Digital Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East and North Africa

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Acknowledgment

Contents

Introduction

This paper examines digital violence against women (DVAW) in conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It uses Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Libya and Palestine as models for study. Since the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, many MENA countries have witnessed unprecedented political, economic and social transformations. These shifts have led to political instability in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria. Others have slipped into civil wars and armed conflicts, including the countries examined in this paper. The Palestinian case is distinct, as its conflict is not internal but rather a territorial dispute with the occupying state of Israel stretching over more than 70 years.

The paper is based on a series of 20+ studies of DVAW in the MENA region, conducted between 2022 and 2024 by The SecDev Foundation, most with support from the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This series includes eight studies on our six focus countries, all published on SecDev's website. Seven additional in-depth reports were produced in partnership between SecDev and the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), and these are available on the ARIJ website.

The SecDev studies addressed topics such as the legal and institutional context of DVAW in conflict-affected countries. One study focused on digital violence targeting women leaders and featured contributions from women with extensive experience in community, political, human rights, and media work. Another study examined digital violence against widowed women in camps in northern Syria, featuring interviews with women who had lived in these camps and bore witness to their conditions. A further study looked at DVAW in historical Palestine, exploring the historical context of the fragmented and complex Palestinian political landscape and the governmental and institutional approaches toward each Palestinian region. It also analyzed the dynamics established by the Israeli occupation to fragment society and deepen divisions, as methods of control and violence disproportionately affect women.

The ARIJ investigations addressed the issue of electronic blackmail targeting women with disabilities in Yemen; how female journalists in Palestine work without the Internet after Israel cut off communications; how the occupation digitally isolated Gazans from their families; how Sudanese female journalists face threats of persecution and murder due to their political affiliations; how harassment and death threats affect female football players in Sudan; how ethnic nationalism threatens the work of female journalists in Syria; and how minors fall victim to cybercrimes in Syria as well.

All these studies and investigations document and analyze the reality of DVAW in conflict zones in the region, which of course did not start with the beginning of today's conflicts. Rather, DVAW has roots reaching into the patriarchal culture of those societies, in which the current state of political, security and economic fragility and the rise of religious fundamentalism have greatly contributed to rising severity of digital violence, along with the inability of any of those countries to confront it or find effective mechanisms to limit it.

Reasons for Increase in DVAW in Conflict Zones

The research has concluded that the growing scale and diversity of digital violence against women in conflict-affected areas of the MENA region can be attributed to several key factors:

- **Prolonged armed conflicts** lasting between eight and twenty years (and much longer in Palestine) have contributed to the proliferation of armed militias and extremist groups and the collapse of state authority. This has exacerbated violence against women and led to the deterioration of their conditions across many levels. These conflicts have also hindered the development of institutions tasked with protecting citizens, such as the judiciary, police, and security forces, and have stalled the enactment of new laws responsive to community needs, including digital protection legislation. In parallel, stalled development, rising poverty and unemployment, and declining education levels—worsened by war—have contributed to a surge in online harm. This can take the form of extortion for money, attempts to silence women's political or rights-based positions, or coercion for sexual favors, with women often being the most vulnerable to this type of exploitation.

- **Political conflict** has intensified digital targeting of women leaders and activists in politics, human rights, and the media. These women are frequently subjected to online bullying and smear campaigns—whether individually or in coordinated efforts—by political rivals, ideological opponents, or even armed groups. The aim is to sideline them from political competition and to discourage their participation in male-dominated arenas. In some cases, women are used as tools to discredit political opponents, undermining their standing both socially and politically.

- **Patriarchal societies and structures** in these countries reinforce cultural and societal norms that devalue women and limit their roles. Women are often seen as bearers of family honor or shame, which entrenches male dominance within the household. This results in increased restrictions on women under the guise of preserving religion and morality, and it heightens their fear of reporting harassment or digital violence due to potential punishment—such as being denied access to technology. In more extreme cases, it may lead to being barred from education or work altogether. Despite gains in women's access to education and employment in many of these countries, deep-rooted traditions continue to give men authority over decision-making and household control.

