Unveiling Digital Shadows: Digital Violence Against Women in Somalia

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Acknowledgments

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Additional credits

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Abstract

This study explores Digital Violence Against Women (DVAW) in Somalia, examining its prevalence, impact, and potential solutions. Using a mixed-method approach, incorporating surveys and interviews with educated Somali women, the research revealed that 33% of the respondents had experienced DVAW, predominantly on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Common forms included verbal abuse, indecent photos and communication, and unwanted contact, with severe incidents occurring less frequently. This study highlights the covert nature of DVAW in Somalia, influenced by social norms and inadequate legal enforcement. Victims faced significant psychological impacts, yet many were unaware of available support services. The findings emphasize the necessity for increased community awareness and improved support mechanisms.

Contents

Executive Summary

Digital violence is an increasingly critical issue globally, with significant implications for individuals and communities, specifically the vulnerable. This research aims to address *digital violence against women* (DVAW) in Somalia, exploring its context, prevalence, impact, and potential solutions. It employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods by conducting 14 interviews with key stakeholders and collecting 195 survey responses from educated Somali women across various regions, including South and Central Somalia, Puntland, and Somaliland. The target population was identified as women who have regular access to the Internet in their daily lives and a level of education that allows them to engage in public activities and/or pursue a career. This ruled out illiterate women or those without substantial Internet access.

The surveys showed that 33% of the 195 respondents to the survey were victims of DVAW, although 13% of them normalized it, stating that they were uncertain whether their experiences could be classified as violence. Regarding platforms, the acts of aggression were mostly exercised through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, with the most prevalent types of violence including verbal abuse, such as insults, repeated unwanted contact, being sent indecent photos, and defamation. Stalking, hacking, trolling, blackmail, and threats were among the least frequently experienced forms of digital violence overall.

Interestingly, upon examining responses and filtering geographically, the data showed that respondents from Puntland reported the lowest percentage of DVAW (29%) compared to Mogadishu and central Somalia (32%), with the highest percentage observed in responses from Somaliland (47%).

A key finding of the study reveals that DVAW is covert, occurring surreptitiously or when the perpetrators believe they can evade consequences due to the robust protective social structures that would take action against abusers of women in public domains, including online platforms. More than half of the respondents reported experiencing harm privately through direct messages online or on WhatsApp.

However, it was also revealed that this social protection ceases if women challenge the prevailing social norms and gender power balance within the society or even pose a potential threat to the established political, religious, and clan social institutions. In such instances, the community adopts an adversarial stance towards the woman, attributing blame to the victim for the events that transpired.

The majority of the respondents confirmed that this phenomenon occurs due to their gender, elucidating that women often encounter gender-specific abuse, such as sexist remarks and threats, attributable to social norms of society. Nearly 58% reported that the perpetrators of abuse are predominantly male.

The anonymity afforded by these platforms, the inadequate enforcement of legislation, the prevalent cultural and societal misogyny, and the ease with which perpetrators can target women without apprehension of consequences are reported as some of the primary factors in Somalia.

The most frequent type of digital violence was being sent indecent photographs and persistent unwanted contact. Verbal abuse, including gender-based slurs, was also common, as was being stalked, hacked, or emailed malicious files. Extortion, threats of physical violence, including rape, and the use of fabricated images to defame a woman's character or honor were the least common forms of violence. Experts in this study attributed this pattern to the normalization of the most frequent types of digital violence by society at large, particularly men who perceived them as harmless and fun. For more grave instances, the motivation is usually more serious, such as revenge or, in some instances, politically motivated, and this was less common, especially since the women would report such incidents to the police or the family prior to that.

Traditional institutions such as the clan could take strong action against perpetrators of violence, which may be considered a significant deterrent, or they could dissuade the women from reporting the violence.

The study categorized digital violence into three categories to explore the reaction and impact on the respondents: *common types of violence*, such as harassment, insults, and transmission of indecent comments or gender-based slurs; *concerning types of violence* including stalking, hacking, sharing personal information; and *severe types of violence*, such as threats of physical or sexual violence, financial or sexual extortion, defamatory fabricated images, and attacks on honor.

It was found that, in common cases of DVAW, women's primary responses were to implement technical measures, such as blocking the perpetrator, reporting the incident on the platform, or disregarding the issue entirely. For more concerning cases, the respondents' most frequent response was also to employ technical measures, report the incident to the platform, or disregard the issue. However, a proportion of women decided to escalate these cases to authorities, and fewer shared the problem with someone close and became more hesitant or cautious online. In cases of extreme severity, women's main response was to report the incident to social platforms, followed by implementing technical precautions as well as disregarding the issue. Other responses included reporting to authorities such as the police.

As for the category related to women's apprehension regarding the potential transfer of digital violence to their offline lives, approximately 32% of the respondents confirmed that digital violence extended to offline contexts, in addition to 25% were uncertain about the causal relationship.

The most significant impact of DVAW was experiencing fear and anxiety, including panic attacks, closely followed by depression and isolation. Some women exhibited defensive or aggressive attitudes, internalized blame from their experience, and experienced a loss of self-confidence and trust in others. A quarter of the respondents reported having to relocate their residence or workplace.

This study also highlights the challenges faced by women regarding their rights within the legal and justice systems, as well as available support tools. The majority of the respondents were unaware of their rights under the laws pertaining to cybercrime victims in their country or the appropriate official authorities to whom they should report such incidents. Moreover, they lacked knowledge of any legal, psycho-social, or technical support agencies, or were unfamiliar with the role of the traditional authorities, such as the clan, in assisting them navigate their problems.

The most prevalent knowledge and utilized service was the reporting tool available in the online systems. A substantial number of respondents expressed doubt regarding the existence of any support mechanisms designed to protect or assist them as victims of DVAW, and regrettably, according to this study, their concerns are substantiated.

Approximately 36% of women who experienced DVAW in Somalia required assistance but were unaware of available resources and support. The primary support for these women was their friends, followed by family members and social media platforms when reporting incidents. The women reported that when seeking professional legal or technical assistance, they were denied support, as was the case with civil society organizations they approached. Notably, 36% of the women who contacted official authorities such as the police reported receiving inadequate assistance, a situation mirrored in their interactions with employers, colleagues, and clan leaders.

Similarly, the responses to the question 'If you asked for help, how was your experience?' revealed that women found social media platforms to be the most helpful, followed by female family members. Notably, some reported negative experiences regarding male family members and work colleagues.

Regarding potential solutions, the respondents identified that the intervention with the highest potential impact for enhancing Internet safety for women in Somalia is increasing community awareness to encourage families to support and empower women to voice their concerns. This was followed by the provision of free psycho-social support, digital security education, and complimentary technical assistance. Subsequent priorities included more accountable social media platforms, gender-sensitive training for frontline responders to complaints among official authorities, such as police, and free legal support for victims should they pursue it. Interestingly, the survey respondents perceived that legally criminalizing digital violence and establishing deterrent penalties for perpetrators would have the least impact.

Introduction and Background

Somalia, officially designated as the Federal Republic of Somalia, is situated in the easternmost region of the African continent, specifically in the Horn of Africa. The nation shares borders with Ethiopia to the west, Djibouti to the northwest, and Kenya to the southwest, while its northern coast is bounded by the Gulf of Aden and its eastern shore by the Indian Ocean. Somalia boasts the longest coastline of any mainland African country. As of 2024, the estimated population of Somalia stands at 18.7 million inhabitants.[1]

The capital and largest city, Mogadishu, has a population exceeding 3 million inhabitants. Almost all inhabitants are ethnic Somalis. The official languages are Somali and Arabic, with Somali serving as the primary language. The entire population adheres to Islam, predominantly of the Sunni denomination.

Somalia is structured as a federal republic consisting of six federal states: Puntland, Jubaland, Galmudug, Khaatumo, Southwest, and Hirshabelle, in addition to the Banadir Regional Administration (BRA), which houses the central government. In 1991, Somaliland, an autonomous region in the northern part of the country, declared its independence from Somalia; however, it remains internationally unrecognized as a sovereign state.[2] For the context of this study, it is considered part of Somali society due to social and demographic integration.

Figure 1: Somalia and Somaliland

Rapid urbanization is currently occurring in Mogadishu due to multiple factors, including the relative stability, periodic floods and droughts in rural areas, and the influx of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from neighboring states and beyond, rendering it one of the fastest-growing cities globally.[3] Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) is the third largest industry for employment in Somalia, and the development of ICT-enabled enterprises and ICT services, such as mobile money payment systems,

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[1] Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data: 2024
[2] Actionaid, Somalia/Somaliland: the differences and issues explained.
[3] UN-HABITAT: Somalia

has been facilitated by the expansion and extension of fiber optic networks. This development was further propelled by the demand from the country's predominantly youthful population, wherein approximately 75% of individuals are under 35 years of age.[4]

Furthermore, a significant milestone in Somalia's development was achieved in December 2023 when it reached the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative Completion Point. This accomplishment enabled Somalia to secure $4.5 billion in debt relief and gain access to crucial new funding, which will support the nation's efforts to stimulate economic growth, alleviate poverty, and generate employment opportunities. Consequently, Somalia's debt sustainability improved markedly, with its external debt decreasing from 64% of GDP in 2018 to less than 6% of GDP by the end of 2023. Somalia successfully implemented thirteen of the fourteen HIPC Completion Point triggers and continued to advance structural reforms despite numerous climate-related challenges and a complex security environment.[5]

Internet penetration in Somalia has increased significantly in recent years, reaching 27.6% at the beginning of 2024.[6] A significant potential exists for further growth, particularly given that mobile network penetration reached 85% of adults by the end of 2023, and 82% of adults utilize smartphones for financial activities, predominantly for mobile payments.[7] Moreover, the telecommunications industry in Somalia is entirely privatized, resulting in comparatively affordable Internet services relative to other East African countries and facilitating accessible mobile banking.[8]

Limited educational attainment (with 41% as an overall literacy rate and 26% for adult females), high poverty rates, and the residence of more than half the population in rural areas are contributing factors to the relatively low Internet penetration in Somalia.[9] In rural areas of Somalia, educational opportunities are limited, and a gender disparity persists in the representation of teachers and students. It is frequently the case that parents also contribute financially to educational institutions, which significantly impedes access to the educational system for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[10] Several factors contribute to the low literacy rate among women, including socio-economic barriers, cultural norms, and limited access to educational opportunities.[11]

Notwithstanding, the significant growth in the use of technology and Internet access in Somalia is accompanied by an increase in the use of social media platforms as primary sources of news and information. Somalis are inherently oral communicators, and these platforms have facilitated the development of robust social networks among Somalis within the country and those residing abroad, enabling connections and discussions of political issues.

