Digital Violence Against Women in Algeria

Feb
2022

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Acknowledgment

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In 2021, Fereil Kessai and Sanna Harmadouche co-founded Astarté Conseils, a research and consulting firm that promotes female expertise.

Partners

Produced by: The SecDev Foundation
This Canada-based NGO works globally to promote digital resilience among vulnerable populations. Working most often with women, youth and at-risk civil society organizations, the Foundation helps people protect themselves from an evolving world of digital harms. Ultimately, that helps people build their own capacity to make life better for themselves and their communities.

Coordinated by: Salam@
This Foundation-supported project promotes digital resilience across the Middle East and North Africa, especially among women and youth. From 2019 to 2022, Salam@ led intensive frontline work—from training to awareness campaigns—in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The team is also now tackling the research gap on digital violence against women across the MENA region.

Contents

Introduction

Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women

The use of digital technologies has become an integral and unavoidable part of the lives of women and men in both personal and professional lives. Human interactions and social relationships are transcribed into virtual spaces without much change in gender power relationships/dynamics, and the patriarchal structures. On the contrary, the possibility of anonymity that is offered in the digital space allows for virulence and the creation of new forms of violence. While digital life brings opportunities at the professional, social and personal levels, it also becomes an environment hosting different forms of TFV.

TFV takes many forms, including cyber harassment, threats, phishing, defamation, rumors, sexual or hateful comments and/or the unconsensual sharing of sexual audiovisual material. The most important elements of TFV, which are allowed by the very nature of the virtual world and the Internet, are the possibility of anonymity of the offender and the speed of dissemination. Additionally, certain properties of the Internet, such as the possible absence of visual contact and the dematerialized nature of communications, allow individuals to alter and mask their identity (Cardon, 2008). Through digital tools, perpetrators are able to address their potential victims anonymously, making it difficult for victims to protect themselves (Slonje and Smith, 2008). The perpetrator's digital skills and media equipment, anonymity, and the viral nature of online data are all factors that can create a sense of helplessness for the victim (Langos, 2012; Hinduja, Patchin, 2015). Thus, it is easy to rally "digital armies'' to harass a person. In the same way, defamatory information, rumors or personal images/videos/audio, which are relayed without the person's consent, can flood the online sphere in a few minutes and become embedded in the digital memory indefinitely. Women find themselves facing violence, in its different forms, in concrete public and private spaces and in digital public and private spaces.

TFV has severe psychosocial repercussions on women, which worsen in patriarchal societies that promote toxic masculinity standards. These can vary based on the familial and cultural situation of women, in addition to the kind and extent of violence exercised. This paper will explore the psychosocial aftermath of TFV on Algerian women, reflecting their own voices and opinions. No known study on the psychosocial repercussion of TFV against women has been conducted in Algeria to date. This is the first set of data collected and analyzed on this topic.

Algerian Context

With an area of over 2 million km², 85% of which is desert, 56% of the Algerian population lives in only 3% of the territory. The languages spoken in Algeria are Algerian Arabic, Tamazight and French. The country had 43.9 million inhabitants in January 2020, with a slight predominance of the male gender (50.7%)[1].

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[1] Source: National Statistics Office

The Algerian constitution guarantees fundamental freedoms and equality between citizens, without discrimination based on gender. Article 32 states that "*All political, economic, social and cultural rights of Algerian women are guaranteed by the Constitution*". The government's guarantee to the protection of women's rights and their integrity is reflected in the implementation of several specific laws and legislations. The provisions of the 2020 constitution reinforce this stance by introducing specific articles that provide for mechanisms to respond to women survivors of violence, such as

- Article 40 - The State protects women against all forms of violence in all places and in all circumstances in the public space, in the professional sphere and in the private sphere. The law guarantees victims' access to shelters, care facilities, and legal assistance.
- Article 59 - The State promotes the political rights of women by encouraging their access to representation in elected assemblies.
- Article 68 - The State shall promote parity between men and women in the labor market. The State encourages the promotion of women to positions of responsibility in public institutions and administrations as well as in companies.

In addition, there are national laws that support women's rights in general. For example, sexual harassment was criminalized by the Penal Code, notably when it was amended in 2005 and reinforced, ten years later, by the provisions (around gender-based violence: marital violence, sexual violence, in public places and economic violence) of law n°15-19 of December 30, 2015. However, this law includes a "victim forgiveness" clause, which puts an end to the legal proceedings initiated and/or reduces the sentence for very serious cases of violence. As for technology-facilitated violence, there are some punitive provisions in the law that can offer some protection for women. These will be detailed in this paper, as per an in-depth interview with a lawyer.

The state has also adopted strategies and action plans for gender equality and has ratified international treaties and UN human rights mechanisms[2]. Among the most relevant strategies:

- The National Strategy for the Integration and Promotion of Women (2008-2013) and its Action Plan (2010-2014)
- The National Family Strategy (2010 - 2014)
- The National Strategy for the Fight against Violence against Women (2007 - 2013)
- It should be noted that no national strategy has been produced since 2014, in favor of the rights of Algerian women.

