Digital Violence Against Women in Syria: a Field Study

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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

This study delves into the complex landscape of digital violence against women in Syria, examining legal frameworks, stakeholder perspectives, and the impact on victims. Through a mixed-method approach including questionnaires, interviews, and desk studies, the research unveils a troubling reality where approximately 60% of Syrian women experience digital violence, primarily on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. The study uncovers a range of abuses including defamation, stalking, hacking, and trolling, with female activists and leaders facing targeted attacks aimed at silencing their voices. Economic exploitation and psychological trauma are prevalent outcomes, with over 89% of participants reporting psychological disorders. The study highlights the challenges faced by victims in seeking justice, including difficulty in tracing perpetrators using external communication tools and fear of reprisals. Despite these obstacles, the research underscores the resilience of Syrian women who, though often unsupported by official channels, seek assistance from personal networks and digital security specialists. The study's findings emphasize the urgent need for increased awareness, institutional support, and legal protections to combat digital violence against women in Syria and empower victims to seek redress.

Contents

Executive Summary

This study aimed to investigate digital violence against women in Syria, focusing on the legal and institutional frameworks surrounding the issue, as well as the reports of women and stakeholders on the prevalence and most significant manifestations of this phenomenon. Additionally, the study examined the impact and damage caused by digital violence and explored potential solutions from the perspective of female leaders who are active in the public sphere in Syria. The study also conducted in-depth case studies to provide a personal and descriptive account of women's experiences with digital violence.

This study brought to light the disparities and intersections that Syrian women encounter in various local geographies, based on their areas of control, as well as insights from Syrian women living in diaspora.

This research also grappled with the issue of the link between traditional and modern forms of violence, with particular emphasis on the significant harm caused by digital violence, which can frequently result in the loss of life or liberty.

This study sought to explore the issue of violence against women on a global scale, with a particular focus on its impact on Syrian women. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research examines the experiences of female activists in the public sphere, specifically their experiences of self-expression and leadership, as well as the consequences of their roles, including the phenomenon of digital violence and its subsequent effects on their surroundings.

This study has provided insights into the institutional, legal, and civil society contexts, outlining the measures taken to combat digital violence or support its victims. It is crucial to mention that although the in-depth interviews and questionnaires were mainly directed towards women leaders, a substantial number of participants represented diverse segments of women, such as those employed in public or private sectors, housewives, and the unemployed. Consequently, the findings of this research, given the participation of 84 women, offer a broad understanding of the prevailing patterns of digital violence against Syrian women in general and female activists and leaders specifically.

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, comprising a desk study and a review of existing literature on the situation in Syria and violence against women, including digital violence. This was followed by an examination of the relevant laws and institutions. The primary data was collected through a confidential digital questionnaire, distributed via social media networks such as WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as through the researcher's personal relationships to ensure access to the target community. A total of 84 responses were received from Syrian women in various locations, both at home and among expatriate activists abroad. The questionnaire results were then explored and elaborated upon through in-depth interviews with eight stakeholders, including jurists, activists, and individuals who had experienced digital violence. The expertise and experiences of these stakeholders were utilized to interpret the questionnaire results and add further insights. The researcher, who is a digital safety specialist, community activist, and Syrian journalist, contributed to the interpretation of the findings, situating them within the broader context of the country, and proposing solutions and recommendations.

The study findings suggest that the legal framework in Syria is inadequate given the current situation in the country, characterized by the proliferation of de facto authorities and widespread violence due to years of conflict, which has restricted civil liberties and fostered repression, particularly against vulnerable groups such as women. Notably, there is a plethora of legal references, including local authorities that resort to comparative jurisprudence and Islamic law, while others rely on the civil system, albeit with laws that are

lacking in safeguarding women's rights. Furthermore, there are authorities that base their decisions on personal whims, imposing their will on the communities under their control without referring to established institutions or legal frameworks.

Regarding the proliferation of digital violence, the study unveiled that roughly 60% of Syrian women were subjected to such violence on social media platforms, with Facebook emerging as the most prevalent platform, followed closely by WhatsApp. The majority of the female participants reported experiencing defamatory and sexually-charged messages, including harassment, electronic stalking, account hacking, fraud, and trolling. Female activists and leaders were particularly vulnerable to manipulative attacks aimed at excluding women from participating in gender equality and freedom-related campaigns and activities. Moreover, organized campaigns targeting women were prevalent, involving the reporting of accounts and the dissemination of fabricated information, facts, and even pictures. There is also an economic dimension to the manifestations of digital violence, as women were subjected to electronic exploitation, blackmail, threats, and emotional trolling with the intention of fulfilling sexual or material demands.

Regrettably, this study established the exploitation of certain women's vulnerabilities and their consequent necessity for care and humanitarian support as a result of the ongoing conflict. Aggressors employ digital communication to deceive these women by posing as caregivers for orphaned children or purveyors of relief aid. Moreover, some women have been exploited through fraudulent links that promised work, travel, or educational opportunities. This phenomenon is not unique to Syrian society, which has been engulfed in armed conflict for a decade, resulting in a substantial number of displaced women residing in camps, many of which lack effective oversight or accountability. The study corroborated the findings of previous research, suggesting that some perpetrators of violence are among those who provide protection or care, such as security agencies or humanitarian aid distributors.

The majority of the female participants indicated that they would not have been subjected to digital violence if they were men, attributing this to the prevalence of patriarchal societal norms and the association of violence with customs and traditions that restrict women. Additionally, half of the participants reported that the violence had spilled over into the real world or vice versa, confirming the circular nature of violence against women. Participants provided examples of this phenomenon, including instances of digital espionage that escalated into real-life stalking, the threat of legal repercussions if the victim did not comply with digital sextortion, and other similar stories.

There is an additional peculiarity in the Syrian context pertaining to the difficulty in tracing the source of violence, particularly in instances where perpetrators use external (primarily Turkish) SIM cards and numbers to carry out violence through WhatsApp messages. Consequently, women are unable to utilize communication companies to identify and report the perpetrator, which may hinder their willingness to report the incident or trust the official authorities to provide justice. Additionally, 65% of participants reported that they are targeted through private communication channels, such as personal messages and direct communication on Messenger, more frequently than in public forums.

It is also noteworthy to mention that women activists often face organized campaigns of targeting and defamation by politically hostile parties who create groups and channels on various platforms to spread scandals, blackmail, and defamatory content, including private information and media. Due to a lack of digital awareness, individuals may circulate these posts without verifying the information, which can result in severe social, psychological, and even life-altering consequences for the victims.

The various methods of data collection, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and desk studies, have revealed a set of motives and factors contributing to the spread of digital violence against women in

Syria. These factors include gender discrimination and inequality in societal culture, which has moved to the digital space, weak support and lack of protection mechanisms, including legal protection, and low societal morals, especially among young males. Political tension was also identified as a main motive, with digital violence used against female politicians and activists to weaken them personally and their political components by extension, and to limit feminist political and human rights activity. The poor economic situation has contributed to the exacerbation of digital violence through physical blackmail against women, which is a peculiarity related to countries of long-term conflict that often leads to the collapse of the economic structure. The Corona pandemic also contributed to the spread of digital violence due to the increase in Internet users and the absence of laws and procedures regulating digital presence. Additionally, natural disasters such as the earthquake that occurred in February 2023 have created opportunities for trolling and digital exploitation due to humanitarian need, especially targeting women.

Despite the prevalence and dissemination of digital violence, particularly targeting Syrian female leaders, the majority of them have opted to address the issue discreetly by blocking or disregarding the offender. This is largely due to women's reluctance to participate in online conflicts, as they are well aware that they will not receive any support, either societally, legally, or otherwise. This lack of support has been clearly demonstrated by numerous women. However, if the harm was related to technology, such as spying, phishing, or account hijacking, a third of the women took proactive measures to secure their accounts.

The repercussions of violence extend to women in varying degrees, influenced by the intensity of the violence, the characteristics of the victim and the perpetrator, and so on. In extreme cases, 23% of women contemplate suicide, a prevalent phenomenon among economically or socially disadvantaged women who face numerous challenges and feel hopeless about obtaining support or solutions. Conversely, female activists and politicians who hold positions of leadership and societal empowerment confront fierce digital campaigns, with 17% of them relocating to evade serious consequences, such as threats of death or rape.

However, the overwhelming majority of women, 89%, suffer psychological disorders as a result of digital violence, including depression, isolation, diminished self-confidence, and self-blame. Furthermore, the majority of the sample alter their online behavior, such as using pseudonyms and refraining from expression, and adopt a cautious approach on various platforms in general.

The connection between the place of residence and digital violence is a specificity of the Syrian context. While digital violence transcends geographical boundaries, the environment surrounding the victim and their geographic affiliation can impact the nature of the violence, its consequences, the victim's reaction, and the availability of support resources. Almost half of the women surveyed reported that their location, whether in a camp, village, city, or country of asylum, exacerbates the violence they experience. This is due to the changes that have occurred among Syrians during the years of war, including immigration, displacement, and demographic shifts in the regions, as well as the political and cultural backgrounds of decision-makers in various areas of influence. There is a dual effect related to geography, which is linked to urbanization versus rural areas, and to the ideology of the party controlling the land and its views on women. While the majority of participants agreed that the treatment of women's complaints regarding digital violence is similar across all areas of control, regardless of their orientations, the situation is worse in areas under strict control, where the blame often falls on the victim. Women subject to various authorities reported that complaining would not benefit them and could even cause them harm, especially since there are no clear laws or strict penalties for those who abuse them. This reluctance to complain or resort to various authorities inside Syria is what makes women generally hesitant to do so.

Even among immigrant women, Syrian women in Turkey, in particular, do not seek assistance from official agencies due to their fear of being deported or experiencing racism in their treatment. According to study

participants, this fear has intensified in recent years towards both male and female Syrian refugees. Female activists in European nations, for instance, have found that there is ambiguity in the reporting mechanism for perpetrators from other countries. This is due to the fact that systematic campaigns often originate from within Syria, and digital platforms are left to bear more of the responsibility for preventing harm than official authorities. In cases of direct threats via WhatsApp or phone, there are legal complexities involving privacy and tracing the source of the threat, which cause even women residing in developed countries to hesitate to report cases of violence in official forums.

It is evident from the findings presented above that digital violence against women in Syria is characterized by a multitude of causes and dimensions, which necessitates the adoption of diverse mechanisms and solutions to mitigate and address the issue. The research revealed an insufficient understanding of the available services, which may be attributed to their limited availability and restricted access. Surprisingly, over half of the study's participants were unaware of their rights as victims of cybercrime or the existence of appropriate reporting agencies, despite the existence of relevant laws.

Due to a lack of understanding of civil rights, particularly women's rights, and the ongoing armed conflict, law enforcement is difficult in this country. Participants reported feeling unsafe and lacking confidence in official institutions, as well as fear of stigma, societal rejection, and further violence.

The level of awareness regarding technical services aimed at supporting women, such as the Salamatech program, has risen significantly, with over 70% of the sample indicating familiarity with these services. Moreover, nearly half of the participants have already made use of these services. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the participants are female politicians and activists, who may consider these services as a form of community service. In a similar vein, 67% of the same sample reported having knowledge of reporting mechanisms through social media platforms. However, the percentage of those who actually utilized this knowledge remained relatively low, at just 19%.

In light of the prevalence of digital violence in Syria, victims often seek support from their personal environment. This typically includes women within the family, followed by friends and digital security specialists. In some cases, family men may also provide support. Notably, a quarter of the sample reported needing support but failing to receive it.

The primary connection between the dimensions of harm and assistance tools lies in the social culture and the institutions involved. Accordingly, raising community awareness and activating the role of civil society were identified as top solutions. These include encouraging the establishment of more institutions that provide free legal, psychological, and technical support to abused women, given the absence of official institutions due to political instability. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of training complaints recipients in relevant institutions to address issues of digital violence, as well as incorporating digital security awareness in school curricula and providing training in the field of public and private work.

This study is regarded as a significant contribution towards enhancing understanding of digital violence against women in Syria, as it is informed by the perspectives and realities of Syrian women themselves, while taking into account the multifaceted nature of the political, security, societal, and economic contexts in which it occurs. Despite the numerous logistical and security challenges that posed the most significant obstacle to the successful completion of the study, particularly in terms of reaching women and obtaining their responses, the value of this study is deemed to be comprehensive and rich, as it includes a thorough desk study and data gathered from dozens of participants, all of which have been informed by the expertise of a specialized group of stakeholders, as well as the extensive experience and expertise of the researcher herself, who is an acknowledged expert in this field.

Methodology

This research employed both a descriptive and quantitative approach to explore the phenomenon of digital violence against Syrian women. Relevant data, including digital data, studies, and various activities, were reviewed to provide an in-depth understanding of the issue. A detailed questionnaire was also administered to 84 Syrian women who use social media platforms and reside in different regions within Syria or as refugees outside of Syria. The questionnaire comprised 30 questions that gathered both quantitative and qualitative information to identify the forms of digital violence experienced by the women, the digital platforms on which they encountered violence, the mechanisms they used to cope with the violence, their level of knowledge about their perpetrators, the motives behind the violence, and their suggestions for reducing it. Personal data was also collected, and follow-up clarification requests were made when necessary.

The findings of the questionnaire were supplemented by a desk study and the researcher's experience, as well as by conducting eight in-depth personal interviews with key stakeholders, including case studies, representatives of civil society, and experts. Undertakers who were the focus of the interviews were contacted directly by the researcher, either through a shared network of relationships or other means, and all of them provided explicit consent to participate in the research and to have their statements included in written form as part of the research.

Among the group are those who occupy a position within the Syrian Interim Government while concurrently engaging in journalistic pursuits. Additionally, there are those who serve as prominent journalists in the regions east of the Euphrates, which are controlled by the Autonomous Administration. Furthermore, there are individuals who operate as directors of women's projects within humanitarian organizations situated in the camps area north of Idlib, an area governed by the Salvation Government. The group also comprises a renowned activist who works in areas under the jurisdiction of the Syrian government, including a woman and the head of a women's organization functioning in northwestern Syria. Two of the five women traverse between within and outside Syria depending on the situation, while three reside within Syria. All of them maintain profiles on a multitude of social media platforms and various messaging applications.

The remaining participants in the sample were represented by a digital safety specialist who works extensively with women in northern Syria and focuses on responding to cases of digital violence on Facebook, and who resides outside Syria. Additionally, a legal consultant and lawyer residing in areas controlled by the Syrian government and familiar with various cases of digital violence against women in the region was included.

A significant challenge encountered during the research was the difficulty in reaching certain cases in certain areas due to variations in control and security situations. Some cases refrained from participating because the aggressor was part of the ruling authorities in their area, causing them to fear potential harm, such as arrest or forced absence.

A number of female refugees in Turkey have chosen not to engage in discussions on this topic due to their belief that speaking out will not alleviate their difficulties, given the persistent threat of forced deportation if they report the violence they experience.

Furthermore, certain participants were averse to delving into painful memories and re-experiencing trauma. Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies on this subject specific to Syria, which impedes the development of research based on prior findings.

A General Context of Syria

The situation in Syria is marked by complexity and constant change. Since the outset of the revolutionary movement in 2011, due to the ongoing conflict that has resulted in extensive destruction and a humanitarian tragedy, the country has witnessed numerous shifts in the control of regions between the Syrian regime government, armed opposition groups, Kurdish factions, and other entities.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria during the years of conflict is widely regarded as one of the most severe in the world, with millions of Syrians being displaced both within and outside the country. The country's economy has suffered greatly as well, leading to high inflation rates and the collapse of the national currency.

According to Jusoor for Studies' latest statistics for the year 2023, the population of Syria is estimated at 26.7 million, comprising approximately 16.76 million individuals within the country and around 9.12 million outside of it, in addition to 897,000 who are missing or imprisoned. The population is divided roughly equally between males and females, with 50.1% and 49.9% respectively. Furthermore, 57.1% of Syria's population resides in urban areas, while 42.9% live in rural regions. The average age of Syria's population is 22.1 years, indicating a predominantly young demographic. [1]

Despite the ongoing efforts to establish stability, security challenges persist in Syria to this day. The country is characterized by the presence of four distinct areas of control, each associated with a particular party, and marked by escalating tensions between all parties involved. These areas of control are divided into four main sections: regions controlled by the Syrian government, areas controlled by the Salvation Government opposition, territories controlled by the Interim Government opposition, and regions controlled autonomously.

The areas controlled by the Syrian government are under the authority of the Syrian regime headed by Bashar al-Assad. The areas of the Salvation Government in northwestern Syria, specifically Idlib Governorate, are under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which has an Islamic character. The areas of the autonomous control are located in northeastern Syria, specifically east of the Euphrates River, and this region is controlled by the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces.

Finally, the areas under the control of the Interim Government belong to the Syrian opposition coalition and are located in northwestern Syria, specifically some of the northern and eastern-western Aleppo countryside. This area is controlled by the National Army (moderate opposition) supported by the Turkish government.

