

DIGITAL RIGHTS & FEMINIST FUTURES



BY ZUHA SIDDIQUI
AND AZIZA AHMAD



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Digital Rights and Feminist Futures of Zuha Siddiqui and Aziza Ahmad was developed as part of Movements and Moments – Feminists Generations, an initiative of Goethe-Institut. The project aims to make visible Indigenous feminist activism and protagonists from the Global South by relating their life stories in the highly accessible format of comics.

When Pakistani women march for their rights on International Women's Day, the event is exuberant –



but the euphoria does not last long.

A deluge of online hate inevitably follows.






LOL! F#!@ THESE FEMINISTS!


 **AMNA BASHIR**
HI! I'VE BEEN GETTING NONSTOP CALLS & WEIRD MESSAGES ON WHATSAPP. WHAT SHOULD I DO? SCREENSHOTS ATTACHED.

	
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 **FERREZ RANA**
ALL WOMEN WHO ATTENDED AURAT MARCH SHOULD BE JAILED FOR GOING AGAINST PK VALUES!

Amidst the immediate backlash, Nighat Dad's online presence feels ubiquitous as a counter-force in almost every case of online harassment.



4629 

 **eeee**
@eee-91
PHOTOS FROM MY PVT ACCOUNT ARE BEING CIRCULATED ONLINE. FREAKING OUT, HOW DO I STOP THIS???

 **eeeeeee eee**
@mm-m
@NIGHATDAD CAN YOU HELP??!

Nighat is a lawyer, a digital rights activist, and the founder of the Digital Rights Foundation, an advocacy organization that launched Pakistan's first cyber harassment helpline.



And she knows, just like every woman tagged in doctored photos and doxxed in hateful tweets knows,

ee



that cyber violence against women is unceasing, and can occur anytime.

There were 61.34 million internet users in Pakistan in January 2021.

But internet access comes with consequences, especially concerning women. Just like in real life, women face violence on the internet 24/7, 365 days a year.

As such, Nighat also has no office hours.



This is nothing new for her. In her 40 years, Nighat has shown resilience in the face of backlash from her family, her colleagues, her workplace. And she has witnessed the flailings and failures of the legal system first hand, not only as a lawyer but also as a single mother fighting for the custody of her child.



In 2007, all alone, she felt broken, bruised.



In the hallowed halls of the courthouse, Nighat saw other women...

...women who looked like her, broken, bruised. When they walked – always with a man, a father, a brother, never alone – their eyes swept the floor.



They were ashamed.



Stop! He's my child! What are you doing?

We must take him to his father.



He must meet his father.

MAMA!
MAMA!



Quietly, Nighat watched the court – an esteemed institution that stood for fairness, justice and equality for all – separate children from their mothers.



And Nighat watched as women were shushed.



And men were praised.



And when Nighat — clad in a black coat, a lawyer herself — raised her voice to defend herself, the judge glared.



Quietly, Nighat fumed. A fire began to burn inside her.

In the courthouse, fighting for her son's custody, Nighat was a powerhouse. She drew strength she did not know she had.

But at work, her wings were clipped.



The only woman at an all-male law firm, she was given the task of unlocking the office doors at 7 a.m. every morning – a requirement that was part of her job description, come rain, shine, hail, or snow.



She was the first to arrive every day, but restricted to sitting at her desk, while the men huddled over cases.



At the time, right after her divorce, Nighat was living with her parents and siblings – they only had one car, shared between multiple members of the household.



During Lahore's hazy wintertime, she used to leave her home before dawn, switch buses twice, and then walk half a mile to work.

Nighat's brother hassled her over her choices.

Why do you do this? Why do you work? You barely earn 8000 rupees a month and all your money is spent on your commute. You can't even buy diapers for your baby.

But Nighat's father supported her. He was her pillar of strength.

Especially after her divorce.

