She uses her office laptop at home, and has a mobile phone as well. She has been using technology since her early teens, and has wifi at home.

Muneeza uses WhatsApp the most, then TikTok; she sometimes uses Instagram as well. She says she does not have a Facebook account, and tried using BigoLive once but did not understand its relevance, plus no one she knows uses the app.

For Muneeza, the internet is very important.

“I do not use the internet a lot. I usually do not have the time because of office work; we are not allowed to use our phones in the call centre anyway. My knowledge of technology helps me with my work at the call centre.” As for her education, Muneeza mentions that she submits handwritten assignments, but uses the internet to submit admission forms (“I fill them out on my phone...”) and look up information online in case she does not understand something related to her education: “I study privately at home, and do not have a teacher around to explain things to me because of studying remotely; that is why.”

All of Muneeza’s three older siblings have received higher education; she has one younger brother who works at the same call centre as her. Since Muneeza’s parents are not educated, they can only use WhatsApp. “They are from an older generation and do not understand technology like we do. They can only use WhatsApp to talk to family members,” she says.

Even though her parents are not well versed in technological matters, they believe in the “to each their own” aphorism and do not discriminate on the basis of gender when it comes to the usage of technology. Other forms of obstructions do exist, though. Muneeza says that the pandemic has affected her studies abruptly and negatively, as she now has to sit and study from home. She also helps her mother with household chores, and balances housework with her education and job. “I am the only one in the house, so I have to do the housework,” Muneeza states. I am assuming that she means the only other woman besides her mother here; she does not bring up her young brother or father at all while speaking of responsibilities at home.

I asked Muneeza if women experienced any difficulties online, to which she said yes. “They have to. Parents keep asking about what their children are upto nowadays. So do relatives: for instance, they keep asking why we are continuously online on WhatsApp.” Besides that, Muneeza mentions that women continue getting calls and text messages from unknown numbers. “Of course numbers can be blocked or reported but we still face these things. Then, whenever we set foot outside our house, people look at us and ask why we are using our phones and so on.”

Muneeza and I discuss her experience of working in a call centre at length, since I have also worked in a call center in the past and am familiar with the kinds of issues women experience over there. Call centres tend to be male-dominated and rife with sexism.<sup>68</sup> “We have to keep ourselves really safe throughout the time that we are working there,” Muneeza states. “Especially while we are sitting and working with them (the

68. Russell, B. (2010). Reena Patel, Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry. *Canadian Journal Of Sociology*, 35(3), 523-525. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs9231>

men).” She mentions how one has to be wary of even sharing their personal number with the manager: “Otherwise it would spread everywhere. But therein lies the problem; we have to use our mobile phones to stay in touch and keep abreast of work updates. We have work groups. That is also the reason why so many problems arise, and are now increasing. We are teased by boys who keep sending us messages. They send ‘dhamkiyaan’ (threats). These instances have increased if you ask me.”

Does the management do something about this, I asked her, to which she replied, “They should do something, but they will instead always say that the woman is wrong.” As we go further into the conversation, I mention Pakistan’s harassment laws, particularly the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010.

How important is the internet to Muneeza? “Very important, especially at this time. We cannot go on without it, or contact anyone as such (unless we make phone calls, which are expensive and unfeasible)”. Muneeza also elaborates that women’s responsibilities have increased since the advent of the pandemic, their access to, and need for, the internet has also increased. She personally has not seen restrictions on women in regards to the internet increase in 2020, nor has she seen a rise in gender-based violence in her own environment.

Muneeza says she talks to friends and distant family members more often now. It was important for her and her family members to maintain contact, especially while being stuck at home during the start of the lockdown, which explains why the usage of mobile phones has not only increased in her own household but also across Pakistan. She repeats that she has experienced no restrictions “thus far”. However, when asked if she feels safe using social media, she flatly says “not at all.”

WhatsApp makes her feel unsafe the most: “I constantly feel that my WhatsApp is being hacked.” Muneeza remarks that she does not use Facebook at all, and never liked the platform in the first place. “I am sure that the Facebook administrators have introduced new privacy mechanisms, but it never felt safe to me personally. Everybody I know uses Facebook, but I never had it.” However, Muneeza does have an Instagram account, albeit an inactive one: “I only use it to see dresses and fashion updates. I do not post anything though.”

Muneeza declares that her favorite social media platform is TikTok. She has used it a lot more in 2020. However, when asked to speak about the temporary ban on TikTok courtesy the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority,<sup>69</sup> Muneeza comments that “mahol kharab ho raha hai” (our society is fast losing its morals). “I can see why the app would be spreading indecency and immorality, especially among children. People are becoming more antagonistic towards each other. That is probably why the app was banned.”

Does Muneeza feel similarly about TikTok? “I think it is great fun, and great for time pass. I guess the app was banned because boys nowadays are making TikToks without worrying about their safety. They climb walls and fall down from them deliberately merely for clicks; they will do anything for social clout, it seems!” She also says that she is hesitant about the trend of finding partners to make TikToks. “Having a partner to make a TikTok or join in as a supporting actor is a key feature of the app, but that also becomes an issue, as people start gossiping about you, especially if you are making TikToks with men and boys.” When I ask her if she has seen any ‘immoral’ TikToks, Muneeza pauses to think and then says, “Not as such.” We go on to discuss the ban some more, and how TikTok has also helped many people, including women, become stars and celebrities overnight in a country where the media industry is known for its nepotism and

69. Hussain, J. (2020). PTA bans TikTok over complaints against 'immoral content'. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1584123>.

intransparency. Muneeza adds that she has a lot of fun making TikToks with her older female relatives. “I enjoy TikTok a lot, but I put my profile on private if I ever feel unsafe. However, I have never really felt supremely unsafe on the app to be honest.”

Have Muneeza’s feelings regarding safety in online spaces changed in 2020? “Not really,” she says. “My feelings remain the same.” However, Muneeza says that the internet can be made safer if laws were enforced properly. “There should be privacy laws to regulate harmful behaviors on social media. I also think that there needs to be more awareness regarding harassment laws for women like me.” Parents and technology experts also have a role to play according to her. “We all need to understand how to put privacy on apps, and the app makers obviously have a responsibility to fulfil here. However, I do not think hacking accounts is as easy as we all make it out to be,” Muneeza laughs. “We need a big, big hacker for that!”

Muneeza thinks that educated people need the internet now more than ever; they cannot survive without it. “It is important for our jobs; it is our means of income. Technology is a good thing! It helps people move ahead in life. It is also fun and enjoyable to use. I have so much fun on it.” Having said that, Muneeza reiterates that technology can definitely be improved for women.

Muneeza also states that perhaps technology could be used better if women were to use it together in women friendly offices and spaces. “We can do anything with fellow women around. We can always share things safely and discuss whatever we want with each other without hesitation. This is why I love being a part of women only WhatsApp groups!”

### **The Importance of Agency: How Technology Aids Nasreen in Her Daily Life**

Nasreen is a domestic worker in her thirties who I have known for many years. She is the mother of three children, two daughters and a son. She has been married for around 17 years, and is based in a neighborhood in the outskirts of Islamabad. Nasreen has wifi at home, and her own mobile phone. Her husband also owns a mobile phone. The children use a laptop and desktop computer (“both were donations”) at home.

Nasreen, the sole breadwinner of her family after her husbands’ layoff due to COVID-19, worked as one of the data collectors for the research team and went to areas in the G-9 sector of Islamabad, as well as Christian colonies in the Saddar area of Rawalpindi, to speak to women and girls and collect their survey responses. She collected 60 survey responses in total and spoke to many women in their homes as well as churches in Rawalpindi.

### **Why, then, does Nasreen use technology?**

“It is very important for me because of my ‘duty’ (that is work). I have to use WhatsApp and stay online. I also get calls from my children’s schools. We have a device at home because we use WhatsApp for calls throughout the day.” Apart from using WhatsApp, Nasreen watches cooking and DIY videos on Youtube. Like Muneeza, Nasreen also enjoys using TikTok, and was upset that she could not watch TikTok content for a while because of the aforementioned ban.

Nasreen notes that the lockdown has increased the need for the internet, and with that the cost of the internet has become an issue.

“Our children had to study from home, which is why my husband and I restricted our internet usage. We would time ourselves while speaking to our relatives, and avoided initiating video calls altogether.” Nasreen’s children use the internet a lot more now, but the entire family has had to curtail their recreational activities online, including the children. “They have to concentrate on their studies.” Nasreen says that her own usage of the internet has decreased as a result.

Moreover, since Nasreen's husband was laid off in March 2020, right after the lockdown was imposed in Islamabad, Nasreen is now the sole breadwinner of the house, and juggles this responsibility with housework. She agrees that women's responsibilities have increased significantly since the lockdown, as she has witnessed many men in her community being fired or laid off from their jobs. She also spoke about her experiences of working with the Corona Solidarity Campaign, and remarked that all the women she met were single handedly making ends meet within their families. "Women are being brave right now and still trying to run their houses like nothing has happened." Nasreen also mentioned some of the other domestic workers in her community who were abruptly laid off and are now dealing with a lot of domestic responsibilities. "They do all the work; they have no respite," she says. "We are just doing guzaara: making do." Nasreen says that she is stretched too thin and the situation seems to be worsening instead of getting better.

Nasreen notes that women who use technology more proactively in their line of work, "such as teachers and educated office goers", have started using it more in 2020, whereas women like Nasreen, "who do domestic work and are also homemakers", use it less. Nasreen also notes that a lot of women who filled out the survey in Rawalpindi stopped using the internet completely in 2020 due to restrictions imposed by their families. "Firstly, their wifi got disconnected simply because the internet became even more of a luxury this year. Secondly, many of these women were already being closely monitored by their family members."

When asked if gender-based violence had increased in 2020, Nasreen says "Actually, I think it has increased a lot. I personally heard of a lot of cases of violence. I would say this kind of violence takes place in 80% of the households where both men and women are stuck with each other day and night. It is worse if inlaws are involved and there is a joint family system in place." Nasreen notes that unemployed men have nothing better to do than think about their "frustrations" now. "If you are going to be home and stay idle throughout the day, your mind would only lead you towards evil and compel you to do the wrong thing. Women at least have something to do at home: they have kids to take care of, errands to run, household chores to cater to." A lot of the women Nasreen spoke to while volunteering for the Corona Solidarity Campaign discussed their experiences of domestic violence with her.

No restrictions are imposed on Nasreen with regards to her usage of technology. "I did not have a phone when I started working a couple of years ago. My husband taught me how to use it. Now he laughs and says, Nasreen, you know how to use it even more than I do! He feels happy and proud of me. Some people do not like this though because they do not want women and girls to use technology; I realized this especially while working for the Corona Solidarity Campaign, and also while conducting this survey." Nasreen notes that using technology is key to a person's success.

When asked whether technology is safe, Nasreen remarked, "That one has to ensure themselves. You have to keep yourself safe; it's your responsibility. Use the internet the right way. For instance, I use Youtube to watch tutorials, and I learn so much about the world that way. But some people just want to think negatively." She mentioned that she also gets harassed and receives WhatsApp calls from unknown numbers: "But I block them. Simple. And my husband never picks up my phone. He trusts me; he says it happens; it's not a big deal." She adds that technology makes things simpler and better; the good outweighs the bad.

"Besides, our society is disintegrating because of men, not women!" Nasreen discussed the surveillance women experience in their homes at length, and remarked, "If people can follow women and girls everywhere and constantly keep an eye on them, why can't they do the same when it comes to men and boys? Maybe keep an eye on your sons? Men can mess about and do whatever they want, and ruin the lives of many young girls, and yet we keep supporting them while locking our girls up. Then we say our society isn't safe for women! Whose fault is it?" Nasreen asks, while pointing towards herself.

She also asserts, rather angrily, that she supports the death penalty because of this very reason. "At least someone will be scared; I see no other way to instill fear among men!"

I changed the subject to something lighter: TikTok. Nasreen told me about the TikToks she makes with her husbands and kids on their family account. She also had her own theory regarding the recent ban on TikTok: “Some boys and girls are very stubborn and keep making TikToks without thinking about the quality of their content. Recently, some TikTokers from Rawalpindi challenged the ones from Lahore and vice versa. These are the bad eggs: they promote vigilantism and thuggery. You know, the kind of men who swear openly! That’s why all the decent TikTokers are leaving, because the bad ones are taking over. There is so much animosity; they are encouraging murders. Even a girl committed suicide a while ago.<sup>70</sup> A man killed his wife over using TikTok as well. If this is how things will be, then perhaps the ban is a good thing!” Nasreen states this as the reason why she has stopped putting up her own TikToks online. “Again, we never think of the women and children.”

Nasreen goes on to discuss some other pet peeves she has regarding her own usage of TikTok. “They (boys) make funny videos of us. For instance, when a girl makes a TikTok, boys will do a ‘duet’ with them. And then they don’t remove the girls’ videos. Some boys started doing duets with me whenever I would put something up, and then they would share those duets on their own account. That’s why I shut down my entire ‘system’: now nobody can do a duet with me, or message me.” Nasreen says that she has learnt about these features slowly, but eventually she taught herself how to stay safe on TikTok.

“I get so many strange messages on TikTok. Some boys message me and ask me to become their fiancée. Others invite me to a park to make TikToks with them. I try to keep myself safe, but I feel that the app could be much safer.”

When asked why she loves TikTok so much, Nasreen replied, “Obviously because of the funny content and entertainment value.” We also discussed how TikTok provides a means of income to so many women. Nasreen mentioned the rise of TikTok celebrity Kanwal Aftab<sup>71</sup> (“have you noticed how much she looks like you by the way,” she says to me) and Faisalabad-based model Jannat Mirza.<sup>72</sup> “Even dadis and nanis (paternal and maternal grandmothers) are getting famous: like that famous nani! We call the guy who makes those videos Nadeem nani wala<sup>73</sup> (Nadeem, the one with the nani).” Nasreen also talks about the ways in which TikTok has brought her closer to her family members. “I make videos with my nephews and nieces, as well as some distant female cousins all the time. It is such a fun app, but only when used right.”

Of course people will talk, Nasreen says. “People say nasty things about me: why isn’t she wearing a dupatta (shawl)? Why is she so dressed up? Why is she wearing pants? Why did she open her hair? Who does she think she is?” No matter, she says. It is just noise.

“I have blocked them all!”

### **Complete Disconnect: How Bilqees\* Lives Without Feeling the Need to Use Technology**

Bilqees does not own a phone, nor does she use mobile phones in general. “I do not like it,” she says. “I do not use the internet, but I use WhatsApp sometimes.” Her children, however, use the internet. Bilqees has 5 children: 2 daughters and 3 sons. “They need to use the internet often for their studies and work and

70. Correspondent, N. (2020). Girl dies while making TikTok video. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1573138>.

71. Hamid, G. (2020). *Kanwal Aftab becomes second Pakistani TikTok star to hit 10M followers*. BOL News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.bolnews.com/latest/2020/11/kanwal-afab-becomes-second-pakistani-tiktok-star-to-hit-10m-followers/>.

72. Desk, W. (2020). *Jannat Mirza hits 12mn followers on TikTok*. Daily Pakistan. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/21-Dec-2020/jannat-mirza-hits-12mn-followers-on-tiktok>.

