Digital Violence from the Perspective of Libyan Female Leaders

Dec
2022

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Acknowledgment

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Rana Al-Akbani is a trainer, media consultant, well-known editor, and researcher. She currently is the director of North African Media Academy (NAMA), an independent non-profit organisation that works to support media development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and provides services across the region. NAMA works with experts to conduct research on media and communications across politically and socially sensitive environments in the target communities. She is member of the Experts Council of the Fetisov Journalism Awards, one of the largest international contests intended to reward outstanding journalists around the globe, and she was the only Arab journalist on the award's expert panel in 2022.

Partners

Produced by: The SecDev Foundation

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

Coordinated by: Salam@

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

This is an English translation of a 2022 study written in Arabic. That research was extended in 2024 with significant new data and analysis—available in Arabic here, with English pending.

Contents

Executive Summary

This research aimed to answer the following question: *What are the most significant forms of gender-based digital violence and what are possible solutions to combat it from the perspective of active female leaders in the public sphere in Libya?* This research also investigated the experiences of these women with digital violence, which may not necessarily reflect their experiences in Libya.

This research was prompted by the urgent need to analyze this issue and conduct a qualitative study of the experiences of women in Libya who are more visible in the public space, expressing themselves, and exercising leadership roles, which often results in negative and denounced reactions, including gender-based digital violence that has an impact on them and their social circle.

Furthermore, this research sheds light on the measures that have been taken to address digital violence or support its survivors, whether at the individual/group level of activists in this field, or at the official/governmental/institutional level, as represented by legislating deterrent laws and penalties to combat it.

Given the dearth of information available on Libya in reports issued by international organizations and global research centers, it is evident that further research and studies on broader segments of society are necessary. However, due to time constraints and the need for a preliminary investigation, qualitative research methodology was deemed more appropriate than quantitative research.

The target research group comprised 12 Libyan females who had suffered digital violence, including business owners, artists, influencers, members of government bodies, institutional administrations, or legislative bodies involved in enacting legislation against digital violence. Furthermore, it included female lawyers who represented victims and female politicians who actively participated in public spaces by exercising their rights.

The target group was selected to cover the most prominent aspects of this research, based on a set of criteria, that is, a direct relationship with the research topic, geographical diversity, ethnic diversity, different age groups, different job levels, duration of activity on social media platforms, and types of activities and reactions provoked.

The target group for this study was identified based on a set of criteria, including a direct relationship with the research topic, geographical diversity, ethnic diversity, representation across different age groups, job levels, and duration of activity on social media platforms. Additionally, this study aimed to capture a range of activities and reactions on social media platforms.

Data were collected through individual case studies, initial in-person or online interviews, and supplementary telephone or email interviews. Although the study was primarily qualitative in nature, quantitative indicators were used in the questionnaire, which was sent to the participants via email or messaging applications to provide general trends in the sample as a guide rather than as a measurement.

This study did not delve into the issue of offline violence against women, except as it pertains to digital violence, including whether there is a direct or indirect relationship between the two and the opinions of the participants regarding the direction of the causal link.

The scope of our examination of digital violence was confined to instances of incitement of physical or verbal violence, sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, bullying, hate speech, defamation, violation of privacy through unauthorized access to email or social media accounts, dissemination of private, false, or misleading information, slander, and blackmail through online posting of electronic audio or visual materials.

The main results of this study are as follows:

In Libya, women who hold leadership positions or advocate for change in the public sphere are vulnerable to gender-based digital violence. Violence is often perpetrated through paid campaigns or by unpaid individuals. These attacks on women's reputations can be devastating both personally and professionally. Moreover, women leaders in Libya are frequently the targets of complex gender-based violence that intersects with other factors, such as their social status or political affiliation. The role women play in society, and therefore the way they are represented online, can have a direct impact on the level of violence they experience.

While both men and women are subjected to digital violence, research indicates that women are more frequently the object of a distinct type of gender-based violence, which not only impacts them personally but also affects their family members and closest social circles.

Female politicians are at risk of systematic violence because of their political positions, opinions, or conflicts with their opponents. These attacks are often carried out by individuals using fake accounts to impersonate targeted women and their reputations and assassinate them morally.

Gender-based violence inflicts significant harm on those who experience it, regardless of the form it takes, whether it is psychological, social, or professional impairment. The fear of such violence spilling over into real life is a concern for many individuals, particularly for women. It is noteworthy that those who have experienced violence have not received any governmental or institutional support. The only assistance they receive is from their families, which, in the case of female leaders, enables them to become who they are today.

This research has concluded that there is a lack of adequate and effective legal measures to curtail and combat this issue, and that the Cybercrime Law of 2021 is inadequate and lacks implementation mechanisms. The absence of legal initiatives and tools to combat digital violence exacerbates this issue. Furthermore, conservative families often prevent their daughters from pursuing legal action, citing the desire to uphold traditional values and customs.

This study has put forth several suggestions derived from the viewpoints of the participants and the investigator's observations, as follows:

The following recommendations, which are presented in detail at the end of this research, highlight the need for increased awareness and support for victims of gender-based digital violence in Libya. There is also a need to establish and support organizations and institutions that offer diverse forms of

psychological and legal assistance to those who have experienced digital violence. These recommendations include advocating for public issues, conducting further research to better understand the communities and contexts of women in Libya, tracing the roots of violence within these communities, and revealing the most effective methods for combating it.

Legal reform is also of utmost importance, including the amendment and revision of the Cybercrime Law issued by the Libyan House of Representatives in September 2022 and the development of security units and police stations equipped with the necessary technology and expertise to pursue and apprehend perpetrators.

Finally, institutions should be established to provide digital awareness training for women and put pressure on social media platforms to take more serious and immediate measures to combat digital violence. These institutions played a critical role in supporting and protecting the digital presence of women in Libya.

Introduction

The various types of harassment that an individual is exposed to in cyberspace are known as digital violence, a global phenomenon that has been investigated by many studies and has shown that the degree of exposure to it varies from one person to another based on several factors, perhaps the most prominent of which is gender. According to the Council of Europe, "digital violence is a growing problem around the world and is often gender-based and targets women,"[1] while the European Union estimates that "one in 10 women have already experienced some form of online violence from the age of 15 and older."[2]

Studies also confirm that the consequences of digital violence on women often undermine their security and push them to withdraw from playing prominent roles in public life, especially those working in the political and media fields. A study issued by UNESCO in 2020 stated that 30% of female journalists who responded to the study questionnaire and were exposed to digital violence exercised self-censorship when using social media, 20% stated that they stopped interacting online, and 18% had specifically avoided public participation.[3]

The effects of violence on work and productivity were examined. It was concluded that 38% of participants limited their public appearance, 11% did not show up at work, 4% resigned from their jobs, and 2% completely retired from journalism.[4]

The report also raised the issue that most female journalists who experience digital violence do not report these attacks, which, according to the research results, explains the low number of reports concerning violence against women and the fact that many employers are reluctant to consider violence as serious cybercriminals.[5]

Regarding the Arab world, a study on digital violence against women conducted by UN Women stated the percentage of women who were exposed to digital violence and reported that in 2020, 60% and 44% of women were exposed more than once.[6]

In Libya, the spread of the Internet has lagged behind neighboring countries for several reasons. The most important of these were the siege imposed on the country in the 1990s, weak infrastructure, and other reasons related to the country's geographical and demographic structure. Thus, Internet use did not spread until the beginning of the millennium, when service provision was limited to Libya Post and Libya Telecommunications and Technology Company, which had been Libya's only Internet provider for many years. The company began marketing the dial-up Internet service in 1999, and the number of Internet users increased after the launch of the Libya DSL service in 2005 but remained limited until the LYMax project was launched in 2009.

