

Understanding Gendered Experiences of Harassment Among Pakistani Young Adults Using Human-Centered Threat Modeling

Warda Usman*
Computer Science Department
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah, USA
warda.pieas@gmail.com

Taha Taha*
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana, USA
CISPA Helmholtz Center for
Information Security
Saarbrücken, Germany
tahat@purdue.edu

Saba Iqbal
Computer Science
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah, USA
isaba@byu.edu

Amna Batool
School of Information
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, USA
Keough School of Global Affairs
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana, USA
abatool@umich.edu

Daniel Zappala
Computer Science Department
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah, USA
zappala@cs.byu.edu

Abstract

Harassment impacts the safety and well-being of young adults in Pakistan. Prior research has largely focused on women, often imposing external definitions of harm and overlooking how individuals themselves understand and respond to harassment. This study examines how Pakistani young adults define, experience, and cope with harassment. Drawing on 33 semi-structured interviews guided by a human-centered threat modeling framework, we surface context-specific threat models. Participants' definitions of harassment were shaped by gender norms, religious values, and moral judgments. Women described harassment as a routine part of life, tied to public visibility, modesty norms. Men also reported harassment, though framed by different dynamics such as pressure to maintain control, avoid vulnerability, and conform to masculinity. Across participants, formal reporting pathways were viewed as untrustworthy or unsafe. Our findings highlight the need for interventions that reflect local definitions of harm, address relational adversaries, and support safety within sociocultural contexts.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy**.

*Both authors contributed equally to this research.

Keywords

Human Centered Threat Modeling, Harassment, Pakistan, Young adults, Gender

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1 Introduction

Harassment is a pervasive and deeply harmful behavior that shapes how people move through public, private, and digital spaces [4]. For young adults, it can constrain educational opportunities, undermine emotional well-being, and instill long-term fear or self-surveillance [15]. In Pakistan, cultural, social, and legal factors, including deeply rooted gender norms, create a unique and often more hostile landscape for harassment [7]. Yet, despite growing awareness of the risks faced by youth in patriarchal societies, the lived realities of how harassment is defined, experienced, and navigated remain underexamined in security and privacy research.

Prior studies on harassment in South Asia have made critical strides by documenting women's experiences with digital abuse, moral policing, and the limits of platform protections [4, 6, 8, 43, 62, 64, 66, 72]. However, much of this research adopts externally imposed definitions of harassment and rarely accounts for how individuals themselves define, interpret, and classify harassment in their social worlds. This matters because definitions of harassment are not universal: they are socially constructed and are deeply shaped by gender, sexuality, race, class, caste, religion, and other intersecting social factors and identities. Without understanding how people themselves perceive the threat and harms of harassment, and how it blurs the boundaries between digital and physical spaces,



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efforts to prevent or mitigate harassment risk being misaligned or ineffective.

Moreover, the experiences of men are largely missing from this body of work. To our knowledge, there is no systematic empirical research on how young men in Pakistan experience, interpret, or respond to harassment. This absence reinforces the idea that harassment is exclusively a women's issue, ignoring how gendered expectations of masculinity, silence, and strength may shape men's own encounters with harm and constrain their ability to name or report it.

To overcome these limitations, we apply the Human-Centered Threat Modeling (HCTM) framework developed by Usman et al. [78] to study harassment experiences of young adults, both men and women, in Pakistan. The HCTM framework offers "a process to identify how people perceive and respond to risks to themselves" [78]. Using this lens, we surface how young adults in Pakistan define harassment, describe their experiences, and develop strategies to cope with or avoid it. The framework enables a contextual inquiry into not just perceived threats, but also the broader sociotechnical conditions that shape them: including family structures, socioeconomic status, gender norms, institutional trust, and access to recourse.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 33 young adults in Pakistan, 17 men and 16 women, aged 18–25. Interviews were designed to elicit participant-defined understandings of harassment, their experiences across digital and physical settings, and their coping and protective strategies. Rather than assume what counted as harassment, we asked participants to define it themselves. We then analyzed these narratives using a combination of inductive thematic coding and the HCTM lens to identify perceived threats, contextual risk factors, and the sociotechnical constraints that shaped participants' responses.

Our findings show that harassment is not experienced or understood uniformly. Women described it as a near-constant threat tied to visibility, mobility, and moral judgment, while men described experiences of reputational harm, sexual coercion, and political silencing—many of which they hesitated to label as harassment. Participants across gender lines distrusted formal reporting mechanisms, instead relying on behavioral regulation, silence, and informal support networks. These findings reveal divergent yet intersecting threat models rooted in cultural norms, institutional distrust, and social risk.

We also find that harassment in Pakistan operates on an online-offline continuum. Digital actions, such as sharing a photo online, often invite physical consequences (e.g., violence or mobility restrictions), while offline norms (e.g., modesty norms, expectations of gender segregation, etc.) dictate digital behaviors. In line with Sambasivan et al.'s account of boundary-crossing harassment [64], and drawing on Toyama's theory of technological amplification [75], we find that technology magnified the social forces and human intent already in place, such as moral scrutiny, gendered expectations, and the asymmetries of power embedded in family and peer relationships and often simply provides new tools for committing old forms of harm [59]. These digital-physical dynamics make clear that improving safety for young adults in Pakistan requires coordinated interventions across technology, policy, and social norms.

While technology is a critical site of both amplification and mitigation, it cannot, on its own, overcome the structural and cultural forces that sustain harassment.

Overall, our study makes the following contributions:

- **Empirical:** We contribute a grounded account of gendered harassment threat models among Pakistani young adults, including the often-overlooked experiences and perspectives of men.
- **Methodological:** We extend the human-centered threat modeling framework to the domain of harassment, showing how a holistic lens that attends to sociocultural context, lived experience, and structural barriers can surface nuanced and context-specific threat models.
- **Conceptual:** We demonstrate how harassment threat models span digital and physical spaces, and how harms are enacted not only by strangers or technical adversaries, but also by known actors such as teachers, peers, and relatives. These findings challenge dominant security paradigms and call for a broader rethinking of who constitutes an adversary in security and privacy research.

2 Related Work

2.1 Defining Harassment

Harassment is commonly understood in psychology and sociology as interpersonal aggression involving repetition, intent, and power imbalance [56]. Within gender and harassment studies, Fitzgerald et al.'s Tripartite Model is widely used to classify sexual harassment into gender harassment (hostile or derogatory behavior based on gender), unwanted sexual attention (uninvited and unwelcome sexual behaviors), and sexual coercion (pressuring or threatening someone for sexual cooperation) [31].

These definitions, however, are not universal. Scholars note that harassment is socially constructed and conditioned by gender, cultural, legal, and moral norms [10, 13, 23, 27, 32, 61]. In South Asia, for example, public-space harassment is often euphemistically described as "eve-teasing", a term that downplays harm and normalizes behaviors like stalking or groping [64]. Similarly, online definitions often fail to capture the complexity of harm. Blackwell et al.'s analysis of victim reports on HeartMob (an online support platform for people targeted by harassment) demonstrates that online harassment involves diverse, overlapping behaviors that vary by context and defy standardized platform classifications [12].

Across both online and offline settings, research consistently finds a gap between formal definitions of harassment and how people interpret and label their own experiences. Studies in Western contexts find that many people, including young adults, avoid using the term *harassment* unless the behavior is extreme or repeated, while others reject the label entirely to avoid stigma or blame [52]. In Pakistan, studies with young women reveal that street harassment victims *neglect to perceive or mark the issue* due to normalization, fear or choose silence to avoid defaming their families. [42].

These definitional mismatches extend beyond academic debate. Narrow technical classifications of harassment determine which harms are recognized by law, what legal remedies victims are able to seek, how platforms categorize and moderate problematic behavior,

and how civil society organizations design prevention and support mechanisms. When formal definitions fail to capture context-specific harms, victims may struggle to pursue justice, platforms may overlook culturally salient abuse, and interventions may misalign with local experiences.

Given these definitional complexities, we foreground participant-generated understandings of harassment rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks. This approach allows us to reveal how harassment is conceptualized in everyday life and varies by gender.

2.2 Intersectional Dynamics of Harassment

Harassment is widely recognized as a deeply gendered phenomenon [11, 16]. Across both offline and online settings, women experience disproportionately high levels of sexual harassment compared to men, with global estimates ranging from 40–60% in offline contexts [76], and between 16–58% in online settings [58, 70].

Men also experience harassment. Global surveys indicate men report slightly higher rates than women (43% vs 38%), though their encounters typically involve non-sexual aggression like name-calling or physical threats [11, 39, 58]. In South Asia, boys similarly face multiple forms of harassment, yet discussing their victimization remains a significant cultural taboo [47]. Feminist scholars argue that these gendered differences reflect broader social norms, where harassment against men often challenges masculinity or status, while harassment against women frequently takes sexualized forms of control over their bodies and sexuality [44, 71].

Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity explains that dominant cultural ideals of manhood discourage men from recognizing vulnerability [20]. Empirical research in gender studies confirms men hold narrower definitions of sexual harassment, recognizing only overt behaviors as harmful [26, 38, 63], whereas women identify a broader range of behaviors, including subtle or ambiguous actions, that create discomfort or fear. These findings align with feminist scholarship [44, 71] on women’s attunement to boundary violations, and they complement masculinity research demonstrating that men are socialized to minimize behaviors that do not threaten their safety or identity [26, 28].