73. Greenberg, P. (2020). *Nadeem Mubarak - One of the finest TikTokers of Pakistan*. Time Bulletin. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.timebulletin.com/nadeem-mubarak-one-of-the-finest-tiktokers-of-pakistan/>.

‘duty,’” she mentions. There is a WiFi device at her house. “We have the internet because it is a necessity, and a big necessity at that.” Bilquees elaborates on this by saying that one has to adapt according to their environment: proceed “mahol ke mutaabik.... Jis tarha mahol ja raha hai.” She thinks this over and then adds that WhatsApp helps her family make calls for free and provides them access to their loved ones who live far away. Moreover, she reiterates that her children need the internet. “We need the internet in our society, as long as it is used well. My children have needed the internet more than ever during the pandemic.”

When asked about whether women’s responsibilities have increased during the coronavirus lockdown, Bilquees said yes before I finished my question. “There is so much anxiety, and so much to cope with at home. Many men are without jobs at the moment. Therefore, women have had to take on additional work in the domestic sphere.” When asked about her own responsibilities, she remarks, “my responsibilities at home have increased ten folds.”

When asked if there had been an increase in gender-based violence since the lockdown, Bilquees shook her head and said, “This does not happen in my area. I live in a good neighborhood, so I have not heard of such instances personally. However, I have seen news reports and I am aware of the increase in gender-based violence generally. It happens a lot; so much so in our country.” She shakes her head and does not say more for a bit.

After a brief pause, she mentions that she has seen both good times and bad times. “Such is our life.” I am assuming that by this she means the lives of women. Bilquees says that the situation is not so black and white, and that she has lived through everything, including happy occasions. “We survive; guzaara ho jata hai.” The interview has to be concluded earlier than usual because Bilquees was generally reticent and I felt that pushing her for more answers at this point would have been unethical and unnecessary.

## Analysis

*“There is an unequivocal evidence that COVID-19 is not just a global public health emergency but is also leading the world to a major global, economic downturn, with potentially strong adverse impacts on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups.”<sup>74</sup>*

It is evident that the pandemic has deepened economic and social stress, and exacerbated existing problems. The women I spoke to were hesitant about talking about their own problems in detail, and more keen on providing their opinions regarding the questions I asked them. They referred to problems experienced by other women more than recounting their own experiences. I did not push for further details in this case.

The following themes emerged from the interview discussions:

### *I. Nuances in Access to the Internet*

A lot of assumptions are made in most literature on access, whereby women are seen as subjects without any agency in regards to their lack of access to technology. The experiences shared during the interviews, as discussed above, show that a lot of times, women set out the parameters of their access to the internet on their own terms. For instance, Bilquees claims that she has made a conscious choice not to use technology. Muneeza states that she does not like Facebook and therefore avoids it. Nasreen has stated that

74. Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan. (2020). *Gendered Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan*. UN Women. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/04/pk-gendered-impact-and-implications-of-covid.pdf?la=en&vs=2138>



she has made TikToks primarily for herself, and blocks men who send her unsolicited messages. She makes videos of herself and keeps them in her smartphone folder to watch later with her family. “I have not put any TikToks up since the past 3-4 months, even though I used to get a lot of likes,” she admits.

There is a common assumption that marginalized women cannot protect themselves online, but these examples show that the interlocutors have learnt how to keep themselves safe on the internet themselves, without any outside intervention whatsoever. By sharing their experiences, the interlocutors are debunking the tired trope of being marginalized women who are in need of saving.<sup>75</sup> This trope is also perpetuated because many women who do not have access to technology tend to have lower literacy and education levels. Also, women’s perception and usage of technology appears to be a generational issue: the challenges they experience in developing their digital prowess differ not only between locations but also among different age groups and generations. Bilqees has spent her entire life without using technology; therefore, she feels that she does not need to use it so regularly. Nasreen is a millennial who embraced the usage of technology later on in life; she owns a smartphone but does not use a computer.<sup>76</sup> Muneeza is compelled to use technology not only for her job and studies, but also for staying connected with her friends and family. These experiences complicate our analysis on the gender digital divide and provide the opportunity to further study the experiences of women at local levels.

## *II. Gender-Based Violence, its Digital Manifestation and State Support*

It is common knowledge that a majority of women do not end up reporting domestic violence. Therefore, it is always difficult to assess the level and impact domestic abuse has on the lives of women and girls. Often, the fear of reprisal or threats by the offender, or concerns related to family honour and social stigmas prevent women from reporting on domestic violence. Hence, there is often insufficient evidence to prosecute an offence in cases of gender-based violence.

According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-2018, 28% of women aged between 15-49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and 6% have experienced sexual violence. 34% of ever-married women have experienced spousal physical, sexual, or emotional violence.<sup>77</sup> 5% of the married women have experienced spousal sexual violence. A report by Digital Rights Foundation and Chayn illustrates that there is an urgent need for more resources to address the problem of gender-based violence in Pakistan, especially in the face of diminishing access to civil society spaces and welfare programs, which have been cut as a result of state-led austerity measures.<sup>78</sup>

One factor that must be noted is that all three women, interviewed for this study, were cognizant of the rise in gender-based violence in Pakistan. All three women referred to the heinous motorway rape incident<sup>79</sup> that occurred in September 2020.<sup>80</sup> All three women said that such incidents of violence also took place in certain “colonies” or settlements, or online, to imply that they have not seen such instances first-hand. Nasreen was the only interviewee who talked more openly about seeing gender-based violence on the rise in her surroundings. She remarked that living with one’s extended family exacerbated intimate partner abuse

75. Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>

76. Vogels, E. (2019). *Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>.

77. Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan. (2020). *Gendered Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan*. UN Women. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/04/pk-gendered-impact-and-implications-of-covid.pdf?la=en&vs=2138>

78. Digital Rights Foundation and Chayn. (2020). *Availability and responsiveness of gender-based violence helplines in Pakistan* [Ebook]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chayn-x-DRF\\_-Availability-and-responsiveness-of-gender-based-violence-support-helplines-in-Pakistan.pdf](https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chayn-x-DRF_-Availability-and-responsiveness-of-gender-based-violence-support-helplines-in-Pakistan.pdf).

79. Chaudhry, A. (2020). Lahore motorway gang-rape causes outrage. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1579054>.

80. All three interviews were conducted in October 2020

and violence.<sup>81</sup>

With regards to the rise in harassment, both online and off, Nasreen stated, perhaps rightly so, that men and boys were “bored”: “they browse Facebook out of boredom, stalk girls out of boredom, make their lives a living hell out of sheer boredom.” She mentioned that some of the survey respondents who were either in their late teens or early twenties had deactivated their Facebook accounts because men were downloading their pictures and putting them up on their own profiles. One of the survey respondents burst into tears in front of her and shared that a man put her picture up on his profile, and somehow got hold of her number and put that up along with the picture. He captioned the picture by stating that the girl was “corrupt” and “indecent” and that men should call on her number if they “wanted” her.

“I felt really bad after hearing such stories. These are young, bright girls who come to the church regularly and tutor kids over there. I wish they knew that these kinds of actions can be reported,” Nasreen said, after I asked her if the girl had reported this incident to the cybercrime wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) or any NGO helpline. “This particular girl was so sweet, and such a good teacher. I noticed that she was so good with the children she was tutoring that day. It always boils my blood to hear such stories,” Nasreen lamented.

Another survey respondent told Nasreen that her elder brother beat her up when he found out that she was being harassed on Facebook, and took her phone away right after. He said that she was an indecent woman because she went to school and used technology. She could not use WhatsApp or Facebook anymore to stay in touch with her friends. Nasreen reported that a lot of girls shared similar stories of harassment and familial abuse and were generally very upset. Some even wanted to report the online harassment they experienced to the FIA but their families did not let them because of ‘badnami’ (the fear of infamy and shame). She mentioned that such incidents took place on either Facebook or WhatsApp.

Nasreen was the most vocal in terms of pointing out that women do not get the support they need in our society. “Look at the motorway rape survivor. People are criticizing her instead of the rapists. The statement of that CCPO<sup>82</sup> is abhorrent. This is why parents are scared of educating their daughters.” Nasreen is clearly an exception in that her views on women are a lot more progressive than that of other Pakistani women in her community, and she keeps reiterating that there is a need for a mindset change in Pakistani society.

### *III. Women’s Mobility and Inclusion in Public Spaces*

A clear distinction can be made between the experience of Bilqees, and that of Nasreen and Muneeza. Bilqees does not feel the need to use technology as much as Nasreen and Muneeza do because she mostly stays at home. However, both Nasreen and Muneeza believe that technology is inextricably connected to their lives in the public sphere, since they are both working women. Muneeza is also a distance learner, and has been studying from home since the imposition of the lockdown.

Bilqees’s role in her own family is also indicative of the gendered division of work that persists in society, and it must be noted that even private spheres are heavily surveilled. There is a pronounced split between public and private spaces that has been theorized extensively by feminist scholars.<sup>83</sup> Nasreen also points

81. Ali, P. A., O’Cathain, A., & Croot, E. (2018). Influences of Extended Family on Intimate Partner Violence: Perceptions of Pakistanis in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518785378>

82. News, B. (2020). *Pakistan outcry over police victim-blaming of gang-raped mother*. BBC News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54186609>.

83. Gavison, R. (1992). Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction. *Stanford Law Review*, 45(1), 1-45. doi:10.2307/1228984

this out while explaining women are constantly being “watched” and “followed” by their own families. “If we can ‘watch’ women all the time, why not men? Why do we lock women up instead? Our society isn’t safe because of men’s actions, and yet women are the ones who are forbidden to leave their homes.”

Nasreen’s words echo in my head, especially when she points out how women have to think a thousand times before leaving their homes: we practice self-surveillance all the time. Women’s notions of safety in Pakistan have been shaped significantly by the arbitrary private/public dichotomy.<sup>84</sup>

“The other day, I entered my neighborhood and right then and there I saw two boys in ‘pent shirt’ hovering around the resident girls’ college. Tell me, do they have nothing better to do than put young women under distress? We exit a private space, we get harassed. Young girls, especially, are so impressionable and fragile. They end up succumbing to societal pressures and get married, and then their lives are ruined,” Nasreen candidly details her own perception of the kinds of pressures women experience in public spaces.

“There is a man lurking in every corner the minute we leave our homes. They are holding their mobile phones and taking pictures of us. Our society has no control over its men.”

#### *IV. ‘Digital Purdah’ and Surveillance*

Surveillance in private spaces is very much a feminist issue.<sup>85</sup> Nasreen talks at length about the surveillance she experienced when she was living with her extended family. “My younger brother-in-law and my father-in-law made my life a living hell. They chastised my husband for allowing me to work and being too permissive in general. They criticized him when I bought my own mobile phone. Now she will speak to men, they said.” Nasreen expressed relief while mentioning that it was her husband’s idea to move out of her in-laws’ homes, as he felt that it would have a bad impact on their children. “They would criticize me for going out, for wearing clothes of my choice, for even brushing my hair. Their suspicious nature drove me insane. I could not go out or speak to anyone.”

Nasreen shared harrowing stories about how her father-in-law would lock her up inside her room with her children when she was not working the minute her husband would leave the house for work. “Once, when our lightbulb burnt out and my room went dark, they concocted this story that there was a man inside my room to convince my husband that I was a bad woman who deserved a good beating.” Nasreen explains that most of these men have very dysfunctional and abusive relationships with their wives, which is why they cannot bear to see men who actually treat their wives well.

There is a common misconception that once women venture outside the ‘chaadar aur chaar dewari’ (the veil and four walls of their home), they become ‘unsafe’ as they are susceptible to the ‘unknown’ and suspicious aspects of society. Women are therefore constantly subjected to familial control and societal moral policing, as well as state surveillance and paternalism. Controlling women becomes synonymous with protecting one’s ‘honor’ and propriety, so surveillance practices become dependent upon both their hypervisibility and invisibility.<sup>86</sup> As explained by Schoemaker, these deeply ingrained gender divisions are also negotiated in online spaces, which are rife with accepted forms of identity (in this case, male).<sup>87</sup> Therefore, women are essentially “asking for it” if they enter the public arena, be it online or off. This explains why women like

84. Rehman, Z. (2020). *Gendered Surveillance and Feminist Resistance in Pakistan*. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://medium.com/@zooya\\_rehman/gendered-surveillance-and-feminist-resistance-in-pakistan-a27aced8f7c0](https://medium.com/@zooya_rehman/gendered-surveillance-and-feminist-resistance-in-pakistan-a27aced8f7c0).

85. Khan, S. (2016). *Surveillance as a Feminist Issue*. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://medium.com/privacy-international/surveillance-as-a-feminist-issue-12b5b45e1312>.

86. Khan, S. (2016). *Surveillance as a Feminist Issue*. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://medium.com/privacy-international/surveillance-as-a-feminist-issue-12b5b45e1312>.

87. Schoemaker, E. (2016). *Digital Faith: Social Media and the Enactment of Religious Identity in Pakistan* [Ebook]. London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker\\_digital\\_faith%20.pdf](http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker_digital_faith%20.pdf).

Muneeza practice ‘digital purdah’<sup>88</sup> while avoiding ‘unsafe’ male-dominated platforms like Facebook.

#### V. Class and Technology

In my view, there is a common misconception among upper class progressives that technology is not a regular feature in the lives of working class women. Nasreen is a working class woman, and Muneeza is from a lower middle class family; technology has become an intrinsic part of their lives. While it must be acknowledged that their experiences could be exceptional because they are based in an urban context, and that the gender digital divide is possibly more pronounced in Pakistan’s rural districts,<sup>89</sup> we can see that women’s phone ownership is on the rise in middle and low income countries, even if they may be 14% more unlikely to use mobile phones than men.<sup>90</sup> The quantitative findings of this case study also show a majority of respondents saying that they own their own mobile phones. However, women from working class and rural backgrounds are not seen as key players on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I contend that this is a result of conservative social norms and the ‘digital purdah’ imposed upon women rather than class impoverishment. Moreover, the fear of security and harassment also stops women from enjoying the benefits of technology as fully as possible. Moreover, all the interlocutors I spoke to understand the inherent value and benefits of technology.

Both Nasreen and Muneeza saw technology as a life-altering and life-affirming tool. “My life would be so difficult without technology,” Muneeza states. “It is a great thing; it is beneficial. I study and work efficiently because of technology. It opens up so many opportunities for women like me. And best of all, it is fun! We can watch films, listen to songs, seek knowledge, make TikToks, and whatnot,” Muneeza says to me.

The intersection of class and gender is an important factor to consider, as women usually have limited purchasing and decision-making power.<sup>91</sup> Both Nasreen and Muneeza clearly have greater financial autonomy. The survey results also reveal that female breadwinners are more likely to use technology and make independent decisions regarding their usage of the internet. Bilqees, on the other hand, lead a more isolated and domesticated life, and therefore may not be able to make the decision to use a mobile phone as freely as the other two interlocutors.

The link between technology and precarity most certainly cannot be ignored. According to Durr-e-Nayab, people who fall below the middle class have “a sense of stability attached” to them that makes them “less susceptible to sudden inflationary shocks than an income-based measure.”<sup>92</sup> Both Nasreen and Bilqees talked about the difficulties their families experienced because of their husbands being laid off. Nasreen and her family were nearly kicked out of their portion by their landlord because she and her husband could not pay their rent on time. Nasreen also struggled to pay her children’s school fees alone. The pandemic has clearly destroyed the livelihoods of many working class Pakistanis. In a country like Pakistan where the political economy is deeply inegalitarian,<sup>93</sup> all forms of inequality have worsened significantly.

