

DEEPPAKES AND THE PAKISTANI WOMEN

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THE ESSAY

A research by the US Congress' digital policy wing unveiled that out of 35,000 online doctored content that superimposed faces of members of congress over pornographic content, 95% of them were women. This stark number presents the alarming situation facing women globally; The gender that makes up 49% of the global population. With the advent of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence, online spaces grow increasingly complex. The ability of generative AI to doctor content has flooded online spaces with a plethora of synthetic content, not distinguishable to the common unsuspecting members of the public. The lack of the discerning ability as well as the rapid advancement of AI poses a grave risk to the safety and privacy mechanisms of digital platforms. The situation is particularly alarming in Pakistan - a conservative patriarchal society. A place where women face never ending challenges to their safety and privacy, digitally altered

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content has wreaked havoc across their lives. It has become a form of gender-based violence against women by depriving them of their right to dignity and ^{while} curbing their online participation. ^{white} patriarchal norms and attitudes continue to perpetuate a culture of impunity protecting the perpetrators, the solution lies in spreading digital awareness, inclusive policy making and stringent laws protecting women.

Before delving into the reasons how deepfakes have emerged as a form of gender-based violence against women, it is imperative to define the concept of deepfake ^{technology}. It refers to content, including photos and videos, that are digitally altered. It is a form of generative artificial intelligence, which makes the altered content appear hyper-realistic and difficult to distinguish from the original. The most common forms of deepfakes include, altering voice overs in an audio clip and superimposing faces from random pictures across videos of any kind. - a practice that disproportionately affects women.

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The most common tactic used to harass and intimidate women is through doctored pornographic deepfakes of them. Unsuspecting women find their faces plastered across adult content and sites. This is used as a tool of abuse and intimidation by cross ex-partners and even husbands in some cases. A report by the Federal Investigation Agency in 2024 revealed that of the 13,000 complaints received pertaining to cyber crimes, 1200 were directly related to deepfake content, also known as Non-consensual Intimate Images (NCII). This type of content impacts every aspect of women's lives. They are blackmailed by leveraging such images or videos. The prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and victim-blaming culture makes women all the more vulnerable and prevents them from seeking legal help for the fear of spread of their doctored content. This shows how technological inventions are used to abuse and subjugate women.

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Moreover, the prevalence of deepfakes has also led women to self-censorship, in turn curbing their participation across digital platforms. This approach leads to heightened awareness of potential perceived threats to privacy and safety, leading to stress, anxiety and other mental health symptoms. Further, this cautions women from participating on digital platforms resulting in the loss of inclusive voices on socio-economic affairs. A report by the Digital Rights Forum in 2024 showcased that 70% of women in Pakistan did not feel safe online. This is contrasted by a report by Jiyon Lee on Deepfakes and self-censorship; Lee posits that despite facing online risks women in South Korea do not feel inclined to self-censor across digital platforms. This contrast reveals a different picture within the Asian continent. This indicates how the presence of conservative norms across Pakistan and underlying attitudes make women more risk-averse and avoid digital platforms altogether for the fear of being abused by deepfakes.

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Furthermore, deepfake ^ is also used as a tool to discourage women from the public sphere and political participation. Aside from the traditional security risks such as stalking and risks to dignity, Pakistani women now face a daunting challenge - AI doctored deepfakes. Females engaged in political activity or public sector jobs are particularly vulnerable. Deepfakes are used as a tool by opposition factions to malign female politicians or workers. Such content is then disseminated across social media platforms to harass the victims. A case in point is that of Uzma Bokhari, a senior female politician from Pakistan. Miss Bokhari found herself at the heart of the controversy when her pictures began spreading across online platforms. Another notable case is of Maryam Nawaz, the chief minister of Punjab. In a similar manner, her pictures were spread across social media platforms in a bid to defame her. These examples highlight how deepfakes have become a tool to defame and abuse female politicians disproportionately.

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Additionally, the extremist conservative ideologies along with the victim blaming culture prevalent in Pakistan have resulted in deepfakes as a weapon to control and diminish women — taking a toll on their mental health. Pakistani society holds the honour of women above all. This honour is attached to women's bodies and used to define their worth. Deepfake contents have the ability to crush this honour, thereby bringing shame to the victim and their family. Even if the content is proved inauthentic later, the damage is rarely reversible. This is corroborated by the report of Digital Rights Foundation, which states that victims that reach out to them are under severe mental pressure and have voiced thoughts of suicide as well. This reflects the grave impacts deepfake content have on women and their mental health.

