Sector Study: Digital Violence Against Tunisian Female Political Activists

Dec
2021

Author
Amel Grami

credif

Acknowledgment

Author

Dr. Amel Grami is a professor of Islamic studies and gender studies at the University of Manouba (Tunisia). Her fields of specialization include Islamic and gender/women studies, comparative religion and dialogue between religions and cultures. She is a regular contributor to international conferences and a widely published author on gender analysis in media, with an emphasis on the impact of new media. Her Arabic-language books include *Women, Knowledge and Power* (2019) and *Women and Terrorism: A Gendered Study* (2017).

Partners

Contents

Introduction

The heightened awareness of feminist scholars regarding the intricacies of structural violence and its interconnection with patriarchal societies has led to a significant increase in research and studies on violence from various perspectives and approaches, analyzing the implications of violence at various levels, including social, economic, political, and health. These investigations have served as a crucial foundation for young women, particularly in the last decade, which witnessed a plethora of revolutions, uprisings, and conflicts. Activists recognize that meaningful change is unattainable without endeavoring to transform women's roles and positions, acknowledge their competence, or pressure governments to abide by international constitutions, charters, and treaties that advocate citizenship and equality. These documents also emphasize women's participation in political processes, empowerment, representation in decision-making, and protection from all forms of discrimination, exclusion, and threats. The digital revolution and modern media have been instrumental in empowering women by enabling them to fulfill various demands and enhance their circumstances.

Despite the ongoing efforts of women to combat gender-based violence, the prevalence of this phenomenon has become undeniable and a source of feminist outrage, given the rising number of victims, the varied forms of violence, and the emergence of new practices in contemporary Arab societies that have not been thoroughly analyzed. In particular, gender-based digital violence,[1] which has emerged with the increase in use of the internet and social media, involves the use of electronic communication to harm women by sending messages that threaten physical, moral, sexual, or economic harm, or by using pictures or videos for the purpose of blackmail, intimidation, or monitoring the content of electronic correspondence and behavior, with the intention of insulting or causing distress. Given the significant impact of digital violence on the lives of women and the lack of awareness among technology users regarding the risks associated with digital interactions, further investigation into this topic is essential.

Although digital violence targets active women, in particular, human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, and others, the primarily focus of this study is monitoring aspects of digital violence perpetrated against Tunisian female political leaders and activists,[2] analyzing the motivations behind such practices, and shedding light on the crucial role of female activists in advocating for safe digital spaces for women and promoting their full citizenship rights in a safe and equitable environment.

---

[1] Digital (or online) gender violence refers to acts of gender violence committed, instigated or aggravated, in part or totally, through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), social media platforms or email services. Such violence causes psychological and emotional damage, reinforces prejudice, damages the reputation, causes economic loss, poses barriers to participation in public life, and it may lead to sexual violence and other forms of physical violence." https://violenciadigital.tedic.org/en (Accessed 18-9-2021)

Doxing: investigating and disseminating information that identifies a person without their consent, often with the intention of having access or contact with the person for the purpose of harassment or other harmful purposes. cyber harassment, cyber stalking, non-consensual pornography, revenge porn

European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). Cyber violence against women and girls. https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1484

[2] It ranges from digital harassment, bullying, sending messages containing pornographic images and inappropriate phrases, blackmail, and campaigns to smearing reputation through the publication of personal photos and videos, all of which threaten physical safety.

Interest in the issue of digital violence against female activists in the political sphere is justified by the following three points: (1) the rise in the level of violence against female activists, especially in recent years, (2) the impunity of the perpetrators, despite some of the women resorting to the law to defend their rights, and (3) the tendency of a number of legislators to normalize the culture of gender-based violence and their continuous assault on a number of female representatives within the People's Assembly.[3]

Has the fact that women are more active and effective, enjoying more political rights, and engaging in political activities become disturbing factors for a group of people who endorse patriarchal culture?

Theoretical Framework

Violence against female political activists has been examined from various theoretical perspectives. Some of these are related to the approaches and methods provided by feminist scholars specializing in political and legal science (Anne Phillips, 1991; Tickner, 1992; Kahn, 1996; Didier, 2004), emphasizing that women's views, priorities, and political positions are important and that they should express themselves without being subjected to guardianship. Other studies are related to feminist theories of gender, which focus on examining the structure of relations between sexes and power relations. Other approaches are interested in the social sciences, which analyze social, economic, and political structures, and study power relations (Charrad, 2001), including studies that examine the role of representations, value systems, symbols, and others in shaping behavior, discourses, and identities.

In this regard, the contributions of other approaches should not be overlooked, such as the behavioral psychoanalysis approach, the analysis of the structures of power and hegemony, the power approach, the language, power, and gender approach, discourse analysis, and approaches analyzing the contexts of globalization and its cultural and psychological impact on the lives of people in Arab and Islamic societies and others.

Regarding the phenomenon of digital violence, it is one of the topics that are examined in media sciences, feminist and gender studies, psychological sciences (behavioral psychology, etc.), psychoanalysis, social sciences, and criminology to study new practices targeting different groups who are viewed as vulnerable, such as women and ethnic and religious minorities. A number of feminist theorists, especially Marxists, rejected the "imaginary" distinction between private and public spaces, and linked politics to public spaces, explaining that politicians infiltrate all areas. Hence, violence practiced by the individual cannot be analyzed in isolation from economic violence, violence practiced by the state on minorities, or violence practiced by colonial and imperial regimes, proving, at the same time, the clear intersection between violence against women at home and the violence they are

---

[3] Tunisia. The "Free Constitutional Party" raises "the persecution of Abeer Moussa" to international justice. The Arab World News website. Accessed 7-6-2021.

The Ministry of Women announced a statement dated 10-18-2021, a statement that said: "According to the violent rhetoric being circulated on social media that is based on degrading the honor and insulting the dignity of Tunisian women's rights, the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood, and the Elderly expresses its rejection and condemnation of these practices in public." The default affirms that the dignity of Tunisian women is above all else, and that difference cannot be an excuse to violate the right of the female elite to freedom of expression and difference, an elite that we all cherish just as we cherish every woman in this country, no matter how different their intellectual views are. The Ministry calls for the necessity of creating a culture of difference from Yes, it is good for Tunisia, and it gives awareness of difference, its conditions, and its discourse a fundamental place. The Ministry will be keen to properly implement the provisions of Law No. 58 of 2017 regarding combating violence against women with all relevant structures and institutions.

exposed to in the workplace, transportation, or streets. Digital violence is an extension of these practices, which spread over time and become permanent.