The percentage of the area under the control of the opposition, represented by both the Interim Government and the Salvation Government, is 10.98% of the Syrian geography, while the percentage of the regime's control is 63.38% of the Syrian geography, while the percentage of the autonomous control is 25.64% of the Syrian geography.[2]

In terms of the population distribution within Syria based on areas of control, the largest group (9.6 million people) resides under the governance of the Syrian regime, followed by approximately 4.3 million individuals in opposition-held territories, specifically in the Idlib region and parts of the Aleppo

[1] DataReportal
[2] Jusoor for Studies.

countryside. Additionally, the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) maintain control over an estimated 2.6 million people.[3]

The proportion of displaced individuals in and outside camps in northwestern Syria, which hosts the largest concentration of internally displaced Syrians, amounts to 49.32% of the total population. The number of camps has risen to 1,873, which includes camp shelters, random camps, and other centers, and the population of these camps has reached 2,016,344 individuals.[4]

Per the information provided by the Syrian participants, the total count of widowed women, or female heads of households, in the northeastern regions of Syria has surpassed 22,000. These women are either residing in organized or unorganized displacement camps.[5]

In light of the ongoing conflict in Syria that has lasted nearly a decade, the plight of women in Syria has been exacerbated at all levels. The frequency of violence

Map of military control across Syria at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023

Control percentages: 63.38 The Syrian regime, 25.64 The SDF, 10.98 The Syrian opposition

Map keys:
- Syrian Opposition-Held Areas
- Syrian Regime-Held Areas
- The Syrian regime forces
- SDF-Held Areas

against women has risen during the conflict, and women have been subjected to a variety of forms of violence, including digital violence, the incidence of which has increased in recent years. The suffering of women in Syria is deeply ingrained in the country's history due to the entrenched patriarchal culture, which the war has sought to preserve by obstructing the development and progress of society as a whole. It is estimated by the United Nations in Syria that in 2023, a staggering 7.3 million people, mostly women and girls, require assistance related to gender-based violence.[6] Syria appeared in the last ranks in the gender gap index[7] issued by the World Economic Forum for the year 2020, as Syria came at the bottom of the list and ranked 153 out of 156 countries in the index of the best countries for women.[8]

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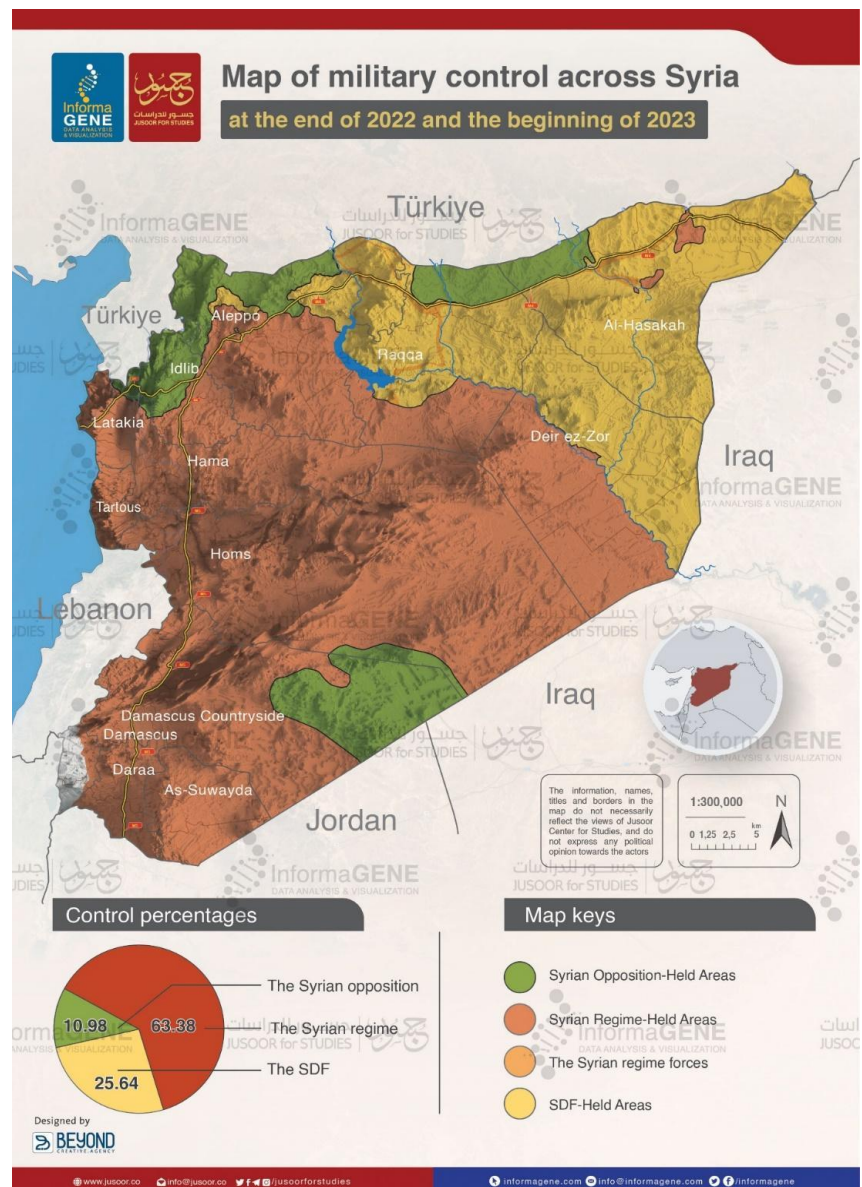
[3] The opposition areas are considered one in the eyes of all people, and the statistics include them as a whole, but they are divided into two parts: the Idlib region controlled by the Islamic opposition and the Aleppo countryside by the moderate opposition. Source: Map of the distribution of Syrians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

[4] Syria 2023 Response Coordinators. Demographics in northwest Syria/July 2023.

[5] Syria 2023 Response Coordinators.

[6] The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. (MS Word document.)

[7] The World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Report. These are the latest statistics for Syria for the Forum's gap index.

[8] The best countries in the world for women 2021.

Considering the escalating situation, women from varying social standing and educational backgrounds found themselves either displaced, refugees outside Syria, unemployed, or bearing the responsibility for themselves and their families. In many cases, the loss of the breadwinner, due to death, disappearance, arrest, injury, or loss of income, left women as the sole provider. Consequently, they were compelled to take on both maternal and paternal roles, leading to their involuntary employment and the necessity of accessing the internet.

According to the Central Statistics Office in Syria, the percentage of women working in the country did not exceed 13% in 2010. However, following the Syrian revolution in 2011, women took advantage of the opportunity to assert their rights and participated in various fields, including humanitarian, legal, media, political, and social work. As a result, women's participation in the labor market doubled to 26% in 2021, as reported by the Syrian Economic Observatory in its 2022 report. Despite this increase, protection measures and institutional systems have deteriorated, resulting in women working in a detrimental environment and making them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Despite efforts to promote gender equality, women's representation in political bodies remains limited, with the percentage of women in parliament not surpassing 13%. Moreover, discriminatory legislation persists, which further hinders women's direct participation in political processes.[9] The provisions in the Syrian Personal Status Law that discriminate against women, such as the denial of the right of Syrian women to confer their nationality to their children, regardless of whether they are born within or outside of Syria, and the granting of exclusive custody rights to men while denying them to women, are deeply concerning. Additionally, the low percentage of women holding parliamentary seats in areas under the control of the Syrian regime, which stood at only 13% in 2020, is far below both the global and regional averages.[10] In 2023, the global and regional average rate of women's representation in national parliaments attained 26.7%.[11]

In the year 2020, the proportion of women in the Saudi Parliament was 19.9%, in Afghanistan it was 27%, and in Somalia it was 24.4%. With regard to the ruling Baath Party affiliated with the Assad regime, out of the 14 members of the party's central leadership, there is only one woman, which represents approximately 7%. Additionally, in the regime's government, there are three female ministers out of a total of 31 ministers, amounting to a representation rate of roughly 9%.[12]

With regard to the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which the international community has supported and deems as a legitimate representative of Syrian society, it is regretful to note that its membership comprises only eight women out of a total of 91 members, amounting to approximately 9%. This percentage is one of the lowest when it comes to women's representation globally. Furthermore, among the representatives of the "coalition" in various countries, there is only one female representative for every ten individuals. Within the "Interim Government" of the "Coalition", there is a single female minister out of a total of eight ministers.

According to the website of the "Coalition," all eight of its female members are independent, signifying that there is no representation of women in any of the political alliances that make up the "Coalition," including the "Damascus Declaration," the Syrian local councils, and the "Kurdish National Council."

The "Salvation" government, which is affiliated with the Islamic group "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" and controls Idlib and its surrounding regions, has ten male ministers and a male prime minister. Furthermore, the

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[9] Syrian women's participation in the Syrian political process: crystallizing advocacy for peace.
[10] Syria: Unfair representation of women in peace negotiations.
[11] Global and regional rates of the number of women in national parliaments 2023.
[12] The representation of Syrian women…is between zero percent and the highest in the world.

"General Shura Council," which serves as the equivalent of a parliament, does not have any female members among its approximately 107 members.

On the other hand, the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" boasts a representation rate for women that is among the highest in the world, according to data from the year 2020. Only Rwanda (61.3%) and Cuba (53.4%) rank higher than the "Autonomous Administration," which is tied with the United Arab Emirates. The "co-presidency" system used in the "Autonomous Administration" mandates that decisions within management institutions be made equally by women and men, and each institution is required to have at least 50% representation of women.[13]

Although the situation in Syria remains dire, the feminist movement is gaining momentum in the political and human rights spheres, with a growing demand for equality in access to decision-making positions. In recent years, there have been some positive developments at the international level, as in 2019, nine Syrian women from opposition areas delivered a high-level briefing to the Security Council, a first in the history of the Council.

In the local context, roughly thirty percent of women were comprised in the Constitutional Committee, a constituent assembly sanctioned by the United Nations and aimed at reconciling the Syrian government, under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, and the Syrian opposition within the Syrian peace process. However, the realm of Syrian human rights and political work faces numerous obstacles, particularly the persistent breaches against female activists in Syria, occurring amidst armed conflict or infringements of international human rights law, which has prompted many women to discontinue or significantly diminish their endeavors.

According to a report released by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the organization documented 107 instances of assault and intimidation against women during a one-year period spanning from 2020 to 2021. These incidents occurred in northeastern and northwestern Syria, and were committed against women who were active in various fields, including politics and media. Many of these violations involved defamation campaigns aimed at damaging the reputations and dignity of the women involved, with some perpetrators using social media to spread false information about them.

These incidents have had a chilling effect on women's participation in various fields, particularly in areas related to freedom of opinion and expression and social media publishing. Some women have been forced to abandon their work or reduce their activities due to the pressure and threats they have faced. In some cases, women have been fired from their jobs or forced to leave their positions in local organizations as a result of these incidents. The report highlights the need for urgent action to protect the rights of women and ensure their safety and security in Syria.

The report indicates that the current situation is not solely attributable to security and political factors, but primarily to the prevalence of discriminatory practices that aim to deter women from participating in public affairs, particularly in political and media domains. Moreover, numerous violations of women's basic rights are being documented, including the right to life, freedom from torture, arbitrary arrest, and enforced disappearance, as well as the rights to movement, dress, freedom of opinion and expression, and work, among others.[14]

The escalation and proliferation of armed conflict have resulted in a rise and intensification of all forms of violence against women, which were already prevalent prior to the conflict. Furthermore, new forms of

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Syrian Network for Human Rights. On International Women's Day, Multiple Violations from Different Parties to the Conflict in Syria.

violence have emerged as a direct consequence of the ongoing conflict.[15] Notably, digital violence against women transcends geographical boundaries and is often perpetrated anonymously. Recently, electronic violence has been employed as a weapon against women, particularly female activists, with the aim of intimidating them, restricting their public activities, and tarnishing their reputations, as evidenced by a report issued by the Syrian Feminist Lobby.[16]

The report highlighted the pervasive unity of the state, society, and family in perpetrating all forms of violence against women, despite the fact that these entities are supposed to safeguard and care for women. The state denied a permit to a group (civil society organization) created for women's rights defenders at the dawn of the current millennium, which extends from the twenty-first century to the end of the twenty-first century. Additionally, security forces pursued them due to their feminist activism. Syrian female activists experience various forms of violence, including arrest, torture, limitations, travel bans, and exclusion from decision-making positions by all parties. Furthermore, the report revealed that during the revolution, feminist activists were subject to online harassment, assault, and defamation campaigns as a result of their community work.

Widowed and divorced women are particularly vulnerable to violence in all its forms, as they are often secluded in separate camps and residences in northwestern Syria, isolated from other displaced individuals. This segregation is frequently justified as a "protection" measure, but it increases their stigma and enhances their susceptibility to protection risks.

According to reports, men have been known to use photographs of women residing in these areas to harass and exploit them via mobile phones, thus rendering women living in these locations more susceptible to harassment and exploitation than those residing in other communities.[17]

Regarding the Internet in Syria, it arrived in the country late, and until 1999, Syrian citizens were prohibited from subscribing to the service. In 2005, those wishing to access the Internet were required to submit an official request to one of the service providers operating in Syria. This request had to be accompanied by a copy of their ID, and the individual would then have to wait for the outcome of their request. At times, citizens were forced to wait for several months to obtain an Internet subscription, as the Telecommunications Corporation often rationed the service for extended periods in previous years.[18] According to the "DataReportal" report, the culture of Internet citizenship and the awareness of Syrians, particularly women, regarding digital protection methods and their digital rights is currently very limited. Despite this, the number of Internet users in Syria has increased by approximately 384,000 between 2022 and 2023, resulting in a total of 35.8% of the population being connected to the Internet as of January 2023. The population of Syria, based on data from communication services, was 22.66 million as of January 2023. While there is no specific data on the percentage of women who use the Internet compared to men, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a growing demand among women to access the Internet, with women's access being equivalent to at least half of men's access to Facebook in the Arab world on average.[19]

According to a scientific study entitled "The Role of the Media in Arab National Security" conducted by Dr. Moataz Salah El-Din, an expert and media advisor, and head of the Arab Women's Media Network, as well

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[15] Human Rights Wartch. Syria: The price of war that women pay.

[16] Syrian Feminist Lobby. Thoughts on violence against Syrian women 2021.

[17] Gender-Based Violence Sub-Cluster 2019. Guidance Note: Mitigating Protection Risks in IDP Sites Exclusive to Widowed and Divorced Women and Girls

[18] Internet Media, Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

[19] Arab Social Media Report 2011, Dubai School of Government.

as an advisor to the Democratic Center for Middle Eastern Studies in North Carolina, the number of Facebook users in 2021 reached 7.5 million people.

The proliferation of Internet usage in Syria has led to the widespread utilization of social media sites as a means of communication among Internet users, thereby transforming these platforms into significant spaces for interaction and reflection of societal happenings.

However, it is essential to recognize that the digital violence experienced by Syrian women is an extension of the long-standing phenomenon of digital violence against women worldwide. On September 24, 2015, the United Nations Broadband Commission published a report asserting that a substantial proportion of women online, amounting to approximately 75%, have been subjected to harassment, bullying, and threats of violence, commonly referred to as cyberviolence.[20]

This type of violence utilizes technology to target women, with certain groups being particularly susceptible to its dangers due to the nature of their work, identity, or access to specific websites for obtaining information and services. These groups include female journalists, politicians, activists, members of women's movements, individuals in the academic field, and young girls. According to Amnesty International's 2018 report on online violence against women, cyberviolence takes various forms, such as direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence, abuse based on aspects of a woman's identity, including racism or transphobia, targeted harassment, privacy violations like disclosing private information with the intention of causing harm, and sharing sexual or intimate images of a woman without her consent, as evidenced by testimonies from Syria in this study.

The virtual world and digital arenas are increasingly being recognized as sites of digital violence against women, which is seen as an extension and perpetuation of the violence directed against them in the real world. In these digital interactions, the sayings and attitudes that circulate in the real world are often projected onto the digital world. The origins of the components of verbal violence against women in the digital world can be traced back to the social milieu in which they live. There are various forms of digital verbal violence that can occur on social media platforms, including written posts, comments, direct messages, interactive images and videos.

The first issue is the widespread stereotyping of women in certain societies, which is often accompanied by derogatory language and disrespect. This includes the use of insulting and demeaning language based on perceived differences. The second problem is the promotion of a superior view of men through confrontational discourse that discriminates against women. This can lead to the dissemination of negative stereotypes and the marginalization of women. The third problem is the prevalence of an offensive semantic field that reinforces societal biases and excludes women. This can contribute to a culture of discrimination and inequality.

The term "digital violence" refers to the various forms of harassment that individuals may encounter online. This phenomenon is of global concern and has been the subject of numerous studies, which have shown that the extent of exposure to digital violence can vary significantly from one individual to another, with gender being one of the most significant factors, as indicated by the Council of Europe.[21] According to the European Union, approximately 10% of women have encountered some form of online violence from the age of 15.[22]

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[20] UN Broadband Commission Report, September 2015.
[21] Council of Europe. Cyberviolence against women- Cyberviolence (coe.int)
[22] Study prepared by FRA- the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Digital Violence and Syrian Law

The virtual nature of digital violence does not diminish its status as a form of internationally and legally condemned violence. As stated on the UN Women website, digital violence is classified as a form of violence against women, and this violation contradicts the principle of non-discrimination outlined in Article Two of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as numerous international covenants and conventions. This highlights the need to direct efforts towards reducing it and raising awareness.