- **The rise of extremism (religious, ethnic and or partisan)** in many of these countries, fueled by political instability, has also contributed to a surge in DVAW. Extremist groups use the internet and social media to impose strict social controls over women and to limit their presence in public spaces. Women who defy these rigid norms face smear campaigns, cyberbullying, threats of violence, and digital extortion. These fundamentalist ideologies also promote hate speech that normalizes the invasion of women's privacy and moral shaming, often pushing women into digital isolation or discouraging them from participating in public discourse for fear of reprisal.

- **The political and colonial context in Palestine** exposes women to compounded forms of violence. Various authorities exploit prevailing social dynamics to intimidate women, particularly those who are politically active. These women are often targeted by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, and the official mechanisms that might offer protection are frequently viewed as unreliable—or entirely unknown to women in various geographic areas.

Forms of DVAW in Conflict Zones

Although the underlying factors that exacerbate DVAW are often similar, each country has its own particularities in how this violence is carried out. In Libya, for example, women have long been used as tools of war. Warring parties have not hesitated to exploit women as a means of shaming and insulting their opponents through coordinated online campaigns. During the 2019 war on Tripoli, for instance—where both sides enlisted foreign forces—each faction tried to humiliate the other by spreading claims that the foreign soldiers were raping women while local men failed to defend their honour. These narratives were disseminated through dedicated social media pages and video platforms, which served as a parallel battleground to the one on the ground.

There have also been coordinated campaigns targeting women in politics and leadership positions across various fields. This was confirmed by Meta's December 2021 *Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour Report*, which revealed that Facebook accounts created primarily in Turkey were targeting individuals in Libya. According to the report, "the people behind this activity were posting Arabic-language news about current events in the region. The network created pages pretending to be run by prominent female figures in order to post provocative statements on their behalf. Then, the network used its other pages to criticize those fake posts and encourage harassment against those women."

Similar attacks on female leaders have occurred in Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria, though each country exhibits a distinct pattern. In Syria, for example, female journalists face digital violence even based on their ethnic background, as revealed by an ARIJ investigation. That same study documented the existence of private groups and channels—particularly on Facebook and Telegram—dedicated to so-called "scandals." These are often run by politically, religiously, or ethnically extreme groups, and are notorious for attacking and defaming women. Their main activity revolves around blackmail, smear campaigns, and publishing what they call "exposés." Women who are active in public life are frequent targets, and their names and images are circulated widely, with no effort to verify the claims being made. This is especially likely in countries with ethnic diversity, such as Iraq and Palestine.

In Sudan, the dominant discourse has taken a hardline religious tone. It hasn't only targeted women in leadership roles—it's also extended to any woman who dares to break with social norms, such as by removing her head covering. Non-state actors have launched digital campaigns urging men to publicly whip such women and report them to family members using digital tools, pressuring male relatives to "discipline" the women in their families.

Sudanese journalists, both male and female, have been named on so-called "lists of shame and disgrace." According to a report from the Sudanese Journalists' Syndicate, anonymous lists circulated with names of journalists accused of supporting one faction or another in the conflict. The syndicate warned that being named on such lists could put journalists at risk of physical harm once fighting subsides.

Digital violence has also targeted women who challenge social norms in other spheres—such as female football players. One player who took part in the women's league said that negative comments on Facebook, audience chants, and even remarks from coaches led several women to quit the sport. Some

were forced into marriage and made to leave football, while others were banned from participating by their families after hearing offensive and shaming comments.

These patterns have found fertile ground in patriarchal cultures that use religion as a shield. Such norms have made these behaviors socially acceptable, even among ordinary citizens raised in environments implicitly hostile to women and fearful of their advancement in public life.

In Iraq, the government itself has played a role in targeting prominent women. According to research, in 2023 the Iraqi Ministry of Interior launched a platform called *Balagh* ("Report"), inviting citizens to report what it described as "low, immoral content that violates Iraqi societal values and traditions." Soon afterward, a committee was formed to monitor this content, prompting concerns from human rights advocates that the platform could be used to suppress free expression and intimidate bloggers critical of government policies.

According to the digital rights organization INSM, 44 legal actions were taken over the past two years, appearing to disproportionately target women—especially those who defy traditional social expectations. This reflects a broader regional trend of restricting women's rights under the pretext of morality and public order.