Intersectional scholarship further shows that harassment reinforces social hierarchies. Marginalized groups, including racial [22] and religious minorities [34], LGBTQ+ individuals [51, 60, 67, 79], and children [17, 33, 49, 80], experience compounded forms of harassment targeting multiple aspects of their identity. For example, Black, Indigenous and other women of color endure simultaneous racist and sexist abuse, magnifying its psychological and social consequences [22]. LGBTQ+ communities face elevated rates of verbal transphobic sexual harassment, coercion, or aggression often linked to hostility toward their gender or sexual identities [51, 60, 67, 79]. Religious or ethnic minority groups and feminist activists encounter compounded attacks on their gender and group identity [4, 34, 76]. Caste and class, similarly, influence victimization and the virulence of harassment, particularly in South Asia [47]. Although this paper centers on gender, we acknowledge that harassment reinforces broader power asymmetries, disproportionately targeting individuals at marginalized intersections across offline and online environments.

2.3 Contextual Dynamics of Harassment

The social and cultural contexts significantly shape the forms and perceived severity of harassment. A 14-country study found men outside the United States (US) often rated online harassment scenarios as more harmful than American women, illustrating the influence of cultural values [66]. In many non-Western settings, insults or rumors threatening family honor are viewed as especially damaging [8, 66].

Contextual differences not only shape what is considered abusive, but also determine whether interventions developed elsewhere can function effectively, rendering a “one-size-fits-all” approach inadequate. Prior work also shows that safety solutions designed for Western settings often fail where social norms and institutional supports differ. For example, Sultana et al. note that an emergency phone button proved ineffective in communities where violence was primarily domestic and no social or institutional actor was willing to intervene [72, 73]. This illustrates that technological interventions rely on non-universal assumptions about social infrastructure.

2.4 Harassment in South Asia and Pakistan

In South Asia, and Pakistan in particular, harassment is deeply intertwined with patriarchal structures and sociocultural norms. Studies show that Pakistani women often rely on women-only digital spaces, such as private Facebook groups, to seek support in the absence of trusted formal reporting channels [4, 6, 8, 64, 81]. Other studies document threats faced by Pakistani women, including stalking, harassment, and content leakage, with coping strategies like self-censorship and withdrawal reflecting limited avenues for protection [37].

These coping strategies are shaped by local understandings of privacy, modesty, and legality in Pakistan [8]. Patriarchal norms and close family monitoring often extend into digital environments, leading women to adopt what Sambasivan et al. describe as *performative privacy* practices such as deleting call logs, using multiple SIM cards, or concealing their phone use [64, 65]. Even seemingly protective advice from family, such as encouraging women to use non-face profile photos to avoid reputational harm, further restricts online autonomy. These practices reflect broader conditions where privacy is shaped by shared devices, moral surveillance, and reliance on family rather than institutions for protection [55, 65].

Although prior work documents the gendered and culturally embedded nature of harassment across global, South Asian, and Pakistani contexts, several gaps remain. Women’s experiences dominate the literature, while men’s victimization is rarely discussed due to masculinity norms that discourage acknowledging vulnerability and concerns about overshadowing severe harms faced by women. This silence obscures men’s vulnerabilities and limits a holistic understanding of how harassment operates across gender in conservative sociocultural settings. Existing scholarship also offers little insight into how men and women position themselves within the dynamics of harassment beyond the familiar framing of men as perpetrators and women as victims. This gap leaves unexplored how gendered expectations and patriarchal norms may shape not only individuals’ experiences of harassment, but also the self-roles through which they interpret their experiences. Prior studies also rely on externally defined typologies, which often overlook how

men and women within the same non-Western context define harassment and respond to harassment. We address these gaps by foregrounding participant-defined meanings of harassment, and by examining how men and women in Pakistan conceptualize, experience, and seek remedies for it, shaped by the distinct gender roles they inhabit within patriarchal norms.

Below, we briefly outline the broader legal landscape governing harassment across global and South Asian contexts particularly Pakistan to give readers a general sense of how different jurisdictions regulate online and offline harms.

2.5 Global Legal Framework of Harassment

Globally, most countries regulate offline and online harassment through separate legal instruments. In the US and European Union, offline harassment falls under criminal and workplace laws, while digital abuses are governed by dedicated cybercrime and platform-regulation frameworks [2, 19, 77]. In addition, federal criminal laws have evolved to address emerging online offenses and broaden definitions of harassment. For example, 18 U.S. Code § 2261A, the primary federal stalking statute, now explicitly covers both offline stalking and cyberstalking [77].

In South Asia, countries like India and Bangladesh follow a similar dual structure: penal codes criminalize offline harassment and sexual intimidation [25, 48], while ICT laws address digital abuse [35]. Although varying in scope and enforcement, these systems consistently manage physical and digital harms through parallel regimes.

In line with these countries, harassment in Pakistan is governed through two primary legal frameworks that separately address online and offline spaces. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) [36] 2016 criminalizes various forms of online harassment, including the dissemination of false information that harms an individual's reputation, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and persistent unwanted digital contact such as cyberstalking. These cases are overseen by the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) Cyber Crime Wing [29], which is tasked with collecting digital evidence and coordinating with service providers to pursue offenders. Civil society organizations, such as the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) [24], supplement these government efforts by providing legal aid and trauma-informed counseling to victims. While these legal mechanisms exist on paper, implementation remains inconsistent. Many citizens remain unaware of their rights or distrust State agencies, leading to widespread underreporting.

Offline harassment, particularly in public spaces, is addressed by the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). Section 509 of the PPC covers verbal and gestural harassment, while Section 354 deals with physical harassment. More severe acts, such as public stripping or parading, fall under Section 354-A and carry significant penalties, including life imprisonment or death. Despite the apparent strength of these laws, cultural stigma, systemic bias, and procedural barriers often prevent victims from pursuing justice. Many individuals fear that reporting harassment will result in reputational harm or retaliation, a reality that helps explain why victims, especially women, frequently avoid formal reporting channels. These systemic gaps

between legal frameworks and lived realities provide an important backdrop for understanding participants' pervasive distrust of formal authorities in this study.

2.6 Human-Centered Threat Modeling

Human-Centered Threat Modeling (HCTM) is an emerging framework that extends traditional threat modeling beyond technical systems to focus on people and their lived experiences of harm. Traditional threat modeling approaches, common in computer security, identify threats by focusing on a computer system and then mapping technical vulnerabilities and external adversaries. HCTM shifts this focus by centering people rather than systems, examining how individuals perceive threats to themselves, who they see as adversaries, and the strategies they use to protect themselves, grounding these insights in their cultural, relational, and technological contexts [78]. HCTM comprises four interconnected components: context, or the social, cultural, and technological environments in which risks emerge; threats, the concerns or harms participants identify; protective strategies, the actions they take to mitigate these risks; and reflection, the process of evaluating what strategies work, what barriers persist, and what systemic changes are needed.

Our analysis is guided by HCTM, which allows us to surface context-specific threat models rooted in participants' lived realities. Through this lens, we examine how young adults in Pakistan navigate interconnected offline and online risks, and how their protective strategies are shaped by distrust of institutions, cultural norms, and relational power dynamics. HCTM helps move security and privacy research beyond models focused solely on technical systems or anonymous external adversaries, bringing attention to the sociotechnical conditions that enable harassment to persist. This framework enables us to highlight not only the harms participants face but also the nuanced ways they resist, adapt, and cope, offering a more holistic understanding of harassment as both a social and technical problem.

3 Methods

3.1 Study Design and Recruitment

Our recruitment strategy emerged from two months of fieldwork by the first author, who traveled to Pakistan to build rapport, establish recruitment channels, and assess the feasibility and ethics of data collection. This fieldwork also included 12 pilot interviews (7F, 5M), which helped refine the study protocol and surface culturally grounded considerations around safety, comfort, and accessibility.

While we initially sought to recruit across a range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, conversations with women from low-literate, low-income communities revealed deep concerns about the risks of discussing harassment. Several women shared that discussing harassment could result in being labeled *be-sharam* (shameless), a label that carries serious social and economic repercussions. As one female domestic worker explained, "no one hires besharam women in their houses," referencing domestic work, which is the primary form of paid labor for many in her community. Interviews with men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds similarly revealed substantial discomfort with the topic. Although they did not provide specific reasons, several male pilot participants

ended the conversation early, mentioning excuses to go. As a result, pilot durations ranged from approximately 8 to 60 minutes, with the shortest sessions reflecting cases where men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds declined to continue beyond initial questions. Although we maintained strict confidentiality protocols, we did not attempt to persuade anyone who expressed hesitation. We took their concerns seriously and concluded that we could not reliably prevent community-level disclosure or discomfort outside our control. To minimize reputational risk, we therefore chose not to formally recruit from these groups.

Since our interview guide was grounded in a participant-centered approach that emphasized individuals' own interpretations and lived experiences [68], it was independent of literacy or socioeconomic background. As a result, the decision to exclude low-literate individuals did not require substantial content changes to the guide, but instead the pilots informed procedural decisions around safety and comfort in the study design.

