Violence against women in the online space

Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States

Summary report

BACKGROUND

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and it cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography. It takes place in the home, on the streets, in schools, the workplace, in farm fields, refugee camps, during conflicts and crises. The growing reach of the Internet, the rapid spread of mobile information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the wide diffusion of social media have presented new opportunities and enabled various efforts to address VAWG. However, they are also being used as tools to inflict harm on women and girls and to perpetrate VAWG. Online and ICT facilitated-VAWG is emerging as a global problem with serious implications for societies and economies around the world. In April-May 2020, UN Women Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS) conducted a web-survey in nine countries to shed light on the rising instances of violence during COVID-19, as well as attitudes towards violence. The results of this exercise identified online violence as the highest reported form of violence during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To better understand this emerging form of violence, UN women ROAS initiated a research project to explore the prevalence, impact and consequences of online violence on women and girls in the Arab States, and the barriers women and girls survivors face to access services and reporting. The research project included three complementary components: a. A quantitative web-based survey in 8 countries in the region with nearly 11,500 respondents, examining the prevalence, perceptions and implications of

online violence; b. Qualitative research to explore experiences of online violence through the lens of civil society organizations (CSOs), women activists and service providers; and c. a mapping of existing laws and services related to online violence against women in the region.

This document summarizes the key findings of the research project study and presents new knowledge on violence against women in the online space in the Arab States.

This project was undertaken with the generous funding of the Government of Japan.

METHODOLOGY

Each component of the study followed a different methodology of data collection to ensure triangulation of the data.

Quantitative web-based survey using an innovative data collection: Data was collected using a method invented and patented by RIWI Corp. by which random web users encounter anonymous opt-in surveys when they encounter lapsed or dormant website destinations into the web address bar. All Internet users over the age of 18 in the targeted countries[1] had an equal random probability of inadvertently landing on the web page where the survey is posted.

The targeted sample size was 1,000 respondents in each country with two strata consisting of a minimum of 500 men and 500 women: with a confidence level of 95 per cent and less than 5 per cent margin of error. A total of 11,497 respondents took part in the survey, including 4,187 women (36.4 per cent).[2] The questionnaire included 22 questions for all respondents, and up to 38 questions depending on skip logic and country. It was administered in Arabic, English and French as per the respondents' preference. Data was collected between July 26th and September 2nd 2021. Data was analyzed by RIWI corp.

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1   The countries included were those with UN Women presence in the Arab States: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen.

2   In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the mobile ownership and mobile use of internet are below the global average by 1 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. Women in the region are 9.8 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile and 20 per cent less likely than men to use the mobile internet.

Qualitative Research on the experiences of online violence through the lens of CSOs, women activists and service providers: The research adopted a mixed methods approach, using both the review of secondary materials and primary data collection. Data was collected through an online survey administered to 67 civil society organizations, and 90 women activists and human rights defenders, from 14 countries[3] in the region. In addition, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were held with civil society organizations and service providers from the region. Data was collected between July 16th and September 3rd, 2021.

Mapping of existing laws and services related to online, and ICT facilitated violence against women.

This mapping exercise relied on a review of legal texts available on Arab States government websites, focusing on resources provided by the Ministries of Justice and ICT agencies, as well as online legal databases such as Natlex; and a desk review of secondary data, mainly online through a Google search of government provided services. The mapping covered the 22 Arab States[4] and aimed to highlight to good practices from the region and beyond.

KEY FINDINGS

THE ONLINE SPACE IS NOT SAFE FOR WOMEN IN THE ARAB STATES

Nearly half (49 per cent) of women internet users in the Arab States reported feeling unsafe from online harassment. This feeling of unsafety was more important among women activists and human rights defenders (70 per cent).

16 per cent of women in the Arab States reported having experienced online violence at least once in their lifetime. The proportion of women who have reported exposure to online violence was higher during the pandemic, as 6 out of 10 (60 per cent) women respondents to the web-survey reported having been exposed to online violence in the past year. Of women who experienced

online violence this year, for almost half, it was the only time they had experienced online violence.
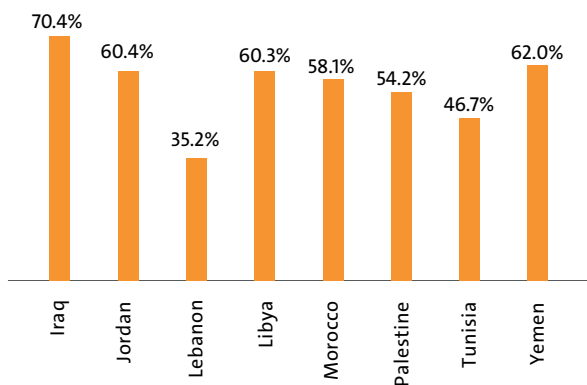
Proportion of women activists and human rights defenders who reported feeling unsafe online