At the international level, Algeria has taken part in the main world conferences on women's rights, such as the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the 1995

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[2] Maternity Protection Convention, 1962

Equal Remuneration Convention, 1962

UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1968

ILO Convention No. 111 concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation, 1969

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (reservations on certain articles, in particular those obliging States to implement all legal and regulatory measures that would eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in national law), 1996

Solemn Declaration of African Heads of State on Equalitý between Men and Women, 2004

Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol), 2016

Beijing Conference, and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 with reservations on articles "2, 9-2, 15-4, 16, 29", relating to marriage, adoption and the family.

Despite of these laws and international treaties that promote women's rights and gender equality, the Algerian Family Code[3], adopted in 1984 and revised in 2005, is considered by civil society organizations to be unconstitutional because it keeps women in a subordinate status. The law of June 9 1984 on the Algerian Family Code links family organization to the patrilineal, agnatic type (kinship by males) by following the Shari'a as a reference model. As a result, the sacredness of marriage is based on a system of guardianship of men over women[4]. Therefore, the gender power dynamics embedded in this family code can lead to discrimination and violence against women. Despite some of the modest legal advances that have been achieved, women face discrimination in the private and public spheres on a daily basis. The Algerian women's movement condemned[5] the lack of application of the few abovementioned legal protections that they have been granted, delayed procedures and the lack of platforms and support mechanisms available to women.

In addition to the legal shortcomings, there is still social and institutional resistance to achieving gender equality and to the practical application of the limited legal mechanisms available to women. This leads to a continuation of violence in the private sphere, which remains significantly under-reported by women[6], particularly those in situations of economic and social dependence.

The paper will move from the offline to the online sphere to find very similar, but often more severe inequalities and violence against women. After a brief background on Technology-Facilitated Violence (TFV) and the methodology, we will move on to present some results from the data collection and analyses employed.

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[3] Family Code: based on the precepts of the Sharia, a set of laws governing marriage, conjugal life and inheritance.

[4] Algeria: Women and families between law and reality - Zahia Ouadah-Bedidi and Nourredine Saadi, 2014

[5] "La Violence à l'égard des femmes, j'en parle", Nadia Ait-Zai, CIDDEF's publication, https://ciddef-dz.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/formes_violence_contre_les_femmes.pdf

"Les féministes algériennes toujours dans la rue : une révolution avec et pour les femmes" https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/les-feministes-algeriennes-toujours-dans-la-rue-une-revolution-avec-et-pour-les-femmes

[6] In December 2021, the feminist group "Feminicides Algeria" counted 55 women killed by male violence, nearly 5 women per month.

Methodology

In order to carry out this study, we opted for the steps and methodology specified below:

First, we focused on the local context, information/data on violence against women in the cultural, social and legal context in Algeria and the region. Following this, we tried to build a global vision on the nature of TFV and the different forms they can take.

For this study, we collected data between September and December 2021, using the following three methods.

Anonymous Online Questionnaire

112 questionnaires were filled out by Algerian women who have been subjected to some form of online violence—74 in French and 38 in Arabic. Each questionnaire contained 27 questions in three main sections:

- Demographic information about respondents and their use of digital platform
- Experiences with TFV and its impact: What types of violence are involved? And on which platforms? What impact has this violence had on their lives and on their digital use? What levers have they used?
- Existing and proposed mechanisms/solutions: What help would they have liked to receive?

Focus Groups

One focus group in Algiers with 8 women who have experienced TFV with the following objectives:

- Verify and enrich/complete the results of the online questionnaires.
- Identify and discuss with the participants the approaches they used to protect and/or defend themselves against this violence.
- Collect testimonies to enrich the study.

Interviews

The objective of the in-depth interviews was to better understand the experiences of TFV from the point of view of 8 women who 1) have direct experiences with this kind of violence and/or, 2) advocate for the protection of women's rights. In addition, one female lawyer (who has been working for many years in the field of defense and protection of women's rights in Algeria. The objective was to identify the existing and proposed mechanisms to address this form of violence against at the legal level was interviewed). We also wanted to verify and supplement the results of the online survey to enrich the study and have a deeper understanding of the psychosocial effects of TFV on women.

Findings: Demographics, User Habits and Gender Reflections

Demographics

The age of the women who responded to the questionnaire and the interviews ranged from 18 to 64 years. For the surveys, the majority of the respondents come from urban areas, in particular large cities such as Algiers, Oran and Constantine. The rest of the respondents were from small towns and cities such as Laghouat, Touggourt, Tiaret, Skikda, Tizi Ouzou and Mostaganem. The interviews and the focus group discussion, however, were only conducted with women from Algiers and Oran.

Regarding the social status of women, 71.44% of the respondents were single, 12.5% were married and had children, 6.25 were married without children, and 8.03 % of the women were divorced, and 1.78% were in a non-marital relationship. As for the economic status, 69% of respondents were in paid employment (47% private sector, 22% public sector), 16% were students and 15% were without paid work (unemployed and/or housewives).