During pilot conversations, both men and women expressed that one-on-one interviews felt more private and emotionally safe than focus groups. Women also noted that leaving the house to meet for an interview was difficult due to familial and logistical constraints. Men similarly shared that meeting in person posed challenges related to commute time and finding a location that is safe, private, and convenient. To address these concerns, we adopted a fully remote format for all interviews, and conducted the study over Zoom with the camera turned off.

Feedback from these pilot interviews guided minor refinements to our interview protocol. For instance, we initially asked participants to define harassment at the start of the interview. We observed that starting with a definition led participants to overthink how they wanted to conceptualize harassment, which then constrained how they talked about their experiences. To support more organic and experience-driven narratives, we moved the definition question to the end of the interview. We also ensured that male participants were interviewed by a male researcher and female participants by a female researcher.

We consulted with local contacts during fieldwork to determine an appropriate compensation amount. Participants were paid 2,500 PKR, which was considered respectful of their time without being coercive.

We circulated digital flyers in English and Urdu in WhatsApp groups associated with universities in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. From there, the flyer was organically shared across broader networks, reaching participants from a range of geographic and institutional backgrounds. The flyer outlined the study's goal of examining the harassment experiences of young adults in Pakistan. Our recruitment criteria did not require participants to have personally experienced harassment; we were broadly interested in their perceptions and threat models. We advertised the topic explicitly and very transparently, so that participants would not feel surprised by a sensitive subject, even though this may have reduced participation among those reluctant to discuss it. In practice, all participants ultimately chose to share personal experiences. Our eligibility criteria required participants to be 18–26 years old, to have lived in Pakistan for at least the past ten years, to be able to participate in Urdu or English. All recruitment materials (including eligibility criteria and screening questions) are available [here](#).

3.2 Interview Protocol

We invited participants to sign up through a Google form linked in our recruitment flyer. After confirming eligibility, we scheduled one-on-one interviews, each lasting between 26–57 minutes (average = 41). Interviews generally followed the protocol in Appendix A. Figure 1 illustrates the components and structure of the interview, which were primarily informed by the HCTM framework [78].

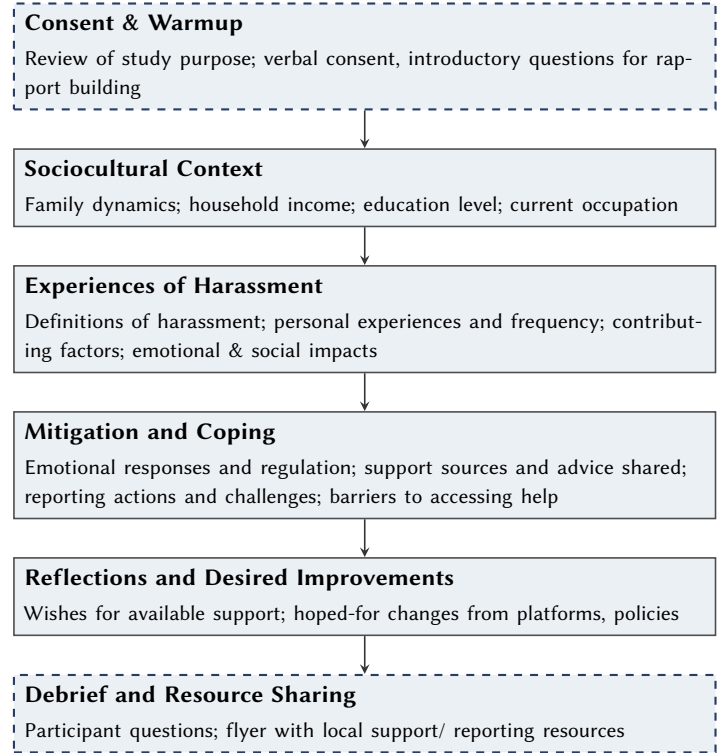


Figure 1: Components of the semi-structured interview.

3.3 Demographics

We interviewed 33 Pakistani young adults between November 2024 and June 2025. 17 of them are male, and 16 are female. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics.

3.4 Data Analysis

Our interviews were primarily conducted in the Urdu language. However, participants were given the option to use English if they felt more comfortable. We transcribed all audio recordings into Roman Urdu (i.e., the transliteration of Urdu using the Latin script) to prepare the data for analysis. Urdu interviews were manually transcribed without translation to retain original language and meaning. The researchers who conducted the analysis are native Urdu speakers.

We conducted a thematic analysis to examine how young adults in Pakistan define, experience, and respond to harassment. We followed an iterative process in which data collection and analysis occurred in parallel. Inspired by Fereday and Cochrane [30], our

ID	Age	Marital Status	Education	City	Family Income
F1	19	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Multan	50,000
F2	22	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Lahore	700,000
F3	20	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Karachi	300,000
F4	20	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Multan	60,000
F5	22	Single	Bachelor's degree	Wah Cantt	90,000
F6	22	Engaged	Fsc/ O/A levels	Quetta	300,000
F7	18	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Lahore	500,000
F8	23	Engaged	Bachelor's degree	Rawalpindi	9,000,000
F9	20	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Quetta	250,000
F10	25	Single	Master's degree	Islamabad	50,000
F11	19	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	60,000
F12	19	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	500,000
F13	25	Married	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	500,000
F14	23	Single	Bachelor's degree	Karachi	400,000
F15	24	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	400,000
F16	20	Single	Bachelor's degree	Multan	50,000
M1	20	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	400,000
M2	21	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	40,000
M3	22	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	37,000
M4	21	Single	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	65,000
M5	25	Single	Bachelor's degree	Okara	250,000
M6	20	Single	Bachelor's degree	Faisalabad	70,000
M7	21	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Shujabad	150,000
M8	22	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Sheikhupura	30,000
M9	19	Single	Bachelor's degree	Muzaffargarh	Not disclosed
M10	20	Single	Bachelor's degree	Layyah	40,000
M11	20	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Kasur	50,000
M12	22	Single	Bachelor's degree	Muzaffargarh	30,000
M13	22	Engaged	Bachelor's degree	Lahore	100,000
M14	21	Single	Professional degree	Lahore	200,000
M15	18	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Lahore	100,000
M16	22	Single	Bachelor's degree	Karachi	70,000
M17	22	Single	Fsc/ O/A levels	Karachi	600,000

Table 1: Participant Demographics. M denotes male, and F denotes female.

analysis used a hybrid approach that combined both inductive and deductive approaches. Consistent with prior work [14, 37], we employed a data-driven inductive process, using open coding to analyze participants' harassment narratives and allowing categories and themes to emerge directly from the data itself. This ensured the findings were grounded in the participants' own language and allowed unexpected or novel patterns to surface. Concurrently, we used the HCTM framework [78] as a deductive lens, following the a priori template-of-codes approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller [21] throughout the analysis. Since the framework is not prescriptive, it did not determine an initial codebook; rather, it guided what we were attentive to as we coded and later helped us organize the inductive themes across its four components – Context, Threats, Protective Strategies, and Reflection.

Three researchers collaboratively coded a subset of transcripts to develop a shared codebook. The codebook included code names, brief definitions, and example excerpts, and it was iteratively refined as new patterns emerged. Throughout coding, we used the HCTM components as higher-level analytic categories to support organizing and comparing inductively derived codes. We then consolidated related inductive codes (e.g., boundary violation, photo-based coercion, victim-blaming, etc.) into candidate themes (e.g., definitions of harassment, perceived effect of religiosity, causes of harassment, etc.), and reviewed these themes across transcripts to ensure they consistently represented participants' narratives. Any disagreements between the coders were resolved through

discussion until consensus was reached. After reaching consensus on the initial set of codes and their definitions, we divided the remaining transcripts among the team for independent coding.

Each researcher independently coded their assigned interviews, and we conducted regular discussions to compare interpretations, refine code definitions, and ensure consistency. Throughout the analysis, we took detailed memos and interim summaries to support theme development and to document emerging interpretations. Both male and female researchers analyzed interviews with men and women to maintain perspective balance and reduce interpretive bias.

When presenting findings throughout the paper, we separate accounts by gender only where men's and women's experiences diverged, and we present them together where experiences were shared.

The role of technology: Our analytic approach treats technology as intertwined with, rather than separate from, participants' everyday social worlds. We adopt a sociotechnical perspective in which online and offline harassment shape one another, consistent with prior qualitative security research showing that digital threats often spill into physical spaces and interpersonal relationships (e.g., [50, 62]). Because of this, our coding did not focus solely on technology-mediated harms; instead, we treated digital platforms, communication tools, and in-person interactions as part of a shared sociotechnical landscape. This allowed us to develop a more holistic view of participants' harassment experiences, in line with the HCTM framework's emphasis on situating threats within their

broader social context [78]. Accordingly, our findings interweave online and offline experiences rather than separating them into distinct categories.

3.5 Researchers' Positionality

Researchers' identities and positionality shape both methodological choices and interpretation of findings [40]. Our team includes three Pakistani women, one Pakistani man, and one American man. The team includes both Urdu and English speakers, which helped navigate language and cultural nuances during data collection and analysis. Sharing cultural and linguistic backgrounds with participants may have supported deeper disclosure during interviews. We recognize that our interpretations are shaped by our own subjectivities and experiences.