Specialists in media studies have drawn attention to the relationship between digital space and reality, as the interaction taking place on social media platforms has often become a reflection of what is taking place in daily reality, including conflicts, confrontations, and chaos (Boyd, 2007, p. 6). Scrutinizing this interaction reveals emerging transformations at the level of values, methods of socialization, building relationships, behavior, and practices. Similarly, it reveals the role of social media platforms in people's lives, as they have become a means of moving from isolation and non-sociality to a space where a person is accepted to break the barriers of fear and hesitation or to change a lifestyle that may be monotonous, dull, or cold, and replacing it with another style in which the interaction is interesting and hot.[4] Having a Facebook page means that you see others and they see you, and also means that you behave in a way with others, and others treat you in ways that you may not necessarily like.

A number of scholars have studied the relationship between violence and age and gender and concluded that technology and digital culture, in particular, are no longer a manifestation of luxury for new generations but rather a way of life (Siegle & Mitchell, 2011). Through social media, according to Michael Prensky (2001), the individual remains "digital native," who is active and interactive with others outside the public and private boundaries. That is, what is published in terms of photos, private conversations, and videos can be downloaded and circulated. Just as adults today learn how to interact in digital space, "and the art of communication on the Internet (McIntosh, 2010), new generations are learning etiquette in public space, recalling the rules of behavior that have been established in the digital space (Boyd, 2008, p. 295).

As a result of the increasing number of cybercrimes against women, vulnerable groups, or activists, new terms and concepts have emerged, such as cyberspace,[5] cyberbullying, cyber/digital violence, and cyber harassment. Studies have proven that the Internet is not just a technological means but rather a network that interacts with its surrounding cultural and social context (Chung Tai Cheng, 2009). Therefore, interactions in the digital space reveal the extent of the dominance of gender stereotypes, prevailing hierarchies, sexism, racism, and other practices that have serious repercussions for individuals.

Several scholars have argued that digital media is a double-edged sword because it can facilitate the building of relationships between people and enable them to express themselves and achieve their ambitions (Collier & Magid, 2010, p. 4). It may also increase the complexity of their lives and create problems for them, causing them to lose psychological and social balance. It threatens their psychological health, and other studies have shown that political activists' use of social media exposes them to many crises compared to others, especially since most of them do not have sufficient knowledge of digital technology and awareness of its impact on image building and political propaganda, and rarely undergo training to learn how to protect themselves.[6]

By referring to a number of cognitive frameworks through which digital violence can be investigated, two points have been highlighted: (1) the intersection between several fields of knowledge, such as violence studies, media studies, law, criminology, and other human and social sciences in general, and

---

[4] Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, NewYork, McGraw Hill Book Co(1964). Media Hot and Cold.

[5] Cyber Stalking, Non-Consensual Pornography, Revenge Porn, Doxing. European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). Cyber violence against women and girls. https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1484

[6] Keith Suter. "The Impact of the Media on Politics," in Contemporary Review – 73-(71-78-)

(2) the emphasis on the importance of employing both perspectives, that is, feminist and gender-based perspectives, as violence against women is the result of a gender-based structure.[7]

Methodology

Most media and audience studies have adopted a qualitative analysis approach highlighting the context of texts, power relations within them, actors' perspectives, and implicit meanings. However, studying digital violence requires an understanding of the nature of the topic and choosing the method.[8] Thus, it is necessary to combine feminist and gender approaches to contribute to our understanding of digital violence.

Adopting gender as an analytical approach to understand power relations and reasons for resorting to violence is indispensable. The behavior of abusers in digital space is linked to the structure of society, prevailing upbringing patterns,[9] dominant social values and standards, gender relations, social representations of women and men, their status in society, and social expectations that pertain to their roles that are represented in the law, space, and the state. Communication between the abuser and activist is indicative of the ideas, values, and perceptions that have been firmly established in the mind, as well as the experiences and knowledge accumulated by the person.

Employing gender analysis helps us understand the formation of identity and the specificity of the experiences of female political activists and their impact on their lives, as the image of the female political activist is subject to a process of construction, rebuilding, restoration, and modification that varies according to context, time, place, effectiveness, and other factors.

Study Sample

The study sample included a group of female political activists who experienced digital violence in the last decade, during which Tunisian women's activism intensified, believing in their rights and the necessity of struggling to obtain them. In selecting the sample of this study, the differences among generations were taken into consideration, as age is considered in evaluating experiences and might be a factor of discrimination, ridicule, and bullying. In addition, sociocultural and demographic diversity and the different party affiliations of female activists have also been taken into consideration. The sample included the following participants:

- JawaherEl-Tais, former deputy in the Constituent Assembly of the Ennahdha Party (recently resigned).
- Yamina Al-Zoghlami, a former member of parliament from Ennahda Party.
- Hayat Omri, MP from Ennahda Party (and now independent).
- Boushra Belhaj Hamida, former deputy in the Constituent Assembly and Parliament (Ettakatol Party, Nidaa Tounes Party, and now independent).

---

[7] We are aware that the space available for this study is not sufficient to fully present the theoretical background from which the researchers can delve deeper into this topic.

[8] Azmi Bishara. Priority of Understanding over the Curriculum. Tabyan, Issue 30 (Fall 2019), pp. 7-30.

[9] Improper socialization may lead to the reproduction of male dominance across generations, sexual deprivation, the reduction of women to their bodies, and deliberate devaluation of their value in society.

- Samah Al-Yahyawi, Vice President of the Democratic Movement for Reform and Construction Party and Assistant Secretary-General in charge of Political Affairs.
- Jawaher Shanna, a political and human rights activist in the Workers' Party.
- N.B., political activist in the People's Party.
- H.S., political activist in the People's Party.
- R-Sh is a political activist in the People's Party.
- Naziha Al-Obaidi, a former minister who held the position of Minister of Women, Family, Children, and the Elderly.
- Kalthum Kanno, an independent political activist who ran for the presidential elections.