However, despite the prevalence of digital violence in the Arab world, the legal systems in most Arab countries have yet to incorporate this factor into their legal requirements. As the study of the sample conducted in Syria will demonstrate, the seriousness with which digital violence is addressed is inadequate, as evidenced by the increasing proportion of this phenomenon. The danger of digital violence escalates when it spreads to the physical realm or vice versa.

It is widely recognized that the more justice is entrenched in public life and the laws and constitutions governing societal relations, the fewer violations against individuals and all segments of society will occur.

In light of the complex situation and overlapping problems in Syria, which have persisted for over twelve years of war and division, digital violence has had a significant impact on the reality of women in general. Women's suffering in Syria varies depending on the area of control, as Syria is currently divided into various areas of control, a fact that was corroborated by the women's testimonies in this study.

In accordance with a legal advisor who is well-known and operates within areas controlled by the Syrian government, there have been numerous instances of digital violence that have resulted in actual, brutal crimes in various locations. During our meeting, the advisor shared their insights to enhance our research.

According to the advisor, who also works as a lawyer in the aforementioned regions, electronic crimes are on the rise compared to other Arab countries in the vicinity, due to the war on one hand and the large population on social media platforms on the other hand, resulting in the crossing of societal boundaries that were previously unexplored.

During the interview, the advisor stated that they deal with at least three digital violence cases against women every day. Among the most notable cases they have worked on is "breach of the sanctity of private life," which includes the publication of photos, defamation, blackmail, sexual exploitation, moral and material abuse, as well as electronic fraud and other forms of internet slander. The advisor noted that the majority of the violence originates from men and that instances of violence are higher in rural areas compared to urban centers.

The legal advisor opined that the enactment of the Cybercrime Law No. 20 of 2022, which codifies cybercrimes, is beneficial to women, but the challenge lies in the extent of their knowledge of these laws, as the majority of the population is unaware of them.

On the other hand, Fadel Abdel Ghani, the director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, stated that the Syrian regime has implemented numerous laws to suppress any form of dissent or criticism. He observed that Law No. 20 of 2022, which aims to further restrict freedom of opinion and expression, was enacted amidst the growing popular criticism of the government's work and the widespread dissatisfaction

with the lack of basic services such as water and electricity. Ghani believes that the primary reason for this law is to suppress criticism directed at Bashar al-Assad himself, rather than just his formal government.[23]

In light of the Syrian Constitution, Article 45 of the 1973 Constitution provides the following: "The state ensures women's access to all opportunities enabling them to contribute fully and effectively to political, social, cultural, and economic life, and strives to eliminate impediments hindering their growth and participation in the development of the socialist Arab society."

The article explicitly emphasizes the provision of opportunities, rather than equality or advocating for actions that promote equality, consequently, women in this article did not secure their equal rights.

The 2012 Constitution is a valuable addition to Article 45 of the 1973 Constitution in terms of eliminating restrictions, as Article 33 of the 2012 Constitution specifies: "The state guarantees women's full and effective participation in political, economic, social, and cultural life, and works to remove any obstacles that may impede their development and contribution to society." Additionally, the third paragraph of the same article states: "There shall be no discrimination among Syrians on the basis of gender, origin, religion, or belief."

In the context of the Syrian constitution and digital violence, the advisor has emphasized the significant constitutional and legal protection afforded to the private lives of individuals in Syria. Recently, there has been a legislative response at various levels to address this protection, and the judiciary has played a noteworthy role in supporting this jurisprudence. The advisor referred to Article 20 of 2022, which highlights the importance of protecting the private lives of individuals for both the individual and society.

Furthermore, Article 636 of the Penal Code imposes penalties for individuals who threaten to expose or divulge information that would tarnish someone's reputation or honor to force them to obtain an illegal benefit. The punishment for such an offense includes imprisonment for up to two years and a fine of up to five hundred Syrian pounds.

This article provides an extensive overview of electronic blackmail crimes that are classified as cybercrimes when the images or information utilized or exhibited via a network or information system were acquired through unauthorized access to a mobile device or computer, or the threats and blackmail were transmitted via mobile phone or network. However, capturing a person's image on a mobile phone and coercing individuals using these photos is not considered a cybercrime.

From the perspective of protecting private life, Article 52 of Syrian law stipulates, "Any individual who has experienced an unauthorized infringement upon one of the rights inherent to their personality may request that this violation be halted and seek compensation for any harm they may have sustained as a result."

Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, including the Media Law, mandates in its fourth article, paragraph 4, the imperative to respect the privacy, dignity, and rights of individuals, and to abstain from violating them in any manner.

In the final paragraph of Article 1 of this decree, privacy is defined as "the individual's right to safeguard their personal and familial secrets, correspondence, reputation, and the sanctity of their home and private property, and to prevent these from being breached or disclosed without their consent."

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[23] Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Below are several instances of violations of the right to privacy and the legal provisions that regulate them:

The sanctity of private life, as enshrined in Article 23, stipulates that anyone who discloses information via the internet that violates an individual's privacy without their consent shall be punished with imprisonment ranging from one to six months and a fine of one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand Syrian pounds, even if the information is true. Consequently, it is possible to file a case with the Public Prosecution for the crime of intimidation, initiate a public lawsuit, and prove threats and blackmail through legal means.

The advantage of this constitutional and legal recognition of the right to private life is that it allows for its application whenever necessary to protect individuals, rather than waiting for the judiciary to establish a new personal right. However, the small penalties and fines imposed in some cases may not serve as an adequate deterrent to protect the right to privacy and are not commensurate with the legislator's interest in this right.

In areas under the control of the Interim Government, lawyer Nader al-Matrouh explains that the applicable law is the Syrian law, with the exception of amendments and decrees issued after the start of the Syrian revolution.

The legal professional has indicated that dealing with cases of digital violence in accordance with existing laws poses a challenge due to the absence of any country that has established a department dedicated to electronic protection to aid in identifying the aggressor. Each case is addressed based on its unique circumstances and the potential for assistance.

In the areas under the control of the Salvation Government, comparative jurisprudence, which is grounded in Islamic law rather than statutory civil laws, is applied, along with circulars and decisions issued by the Ministry of Justice affiliated with the Salvation Government. Some of these decisions are currently enforced without being underpinned by specific laws.

In the areas governed by the Autonomous Administration, Syrian law is applied, with additional amendments and additions made through the Administration's platforms and institutions to suit its interests, without regard for the potential harm to civilians. There are currently no laws addressing digital violence in these areas.

It is important to recognize that prior to the 2011 revolution, there were no official institutions dedicated to protecting women or developing national strategies to empower them. This institutional void is particularly notable in light of the fact that Syria had an entity known as the General Women's Union, which was established in 1967 and reauthorized in 1984. Despite its stated mission of uniting women's efforts and having an internal structure, the Union has had little discernible impact on the ground. Additionally, in 2002, Syria ratified the CEDAW agreement, with certain provisions subject to reservations. The ongoing debate surrounding this agreement, particularly among various authorities, highlights the challenges faced by feminist civil society in Syria.[24]

Similarly, there are currently no organizations dedicated exclusively to digital safety and security. Instead, the various governmental intelligence agencies oversee and address digital matters in accordance with their respective political objectives and interests.

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[24] The CEDAW agreement on women ignites controversy in northern Syria and a local organization denies implementing projects related to it, orient-news.net, 10-02-20122,

Digital Violence Against Women in Syria: Findings

The study was conducted through interviews with six women from diverse regions of Syria, who had either experienced violence or possessed extensive knowledge of cases involving digital violence against women. Furthermore, two additional interviews were conducted, one with a legal advisor and the other with a digital expert, to enhance the research information. Concurrently, a questionnaire was sent to women in leadership positions in society, considering the various regions of control in Syria. The study also took into account the different ethnicities and races, including Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Druze, Turkmen, and Circassians, as well as the significant number of Syrian women who are refugees outside Syria and still maintain professional connections within the country.

Regarding the questionnaire, 84 women responded, and the table on the following page illustrates the distribution of participants based on age group, marital status, area of control, place of residence, educational level, and field of work.

The majority of the participants in the study were aged between 35 and 45 years old, with a smaller percentage falling within the age range of 18 to 34 years old. The vast majority of the participants, at a rate of 60.24%, were married. With regards to education, the highest percentage of participants, at 72.29%, had completed their university studies, while only 3.6% had only completed primary school. Additionally, 5% of the participants had completed postgraduate studies. The most common employer for the participants was civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, with 59% of the sample falling into this category.

Table 1: Participants' Information

Age Groups		Marital Status		Region		Place of residence		Education		Profession	
18-	2	Single	13	Opposition-controlled areas	24	City	58	Less than high school	3	Government	2
18-34	36	Married	50	Idlib	35	Village	8	High school	15	Private	3
35-54	42	Divorced	7	Regime-controlled areas	8	Camp	17	Undergraduate	60	Professional	4
55+	2	Widow	13	Autonomous control areas	4	Skipped	1	Postgraduate	5	Civil	49
Skipped	2	Skipped	1	Abroad	12			Skipped	1	Consultation	6
				Sipped	1					Unemployed	16
										Skipped	1

When asked about their place of residence, the majority of the participants, at 69.88%, lived in cities, while only 9.64% lived in rural areas and 20.48% lived in refugee camps. The high percentage of participants living in cities is likely due to the displacement of rural residents to urban areas as a result of bombing and military campaigns.

The study focused on five key areas in Syria, including the opposition-controlled region (the interim government), the Salvation Government-controlled region (Idlib), the Autonomous Administration-controlled regions (east of the Euphrates), the Syrian regime-controlled regions (government), as well as areas outside Syria (countries of asylum). The results revealed that the highest percentage of participating women came from Idlib, at 42.17%, and the opposition-controlled regions, at 28.92%. This could be attributed to the fact that these two areas have a higher number of active and visible women, as well as more availability of the Internet compared to other regions. However, the regime-controlled regions had the lowest percentage of participating women, at 7.00%, due to security restrictions and frequent power outages, which limit the number of active women and Internet access in these areas. Despite the large size of the regime-controlled regions, the small number of active women and limited access to the Internet pose challenges to women's participation in the online sphere.

In terms of utilizing the internet for daily purposes such as accessing information, communicating with others, and posting or commenting on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, 42 individuals out of 85 participants, representing a percentage of 50.60, answered affirmatively to a great extent. Forty-three (43) individuals, accounting for 40.96% of the participants, answered somewhat positively, while only 7 individuals, making up 8.11% of the total, answered negatively.

When it comes to the content of their posts, the majority of the participants reported sharing information about societal and feminist issues, public events, and topics related to their humanitarian and media work, as well as their general activities. Some participants also mentioned sharing personal topics, and others shared both Arabic and English posts for the purpose of translating humanitarian reports they were working on. Additionally, several participants posted online promotions, job opportunities, and advertised some businesses and products. Some also shared medical and religious articles.

It is evident from the comments made by the female participants that the majority of female Internet users tend to express their opinions and convictions, as well as discuss political and societal events that are relevant to their reality. However, only a small segment of female participants chooses to share aspects of their private lives online.

In the comments section of a question, one woman stated that she shares content related to social conditions and current events, while another mentioned that she addresses feminist and societal concerns. Additionally, another individual indicated that she publishes posts concerning women's rights, particularly in the realm of real estate, as it is her present occupation.

There are various reasons that compel Syrian women to concentrate on social and political issues on the internet, rather than discussing their personal lives. These factors can be summarized as the increasing awareness of social and political issues that has become significant in women's lives, particularly in opposition areas where many of the participants reside. Women recognize the value of expressing their opinions and engaging in online discussions, campaigns, and activities aimed at bringing about change and raising awareness of particular issues.

It is possible that women may prefer not to disclose personal information on the internet to safeguard their privacy and security, in addition to the presence of cultural practices and conventions that promote maintaining confidentiality and refraining from divulging information about individuals' lives on social media.

In terms of the participants' utilization of social media, Figure 1 indicates that Facebook is the most commonly employed communication channel, accounting for 95.12% of usage. Notably, Facebook has long been one of the most widely utilized platforms in Syria, particularly in recent years, due to its significance in staying informed about events, as the majority of individuals' lives have shifted to Facebook. The Syrian opposition community has demonstrated a greater interest in Facebook compared to other social media channels.[25]

WhatsApp ranks second with a usage rate of 92.68%. This growth can be attributed to the application's ease of use and popularity, as well as the fact that it does not require a strong internet connection, making it a highly suitable option for areas with weak networks, such as Syria.

The proportion of individuals using both Telegram and Instagram is 63.41%, while the usage of other platforms decreases proportionately.

Thus, it may be inferred that Facebook and WhatsApp are the most widely utilized methods among the participants. Additionally, some participants disclosed that they employ additional applications, as two women divulged that they utilize the Signal application, which is renowned for its robust security features in comparison to other social media platforms, while only one participant reported using Pinterest.

Figure 1: Social media channels used by participants
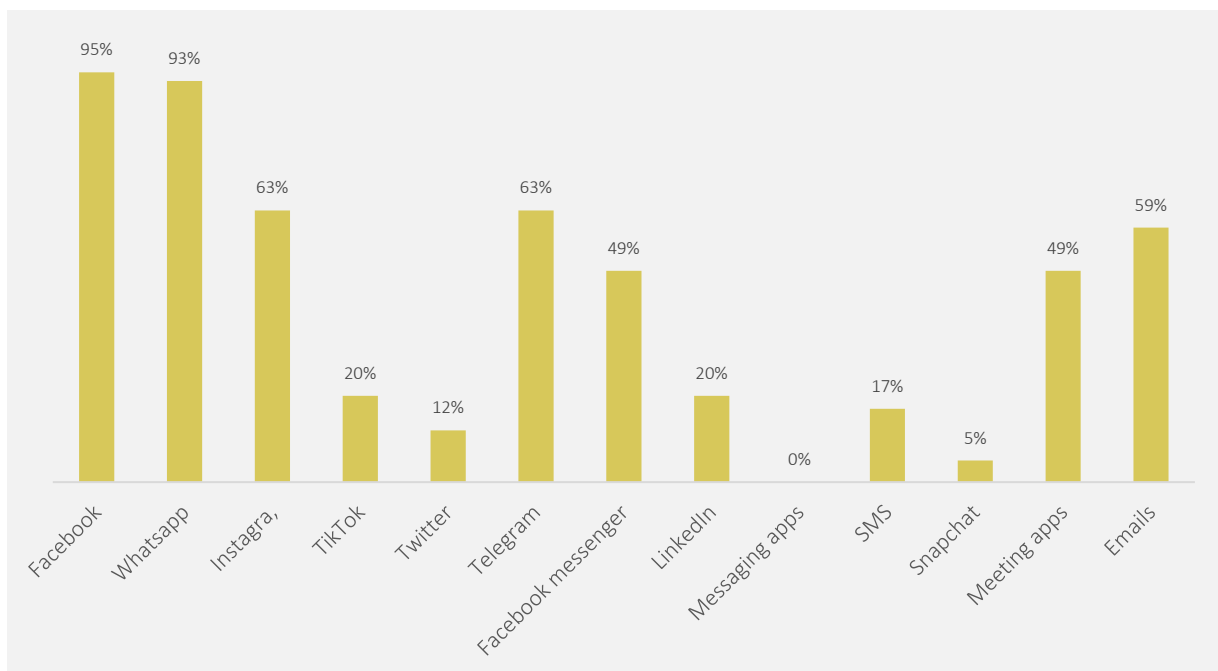
In terms of utilizing social media for publishing and expressing opinions, Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which participants engage in such activities. It is evident that a significant portion of participants, particularly females, refrain from sharing personal content on social media, as indicated by the 72% of female participants who reported non-posting behavior. Notably, half of the sample reported not sharing any personal photos or videos, while 70% indicated that they do not write text posts regarding personal matters. This finding highlights the extent to which women are constrained in their ability to publish or express content pertaining to themselves. However, it is worth mentioning that the percentage of

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[25] Jusoor Center for Studies, Social Media in the Syrian Opposition Movement 2011-2021.

participants who engage in publishing and writing about general topics is 43.59% and slightly decreases when the content is a graphic.

During our interview with Muhammad Asakra, a digital safety expert with six years of experience in handling cases of digital violence on Facebook, he revealed that a significant number of women in Syria aspire to engage in social media activities, particularly on Facebook, which boasts a substantial user base among Syrians. However, various factors hinder their full participation or restrict their online activities. These include the fear of the virtual realm and potential reactions to content shared on the platform, as well as limitations imposed by social norms that prevent women from fully embracing their online presence or using their real names. It is noteworthy that many female Facebook users in Syria resort to pseudonyms or names associated with those of their male kin or spouses.