All team members have qualitative research experience ranging from two to over ten years. This range of insider and outsider perspectives allowed us to develop a holistic view of our results [46], and informed our study design, interactions with participants, and interpretation of the data.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study received expedited IRB approval from our institute. While Pakistan does not currently have enacted human subjects research regulations, we aligned our practices with the rights outlined in the 2023 Personal Data Protection Bill (PDPB), which had been approved by the Federal Cabinet but not yet passed into law at the time of the study. These rights include access, correction, erasure, objection, restriction of processing, and withdrawal of consent. Although anonymized research data is exempt under the PDPB, we chose to fully inform participants of their rights and took proactive measures to protect their privacy. To minimize risk and prioritize participant well-being, we adopted trauma-informed practices throughout the study. Interviews were conducted remotely to allow participants to speak from comfortable and private settings. We opened with warmup questions to build rapport, provided transparency about the study's goals, and gave verbal cues before sensitive topics to help participants prepare emotionally.

3.7 Limitations

Although our study offers important insights into experiences of harassment among young adults in Pakistan, several limitations should be noted. First, the study was limited to individuals identifying within the binary gender categories of male and female, excluding non-binary and gender-diverse perspectives that are often marginalized yet crucial to understanding the full spectrum of harassment. Second, participants voluntarily enrolled in a study explicitly framed around "harassment", which may have introduced selection bias, those with prior experiences or a particular interest in the topic may have been more inclined to participate. The sample size, while appropriate for exploratory qualitative research, remains small in comparison to the broader population of young Pakistani adults, and was skewed toward more educated participants, potentially limiting generalizability.

Interviews were conducted by Pakistani researchers, which may have increased participant comfort and cultural alignment, but also introduced the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly

when discussing stigmatized or sensitive experiences. Additionally, harassment is a highly sensitive and often traumatic subject; some individuals who may have offered valuable perspectives may have opted not to participate in order to avoid psychological distress. As such, our findings reflect the experiences of those who were both willing and emotionally able to speak with us, and may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across more marginalized or vulnerable groups.

4 Findings: Context

The context component of HCTM [78] focuses on the environments in which risks emerge, including the cultural norms, social relationships, and institutional forces that shape how individuals experience harm. In our study, participants' threat models were rooted in how they defined harassment, how they perceived its causes, and what risk factors they believed shaped vulnerability. These foundational understandings reveal why harassment often begins offline and why adversaries are frequently relational rather than anonymous outsiders.

4.1 Defining Harassment

4.1.1 Women: Sexual harassment as an everyday threat. Among our participants, females consistently defined harassment in terms of sexualized violation and reputational harm, describing a near-constant background threat that shaped their daily lives. This background threat was rooted in moral surveillance and the burden of protecting family reputation. Female participants' definitions were more focused on their everyday experiences of being made to feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or violated in public or digital spaces.

"Harassment is anything that makes you uncomfortable. It can be a message, a photo, a stare, someone's tone, or even their posture." (F4)

Female participants also highlighted the cumulative burden of being routinely made to feel unsafe in everyday interactions, without having done anything to invite the behavior. Some female participants described harassment as a form of social manipulation that made them question whether they were somehow at fault for what happened:

"I define harassment as something that makes you question your identity and beliefs. You start wondering if maybe you were at fault, and that's why something bad happened to you." (F6)

Others focused on technology-specific violations of personal boundaries, particularly in digital contexts, where females were pressured to appear on video calls or interact in ways that made them uncomfortable:

"To me, harassment is when someone forces themselves on you without your consent. Like when someone pressures you to join video calls just so they can look at you for their own pleasure." (F5)

4.1.2 Men: Broader harassment including structural and political harms. Male participants described harassment through a broader and more varied lens, shaped in part by exposure to political, institutional, or social forms of control.

For instance, in Pakistan's highly religious and socially conservative context, dating is widely regarded as un-Islamic and morally inappropriate. Participants described consensual dating itself as a form of harassment, considering it as a threat to the moral fabric of society. Within this framing, efforts to expose or punish couples who date were not seen as violations of privacy, but as acts of moral vigilance that deserved praise.

One participant from a public university commended the actions of a student who non-consensually recorded a couple in the university cafeteria and shared the video online. He defined harassment not as the act of recording or violating consent, but as the couple's behavior, which he viewed as degrading the university's values:

"I fully support the person who made the video and shared it, because it's always a small percentage of students who ruin the university's reputation. I admire people like him, and the whole university stood by him when the video was submitted with proof and the couple was expelled." (M2)

We found that participants' definitions of harassment were shaped by their socio-economic status, geographic context, and social environment in which they lived. For instance, one male participant from a rural arid region of Pakistan, who had grown up witnessing the unchecked authority of feudal landowners, defined harassment as the abuse of power by those in positions of control. In many rural regions of Pakistan, *waderas*, the feudal lords, continue to wield significant influence over local governance, law enforcement, and everyday life. Within this context, harassment was understood as the coercive use of power to demand obedience or extract personal gain:

"To me harassment is when someone uses their authority or power to make unfair demands or get something done for their own benefit." (M1)

In contrast, participants from urban settings often emphasized harassment by State institutions, noting instances of politically motivated forms of suppression. One participant recounted the case of a senior student who was abducted by State authorities after posting anti-government content on social media. He framed this as a form of harassment enacted by the State to silence dissent:

"[The senior student] was very vocal, but after what happened, he wasn't the same. It was clearly a traumatizing experience. And I see that as harassment too. Nowadays in Pakistan, you can't speak freely. There's no freedom of speech anymore." (M5)

Interestingly, when defining harassment, male participants left out sexual harassment, despite having described such experiences in their interviews (§5.1).

4.2 Shared Perceptions about Harassment

Participants shared a range of beliefs about why harassment happens, who commits it, and how frequently it occurs. These perceptions were shaped by media exposure, gender norms, religious values, and sociocultural understandings.

4.2.1 Why people harass. Some participants described media, including films and TV shows, as playing a central role in shaping

how people, especially men, understand relationships and boundaries. A male participant explained how repeated exposure to non-consensual pursuit after women being rewarded in South Asian films distorts public understanding of appropriate behavior:

"The public is on social media now, and what we see in our cinema or movies is that a boy touches a girl, she doesn't say anything, and eventually she falls for him and ends up with him. This shapes our psychology. The human mind is more drawn to what it sees than what it reads, so we internalize these concepts quickly. It has a harmful impact—people start applying it in real life." (M1)

Female participants also offered explanations for why men harass. Several attributed it to sexual frustration, lack of emotional intimacy, or a habitual desire for gratification. Some specifically pointed to men who live away from their wives, such as for work or education, as more likely to harass, suggesting that physical separation and unmet sexual needs contributed to their behavior. They also described harassment as something that men just do "for the thrill," when they are "bored," or when "they feel entitled to attention."

4.2.2 Who harasses (or doesn't). Both genders overwhelmingly identified men as the primary perpetrators of harassment. However, they distinguished between men who were likely versus unlikely to harass, often citing religious or educational backgrounds as mitigating factors.

"When you pray, it gives you motivation [to do good deeds]. You think, 'I just offered prayer—how could I [possibly] do something that would waste those good deeds?' A mindset forms where you tell yourself: 'I have to go pray again, so I shouldn't do anything wrong in between.'" (M14)

A female participant emphasized that harassers lacked both education and moral grounding. She distinguished between those who merely appear respectable in public and those who are genuinely educated in both religious and worldly terms. In her view, a truly educated person would not engage in such behavior:

"These people are mentally uneducated. A person who is truly educated, both religiously and in worldly knowledge, wouldn't behave this way. The ones who do are mentally unstable or psychos—but they often seem completely normal. To the world, they appear to be very good people." (F1)

4.2.3 Frequency. When asked to rate how often harassment occurs on a 1–5 scale (1 being infrequent and 5 being frequent) for themselves and others, both males and females perceived that women faced harassment more often. On average, participants ranked:

- Harassment of themselves: 2
- Harassment of other women: 5
- Harassment of other men: 2.5

These averages were consistent across genders, with individual responses aligning closely with the combined average. Participants

thus shared a common perception that women experience harassment most intensely, while men face it less frequently and often in different forms.

What stood out was the gap between participants' self-assessments and the stories they shared. Although most rated their own experiences as relatively infrequent, they nonetheless recounted numerous incidents of personal harassment. This dissonance suggests that harassment was so normalized that participants often discounted their own encounters, framing them as less significant than what "others" endured.

4.3 Perceived Risk Factors

4.3.1 Men's perceptions. While male participants acknowledged that women face harassment more frequently than men, they offered contextual explanations for this disparity. Several men attributed increased vulnerability to women's presence in public spaces, particularly when women adopt behaviors perceived as "liberal," such as dressing in ways considered attractive, driving alone, or socializing freely. They believed these visible behaviors heightened women's exposure to unwanted attention.

Participants also identified sex workers and intersex individuals as particularly vulnerable to harassment, citing the nature of sex workers' jobs and the social marginalization of intersex individuals.