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[1] Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/cyberviolence-against-women

[2] Violence against women: an EU-wide survey
https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf

[3] UNESCO, 2020: Online Violence Against Women Journalists Global Snapshot. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid.

[6] Violence against Woman in the digital space: Insights from a multiplex study in the Arab countries
https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Summary_Keyfindings_Arabic_Final_2022.pdf

During this period, mobile phone companies launched Internet services on mobile phones, and by 2009, the Internet had spread widely, similar to the rest of the countries in the region. With the spread of smartphones, social media has become the most widespread means of communication among Internet users, as shown by the political events that took place in the region as a whole, from Tunisia in 2010 through Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria in 2011. Social media was the most important means of interaction that reflected what was happening on the ground and vice versa.

The population of Libya, according to the "Population Estimation by Regions" report issued by the Department of Statistics and Census in 2020, is approximately 7 million people,[7] while the percentage of females is approximately 49.6% of the total population,[8] and the age of approximately 41.57% of the population ranges from 25 to 54 years, which is the highest age group among the population, followed by the percentage of children, and then the age group from 15 to 24 years, which amounts to approximately 15.21% of the total population.[9]

Given the difficulty in obtaining recent information on labor force rates and the rate of women's participation in the labor market from direct Libyan government sources or international sources affiliated with international organizations and bodies, we used data from the Employment and Unemployment Survey for the year 2013 issued by the Department of Demographic and Social Statistics at the Bureau of Statistics and Census, which is the most recent report. In particular, the percentage of employed people of the total number of working-age individuals in Libya was 43.1%, while the economic participation rate for females was 39.2% of the general participation rate.

Libya also achieved good rates in women's education, as it is considered an Arab country that ratified the UNESCO Convention to Combat Discrimination in Education and took an additional step by including the right to education without gender-based discrimination.[10] The percentage of women who reached a secondary educational level was 69.4% compared to 45% of men.[11]

In Libya, all children attend school regardless of their gender. However, girls usually complete their education, whereas young men withdraw at the secondary school level and beyond, especially in recent years, to join armed formations, whether affiliated with the state or militias of various types that provide young people with an income source that does not require a specific level of education. This is evident in the statistics of the number of students studying at the University of Tripoli for the academic year 2021-2022, in which the number of male students reached 21,594 compared to 33,307 females,[12] out of 81,886 male and female students who took preparatory certificate exams for the academic year 2016-2017, according to the Libyan Ministry of Education website.

However, the high rate of education for females in Libya does not necessarily mean a high rate of economic empowerment, nor does it protect them from violence, whether in the real or virtual world,

[7] Population Estimation by Regions مصلحة الإحصاء والتعداد (bsc.ly)

[8] Digital in Libya 2018 report https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2018-libya?rq=libya

[9] Libya - The World Factbook (cia.gov)

[10] Arab Gender Gap Report 2020, Gender Equality and Sustainable Development Goals, issued by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Gender gab report Arabic 2020

[11] UNDP Libya website. Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org)

[12] Statistics on the number of (actual) students studying at the University of Tripoli for the academic year 2021-2022. https://uot.edu.ly/gra/

as Libya ranks second in the Arab world in the high gender-gap index of unemployment rates, with women constituting 68% compared to 41% for men. Libya's unemployment rate is the worst in the Arab world, followed by Palestine.[13]

Even in the job market, women are still likely to earn less than men, spend more time doing unpaid work to care for their families, and do not have the freedom to choose the profession they pursue or the freedom of movement and time to achieve career advancement that men can achieve. Under the same circumstances, it is also likely that they will not be protected from gender-based violence, as anecdotal evidence indicates a widening cycle of violence against women, especially in the context of domestic violence.

This causes increasing pressure on women, who have had to bear the responsibility of supporting their families, because of the ongoing wars in different regions of the country in which men are mainly victims. This forced women to face economic destitution without the availability of real support programs from the state or society, which still believes that the main role of women is to take care of the family and raise their children.

Many women turn to social media either as a source of entertainment due to psychological pressure and tension or as a source of income, offering various services. The most important of these are preparing household products and marketing them on these platforms, working as sales representatives for external brands, or offering delivery services (taxis for women), especially in conservative governorates, where women cannot use public transportation. Thus, these sites played a major role in enabling women to work and communicate with their target audience without leaving their homes.

According to Dataportal.com and comparing the Digital in Libya reports for the years 2021 and 2022, there were 3.47 million Internet users in Libya in January 2022, equivalent to 49.6% of the total population at the beginning of 2022. More than 10% of the statistics are for the year 2021. This may be due to an increase in the speed of Internet connections because, based on the same report, the speed of Internet connections in Libya increased by approximately 9% between these two years.[14]

At the same time, Libya recorded a number of active users of social media that far exceeded this number, as the number of active accounts reached 6.40 million, equivalent to 91.4% of the population, about 40% of which were female accounts.[15]

This number is significantly higher than the number of active Libyan accounts on social media platforms in 2021, which amounted to approximately six million, representing 86.8% of the population.[16]

The report showed that the reason for the discrepancy between these numbers is that the user numbers reported on social media platforms are typically based on active user accounts, and may not represent real individuals. For example, an individual may maintain more than one active account on

[13] Arab Gender Gap Report 2020, Gender Equality and Sustainable Development Goals, issued by the United Nations, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

[14] Dataportal.com. Digital in Libya 2022 report.

[15] Ibid

[16] Dataportal.com. Digital in Libya 2021 report.

the same platform. Likewise, some accounts may represent "non-human" entities, including pets, historical figures, businesses, groups, and organizations.

However, given the Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report issued by Meta in December 2021, the report stated, "We removed 41 Facebook accounts, 133 pages, 3 groups, and 14 Instagram accounts. They were primarily created in Turkey and targeted the Libyan people. We found that this network, as part of our internal investigation of suspected organized behavior in Libya, was linked to previous reports of impersonation. We have linked this activity to the Muslim Brotherhood's Libyan Justice and Construction Party."[17]

According to the same report, "The individuals behind this activity published news in Arabic about current events in the region, including postponing elections and criticizing the rise of women in politics, society, and the media. This network created pages claiming to be run by female public figures to make inflammatory statements on their behalf. They then use other pages to criticize these fake posts with the aim of encouraging attacks and harassment of female figures."[18]

This information confirms the existence of organized networks that target Libyan women in the public sphere using fake social media accounts, impersonating other real or even invented personalities, and besieging them to withdraw from playing prominent roles by assassinating them politically and morally. This finding was confirmed in the present study. As mentioned earlier, some participants were exposed to systematic violent campaigns within the framework of political conflict.

Linking these networks to political parties and movements is supported by the fact that these activities are paid for and political money is used to finance them. The same report stated that approximately USD 59,000 was spent on this campaign in the form of sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram, most of which were paid in US dollars and Swiss francs, respectively.[19]

Therefore, the presence of women in virtual reality imposes challenges that are not different from offline reality. The violence exercised on women in the virtual world is a perpetuation of the violence practiced against them in real life, where the vocabulary of verbal violence used in reality has remained unchanged in the virtual space. Digital violence is often justified by prevailing culture, customs, traditions, and religion. In many cases, attempts to exclude women and suppress their voices are not considered as digital violence. Rather, it is a defense of identity, religion, or the morals of society. Violence campaigns specifically target female politicians, television broadcasters, artists, and defenders of women's rights, human rights, and the freedom of speech. It also targets less-active women, although in smaller proportions.