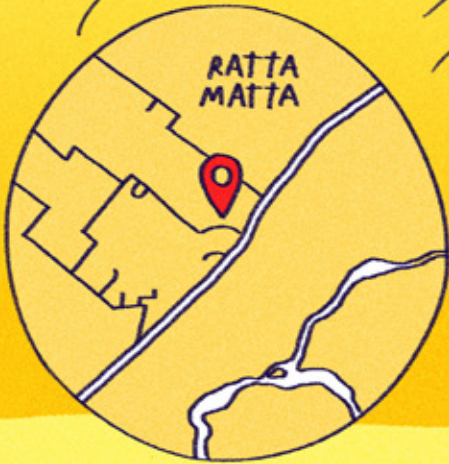
I just wanted to share my condolences for your daughter's divorce. Such a tragedy.

Nighat, don't listen to them. You should go to work. Stand on your own two feet, never be dependent on another person again.



In many ways, the life of Nighat's father, Mehar Allah Dad, paralleled hers -

Like Nighat, he too had humble beginnings and big dreams...



Mehar Allah Dad and his wife, Nasreen, were born in Ratta Matta, a small village in Punjab. They were sharecroppers, as were their parents and grandparents.

They toiled away under the beating sun for months in exchange for a small portion of the harvest.



But Mehar Allah Dad saw the injustice in the system and knew he had to leave Ratta Matta in order to seek a better life for his children.

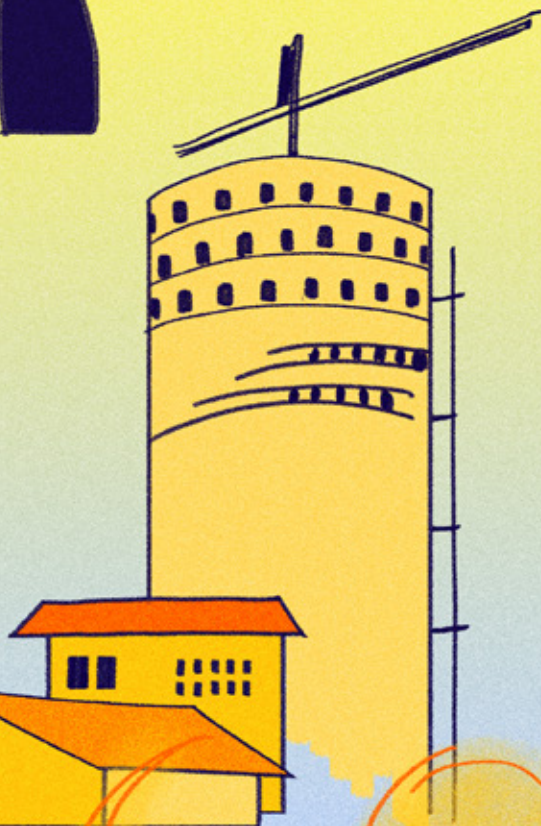
And so, in the early 1960s he left and journeyed nearly 700 miles south to Karachi – a hustling, bustling city of nearly 10 million people at the time.



RATTA MATTA



KARACHI



There he worked as a laborer, hauling bricks to build what would become the tallest building in the city – the Habib Bank Plaza.

After the building was completed, he began working as a chowkidar at a local family-run textile company.

Mehar Allah Dad received no formal schooling, but he was smart and very good at calculations – and soon his employers noticed his talent for numbers.



They hired him as a clerk and promoted him to manager a few years later.

MANAGER



And by the time Nighat started going to school in the 1980s, her father – a laborer just two decades earlier – was a partner in the company where he started off as a clerk.

They were still middle-class but a far cry from the life Mehar Allah Dad and his parents had as sharecroppers at the mercy of local zamindars for food and water.



The roof over his head was his own.

His six children were studying – English! – at private schools, getting good grades.

Mehar Allah Dad had accomplished his life's work. Now his dreams were for his children.



Today Nighat has made her father's dreams come true.



She is one of the country's most prominent public figures.



