[**Patriarchal elitism**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1635542/patriarchal-elitism)

[Usama Khilji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7248/usama-khilji)Published July 17, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

THERE seems to be an unwarranted moral panic induced by the highest leadership in Pakistan, be it about harassment or rape, how women dress, and even social media regulation. The main issue is how the morality and decency discourse has been restricted to superficial factors rather than debating the attitudes and mindsets that threaten and violate others.

Take, for example, the [third ban](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631996) on video-sharing social media platform TikTok, most popular among the youth, and most used in areas on the margins of the elite power centres. The persistent banning of the platform, first by the [Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)](https://www.dawn.com/news/1584123), then by the [Peshawar High Court](https://www.dawn.com/news/1611912), and most recently by the Sindh High Court, all under the pretext of ‘obscene and immoral content’ point to the unease that both the powers that be and society at large feel when young people express their creative talents on social media by acting, singing, lip-syncing, dancing, or commenting on various issues.

Why is the expression of creativity being censored instead of being harnessed?

It is important to deconstruct such moral policing of the youth in this country, and consider factors that motivate the act of banning entire platforms, something that needs to be banned by law itself.

First is the blatant elitism against TikTok in Pakistan, because it is used by a cross-section of society, especially sections that have not been prominent or present on the traditionally elite-dominated social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter and Facebook to some extent. When people from small towns, villages and lower socioeconomic backgrounds — groups that form the majority but are grossly underrepresented in mainstream media and other social media — have gained a voice and creative control, the elite-dominated media and social media discourse tends to ‘cringe’ and look down upon the entire application. I have heard several in the creative industry comment on how marketing on TikTok may damage their ‘brand image’ because of the ‘type of people that use it’.

The truth is that TikTok is a platform that is most user-friendly and its video-based interface does not demand literacy for one to set up an account and create content with the potential to go viral. For the first time, people from small towns and villages are able to amass a large following by, in some cases, simply showcasing their lifestyle, sharing pearls of wisdom uttered by their elders, and traditional culture such as dance, music and songs that are underrepresented in the mainstream. TikTok is also providing a platform to languages and cultures that are missing from the Urdu-dominated media — and until now social media — in Pakistan.

Second is the patriarchal wish to objectify, silence and control women. Because TikTok enables women to showcase their talent on the application, the patriarchy considers that beyond the remit of the *chaadar chaardiwari* that it would be happiest to see women confined to. Hence, many gasps are elicited by virtue of seeing women only smile, sing, act or perform on TikTok, and the intersectional curse of being a woman from a non-elite background from a rural area or small town makes it all the more unacceptable for the elitist patriarchy.

Third is the assumption that TikTok is rife with obscene content. TikTok has strict global standards against nudity and sexually explicit content, and its automated filters often take down more than 90 per cent of such content even before anyone sees it, with a reporting mechanism available for users to report content they may deem in violation of the community standards that govern the application. The company is reportedly complying with the PTA on content takedown and user data. In fact, this should worry us because governments should not be able to influence content moderation on the internet so much, especially with the risk of silencing voices critical of the state — a legitimate concern considering the censorship spree the PTI government has been on since 2018.

**Read:** [*TikTok removed 6 million videos in Pakistan in first quarter of 2021*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1632389)

Several content creators have experienced their content being taken down despite being within the remit of TikTok’s rules, clearly indicating that the company is going very far in trying to please the patriarchal powers that be in Pakistan in order to avoid a ban. Such arm-twisting and a fear-induced, threatening environment violate the rights of citizens and paint a bleak picture for the content-creator industry in Pakistan. Often, content is restored upon an appeal, symbolising the prying eyes of the big brother policing innocent moves on the app and suffocating creativity.

Additionally, Pakistan’s Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (Peca), 2016, outlaws hate speech, cyberterrorism, child pornography, content uploaded maliciously to damage someone’s reputation and explicit content anyway, so there are multiple layers of protection available to citizens to protect themselves from harm on the internet rather than the state-corporate nexus policing creativity and expression unilaterally.

Such moral policing cannot be isolated from the prime minister’s problematic statements, the frequency of which exceed the occurrence of censorship of TikTok in Pakistan. Speaking about women’s clothing as a factor that leads to violent sex crimes by men in society emboldens harassers and rapists, gives them the impetus to further blame survivors and victims, and completely overlooks the tragic reality that countless fully covered women and children are also routinely subjected to violent sex crimes by men.

Why is the overwhelming research pointing towards rape being a crime motivated by the desire to exert power as a factor of toxic masculinity repeatedly ignored? Why are young boys not being taught the concept of consent and how to be respectful of boundaries? Why is the expression of creativity being censored instead of being harnessed? Why are women being shamed and blamed for enticing men instead of men being punished for not being ‘robots’?

These questions must be grappled with at the highest levels, and answered at the family and school level to bring up boys who respect women rather than girls who are taught to be invisible. That is the way forward for our society to be cohesive, respectful and moral; not outfits and “this app is banned” notices.

*The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.*

[**usama@bolobhi.org**](http://mailto:usama@bolobhi.org)

**Twitter:\*\*\*\***[**@UsamaKhilji**](https://twitter.com/UsamaKhilji)

*Published in Dawn, July 17th, 2021*