

# Patriarchy and Social Media: Women Only Facebook Groups as Safe Spaces for Support Seeking in Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

We explore peer support mechanisms in patriarchal contexts where a woman's movements, social relations and the seeking of support are restricted. We investigate the use of closed Facebook groups as a vital mechanism for access to anonymous peer support in Pakistan for taboo narratives like abortion, sexual harassment, rape, domestic abuse and issues relating to child-rearing and parenting. We discuss how technology is impacting these women's lives and allowing access to a safe, non-judgmental space to share their stories and collectively support other women within the same context. We analyze the posting and support seeking behaviours and the mechanisms for anonymity and privacy within a closed women only Facebook group of 15,000 members. Our study reveals the vital importance of such digital safe spaces and the mechanisms that allow them to remain judgment free and safe for support seeking in stigmatized contexts within vulnerable populations.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

## KEYWORDS

Facebook, gender, Pakistan, closed groups

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores online peer-support mechanisms for deeply taboo narratives in patriarchal and low-resource communities. Pakistan along with Syria places second to last in the gender gap index ranking 148 out of 149 countries in the *Global Gender Gap Index 2018* report. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, Pakistan ranked 146th, while in health and survival, its rank was 145 [35]. Pakistan is a conservative and patriarchal society with

few safe spaces for women to share traumatic experiences of abuse, rape, assault and harassment [40, 62]. Within the Pakistani context, women, once married, leave their parents home and move to their in-laws home to live in joint-family systems [4], further isolating them from long established support structures and safe spaces. Previous studies exploring mental health in Pakistan reveal double the prevalence of anxiety and depression in women as compared to men, and a higher prevalence in rural compared to urban areas [8, 63, 64]. The strongest risk factors for depression within a Pakistani context are physical, sexual and verbal abuse, very early marriages, hostile in-laws and lack of an intimate and confiding relationship with the husbands [8, 49, 67]. In Pakistan between 70 to 80 percent of women face some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime [9, 69], while marital rape, which is not considered a crime under Pakistan's Zina laws, goes unreported [42]. Given that sex, harassment and abuse are taboo subjects in Pakistan women often refrain from reporting their experiences with rape whereas marital abuse is considered to be a family and private matter which is never discussed for fear of social judgment and isolation [42]. The non-disclosure of such abuse has direct negative outcomes for the physical and mental health [73, 77] of the survivors whereas disclosure and support seeking have a positive impact on mental health and well-being [71]. Similarly, studies reveal that an important factor in the decision to disclose is the presence of supportive, non-judgmental peers [54].

In this context we explore how technologies, particularly Facebook have been leveraged to find connections, anonymous support and the sharing of deeply personal and traumatic experiences in a difficult and traumatic context. Our work is grounded in recent studies within the HCI community on women in the Global South, their access to and engagement with technologies [55, 74, 78] including conversations on their assertion of individual agency and autonomy in response to the patriarchal structures that constrain them [5, 50, 52]. We seek to go beyond issues of access to better understand this expression of agency and autonomy with respect to online digital safe spaces for connection, self-expression, self-disclosures and support seeking.

In recent years there has also been considerable work that explores sensitive disclosures and support systems within HCI [17, 22, 48], however there is little that expands upon the experiences and support seeking behaviours of women in religious and patriarchal contexts like Pakistan who seek support online, or the kinds of online cultures and technical features that support or inhibit such sharing. This study fills an important gap and builds upon previous work about online disclosures and support seeking within a restrictive context that suppresses women's voices and stories.

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The last few years have seen an increase in closed women's Facebook groups in Pakistan as an alternate to the lack of safe, non-judgmental spaces offline. These groups have become spaces for women in Pakistan to support one another through careers, marriage, motherhood, parenting and everyday lives [1, 2]. We study one such group with over 15,000 female members and investigate how closed groups provide opportunities for traumatic disclosures in a patriarchal context and explore the relationship between taboo/shame, anonymity and disclosures by analyzing anonymous and non-anonymous content. We also discuss the role such spaces play in mitigating the pressures and constraints the women face in their existing patriarchal contexts. Additionally this study also explores the features of Facebook that must be circumnavigated to allow for anonymity and the role moderators play in ensuring privacy and a safe space for all members. We particularly focus on:

- What do women share in sensitive and abuse-related posts?
- What factors are significantly associated with a post being anonymous versus from own account?
- What role do moderators play in ensuring anonymity and privacy?
- How are moderators perceived within the community since anonymous disclosures must be made through them.
- What factors are significantly associated with support seeking? How do these factors differ between direct and indirect support seeking?

## 2 RELATED WORK

Prior work in ICTD and HCI for Development (HCI4D) communities has examined the gap in technology and Internet usage especially by women from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds [84]. While some studies have created technological solutions to highlight issues women face in patriarchal societies [7], others have acknowledged that the challenges women face are so dire that simple technological solutions cannot begin to solve such deeply ingrained societal challenges.[78] More recently, Internet usage behaviors of women in the Global South have been explored, and findings show that offline challenges not only persist but in some instances are exacerbated when women come online.[51, 75] However, women continue to use the Internet to find means of self-empowerment among various communities of practice.[44] Our work builds on this notion of empowerment, and explores how women-led, women-only Facebook groups can act as digital safe-spaces for literate women in patriarchal societies.