95% of the survey respondents use social networks on a regular or occasional basis, while the remaining 5% claimed to have stopped using them for good. Some respondents explained that their cessation of social networking is due to the social and professional burden they have, which prevents them from having time to devote to social networking. Others explained that it is due to the negative experiences they have encountered on social media platforms, as will be discussed in this paper.

Platforms

Results regarding platform usage were similar between interviews and surveys, where the age and type of activity affected the choice of the platform most commonly used. From the surveys, percentages of respondents were: Facebook Messenger7 (88%), Instagram (87%), WhatsApp (84%), Viber (64%), Snapchat (28%) and Twitter (21%). In addition, 11% of the survey respondents used the secure platform "Signal". SnapChat was used by the youngest respondents and Twitter was used by respondents who are professionally active in areas such as journalism and the information economy domains in general. Similarly, among the interviewees, Instagram and instant messaging applications (WhatsApp, Messenger, Viber) were used on a daily basis to share various content, learn about topics that interest them, interact with others (friends, family, work), and keep up with current events. Only 3 out of 8 interviewed women used Twitter as a quasi-main source of information. Negative sentiments were expressed regarding Facebook, by both interviewees and surveyees. It was the most criticized application, for its negative atmosphere, the violence that can be experienced and/or observed, and the limited information resources it offers.

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[7] Instant chat platform owned by Facebook.

Awareness of TFV

We wanted to explore the awareness and knowledge of respondents about TFV, and their ability to recognize when it happens to them. We also wanted to take into consideration the possibility of denial that sometimes accompanies the violence experienced by women. For example, some survey respondents said "no" to the question "have you experienced digital violence?" but their answers were more nuanced once they discovered the different forms of digital violence, further down in the survey. 88% of the survey respondents declared that they were completely or somewhat aware of what TFV is. It should be noted though that efforts have been made to target women who have experienced violence, because the purpose of this research is to understand and unpack these experiences, and not to merely count them. Therefore, the majority of survey respondents (97%[8]) declared that they have experienced the following forms of TFV:

- Sexual harassment and blackmail (83%). These two forms of violence were systimatically clustered together in the responses, particularly in regards to demanding sexual favors which is both a sexual harassment and blackmail behavior.
- Insults and harassment (60%).
- Harassment and intimidation (54%).
- Threats/blackmail/explosion (to divulge photos, to send exchanges to family, etc.) (42%).

Online Communication Patterns

In terms of communicating with the public, the survey results showed that respondents err on the side of caution. Although 85% of them said that they communicated with strangers regularly or occasionally, 97% of survey respondents indicated that they take precautions when sharing their personal information in social networks and instant messaging platforms. Regarding the precautions taken, three answers are predominant: never share photos or personal/sensitive information, only share with "trusted" people, especially with people they know in real life, and only share photos or videos in which they are unrecognizable. These results indicate that even when respondents communicate with strangers online, they do so cautiously, without sharing personal information.

Interviews showed similar patterns, where 6 out of the 8 interviewed women stated that they had exchanges, occasionally, with people they do not know. The two women who refrained from such exchanges are both in serious relationships (one is married and one is in a long term relationship). One of these two women clarified that she refrains from talking to strangers online to avoid conflict with her partner. The 6 women who did communicate with strangers, showed the same caution as indicated in the survey results: they first investigated the person before messaging them. Also in line of caution, only 3 of the 8 interviewed women allowed public access to their social media accounts. These three have public profiles because of their jobs: one is a journalist, one is a lifestyle influencer, and one is the director of a cultural organization. The other 5 women had private accounts accessible to people they know or people they have vetted. All 8 women interviewed, except for the lifestyle

