Digital Violence Against Women in Historical Palestine

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Acknowledgment

About the author

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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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Executive Summary

This study aimed to examine the nature and consequences of digital violence experienced by Palestinian women on the internet, with a particular focus on the interplay between violence and social and cultural factors in a complex colonial context. The research also sought to dismantle the intersections of digital violence and identify the obstacles that impede Palestinian women's ability to effectively confront this violence. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify the factors that make Palestinian women more vulnerable to digital attacks by individuals, groups, or organized entities, given the multiple political authorities and fragmentation of the Palestinian presence.

This research responds to a knowledge gap in the understanding of digital violence and its impact on women, particularly in the context of historic Palestine, which encompasses three distinct authorities: the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the Israeli government within Palestine and Jerusalem, and the Gaza strip government.

Based on a mixed methodology of desk research, quantitative questionnaires, comprising 91 forms, and ten in-depth descriptive interviews, taking into account the geographical diversity of the target group in the study. It was concluded that more than half of the sample, amounting to 62% of the participants, admitted to having experienced violence due to being women. The study also considered the intersections of participants' activities and identities, such as political affiliation and geographical location. The results indicated that most instances of violence occurred on the Facebook platform, followed by WhatsApp and Instagram. The descriptive answers also highlighted the significance of the geographical factor in the Palestinian context, which may either exacerbate or reduce violence depending on the specific location. The spatial factor was found to be related to the larger geographical location, such as the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the territories of 1948. Additionally, the study revealed that the classification of the place where women live, such as camps, villages, and cities, also plays a role in the prevalence of violence. Moreover, 65% of the participants in the survey concurred with the transfer of violence from the digital world to the real world and vice versa. This transfer is often accompanied by persistent feelings of anxiety and fear, which are exacerbated by the proliferation of digital platforms and spaces where violence can occur.

The most common form of violence experienced by women is verbal abuse, insults, and the use of masculine expressions or words that belittle women. This is linked to the prevalence of a fertile environment for hate speech, which is reinforced by social, economic, and political factors. Women, particularly those who are marginalized, are frequently exposed to this speech.

The violence experienced by Palestinian women in the digital space is not disconnected from the violence they encounter in their daily lives. As a result, the ongoing cycle of violence against women affects their choices, security, and overall sense of well-being. The psychological and social effects of the continuation or escalation of violence can be severe and sometimes invisible, leading women to withdraw from public spaces and discontinue their public activities. In some cases, the harm caused by digital violence can amount to a threat of either death or persecution, and some women have received threatening letters containing rape threats.

The study showed that women are often reluctant to file a complaint due to the inadequate handling of such cases by the judicial system, or the inability of the relevant security authorities to identify and hold the perpetrators accountable, often due to a lack of available confiscations. This lack of protection for women has prompted some civil society organizations to take initiatives to address the issue through digital safety training and community awareness programs, albeit these efforts are currently limited in scope and require further attention.

Finally, the findings of this study have significant implications for improving the protection and provision of necessary support to women affected by this issue, as well as for delivering effective recommendations that can help to combat the problem and mitigate its effects. Among these recommendations:

- There is a pressing need for further research and studies that address the needs and aspirations of the people.
- Efforts should be made to establish community initiatives and explore alternative solutions.
- In order to combat digital violence effectively, specialized bodies should be established to address this issue.
- Staff at official agencies and support organizations must be trained to handle complaints.
- The human rights movement in Palestine must be strengthened to improve the legal system and enhance the working methods of the relevant authorities.
- It is essential to provide women with access to human rights information and make knowledge sources more readily available.
- Societal attitudes towards women must be changed, and discourse supportive of their rights must be strengthened in society.
- Preventive techniques and algorithms must be developed to deal with content that is offensive to women in an efficient and timely manner.
- Independent community bodies should be established to monitor the operation of official bodies and protect the rights of women during judicial processes. Continuous follow-up and monitoring of women's experiences are crucial to ensure their protection and well-being.

Introduction

The United Nations defines violence against women (VAW) as any act of gender-based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty. This violence can occur in both public and private life.[1]

While the root cause of violence stems from a single focal point based on the use of direct and indirect force to enhance disparity in power relations, the problem lies in the limited context in which it is often addressed. The issue of violence is often addressed theoretically through a set of numbers and statistics without delving into the political and social structures that promote and benefit from this violence. Moreover, there is a lack of discussion regarding organized violence perpetrated by entities, states, or organizations, not just violence perpetrated by individuals against individuals.

In recent times, a novel form of violence has emerged that is associated with technological advancement, which is referred to as digital violence (DV). This type of violence encompasses the utilization of computer systems to inflict, facilitate, or threaten violent acts against individuals, which may result in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm. It also includes the exploitation of an individual's circumstances, characteristics, or vulnerabilities.[2]

A report by the United Nations General Assembly acknowledges the absence of comprehensive global data to address the issue of digital violence in general, due to its relative novelty. However, estimates suggest that one in ten women worldwide have been exposed to some form of online violence by the age of 15, and that 23% of women have experienced at least one form of digital violence in their lives.[3]

In the Arab world, a report by the United Nations Women's Fund titled "Violence Against Women in the Digital Space"[4] reveals that 16% of women have been exposed to digital violence, with 60% of them experiencing it during the year 2020, specifically during the Corona pandemic. This accounts for half of all instances of digital violence experienced by these women.

The extent of digital violence has increased during the Corona pandemic, due to the rise in the number of Internet users and the intensity of use during this period. However, the reported percentages of digital violence may not fully represent the true extent of such incidents, due to the ambiguity in defining violence. The seriousness of digital violence is often underestimated, as it does not result in physical harm to women and is not considered a significant threat. According to a previous report on the Arab world, nearly half of men (48.0%) and 41.0% of women believe that violence on the Internet is not a serious matter if it remains online.

Despite this, digital violence poses a real threat to the safety, activity, effectiveness, and ability of women to safely access all platforms. Digital violence is considered part of gender-based violence and violence against women, which includes all practices they are subjected to because of their gender.

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[1] United Nations (1993). Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

[2] Council Of Europe. What is cyberviolence?

[3] United Nations General Assembly. (2018). Special Rapporteur on Violence Against women and girls.

[4] UN Women (2022). Violence Against Women in the Digital Space: Insights from a Multi-Country Study in Arab countries.

In Palestine, a report by the Center for Women Against Violence in the 1948 Palestinian Territories indicates that from January 2022 to the end of October 2022, 1,191 requests were made to the Center for Assistance to Victims of Sexual and Physical Violence, compared to 1,172 requests for the same period in 2021. That is, they receive an average of 119 requests each month. Of the total incidents of sexual violence crimes, 61% were crimes of harassment, blackmail, and publishing images. In terms of digital violence, 15% of total incidents of assault were committed via the Internet or phone, according to this report.[5]

In a study conducted by the Hamleh Center,[6] citing data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, it was found that approximately 8% of married or previously married Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have experienced some form of digital violence on social media platforms. These percentages increase among younger women, with 10% of those aged 18-29 reporting exposure to violence and reach 14% for never-married women in the West Bank and 5% in the Gaza Strip.

In her paper entitled "Palestinian Women and the Politics of Invisibility: Towards a Feminist Methodology," Nadra Shalhoub discusses the concept of "spiral attacks," which are a series of local or global attacks that operate in a cumulative and cyclical manner, affecting the daily actions and movements of individuals. In the Palestinian context, these spiral attacks have had a profound impact on the lives of Palestinian families, who have lost their homes, social networks, access to education and job opportunities. Shalhoub's paper focuses on the ways in which these attacks limit the options of women and put them in a constant state of distress and confusion.

Accordingly, this paper aimed to examine the nature and extent of digital violence experienced by Palestinian women who are active on the Internet, and to understand the intersectional factors that prevent them from challenging and confronting this violence. The paper also seeks to explore how the colonial division of Palestinian geography and the multiple political authorities to which Palestinian women are subject affect the extent and intensity of this violence, and why Palestinian women are more vulnerable to digital violation and violence than others.

Methodology

This research utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and was grounded in a library study that encompassed a range of previous readings on the research topic. The quantitative approach involved the distribution of a set of questionnaires, which were completed by 91 women. This study aimed to account for the diversity and geographical distribution of the target population, with 34 women from the West Bank, 34 women from the Gaza Strip, 20 women from Jerusalem and the 1948 territories. To compensate for the relatively small number of Palestinian women's contributions from Jerusalem and the 1948 territories, the research intensified in-depth interviews with women from the Palestinian interior, which encompasses the territories occupied in 1948 and comprises all of Palestine's territories except the West Bank and Gaza Strip and are subject to full Israeli control.

The qualitative approach was conducted through a series of in-depth interviews with individuals who work on issues of digital violence. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, including researchers,

[5] Women Against Violence Association (2022). A summary report for the period extending from January to October 2022.

[6] Campaign Center–Social Media (2022). A Violated Network: Gender Violence Against Palestinian Women in the Digital Space.

trainers in the field, workers in official agencies, and women who had experienced digital violence as a case study.

During the development of the questionnaire, the researcher aimed to enhance its capacity to monitor the experiences of women in a complex reality, in line with the assumption of the existence of organized digital violence campaigns against Palestinian political women, which necessitated the inclusion of a mechanism to address such organized violence. The analysis of ratios is often accompanied by mechanisms that are equipped to deal with more intricate contexts, allowing for a deeper understanding of these ratios and their placement within their respective contexts. The research acknowledges that it might not fully capture the experiences of all women, but it aimed to address some of the issues and challenges that the study sought to define as digital violence against women, taking into consideration the complex Palestinian context.

Challenges

In the course of implementing the study, the researcher encountered a series of challenges stemming from the unique characteristics and complexities of the Palestinian context, which had a significant impact on the research process.

