

Digital Violence in Displaced Widows Camps of Northern Syria

March
2024

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Acknowledgments

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*This study was originally written in Arabic.
You can find the original version [here](#).*

The SecDev Foundation

Since 2011, this Canada-based NGO has worked globally to promote digital resilience among vulnerable populations—especially women, youth and at-risk civil society organizations. The SecDev Foundation's Salama@ team supported this research as part of a series of 20+ studies on the psychosocial and legal dimensions of digital violence against women across the MENA region. Responsibility for any views expressed in these studies rests with the authors.

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Abstract

Due to the Syrian war more than a decade ago, camps appeared that were limited to widows and divorced women. They were called “widows’ camps,” and they are home to tens of thousands of widows and other women who live with complex challenges. In addition to the difficulty of living in camps in general, especially with the decline in support for the camps in Syria, women in widows’ camps experience double violence because they are considered easy victims for violators, especially through digital means. This study explores the dimensions of digital violence on a number of female residents of widows’ camps, while providing recommendations to those concerned to protect women and make the digital space safer.

Contents

Introduction.....	5
Research Questions and Methodology.....	9
Study Findings.....	10
Analysis of this Phenomenon	10
The Factors of Digital Violence.....	14
Consequences of Digital Violence	16
Suggested Solutions.....	17
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	19
A Victim's Story.....	20

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Syria, spanning over 12 years, has resulted in widespread violence, displacement, and hardship for its people. Many Syrians have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in northern Syria, near the Turkish border, where opposing factions have established control.

According to the Global Peace Index in 2022, Syria ranked third among the least peaceful countries worldwide.¹

Per a map of military control issued by the "Jusoor Center for Studies," the opposition factions hold 10.98% of Syrian territory, with Idlib and northern Aleppo being the primary locations. Additionally, opposition control extends to the Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn areas in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah, as well as the "Zakf" and "Al-Tanf" regions (Area 55) in southeastern Syria.²

The mounting pressure on the populace in the confined region of northern Syria is a daily occurrence, as a result of the ongoing bombing and displacement operations, as well as the forced relocation of individuals from Turkey to Syria. Despite the already substantial population density in the area, which has been further intensified by the repeated displacement and relocation of Syrians during the war, the region continues to face this increased strain.

The most recent figures from 2023 indicate that the population in the regions of northwestern Syria under the control of opposition parties has increased to over 6 million individuals, following a previous count of 5.5 million in 2022. The Idlib region, which is the focus of this study, has a population of 4,239,164 Syrians.³ The displaced individuals make up 50% of the total population. Most of these individuals reside in camps and makeshift housing, which aggravates the humanitarian conditions, economic crisis, and social and service issues over time. There are currently 1,873 camps and shelter centers in the Idlib region and other areas under opposition control. The random camps house 2,016,344 people, including 604,903 women, and 10,146 widowed women without a breadwinner are in the selected geographical area alone.⁴



¹ Global Peace Index – Section 1.3

² Jusoor Center for Studies "Map of Military Control"

³ The opposition areas are considered one in the eyes of all people and the statistics include them as a whole, but they are divided into two parts: the Idlib region controlled by the Islamic opposition and the Aleppo countryside by the moderate opposition. Source: Map of the distribution of Syrians inside and outside Syria, Jusoor Center for Studies.

⁴ Response coordinators.

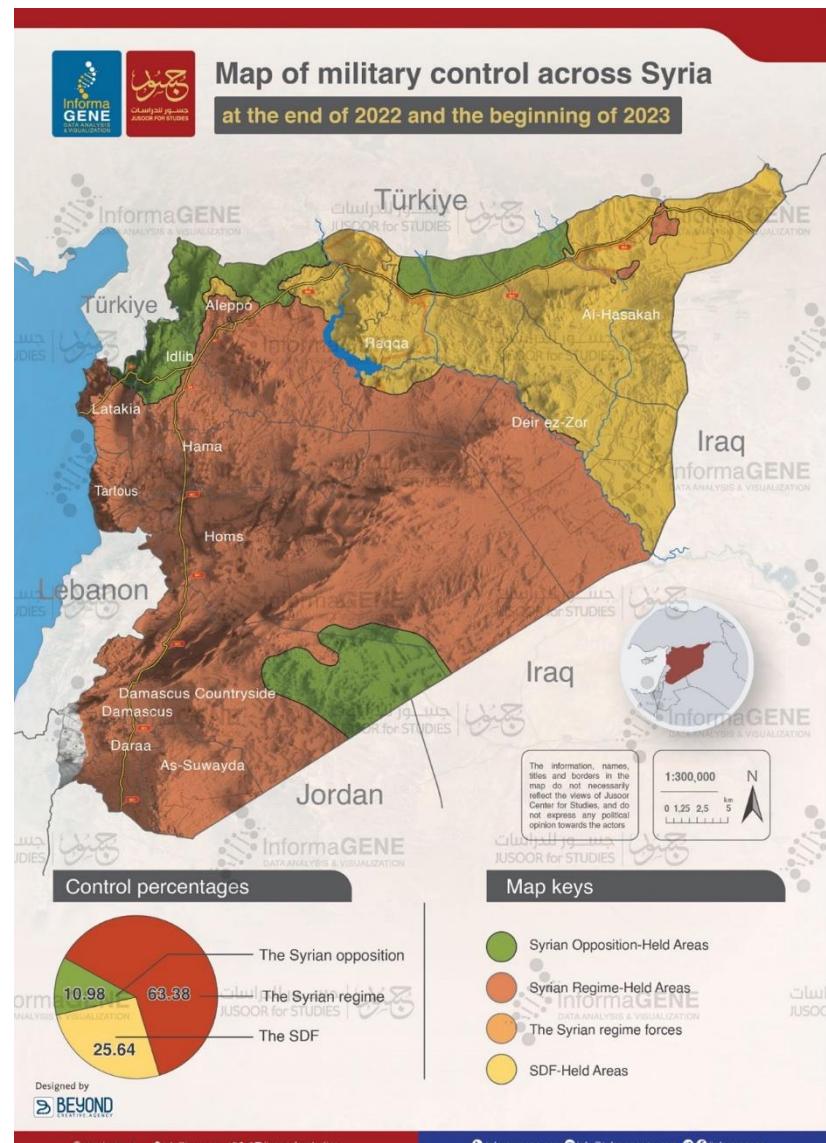
Among the 13.1 million Syrians requiring assistance, women are at a heightened risk of experiencing protection violations, including gender-based violence that puts their lives in jeopardy.⁵