This is also consistent with what was stated by a number of participants in an academic study on Libya entitled "Gender Equality and Violent Extremism," issued by UN Women and Monash University, in which it was stated that "It is known that violent extremist groups use bargaining, blackmailing, and smear campaigns to specifically obstruct women leaders."[20]

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[17] Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, issued in December 2021. (fb.com)

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

[20] Press release for academic study on Libya entitled "Gender Equality and Violent Extremism", UN Women and Monash University, 2020.

Digital Violence and Libyan Law

Libya established a legal framework for transactions in cyberspace more than ten years after the spread of the Internet, and as a result of years of demand and pressure to acknowledge the existence of digital violence, especially gender-based violence. After several proposals for laws and legislation were presented to the Libyan House of Representatives in 2014, legislative authorities began to pay attention to the necessity of regulating this shared digital public space in which violence is no less dangerous than what is practiced on the ground.

Finally, during a plenary session held on October 26, 2021, the Libyan House of Representatives ratified the law to combat cybercrime, making it the first law issued in this regard.[21]

Before establishing this law, cybercrimes committed in Libya were dealt with by resorting to Publication Law No. 67 issued in 1972,[22] or by using the provisions of the Libyan Penal Code, which was established to protect humans from three aspects: physical protection, protection of honor and reputation, and protection of property. Cybercrimes fall under the provisions of protecting honor and reputation, which include a group of crimes such as insults, defamation, and threats.

It is worth noting that Public Prosecution, which is responsible for managing cases, adapted texts to suit crimes committed in cyberspace; however, there were always problems with extracting evidence and adapting laws. In addition to many violations that were not originally criminalized in the Libyan Penal Code, such as electronic impersonation, the idea of violating privacy, and hacking electronic accounts, the Cybercrime Law has established clear definitions, addressing the issue of jurisdiction to consider these cases regardless of the location of crimes. In its third article, which stipulates: “The provisions of this law apply to any of the crimes stipulated in it if all or some of its acts were committed inside Libya, or all of their acts were committed outside Libya and their consequences and effects extended to inside Libya, even if the act was not punishable in the country in which it was committed.”

This made the issuance of this law a necessary step towards framing the problem and setting a general context to deal with it. However, its issuance was met with a wave of denunciation and sharp criticism because it contained what was considered “broad expressions that can be interpreted to restrict freedom of expression.” It also claimed that it imposed severe restrictions on the media because of its invocation of principles such as public security, public morals, and other expressions with unspecified connotations. Accordingly, it can be used to restrict women and impose specific behaviors in public spaces that are consistent with prevailing gender roles in society, which necessarily limits women’s freedom to choose the best method appropriate for them to represent themselves.

It should be noted that the participants in this study were not enthusiastic about the law. Most of the interviews focused on the absence of tools to implement this law as the stages and implementation tools were not detailed. In addition, public prosecutors in Libya lack the ability and experience to deal

[21] Law No. 5 of 2022 regarding combating cybercrime in Libya. cybercrime law in Libya

[22] Law No. 67 of 1972 regarding publications, issued by the Revolutionary Command Council. Publications law in Libya

with electronic evidence and the means of tracking perpetrators to identify and arrest them. Hence, it is impossible to manage cybercrimes in Libya.

One of the participants, a well-known politician, said, “For ten years, there has been no measure that could be taken to respond to electronic violence or track down the aggressors. Even now, after the issuance of the Cybercrime Law, if I decide to take legal action against those who have committed digital violence, I am not sure where I should go. I know that police stations do not have specialists who can investigate the crime and identify the aggressors.”

Another participant, a well-known lawyer, commented on the law saying, "Laws are issued despite our need for them without conducting studies, and we have trouble interpreting them, as they are worded loosely and violate privacy, freedom, and human dignity. This law should have been precise, and, in its current state, it must be amended. The implementation mechanisms were not specified, and this will be exploited to enable a repressive party to implement it.”

Research Framework

In this study, 12 Libyan women who were visible in the public sphere because of the nature of their work and role in society were interviewed. Their ages range from 30-65 years old. They all hold university academic qualifications and are virtually active, with varying degrees depending on the nature of their work.

Among them were those who held a high position in the state and those who had been practicing law for more than 20 years and had taken on important cases that qualified them to assume leadership positions in the state. Two of them headed public or private television channels. In addition, there are distinguished and well-known female journalists, television broadcasters, researchers, and politicians. All had social media accounts and messaging applications. Eight of them were married to children and four were single.

The nature of each participant’s online activities depended on the nature of their job. Some of them communicate using their personal pages and some have a public page on which they share their activities and opinions regarding various issues.

According to the participants, the most commonly used platforms in Libya are Facebook and Twitter. Some participants reported that they preferred Twitter because they could immediately report any violence they were exposed to, and Twitter takes quick measures to deal with violent content, unlike Facebook, which takes a long time to report such content and, in most cases, may not lead to any result.

On the other hand, the most widely used messaging apps are WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, followed by the video-sharing platforms YouTube and TikTok, and to a lesser extent, photo sharing platforms such as Instagram.

The author of this study contacted the participants directly through their personal contacts or shared relationship networks. All participants provided their consent to participate in the research, and the information they provided was used for noncommercial research purposes. In addition, they agreed to allow the researcher to anonymously use their written statements.

Digital Violence from the Perspective of Libyan Female Leaders

According to the responses of the participants in the interviews conducted in this study, 11 of the 12 participants were exposed to digital violence in various forms and degrees.

All participants used the Internet because of the nature of their work, while 10 out of 12 participants used the Internet as a source of information and means of communication. Seven added academic and research purposes. The participants did not use work devices or public places to connect to the Internet; rather, they were all connected using personal devices (phones, tablets, and laptops) that were not shared with family members.

All of them have been using the Internet for the last ten years or more, although the circumstances and purposes of use have changed over time. For example, today, those who hold public positions and need to be present on social media platforms previously use the Internet as a means of communication or for academic purposes, and vice versa. Some previously used the Internet differently because of their jobs, which they no longer perform today.

One of the participants, who holds a prominent position in the media sector, said, “My use of the Internet has increased now more than before because of my job. I have also used it for social networking but to a lesser degree. Sometimes, this use decreases as work responsibilities increase because of my busy schedule and unwillingness to receive false and malicious rumors. I sometimes resort to isolating myself from the negative energy that spreads on these platforms.”