88. Schoemaker, E. (2016). *Digital Faith: Social Media and the Enactment of Religious Identity in Pakistan* [Ebook]. London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker\\_digital\\_faith%20.pdf](http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker_digital_faith%20.pdf).

89. Siegmann, K. (2009). The Gender Digital Divide in Rural Pakistan: How Wide is it and How to Bridge it?. *Economic and Political Weekly - ECON POLIT WKLY*.

90. Santosham, S., & Lindsey, D. (2015). *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Connected-Women-Gender-Gap.pdf>.

91. Croxson, H., & Rowntree, O. (2017). *Triggering mobile internet use among men and women in South Asia* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GSMA-Triggering-Mobile-Internet-Use\\_Web.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GSMA-Triggering-Mobile-Internet-Use_Web.pdf).

92. Nayab, D. (2011). *Estimating the Middle Class in Pakistan* [Ebook]. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://www.pide.org.pk/pdf/Working%20Paper/Middle\\_Class\\_Nayab.pdf](https://www.pide.org.pk/pdf/Working%20Paper/Middle_Class_Nayab.pdf).

93. Sial, F. (2020). COVID in Pakistan, the Role of Middle-Classes and the Unprecedented Demand for a New Social Contract. *Developing Economics*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://developingeconomics.org/2020/06/26/covid-in-pakistan-the-role-of-middle-classes-and-the-unprecedented-demand-for-a-new-social-contract/>.

#### IV. Technology and Leisure

I believe that the access debate is missing a key component: “women’s leisure use of ICTs”.<sup>94</sup> This was a key finding as both Nasreen and Muneeza discussed how a lot of their time online, particularly during the ongoing pandemic, is spent on leisurely activities, particularly on TikTok. As illustrated by Sachini Perera and Minoli Wijetunga, TikTok has become a key platform for performance, play and creative labor for women.<sup>95</sup> TikTok is particularly critical for “grooming Gen Z’s political expression, personal entertainment, and peer interactions.”<sup>96</sup>

TikTok has been making headlines in Pakistan for some time now. It was reported to be the most downloaded social media app in the country just a while ago.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, there have been calls for a ban on the app<sup>98</sup> for spreading ‘immoral’ and indecent content, especially among children, in an Islamic society, as well as encouraging political satire regarding the Pakistani government. PTA’s temporary ban on TikTok is indicative of the government’s desire to regulate the internet more strictly, as can be seen by the kinds of laws and policies that have been introduced in Pakistan in 2020.<sup>99</sup> Tooba Syed posits that social media apps like TikTok and Bigo have come under scrutiny lately “because they do not fit into the model of nation-state and the predefined roles of men and women in it. In any nation-state the ideal woman citizen is a middle class woman whose duty is to produce brave loyal sons and subservient, obedient daughters and her primary place is the private sphere. On apps such as Bigo live and TikTok, people deviate from these norms.”<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Sanam Maher, “TikTok is user-friendly and because it’s all about videos, there’s little to no language barrier.”<sup>101</sup> TikTok also challenges ideals of respectability politics. It invokes class anxieties among middle and upper class people who think the app is too “awaami” (plebeian).<sup>102</sup> The experiences shared by Muneeza and Nasreen show that TikTok is a space of leisure and catharsis for them. They see it as an exception to other social media platforms: an app where “working class women are key players in the realm of cultural production.”<sup>103</sup>

As expounded by Sidra Kamran, TikTok not only provides working class women in Pakistan a key site for play, laughter and performance, but also acts as “a vehicle for eroding gender and class norms around women’s sexuality and participation in public life” through a subversive “pariah femininity”: a kind of working class femininity and is seen as a threat to gender hegemony.<sup>104</sup> Sidra calls it a “gendered and class

94. Green, E. (2000). Negotiating Time and Space for Every-day Pleasure - An Exploration of Technologies for Home-based Leisure. In *Women, Work and Computerization Charting a Course to the Future* (pp. 225-232). Springer, Boston, MA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from.

95. Perera, S., & Wijetunga, M. (2019). *How TikTok is a platform for performance and play for women in Sri Lanka*. GenderIT.org. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.genderit.org/articles/how-tiktok-platform-performance-and-play-women-sri-lanka>.

96. Savic, M., & Abidin, C. (2020). *The Politics and Optics of the TikTok Ban*. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://points.datasociety.net/the-politics-and-options-of-the-tiktok-ban-d88bdc532d>.

97. Desk, N. (2020). *TikTok becomes most downloaded social media app in Pakistan - The Current*. The Current. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://thecurrent.pk/tiktok-becomes-most-downloaded-social-media-app-in-pakistan/>.

98. Reporter, S. (2020). Court moved for ban on TikTok. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1568996/court-moved-for-ban-on-tiktok>.

99. *Implementation begins of new rules to control unlawful social media content*. Profit. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/10/08/implementation-begins-of-new-rules-to-control-unlawful-social-media-content/>.

100. Syed, T. (2020). *Raw unedited human emotion is what makes Bigo Live so popular*. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/raw-unedited-human-emotion-is-what-makes-bigo-live-so-popular/>.

101. Maher, S. (2019). *What TikTok tells us about Pakistan*. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514445>.

102. Maher, S. (2019). *What TikTok tells us about Pakistan*. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514445>.

103. Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: “TikTok didn’t die, it merely fainted”: *Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45)* [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/).

104. Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: “TikTok didn’t die, it merely fainted”: *Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45)* [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/).

counterpublic” and a space for subversion and “transgression”.<sup>105</sup> She asserts that such transgressions include duets (digital interactions with men), also mentioned by Nasreen, making videos with male partners, as explained by Muneeza, playing with masculinity and femininity, drag, and queerness.<sup>106</sup>

## *VII. The Need for Digital Literacy and Public Awareness*

Just like Muneeza, Nasreen also asserts that there should be a separate platform that is exclusively for women where they can “have fun” and “be safe”. She also explained, in Urdu, the need for more education around the usage of the internet, and public awareness around digital safety. “But they (the government and society at large) don’t do anything. They just want to control women. Nobody controls the boys,” she repeats.

Both Nasreen and Muneeza declare that privileged, educated people have a responsibility to create more public awareness and work with marginalized women to ensure that the internet becomes safer to use for everyone in the long run. Nasreen tells me, “Look, I am not very educated. Had I studied more, I would have definitely used the internet more frequently. Then I would have been able to do something more as a Pakistani citizen and think better for my children. I suffered a lot in the past; I don’t want my daughters to suffer like I did. I don’t want to see more young girls like the ones I saw at the church: educated, intelligent girls who are imprisoned in their homes.” She made it very clear to me that she would always side with women on these issues, and be stricter on men. “Keep them busy, make them work, study, and keep them in check instead of spoiling them. It is really that simple.”

105. Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: “TikTok didn’t die, it merely fainted”: *Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45)* [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/).

106. Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: “TikTok didn’t die, it merely fainted”: *Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45)* [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/).

# CASE STUDY 3

Chadar and Char Deewari meet Classrooms and COVID-19: the Gender Digital Divide and Women's Experiences in Higher Education During the Lockdown



## CASE STUDY 3

### Chadar and Char Deewari meet Classrooms and COVID-19: the Gender Digital Divide and Women's Experiences of Online Education

Written by: **Zoha Batool Khan**



#### Background and Methodology

In the middle of March 2020, when I should have been receiving news of a junior year spring break, I instead received a mass email about my university shutting down. COVID-19 occurred during my third year at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and caused a stir. The first case<sup>107</sup> was reported on 26 February, 2020, in Karachi but the confusing messages broadcast by politicians meant many people were

107. Abid, K., Bari, Y., Younas, M., Javaid, S., & Imran, A. (2020). Progress of COVID-19 Epidemic in Pakistan. *Asia-Pacific Journal Of Public Health*, 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539520927259>



still unsure whether it was ‘just another flu’ that was a concern only for the elderly,<sup>108</sup> the immuno-compromised and other such vulnerable populations, or a new ball game altogether. In my university, many students saw it as a useful opportunity for getting their midterm exams cancelled or postponed so they joined in on the hue and cry about the pandemic generated by those actually concerned about falling sick.

After roughly two weeks of insistence, the campus was emptied. Hostelites - such as myself - were instructed to leave for home within 4 or so days. Those from Karachi - also such as myself - were essentially instructed to walk into the mouth of the beast. It may have been the Higher Education Commission (HEC) that instructed universities to close<sup>109</sup> but the fact that certain universities were afraid of the possible damage to their reputations from having an outbreak on campus cannot be denied.

COVID-19 was still new to Pakistan. Karachi was the obvious epicenter but cases were spreading in Punjab from other entry points as well. My parents warned me to pack up as many of my belongings as I could and bring them with me. They predicted that Lahore would go into lockdown soon too, as Karachi had, and that my semester would transition online. I left suspecting that I would not be returning to university anytime soon, even with the administration assuring us that the directive to return home was only a temporary measure.

My parents were correct. Our spring break was usually one week long; in March 2020, it was extended to 3 weeks so LUMS could have time to deliberate on how to respond to COVID-19. Eventually, we were informed that the rest of our semester would be online learning, that the extended break had allowed instructors to adjust and adapt. The silence during Lahore hosting several Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches, with authorities looking the other way and pretending there were no cases in Lahore even as doctors working in hospitals saw something else, meant that Lahore’s cases surged. Because it had not taken heed of Karachi’s example and responded promptly enough to the news that COVID-19 had entered Pakistan, the city soon went into lockdown as well.

Universities were hastily shutting down left, right and center all over the country. Students were being forcibly evacuated from their dormitories and to return to hometowns with poor or no internet connectivity or power to take online classes. Some tried to find private hostels<sup>110</sup> to stay in, so they could keep attending online classes, but that proved to be expensive,<sup>111</sup> especially when most people had tighter budgets than usual. COVID-19 brought several lay-offs<sup>112</sup> with it; businesses were suffering losses<sup>113</sup> and scaling back their workforce<sup>114</sup> or cutting the workers’ pays to compensate, meaning that many students and/or their parents were out of work or earning less than usual. Even part-time job opportunities were taking a hit because many of those required face-to face contact (such as tutoring), while others were in spaces that were closed down on government orders (such as restaurants).

108. *Imran Khan's blind faith in COVID-19 - Times of India*. The Times of India. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/imran-khans-blind-faith-in-covid-19/articleshow/74990068.cms>.

109. *HEC orders all universities to begin online classes*. The Nation. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://nation.com.pk/30-Mar-2020/hec-orders-all-universities-to-begin-online-classes>.

110. The News, E. (2019). No place for students. *The News*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/543909-no-place-for-students>.

111. Ahmer, A. (2020). Private Hostels. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1549642/private-hostels>.

112. Arab News, P. (2020). *ADB says Pakistanis could lose up to 2.3 mln jobs due to pandemic*. Arab News Pakistan. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1721796/pakistan>.

113. *Pakistan may see job losses of up to 18.5 million due to Covid - Times of India*. The Times of India. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-may-see-job-losses-of-up-to-18-5-million-due-to-covid/articleshow/76357441.cms>.

114. Qureshi, Z. (2020). COVID-19:Pakistan Finance Ministry reveals 3 million jobs have been lost. *Gulf News*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from

<https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/covid-19pakistan-finance-ministry-reveals-3-million-jobs-have-been-lost-1.71886956>.

These are all things I know because I was - and still am - a student. These are not things frequently reported in the media, if at all, but also cannot be allowed to slip through the cracks.

Students and teachers alike were among those most affected by the pandemic because they were expected to continue learning and teaching respectively. Education as a sector was forced into revolutionizing overnight, with everyone under pressure to learn new software to enable e-learning, such as Perusall, Canvas, Blackboard, etc. Of course, the extent of the adaptation was heavily influenced by socioeconomic factors. Working class and lower-middle class students and teachers mostly did not have the necessary infrastructure (such as devices, internet connectivity, power, tech literacy, etc.) to transition as smoothly. Women were often unable to study at home because of the expectations of the gender roles assigned to them. Many professors and students alike had to do domestic work while handling schoolwork at the same time.

While promises of leniency were made in most universities, few actually complied. As such, this case study is not only a documentation of events that happened but also an explanation of current events. Students are still struggling to adapt, with many still stuck on square one. In fact, some are faring worse than before because even the hope that online learning is temporary is gone.

Many students are complaining of burnout because the online course-load is heavier. Others are complaining of physical pains from the eye-strain headaches, nausea, etc., of having to stare at a computer/phone screen for hours every day. Many are now despairing or joking that this has become 'the new normal'. As a result, coping mechanisms have also been created. Memes and groups have sprung up around the hilarities and difficulties of online learning, with a Facebook group called 'Zoom Memes For Self Quaranteens' having a global population of over 800,000.

I am more familiar with students' complaints because of my own positionality. However, during the lockdown, I was living with parents. My mother is a principal-owner of her own school, which allowed me a look into how teachers were faring as well. Albeit a limited look because of the obvious passivity.

A combination of observation, participant observation and of interviewing 3 other female students informs this case study. 2 of the female students are my juniors at LUMS. Both of them are enrolled in the National Outreach Program (NOP),<sup>115</sup> a LUMS effort to identify financially disadvantaged achievers who have secured 80% or above in Matric or the equivalent in their O-Levels. The first person is an NOP scholar from Rawalakot in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in her third year of a BSc (Hons) in Sociology/Anthropology called Waniya\*. The second person is an NOP law student in her third year from Layyah named Zohra\*. I am a final-year sociology/anthropology student on financial aid from Karachi. All 3 of us lived in the hostels on LUMS grounds. The 4th person, named Aliyah\*, is a day scholar pursuing a Master's in Genetics from Karachi University. All four of us are heavily impacted by class and regional dynamics, making it a unifying theme, which is why class will feature in my analysis as well.

The interviews were all conducted over Zoom, because the participants were all over Pakistan at the time of the interviews. The interviews themselves were semi-structured and conversational in tone for the ease of the participants, because they knew me first and foremost as a friend/acquaintance, second as a peer and third as an interviewer. Additionally, I was speaking to them as a fellow student, because this study is also informed by my own version of events. That is also the reason my case study relies on an auto-ethnographic method to relay information. I believe the facts conveyed are strengthened when I use the same tone I used in the interviews; it reflects my proximity to the experiences and remains cognizant of

115. *National Outreach Program*. Lahore University of Management Sciences. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://nop.lums.edu.pk/>.

my position. Additionally, a lot of the topics discussed have not been previously researched. The pandemic itself is new, clearly, but many other phenomena in Pakistan that I will be detailing do not have pre-existing literature on them, if any at all, because of the difficulties conducting research in this country.

This paper explores the experiences of 4 female students, including the author, in higher education during COVID-19 and the lockdown imposed in Pakistan, to understand the gender digital divide in Pakistan.

## Theme 1: Rape Anxiety and Remote Work Opportunities

Note: I will be using the term femininity instead of womanhood because the people sharing their experiences comprise women and nonbinary people.