In various camps, there exist camps specifically for widows and divorced women, referred to as "widows' camps," which house tens of thousands of widows and other single women, including those who have lost their spouses and children, or daughters of widowed women who were raised in these camps.

The challenges of daily life in these camps are overwhelming, exacerbating the crisis for this group of women. The humanitarian conditions are dire, and support for the camps has declined to less than 20%. This is evident in the low response rates during the year 2022, which did not exceed 42.45% at the national level. Furthermore, the demographic composition of the camps has increased due to new waves of displacement, which has led to a rise in the number of widows seeking employment opportunities to provide for their children.⁶

A guidance note issued by the Gender-Based Violence Sub-Cluster in 2019 expressed concerns about the establishment of facilities for internally displaced persons who comprise solely widowed and divorced women. The cause for the development of these camps is firmly grounded in gender inequality, which leaves women vulnerable to violations of their protection and increased susceptibility to a variety of recurring forms of violence. This includes widows, divorcees, and young girls who have been segregated to reduce the likelihood of mistreatment.⁷

The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria has issued a report in June 2023, which indicates that the twelve-year conflict has resulted in the exacerbation of "preexisting patterns of discrimination" due to "societal and patriarchal cultural norms."⁸



⁵ Second page of the Humanitarian Needs Overview file (2018).

⁶ Response coordinators. <https://www.facebook.com/share/ZKPLk1jqawoxaekX/?mibextid=WC7FNe>

⁷ Gender-based violence sub-cluster

⁸ Report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry.

According to a study conducted by the Syrian Dialogue Center, families in general and women in particular face a lack of privacy within refugee camps. The tents, which are often shared by large families or multiple families, offer little space for privacy. The camp is generally viewed as a large, cohesive family unit that is subject to constant exposure to one another. While the tents may have walls, they are constructed of blocks and roofed with fabric, making them neither soundproof nor able to provide any private spaces. Widowed women, in particular, face a double lack of privacy as their movements are monitored by all camp residents, leading to the spread of rumors and interference from those who might be family members seeking to restrict their privacy. This vulnerable situation makes this group highly susceptible to exploitation, which can result in negative social phenomena with serious consequences.⁹

The primary reasons women seek out alternative shelter in this type of location are a lack of free permanent shelter in host communities, high rental prices coupled with a lack of employment opportunities, or disagreements with family members or members of their husband's family. Women residing in these locations are reportedly more vulnerable to harassment and exploitation than those in other locations. According to the gender-based sub-cluster, these women face harassment and exploitation from men outside of the designated sites for widowed and divorced women. This includes being exposed to such risks personally when venturing outside to fulfill a need or through premeditated encounters meant for sexual abuse and exploitation.¹⁰

Many of these women struggle with economic constraints, including financial discrimination, as they strive to make a living, which puts them at risk in multiple ways. Due to limited job prospects, they are more likely to be subjected to exploitation. Furthermore, there are standards in place that discriminate against widowed and divorced women on the basis of their marital status, penalizing them and isolating them from the rest of the displaced population. This practice is often defended as a protective measure and a means of upholding "honor," but it actually increases their stigma and exposes them to additional protection risks.¹¹

The organization and structure of "widows' camps" may vary considerably. In some instances, these sites designated specifically for women may be partitioned into sections comprising multiple adjacent sites, while in other cases, widowed and divorced females and minors may inhabit a separate area within a larger camp that accommodates both genders.

The management of certain sites in Idlib Governorate is overseen by the Department of Displaced Persons of the Syrian Salvation Government, with the collaboration of Turkish authorities (AFAD) in Aleppo Governorate. Local residents are occasionally selected to administer these sites on a daily basis, in collaboration with local authorities and organizations that provide services within the camps. These sites have strict rules regarding behavior, movement, and exit permits, which can pose challenges for women seeking services, and increase their vulnerability to various forms of violence, such as extortion and blackmail through mobile phones,¹² known as digital violence.