Figure 2: Social media activities reported by respondents
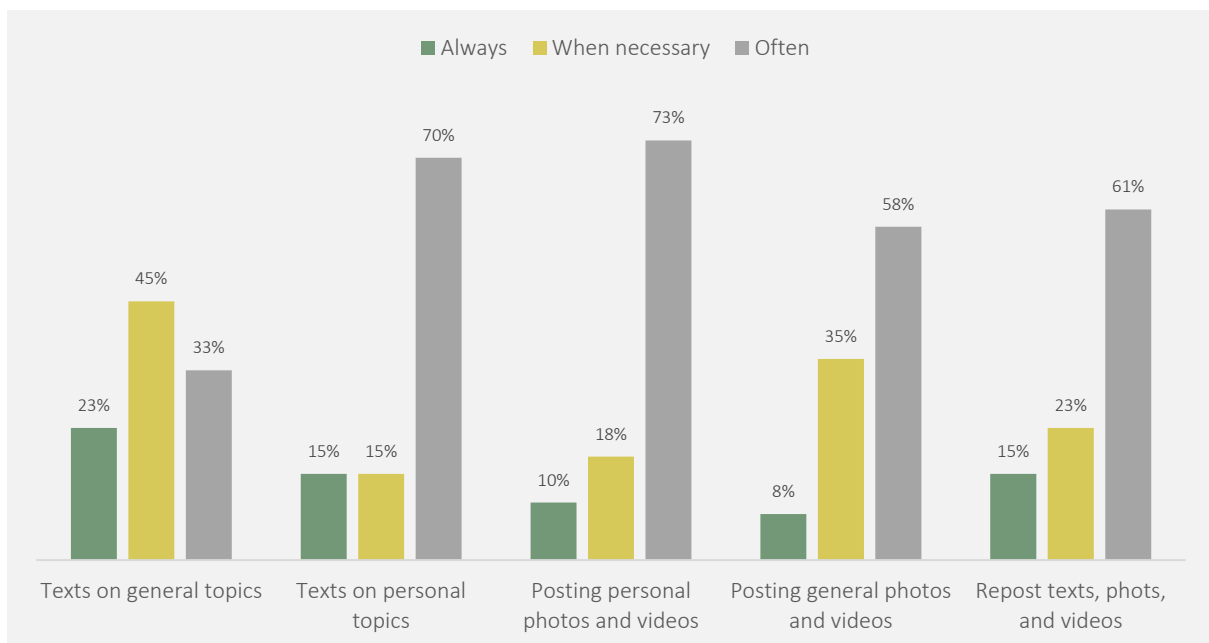
To ascertain the nature and extent of participants' exposure to digital violence, a question was posed to them, "Have you ever encountered any form of digital violence, such as insults, blackmail, stalking, violation of privacy, threats, harassment, or any other specific incidents that you believe were perpetrated against you due to your gender?" Of the participants, 49 reported having experienced digital violence, amounting to 59.04% of the total.

A number of the individuals interviewed indicated that they had been victimized by electronic blackmail and experienced unauthorized access to their social media accounts. Additionally, several participants reported being subjected to verbal abuse, character assassination, intimidation, electronic surveillance, electronic harassment, and harassment. Among the various forms of digital aggression cited by the participants were defamation, bullying, and other types of cyberviolence. The following are some of the specific incidents that were reported by the participants.

- I was a victim of blackmail by an individual residing in Europe. This individual made direct threats to harm me and my family and engaged in defamation and false accusations that have damaged my reputation. The perpetrator posted photos of me taken from previous interviews with local and international agencies, and added derogatory comments that caused me significant harm.

Furthermore, my personal cell phones were stolen from my workplace, and the individual threatened to post my photos on pornographic websites unless I leave the area in which I reside (Idlib).

- I was scammed online and had my photos taken.

- For several years, I have been subjected to various forms of cyber violence, including defamation, invasion of privacy, trolling, stalking, verbal abuse, threats, incitement of violence, bullying, and blackmail through the posting of online images of myself and my family.

- As an individual who participated in an awareness campaign during the Corona virus pandemic, I was unfortunately subjected to defamation, harassment, and threats. Despite being a Kurd from the Afrin region and choosing not to wear the hijab, I was still targeted by individuals, particularly those from the Idlib region who had recently arrived in the area or were still residing there. Following the dissemination of my picture on social media during the campaign, my number and Facebook and WhatsApp accounts were shared, leading to a barrage of harassment and threats. I was repeatedly referred to as an immoral person on various Facebook pages and subjected to a significant amount of cursing and insults.

- While I was pursuing my academic studies, I was subjected to threatening text messages. If I failed to respond to the sender, they would falsely report me as a terrorist to the authorities. In a group exercise on the WhatsApp platform, someone sent me inappropriate and immoral images as a result of my expressing an opinion on a subject that they disagreed with.

- At the outset of my humanitarian endeavors, I spearheaded an art exhibit that, in some respects, depicted acts of violence against women. Consequently, I encountered online backlash from individuals and groups, which took the form of insults and derogatory comments. Furthermore, I was subjected to persistent online harassment, both from individuals I knew and those I was unfamiliar with. The experience had a profound impact on my psychological well-being.
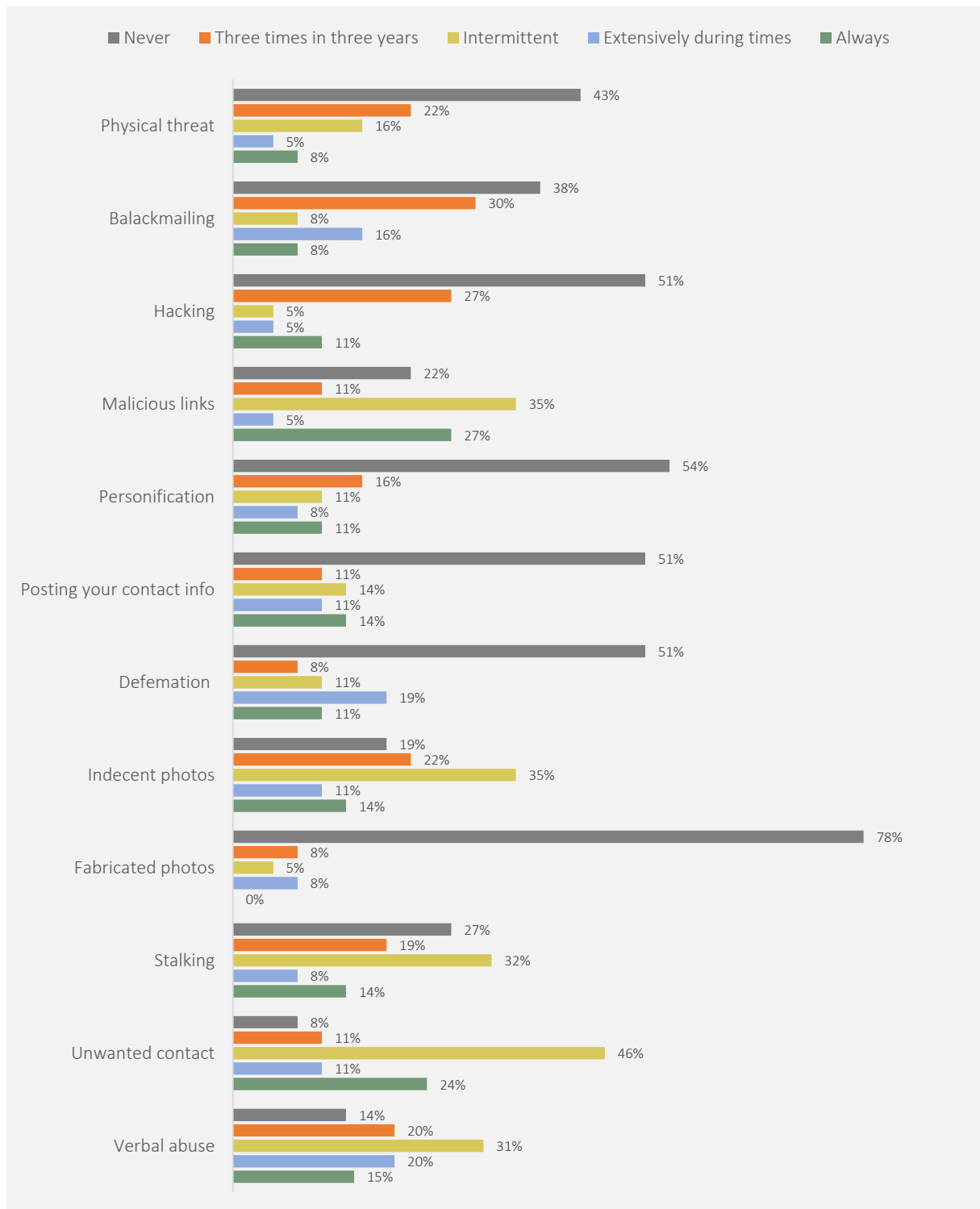
As per the account of activist and journalist H.A., who resides in regions under the control of the Syrian regime and was interviewed for this study, the issue of digital violence against women has emerged as a global concern, exacerbated by the deteriorating security situation in Syria, the absence of protective laws and regulations for women, and the lack of legal accountability in many cases. The participants in the study frequently noted that the perpetrators of digital violence are often unknown, due to the simplicity of creating false online identities, which complicates efforts to apprehend those who commit such crimes.

One of the digital safety trainers from the "Salamatak" team, based on her experience working with women in northern Syria, attributes the rise in digital violence against women to a lack of awareness among women about how to prevent and address digital risks. The trainer also advises women to report any threats or violations they encounter on the platform where the violence occurs.

To assess the various forms of digital violence and the level of exposure to such violence among the participants, a specific question was posed regarding the different types of digital violence and their frequency of occurrence, as well as whether the perpetrator was known or not. Figure 3 illustrates the diverse forms and extent of the participants' exposure to various types of digital violence.

The data presented in the figure below indicates that the predominant form of violence to which the participants are subjected is "contact by unknown individuals with whom the participants do not wish to communicate," at a rate of 70.27%. This was followed by exposure to infected files or links containing a virus or tracking file, at a rate of 62.17%. It is also noteworthy that 47.23% of the participants reported being subjected to verbal abuse, including insults aimed at them because of their gender, as this type of violence has become more prevalent due to the activities of women on various social media platforms.

Figure 3: Frequency of exposure to forms of digital violence

Legend: ■ Never ■ Three times in three years ■ Intermittent ■ Extensively during times ■ Always

Physical threat — Never 43%, Three times in three years 22%, Intermittent 16%, Extensively during times 5%, Always 8%

Balackmailing — Never 38%, Three times in three years 30%, Intermittent 8%, Extensively during times 16%, Always 8%

Hacking — Never 51%, Three times in three years 27%, Intermittent 5%, Extensively during times 5%, Always 11%

Malicious links — Never 22%, Three times in three years 11%, Intermittent 35%, Extensively during times 5%, Always 27%

Personification — Never 54%, Three times in three years 16%, Intermittent 11%, Extensively during times 8%, Always 11%

Posting your contact info — Never 51%, Three times in three years 11%, Intermittent 14%, Extensively during times 11%, Always 14%

Defemation — Never 51%, Three times in three years 8%, Intermittent 11%, Extensively during times 19%, Always 11%

Indecent photos — Never 19%, Three times in three years 22%, Intermittent 35%, Extensively during times 11%, Always 14%

Fabricated photos — Never 78%, Three times in three years 8%, Intermittent 5%, Extensively during times 8%, Always 0%

Stalking — Never 27%, Three times in three years 19%, Intermittent 32%, Extensively during times 8%, Always 14%

Unwanted contact — Never 8%, Three times in three years 11%, Intermittent 46%, Extensively during times 11%, Always 24%

Verbal abuse — Never 14%, Three times in three years 20%, Intermittent 31%, Extensively during times 20%, Always 15%

According to the digital safety trainer, one of the most pernicious forms of violence that women in Syria are subjected to is the dissemination of malicious links. This form of digital violence is particularly insidious because it exploits the various needs of women in the region, such as their need for employment or assistance with travel, scholarships, and other relief aid. Unfortunately, these links are frequently shared without any regard for their safety or potential harm, and without any effort to verify their authenticity before opening them.

The trainer emphasized that the primary reason why women are vulnerable to digital violence involving calls from unknown numbers or individuals is due to the ease with which the caller can engage in acts such as sexual harassment, teasing, or blackmail without fear of accountability. One of the primary factors contributing to this issue is the prevalence of fake identities on the internet, which makes it challenging to identify and verify callers, particularly in light of the proliferation of fake numbers without a SIM card or even a telecommunications company. It is effortless for anyone to generate hundreds of numbers in a single day without even having to provide their name, utilizing number generation applications. Furthermore, on Facebook, there are millions of users with accounts under false or pseudonyms, making it difficult to determine their true identities due to the lack of any substantive information about them. Additionally, the multiple forms and types of internet networks in Syria, depending on the differences in areas of control, the dispersion of networks, and the presence of an increasing number of internet service providers, can complicate efforts to accurately track the actions of the perpetrator on the internet.

Several women recounted in detail the forms of digital violence to which they had been subjected, noting that the severity of such violence often intensifies following their involvement in social issues, advocacy campaigns, humanitarian and feminist activities, or political activities. This can take the form of various threats, such as murder, kidnapping, and the misuse of personal images by fabricating and posting them online. Such experiences can have a profound psychological impact on the victim, who may feel fear and anxiety, as one participant described.

According to Ruba Haboush, a journalist and political activist who participated in this research as a case study and has personally experienced digital violence, these forms of violence are often rooted in sexual discrimination aimed at silencing women and reducing their role in public or political dialogues. In some cases, it may be a resistance to change, as these women's participation aims to bring about political or social change. This can lead to increased tensions and divisions, resulting in an escalation of digital violence.

One participant confirmed that her social status as a widow increased the intensity of the pressure and digital violence directed towards her by individuals she knew. Another noted that her activity on social media decreased significantly after she was blackmailed, and her private photos were posted online.

In order to assess the extent to which digital violence is linked to the gender of women, a question was posed: If you were a male, do you believe you would have experienced similar violence? Please provide reasons and explanations for your response.

The majority of participants who reported experiencing violence indicated that they were primarily exposed to digital violence due to their gender, while only a minority of five participants responded affirmatively.

The participants provided a unanimous response of "no" to the question at hand, citing that the digital violence directed against them is connected to factors such as gender, customs, traditions, patriarchal societies, and the vulnerability of women. The following are some examples of the reasons given:

As stated by one participant: "Indubitably, for women are perceived as feeble and intimidated by societal expectations, thus making them particularly susceptible to being targeted through personal or social issues, such as honor and morality."

Another participant added, "Certainly not, as women are more prone to coercion due to their apprehension for their reputation and the fear of societal repercussions, including harm and stigmatization."

Additionally, another individual noted, "Absolutely, no, for this type of violence is fundamentally connected to the cultural values that associate honor with women, rendering all forms of violence centering on this premise. Moreover, violence is closely tied to the distribution of power, and in Arab societies, men hold the upper hand due to the prevailing masculine mindset."

The following comments represent the personal experiences of participants with digital violence, which are shaped by diverse cultural, social, and political contexts that are unique to each individual woman.

During our interview with the women's rights activist (S.T.) in northern Syria, who oversees projects for women both within and outside of the camps, we inquired about the reason behind the observed results. According to her, the percentage of women experiencing digital violence is not surprising, as women are often targeted due to their gender. The severity of violence increases when women lack a means of financial support, which is often due to sexual discrimination and a patriarchal society that blames women and defends men, even when they are in the wrong. Furthermore, the dire living and security situation in Syria has led many women to become victims of violence in various forms.

We also asked participants about sharing one or more incidents in which they were subjected to any form of digital violence. Several participants expressed their willingness to share their experiences. Initially, all reported being subjected to insults and abuse because of their gender, either publicly or privately.

Digital violence has taken many forms, including exploitation, electronic blackmail, threats, physical hacking through theft of devices or storage media, and fraud through social engineering, as reported in various stories. It was discovered that the majority of hacked accounts were fraudulent. Women, especially activists, were frequently targeted with online defamation, misuse of images, negative comments, account reporting by others to shut it down and prevent expression, impersonation, electronic stalking, fabricated images, and harassment in private.

It is important to recognize that a significant number of women have experienced targeted theft of their mobile phones, followed by threats involving the content stored on the devices.

The study participants reported being exposed to multiple forms of violence simultaneously. They provided detailed explanations for the various types of violence they experienced. Some participants were exploited under false pretenses, such as sponsoring orphaned children or providing relief aid, while others were deceived by fraudulent job, travel, or study opportunities. Additionally, some participants were subjected to blackmail for sexual or material demands following a romantic relationship or after hacking or stealing accounts or devices.

Furthermore, some participants were subjected to defamation due to their stance on feminism and women's rights or their physical appearance and attire.

In a disturbing incident, five female individuals were subjected to fabricated images and deep fakes as a result of the attacker's vengeful intentions. In some cases, the motive behind the attack was to prevent women from participating in campaigns and activities related to women's rights and freedom. The use of deep fakes in this manner is a serious violation of these individuals' privacy and dignity and must be condemned in the strongest terms.

