Pakistan: CFWIJ’s #ThreatsToWIJ campaign brought together women journalists to discuss the issue of safety in the industry.
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ABOUT US

The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) is a global organization of support for women journalists. The CFWIJ pioneered mentorship for mid-career women journalists across several countries around the world, and is the first organization to focus on the status of free press for women journalists. Our network of individuals and organizations brings together the experience and mentorship necessary to help female career journalists navigate the industry. Our goal is to help develop a strong mechanism where women journalists can work safely and thrive.
On September 14, The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) launched a twitter campaign to support women journalists in Pakistan against the threats they are encountering online and offline.

#ThreatsToWIJ campaign was conducted as an interactive chat with women journalists and activists discussing the dire issue of various threats women journalists face around the world.

The idea stemmed from the unprecedented increase of online and physical attacks on women journalists, activists or any women voices that CFWIJ documented in the last two years. The brutal murder of journalist Shaheena Shaheen Baloch, who was the second woman journalist murdered in the last two years, crystalized the magnitude of the problem. We also remember the brutal murder of Urooj Iqbal in November 2019 who was also shot by her husband outside her workplace for allegedly not agreeing to leave her job.

Pakistan remains to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women journalists. Aside from the glass ceiling and government intervention, women journalists in Pakistan are encountering vicious social media attacks, doxing, and hacking attempts by accounts affiliated to the ruling party and conservative, right-wing elements in the country. We have documented 26 cases of threats and violence against women journalists, since 2017. Knowing that these cases are only exemplary, and the vicious online attacks happen everyday for umpteemth times to several journalists explains how dire the situation in reality is.
The Coalition For Women In Journalism shortly before this campaign joined hands with Pakistani women journalists last month in order to condemn online violence against women journalists and to propose solutions to the government and political parties.

Our founder @KiranNazish initiated the discussion revolving around the following issues:

1- The grave issue of online trolling against women journalists in Pakistan.
2- The physical attacks against women journalists, by trolls, state agencies and families.
3- The mental and physical toll these attacks take on women and solutions to solve.

#ThreatsToWIJ campaign was launched on Twitter on September 14, at 8:00 PM Pakistan time (11:00 AM EST).
Staff members of the CFWIJ also participated in the discussion pointing to the numbers they have documented especially when it comes to the trend of online violence. Detailed conversation is available through #ThreatsToWIJ hashtag and this moment by CFWIJ.

Journalists who joined in the discussion shared a) their testimonies b) talked about how it affected them, and c) suggested solutions and cultural changes to tackle the issue.
Amber Rahim Shamsi stated that women journalists face a number of obstacles: discrimination and harassment at the workplace, domestic pressures or threats due to their work. She said that online spaces have become equally unsafe, impacting freedom of expression, job security and access and security. She pointed out the different ways online harassment takes place, including threats of violence, discriminatory content and invasion of privacy and criticized that too often digital laws are used against journalists instead of protecting them. Amber also noted that the attacks on women journalists are occurring in a broader environment of fear and intimidation where critics and dissent are being suppressed through abductions, disappearances and charges of sedition.

The participants highlighted three main issues:

- Intensity of online attacks and lack of regulation to tackle them.
- Unresponsiveness of the government.
- Toxic masculinity and misogyny pushing women journalists to self-censorship.

1. Amber Rahim Shamsi stated that women journalists face a number of obstacles: discrimination and harassment at the workplace, domestic pressures or threats due to their work. She said that online spaces have become equally unsafe, impacting freedom of expression, job security and access and security. She pointed out the different ways online harassment takes place, including threats of violence, discriminatory content and invasion of privacy and criticized that too often digital laws are used against journalists instead of protecting them. Amber also noted that the attacks on women journalists are occurring in a broader environment of fear and intimidation where critics and dissent are being suppressed through abductions, disappearances and charges of sedition.
2. Marvi Sirmed who has been targeted by constant and vilest online attacks over the years shared screenshots of the latest attacks against her, exposing the indecent behaviour of trolls and their misogyny.

3. Mehmal Sarfraz, quoting Reema Omar stated that women journalists are arguing that abuse has to be looked at in the context of censorship. “More than private individuals, we want to focus on coordinated campaigns; on the role of government officials in encouraging such abuse and dog whistling” pointing to the role of women in journalism in holding governments accountable.

4. Tanzeela Mazhar urged the government to take necessary actions to protect women journalists, reminding that the government has a larger responsibility to take initiatives to change civil discourse for women in the society, especially for women journalists.