Digital violence, which is often viewed as an extension of the violence present in reality, arises from the interconnected nature of the virtual world with the real physical world, as indicated by a study that analyzed the reasons and outcomes of digital violence among young individuals via social media platforms.

⁹ Syrian Dialogue Center.

¹⁰ Gender-based violence sub-cluster

¹¹ Gender-based violence sub-cluster

¹² Gender-based violence sub-cluster

Digital violence, as the study indicated, constituted by hate speech emanating from digital communication and online clashes and verbal aggression through insults, cursing, defamation, and the dissemination of private or intimate video clips and pictures, whether real or altered with the intent of causing harm to the owner and other individuals. This type of malicious behavior is also referred to as digital harassment, and encompasses acts of threatening, blackmailing, and insulting others.¹³

It is a universally observed phenomenon that has been thoroughly examined in numerous investigations, which have revealed that the extent of exposure to it varies considerably from individual to individual, influenced primarily by a range of determining factors, including but not limited to the individual's gender. As reported by the Council of Europe, "digital violence is an escalating concern worldwide, commonly directing its impact towards women."¹⁴ As per the estimation provided by the European Union, it is indicated that approximately one out of every 10 women have faced some form of digital violence since the age of 15.¹⁵

In another study, it was discovered that a significant percentage of Syrian women, approximately 60%, reported experiencing violence on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, which are the most widely used platforms.¹⁶

The majority of the violence that female respondents experienced was linked to defamation and sexually explicit messages, including harassment and digital stalking, as well as account hacking, fraud, and trolling. Furthermore, there is an economic aspect to the manifestations of violence, as women were subjected to digital exploitation, blackmail, threats, and emotional trolling with the intention of making sexual or material demands.

The research findings argued that the exploitation of certain women was due to their vulnerabilities and need for care and humanitarian aid as an outcome of the war. The aggressors communicate with these women online, feigning care for orphaned children or providing relief assistance. Furthermore, certain women were also exploited through the pretext of offering work, travel, or study opportunities via fraudulent links.¹⁷ The root of the violence against women in the digital world is derived from the social environment.

¹³ <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/188118>

¹⁴ Council of Europe. Cyberviolence against women- Cyberviolence (coe.int)

¹⁵ Study prepared by FRA- the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

¹⁶ Hanin Al-Sayyid. Digital Violence against Women in Syria 2023. SecDev Foundation and International Development Research Center.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study seeks to investigate and reveal the state of digital violence against women in "widows' camps," including the reasons for targeting them, the most common forms of digital violence that have been encountered, the locations and perpetrators of these forms, the relationship between residence and the prevalence of the phenomenon, and the implications for addressing the violence. Additionally, the research examines how digital violence is confronted, the services available to women to combat it, and methods to enhance awareness of the problem and strategies for combating it.

The methodology employed was a descriptive analytical approach to examine a dataset gathered through holding two focused discussion sessions targeting widows from five different camps in northern Idlib. These camps are among numerous camps in the region, with many women having experienced digital violence. Notably, there are numerous similar camps throughout Syria, some of which are overseen by international organizations and have similar conditions for women.

The selected geographical area of this study encompasses 36 camps and refugee centers initially designated for this particular demographic of women. Subsequently, the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the Salvation Government, which governs the region, undertaken efforts to recently close some of these centers and transform others into regular camps. As per our communication with the ministry, the current number of camps designated for this category of women stands at eleven, located in various areas such as Al-Foua, Jabal Kalli, Aqrabat, Qah, Al-Dana, Sarmada, Mashhad Rouhin, and Al-Zarzour in the Darkush region. It is worth noting that there is a plan in place to integrate widowed women into the broader society and mitigate the negative consequences associated with widows' camps.

Study Findings

Analysis of this Phenomenon

Twenty female participants were recruited through two focus group sessions, as well as ten in-depth interviews with women who were not part of the focus groups.

The individuals selected for this research study are comprised of individuals aged between 20 and 40. Of the thirty participants, five possess a high school diploma or an intermediate institute degree, one is currently pursuing a university education, and the remaining participants have not completed their high school education. Some participants have achieved a ninth-grade education, while others have not received any formal education.

Three out of thirty women in the sample are employed in their respective fields, while the remaining individuals rely on humanitarian aid, orphan sponsorship, and engage in freelance work, such as knitting or cooking.

The participants in this study are from seven different governorates in Syria and were forcibly displaced to the northern countryside of Idlib by the Syrian regime. Currently, they reside in five different camps, some of which cater exclusively to widowed women while others are divided into various sections and sub-sections. Widowed women are assigned to a particular section, while families consisting of men are located in adjacent sections within the same camp.

The Internet is accessible in the selected camps, and the participants utilize it on a daily basis, particularly using WhatsApp. All the participants use WhatsApp, followed by Facebook and Messenger application, except for one participant who does not use these applications. The participants are required to be present in WhatsApp groups designated for each camp to receive updates, requests, or decisions from the camp administration that supervises them. Only four out of twenty participants use Telegram or Instagram, and these applications are rarely utilized by the participants.