Blog posts and comments of a group of female political activists, namely, Saida Garrash (Nidaa Tounes) and Naziha Rajiba (who belonged to the Congress for the Republic party, served as the party's general secretary, and submitted her resignation from the party in June 2011), Samia Abbou (a representative in the People's Assembly for successive terms for the Current Party), Democratic Party), and Abeer Moussa (Head of the Free Constitutional Party), were examined as well. The activists' personal accounts were selected because of their controversial opinions and active interactions on social media.

A number of various techniques were adopted, including telephone interviews, directing written questions (questionnaire),[10] reading comments, blog posts, and monitoring photos,[11] especially photoshopped photos circulating on Facebook about female activists, and monitoring testimonies and statements in press interviews. Confidentiality was observed as some activists agreed to participate anonymously, so letters such as N. B were used. It is worth noting that some activists were unwilling to participate, so they kept rescheduling interviews, and others ignored our requests.[12] It can be claimed that the refusal of the female political activists and their insistence to redact their names, in itself, is an issue worthy of investigation, as it is not easy to recall painful and traumatizing experiences.

By conducting interviews over the phone, discussing, or distributing a questionnaire to some of the female political leaders and activists, women's practices, expressions of trauma, feelings of anger, and resentment were examined. In addition, field studies were employed to bring the issue of gender-based violence or 'political violence' practiced against women under scrutiny.[13]

The analysis of the data and the most important results and recommendations were not limited to the data obtained, which revealed women's experiences in the political field and their representation of reality. It was necessary to examine other experiences that would allow us to place these current

---

[10] The questionnaires were conducted according to the following dates:
Samah Al Yahyawi | N-B on 10-17-2021 | H-S on 10-18-2021 | R-Sh on 10-17-2021 | Naziha Al-Obaidi on 10-6-2021 | Yamina Al-Zaghlami on 10-7-2021 | Bushra Belhaj Hamida on 10-14-2021 | Life of my life on 10-16-2021 | Jawhara El-Tais on 10-5-2021 | Jawaher Shanna on 10-16-2021 | Kulthum Kanno, on 10-18-2021

[11] We adopted a number of female activists' posts as testimonies explaining problems they suffer from or what they feel.

[12] We assumed that the sample required to respond to the questionnaire would include 20 female activists because of time constraints, but a number of female activists did not respond to our request.

[13] We refer to studies conducted by the Association of Tunisian Women Voters and a report issued by the National Democratic Institute (NDI): Yasmina Chouakri, "Violence Against Women in Political Parties: Analysis of the Situation in Tunisia", February 2019. It included interviews with activists from the Al-Massar, Ennahda, Ettakatol, Nidaa Tounes, Labor Party, and other parties, as well as a number of female candidates for public prosecutors. This study was conducted in 2017.

experiences within the framework of globalized political experiences. Although theorists of the social and human sciences in the Arab region have not yet been budged from the classic epistemological position, which calls for the separation between the self and the topic and the necessity of maintaining a distance between them, this study is positioned within feminist epistemology, which has made clear that the separation between the self and the topic is false and illusory. That is, our personal experiences intersect with female academics and activists (scholar-activists) in our perception of building knowledge and our choice of approaches.[14] Based on this methodological approach, our experience and position were considered in this study.

Results

Politics Creates a Hostile Environment for Women

The respondents acknowledged that modern means of communication represent an opportunity for all women who want to engage in political work to build relationships and power, practice political mobilization, spread awareness of some issues, and discuss political, economic, and social issues. This digital space allowed female activists to prove themselves, justify their positions, and express their opinions by blogging and interacting with various social segments. Therefore, the digital space is considered the best way to empower women and achieve their independence.

However, this digital space, which was always considered neutral, soon became a reflection of social problems observed in reality. The massive emergence of women into public spaces and their determination to be active, have a distinctive presence, acquire power, and become visible is often not met with satisfaction.[15] Hence, forms of male resistance emerged and took on a violent nature, ranging from the practice of exclusion, discrimination, and verbal, physical, and symbolic violence, whether in the public, private, or digital space, which has turned, in recent years, into a source of danger for most female political leaders and activists. Bushra Belhaj Hamida said, "I was exposed to all kinds of violence: harassment, threats, slander, defamation, bullying, cursing me and my family, infringing on my private life, praying for my death and cancer, spreading false news, fabricating baseless statements, etc." The situation is not different for Yamina Al-Zoghlami who said, "I was exposed to all types of digital violence: bullying, distortion, false statements, some posts containing sexual connotations, focusing on my appearance and face in particular, and using obscene language."

The degree of violence varies from activist to activist. The former Minister of Women, Naziha al-Obaidi, told us how she was targeted by using her photos to spread false news in addition to bullying and insults. The young activist, Jawaher, enumerates the details of the digital violence that she was exposed to saying, "I was exposed to all kinds of harassment and violence during my political career, including digital violence of all kinds, harassment, bullying, threats of violence, threats of death, threats of rape, and threats to harm those close to me, my family, and especially my parents, my sister, and my son. I was also subjected to the defamation of my reputation by publishing my very private photos and spreading rumors about me and my personal behavior."

---

[14] Feminist epistemology believes in the necessity of this separation and recommends starting from the self. That is, it takes into account the experience of women and, in general, the experience of each dominant group in knowledge production.

Marie Mathieu et al, Pour un usage fort des épistémologies, féministes, Nouvelles Questions Féministes, 39(1), 2020, p. 10.

[15] It is worth noting that there is a lack of available academic research and studies on this subject that can document cases, provide accurate statistics, and analyze positions and backgrounds.

The testimonies of female activists indicate that violence is not limited to insults and belittling of opinions; rather, their bodies become the subject of ridicule. Jawhara El-Tais was the subject of ridicule and bullying, as her appearance, figure, and character were considered outside the acceptable and expected standards of beauty for political activists. She commented, "This violence focused on ridiculing my appearance (your teeth are like court drawers, your teeth cut a six-iron meaning she is vulgar) and my look/clothes (e.g., your clothes look like someone who is working in women's bathroom/Hamam), defaming my reputation, and threatening me of rape and imprisonment."