All four of us work part-time and/or are on the constant lookout for (more) work. While remote work is generally preferable for many students for a variety of reasons, it became the norm during lockdown because workplaces adapted to COVID-19. Travelling into certain areas for tutoring became difficult, if not impossible. Ride-sharing - such as Uber, Careem and Airlift - was halted for fear of transmission; makeshift checkpoints sprung up where most of our clientele was located, such as in Lahore's DHA. When the university campus shut down, Waniya, Zohra and I had to return to our homes, which forced us to give up our jobs and cut off our sources of income. I will speak first about content writing and tutoring because not only were 3 out of the 4 subjects in this study involved in those fields, they are easily two of the most common forms of income for university students. Tutoring has lower barriers of entry<sup>116</sup> than many other jobs, including teaching, and offers the added temptation of flexible hours. As technology evolved, content writing was added to this list of student-friendly jobs for the same two reasons.

Of course, there were opportunities for online tutoring but they were few and far in between because many parents disregarded advice to isolate and found tutors who resided in the same city. Even the handful required consistent electricity and power availability. For students who were returning home to cities and villages with poor sporadic access, quitting was better. This loss of income hit harder than it otherwise would because many were the primary breadwinners for their family. For others, the loss of the amount that normally supplemented their family's main earnings was more strongly felt if the parent or parents had been laid off or if their salary had been reduced. When they needed that money the most, it had been taken away.

Students from controlling homes could not reveal to their parents they had been earning, especially those under direct orders to not take up work. Several female students I knew were from abusive homes that forbade any semblance of financial independence. Their parents monitored their spending by keeping an eye on their account. If someone did part-time work where they got paid in cash (as many university students do), there would be no way to trace either the receipt or the nature of the expenditure.

However, the rules were a bit complex for others. Some were permitted to pursue remote work - like content writing - because it maintained purdah. Additionally, the remote nature of this work meant the payment would often be in the form of a bank transfer, which meant that the surveillance could continue uninterrupted. The problem with content writing was that it involved a lot more labor for a lot less pay, with most employers offering a rate of less than 1 rupee per word. Tutoring, in contrast, paid more, by a significant margin. It was where women were actively sought because they were perceived as safer, raising their chances of finding work. There are, and always have been, several posts in my university's Facebook group alone that started with 'female tutor only.'

116. Bray, M., & Lykins, C. (2012). *Shadow Education Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Implications for Policy Makers in Asia*. Asian Development Bank. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29777/shadow-education.pdf>

Tutoring as a university student also comes with a readymade community nearby that seeks your services mostly because of the institute you belong to, with many parents priming their children with admission to the same university. Whereas content writing requires individual brand cultivation that can take years, tutoring as a university student means you have your university's reputation giving you a leg up. In my personal experience, many DHA residents - if not most - sought a LUMS tutor. First, there are the obvious reasons: they were nearby. Some hired students from LUMS because of the belief that if an institute as exclusive as LUMS had accepted a student, it would guarantee some level of quality. Others hired them as class symbols, trusting them to have English 'fluent enough' for their private-academy attending offspring. Some saw a 'buy a tutor, get a counsellor' free deal; they expected the tutor to explain the admissions process and help the student gain admission into the university.

Unfortunately, tutoring was either discouraged or banned for many women because the parents were afraid of them being harassed, assaulted, kidnapped, etc. Having the women be in someone else's home for hours was a risk they were unwilling to take, especially in a strange city so far away. Some parents said it more from a place of concern for the daughter's well-being; others said it more because of the family honor at stake. In both cases, there were countless women who were working in secret. The lockdown halted even that level of freedom. It shut down the hostel and compelled many to return to geographically distant areas. It also closed the campus where many day scholars could either meet students to teach them, or pretend to be attending classes when they were, in fact, conducting classes in their students' homes.

For this specific category of students, working from home meant the same thing as being unable to work. Not only would they not have the necessary privacy required to teach (such as a separate room, the right bandwidth so the call would not lag or get dropped, general silence, regard for their privacy that is not afforded to many women living with their parents, etc.), they were afraid of the consequential violence if their parents found out. Even if they lived in the same city, they had to quit.

The reason I have explained this in so much detail is to illustrate a common example of the gender digital divide in Pakistan. Tutoring is a widespread phenomenon in this country but the social dynamics that keep so many women away from availing offline opportunities are then reproduced digitally when those opportunities go online. In a pandemic, we as women are seeing that we can be formally educated for a year - or more - online but we cannot access the opportunities presented to so many men and teach, even if we have the necessary resources, because we are women.

At the same time, it is important to note that the surge in work-from-home jobs has been a source of relief for many women. A study of Lithuanians<sup>117</sup> working from home during a COVID-19 lockdown showed that women were happier working from home because it allowed them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Unlike men, who saw other family members as distractions, women understood focus as a personal skill, seeing teleworking as something that can be successfully done from home if the person doing it has the right personality.

For female students who either could not leave their residence or did not want to, employers permitting remote work during lockdown has allowed them the financial freedom they could not have before this. Some observed that they were saving more of their income, because they did not have to spend as much on conveyance, lunch, etc. Women also discussed the psychological gain from remote work (a component of health); they did not have to focus half as much on their appearance anymore because there was no audience. 'Appropriate' femininity required a performance that had to be socially acceptable, which made it taxing. This was a sentiment espoused frequently by those who went to an office to work.

117. Raišienė, Agota Giedre, et al. "Working from Home—Who Is Happy? A Survey of Lithuania's Employees during the COVID-19 Quarantine Period." *Sustainability*, no. 12, 2020. MPDI, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/13/5332/pdf>

Since September's motorway rape incident<sup>118</sup> and the string of cases featuring violence against women surging, rape anxiety has risen among many women, making remote work opportunities seem more appealing. This was consolidated by news on 23rd September that involved a woman getting off work in Clifton, Karachi. She was looking for transport to go back home when she was abducted by two men in a Vigo, taken to an apartment and raped.<sup>119</sup> With news like this, it was evident that rapists were now tracking schedules and taking note of the arrival and departure from a workplace to find a window to attack in.

However, even this remote work now being found increasingly desirable by more women does not change the fact that only a few have the necessary infrastructure to sustain it smoothly. Others will have to contend with the outside because they do not have the privilege to stay indoors, while battling more stress and more fear than before.

In the case of Zohra and Waniya, their parents were receptive to them working. However, many internships offered were during vacations, which is when they went back home to Layyah and Rawalakot respectively. Waniya discussed how even pre-lockdown, she could not take advantage of work-from-home opportunities, how a spike this year changed nothing for her. She commented on how she would have benefitted from this phase and how it would have helped build her CV for jobs and for postgraduate education, only if the hostels had stayed open. Many workplaces - including multinational corporations - offered online internships this year, leading to a rise in applicability. The students who could not apply before this, because of the prohibitive costs of conveyance with the lack of a stipend, all participated. But students who did not have the right infrastructure for an online internship were still unable to avail this opportunity.

During my interview with her, she was based in a girls' hostel in Rawalpindi with her friends simply so she could have the WiFi she needed to attend her online classes; even then, she had to deal with power-cuts and an unstable connection. Most of her courses had a graded Class Participation (CP) component - customary for LUMS' humanities and social science courses - which she was struggling with, because she shared a room with other people and felt uncomfortable asking them to be silent for the duration of her classes, so she could speak over Zoom. The background noise meant that she had to explain her circumstances to professors, so her chatbox comments were counted in the CP requirement.

Here, I would also like to add that many professors have increased the weightage of the CP requirement because of their own frustrations with teaching an unresponsive class. Others have made it mandatory for students to keep their videos on. Because I was a Teaching Assistant for a course last semester (Spring 2019) and am for another course this semester (Fall 2020), I have also been approached by many students over the course of the year. Some students - most of them women - have explained that they cannot participate in class and share their opinions. Many of these were students who had participated enthusiastically for the early offline half of Spring 2019.

They explained that they could afford to speak their mind in class but could not reveal the ideas they were being taught - regardless of whether they truly believed them. For instance, if they commented on feminist theory being discussed in class within earshot of their parents, they would face consequences at home simply because of the mention of feminism. Many avoided discussion at home of the exact concepts they learned and spoken CP over the course of months would inevitably lead to a slip-up. Self-censorship was key, so some requested an allowance for written CP instead.

While educational usage of the internet is allowed to some extent for many women because it's considered

118. Naeem, F. (2020). Pakistan outcry over police victim-blaming of gang-raped mother. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54186609>

119. Woman kidnapped, raped in Clifton. (2020). Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1581072>

more 'moral' and safer, there are parameters to that educational usage as well. What is considered education and what is considered ideological and spiritual corruption in the guise of education are two different categories. The same insistence on 'protection' that we witnessed earlier in the example of tutoring operates here as well. A woman's mind is seen as vulnerable to invasion as her body.

As of now, LUMS' gradual and limited hostel accommodation has allowed Waniya to relocate to the hostel on campus.

## Theme 2: Class

The earlier theme demonstrates to an extent that class plays a huge role in all four of our lives. All four are working part-time and live in households where money is tight. Of course, some of us have it much worse than others. It was in that contrast that an interesting relationship was revealed.

Often, research on the gender digital divide shows that the lack of access starts at home, that the first social structure to hinder women's digital presence is their very own family. But as per Waniya's experience, her family encouraged her to use their desktop to browse the internet and find scholarships for herself. There are situations in which class mobility triumphs all other interests, where children who are smarter and likelier to get a foothold in the ladder of class are prioritized on the basis of intelligence instead of gender.

Waniya discussed how she learned with every passing year that it is not simply access that matters. The access needs to be guided, structured, to ensure that the user is trawling the internet efficiently and not just wasting their time because they are lost in the vast expanse. She spoke about how key informed access was in finding useful resources, anything ranging from time-relevant scholarships (such as the LUMS' NOP scheme, which requires students to apply two years in advance) to resources that would help her study better. As she learns to navigate the internet, she then imparts her knowledge to her siblings so they will have informed access and learn quicker, because time is of the essence.

“It is not enough to simply have access to ICTs. It is equally important that women have the knowledge and resources to translate access into effective use. ICT initiatives will only be effective if the information is useful and relevant to the end user and where the end-users have the capacity to act on it.”<sup>120</sup>

Obviously, the guardedness regarding a daughter's morality and chastity is not erased. Part of this leniency is also due to the trustworthiness she has racked up over the years, but it cannot be denied that the approach changes. Not only is gender no longer the primary deciding factor, the adept children are encouraged to learn how to navigate the digital realm so they can teach it to their siblings, their parents, their cousins, etc. That child becomes an entry point for everyone else. This approach tries to narrow the digital divide between the family members, unlike the gender-oriented divide, which always reproduces itself.

It is possible that a smart daughter is expected to learn how to use the internet and teach it to other family members because of the gendered expectations that daughters face. When daughters are seen as quasi-mothers who must help nurture and raise the younger children, who must contribute to their success and put the collective first, it is inevitable for it to manifest in digital navigation. But it is also possible that the collectivism mentioned stems more from class than from gender; all these daughters are from working-class or lower-middle class families, where every single person must work together for the family's survival. It is also possible that both class and gender worked together to produce this set of circumstances.

120. Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/F6040673>

A study by Antonio and Tuffley<sup>121</sup> reveals that “the large majority of women (an estimated four out five) live in developing countries and they often suffer even more gender-related discrimination than their counterparts in developed countries; they are more likely to be unemployed and have fewer employment and educational opportunities, with large numbers (approximately 60% according to UN statistics) ending up as unpaid family workers. These women are trapped in traditional family roles and lack the basic digital literacy skills that could allow them to achieve more of their potential.

Role definition underlies many of the reasons why women do not make ample use of technology. In Southern India, according to Vinitha Johnson a woman’s existence is defined as a source of support for her family and the wellbeing of the family unit. Culture, the media and society define the roles of women and they are not generally encouraged to fulfil their individual needs, or pursue self-growth, even in educated families. Similarly, in Ghana, there is a strong correlation between an individual’s work environment and access to digital resources. “While such access may seem gender neutral at face value, traditional gender roles, institutional structures and economic realities force disproportionate numbers of females into the informal sector where such opportunities for access are limited.”

While Waniya’s self-growth was seen as beneficial to the family’s growth, that is not always the case. In Zohra’s case, class and gender worked together in a different way. Though there wasn’t enough money for a home connection in the 2000s, internet cafes were common - and accessible mostly to men. In her FSc, when she required an internet connection for her academics, she had to beg and cajole her father to be allowed to go, even though her brother, cousins and peers would often visit these places. In the entirety of her FSc, she went once.

As per Antonio and Tuffley, “Weingarten notes that, while these barriers apply to both genders, they hinder women more than men because other cultural obstacles compound the problem. Internet cafes, for example, are an easy way to access the Internet but they are often impractical for women who cannot leave home for religious and cultural reasons, and/or because they are intimidating for women due to low technological expertise and their belief that they are socially unwelcome.”<sup>122</sup>

When she was in sixth grade, her family purchased a desktop without an internet connection. It was purchased because her brother used to spend too much for her father’s liking in arcades playing games. Concerned by the unsavory company the arcade attracted, her father used the money he earned from a temporary job to purchase a desktop so the brother would play games at home. Though everyone in the family got access to it, it is important to note that the father did not want either Zohra or her brother to spend time in places with bad company, so the restrictions were placed on both. But accommodations were made for the brother to continue what he was doing, not for Zohra.

In her own words, ‘My cousin - who was my age - was allowed to have an Android phone (and I and his twin sister weren’t). Back then, I used to view everything through the lens of class, so I used to think that maybe they had a lot of money.’ Her first Facebook profile was created under a false name to avoid detection, even though she was only on the platform because a cousin had told her about a scholarship she could find there.

In contrast to Waniya, Zohra represents a model where policing morality is a family effort. While Waniya’s family encouraged her to learn online and find scholarships, Zohra’s extended family and family friends

121 Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>

122. Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>

would rebuke her parents for allowing her access to the internet. When her Matric results came out in 2015, the District Administration gave her prize money for being one of the highest-ranking students. She wanted to purchase a GSM Q-mobile phone with the PKR 5000 she received. Her family initially agreed to it but her mother's friend discouraged her from buying it by saying it would negatively affect her studies and that once Zohra graduated from FSc, the friend would buy her a phone herself. That promise was never fulfilled.

GSMA's The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020<sup>123</sup> stated: "lack of family approval was a major impediment for women in several markets, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Algeria." At another point, it claims that "of the countries surveyed, the widest gender gap is still in Pakistan, where women are 38 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile and 49 per cent less likely to use mobile internet." Family disapproval had deterred 29% of the "sampled female non-users of mobile internet from getting online"

Even money independently earned is not free from influence, because all expenses - whether self-financed or family-financed - will reflect upon the family. Waniya and Zohra are both demonstrations of how individual actions can influence the collective, especially when they come from daughters. But Waniya's actions were seen as useful for class and social mobility and encouraged. Zohra's actions were considered ineffective for class mobility and socially untoward. She gained a lot more freedom and agency once she became the primary breadwinner of the family, which began when she came to LUMS.