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[8] In Spring 2021, EuroMed Rights released a report mapping the situations of tech-facilitated violence experienced by women in the MENA region. Percentage of women who have experienced at least 1 form of online violence or cyberstalking: 60% in Turkey; 80.8% in Jordan; 41.6% in Egypt.
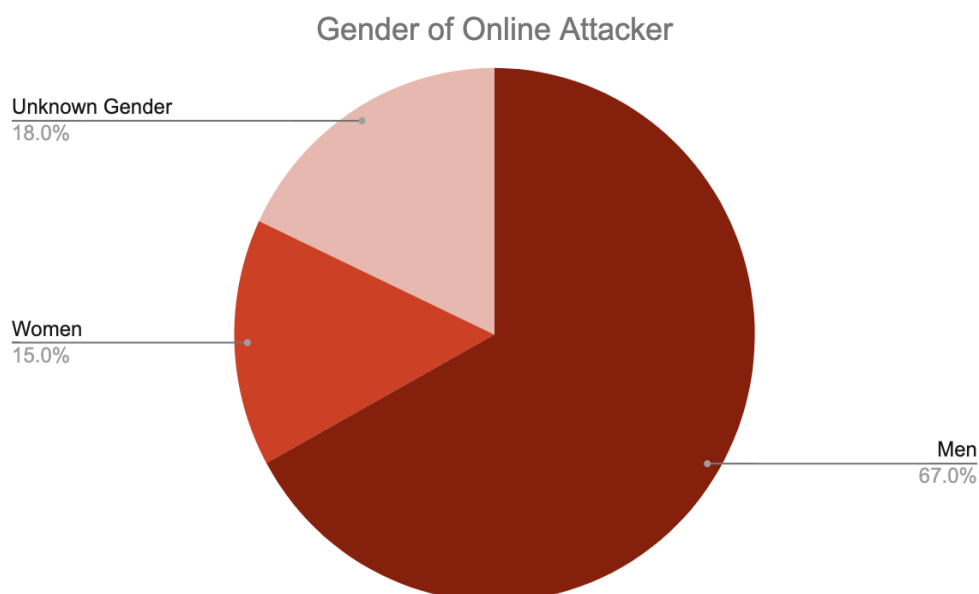
Only a summary of the results is available; the full report will be published in the coming weeks including data for Algeria. See here: https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/RAPPORT_GBV_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf

influencer, posted very few personal pictures online, and they all did it in a very controlled way, to avoid negative and/or violent reactions, as well as nonconsensual use of these pictures by others. Only 3 out of 8 interviewed women had their first and last name displayed on their social media accounts. The others used their first name and a pseudonym as a last name. None of the interviewed women put their personal contacts on their social media profiles. While all interviewed women indicated that they sent their family and friends private pictures over social media, they also all confirmed that they only choose the pictures that would not be "controversial" if they go public. This is because they have already had an experience where their private photos (in underwear, in erotic breaks) have been used without their consent, or because they have witnessed this violation with other women and girls.

While caution exercised when displaying names and pictures on social media can be interpreted as digital safety precaution, they are also an indication of the self-prohibition that women exercise. Some of these practices generally mirror toxic masculinity in the offline sphere where women have to strongly regulate their behavior so as to conform to social expectations and avoid negative experiences. Similarly, self-constraint of online activity in fear of a conflict with a partner is an extension of the gender power dynamics prevalent in intimate relationships offline, where men are considered guardians of women, and therefore can control their actions.

Offenders

The results of the survey showed that most perpetrators (67%) are men, or people identified as men. Followed by the 18% of perpetrators with an unknown sexual/gender identity, and 15% were women or people identified as women. Some survey respondents explained that they have been victims of people that they trusted who have manipulated them and then used their personal data to harass them. Others reported that they have been subjected to violence because of their position on political and/or social issues or even because of their profession or activism (journalists, feminists, etc.). Of the perpetrators, 60.91% were known to the victim.

Gender of Online Attacker

Unknown Gender
18.0%

Women
15.0%

Men
67.0%

Psychosocial Impact of TFV Against Women

As expected, TFV had a negative impact on all interviewed and surveyed women. Their reactions to the violence were generally based on the kind of violence they experienced, and the impact, as well as other social factors. Most respondents have taken action: 52% of survey respondents reported the aggressors' accounts on social media platforms. 12% of the respondents went to the police station to file a complaint and 16% confronted their aggressor.

Psychologically, fear was strongly associated with all forms of violence. Interviews showed that the fear generated because of an online attack extends beyond the online sphere. Three out of the eight women interviewed reported being afraid of physical attacks because of threats made by men online. These findings correlate with a Plan International study investigating TFV experiences with more than 14k girls, which found that 24% of those who had experienced online harassment, said that they also felt physically unsafe.[9]

The impact of TFV also led to significant changes in the digital practices of both interviewees and survey respondents. As a result of the violence, 48% of the women surveyed stopped using social media networks temporarily or permanently. Similarly, of the 8 women interviewed, 6 said that they took breaks/withdrawals several times a year, which can last a few days or several weeks, when using social networks becomes too difficult on a psychological and emotional level. This difficulty is linked to the violence they experience, witness and/or the anxiety-provoking aspects of the information they find there. Furthermore, because they have directly experienced TFV or because they have witnessed it, 7 out of 8 women interviewed said that they no longer post content or comment on other people's content on sensitive topics (such as religion) , where it could create negative and/or violent reactions: they do not comment on current events, they do not give their opinion on topics that interest them, and they do not talk about feminism, religion or politics. One interviewed woman, the lifestyle influencer, only shares photos/videos that are very well worked out and controlled, where she makes sure that she is "mestora"[10]—wearing clothes that are "accepted" by the public. Also avoiding uninvited negative attention, the journalist shares information without commenting on it, to avoid any risk of instrumentalization. The following quotations are from interviews.