- **Language barrier:** The researcher encountered a challenge in that the statistics and certain investigations pertaining to the Palestinians in Jerusalem and the 1948 territories are solely available in Hebrew, necessitating the expenditure of additional time and effort in translation and research.
- **Accessibility and availability of data:** The division of the Palestinian people, which is geographical and political in nature, has an indelible impact on the nature of published statistics. Such statistics often pertain to specific regions rather than others, necessitating further investigation, particularly with regard to the scarcity of sources that focus on Palestinians residing in the territories of 48 and Jerusalem. With regard to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it was observed that the absence of a functioning link to an empty statistical source from within, leading to a deficiency of up-to-date and comprehensive data.
- **Suitability of recommendations:** The multiplicity of particularities to which Palestinian women are subject based on their geographical location, and the subsequent diversity of political authorities and legal frameworks, necessitate the creation of recommendations that are tailored to meet the needs of Palestinian women.
- **Access to a comprehensive and representative sample:** The researcher encountered challenges in its efforts to reach out to women through various channels. In an attempt to create a geographically representative sample, the researcher limited the scope of the sample to certain social, economic, and cultural segments, utilizing the snowball strategy resulting in a sample that was not necessarily representative of the entire Palestinian population. As such, the research findings may not fully capture the breadth of experiences faced by Palestinian women, but rather, they focus on specific contexts of violence.

Digital Space and Violence Reality in Palestine

The digital space in Palestine has formed a space and outlet for Palestinians. In light of the complex political context, Palestinians have to deal with a fragmented reality in different geographical areas separated from each other. In addition to the intensity of daily events, the Internet has become an essential source for following and interacting with daily news. Therefore, the digital space is a space for Palestinians to gather and communicate with each other. The Internet also provided a platform for expressing opinions and ideas, a sideline for attempts at organizing and a platform for calling on people in different regions to gather and demonstrate.

The Palestinians who reside in historic Palestine are subject to three different authorities: the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the Israeli government in the Palestinian interior and Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip government. This political multiplicity of powers is an additional complex multiplicity. For example, Israel can try Palestinians from the West Bank and prosecute them legally on security or criminal grounds. This complex reality puts women in front of a double challenge while trying to confront and reduce this violence, as it can be said that addressing the complex Palestinian reality requires collective efforts across geography.

According to the results of the 2022 Labor Force Survey, it has been observed that 92% of families in Palestine or one of their members have access to Internet service at home, with 93% in the West Bank and 92% in the Gaza Strip. The percentage of males and females with access to the Internet is also relatively high, reaching 89% and 88%, respectively.[7]

However, data regarding the use of the Internet and exposure to digital violence among people in Jerusalem and Palestinians in the interior 48 is limited. Although statistics from 2018 indicate that 80% of the Arab community uses the Internet compared to 90% of the Jewish community,[8] there is a lack of information regarding the extent of Internet use among males and females.

The high prevalence of the Internet in historical Palestine has created a space for expression and solidarity among Palestinians, regardless of their location. Despite the existence of this space, which could be relatively different, and the margin of freedom that is formed in the digital space, this has not prevented the transfer of daily life experiences and physical reality to the digital space. The separation between physical and digital reality has since become increasingly challenging, with the digital space now serving as a new venue for violence and violations. The digital space has allowed violent individuals to use false or hidden identities while practicing violence, thereby increasing the spaces of violence and providing relative immunity to the aggressors.

Women are subjected to violence from individuals who do not reside in the same geographical location, making it difficult to prosecute and hold them legally accountable. This is particularly evident in the case of Palestinian women, who are subjected to violence by individuals residing within Palestinian

[7] Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2023). The Bureau and the Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology issue a joint press release on the occasion of the World Telecommunication and Information Society.

[8] Israeli Internet Federation (2018). The digital gap between the Arab community and the Jewish community in Israel.

territories but holding Israeli identities or nationalities. As a result, Palestinian women are unable to file complaints or obtain information about their abusers due to the limitations imposed on the Palestinian Authority. That is, the Palestinian Authority is not authorized to obtain information related to the Palestinians of Jerusalem and the 1948 territories. All this takes place in a complex political and colonial environment, where women's issues are often marginalized, it is crucial to bring attention to the challenges faced by rural and indigenous women in different geographical regions.

Furthermore, gender discrimination is prevalent in social media, as evidenced by a report titled Hate Network[9] by the Hamleh Center (Arab Center for Social Media Advancement) in 2021. The report revealed that a total of 89.6% of categorical words were related to gender discrimination.

In another study published by the center in 2022, entitled "A Violated Network: Gender Violence Against Palestinian Women in the Digital Space," it was found that approximately 33.2% of women surveyed dealt indifferently with violent content and chose to delete the sender's account. This suggests that general statistics may not accurately reflect the extent of violence to which women are actually exposed.[10]

Multiple Political Systems and One Patriarchy: Violence Practiced by Authorities

In the political and colonial context of Palestine, women are vulnerable to double violence, as various authorities exploit the social reality and threaten or lure women with it. Women who are politically active are also targeted to a greater and more complex degree. In such cases, the official authorities that could be sought for relief are not reliable.

Since Haba Ayar the May 2021 uprising,[11] demonstrations and confrontations with the Israeli occupation have taken place throughout historic Palestine, because of the Israeli attempt to confiscate Palestinian homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, with Palestinian women participating extensively and often taking a leading role in the confrontation.

It was immediately followed by demonstrations denouncing the assassination of political activist by the Palestinian Authority security force, Nizar Banat,[12] an opponent of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, who was previously subjected to incitement campaigns by the Palestinian Authority. He was arrested several times prior to his assassination on the grounds of his freedom of opinion and expression. As a mechanism to suppress the political activity of Palestinian women, according to independent investigations and reports by human rights organizations, such as the Independent Commission for Human Rights and Al-Haq Foundation, the Palestinian Authority has targeted Palestinian women participating in demonstrations through organized campaigns on the Internet. The

[9] Hamleh Center - Social Media (2021). Hate Network: Hate speech in social media networks among Palestinians and its impact on their digital rights.

[10] Campaign Center (2022). A Violated Network: Gender Violence Against Palestinian Women.

[11] The New Arab (2022). Heba Ayar is one Palestinian narrative.

[12] The Independent Commission for Human Rights and Al-Haq Foundation (2022). Joint fact-finding report issued by the Independent Commission for Human Rights and Al-Haq regarding the killing of political activist Nizar Banat.

participants' phones were stolen, and their private photos were later circulated on social media. Videos were also fabricated and attached to the names of specific female activists. The organizations declared that these were attempts to discredit them and push them to leave political work by "discrediting" them.[13] The High Commissioner also stated that the office had received credible reports of specific targeting of women in the context of the demonstrations, regardless of whether they were protest participants, journalists, or bystanders. A number of them had also been subjected to threats, including death threats, and harassment, including intimidation. Additionally, some women had been subjected to sexual nature harassment on social media.[14]

Accordingly, violence against women who are politically active moved from the street to the Internet. Women who were politically active and involved in demonstrations have been subjected to violence, including online threats of death, persecution, and even rape.

Following the demonstrations for Nizar Banat, and as a result of the exposure of female activists in the field, shows that the Palestinian Authority was involved. They are responsible for protecting women from such violence but have been involved in blackmailing and complicity in the abuse of these women and concealment of those accused of blackmailing women, violating their privacy, and threatening them through social media. This systematic targeting of women is associated with a deep understanding and awareness of the sensitivity of the social context and the great impact of the effects of social issues on the general situation. Accordingly, women were deliberately used as a pressure tool to intimidate demonstrators and limit the protests that were roaming the streets.

Based on a study published in 2022, 83% of victims of violence and crimes of assault and sexual harassment in the Arab society[15] of the Palestinian interior, i.e., the territories of 1948, refrain from filing an official complaint with the Israeli police due to a lack of trust in the police, which is attributed to their procrastination in processing complaints and failing to exhaust procedures.[16] Moreover, the study found that electronic violence constituted 16% of all assault crimes. Women are less likely to file an official complaint due to the police's procrastination in handling cases of violence within Arab society, which is more pronounced in cases of violence against women. The Women Against Violence Association reports that in 2022, 78% of Palestinian women in the 1948 territories who experienced violence did not report it to the police due to a lack of confidence in the police and concerns related to society and the environment.[17]

[13] DW (2021). Publishing private photos of female protesters...a new method of oppression for the Palestinian Authority?

[14] The New Arab (2021). Ramallah mobilizes for a demonstration to protest the assassination of activist Nizar Banat.

[15] Palestinians living in areas controlled by the Israeli occupation are referred to as Arabs to differentiate between them and Israeli citizens.

[16] Arabs 48 (2022). Sexual harassment in Arab society... crimes that are kept secret.

[17] Women Against Violence Association (2022). A summary report for the period extending from January to October 2022.

Protection Laws and Mechanisms

It is of utmost importance to consider the legal context to which Palestinians are subject, which involves examining the various political circumstances that lead to their being subjected to diverse legal frameworks and legislation based on their geographical location and the type of identity they possess (West Bank identity, Jerusalem identity, Gaza identity, Israeli citizenship).

A critical examination of the legal frameworks applicable to the Palestinian population is necessary to understand the interplay between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by each, and the potential for collusion among these authorities for purposes tied to the ruling power in the region.

It should be pointed out that the legal code in force in the West Bank differs from that in effect in Gaza, and the Palestinian Legislative Council has been disbanded since 2006 due to the ongoing division between Fatah and Hamas, with Fatah controlling the West Bank and Hamas governing in the Gaza Strip.[18]

The Palestinian Decree Law No. (28) of 2020 amending Decree Law No. (10) of 2018 regarding cybercrimes defines the scope of cybercrime in the West Bank. It states that anyone who uses the electronic network, or any information technology means to threaten or blackmail another person, with the intent to force them to carry out an act or abstain from it, is subject to imprisonment for a period of not less than one year and not more than two years. If the threat is to commit a felony or to attribute matters that are dishonorable or prejudicial, the punishment is imprisonment for a period of not less than two years and not more than two years. The law also provides for a suspended imprisonment of three years, a fine of not less than five thousand Jordanian dinars and not more than ten thousand Jordanian dinars, or its equivalent in the currency in legal circulation.