It is noteworthy that a portion of the accounts belonging to female participants were reported by their relatives, motivated by the traditional stereotypes associated with women's online activities. This, in turn, has led to an extended pattern of behavior that includes not only verbal abuse and threats, but also compels some of them to adopt false identities and accounts in order to access the platform.

The participants who faced defamation were engaged in activities or disclosing information related to a particular subject while carrying out their journalistic or humanitarian work. Unfortunately, there has been a surge in the dissemination of defamation channels on the Telegram application, which thrive on spreading scandals and perpetrating digital violence against individuals, including blackmail and defamation. Female activists and defenders were particularly vulnerable to these malicious campaigns, which often involved the posting of their private photos and personal information online.

The majority of female participants in the study were subjected to harassment, indecent messages, and unwanted private communications from both known and unknown individuals. Furthermore, some of these participants were targeted with attacks throughout the year, particularly after engaging in activities related to feminist issues.

The activist and journalist (H.A.) asserted that violence against women, particularly in private settings, is often manifested through the transmission of harassing and obscene messages, as well as threats. This form of violence can have severe consequences for the victims, leading to negative psychological and social effects. Furthermore, there is also socially sanctioned violence that is directed at the public. For instance, there are numerous Facebook pages that exist solely for the purpose of insulting women, perpetuating demeaning stereotypes, and bullying them by publishing private information and commenting on scandals. This type of violence is condoned by society, and individuals often participate in it without realizing the harm they are causing in the discourse surrounding violence against women. This discourse has been greatly facilitated by social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram. In some cases, participants have been subjected to impersonation and electronic stalking, which can be used to collect information or intimidate and harass. When individuals are constantly monitored and stalked by an unknown party, they often experience anxiety and fear.

According to various female activists from different regions who were interviewed, the degree and forms of digital violence vary depending on the nature of their activities and their influence and ability to effect change. As one activist and journalist (H, A) stated, "Digital violence has increased among women activists due to social attitudes and stereotypical views of women. Violence against women has been ingrained in society and has now extended to the virtual world. Currently, there are no parties in Syria capable of protecting women. I am actively involved in public affairs and am constantly subjected to electronic attacks, such as harassment, sexual abuse, and intimidation."

Regarding the relationship between digital and real-world violence, 47.22% of participants selected "yes," while 38.89% chose "no" and 13.89% answered "maybe." Our findings indicate that digital violence is often transferred to the real world or vice versa, which poses a significant challenge in addressing violence against women, as the perpetrators are often unknown and difficult to hold accountable.

In light of the ongoing chaos in Syria, there are individuals who, according to the "jungle policy," are granted privileges that others do not possess. As an activist and journalist (H.A.) from the regime's areas explained, these individuals are capable of engaging in acts of violence both offline and online, without facing any consequences. One participant reported being threatened with arrest by the Syrian regime forces if she did not comply with their demands for private photos.

The participants were also asked about the perpetrators of digital violence, the frequency of such acts, their motives, whether they occur in private or in public, and the gender of the violator. According to the accompanying graph, which illustrates the participants' responses to the question of who commits violence and how frequently it occurs, a significant majority (73%) of the participants believed that violence comes from anonymous individuals hiding behind fake accounts. To a lesser extent (48%),

violence is more often committed by people known on a personal or business level. These statistics suggest that the use of screens as a means of concealment is a contributing factor to the rise in digital violence against women. Additionally, 16% of the participants reported that violence against women is frequent, perpetrated by individuals or groups known to them, as opposed to 27% who indicated that such violence occurs infrequently. It is important to note that in the case of Syrian women, the division of the region by control is related to the presence of groups that may frequently attack women's work based on their location and affiliation. Scandal-related groups and channels on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, which are supported by groups on the ground, are considered among the most significant perpetrators of such attacks. Their primary objective is to spread scandals, as they refer to them, blackmail, and defamation. For instance, each channel on Telegram has a channel bearing the name of the associated post, through which photos, videos, conversations, and private information of individuals are published. The publications channel is committed to presenting scandals in their unvarnished form, while its affiliated main channel disseminates news and encourages viewers to visit the publications channel to uncover hidden secrets. Unfortunately, women who are prominent in society within these groups are frequently subjected to attacks, and the circulation of unverified posts about them becomes prevalent among individuals who lack any semblance of due diligence.

The majority of participants, 65%, reported that digital violence occurs more frequently in private settings, such as personal messages and direct communication on Messenger, than in public settings, such as comments in front of everyone and communication in a public forum. The response rate for both private and public options was roughly equal, at around 35%. This finding highlights the tendency for violence against women to be more private than public, which contributes to the concealment of many such cases.

According to the digital safety trainer, the reason for directing digital violence in private is due to the benefits of secrecy and concealment. Private conversations provide a space for digital abusers to operate without being easily detected, making it difficult to trace their identity or take action against them. Additionally, they can use private conversations, photos, and other materials to manipulate the victim psychologically, and to blackmail or threaten to publish in exchange for specific demands. The reason for this may be due to censorship and restrictions on public expression, as people resort to private conversations to express themselves freely.

In regard to the gender of the abuser, 84% of participants reported that most abusers are male, while 11% did not know the gender of the abuser, and 5% indicated that they were equally male and female. One participant mentioned that the violence she experienced was from men, including well-known figures, while others stated that they were men who befriended them on Facebook and then pursued them via Messenger. This finding underscores the disproportionate impact of digital violence on women.

To determine the social media platforms where digital violence is prevalent, Facebook was the most frequently cited platform, followed by WhatsApp and Telegram. This result was expected, given the widespread use and influence of these platforms in the Syrian environment.

Muhammad Asakra, a digital security expert, reported that he has received over 500 cases of Syrian women being threatened and blackmailed, including female journalists and activists, who have experienced violence on Facebook over the past six years. He noted that the number of cases is increasing, and thousands of individuals, both women and men, have contacted him daily, seeking assistance with various forms of digital violence, such as hacking attempts, defamation, electronic stalking, harassment, and other types of abuse that occur on Facebook. Asakra provides assistance to these individuals by communicating directly with the management of social media platforms, such as Facebook, to report harmful accounts or to secure and recover their accounts. He also teaches individuals the proper reporting

methods for violence and abuse on the platform. Asakra operates as an independent activist and human rights defender, without affiliation with any political party.

The causes of digital violence against active women in the public sphere on the Internet, particularly on social media platforms, were explored in a recent study. The study posed an open question about potential causes, including sexual discrimination, inequality, social factors, and the impact of ongoing conflict. The proliferation of technology and social media may also exacerbate digital violence against women, along with other contributing factors such as restricted personal freedoms, lack of awareness of women's rights, traditional cultural influences, economic and social challenges, and weak laws protecting women in Syria. To better understand the various perspectives of participants, the study was divided into several categories based on their responses.

1. Sexual discrimination and inequality

The prevalence of gender discrimination may lead to a lack of respect for women's rights and the justification of violence against them. The disparity in gender equality in areas such as education and employment can also increase women's susceptibility to violence. The participants highlighted the reasons for digital violence, which increase the likelihood of women becoming victims, such as male authority and stereotypical gender roles. Accordingly, women who work in public affairs are more vulnerable to violence, as society has not yet accepted feminist activity and movement, which has increased during the years of the revolution in Syria. Other reasons include women's limited roles in stereotypical and traditional works, in addition to men's fear of women's success and rebellion. Many Syrian women activists have been excluded, marginalized, or harmed simply for their presence in some events, campaigns, and places. One of the most important reasons is that men generally believe that a working and active woman, especially a widow or a single woman, are easier to troll. According to the activist (S.T.), some men also believe that women have taken away their work opportunities and are attacked accordingly. Some of them believe that she has become a rich meal as she has a good income, and they are being hunted for the purpose of blackmailing her and obtaining money. It is worth noting that this was not as common before the revolution as it was after it in the liberated areas.

2. Weak social support and a decline in the moral level of some young people

The inadequate social support for women who are subjected to violence increases their susceptibility to remaining in such situations. This discourages women from disclosing their experiences or asserting their rights. Members of society, across different social strata, significantly contribute to digital violence by disseminating defamatory and blackmailing posts instead of offering support as the internet has become pervasive. In general, Syrian society does not endorse women's active engagement in fields such as journalism, politics, and public affairs, leaving women isolated in the cycle of digital violence. Additionally, the abuser underestimates the victim's reaction, given the sensitive situation of women in various Syrian societies. Furthermore, the absence of a life partner due to the war that claimed the lives of many young men exposes women to attacks, electronic harassment, and all forms of digital violence. The lack of infrastructure for psychological and social support for women who have experienced violence, as well as the inaction of humanitarian and international organizations in addressing cases of digital violence against women, contribute to the persistence of such cases despite their prevalence and duration of up to 11 years for some participants due to their community activities.

In a similar vein, women can be subjected to digital violence as a response to perceived threats to their honor, particularly when individuals or society believe that they possess compromising photographs of the

woman. As a result, women may acquiesce to blackmailers and digital violence in order to prevent more severe consequences from family and society if they are exposed.

Several factors contribute to the prevalence of digital violence, including the lack of moral deterrents among some males, the absence of education, the proliferation of moral decay resulting from unemployment and lack of education, and the growing trend of drug abuse among young people. Additionally, the internet facilitates the formation of relationships that result in the exchange of private photographs, which can then be used for blackmail purposes, particularly when the other party is unknown to the woman.

At times, moral justifications for digital violence stem from the exploitation of women's privacy to settle disputes between men. In numerous instances, women have been targeted in retaliation or blackmail, leaving them as the primary victims.

3. Lack of legal integrity and the impact of the ongoing conflict

The implementation of laws regarding digital violence against women faces significant challenges, including the absence of penalties that encourage an increase in such violence. Several reasons have been identified that contribute to this weakness in legislation, such as ongoing wars and conflicts that exacerbate sexual and digital violence against women, as well as a lack of knowledge about women's rights due to the absence of effective governance. This lack of knowledge and governance keeps women in a state of darkness and prevents them from using their strength to confront digital violence. Additionally, there is a lack of effective legislation and laws to combat digital violence and punish aggressors, which is compounded by difficulties in implementing laws in certain areas. Women also fear reporting cases of digital violence due to the diversity of authorities and ruling regimes. Overall, the weakness of effective legislation and laws, coupled with a lack of penalties and fear of reporting, contribute to the ongoing problem of digital violence against women.

4. Lack of awareness and education

The insufficient recognition of the significance of women's rights and the perils of digital violence may exacerbate the issue. According to the questionnaire, factors related to digital violence encompass the general public's inadequate comprehension of the hazards of digital violence and its detrimental consequences for victims, inadequate knowledge among women regarding digital safety, and insufficient awareness of how to safeguard themselves online. Moreover, perpetrators often presume erroneously that if a woman is on social media, she is accessible and her privacy may be violated since she has created a public space around her. Furthermore, there is a dearth of supportive networks. Sometimes, family or friends do not offer support, and may even blame the victim.

 The dearth of awareness is also exemplified by the curtailment of women's freedom to express their opinions and make choices, as society does not accord them equal rights to men. This renders them more susceptible to control and digital violence. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the realm of politics and the public sphere, where women are not actively encouraged to participate. Consequently, when they do engage, they are subject to heightened scrutiny and criticism. The severity of this backlash is exacerbated when the topic in which the woman is involved is as sensitive as women's issues in general. One participant recounted her experience of digital violence from the family of a girl who had committed suicide, after she had written about the incident.

5. Economic and political reasons

The current economic and social climate, marked by difficulty and decline, has rendered women particularly susceptible to exploitation and violence at the hands of fraudsters and abusers. This is evidenced by the prevalence of cases involving the manipulation of women's needs for employment, relief, scholarships, and travel, which have contributed to a significant rise in instances of digital violence in Syria. Furthermore, war and political divisions have utilized women as pawns in their battles, employing digital violence against them as a means of discrediting and undermining the opposing political party. This includes tactics such as defamation and invasion of privacy. By exploiting customs and traditions, these groups aim to achieve political gains by targeting the women of the opposing side, thereby attempting to exclude them from both the societal and political arenas. Additionally, the persistence of security threats in Syria exacerbates women's vulnerability to violence in all its forms, including digital violence.

6. The spread of the Corona pandemic and natural disasters

During the Corona pandemic and the resulting quarantine period, there was a significant increase in the proportion of individuals with an online presence. As a result of the shift towards remote work and distance learning, more people were accessing the internet. However, this growth in access was not accompanied by corresponding advancements in culture or the implementation of regulatory measures. This lack of oversight allowed for the proliferation of digital violence against women. According to activist and journalist H. A., the Corona pandemic and the resulting quarantine have exacerbated the issue of digital violence against women. This is due to the absence of a stable state, the lack of accountability mechanisms, and the presence of individuals with the power to carry out digital violence against women without fear of prosecution or accountability. Even when victims attempt to seek justice through legal channels, they face significant obstacles.

The frequency of digital violence, exploitation, and trolling heightened in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that occurred in Syria and southern Turkey on February 6, 2023. Women who had lost their families or homes in the disaster were targeted through phishing links and deceitful correspondence, with the intention of exploiting their vulnerability by offering false promises of aid and employing other manipulative tactics.

Consequently, various interconnected social, cultural, economic, and security factors, among others, have exacerbated the incidence of digital violence against women in Syria.

The Effect of Place and Point of Control

The situation in Syria presents a unique and intricate challenge, as it is a country embroiled in conflict with multiple de facto authorities representing diverse ideological and political backgrounds. Additionally, there is a notable disparity in education, capabilities, and societal culture that is linked to geographical location and place of residence. Given this context, it was deemed essential to investigate the role of place in exacerbating the phenomenon of digital violence against women. The study participants were asked to consider whether the specific location (such as a camp, village, city, or country of asylum) had any additional impact, as well as whether the ruling authority played a role in the severity of the violence and the victims' ability to cope with it.

According to the findings of the study, 47% of participants indicated that their living situation exacerbated digital violence against women, while 47% stated that it did not, and 6% were unsure. This percentage is reasonable given the changes that Syrians have experienced during the war, including displacement, exodus, and demographic shifts. Women in displacement camps are particularly vulnerable to digital violence due to the lack of privacy, proximity of tents, and the prevalence of unemployed individuals spending long hours online. As a result, women activists and workers in the camp are more likely to be targeted with online defamation and threats. One participant attributed the digital violence she experienced to people's jealousy of her success, as well as social norms that restrict women's mobility. Another participant noted that digital violence is becoming more prevalent in camps for widowed women, where cases of extortion and exploitation are common.

Activist S. T. remarked, "Widowed women are particularly susceptible to violence due to their ubiquitous exposure to it. Several of them have confided in me their experiences of harassment, especially given the prevalence of their contact information as a result of their registration for relief and financial assistance. The situation becomes even more dire for those living in camps, as information about camp residents can easily be obtained through casual conversations within tents. The close proximity of tents to one another allows for easy eavesdropping without any effort required." The majority of these camps are located in Idlib, in the northern region of Syria, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Salvation Government, as well as in the northern and eastern suburbs of Aleppo, which are governed by the Interim Government.

Many individuals who have experienced displacement have cited the absence of social constraints as a contributing factor to the rise of digital violence. In situations where people are unfamiliar with one another and have diverse cultural practices, the likelihood of digital violence spreading increases. Furthermore, the lack of accountability and deterrent laws exacerbates this issue. One participant suggested that the lack of acceptance of different cultures and customs in the new social environment following migration and displacement can lead to an increase in digital violence. Another participant mentioned that being in an unfamiliar place can expose individuals to various problems that extend to the digital environment, with the severity of these problems varying depending on the location.

Several individuals suggested that digital violence tends to be more effective when it takes place within a confined setting, such as a village, due to the close-knit nature of the community. Consequently, if an incident of digital violence occurs, such as blackmail or defamation, there is a higher likelihood of the news spreading rapidly, thereby increasing the risk of experiencing secondary violence.

Some of them argued that if they resided in countries that uphold the rule of law and actively pursue cybercrimes, the incidence of digital violence against women may be lower compared to other locations within Syria. However, the most significant obstacle that continues to persist is the fear of Syrian refugee women in Turkey to report instances of digital violence to which they are subjected, for the fear of being

deported. This fear is rooted in the numerous cases of arbitrary deportation of Syrians from Turkey that have occurred in the past, where individuals have been forcibly repatriated following the filing of a complaint rather than being directed to Turkish security and police centers for assistance.

For the purpose of examining the impact of one's place or region of origin on the prevalence or severity of digital violence inflicted upon women, we posed the following inquiry to our sample: Does your geographical origins provide a safeguard for you or amplify the frequency and magnitude of the aggression you experienced?

The majority of participants indicated that their affiliation with a particular region intensified the digital violence they encountered. They provided explanations for this phenomenon, with some believing that it stemmed from social views of women's inferiority in the society from which they originate. Women are held responsible for any issues they face, whether fair or unfair. Others believed that coming from a conservative environment exacerbates digital violence due to society's unwillingness to accept any wrongdoing associated with women. One participant provided a summary of her experience, stating, "As a woman from the Idlib Governorate, specifically the Idlib countryside, digital violence against me increased due to the expected form and behavior of women from this region, as it is a conservative area. I do not wear the hijab and I discuss feminism and human rights, making me a constant target for abusers."