Some male participants who had migrated from rural to urban areas perceived harassment to be more common in cities. They attributed this difference not to the absence of problematic behavior in rural settings, but to the differing levels of social visibility and accountability. In rural communities, participants believed that stronger social ties and communal surveillance served as deterrents, and people were less likely to engage in harassment for fear of being recognized or reported by someone in the community:

"One reason is that in [my village], we all know each other, if not personally, then through someone. So people are afraid that they might be exposed somehow. But here [in the city], someone can just walk through one street and disappear into the next—no one knows who they were or where they went." (M12)

However, prior research complicates this narrative by showing that harassment and gender-based violence also occur in rural areas but are often embedded within normalized cultural practices. For example, Buriro et al. found that in some rural communities in Pakistan, domestic violence by men was perceived as part of socio-cultural norms rather than recognized as abuse or harassment [18].

4.3.2 Women's perceptions. Many female participants agreed that harassment can happen to anyone, but described it as more commonly experienced by women, especially young girls. Several women noted that older women tend to face less harassment, and that a person's gender, appearance, demeanor, or social positioning could affect how often they are targeted.

One participant emphasized that children, especially young boys studying at Madrassas (Islamic schools), were also vulnerable:

"Harassment mostly happens to females, but sometimes when I notice, I see that younger boys, like those who often go to study with the local religious

teacher in Madrassas, also experience it. I think young children are especially targeted." (F5)

Another participant pointed out that harassment often depends on the kind of woman someone is perceived to be, particularly if she expresses herself or exercises autonomy:

"It totally depends on what she is, who she is, and what she is doing. Even in class, I see that the girls who want to feel like themselves, who wear what they want and do what they want, face criticism and harassment on a daily basis." (F6)

Other women challenged common assumptions that modest dress or religious covering prevents harassment. One participant, who began wearing the *abaya* (a modest Islamic gown) after initially not doing so, shared that she experienced no significant change in how often she was harassed. However, she described feeling more at peace, knowing she had done what she could to protect herself:

"I don't think the veil makes a difference. If someone has bad intentions, they don't care whether you're wearing a veil or not, or what kind of clothes you have on. So I don't think harassment has anything to do with the body." (F6)

These beliefs about modesty and visibility extended to the digital realm, where participants saw digital platforms as new sites for negotiating boundaries. Some females described how strict privacy settings on platforms like Facebook mirrored offline practices of *parda* (veiling or seclusion). Participants believed that women who set strong privacy controls were less likely to engage in or become targets of digital harassment. At the same time, they noted that overly strict privacy settings could provoke curiosity and unwanted attention, as others might see the restrictions as a challenge or invitation to push boundaries.

"I'm trying to say that people shouldn't be so extremely private that others start getting curious about their lives—who they are, where they're from. Because when people start getting curious like that, they use rough language to try and provoke you, to make you react." (F4)

Women who interacted freely with men, spent time with them in public or private, or were labeled as "bad" based on lifestyle were often viewed as responsible for their own victimization.

"Harassment happens more to the girls who get involved with boys, who engage in these kinds of things themselves. Let me tell you, no one just shows up at your home and forces you. The girls go to them willingly, spend time with them, and then later those same men harass them." (F10)

"I think it happens to everyone equally, but girls who get more involved with boys—like if they're really free with them—then it happens more to them." (F5)

These narratives reflect internalized cultural scripts that assign blame to women for their own harassment, especially if their behavior challenges dominant expectations around modesty, piety, or restraint.

Finally, some female participants described how women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were particularly vulnerable to

harassment and coercion—both offline and online. They noted that limited resources, financial dependence, and lack of safe housing or digital literacy created conditions in which women had fewer choices and less protection.

Table 2 summarizes our results regarding males and females perceptions of the risk factors that make a person vulnerable to harassment.

5 Findings: Threats and Protective Strategies

Participants described a wide range of harassment experiences and coping strategies that varied by gender, context, and social positioning. While male and female participants both experienced threats across physical and digital spaces, the nature of those threats, the perceived intentions behind them, and the logic behind protective strategies differed substantially. This section examines how participants conceptualized their experiences of harassment and the mechanisms they adopted to mitigate future harm.

5.1 Men's Narratives

We began the study thinking we would ask males about females experiences of harassment. However, every man in our study also shared incidents of getting harassed themselves. Here we report the experiences men shared of being harassed.

Men's accounts of harassment spanned both systemic violence and interpersonal violations. Several male participants described harassment as threats emerging from positions of institutional power, particularly the State. This practice of State-enforced disappearances has been widely reported in Pakistan, where government agencies extrajudicially abduct and detain suspected "terrorists" and their sympathizers [41, 45]. Male participants shared experiences of their acquaintances being "disappeared" by State authorities for being overly vocal against government policies online. For instance, one participant, who belonged to a wealthy family in an urban city, recounted how his school friend was abducted after posting anti-establishment content on Facebook. The participant interpreted this incident as politically motivated repression and harassment in Pakistan:

"He used to post political content... and he got abducted. He came back completely changed. It was traumatic. It made me realize that speaking out online can have real consequences for you and your family." (M5)

Harassment for men, therefore, was sometimes framed through the lens of surveillance, censorship, and enforced conformity by powerful institutions, like the State. The adversary here was not just the State but the digital surveillance infrastructure (e.g., deep packet inspection, IP tracking) even when using fake social media accounts that rendered political speech in digital spaces physically dangerous for male participants.

Male participants also described personal experiences of sexual harassment and assault, particularly in informal or poorly monitored settings. A range of harassment experiences discussed by participants involved inappropriate physical contact ("bad touch") perpetrated by strangers during rides in cars and on motorbikes, as well as in public transportation and rickshaws. The harassers were typically middle-aged or older adult men. One participant detailed

how an older man in a rickshaw initiated unwanted physical contact under the guise of friendliness. Another shared a story of how he asked for a lift on a bike and the rider touched him inappropriately.

Participants described severe forms of sexual harassment in workplace settings, including incidents that escalated to attempted rape. One participant, employed as a fashion model, recounted being targeted while alone in a room, which he described in vivid and distressing terms.

These stories disrupted a common assumption in Pakistan that men are immune to sexual harassment [5, 74] and revealed how gendered expectations of silence and strength may prevent male victims from seeking recourse [5].

The cycle of harassment. Some male participants described how experiences of *shughal* (peer teasing) shaped their interactions with females in ways that normalized control. One male participant from a low socio-economic background recounted how mocking among male friends began after he shared that he liked a girl. He perceived the repeated joking as a form of harassment directed at him.

"We were students back then and didn't really understand what love was. I told some friends I liked a girl, and after that, they just kept joking about it, always bringing up her name, over and over." (M10)

He described feeling pressured to take action, not only to demonstrate the seriousness of his feelings, but also to regain a sense of pride among his peers. His attention toward the girl, who had no involvement with him, intensified. He began gathering information about her from people in the community:

"I got caught up in trying to get her. I started asking people around, like neighbors, friends, cousins, what's her deal, what's her background." (M10)

Over time, this behavior became emotionally possessive. The participant said he felt angry when she spoke to other boys, even casually, and eventually threatened her:

"It changed my nature. If she even spoke to another boy, just randomly, I would get angry. I even went so far as to threaten her (through a Facebook message), telling her not to talk to a certain guy." (M10)

The participant stalked the girl both offline and through social media, downloaded her photos, and repeatedly sent her threatening messages. The participant did not view his actions toward the girl as harassment. He framed them as a reaction to what he saw as harassment from his male peers. Although he acknowledged his behavior had become obsessive, he saw it as a somewhat innocent outcome of social pressure.

This narrative illustrates how harassment can emerge not from an intent to harm, but from efforts to reestablish social standing in social environments where vulnerability is mocked and control is rewarded.

Further, such behaviors are often normalized and even romanticized through popular media. Bollywood films in particular have long portrayed persistent, possessive, or coercive male pursuit as a legitimate form of love, framing rejection as a challenge rather than a boundary. These tropes, widely consumed across South Asia including in Pakistan, may reinforce and motivate similar behaviors.

Risk Factor	Men's Perceptions	Women's Perceptions
Behaviors	Harassment of women linked to "liberal" behavior, such as attractive dress, public mobility, or socializing	Women expressing autonomy or dressing freely are more visible and targeted
Type of Person	"Weak" men, sex workers, intersex individuals face higher risk	Young girls, madrasa-going young boys, and socioeconomically vulnerable women are frequent targets
Geographic Context	Urban areas seen as riskier due to anonymity; rural areas framed as socially accountable	Less focus on geography; risks shaped by lack of safety, resources, and digital literacy
Cultural/Religious Norms	Not emphasized explicitly	Modest dress offers limited protection; strict digital privacy can invite curiosity
Victim-Blaming Beliefs	Not emphasized explicitly	Women blamed for harassment if they socialize with men

Table 2: Perceived harassment risk factors by gender.

As explained by cultivation theory, repeated exposure to these media narratives can shape social expectations and individual attitudes over time [57, 69].

5.1.1 Protective strategies. Male participants described adopting a variety of protective strategies in response to harassment or perceived threats. These strategies typically reflected a desire to maintain autonomy, avoid embarrassment, and navigate reputational or institutional risk. They were often framed as practical, self-directed choices aimed at avoiding uncomfortable or dangerous situations without drawing unnecessary attention.

