

# ORBITS

Survivor stories

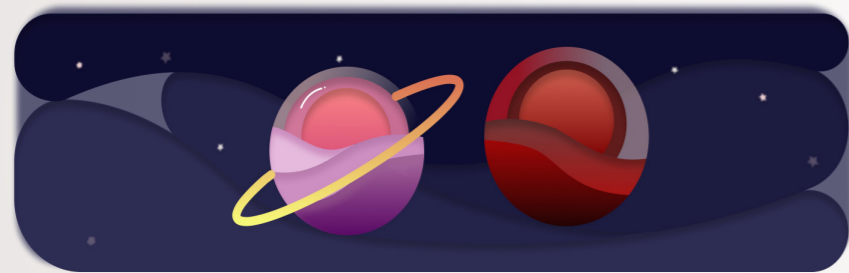


*"It's a kind of abuse that no-one ever faced I think," she says. "Nobody knows what I'm talking about. Nobody understands what I'm talking about. It's so complicated that I'm searching for answers."*

## Huma's story

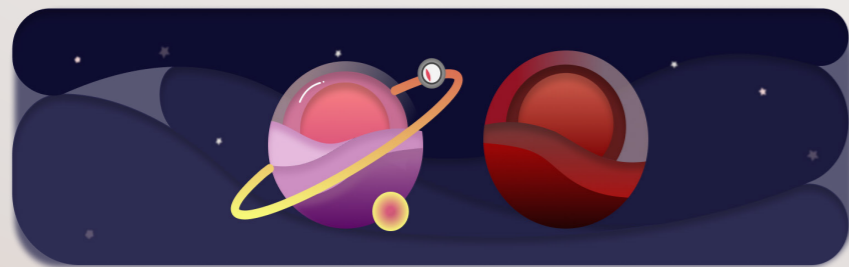
In the ten years Huma was married, she faced multiple forms of violence, including non-consensual recording - a form of tech abuse.

When 20-year-old Huma got married in her native country, Pakistan, the controlling behaviour began immediately. She wasn't allowed to pursue her education, or visit her parents and relatives, especially male cousins. A year into the marriage, Huma had her first son. Her husband and mother-in-law continuously reprimanded her for not being a good mother, and falsely accused her of neglecting the child. Meanwhile, her husband wouldn't sleep in the same room to avoid the noise of their newborn son.



A year later, the couple moved to Saudi Arabia where the abuse escalated to frequent physical violence. On one occasion, her husband split open her eyebrow in front of her mother-in-law, who pretended nothing happened. Unfortunately, this was just the tip of the iceberg.

*"I experienced severe emotional, mental, financial, physical abuse"*

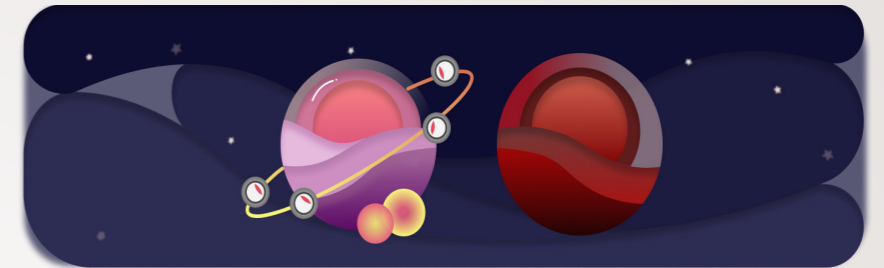


Eventually, the husband began to abuse her using technology, which became one of his central methods of control. Huma first experienced tech abuse when the couple and their son took a trip to Pakistan, to visit Huma's mother-in-law. During that trip, Huma's husband accused her of having sex with another man in her room. She denied this, reminding him that they were in his mother's house, and the only other man there was his brother. At this point, he revealed that he'd downloaded an app on their son's iPad to detect sounds nearby, and insisted he had heard her having sex with another man. "I was just crying miserably: no I didn't do anything, I didn't do anything," she shares. Shattered, she went to his mother who spoke to him and calmed him down. Nevertheless, it became a point of contention that he repeatedly brought up in the years that followed.