Contrary to the government's stated intentions, the platform was used to target influential figures in the digital space following a wave of incitement and hate speech—particularly against Iraq's community of bloggers and fashion influencers. Among those arrested during this wave were two women: Asal Hossam and another who goes by the name "Um Fahad," both of whom were active on TikTok.

Even the news of the Iraqi YouTuber and blogger Tiba Al-Ali being strangled to death by her father was followed by a surge of hate speech against the victim herself. The backlash included defamatory posts, incitement, and attacks on her honour, all rooted in victim-blaming and attempts to justify the violence committed against her. Tiba had left Iraq to escape her brother, who had raped and assaulted her multiple times, as she stated on her YouTube channel. She returned to Iraq after repeated efforts by her family to persuade her to reconcile and come back—a return she expressed great joy about on her social media accounts. She was killed shortly after.

The demonization of women and the stripping away of their human rights is a result of the turmoil in these countries, where violence permeates every level of society. In such environments, victims often adopt the role of oppressor toward those more vulnerable than themselves — and so women, being more vulnerable than men, become targets of layered and compounding violence. This violence is then rationalized and blamed on the women themselves.

Blackmailing women in socially fragile environments is also a widespread phenomenon. In Syria, for example, where the war has led to the emergence of camps inhabited solely by widows and divorcees—commonly referred to as "widow camps"—tens of thousands of women and children live in conditions that make them targets for various forms of digital violence, such as blackmail, defamation, and cyberbullying. These women are seen as a vulnerable group, unable to defend themselves. According

to participants in one study, the rise in digital violence against them is driven mainly by poverty and lack of awareness. Many are quick to trust anyone offering help online, making them easy prey.

These women are also victims of societal customs that allow new husbands—or the family of a deceased husband—to take their children away if they remarry, forcing them to sacrifice their own well-being for their children. As a result, many of them turn to the internet in search of grants, aid, and sponsors—using any means available to provide for themselves and their children. In doing so, they often fall victim to scammers and extortionists, and at times give in to coercion that deepens the stigma and discrimination they already face.

In Syria, underage girls have also been targeted, with perpetrators impersonating them online and threatening to expose them. In Yemen, blackmail has emerged as a way to make money. The study found that economic collapse and high unemployment have driven many men to engage in online extortion of women. According to an investigative report published by ARIJ on Yemen, women with disabilities have also been targeted. In several documented cases, women were emotionally manipulated by men who promised marriage or help with treatment, only to later blackmail them with private photos—leading, in one case, to suicide out of fear of public shame.

DVAW in conflict zones across MENA isn't limited to those living inside the region—it crosses borders. Many women who are active online but live abroad have faced severe online abuse that prevents them from participating in political, advocacy, or media work. Some have withdrawn entirely from public life.

According to studies and survivor testimonies, this violence often translates into real-world threats. An Iraqi journalist living in Turkey with her daughter shared that she continues to receive threats even after leaving Iraq. Because her mother still lives there, she often responds to threats in an attempt to de-escalate, fearing harm to her mother. The threats stem from her investigative reporting, especially on women's rights in Iraqi society. The journalist was thrown into a panic after Turkey announced it would allow Iraqis over 60 to enter without a visa. "At any moment," she said, "one of my family members who wants to eliminate me to 'defend their honor' could enter Turkey and harm me. I know no one will protect me here, and that terrifies me."

The studies found that digital violence had spilled into real life for 47% of respondents in Syria, 17% in Iraq, and about one-third in Sudan. In-depth interviews confirmed that this crossover between online and offline violence is also significant in Yemen and Libya. Many participants said they had to change their homes, workplaces, or even leave their countries entirely. For instance, Iraqi activist L.L. changed governorates and homes after receiving death threats from fake accounts. Libyan rights advocate A.B. fled the country due to ongoing online harassment and threats. In Syria alone, 17% of respondents said they had to move or change jobs because of online abuse.

Similar patterns appear in Palestine, though the context is even more complex. Hate speech and incitement have a long history there, tied to a tangled political backdrop. Palestinians face hate speech both from Israeli occupation forces and channels, and internally, among Palestinian groups. The internal hate speech often targets political, religious, ethnic, or gender-based differences, and intensifies during political stagnation—particularly in the absence of a unified national project. Understanding this

internal discourse requires grappling with decades of occupation and colonial strategies designed to divide Palestinians, even by superficial differences. These colonial powers have long exploited internal contradictions to tighten control.