Participants described exercising situational awareness to avoid public encounters that might lead to harassment or social discomfort. Some said they scanned public transportation before boarding, avoided areas associated with prior incidents, declined offers for rides from strangers, or opted for university-provided buses over public options. These strategies were generally described as discreet and effective.

In addition to physical navigation, participants practiced behavioral regulation to avoid becoming a target of ridicule or conflict. Some said they deliberately limited emotional expression in front of peers, maintained formal interactions with females, or chose to avoid mixed-gender settings. A few male participants described adopting religious symbols—such as growing a beard or wearing traditional clothing—to signal morality and reduce the likelihood of being perceived as inappropriate or deviant.

Men also discussed digital self-protection, particularly in response to concerns about online visibility and surveillance. Several avoided posting political content or sharing personal opinions online, especially those critical of the government. Others restricted their online engagement to trusted social circles and refrained from participating in public discussions. These strategies were typically framed as common sense measures to avoid institutional or reputational fallout.

Across these examples, men's strategies were often described as optional and effective, employed selectively in contexts where the threat was visible and concrete. Unlike female participants, male participants rarely described these practices as burdensome or emotionally exhausting. Rather, they viewed them as ways to preserve control over their environment, manage peer dynamics, and avoid exposure to unwanted scrutiny.

5.2 Women's Narratives

Female participants described harassment as a constant and deeply gendered threat that shaped how they navigated both public and digital life. Their accounts included everyday interactions and severe incidents, with harms ranging from unsolicited messages to blackmail, public groping, and sexualized staring.

Several female participants in our study described being targeted not because they had shared anything private, but simply because they were visible—through a profile picture, a public phone number, or candid photos taken without their knowledge. This visibility, they explained, was often interpreted as permission to cross boundaries. What followed was not just harassment, but a quiet, constant fear of being blamed for it.

One female participant recounted an experience from her college years, when a boy she didn't know messaged her with pictures of herself. The images were taken at public events: she was holding a poster during a group presentation, speaking at a debate, or standing with friends at a sports day. She had never posted these photos, and they weren't intimate in any way. But the boy threatened to leak them unless she agreed to be in a relationship with him, revealing how digital access could enable coercion, even when the images are non-intimate.

"They weren't private pictures, just random moments from college. But then this guy sent them to me and said that if I didn't agree to be in a relationship with him, he'd leak them." (F9)

Though the pictures were completely ordinary, the participant said people would blame her for the fact that a man had her photos in the first place.

Others shared similar experiences where seemingly polite or casual digital contact escalated into persistent and distressing harassment. One female participant described how her phone number, listed on her workplace's Facebook page, became a point of access for men she didn't know. The messages they sent weren't vulgar, but they crossed personal boundaries and illustrated how digital platforms can inadvertently facilitate unwanted contact:

"My number was on the company's Facebook page, and I had a profile picture too. So I would get random messages, like "good morning beautiful," or "can we talk?" They weren't abusive, but they still crossed a line because I didn't know these people." (F2)

Another participant described how a man overloaded her inbox by texting her from over 20 phone numbers over the span of several

days. Even after she blocked him, he kept finding new ways to contact her.

“He must have gotten my number from someone I knew. He pretended he already knew about me, and I believed him. That was my mistake – I replied once, and that was it. He kept switching numbers and harassed me for weeks.” (F1)

5.2.1 Protective strategies. Female participants described a wide range of protective strategies they used to navigate the threat of harassment in both offline and online spaces. Like male participants, their approaches involved situational awareness, behavioral regulation, and digital caution. However, despite these surface-level similarities, the nature, meaning, and burden of these strategies were profoundly different.

For female participants, protection was not an optional or occasional practice, but rather a routine condition of moving through the world. Many participants shared that they had developed these strategies from a young age, often shaped by guidance from parents, societal expectations, and firsthand experiences of harassment. Their responses reflected a constant process of self-monitoring, designed to reduce visibility, manage risk, and signal compliance with cultural norms around femininity and modesty.

Participants described using situational awareness to remain alert in public spaces. This included walking with family members, avoiding known risk locations, changing routes based on past incidents, and using assertive body language, such as giving “death stares”, to signal unapproachability. These behaviors were often habitual, rooted in a sense that harassment could happen at any time, regardless of intent or appearance.

Female participants also practiced behavioral regulation, often by modifying how they dressed, interacted, or expressed themselves. Some wore an *abaya* (a full length modest gown) or maintained a certain physical demeanor to avoid being perceived as “inviting” attention. Others avoided conversations with men, limited time spent in public, or avoided laughing or speaking loudly. While participants acknowledged that these actions did not necessarily prevent harassment, they described them as a way to feel they had done everything they could to avoid blame if something happened.

Their strategies extended to the digital realm as well. Female participants employed digital self-protection by keeping social media accounts private, avoiding posting photos, blocking or reporting suspicious users, and staying silent in group chats where men were present. Some stopped posting entirely. A few noted a paradox: being too private sometimes triggered more curiosity or suspicion, as if concealment itself provoked attempts to breach it.

Unlike male participants, female participants did not view these practices as neutral or straightforward. Instead, they spoke of the emotional toll of having to constantly anticipate and defuse threat. Many described a sense of moral pressure that even when they were harassed, they would be judged for how well they had protected themselves. This burden of proof fell disproportionately on them, reinforcing cultural narratives that linked a woman’s safety to her behavior.

Thus, while the categories of protection may appear similar across the two genders, their function and consequences were not. Male participants described using strategies to minimize disruption

to their daily lives. Female participants described using them to justify their right to exist safely in public. The difference was not only in the frequency or necessity of these practices, but in the social weight and psychological exhaustion they carried.

Table 3 summarizes the gendered effects of harassment and the coping mechanisms reported by our participants.

5.3 Findings: Reflection

5.3.1 Shared barriers to reporting and getting help. Across both online and offline contexts, participants described a shared set of barriers that shaped whether they felt able or willing to report harassment or seek help. Across genders, participants often chose not to tell their families, anticipating worry, indifference, or advice that felt dismissive. A male participant, who shared an incident in which a beggar propositioned him for sexual favors at a mosque, explained why he withheld the experience from his parents:

“I didn’t even think of telling my parents. Even if I did, they’d just casually say, ‘Stop going to the mosque.’ It wouldn’t go anywhere.” (M12)

Female participants described similar hesitations. One participant noted:

“I didn’t report it. If my dad found out, he’d say, ‘You keep bringing this stuff home. Just stay home.’ Even if I did report it, people would say it’s my fault for being online in the first place.” (F5)

Participants also described growing up in homes where sexual harassment was not something people talked about. These were not just private matters, but also taboo. Families rarely modeled open conversations about boundaries, consent, or how to respond when someone crossed a line. F7 shared why she kept quiet:

“It’s uncomfortable to talk to my parents. Even in normal things, they think, ‘You must have done something wrong.’ So I just don’t share.” (F7)

A general lack of institutional trust further discouraged disclosure. Participants expressed doubts that authorities would take their experiences seriously, and some feared that reporting might lead to retaliation or false accusations. Several male participants admitted they had never even considered reporting, citing lack of awareness of how the process worked and doubts it would be effective. One participant who was working as a waiter in a restaurant shared:

“No, I didn’t know anything about that—police, authorities, FIA. I’d never been to a police station. We didn’t have that kind of awareness. Like, who would we go with? What would we say? And besides, this industry is so unpredictable. If you file a case against someone, they could file one back on you—say that you harassed them instead.” (M8)

Likewise, female participants shared their reasons for avoiding formal channels. Some believed their experiences were “not serious enough” to report, while others feared reputational damage or unwanted attention. As one explained, speaking up could quickly escalate into gossip and dishonor for the entire family:

“We’ve been taught since childhood that a girl’s honor can be ruined so quickly. I’m from [city known for its strong religious and patriarchal norms], and things

Category	Men	Women
Social Consequence	Subject to peer ridicule when showing vulnerability or victimization	Subject to moral judgment and victim blaming, even when not at fault
Emotional Effects	Shame, embarrassment, pressure to reassert control	Fear, anxiety, guilt, internalized shame
Behavioral Response	Attempts to restore status (e.g., controlling behavior, withdrawal, image management)	Efforts to appear irreproachable (e.g., modest dress, limited visibility, self-censorship)
Perceived Responsibility	Framed self as a victim of peers or circumstances; did not self-identify as a harasser	Felt pressure to justify or defend their actions, even when they were the target
Long-Term Impact	Distrust in social environments; sensitivity to public perception	Chronic hypervigilance; reduced engagement in public and digital spaces
Professional/Educational Impact	Avoided certain online behaviors to prevent backlash; withdrew from social interactions	Left internships or extracurricular activities due to discomfort; missed opportunities due to fear

Table 3: Summary of effects of harassment and coping mechanisms for male and female participants

are very conservative here. If I said anything, the whole situation would spread fast, and I didn't want that to happen." (F6)

Participants also described fears of navigating a culture steeped in victim-blaming. Disclosure was seen as risky because it could lead to ridicule, disbelief, or accusations of complicity. As one participant reflected:

"People don't take it at face value. They'll say, 'There must be something going on', or think I was at fault. That's why no one talks about it." (M12)

5.3.2 Gender-differentiated needs.

Men. Male participants described a cultural landscape where expressing vulnerability undermines masculinity. Sexual harassment was perceived as a direct threat to their reputation and credibility, and admitting to it risked being labeled weak. Coping often meant leaning on peers for distraction, such as sharing unrelated jokes, tea, and laughter to "move on." While these practices helped ease discomfort, they did little to validate the harm or promote accountability.