Four years into the marriage, a new form of tech abuse started developing. During arguments, Huma's husband would record her and make videos with his phone. This would aggravate her further, and she'd try to stop him. Later, he would claim that he only wanted to stop her from fighting him, and that he had deleted the videos. "I trusted him throughout this marriage on everything he said," she says.

The next year, Huma and her husband moved to the United States. There, the frequency of these recordings increased: "That is where it started to happen too often, too much. Every single fight he would do this." He would start recording her whenever she tried to discipline their son. One day, she found a hidden camera installed in their kitchen. The husband said he was monitoring the house for security purposes, but when she challenged him, he admitted that it was to record her because he claimed that she was abusing their son. This became a common reason used to justify his actions. At one point, Huma says that the manipulation was so overwhelming that she began to believe that she was indeed abusing their child.

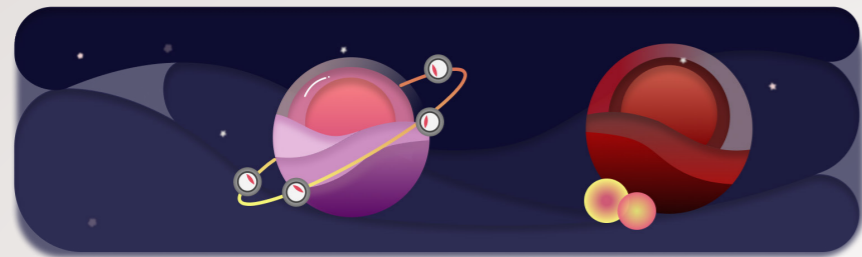
A few years later, the couple had another son. Again, the husband refused to sleep in the same room as their baby, so Huma and her newborn moved to a different room. Her husband set up a humidifier for her and would ensure it was turned on every night. This made Huma suspicious, so she searched the model online and discovered that it was a spycam. She dismantled it, and found another camera. Her husband initially acted surprised and threw the humidifier away, but later admitted that he had been recording her, using the same justification as before.



Additionally, he told Huma that she was bipolar and would joke about uploading videos of her on YouTube. Following this incident, her husband continued to record her with his phone. Though the couple spoke Urdu at home, he'd narrate the videos in English, saying she was abusing the baby who was asking for milk. Soon, Huma found another camera in the kitchen. This time, he said that he had placed it there because he feared that she could be poisoning their food. Meanwhile, he consistently threatened and manipulated her:

*"Please be very careful. I have a library full of your videos. You will lose these children. These children will go to a foster home. You are an abusive mother. I've got you on camera where you are abusing the children. They are not going to spare you. You are going to jail. You're not getting these kids. If you try getting out, just remember one thing: you are not getting the children, because I am going to show these videos to everyone."*

The marriage hit a turning point when Huma's husband called the police after an argument with her, claiming she had hit him. While no arrest was made, the Child Protection Services (CPS) were informed and they opened an investigation. Soon after, the husband called the police again, alleging that she had harmed their youngest son. Before the police arrived, her husband fled, taking their older son with him. Over the next few weeks, she tried to get her son back but to no avail. At this point, she filed for divorce.

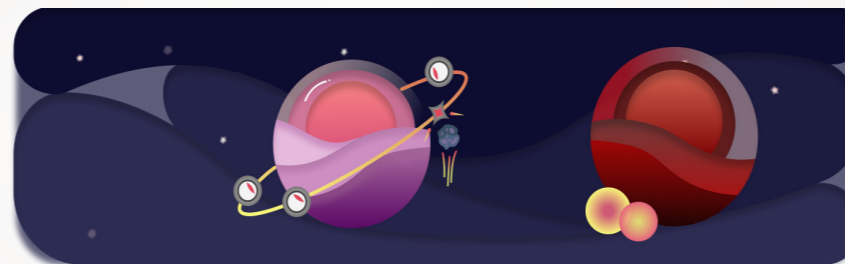


For her first hearing, she was sent the videos her husband was presenting as evidence. There were ten videos from cameras she had never found. In two videos, Huma was aggressive towards her sons. "I just sat there and I cried and I cried," she says. "I was watching myself in these videos, and I knew that in court these videos were going to be on full-blown TV, and what am I going to do? Because I thought I'm never going to get my son back."