### 2.1 Gender and Social Media in the Global South

Our analysis of the use of Facebook groups for support seeking is grounded in the patriarchal context of Pakistan. Previous work has studied the mechanics of patriarchy and the role of gender and defines patriarchy as a kinship-ordered social structure with strictly defined gender roles in which women are subordinated to men and reveals that in Pakistan particularly, the state fosters patriarchal ideology and practices [62]. There is a large body of work that specifically focuses on patriarchy and abuse with an emphasis on an understanding of how control over women is exerted

through institutionalized restrictive codes of behavior, gender segregation and a deep rooted doctrines that associates family honor with female virtue [40, 41, 80]. These structures of patriarchal subordination include honor killings, rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, acid attacks, being burned, kidnapping, domestic violence, dowry murder, and forced marriages [10, 24, 82]. In this context work in HCI and HCI4D has explored the use of mobile phones and social media technologies by women for information seeking, entertainment, financial services and safety [43, 74, 76]. These studies investigate the barriers to use and the harassment women face when they do engage with social media platforms like Facebook. Outside of Pakistan, prior work on gender and ICTs explore similar struggles women face in restrictive and developing contexts [18, 23, 31] including the access to only shared smart phones and the associated privacy concerns. This has been reported by studies in multiple countries across South Asia [75].

### 2.2 Seeking support

Research in psychology supports the idea of a positive impact on mental health directly linked to sharing your story, and making sense of your lived experiences [30]. The sharing of stories in support groups leads to not just an emotional catharsis, but also the empathetic witnessing of injustice [46]. In general peer support allows for those who share the same social stigma, have had similar experiences, and who can offer more authentic empathy and validation to seek and support each other [38]. This is particularly true for women in patriarchal cultures that experience the same daily struggles surrounding loss of agency and autonomy and a stripping away of self. However, in the Pakistani context self-disclosures and the sharing of taboo narratives around abuse are discouraged and associated with a loss of 'respect' and social stigma [6].

In this study we employ the Social Support Behavioral Code [28] to analyze and categorize the types of anonymous and non-anonymous posts made on the group. This is a categorization model that includes providing informational support, instrumental support which is the willingness to help in a more concrete way, esteem support (boosting confidence in abilities), network support and emotional support.

### 2.3 Online Support Seeking

The use of digital technologies for the discussion and support of sensitive and taboo topics has long been a focus of the HCI community. Andalibi et al [16] explore the use of Reddit for support seeking for sexual-abuse finding that the use of 'throwaway' accounts ensured greater anonymity and increased the likelihood of support seeking as opposed to using identified accounts. Similarly, studies exploring online disclosures reveal that anonymity, and the absence of nonverbal cues in online environments are more likely to elicit intimate disclosures [45, 81]. Similar studies support the importance of anonymity in online disclosures revealing that anonymous applications allow more honesty, openness, and diversity of opinion than other social media platforms [48].

Online support groups have also been widely used for health related information seeking and support and studies reveal online spaces to also be useful for those seeking support for depression [17, 27, 33, 34]. Similarly, Wang et al. [83] investigate the dynamic process through which participants in online support groups elicit and provide emotional and informational support. Their study reveals that self-disclosure is effective in eliciting emotional support. Another recent study looked at knowledge sharing in online health communities revealing that the three factors that positively impact the sharing of both general and specific knowledge are a sense of self-worth, members' perceived social support, and reputation enhancement [85]. Similarly, patterns of communication in an online diabetes community TuDiabetes suggest that members of this community often build shared meaning through deep discussions, back and forth negotiation of perspectives, and resolution of conflicts in opinions [56]. Another study was conducted to investigate how pregnant women seek and receive peer support during different stages of pregnancy. This work reveals that pregnant women were motivated to seek multiple types of support from peers due to limited access and help from health-care professionals, limited offline social support, and mismatch between online information and books and women's actual experience [39].

## 2.4 Subject-Specific Facebook Groups

A number of recent studies have explored the role of Facebook pages and Facebook groups in providing subject-specific peer support to members of various groups. Parents of children with special needs [14, 65] join Facebook groups and pages that provide access to geographic communities for local needs (e.g. school services) and case-based communities for specific conditions (e.g. autism) [13], and the main purpose of common postings is to share personal experiences with other individuals in a similar situation [65]. A study that researched Moms and Moms-to-Be on a Facebook group called *Ask The Chicks* found that the underlying motivations for women who engaged in the group were significant for relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, social interaction, and information seeking [12]. Similarly, a study that explored Stay-at-Home Dads (SAHDs) overcome isolation through social media, how SAHDs manage roles and relationships, and SAHDs' disclosure behaviors on social media [15], found that SAHDs found that SAHDs selectively tailor their responses to the audience receiving the message and gender-specific parenting groups provided a safe space for SAHDs to ask questions and discuss problems, and share information they wouldn't feel comfortable sharing with their family in their Facebook network.