> "I don't put myself in complicated situations to deal with afterwards."
> — Girl, 18 years

> "I don't get into any subject that would provoke debates, especially when it comes to women and religion."
> — Woman, 23 years

Survey respondents reported negative psychological impact, with 48% explaining that the deterioration of their emotional and psychological state was the biggest impact of TFV, and 45% said that it has contributed to the deterioration of their professional, family and social life. The individual
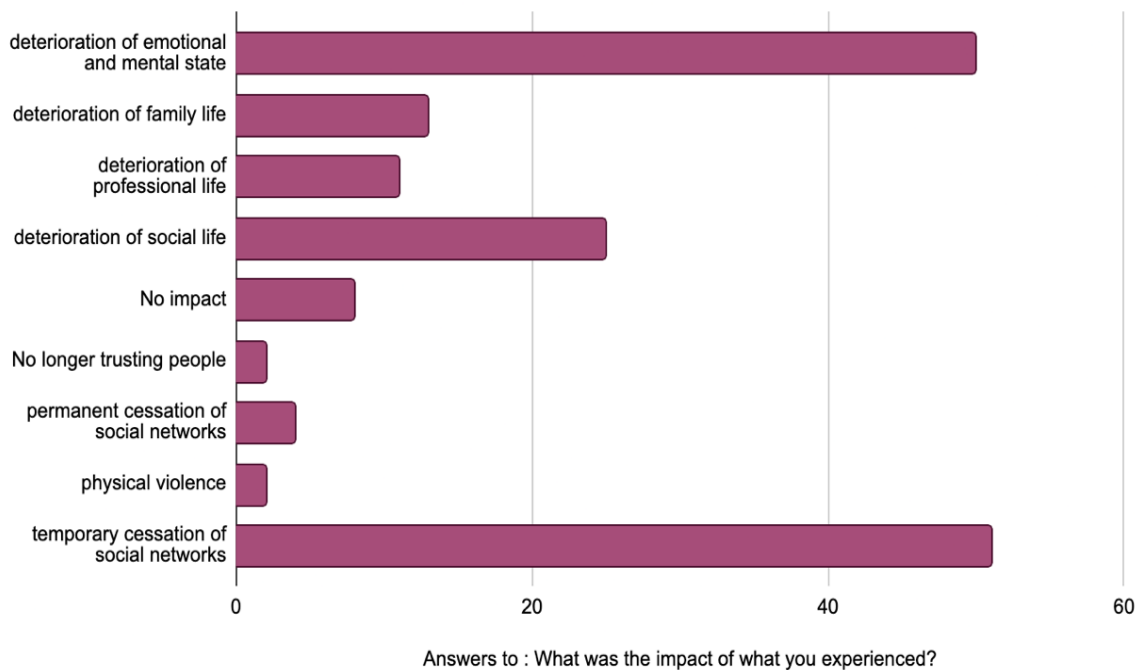
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[9] 2020, https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline
[10] Covered—modestly dressed.

interviews allowed us to illuminate, through the personal stories of the 8 women, specific psychological consequences that we expose in the table below:

Consequences	How they manifest
Silence & isolation	The 8 women interviewed said that they do not share what they experience with their families to avoid additional problems and not make their families worry. This leads to a feeling of isolation.
Insomnia	Insomniac episodes during the periods in which the violence is experienced were reported by 4 women out of 8.
Anxiety and high stress levels	2 women out of 8 reported clammy hands, difficulty breathing, tachycardia, gestural tics.
Panic attacks	2 women out of 8 reported panic attacks when there is a loss of control in certain situations where they are exposed against their will.
Fear	4 out of 8 women said they were afraid to walk alone in the street and be assaulted because someone might recognize them. 7 out of 8 women said they were afraid that their loved ones will have access to a photo, a video, or see discussions that they have been involved in, particularly around sensitive topics such as sexuality.
Breakdown of certain social/friendship relationships	When the person has not complied with the request not to disseminate content from them, 4 women out of 8 had breakdowned the relationship.
Loss of confidence	All of the 8 women reported a loss of confidence when they had to start a relationship with strangers or when they are around strange men.
Restrictions in their use of social media	All 8 women control their photos, their posts, significantly decreasing or even stopping any interaction or reaction to posts on social media. And all are unaware of what can trigger stranger violence. 3 of them described permanent hyper-vigilance and "paranoia," which creates great fatigue.
Avoidance	All of the 8 women avoid certain encounters online, which deprives them of certain professional opportunities and reduces their social life.
Banalization of the violence experienced	7 women out of 8 banalize the violence they experienced, to quickly overcome the episodes of violence.
Self-blame for inciting violence and allowing it to affect them psychologically	6 women out of 8 ask themselves what they did wrong to provoke such violence, and they blame themselves for being affected by it.

Consequences of tech-facilitated violence - Survey

Answers to : What was the impact of what you experienced?