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[4] International Trade Administration, 2024. Somalia: Information, Communication and Technology (ICT). Published January 22, 2024.

[5] The World Bank in Somalia

[6] Datareportal, 2024, "Digital 2023: Somalia"

[7] International Trade Administration, 2024. "Somalia - Country Commercial Guide: Banking Services and the Financial Services." Published on January 22, 2024.

[8] Sominvest, April 2021. Somalia Investment Value Proposition Information and Communications Technology sector.

[9] Datareportal, 2024, "Digital 2023: Somalia"

[10] Eno, M.A., Dammak, A., Eno, O.A. and Mweseli, M.N., 2014. Somalia: An overview of primary and secondary education. *Journal of Somali Studies: Research on Somalia and the Greater Horn of African Countries*, *1*(1), pp.11-33.

[11] UNESCO Somalia, 2022. Somalia - Literacy rate.

Digital Violence Against Women in Somalia

With the prevalence of digital access, the potential for Digital Violence Against Women (DVAW) correspondingly increases. This phenomenon is particularly significant given that approximately 40% of social media users in Somalia are reportedly female, indicating their substantial presence among the country's Internet users.[12]

Considering its relatively recent emergence as a recognized phenomenon, gender-based violence in the digital sphere is comparatively less well-understood among researchers and women-led civil society organizations in contrast with domestic violence or gender-based violence. However, while there is limited literature on DVAW in Somalia and a paucity of official reports or statistics, the few available studies - including the present one - depict a concerning situation.

A 2020 survey on digital harassment in Puntland, the largest and longest-functioning state in Somalia, revealed that approximately half of the female respondents (aged 18 to 35 years) reported experiencing harassment and stalking via messaging applications. Furthermore, nearly 40% indicated that their online accounts had been hacked at least once, with over 82% of those affected reporting multiple instances of account breaches.[13]

The study further indicates that a significant 91% of women lack confidence in police agencies' ability to address their complaints of online harassment with due seriousness, or at least parallel to the attention given to offline gender-based violence. Consequently, women frequently refrain from reporting incidents of online harassment and violence.

A subsequent study conducted by the Digital Shelter,[14] which is a Somali initiative aimed to promote digital safety, digital rights, inclusion, and internet freedom in Somalia, in 2020 surveyed 82 Somali women and documented their experiences with digital violence.[15] It inspired a digital campaign, #WithoutFear, advocating for enhanced digital safety measures for women in Somalia.[16] The survey results indicated that more than one-third of the female respondents reported that online violence has deterred them from engaging with social media platforms.

In 2023, the Somali Women Journalists' Rights Association (SOWJRA) collaborated with several other organizations to conduct a survey on DVAW in Somalia, collecting data from 3,500 women regarding their online experiences. The study revealed that a significant 71% of the women surveyed had encountered digital violence, with Facebook identified as the primary platform for such occurrences.[17]

The societal attitude towards DVAW is derived from the prevailing perspective on women in general, as the country is characterized by its patriarchal, traditional, and clan-based social structure. Despite the implementation of a 30% quota for women in parliament since 2016, evidence from the limited civil society organizations and country reports suggests that this measure is a form of window dressing and not a true empowerment of women.[18]

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[12] Datareportal, 2024, "Digital 2023: Somalia".
[13] Bareedo Platform: Online Harassment and Violence Are Emerging As New Forms Of Gender-Based Violence In Puntland, Somalia. 2020.
[14] https://digitalshelter.org/
[15] Abdifatah Hassan Ali, "Confronting Online Abuses Against Women #IWD2021," (2021), *Digital Shelter*.
[16] Digital Shelter, WithoutFear campaign (2021). Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA).
[17] SOWJRA, 2023. The Key Findings: A Survey on the Extent of Online Gender-Based Violence in Somalia.
[18] Mohamoud–Barawani, Mohamed A. "Understanding the Clan Barriers and Religious Perspectives for Women Political Participation and Elections in Somaliland." *Journal of Power, Politics & Governance* 9.2 (2021): 1-16.

The clan structure of Somalia is a fundamental aspect of Somali society and plays a significant role in the social, political, and economic spheres of the country. The clan frequently functions as a corporate political entity with a degree of territorial exclusivity, adhering to regular seasonal migrations for pasturage and establishing semi-permanent settlements. Clan members derive their identity from common agnatic descent rather than a sense of territorial belonging. The clan represents the upper echelon of political action, possesses certain territorial characteristics, and is typically led by a clan head; however, it lacks centralized administration or governance.[19]

Women in Somalia face numerous challenges stemming from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural practices. These challenges are exacerbated by the protracted conflict and absence of robust institutional frameworks to protect women's rights. The labor force participation rate among women in Somalia is significantly lower compared to other sub-Saharan African countries. According to data in 2023, the labor force participation rate is 21.2% among women compared to 47.3% for men.[20] The proportion of women in vulnerable employment was 58.9% in 2022.[21] These women are more susceptible to impoverishment and are less likely to have formal employment agreements and social security protections against economic shocks. Somali women tend to have higher rates of vulnerable employment in comparison to men.

Furthermore, gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is prevalent, particularly among women from vulnerable populations. According to UNFPA (2021), 75% of the reported cases of gender-based violence against women, adolescents, girls, and children were reported from displaced communities in Somalia.[22]

Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Since the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia has experienced periods of lawlessness, clan-based conflicts, and the emergence of extremist groups. Despite recent advancements in governance and security, the lingering effects of these turbulent years continue to impact all aspects of Somali society. Furthermore, Somalia's legal and institutional frameworks remain underdeveloped. The country's legal system comprises a complex amalgamation of customary law - known as Xeer law, Sharia law, and formal statutory law.

The Somali Penal Code, approved by legislative decree in December 1962 and implemented in 1964, serves as the primary legal framework for the Somali government to prosecute both offline and online offenders. This code encompasses various articles addressing the treatment and adjudication of offenders. Article 451 of the Somali Penal Code specifically addresses the protection of citizens' dignity. This article emphasizes the importance of respecting individual dignity, stipulating that no person should be subjected to treatment or punishment that infringes upon their dignity or inflicts unnecessary suffering, including violence or any form of abuse.[23]

Nevertheless, the current legal system demonstrates limited adaptability to contemporary manifestations of violence, including digital violence. The current legal provisions predominantly emphasize physical and traditional modes of abuse, failing to explicitly address phenomena such as cyberbullying, online harassment or blackmail, or digital privacy infringements. Consequently, while the existing system offers broad protections for individual dignity, it may prove inadequate in effectively addressing and mitigating the

[19] European Union Agency for Asylum. 2023. "The role of clans in Somalia" in Country Guidance Somalia 2023.
[20] World Bank Gender Data Portal (2023): Somalia.
[21] Trading Economics (2022). Somalia - Vulnerable Employment.
[22] UNFPA (2021): Overview of Gender Based Violence in Somalia: Somalia Country Office, Published in 2021 www.unfpa.org
[23] The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia, adopted 2012.

complexities of modern, technology-facilitated forms of violence. This gap underscores the necessity for legislative updates or supplementary legal provisions to address these emerging challenges in the digital era.

Nonetheless, initiatives are in progress to strengthen legal protections for women and to enhance institutional capacity in addressing such cases. For instance, according to lawyer Mohamed Abdirizak, legislation addressing cybercrime is currently under development and is proceeding through the Somali parliamentary approval process.

In recent years, Somalia has been taking significant steps to address cybercrime within its legal framework. According to Mohamed Abdirizak of Hiiliye Legal Services, "*laws against cybercrime are being prepared and are now going through the parliamentary approval procedure. Somalia currently employs the Penalty Code Law, which indicates that a person faces a three-month prison sentence and penalty fees if they threaten, insult, or force a citizen to do something against their will*."

An example of the existing support tools is the civil-society-run Digital Help Desk, which has a hotline, and an email service provided by the Bareedo Platform to offer "*timely technical assistance and advice to journalists, media organizations, and activists in Somalia who are under or at risk of digital threat*."[24] Bareedo is a Somali youth-led non-governmental organization that promotes participatory democracy, open government, digital rights, and civil society building. Nevertheless, substantial gaps persist, particularly in the enforcement of laws and the protection of women's rights in the digital sphere.

To address the gap in the literature concerning Somalia, this research investigates domestic DVAW in the country, encompassing the three primary regions of Central and South Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland. This study elucidates the context, prevalence, impact, and potential interventions and solutions related to DVAW.