When harassment involved State actors, the stakes were even higher. Participants feared that disclosing such experiences would not only invite paternal punishment—such as restrictions on mobility or withdrawal from school, but also expose them to further scrutiny or retaliation from authorities.

Women. For female participants, the greatest barrier was the fear of victim-blaming and the loss of honor. Speaking about harassment risked social judgment, family restriction, and damage to their perceived respectability. Everyday moral surveillance shaped disclosure decisions, as even digital traces could be turned against them:

"It's hard being a girl. If your phone shows random guy messages, they'll think it's your fault—even if you never replied." (F1)

Attempts to seek justice often led to greater control over female participant's lives, such as being prohibited from leaving home alone, further limiting independence rather than addressing harm. Some also worried their mothers would be blamed for raising them "improperly," reinforcing cycles of guilt and silence. When participants did report incidents informally to institutions, their accounts

highlighted dismissal rather than support. Even when female participants attempted to report harassment through institutional channels, their accounts were frequently dismissed or minimized. One woman described contacting a tour company after harassment from an employee; another went to her college coordinator after repeated inappropriate comments, only to be told to ignore it because "boys are like that."

5.3.3 Participant visions for safer futures.

Men. When asked what change might look like, most male participants imagined structural fixes. They called for better awareness of harassment laws, more transparent reporting processes, and mental health resources tailored to those who experience harm. Several expressed frustration that existing systems did not take the emotional toll of harassment on men seriously.

Others critiqued how even in digital spaces, power dynamics often dictate outcomes. One participant who was from a low-income background and was learning English language through a Discord server shared his frustration at being unfairly removed from the Discord server after being verbally abused by another member:

"I wasn't spending money on their server, and some guy was abusing me—swearing at me—and instead of taking action against him, they removed me. Just because I didn't pay." (M9)

Most male participants viewed change as a hope rather than something they felt empowered to initiate. Few imagined themselves as agents of change; instead, they called on institutions and society at large to intervene.

Women. Female participants' hopes for safer futures carried both aspiration and anger. Many envisioned homes, streets, and digital spaces where they could move without fear. But these hopes were not abstract. Participants often grounded them in specific moments, such as when a teacher believed them, when a friend stood up for them, when a family member chose to listen rather than blame. These moments, while rare, revealed what was possible. One female participant stated that change had to begin in the home:

"In desi households, there should be transparency. Kids shouldn't be punished for telling the truth. The one who did wrong should face consequences, not the girl." (F3)

Others emphasized the importance of education and making space for conversations about harassment. They believed that a

good starting point was to educate the fathers and brothers in the house about how harassment is not the fault of the person who experiences it. Some also shared that education about boundaries, consent, and respect should begin as early as possible, so that harmful beliefs about gender and blame do not take root in the first place.

"It starts with upbringing. You have to teach your sons and daughters what's okay, what's not. People need to know how others should treat them—and how to respond." (F3)

Most of our participants were unaware of any laws in Pakistan that address harassment. They did not know about the FLA's cyber-crime wing or organizations like the Digital Rights Foundation that could help with reporting online harassment. They also did not know about laws related to physical harassment. One participant mentioned that while she knew laws existed, she did not know what they were. She also believed they were ineffective and criticized the failure of State protections:

"Pakistan has laws, but they're useless. Passing them is one thing... but implementation? That never happens." (F7)

6 Discussion

6.1 Lessons Learned

The gendered construction of harassment definitions. First, our findings show that definitions of harassment are not fixed or universal. They are shaped by gender, socio-economic position, geographic context, and local moral narratives. These patterns align with prior scholarship that conceptualizes harassment as socially constructed and shaped by cultural and institutional power relations rather than fixed psychological or legal criteria [10, 12, 20, 31, 56, 61, 66]. Female participants in our study frequently described harassment as a persistent and routine part of everyday life. Men, by contrast, offered a different framing. When asked about their own experiences, some men described coercion, surveillance, and even forms of assault. Yet, when speaking more generally, many characterized harassment as something that "happens to females." Likewise, even having experienced graphic forms of sexual harassment, their definitions omitted sexual harassment at all. The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* helps explain this pattern. Connell conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as the dominant cultural ideal of manhood that values invulnerability, authority, and emotional restraint [20]. To align with this ideal, men avoid vulnerabilities associated with feminized experiences of harm. In our study, men described coercion, surveillance, and assault in private, yet publicly defined harassment as something that only happens to women. This shows how pressure to appear masculine limits what kinds of harm men feel they can publicly admit. Men who do acknowledge harassment tend to occupy subordinated positions within masculine hierarchies, indicating that intra-group power structures shape which experiences can be publicly named as harm. Here our findings extend prior work [26, 38, 63] by demonstrating that definitional boundaries vary not only across gender groups but also within them based on vulnerability and marginalization.

Not all harassment is considered harassment. Another broader pattern we observed was how harassment can emerge not from malicious intent but from social pressure, emotional misrecognition, and normalized harmful behaviors. Prior work shows that individuals do not always interpret their own actions as harassment, especially when these behaviors are embedded in local peer cultures or gendered expectations [52, 61]. Our findings extend this work by showing how these dynamics operate within Pakistani youth cultures through everyday practices such as teasing, peer pressure, and masculine bonding. As discussed in §5.1, one participant described how teasing from friends about his interest in a girl escalated into increasingly invasive and threatening actions toward her. He did not understand these behaviors as harassment at the time. Instead, he saw them as expressions of seriousness and affection. Similarly, practices like *shughal* were so normalized among male peer groups that even when participants felt hurt or uncomfortable, they questioned themselves rather than challenging their peers, since no one in their social environment framed it as harassment.

These examples highlight how harassment is often rooted in learned patterns of masculinity, limited emotional literacy, and the absence of socialization around consent and boundaries. This complicates prevention efforts that rely solely on labeling harassment as wrong or unacceptable. If individuals do not recognize their behaviors as harmful in the first place, educational messages about "harassment" may fail to resonate. Our results suggest that effective interventions must begin with building awareness of how ordinary or socially accepted behaviors can cause harm, and they must address the underlying gender norms and emotional socialization shaping these interpretations.

Moral judgments shape who is seen as the victim. A further insight from our study is that moral judgments play a central role in determining who is viewed as a victim and who is framed as deserving of harm. Prior work shows that such judgments often emerge from community norms around modesty, sexuality, and public interactions, which are shaped by religious, communal, institutional, and personal values [13, 13, 23, 27, 32]. In Pakistan, a patriarchal, collectivist, and honor-oriented society, modesty norms are particularly stringent for women. These norms framed how participants evaluated different behaviors. Our findings confirmed that many viewed consensual actions such as dating, which are morally unacceptable within their social context, as equally or even more harmful than non-consensual violations like filming someone without permission. For instance, one male participant praised a student who secretly recorded a couple in the university cafeteria and circulated the video. In his account, the couple's consensual interaction was framed as the true moral transgression, while the person who violated their privacy was celebrated for upholding institutional and cultural values. This aligns with broader scholarship on victim-blaming, moral policing, and the gendered regulation of public behavior, especially in South Asia [4, 8, 64], and it highlights the challenges victims face when seeking help. If community members perceive consensual behavior as morally wrong, they may not recognize subsequent violations as harassment at all, making it nearly impossible to report such behaviors.

Harassment blurs online and offline boundaries. Our findings extend prior work that briefly noted the porous boundary between digital and physical harassment, especially in collectivist context like Pakistan [64]. Sambasivan et al. observed that abusers often obtained contact information both within and outside technology platforms, such as through mutual contacts, peer groups, top-up shops, and even through offline service interactions like taxi rides [64]. While prior work acknowledged these moments of crossover, it did not examine them as a core dynamic shaping harassment. Our study builds on and deepens this insight by showing that these spillovers are not isolated events, but part of a continuous sociotechnical pattern in which harms move fluidly between online and offline settings. Our findings show that offline encounters often escalate into digital violations by offline adversaries (family, peers, etc), and digital visibility (F9) frequently produces offline consequences, including reputational harm, family surveillance (F4), and restrictions on mobility. By foregrounding this continuum, our work demonstrates that harassment in collectivist, patriarchal contexts like Pakistan is experienced as a linked chain of interactions rather than separate categories of digital or physical harm, and therefore requires integrated interventions that address both spaces together.

6.2 Implications

Research. Our findings suggest the value of conducting holistic investigations of harassment that consider how individuals experience and interpret threats in relation to broader social, familial, and institutional contexts. Many participants in our study linked digital harms to offline consequences and vice-versa. These accounts point to the need for research that does not draw hard boundaries between digital and physical spaces, but instead examines how people's threat models are shaped across both.

We also suggest that research on harassment in security and privacy could benefit from expanding how adversaries are understood. Several participants described harassment from people they were socially close to, such as cousins, teachers, or peers. This form of harm shares parallels with patterns seen in intimate partner violence research, where the adversary's ability to cause harm is tied not to technical access, but to familiarity and proximity to the person and their devices. While more research is needed to fully explore these overlaps, our study points to the limitations of threat models that assume distance, anonymity, or stranger-based risk.

