

Cyber harassment complaints surged during lockdown: report

KARACHI: The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) has reported a 189 per cent increase in complaints registered with its Cyber Harassment Helpline during Pakistan's coronavirus lockdown.

"As Pakistan entered its lockdown [in March] in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, we feared there would be an increase in cyber harassment cases as well as cyber attacks in general," a press release issued on Wednesday by the not-for-profit organisation said.

The organisation, which works to ensure digital freedoms in the country, reported a combined 136 complaints of cyber harassment in March and April — during the lockdown — compared to 47 such complaints, an increase of 189pc, before the lockdown in January and February.

Seventy-four per cent of the complaints registered in March and April were reported by women, whereas, men and non-binary persons registered 19pc and 5pc complaints, respectively.

A majority of the cases that the organisation's cyber harassment helpline received during the lockdown months "pertained to blackmailing through non-consensual sharing of information, intimate pictures and videos".

Complaints of hate speech, phishing, fake profiles and defamation were also reported, according to DRF.

Women in Pakistan are victims of forms of gendered violence in the digital sphere that includes sexual harassment, surveillance, unauthorised use and dissemination of personal data, and manipulation of personal information, the organisation said.

The DRF also released a list of recommendations for policy makers and law enforcement.

"These [recommendations] cover issues of the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) accessibility especially during the pandemic, and also how technology needs to be used hand in hand while dealing with digital harassment cases, like allowing for video testimonies," it said.