However, after completing a two-month investigation, CPS ruled out any abuse. When the videos were played in the courtroom, Huma realised that no one blamed her. Her husband demanded that she should have a psychological examination, but the judge ordered for both to be examined. Her husband had also presented 23 videos as evidence but the examining psychologist asked for the videos to be translated for more context, validating Huma's experiences. An amicus attorney also met the children, the families and saw the houses. A 40-page report was produced, which was completely in favour of Huma. "The amicus attorney said, 'How dare you record your wife in front of your children? How dare you do that?'" she says. Following this, the older son was returned to her.

Though this was a win for the survivor, the situation is far from resolved. Post-divorce, Huma now has shared custody of her children, so she has to keep interacting with her ex-husband. He continues to make threats about taking the children away and records everything to prove that he is a good father. Through a counsellor, the survivor has learnt not to respond to these texts but she worries about the wellbeing of her children. The husband's house has four cameras installed, and this surveillance has been normalised for the older son.

Moreover, her ex-husband continues to record her when they meet to exchange the children. Huma is careful not to retaliate as she knows that he may use this against her. To address this behaviour, she once called the police to complain but they say they can't help her unless her life is under threat. A lawyer from a non-profit has informed the survivor that her lawyer should have included a condition in their divorce agreement that stopped her husband from recording her. However, this did not happen, and it seems that all previous videos were also not seized from him.



To add insult to injury, she later realised that her husband had also been cheating on her. Naturally, Huma is worried about all those videos her husband may have recorded during their time together, especially in intimate situations, since there is no clarity on how many cameras he had over the years, or when and where he had been using them. "All my life, the camera might be there recording it. Now I'm divorced, what is he doing with those videos?" she wonders.

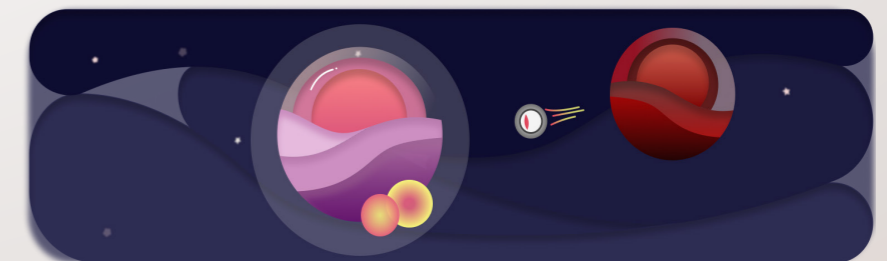
Unfortunately, Huma isn't free from physical violence either. In one instance, the ex-husband physically grabbed her at a doctor's office. She filed a complaint about this assault but the case was dismissed. When Huma approached the prosecutor for an explanation, he implied that she was lying and acting in retaliation. This has severely damaged her trust in the legal system.

*"When a person of authority says something like that, it really makes a big difference," Huma says. "His words still ring in my ears when I think about it."*



Though Huma has now found a government website where she can register a complaint about the harassment, she is hesitant because of the lack of trust in authorities and the difficulties one encounters when trying to report such incidents.

*"A lot of things would start again," she says. "All of that would start again. I'm just scared and tired. I don't want to go through it. I don't know what the outcome will be, actually."*



*"Even though I was not physically assaulted, this man assaulted my reputation sexually," she says. "He was enabled by technology because he put it in a group."*

## JayneRose's story

A lawyer in Kenya, JayneRose was subjected to tech-enabled abuse facilitated by WhatsApp groups when she took a ride from a colleague one day.