Participants' definitions of harassment were context-dependent and often differed from what researchers or institutions might assume. Their understanding of harm was shaped by local norms, reputational consequences, and emotional risks that shaped what felt threatening and what responses were possible. Rather than imposing predefined categories or solutions, we suggest that researchers should center participants' own perspectives when studying harm. Like prior work on designing within structural constraints [73], we argue that future research should aim to design within the systems people live in—not outside them. While researchers cannot resolve deeply embedded social risks, we can identify where people are already exercising care and control, and design tools that align with and support those efforts.

Technology. Many of the harms described by participants in our study fall outside the scope of what technology alone can address. Technology changes often require careful balancing of many competing concerns and risks. Consider the case of women fearing that someone may have access to their photo. One could imagine building on existing initiatives like Meta's StopNCII tool [53], which allows individuals to proactively request takedowns of non-consensual intimate imagery. A similar system could be extended to *any image* of a person, not just intimate ones, and crucially, could intervene even before the content is posted. For example, individuals could upload a photo they fear might be misused and request platforms to track whether it appears elsewhere, or to flag when accounts associated with the harasser attempt to share it. While such a proactive system appears to offer meaningful protection, concerns about freedom of expression, increased censorship, misuse by perpetrators, and low trust in law enforcement pose significant challenges. Prior work illustrates these fears clearly. For example, a participant in a study of South Asian women's experiences with online abuse reported hesitation to approach authorities because "*that file can be placed on any desk or cupboard and seen by any officer as per his (officer) convenience [64].*" In contexts where institutional actors are mistrusted and data handling is opaque, introducing mechanisms that require uploading personal images risks further exposing individuals to surveillance, moral policing, or retaliation. These concerns echo broader policy debates, such as critiques of proposed NCII legislation in the United States, which warn that mandatory scanning systems could incentivize platforms to weaken encryption or expand monitoring powers [54]. Consequently, implementing a system of proactive image tracking must be approached with caution, with careful consideration of the legal, ethical, and institutional risks that accompany it.

Examples of meeting the challenges in this space can be found in prior HCI work in Bangladesh that leverages digital tools for reporting, documenting harassment, and capturing evidence [1, 3, 72]. To build on this work, we argue that future designs must operate with a holistic understanding of these constraints. Systems that preserve survivor autonomy without requiring risky disclosures, that maintain compatibility with encrypted communication, and that minimize reliance on institutional intermediaries may be better aligned with the realities surfaced in our study. One direction involves designing interventions that quietly safeguard autonomy. For instance, female participants often deleted threatening messages to avoid family backlash, eliminating the possibility of reporting. Technology could help mitigate this trade-off. For example, a Report & Archive option could allow survivors to remove content from their own devices while an encrypted, server-side copy retrievable only by the survivor remains available should they later choose to pursue action.

Challenges that the men in our study faced further demonstrate how technology changes must often be accompanied by other societal changes. Men in our study raised concerns about being surveilled, threatened, or even kidnapped after posting anti-State or politically sensitive content online. In these cases, the adversary was not an individual peer but a powerful institution. This dynamic resonates with Toyama's amplification theory, which argues that technology magnifies existing human and institutional intent and capacity rather than transforming them outright [75]. When a State

already possesses coercive power and privileged infrastructure, digital platforms amplify its ability to monitor and target citizens. Addressing these risks requires more than platform-level design. Features such as pseudonymous participation, minimized meta-data exposure (e.g., reduced IP logging and account linkages), and region-specific risk alerts or ephemeral posting modes for politically sensitive content can offer some protection. However, meaningful safety ultimately depends on the interplay of technological measures with legal, institutional, and policy safeguards, as well as broader societal shifts in how harassment is understood and addressed.

Governance Framework. Participants in our study were largely unaware of existing laws or formal reporting pathways related to harassment in Pakistan. Even when they suspected that protections might exist, they expressed little confidence in these systems, citing widespread perceptions of apathetic responses by law enforcement, including victim blaming, retaliation and secondary victimization. As a result, trust in these institutions was limited, and participants doubted that reporting would lead to meaningful support or action.

Thus, for existing legal frameworks to be used effectively, local governments must educate communities on reporting processes and available support. For instance, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) recently established a specialized Cybercrime Wing [29] with female officers trained to handle cases involving women [9]. However, public awareness of this unit remains limited. Targeted awareness campaigns on mainstream media, which has wide reach in Pakistan, can help inform communities about what constitutes harassment and how to access formal reporting channels. Such efforts are critical for improving trust in legal institutions and encouraging victims and survivors to seek help.

Moreover, broadening legal definitions of harassment to reflect local harms is essential. Current laws often capture only overt or severe violations and may not account for culturally embedded behaviors like moral policing or non-consensual non-explicit digital interactions [36]. Expanding these definitions in consultation with affected groups would ensure that legislation aligns with lived realities and provides enhanced protection for those affected.

Civil society organizations can establish informal support pathways, such as peer advocates or confidential advisors, offering technical, legal, psychological support without requiring formal complaints. These mechanisms can lower barriers to help-seeking and serve as a bridge between victims/survivors and formal institutional reporting channels.

7 Conclusion

Our interviews with young adults in Pakistan reveal how gendered experiences of harassment are shaped not only by individual actions but also by broader sociocultural systems, such as family expectations, institutional distrust, and deeply internalized moral codes. Many of the threats our participants described, including surveillance, blackmail, and moral policing, are not easily categorized or addressed through technology alone. Still, technology can play a supportive role, particularly in cases where people fear loss of control, such as the possession or circulation of images without consent.

We conclude with a call to center the lived definitions and context-specific threat models of those most affected. Researchers, policymakers, and technologists must attend not only to what constitutes harassment from a legal or platform perspective, but also to how people themselves understand and navigate harm in their everyday environments. Future research could build community-informed frameworks for understanding harassment, while technologists could create tools that help users anticipate and interrupt harm, even when it is not public. Institutions and educators should consider interventions that are attentive to moral and relational contexts, particularly in environments where speaking out can result in blame or punishment.

If we are to make digital and physical spaces safer, our efforts must begin from within the systems people already inhabit and trust.

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A Interview Protocol

- Demographics:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Education Level
 - Major
 - Perceived Tech Savviness
 - University Name
 - Socioeconomic Status (SES)
 - Devices they hold (mobile, laptop, tablets, etc.)
 - How frequently they use each device
- Have you ever experienced harassment?
 - Can you describe those experiences?
- Which social media platforms do you have an account on?
 - For each:
 - * How often do you use the platform?
 - * How long each day?
 - * Since when?
 - * What for?
- Do you have any preferred platforms? Why?
- Which do you use the least? Why?
- Can you recall a specific instance where you experienced harassment on social media? What happened?
- How did experiencing harassment affect you?
 - Any practical implications on daily life or activities?
 - Any offline repercussions (if online)?
 - Any online repercussions (if offline)?
 - How severe were these experiences?
 - How likely and frequent are these experiences? (1–5)
 - * How frequent is your own experience?
 - * How frequent for other women?
 - * How frequent for other men?
 - * Why do you think it's this frequent?
- Who did you turn to for support?
 - Who did you go to?
 - How did they help?
 - How helpful was the support?
 - Any advice received?
 - How effective was the advice?
 - Challenges faced while accessing support?
 - Was support adequate? Why or why not?
- What was the first step you took after the incident?
 - Why did/n't you report to FIA?
 - How did your behavior change?
 - Would you take the same steps again?
 - How private did you keep the incident? Why?
- What do you currently do to protect against harassment?
 - How helpful are these strategies?
 - How easy are these strategies?
 - Are there things you wish you could do but currently don't?
- Can you recall when someone you know experienced harassment on social media?
 - Were you able to offer support?
- Have you witnessed someone you know harassing others online?
 - What happened?
 - How did you respond?
- What strategies or coping mechanisms have you found helpful?
- Do you have advice for people to protect against harassment?
- What could social media platforms do to better address and prevent harassment?
- What would it take to get to a world free of harassment?
- Are there any legal or policy measures that would be effective?
- How do you define harassment?
- If they say no experience with harassment:
 - Do you know of anyone who has experienced harassment?
 - If not, ask about both genders:
 - * Any women around them?
 - * Any men around them?
 - How did it affect them?
 - Any practical implications on their daily life?
 - Any online repercussions (if offline)?
 - How severe were their experiences?

- Frequency of such experiences?
 - * With you
 - * With people you know
 - * Why do you think it's this frequent?
- Who did they turn to for support?
- How did support help them?
- How helpful was the support?
- How effective was the advice?
- Any challenges faced?
- Was support adequate? Why or why not?
- What was the first step they took?
- Did they report to FIA? Why?

- How did their behavior change?
- How private did they keep it?
- Were you able to support them? Why or why not?
- What do they do now to protect against harassment?
- How is it different from your own practices?
- How easy are those strategies?
- Things they wish they could do but don't?

B Study Materials

All study materials, including the recruitment flyer, eligibility criteria, screening questions, interview protocol, and the resource flyer shared with the participants are available at [this link](#).