There is awareness around how access to the internet can lead to greater economic independence but the reverse is also true; pre-existing economic independence can ensure access to the internet because the person pays their own bills for the devices and the connection. This shift in economic power is corroborated by Antonio and Tuffley. "Moreover, women often do not control finances or have sufficient personal income to purchase products or pay Internet service providers for monthly access. As such, due to financial and institutional barriers, women lack the means to use, rent or purchase established and new technologies that could help them advance economically. The combination of laws, policies and social customs in many developing countries prohibit women from owning property and obtaining loans for technology purchases. A vicious cycle is thus perpetuated in which women cannot develop their skills, which prevents them from earning higher incomes, so they cannot afford the technologies that might boost them to the next rung on the economic ladder."<sup>124</sup>

The family also remained the primary influencing factor because the lack of access to the internet meant that the daughter often had no way of staying in touch with her friends after graduation. Even though it was academically advantageous to be online on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, because one could form class groups and ask friends for help on difficult assignments, it was still not permitted for Zohra. As such, friends became hard to stay in touch with, unless one lived in geographical proximity.

In Zohra's family, informed access was a liability. When one of her female cousins was caught texting a boy from her brother's phone, she blamed Zohra and another cousin (called Samra) for teaching her how to do it by texting boys themselves. When informed access is immoral (i.e. it teaches others how to access the internet in a 'shameless' way), the teacher who passed that information on was also to be held accountable. Once things came to light, Zohra and Samra had to work very hard and do a lot of persuading to avoid severe punishment for something they were not even guilty of.

123. Rowntree, O., Shanahan, M., Bahia, K., Butler, C., Lindsey, D., & Sibthorpe, C. (2020). *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

124. Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>



However, it must be emphasized that this pressure may reduce internet usage - because the parents then refuse to buy a phone, an internet connection, etc. - but it never fully deters the child. They find secret avenues, as Zohra and her cousins did. “When my parents confiscated my phone to force me to listen, I would simply use my grandmother’s in secret. She wasn’t tech-savvy enough to understand that I was using her 2G so she would be confused by her credit being used up overnight but paid no further heed to the matter because she knew she wouldn’t be able to make sense of it,” said Zohra.

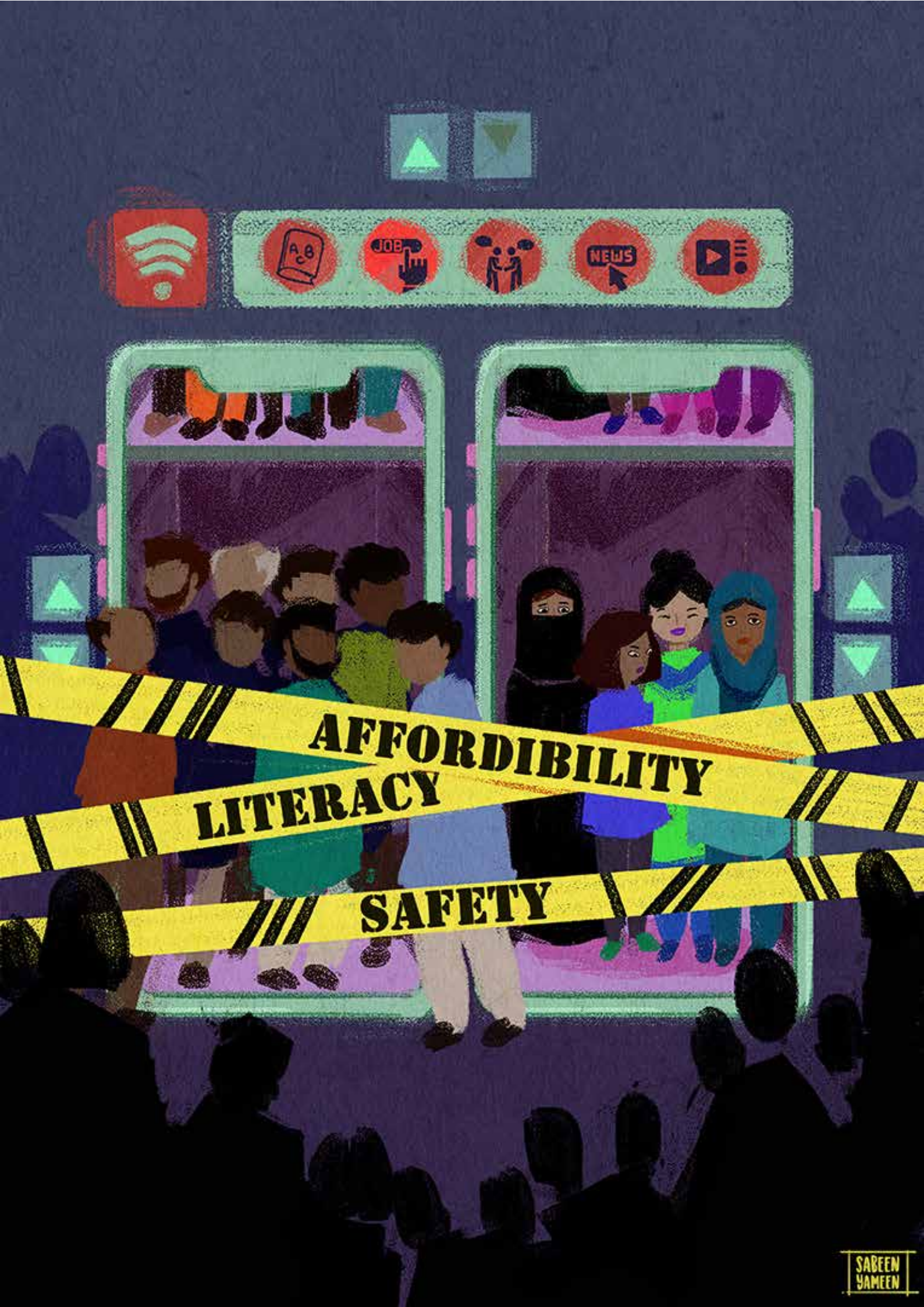
As such, a daughter’s return home after losing her sources of income (as covered in the first theme) means becoming dependent on her family again. When her hostel closes, she is dependent on them for the roof over her head, for the food she eats, etc. That control is then re-exerted over her life, even if boundaries have been drawn and the exchange is a bit different now. Even if she is older now, even if everyone knows that she is using the laptop and staying up the night to finish an assignment now (not to talk to a boy), that old exchange continues, almost as if only to remind her of who is conceding power to whom and who can take it away when they so desire. The internet usage must still be justified for the performance of dependence and control, even if it has already been explained scores of times before and is understood by both parties.

This psychological stress is difficult to explain to professors. Its impact on academics and on digital activity is even more difficult to measure. Many daughters start leaving their devices alone subconsciously simply to avoid tension and conflict.

This is another way class and gender intersect. As demonstrated by the anecdotes Aliyah shared, the daughters of these households are so busy helping out with household chores, dealing with power struggles, helping out with younger siblings, etc., that they have much less time left over to ‘learn’ the internet and practice it like a skill. This also means they have much less time to keep up with the workload of the online semester, which has increased firstly because the teachers have increased assignments and secondly because of all the softwares students have to master to keep up with the assignments.

Antonio and Tuffley summarize this. “Women invariably bear a disproportionately heavy burden of household and family responsibilities. Due to the combination of domestic chores and their role as primary caretakers, women have very little free time to experiment with new technologies. They are further constrained by social norms that confer control of technology to men. A major digital divide based on gender is emerging in India, which is partly attributed to the constraints that women face in accessing education due to a lack of time to attend school, familial and household duties and socio-cultural norms that give a low priority to education. Moreover, the extent to which women exercise autonomy in using the web significantly influences the extent to which they can access it. There are several factors that contribute to a woman’s autonomy. Location of access, for example, is important. If Internet access is only available outside the home, and the user has to travel long distances to an Internet-enabled facility, this is likely to reduce one’s likelihood of pursuing the online environment. If access is available within the home, to what extent is women’s autonomy limited by the actions of other family members? The greater the autonomy of use, the greater the benefits the user is likely to derive.”<sup>125</sup>

125. Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>



**AFFORDABILITY**  
**LITERACY**  
**SAFETY**

# Additional Reflections

Our decision to undertake a feminist analysis, instead of a gender one, was deliberate; we wanted to underscore its necessity in any research project that investigates the gendered effects of the existing digital divide, and also to mull over the politics of the knowledge we are responsible for producing. We attempt to propose a different point of view through which to understand gendered marginalisation and hegemony. As researchers, we tried to highlight the complex experiences of Pakistani women as ‘agents of knowledge’, instead of ‘victims’ or potential ‘beneficiaries’. We also tried to demonstrate that conflicting views and realities can coexist together in this debate.

Moreover, we showed that the pandemic has significantly reformed our understanding of precarity,<sup>126</sup> particularly in case study 3, where the researcher attempted to practice personalized vulnerable writing as a feminist reflexive practice.<sup>127</sup> Feminist research processes themselves are inherently unsettled and uncertain as they provide space for new forms of unknowing and continued attempts at understanding the stories and lived experiences of others.<sup>128</sup>

All three case studies were undergirded by an understanding of meaningful access, and the cultural norms, social behaviors and gender stereotypes that impeded this form of access in the specific locations where fieldwork was done. Other key factors that were pointed by the interlocutors in all three case studies were language, healthcare, cost and affordability, electricity, familial responsibilities, social attitudes, patriarchy, education, financial independence, location, and social mobility. This research project demonstrates that women’s meaningful access remains not only limited but also contradictory, thereby warranting further investigation.<sup>129</sup>

Clearly, the spread and adoption of ICTs has not lessened the digital divide in any way and has, instead, exacerbated existing inequalities. The divide persists as a reflection of existing socioeconomic inequalities. Therefore, promoting individual, one-off success stories over collective growth and awareness is counterproductive. It is important that the digital divide debate does not continue to be “a rhetorical trope in a neoliberal ideology”.<sup>130</sup> That is why we tried to emphasize the importance of social class and marginalization in this debate, through not only our survey findings but also the case studies. We have eschewed propagating a top-down imposition of any efforts to bridge the digital divide.<sup>131</sup>

All three case studies, particularly case studies 1 and 3, show that the gender digital divide is deepening despite the availability of technology in Pakistan. Even in case study 2, Nasreen highlights the existing barriers to young women’s access to technology that she personally discovered during her field visits. Case study 2 also illustrates that just because a woman has ample exposure to technology does not mean that she would be able, or willing, to acquire or access it for her own personal usage, as per Bilquees’ experience.

126. Ahmed, N., Gore, E., & Langford, N. (2020). Pandemic and Precarity: rethinking what it means to be precarious under COVID 19 | SPERI. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2020/04/30/pandemic-and-precarity-rethinking-what-it-means-to-be-precarious-under-covid-19/>

127. Page, T. (2017). Vulnerable Writing as a Feminist Methodological Practice. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41305-017-0028-0>

128. Ibid.

129. Association for Progressive Communications (APC). (2017). *Mapping Research in Gender and Digital Technology* [Ebook]. Retrieved from [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC\\_Mapping\\_0323\\_0.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC_Mapping_0323_0.pdf)

130. Siobhan Stevenson (2009) Digital Divide: A Discursive Move Away from the Real Inequities, *The Information Society*, 25:1, 1-22, DOI: 10.1080/01972240802587539

131. Lim, S. (2017). There is no opting out: Indigenous women in Malaysia and questions of access. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://genderit.org/node/4995/>

However, as case study 3 illustrates, sometimes desire for upward class mobility can take over gender biases, as a woman's intelligence and potential to succeed academically is privileged over her gender.

The majority of female technology users who were a part of this research use mobile phones instead of computers, as mobile phones are more widely and easily available for purchase as compared to laptops and personal computers, which remain expensive and out of reach for most audiences. However, we have tried not to create a reductive binary between the proverbial "haves and the have-nots", to underscore the importance of a nuanced class critique and how many marginalized groups struggle to feature in the public policy arena at any and all levels within Pakistan.

There was also a shared understanding among the interviewees that more work needs to be done at the policy and institutional level. Case study 3 showcases how the neoliberal and gender-blind academy perpetuates structural violence through administrative oversights. Some of the conditions in which Pakistani female students are having to study, live, work and deal with a multitude of issues are indeed troubling, and yet universities administrations are making circumstances harder for them with the imposition of detrimental policies and demands that are only geared towards their profit-making goals. At the same time, it also reveals that remote work or taking tuitions has helped a lot of women gain some semblance of independence and autonomy. Case study 2 also corroborates this finding.

Case study 1, however, depicts the conditions of women living under a complete internet blackout and how this unavailability of communication technology hinders their ability to seek medical assistance. It demonstrates that even when some kind of access, however limited, is made available, gendered restrictions will continue to block any opportunity for women to connect to the global internet.

Despite a decades-long movement to free the peripheral regions from draconian regulations that led to relief in the form of the merger of FATA with the province of KPK, rights are still not granted. And in the process, women continue to be most impacted with this lack of access to the internet that brings forth various other issues in the region, including the lack of education and healthcare. This perpetuates continued oppression, whereby the women's lack of access to technology routinely becomes a matter of life and death.

However, case study 2 indicates that access to technology is not necessarily going to lead to the adoption or enjoyment of the internet. Some women make the active choice of not using technology, or avoiding certain social media platforms altogether. One also needs to bear in mind the intersectional challenges that impede women's access to technology. For instance, while class and location are barriers that would inevitably affect people across genders, as seen in all three case studies, women tend to experience these barriers more acutely due to deeply held prejudices within and outside their specific communities. Sometimes women are reluctant to use the internet or social media platforms because of complacency and their own set of moral values that is in line with family attitudes and societal expectations. Many women, like Muneeza, do not want to be exposed to additional harms, which is why they completely avoid social media platforms like Facebook.

Even women who enter the public domain do so on their own terms, while circumscribing their own mobility as agents rather than victims. Therefore, not all cultural barriers are completely apparent within research on access to technology, and nuances have to be taken into account. It must be emphasized that all three case studies present conflicting views out of which no neat and monolithic results can be drawn. This is where multivariate conversations around meaningful access become germane.

There is no catch-all solution that can be applied to the issues experienced by the interlocutors. The expansion of mobile broadband and the internet by itself will not meet the connectivity needs of every single woman in Pakistan. It is evident that the internet is still poorly dispersed over here, and unaffordable for many people as well, due to the poor distribution of basic telecommunications infrastructure in Pakistan generally.

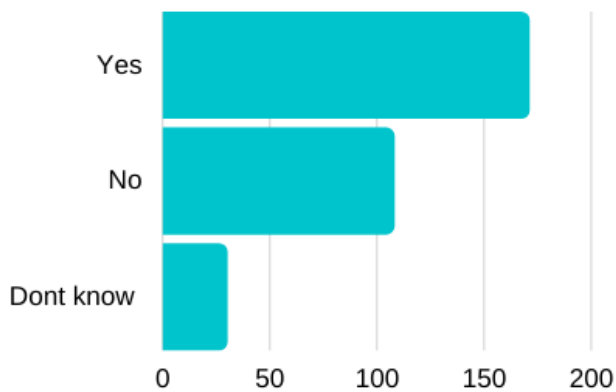
Moreover, a lack of public access and social welfare infrastructures, be it well-connected libraries or shelters, shows that the government is not deliberating on making meaningful investments in this regard.