In such a politically charged environment, the existence of political structures that fuel hate speech creates fertile ground for hostility. Marginalized groups are most vulnerable, and women are easy targets for insults, slurs, and verbal abuse—often using terms meant to diminish them simply for being women.

Political women have increasingly been targeted online, just as they were in the streets. Many have received death threats, threats of surveillance, and even threats of rape. Some of these threats appear to come from the Palestinian Authority itself—the very body that should be protecting women. In Palestinian communities inside Israel (1948 territories), a 2022 study found that 83% of Arab women victims of violence, assault, or harassment avoid reporting incidents to Israeli police due to delays, lack of enforcement, and failure to hold perpetrators accountable.

This problem is compounded by the complicity of social media companies, whose algorithms quickly remove Palestinian content that criticizes Israeli aggression, while responding slowly—or not at all—to hate speech and abuse targeting Palestinians, especially women. They have also failed to adopt policies that would make the internet safer for women.

In 2024, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media (7amleh) published a report featuring direct testimonies from Palestinian journalists and influencers who were subjected to Meta's discriminatory practices. The report shows how the company systematically suppresses Palestinian content—especially during the ongoing genocide in Gaza. According to the testimonies, these policies not only silence Palestinian voices, but also enable hate speech and incitement against them. This violates core rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and political participation, harms the digital economy in Palestinian society, and worsens the psychological toll of constant surveillance and digital repression.

Many women across different countries echoed similar complaints in the studies: that social media companies respond slowly and ineffectively when they report abuse, and that they fail to remove harmful content quickly enough to prevent damage to victims.

Conclusion

Given all the above, addressing violence in general—and digital violence in particular—requires tools and strategies that tackle its root causes to reduce its severity and impact on women and society. Raising awareness remains a key objective that must be pursued in an integrated way: both among women, regarding their rights and how to defend themselves, and among men who exploit women and impose paternalistic roles that range from guardianship to punishment and abuse.

Combating DVAW requires a multi-dimensional approach that influences beliefs and behaviors. This includes strengthening legislative frameworks and enforcing strict laws to combat digital violence. Governments should implement comprehensive programs to promote digital literacy among women, empowering them to navigate digital spaces safely and effectively. At the same time, holding social media companies accountable through regulatory oversight and proactive measures to curb abuse on their platforms is an urgent necessity.

In addition, establishing reporting mechanisms and psychosocial support services provides victims with access to help and recovery, which can reduce the long-term harm of such violence. Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in this context—whether by advocating for structural reforms or by offering direct support to victims at the community level. When combined with initiatives from local and international actors, these efforts can help create a safer digital environment for women, particularly in conflict zones where systematic violence is prevalent.

The persistence of gender-based violence in MENA is not only a women's issue; it is a human rights crisis that undermines societal stability and peacebuilding processes. Silencing women's voices deprives society of essential insights for resolving conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence. Therefore, the international community, governments, and tech companies must prioritize the fight against this violence by supporting initiatives that empower women and amplify their voices—while working to dismantle the structures that perpetuate discrimination and abuse. This silent war against women in the region must not go unnoticed or unaddressed.

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- Digital violence against Yemeni female leaders: a field study
- Digital violence against widowed women in northern Syrian camps
- Digital violence against women in Syria
- Digital violence against women in Iraq
- Digital violence against women in Libya from the perspective of female leaders
- The digital revolution of Sudanese women and the violent reaction
- Digital violence against women in historic Palestine

Find these studies and more on the Salam@ Publications page:
https://portal.salamatmena.org/research-publications/

Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) Reports

- From behind their screens: In Yemen, perpetrators choose their victims from among those with disabilities
- Female journalists in Gaza work without the Internet after Israel cuts off communications
- Israel digitally isolates Gazan women from their families
- For the price of the word: Sudanese female journalists face threats of persecution and murder
- For men only: Harassment and death threats haunt female football players in Sudan
- "Ethnic nationalism" threatens the work of female journalists in Syria
- Syrian minors are victims of "cybercrimes"

Find these reports and more on the ARIJ website:
https://iwnss.arij.net/ar/empowering-arab-female-journalists-for-inclusive-reporting-in-conflict-regions/