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[24] Bareedo Platform. Digital Help Desk

Methodology

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to examine the issue of digital violence against Somali women. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, relevant contextual data, including digital information, country-based studies, and various activities to address DVAW, were systematically analyzed. A detailed questionnaire was administered to 195 Somali women who are active on social media platforms and reside in various regions within Somalia and the diaspora. The research population primarily comprised women in the public sphere, including educated women, women in politics, and women's rights' advocates. The study sample comprised a small percentage of respondents, specifically 4%, who were under 18 years old. In contrast, the vast majority, accounting for 96%, were 18 years or older.

Of the 195 women surveyed for this study, 47% were from the capital and most populous city, Mogadishu, followed by Puntland with 16%. Additionally, 11% of respondents were from the diaspora, and 10% were from Somaliland.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on the types of DVAW these women experienced, the digital platforms where the violence occurred, their coping mechanisms, knowledge about the perpetrators, perceived motivations behind the violence, and recommendations for mitigating it.

In addition to the survey findings, this study was supported by a comprehensive desk review and the researcher's personal observations, as well as through the conduct of 14 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including case studies of victims, representatives from civil society organizations, and subject matter experts. The interviewees were contacted directly through established professional networks or alternative means, and all provided explicit informed consent to participate and to have their statements incorporated into the study.

The interview participants included individuals involved in legal services, women's projects in local organizations, academia, digital technology, social media influence, cybersecurity activism, and governmental positions within Somalia, including those working in federal states with diverse governance structures.

Research Questions

This research aims to address the following questions:

1. To what extent are women exposed to DVAW in Somalia?
2. What are the most commonly experienced forms of DVAW in Somalia?
3. What are the responses of women to incidents of DVAW in Somalia?
4. What are the impacts of DVAW on women?
5. What support systems are accessible to women to mitigate DVAW and protect them? How useful are they?
6. What practical and policy solutions are necessary to foster a safe online environment for women in Somalia?

Research Findings and Discussion

The survey sampling targeted educated women who were active online and in the public sphere, and who were capable of responding to the survey questions in English. This targeting was intentional, as the study aimed to explore the digital violence experienced by women in the frontlines or public spaces as part of their daily online communication, both personally and professionally.

Frequency, Nature, and Root Causes of DVAW in Somalia

The survey results indicate that 19% of the respondents reported being exposed to some form of digital violence, such as insults, extortion, stalking, privacy violations, threats, or harassment. A majority, 68%, stated that they have not experienced such digital violence, while 13% were unsure or maybe had experienced it.

Expert analysis from interviewees explains why the percentage of women facing DVAW in this research is relatively small, compared to other studies in the literature. A Member of Parliament from Southwest State, affirmed that it is true that educated women, who were targeted as the population of this research, could be in a better situation when it comes to DVAW; however, much normalization of digital violence is going on. "*We know from our research that the majority of Somali women face a variety of digital violence just because they are women. However, some try to normalize it as part of everyday life, especially if it is limited to harassment and does not include threats or extortion. Some women do not even realize they are facing digital violence because they are not aware of it as a concept. They just know that they are made to feel scared or uneasy in the best-case scenario. This is why we need to carry out awareness campaigns and encourage women to report incidents and take action against the perpetrators*," she said.

Interestingly, there may be another aspect to this normalization. An interview with a Fintech Expert who requested to be Anonymous, underscores the lack of seriousness in dealing with online violence compared to life-threatening risks faced by women in frontline roles, such as politicians and activists in Somalia. She argued, "*I believe that many women do not perceive cyber threats as significant compared to the other, more immediate threats to their safety. Women in prominent roles, such as politicians and activists, have accepted the risks of violence that come with their positions, which may lead them to view digital threats as less pressing.*"

Furthermore, upon analysis of the responses, stratified by geographical location, the percentage of women reporting digital violence exhibited regional variation. That is, among respondents from South and Central Somalia, 32% either experienced or were uncertain about experiencing digital violence. In contrast, 47% of respondents from Somaliland reported either facing or being unsure about encountering digital violence. Responses from Puntland demonstrated a lower incidence, with 29% of respondents reporting either experiencing or being uncertain about experiencing digital violence.

Interviews provide significant insights into the regional variations in experiences of digital violence among Somali women, indicating the importance of education and digital literacy in empowering women to combat digital violence. For the purpose of anonymity, she will be referred to as Hana Abdi from Somaliland, who said, "*In Somaliland, women are empowered to recognize and oppose harm. Higher levels of education, with many female graduates, contribute to their ability to stand up for their rights. The community's increased internet usage also allows them to take serious action against violations of their rights*

Concurrently, Samira Abdikadir, Digital Marketing Expert, ICE Somalia, and an interviewee from Mogadishu commented on these regional variations, stating, "*In my opinion, the majority of Mogadishu people know very little about digital matters in comparison to individuals in Somaliland, who also know more about their*

digital rights. In comparison to Mogadishu, Somaliland has higher Internet usage and a better education level, I guess. And I think, they utilize it extensively, are conscious of the bad things, and can quickly spot the harassers. However, most individuals in Mogadishu utilize the Internet primarily for communication and information gathering."

The survey also explored the behaviors of social media users. Respondents were asked whether they use their real name and/or real picture on their social media accounts. The findings reveal a strong preference for authenticity, with 89% of respondents indicating they use their real name and/or picture. Conversely, 11% of the respondents preferred not to reveal their true identity, whether picture or name, online.

These results show that Somali women are willing to share their real names or real pictures publicly on the Internet. This willingness signifies a level of confidence and perceived security, suggesting that they do not anticipate facing backlash or negative consequences from displaying their real identities online, regardless of their backgrounds. "*No, we are not afraid of anything, it's normal to use names and pictures online, you are part of the community, and for some of us, it's a place to build our self-brand so that the community knows what we learn, work, and build community connections. There is nothing to be afraid of,*" Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, a women and youth activist, Coordinator of American Corner Mogadishu, and a self-defined digital guru, confirmed.

The survey responses indicate that women experienced less harassment in public spaces compared to private settings, where perpetrators, predominantly men (58% according to the survey), perceive a lower risk of consequences. Thirty percent of the respondents believe that men and women engage in harassment to a similar degree while 9% attribute it to unidentified individuals, such as those who create anonymous social media profiles.

Figure 2: Where does DVAW occur on social media platforms?
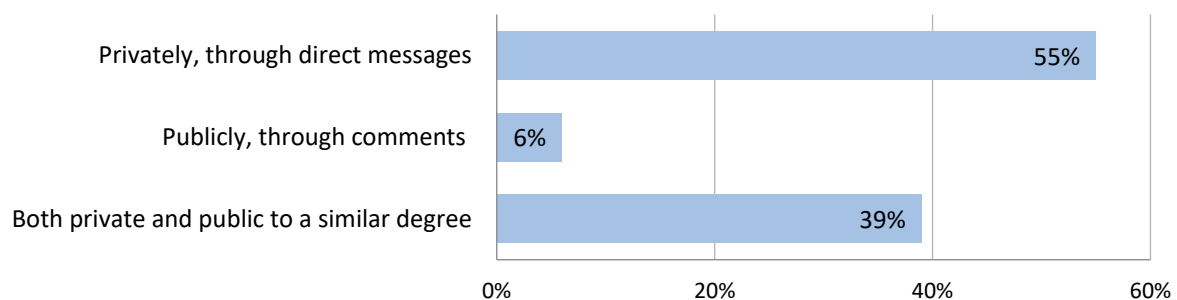
In response to the question regarding the platforms where most digital violence occurs, Figure (2) shows that approximately 55% of the women reported that it occurred in private settings, through direct messages or WhatsApp. While 39% stated it happened to a similar degree in both private and public spheres, only 6% reported that it occurred exclusively in public spaces. This suggests that digital violence is prevalent but often concealed through private communication channels, potentially due to concerns about public exposure and response.

To delve deeper into the reasons why women are targeted online in private, Anonymous from Somaliland said, "*Our community will not accept harming innocent women, that's why the harassers can't engage them publicly when the woman is not doing anything that is socially perceived to be wrong. The harassers know that they can't do it in public and the community will search their identity and take action against them. When women receive such violence privately, they don't share it with the community. They will feel shame and keep quiet or simply block the harassers. I can say that bad people cannot try to harm you in public.*

Therefore, they will hide in private. And most of the time, these harassers have hidden identities, which makes it difficult to find them."

Hence, expert analysis suggests that the primary deterrent of harmful digital behavior may not be related to ethical considerations or personal values, but rather fear of societal or legal repercussions. The implication here is that if individuals believe they can avoid detection or punishment, they are more likely to engage in such behavior.

As regards the respondents' perception of whether they would have experienced similar digital harm if they were men, notably, half of them answered 'No,' suggesting they believe being a man would have shielded them from such abuse. Only 26% believed they would still encounter digital harm even if they were men, and 24% were uncertain, answering 'Maybe, not sure.'

Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, the activist, reported a personal experience of frequent digital harm, particularly in the form of repeated and unwanted contact and the receipt of inappropriate photos: "*Someone created a fake social media account using my name and photos to post inappropriate content and send harmful messages, damaging my reputation and causing emotional distress. The attack was clearly gender-based, as the impersonator used sexist and derogatory language.*" When asked if she would have encountered this issue had she been a man, she responded, "*If I were a man, it is possible that I might still have been subjected to digital harm, but the nature and frequency of the harm could be different. Digital harm, such as cyberbullying, harassment, and online abuse, affects individuals regardless of gender, though the types of harm and the contexts in which they occur can vary. Women often face gender-specific abuse, such as sexist remarks and threats, which might be less prevalent for men.*"

Figure 3: The frequency of forms of DVAW
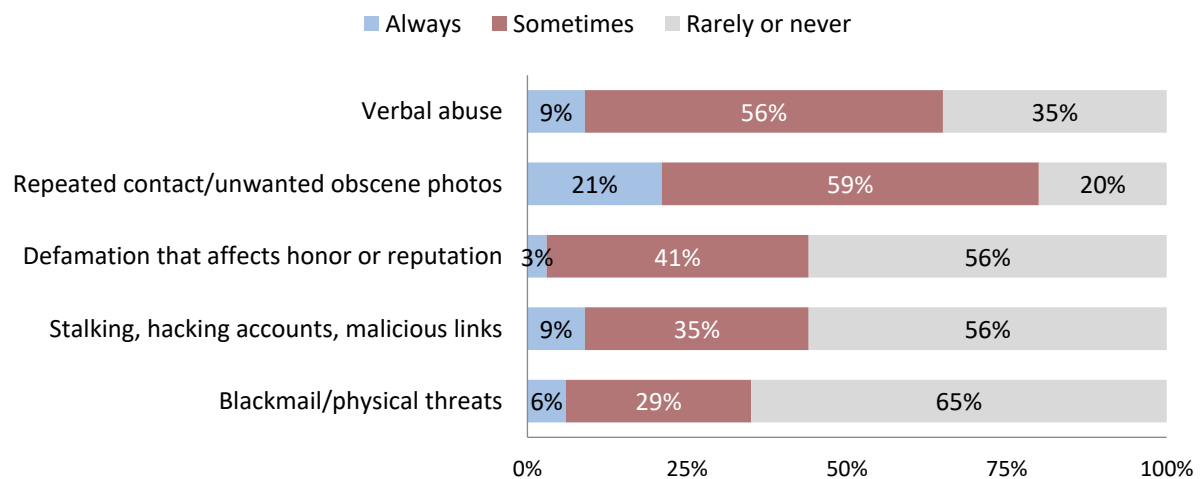
The survey results shown in Figure (3) indicate that the most frequent form of digital violence experienced by respondents is repeated contact or unwanted obscene photos, with 21% of the respondents reporting it happened to them always and 59% sometimes. Verbal abuse is also common, with 9% saying they always experienced it and 56% only sometimes. On the other hand, the least frequent forms of DVAW include defamation that affects honor or distorts reputation, and stalking or hacking, both with 56% of respondents reporting they rarely or never experienced these issues. Blackmail or physical threats are also infrequent, with 65% of respondents indicating they rarely or never faced such threats. These findings highlight the varying prevalence of diverse types of digital violence among the surveyed women.

Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, Women and Youth Activist, American Corner Somalia, highlighted the complexities of DVAW, stating, *"It's not easy to harm you with serious threats like rape or murder, because it's hard to do this in the real world and get away with it. But the harasser can insult you and send you whatever he wants. When a woman has a relationship with a man and he has her nude pictures, then yes, he can blackmail her and threaten her with serious harm, and she is more likely to be afraid of him and she is also afraid to tell the community because she feels the shame."*

These forms are exemplified in the following extracts from the survey in relation to the respondents' harmful digital experiences:

> *"Sending inappropriate pictures like nude photos many times."*
>
> *"Yes. As a 14- or 15-year-old, I shared a photo of me with a guy friend whom we were too close. We weren't in a relationship or any sort of that. A few years later, the guy shared my photo with others including my classmates and it drove me crazy. When I confronted, he denied it. I wasn't nude in the photo, but I didn't have a hijab on, and it could be against me at any time."*
>
> *"They sent me pictures or unwanted videos, or they called me. When I answered, I observed a male individual who was unclothed, which was deeply distressing."*

Interviews offer a better understanding of the nuanced nature of DVAW forms and the underlying causes of DVAW. *"One of the most common ways that women are harmed online is by cyber-stalking, which includes trolling them on social media. They begin by making threats to hurt the person, using offensive language, such as 'you are someone who does this and that,' 'if you don't stop doing that or sharing that, I will do this to you.' Intimidating messages and nude photos are also sent to women,"* as Mohamed Abdirizak, Founder and CEO of Hiiliye Legal Services, argued.

Supporting this perspective, Abdirizak also highlighted, *"The most common forms of abuse against women include insults, threats, forgery, hacking into personal accounts such as email and social media accounts, and spreading sensitive photos and videos of them without their consent. There are also cases related to corruption and fraud using technology."*

For serious forms of harm and threats, the occurrence is less frequent due to men's apprehension regarding potential consequences. These actions are classified as criminal offenses by law, or women may seek social support networks through clan or familial connections, who may be inclined to retaliate against the perpetrator if his identity is disclosed. The distinction lies in the intent: contact attempts and inappropriate photos are often motivated by a man's desire for fun, whereas serious threats are malicious in nature, stemming from hatred or a desire for revenge. It is essential to consider the underlying motive.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that multiple factors contribute to the prevalence of DVAW. These include lack of education, economic hardship, unemployment, substance abuse, deceptive romantic relationships, insufficient public awareness regarding the ramifications of DVAW, inadequately enforced regulations and legislation, and the pervasive utilization of unregulated social media platforms alongside their deficient security protocols. The following extracts from the survey are illustrative:

A survey respondent from Mogadishu stated, *"The increasing reach of the Internet, the rapid spread of mobile information, and the widespread use of social media, have led to the emergence of cyber violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a growing global problem with potentially significant economic and societal*

consequences." Others explained the causes of DVAW as follows: *"women are easy targets," "that men suppose that women are always helpless," "because of misuse of social media," "because anybody can use social media,"* or *"due to lack of law and lack of enforcement."* Jealousy, hatred, desire for revenge, insecurity, and psychological disorders were also mentioned as factors driving the spread of this phenomenon.

It was suggested that the anonymity feature afforded by social media platforms for their users contributes to digital harm. For instance, a survey respondent from Mogadishu who reported experiencing gender-specific digital harassment, which involved receiving unsolicited pictures and videos from an individual who utilized multiple phone numbers to contact her, explained one of the potential causes of such digital violence in her country, "*In Somalia, this phenomenon is largely attributable to the anonymity provided by these platforms, the absence of stringent regulations and enforcement, cultural and societal misogyny, and the ease with which perpetrators can target women with minimal fear of consequences.*"

In response to the question about the reasons for the propagation of digital harm, Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, an activist who was experiencing ongoing DVAW, responded, "*In my opinion, violence, and harm against women on the Internet spread because people can hide their identities, making them feel safe to be mean without getting caught. Also, social media platforms don't have strong enough rules or punishments to stop this bad behavior. Lastly, negative attitudes towards women in society contribute to this problem.*"

Layla, a victim, asserted that the perpetrators, who contacted her privately, through direct messages or WhatsApp, are predominantly unidentified: "*Sometimes, people I don't exactly know send me nude pictures plus insulting messages. I feel sometimes those who are sending me this type of message know me well and they don't want to come in front of me.*" She attributed the prevalence of DVAW to cultural norms: "*Because women and girls are vulnerable for violence and due to our social norms and culture, Somali women do not like to speak out about violence and any type of GBV.*"

Some survey respondents also posited that the cause could be rooted in cultural norms, where men traditionally perceive themselves as superior and women as vulnerable and incapable of resisting violence, thus emboldening them to violate women's rights. Deceptive romantic relationships are used by men to lure women, one respondent, stated, "*Some men feel entitled and believe that every woman should respond to their inappropriate messages. If they do not receive the expected response, they resort to violent behavior through social media.*"

Samira Abdulkadir, a Digital Marketing Expert, mentioned a similar argument in the interview: "*Some people believe that she is vulnerable just because she is a woman. They believe she is too weak to defend herself and that no one is chasing him. Additionally, there isn't a solid legal structure or harsh penalties in place to deal with harassers.*"

Reflecting on the existing lack of awareness about digital harms and its effects on mental health, a respondent noted, "*Ignorance is prevalent among many individuals, causing harm to others, particularly women, is ultimately a manifestation of psychological disturbance.*" Another respondent also cited "*a lack of digital literacy and awareness concerning online safety measures,*" as one of the causes of digital harm.

The in-depth interviews uncover significant insights into the causes of DVAW, showing that technical, legal, social, financial, and personal factors intertwine. The level of a woman's self-confidence in Somali culture, whether young or mature, is influenced by societal norms and religious protections. Fear of community backlash and apprehension of being held accountable can lead women to a tendency to avoid certain actions. Anonymous from Somaliland, argued, "*When women engage in behavior viewed as socially unacceptable, they may feel more vulnerable to threats, regardless of their age or experience. For instance, sharing private images in a relationship can lead to significant community stigma, causing fear of repercussions.*"

Dr. Mohamed Taher Abdulkarim, a psychology lecturer from the Department of Psychology at SIMAD further elaborated on the underlying cultural reasons of digital violence, explaining how the normalization of certain acts of digital harassment against women contributes to the devaluation of their emotional well-being and psychological state. He asserted, "*Our societal attitudes do not consider this as detrimental to the well-being of women. However, this can lead to social exclusion and long-term mental health issues. This normalization impedes women's ability to have their concerns addressed seriously.*"

The Member of Parliament Southwest State, pointed to the dysregulation of Internet and social media use, "*The use of the Internet among our youth has really gone far and bad; for instance, a small child has a smartphone, and parents need to have an age limit where they start giving their children access to the digital world. Unregulated use of digital devices and platforms encourages the negative impacts of the Internet that our women are facing, the issues of sharing personal information, extorting women, and sharing private images for both men and women have increased.*"

She also acknowledged, "*Ignorance and money are the main causes behind this DVAW, the women trust their boyfriends or partners, then they are asked to come to a house, and anything can happen there. The girls' pictures are taken and used to blackmail them. Many of them decide to remain silent while others might share it with parents or family, who are also afraid to lose their honor within the society and ask the girls to keep their dignity and that of their parents and remain silent.*" She also argued, "*The state laws are behind this fast technology and the Internet is not regulated. As I said before, the police are doing a good job and are arresting both genders who share negative content on social media to protect the community.*"

In terms of the legal framework, Somalia lacks comprehensive laws and adequate regulations concerning the protection of women and online violence. This legislative deficiency results in impunity for perpetrators, subsequently facilitating the prevalence of DVAW. As for insufficient institutional and community support, the dearth of support from governmental and non-governmental organizations dedicated to combating DVAW contributes to its prevalence. In some instances, women victims do not receive adequate support from these institutions, leading to the perpetuation of abuse, as Abdirizak Mustaf, Legal Advisor, explained.