These studies also uncover various modalities through which such groups enable participants to reveal sensitive information while overcoming the persistent design issue of how to leverage the benefits of anonymity without suffering its drawbacks. One case study reveals how university students use anonymous Facebook Confession Boards (FCBs) to discuss taboo topics including sex, illegal substances, mental health, and bodily functions [22]. They reveal how *members of an offline community (e.g., a university) anonymously submit content to a moderator who posts it to a Facebook page where others in the community can view it and respond* [22]. Similarly, a closed Facebook-group for social workers [37] found

that social workers used it for peer support, informal consultation, emotional support, and personal social connection. In this particular Facebook group, there were 17 social workers who were all graduates of the same Masters in Social Work (MSW) program class of 2009, so as such were well acquainted to each other in the 'real world' outside of Facebook. This offline connection, alongside Facebook's privacy and membership control settings, increased practitioners' trust that confidentiality for their clients' information will remain with other fellow social workers. As the authors describe [37], *so in a sense, this private, closed Facebook group is the e-mail listserv of the modern Internet era*. In the Facebook Confession Boards (FCB) case study, anyone can join the page. In the social workers case study, the membership is limited to members of an offline existing network that the moderator already knew. In the SAHD case study, the moderator simply rejects the request to join the group by Stay-at-Home Moms and other women, but doesn't try to identify the real identity behind the profile of Stay-at-Home Dads, given that there's limited sensitive disclosures that get made on the group.

As previously discussed, while there's existing literature on support seeking for sexual abuse [16] and mental health concerns [25] on Reddit, sensitive disclosures of depression on Instagram [17], self-disclosure of an underlying mental health concern on Twitter [29], to our knowledge there's only one study on a closed Facebook groups specifically for women called Girl army.[26]. In this particular instance, the group had grown to 850 participants by the time the authors wrote the paper (2015), and acted as a digital safe space for women who faced online harassment in other parts of the Internet. While the participants of this community may not be able to solve the problem of online harassment, such a space allowed marginalized users a place to speak up their mind, seek support and organize action collectively. The narratives shared on Girl army are of traumatic instances, in most of these instances, the harassment is happening by people who are unknown to the participant, and if these narratives were to leak out of the closed group, the repercussions to the poster may not be as dire. However, the group we study is different in the sense that it allows women to discuss highly personal and sensitive topics such as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and marital rape, and as such there is a greater risk if the identity of the participant gets revealed. To be clear, there is a separate body of work that looks at privacy and security practices of IPV survivors [36, 60] and creepware used in other interpersonal attacks [72]; however, this work doesn't overlap with support seeking behaviors on Social Network Sites (SNS) by this particular target population. While the literature has identified modalities to communicate anonymous messages on Facebook groups, a gap exists in (a) the amount of manual and emotional labor that goes in on the behalf of the moderator, and (b) the type of risk women take when they disclose sensitive information in patriarchal contexts to moderators who can see their identity. While previous studies have found how gender-segregated groups are curated, we uncover the significant extra-steps that the moderators in our case have to take to ensure that each profile that joins the group is in fact owned by a Woman - this is due to the patriarchal context and the sensitive nature of the comments.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The main goal of our study is to understand how digital technologies are currently being leveraged in patriarchal and developing contexts to create safe online spaces for women to discuss forbidden subjects like mental health, sexual assault, abuse etc. and to circumnavigate the constraints of their existing conservative contexts. In order to understand how women in Pakistan leverage these online spaces, we conduct a high level analysis of a closed women-only Facebook group of more than 15,000 women. The group was formed in 2016 and consists of literate Pakistani women, mostly residing in different cities across Pakistan. We also conducted a semi-structured interview with one of the group moderators (the group has 2 moderators).

One of the authors has been a member for a year, has disclosed herself to the group as a researcher, interviewed one of the moderators and observed the mechanisms of the group for a year. The author was vetted by the moderators before acceptance into the group. There are two ways to post on the group; from the user's own account and anonymously by private messaging the group moderators who then post from their own accounts after labelling the post as 'anonymous'. Due to the sensitive nature of these posts, and the expectation of privacy that the women had when they joined or posted on the group, our IRB allowed us to only conduct a very high level analysis of the anonymous and non-anonymous posts on the group without using direct quotes etc. We also conducted a quick survey to understand the demographics of the group.

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

We manually tagged 1700 anonymous and non anonymous posts from the closed Facebook group. We iteratively developed codes and followed a semi-open coding procedure, specifically looking for specific tags based on literature and our observations over a year on the group. We specifically also focused on the type of posts like information seeking, emotional venting, directly asking for support and advice etc. We however, also remained open to other topics and themes that might emerge. Out of a total of 1700 posts analyzed, 900 posts were non-anonymous and 800 were anonymous. After tagging we collected the posts into different common themes. Tables 1 and 2 show the main themes within the non-anonymous and the anonymous posts. Due to ethical considerations and to further protect the identity of the posters we can not share direct quotes but have paraphrased (marked in square brackets []) and shared some of the narratives to allow western audiences unfamiliar with our context a deeper understanding of the challenges involved.