In the Gaza Strip, there is no specific law for electronic crimes. Instead, the electronic transactions law regulates electronic transactions. However, there are attempts by the police force in the Gaza Strip to adopt a draft law to address cybercrime.

[18] Following the occupation of Palestine in 1948 and the subsequent control of Zionist gangs over the majority of Palestinian land, the State of Israel was established, and the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as the Gaza Strip, remained under the control of neighboring countries. Specifically, the West Bank came under Jordanian rule, while the Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian control. Jordanian law was enforced in both territories, while Egyptian law was implemented in the Gaza Strip. This situation remained in place until 1967, when Israel gained control of the remaining Palestinian territory, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and established the Israeli Civil Administration to govern these areas. The Jordanian law in the West Bank was completed, and the Egyptian law in the Gaza Strip was discontinued, and articles that contradicted Israel's right to exist were removed. This status quo persisted until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which led to the formation of the Palestinian National Authority and the establishment of the State of Palestine. It should be noted that Palestine did not relinquish Jordanian and Egyptian laws, but rather, work was completed on the application of these laws in the West Bank with Jordanian law and in Gaza with Egyptian law. However, the issuance of new joint laws was not fully completed. This situation was a result of the division that emerged between the Fatah and Hamas movements after the Hamas victory in the Legislative Council elections and Hamas' military takeover of the Gaza Strip, which led to the Palestinian Authority, represented by the Fatah movement, taking control of the West Bank, while Hamas assumed control of Gaza. Consequently, the Legislative Council has been in a state of disruption since 2006 and the continued division between the two territories has resulted in the West Bank being under a state of emergency, with laws being issued through a "decision by law" process, while the Gaza Strip has a different legal and judicial system.

The Palestinian law in the West Bank, regarding cybercrimes (Decree Law No. 28 of 2020 amending Decree Law No. 10 of 2018) defines the offense of cybercrime under Article 1. Any individual who utilizes electronic networks or information technology means to coerce or intimidate another person to carry out an act or abstain from it, regardless of the legality of the act or abstention, shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of one to two years. If the threat involves committing a felony or attributing dishonorable or prejudicial matters, the punishment shall be imprisonment for two to three years, with an additional fine of five to ten thousand Jordanian dinars or its equivalent. The sentence may also include a period of suspended imprisonment for up to five years, to be served after the completion of the actual sentence.[19]

With regard to the Gaza Strip, there is no law specifically addressing electronic crimes, as the decree law that applies in the West Bank is not implemented in Gaza. However, there is an electronic transactions law that governs electronic transactions but does not address cybercrimes.[20] Nevertheless, the Police in the Gaza Strip are making efforts to promote the adoption of a draft law that would specialize in cybercrime.

The matter of the legal complexities in Palestine transcends the mere existence of a law and extends to the validity and scope of application of such laws. In an interview for this study, an official from the Cybercrime Unit acknowledged that there is no cooperation or coordination between the police forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In his view, it is the police in Gaza that refuse to cooperate with their counterparts in the West Bank. Conversely, Hussein Abu Saada, Director of the Cybercrime Department in the Gaza Strip, stated in an interview with the Palestinian Safa Agency that the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah declines to communicate with the Ministry of Interior in Gaza, hindering the resolution of grievances for citizens in Gaza.[21]

While both authorities acknowledge the possibility of filing a complaint by a Palestinian from Gaza in the West Bank through legal representation, and vice versa, the lack of cooperation between the two authorities in addressing issues collectively suggests that the impact of the political division between the West Bank and Gaza governments on Palestinian women may be significant.

The distinction between the legal systems to which Palestinians are subject presents a challenge to the process of improving the situation regarding digital violence against Palestinian women. This is due to the varying pace at which different regions address electronic violence. Consequently, the development of national plans to address such violence must be comprehensive and consider the diverse contexts and legal systems to which Palestinian women are subject.

The clans and community reform system also hold significant influence among Palestinians, particularly in the absence of a robust legal and judicial system. This has resulted in the continued significance of the family in social organization.

The utilization of clan-based dispute resolution among Palestinians is a common practice, instead of seeking assistance from the police. The Department of Tribal Affairs and Reform, which was established

[19] Institute of Law, Birzeit University (2020). Al-Muqtafi: The judicial and legislative system in Palestine.

[20] Safa (2022). Gaza Investigations to "Safa": Electronic crimes are on the increase, and we receive 500 complaints per month.

[21] Ibid

in 2005[22] as a part of the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for receiving complaints from citizens. The reform men and tribes hold special cards to facilitate their work when interacting with both official and unofficial bodies, and there is an attempt to develop and apply tribal custom/law within this context.

This reality is applicable to both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. However, there has been a significant development in the reform system in the Gaza Strip. A general trend has been observed among women in Gaza to avoid filing complaints with the police, thus avoiding the creation of judicial files linked to their names with the prosecution due to its negative social effects on women. To address this issue, community bodies have been established to deal with the various problems faced by women. These community committees, affiliated with the prosecution, receive complaints without entering them into official state records. Other reform committees are led by women reformers called "Mukhtarat," in parallel with the "Mukhtar," who resolves cases and plays a reformative role in society. As a result, this group of women was able to become "reform women" in parallel with the presence of "reform men." They also issued identification cards as Mukhtarat.[23] They succeeded in resolving conflicts and family problems, thus have earned the trust of the people, making them a destination for those seeking help with women's issues.[24]

Faten Harb, the first Palestinian female Mukhtarh in the Gaza Strip, emphasized in the interview conducted for this research that the societal system and the patriarchal restrictions imposed on women limit their ability to seek redress through the judiciary or arbitration. However, women's entry into the sphere of reform has encouraged them to seek help.

Regarding Palestinian women in the 1948 territories, there is no specific law in Israel for cybercrimes. However, a cyber unit was established in 2015 within the Public Prosecution to address "crime and terrorism."[25] This unit defines cybercrime as any offense that is punishable by law when committed in the digital space.[26]

According to a report[27] by Women Against Violence Organization and two other organizations, there are disparate and unequal paths to law enforcement with regard to the killing of Israeli and Palestinian females by the Israeli police. Specifically, 80% of murdered Palestinian women had previously reported incidents to the police, and the police failed to ensure the safety of witnesses who had completed their testimony.

The report also highlights serious shortcomings in the police's handling of murder cases in Palestinian society, including failure to exhaust investigations even when the suspect is known, conducting partial investigations, and attempts to discourage witnesses from testifying.

Naila Awad, Director of the Women Against Violence Association in the 1948 Territories, has indicated that while the statutory law protecting women in Israel is considered to be one of the more favorable

[22] Wafa Agency. Tribal judiciary in Palestine.

[23] Al-Mukhtar is a description of a social legal personality who has leadership powers and whose authority is recognized by official authorities.

[24] D.W. (2015). Gaza women break into the male profession of mukhtar.

[25] The Cyber Unit is a specialized unit established in Israel to confront crime and terrorism in the digital space, and it is the one that deals with complaints submitted to the Israeli police about digital violence.

[26] Ministry of Justice (2019). About the cyber unit.

[27] Tufula Center, and The Israel Women's Network (2021). Israeli police law enforcement of Palestinian femicide cases

laws, there are still loopholes within the legislation. However, she emphasizes that the issue goes beyond the law itself and is deeply rooted in the legal system, which is not spoken about. Additionally, the effectiveness of these laws in addressing gender-based violence within the Palestinian Arab society is also a matter of concern.

The disparity in the legal frameworks and governing bodies to which Palestinian women are exposed in various geographical regions is mirrored in their capacity to confront the violence inflicted upon them. This regional diversity often impairs the competence of the relevant authorities in identifying the perpetrator, as there are inadequate mechanisms in place that allow them to determine the identity of the aggressor. Specifically, if an Israeli SIM card is utilized, the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are unable to identify the aggressor, as they have no jurisdiction over communication companies, which they rely on to reveal the identity of the abuser based on the number, contact details, and geographical location of the Internet access point.

It can be stated that women from the Palestinian territories in 1948 have the option to file a complaint with the Palestinian police in the Gaza Strip, although access mechanisms are not available in the Gaza Strip. The situation becomes more challenging if the aggressor is from the territories of 1948, as Palestinian women residing in the West Bank or Gaza Strip are unable to legally prosecute the aggressor under Israeli law, as compliance with Israeli law is not feasible for them.

There is also a societal dimension involved in the prevailing implicit agreement that does not allow Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to engage in any form of interaction with the Israeli authorities and their affiliates. This societal attitude is rooted in a firm rejection of the normalization of ties with the Israeli authorities.

This complex political situation necessitated the creation and deployment of community organizations that specialize in addressing this issue and offer a tailored solution that is relevant to the setting. For instance, Hamleh Center (Arab Center for Social Media Advancement) was founded to operate within the scope of digital rights and safety in general. As part of its growth, the center began to direct its attention towards gender-related digital space concerns.

Ahmed Al-Qadi, Monitoring and Documentation Officer at Hamleh Center, has emphasized the importance of the role of the center in addressing the significant void created by the inadequate implementation of powers by the responsible authorities as well as by the existence of multiple authorities. This means the authority are unable to protect male and female citizens in light of a complex political situation. In addition, there is a multiplicity of official bodies with overlapping powers, with limited clarity on the resolution process, particularly in the context of ongoing political conflict. For example, the Palestinian division between non-democratic political systems does not actually aim to protect the rights of citizens.

It can be stated that there exists a deficiency in the authorities' capacity to exert pressure on social media companies. Were it available, such capacity would never have been granted to the Palestinian citizens. Consequently, the center's responsibility is to provide protection to the extent feasible. However, the limitations of the center's capabilities and powers as a civil society organization, which lack legal and executive authority, must be recognized. Therefore, the center is making efforts to communicate with social media companies for the purpose of removing content and minimizing its dissemination.

