

## A CASE STUDY FROM PAKISTAN

# WHEN WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS ARE DEEMED "BLASPHEMOUS"

**Keywords:** accessing private data; faking personal data; repeated harassment; threats of violence; threats of rape; sharing private information; abusive comments; human rights defenders; emotional harm; harm to reputation; mobility limited; invasion of privacy; censorship; Facebook; Twitter; blog; news website; abuser is unknown; many abusers; leaving platform; reported to platform; platform takes action against abuser; platform deems no action necessary; survivor's age is 31-45

### THE STORY AND THE VIOLENCE

Bayhaya, 39, is a human rights defender who hails from upper-middle-class urban Pakistan. As part of her work, Bayhaya developed a campaign in response to certain right-wing narratives that were gaining traction at the time. This campaign was disseminated widely across social media and reported on by a media organisation, which uploaded the story onto its website. But not long after the story was published, abusive comments and online violence began with such ferocity that the piece about Bayhaya was removed.

Bayhaya and her female colleagues and fellow activists – as well as the employees of the media organisation – were made victims of extreme online sexual violence. Several people swore to rape and kill her, innumerable Facebook pages targeting her and her colleagues began to appear, and hate tweets were sent out by the thousands. Interestingly, the abuse hurled at Bayhaya's male colleagues targeted their wives, mothers or daughters, none of whom were involved with the campaign. This is indicative of the gendered motivations behind the violence.

Once Bayhaya learned of the abuse, she immediately deactivated her Facebook and Twitter accounts; however, large amounts of her personal data, including her photographs, had already been stolen and re-

published. Her face was used for posters in which arrows pointed at her, calling on people to identify "the woman who has insulted the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed." In other words, Bayhaya's campaign was implicitly accused of blasphemy, and related hate speech called on people to "hang this woman in a public square." The risks associated with the accusation of blasphemy – from violence to murder – led to Bayhaya removing all traces of her campaign from social media. This too proved difficult, because while Bayhaya wanted to "kill the hashtag" associated with the campaign, many of her supporters were using it to defend her. However, in her mind this only increased the visibility of the case, which goes to show that support from an online community may not always be in a survivor's best interests.

During the first outbreak of violence, Bayhaya's employees were afraid to come into work. She herself felt both fear and anxiety, and as she says, "I was traumatised, no two ways about it." The terror she felt sitting at home and looking at her computer screen was something she had never experienced before, including during public protests and actions for similar issues. She recalls, "The second day in the afternoon I was alone at home and the bell rang. I was frightened out of my wits. I picked up my cricket bat and went to the door thinking, 'Somebody's come to kill me. Or rape me.' [But] it was just the water delivery man." Bayhaya also felt a certain amount of guilt

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for exposing the younger women who work with her to danger.

For Bayhaya, the severe sexual violence she faced online – such as violent and graphic threats of rape – were barely an issue in relation to the allegations of blasphemy, which held far graver consequences.

## SEEKING JUSTICE

Bayhaya did not make a complaint to the police, and when asked about it, she responds, "Look, we all know how law enforcement works in this country." Her comment echoes the sentiments of many people in Pakistan – and in particular, many women – who are suspicious of law enforcement agencies and processes. One of the reasons she did not report the situation was because *she felt the police would say that she deserved what happened to her.*

A *fear of blasphemy charges* also prevented Bayhaya from contacting the police. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are vague about what constitutes blasphemy; however, the police are quick to register a First Information Report (FIR) in incidents where someone is accused of the crime. In Bayhaya's case, a senior journalist had to ask several police stations not to register a blasphemy case against Bayhaya or her colleagues. In the past, several well-known public figures accused of blasphemy have been imprisoned, murdered or forced into hiding. Because the responsibility of meting out justice in the face of blasphemy accusations is often left to citizens, and in particular religious groups, there is a *lawlessness that surrounds the issue of blasphemy that renders legal instruments useless.*

Bayhaya *did not consider reporting the sexual violence*, which was of less importance in her mind than

evading the blasphemy charges. The younger women human rights defenders who were also targeted by sexual violence did not report it for *fear of their families learning about the sexualised nature of the abuse*, which included accusing the girls of having sexual relationships.

Insofar as accessing justice through internet intermediaries goes, *Twitter's lengthy reporting mechanism was a barrier to justice*, since Bayhaya says she "just did not have the mind space" to go through the process. *Facebook's reporting mechanisms were more effective* when she reported the abuse herself (rather than her friends or supporters). She does wonder how effective the response would have been were the abuse only verbal, since *Facebook does not accept translations*. In this case, because her personal photographs had been used to create parody accounts, *Facebook closed down several of the offending pages on the basis of privacy violation.*

## FINDING AGENCY

When Bayhaya first learned of the abuse, *she deactivated her Facebook and Twitter accounts*, and when she did finally return to social media *she avoided looking at any of the abusive content*. During the worst periods of violence *her friends and family were a great source of support*; however, there was little they could actually do to rectify the situation. Bayhaya *chose not to accept any extra security measures* for fear of worsening the situation and aggravating her aggressors. *Removing her campaign from social media* proved to be the most effective strategy in curbing the extent of the threats, though at the same time it limited her own freedom of expression.



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