Some of the survey respondents talk about loss of trust, anxiety, depression and fear as principal impact and psychological consequences of the violent situations they lived online. Some said:

> "I notice that the virtual world is even more violent than the real world."
> – Woman, 45

> "I entered a circle of fear and anxiety."
> – Woman, 25

> "I no longer talk to people I don't know."
> – Woman, 25

> "I feel bad about myself."
> – Woman, 54

Women Seeking Support

Enduring the challenges of TFV, victims have found limited psychosocial support from family and friends. Very few of the survey respondents turned to family members for support, and when they did, it was to a sister or mother. Of the 112 surveys filled, to which respondents had a multiple choice of answers, 30% of these women sought support from friends. While 67% did nothing, either because they were afraid of the consequences, did not think it was necessary, did not pay attention or did not know what to do. Many explain that they did not expect or rely on any support, and 2 of the interviewed women reported moral and physical abuse as a result of the disclosures in the private sphere.

Among women surveyed

Action taken	Arabic Survey (73 responses)	French Survey (147 responses)	Overall
Sought support from friends	14%	16%	15%
(Did nothing)	23%	31%	27%

Among women interviewed

Sought support from	Of 8 interviewees
Friends	3
Friends and husband	1
Friends and police	1
Family	1
(Did nothing)	2

The gender dynamics behind TFV is an extension of the gender relations in the offline space, where women are silenced in the public sphere in fear of violence or they leave the public sphere altogether as they do not feel that this space is safe for them. An additional concern of victim-blaming deters women from confiding in family and friends. Furthermore, they often have to change their practices and exercise self-prohibition to avoid an uncomfortable situation, which creates a vicious cycle - one where women do not express their opinions publicly in fear of violence, and when they express them, women are subjected to more violence which pushes them to stay silent.

Gender Dynamics in Online Space

Results from both questionnaires and interviews have highlighted the strong element of "sexuality" embedded in the different kinds of violence that women face online. We have clustered those accounts into broad categories in the following table:

Types of TFV	Illustrations
Theft of pictures/videos/private conversations	Publish them on Facebook pages that deal with various themes, without their permission. Create fake profiles with it. Show them to parents. Hacked accounts and stolen content. Non-consensual filming of women when they are under the influence of alcohol and refuse to erase pictures/videos.
Racism	"*You suck black people*". "*You go to the blacks instead of helping your own, we all know why you do that*".
Messages and/or photos of a sexual nature, requests for sexual exchanges Flirting and/or proposals for meetings, appointments, marriages (whether these men know the women or not)	Sending pictures of genitals "*Can I be your slave?*" "*I love your lips*". "*You turn me on*". "*I want to fuck you*". "*Give me your address, I want to ask your father for your hand*" NB: one respondent was 13 or 14 years old when she got a comment above; the assailant knew her age even though he was an adult male.
Insults (homophobic, sexist, etc.)	"*Dirty dyke, lesbian*" "*I want to piss on you*" "*You are not a self-respecting Algerian woman*"
Online harassment, by individuals and/or groups	Repeated texts and voice messages, repeated calls over several weeks or months. Public defamation Calls to violence Threats of: - rape - death - dissemination of private photos/conversations - damage to professional reputation - threats of assault ("we'll shut you up") Several accounts send, in a short period, very similar insults and threats.

"Sexuality" and sexism are unsurprisingly present in most online attacks against women. All interview respondents say that men's comments are systematically sexist and/or sexual. So even if the attack is political, it has a sexual element in it, as shown in the quotation below. These online gender dynamics mimic the offline gender ideologies that hold women to standards of beauty and good manners, and therefore any insults against women purposely have an embedded component to undermine these two (for example, adding words like ugly and bitch to any insult).[11]

> "It's not just *'you're an enemy of the country'* … it's *'you're a whore AND an enemy of the country.'*"
>
> – Woman, 34

In addition to men being perpetrators of violence, they also attempt to silence women and control their behavior by fear mongering. Observations during interviews and the focus group discussion showed that, when women post pictures, vidoes, posts, or comments, they are sometimes approached by men, including strangers, to warn them that their content is likely to provoke the public, and therefore incite violent reactions against them. Some survey respondents made some similar suggestions for women to avoid online violence - women should refrain from discussing/sharing information with strangers and to avoid things that can be used against them. Statements such as "a woman should avoid suspicion" (على المرأة آن تتقي الشبهات), were used, which echoes the sentiment of "silencing women''. While digital safety is a pertinent knowledge nowadays, we caution against falling back into the social mechanism where the burden of responsibility is placed primarily on the victim. The intention behind this advice is usually concern for women's safety, but the advice also inherently denies women the capacity to protect themselves, and it also hints to victim-blaming. In addition, it encourages women to refrain from "upsetting" the public when they challenge the patriarchal system, and therefore withdrawing from public space eventually.

Interviews showed that gender power dynamics in intimate relationships also extend to the online sphere, especially regarding male guardianship and control patterns. Of the 8 women interviewed, only 1 said that she had never had a partner who tried to control her activity on social networks. The other 7 women reported that their current and/or former male partners have tried to control their activity over social media, including control over the type of photos shared, outfits and/or attitude/way of posing in the photos, interactions with other men online, etc. This resonates with the offline gender power dynamics where men exercise significant control over their partner's thoughts and behaviors.