Saida Qarash and Boushra Belhaj Hamida were among the activists most exposed to campaigns of defamation, bullying, insults, and other practices aimed at insulting them and harming them psychologically. This is because they hold an important position. The former was an advisor to the President of the Tunisian Republic, in charge of relations with civil society and social files, and the official spokesperson. Hence, she was the focus of the attention of opponents and the public, who sought to destroy her. She had to publicize her position on this violence through a Facebook post: "Of course, what is attributed to me on some websites owned by individuals or groups that will inevitably be neglected by history is baseless. I have great confidence in my male and female friends, honorable politicians, and honest, objective, and responsible public opinion, so that they spare me the trouble of responding to those whose hearts and minds are empty."

As for the latter, in addition to her duties in the People's Assembly, she chaired the "Individual Liberties and Equality Committee." The campaigns launched against her were beyond bullying and defamation; it was excommunication and incitement to murder under the pretext of defending the "rules of Sharia."[16] The two activists meet in their affiliation with the Democratic Women's Association, which makes them feminist political activists who are the subject of 'condemnation.'

What is striking about the forms of violence practiced against these women is the ridicule of the physical characteristics of activists, which amounts to questioning the activists' femininity, as if political work requires women to have specific aesthetic standards. In addition, they mock activists' behavior, words, and appearance and discriminate against them based on age. Bushra Belhaj Hamida, Naziha Ben Rajiba, and Kulthum Kannou were described using words that represent aging as a negative trait. The activist 'harridan.' This discrimination based on age intersects with discrimination based on gender and reveals established social representations. They are active women, but they are socially expected to stay at home, care for their grandchildren, and perform religious rituals.

Samah Al-Yahyawi explained that the abuser wants to belittle the activist. "Bullying is done by women and men. Comments such as 'Who are you to argue with so-and-so? Clean in front of your house Ha-ha, or You are still young, grow up a little,' attempt to belittle the values of opinions, positions, and proposals presented by female activists, especially if they are not experienced, young, or have striking characteristics such as the ability to argue, eloquence, etc.

---

[16] Bushra Balhaj Hamida: The Story of a Brave Woman, signed on 1/13/2015, date of access 10/16/2021. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/بشرى-بالحاج-حميدة-حكاية-امرأة-شجاعة

In a statement to Diwan FM, Bushra Belhaj Hamida said that the provision of continuous security protection after the threats she was exposed to was related to the report of the Committee on Individual Liberties and Equality deprived her of living her normal life. (2018)
http://www.kapitalis.com/anbaa-tounes/2018/08/08/بشرى-بلحاج-حميدة-الحماية-الأمنية-حرم/

Digital Violence is a Means of Removing Women from the Political World

Female activists acknowledged that most political parties 'normalize' violence and consider it a practice linked to the 'man's game,' which is a common attack strategy. Therefore, most parties are content with issuing statements of condemnation and do not care about providing psychological support to victims of violence or providing them with training to support their abilities to confront bullying and threats. In fact, most parties believe that violence is a cost of being active and a price that must be paid.

Female candidates in various elections pointed out that the "smear" campaigns launched against them on Facebook had a significant impact on directing voters and influencing their choices.[17] That is, these campaigns resorted to spreading fake news, promoting rumors, and other things to weaken voters' confidence in the candidate and prove to them that she is not qualified "morally" to be responsible and in a position of legislators and leaders. Hence, they will not be able to provide services to the entities they work for.

Female activists have highlighted the consequences of digital violence. At the personal level, threatening messages and photoshopped photos, memes, and comments that intentionally violate women's dignity cause stress and have a psychological impact on female activists and their family members. In addition, the activist/mother may become a source of anxiety, tension, annoyance, or condemnation for her children, especially teenagers. Needless to say, circulating photoshopped photos that mock and ridicule mothers provoked children. Husbands must also tolerate and deal with these insults and defamation, and they themselves become a topic of ridicule and humiliation. Explaining the impact of digital violence on activists and their relationship with their husbands and families, Jawaher Shanna said,' Violence against women does not only affect women but also those around them. Unfortunately, all the violent messages that I always receive include my husband describing him as a "cuckold" who cannot tame me. Thus, they have to volunteer to tame me, including sexually. These messages target both of us as they indirectly tell my husband to "watch and control your women." Therefore, the struggle of women in the political field is not only a struggle against the system or a political opponent, but rather it becomes a daily struggle to convince families that what the abusers are spreading is not true and reassure them of their safety and personal security. "There is no doubt that violating the sanctity of women is a means of settling scores with their husbands, fathers, or guardians. This is because the battle is between men who represent hegemonic masculinity and men who are feminists, but women's bodies and reputations are the means."

It is noted that the matter worsens if the activist is from a rural environment, as she is exposed to pressure from the extended family, who orders them to leave the political sphere, which is viewed as a polluted and profane world, and makes the tribe questionable because they did not maintain its control over women.

As for directing obscene words to female political activists, using negative epithets and sexual implications and spreading rumors aimed at distorting their reputation are meant to hurt them psychologically and socially and strip them of their political legitimacy, as they are actors, leaders, and role models who have gained the trust of voters. Furthermore, perpetrators deliberately violate women's dignity, undermine their self-confidence, and threaten their security and family stability;

---

[17] For example, we point to Bushra Belhaj Hamida, Saida Karaj, and a number of female candidates running municipal elections, some of whom were exposed to marital problems that reached the point of divorce.

they attempt to create objects that are subject to the male gaze. That is, they evaluate their beautiful features and criticize their less attractive ones based on the standards recognized by these perpetrators, and accordingly, slander and scorn these women.

Women are often objectified and stripped of their professional qualities, such as competence and ability to work and suggest solutions, to represent them as objects of sexuality. Accordingly, this exacerbates female activists' feelings of anger because of the expansion of the gender-based discrimination circle. It is worth noting that male politicians are not exposed to such attacks because man remains the representative of the logos (mind) and is not associated with sexuality, that is, eroticism.