The case has generated a firestorm on social media and has polarized public opinion.



Her victory will mean that Pakistan's draconian defamation laws, which Nighat has spent her life battling, will stand defeated for the first time.

But Nighat is not new to firsts.

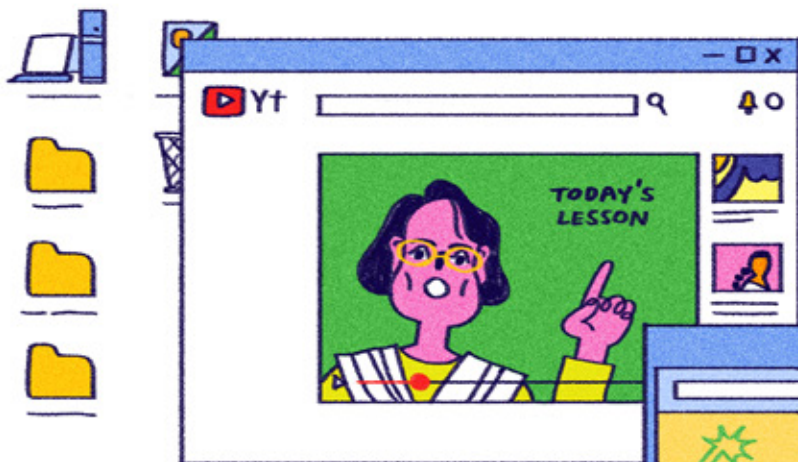
She was the first woman in her family to go to college, the first woman in her family to go to law school –

even before the divorce, there was chatter about her in her extended family.

At her workplace in 2007, where no one took her seriously, Nighat built herself a computer.



She went to Hall Road in Lahore, bought a RAM, a hard drive, and various other parts that make a CPU. She paid PKR 350 a month for an internet connection.



She spent idle hours at her desk teaching herself English by watching YouTube videos and hanging out on mIRC chat rooms practicing her newly acquired English skills.

She also applied to a bunch of random fellowships, looking to break the monotony of her life in Lahore.

In 2009 she received a call from the US Embassy informing her that she had been selected for the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).



What? This has to be a scam. Why would anybody select me for this?

I'm a nobody.

At home, her brother thought this was a ruse and that she was trying to escape the country.

What have you done to deserve this?

That trip to the US was Nighat's first time on an airplane and her first time outside Pakistan.



In the US, the months she spent teaching herself English on YouTube finally came in handy -



LATER, AT NIGHT



Hi, Beta! You won't believe how much I talked all day today. My face hurts.... How's school going?



Back in Lahore a month later, Nighat realized that trip had changed her life.

The world is much bigger than this room. There is so much more work to be done. I have to quit this job.



In the months that followed, Nighat gave herself an education: she unlearnt, and learnt, and learnt more. She learnt about

the absence of cybercrime legislation in Pakistan,

the blocking of online forums in the name of national security, religion and morality,

the stifling of free speech.



Three years later, in October 2012, she launched Digital Rights Foundation, a non-profit organization that would equip Pakistani women with the tools necessary

to combat cyber harassment,



to rally for strong legal protection for privacy,



and to make the internet a safer place for all.

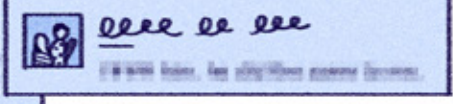
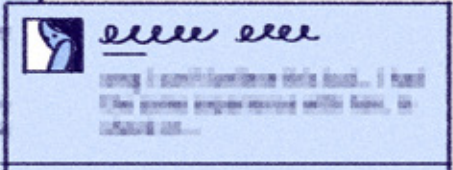
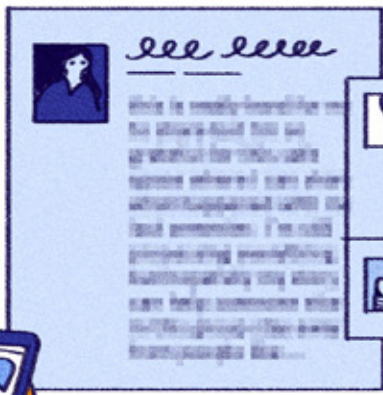


Today the DRF stands as a safety net where law enforcement fails to provide justice.