Responses to and Impact of DVAW

The survey results on Figure (4) reveal various responses to various levels of digital violence.

Figure 4: Women's responses to the three categories of digital violence
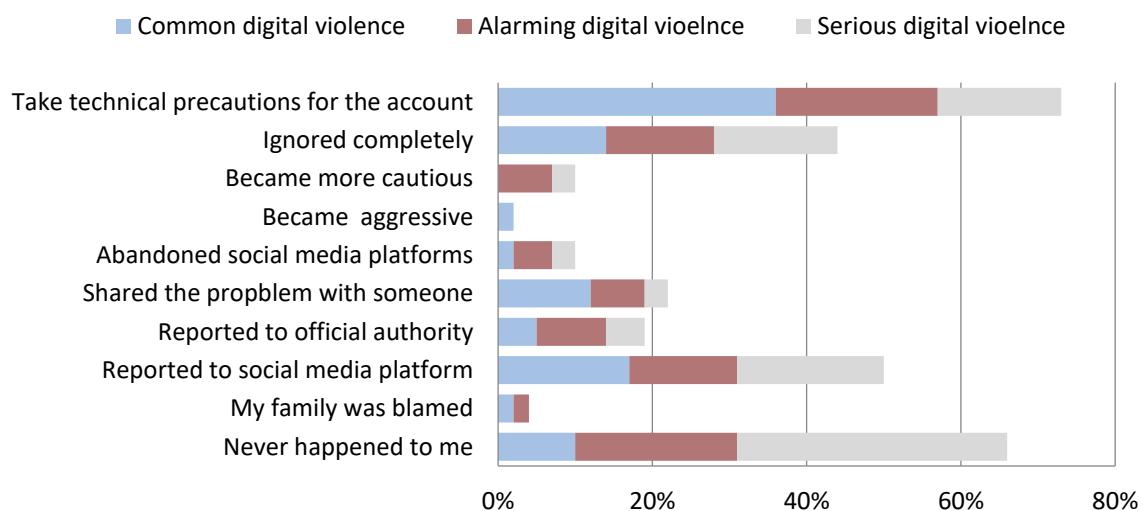
For common DVAW forms, the most frequent response was taking technical precautions for the account (36%), while becoming more cautious was the least frequent response (0%). In cases, concerning digital violence types, the most common responses were 'never happened to me' and 'ignored completely' (both 21%), with becoming aggressive being the least common (0%). For serious digital violence incidents, the most frequent response was 'never happened to me' (35%), while 'my family was blamed' and becoming aggressive were the least common responses (both 0%).

The primary response of women was to implement technical measures, such as blocking perpetrators of violence, reporting the incident on the platform, or disregarding the issue entirely. However, what factors contribute to women's preference for taking charge of the situation or disregarding and blocking the individual? Digital marketing expert, Samira Abdukadir Hareed, explained, "*Blocking, in my opinion, is the simplest, least time-consuming* [response] *and requires no defensiveness or pointless debates. It is also highly effective. Usually, the next step is to inform your friends about the situation, so they are aware of it.*" She added that women tend to ignore such behavior because they do not consider it worth their time to address these issues, as they are perceived as a normative aspect of women's lives in Somalia, and there are more pressing concerns to address.

A survey respondent from Mogadishu, who was contacted repeatedly by someone that she did not want to communicate with or sent unwanted rude photos commented on the factors contributing to the prevalence of violence against women. For the purpose of anonymity, she will be referred to as Layla. She said, "*I think that women are always susceptible to sexual assault. Society doesn't care about men nudity but exacerbates the issue for women. Women are also known for not seeking justice at the first assault but going through the trap of blackmail, and victims always increase for these reasons.*" When such incidents occur on the Internet, Layla asserted, she implemented technical precautions for the account, including blocking the abuser, and she became more cautious online to avoid encountering alarming cases of tracking or stalking. Unfortunately, she reported that the digital harm transferred to her real life, stating that "*it does transfer to your life. It makes it difficult to accept anyone sending you a friend request, fearing that he or she may insult you.*"

In the same vein, the activist, Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, mentioned that when she was confronted with any of the common DVAW incidents, such as verbal abuse, she opted for reporting to the social media platform because she found it more accessible, or she communicated the issue to her close friends. However, in cases of more severe harassment, women resort to alternative measures wherein the predominant response was also to implement technical precautions, report the incident to the platform, or disregard the issue. However, a considerable proportion of women escalated the matter to authorities, disclosed the problem to a close associate, exercised increased caution online, and, in some instances, completely withdrew from social media platforms.

A survey respondent from Mogadishu recounted her experience, "*I found a message from a random guy online who was threatening to photoshop me in an inappropriate manner if I did not respond or talk to him. He would then make a fake profile and use that picture to humiliate me. I did not take it lightly and screenshotted the message in a post on Facebook where people defended me, and he was forced to apologize.*" Another respondent said, "*I was sent nude videos and images, and I was asked to share mine. I was asked to send some money. My accounts were tried to be hacked [sic], and I received several notifications for those attempts.*"

These responses confirm the aforementioned observation that women demonstrate a willingness to confront offenders and, moreover, they are able to mobilize support from various sources, including the online community, in their efforts to address harassment.

Figure 5: Common impacts of DVAW in Somalia
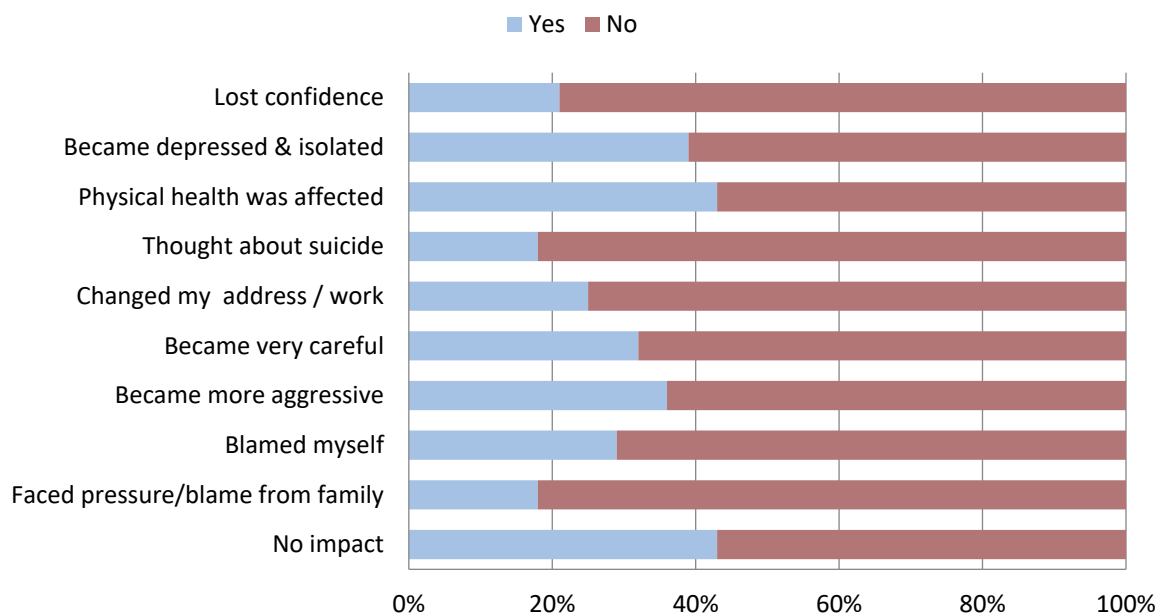
In terms of impact, the survey results shown on Figure (5) reveal that the most frequent impact was on physical health, as reported by 43% of respondents. Additionally, 39% of the respondents became depressed and isolated while 36% became more aggressive and 32% became cautious online. Self-blame was experienced by 29% and changes in address and work were made by 25% of respondents. On the other hand, the least frequent effects included thinking about suicide and facing pressure and blame from family, both reported by 18% of respondents. Interestingly, 43% reported no impact at all. These findings highlight the varied and significant impacts of digital violence on individuals' well-being and behavior, depending on the character of the victim and the support available to her.