Jawaher Shanna attributed the causes of violence to various social, political, economic, and mental structures. She commented, "Patriarchal societies, especially in our conservative societies, where the voice and opinion of women are undesirable, is a suitable environment for violence against women. Since political activists "inhabited" a field, other than their "natural" field, they are constantly vulnerable to subjugation and intimidation. There is no technique easier than attacking women on issues of honor as soon as they disagree with them politically to force them to immediately retreat out of fear of consequences, especially with their families. In addition, the widespread political violence between political opponents at a higher level (parliament and presidency) aggravated the violence and provided a mental ready-made example for the recipients so that they could attack women politically, as they saw in parliaments (e.g., Saif Al-Din Makhlouf practiced all forms of violence against women, including violence committed against Abeer Musa). Accordingly, in my opinion, this relationship is reflective. That is, parliament, presidency, and unions reflect what society harbors for the most part, which is a society that reproduces the violence that power legitimizes."

A number of female activists believe that violence directed at them is linked to social upbringing that elevates men 'sand belittles women's experiences, in addition to the prevailing culture that imposes gender stereotypes. Samah Al-Yahyawi said, "This is due to male heritage that made members of society internalize the fact that the world of politics is a world of men par excellence. In addition, the failure of some women to manage political affairs led to the idea that women are ineffective in this field. There is also the religious heritage: "There is no good in a nation led by A woman." Boushra Belhaj Hamida explained the reasons for the spread of the phenomenon of digital violence targeting female activists, saying: "I notice that it is linked to women's participation and leadership in political and public life, which is recent. This space is still viewed as a masculine space par excellence, and this mentality is internalized by women, and sometimes in the name of defending women, such as accusing a woman who criticizes the political woman of being jealous. This is an inferiority complex."

A number of female activists admitted that they had thought more than once about resigning from political work, became hesitant about accepting leadership positions, or decided not to run again. Yamina Al-Zoghlami commented, "Honesty, I decided to resign from political work as a result of this violence and the absence of any protection or even societal condemnation, as Tunisian society is still patriarchal." Thus, it is obvious that the purpose of violence against female political activists is to place obstacles in front of them and create an unsuitable climate for political work so that they do not work, become unable to prove themselves, and do not achieve their ambitions.

It is worth mentioning that based on the experiences of female activists and their blogs, violence inflicted on them is not always attributed to men. Rather, we find a number of women violating the dignity of female activists, praying against them, and calling them with the most horrific epithets, such as "the Sultan's Harem," "Spy," and "maids and objects of sexual jihad." One of them commented on the activist Naziha Rajiba, saying, "Naziha Rajiba, insane," and commented on the positions of one of the presidential candidates, Kulsoum Kannou, saying, "Kulsoum Kannou has officially entered

menopause." In addition, N.B. admitted that she received a voice message threatening her saying, "Politics is not old women's (harridans') activity and stop discussing issues with those who are higher/better than you." Some female opponents used obscene words or encouraged "friends" to insult female activists and violate their dignity. Therefore, they say "Have fun with her" or "Take care of her." Some comments highlighted the extent to which some women internalized their masculine values. Qamar Qammoura said, "Leave, let me do their jobs," and Razia Radyouna Lafi said, "You even distorted the Quran, stay home, it is better for you, rather than jumping from one plateau to another."[18]

Some activists believe that a lack of female solidarity with victims of digital violence may force them to resign. Bushra Belhaj Hamida commented, "There is no actual solidarity between women in politics, and there are no women in the political space who defend other women when exposed to violence. My personal experience showed that civil society was in solidarity with me, unlike female politicians, even though I was with them in the council." This reveals structural violence as male solidarity is achieved in hidden ways.

Anyone who follows the narratives of a number of female activists realizes a sense of bitterness because of their political experience. The violence practiced against them in the digital space may be intertwined with violence targeting them within political frameworks, that is, within the party, in municipal councils, or in parliament, among colleagues, comrades, and leaders. This does not allow female activists to achieve their goals, celebrate their achievements, or distinguish political performances.

Digital Violence is a Means of Patriarchal Society to Resist Changes that Occur in the System of Social Roles

Many female activists realize that digital violence grows in societies where patriarchal culture prevails and where males enjoy a position that guarantees them the ability to exercise authority over those who, in their view, are considered less capable of political management and decision-making. Since women's participation in political work has become a threat to male privileges, resorting to violence through organized campaigns launched by some parties against female activists has become acceptable and justified. Samah Al-Yahiawi believes that harassment, threats, and bullying are merely strategies aimed at preventing women from being politically active and playing important roles. She said, "Violence begins with intimidation and turning the family against women. Even if female politicians remain steadfast, their family members will fear social stigma, which makes such decision-making positions a curse or punishment that women avoid protecting their private life." Jawaher Shanna recognizes the role of social representations in establishing roles. She said, "The institution of marriage and motherhood has given me a special kind of privilege, which is that I do not deviate much from what women are allowed to do and abide by the division of social roles of patriarchal society. I am not an "abnormal" example. Rather, I am a wife and mother according to social laws, and I engage in political activity (transfer this picture and I do not agree with what they want, but rather I am aware of what the majority thinks.)" However, if the institution of marriage provided this activist with the required protection, the women's community would quickly express its dissatisfaction and seek to pressure female political activists to adhere to her "natural" and "innate" roles. Jawaher Shanna revealed these pressures saying, "In most cases, these women will not receive the same celebration that other women receive when they sacrifice for the sake of their ideas and homeland. Rather, they will always hear comments such as, 'Leave it, it is not worth it' and 'Give it up,' and 'It is not

---

[18] https://www.facebook.com/Abbou.Samia/ (Accessed 17-10-2021).

nice/appropriate,' from those who are considered close and friendly. However, there are more hostile comments from opponents such as "Every day you run like a man" or "Stay in your kitchen/take care of your son/wash your clothes." When a case or issue is very important for the majority of people, female politicians' defense becomes important and acceptable. Nevertheless, even the gratitude expressions are gendered, for example "A woman that equals a thousand men" or "She did what men did not do," and that is a constant reminder that it is not her natural field."