Some participants who had relocated from rural areas to urban settings reported experiencing double violence, as they were perceived to be naive, simple, and easily accessible due to the prevailing stereotype of rural women. The reasons for facing problems and being subjected to digital violence varied among the participants, as some of them hailed from the coastal region and were loyal to the Syrian regime, making them vulnerable to online attacks that accused them of working for the regime or belonging to a specific sect that was predominant in the region. One confirmed that her previous detention by the regime and her revolutionary work did not provide her with any protection from digital violence. Additionally, another participant highlighted that belonging to a clan can exacerbate digital violence against women and increase their susceptibility to such attacks.

One participant indicated, "I am unable to assess the situation with precision; however, the customs in my region mandate that others oversee my actions, regardless of the location or context, whether on social media or elsewhere. On the other hand, the intervening party exercise greater caution, as they too are bound by these customs. The nature of the issue varies based on the type of experience, the form of harassment, and their capacity as a woman to manage it, rather than their geographic origin."

A limited number of participants explained that their environment provided them with a sense of protection, while a similar number of declined to specify the rationale behind their assertion that the environment from which women originate holds no bearing on the digital violence they experience.

During our interview with the journalist activist (H.A.), she highlighted the connection between the type of environment in which a victim originates from and the environment in which they are exposed to violence. When the environment is permissible and unprotected, women and girls are vulnerable to violence in all its forms, compounded if the environment they belong to is extremist or tribal. She recounted a case of a university student who sought her help after being subjected to blackmail and threats, which occurred after her personal information was withdrawn and her life was destroyed by an individual who accessed her data through the city administration that manages the university housing for female students in a private residence. This highlights the risks associated with digital violence, which increases when women move away from their community protection space and are exposed to double violence from their original community in case of any form of violence, particularly honor-related or extortion-related violence.

The activist highlighted that university campuses do not provide complete security for female students, and there is no safeguard against any form of harassment or violence. The attacker can obtain personal information of any girl living in the residence, such as their phone numbers, residential address, family address, and national numbers, by accessing the housing supervisor in the housing unit. This is due to the prevalence of corruption in the system. Such information is then misused to target, exploit, and perpetrate violence against the victim.

To gain a better understanding of the experiences of women activists in various regions of Syria, we posed the following inquiry to our participant sample: How do you believe your experience as a female activist in the public domain varies from that of other women, particularly in terms of submitting a complaint to an official authority, based on the geographical areas where they exercise control?

The overwhelming majority of participants to this question concurred on the consistent treatment of women's grievances relating to digital violence by the relevant authorities across all areas of jurisdiction, irrespective of their orientations. A significant proportion of these participants believed that complaints would not prove beneficial, but rather, might result in negative consequences, especially in regions with stringent authorities. Unfortunately, the burden of responsibility, or part thereof, often falls on the shoulders of the victim. In the comment box, one participant shared her experience, stating, "A woman may face digital violence due to a post she uploaded on the internet, and this same post could cause her to face difficulties with the relevant authorities." Another one expressed their reluctance to file a complaint against the controlling authorities due to their involvement in civil activism, which led to disagreements with these authorities.

The manner in which the governing bodies handle women's concerns varies; however, with reference to all of them, there are no established legal frameworks with stringent sanctions for those who mistreat women. Consequently, women in diverse areas appear to have similar experiences, as indicated by the responses collected from the sample.

Several participants indicated that pursuing legal action in countries of asylum is more advantageous than doing so in Syria, despite the challenges and expenses often associated with retaining a lawyer or translator. Conversely, others reported that they face obstacles in filing complaints in the country of asylum due to their limited understanding of the relevant laws and procedures.

Certain feminist advocates may opt to temporarily deactivate their social media accounts and subsequently reappear under a pseudonymous identity, which is deemed more prudent than pursuing legal recourse. One of the participants stated, "The process of filing a complaint is intricate, and I have discovered that it is preferable for the victim to vanish from public view for an extended period before resurfacing, but with new identifiers and accounts, while simultaneously exercising caution in all of her endeavors."

A number of participants indicated that their experience as activists differs from that of other women, as they are able to rely on advocacy and community support from other activists in cases of digital violence to which they are exposed, depending on the woman's individual circumstances and the situation in her region. Some participants suggested that, as activists, they are better equipped to secure support and advocacy than other women who are still under parental or partner guardianship, or who reside in societies governed by unsupportive customs, traditions, and de facto authorities.

The findings from a diverse sample indicate that the experiences of women activists vary based on political, social, and cultural factors in different regions. The nature of digital violence and its associated reactions and challenges depend on the political context of each region. Women activists may face unique

obstacles that stem from limitations on freedom of expression, ongoing conflicts, and cultural norms and traditions that shape societal attitudes towards women's participation in public affairs and the challenges they confront.

The provision of legal, psychological, and social services and support can have an impact on a woman's ability to file a formal complaint regarding digital violence. Furthermore, the laws and institutions responsible for addressing violence against women can vary across regions, which can influence the procedures available to women for filing complaints. The level of awareness regarding digital violence issues and the ability to communicate effectively with official authorities can also affect a woman's experience in dealing with this problem.

The individual experiences of Syrian women activists are subject to diverse influences, including the factors previously mentioned and others. Thus, it is crucial to consider the local context and provide tailored support in order to empower them to effectively manage their experiences.

Responses and Consequences of Digital Violence

To gain a better understanding of how Syrian women respond to different types of digital violence, they were asked in detail about their responses to each type of violence. The participants were presented with various cases of digital violence and were asked to select one or more options for their reaction to each form of violence.

The analysis shows that the most common response to unwanted photos or repeated contact from someone they did not want to communicate with was to block the person, at a rate of 37%. Additionally, taking technical precautions for their account was also a common response, at a rate of 38% in the case of internet spying or monitoring, and 33% in the case of hacking devices or accounts. The response of neglect also appeared to increase when the actions were related to sending unwanted pictures or contact from people who did not want to communicate, as well as when the actions involved cursing, inciting, publishing personal information, blackmail, and other actions.

The act of ignoring or overlooking this kind of violence has numerous implications, one of which is the fear of women engaging in online disputes, as they are aware that they will not receive any form of support from society, the legal system, or other sources. During the course of the study, some participants elaborated on their decision to ignore it as a response, with one stating, "If there is a direct response to such violence, the issue often gains attention and becomes a trending topic and rumors begin to circulate. Therefore, we frequently ignore it." Another participant shared her perspective, "The perpetrator derives pleasure and a sense of victory from knowing that he has made me feel afraid and threatened. This feeling motivates him to continue his malicious behavior. However, when I choose to ignore him, I deprive him of this satisfaction and take away from him the power and authority he believes he possesses, particularly in countries where electronic crimes are not rigorously prosecuted."

Other women agreed with this interpretation, contending that ignoring violence is a form of control, while responding conveys a sense of fear to the perpetrator, which is what he desires. In the case of neglect, he can simply turn away from it by ignoring it. One wrote, "I believe that dealing with this type of experience generates negative feelings in me and makes me anxious, so I block and ignore. I think it is an appropriate option for me, and it may not be appropriate for others because I have supportive people within the family who always support me in these situations. However, it may not be a good option for another girl because sometimes families are not supportive." There were numerous responses that favored ignoring, as one participant wrote, "Opening a space to talk to the harassing person gives him an opportunity to manipulate the situation or feel victorious, so I prefer to ignore him."

On the other hand, another participant preferred not to ignore it because it exacerbates the problem, stating, "In my opinion, ignoring violence is wrong because it is possible that the abusive person has a long patience and continues to do harm. Therefore, in my opinion, it should be reported or the help of a person with more experience should be sought."

In contrast, our research indicates that the proportion of individuals who report incidents of digital violence to the platform where it occurs varies between 10% and 15%, depending on the nature of the harm. The low rates highlight the pressing need to enhance women's understanding of reporting mechanisms and reduce prevalent violent practices. Although the assessment of knowledge about reporting procedures indicates greater awareness, violence being underreported is attributed to a lack of trust in the platform, or as previously discussed, the belief that disregarding the issue is the most effective solution. This normalization of digital violence, particularly in the form of insults, insults, and sexual innuendos, perpetuates the problem.

This is supported by the fact that a higher proportion of women report serious incidents, such as threats of physical harm, rape, or death, and incidents of extortion to official authorities, reaching 16%. Despite this increase, women express their lack of confidence in the laws and ruling authorities, as previously mentioned. Some participants commented on this issue, with one stating, "The controlling authorities are often unable to provide assistance, especially when the perpetrator is anonymous." Another shared, "There is no legal system I can turn to if I experience violence." One participant briefly described her experience, "When I received a threat to burn down my workplace, I filed a complaint with the authority in charge, but received no response or follow-ups or any procedures."

It is worth noting that all of the participants were subjected to insults or abuse due to their gender, which underscores the prevalence of digital violence in Syria and the perpetrators' sense of impunity when using social media platforms to curse or abuse others without fear of consequences.

After examining the expected reactions and responses of women to incidents of digital violence, we posed a question: Would your reaction have been different if you had known the abuser or perpetrator?

The response rate for "yes" was higher, at 52%, while the response rate for "no" was very low, at 10%, and 24% were neutral, and 15% preferred not to answer. These percentages suggest that knowing the abuser can help the victim identify strategies and resources to reduce the extent of violence through mediation, reporting to authorities, and so on. The participants provided explanations for their affirmative answers through the comment box. The responses generally indicated that the problem could be resolved if the offender was known. For instance, one participant wrote, "I would have used that proof and complained to the community leaders if the authorities in charge couldn't help me." A second female contributor posited that the situation would become less complicated if she were to ascertain the identity of the attacker. Another individual opined, "Upon gaining knowledge of the abuser, I shall inform the supportive individuals and take appropriate action to cease his malicious behavior. Furthermore, if I am familiar with him, I shall caution others against him." Yet another female participant emphasized, "When we are aware of the perpetrator's identity, we possess greater opportunities for holding them accountable or reevaluating their punishment."

The reactions of women towards learning about their abuser vary depending on several factors. Some women might choose to remain silent or tolerate the situation due to social pressures or fear of potential threats and complications. On the other hand, some participants have indicated that social support, such as assistance from friends, family, and community, significantly influences how women cope with digital violence. It is worth noting that in many regions of Syria, people often resort to local notables or individuals to resolve issues.

It must be highlighted that the challenge of identifying and holding digital abusers accountable is often compounded by the nature of online violence, including the use of fake names and accounts, as well as communication via anonymous numbers generated by certain applications. As previously discussed, this can make it difficult to trace the abuser or violator and can exacerbate the severity of digital violence directed against women in Syria. Compounding this issue is the lack of effective mechanisms for reporting and investigating such cases, further complicating efforts to hold the abuser accountable.

The consequences of digital violence extend to women in multiple dimensions, leading us to inquire about the influence of such violence on the experiences of the sample individuals participating in our study. Figure 4, below, shows the sample responses.

Figure 4: Impacts of digital violence reported by participants
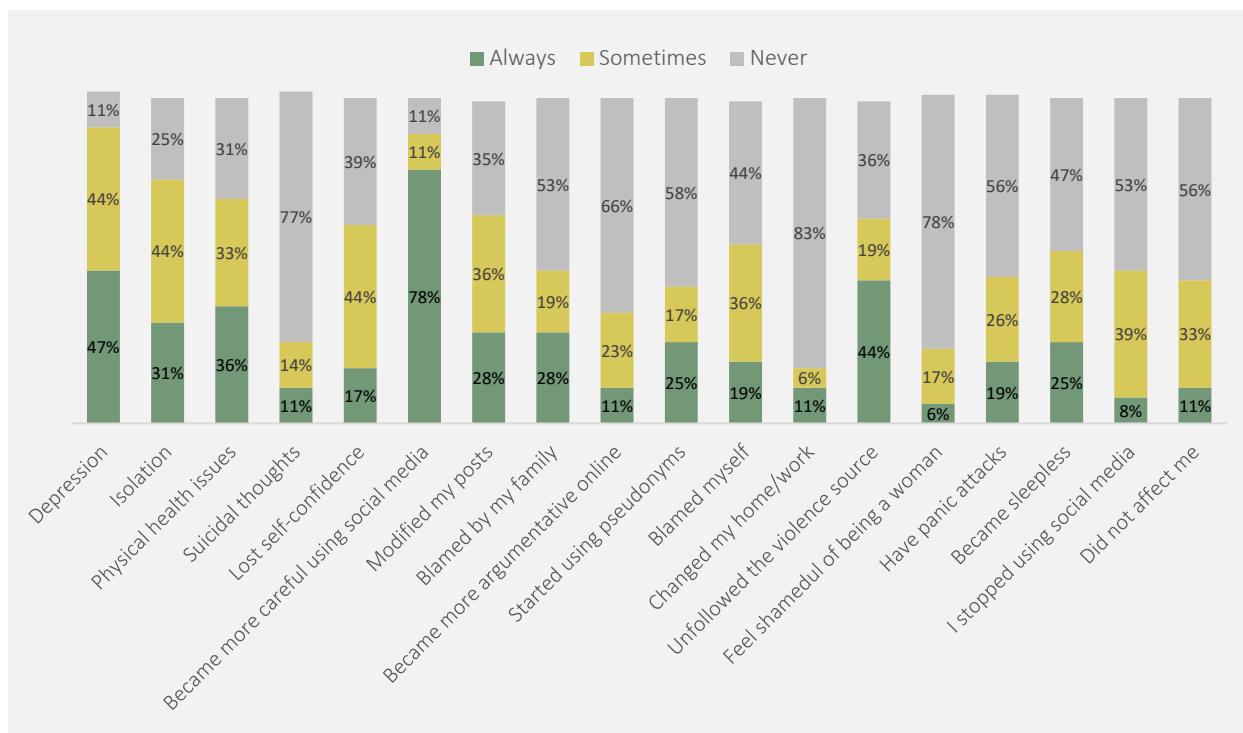
In our observations, the percentage of female participants who entertained thoughts of suicide, which is one of the most severe consequences of digital violence, stands at 23%. These figures are particularly concerning when incorporated into the overall statistics. During our interview with an activist and humanitarian worker operating in the camps of northern Syria (S. T.), she shared that she had encountered five instances of women attempting suicide as a result of the digital violence they experienced during her year-long tenure as a case manager at a humanitarian organization in the region. Notably, the majority of these cases involved displaced women residing in the camps, which prompted the organization to intensify digital awareness sessions. However, these efforts were unfortunately suspended due to a lack of support.

Additionally, 17% of participants reported relocating to a different place of residence or employment, reflecting the heightened risk they faced as a result of their experience with digital violence. A significant proportion of participants, approximately 89%, indicated that they suffered from depression following their exposure to digital violence. Moreover, 75% reported feeling more isolated, while 56% began to blame themselves for their experiences. Furthermore, 61% experienced a loss of confidence in themselves, others, or the content they produced. Lastly, it is noteworthy that 53% of the participants reported experiencing difficulty sleeping.

It is observed that 64% of the participants ceased to follow the channel through which the violence was perpetrated and 67% modified their mode of expression. Furthermore, 42% chose to use a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and express their views more freely without fear of repercussions from family and society, as they remain an unknown entity.

The findings indicate that women have become increasingly cautious in using social media platforms, with a staggering 89% of them adopting this approach following instances of digital violence.

The remaining percentages demonstrated the profound and serious consequences of digital violence on Syrian women, particularly during the years of conflict and instability that they endure, as well as in the face of a patriarchal, authoritarian society that exacerbates the practices of digital violence against women.

Upon examining the comments provided by the participants, instances of psychological disorders such as anxiety, fear, isolation, and sleep problems were revealed, which led to the need for medication. Additionally, social problems with family and relatives were reported, where the participants were subjected to blame and domestic violence. Furthermore, work-related problems were experienced, with some participants losing job opportunities or being forced to leave their place of employment.

The journalist and activist, H.A., argued that although women activists may be robust, influential, and capable of eliciting change, they are still susceptible to the psychological ramifications of violence. The constant perception of oneself as a potential victim can be a debilitating feeling, weighing heavily on a woman's mind and hindering her accomplishments.

Support and Possible Solutions

The necessity of addressing digital violence against women calls for a multifaceted approach encompassing social, legal, psychological, and technical support. In light of this, we sought to gauge the extent of the participants' familiarity with their rights and the resources available to them for confronting the digital violence they face. Our findings revealed that the majority of participants possess limited knowledge about the available services for addressing digital violence, with some having no knowledge at all. Only a small proportion of participants reported possessing knowledge of these services and utilizing them. Figure 5 below illustrates the response rates to the questions posed.