During the focus discussion sessions, twenty participants were asked about their knowledge of digital violence. Nine of them indicated that they are aware of it, while the remaining eleven had not encountered the concept before. Among the ten women whose experiences were discussed, all had heard of digital violence and its meaning. They had been exposed to various forms of digital violence, which helped to clarify the concept from their perspective and their experiences. One participant in the focus group sessions explained that digital violence involves exploiting women's need for work, assistance, and financial guarantees, and trapping them in fraud through links or communication that claims they belong to a supportive organization or party, or even individuals who help for the sake of God. A different participant indicated that digital violence constitutes an exploitation of women's emotions and vulnerabilities through the use of the Internet. Another participant identified specific forms of exploitation and linked it to the services or goods that women require in their homes, which compels them to engage with parties that claim to offer these services and ultimately fall into their trap. Another one argued that digital violence refers to the violence that women endure as a result of their presence on social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, revenue-generating applications, and other similar venues. Another participant stated that digital violence refers to any kind of online mistreatment that affects women emotionally, socially, economically, or even physically. For instance, "we have witnessed several instances of suicide among girls in our camps, without disclosing the reason, which is most likely related to

digital violence." Last year, another case of suicide was reported involving a ten-year-old girl due to an electronic game called Maryam, which is also considered to be a form of digital violence."

Another participant connected the notion of digital violence to the recent disaster that the region experienced, which was the catastrophic earthquake on February 6, 2023. She stated that it represents the exploitation of women's situations after the earthquake disaster and the circulation of numerous links claiming to provide assistance over the Internet. One of the participants also opined that digital violence involves assaulting women by violating their privacy on the Internet, such as by obtaining their phone numbers from groups designated for widow camps and then sending them indecent or unwanted messages.

On one occasion, an unidentified individual infiltrated a WhatsApp group and replaced the group's image with a very indecent one. Additionally, the individual composed a disparaging description for the group's bio box, which contained derogatory phrases targeting widowed women. This incident has been recurring in numerous groups for widowed women, leading to the hurt feelings, insults, or abuse of these women in various ways.

According to one of the individuals who experienced blackmail, digital violence involves the unauthorized access to an individual's online account or device, from which the hacker extracts personal images and information for the purpose of blackmailing the victim. This blackmail may involve extortion for money or other demands, or it may simply involve a violation of the victim's privacy through the publication of her photos and the use of her name, reputation, and social standing if the victim works in the public sector.



Considering the responses provided by the participants, it is evident that the definitions vary, while the underlying concept remains consistent. The foundation of digital violence lies in exploitation, which is followed by online harassment and abuse, invasion of privacy, as well as blackmail and defamation.

All the participants in the focused discussion sessions had experienced some form of digital violence, as clarified by the participants with knowledge of the topic. When asked to provide examples, various forms emerged, affecting some participants personally, while others were affected indirectly through acquaintances within the same camp, or even targeted at them as a collective, rather than as individual entities. In one of the selected camps, a group of widowed women were targeted with a fraudulent sponsorship scheme, where a number was spread among the camp widows claiming to belong to an association that sponsors orphans. The value of the sponsorship was \$300 per month, and multiple women, including four participants in the session, fell victim to the scam. The scammers requested photos of IDs and family books, and in some cases, even personal photos and videos. One participant reported that her personal photos and those of her daughters were requested, despite the fact that her daughters were 13 and 19 years old. This incident posed a significant threat to the participants and caused them distress, particularly after the scammers requested a video of the girls. At that point, the participant stopped communicating with the scammers.

Another participant remarked, "I declined to provide any photos or videos, but I was willing to share the documents because I believed it would be impractical for the organization to request all of these items." The remaining participants who experienced the same deception verified that they had supplied all of the

requested information, including personal photos and videos at regular intervals. They suggested that the perpetrators of this deception may be fraudulent organizations that collect information to solicit donations.

All the participants indicated that they had all been subjected to similar instances of communication from individuals claiming to offer financial assistance and guarantees, who used the logos of various known humanitarian organizations, such as the Hand in Hand Organization, the Shafak Organization, and the Violet Organization, to a notable extent.

According to a participant from a different camp, numerous women from her camp encountered circumstances similar to those faced by the aforementioned women, and information about them was also obtained.

The analysis in this study indicates that the experiences of women with online fraud are influenced by a variety of factors, such as their level of digital safety awareness and their economic circumstances. In addition, women who are widowed are more likely to encounter digital violence in their daily lives, regardless of their awareness level or economic situation.

One of the participants who attended in multiple digital safety training sessions reported that, after learning about various digital safety topics, she became aware of the numerous mistakes that women make within widows' camps, which are largely related to exploiting their financial and social status. She also recounted a significant incident that occurred within her camp, where a person who was dedicated to assisting orphans and was trusted by all the widows was taken advantage of through communication with an individual who claimed to be from the United Arab Emirates and wanted to provide aid to orphans. A WhatsApp group was formed comprising 100 families of widows residing in widows' camps, including women with disabilities.

