

Syria: What gender-based violence online means for women

April 2, 2026

A new DW Akademie study has mapped how gender-based violence online (GBVO) in Syria affects women's ability to speak, work and participate in public life.



Gender-based violence online is a form of social control in Syria. It escalates when women become visible. This has consequences not only for the individual, but also for the public debate and inclusive peacebuilding process (Picture shows Syrian people gathering to celebrate the first anniversary of the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Latakia, Syria on December 08, 2025)

Image: Sevket Akca/Anadolu/picture alliance

Drawing on desk research, interviews and focus group discussions with media professionals, civil society actors, legal experts and survivors, as well as an exploratory scan of Facebook and Telegram, [DW Akademie's study](#) "Safer Platforms, Stronger Participation – Mapping gender-based violence online in Syria" shows that online abuse is not a side issue. It is a structural problem that shapes who can be visible, who feels safe and who is pushed out of digital and public spaces.



DW Akademie's new study

Here are the main takeaways from the study and discussions with Syrian media and civil society stakeholders:

GBVO in Syria is systemic, not "isolated incidents"

The study finds that GBVO in Syria is not a series of one-off attacks, but a normalized and systemic pattern. Abuse is widespread across platforms and communities and cuts across different political and social divides.

Women who post opinions, appear in media, run small businesses or simply share photos can be targeted. Many respondents described online abuse as an expected "cost" of visibility: something every woman must factor in before speaking or working online. This normalization makes abuse harder to challenge and easier to ignore.

Gender-based violence online

According to [UN Women](#) [↗](#), technology-facilitated violence against women and girls refers to any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms.

Sexual harassment and stalking are the most commonly reported forms of technology-facilitated violence worldwide. Others are cyberbullying, hate speech, sexual exploitation, defamation, intimate image-sharing, sextortion, revenge porn.

Abuse escalates when women become visible

Violence online often intensifies with visibility. When women gain followers, appear in media reports, speak about politics or take leadership roles, they are more likely to face coordinated attacks.

Respondents described how criticism of women's appearance, morality or "honor" is used to discredit their work or silence their opinions. In some cases, online campaigns escalate around specific moments – a TV appearance, a viral post or a public statement – sending a clear message: "know your place or face consequences."

This dynamic not only affects prominent activists or journalist, but also affects younger women, activists and women running small initiatives who use social media to reach audiences.

Blackmail, defamation and doxing work together

GBVO in Syria rarely takes a single form. Instead, women face overlapping tactics that reinforce each other:

- Harassment and threats in comments and private messages
- Defamation campaigns, spreading rumors or edited images
- Doxing, publishing personal data such as addresses or phone numbers
- Blackmail, often involving stolen or fabricated intimate images

These tactics aim to create fear, reputational damage and loss of control. In some cases, threats extend offline – to families, reputations in local communities or even physical safety. The cumulative impact can be devastating, even when individual messages seem "mild."

Platform dynamics amplify harm – and hide coordination

The study shows how platform design enables both coordination and amplification of attacks.

Closed or encrypted groups (i.e. on Telegram or private Facebook groups) are used to share screenshots, personal information or "evidence" and to plan campaigns. Public feeds and comment sections then become the visible front of the attack, where reputations are destroyed and pressure builds.

Algorithms that reward engagement can unintentionally push abusive content further. Meanwhile, interviewees reported that existing reporting tools are often ill-suited to Arabic dialects and local contexts, and do not always respond quickly or fairly to Syrian users' complaints.



Violence online often intensifies with visibility

Image: Omar Sanadiki/AP Photo/picture alliance

Victim-blaming pushes women into self-censorship

Across interviews and focus groups, victim-blaming emerged as a central driver of harm. Women who are targeted are frequently told that they "provoked" the abuse by posting certain photos, expressing opinions or being too visible.

Fear of stigma and of being blamed by family, employers or communities pushes many women into self-censorship. They restrict what they post, avoid certain topics or withdraw from social media altogether. Some stop applying for visible jobs or media opportunities because of anticipated online

attacks.

The human costs are high: anxiety, fear, isolation and lost opportunities. But there are also collective costs: fewer women in public debates, weaker representation and narrower perspectives in media and public life.

Survivors lack trusted, survivor-centered support

Despite the scale of the problem, support systems are fragmented and uneven. Many survivors do not know where to turn. Others fear that seeking help will lead to more stigma, victim-blaming or even punishment.

Existing services – whether legal advice, psychosocial support or digital security help – are often not tailored to GBVO or are hard to access safely. Some women rely on informal networks and trusted individuals rather than formal institutions.

The study calls for survivor-centered approaches that respect confidentiality, recognize the digital-offline link and offer practical options instead of simply telling women to “leave social media.”

Media are on the front line but lack clear protocols

Women journalists, editors and media contributors are both messengers and targets. They face abuse for their work, their public profile and sometimes for the content they publish about gender based violence online or offline itself.

Many media outlets, however, lack clear internal protocols on how to respond when staff or sources are attacked online. Responsibility often falls on individuals or sympathetic colleagues, rather than being treated as a workplace safety issue.

The study recommends that media organizations develop internal guidelines for responding to online attacks, clarify responsibilities for support and follow-up, strengthen digital safety and psychosocial support into newsroom practice and avoid reproducing victim-blaming narratives in their own reporting.



The study makes clear that no single actor can fix GBVO in Syria. Media organizations, civil society, platforms and policymakers each have a role to play

Image: Mohammad Daher/NurPhoto/picture alliance

Civil society is filling gaps but needs support

Civil society organizations in Syria and in exile are already working to document GBVO, support survivors and raise awareness, often with limited resources and high risks.

Some provide digital security training, others offer psychosocial support or legal referrals, and some engage with platforms or international actors. But these efforts are fragmented and not always well connected to media actors or to each other.

The study highlights the need for stronger coordination and resourcing so that good practices can be shared, gaps can be identified and survivors can find support more easily.

Safer platforms and stronger participation need joint action

The study makes clear that no single actor can fix GBVO in Syria. Media organizations, civil society, platforms and policymakers each have a role to play.

Recommendations include:

- Media: Adopt clear protocols, invest in digital and psychosocial safety for staff and ensure gender-sensitive reporting.
- Civil society: Strengthen survivor-centered services, advocate collectively and build coalitions across sectors.
- Platforms: Adapt policies and reporting tools to local contexts and languages and respond more effectively to GBVO reports from Syrian users.
- Donors and international actors: Provide sustained, flexible support to initiatives that make digital spaces safer and amplify women's voices.

Gender-based violence online in Syria is not just a 'digital' issue – it shapes whose voices are heard in society. If women cannot participate safely online, they are pushed out of public life offline as well. This study is a call to action for media, civil society and platforms to change that.

With Safer Platforms, Stronger Participation, DW Akademie aims to provide a practical resource for Syrian partners and the wider international community to strengthen prevention, support survivors and protect women's right to speak and participate – online and beyond.

DW Akademie's report, Safer Platforms, Stronger Participation – Mapping gender-based violence online in Syria, was conducted by the research organization [Ektimisi](#)  as part of DW Akademie's project "Strong Female Voices for a United Syria," supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

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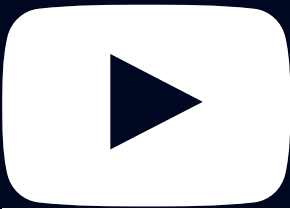
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