Figure 5: Participants' knowledge of rights/resources to confront digital violence
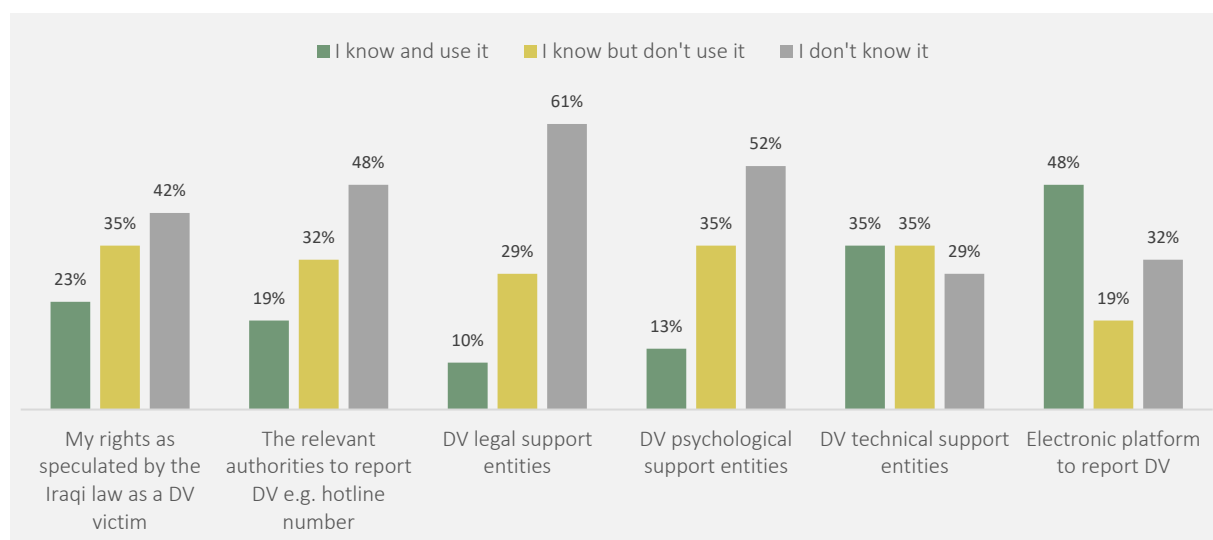
It has been noted that a significant portion of the participants are unaware of their rights under the law as victims of cybercrime, as well as the existence of official bodies responsible for reporting digital violence, and the availability of legal or psychological support for victims. Although the level of awareness regarding technical support services and reporting mechanisms on social media platforms has improved, there is still a considerable lack of knowledge in these areas. Specifically, only 35.48% of participants were aware of the technical services available to support victims of digital violence, while 35.48% were aware of the reporting mechanisms on social media platforms. Furthermore, only 48.39% of participants were aware of the option to report incidents on social media platforms, and 19.35% were aware of this service but did not use it. In terms of psychological services, 12.90% of female participants reported using them, while 35.48% were aware of their availability but did not use them. The reasons for this lack of awareness and utilization

of legal, psychological, and technical services among women in Syria are numerous, as indicated by the responses of the sample group in the comments section.

The findings suggest that a significant number of participants were not aware of the services available to them due to a lack of awareness about women's rights and the services provided. Additionally, political and economic conditions in Syria make it difficult for some individuals to access these services, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, fear of retaliation or further violence, as well as cultural and social factors, may prevent women from seeking help. In some cases, participants outside of Syria face limitations in accessing government services and legal assistance due to fear of forced deportation.

Due to the precarious state of affairs in Syria, which encompasses all areas under control, the individual and society are directly impacted. In light of this, we posed a question to the women participating in the questionnaire, asking if they believed that filing a complaint with an official body in their region was a secure process for women, or if they felt that doing so could expose them to violence and additional pressure. Of the 30 women who responded, 18 indicated that the procedure was unsafe, 6 stated that it was secure, while 6 others expressed a mixed view, dependent on the circumstances. Upon analyzing the responses based on the feedback provided by the participants, we uncovered multiple reasons that contribute to the unsafe nature of filing a complaint with an official body. These include fear of stigma, societal repercussions, and the possibility of additional violence, as well as a lack of trust in the ruling authorities. A significant number of participants expressed a lack of faith in the ruling authorities, citing their propensity for violence and the futility of lodging complaints with them. Moreover, some participants revealed that they were refugees in Turkey and faced discriminatory treatment when attempting to file a complaint, due to the complexities of asylum files and Turkish laws governing refugees, compounded by recent racist campaigns targeting refugees. Furthermore, some participants believed that existing laws were discriminatory, placing the victim under additional blame and exposing them to further violence. The study revealed that among the participants who perceived the process as secure, some specified that the destination of the complaint should be kept confidential to ensure safety, while others considered it safe due to the protective security measures implemented by the asylum countries in which they reside.

Regarding those who indicated that the process was sometimes safe and sometimes unsafe, some believed that the issue was contingent upon the size of the abused individual, their dominance, and the strength of their relationship, along with the party to whom the complaint would be addressed. Some parties may provide assistance, while others could exacerbate the violence if the woman had a previous relationship with the abuser, this might be due to the governing laws play a role in this regard.

Overall, most women do not seek assistance from official authorities in the event of digital violence or hesitate before doing so.

When inquiring about the participants' experience with receiving or requesting support from others in cases of digital violence, it was found that the highest percentage of women received assistance from their family members, followed by a good percentage and less than the first percentage from male and female friends. A smaller percentage of specialists in digital security and family men provided support, with the latter being equal to the percentage of female participants who required assistance but were unsure where to find it, as shown Figure 6. We also note that no support was received from legal or psychological bodies or the platforms where the violence occurred, and only 3.23% received support from official bodies after resorting to them. In contrast, we find that the highest response rate from the sample confirmed not receiving support from official bodies.

Figure 6: Where participants receive support in cases of digital violence
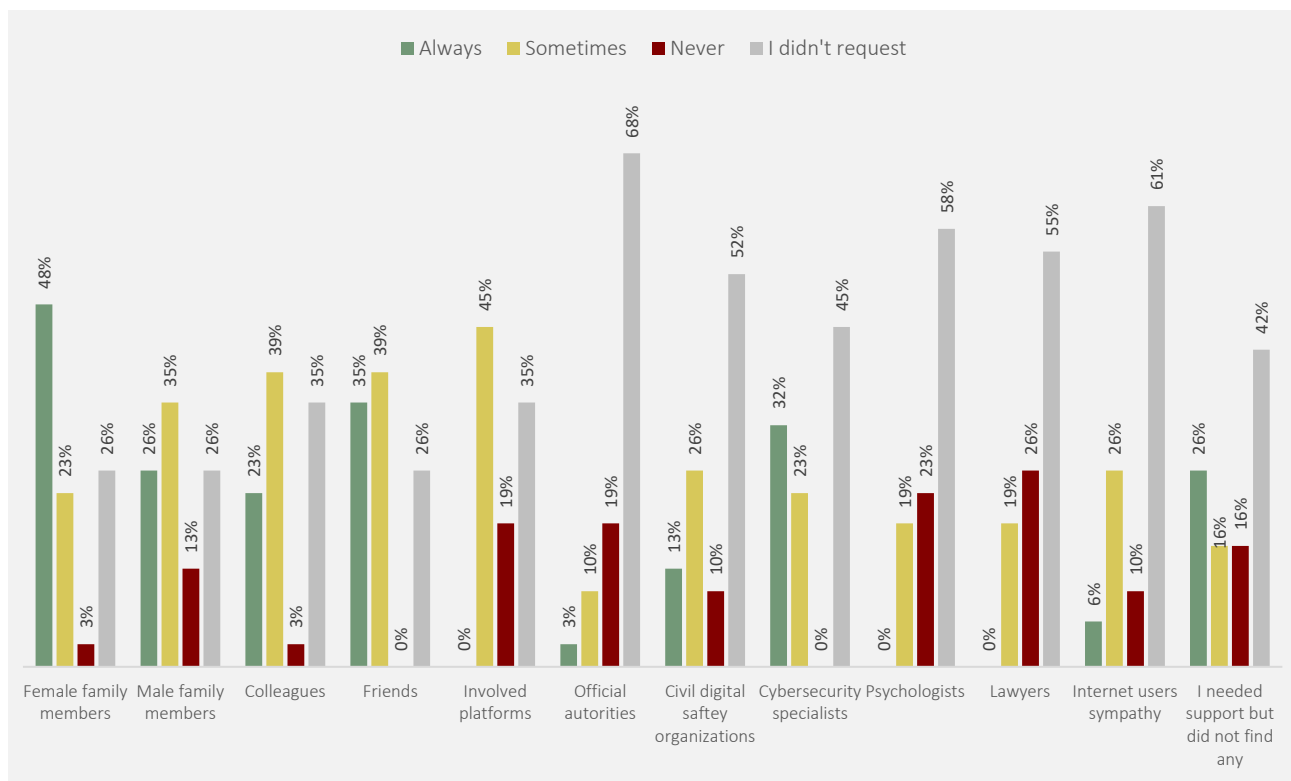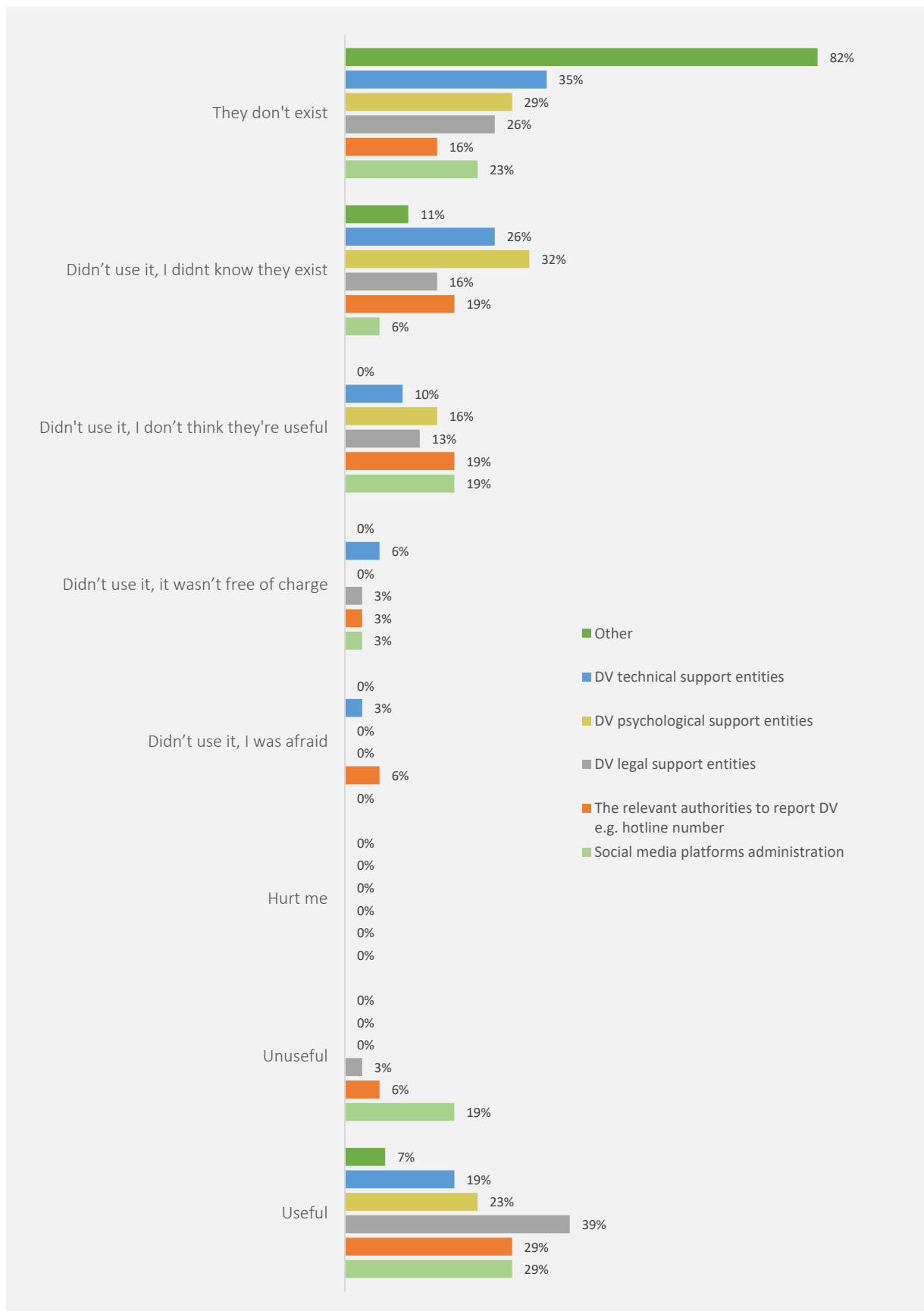

The findings from the previous graph reveal an accurate portrayal of women's relationships with potential sources of support. Our research indicates that women in the participant group are more likely to seek and receive support from their families due to several factors, including trust and emotional support. Families often serve as a reliable source of emotional, social, and psychological support for women, and they may feel comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings with their female relatives because of a sense of safety, confidentiality, and a deeper understanding of their situation. Furthermore, female solidarity and a shared history of similar experiences may contribute to a stronger bond between women within the family unit. Ultimately, the reliance on familial support is often a typical reaction in numerous situations.

It appears that, notably, women tend to receive greater support from friends and girlfriends than from family members in the event of digital violence. This may be due to societal norms that do not accept women being exposed to such violence, as well as friends' deeper understanding and trust in women's issues. Additionally, friends may be more present in social environments where women face challenges.

The reliance on support from family or friends varies among women depending on their personal circumstances and social relationships. Some participants reported difficulties in accessing support, lack of knowledge, and psychological impact when recalling an incident of digital violence. Others focused on seeking support only from a narrow social circle, such as family, and distrusted other parties or people. Some women felt that resorting to the judiciary or digital security specialists was necessary.

Providing support and assistance to women who have experienced digital violence is crucial and cannot be ignored or postponed. Women must have multiple options for seeking help, including psychological, legal, and technical guidance. To assess women's experiences in seeking assistance, we asked the participating sample to evaluate support from various parties, such as social media platform management, official authorities combating digital crime, and support agencies. The results are illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Participants' evaluaton of support services from platforms, digital crime authorities, support agencies, etc.

- Other
- DV technical support entities
- DV psychological support entities
- DV legal support entities
- The relevant authorities to report DV e.g. hotline number
- Social media platforms administration

As it has been noted, the most frequently utilized support agencies among participants are technical support agencies for victims of digital violence, with a rate of 38.71%, followed closely by official agencies responsible for combating digital crime and managing social media platforms, at a rate of 29.03%. However, some participants avoided seeking support from official and legal authorities due to fear, as previously discussed regarding the multiple controlling parties in Syria and their varying orientations, which can lead to hesitation or lack of trust in seeking assistance from these sources. In fact, 19.35% of participants did not request support from these authorities, while 35.48% reported that such support facilities were not available to them, and 25.81% did not utilize them due to lack of knowledge. Furthermore, it appears that a significant proportion of the participants did not seek support from psychological support agencies because they were unaware of their existence, at a rate of 32.26%. This highlights the need for increased efforts by humanitarian organizations and other agencies working in the field of psychological support in Syria to raise awareness and provide information on available services.

The proportion of the participants who reported unhelpful experiences with managing social media platforms was 19.35%, and an equal percentage did not use these platforms due to lack of confidence in their effectiveness. This perception is rooted in several reasons, as indicated by the participants, including the ineffective response to reports of digital violence on social media platforms. Some participants feel that reporting such cases does not lead to effective intervention or solution to their problems. Moreover, fear of retaliation from the aggressor if they report and close their accounts further exacerbates the situation, leading to increased tension and anxiety.

However, a significant reason for the ineffectiveness of social media platforms in addressing digital violence against women is the lack of sufficient awareness among some women of the available options for seeking help on these platforms. Nonetheless, one participant shared a positive experience, saying that "After I was exposed to electronic violence, I became a trusted partner on Facebook, and this helped me a lot to stop the violence against me and other women."

The participants also indicated that they received support at an acceptable rate from entities working in the field of digital security. These entities are viewed as the only solution to the problem, as described by one of the participants. Additionally, others praised the services provided by the Salamatech team working inside Syria in the field of digital security and safety and reported receiving support from the team on multiple occasions.

The Salamatech team offers immediate technical support and guidance by evaluating the digital hazards and dangers that individuals and institutions encounter when using electronic equipment and offering appropriate recommendations to mitigate these risks. This service is provided without any form of discrimination based on political, religious, ethnic, or sexual orientation.[26]

With regards to the measures that can be helpful in safeguarding women online, according to the feedback from the participants, which is illustrated in Figure 8, below.