Upon completing the required number of 100 women, the fraudster instructed the group to communicate and work exclusively after 12 a.m. Syrian time, utilizing the pretext of the time difference with his current residence. He also used a photograph of a person wearing Gulf attire to create the impression that he was a genuine supporter, and during the initial stage, he communicated with the women and collected comprehensive data about them. In the second stage, the fraudster selected a number of women whose data he had collected and requested that they film videos of themselves and their children. He claimed that the monthly amounts provided would reach \$750 to expedite the women's responses to his requests. This amount was larger because it is considered a dream for any widowed woman who has lost her family's primary source of income. In the subsequent stage, the fraudster personally communicated with some of the women and inquired about their academic degrees. The narrator of the case suggests that he aimed to target a specific group of widowed women based on their circumstances, appearance, and educational background. He misled the women by claiming that he needed the certificate to offer them employment opportunities. Following the selection of a female academic, the individual tasked her with gathering any outstanding documents from the camp. Despite not being informed of her position or the entity she was representing, the woman collected the necessary data and submitted it. Soon after, it was uncovered that the supporter was, in fact, a fraud. The women were then asked to leave the previously mentioned group created by an individual assisting orphans. Many women chose to depart, but the fraudster created a second group and convinced the remaining women that the person who had asked them to leave was the fraudster. Some of the women believed this story and continued to communicate with the fraudster. Rumors then spread that the fraudster had obtained private information and photos of some of the women in the camp; however, these claims have yet to be confirmed. The fraudster then created a new group, including most of the individuals from the camp, and began to insult the women, threatening to

publish scandalous material and videos about them. In response, the women changed their telephone numbers to prevent further communication with the fraudster.

All the participants concurred that this occurrence was recurrent among the community of widowed women, as well as numbers being divulged through groups for the camps. A substantial portion of women in one of the camps were contacted by unfamiliar individuals, who provided all the data to the victim and asserted that they know everything about her. The participants disclosed that the target group was relatively young, as the victim was reportedly under the age of thirty.

Other participants have reported experiencing harassment from unidentified phone numbers, which often entails receiving communications that they do not respond to. In retaliation, their phone numbers are subsequently shared without their consent on dating platforms and WhatsApp groups. These groups are typically established for the purpose of entertainment, and women are added to them without their knowledge. In some cases, the number of women in these groups is publicized, attracting messages from men across various Arab countries. This exposure has put them at risk of cyberbullying and sexual harassment, as they receive numerous messages with inappropriate content. Unfortunately, there are individuals who attempt to mislead these individuals by feigning sincerity and goodwill, when in fact, their true intentions are dishonest aiming at exploiting them emotionally.

According to one of the participants, she received a call from an unknown number, where the individual claimed to be someone she didn't know. The person informed her that she had a money transfer that she needed to collect, but she was afraid of the individual and denied any knowledge of them or the person they mentioned. Despite her denial, the individual persisted and began to threaten her with private information, causing her fear to escalate. Consequently, she blocked the number. The following day, she found out that she had been added to groups that she had not joined and was receiving offensive sexual videos and pictures from unknown numbers. Furthermore, she was being contacted by numerous unknown numbers, all of which resulted in inconvenience and harassment even though she blocked 100 phone numbers. Ultimately, she was forced to cancel her number permanently and acquire a new one. The participant stated that these experiences had a significant impact on her emotional well-being and affected her psyche. She emphasized that such practices constitute a violation of women's privacy and dignity and that digital oppressors use this method to increase the harm and psychological trauma inflicted upon women.

The participants collectively agreed that transportation plays a significant role in facilitating the incidence of violence, particularly digital violence. They opined that on several occasions, they had experienced diverse forms of violence while traveling in a car. Frequently, we receive a telephone number that we promptly discard upon exiting the vehicle. However, this is not always the case, as it depends on the details provided by the driver. Does the driver hold a position within an organization and possess the ability to provide us with aid, can the driver extend sponsorship to orphans?

One of the primary factors compelling widowed women to accept rides from strangers, as discussed during the sessions, is the remote location of their camp locations, which are typically situated far away from urban and suburban centers. This necessitates the use of a transportation method known as "cutting," whereby they can board multiple vehicles to reach their destination. Due to financial constraints, these women are unable to pay for road fees while traveling in cars, as the cost per kilometer can reach 100 Turkish liras, which is equivalent to a day's wage for a worker. Consequently, they choose to save on these expenses, prioritizing the well-being of their children by providing them with food and drink.

A participant reported that they reside in a camp far from their family's camp and must rely on strangers' cars for transportation (cutting) while wearing a veil that covers their face and body, even when accompanied by their children. Despite this, the participant has experienced hundreds of abusive situations in front of my children over the course of five years I am still residing in despite repeated requests to relocate to a camp closer to their family's residence. Unfortunately, the camp director has not responded. In the meantime, drivers have posed inappropriate questions to the participant pertaining to their social standing, age, name, and other personal details, at times requiring the participant to provide a response. Additionally, the drivers have offered their phone numbers and assistance in exchange for sending a video of the housing situation, which is only accessible through the internet due to restrictions on entering the camp. One instance involved someone attempting to touch the participant in front of her children, but the participant was able to defend herself and escape. Despite this, the participant still feels the pain of the situation and has not fully recovered.

Despite the existence of security barriers and laws that prosecute those who engage in such practices, as well as the allocation of public internal transport vehicles on the main roads. According to the participants' accounts shared during the sessions, the presence of these vehicles has significantly reduced incidents of violence against women during transport, but their routes do not extend to the camps. As a result, women are often forced to ride on "cutting" cars on the side roads and routes leading to their residences.