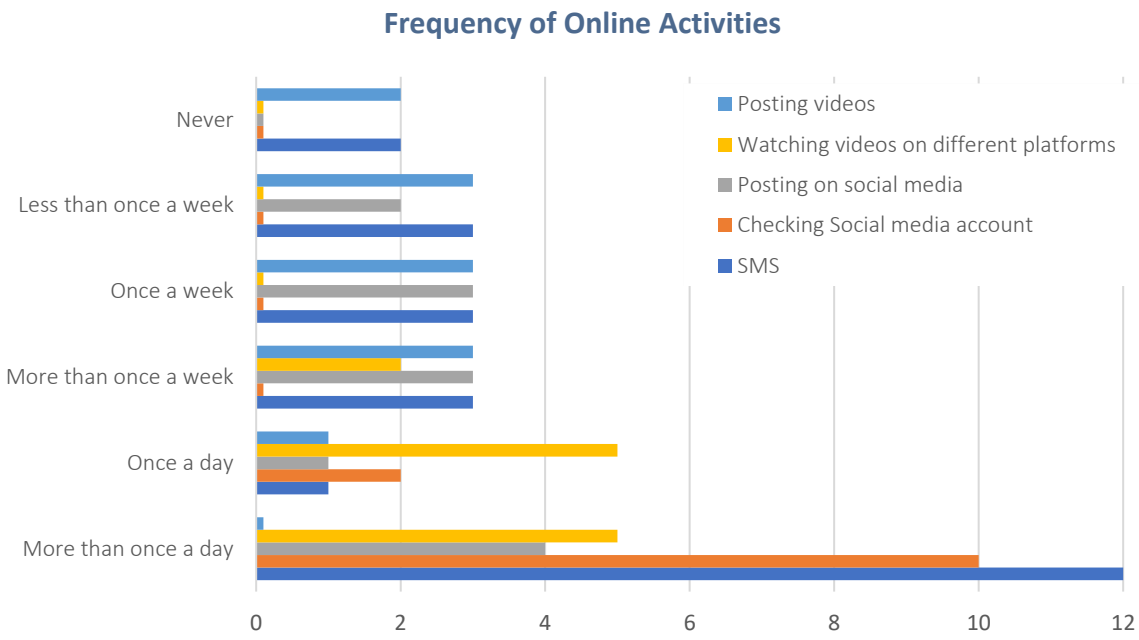
Political and security situations also affected participants’ use of the Internet. During times of war, writing on social media platforms became a source of direct threat. Therefore, people’s online activities decrease, especially for women and those working in the media or those who can influence public opinion.

One of the participants was a prominent journalist who had experienced difficulties expressing her opinions in times of conflict. She said, “Severe polarization forced me to remain silent regarding issues that should be raised in an objective manner, biased towards issues of human rights and peace. I remained silent, fearing the military party, who is in control of the geographical area in which I live. Otherwise, my life would be in danger. This caused me to stop working as a journalist for a certain period, during which time the control of the influential person was strong, and the armed conflict was at its peak. The fact that I was a woman exacerbated the matter, as my male journalist colleagues were exposed to the same threats but were more free and able to carry out their journalistic tasks and express their opinions on social media. It is easier to target and threaten me as a woman.”

Another female journalist was forced not to publish a newspaper article dealing with a sensitive topic in her city, which might have conflicted with the interests of some armed militias controlling the city’s resources. She said that she posted on her private Facebook page requesting that she be connected to reliable sources familiar with the matter. The response to her Facebook post was “a verbal message sent by armed men through my brother-in-law, ordering me to close the file and delete the post in which I mentioned the topic.”

She continues, “Especially if I work on sensitive issues such as immigration, smuggling, or women’s rights, even if it is in a private digital group without using my official public page. They threatened me and told me if I do not stop, my life will be in danger.”

The frequency of the participants’ online activities varied according to the following figure:



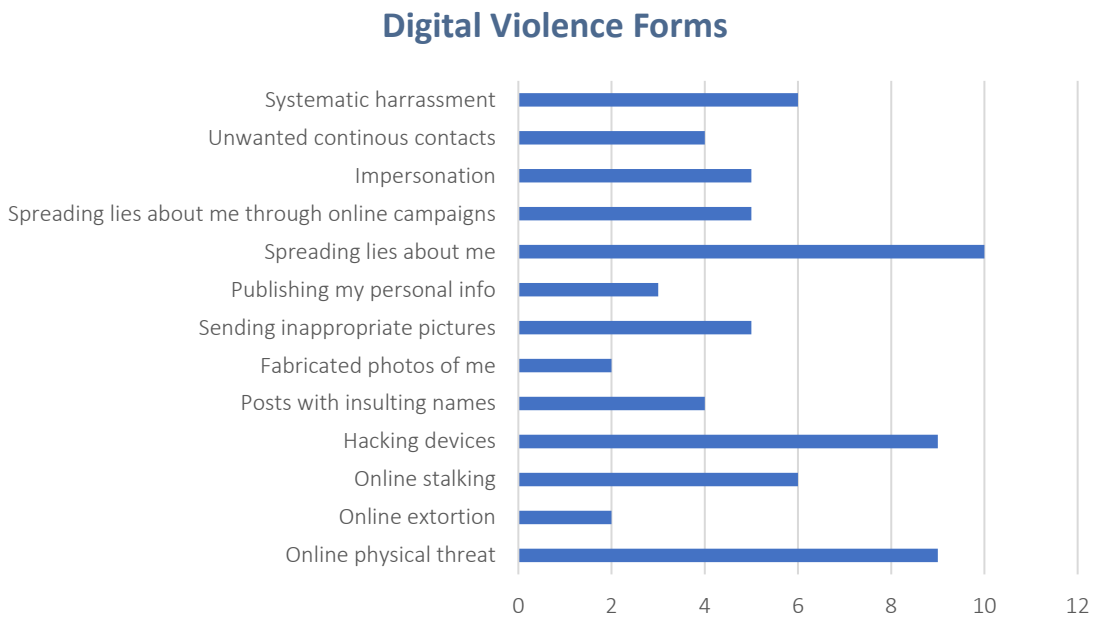
From the figure above, all participants used one of the messaging programs (WhatsApp, WeChat, etc.) more than once a day, 10 checked their accounts on different platforms several times a day, and two did so once every day.

To a lesser extent, the participants took the initiative to publish their own posts on social media, as only four of them posted more than once a day, one did so once a day, 3 them posted more than once a week, three participants published one post per week, and two posted fewer than one post per week.

All participants watched the video clips on different platforms at least once per day. Three of them published their own videos on different video platforms more than once a week, 3 did so once a week, and 3 published their own videos less than once a week. Two of them did not post video content, whereas only one posted videos daily.

Eleven out of twelve participants reported that they usually received violent content via Facebook or Twitter, and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, which were chosen by four out of twelve participants, followed by the photo-sharing platform Instagram, which was selected by three participants. To the same degree, two participants selected email and text messages. Finally, one participant chose video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat as the channels through which she received violent content on the Internet.

According to the following figure, there are many forms of violence:



As shown above, 10 out of 12 participants were exposed to lies and fake news being virtually spread about them, while nine were exposed to online physical threats. Nine participants indicated that their accounts and devices were compromised as they tried to hack them, and six reported that they suffered from monitoring or tracking. In addition, six experienced organized harassment campaigns for political and non-political purposes. Five of them believed that the lies that are being spread about them are done by organized professional campaigns, while five confirmed that they have been subjected to identity impersonation via the Internet with the aim of accessing private information or publishing incorrect statements on behalf of the participants to harm them and ruin their reputation.

One of the five women who were subjected to identity theft on the Internet, who is a famous media figure, said, “One of them created a Facebook page and an Instagram account in my name and posted my photos on them. The two pages dealt with sensitive political topics that put my life in danger, so I was forced every now and then with advice from people from the army in the city of Benghazi to publish a disclaimer concerning these pages to confirm that they are not affiliated with me, and I have no control over what is published on them.”