Last summer a university in Lahore found itself in the midst of its own iteration of #MeToo -



Did you see the Facebook group? People are coming out with their stories on it.



OMG, people are sharing screenshots of allegations.

But it's a private group. I didn't think this could happen.



I deleted my post, but all my screenshots are all over Twitter with my name. People are saying we will get defamation notices. I'm so scared.



A glorious, empowering moment had turned into a nightmare.



Marha, 22
President of the university's
feminist society.

It became one never-ending, sleepless night. There was darkness all around.

Everyone who spoke up was rushing to erase their posts, scared of getting defamation notices from powerful men.

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LOADING...

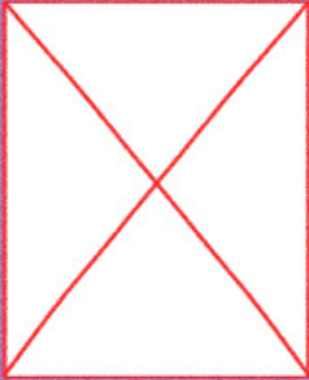
Subsequently, Pakistani women have lost faith in law enforcement, and particularly in the country's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), which since 2007 has been tasked with investigating cyber offenses.

The FIA puts a lot of pressure on those reporting themselves. They don't take cases seriously, keep delaying investigations, but as soon as someone with power or wealth enters the picture, the process speeds up.

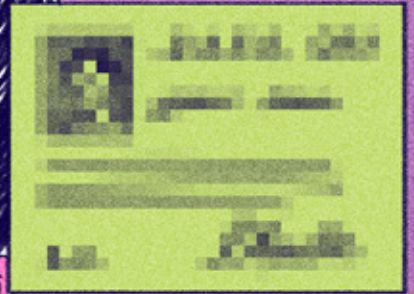


When law enforcement fails, DRF steps in. But five years ago, when Gandeel Baloch was murdered, this avenue did not exist.

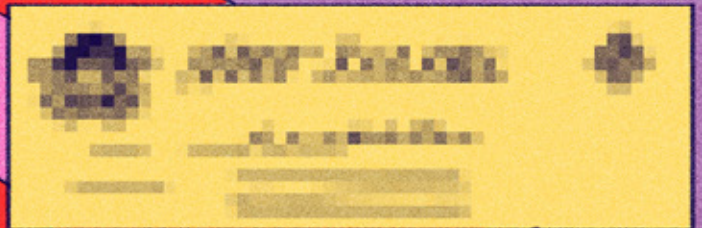
A 26-year-old social media star, Gandeel struck a raw nerve with her coy videos and selfies, largely tame, but considered provocative by many in Pakistan.



In July 2016 she was murdered in cold blood by her brother.



Three weeks before her death, Gandeel's identification documents were leaked on Twitter.



She knew her life was in danger. She wrote to the local police and the Federal Investigation Agency asking them to provide her security.

They did not.



Gandeel's death shook me. I felt broken afterwards.

After her death, I knew the cyber harassment helpline for women needed to be set up. But I had no money, and no one was willing to help. Donors were hesitant.

A cyber harassment helpline like this has never been set up in South Asia before.

How will you sustain it?



That summer, her friend nominated her for the Dutch Human Rights Tulip Award.



By September, she had been shortlisted for the Tulip. And after two months of voting, in November 2016...

Nighat Dad Receives Dutch Human Rights Award for 2016

The Pakistani internet activist will be receiving €100,000 to further develop her work.