In our high-level analysis of this group, we were interested in understanding the online support seeking behaviour of women in Pakistan around taboo and forbidden subjects and how the group moderators ensure the rules of patriarchy are suspended in this online space.

#### 3.2 Limitations

We conducted a high level analysis of the posts and conducted a manual thematic analysis to characterize narratives about abuse, with a focus on sexual, physical and emotional abuse. While we recognize that our data might not be representative of the wide population who experience abuse and rape (e.g., not everyone has access

Types of non-anonymous posts (Number)(percentage)	Subcategories
Looking for recommendation (477) (53%)	Sales on clothes, furniture & other products (25%) Looking for maids (21%) Freelancing questions (7%)
Seeking Advice (180)(20%)	Childcare advice (8%) Pregnancy advice (2%) Reviews and feedback advice (10%)
Social Venting (171) (19%)	Sharing daily experiences (6%) Personal opinions (5%) Asking other's opinion (4%) Greetings (2%) Specific entertainment post (2%)
Sexual harassment (63)(7%)	sharing #metoo stories (4%) sharing on the behalf of friend (2%) Reporting mechanisms (1%)
Domestic violence (9)(1%)	Physically assaulted by husband/partner (1%)

**Table 1: Main themes of Non-Anonymous posts from a Facebook group of 15000 women**

Types of anonymous posts (Number) (Percentage)	Subcategories
Intimate partner relation (79)(9.88%)	Intercourse advice (2.38%) Intimacy advice for husband (6.25%) Unwanted sexual experience (1.25%)
Abortion and contraception (149)(18.63%)	Contraception methods (8%) Abortion and religion (10.63%)
Intimate health (56)(7%)	Menstruation cycle (3%) Pregnancy (4%)
Anxiety and Depression (153)(19.13%)	Pre/PostPartum depression (3.25%) Husband cheating (13.38%) Guilt of choosing wrong person (2.5%)
Sexual Abuse (173)(21.63%)	Sexual harassment (18.5%) Intimate partner violence (3.13%)
Abuse (75)(9.38%)	Psychological abuse (8.5%) Verbal abuse (0.88%)
Seeking advice (115)(14.35%)	Validation for decisions (3.75%) Childcare (2.60%) Gynecologist help (4.75%) Psychiatrist help (3.25%)

**Table 2: Main themes of Anonymous posts from a Facebook group of 15000 women**

to the Internet, or uses Facebook) or even the narrower population who post on closed Facebook groups, we believe our approach is sufficiently robust to provide a foundation for understanding the powerful use and outlet Facebook closed groups provide for women in patriarchal contexts for support seeking and the role anonymity plays in eliciting taboo narratives and disclosures. We gained additional insight by speaking to one of the moderators for this group about the motivation behind the group, their experience of moderating the group and the narratives most frequently shared. We recognize that we would be able to get more valuable data by directly accessing and speaking to the female members but because of the sensitivity of the posts we refrained from approaching the women directly.

#### 3.3 Findings: Anonymous Posts

There were a total of 800 anonymous posts (approx. 47%), which discussed a range of issues from intimate partner relations, abortion, intimate female hygiene, depression, sexual abuse, psychological and verbal abuse, and advice seeking (Table 2).

Similar to the categories observed by Andalibi et al [17] in their analysis of abuse-related Reddit content, we also observed five distinct categories of emotional valence in the analyzed posts: sadness expressed as depression, confusion, fear expressed as anxiety or fear of husband, in-laws or male family members, anger, shame and neglect. The most frequently expressed emotion was depression and loneliness.

Facebook groups do not intrinsically allow the posting of anonymous content and in order to facilitate the anonymous sharing of sensitive subjects the moderators of this group allow members to direct message them the posts which are then shared via the moderators account.

**3.3.1 Sexual, Physical and Emotional Abuse.** Our analysis reveals that the highest percentage of anonymous posts revolved around sexual abuse (approx. 22%) 2). These posts relived old traumas of being abused as a child, or were narratives of abuse in marriages. The main subcategories of posts under sexual abuse were regarding sexual harassment (18.5%) and intimate partner violence (3.13%). These posts are pre-tagged with either a trigger warning or sexual abuse hashtag. For example, one anonymous post detailed an episode of extreme violence while she was six months pregnant. As a result she had a pre-term delivery:

[ ... I was dragged, slapped and thrown against walls until I escaped and hid in a separate room and although I let my parents and in-laws know of the abuse no steps were taken and I regret informing them. I am still in the relationship which is a 'hell-hole', and I still experience physical abuse. I wish I had been able to leverage social media and find support at the time this particular incident happened...]