Recently, video footage surfaced of a widow accompanied by two individuals in a vehicle. One of them captured a clip of the woman coercing her with sexually suggestive language, urging her to marry the elderly man also present in the car, who was reportedly engaging in similar behavior. The woman was subjected to ridicule following the video's dissemination, and as a result, the man was apprehended by security authorities and subsequently tried and imprisoned for his actions against the woman. However, this is what appeared publicly, but the hidden practices inside cars are greater, according to the testimony of the participants in this study.

The Factors of Digital Violence

When women were asked about the factors that led to the increasing spread of digital violence, in their opinion, and is this based on gender, all participants unanimously agreed that they are subjected to digital violence at a higher rate than men, due to factors such as customs, traditions, and societal perspectives, as well as the exploitation of their social status, which exacerbates their vulnerability to violence and digital violence.

The participants identified numerous factors that contributed to the rising prevalence of digital violence against them, including a lack of awareness, transportation, believing anyone who offers help through the internet or links, the increased use of social media platforms, and the need for support and assistance. Additionally, some factors include customs and traditions, including new husbands' rejection of widows' children if they wish to remarry, or depriving them from their children by their deceased husband's family if they wish to remarry, leading them to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their children. Many of these women remain online to search for aid and supporters, using whatever means necessary to provide for themselves and their children. The participants emphasized that a crucial factor contributing to the spread of this phenomenon is the simultaneous search for assistance or job opportunities in conjunction with the scarcity of resources experienced by women and the necessity for attention and support in all its forms.

The lack of religious and moral motivation, as indicated by the participants, played a significant role in exacerbating and propagating the phenomenon, as well as promoting the utilization of revenue-generating applications, which are widely regarded as the primary means of harassing women, as seven out of twenty participants reported that approximately 50% to 60% of the applications utilized in their camps are revenue-generating, based on their estimates. Four participants stated that around 20% of the applications used in their camps are revenue-generating, while one woman claimed that approximately 85% of the applications used in her camp are revenue-generating. Lastly, eight participants reported that the percentage of revenue-generating applications used in the camps to which they belong ranges from 50% to 75%.

Applications for earning money are utilized by women residing in widows' camps due to the necessity of supplementing their income and that of their families amidst challenging economic conditions and scarce job opportunities. The convenience of not having to physically commute to a workplace, as well as the fact that these types of jobs do not necessitate any certifications or prior experience, contributes to the appeal of these applications.

The use of these applications facilitates the exchange of private messages, photos, and videos, in addition to group chats and voice and video calls. To generate revenue through these applications, it is essential to maintain open communication channels as long as possible. The utilization of various applications facilitates the exchange of private photos and contact information for the purpose of soliciting increased support from individuals who engage in online games, particularly those from the Gulf region. These games often involve participants accepting invitations to communicate and share photos and conversations, which has unfortunately led to numerous instances of blackmail and threats. A particularly distressing case involves a participant whose neighbor has been compelled to send money to a blackmailer she encountered through the Claps Clip application, which is accessible on the Google Play Store, to prevent the dissemination of her private information and photographs. It is worth noting that numerous revenue-generating applications are prevalent online, utilizing a shared approach.

The participants in the targeted sample reported that the most common forms of digital violence they experienced were digital blackmail, hacking, defamation and threats, theft of information, stalking, harassment, and sending unwanted messages that may be of sexual and non-sexual nature. Additionally, they reported experiencing impersonation, taking pictures of them without their consent, and stealing devices or installing malicious software on devices physically or via the internet. Furthermore, sharing personal information of widowed women irresponsibly was also reported, which exposes them to the risk of blackmail and threats.

The participants unanimously agreed that digital violence is perpetrated by both men and those who purport to offer humanitarian aid in the guise of organizations. Three out of the total of twenty participants indicated that digital violence within widows' camps may also be caused by women, specifically for the purpose of obtaining financial gain in exchange for providing private information about certain individuals.

The participants reported that, in their observations, at least half of the inhabitants of widows camps were subject to some forms of digital violence. And this increases significantly in camps situated near family camps that include young men and men with their families.

According to the participants, the absence of employment opportunities has led women in widows' camps to resort to revenue-generating applications, click on links promising assistance, or trust individuals who claim to offer sponsorships for orphans, all of which contribute to their exposure to digital violence.

The camps, devoid of job opportunities or any means of support for women in terms of education, training, or work, inadvertently become breeding grounds for digital violence and corruption. With Internet access being the only recourse available to both young and old within these camps, it is no wonder that they are vulnerable to falling prey to digital violence.

Furthermore, the absence of a principal provider, coupled with the aspiration to improve their life conditions and establish stability through marriage to a partner who would facilitate their escape from their current situation, compels some participants to resort to seeking marriages via applications. It is noteworthy that approximately 35% of the women in one of the camps to which some participants belong were successful in finding husbands through these applications, thereby enabling them to leave their precarious circumstances. However, the camp participants have reported that the motivation to accept communications from strangers over the internet, which may lead to marriage, stems from their desire to escape their current lives. Unfortunately, these communications often prove to be exploitative and result in blackmail.