In May 2015, JayneRose took a bus to attend a law development seminar, in a town 100 kilometres from her hometown. A colleague offered her a ride back. On the way, he paused at his stepmother's grocery store, where both greeted the stepmother, and then continued on their journey. JayneRose reached home safely.

Two years later, a male friend reached out to the survivor, to share the rumours that were circulating about her in legal circles. In a WhatsApp group, her colleague had disseminated a story about the day she took the ride from him. According to him, she'd had sex with him in a hotel after they met his stepmother, after which they'd also had sex outdoors, "in a bush".

"He never left that bit out that we went to see the stepmother. So when people are asking me, have you ever been with this man, and have you ever seen his stepmother? I said yes, I know the stepmother." Unknowingly, she'd been confirming the rumor. By mixing fact with fiction, the colleague had gained validity for this fake sexual encounter.

Later, JayneRose realised that this story had primarily been shared in all-male WhatsApp groups where men narrate such stories as a source of amusement. She says of the groups: "I think they had a list, that is what I concluded, for sharing wishful thinking or something." The reference to the 'bush' was meant to inject humour into the tale. The friend who'd alerted her had himself felt guilty for being in such a group and for not standing up for her.

*"Their work is to discuss their sexual encounters, real and imagined, with women. If, say you have turned down someone's invitation or a date or a relationship, they actually go there and create their own stories."*

She identifies the usage of WhatsApp groups for abuse as a widespread problem in the region and advises everyone to first understand the nature and objective of such groups before engaging with them.

*"If the aim of the group is not social progress, if it's to defame people's character, to abuse men or women or children, just get out of that group."*

Since two years had passed when she found out, she couldn't file a case for libel or slander due to a statute of limitations. Moreover, she felt unsure of the support, if any, that she would receive from the other men in the group who had witnessed the abuse. However, she did confront him. "I said to him that you are very, very lucky that I cannot sue you because time has passed, but do not talk to me again and do not abuse me again," she says. "Because if this happens again and I hear another bit of this story, it's going to be very, very bad for you."

Despite the confrontation, it's an experience that continues to impact her. "For me it's very important because the work I do, your reputation is everything," she says. "Your character, how people view you, is everything. I always wonder, did someone fail to give me a job or look down on me because of a lie they heard about me?"

Today, JayneRose continues to be a successful lawyer, who shares her experience with young women in the legal circles as a cautionary tale. She is vocal about what happened to her, and urges women to support and defend each other, and avoid situations where they are alone with male colleagues. On some level, the incident is inhibiting JayneRose as she avoids professional gatherings. Moreover, it's also affecting other women lawyers who hear about it.

*"I always tell people: if you ever hear a story about a woman and it's coming from a man, then you better not believe it."*



*"There really wasn't anything that I did about that, besides continue to have quite a low presence online. It again dug in that experience of just not feeling safe and the general feeling of unsafety and almost like you can't turn anywhere. That is a really different feeling that I've had with the things that have happened online."*

## Emily's story

Three incidents of tech abuse have created a chilling effect on one survivor's usage of the internet. Emily was sexually assaulted when she was 18 and has been cautious about her physical safety ever since. Her first experience of tech-enabled abuse was a few years after the assault, when she gave her number to someone she met in a gay bar, thinking their interaction had been friendly. The next morning, she woke up to a series of increasingly aggressive messages from them.

Disconcerted from this interaction, Emily clarified that she didn't want to talk further and blocked the number, but for the next month, the messages kept pouring in via other platforms. As her number was linked to a social media profile which contained more information, it had been possible to track her down. "It was very much like constant harassment," she says. "I just felt really uncomfortable." Eventually, she deactivated her profiles and went off-the-grid, completely changing her online presence. Though 5 years have passed, she hasn't reactivated several accounts for this reason, as information from one account could then lead to another.