Thus, socialization based on the regurgitation of the system of distributing traditional roles does not encourage women to engage in political work or assume new roles, such as being a mayor or an official spokeswoman for the government. Additionally, raising a girl to the values of modesty, non-confrontation, and argumentation often makes her unwilling to accept the consequences of holding positions that involve plotting conspiracies and smear campaigns.

Violence against female activists is a form of discipline that aims to deter those who rebel against male authority. It is a discipline for those who have transcended the roles that society attributes to women and have decided to compete with them. It is also a discipline for those who have abandoned their internal space based on the cultural division of social roles and have become strongly present in the public space. Accordingly, violence appears to be a punishment imposed on women who rebel against the social system of roles and hierarchies, and simultaneously wish to change men's leadership positions. In addition, violence is a warning message addressed to women as a group or class, so that they do not use social media platforms in their political activities. That is, it is a means of excluding female activists from a space that has proven its importance in political work, propaganda, and positioning. The more aggressors and abusers succeed in stripping women from their agency and stigmatizing them, the more traditional roles and gender stereotypes become entrenched (women are weak, shy, and cowardly; on the other hand, men are strong, bold, and brave), and women become more wary or hesitant about using digital space and more convinced of practicing self-censorship, which affects the behavior of women even in digital space, as it is not how men behave online. Therefore, it reflects the prevailing power relations in society and the discriminatory reality that manifests itself at many levels.

Enacting Laws is not Enough to Protect Female Activists

The respondents unanimously agreed on the importance of the law as a framework that regulates relations between people, behaviors, and forms of interaction, and is also a tool to deter those who transgress controls and values. However, most victims believe that the laws are insufficient because of obstacles to their implementation. R. Sh. said, "Tunisia has singled out this phenomenon with a set of laws, the echo of which we find in: Chapter 86 of the Telecommunications Code, 'The penalty shall be imprisonment for a period ranging between one and two years' with a fine of one hundred to one thousand dinars, anyone who intentionally offends others or disturbs their comfort via public telecommunications networks." In the Penal Code, Article 226, which stipulates that "Anyone who publicly assaults good morals or anyone who publicly draws attention to the opportunity to commit immorality through writings, recordings, or audio, visual, electronic, or optical transmissions, shall be subject to the same penalties mentioned in the previous period." These laws are not sufficient if they are not implemented, meaning that the authorities must strive to implement these laws against the perpetrators of cybercrimes."

The references of political activists (human rights, feminists, legal, etc.) and their reactions to the violence practiced against them in the digital space vary according to their personalities, experiences, and other factors. In addition, N. B. admitted that she is afraid of "scandal and defamation and I may not tell this to my family." A young woman, R. Sh. sought help from her colleagues at the People's Movement Party. She said, "I inform my colleagues in the party, and they respond to the perpetrators before blocking him. As for the

psychological impact, it is natural to feel tension and anxiety, which often makes me think about leaving political activity, but my family's support makes me continue and overcome all of that. They are very understanding and contrary to the stereotypical image of most families, which usually reject women's political activities. I find all the support and encouragement from them."

On the other hand, Saeeda Qarash responded in a way that proves the multiplicity of her experiences, enabling her to remain steady. She wrote in a Facebook post: "Good morning, a nation that is rising, undaunted by the howling of those who are killed by the emptiness of the heart and mind. I am a Tunisian woman. My Tunisian meal was made by Tunisian hands, and I am proud. Thank you to my male and female friends who took the trouble to defend me against the rabid campaign that I saw as I saw the sun! We are beautiful, smart, and enduring. With my love for you, history preserves the most important and neglects emptiness."

Hayat Al-Omari's attitude differs according to each attack. She said, "Most of the time, I don't care about what is written about me as long as it is not true, but I resorted twice to the judiciary when the distortion reached the point of harming the family." Both Kulthum Kanno and Jawaher Shanna pointed out the development of their reactions over time. That is, instead of confronting violence, Jawaher adopted "other defense mechanisms, including judicial follow-up, where I filed complaints on profiles and pages that harassed me digitally. I also started turning to my personal and professional circles in search of support, especially from feminists who launch campaigns to defend me and other activists whenever we are targeted." As for Kulthum Kanno, she said, "At first, I was upset when photoshopped photos or words that insulted my reputation were published or false news was spread about me because it had a direct impact on my family and friends. However, over the course of time, there became many people who respond and refute what is published about me."

According to a recent study by the League of Tunisian Women Voters, 53% of women generally report violence. However, the percentage of women who go to court to hold their attackers accountable in digital space remains unspecified.[19] Referring to female respondents, there has been an increase in the number of people filing cases against those who violate their privacy or spread fake news targeting female activists, especially on social media. They do not hesitate to announce this in various media outlets and through blog posts or party pages (Abeer Moussa, who internationalized recent attacks). It was stated in a blog post published by Hayat Omri after promoting fake news and accusing her of corruption: "The lies and distortion continue." Representative of Sidi Bouzid, H. A. wrote, "To these scum owners of these pages who have become professionals at distorting and claiming falsehood, I promise you to take my rights from you by law. The deciding factor was the judiciary. I know you, the descendants of Abeer and Al-Watad."[20] Similarly, Yamina Al-Zaghlami, who filed a case against the supervisors of pages on Facebook on charges of defamation and lying, as well as against "Sheikh Al-Hentati, who addressed her with a letter that violated her dignity, as well as Lotfi Bandaqa, who called her a 'ugly face/bad-looking.'[21]

---

[19] Etude sur la violence contre les femmes politiques, Rapport de synthèse Le 21 Juin 2021. We thank Ms. Taraki Chebbi for providing us with this study conducted by the League of Tunisian Women's Voters on political violence.

[20] A post on the private Facebook account of Representative Hayat Omri about the Ennahda Movement was posted on September 9, 2021. Hayat Omri Facebook Accessed 15/10/2021.