The same participant believed that the reason for the organized campaign that was launched against her was her work as a programmer on television and because she supervised some T.V. materials that touched on the positions of the Mufti of Tripoli, Sadiq al-Gharyani. She said, “I was subjected to defamation and incitement against me on social media. My name was mentioned on one of the T.V. programs from Tripoli, which is supportive of Mufti. This digital violence turned into real violence during a job trip to Tripoli, where I was beaten in Martyrs’ Square, in front of the Saraya Museum. Then, my crew and I were taken to the police station, where I was recognized by one of the station’s employees, who seemed to know that something was being planned. Thus, they let me go and instructed my colleague that I should stay away, and I actually left the city immediately.”

Concern about digital violence becoming offline violence was the concern of a number of the participants in this research. Nine of them received messages on physical threats via the Internet.

Based on their stories, most had to leave the country, either permanently or temporarily, for fear of these threats or because of their actual exposure to violence.

One of the participants, a well-known television presenter, said, “One time, I was stalked through Facebook by a harasser, who did not stop calling me repeatedly and I did not take his call. He then threatened me with the message that he knew my residential address and place of work, and he could reach me. It frightened me that this digital threat could turn into real life violence. I also constantly receive messages containing sexual and indecent images, and what really surprises me is that the messages are from the accounts of real people, that is, from accounts that do not have pseudonyms or hidden identities."

The frequency of violence that participants receive varies. While three confirmed that they were exposed to violence on a daily basis, the rest stated that they could not determine a pattern for the frequency of violence, as political and security conditions often control this issue. In addition, the intensity of digital violence campaigns increased after any of the participants endorsed a political position or appeared on T.V. to discuss controversial issues.

Seven participants considered that the violence exercised against them was systematically organized on a political basis. However, five believed that it was organized on a religious or social basis (accusing them of not respecting religion, customs, and traditions), whereas seven were exposed to violence exercised by individuals who did not seem to have organized motives. Most of those who experienced digital violence targeted people with fake accounts bearing pseudonyms, and it was not possible to determine their gender.

Is Digital Violence Against Women Gender-Based?

All the participants agreed that the violence they were exposed to was gender-based, as they were exposed to violence more violently than men because they were women. That is, most of them are accustomed to receiving phrases of the type “You are a woman, why do you stick your nose into such topics?” or “Stop discussing such topics and raise your children,” or “Respect yourself and wear the hijab.” This does not deny that digital violence against men is strong and sometimes systematic within the framework of political wars between opponents. However, this does not affect them in the same manner, and the effect disappears faster.

One of the participants, a well-known lawyer, said, “I was exposed to digital violence more severely than men because I am a woman. This violence doubles when it is exercised by members of families and close ones who are affected by violence against me. Therefore, I would hear sentences such as “What brought you into these matters?” This applies to other women in society. When a man commits crimes such as murder or shameful acts that desecrate honor, his family and those close to him stand by his side and try to intervene according to custom to solve the problems. On the other hand, when women are abandoned for the simplest reasons or violation or act that contravenes the customs of society.”

This was confirmed by another participant who worked in circles close to the government, saying,’ The Minister of Culture in Tripoli, Fatima Tughi, was subjected to a severe smear campaign after accusations of corruption, and before the results of the investigation were announced or the court’s

ruling was issued. This campaign significantly affected her. While a number of male officials and ministers in the government were accused by the Audit Bureau of being proven with numbers and facts, these men continued their political careers without being deprived of opportunities to stay in their decision-making positions. Therefore, there is great disparity between women and men, even when committing violations. In other words, society's memory of women is iron. They do not forgive their mistakes."

One participant, a person who works in political analysis and usually appears on T.V. programs and news for this purpose, said, “I was once in Tunisia, and I was out shopping, and one of the television channels called me to appear on T.V. and comment on political events during the army forces’ attack from Benghazi on Tripoli. I told them that I did not have formal clothes and did not have time to return to the hotel or prepare myself. They insisted on appearing on T.V. because of the importance of the event, and I had to agree. By coincidence, I had a military-like green jacket, but it was definitely not military clothing. After my appearance on T.V., I was shocked by a severe campaign accusing me of supporting the war on Tripoli and of going out in military uniforms in support of Haftar’s forces, although what I said did not support military force. However, the public were content with the image and the smear campaign accompanying it to attack me without verifying anything or listening to the program.”

Although this incident is an ideal example of systematic violence on a political basis, the type of attack and its vocabulary are gender-based.

While one of the participants, a media personality and researcher in the field of gender, commented, “I believe that the level of violence to which men and women are exposed due to the nature of their work, for example (a journalist or a politician), is equivalent. However, society’s response and reaction to rumors, the use of sexual images, or the defamation of reputation, as forms of digital violence, is different, as represented in utilized statements, such as “There is nothing that can harm a man's reputation” when commenting on men who are exposed to digital violence. On the other hand, women are greatly affected by such violence and the family circle, especially if they work in the field of defending human rights and freedoms. For myself, my family is used to the nature of the risks that I suffer from because of work, but my in-laws have a hard time accepting it.”

In addition to gender-based violence, to which women are exposed, some suffer from complex violence, in which several forms of discrimination intersect. For example, if she has dark skin, is not veiled, or both, this makes her vulnerable to bullying, harassment, or discrimination.

One of the participants, a television presenter, said, “I am exposed to violence because I am a woman, and this violence is doubled because of my skin color due to discrimination.” Another participant, a researcher and political analyst, confirmed, “I classify the digital violence I was exposed to as complex gender-based violence, because I am a woman and without a hijab.”

Violence is closely linked to the role of women in society. The more famous and active women are, the more likely they are to be exposed to violence. This matter is not limited to those who work in politics, as digital violence affects everyone who dares to occupy a space in the public space, regardless of the type of activity they exercise.

The same participant believes that violence increases "especially when it is linked to a woman's shape and appearance; when it is not consistent with the society's stereotype and what they are accustomed to," for example, when a woman does not wear the hijab, for example, or wears skirts and frilly clothes. This is different from what women leaders in political places or activists are exposed to, as they are exposed to "systematic and obvious campaigns of violence."

Of course, violence is more severe for those who combine both. For example, Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Al-Mangoush is exposed to intense digital violence, including online posts, video clips, and pages attacking her because of her outfits, behaviors, and ways of speaking. In addition, they disown her because she does not represent the socially acceptable example of a Libyan woman. Continuously, stories are made up and published about her private life and relationships, accusing her of having secret relationships or a secret marriage with an influential person in the government in exchange for money and power. In addition, all her official international visits are circulated, showing her speaking, laughing, or greeting a politician with fabricated sexual expressions or connotations aimed at destroying her reputation and social status to fight the rise of women in politics.[23]

In fact, the matter is not limited to female leaders but sometimes even occurs in narrow social circles, such as work, friends, or even family circles. According to one of the participants, a well-known media personality, "Even women who are not active in the digital space and do not have a prominent role in public life are also exposed to digital violence, perhaps in a different way, but they are also exposed to it. It is related to her being a woman, whether she appears wearing a niqab or without a veil, even if she puts a picture of a rose in her account."

Another participant, a prominent journalist, agrees with the previous participants, explaining, "In closed and conservative societies like Libya, simply having a social media account makes her a target for violence. We do not find a safe space for dialogue and digital interaction with other men in particular, without being a target of violence. Sometimes, a comment becomes a systematic campaign of violence against men. We noticed that women felt safer in digital interactions in groups that included only women, and they expressed themselves more freely. This does not deny that women are exposed to violence from others.

