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Pakistan's #MeToo movement hangs in the balance over celebrity case

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A popular actor was accused of harassment - now those who spoke against him are being charged under law meant to protect women

It takes a lot to rattle Leena Ghani. As an artist turned activist helping to raise the voices of Pakistan's women, she has often fielded abuse, threats and harassment.

But when she learned, on a morning in late September, that police had charged her for criminal defamation, linked to Pakistan's most high-profile #MeToo case, Ghani says she was shaken. "In terms of silencing and demonising people speaking out against sexual assault, it was a new low even for Pakistan," she says.

Ghani was not alone. Eight others were also named in the case, facing three years in jail for criminal defamation. Some only learned of their involvement through a [newspaper article](#).

Lawyers say the case has exposed how cyber defamation laws passed under the guise of protecting women from online harassment are being used instead to silence Pakistan's victims of sexual assault.

On [16 December](#), the authorities said there was enough evidence to take Ghani and others to trial - and the future of Pakistan's #MeToo movement now hangs in the balance.

That movement began in April 2018 after Meesha Shafi, a singer and actor who starred in The Reluctant Fundamentalist, sent out a tweet alleging sexual harassment.

Shafi alleged that she had "been subjected, on more than one occasion, to sexual harassment of a physical nature" at the hands of one of Pakistan's most beloved celebrities, Ali Zafar. Shafi wrote that by speaking out, she hoped to "break the culture of silence that permeates through our society".

Zafar [denies](#) "any and all claims of harassment lodged against me by Ms Shafi", and so far has successfully defeated the sexual harassment claims she brought against him in court.

The allegations reverberated through Pakistan's deeply conservative Islamic society, where women speaking out against assault is rare and taboo. Because of Zafar's popularity disbelief was rife, but dozens of women and men came out in support of Shafi on social media, including several who alleged assault by Zafar.

Among them was Ghani, who said her concerns about Zafar's treatment of women emerged after they became friends in 2014. Writing on Twitter, Ghani accused Zafar of behaviour towards her that "displays a clear lack of respect for women", including "inappropriate contact, groping, sexual comments".

"You hide from him," read Ghani's post, "hoping his sleazy eyes and hands don't find you again. His hands don't make their way up and down your waist or hold you too tight while you desperately try to wriggle and run."

Similar accusations followed. Blogger Humna Raza alleged that Zafar had groped her at an event, while Maham Javaid, a journalist, recounted on Twitter an alleged incident where Zafar had "tried to kiss my cousin and pull my cousin into a restroom with him. Luckily, my cousin's friends were there to push him off."

Zafar has accused Shafi of organising a social media campaign against him. According to newspaper reports, he said he could not believe that "anyone can come forward and accuse someone who is innocent and decent, has worked hard for over two decades – solely on social media".

Zafar filed a civil defamation lawsuit against Shafi, seeking a billion rupees in damages. The court accepted the lawsuit and placed a gag order on Shafi, which still prevents her from discussing the allegations in public.

Over the next two and a half years, Zafar appeared on a dozen television shows to defend his name, sometimes breaking down into tears and occasionally accompanied by his wife. He alleged the accusations were a smear campaign, coordinated by a group of women who created fake accounts and were funded by foreign money. Last month, Pakistan's president awarded Zafar the Pride of Pakistan, one of the country's highest honours.

In July 2018, Shafi also began legal proceedings, attempting to take Zafar to court for sexual harassment in the workplace. Her case was dismissed on the technicality that freelancers were not covered by the law. An appeal to the Lahore high court was unsuccessful and although her lawyers have challenged the ruling in the supreme court, the case has still not been heard.

In November 2018 rumours began to swirl that Zafar had also filed criminal charges against Shafi and 25 of her online supporters and fellow accusers with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Pakistan's most powerful investigating body.

By July 2019, dozens of people, mainly women, who had written social media posts either making allegations about Zafar or expressing support for Shafi, began to receive notices to appear before the FIA for questioning.

Ghani, Javaid and Raza were among them, as well as Iffat Omar, an actor who knew Shafi and Zafar personally. When Zafar claimed on television that the women taking Shafi's side were being paid by the west to spread propaganda, Omar wrote "stop lying harasser" on her social media.