All the comments to the above post were supportive of the poster with many prayers, empowering words and some comments that laid out ways in which the poster could perhaps become financially independent and leave the marriage. Some of the suggestions included applying for immigration abroad. All comments encouraged the poster to leave the marriage.

Some of the posts revolved around trauma of not being believed as a child, or not finding support from family members. These posts sought and elicited emotional support and a recognition of the trauma and injustice. For example one post detailed being sexually abused by a male household staff member when the writer was a child (less than 8 years old):

[ I was molested by one of the male household workers in the home. (She narrates in graphic detail the episode which occurred in her home)...I still remember the incident and the being haunted by the details. I urge all parents to be more careful with their children. ]

Similarly, another post shared anonymously detailed the sexual abuse of a young girl by her father.

[ I was molested by my father and as a result became an aggressive teenager, which eventually led to an end to the abuse. I recently confronted my mother about the abuse and her lack of action. My mother responded by saying that she did not know the details

of the abuse, that she had asked me not to interact with my father and that I had always had male friends and so I was not 'good' to begin with. ]

The group also sees posts detailing emotional abuse, typically by in-laws or partners, one example:

[ I faced emotional abuse from my husband. I have been married for a year and my husband is verbally abusive. I have no privacy; he reads my messages, and dislikes me visiting my mother. He uses abusive language which reduces my self-respect. I would like to ask the group for advice on how to deal with this kind of abuse. ]

Most comments to this specific post encouraged the poster to leave the marriage. The commenting members argued that mental and emotional abuse was the same as physical abuse and causes equal damage. There were also a few posts recommending the original poster wait and that with time and parenthood things would improve. These were met with a great deal of disagreement from other members of the group. The comments section of posts that detail this kind of abuse that is less obvious than physical abuse becomes a space for members to argue about what constitutes abuse that can be tolerated and where the line is between putting up with a certain type and intensity of abuse so as to exist within the society and what must absolutely not be tolerated regardless of societal pressures.

**3.3.2 Contraceptives and Abortions.** Approximately 19% of the posts also revolved around abortions and use of contraceptives (Table. 2). These were mostly concerned with the religious implications of abortion and or the use of contraceptives:

[ I have never used contraceptive pills. If I go to a pharmacy can I get one without a prescription? And what name should I ask for?? ]

Some of these posts were regarding the best contraceptive methods, side effects of certain contraceptives, and the availability of contraceptives eliciting information support:

[ I am looking for a safe contraceptive method. I am turning ... this Year... I have heard that getting tubes tied (ligation) has some complications later on... ]

One primary reason for these posts being made anonymously is the taboo and controversial nature of abortions and contraceptive use in Pakistan [19]. Similarly, in Pakistan, advertisements of contraceptives are labeled as indecent, immoral, anti-cultural and anti-religion [58]. This leaves a gap in the knowledge most young women have regarding contraceptives, their use and where to obtain them. This group provides a safe space for women to ask questions relating to their sexual and reproductive health without fear of harsh judgment or loss of respect. The group consists of female doctors as well and in regards to medical queries, they typically take the lead in answering based on their medical knowledge or refer to a specific doctor.

**3.3.3 Intimate Partner Relations.** Anonymous posts also revolved around intimate partner relations and narratives of partner disinterest in intercourse. Women asked for advice on physical intimacy issues and vented their personal frustrations. A significant number

of posts dealt with attempting to understand what is 'normal' and what is not with regards to physical intimacy:

[ Is a lack of sex is normal in a marriage? Please explain what is normal in terms of frequency of sex with husbands... I feel degraded and unwanted because of my husband's lack of interest ]

This is particular important given that in the Pakistani context this information is not part of the formal schooling (sex education) or discussed at home by the mothers or family members [61, 79]. Similarly, visits to gynaecologists are infrequent and only for serious health concerns [11, 53]. This leaves most women with no frame of reference of their own sexuality and sexual health. Pre-martial sex and dating are also social taboo's in Pakistan and so most women come to their marriages with little or no understanding of physical intimacy and sexual health [57].

**3.3.4 Social Venting, Perinatal Depression.** Most social venting posts dealt with seeking advice (information support) and help in coping with pre- and postpartum depression:

[ I need some help and motivation on coping with an infant and a toddler - I am just... days post partum... I am a patient of an earlier case of post partum depression which never left ... It has started again ... I can't stop crying all day. How soon does it get better...? How do I be strong to cope with post-partum depression? ]

This group is an important space for women to navigate unrecognized challenges like perinatal depression in Pakistan [70].

Stay-at-home mothers revealed how detached they felt from their social circles, and their periodic emotional break downs. Many of these posts looked for validation of their life choices, for example, whether to go back to work with a young baby or choosing not to go back to work.