Ahmed Al-Qadi underscored the significance of the absence of initiatives and organizations that address digital rights issues as a contributing factor to the perpetuation and escalation of violence, particularly gender-based violence. Taking into consideration the complexity of the situation and the presence of strong movements in the area, Al-Qadi stated that this is the sole viable solution available at present, given the added difficulties posed by the occupation and the political scenario in Palestine.

In recent years, certain civil society organizations have commenced campaigns and workshops aimed at addressing digital violence, albeit these efforts have primarily been integrated within the broader objectives of those organizations, rather than being established as standalone campaigns or workshops specifically focused on this matter.

There is an initiative taken by Birzeit University to establish the Social Justice Observatory,[28] which aims to create a system that receives and follows up on incidents of discrimination, harassment, or bullying towards female students and faculty. The observatory emphasizes gender-based harassment and cyberbullying and strives to address the prevalent issues in the digital space among students.

Given the absence of efficacious and suitable safeguards for women who are exposed to digital violence, they are prone to neglect, abuse, and exploitation. Submitting complaints or seeking recourse through judicial channels is often challenging and complex, as there are no specific procedures in place to address this form of violence, and women are not afforded adequate support to confront and reject it. Furthermore, it appears that there is a tendency for police to procrastinate in dealing with complaints, as evidenced by the statistics published for the year 2022.[29] That is, of the 3,067 complaints submitted, only 1,584 were completed, resulting in a large percentage of pending and incomplete complaints.

[28] Birzeit University website. Social Justice Observatory at Birzeit University.

[29] Palestinian Police website (2023). Palestinian police statistics for the year 2022.

Research Results: Reality and Dimensions of DVAW in Historical Palestine

This study utilized multiple methodologies, including exploratory desk research and both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A confidential digital survey was administered, yielding 91 responses from Palestinian women residing in Jerusalem, the 48 Palestinian interior, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as a group of in-depth interviews with ten participants. The sample also included specialists from official bodies, researchers, and case studies on the topic of digital violence.

The sample encompassed the following geographical distribution: 34 female participants from the Gaza Strip, 34 female participants from the West Bank, and 20 female participants were recruited from Jerusalem and the 1948 territories. The distribution of among these areas is detailed as follows:

Geographical Distribution of Participants

Region	Number	Percentage
Gaza Strip	34	39%
West Bank	34	39%
Jerusalem & the 1948 territories	20	23%

With reference to demographic distribution, women aged 18-29 comprised the largest proportion, accounting for 53% of the total participants. Furthermore, single women made up the largest group, representing 60% of the participants.

These findings suggest that a significant number of women have experienced digital violence, which is much higher than the 14%, as indicated in the introduction through the desk research. In fact, 62% of the research participants reported being exposed to some form of digital violence.

In terms of their gender, 35 participants reported that they believe they would not have been subjected to the same level of violence if they were men, indicating that gender is the primary factor underlying the violence. In addition, 9 participants acknowledged that they may have experienced violence, but to a lesser extent, and that being a woman comes with a higher price than being a man. Moreover, 18 participants believed that they would have been exposed to digital violence regardless of their gender, as everyone is vulnerable to digital violence or blackmail, and the same patriarchal and masculine standards can be used to target men as well.

In light of the results of the in-depth interviews, it has been reported that Ahila Shomer, the president of Sawa Foundation, provided 22,805 guidance and counseling calls in 2022, with women accounting for a majority of these calls. Additionally, Sawa Foundation received 338 calls related to exposure to digital violence, of which 197 were made by women, compared to 141 calls from male callers.

With reference to the forms of violence, verbal abuse in the form of insults was found to be the most prevalent type of violence to which women were subjected during a specific period, accounting for 33% of all reported cases. Furthermore, verbal abuse, including insults, is considered a form of hate speech.

The history of hate speech and incitement in Palestine is a long and complex one, rooted in the political context of colonialism and its associated channels against Palestinians. Additionally, internal hate speech among Palestinian groups, directed towards those who differ in terms of politics, religion, race, and gender, is also prevalent. This form of hate speech primarily involves the exchange of accusations and the use of language that belittles and objectifies others. The intensity of hate speech increases in times of political decline, particularly in the absence of a unified national project and in the face of political division, which often leads to attempts to stereotype and demean others.

Ahmed Qazi, the Monitoring and Documentation Specialist at Hamleh Center for Social Media Advancement, emphasized that their organization works extensively on issues related to digital rights, including those pertaining to gender-based violence. As he explained, "We have identified certain harmful practices, such as hate speech, which can be perpetuated by both colonial authorities against Palestinian content and by individuals at the internal level, particularly against women. This can take the form of defamation or slander, but also targets women due to their gender. The situation becomes even more complex when an activist or political woman is involved, as she becomes more vulnerable to this discourse due to her participation and activity, making her a more attractive target." A decline in internal hate speech during major political events or national crises has been observed.

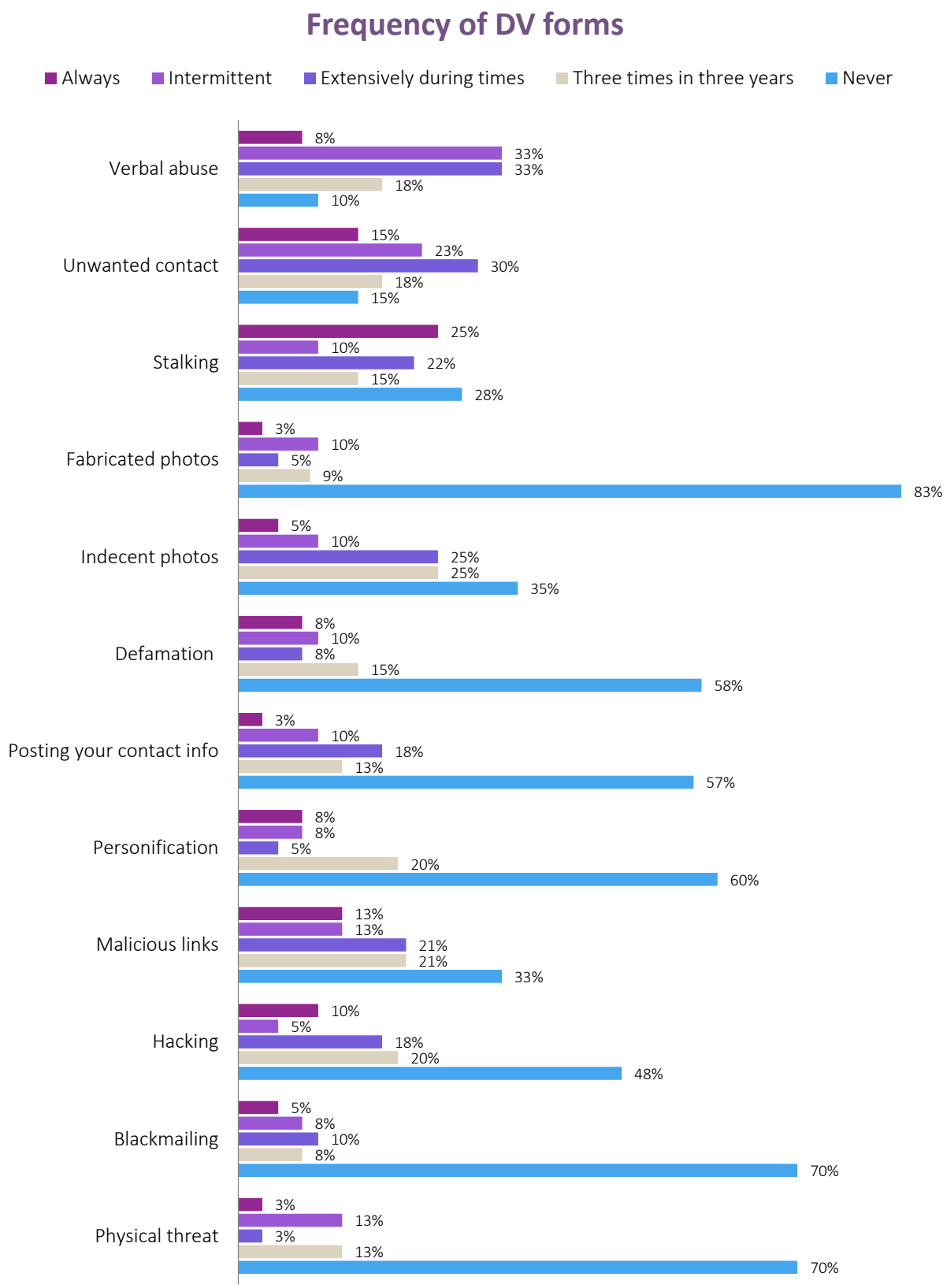
An in-depth understanding of the prolonged period of colonialism is necessary to grasp the depth of internal Palestinian hate speech. This speech is fueled by the complex realities created by the colonial authorities to divide the Palestinians, despite their superficial differences. The authorities also sought to exploit internal contradictions and exacerbate them to maintain control over the Palestinians.

The existence of political structures that promote hate speech indicates the presence of an environment that fosters the proliferation of such speech. The most vulnerable groups, including women, are often targeted with degrading language and insults, as they are considered an easy target. Women, in particular, are subjected to demeaning terms simply because of their gender.

With respect to the digital platforms on which women are targeted, the data revealed that the highest incidence of violence occurred on Facebook, followed by WhatsApp and then Instagram. This is due to the widespread access to these platforms that facilitate daily interaction, providing attackers with opportunities to harass and threaten users. Public posts and comments also contribute to the expansion of digital violence, as aggressors use them to express their threats directly. Women also face challenges in maintaining their privacy, making them vulnerable to exploitation and harassment.

Mays Nasra, a legal expert and human rights activist who works in the judicial and human rights fields, believed that targeting women and their exposure to digital violence is linked to attempts to prevent them from participating, which often concerns men and those in positions of authority. Others attribute this to the absence of a secure digital environment.

The proliferation of various platforms has facilitated access for attackers to target women, resulting in women facing a heightened risk for their involvement in public spaces and events, such as social media platforms.