5. Laiba Zainab shared her disappointment in the society by saying: “Our doctored pictures are made viral, even after multiple complaints, authorities take no action against the culprits. In fact we never get a response from them and Cyber Crime Laws are celebrated here. Are we lesser human beings? Are these laws not for us?” She tagged the Prime Minister pointing out the dire reality: “We are threatened everyday, we are character assassinated on a daily basis, women journalists are killed and it is named as so called “honour killing”. We are abused every time we are just performing our duties. We think multiple times before sharing our opinions due to this. We have started self censoring ourselves because of filthy comments. Do we not matter?”
6. Gharidah Farooqi, who herself was targeted by an online smear campaign very recently tweeted: “Women journalists in Pakistan get attacked every day. Online and Offline. These are often deliberate campaigns to silence them or to impede their ability to work”

7. Zebunnisa Burki also pointed out that threats against women journalists play a role in censorship. “The trolling and online harassment women journalists have to face amplifies the already crippling censorship they have to navigate here.”

8. Afia Salam questioned the silence following the murder of Shaheena Shaheen by stating there needs to be structural changes: “In Shaheena’s case in particular, it’s most worrisome how it’s classified as an “honor killing” – so the conversation can be brushed aside. Why is that acceptable to anyone? Why are there no notices? Or committees? Or harsh penalties? Because it’s a “domestic issue”?”

9. Tehreem Azeem shared her testimony and said the society made it hard for her to perform journalism and the attacks made it even worse but mentioned how solidarity is important. “I had to fight with my family to be here, to do a PHD in Communication Studies. It’s not easy. After all this hardship when we enter the field, we find no acceptance. The only support we get in our work is from those colleagues who understand the culture truly that wishes to hold us back and accommodate us in our work. I have worked with really good editors. They are our real support.”
10. Lubna Jerar Naqvi pointed out that media unions should take the issue of threats against women in journalism into serious consideration and ensure people involved in online attacks are dealt according to the law. She also said that the authorities should understand that threats on digital platforms can be and are translated into the real world and that steps should be taken to prevent them from happening.

11. Sabin Agha shared her testimony of how as an investigative journalist, she was harassed by sources unlike her male peers. She also said women journalists are intimidated by both the state and by non-state actors and that the graphic sexual context of trolling they receive goes unpunished.

12. Najia Ashar in the meanwhile highlighted the importance of solidarity and urged fellow journalists to speak up against threats. “Do not feel guilty, do not ignore the problem and keep records of when, where and how harassment occurs. There are fewer female journalists than male. Despite the challenges, increasing numbers of women journalists are working in the field, acting as role models and helping each other.”

13. Gul Bukhari pointed to the responsibility of the government and hinted to their role in some of the attacks. She mentioned that online violence against women leads to physical violence, resulting in physical, psychological, economic and social harm. She also drew attention to the despicable practice of abductions and forced disappearances. “Though most of the time officials get women attacked by faceless trolls (for plausible deniability), sometimes a few of them can’t resist coming out in the open. Which is where they give away the fact that they’ve led the attacks all along.” She also mentioned the responsibility of the civil society in face of such attacks.
14. Tanzeela Mazhar who herself has been subjected to workplace harassment also drew attention to how threats against women journalists result in self-censorship which is a threat to the democracy of a culture. “Online attacks and abuse has made many women leave social media, many have started self censorship. Mental health and families are affected by these organized campaigns.” She also highlighted that it is only when the ones on top take the issue seriously, this can be dealt.

15. Fareeha Idrees was another participant who mentioned the mental health toll of online attacks. And called on the people at helm of affairs to recognise and rectify threats to women in journalism as a serious challenge.

16. Xari Jalil pointed out that any kind of violence against women is a product of impunity "Shaheena Shaheen's murder must not have happen out of the blue – something happened, and the criminal – her husband in this case – just thought he would kill her and get away with it. A woman isnt safe from rape and murder anywhere."
OUTCOMES

Women have long been outnumbered in journalism in Pakistan. Now, in addition to discriminatory hiring practices and other barriers, personal attacks in online comments, social media posts, emails and more, represent a serious threat to women’s inclusion in the profession. Because of online harassment, women journalists experience depression and anxiety, avoid engaging with readers, reporting on certain topics, or say they consider leaving journalism altogether. Clearly women journalists, as a response engage in self-censorship when going about their work. While a brutal murder seems to be the most chilling outcome of threats to women in journalism, what begins as an online attack can have serious offline consequences. Women journalists in Pakistan are consistent in their demands that regulations should be in place to ensure safety of journalists. Many participants also expressed gratitude for solidarity among journalists which proved the necessity of such campaigns like #ThreatsToWIJ.

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