While there were some violent acts reportedly perpetrated by women or people who identify as women (16%), it was perceived differently by the victims. In the interviews, the motives behind the violence were described as jealousy, wanting to harm the other person, especially by attacking their reputation. Women are not suspected of being capable of organized TFV, yet many girls/women have chat groups bashing other women/girls. Women rarely send private messages of violence, rather they tend to express violence via comments, defaming and spreading photos (to parents, to men). However, interviewees may be overlooking the impact of toxic masculinity of women's thoughts patterns. Women can and do adopt thoughts and behaviors that reflect toxic masculinity.[12]

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[11] Diane Felmlee, Paulina Inara Rodis & Amy Zhang, Sexist Slurs: Reinforcing Feminine Stereotypes Online, Sex Roles volume 83, pages16–28 (2020)

[12] White K, & Dutton D, *Perceptions of Female Perpetrators*, Springer (October 2012) pp 101–116.

Existing and Proposed Reforms

Role of Social Media Companies

Survey participants had the opportunity to propose new/improved techniques to respond to TFV. Some suggested the implementation of more effective complaint mechanisms on social media platforms. For instance, one person suggested that in the event of a sexual harassment complaint, the offender's account shoud get automatically suspended while the complaints are evaluated and their admissibility assessed. One member of the focus group discussion suggested hotlines sponsored by the social media platforms, for faster support. In all cases, social media platforms have a definite role in taking a stance against TFV if they have the political will.

Strengthening Legal Protection and Law Enforcement

There are some protections under article 40 of the Algerian constitution—to protect citizens from violence of all kinds—in addition to articles **30, 31, 32, 33 and 34 of the Algerian penal code that criminalize and penalize discriminatory and hate speech**. Specific to the online sphere, Law 09-04 was passed in 2009, to prevent and combat offenses related to "Technologies of Information and Communication". Several units responding to cybercrime in the country at the level of the services of police and gendarmerie were created, as the brief statement at right from the lawyer interviewee explains.

The law now covers all offenses related to cybercrime, the security services (police and gendarmerie) have specialized units, and the professionals who work there (judges, experts, police officers, gendarmes) receive regular technical training on the issue. However, two problems prevail. First, complaints are still rarely filed, and second, people working in this unit lack gender sensitivity. Regarding low levels of reporting, interview participants gave the following reasons: lack of awareness of the fact that the violence they experience constitutes a criminal offense, the length of the procedure, fear that the people around them will be informed and will therefore have access to the content that has been disseminated, and finally, fear of victim blaming. From the survey, some respondents pointed to a need to strengthen the legal mechanisms responding to TFV, whether preventive or punitive, with dedicated laws that are accompanied by implementation strategies. This can suggest that they may not be aware of the laws, or that they feel the current laws are insufficient. It can also suggest that the authorities are not trusted to implement the law, and it may cause secondary victimization to women who decide to report, such as the example below from an interviewee. More efforts therefore need to be

"Cybercrime is a broad and fairly new phenomenon: the penal code was amended a few years ago to include new concepts such as invasion of privacy, hate speech, etc. Filing a complaint is the only way to start a legal procedure against the author of a tech-facilitated violence. If a person is a victim of any form of violence on the Internet, insult, threat, theft and dissemination of his photos without her/his consent, receipt of photos of a sexual nature without having given her/his consent, etc., she/he can file a complaint with any unit specialized in cybercrime of the police or gendarmerie, offenses and crimes on the Internet being considered as national. These complaints are taken very seriously, and convictions often take place. The perpetrator risks up to one year in prison when the victim is a minor."

– Ms Sihem Hammache, lawyer at the bar of Algiers

dedicated to gender sensitizing law enforcement agents, particularly those who deal with such gender-based violence, including TFV.

> **"And you, why did you send your photos? …Why are you talking to men you don't know?"**
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> – response received at a cybercrime department by a woman, 22,
> after filing a complaint against a man posting pictures of her in her underwear.

Another incident showing police's gender insensitivity and explaining why women and girls may be hesitant to report:

> "There was an awareness campaign on cyber stalking against women in my school. There were police officers and law enforcement, all I could remember was that whatever the situation was, it was our fault and the guy would just be considered crazy. They explained that we could file a complaint 'but…' There was always *'but it will be your fault.'* So I understood that I would never file a complaint, they wouldn't do anything and that they would blame me.
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> Their response to the girls who presented their problems was *'Why did you post that? You have to be careful how you dress, you don't have to take off your hijab.'* It was a bit like propaganda. We were shocked a little bit but I saw that the majority agreed with the *'It's true, it's her fault'* approach because of the internalized misogyny. Even the principal and the supervisor supported the fact that *'you have to be careful too!'* "
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> – Girl, 18

Apart from the police/gendarmerie's cybercrime services, there are no specialized services for TFV against women. TFV victims can access the same support services available for victims of offline violence. However, there are only a few of these, and they are based in the big cities in Northern Algeria, which makes them relatively unknown/unreachable to the most vulnerable victims. For example, there are only five national shelters for women survivors of violence, supported by centers owned by women's/feminist associations. These shelters will receive women who were subjected to cybercrime *only* if they were subjected to other forms of violence. Also, their employees are not trained in TFV and its medico-psycho-social consequences. While services specialized in TFV violence are not necessary, it is crucial to arm all service providers of GBV with the necessary knowledge and tools to be able to support victims of TFV, and acknowledge its dreadful consequences. The current situation confirms the growing need for training and awareness on TFV among service providers.