Samira, a digital specialist, shared a DVAW experience highlighting the impact of online negativity on young women. She stated, "*Actually, I recently made friends with a young female student on Instagram. I questioned why she didn't use any of her own photos. She claimed that because she used to upload her photos online and received negative comments, she lost confidence in doing so. She started to hesitate about posting her photos online after that.*"

A survey respondent from Garowe, who will be referred to in this study as Bayan, recounted one of her recent instances of harassment: "*Sometimes rude comments like talking about my body and stuff when I put my picture on social media platforms.*" This harassment occurred in both public and private settings. She attributed the majority of these incidents to male perpetrators for several reasons, including "*personal rudeness, lack of consequences for digital harassment, and making jokes to disrespect someone.*" She reported that these experiences negatively impacted her life, leading to feelings of disrespect on social media, loss of confidence, and self-blame. Luckily, however, she received support from her friends. Another survey respondent noted that such harassment "*may cause depression and anxiety, and it leads to suicidal* [thoughts]," when the harm extends beyond the digital realm.

As per the survey results, about one-third of the respondents, 32%, reported that digital violence transferred to real life and 25% said they were unsure or that maybe they experienced such a transfer. Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, for example, reported that some of her DVAW experiences transformed her life: "*The*

digital harm did transfer to real life. The fake account and harmful messages not only damaged my online reputation but also caused stress and affected my relationships with friends and colleagues in real life."

A more serious example was reported by Layla, a high school participant in the survey, who shared a deeply personal account of the social and emotional impact of digital violence she experienced during her school years. She acknowledged, "*Some of my classmates were laughing at me and speaking behind my back. I hated the classes, and I hated myself those days. Until a friend who noticed the circulated photo told me that he told them to delete it, and they did. I don't know if that was true, or if he was just trying to make me feel better. I had to believe him, and I had no other choice. The impact was much worse since I was known for my A-grade level, and I always behaved at school. It felt like I was exposed. I confronted the abuser, but I didn't share it with a family member or a friend because I was afraid to be judged and insulted offline. I felt embarrassed. It was around a decade ago. There were no police, and no cybersecurity support, and I couldn't ask for it from my clan elders and family. It would be more dangerous, and I would get blamed and shamed.*"

Nusaiba Bihi, a Gender Advisor at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, highlighted the profound impact of digital harm on women's lives and Somalia's gender equality efforts. She argued, "*Indeed, digital harm has a significant negative influence on women's physical and mental health. When women experience such things, they run away from society and sometimes even leave the nation. They are unable to return to their previous residences to work or pursue their education, which affects Somalia's efforts toward gender equality.*"

Support for DVAW Victims

This study also explores the knowledge and awareness of Somali women who are exposed to DVAW with reference to their rights, the available legal and justice systems, as well as other professional support systems.

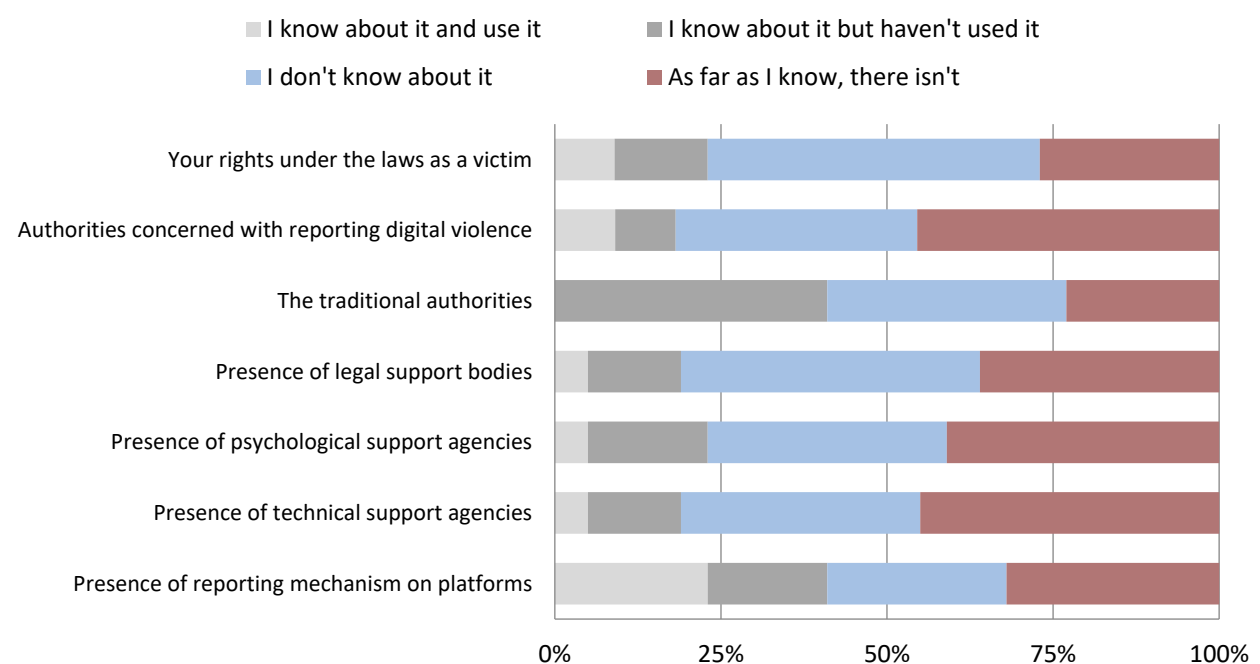**Figure 6: Respondents' awareness of support apparatuses in Somalia.**

Figure (6) reveals varying levels of awareness regarding apparatuses related to digital violence support. Approximately 36% of women who experienced DVAW in Somalia required assistance but were unaware of available resources. However, 23% of respondents expressed awareness and reported using social platforms' technical reporting mechanisms. Conversely, the least known and utilized resource was the traditional authorities, such as clans, with a 0% result. Additionally, half the respondents were unaware of their rights under Somali law as DVAW victims, and 45% were unaware of which official authorities are concerned with reporting digital violence. Many respondents expressed doubt regarding the existence of support resources designed to protect or assist them as victims of DVAW, and unfortunately, according to this study, their concerns are justified. These findings highlight significant gaps in awareness and usage of available support resources for digital violence victims and point to the need to fill these gaps by educating the public on DVAW and how to combat it.

In Somalia, women encounter significant challenges when reporting cyberbullying to authorities due to feelings of shame and a profound fear of being blamed, two commonly reported impacts of DVAW. Furthermore, they experience uncertainty regarding the potential for a favorable outcome and the attainment of justice. These individuals often lack adequate moral support. Consequently, unless a woman possesses exceptional courage, she may opt for silence to avoid such difficulties.

To mitigate these obstacles, Mohamed Abdirizak, Founder and CEO of Hiiliye Legal Services, suggested addressing them through enhancing public awareness of digital issues, providing police with specialized training in digital crimes, and emphasizing the importance of confidential reporting mechanisms.

Figure 7: Available support for DVAW victims in Somalia
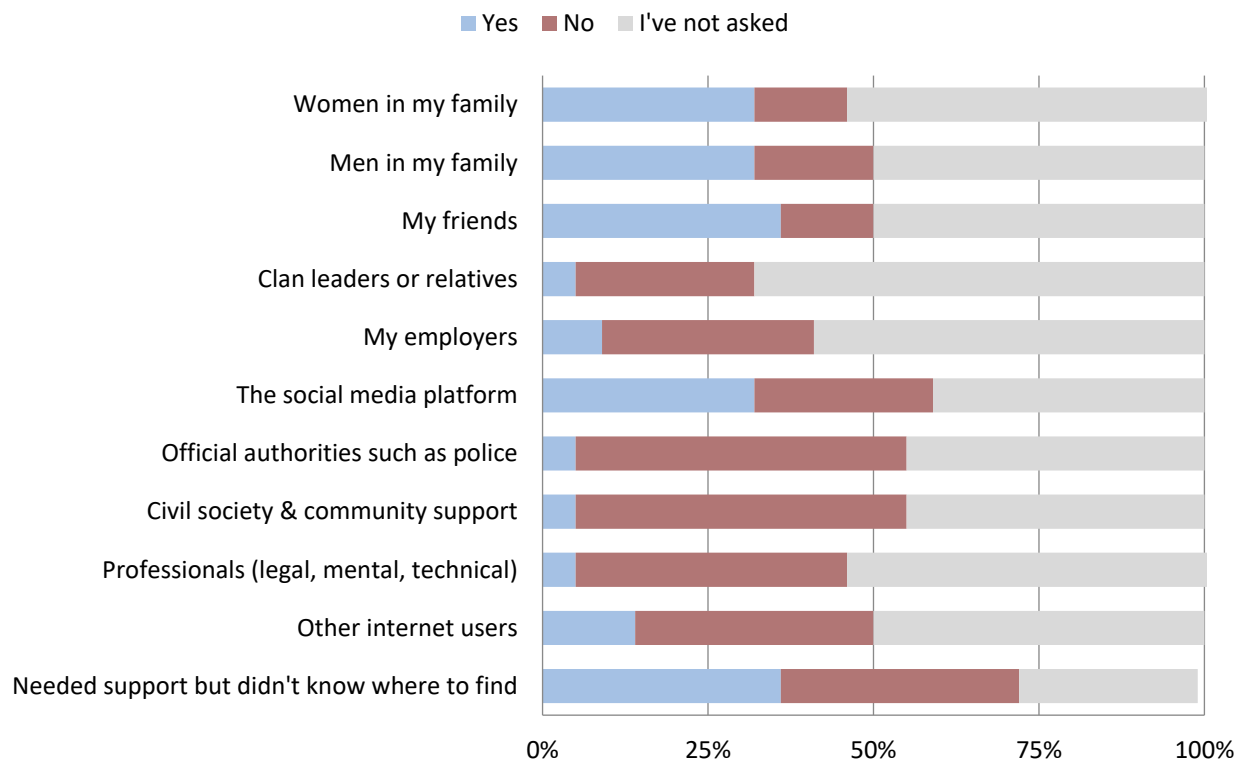
The survey examined the available sources of support utilized by women in Somalia. According to Figure (7), it was found that friends are the most frequent sources of support, with 36% of respondents indicating they received support from them. This was closely followed by women in the family, men in the family, and social media platforms, each with 32% of respondents each. Conversely, the least frequently employed sources of support were clan leaders or relatives, official authorities such as the police, civil society and community support, and professionals (legal, mental, technical), with only 5% of respondents each. Additionally, a sizable portion of respondents (36%) expressed that they needed support but did not know where to find it. This highlights a gap in accessible support resources and the importance of improving awareness and availability of support services.