Omar and Ghani were questioned by the FIA and both separately alleged they had been put under pressure by officers to retract their allegations against Zafar and apologise. Both refused. The senior FIA officer on the case was later [suspended](#) over a tweet which led to accusations he was being "Ali Zafar's personal spokesperson" on social media. The FIA declined to comment on the case.

At least three of the women also allege that Zafar applied "indirect harassment" through social networks. Omar says she received a "clear message from Ali Zafar that if I just apologise, everything will be better for me – and I have given him the direct answer that it is not happening."

Ghani alleges that "Zafar also tried to get to me through my family and would send cruel messages about my family's problems through third parties. A lot of dirty tactics. He was trying to put pressure on me to apologise and I'll admit it was scary."

But in late 2019, after she had filed a legal petition against Zafar and the FIA for harassment and Javaid had written to the senate human rights committee to complain, everything went quiet. Until September 2020, when news of the charges broke.

Nine people, five women including Shafi, Ghani, Omar, Javaid and Raza, and four men, had been booked for defamation by the FIA's cybercrime wing over the alleged social media "character assassination" of Zafar. The charges carried a three-year jail sentence.

There was confusion as to why only nine had been booked in the case, when the original list had 25 names. But then, says Javaid, the penny dropped: "We realised we were the only ones who had refused to apologise to Zafar."

One of the accused, journalist Haseem uz Zaman, is facing charges for tweets that claimed "Ali Zafar harasses women". They refuse to apologise. "That would not only harm my future and my journalistic credibility, but it would also harm every other survivor of sexual harassment who comes forward in the future," they say. "And I could not live with that."

After news of the criminal charges broke, Ghani and the others began to face a barrage of online rape and death threats and harassment, and say they were vilified in Pakistani media.

A week later, the blogger Raza created a new Twitter account and published a handwritten note retracting her allegations against Zafar and apologising for "the hurt" she had caused him and his family. Zafar shared the tweet. Raza's name has been dropped from the case.

For the women, most galling of all was the law they had been charged under. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act was passed in 2016 partly to protect women from online harassment, but the wing of the FIA tasked with prosecuting these cases is accused of being ineffective.

Nighat Dad, Shafi's lawyer, says she knows dozens of women who have complained to the FIA about online abuse, hate-speech, rape threats and vindictive sharing of intimate videos, but had received no response.

"It's rare the cybercrime wing will register cases lodged by women activists, and even if they do, it usually takes years for anything to happen," says Dad. "So I was never expecting that they would be so shameless as to take action against women survivors who are speaking up."

This was not an isolated use of the law against women. When girls at the prestigious Lahore Grammar School recently alleged harassment by teachers and fellow students, several were threatened with criminal defamation, after which the accusations went quiet. At Lahore University of Management Sciences, a Facebook page for student testimonials of sexual assault was shut down with a letter threatening to report them to the FIA.

"We are seeing this happen over and over," says Dad. "The cyber laws that were enacted in the name of protecting women in Pakistan now are being misused and weaponised to silence them."

As Shafi's lawyer, Dad claims she herself has been subjected to a "vicious smear campaign", with newspapers making [suspended](#) that she is a foreign operative running an "illegal NGO", [unsubstantiated claims](#). "They will not only try and silence victims, but anyone who tries to help victims fight for justice," says Dad.

On [15 December](#), the FIA presented evidence that Shafi and others in the case were "guilty" of defamation and asked for court proceedings against them to begin.

Ambreen Qureshi, Zafar's lawyer, declined to talk to the Guardian about the allegations but said "we have presented evidence to the FIA on account of which Ms Shafi and eight others are booked". Qureshi says Shafi had failed to provide any witnesses to support her allegations. Shafi's lawyers say she was not given the opportunity.

According to Qureshi, the court documents so far show "in this case an innocent man was made a target of a criminally motivated malicious campaign by a group of closely related women." The eight women facing charges deny any previous relationship or any campaign and say they intend to fight the case in court and push for the cyber defamation law to be repealed.

Ghani says: "People keep saying #MeToo is dying in Pakistan, which is so terrible because it's not like women are not getting harassed and assaulted and raped, but we are being silenced. We all realise that Pakistan's [#MeToo movement](#) hinges on this case."

"The whole system is against us; Ali Zafar is a powerful man, and going to court is hard – but what can be harder than lying and living with that lie," she adds. "I would rather go to jail."

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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