Frequency of DV forms
Always
Intermittent
Extensively during times
Three times in three years
Never
Verbal abuse
8%
33%
33%
18%
10%
Unwanted contact
15%
23%
30%
18%
15%
Stalking
25%
10%
22%
15%
28%
Fabricated photos
3%
10%
5%
9%
83%
Indecent photos
5%
10%
25%
25%
35%
Defamation
8%
10%
8%
15%
58%
Posting your contact info
3%
10%
18%
13%
57%
Personification
8%
8%
5%
20%
60%
Malicious links
13%
13%
21%
21%
33%
Hacking
10%
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18%
20%
48%
Blackmailing
5%
8%
10%
8%
70%
Physical threat
3%
13%
3%
13%
70%

Correlation Between Violence and Geographical Region Context

The majority of the responses showed that there is no apparent correlation between geographic region and the intensity or type of violence. However, the in-depth interviews revealed a different trend, indicating that certain regions may be more prone to specific types of violence. It must be noted that this dimension is complex on two levels. There is a factor related to the larger geographical region, such as the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, and the territories of 1948, and another factor related to the classification of the living place, such as camps, villages, and cities. The survey results indicate that the majority of women believed that their geographical region, whether a camp, village, or city, has no impact on the exacerbation of violence to which they have been exposed.

The in-depth interviews suggested that the geographical factor is a specific element in the Palestinian context, and its impact on the incidence of violence may be either exacerbating or mitigating. One of the participants, from the Gaza Strip, noted, "the area in which I reside has made violent individuals more cautious." Another participant also acknowledged that the area "constituted a protection. Many attackers are concerned about my area."

In this regard, this study suggests that the resilience of a region and its ability to provide protection to women is primarily linked to the strength of the family or clan. There are geographical areas in Palestine where the family plays a role no less crucial than that of the political authorities. One of the participants stated, "I believe it was a protection for me, and to be more precise, the family in which I was raised contributed to the strength of my personality and instilled in me the courage to confront any challenges with fortitude and without fear because I had a supportive family."

In the conservative city of Hebron in the West Bank, where the tribes constitute a political force, the security services are cautious in pursuing politically active women, and women are often not involved in political equations. This adheres to societal standards that elevate women and consider it shameful to target them. However, this does not necessarily imply that women in Hebron are more protected than others on social networks.

On the other hand, official Palestinian and Israeli authorities exploit the patriarchal system to their advantage by summoning women activists through their fathers and families, in an attempt to exert political control and exclude women from the political scene. Many women have been forced to delete posts or close their accounts at the request of these authorities, who seek to pressure them using the power of the family and the authority of the father. As such, digital violence in this context is linked to limiting freedom of expression, particularly for women.

Naila Awad, the Director of the Women Against Violence Society, has reported that the Israeli authorities have on numerous occasions summoned female political activists in the 1948 territories, Jerusalem, and the West Bank through their fathers, despite these activists being over the age of 18. This method is an attempt to silence women by reinforcing the patriarchal system, its authority, and its exploitation.

A group of women have also indicated that their geographical location, particularly those classified as conservative areas, may make them more vulnerable to violence or abuse. Women who come from these areas are often considered "weaker," and may face increased risk of violence if they move to live

in more " progressive" cities. Additionally, there is a fear within conservative areas of targeting women, particularly if the perpetrator is from the same region. This fear is linked to the possibility that the issue will become a tribal matter and that the perpetrator will be prosecuted accordingly. It must also be noted that incidents of violence between families in Palestine can extend for years and often claim many lives. As a result, there is relative concern about this issue, which makes the perpetrator more cautious about avoiding accountability.

The geographic location of a region can also impact the expectations held for women, even if they are not from the same region. For instance, Ramallah, which is situated in the West Bank and serves as the "political capital" of the Palestinian Authority and a hub of civil society institutions, has a noteworthy feminist and youth activism presence. As a result, the experiences of Palestinian women in Ramallah are influenced by this environment. Additionally, a group of women who reside in Ramallah but are not natives reported to the researcher that they are subjected to specific behavioral and lifestyle expectations.

Mays Nasra, an activist, commented on the impact of geographic region on levels of protection and levels of violence towards women, explaining that the level of violence increases as individuals become more bolder in instructing women who live alone or come from other cities. In particular, she noted that when she moved to the city of Ramallah, her status as a "Daughter of the North" made her a target for others' expectations regarding her lifestyle and behavior, which led to her being subjected to assault, isolation, or control by those around her if she did not conform to these expectations. This treatment is especially pronounced for women who come from other cities and have different lifestyles or behaviors than those expected of them.

It is important to note that women who relocate to cities deemed more progressive are subjected to increased surveillance and stalking, particularly those who lead independent lifestyles that are deemed socially "progressive." This necessitates reshaping these women. A participant from Hebron in the West Bank, currently residing in Ramallah, stated, "I have, at times, inadvertently contributed to making them bolder, as they think that village residents or those who come from Hebron reside in or leave Ramallah to defy customs. Consequently, this group is targeted by those who think they are tasked with suppressing and disciplining them to adhere to the typical expectations held by the areas. As a result, they legitimize harassment, intimidation, and slander to maintain discipline and alienation."

While there may appear to be contradictory or inconsistent answers, there are in fact interconnected factors at play. In certain contexts, the very place that provides protection for individuals can also be the source of violence. Additionally, conservative regions tend to view women as subjects who must either be protected or suppressed, reproducing the same patriarchal notions about women; this is often linked to the nature of the activities or practices undertaken by women. While conservative contexts may provide protection for women who conform to societal norms, they may not offer the same protection to women who challenge or go beyond these norms and may instead subject them to double violence due to their perceived transgression of agreed-upon limits.

The protection in this context does not arise from the basis of ensuring security for all individuals, regardless of their lifestyle choices, orientations, or gender expressions. Rather, it is restricted to women who conform to societal norms, and thus, the very same circumstances that offer protection to women can also subject them to double violence if they diverge from these social norms.

The questionnaire posed queries concerning the transmission of violence between the digital arena and reality and vice versa. The investigation revealed that 65% of the participants acknowledged the potential for violence to be transferred from the digital world to the real world and vice versa. This finding suggests that the termination of the cycle of violence may become more challenging. Women are increasingly grappling with feelings of apprehension and fear due to the increase in digital spaces and platforms where violence is exercised.

Violence can have a detrimental and limiting impact on women. The perpetrators of violence against women in some cases may be unknown, making it difficult to identify and confront the issue. In other cases, women may be exposed to organized campaigns of violence by political parties or communities, or subjected to random acts of violence, which can make it even more challenging to prevent such violations.

A woman who is actively involved in politics and often participates in demonstrations shared her experience stating, “In a viral video from 2011, I can be seen cursing because a security officer placed his baton between my thighs and moved it. This part of the video, in which the policeman placed his stick between my thighs, was cropped. The video showing me cursing God was uploaded to social networking sites and caused a major incitement campaign against me and my family, that moved from the Internet to the street, with people threatening me with lawsuits. I was also insulted in the street and stalked for a long time, which forced me to withdraw from social and political life for a period of time. This did not solve the issue because every time there was a political incident and when the security services wanted to strip societal legitimacy from any social or political movement, they used and exploited social factors to strip this legitimacy. Women are often targeted. Therefore, when any political and social movements oppose authority, my video is re-published to incite society against any political movement and delegitimize it. I was threatened again after participating in demonstrations denouncing the assassination of activist Nizar Banat.

Violence against women in the digital space, which is disseminated in the form of digital content, has the potential to result in stalking and physical harm. An official from the Cybercrimes Unit informed us that, in some cases, complainants are referred directly to the Family Planning and Protection Association, as the nature of the violence and violation they are exposed to could result in death or pose a threat to their safety and security.

Another female political and feminist activist shared her experience regarding the Nizar Banat demonstrations, during which women were targeted on the internet due to their ground activities. "I had a minor altercation with a member of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and the following day, I was subjected to physical violence during the demonstrations. I published my account on my personal social media and shared it with the public. A few weeks after the demonstrations had ended, my friend and I were sitting on a street corner in front of the Ramallah Municipality, when a young man who was involved in the previous altercation passed by in a taxi. He recognized me and began shouting at the top of his lungs in the middle of the street, in front of passersby, "They are Nizar's girls' group, they are Nizar's girls." I decided to ignore him, but I felt unsafe as he had memorized my face and I feared he would find out where I live, specifically because he dared to return on foot, which made me feel threatened. Despite the community support I received when I decided to document the violation I was exposed to, this made me vulnerable to receiving calls and messages from various individuals, including those working in the security services. I received insults and threats from unknown individuals and those

with real accounts. Despite filing a complaint with the Cybercrime Unit against an account that posted offensive content about me, the complaint was not acted upon, and I was not informed of its status.

Another female activist and journalist, who was still a student at the time, provided the following account, "I was actively involved in the Nizar Girls events and was present on the front lines. Although I was not among the girls whose phones were stolen, I began receiving numerous threats and was forced to deactivate my social media accounts. The false allegations against me began to spread in my village, including private videos purported to show a sexual relationship involving me. The video was unclear and did not show my face, but the rumors continued to spread. When the news reached my family, a member affiliated with the Fatah movement, the party representing the Palestinian Authority, told my family that he was trying to help them and me, and he began to convince them that the allegations were baseless. Despite this, my family urged me to return to my village and leave Ramallah. When my mother saw the video, she tried to identify any evidence that the body in the video was not mine, even noting the girl's nails did not match mine. This experience was deeply distressing, and I felt constantly under threat and pressure to prove my innocence."

The causality of this incident was affirmed by an anonymous official from the cybercrime unit in the West Bank, who stated in an interview for this research, "We are vengeful people who wait for an opportunity to strike. I am against any wrongdoing regardless of who is doing it. It is true that there have been instances of data and pictures being stolen from female demonstrators. I am not fully aware of what transpired at that time, but there was data and videos that existed prior to the event but were only shared among a select few. However, during the event, these videos were released to the public, potentially by someone who had access to the files and aimed to cause harm."