*"It feels like the world is closing in on you when you can't get away from somebody and they continue to harass you and bother you and pester you, even though there wasn't anything specifically violent."*

This is also why Emily never seriously considered reporting the incident, because she thought that the police nor anyone else would be able to do anything since the messages weren't violent. However, the fact that the sender was continuously messaging her on various profiles violated her boundaries, especially as she was trying to cut off communication.

In the second incident, Emily was messaging someone on the dating-app Tinder, who insisted that she shared her phone number with them. When she explained that she wouldn't do that until they met, the person sent an aggressive message claiming they had a right to her number and that this was essential for building trust. Emily told them she wasn't comfortable and that perhaps they shouldn't meet, at which point the person proceeded to send her rape threats and graphic messages.

*"I was really freaked out, building on the last thing that happened, and also as someone who had already been raped as well. I think it was kind of jarring to get that."*

She cut off contact with the person but did not report them or talk about it with anyone besides her roommate. "I didn't want to make it into a bigger thing." There was also a general feeling of helplessness in terms of what official authority to turn to in such a case, something Emily always feels with online incidents.

However, this does not mean that the issue was resolved. In fact, Emily continued to feel unsafe in her everyday life because this person had seen her profile, could recognise her and had basic information about her.



*"It just instilled that fear and uncertainty to be like: Will this person do it?, with how quickly the last person was able to find all my profiles, I know how easy it is to find things out about people. I don't have a super high online presence but for the next few weeks I felt so aware. I feel constantly aware".*

The third incident occurred when Emily moved to a new country. The year prior, shortly after moving, Emily had been assaulted at a local bar, causing her to struggle even more with her mental health and feel unsafe in her new home. A few months later, Emily experienced another form of tech abuse when her colleague was being stalked. The stalker sent graphic and sexual death threats to Emily's work email account in order to reach his target. This was extremely distressing. "I had this really big wave of feeling unsafe but also guilt, because I was telling myself, 'you don't deserve to feel unsafe, the emails aren't for you.' Opening your email inbox to that is terrifying even on the periphery, but the toll it took on the person they were meant for was life-ruining." She also had to keep saving the emails because of the police investigation. Unfortunately, the police were also unable to provide any significant remedy.

*"Seeing how little could actually be done to stop this was like the nail in that coffin. I've been shown how easy it is to be a target and how hopeless it feels to get justice. And even if you do get it to stop, that vulnerability doesn't go away."*

In the long run, these incidents impact how safe Emily feels in both online and offline spaces. She reflects that jobs these days demand an online presence, even though it's no longer something she feels comfortable maintaining. Emily feels that she shouldn't be required to present certain information online. Instead, there should be greater emphasis on asking someone if they are comfortable sharing information, rather than assuming they will be.

*"I spent a week and a half in an anxious panic because my job had asked me for a picture and a bio and I personally don't feel comfortable sharing so much information online about myself," she says. "I eventually had a conversation saying I didn't want to do this. But it is difficult having to have these debates and thoughts in your mind, then having to be like I don't want to be seen as difficult to work with. I don't want to have to talk about this, but no one asks if you're comfortable sharing these things and it is just assumed. When you do say you're not comfortable you also feel obligated to give a reason why, or people will just make their own assumptions about what abuse happened to you."*

Emily is now healing and has access to therapy. She is learning to navigate through all these fears and emotions, has started volunteering to support other survivors, is thriving in her career and enjoys travelling. But she continues to struggle with her own feelings and fears surrounding tech abuse.

*"I often think my response of feeling uncomfortable online is too much, and I should just get over it because it wasn't even that bad. I think that's a constant thought too. Which always just makes me more anxious."*

It is evident that the impact of tech abuse on her online and offline life remains profound.