**3.3.5 Seeking Advice Regarding Husbands and In-laws.** A large number of the anonymous posts (under cheating husbands, intimate partner violence and abuse) had to do with seeking advice on what to do with abusive husbands and in-laws. This included narratives on verbal, physical and psychological abuse. Some of these were follow-up posts based on the advice received and the course of action taken. Most of the advice around cheating, abusive husbands or in-laws recommended the poster to leave the marriage. However, financial independence played a great role in determining whether a woman in an abusive relationship with children would choose to leave or stay. Anecdotally from these posts, we see that when a woman is financially independent, she more often than not chooses to leave. However, when a woman is financially dependent, she mostly continues to stay in the marriage, especially since in most cases her family members are not supportive of leaving the marriage.

**3.3.6 Anxiety and Depression.** Anxiety and depression is one of the most often mentioned concern in anonymous posts. Most of the posts (approx. 90%) in all the categories from Table 2 were also tagged with terms related to mental health. Our analysis reveals that for this group of women, their mental health is linked to issues of intimate partner relations, pre and post-partum depression, sexual

and psychological abuse, childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence. This is further exacerbated by few outlets for sharing these traumatic narratives and experiences.

### 3.4 Findings: Non-Anonymous Posts

Most non-anonymous posts on the group were information seeking content, looking for recommendations (53%) for furniture, beauty products, doctors information, party planners and schools reviews.

Women also made general posts (19%) with quotes, facts, or information about topical interests like #MeToo and political situation of the country. The group provides an important space for women to engage in conversations on their role in Pakistani society and the patriarchal constraints they must navigate:

[ The one thing that I find incredibly demeaning is the exclusion of a woman's name from the name-plate hanging outside a family home. Or the casual absence of her name on invitation cards as it reads Mr. and Mrs...]

Similarly posts that encourage women to fit into patriarchal narratives face severe criticism on the forum and foster detailed discussions on what constitutes patriarchy and how feminism is aligned with Islamic thought and principles (Islam is the majority religion in Pakistan). Some examples:

[ It's not about gender roles look at the bigger picture that women are not objects women shouldn't be treated like dirt. That men should respect women and treat them the way they should be treated. ]

[ I always say that Islam is a feminist religion and Allah (God) Himself is a feminist. I call myself a feminist but I'm believe that this label is useless because feminism is humanism - women rights are human rights...]

Additionally, approximately 20% of the posts were about seeking advice for childcare, psychiatrists and gynecologists for pregnancy advice.

An interesting, but unsurprising, finding was that there were very few non-anonymous posts related to sensitive topics such as intimate partner relations, abortions and contraceptives, sexual harassment and abuse, or anxiety and depression. From Tables 1 and 2 we can see there is little overlap between the two categories of posts except in terms of seeking advice. There are very specific topics on which women do not post non-anonymously.

A significant number of non-anonymous posts were also discussions around popular hashtags like #metoo and #HearMeToo along with their personal stories of different types of harassment they face in the workplace, or public places. A few women disclosed personal experiences of domestic violence from their own accounts to provide emotional support to those women who were having a tough time in their lives.

### 3.5 Comment Types

The comments on both the anonymous and non-anonymous posts fall into three main categories:

- (1) Factual and informative; doctors names, shop names, recipes etc.

- (2) Advice; how to handle in-laws, husbands, abuse, depression
- (3) Personal Experiences; in response to abuse narratives sharing of personal experiences
- (4) Motivational/empowering messages ; especially in relation to abuse, motivating women to leave
- (5) Mental Health Support; direct message me, we can have a conversation or I am here to listen.
- (6) Material Support; to help women leave or offer support for women in financial distress.

### 3.6 Survey Results

In addition to a high level analysis of the posts over a 6 month period, we also posted a quick survey within the group that was completed by 28 women. The survey asked about the highest level of education, age, marital status, Facebook account use, knowledge of Facebook privacy settings, specific questions regarding the use of this particular group on Facebook.

Survey results show that 79% of the women in our sample are married, approx. 18% are single, and the rest are divorced. All the women have 14 years of education or more. All participants(100%) of our sample belong to urban areas of the country. In terms of current working status, 50% of the women did not work, 25% had full-time jobs, 18% had part time jobs and approx. 7% were students. Given that women's movements in Pakistan are restricted or monitored, and working outside the home is sometimes discouraged, this is an expected outcome. It is interesting to note that all women (100%) in our sample self-reported knowledge about Facebook privacy settings, even though only 10% of our sample posted status updates three or more times a week. Ninety percent of the women posted once a week or less.

Questions around the content of their posts on the group in question revealed that 20% of the women post about mental health on their time-lines, 20% posted about domestic violence and 20% posted about issues with their in-laws. Similarly, 21% of the women said they posted on mental health on their personal time-lines, 10% said they posted mental health issues on another Facebook group and 7% said they posted about mental health on the group in this study. Mental health related posts feature heavily across most women-only groups. A question asking the participants if there were other themed anonymous posts they made on Facebook revealed they posted anonymously on postpartum related issues, new born health, physical and sexual health. A larger than expected percentage of women (approx. 39%) were part of more than 10 Facebook groups. Our survey also asked for the names of their most frequented groups, and all of the most-frequently used groups reported were all-women support-groups or all-women buying and selling groups.