If this statement is taken seriously, it serves as an acknowledgement of the possibility that individuals within the security services may have been involved in tarnishing the reputation of certain female activists through the manipulation of online information, utilizing files in their possession, which constitutes a flagrant breach of ethical standards.

The women in this case were subjected to violence that transcended both the physical and digital realms, transforming them from victims to accused individuals. In an effort to clear their names, these women were required to condemn their peers for engaging in practices deemed "defective," thereby exposing them to a double complex of symbolic violence and psychological distress, threats, and a constant state of accountability.

In many cases, women are forced to confront this violence alone. In societies that are marked by patriarchal and oppressive attitudes, women are transformed from being seen as victims to potentially being viewed as accusers. This places women in a difficult position with future violence further complicates their situation.

With respect to identifying the perpetrators, the data revealed that a substantial portion of the women participating in the study indicated that violence is most often inflicted by unknown individuals or people they do not know. Specifically, 40% of participants attributed violence to fake or anonymous accounts, while 20% believed that it was perpetrated by a known party or parties, implying that violence is part of organized campaigns targeting women. Moreover, 15% of participants believed that the violence originated from individuals known to them on a personal or professional level.

The majority of the participants indicated that they would have reacted differently if they had known the perpetrator's identity. They would have pursued the abuser and sought legal or tribal prosecution. The process of identifying the perpetrator and obtaining knowledge of their identity is a crucial factor in the decision-making of women when it comes to filing a complaint or choosing not to do so. Women are always hesitant to file a complaint due to concerns about the efficacy of the judicial system in holding the aggressors accountable or the lack of confiscations available to the security services, resulting in an inability to identify and prosecute the perpetrator.

There exists a characteristic within the realm of communication technologies, as some instances examined in this research indicated that some perpetrators utilize Israeli SIM cards as a form of protection. Often, the Cybercrimes Unit is unable to pursue the matter further and reach the perpetrator because they use an Israeli SIM card, resulting in the termination of the investigation and the suspension of work on the complaint. The Cybercrime Unit in the West Bank has no jurisdiction over individuals with "Israeli" numbers, making it extremely difficult to identify and apprehend the perpetrator, which often leads to continued acts of violence.

In the Palestinian context, the process of identifying an individual's identity can be arduous, particularly for women who may be subjected to violence by perpetrators who do not reside in the same geographical location. This often leads to a scarcity of resources that hinder the ability of security agencies to identify the violent party.

Endless Battles: How do Women React to Violence Against Them?

Given the intricate social and political context in which Palestinian women exist, and in the absence of adequate protection mechanisms for women, it is common for women to disregard acts of violence, or to delete or block offensive content or individuals. According to the study, 16% of participants reported resorting to this course of action, while 24% indicated that they would block the offensive party if subjected to verbal abuse or insults. This percentage increases among women who have been exposed to repeated contact, with 21% of participants indicating that they choose to ignore such calls, and 34% opting to block the individual who persistently contacts them.

With regards to offensive images of women, 10% of participants reported that they elect to disregard such content, while an equal percentage assert that they opt to block the perpetrator. In this context, the participants provided justification for their decision to ignore violent acts, noting that such instances of violence are prevalent and may occur frequently. Women may react to one or two incidents, but it is unfeasible for them to react to all instances of violence.

One of the research participants, a political and feminist activist, shared her perspective on the matter, expressing that she frequently prefers to disregard and may react to only one or two incidents. It is because I feel it is unnecessary to waste my time engaging with them, whereas filing a complaint with official authorities seems like a last option even though my family often encourages them to pursue this route, because I do not trust the authorities and do not believe they can achieve meaningful results.

Women may choose to ignore violent incidents as a response, as direct confrontation may invite further abuse from perpetrators. Some view ignoring perpetrators as a message to abusers that they are not scared, while others may ignore the event to avoid turning it into a "painful memory," as one of the participants said. Another participant described violent incidents as a "headache," and considered ignoring it a better alternative to forget and move on from the event. Ignoring may be a mechanism utilized by women in coping with the violence perpetrated against them, but the motivations behind selecting this course of action are multifaceted, and the consequences are equally diverse.

Considering the multifaceted nature of the adversities that women face, it is not uncommon for them to ensure ongoing and concealed acts of violence, which makes the process of putting a stop to the cycle of violence more intricate. This is particularly true for women in Palestine who are subjected to digital violence, as it becomes increasingly challenging to identify and document such incidents. As a result, assessing the overall impact of violence on women's lives and the particular effects of such violence becomes a more complicated task. This is because violence takes diverse forms, is often perpetrated in secret, and occurs intermittently, which means that the effects of harm and violence unfold gradually and imperceptibly, yet they have the power to transform women's relationships with their surroundings in profound ways.

VAW is often accompanied by a sense of insecurity without being able to pinpoint the root cause of this feeling. This is because violence is not always perpetrated in a direct, specific, or defined manner, but rather occurs intermittently and in various forms, often going unrecognized as such and thereby escaping the anticipation of its consequences.

Lina Meari,[30] a renowned academic and feminist, argued that it is crucial to understand violence as a network of relationships and dynamic. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive view of the issue, recognizing this form of violence is not a standalone entity, but rather an intricate part of broader relationships. This requires a nuanced approach to understanding and addressing this form of violence, one that considers the complex interactions between violence and the broader network of relationships.

In relation to the most severe instance of digital violence that the participants experienced, the majority reported that they were affected by the violence directed towards them. They acknowledged that there are transformations and changes they underwent as a result of being exposed to violence. Many women faced psychological setbacks, including feelings of sadness and decreased confidence in themselves and others, which were often associated with the insults or attempts to stalk or threaten them.

For example, in the context of threats and blackmail, one participant shared her experience during her university years indicating, "I started having nightmares about the incident and found it difficult to interact with my peers at the university. I also avoided being around young men. I deactivated my social media accounts for periods of time and lost confidence in myself as a woman. I no longer felt comfortable in my own body. I did not trust men and decided not to get married. I attempted suicide and started seeing a therapist. I also had to explain to my family why I changed my phone number, which caused me additional stress and strain."

Through this experiment, the psychological impact of exposure to violence and threats on women was examined. A participant experienced a significant setback in her mental wellbeing, leading to a loss of trust in those around her. This loss of trust caused her to isolate herself as she was blackmailed by one of her colleagues, causing her to feel suspicious of those she meets daily as one of them is the perpetrator. The fear of the story being circulated and the potential for further targeting among students also contributed to her decision to isolate herself as a means of protection. Women often face high social costs; accordingly, many avoid social spaces and place men at the source of anxiety and accusations. This lack of trust in others, combined with the psychological impact of violence and the constant feeling of danger, can make women feel guilty, ashamed, or as if they bear responsibility for the abuse they have suffered. In the absence of a supportive environment, these feelings can be intensified, leading some women to feel overwhelmed and opt for suicide as a means of escape.

A journalist from the West Bank recounted her own ordeal, noting, “during my university years, I was frequently targeted by anonymous individuals via fake accounts, who threatened to publish my photos online without a hijab. I was contacted by many "Israeli" numbers via WhatsApp, who subjected me to further intimidation by threatening to contact my father and reveal personal information that would cause him to ‘kill’ me. During my second year at university, a male colleague circulated a photograph showing an unidentified woman in a compromising position with a man, assuming it was me. The reason for this was due to my declining his advances and rejecting his attempts to accompany him home.

I experienced nightmares and avoided social situations with male colleagues at the university and young men in general. I also deactivated my social media accounts for extended periods and struggled with feelings of self-loathing as a woman. These experiences led me to lose trust in men and abandon the idea of marriage. In addition, I attempted suicide and sought the help of a psychologist. I also found

[30] Lina Meyari, President of the Workers Union at Birzeit University, is also a lecturer and academic staff member in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the Women’s Studies Program.

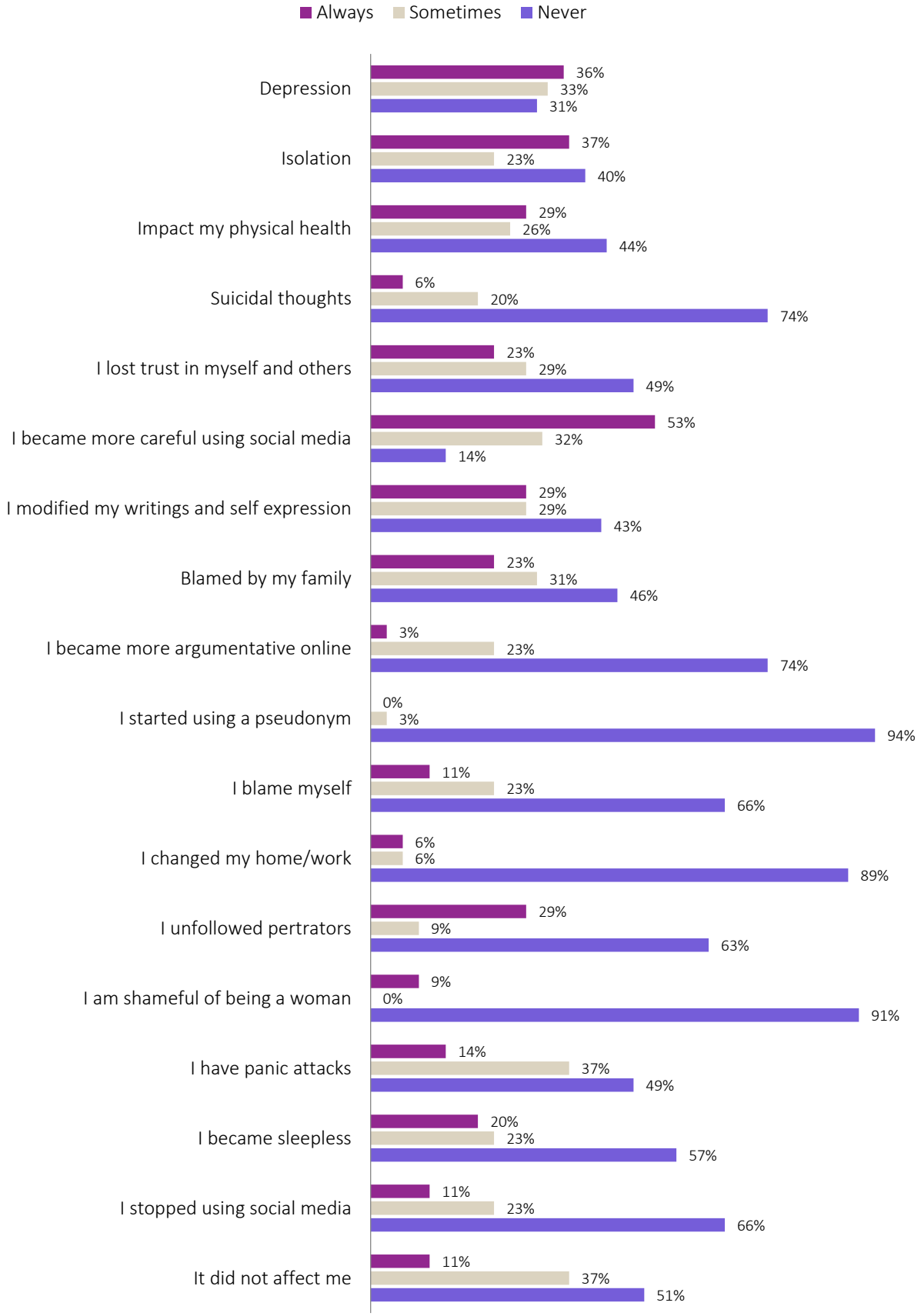
myself in a challenging position when I changed my phone number, which required explanations from my family."