The respondents indicated that they occasionally experience harassment when they venture outside of the camp. The impact of displacement and family disintegration on widowed women, who often lose familial support following the demise of their spouses, and their primary aim is for her family or her deceased husband's family to inquire about her and her children, is one of the most critical elements contributing to the presence of these women in camps and their ongoing solitude in dealing with life, which renders them susceptible to digital violence.

The participants in the study unanimously agreed that the close proximity of housing in camps, as well as gatherings, contribute to an increase in cases of digital violence. The circumstances in widows' camps are further compounded by the fact that they have become increasingly vulnerable to fraud perpetrated by individuals and groups. The weak infrastructure of the security networks used inside the camps presents an opportunity for digital attackers to exploit the vulnerability, while the insufficient security measures within the camps themselves amplify the risks of digital violence.

Consequences of Digital Violence

The responses of the participants to digital violence aimed at them were varied. Most of the participants stated that they avoided confrontation by blocking the offenders and having taking steps to protect themselves. However, one woman highlighted the significance of a strong personality and awareness on the part of the victim, which are qualities that are not commonly found in widows' camps. The participants reported that their reactions to digital violence could sometimes lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and extended periods of not eating, as well as suicide attempts.

Therefore, the participants were thoroughly questioned about the psychological, social, and economic consequences of digital violence. The participants reported that one of the most significant psychological and social effects of digital violence on women is anxiety of digital threats, which cause them to live in a constant state of fear and unease. They worry about any information related to them in their digital lives and fear a negative reaction from a family member, such as cousins. This can result in a loss of trust in relationships or tension in family relationships, ultimately leading to the loss of essential social support, which is a significant social effect reported by the sample.

According to the participants' response, it is evident that feeling depressed is a common psychological condition among women in widows' camps. This condition negatively impacts their self-perception and their relationship with their children or the environment. As a result, these women are less likely to benefit from any support that may be available in their environment.

The participants also indicated that the psychological consequences of digital violence encompass a reduction in self-assurance and a perception of inadequacy in safeguarding oneself or coping with the digital obstacles encountered.

All of the participants emphasized that social isolation is a frequently reported psychological effect experienced by women following exposure to violence to avoid exposure to any potential pressures or threats. The exposure to multiple psychological and social effects experienced by widowed women can, depending on their response, result in health issues including sleeplessness, eating disorder, and relationship issues with family and other social connections.

Digital violence has substantial economic consequences for women, as indicated by the participants' response. This mostly affects their already precarious financial situation, as blackmail and threats can lead to reduced overall income, increased expenses, and accumulated debt, while also curbing their opportunities to invest or improve their sources of income. The participating women confirmed that in some cases, women are compelled to seek any job that can help pay these amounts, which exposes them to exploitation and risks falling into greater pitfalls that exacerbate the problem they are trying to resolve. This desperate situation drives some of them to contemplate ending their lives.

Suggested Solutions

In the discussion sessions that were held, solutions and services that women and victims require to cope with digital violence were discussed. All the participants emphasized that having a dependable entity to which complaints can be made in the event of digital violence is crucial, and that existing laws ought to be revised and strengthened to provide better protection, including punishing digital harassers and blackmailers, and informing these women of the hotline that exists in the General Security Service that can be utilized for referrals to cybercrimes.

The necessity of implementing digital awareness programs that focus on digital safety and digital violence was emphasized. Providing women with the appropriate training courses that specialize in safe digital behavior and protecting personal data is crucial for enhancing their digital protection. The participants also suggested the establishment of a digital tent within the camp, managed by a group of female specialists, to serve as a location for widowed women to file complaints, receive advice, and obtain technical and psychological support. The participants highlighted the importance of having the female element manage the tent, as this would encourage women to seek help. It was suggested that information shared within the tent remain confidential and not be disclosed to any third party unless it poses no harm to the victim.

In addition, one of the proposed remedies is to offer transportation between the camps and the major roads, thus eliminating the need for individuals to hitch rides with unfamiliar drivers and consequently reducing the risk of digital or physical violence.

The participants indicated that a crucial service for women in the aftermath of digital violence includes psychological support services, which involve providing a safe space within the camp and resources for coping with the psychological consequences of violence. In addition, relief and a supportive listener are essential in addressing the situation without placing blame.

The participants also indicated the presence of legal assistance services that enable them to submit reports and address digital harassment when filing a grievance with the relevant authorities, if they opt to do so.

Another question posed to the participants pertained to the development of strategies that would facilitate collaboration among widowed women residing in camps, with the aim of fostering mutual support and resilience in the face of digital violence.

In response to this question, the participants emphasized the significance of women advocating for one another in digital tents during instances of digital violence. They suggested that providing psychological and technical support, exchanging experiences, and offering assistance within one's ability (whether psychological, technical, social, or otherwise) are crucial for fostering feminist solidarity and promoting a culture of mutual support.

The participants were asked about the most effective methods for raising awareness about digital violence and inspiring society to take action against it. The participants provided several key recommendations, with the most significant being the dissemination of digital awareness in educational institutions, residential communities, and various locations, targeting all groups, and collaborating with influential individuals, such as imams of mosques, university directors, and other community leaders, to educate society about digital violence and the need for cooperation in combating it, rather than placing blame solely on the victim. Furthermore, it is recommended to increase the efforts of organizations that promote digital safety awareness, fostering freedom of speech, and empowering women in various sectors.