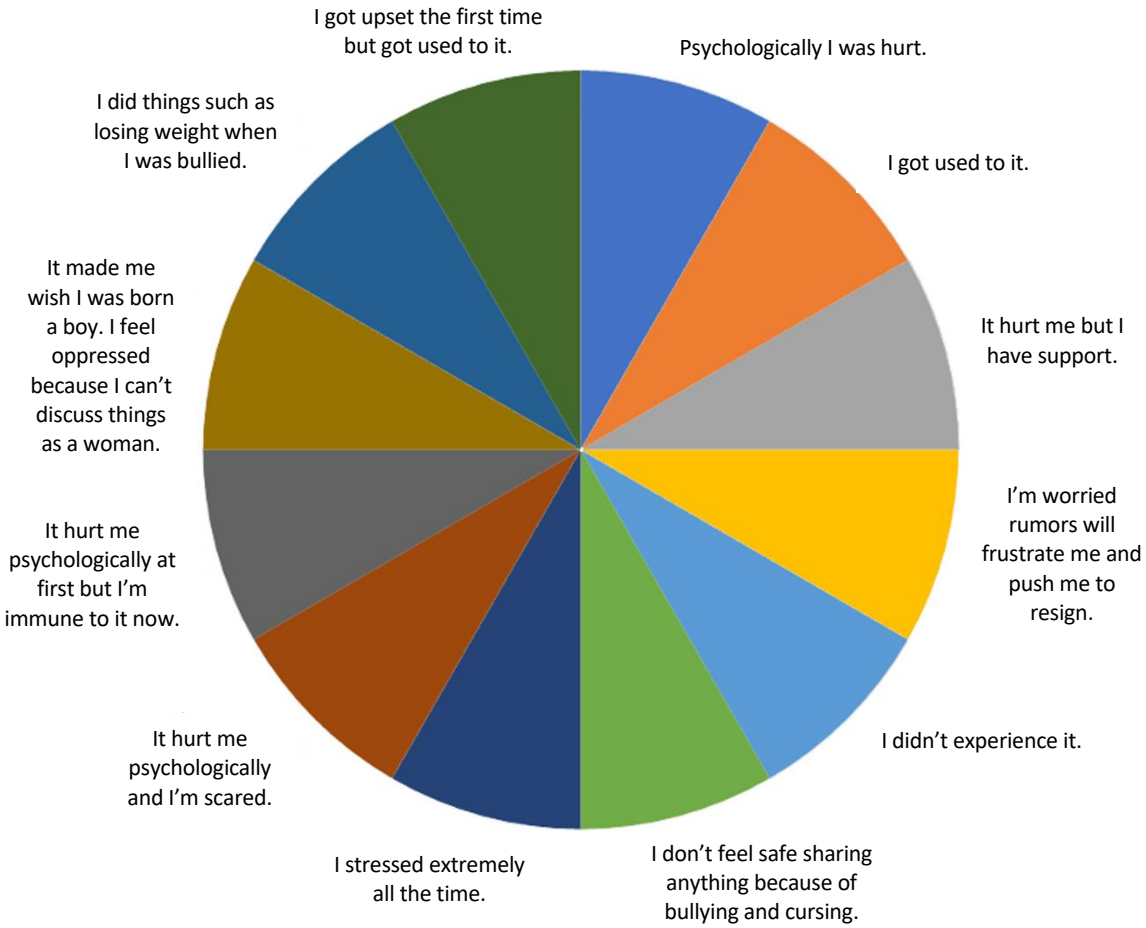
However, more precisely, if we talk about women working in certain fields, I believe that women working in the field of defending women's rights are the most vulnerable to violence, followed by female artists and female journalists, as they face violence caused by their presence and discuss topics that disturb authorities and opinions. Although female politicians are exposed to severe violence, they are part of the political balance and alliances between different parties, and they are also surrounded by those who benefit from their influence, and this does not make them alone in facing this violence."

[23] Video clips attacking Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush and accusing her of moral behavior. Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Elmangoush

How Does Violence Affect Women?

Digital violence has a severe impact on those who are exposed to it, especially psychologically, as all participants who were exposed to it reported that their psychological health was severely damaged. Some of them underwent psychological treatment. Different types of psychological harm emerged from their comments on this question, as summarized in the following figure.

Digital Violence: Impacts on the Wellbeing of Respondents



Three out of 12 participants in the research reached a state of normalization with the violence they were exposed to; that is, it no longer affected them. However, 12 participants confirmed that they experienced stress at some point.

One of the participants, who holds a prominent position in the country, said, "One time I was a victim of a misleading and offensive campaign that caused me to not come to my job for two days, because of the virtual circulation of a picture of me with incorrect comments that insulted me. I felt frustrated, afraid, and did not want to go to work, as I felt that when I go out, people would repeat the offensive comments that were circulated on Facebook."

Of course, the effects of violence affect family members and social circles close to those exposed to digital violence. Therefore, the methods to deal with these sensitive situations differ. While some families support victims of digital violence, others abandon it to please society. The participants' responses varied between those who received full support from the family and partner and may defend them and those who were blamed and abandoned by their closest social circle out of fear for them or out of concern for the family's reputation, which may be harmed by a severe attack on one of their women. The same participant commented, "When my photos were circulated and digital violent campaigns were launched against me, my brother opposed me staying in my job and said that he did not think that my job was worth it. My mother and sisters did not tell me about the rumors and misinformation being spread about me, but they definitely got upset. What worries me is that these misleading campaigns may continue and succeed in creating a false image of me that my extended family members, friends, even those who are close to me would believe."

This situation has expanded the impact of gender-based digital violence. Women experience violence and must deal with the fear that it might lead to real-life violence. They become victims of stress that is a result of sharing the violence they are exposed to with their families, fearing that they will be blamed for causing this violence and that significant restrictions might be imposed on them. One participant, a prominent journalist, said that she preferred not to talk about this issue with her family. She commented, "I usually do not share with them the stress I am exposed to because I am afraid this will affect the space of freedom that I barely have. I always make sure to maintain trust between me and them and also to expand the space of freedom in an unfair negotiation based on the theory. As long as I am worthy of this trust, I will be granted a greater space for freedom. I know that this is not fair, but I deal realistically."

Another participant, a well-known lawyer, was caught in conflict with her family. She said, "My mother categorically rejects the nature of my job, which puts my life in danger, and my brothers also always urge me to leave it, not only for my safety, but also for the safety of my children, as my young son was once intimidated by a number of armed men, which could have become an assassination attempt. However, my husband constantly supports me, and perhaps without his support, I would have resigned."

Thus, in this study, digital violence limited six participants' online activities, whereas the other six participants' online activities were affected. However, it created a "state of challenge" for eight participants, who confirmed that they did not decrease their political or human rights activities, and that their job performance was not affected by this violence. One of the participants, a well-known human rights researcher and media personality, said, "Currently, I do not think about entering the political field, in which female politicians are subjected to hideous smear campaigns that have not only affected them but also prevented the rest of women from working in the field of politics and human rights. I will not stop working in the human rights field regardless of the amount of digital violence I'm exposed to."

One participant, a famous media personality, believes that "during the period of the revolution and immediately after it until 2013, there was a stronger presence of women and their opinions at various levels, including their presence on social media, but this has declined significantly now due to the spread of weapons and the fear and intimidation practiced against women who raise their voice."