Another participant, who shared her experiences following the events of Nizar Banat and the effects of digital violence on her life, stated, "I felt a sense of relapse and withdrew from my political activities on the streets and social media due to the overwhelming nature of the violence directed towards women. This feeling of lack of support left me feeling disappointed and at times, hatred towards activism and the streets."

This was echoed in the survey results, as over 50% of the participating women reported being affected by digital violence to varying degrees. As a result, the impact of such violence on women in Palestine is examined below.

It is evident from the responses that the pervasiveness of violence against women and its far-reaching impacts on their lives are significant, persistent, and often beyond the scope of traditional methods of data collection and analysis. Nonetheless, violence against women typically impacts women emotionally and socially, causing them to withdraw from public life and limit their political and social participation. This withdrawal is often a protective measure taken in the absence of adequate safety mechanisms. Accordingly, ongoing violence can significantly influence their choices and limit their experience. The traumatic experiences that women have endured often affect their ability to engage in public life.

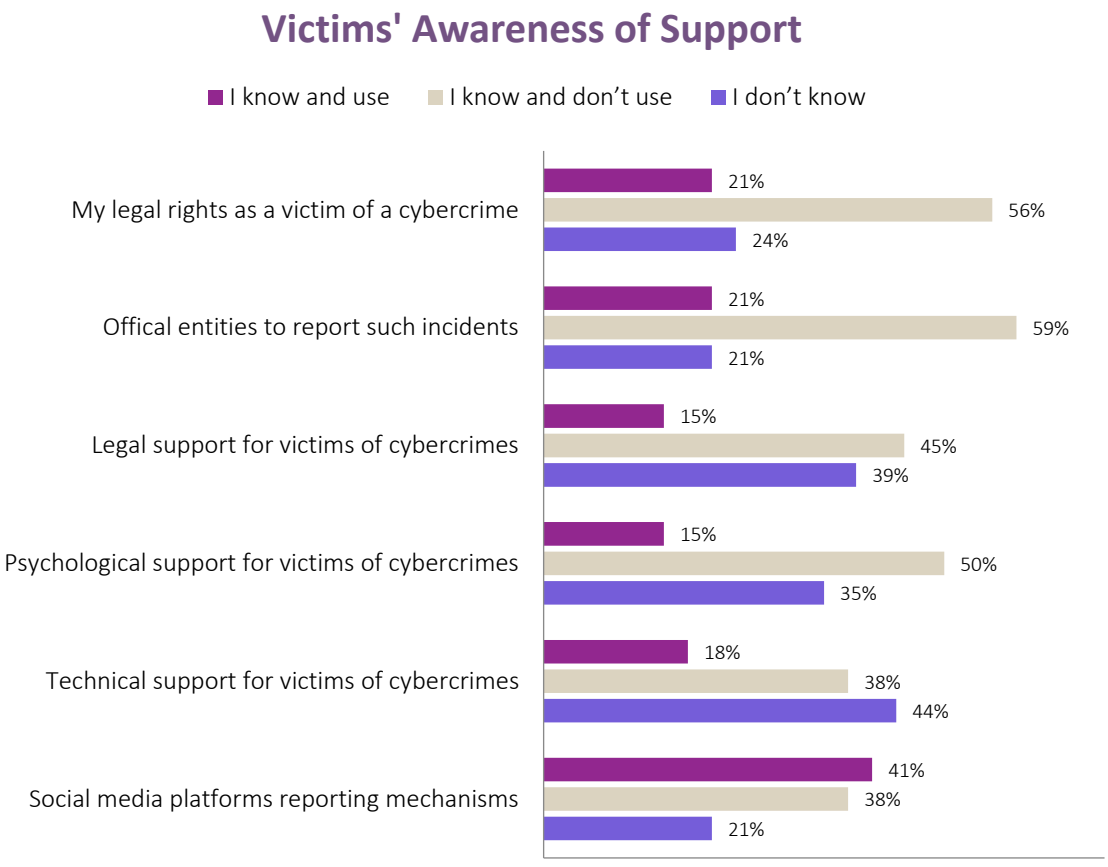
Impact of DVAW



What Prevents Women from Seeking Support: Problems of Support Tools and Solutions

This research reveals that women are often aware of various forms of support but choose not to utilize them, largely due to a lack of faith in the efficacy of these institutions to provide genuine support. In addition, they believe that seeking assistance is a waste of time that may result in additional difficulties rather than resolution. To address this issue, it is necessary to explore the root causes that impede women from seeking support from relevant authorities, and to consider measures that could enhance the reliability, safety, and effectiveness of these institutions. The ultimate goal should be to either improve the current system or to establish alternative support structures that better serve the needs of women.

Based on the data presented in the figure below, it is apparent that approximately 50% of the women surveyed were aware of the existence of legal, psychological, and technical support bodies, in addition to official bodies, but opted not to seek their assistance. In contrast, 41% of women were aware of the reporting mechanisms for social media platforms and were more likely to utilize these mechanisms due to their ease of access and ability to confidentially receive and delete offensive or violent content. It should be noted that the West Bank Police enables electronic complaints to be submitted through their website, and there are community platforms such as Munser Hur, which is affiliated with Hamleh Center for social media development and aims to document and eliminate offensive content.



Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the availability of support tools for women to combat digital violence is limited, and this is associated with a range of factors that can be addressed and improved to ensure that women are surrounded by the support necessary to confront and break the cycle of violence. One of the most significant challenges that women face in seeking support is a lack of confidence in the providers of support or a lack of awareness among providers about the existence of these tools.

Notwithstanding, there exists a discernible trend in the reporting of complaints with official authorities. For instance, in the Gaza Strip, the Director of the Cybercrime Department at the General Investigation Department, Hussein Abu Saada, acknowledged that cybercrimes have been increasing annually in a proportional manner. In 2021, the department completed approximately 5,000 tasks, and during the past year, cybercrimes escalated by 200% compared to the same period in 2022, with the department receiving over 500 complaints per month.[31]

According to the Palestinian Police statistics on crimes in the West Bank for the year 2022,[32] the Cybercrime Department recorded an 18% increase in the number of complaints submitted for cybercrimes in 2021. Of the total number of complaints, 50% were filed by males, while 44% were filed by females, and the remaining were joint complaints.

It has been observed that the percentage of complaints submitted to the Cybercrime Department by males has marginally increased, which does not necessarily signify that men are more vulnerable to online violence. It is also worth noting that the percentage of female complaints is relatively low, which can be attributed to various social and cultural factors. Women may be hesitant to file a complaint due to the fear of social stigma and the perception that the legal process may have negative consequences for them. Additionally, there is a lack of confidence in the police force and their ability to provide effective solutions and ensure justice for women. This was mentioned by a respondent from the West Bank, who acknowledged that expressed concerns about the monitoring systems in place, which makes her hesitant to submit complaints to official bodies, resorting to consulting friends, or search on my own for ways to secure accounts. Therefore, it can be concluded that women's reluctance and hesitant to seek assistance from official authorities is not necessarily due to their inability to provide solutions, but rather a concern about the potential misuse, abuse, and exploitation of personal information by the monitoring systems themselves.

While another, a Palestinian woman from in the 1948 territories, highlighted the nature of this issue saying that the police do not take such complaints from the Arab community carelessly, particularly those related to women, including online and offline violence. The failure to take these complaints seriously has resulted in these women being killed, even when they have reported incidents to the police. Therefore, she expects digital violence to be overlooked and will never take it seriously. Therefore, women not only choose to avoid filing a complaint, but rather not taking it seriously and choose to ignore violence.

One of the participants, a student and activist, shared her experience of filing a complaint: "My friend and I went to file a complaint. Unfortunately, she was made feel as though she was being accused and had to prove that she did not know the person and was there to help her find out his identity." This

[31] Safa (2022). Gaza Investigations to "Safa": Electronic crimes are on the increase, and we receive 500 complaints per month.

[32] Palestinian Police website (2023). Statistics 2022.

highlights the lack of competence among those who receive complaints in handling sensitive issues with sensitivity. Additionally, it raises questions about the level of protection women receive when choosing the judicial path and submitting complaints. The masculinity of the agencies themselves is also a concern. There is an absence of safe and sensitive paths for women during the complaint-filing process, and this may require a series of interconnected steps. That is, complaint-receiving crews need to be trained regarding the rights of complainants and the limits of the work of employees in the agencies. Specialized training on gender and the establishment of safe paths for women filing complaints is also necessary. Oversight bodies should monitor the work of the concerned authorities in receiving complaints and verifying their validity and effectiveness.