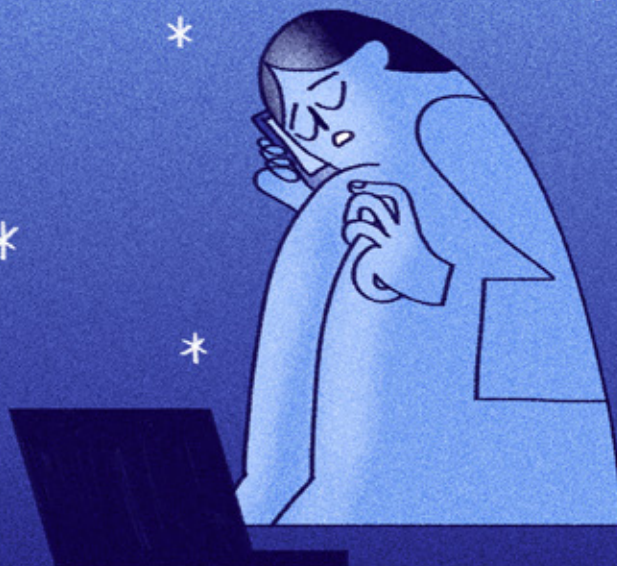


On 1 December 2016, the helpline took its first call.

From a two-person team – comprising of Nighat and her associate Shmyla Khan – the Cyber Harassment Helpline has grown exponentially, attending to an average of 212 calls per month.



They also provide psychological counselling to victims of online harassment, and legal assistance through a dedicated legal officer.



When the pandemic struck Pakistan in 2020 – and women were locked inside their homes – the helpline began operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And the number of calls they were receiving rose continuously.



Now at forty, having spent four decades on this earth, Nighat has become a household name in Pakistan.

She has been travelling across the country conducting training sessions for women who want to be safe on the internet, a space that is becoming increasingly perilous.



Back in the day, she trained a young girl from Swat, in northern Pakistan, who wished to share her quest for education in a part of the country then controlled by the Taliban.

That girl was Malala Yousufzai



Nighat also sits on the Oversight Board, she holds big tech accountable, represents Pakistan on global forums, travels the world, creates a safe space for women online.

But deep down inside

she is still



The girl who switched buses twice and then walked half an hour to her office building because she didn't have enough change in her pocket to hail a rickshaw.



Who walked the hallowed halls of courtrooms, alone, as she fought for custody of her son.

She is still the girl from Ratta Matta, Jhang –

a tiny speck on the map,

where little girls, now, dream big beautiful dreams,

They can – and they will – conquer the world.

When Nighat rises, she takes women with her.



Reading List

PECA's origins lie in the 2014 National Action Plan, proposed by the Pakistani government after the Taliban murdered nearly 150 students and teachers at an elementary school in Peshawar on 14 December 2014. The plan consisted of 20 actionable items to eradicate extremism – Pakistani officials emphasized needing an unfettered ability to monitor, locate, and prosecute alleged militants. This helped rally support for a punitive cybercrime law.

Since its introduction in 2016, PECA has been criticized for violating fundamental freedoms guaranteed in Pakistan's constitution. Its most misused section, Section 20, criminalizes "defamation": the act of publicly exhibiting, displaying, or transmitting information one knows "to be false, and intimidates or harms the reputation or privacy of a natural person."

Section 1 – concerning interfaith, sectarian or racial hatred, or hate speech – is often used to charge those critiquing state institutions. Between 2018 and 2019, people lodged at least seven police reports charging citizens under Section 1 of PECA for "hate speech" against state institutions.

PECA Timeline, Bolo Bhi:

<https://bolobhi.org/archive-prevention-electronic-crimes-bill-2015/>

DRF Annual Report:

<https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Helpine-Report-2020.pdf>

Pakistan's cybercrime law: Boon or Bane, Farieha Aziz for

Heinrich Böll Stiftung:

<https://www.boell.de/en/2018/02/07/pakistans-cybercrime-law-boon-or-bane>