By comparing the results of the interviews, we noticed that the participants whose job performance was affected by digital violence were women working in the media field, particularly because their journalistic or media work was completely displayed on social media. Therefore, there are no barriers between them and their audience that will interact with them to support or criticize their contents that reveal certain facts or expose the corruption of certain parties, which exposes them to campaigns of bullying, profiling, incitement, and harassment, as the public sphere allows the perpetrators to feel that they have the right to attack such women because "they put themselves there knowing the risks." Some reduce the time they spend on these social media platforms; accordingly, their performance at work is negatively affected to avoid violence.

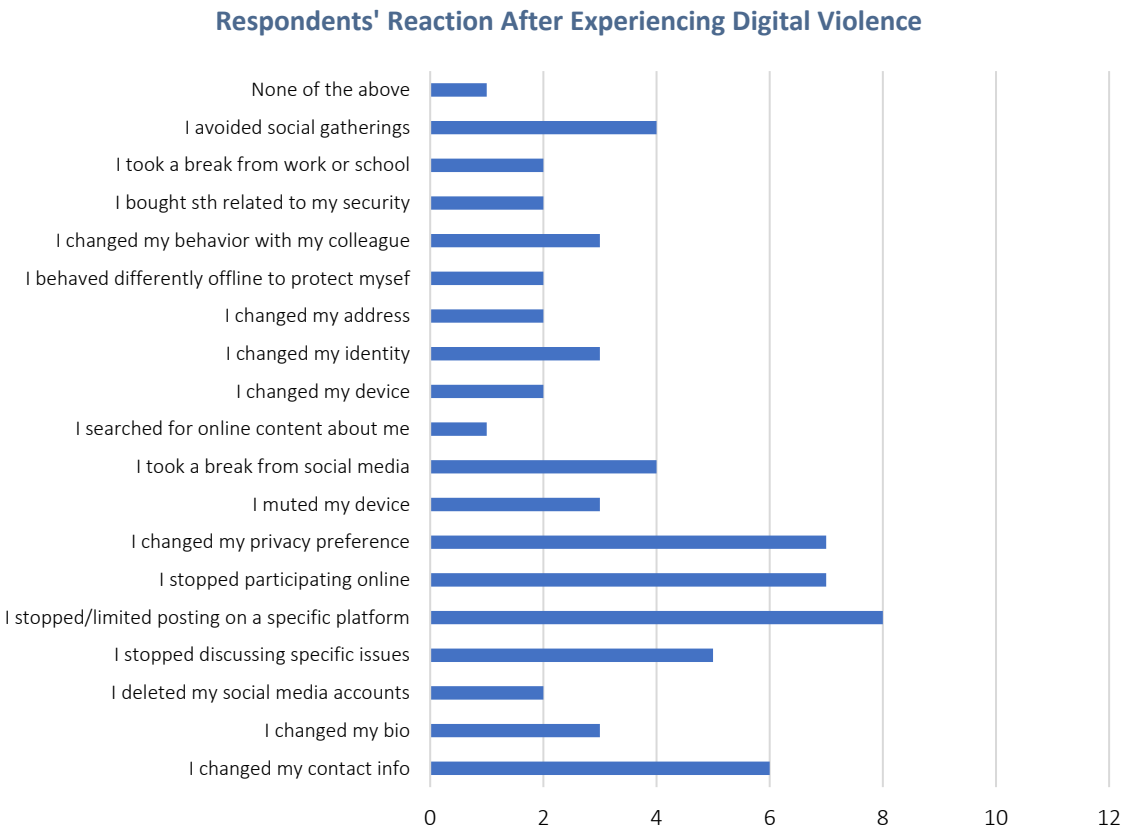
How Do Women Deal with Violence?

As a reaction to the digital violence that Libyan women are exposed to, especially those who are present in the public sphere, eight participants believed that there is no benefit in resorting to security agencies to file complaints because they themselves do not have the necessary tools to track perpetrators or because going to the police station will make matters worse. It is worth noting that society does not accept women entering police stations. One of the participants, a journalist, said, "Social status also plays a role. If I go to the police station to file a report, I will impose more restrictions on myself from those who are around me."

In some cases, ignoring perpetrators may be a better solution if the matter is not more than an offensive comment. One of the participants, a researcher and politician, said, "There was no assault in the sense that required me to take deterrent action, as the form of violence was no more than offensive comments, such as 'you are so impolite!' or "put a veil on your head." It is better to ignore these comments than respond to them and give them value.

Three of the participants preferred to take deterrent measures, either by going to the police and filing reports or by reporting abusive accounts to the administrations of social media platforms. One of them, a famous media personality, used what she was exposed to in a positive way by "working on the matter differently. For example, I am not satisfied with dealing with a personal problem, so I go beyond that and raise awareness or participate in workshops to support women affected by digital violence."

Although attempts to undo the harm of digital violence or arrest perpetrators were not a common option among the participants, they took measures concerning digital and personal security, of which there were various forms, according to the following figure:



As shown, none of the participants completely stopped posting online. Nevertheless, nine stopped or reduced postings on specific platforms, whereas five stopped posting on a specific issue. Unfortunately, two participants deleted their accounts on social media platforms, three took a break from social media, and four searched for online content mentioning them.

In terms of identity management, seven participants changed their privacy settings on their devices or social media accounts, six changed their contact information, three changed their profile information, one participant replaced the devices she used with new ones, and seven blocked or muted their phones to prevent unwanted calls.

In real life, four participants avoided social events, three changed their residence, and two changed part of their identity or behaved differently in the real world. That is, they change the routes they usually take for safety purposes, take leave from work or school, or use security systems, such as a home alarm system or self-defense equipment. Three of them changed their behavior with their partners or co-workers.

Some women who were exposed to digital violence took security measures in real life because of the possibility that digital violence had led to real-life violence. For example, one participant who enjoyed great fame in Libya because of her distinguished work was subjected to a severe campaign of violence as a result of a fragment of an old television interview (out of context) discussing sensitive social and religious topics. A number of offensive names were given to her, accompanied by distorted pictures, and Facebook pages were specifically created to attack her. She personally believes that this campaign is systematic and organized by her opponents, whether politicians or those working in the

same field, who want to thwart her. She recounted what happened to her when she visited Libya in 2012, saying, “I was on a visit to Libya and was stopped at one of the Security Committee checkpoints in Tripoli at Shatt Road. I was accompanied by the Director of Human Resources. Before the officers recognized who I was, they arrested me for being *uncovered*. They inspected my bag and found a work ID card that confirmed my identity. They asked me to leave the car and started calling me one of the names given to me as part of the smear campaign. However, I refused to get out of the car and locked my car and called my brothers, but the gunmen smashed the car’s windows and towed them to the sidewalk while inside. I remained inside the car, refusing to get out no matter what happened, especially because those who attacked me wore shorts and had beards, which made me very afraid. When my brothers arrived, they contacted influential people. Only then, we were allowed to go, and I left the country immediately after that.”

What Support Tools are Currently Available?

Amid the struggle that the participants were going through to combat digital violence, one of them who was exposed to violence did not receive any kind of support because she did not share her struggle with anyone and preferred to deal with the issue alone. In contrast, nine participants received family support, which is theoretically a good number.

However, given the type of women participating in this research and the social and cultural backgrounds that support women in playing a leadership role in society, the number of women who received support from their families did not apply to the majority of women in Libya. Therefore, the average woman may not receive such support when they is exposed to gender-based digital violence.