Within the context of managing social media sites, a disparity in percentages exists. In more detail, 28% of participants reported finding their experience to be beneficial, while 25% indicated that it was not. This discrepancy is primarily attributed to the fact that addressing violence on social media platforms requires a significant amount of time, and therefore the management mechanisms and policies must be thoroughly developed. To ensure a safe internet for women, social media platforms must take immediate action against violence, such as identifying and removing content that contains hate speech or promotes violence. This is a point emphasized by Ahmed Al-Qadi in the interview, where he stressed the importance of collaborating with social media companies to create a list of keywords that indicate gender-based violence and promptly eliminate it. However, he also acknowledged the gravity of this issue, as it may infringe upon freedom of expression. Therefore, caution must be exercised when implementing these measures to prevent them from being misused to achieve other objectives.

For example, the algorithms of social media platforms have an inclination to swiftly and immediately remove Palestinian content that includes specific keywords, such as "martyr." However, these platforms have been slow in implementing policies that aim to safeguard women and prevent posting offensive content targeting them.

The challenge also lies in the fact that platforms are a space for expression and documentation. Therefore, if a woman experienced gender-based violence and decided to document her experience and write about it, how can algorithms be developed to preserve this woman's testimony and differentiate between documentary content and inflammatory content? As Ahmed Al-Qadi pointed out, it is necessary to establish a list of offensive words and build algorithms that can react immediately to such content while also taking into account the complex context in which the words are used. This is especially important to avoid deleting content that is part of a person's personal experience and should be preserved. Careful consideration must be given to the development of these technologies to ensure that people's right to expression and documentation is protected.

With regards to seeking assistance from technical support agencies, 41% of participants reported that they did not utilize technical support agencies due to their unawareness, while 22% believed that such agencies did not exist. These findings underscore the importance of enhancing the visibility and accessibility of technical support agencies to ensure that women can benefit from their services.

With regards to psychological support, 35% did not utilize such services due to their unawareness of their availability. Additionally, 32% of participants believed that such support did not exist. These findings suggest a deficiency in women's ability to access pertinent information and resources, which is reflected in their knowledge of the availability of support structures. It also indicates a scarcity of

initiatives aimed at providing psychological and technical assistance. Consequently, the limited number of such initiatives hinders the ability of support services to absorb the magnitude of violence experienced daily, which in turn affects women's choices when seeking support. To address this issue, there is a need to encourage the development of more initiatives that provide the necessary support to ensure that services are adequately available and accessible to those in need.

In the legal framework, the development of laws and their operating methods is crucial to mitigate digital violence against women (DVAW) in Palestine. This requires a change in the approach taken by official authorities, as there are laws in place to hardly protect women, but their effectiveness is hindered by a lack of the legal background and the operation of the system. It is also important to note that 52% of the participants agreed on the necessity of criminalizing violence legally and imposing deterrent penalties on perpetrators. However, this percentage may indicate two underlying issues. Firstly, 40% of the participants indicated that there are insufficient legal institutions to provide legal support, resulting in a lack of knowledge of relevant laws and a lack of confidence in the accountability system. Secondly, the lack of knowledge and understanding of the legal system and its procedures can discourage women from filing complaints.

The second challenge pertains to the lack of confidence in the legal process and its functioning, as laws alone are not adequate to create an atmosphere of safety for women to file a grievance. Unfortunately, women who seek support from relevant authorities are often subjected to violence, as 27%, refrained from seeking legal support due to a lack of trust in these authorities.

The emergence of laws safeguarding women's rights did not result from a human rights movement and social demand for change, but rather arose in the context of the establishment of the Palestinian state following the Oslo Accords. Consequently, any discussion regarding the development and implementation of such laws must be accompanied by efforts to strengthen the human rights movement and mass movement in Palestine, leading to the creation of fair and secure legal paths through community-based initiatives and tools.

This requires the existence of a mass movement as well as adequate protection mechanisms for activists and any organizations that may be established to advocate for the implementation of these laws and policies.

Another solution that was suggested is the training of cadres and individuals tasked with receiving complaints, with the aim of unifying their efforts. This is a crucial step towards effectively addressing the legal issues identified in previous discussions, as 42.42% of participants indicated that they did not seek assistance from official authorities due to a lack of trust in their ability to resolve the matter.

The lack of utilization of support tools by women is connected to a group of factors that force women to deal with adversity independently rather than soliciting aid when necessary. This is primarily attributed to the overall experiences that women are subjected to daily, which forces them to refrain from accessing resources that would serve as protection in the face of violence.

The development of support tools between regions demands the consolidation of efforts made by relevant authorities and feminist and human rights movements, while being aware of the contextual circumstances in each region. It is also important that the concerned authorities assume their designated responsibilities. Ahila Shomer, Director of the Sawa Foundation, pointed out that it is

necessary to increase the training for various institutions, with coordinated efforts ensuring the quality of services provided to women. This is necessarily linked to the strength of the feminist social movement and the development of alternative and societal feminist mechanisms that push towards raising women's issues and changing the existing structure and building more fair alternatives for women. The strength of the feminist movement and the development of alternative and societal feminist mechanisms are crucial to advancing women's issues. This includes accounting for existing structures, enhancing their capabilities, and striving towards the establishment of more equitable alternatives. These efforts must be undertaken in a manner that is appropriate to the context and objective reality in each region.

The majority of the participants expressed the importance of improving a set of measures that will provide protection for women. These measures include altering the approach taken by social media platforms in addressing gender-based violence, engaging civil society institutions, and promoting the availability of psychological, legal, and technical support for women. It is essential that these resources be provided free of charge to ensure that women can access and benefit from them.

Strengthening campaigns that address digital rights issues, incorporating education on human rights in school and university curricula, and providing training in various institutions are crucial in enhancing women's access to human rights information.

This may require establishing productive dialogue among all parties involved, with a focus on developing effective coordination mechanisms between legal and executive bodies, as well as psychological and technical support services. The ultimate goal is to create a secure environment that facilitates a smoother and safer procedural process, particularly for women who choose to pursue legal action against their assailants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to explore the nature of digital violence against Palestinian women and its operational dynamics within the complex Palestinian context, considering the geopolitical factor that affects women's experiences. It was concluded that Palestinian women who are politically active are more vulnerable to digital violence. Moreover, the region from which women come and their geographical location play a significant role in their exposure to violence. This study also found that Palestinian women are reluctant to file complaints with the police. Therefore, this research proposed a set of recommendations based on the understanding of the context and its complexities, as identified by the participants, including the experts. These recommendations include:

- **Conducting more relevant research and studies:** It is imperative that more comprehensive investigations and analyses be undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of the context and the overall experiences of Palestinian women. Such research should focus on specific target groups and be more specific to ensure the accuracy of results and findings. This researcher highlighted the need to explore the issue of DVAW who are politically active to understand the different structures of violence against them. It is also necessary to conduct research related to digital violence against female university students, including its nature and scope.
- **Strengthening the establishment of community initiatives and formulating alternatives:** It is highly encouraged to endorse and boost initiatives that can manage and resolve matters pertaining to digital rights and digital security, and to proactively pursue options that enable women to seek and receive aid.
- **Strengthening capabilities to combat digital violence:** It is imperative to form organizations including specialized bodies to address digital violence issues as well as the political obstacles that have been highlighted. Such organizations should provide these bodies with the necessary resources to furnish them with the wherewithal to dispense effective services, including psychological, technical, and legal support.
- **Training cadres to deal with digital violence:** It is highly recommended that workers in security agencies and community institutions receive specialized training on how to handle cases of DVAW. This training should encompass technical, psychological, and legal aspects to ensure safe accompaniment and a thorough understanding of the context and methods of support.
- **Improving legal systems and legislation:** It is imperative to undertake a thorough examination of the legislation pertaining to DVAW to improve and strengthen the safeguarding of women's rights. The legislation should incorporate adequate penalties for offenders and provide strategies for efficient and effective investigation and accountability. It must be recognized that legal legislation alone is insufficient to change the prevailing circumstances, and that the legal pathway is problematic. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to pursue the establishment of independent societal bodies that are empowered to monitor the effectiveness of legal measures and provide guidance for their improvement.
- **Enhancing women's access human rights information:** All human rights information needs to be more accessible to all individuals, particularly women, by providing it in various forms and formats. This can be achieved through providing training, organizing events and courses, and enhancing their technical proficiency, which enables women to find the appropriate support tools.
- **Changing societal culture to make it supportive of women:** It is imperative to increase awareness campaigns in both the public domain and educational institutions, with the primary aim of educating the general public on digital violence, its characteristics, and its impact on marginalized groups, particularly women. These campaigns should also concentrate on enlightening people about detrimental conduct and providing support to affected women, while promoting a discourse that advocates for the empowerment of women in society.

- **Developing preventive technologies:** It is imperative to promote research and development in the field of information technology to create technical instruments that prohibit the diffusion of misogynistic content and technologies that impede the circulation of harmful material, particularly in the Arabic language and local dialects. These tools should be designed to allow women to communicate in a secure environment and document their experiences without fear of further violence or infringement of their right to expression. Moreover, it is essential to foster greater cooperation between the technical units of relevant authorities, civil society organizations, and social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This collaboration should be guided by the principle of putting women's interests first, without resorting to political manipulation.
- **Continuous follow-up and control:** It is imperative that ongoing efforts be dedicated towards tracking and evaluating the performance of the relevant authorities in combating DVAW through the implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. It is also crucial to establish avenues for receiving complaints and feedback from women and relevant authorities, and to take the necessary actions to promote improved performance and provide the necessary support. Additionally, support and protection must be provided to the bodies responsible for monitoring and following up on the implementation of these efforts.

In conclusion, based on these recommendations, policies can serve as a comprehensive framework for addressing DVAW, encompassing legal aspects, training, public awareness, preventive measures, institutional structures, research, and promotion of research that is informed by the actual needs of the population.