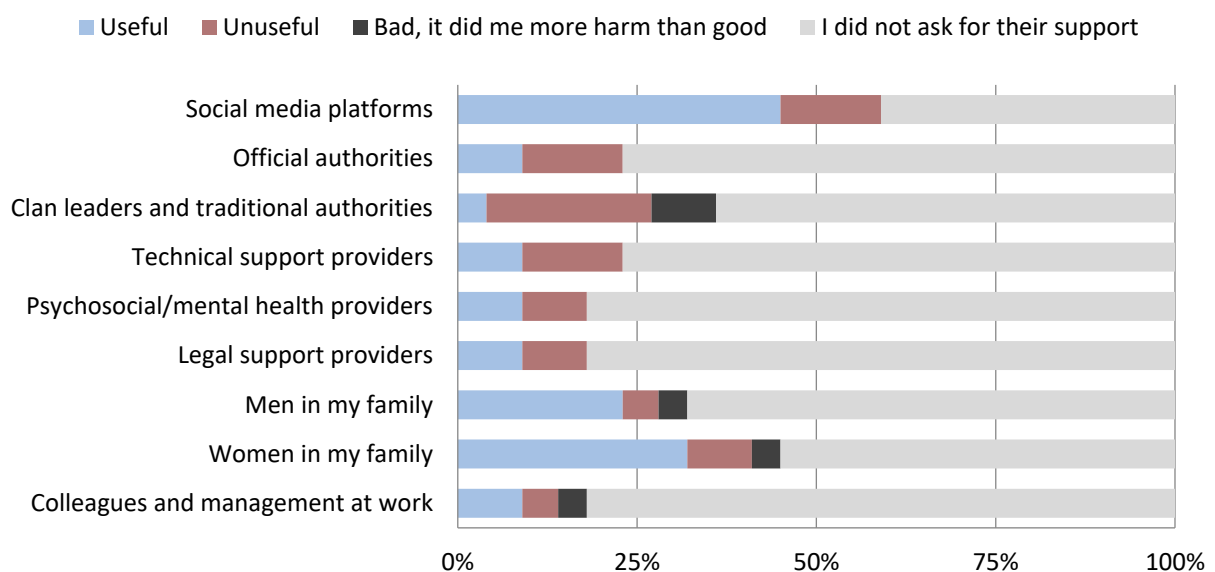**Figure 8: Respondents' evaluation of various support systems in Somalia**

Figure (8) shows the survey results about the usefulness of the support resources available to women. Social media platforms were reportedly the most useful source of support, with 45% of respondents. Women in the family were the next most useful, with 32% of respondents indicating they received good support from them. Men in the family also provided useful support to 23% of respondents.

On the other hand, clan leaders and traditional authorities were the least useful, with only 4% of respondents finding their support helpful. Official authorities, technical support providers, psycho-social/mental health providers, legal support providers, and colleagues and management at work were all rated as useful only by 9% of respondents each.

Interestingly, no respondents reported that social media platforms, official authorities, technical support providers, psycho-social/mental health providers, legal support providers, or colleagues and management at work did them more harm than good. However, 9% of respondents felt that clan leaders and traditional authorities did more harm than good, which explains why women in Somalia refrain from involving them in combatting DVAW.

A significant portion of respondents did not ask for support from official authorities (77%), technical support providers (77%), psychosocial/mental health providers (82%), legal support providers (82%), and colleagues and management at work (82%), indicating areas where awareness and accessibility of support services could be improved.

Undeniably, social media platforms play a crucial role in either perpetuating or mitigating DVAW. Mohamed Abdirizak, the CEO and Founder of Hiiliye Legal Services, explained: "*Social media platforms may help reduce digital violence against women by enforcing strict privacy policies, protecting users, moderating content, and making it simple to report or block harassers. They should always work to make their policies better and consider providing easy access for those who are illiterate.*"

To emphasize the significance of offline community support for women facing digital violence in Somalia, Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, the activist stated: "*The most important support that I have seen for women in Somalia who are being harassed online is community support. For example, individuals make videos to stand up for the woman who is being harassed. Then when things worsen, the clans and relatives work out a solution.*" She later highlighted the contrasting dynamics between offline and online support networks for Somali women: "*When comparing offline and online support networks for Somali women, I believe the online community has a stronger voice than the offline one. There have been other instances where the online community has backed the victim, and the perpetrator fled out of fear of being charged. However, the offline world is typically not particularly supportive unless your parents remain relentlessly dedicated to supporting you.*"

Expert interviewees reported that the support received by the women extends beyond the digital realm, as they may also find support from their offline social community, including family members and clan leaders, but it is a doubled-edged sword. Abas Mohamed Hassan, a Senior lecturer at SIMAD, asserted "*Since our legal system is not functional in Somalia, offline communities like families and clan elders play a crucial role in supporting women who have experienced online harassment. If the women receive a lot of support from the online community, they may even be encouraged to expose the perpetrators. But, if she is held responsible for the incident, she will likely run away, leaving the perpetrators free to carry out his wishes.*"

Reporting the incident to these apparatuses may prove highly effective in the best scenarios, as it may lead to immediate intervention from the authorities. Abas Mohamed Hassan recounted a rare instance of familial support in a DVAW case: "*But I witnessed a case. A man who worked at the same place as me was in a relationship with a woman. He had a video of her; I'm not sure what it contained, but it appeared to be an illegitimate one. I believe he was attempting to coerce her into sharing the footage online and blackmailing her. She told her family about the case. I am sure she was a brave lady. One day while at work, we witnessed soldiers arriving at our location accompanied by the lady's mother and brothers, who were searching for the man. They apprehended him, but a few others attempted to step in and calm the situation; however, upon reporting the incident to his employer, he was dismissed from the company. He never returned to the organization after that, but the two families did come to discuss and resolve the matter.*"

Approximately 36% of women who experienced DVAW in Somalia required assistance but were unaware of available resources. The primary sources of support for these women were their friends, followed by family members and social media platforms when reporting incidents. The women reported that when seeking professional legal or technical assistance, they were denied support, as was the case with civil society organizations they approached. Notably, 36% of the women who contacted official authorities such as police reported receiving inadequate assistance, a situation mirrored in their interactions with employers, colleagues, and clan leaders.

To address the current efforts and focus of Hiiliye Legal Services regarding DVAW, it is important to highlight their initiative to raise public awareness including preventive resources. Currently, according to Mohamed Abdirizak, Hiiliye Legal Services is not involved in any campaigns or ongoing projects concerning DVAW. However, the organization typically conducts initiatives at an individual level to enhance public awareness of cybercrimes. The principle that prevention is preferable to remediation is applied in this context. The organization consistently works to disseminate information regarding online safety measures.

Suggested Solutions

The survey suggested various solutions and measures to the respondents to ask them whether they would be helpful or not in combatting DVAW.

Figure 9: Evaluating proposed solutions and measures to combat DVAW.
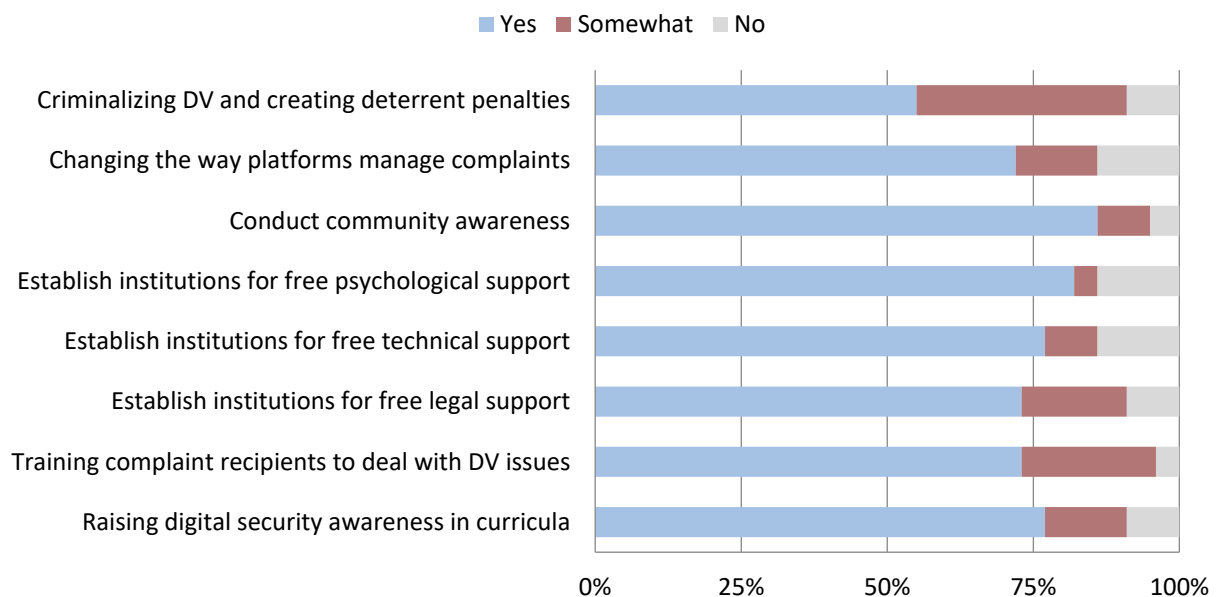
In Figure (9), the measure with the most votes was spreading community awareness, with 86% of respondents in favor and 9% somewhat in favor, yet 5% believed it would not help. Establishing institutions for free psychological support also received staunch support, with 82% in favor, 4% somewhat in favor, and 14% not thinking it could address DVAW. Including digital security in school curricula and setting up institutions to offer free technical support both received 77% support. For adding digital security to curricula, 14% were somewhat in favor and 9% opposed. For creating support institutions, 9% were somewhat in favor, but 14% were against

Changing the way platforms manage complaints was supported by 72% of respondents, with 14% somewhat in favor and 14% not in favor. Setting up institutions that offer free legal support and training staff in relevant organizations both got 73% support. For free legal support, 18% were somewhat in favor, and 9% were against. For training staff, 23% were somewhat in favor, and 4% were opposed. Finally, criminalizing digital violence legally and creating deterrent penalties for its perpetrators was supported by 55% of respondents, with 36% somewhat in favor and 9% not in favor.

