**Imagining inclusivity in the digital age**

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Early 2000’s was the time when countries like India and Philippines experienced exponential growth in the Information Technology sector in Asia. Rapid and sustained growth led to the creation of a second Silicon Valley in India, however, much to Pakistan’s dismay, the same could not be replicated here. But now, under the incumbent government, Pakistan’s digital landscape is changing for the better. While the Ministry of Information and Technology sets out to establish the Digital Policy of Pakistan, Oxfam Pakistan and Bargad Organisation have prepared a framework, the Future of Work (FOW): Automation and Digitisation, that lends support for making the upcoming digital policy of Pakistan an all-inclusive policy mechanism.

In Pakistan, while we look to empower youth groups, our main focus should be the rural youth who remain largely under-represented in main policy reforms, and experience inequitable access to most public services, like the internet. This framework, FOW is a voice to the many people who can benefit from internet acquisition, and laws concerning digital security, as it offers a digital governance mechanism that sets out to empower rural youth, women, transgender, and differently-abled persons. This intervention by civil society organisations is an opportunity for the federal government to effect laws that can be useful at the community level, which will in turn help the local economy to grow. These propositions come at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need for more reliance on the internet for ensuring greater connectivity and kickstarting economic activity.

[India surpasses 33.1million total COVID cases, death toll at 441,411](https://nation.com.pk/08-Sep-2021/india-surpasses-33-1million-total-covid-cases-death-toll-at-441-411)

In Pakistan there is a dearth of constructive dialogue on connectivity that is afforded through the internet, and what it means for a society. To a much larger extent, people still equate connectivity to the use of social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc, whereas they depend heavily on the internet for recreational and/or entertainment purposes. It has only been under the incumbent government that the need for expanding into the digital economy and equitable access to the internet has been felt, primarily for empowering people, especially youth groups.

While Pakistan’s IT sector has grown, it has done so in a fragmented manner; uncovering the socio-economic disparities that exist within the society. This fragmented growth is not in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of ‘universal and affordable’ internet connectivity for all, and runs the risk of isolating people in far flung areas from the socio-economic benefits of internet acquisition.

[Taliban names key ministers in new Afghan government](https://nation.com.pk/08-Sep-2021/taliban-names-key-ministers-in-new-afghan-government)

When we think of Pakistan’s contrasting landscape of internet poverty and rapid development, one of the most important examples is the Digital Silk Route (a flagship project of CPEC). This high-speed internet connection passes through Hunza before entering KP and Punjab; but offers no real respite to the people of Hunza, who rely on local low-speed internet provider, SCO. This is just one of the few examples of bad internet governance in the country that directly affects how we have more voices from internet developed areas in mainstream media, than from the isolated regions. Instances such as ‘Hello, DC’ are just one of the very few examples of how better internet facilities can improve rule of law and governance. The Internet also enables access to public facilities, such as health, education, transport, and enables e-commerce—all of which are essential for the improvement of socio-economic well-being of people.

These are some good ideas and for anyone who lives in a metropolis like Lahore, these make sense. However, for a large section of Pakistan’s society, these are mere myths that need to be turned into a reality. This is where the efficacy of FOW Report can be the most influential because what this report particularly highlights is a narrative that is not being debated enough in policy-making corridors. It’s an attempt to address the woes and concerns of disempowered people in society, especially of economically-marginalised gender groups; women and transgender people.

[PM Imran to launch Islamabad’s digitalized land record, cadastral map today](https://nation.com.pk/08-Sep-2021/pm-imran-to-launch-islamabad-s-digitalized-land-record-cadastral-map-today)

This joint report by Oxfam and Bargad is qualitative research, consolidating responses from 56 individuals from across the country—representing varied internet access. It comes as no surprise then that the first proposition this report makes is about equitable access to internet—expansion of infrastructure to rural areas which can be financed through micro financing. In addition to this, the report also lends support to the idea that the networks of e-payment methods should be extended, whereas transgender people facilitated for operating their own online banking channels.

For infrastructural expansion of internet connectivity and access, a sustained stream of financing is required. In addition to this, Oxfam and Bargad have highlighted other sectors such as agriculture (the main sector of sustainable employment in rural areas), which can benefit from internet financing. The biggest benefit internet acquisition can provide the farmers is access to modern technology and farming methods, as well as connect them to easy online payment systems. This will help the farmers adopt better eco-friendly policies and efficient farming methods.

[El Salvador 1st country to have Bitcoin as official currency](https://nation.com.pk/07-Sep-2021/el-salvador-1st-country-to-have-bitcoin-as-official-currency)

Ensuring safety and inclusivity is another component that deals with cyber security for individuals. This component highlighted the need for creating easy-to-use online platforms for persons with disabilities (PWDs) such as people who are visually impaired, etc. The proposals ask for a dedicated portal for PWDs so their mobility and access to fundamental facilities such as education, travel, leisure and employment can be facilitated at all levels. This will primarily require rapid innovation in IT and can lead the path for greater inclusion and safety. Moreover, it is stressed that the option of transgender should be added in the gender categories for admissions applications to either universities or employment offices.

It’s impossible to think of Pakistan’s digital policy without looking at how the pandemic has affected the students. Almost two years into the pandemic, and students haven’t had a chance to attend classes outside of the hybrid system (a blended learning method involving in person and online classes). For any digital policy to be effective in Pakistan, it needs to cover all sectors; especially education. For this, The FOW proposes training youth, especially women to use digital tools for online education. As Pakistan has one of the highest number of people working as freelancers, globally, there is a broad consensus on expanding the scope of youth training to include setting up e-businesses as well, especially through Fiverr (most widely used digital forum), Upwork, Youtube, Facebook and Instagram. Pakistan’s online freelance industry as well as social media influencers have a higher representation from women, which can be further harnessed to empower women.

[Lt General Sahir Shamshad Mirza appointed Commander Rawalpindi Corps: ISPR](https://nation.com.pk/07-Sep-2021/lt-general-sahir-shamshad-mirza-appointed-commander-rawalpindi-corps-ispr)

However, while we talk about empowering women and youth groups through the digital realm; cases such as the Minar-e-Pakistan Incident uncover the lack of awareness in using digital spaces safely. Conversations on the safe and ethical use of TikTok and Snack Video are essential as youth are especially drawn towards it, without little knowledge about Digital Sensitisation, Privacy, and Identity Theft, all of which Bargad and Oxfam propose should be the backbone of ‘awareness’ in Digital Policy of Pakistan.

Pakistan is a country that has either allowed open (and disparate) access to digital tools within its society without any real conversation about the fallout, or a blanket ban—there has been no in between. This coupled with weak cyber security laws and a fractured digital policy has intensified the existing socio-economic disparities. A large number of young people are especially drawn to using social media and other digital tools for recreational as well as professional purposes that put them at risk of public harassment. While these platforms are helping people earn a living, a regulated and safe mechanism needs to be in place so more people, especially marginalised gender groups, can work in a safe manner.

With the proposals outlined by Bargad and Oxfam, there is hope for the digital policy of Pakistan to be an attempt at inclusivity, safety, and empowerment of rural youth.

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