[21] To view Al-Zaghlami's blog post, Al-Hantati's speech, and Lotfi Bandaqa:
https://www.tuniscope.com/ar/article/307990/arabe-actu-arabe/yamina-372213
https://asslemafm.net/بالفيديو-محمد-الهنتاتي-يردّ-على-يمينة/
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt3QXr8y-FM

Although female activists are able to contribute to the enactment of laws by exerting pressure, submitting proposals and projects, or chairing committees within the Constituent Assembly or Parliament and voting on the laws that were discussed, most are convinced that the violence practiced against them in the digital space calls for measures that go beyond enacting laws to carry out comprehensive reforms in education and media, think about new mechanisms, and review several issues related to social upbringing, improving morals, and others. Activists believe that social media platforms can implement measures for preventing or limiting digital violence. Samah Al-Yahyawi believes that Facebook can take other measures to limit digital violence directed against women, such as "placing a symbol on the harasser's account so that he or she is stigmatized." Hayat Al-Omari believes that Facebook administration must close the account of every harasser or violator of the dignity of female activists. Jawaher Shana believes that Facebook administration must "prevent the circulation of violent videos or blogs. This must be done quickly while preventing some of the features that violate the rules of reporting. They must also prevent the publication of content that incites violence, hatred, or spam. However, I know that they have no real intention of preventing this decisively because the exchange of violence and the spread of rumors fuels the popularity of these sites and makes them a destination for all people. These platforms are used for the purposes of violence, revenge, and settling scores, and women are the first to be affected by this." Naziha Al-Obaidi agrees with Yamina Al-Zaghlami in calling for the enactment of strict laws to deter aggressors and "creating platforms that filter messages directed to women."

Undoubtedly, activists' awareness that the state is shirking its duties of enforcing laws and providing protection for women makes them more determined to intensify campaigns seeking pressure to change laws and push the state to assume responsibility.

Political Activists: From Victims of Digital Violence to Those Who Confront it

The respondents realized that practicing political activities, expressing their opinions,[22] and holding positions fell within their political rights, which generations of women struggled to achieve. Therefore, the new generation must fulfill this history of struggle and work to obtain more rights and change the mentalities that insist on considering women as newcomers and intruders in the world of politics. Despite the harsh experience that most female political activists experienced, the sacrifices they made for the sake of political participation, and the family pressure exerted on some of them, most believed that women's determination to participate in political work, which had long been exclusive to men, would open the door to Tunisian women and support their rights. Hayat Al-Omari said, "Digital violence should not be a reason for women to leave politics or not engage in public life. On the contrary, it should be an incentive for more determination to continue to be active in the field of politics and engage in public life." R.U. considers digital violence as an incentive "one of the incentives that makes me overcome all these difficulties to reach my goal and become decision maker and on the front lines side by side with men." Both Jawharat Al-Tais, H.S., and others insist that "when a female activist is exposed to violence, she becomes stronger and more resilient." Jawharat Al-Tais gives advice to women, saying, "I advise every woman to withstand all attempts at massacre and

---

[22] The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which states this directly: "Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account" (United Nations 1995, paragraph 181).

It is important to pay attention to the measures in the Beijing Agreement that demonstrate the importance of considering women's interestsount.

confront violence, which will not stop except with more feminist involvement in public affairs. The more women engage in political activity, the more their existence is normalized. In addition, the circle of societal acceptance will expand, the family pressures on the hesitant women will ease, and the level of violence against them will decrease." Naziha Al-Obaidi agreed with Jawharat Al-Tais, as she advises "women not to give up, to have self-confidence, and be in constant dialogue with their families and groups to which they belong to find support and support, insisting on the right to contribute to public life because it is a matter that concerns all women, whether they are working or a housewife."

M. T. admitted that participating in political work was "a successful experience. Leadership is fun and feasible for women. In addition, the political experience builds a solid social personality." Samah Al-Yahyawi motivates women to participate in political work because "withdrawing from the battlefields is cowardice and a betrayal of the community of women." She does not stop at that, but rather sends a message to every activist, "Be careful not to internalize that your femininity is a curse. Make them confused and disoriented in front of the will of a woman who wears high heels, wears lipstick, and manages a world that they own but fail to manage." In the same context, Jawaher Shanna views "Political work for women as a dual struggle: a struggle for the basic idea that they struggle for in the company of men and others, and a special struggle for women to establish and enforce their presence. To manage and mitigate personal damage resulting from public activities, in my opinion, women must be aware that they will be exposed to double discrimination, that is, discrimination on the basis of embracing ideas that may not be widespread and accepted in their society, such as socialism in my case, and discrimination on the basis of gender." Boushra Belhaj Hamida concluded that after years of political participation, "politics is an adventure worth engaging in, and violence strengthens its victims, so it is important to prepare for it psychologically."

Evidently, there is some confusion at the social representation level. While women have been described as cowardly, weak, and having other negative traits, the political experiences that most Tunisian women have experienced have created new perceptions. They are steadfast, resilient, and defiant and are opposed to all forms of violence directed at them. Whenever someone wanted to eliminate a female activist, she responded quickly. "I acknowledge that I am indebted to every man or woman who sought to discredit or threaten me, try to blackmail me, or disrupt my work and activity. They provided me with a valuable opportunity to discover my ability to withstand or my fragility to work on self-empowerment."[23]

I will live despite the sickness and enemies,
Like an eagle above the majestic peak.[24]

---

[23] Muhammad Al-Hadi Al-Waslati, an interview with Professor Amal Qarami, Visions of Literature, Issue 4, year 2021, p. 64.

[24] Diwan of Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabbi. https://www.aldiwan.net/poem38976.html

Forms of Combating Digital Violence Against Women Active in the Political Field

There is no doubt that most active women know that they have become more threatened than before, yet there are other groups that have been and continue to be targeted, such as activists in civil society and female journalists. These women have broken away from the boundaries of male hegemony and have rebelled against gender norms. Based on this reality, digital violence is considered a factor hindering political participation, national construction, and women's struggles and limiting their efforts to fulfill themselves and obtain their rights. On the other hand, digital violence consolidates social representations, reproducing stereotypes and deepening the gender gap. Indeed, it has become a real threat to democracy and prevented the establishment of social equality.