Accordingly, the respondents identified that the intervention with the highest perceived impact on enhancing Internet safety for women in Somalia is increasing community awareness to promote familial support and empowerment of women to voice their concerns. This was followed by the provision of free psycho-social support, digital security education, and complimentary technical assistance. Subsequent priorities included more accountable social media platforms, gender-sensitive training for first responders to complaints among official authorities such as police, and pro bono legal support for victims should they choose to pursue it. Notably, the women considered the legal criminalization of digital violence and the establishment of punitive measures for perpetrators to be of least impact.

The Member of Parliament Southwest State, believed that if women come out and report, they will get support, but they do not due to fear of defamation and isolation. Some drop out of school, work, or feel depressed after experiencing DVAW, but they may still be on social media platforms, such as TikTok, as they use them for income generation. She emphasized the necessity for legislation that enforces accountability for individuals' actions and mobilizes women. Without proper regulation of the Internet, the issue will escalate significantly. Previously, the government implemented a suspension of TikTok; however, its subsequent reemergence remains unclear. The education of women is of paramount importance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to understand the complexity of DVAW in Somalia through a mixed-method approach of surveys and qualitative interviews with various stakeholders, including victims of digital violence. This study revealed aspects of the deeply rooted and multi-layered nature of DVAW in Somalia. This violence, often covert and normalized due to societal misogyny, cultural norms, and weak legal enforcement, has a profound impact on women's psychological and social well-being.

It was found that 33% of the surveyed educated Somali women had experienced DVAW, primarily in private, through direct messaging platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Common forms of violence included verbal abuse, unwanted contact, and indecent exposure, while severe forms, such as blackmail and threats of physical harm, were less common but had more significant psychological consequences.

One of the key findings is the covert nature of DVAW in Somalia, driven by a patriarchal system that often silences women, particularly when they challenge social or political norms. Women who do speak out often face victim-blaming, social isolation, and even legal and institutional indifference. Additionally, the lack of awareness about their rights and available support mechanisms further exacerbates the issue. Many women are unaware of the existing legal frameworks that could protect them, and most do not trust police agencies to take their complaints seriously. It is evident that there is a paucity of supporting systems and frameworks in Somalia that women can access when they face digital violence.

The digital violence experienced by women also extends into their offline lives, with many women reporting fear, and depression as a result. A quarter of the respondents had to change their work or home addresses. The study also highlights that 36% of women who faced DVAW did not know where to seek help, with many relying on friends and family rather than formal support systems.

To effectively combat DVAW in Somalia, a multifaceted approach is essential. This includes raising community awareness, enhancing legal and institutional frameworks, providing free psycho-social and legal support, improving social media platform accountability, empowering civil society, and local support networks, and fostering regional research and solutions.

Raise Community Awareness:

- Enhance the efficacy of existing initiatives such as the Somali Women Journalists' Rights Association (SOWJRA) to spearhead national awareness campaigns. This endeavor could encompass expanding their current #WithoutFear digital safety campaign to encompass a broader geographical scope, with particular emphasis on Mogadishu, where the incidence of DVAW is most pronounced. The campaign should spread over different social media and traditional media platforms.

- Implement programs to promote digital literacy and safety education in schools and higher education institutions, with a specific focus on young women and men, to counteract the normalization of digital violence. These educational initiatives should emphasize the recognition of digital harm, comprehension of privacy concepts, and the significance of reporting abusive behaviors. They also should inform of the available tools for women to report DVAW and where they can find support.

- Provide training to local media outlets to facilitate regular coverage of DVAW and its ramifications, thereby challenging societal norms that minimize the gravity of online violence. A marked emphasis should be placed on educating men regarding their role in the prevention of DVAW.

Enhance Legal and Institutional Frameworks:

- Expedite the enactment of the Cybercrime Law currently under parliamentary review, ensuring that it explicitly addresses DVAW. Civil society organizations such as Bareedo Platform, and Hiiliye Legal Services should be included in deliberations to ensure that clauses specific to DVAW are incorporated into the legislation, with substantial penalties that serve as deterrents for perpetrators.

- Utilize **Xeer laws** (traditional Somali laws) to integrate protections for women against digital violence into clan-based justice systems. This can involve collaborations with clan leaders to criminalize DVAW and enforce norms that condemn such acts. Enhancing cooperation between traditional and formal legal systems can establish an additional layer of protection for women, particularly in rural areas where clans exert major influence.

- Implement gender-sensitive training programs for first responders and police officials to enhance their response to DVAW. They should be equipped to address digital crimes against women, and younger girls in particular, with sensitivity, confidentiality, and professionalism.

Provide Free Psycho-social and Legal Support:

- Support and expand the **Digital Shelter**, which has demonstrated significant efficacy in providing digital security and legal assistance for victims of DVAW. With additional funding, this platform could extend its reach across more regions in Somalia, offering pro bono legal and psychological support to victims.

- Establish a network of **digital help desks** similar to the one offered by Bareedo Platform, ensuring that timely technical support is accessible to women across the country. These assistance centers could provide digital literacy workshops, guidance on online safety protocols, and confidential reporting mechanisms.

- Collaborate with civil society organizations and social media platforms to ensure that reporting tools are more accessible and effective for Somali women. Particular emphasis should be placed on fostering local partnerships to provide complimentary or subsidized psychological counseling and legal consultation services.

Improve Social Media Platform Accountability:

- Enhance collaborative efforts with social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to implement more rigorous measures against digital violence targeting women. These entities should improve reporting mechanisms, refine moderation protocols, and provide gender-sensitive training for platform moderators, particularly within the Somali context where DVAW is an escalating concern.

- Social media platforms should establish close partnerships with civil society organizations, exemplified by **Digital Shelter**, to contextualize safety features and provide expeditious response services for Somali women subjected to online harassment.

Empower Civil Society and Local Support Networks:

- Expand the reach and capacity of civil society organizations such as the **Bareedo Platform**, which operates digital assistance center across the country, providing technical support to individuals at risk of digital harm. This platform could be extended to offer legal guidance and psychological support, thereby mitigating the impacts of DVAW.

- Mobilize grassroots organizations to facilitate community-based interventions, including collaborations with clan elders to establish community support systems and make referrals for women experiencing DVAW. Civil society can also exert influence on social media companies to implement more stringent moderation policies that safeguard women from online violence.

- Integrate civil society organizations experienced in tackling DVAW cases into legal reform discussions, particularly regarding the finalization of the Cybercrime Law, ensuring their input is incorporated into the law's provisions, especially concerning DVAW-related penalties.

Foster Regional Research and Solutions:

- Conduct further region-specific research to investigate the factors contributing to the increasing reports of DVAW in Mogadishu compared to other areas such as Puntland and Somaliland. Additional studies are necessary to elucidate how cultural, political, and digital literacy disparities between regions influence the prevalence of DVAW.

- Facilitate comparative research across the diverse regions in Somalia to determine how tailored interventions could be designed for specific areas. The findings from this study indicate that factors such as the robustness of education systems, the presence of civil society organizations, and societal attitudes towards women vary across regions. These factors should be considered in the design of both policy and community-level interventions.

- Support research that examines the potential long-term effects of DVAW on women's participation in public life, political engagement, and employment, thereby providing a foundation for further advocacy and policy change.

Annex: Interviewees

List of Interviewees

1. Mohammed Abdulrazak, Founder and CEO, Hiiliye Legal Services

2. Samira Abdulkadir Hareed, Digital Marketing Expert, ICE Somalia

3. Ismahan Mohamed Hassan, Women and Youth Activist, American Corner Somalia

4. Abas Mohamed Hassan, Senior Lecturer at SIMAD University

5. Nuzaiba Bihi, Gender Advisor, Ministry of Youth and Sports

6. Hana Abdi, Fintech expert from Somaliland (anonymous)

7. A Member of Parliament Southwest State (anonymous)

8. Yusuf Abdirahman Abukar, Puntland representative

9. Abdirizak Ahmed Mustafa, Legal Advisor

10. Maryan, Persecution officer at MRM of Puntland Women Development Organization

11. Rahma Mohamed Ali, Persecution officer in Southwest Federal State

12. Dr-Mohamed Taher Abdulkarim, Senior lecturer at the Department of Psychology of SIMAD

13. Layla, a victim of DVAW (anonymous)

14. Bayan, a victim of DVAW (anonymous)