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[26] About SalamaTech

Figure 8: How helpful are various measures to safeguard women online?
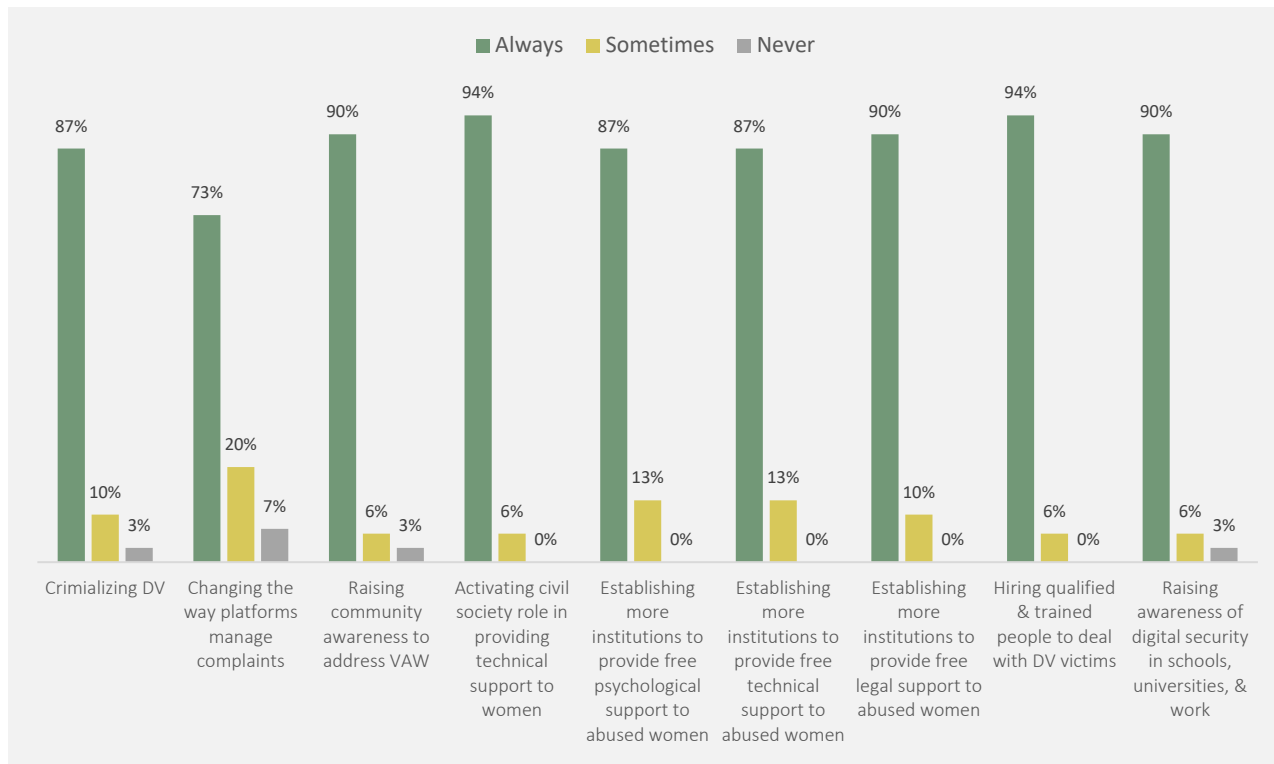
From the results of the response, it is evident that the sample places a high priority on activating the role of civil society in providing technical support to women. This demonstrates the significant need for community support that fosters exchange and collaboration with women, enhances the overall environment for combating digital violence, and encourages dialogue and the sharing of experiences. Technical support can help improve women's safety online and reduce their risk of exposure to digital violence. Additionally, an equal percentage of participants emphasized the importance of providing training to those who receive complaints in relevant institutions to address issues of digital violence. This underscores the urgent need for the law to protect women from digital violence. Providing training and technical support to those who receive complaints in relevant institutions can increase the effectiveness of efforts to combat digital violence and enhance legal protection for women.

In a high and equal percentage, participants also expressed a desire to raise awareness about digital security in school curricula and university programs, as well as to provide training in the field of public and private work. This includes creating community awareness to eradicate the culture of violence against women and encouraging families to support women in speaking out and seeking help. Furthermore, the participants called for the establishment of more institutions that provide free legal support to abused women.

There are multiple reasons why women are interested in developing digital security awareness plans within educational institutions and in the public and private sectors, including preventing digital violence and increasing awareness, which enables them to be more vigilant about potential dangers and more confident in their online activities. Additionally, such initiatives aim to enhance necessary skills for addressing digital challenges and ensuring safe technology use. The promotion of gender equality and equal employment opportunities in both work and education is another positive consequence of this knowledge, as well as reducing digital crimes and enhancing digital safety for all members of society.

Furthermore, the need for protection and the intolerance of violence against women were the primary motivations for women to focus on community awareness campaigns to reduce violence against women, encourage families to support women, and change cultural beliefs that promote such violence. The goal is to promote a culture of respect, equality, and solidarity among members of society, as well as to provide support to women who experience violence. By strengthening the family's role in protecting and supporting women, healthy and strong families can be built, which in turn contributes to strengthening social ties.

In general, these demands aim to establish a society that unequivocally rejects violence against women and actively promotes mutual respect and equality between the sexes. Several factors have led to the growing need for institutions that offer free legal assistance to abused women. These can be summarized as the widespread poverty among the Syrian population due to the ongoing conflict, as the availability of free legal services would enhance the fairness of the legal system and ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities to defend their rights. This would also contribute to reducing violence and protecting women from further harm. Additionally, it would raise women's awareness of their rights and the available options for protecting themselves, encouraging the reporting of any violence directed towards them.

Case Studies

Below are reviews of some of these cases the current study examined.

A Female Journalist's Story

A prominent female journalist operating within the territories governed by the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria reportedly stated:

As a result of my occupational involvement in journalism and civil society, I am a member of numerous groups and pages on social media platforms. On a daily basis, I am presented with numerous opportunities to access research studies, reports, and other materials through links provided by various sources. Regrettably, a significant proportion of these links are fraudulent and malicious in nature, posing a threat to the integrity of digital information.

In addition to my professional pursuits, I also experienced personal exposure to violence. Specifically, a colleague talked to me about problems he was going through with his girlfriend, and I used to advise him when I could. He tried to get closer to me and expressed his romantic interest and attempted to coerce me into a sexual relationship. As a result of my refusal, he resorted to hacking my laptop and monitoring my digital activities, ultimately using the information he obtained to threaten me with severe consequences if I did not comply with his demands.

Fearing for my safety, I was compelled to carry a firearm and restrict my movements. At the time, I attributed these threats to the precarious security situation in the region, which was exacerbated by the Syrian regime's numerous violations of human rights. As a journalist, I had documented many of these violations through my professional work, which placed me at risk of retaliation. Unfortunately, I was unaware that my colleague was the source of the threats I faced. Because I was subjected to a digital attack by Syrian regime forces, which has persisted until the present. This attack included threats of arrest that were communicated to me via the internet.

As a result of this incident with my colleague, I had to leave my job and stay at home for over six months in a state of doubts about everyone around me. During this time, I was isolated from others and suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder, which was exacerbated by my inability to seek help from a psychiatrist due to the social conditions. The mere thought of seeking medical assistance from a local doctor would result in the news spreading, which I wanted to avoid in order to prevent any further problems. Even now, I feel the same fear whenever I recall the incident.

After conducting extensive self-review and consulting with technical experts and digital security specialists, I was able to identify the error and vulnerability that enabled the unauthorized access to my device. I realized that I had temporarily left my office unattended, and my computer was left open, providing an opportunity for a colleague to execute the hack. Upon confronting him, he admitted to the act, acknowledging my pressure to confess. Through my acquaintances, I filed a complaint with his new employer, who happened to be someone involved in the Autonomous Administration governing the region, as the attacker had moved to a different location after I left the company. The employer subsequently summoned the individual, who confessed to the crime and was compelled to apologize for his actions. The threat and blackmail subsequently ceased following this incident.

Story of a Political Activist

A female political activist, who is also a journalist Ruba Habboush, who served as the vice president of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, stated:

During my time in Turkey, I encountered significant levels of targeted violence, incitement, and defamation on social media platforms. This challenge is particularly prevalent among women engaged in public affairs and politics, as we are frequently subjected to digital violence, and some have been compelled to leave their professions as a result.

Personally, I consider social media to be an unsafe environment for women, and I have consequently reduced my presence on these platforms for over a year. I only access them occasionally to browse the news, in order to avoid exposure to violence, incitement, defamation, or hate speech. As a result, I have refrained from expressing myself, posting, or participating on social media platforms. Instead, I have opted to appear on traditional media outlets, such as radio or television, as these media are subject to greater regulatory oversight, particularly with regard to expression. In contrast, social media platforms lack mechanisms to control discussions and restrict violence, despite their stated policies and controls designed to limit hate speech.

Due to the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes in the world, women are frequently targeted with immoral charges or judgments based on their appearance or dress. This unfortunate reality must be acknowledged. As a personal experience, I faced significant digital violence as a result of my political activities, which were compounded by the frustration and disappointment felt by many people after 12 years of revolution. While I accept criticism as part of my role in a decision-making position, I was also subjected to abusive behavior that had no connection to constructive criticism, such as immoral speech, insults, and baseless judgments based solely on my gender or appearance. It is important to note that my male colleagues in politics have also faced digital violence, but in a different form and without the added dimension of being targeted for their appearance.

Women who are active on the internet are particularly vulnerable to digital violence, and the severity of this violence tends to increase when they are activists. In my own case, I was subjected to digital violence for more than seven years, including harassment, defamation, abuse, and harm. In one instance, my

Facebook account was closed due to a report that failed to hack it. I also continually face attempts to hack my WhatsApp account. While I have developed a psychological resilience to this kind of abuse, I am nevertheless saddened by the state of affairs that we have reached.

I have recently been subjected to digital violence by a well-known cartoonist who posted derogatory drawings about my appearance and physique on his personal Facebook page. Despite our political differences, many male and female activists expressed their support for me and condemned the act. The solidarity shown by feminist women through the hashtag #In-solidarity-with-ruba-haboush was particularly significant. Unfortunately, digital violence is a pervasive problem that often divides societies into two groups: those who spread it and those who resist it. Even with laws in place to regulate such behavior, the prevalence of digital violence remains a challenge.

In my case, I experienced continuous and unrelenting digital violence, with the intensity escalating during periods of increased work, activity, or participation in women's workshops. It is my belief that my efforts to empower women made me a target for such attacks. Regrettably, the more I work, the more violence I encounter, despite the expectation that a platform like mine would foster support and collaboration.

I frequently encounter violence directed at me by individuals who use fictitious names and communicate with me through fake numbers, sending immoral messages, pictures, and videos. It is possible that the Syrian regime may be involved in this, given my position within the ranks of the opposition.

I was exposed to this violence more frequently through Facebook, and there are media outlets affiliated with political parties that participate in this behavior. Unfortunately, in my current circumstances, there is no recourse through legal channels.

A Woman Leader and Activist

Ghalia Rahhal, an activist and recipient of the Women Champion of Confidence 2015 award from Reuters, and founder of the Mazaya Women's Organization in northern Syria, stated:

Digital violence against me has not stopped since my engagement in civil activism in 2013. This violence never stopped not even for day, through sending threatening private messages and negative comments on the Facebook page of the Mazaya Women's Centers, which I established at the outset of the revolutionary movement in Syria. Additionally, there have been instances of defamatory posts, blackmail, and impersonation, involving the creation of Facebook pages in my name and the posting of pornographic clips and images, and so on. This matter has even extended to include my family members, with graphic video clips of my daughter, who had not entered Syria for seven years, being published, as well as private clips of me receiving my children. The violence has also been directed at my attire.

The frequency of digital violence increases at specific times that coincide with specific events and activities. Recently, a digital campaign against me was launched in conjunction with my participation in the "Civilian" conference, of which I was a founding member. This conference brings together 170 civil society organizations from all Syrian regions, with the aim of demanding the political rights of Syrian civil society, as we are currently being denied these rights as organizations and as individuals.

There are parties that work to thwart these demands and dissuade women activists from their positions, using the easiest means available to them, which is to attack our honor.

Additionally, during political training sessions, we were also subjected to digital attacks. Anyone can review these posts and observe the level of violence in the comments, which in many cases are from fake

accounts. I believe that these are organized campaigns, and that there is a single party or individual who manages multiple accounts and is responsible for this type of activity.

Digital violence against women's organizations often intensifies following attacks by religious leaders, aimed at inciting civil society against feminist and women's political endeavors. On occasion, men affiliated with humanitarian organizations also engage in digital violence, and regrettably, it can be asserted that they are intellectuals, depending on their political party affiliations.

I have personally taken action to halt digital violence against a woman, reporting the perpetrator to the management of the humanitarian organization in which he was employed, resulting in his dismissal. Subsequently, I faced electronic attacks, continuous threats, insults, and other forms of harassment from him.

The consequences of violence against women are significant and exacerbates when their protection sources and occupational position are weak or absent. Some women have been compelled to leave their jobs, others have retreated from their professional life to safeguard themselves, while others have made more cautious returns, such as altering their names or relocating to another place of residence.

From the cases presented above, it is evident that there is a consensus on several key points. In all three cases, it was observed that the incidence of digital violence increased concurrently with heightened levels of journalistic, humanitarian, or political activity. Furthermore, the majority of the perpetrators remain unknown and employ fake accounts in a systematic manner. Additionally, in two of the three cases, digital violence was rooted in the individual's physical appearance, which is indicative of gender-based discrimination. The findings align with the outcomes of the questionnaire provided by the participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to investigate the dimensions, consequences, and potential solutions to digital violence against women in Syria, while taking into account the political and social context, as well as differences based on location, authority, and the legal and institutional framework. Our findings reveal that although digital technology and social media are an integral part of daily life for many Syrian segments, including displaced women, they have also provided an opportunity for the perpetuation of digital violence, particularly in light of the ongoing war, the absence of the state and protection, and prevalent gender discrimination.

The study found that 6 out of every 10 Syrian women have experienced digital violence, often experiencing multiple forms of it. Digital violence against women is linked to their activism, with Syrian activists facing organized campaigns of violence that transcend geographical boundaries, in addition to other types of violence they experience in the digital space because of their gender. Our research also revealed that there is a specificity of place and power, with half of the sample reporting that their residential environment (village, city, camp) or political environment (*de facto* political authority) has a direct impact on the violence they face. This is particularly evident among displaced women and camp residents, who are primarily targeted by those they rely on for protection, such as security authorities and humanitarian aid workers.

The study also revealed that almost one-fourth of the female participants entertained thoughts of suicide, and 17% were compelled to vacate their workplace or residence and alter their addresses, either temporarily or permanently, which serves as a somber reminder of the pernicious effects of digital violence and its repercussions. By examining supporting and human rights institutions and proffering potential solutions, the study presented a series of measures culled from both the sample and the experts

interviewed for this research. The following constitute the most salient recommendations for mitigating and addressing digital violence against women in Syria:

- It is imperative for the various authorities to enforce laws that safeguard women from intricate forms of violence, especially digital violence and its repercussions on the ground. Additionally, measures must be taken to protect women, especially those who are vulnerable, until the emergence of a conducive context that allows for the establishment of effective laws capable of shielding women from digital violence.

- Monitoring individuals responsible for humanitarian operations and those involved in the broader humanitarian environment, while concurrently providing them with training to effectively respond to gender-based issues. Additionally, implementing deterrent measures to penalize any individual who exploits their position for blackmail or harm. Furthermore, coordinating and conducting awareness sessions in collaboration with organizations that possess the ability to access difficult-to-reach locations, such as camps, in order to facilitate the dissemination of information to all communities. This includes working to support the presence of digital safety teams within each camp.

- Fostering the education and empowerment of women in the realm of digital safety, while also protecting them from online threats. This is achieved by supporting digital safety teams that focus on raising awareness among women and responding swiftly to cases of violence to which they may be subjected. Moreover, educating women on digital safety practices, such as securing accounts, utilizing basic versions of applications, paying attention to application permissions, and understanding reporting methods on social media platforms.

- Undertaking efforts to support digital platforms and social media in their responsibility towards Syrian women involves consistently publishing content on various social media platforms that discuss digital safety. This content should not be limited to those who actively seek it out, but rather should be widely accessible. The aim is to encourage the safe use of technology and provide tools to protect digital privacy. Additionally, partnering with civil society can help put pressure on platforms to establish more responsive mechanisms for addressing cases of digital violence on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. It is also important to advocate for increased protection measures.

- Promoting awareness of women's right to privacy on social media, challenging traditional gender roles, and fostering community support for women in order to prevent mental health issues and protect against blackmail.

- Undertaking extensive psychological, technical, and legal support services by humanitarian organizations to assist victims in coping with the aftermath of digital violence, while simultaneously providing free legal services in order to alleviate the financial burden often associated with hiring a lawyer, which may otherwise deter victims from seeking justice through formal complaints.

This study is recognized as the initial step in comprehending the context and dimensions of digital violence against women in Syria and formulating solutions to overcome it. Despite the wealth of information gathered through a sophisticated research methodology and the researcher's extensive experience in this field, there are several related contexts and topics that could enrich knowledge in this area and be explored in future research. For instance, it is recommended to examine digital violence in camps, particularly widows' camps, as they are often targeted by digitally violent individuals. Additionally, the economic aspect of digital violence in Syria could be studied in greater detail. The study revealed that the ideological background of the ruling authority plays a role in either perpetuating or addressing digital violence against women, but further investigation in this area is necessary. It would also be informative to conduct a follow-up study once some degree of relative peace and stability has been achieved in Syria and compare the findings with those of this study.

These recommendations for future research represent a qualitative enhancement and an opportunity to delve deeper into this phenomenon, ultimately bridging the substantial knowledge gap that currently exists in this area.