*"We'd have these conversations and it was almost as if he knew things that were going on in my life that I didn't really know how he knew. It was a bit confusing. I had started seeing other people by this point, I was moving on with my life. He was being quite accusatory to me of things. I remember being like: what are you talking about? How would you know these things?"*

### Kate's story

Kate was attending a university seminar when a text message from her ex popped up on her phone. It contained just two words: buckle up. At that point, she had no idea what the message was referring to, but she knew something was seriously wrong. What unfolded was a case of TGBV involving both cyberstalking and image-based abuse.

In 2009, Kate and her friends were travelling in Europe when she met Steven. He was Australian, and was on a year-long world trip with a group of friends. They were attracted to each other and hit it off, and kept in touch when Kate returned to Wales, where she lived with her parents. The relationship started to develop deeper as both of them visited each other in their hometowns and stayed at each other's homes for several months on end.

Eventually, Kate moved to a different city to start university and the distance took its toll on the couple. She realised that it was a new chapter for her, and their long-distance relationship was not working. She called things off. At first, Steven was very upset, but they resolved to be friends and stayed in touch. However, their conversations became strange when it appeared that Steven knew more about Kate's life than she was telling him.

Eventually, the communication turned extremely nasty and Steven started sending abusive messages on Facebook. Kate remembers feeling shaken, but also somewhat protected by the physical distance between them. She blocked him on Facebook:

*"I remember thinking that this is really horrible, and it made me feel a little intimidated, but he was on the other side of the world so it kind of felt not as threatening as if someone was doing that who lived near you."*

It was soon after this that Kate received that text telling her to buckle up. She immediately left the seminar, and then got a message from a friend saying something was going on with her Facebook account. Kate couldn't access her account but by speaking to multiple friends, she pieced together what had happened.

Steven had hacked into her Facebook and was sending sexually explicit photos of Kate to her male friends. It was evident that he had been monitoring her account and new contacts, as he specifically messaged men that she'd recently become Facebook friends with. The photos were from when they had engaged in cyber sex, including screenshots that he had taken without her knowledge. He'd also hacked her email account and sent "a torrent of written abuse" to both her parents.



Kate recalls feeling intense humiliation, shame, anxiety and stress as a result of the abuse. Telling her parents everything was particularly difficult, but she was thankful that they, along with many of her friends, were very supportive. Kate resolved to move on with her life, and she did, but the impacts of the experience lingered:

*"It was definitely this kind of shameful thing that I felt like I was carrying around with me, particularly at university."*

The incident also impacted how Kate uses the internet. She describes herself as someone who is "very invisible online." Although she made another Facebook account after deleting the compromised one, she didn't have it for very long. In fact, she now has very few online profiles, and those she does have, such as LinkedIn, don't have a photo. This limits her ability to support causes or issues she cares about online but she comments:

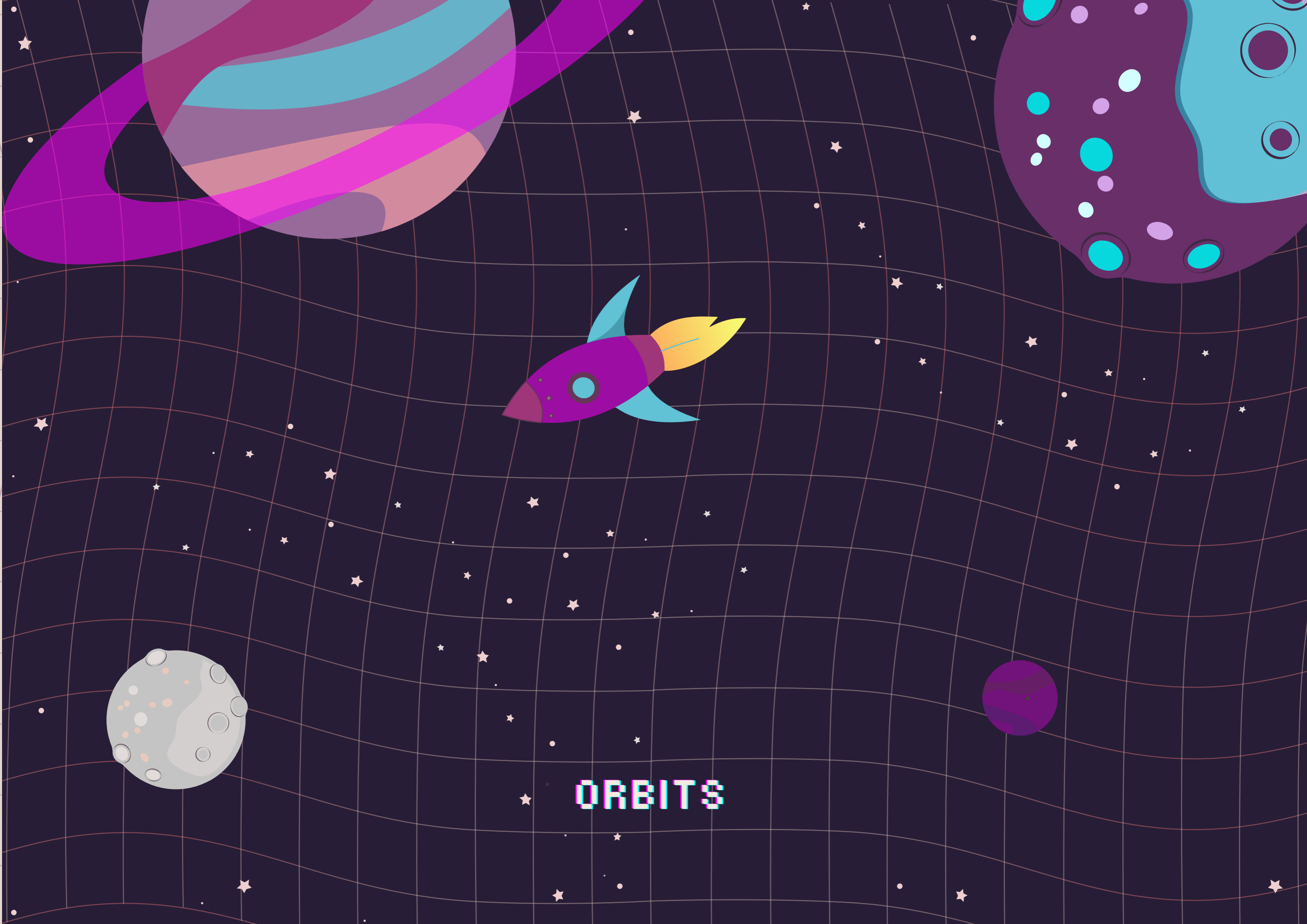
*"I don't want to have any public profile that could put me at risk of further humiliation."*

In 2011, when Kate experienced image-based abuse, it was barely known or spoken about. While there is more awareness and discourse regarding this form of abuse now, it seems as though the issue is getting worse. Kate is appalled that so many women are still going through what she did:

*"It's a total violation. You do feel violated. That for me is what makes me angry. So many women feel violated. All they've done is maybe break up with a partner. Everyone has the right to break up with someone! Now it's become a lot easier for men to take their anger or shame or whatever it is they feel in response to this and really damage a woman. And it can have long-term impacts. Not only on how she feels about it but on how other people perceive her...I'm always open or vulnerable to being black-mailed now. That's how I see it."*

Kate called Steven and found him to be unrepentant: "He was completely defiant about it and was like: 'this is what happens if you act like a sl\*t.'" Kate remained calm and focused on regaining control of her account. In the meantime, a friend contacted the men who received the pictures to tell them what was going on, and asked them to not look at the images and delete them immediately. After a few days, Steven gave Kate the password to her account. The first thing she did was report the abuse, but to no avail. She then ended up deleting her account:

*"This was back in 2011. There really wasn't any mechanisms in place to report stuff like this. I didn't even get a response. Nothing happened."*



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