A peek into a generalised understanding of gender digital divide

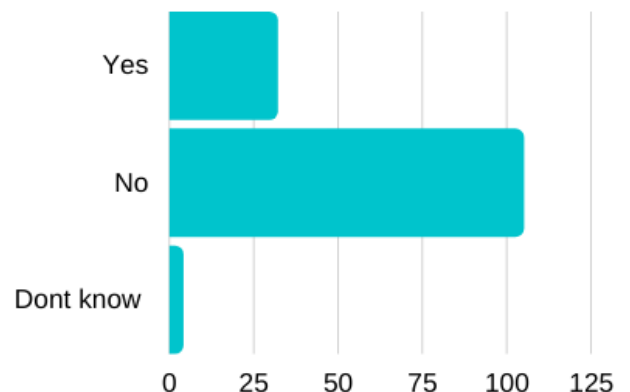
We recently conducted a flash survey on Twitter before the launch of the research to gauge the public's understanding of internet access in the country, and also their understanding of whether the digital divide impacts women or not. Since the surveys only collected responses from women, this was primarily targeted towards the larger population's views regarding the matter.

The results are as follows.

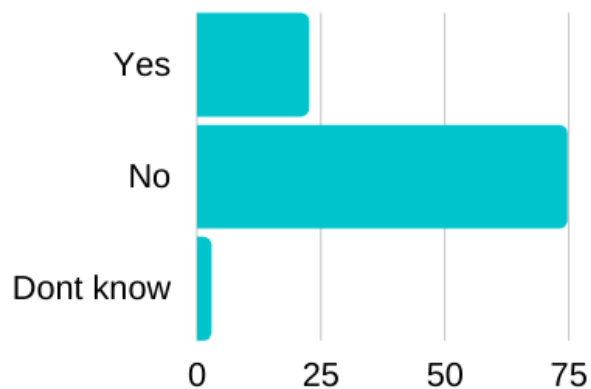
**Do you think women are disproportionately affected by the lack of internet access?**  
309 respondents



**Do you think internet is easily available everywhere in Pakistan?**  
142 respondents



**Do you think internet should be accessible to everyone in Pakistan?**  
141 respondents



On a final note, access to the internet is very much a human rights issue, and inherently linked to internet policy development in Pakistan. There is therefore a need for foundational work in raising public awareness about human rights in general and women's rights in particular, and in ensuring that gender work towards promoting and protecting women's rights also includes information and communications technology.

# Conclusion

## Adjusting Preconceived Notions Regarding the Gender Digital Divide

The fact that the spread and adoption of ICTs has not helped in bridging the digital divide has already been documented extensively in literature regarding internet access. This is a stark reminder that bears repetition in this feminist research project as well. Digital technologies are spreading fast but their benefits are clearly not. However, in this project, we aimed to bring forth not only quantitative data but also the stories of the interlocutors from feminist standpoints, to correlate existing literature on the subject with the lived experienced of women in Pakistan.

This project, by no means, captures a full picture of the gender digital divide in our context. Rather, it recognizes that agency and autonomy are key tenets of the debate on the gender digital divide, and therefore tries to put forth the viewpoints of women from different junctures in life across Pakistan. Its limitations remain, but it nevertheless provides a key starting point as to how one can interrogate this divide meaningfully over here.

Proposing a generalized action plan to “bridge the gender digital divide” is impossible, if not imprudent and problematic. This research report highlights that there is a clear distinction between mere access and gendered, classed and location-specific access to technology. The difference can also be seen as a generational issue. Moreover, the gender digital divide impacts marginalized groups differently on both a personal and societal level. Other factors that add to this divide include not only societal prejudices, existing power structures, lack of awareness, and an overall gender and class hegemony, but also decisions that women may make for themselves to either keep themselves safe or avoid causing an additional disruption in their daily lives.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on women and girls. Women are at the very heart of the fight against the coronavirus. They are not only dealing with the ‘shadow pandemic’ in the form of gender-based violence and harassment, but are also dealing with institutional apathy and neglect. Their precarity becomes more acute as it is structured by hierarchies of gender, location, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, ability and age; and access to technology, of course.

Our recommendations for further research avenues in relation to the gender digital divide are as follows:

1. Research projects that seek to explore the gender digital divide should not be ahistorical and ignore specific social contexts. Such interventions would be more capable of exploring gendered technological access and exclusion in specific communities through qualitative, in-depth and rights-respecting research work, and by being more historically and culturally located. Such research should also consider challenging existing inequalities and power structures more robustly, especially for gauging the diverse and fragmented nature of women's needs and experiences.
2. Development projects that include a research component should seek to enhance or introduce public facilities such as libraries and internet cafes that are women-friendly and geared towards providing easy and unrestricted access to technology.
3. More digital literacy and public awareness interventions are needed for women and girls across Pakistan to learn more about digital rights and online safety issues, as well as available resources and forms of recourse.

4. The rising trend of women using platforms such as TikTok in Pakistan should be seen as a positive development, and an avenue for the proliferation of meaningful content production and artistic inventions among marginalized Pakistani women. This would also help dismantle the conception of women and girls as being ‘beneficiaries’ in the gender digital divide debate, and instead showcase them as being key agents of knowledge and change in online spaces.

We believe that the state also needs to do its part by instituting the provision of affordable and good quality internet across Pakistan, and ensuring connectivity in its most peripheral regions, while keeping in mind cultural dynamics when setting up public wifi spaces so that they are available to women as well.

The Government of Pakistan should also consider initiating more public awareness campaigns that detail how the rights to freedom of expression and information are guaranteed in Pakistan. The vision for a Digital Pakistan should include the assurance of a pro-people environment. The government should consider the benefits of having a free and open internet in Pakistan, and refrain from scaremongering by forcibly banning apps and encouraging online censorship. This would have a chilling effect on Pakistanis, particularly women, girls, children and other marginalized groups. Therefore, the government should guarantee gender sensitivity and friendliness in internet governance policies and initiatives.

The approach to the digital divide issue needs to be gender responsive, and ideally feminist, instead of merely providing lip service to gender issues in the form of tokenistic representation. Our ability to bounce back from the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic is heavily dependent on how we include everyone, especially the most marginalized among us, equally. Ultimately, Digital Pakistan will only thrive if access to the internet is guaranteed as an inalienable right, not a luxury.

# Bibliography

## Academic Sources

Abid, K., Bari, Y., Younas, M., Javaid, S., & Imran, A. (2020). Progress of COVID-19 Epidemic in Pakistan. *Asia-Pacific Journal Of Public Health*, 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539520927259>

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>

Ackerly, B., & True, J. (2008). Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations. *International Studies Review*, 10(4), doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00826.x

Ahmed, N., Gore, E., & Langford, N. (2020). Pandemic and Precarity: rethinking what it means to be precarious under COVID 19 | SPERI. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2020/04/30/pandemic-and-precarity-rethinking-what-it-means-to-be-precarious-under-covid-19/>

Ali, P. A., O’Cathain, A., & Croot, E. (2018). Influences of Extended Family on Intimate Partner Violence: Perceptions of Pakistanis in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518785378>

Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>

Association for Progressive Communications (APC). (2017). *Mapping Research in Gender and Digital Technology* [Ebook]. Retrieved from [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC\\_Mapping\\_0323\\_0.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC_Mapping_0323_0.pdf)

Bonfadelli, H. (2002). The Internet and Knowledge Gaps. *European Journal Of Communication*, 17(1), 65-84. doi: 10.1177/0267323102017001607. Meaningful Connectivity — unlocking the full power of internet access. (2020). Retrieved 14 January 2021, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249720563\\_The\\_Internet\\_and\\_Knowledge\\_Gaps](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249720563_The_Internet_and_Knowledge_Gaps)

Bray, M., & Lykins, C. (2012). *Shadow Education Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Implications for Policy Makers in Asia*. Asian Development Bank. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29777/shadow-education.pdf>

Croxson, H., & Rowntree, O. (2017). *Triggering mobile internet use among men and women in South Asia* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GSMA-Triggering-Mobile-Internet-Use\\_Web.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/GSMA-Triggering-Mobile-Internet-Use_Web.pdf)

Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: “TikTok didn’t die, it merely fainted”: Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45) [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/)



Devault, M. (1990). Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis. *Social Problems*, 37(1), 96-116. doi:10.2307/800797

Digital Rights Foundation and Chayn. (2020). Availability and responsiveness of gender-based violence helplines in Pakistan [Ebook]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chayn-x-DRF\\_-Availability-and-responsiveness-of-gender-based-violence-support-helplines-in-Pakistan.pdf](https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chayn-x-DRF_-Availability-and-responsiveness-of-gender-based-violence-support-helplines-in-Pakistan.pdf).

Fuchs, C. (2017). Capitalism, Patriarchy, Slavery, and Racism in the Age of Digital Capitalism and Digital Labour. *Critical Sociology*, 44(4-5). doi: 10.1177/0896920517691108

Gavison, R. (1992). Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction. *Stanford Law Review*, 45(1), 1-45. doi:10.2307/1228984

Green, E. (2000). Negotiating Time and Space for Every-day Pleasure - An Exploration of Technologies for Home-based Leisure. In *Women, Work and Computerization Charting a Course to the Future* (pp. 225-232). Springer, Boston, MA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from.

GSMA, Alliance for Affordable Internet, World Wide Web Foundation, Association for Progressive Communications. (2018). GSMA - A toolkit for researching women's internet access and use [Ebook]. Retrieved from [https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GSMA-Women-and-Internet-Research-Toolkit\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GSMA-Women-and-Internet-Research-Toolkit_WEB.pdf)

GSMA. (2020). Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report[Ebook]. Retrieved from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

Gurumurthy, A., & Chami, N. (2017). A feminist action framework on development and digital technologies [Ebook]. Association for Progressive Communications. Retrieved from <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FeministActionFrameworkOnDevelopmentAndDigitalTechnologies.pdf>

Losh., E., & Wernimont, J. (2018). *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctv9hj9r9>

MacKinnon, C. (2013). Intersectionality as Method: A Note. *Signs*, 38(4), 1019-1030. doi:10.1086/669570

Meaningful Connectivity — unlocking the full power of internet access. (2020). Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://a4ai.org/meaningful-connectivity/>

Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan. (2020). Gendered Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan. UN Women. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/04/pk-gendered-impact-and-implications-of-covid.pdf?la=en&vs=2138>

Mohanty, C. (2003). "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society*, 28(2). doi: 10.1086/342914

- Nayab, D. (2011). Estimating the Middle Class in Pakistan [Ebook]. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://www.pide.org.pk/pdf/Working%20Paper/Middle\\_Class\\_Nayab.pdf](https://www.pide.org.pk/pdf/Working%20Paper/Middle_Class_Nayab.pdf).
- Antonio, A., & Tuffley, D. (2014). The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries. *Future Internet*, 6(4), 673–687. MDPI AG. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi60406Q73>
- Page, T. (2017). Vulnerable Writing as a Feminist Methodological Practice. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41305-017-0028-0>
- Parikh, A. (2019). Insider-outsider as process: drawing as reflexive feminist methodology during fieldwork. *Cultural Geographies*, 27(3), 437-452. doi: 10.1177/1474474019887755
- Raišiene, Agota Giedre, et al. “Working from Home—Who Is Happy? A Survey of Lithuania’s Employees during the COVID-19 Quarantine Period.” *Sustainability*, no. 12, 2020. MPDI, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/13/5332/pdf>
- Rowntree, O., Shanahan, M., Bahia, K., Butler, C., Lindsey, D., & Sibthorpe, C. (2020). *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020* [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>.
- Russell, B. (2010). Reena Patel, Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry. *Canadian Journal Of Sociology*, 35(3), 523-525. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs9231>
- Saeed, A. (2020). Despite IHC Order, Internet Not Restored In Tribal Districts. *Voicepk.net*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://voicepk.net/2020/04/24/despite-ihc-order-internet-not-restored-in-tribal-districts/>.
- Santosham, S., & Lindsey, D. (2015). Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries [Ebook]. GSMA. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Connected-Women-Gen-Gap.pdf>.
- Savic, M., & Abidin, C. (2020). The Politics and Optics of the TikTok Ban. *Medium*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://points.datasociety.net/the-politics-and-optioncs-of-the-tiktok-ban-d88bdcb532d>.
- Siegmann, K.. (2009). The Gender Digital Divide in Rural Pakistan: How Wide is it and How to Bridge it?. *Economic and Political Weekly - ECON POLIT WKLY*.
- Siobhan Stevenson (2009) *Digital Divide: A Discursive Move Away from the Real Inequities*, *The Information Society*, 25:1, 1-22, DOI: 10.1080/01972240802587539
- Spuy, A., & Aavriti, N. (2018). Mapping research in gender and digital technology [Ebook]. Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Retrieved from [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC\\_Mapping\\_0323\\_0.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/IDRC_Mapping_0323_0.pdf)
- Vogels, E. (2019). Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life. Pew Research Center. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>.

Yost, M., & Chmielewski, J. (2013). Blurring the Line Between Researcher and Researched in Interview Studies. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 37(2), 242-250. doi: 10.1177/0361684312464698

Zerai, A. (2018). African women, ICT and neoliberal politics. University of New Mexico. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328100267\\_African\\_Women\\_ICT\\_and\\_Neoliberal\\_Politics\\_The\\_Challenge\\_of\\_Gendered\\_Digital\\_Divides\\_to\\_People-Centered\\_Governance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328100267_African_Women_ICT_and_Neoliberal_Politics_The_Challenge_of_Gendered_Digital_Divides_to_People-Centered_Governance)

Cultures of TikTok in the Asia Pacific Symposium 2020. (2020). Sidra Kamran: "TikTok didn't die, it merely fainted": Gender, Class and Emerging Digital Cultures in Pakistan (10:45) [Video]. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok\\_apac\\_recordings/](https://tiktokcultures.com/tiktok_apac_recordings/)

Siobhan Stevenson (2009) Digital Divide: A Discursive Move Away from the Real Inequities, *The Information Society*, 25:1, 1-22, DOI: 10.1080/01972240802587539

## Journalistic Sources

Abbasi, W. (2018). FATA: abolished and merged. *Daily Times*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://dailytimes.com.pk/246758/fata-abolished-and-merged/>.

Ahmer, A. (2020). Private Hostels. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1549642/private-hostels>.

Anwer, Z. (2020). Online Communities: COVID-19 lockdown is changing the way people seek human connection. *Digital Rights Monitor*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/online-communities-covid-19-lockdown-is-changing-the-way-people-seek-human-connection/>.

Arab News, P. (2020). ADB says Pakistanis could lose up to 2.3 mln jobs due to pandemic. *Arab News Pakistan*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1721796/pakistan>.

Asad, M. (2020). Govt seeks time to restore internet in tribal districts. *Dawn*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1553046>.

Aurangzeb, A. (2020). For women, access to the internet is more than simply having a device. *Digital Rights Monitor*. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/for-women-access-to-the-internet-is-more-than-simply-having-a-device/>.

Ayub, M. (2021). Digital Gender Divide: Internet is essential for women to access important information. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/digital-gender-divide-internet-is-essential-for-women-to-access-important-information/>

Bashir, S. (2020). <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219036/ihc-seeks-clarity-jurisdiction-restoration-internet-services-former-fata>. The Express Tribune. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219036/ihc-seeks-clarity-jurisdiction-restoration-internet-services-former-fata>.

Chaudhry, A. (2020). Lahore motorway gang-rape causes outrage. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1579054>.