One of the participants proposed organizing social media awareness campaigns to discuss the issue of digital violence as the vast majority of the people use the internet and social media platforms. Therefore, social media platforms are significant to raise awareness about this problem. It is important to recognize that the victim of digital violence does not necessarily bear responsibility for the violence, but rather they may have inadvertently fallen prey to a fraudster's deceitful tactics.

The participants expressed apprehension over the safety of their daughters and advocated for the incorporation of digital violence awareness materials in school curricula. Another participant voiced hope for government legislation and policies that foster the fight against digital violence and prioritize victim protection, with a particular emphasis on ensuring the safety of the victim, even in cases where they may be in the wrong.

The participants were also asked about the existence of successful experiences or initiatives implemented to combat digital violence within refugee camps. Among the twenty participants, two reported that they had undergone training in digital safety and subsequently launched a voluntary initiative to promote digital awareness in their camp through regular awareness sessions. This initiative was highly successful, and over time it evolved into an opportunity for the team in charge to obtain organizational support, which helped to enhance the capabilities of women in various areas, enabling them to provide for their families and avoid online scams in their job search.

The majority of the participants did not report any relevant experiences or initiatives related to this issue. Instead, they only occasionally received digital awareness sessions, either in-person or online, which were sporadically provided by a few specialized authorities in digital safety.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to this study, the majority of widows who reside in camps in Syria and have lost their husbands during the war have experienced digital violence. In some instances, these women have faced multiple forms of digital violence for various reasons, including their social status and economic situation, as well as the ongoing instability in the region.

The presence of widowed women in camps that lack digital privacy and security measures, and their distance from urban areas, have exacerbated the issue of digital violence in their lives.

The following are the key recommendations for addressing digital violence and enhancing the protection of widowed women from such violence in the camps located in northern Syria, which may also be applicable in other camp settings.

- Organizing comprehensive awareness initiatives that encompass various forms of violence and offer practical guidance on addressing them by conducting educational workshops via social media platforms.
- Ensuring providing secure and long-lasting housing for widowed women to safeguard them from potential security risks.
- Providing transportation for widowed women through humanitarian organizations to facilitate their movement between the regions without having to ride with strangers, which may expose them to various forms of violence, including digital violence.
- Providing educational and training opportunities for widowed women to empower them economically and achieving financial independence through small projects, such as enhancing job opportunities and fostering effective participation in community decision-making.
- Undertaking digital tent sessions to furnish psychological support for women to bolster their inclination to seek such assistance, offering psychological guidance, and promoting the development of nurturing communities that encourage social interaction, thereby fostering effective support networks.
- Utilizing an accommodating approach by the camp administration, particularly towards women who experience digital violence, to offer access to the hotline and digital safety services.
- Undertaking initiatives to promote awareness of women's rights and the means of securing legal assistance.
- Enhancing the legislation and guaranteeing its efficient enforcement in relation to domestic violence to safeguard women from domestic violence if they were confronted with threats or digital coercion.

The implementation of these measures can contribute to enhancing the circumstances of widowed women and advance efforts towards creating a society that mitigates the growth of digital violence within the camps in northern Syria.

A Victim's Story

Digital violence had a profound and detrimental impact on my life. The world, with its ugliness, did not align with my inherent beauty, causing my inner being to be distorted. I was residing in a widows' camp in northern Idlib, and an elderly woman there had become a maternal figure to me, especially because my mom passed away. One day, she asked me to lend her my mobile phone to contact her daughter, as her phone was broken. I granted her request without any hesitation. Regrettably, she betrayed my trust by taking private photos and conversations and trading them with a third party for a sum of \$200. Subsequently, I discovered that the individual who had obtained these private photos had paid the elderly woman for them. He had requested pictures of the most beautiful woman in the camp, and she had callously fulfilled his request, resulting in the release of these harmful and destructive photos.

This individual contacted me and threatened me of posting my photos and conversations online unless I agreed to marry him. Despite persistent harassment and threats spanning a full month, I ultimately consented to their proposal. However, my brother refused to approve the union due to the individual's inadequacy in multiple aspects. Unfortunately, I am unable to disclose the details of the situation to my brother as it is highly delicate, and I cannot predict his reaction.

Although my brother rejected the fraudster's proposal, the individual persisted and compelled me to convince my brother to accept the offer, or he would reveal everything. As a result, I was coerced into going against my brother's wishes, and this situation led to my brother disavowing me and rejecting me from his life. Consequently, I will never be able to return to him, regardless of any future events.

Compelled to marry the fraudster, I was more akin to being coerced into a union, not a voluntary one. From that moment on, I endured psychological and physical trauma as the fraudster subjected me to various forms of violence. The beatings were so severe that I lost my unborn child. The last time, before I fled the house and returned to the camp with the help of a neighbor, I was subjected to an especially brutal beating. I am currently in an exceedingly difficult situation that defies easy description, and I am still under threat. I am left with no choice but to return to the abusive situation.

I wish there was an organization capable of addressing my issue, liberating me from this individual, and reconciling the disagreement between myself and my brother, to end this ordeal that began when I entrusted my mobile device to a stranger, who subsequently disappeared, without regard for the potential risks associated with such actions.