Increased Psychosocial Support for Victims of TFV

Other responses from the survey focused on the importance of care and support for victims of TFV. For instance, the creation of care and support units for victims/survivors by government agencies who are more sensitive to gender issues to avoid secondary victimization. Also, to create associations and groups to monitor, guide and support women who have experienced this violence. Another suggestion was listening sessions in a group therapy model, which provide women with space to talk about the violence, because this space is not usually provided to them in their social cricels. This may help women process the negative emotions associated with the violence. It would also be opportune that activist spaces and listening spaces for women be inclusive of women living with TFV, again confirming the need to mainstream TFV in any service provision focused on GBV offline. From the

interviews and surveys, this study concludes that many women have experienced TFV that has lasted over time (sometimes several years) without receiving any real support.

Raising Public Awareness

Public awareness of TFV was also indicated as a need in the survey responses. Awareness raising should cover the basis of TFV, but also the support available for victims. This research shows the urgent need for the general public to know about TFV, its forms, and repercussions. This would allow the public to take TFV more seriously, reduce victim-blaming and increase the rate of reporting. There are various levels and areas of public awareness, and some efforts have been made in this space. Some public institutions (Ministry of Education, the Ministry of National Solidarity, Family and Women's Affairs, etc.) sporadically take part in the organization of awareness campaigns on digital violence. In addition, there are some initiatives for awareness-raising undertaken by activists and civil society actors. However, all these efforts are insufficient and not always reachable to the general public, and therefore, they need to be increased, reinforced and more inclusive. In addition, there is a plethora of online information on gender-based violence, but information on the parameters and responses to TFV are still scarce.

Awareness raising becomes crucial for some groups; as this research has found. Youth is a very critical group in need of such knowledge. Some interviewees mentioned that the first assaults and TFV they experienced happened during their adolescence (from 13 to 18 years old). Furthermore, one participant in the focus group discussion noted that "in this kind of situation, we girls support each other because when we get to a certain age we have all experienced some kind of digital violence, we have all been there, impossible that nothing happened to us, at least a dick pic".[13] While there are some awareness-raising initiatives on various media platforms or interventions in schools, the messages are problematic on various fronts, as the quote to the right illustrates.

> "It would be cool if in high schools and colleges, in the awareness campaigns they set up, they sent women instead of men. We feel better with women, they will say more sensible things. More serious, in-depth campaigns, not just telling us it's our fault and that's it. […] There are things I wish I had known when I was a kid, even in elementary school. Not once you're faced with a fait accompli you think: whatever happens will be my fault. That kind of stuff, if I had known 3 or 4 years ago, things would have been different today."
>
> – Girl, 18

These campaigns should be focused on explaining the different forms of violence, the ways to protect oneself from it and on ending victim-blaming. Also, people working with children must be familiar with the social media networks used by the younger generation, so as not to widen the generation gap and leave the children feeling isolated.

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[13] https://feminicides-dz.com

Conclusion

This study has allowed us to explore in a non-exhaustive and general way the issue of tech-facilitated gender-based violence in Algeria, and its psychosocial repercussions. We quickly realized that TFV, in its manifestation, impact and management, is very similar to physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced in concrete (non-virtual) spaces. However, the virtual nature of TFV can mislead people to think that it is not that important or dangerous, despite the real consequences on the emotional and psychological state, and sometimes the physical safety of women. In fact, the nature of cyberspace that gives considerable anonymity to offenders, and that allows a swift transfer of data, may increase the fear and anxiety of TFV victims, in comparison to other forms of offline violence. Legal and social structures do not support women who are victims of digital violence. Starting with inadequate implementation of the law, to lack of psychological and social services available to them, victims of digital violence are left stranded.

Some interesting gender power dynamics were also observed from the survey and interview responses. Male superiority and guardianship over women, the masculinity of the public space and women's submissiveness have all been issues emerging from the field research, confirming that the offline gender dynamics extended to the online sphere, if not worsened. Technology is just another tool to control and subordinate women, and it is being used for this purpose everyday.

The study has generally found that the road is still long to achieve the desired levels of awareness of TFV, and the adequate responses on the part of state officials, civil society, society and social media platforms. This is unfortunate because many women see the digital sphere as a space where social gender norms can be renegotiated or even erased/forgotten. Thus, enabling their safe use by protecting their rights and safety on these platforms is an absolute necessity.