Correspondent, N. (2020). Girl dies while making TikTok video. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1573138>.

Daily Times. (2020). Jannat Mirza hits 12mn followers on TikTok. Daily Pakistan. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/21-Dec-2020/jannat-mirza-hits-12mn-followers-on-tiktok>.

Franklin, M. (2017). Whose internet is it indeed! Internet governance feminism as political praxis. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.genderit.org/articles/whose-internet-it-indeed-internet-governance-feminism-political-praxis>

Greenberg, P. (2020). Nadeem Mubarak - One of the finest TikTokers of Pakistan. Time Bulletin. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.timebulletin.com/nadeem-mubarak-one-of-the-finest-tiktokers-of-pakistan/>.

Hamid, G. (2020). Kanwal Aftab becomes second Pakistani TikTok star to hit 10M followers. BOL News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.bolnews.com/latest/2020/11/kanwal-aftab-becomes-second-pakistani-tiktok-star-to-hit-10m-followers/>.

HEC orders all universities to begin online classes. The Nation. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://nation.com.pk/30-Mar-2020/hec-orders-all-universities-to-begin-online-classes>.

Hussain, J. (2020). PTA bans TikTok over complaints against 'immoral content'. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1584123>.

Implementation begins of new rules to control unlawful social media content. Profit. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/10/08/implementation-begins-of-new-rules-to-control-unlawful-social-media-content/>.

Imran Khan's blind faith in COVID-19 - Times of India. The Times of India. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/imran-khans-blind-faith-in-covid-19/articleshow/74990068.cms>.

Kamran, H. (2017). The Internet Has Been Shut Down in Pakistan's Tribal Area for More Than a Year. Slate. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-internet-has-been-shut-down-in-pakistans-fata-for-more-than-a-year.html>.

Kamran, H. (2020). An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan. Slate. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.

Kamran, H. (2020). Coronavirus crisis highlights digital divide in Pakistan. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitrightsmonitor.pk/coronavirus-crisis-highlights-digital-divide-in-pakistan/>.

- Khan, S. (2016). Surveillance as a Feminist Issue. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://medium.com/privacy-international/surveillance-as-a-feminist-issue-12b5b45e1312>.
- Khan, S. (2019). Data bleeding everywhere: a story of period trackers. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://deepdives.in/data-bleeding-everywhere-a-story-of-period-trackers-8766dc6a1e00?gi=b5f66e11f8e8>.
- Klain, R. (2015). Inequality and the Internet. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/37/inequality-and-the-internet/>
- Lim, S. (2017). There is no opting out.: Indigenous women in Malaysia and questions of access. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://genderit.org/node/4995/>
- Maher, S. (2019). What TikTok tells us about Pakistan. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514445>.
- Malik, H. (2020). SC upholds govt's policy to suspend mobile services. The Express Tribune. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2257839/sc-upholds-govts-policy-to-suspend-mobile-services>.
- Metri, N. (2017). Beyond the Net Journal: Leveling up Pakistani Women | Internet Society. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2017/05/internet-chalao-patriarchy-dabao-leveling-up-pakistani-women/>
- Morozov, E. (2011). Two decades of the web: a utopia no longer - Prospect Magazine. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/morozov-web-no-utopia-twenty-years-short-history-internet>
- Naeem, F. (2020). Pakistan outcry over police victim-blaming of gang-raped mother. Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54186609>
- Nandagiri, R. (2017). Why feminism: some notes from 'the field' on doing feminist research. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/10/12/why-feminism-some-notes-from-the-field-on-doing-feminist-research/>
- News, B. (2020). Pakistan outcry over police victim-blaming of gang-raped mother. BBC News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54186609>.
- Pakistan may see job losses of up to 18.5 million due to Covid - Times of India. The Times of India. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-may-see-job-losses-of-up-to-18-5-million-due-to-covid/articleshow/76357441.cms>.
- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Media Center | PTA. (2020). Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/media-center/single-media/internet-usage-increases-by-15-in-pakistan-270320>

Perera, S., & Wijetunga, M. (2019). How Tiktok is a platform for performance and play for women in Sri Lanka. GenderIT.org. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.genderit.org/articles/how-tiktok-platform-performance-and-play-women-sri-lanka>.

Qureshi, Z. (2020). COVID-19:Pakistan Finance Ministry reveals 3 million jobs have been lost. Gulf News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/covid-19pakistan-finance-ministry-reveals-3-million-jobs-have-been-lost-1.71886956>.

Rajput, S. (2020). Lack of cell phone services leads to death for some women in former FATA. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/lack-of-cell-phone-services-leads-to-death-for-some-women-in-former-fata/>.

Rehman, Z. (2020). Feminist Digital Labor in Pakistan, Feminist Movements Go Online [Ebook] (2nd ed., p. 23). Lahore: Digital Rights Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.canva.com/design/DAELhTurzIE/KcxIHSRsSzVVIaheO5q9Hw/view?utm\\_content=DAELhTurzIE&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_source=publishsharelink#2](https://www.canva.com/design/DAELhTurzIE/KcxIHSRsSzVVIaheO5q9Hw/view?utm_content=DAELhTurzIE&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink#2)

Rehman, Z. (2020). Gendered Surveillance and Feminist Resistance in Pakistan. Medium. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [https://medium.com/@zoya\\_rehman/gendered-surveillance-and-feminist-resistance-in-pakistan-a27aced8f7c0](https://medium.com/@zoya_rehman/gendered-surveillance-and-feminist-resistance-in-pakistan-a27aced8f7c0).

Reporter, S. (2020). Court moved for ban on TikTok. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1568996/court-moved-for-ban-on-tiktok>.

Reporter, S. (2020). IHC asks govt to explain denial of internet to tribal regions. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1550961/ihc-asks-govt-to-explain-denial-of-internet-to-tribal-regions>.

Schoemaker, E. (2015). Pakistan's 'digital purdah': How gender segregation persists in social media. Retrieved 12 January 2021, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/08/03/pakistans-digital-purdah-how-gender-segregation-persists-in-social-media/>

Schoemaker, E. (2016). Digital Faith: Social Media and the Enactment of Religious Identity in Pakistan [Ebook]. London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from [http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker\\_digital\\_faith%20.pdf](http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3578/1/Schoemaker_digital_faith%20.pdf).

Shahid, J. (2019). USF contracts cellular operator for broadband access to Fata. Dawn. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1462321/usf-contracts-cellular-operator-for-broadband-access-to-fata>

Sial, F. (2020). COVID in Pakistan, the Role of Middle-Classes and the Unprecedented Demand for a New Social Contract. Developing Economics. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://developingeconomics.org/2020/06/26/covid-in-pakistan-the-role-of-middle-classes-and-the-unprecedented-demand-for-a-new-social-contract/>.

Syed, T. (2020). Raw unedited human emotion is what makes Bigo Live so popular. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/raw-unedited-human-emotion-is-what-makes-bigo-live-so-popular/>.

Syeda, M. (2019). The battle for 4G in the North. Profit. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/11/04/the-battle-for-4g-in-the-north/>

The Current (2020). TikTok becomes most downloaded social media app in Pakistan . The Current. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://thecurrent.pk/tiktok-becomes-most-downloaded-social-media-app-in-pakistan/>.

The News, E. (2019). No place for students. The News. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/543909-no-place-for-students>.

Waraich, M. (2020). The Ones We're Leaving Behind: How remote learning is accentuating inequalities at a provincial level. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved 13 January 2021, from <http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/the-ones-were-leaving-behind-how-remote-learning-is-accentuating-inequalities-at-a-provincial-level/>.

Woman kidnapped, raped in Clifton. (2020). Retrieved 14 January 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1581072>

# Annexure

## Annexure 1 Survey (English and Urdu versions)

1/13/2021

Gender Digital Divide Survey

### Gender Digital Divide Survey

We are grateful that you took the time to participate in this survey on the topic of the gender digital divide. This survey is part of a study that is currently being conducted by Media Matters for Democracy, in which we are trying to understand the use of the Internet by women and girls during the coronavirus lockdown. We are hoping that your answers will help us in our mission of further improving our advocacy for internet rights and bridging the digital divide in Pakistan.

The data collected through this questionnaire will be done so on the basis of anonymity. Media Matters for Democracy will not record any information that could help identify you personally. Access to this data will only be given to the research team. Individuals and team members who are not involved in this research will not have access to the data. This is important because this survey is designed on Google Forms, so the information collected through this form will be stored on Google's servers. Media Matters for Democracy will not be held responsible for any violations of Google's data protection principles.

Once the data is collected, Media Matters for Democracy will store a copy of the answers on its internal drive so that the data can be used for research purposes. This copy of the data will be stored on the internal drive only until the end of the research project. Anonymous data will also be shared with our partner organisation in the context of reporting.

Media Matters for Democracy team members use encrypted tools. Strict digital security procedures are in place for these devices and staff accounts to protect devices and accounts from the risk of data breach and unauthorised use. If you have any questions about Media Matters for Democracy's digital security and data protection policies, please email us at: [info@mediamatters.pk](mailto:info@mediamatters.pk)

\* Required

#### Basic Information

1. City \*

---



## 2. Age \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Under 20

20-25

25-30

30+

## 3. Gender \*

---

## 4. Number of people in your house \*

---

## 5. Monthly household income \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Under 20k

20-30k

30-40k

40-50k

50-60k

More than 60k

6. Do you contribute to your family's monthly income? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- A little bit.
- Significantly.
- Fully.
- Not at all.

### Internet Usage

7. How much do you use the internet? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Daily
- Often
- Sometimes
- I don't use the Internet.

8. If you don't use the Internet or use it less, what are the reasons? Tick all the options that are right for you. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- There is no internet in our area.
- I don't have a mobile phone or laptop to use the internet.
- The internet is very expensive.
- My family has placed restrictions me.
- I don't know how to use a mobile phone, laptop and the internet.
- I don't like using the internet.
- I don't have time to use the internet.
- N/A

**Internet Access and Infrastructure**

9. What are the ways to access the Internet in your area? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Only mobile internet is easily available in my area.
- Only Wi-Fi is available in my area.
- Both mobile and Wi-Fi internet are readily available in my area.
- The Internet is not easily available in my area.

10. Is there an internet connection problem in your area? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- It disconnects sometimes.
- It disconnects often.
- There is no internet whatsoever in my area.
- There are no frequent internet disconnections in my area.

11. On what device do you use the Internet? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- On my cellphone
- On my laptop/PC
- On someone else's mobile or computer at home
- I do not use the internet.

12. What kind of internet connection do you usually use? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Mobile internet
- The WiFi at home
- WiFi in other places, for example, office, workplace, school, etc.
- I do not use the internet.

### **Expenditure on Internet Access**

13. What is your opinion about the value of internet in Pakistan? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- The Internet is available at a reasonable price.
- The internet is a bit expensive.
- The cost of the Internet is beyond the reach of the average person.

14. Do you contribute to the cost of mobile internet in your home? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- I pay for my own mobile internet.
- Someone else in the house pays for the mobile internet.
- Part of the cost of mobile internet comes from my salary.
- Mobile internet is funded from the collective budget of the house.
- Mobile internet is not used in my house.

15. Do you contribute to the cost of Wi-Fi internet in your home? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- I pay for WiFi internet myself.
- Someone else in the house pays for WiFi.
- Part of the cost of WiFi comes from my salary.
- WiFi is paid from the collective budget of the house.
- I don't have WiFi internet in my house.

### Internet Usage and Economic Behaviors

16. What is the general opinion of girls in your home and family about internet use? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Girls' use of the internet is considered good.
- There are some concerns about girls using the internet.
- Girls' use of the Internet is considered bad.
- We do not have any opinions on the subject.

17. In your home or family, can boys and girls use the Internet in the same way? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- There is no significant difference between the use of the Internet by boys and girls.
- There are more restrictions on the use of girls than boys.
- Girls are not allowed to use the internet.

18. Are there any restrictions on your Internet use by your family? Tick all the options that are right for you. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Internet access is only allowed for a limited time.
- I can only use the Internet for certain tasks, such as online classes, or talking to family on the WhatsApp.
- There are no restrictions on my internet use, but I have to tell my elders or men of the house about my accounts.
- There are no restrictions on using the Internet.

### Coronavirus and the Internet

19. Did you feel the need for internet more because of the coronavirus lockdown? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

20. Does Corona cause you any additional problems using the Internet? Tick all the options that are right for you. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Lockdown has blocked access to Wi-Fi outside the home.
- With all family members at home, access to mobiles and laptops has decreased.
- The fact that the men of the family are at home has increased the restrictions on the use of the Internet.
- There were no additional Internet access problems during the lockdown.
- Other:  \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

## میڈیا میٹرز فار ڈیموکریسی صنفی ڈیجیٹل تقسیم - سروے

ہم آپ کے شکر گزار ہیں کہ آپ نے وقت نکال کر صنفی ڈیجیٹل تقسیم کے موضوع پر مبنی اس سروے میں شرکت کی۔ یہ سروے میڈیا میٹرز فار ڈیموکریسی کی جانب سے کروائی جانے والی ایک تحقیق کا حصہ ہے، جس میں ہم کورونا کے دوران خواتین اور لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کو سمجھنے کی کوشش کر رہے ہیں، اور آپ کے جوابات تحقیق کے نتائج تیار کرنے میں ہماری مدد کریں گے۔ ہمیں امید ہے کہ یہ تحقیق پاکستان میں انٹرنیٹ حقوق کے حصول کیلئے کی جانے والی وکالت میں مزید بہتری لائے گی۔

### بنیادی معلومات

شہر: \_\_\_\_\_ جنس: \_\_\_\_\_

عمر: \_\_\_\_\_ گھر میں موجود لوگوں کی تعداد: \_\_\_\_\_

- بیس سے کم
- بیس سے پچیس سال
- پچیس سے تیس سال
- تیس سال سے اوپر

گھر کی ماہانہ آمدن:

- بیس ہزار سے کم
- بیس سے تیس ہزار
- تیس سے چالیس ہزار
- چالیس سے پچاس ہزار
- پچاس سے ساٹھ ہزار
- ساٹھ ہزار سے زائد

کیا آپ اپنے خاندان کی ماہانہ آمدن میں حصہ ڈالتی ہیں؟

- تھوڑا بہت
- کافی
- کافی زیادہ
- بالکل نہیں

### انٹرنیٹ کا استعمال

آپ انٹرنیٹ کتنا استعمال کرتی ہیں؟

- روزانہ
- کبھی کبھار
- اکثر
- میں انٹرنیٹ استعمال نہیں کرتی

اگر آپ انٹرنیٹ استعمال نہیں کرتیں یا کم استعمال کرتی ہیں، تو اس کی کیا وجوہات ہیں؟ ان تمام آپشنس کو ٹک کریں جو آپ کے لئے درست ہیں۔

- ہمارے علاقے میں انٹرنیٹ کی سہولت موجود نہیں ہے
- میرے پاس انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے لئے موبائل یا لیپ ٹاپ موجود نہیں ہے
- انٹرنیٹ کی قیمت بہت زیادہ ہے
- میرے گھر والوں کی طرف سے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال پر پابندی ہے
- مجھے موبائل، لیپ ٹاپ اور انٹرنیٹ کو استعمال کرنا نہیں آتا
- مجھے انٹرنیٹ کا استعمال پسند نہیں
- میرے پاس انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے لئے وقت نہیں ہے