### 3.7 Moderator Interview

To better understand the dynamics of the group we also spoke with one of the moderators of the group. She did not have the time to meet in person but spoke with us over Facebook direct messaging. The group has two moderators and each reviews approximately 100 plus (100-150) posts per day, averaging 1000 plus posts per week. She also spends approximately 4 hours everyday on the group averaging approx. 30 hours per week. This is because the only way to

post anonymously on the group is to direct message the moderators who then strip the post, label it #anonymous and post from their own accounts. The moderators also read every post to ensure the space stays safe and judgment free. This places an immense burden on the moderators themselves. Regarding anonymous content the moderator revealed:

Around 20-30% are made as anonymous, considering the fact that we also decline a lot of ratio of anonymous posts since they don't usually fall under the criteria of being posted as anonymous. We see posting as anonymous as a privilege so we make sure it's being used to the best of its purpose.

The criterion for anonymous posts is traumatic content around abuse, trauma or sensitive/taboo topics. Typically information seeking posts (advice on babies, schooling, doctors etc) is rejected if requested for anonymous posting.

The moderator revealed that most anonymous posts dealt with:

Usually complaints about living in a joint family, mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, issues. Husband issues. Divorce issues. Child issues. Psychological issues or how to deal with depression related posts.

The moderator further revealed her perceptions of the function the group provides to its members:

This group provides support for the women in every form. It's a platform where everyone gets the chance of freely discussing their ideas, getting solution to their ongoing issues with an added benefit of appearing as anonymous and hiding their identity to discuss about the most challenging issues they are facing which they can't really disclose in public or with family/friends. Sometimes, the group also helps support women by raising donations for the needy!

Despite the amount of work involved the moderator felt that given the sensitivity of the posts and content there was no way to ensure anonymity other than through the moderators themselves:

No I don't think any other way is suitable. The members trust us only because they know we won't let their identity out. I can't think of any other way for them to send Anon posts

Similarly, the moderator takes the role of community safeguarding seriously and read every post made to ensure the platform stays non-judgmental and beneficial for all members.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The aim of our work is to understand the use of online Facebook groups as digital safe spaces for women to share their narratives around subjects considered taboo and shameful. We explore what features of anonymous vs non-anonymous posts and the factors most associated with the requirement of anonymity. We also investigate the vital role moderators play in keeping the community anonymous and protecting the identity of anonymous posters. Our work provides some key insights into the use of closed Facebook groups by women in patriarchal contexts and explores the role that social technologies can play in providing women with social

support networks and safe spaces for their narratives around abuse and trauma.

#### 4.1 Anonymity and Patriarchy

Our investigation reveals that online peer support provides women a legitimate and valued space to anonymously unburden themselves and find support for deeply disturbing narratives around abuse and trauma. Women in closed women-only Facebook groups rely on their ability to post anonymously on deeply personal and taboo topics like abortions, intimate health, sexual relations with partners and domestic and sexual abuse. Most anonymous posts on these topics are also tagged with keywords around depression and mental stress. Most posters acknowledge the crucial role this group plays in helping them through stressful times. Also, all women who have posted their narratives on being abused sexually as children have acknowledged the feeling of release and unburdening that comes with finally being able to share their story and have that witnessed and acknowledged. This witnessing of traumatic events and the unconditional support of injustice is seen in follow-up posts to have a significant impact on a woman's mental health and ability to deal with trauma.

Our analysis of the Facebook group also shows that women will only share their narratives anonymously and a high importance is placed on sharing in spaces that have little overlap with their real world social circles. Tables 1 and 2 show the distinct difference in posting patterns and type of content posted depending on whether it was anonymous or not. Due to the extremely prohibitive nature of these issues even in online social circles women are only comfortable posting about taboo subjects under anonymity. Unlike the trade-off between anonymity and identifiability discussed by previous work [17, 47] we observed no such conflict in this context. On the contrary, the risk of identification and subsequent consequences in patriarchal and restrictive context's is too high for a trade-off to be meaningful.

More importantly these private groups with only female members are spaces where the rules of patriarchy are suspended. Women can be vulnerable safely and are not afraid of being harassed or stalked as is often the case with social media use in Pakistan [74] and around the world [32]. Women can safely share their narratives, support each other in job seeking, information seeking and encourage each other to subvert their patriarchal constraints in their offline lives. These groups have become a vital mechanism in facilitating women in the sharing of their discontent with the limitations set by their 'male protectors' and to discuss and discover ways to subvert the system. The group also serves the purpose of educating women about their own intimate, maternal and sexual health and challenges the norms for women in Pakistan fostering conversations on female rights and discussions on what feminism means for them.