This was reinforced by the fact that only two participants received support in the work environment after being exposed to digital violence, whereas all agreed that they did not receive any governmental or institutional support regarding the violence they were exposed to. Eight participants confirmed that the institutions in which they worked did not have any deterrent measures when proving that one of their employees had exercised digital violence. Two stated that they did not know of any institutional procedures in which they worked, and four confirmed the existence of internal regulations that specify procedures that can be followed in such cases. However, in two institutions, the procedures were traditional administrative investigations, while in the other two institutions, the procedures included dismissal from work or holding them accountable, in addition to providing psychological support to these women.

The support sought by women who experienced digital violence could not be provided by civil society organizations working in this field. One of the participants, a researcher and media professional, said, “I have not received any support or guidance from institutions or active groups. These institutions exist but have no contact with survivors or victims of digital violence because of their weak financial resources. Therefore, it is difficult for survivors of violence to contact these institutions, not only because of their need for technical support but also their psychological support after the violence they face."

The same participant mentioned some initiatives that she heard about to support survivors of digital violence, such as the (Just Talk) project in the city of Benghazi, which is one of the projects of the French organization ACTED. They have a hotline to receive complaints and provide psychological

treatment to female support-seekers. There is also a hotline affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs in partnership with the UN Women. Although I did not notice any activity or hear of anyone who benefited from their services, they did not publish any reports about their activities."

Six participants claimed that they had not received any such support in terms of technical support or training in digital protection. Some of them expressed a strong desire to receive this training, and one of them, a lawyer, whose son was threatened, confirmed, "I always look for opportunities to enroll in digital security training programs with experts. However, there were not many training programs, and I heard about some of them too late to join. Unfortunately, these opportunities are not well advertised to those interested in taking advantage of them."

Several participants confirmed that they obtained security knowledge either through online self-education, or through friends or colleagues who provided advice in the event that they were exposed to digital violence. Some participants, who were journalists, received direct training that covered only the basic principles and did not delve into the protection methods necessary to combat the digital violence to which they were exposed.

Notably, the Salamat Program for Digital Safety, implemented by SecDev Foundation, was launched in Libya at the beginning of this year. The program included training of trainers on digital safety for approximately 20 women, followed by a series of in-person and online training for young women. The number of organized training programs reached 30, targeting trainees from five geographical regions, and the number of trainees exceeded 900, 750 of whom were female.

In addition, Instagram and Facebook accounts were created, through which digital safety materials were developed and published in the local dialect in Libya. In addition, they interacted with accounts' followers, addressing their questions and inquiries about digital violence from Libya.

However, the participants also complained that the initiatives they heard about and organized by civil society organizations or groups of activists defending women's rights aimed only to raise public awareness and did not provide the psychological, technical, or legal support necessary to combat digital violence.

One of the participants, a researcher in the field of gender, said, "The cybercrime law that was issued last year did not stipulate providing support to the victims of digital violence, especially psychological support, in addition to the role of civil society, which I consider supportive but not essential, since psychological support is expensive and requires high budgets. It is the state's responsibility to enforce the law and have mechanisms and tools to implement it. Just as it is important to have electronic police to identify perpetrators, the law must include mechanisms to support victims."

Thus, after investigating the participants' stories and analyzing and comparing the results, the main conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. Women leaders or activists in the public sphere in Libya are exposed to gender-based digital violence, targeting them in the form of systematic campaigns or unpaid individuals. Some women are exposed to complex gender-based violence that intersects with other aspects, such as ethnic, intellectual, political, or physical appearance.
2. The social role women play in society, and therefore, the way they are represented online, is closely linked to their exposure to violence. There is a direct relationship between the emergence of women as leaders online and the severity and form of violence they are exposed to.
3. Men and women are exposed to digital violence, but to varying degrees, as women are targeted more and with different forms of gender-based violence. The effects of this violence on women, especially in conservative areas, are more severe and impact members of their families and closest social circles.
4. Female politicians are systematically exposed to violence due to their political positions and opinions. This is due to an imbalance in social roles. It targets women exercising a role that they should not exercise, and includes expressions related to discrimination, stigma, and the destruction of social status. It takes the form of campaigns that are not repeated at a constant rate, but rather come in the form of reactions to these women's expressed positions or opinions.
5. Female politicians are also exposed to systematic violence in the context of conflicts between political opponents, and those who carry out these campaigns often have fake accounts that impersonate targeted women, distort their reputation, and assassinate them morally. It differs from violence directed against men in this context, as it is gender based.
6. Gender-based digital violence causes great harm to those exposed to it, whether in the form of psychological, social, or job performance. There is also a risk of digital violence that may lead to real-life violence, which was a concern for a number of participants in this study. Most resorted to leaving the country, either permanently or temporarily, for fear of these threats or because of exposure to physical violence.
7. Women exposed to violence and survivors did not receive any governmental or institutional support. In specific cases, support is limited to the family or workplace.
8. Most Libyan institutions do not implement deterrent measures when one of their employees has been proven to have committed digital violence, and some take non-deterrent measures.
9. There is no effective legal legislation to limit and combat digital violence, and the Cybercrime Law issued in 2021 is considered deficient and lacks effective implementation tools.
10. Owing to the absence of tools to respond to their attackers, women subjected to violence report these accounts on social media platforms. In some cases, they file complaints with police stations or security authorities, and reporting does not usually result in deterrent legal action that combats gender-based digital violence.
11. Social pressure and family attempts to preserve customs and traditions cause some women to avoid taking legal action against their attackers for fear that their families will limit their freedom for safety purposes.

Recommendations

Based on the data and stories in this research, combining gender-based digital violence requires long-term social treatment to address the reasons at the level of collective awareness of individuals' rights and freedoms, and society's acceptance of women's rights to exist in the real or virtual public space and to exercise their right to express themselves, work, and achievements. Accordingly, the recommendations presented below aim to strengthen deterrent measures that work hand-in-hand with an awareness of combating digital violence. Therefore, we recommend the following:

1. Intensifying awareness efforts on gender-based digital violence in cooperation with various media outlets, deepening awareness of the seriousness of this crime, and the depth of its impact and inciting to deter those who commit it socially and legally, in a way that establishes societal change.
2. Establishing and supporting institutions that provide psychological support to those affected by digital violence, especially those who are exposed to severe violence that threatens their lives and social security, or who are exposed to blackmail and harassment to enable them to overcome psychological consequences and rehabilitate themselves to continue living their lives normally.
3. Amending and revising the Anti-Cybercrime Law issued by the Libyan House of Representatives in September 2022 guarantees freedom of expression that does not infringe on personal freedom by creating safer spaces for public interaction, especially by women.
4. Collaborating with security agencies and police stations to create investigation and tracking units that have advanced tools and technical knowledge necessary to prosecute and punish perpetrators to ensure combating digital violence and associated practices in society. This must be included in the law when amended to reduce cybercrimes.
5. Establishing and supporting legal support networks and enhancing communication with jurists to facilitate litigation processes in cases of digital violence.
6. Establishing and supporting institutions that provide digital awareness training for women to protect their digital presence. This support should be directed to all segments of society, including young female schools and university students, to reduce the knowledge gap regarding digital protection and security.
7. Pressuring social media platforms to take more serious, quick, and easy measures to protect women from digital violence through support, advocacy, and boycott campaigns.
8. Conducting more research and studies that focus on women's communities in Libya enables us to obtain more indicators to understand the conditions and problems of this society and provide sufficient data to understand the causes and backgrounds of gender-based digital violence and the best possible ways to combat it.