انفراسٹرکچر اور انٹرنیٹ تک رسائی

آپ کے علاقے میں انٹرنیٹ تک رسائی کے کون کون سے طریقے موجود ہیں؟

- صرف موبائل انٹرنیٹ با آسانی دستیاب ہے
- صرف وائی فائی با آسانی دستیاب ہے
- موبائل اور وائی فائی دونوں با آسانی موجود ہیں
- انٹرنیٹ با آسانی دستیاب نہیں ہے

کیا آپ کے علاقے میں انٹرنیٹ ڈسکنکٹ ہونے کا مسئلہ ہے؟

- کبھی کبھار ڈسکنکٹ ہوتا ہے
- اکثر ڈسکنکٹ رہتا ہے
- انٹرنیٹ موجود نہیں ہے
- کبھی بھی ڈسکنکٹ نہیں ہوتا

آپ انٹرنیٹ کس ڈیوائس پر استعمال کرتی ہیں؟

- اپنے موبائل پر
- اپنے لیپ ٹاپ یا کمپیوٹر پر
- گھر میں کسی اور کے موبائل یا کمپیوٹر پر
- انٹرنیٹ استعمال نہیں کرتیں

آپ عموماً انٹرنیٹ کس طرح کے کنکشن سے استعمال کرتی ہیں؟

- موبائل انٹرنیٹ
- گھر میں وائی فائی
- کسی اور جگہ، مثلاً، آفس، کام کرنے کی جگہ، اسکول وغیرہ میں لگا وائی فائی
- انٹرنیٹ استعمال نہیں کرتیں



## انٹرنیٹ تک رسائی کا خرچہ

پاکستان میں انٹرنیٹ کی قیمت کے بارے میں آپ کی کیا رائے ہے؟

- انٹرنیٹ معقول قیمت میں دستیاب ہے
- انٹرنیٹ کچھ مہنگا ہے
- انٹرنیٹ کی قیمت عام آدمی کی پہنچ سے زیادہ ہے۔

کیا آپ اپنے گھر میں موبائل انٹرنیٹ کے خرچے میں حصہ ڈالتی ہیں؟

- میں اپنے موبائل انٹرنیٹ کا خرچہ خود پورا کرتی ہوں
- گھر کا کوئی اور فرد موبائل انٹرنیٹ کا خرچہ دیتا ہے
- موبائل انٹرنیٹ کے خرچے کا کچھ حصہ میری تنخواہ سے جاتا ہے
- گھر کے اجتماعی بجٹ سے موبائل انٹرنیٹ کا خرچہ دیا جاتا ہے
- میرے گھر میں موبائل انٹرنیٹ استعمال نہیں کیا جاتا

کیا آپ اپنے گھر میں وائی فائی انٹرنیٹ کے خرچے میں حصہ ڈالتی ہیں؟

- میں خود وائی فائی انٹرنیٹ کا خرچہ اٹھاتی ہوں
- گھر کا کوئی اور فرد وائی فائی انٹرنیٹ کا خرچہ دیتا ہے
- وائی فائی کے خرچے کا کچھ حصہ میری تنخواہ سے جاتا ہے
- گھر کے اجتماعی بجٹ سے وائی فائی کا خرچہ دیا جاتا ہے
- میرے گھر میں وائی فائی انٹرنیٹ موجود نہیں ہے

## انٹرنیٹ کا استعمال اور معاشی رویے

آپ کے گھر اور خاندان میں لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے بارے میں عموماً کیا رائے پائی جاتی ہے؟

- لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کو اچھا سمجھا جاتا ہے
- لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے حوالے سے کچھ خدشات ہیں
- لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کو برا سمجھا جاتا ہے
- لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے بارے میں کوئی رائے نہیں ہے

آپ کے گھر یا خاندان میں، کیا لڑکے اور لڑکیاں ایک طرح انٹرنیٹ استعمال کر سکتے ہیں؟

- لڑکے اور لڑکیوں کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال میں کوئی خاص فرق نہیں
- لڑکوں کے مقابلے میں لڑکیوں کے استعمال پر کچھ پابندیاں ہیں
- لڑکیوں کو انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کی اجازت نہیں

کیا آپ کے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال پر گھر والوں کی طرف سے کوئی پابندی ہے؟ ان تمام آپشنز پر ٹک لگائیں جو آپ کے لئے درست ہیں۔

- صرف کچھ وقت کے لئے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کی اجازت ہے
- میں انٹرنیٹ صرف چند مخصوص کاموں کے لئے استعمال کر سکتی ہوں، مثلاً آن لائن کلاسز، یا خاندان سے واٹس ایپ پر بات کرنا
- میرے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال پر کوئی پابندی نہیں، مگر مجھے اپنے بڑوں یا گھر کے مردوں کو اپنے اکاؤنٹس کے بارے میں بتانا پڑتا ہے
- انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال پر کوئی پابندی نہیں۔

### کورونا اور انٹرنیٹ

کیا آپ کو کورونا اور لاک ڈاؤن کی وجہ سے انٹرنیٹ کی ضرورت زیادہ محسوس ہوئی؟

- ہاں
- نہیں

کیا کورونا کی وجہ سے آپ کو انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال میں کوئی اضافی مشکل پیش آرہی ہے؟ ان تمام آپشنز کو ٹک کریں جو آپ کے لئے درست ہیں۔

- لاک ڈاؤن کی وجہ سے گھر کے باہر وائی فائی تک رسائی بند ہو گئی ہے
- خاندان کے تمام افراد کے گھر میں ہونے کی وجہ سے موبائل اور لیپ ٹاپ ملنا کم ہو گیا ہے
- خاندان کے مردوں کے گھر میں ہونے کی وجہ سے انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال پر روک ٹوک کچھ بڑھ گئی ہے
- لاک ڈاؤن کے دوران انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال میں کوئی اضافی مشکل پیش نہیں آئی
- دیگر: \_\_\_\_\_

## Annex 2

### Consent Form for Interviewees

#### Participation Consent Form for Research Study

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of Media Matters for Democracy's (MMfD's) research study. Our ethical procedures require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- You will not be compensated monetarily for participating in this research.
- Before conducting the interview, the research investigator will call you to explain the purpose and nature of the research study, and you will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- You agree to your interview being audio-recorded. Please note that the interview will be analysed by the research investigator. Therefore, access to the recording will be limited to her and possibly 1-2 other MMfD researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process.
- You understand that all information you provide for this study will be treated **confidentially**. You also understand that in any report on the results of this research your identity will remain **anonymous**, unless you state otherwise. This will be done by changing your name and disguising any details of the interview which may reveal your identity or the identity of people you speak about.
- You understand that the general findings of the research study may be quoted in not only the publication itself but also MMfD's work in the future.
- The interview recording will be destroyed after the publication of the research.
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.
- You may refuse to answer any question at any point if you feel uncomfortable. You may also contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of Research Participant (with date)

---

***Research Investigator: "I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this research study."***

Signature of Research Investigator (with date)

## Annex 3

### Questionnaires for the Case Studies

#### *Questionnaire for Case Study 1*

##### GDD Research - healthcare case study

- 1) Tell me about yourself, what do you do, where you are from?
- 2) Why did you decide to become a journalist? Do you think it has helped the region, or women's situation in the region?
- 3) How has your experience been working as the first woman journalist from your region?
- 4) Were there any restrictions and reservations that you had to face while you were starting your career? How did people around you react?
- 5) Has your decision of becoming a journalist that requires a lot of outdoor work, inspired more women to join this field?
- 6) Are women allowed to mobilise and navigate public spaces freely? What do the dynamics currently look like?

##### **Tech access:**

- 7) Do you think women in your region have easy access to technology and the internet? Do most women, if not all, have mobile phones or internet connection?
- 8) Did you have easy access to technology and the internet? If not, do you have it now? How did the situation change for you?
- 9) There is an assumption that the internet opens a gateway of opportunities for its users. Has it helped you in any way?
- 10) How do you think your life would have been affected if you did not have access to a mobile phone? What if you didn't have access to the internet?
- 11) You helped us in collecting a lot of data for this research. Considering that the women who had been interviewed and surveyed did not have access to the internet or mobile phone for that matter, how did you go about data collection? What hurdles or limitations did you face? What methods did you use to overcome these hurdles?
- 12) As women do not have easy access to the internet or technology in Waziristan, how has it impacted them on a personal level?

##### **Implications of GDD on healthcare:**

- 13) A mobile phone is an important tool of connecting to healthcare services in the case of a medical emergency. Memoona Mehsud's example is one where her mother died during childbirth because she couldn't call an ambulance. Are there more examples of its impact on healthcare or access to healthcare for women that you can share?
- 14) Do you think COVID has exacerbated the health related impacts of the gender digital divide? Can you explain how?

- 15) Due to COVID, the use of telehealth services has grown in various urban centres. Hospitals are offering phone and Internet based consultations, telehealth only options are gaining popularity. Do women in Waziristan know of these mobile and Internet based medical services? Have you come across any women who may have used them? Do you think access to these will help women get medical support?
- 16) Reliable health and safety information is harder to reach for people without access to computers and gadgets. If women in Waziristan had easy access to the Internet, do you think it would have helped them attain knowledge and information about healthcare?
- 17) Are there other issues, like lack of digital media information literacy or lack of trust in web based digital information etc., that might hinder their ability to access and benefit from online information even if they did have infrastructural and device access?
- 18) Are medical facilities in the region, offering any phone and Internet based support to women?
- 19) Due to cultural constraints women are often reluctant to talk about reproductive health and refrain from seeking medical attention. Are there any local services that allow women to reach information and seek support for reproductive health issues through mobile and Internet?

## Questionnaire for Case Study 2

### BASIC DETAILS

1. Date and time of interview:
2. Location of interviewee:
3. Duration of interview:
4. No. of visits/interactions that have taken place so far:
5. Names of people present:

### ADDITIONAL DETAILS

No.	Name	Profession	Institute	Locale	Years of education	Which devices do you have access to (e.g. phone, laptop, etc.)

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Do you own a mobile phone? Do you own a laptop? Since when have you owned/used these devices? 5
2. Do you have an internet connection at home?
3. To what extent do you use technology and the Internet? Which social media platforms do you use?
4. How long have you been using the internet for (in a personal capacity)?
5. Does your education require some general form of reliance on technology?
6. Has your family treated your academic need for the internet and relevant devices differently from your other siblings' needs? If yes, why do you think so?
7. Have other responsibilities interfered with educational internet usage? How are you coping with this?
8. Are you satisfied with your institution's online education program?
9. Please identify the main obstacles and barriers faced by women and girls to access digital technologies and participate in digital spaces. Please elaborate on the nature of these obstacles and how they manifest themselves in practice (e.g. political, economic, social and legal factors, cultural and religious norms, education and literacy gaps, online violence, bullying and harassment, infrastructural constraints, security, affordability, lack of relevant content).
10. How important is the internet to you personally?
11. Has your use of the internet increased since the lockdown in Pakistan? How so?
12. Have you witnessed an increase in the responsibilities of women, including yourself, since the pandemic hit Pakistan?
13. Have you witnessed a decrease in women's access to technology since the pandemic hit Pakistan?

14. Have you witnessed an increase in gender-based violence since the pandemic hit Pakistan? Please elaborate.
15. Has your time for leisure decreased since the start of the coronavirus lockdown?
16. Have you been able to stay in touch with your friends and loved ones outside of your home since the lockdown started?
17. How does your family feel about your usage of technology?
18. Do you feel safe while using technology?
19. Has this feeling changed since the lockdown happened?
20. Do you feel that you are supervised by family members while you are using technology?
21. How can the industry and tech community be productively engaged in bridging the gender digital divide and improving the lived experience of women and girls online? What should be the responsibilities of different stakeholders to make digital inclusion a reality and ensure meaningful digital opportunities for all?
22. How does not having technology affect women in Pakistan?
23. Do you think technology is a positive or a negative medium? Please explain.
24. Do you find technology to be women friendly?
25. Do you ever create or produce content and share/publish it online yourself? Can you tell me more about this?

### Questionnaire for Case Study 3

#### Girl, Disconnected: On Women’s Experience of the Gender Digital Divide in Pakistan’s Higher Education

##### Interview Details:

1. Date and time of interview:  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Location of interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Duration of interview:  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. No. of visits/interactions that have taken place so far:  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Names of people present: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

##### Additional Details:

No.	Name	Designation	Institute	Locale	Years of education	Which devices do you have access to (e.g. phone, laptop, etc.)

##### Interview Guide

###### Questions

1. Could you just summarize your schooling for me? Years, your current institute, your field, etc.?
2. Does your education require some general form of reliance on technology?
3. How long have you been using the internet for (in a personal capacity)? (Example: did it start with MSN messaging?)
4. How long have you had a phone for? Did you face any challenges in getting one?
5. How long have you had a laptop/PC (+ other accessories) for? Did you face any challenges in getting one?



6. How long have you been using the internet and your phone/laptop in an academic capacity? (my example: A-level presentations)
7. Ask for a specific trajectory of contact (if schools had computer labs, if they encouraged accessing the internet, peer pressure, teachers' suggestions or assignments, etc).
8. Has your family treated your academic need for the internet and relevant devices differently from your other siblings' needs? If yes, why do you think so?
9. Have you ever been subjected to surveillance, time limit, etc. by your family?
10. If yes, have you told your instructors?
11. If not, why?
12. If yes, how have they responded to your predicament?
13. On that note, some parents are okay with academic websites but not social media. With COVID-19, many of us now need those platforms to stay in touch with the class, post questions, etc. Have you faced any resistance from your family in that regard?
14. Have other responsibilities interfered with educational internet usage? (example: needing to do chores during zoom calls but video needs to be turned on, looking after a baby, general noise, etc)
15. How have you coped with that?
16. Have you shared that with your instructors? If not, why? If yes, how did they respond?
17. Have your conditions interfered with educational internet usage? (example: bandwidth limit, living space, the need for purdah, poor connectivity, power shortages, etc)
18. How have you coped with that?
19. Have you shared that with your instructors? If not, why? If yes, how did they respond?
20. With education going online, course components have changed. For example, we now have Zoom breakout rooms instead of group work. How has that impacted your academics?
21. Has this transition affected your mental health? If yes, how?
22. Studying also involves homework and personal offline work. Has that changed since the lockdown? Do you now do it in a new space, with different habits, on a different time schedule?
23. Has your view of your institute changed because of the way they've handled online education? If yes, could you elaborate?
24. Has your relationship with your teachers changed because of the way they've responded to students' concerns? If yes, could you elaborate?
25. Has your view of your life and your self-assessment changed post-lockdown? If yes, could you elaborate?

### About MMFD:

Media Matters for Democracy works to defend the freedom of expression, media, Internet, and communications in Pakistan. The main premise of our work is to push for a truly independent and inclusive media and cyberspace where the citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We undertake various initiatives including but not limited to training, policy research, movement building and strategic litigation to further our organizational goals. We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MMfD recognises diversity and inclusion as a core value of democracy and thus all our programs have a strong focus on fostering values and skills that enable and empower women, minority communities, and other marginalized groups.