Lastly, deepfakes perpetuate a sinister exclusion of women from online spaces and thereby the digital

economy. In the 21st century, the digital economy is driving unprecedented economic growth and development. In context of Pakistan, e-commerce and freelancing business model contribute an annual 2 billion Rupees to the economy, per the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2025-26. Pakistan is also the country where female labour participation rate is one of the lowest in the world. Digital economy provides a solution to overcome this stark gap. However, prevailing threats to privacy and dignity act as a major hurdle in bridging this gap. As women fear that online participation could expose them to the dangers of the digital world and they could end up with their dignity compromised through doctored content. The exclusion of women, therefore, translates into the exclusion of women in economic affairs due to digital safety concerns.

The preceding section of the essay laid down the impacts of deep fakes on women. The next section deals with the reasons

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behind the prevalence of deepfake culture in Pakistan.

Firstly, there is a ^{lack} of inclusive and gendered policy making in Pakistan. The policy-making machinery in Pakistan is dominated by men, thereby resulting in policies that heavily reflect the male perspective. As the deepfake technology disproportionately impacts the female members of the society, the lack of policy nuance is reflected in the poor state of women affairs in the country. Pakistan unveiled its very first National AI Policy in 2023. The policy ^{mainly} focuses on how AI can be best integrated in existing mechanisms to optimize productivity. While sparing mentions have been made towards privacy and safety, the act fails to mention Deepfakes. This omission reflects poor and non-inclusive policy making which consequently results in the prevalence of deepfake related crime in Pakistan.

Moreover, honour culture and societal expectations in Pakistan

perpetuate a culture of impunity that protects the perpetrators. Women are likely to forgo any legal route for the fear of shame and bringing dishonour to their family. This emboldens the perpetrators as they are certain the victims will avoid reporting them to the authorities. A survey by a leading institution in Pakistan revealed that 62% of the women participants voted that would not report it to the authorities in case they fell victim to deepfakes. On the contrary, a mere 32% women said they would consider reporting such an activity to the authority. These disturbing numbers reveal how women have little faith in pursuing a route towards justice and instead choose to suffer in silence.

Lastly, the dismal state of the criminal justice system and low conviction rates deter women from seeking the appropriate legal remedies. The criminal justice system in Pakistan is especially unfriendly towards female victims. It is a fact showcased by the abysmal

conviction rates. In 2024, the FIA reported that out of 1200 cases pertaining deepfakes, only 22 made it to the First Information Report (FIR) stage, of which only 7 resulted in convictions. This indicates a deeper flaw in the criminal justice system. Despite certain laws in place such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), the road towards convictions remain shaky. In most cases, the victims are concerned about permanent deletion of their data from the perpetrator, rather than pursuing a criminal case. This reflects the deeper flaws in the justice system which facilitates the rise of digital crimes such as deepfakes.

The way forward lies in spreading digital media awareness and literacy. Government mandated digital literacy workshops should be held. These workshops and awareness campaigns should aim to educate the general masses about the nature of deepfakes and how to identify one before spreading such content. Separate workshops targeting females should also be held. As the gender that is

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disproportionately affected by this technology, a large number of women still remain unaware about deepfakes and their nature. Workshops should aim to improve their digital vigilance and adoption of confidence building measures to foster their trust in the criminal justice system.

Last but not least, the National AI Policy should be revised to include more comprehensive and holistic measures regarding deepfake technology. The policy-making process should also include women and other vulnerable factions at risk from this technology to foster their perspective into the formulation of the policy. Moreover, stringent laws should be devised to bolster conviction rates and make the process more victim-centric to bolster faith in the justice system. This would ensure that women feel comfortable coming forward to report their issues. Additionally, special women cells should be devised at every FIA branch or local police stations to streamline the process of cases.

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specifically pertaining to women victims of deepfake technology crimes. These measures ensure that the women of Pakistan feel confident in the working of the justice system and would prevent them from being exploited at the hands of their perpetrators.

In a nutshell, the deepfake technology is a technological marvel but also ^{poses} a grave risk to privacy and safety of women, especially in conservative countries such as Pakistan. The impacts of deepfake technology crimes are multifaceted. Women are subjected to online harassment, face exclusion from online spaces as well as digital economy, increased hurdles in furthering their political and public sector careers. The rise of this technology related crime is facilitated by a combination of regressive conservative attitudes towards women, lack of policy direction, and gaps in the criminal justice system. To compete in the digital age, Pakistan must increase female participation in the digital economy. This can be done through

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designing inclusive AI policies that take into account women safety and privacy. The criminal justice system must also adapt to the increasing prevalence of digital crimes particularly those affecting women. Digital literacy campaigns are also the need of the hour. The state must utilise the tools at its disposal to foster an inclusive and safe digital environment. Inclusivity is the road towards prosperity.

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