Some respondents considered their experiences of being subjected to threats, blackmail, fake news, bullying, and harassment, while others changed their positions on the proposed laws. Al-Zaghlami said, "Honestly, I was against this, especially when a colleague took the initiative to propose a legislative initiative and considered some cases of digital violence as crimes requiring penalties, even deprivation of liberty, but my position changed towards the necessity of enacting a law."

Similarly, feminist organizations, women's associations, and other bodies and centers realized that digital violence, which is considered an "epidemic," must be confronted. Indeed, forms of women's resistance have multiplied, and awareness campaigns have been organized, such as the campaign launched by the Center for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Media on Women (Credev).[25] In addition, research has been conducted to show the positions of a number of people in the spread of violence. In this regard, we refer to the latest study issued by the League of Tunisian Women Voters, which showed that insults come at the top of practices and occupy 89%, which makes female activists feel that their political experience is different from that of men.[26]

Attempts to reduce digital violence reflect a desire to engage in efforts made by global feminist movements. It is worth noting that awareness campaigns and the confrontation of digital violence in the Arab world were launched directly after the global "Me Too" campaign, which exposed harassment violations among celebrities from art and politics. Accordingly, campaigns, initiatives,[27] and training was organized to provide protection to victims or expose harassers.

---

[25] "Stay safe online" for a safe digital space for women. JINHAAGENCY-AR (jinhaagency.com

[26] Etude sur la violence à l'égard des femmes politiques 2021.

Although the study is concerned with all forms of violence, the opinions of the respondents (1200) are important. While respondents consider political participation important to achieve equality and justice (82%), the number of victims of violence is increasing. Women believe that the issue of gender-based political violence has become a danger (88%), and respondents believe that parties are the ones that practice violence against female activists (55 %). You can view other initiatives of the association | https://www.liguedeselectricestunisiennes.com.tn/mediatheque/video/16

[27] One of the most prominent Arab initiatives is the hashtag campaign #The_Screen_Does_Not_Protect, which aims to confirm that women and girls in Lebanon and the Arab world have the right to access the Internet and use it freely and safely, without being victims of electronic violence. The campaign received a great response and spread among Lebanese women who interacted strongly and shared their stories and experiences. In Egypt, after the success of the "Harassment Map" experiment, which provides a map from all governorates of Egypt to report any street harassment, the "Congratulations, you are a famous online harasser" campaign was launched to expose sexual harassment practices on social media networks, so female complainants transmit a conversation about being subjected to harassment, which is required. It must include behavior that is considered harassment and exposes the perpetrator. (continues…)

Recommendations

Confronting digital violence that targets women active in political work to harm them, discourages them from political participation, devalues their roles, and violates their dignity requires the following.

1. Pressure on executive authority to ensure strict implementation of the law, deal with the issues of abused women, and provide a suitable climate for political action.

2. Intensifying awareness campaigns involving men and conducting studies that compare violence affects each gender.

3. Creating centers that document violence targeting female political activists, analyzing it according to a comprehensive approach, and providing legal protection for every victim.

4. Establishing the concepts and skills of media and digital education and disseminating them in social circles.

5. Creating social immunity by first highlighting the culture and social traditions for sayings, proverbs, and sayings that call for the prevention of bullying, ridicule, hate speech, and condemning violence, and second, raising the values of civilization and coexistence.

6. Urging the media to contribute to confronting this phenomenon in accordance with what is stipulated in Law 58 by creating a new culture based on respect for difference and otherness can consolidate civil society organizations and human rights bodies.

7. Enacting new laws regulating digital spaces.

8. Comprehensive policies to combat all forms of gender-based violence.

9. Intensifying local and global advocacy campaigns.

10. Amending legal texts and international articles (13/25) by adding provisions specific to digital violence.

11. Documenting women's experiences of resistance and drawing effective lessons and strategies.

In Morocco, the "Challenge for Equality and Citizenship" association, which is considered one of the first associations in Morocco to engage in the process of combating digital violence, recently launched an electronic application, "Stops of Digital Violence," in order to facilitate communication between victims and associations. The application allows submitting a complaint, and then the association communicates with it and directs it towards local associations, if they are from outside Casablanca, keep up with them procedurally and legally. The association also devotes its work to listening to women who are victims of digital violence and conducts campaigns in educational institutions and among families in order to raise awareness about the phenomenon and promote a culture of disclosure and not remain silent about sexual harassment, as well as the proper use of technological media.

Conclusion

A group of Arab countries have passed laws to combat sexual harassment in recent years: Egypt in 2014, Algeria in 2015,[28] Tunisia in 2016, Morocco in 2018, which includes electronic harassment, and Saudi Arabia in 2018, while other countries such as Kuwait and Bahrain have not yet enacted laws in this regard. In Lebanon, a draft law was submitted to criminalize harassment in 2017, but it remained stagnant without approval. Although several countries are rushing to ratify the 2014 Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which is considered one of the basic pillars of women's rights, this does not necessarily imply the availability of a political will that seeks to implement laws and address the phenomenon of impunity. Studies have shown that men are less enthusiastic about defending women's rights laws (Berkman and O'Connor, 1993; Bratton and Haynie, 1999; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Childs and Withey, 2004; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Htun et al., 2013). This means that confronting digital violence is generally linked to anti-violence legal frameworks that have begun to witness development in recent years.

Anyone who is interested in public affairs and familiar with the testimonies of women reporting violence on websites or pages (Me Too, Falgatna, i.e., We're Fed UP) becomes aware of the widening gap between the law and living reality. This requires intensifying the efforts of various players in society to put pressure on governments to monitor the implementation of laws and ensure the foundations of a societal culture based on respect for human rights values, protecting citizens, whether women or men, and ensuring that everyone has the right to live safely in a private, public, or digital space. The Internet is not a place outside the rule of law, even if it seems so at times. Rather, it is a space subject to controls, conditions, and laws that ensures the protection of everyone and works to deter aggressors so that all spaces become safe and encourage women to participate politically, express opinions, and interact as equal and responsible citizens in an inclusive society.

---

[28] In 2018, Morocco adopted a law to combat violence against women, which stipulates for the first time a prison sentence of up to three years for anyone who broadcasts images that "affect people's private lives or defame them." It also criminalizes sexual harassment in both the public and virtual spaces.