#### 4.2 Moderator Role and Emotional Labor

Given that Facebook groups do not allow the posting of anonymous content all posts must first be sent to the moderators. The moderator of the group revealed having to make a conscious decision to turn down anonymous post requests for information seeking posts outside of sensitive or taboo topics. Similarly, the moderators

have on multiple occasions also publicly posted about rejecting specific anonymous posts, which in their opinion should be posted non-anonymously. This is done entirely at the discretion of the moderator which we believe is a drawback of current use of Facebook groups for support seeking in this context. Not only do the moderators determine the use of anonymity but the necessity of revealing personal profiles and identities to the moderators to post anonymously raises an additional barrier to support seeking for traumatic experiences not all women can accept. This is especially true for new members who have no history of trust where their identities were not revealed to rely on.

However, the moderation of the group plays a vital role in preserving the sanctity of the space. While forcing all members to wait until their post appears after being vetted by one of the moderators, it does also ensure the group posts stay non-judgmental and that no bullying, stalking or harassment occurs.

One of the more conflicting insights that has emerged from our study is this relationship between a moderation for the group versus the advantages of an un-moderated space where anonymous posting can happen directly. While moderation is clearly necessary in ensuring that only women join, fake profiles are spotted and disrespectful or judgmental members removed, a barrier is raised to membership and posting of content. This is a significant barrier as we have seen from the analysis of anonymous and non-anonymous posts women will only share their deeply personal narratives and ask for advice/support if they are ensured of complete anonymity. The vital importance of self-determined anonymity in encouraging support seeking and disclosures has also been supported by previous studies on platforms that allowed the direct posting of anonymous content using 'throw away' accounts [17].

One of the other insights that has emerged is the significant manual and emotional labor that goes into curating a judgement-free community, and ensuring the safety of participants within that community. Moderation comes at a huge personal cost - moderators spend up to 30 hours a week approving content, verifying identities of new members, etc. Apart from the manual labor, the emotional labor that goes into reading sensitive, fairly traumatic content that gets posted anonymously is bound to take a significant toll. Lastly, given that poster identity is available to the moderator, moderators have to take extreme care such that their own accounts don't get compromised. As far as incentives for moderators are concerned, apart from the elevated status within the community that comes with being a moderator, there appear no immediate personal gains or other significant incentives for moderators. This type of involvement is often typically found in activist circles, where curating and maintaining a community takes significant effort. However, taking a personal emotional toll to simply allow for anonymous postings is something unique to this particular digital context.

#### 4.3 Closed Women-Only Facebook Groups and Empowerment

Our study points to the systematic suppression of women's voices and immense family and societal pressure to not speak out against the injustices they face in their married lives, and within society at large. Given the patriarchal and conservative nature of Pakistani



society, not only do women have restricted and monitored movements, they are also strongly discouraged from expanding their social circles. In a survey by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017–2018, it was reported that only 22.53% of the total female population are in the labor force compared to 77.47% of the men [3]. The lack of work opportunities, or disincentives to pursue work outside of the household, further reduces a woman's ability to expand her social circle, find outside support, while restricting her to the four walls of her home. We would argue that closed women-only groups like this one, play a crucial role in the process of empowerment for literate women in Pakistan. The term 'empowerment' is a complex concept associated with a vague goal and multiple understandings that is challenging if not impossible to implement in the field [21, 68]. An understanding of this concept is even more challenging within a patriarchal context like Pakistan where although evidently men wield the most *power* (a crucial element to any understanding of empowerment), women have navigated subversive ways to also yield power and carve out agency for themselves which looks and exerts itself very differently than western notions of agency and autonomy [59, 66]. Power can be unpacked as *power over* which involves a relationship of dominance, *power to* which relates to having the agency to make decisions, *power with* which involves people organising with a common purpose to achieve a collective goal and *power within* which relates to self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness [68]. So while an essential element of empowerment is the autonomy for decision making, an equally essential component is the process that allows people to consider themselves able and worthy of that decision making. Closed women-only Facebook groups play a vital role in the process of empowering women from within - building their self-worth and a belief in their own strength and ability to exert their rights. This ties in directly with creating a more equal society where there is respect for both genders and their experiences.

The leveraging and appropriation of closed Facebook groups by women to carve out safe space for themselves reflects Barzde's principles of participation, plurality and self disclosure allowing for the expression of female agency, autonomy and empowerment [20].

It is imperative to think about designing digital safe spaces for women in patriarchal contexts that allow anonymity and complete privacy to encourage the support seeking mechanisms that women employ. There also needs to be a mechanism for women to create follow-ups to the previously posted anonymous posts. This posting behavior was often seen on the Facebook group where anonymous posts had follow-up anonymous posts which had to be qualified and the previous post pasted before the new post. This is a cumbersome, round about way to create anonymous peer support groups and the ICT4D community needs to collectively think about designing inclusive social support platforms.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The understanding of the access to and the use of online safe spaces for women in patriarchal contexts for the sharing of traumatic experiences and seeking connectivity is of vital importance to allow the HCI community to design platforms suited to their unique needs. In this study we present an understanding of the adoption of closed Facebook groups for support seeking among women with a focus

on sexual abuse and harassment. We specifically unpack the conflict between moderated spaces and the need for absolute anonymity within this context and the vital importance of preserving profile identities for patriarchal context's.

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