70%
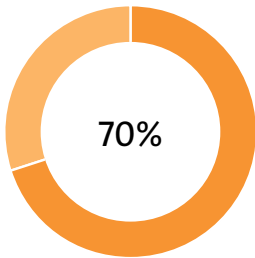
Proportion of women who experienced online violence and who have reported exposure to online violence in the past year

60%
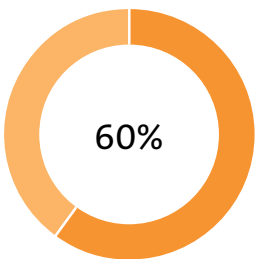
Proportion of women survivors who reported having been exposed to online violence in the past year, per country

Iraq	Jordan	Lebanon	Libya	Morocco	Palestine	Tunisia	Yemen
70.4%	60.4%	35.2%	60.3%	58.1%	54.2%	46.7%	62.0%

The exposure to online violence is usually not limited to a single incident. 44 per cent of women who have experienced online violence, experienced it more than once.

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3 Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.
4 Member States of the League of Arab States

Violence against women in the online space manifests in different forms. The most common form is receiving "unwanted images or symbols with sexual content" (43 per cent); followed by "annoying phone calls, inappropriate or unwelcome communications" (38 per cent) and "receiving insulting and/or hateful messages" (35 per cent). 22 per cent of women who experienced online violence experienced "direct sexual blackmail".

Similar trends were noted among women activists and human rights defenders. Seventy per cent have reported having received to unwanted images or symbols with sexual content, 62 per cent reported receiving insulting and/or hateful messages, while 58 per cent have reported receiving annoying phone calls, inappropriate or unwelcome communications.

The largest share of women who experienced online violence, report experiencing it on Facebook (43 per cent) followed by Instagram (16 per cent) and Whatsapp (11 per cent).

Platforms where women in the Arab States experience online violence

■ Facebook   ■ Instagram   ■ Whatsapp
■ Email-Messaging Apps   ■ Other
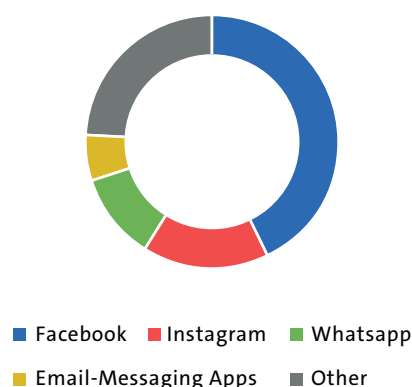
27 per cent of men respondents to the survey have said that they perpetrated online violence. Younger people are more likely to be perpetrators of online violence, and especially young men. **Over 1 in 3 men aged 18-24 say they have perpetrated some kind of online violence.** Male students and unemployed men are the most likely to say they had perpetrated online violence (30 per cent). Men who have only completed primary education are the most likely to perpetrate online violence while men who have completed university / college are the least likely.

ONLINE VIOLENCE IS A THREAT TO WOMEN'S PHYSICAL SAFETY AND MENTAL WELLBEING

Online violence does represent a serious threat to women's physical safety and mental wellbeing. For 1 in 3 women, online violence did not remain in the digital space. Indeed, 33 per cent of women who experienced online violence report that some or all of their experiences of online violence have moved offline. The majority of women who experienced online violence at the hand of someone they knew offline report that the incident moved offline (51 per cent).

Furthermore, 12 per cent of women who experienced online violence reported having been subjected to domestic violence following reporting the incident to family members.

The connection between the online and offline violence was particularly relevant for women who experienced online violence during COVID-19. 44 per cent of women experienced online violence in the past year reported that the incident moved offline, compared to 15 per cent of women whose experience wasn't this year. This indication reflects the exacerbation of physical harm in the last year, suggesting the exacerbation of impacts of online violence during COVID-19.

Proportion of women who experienced online violence in the past year and reported that the incident moved offline

44%
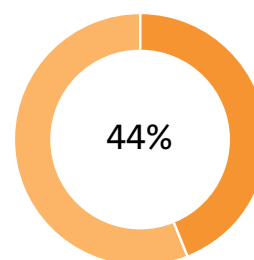
Similar trends were noted through the survey with women activists and human rights defenders. 35 per cent of respondents said they experienced a continuum between online and offline VAWG and 6 per cent of respondents said that all their online VAWG continued offline.

Online violence has also a toll on women's mental health. 35 per cent of women who experienced online violence in the Arab States reported feeling

"sad/depressed", 35 per cent reported that they "lost trust in the people around them" and 12 per cent of women reported having suicidal thoughts following an incident of online violence.

ONLINE VIOLENCE HAMPERS WOMEN'S FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE SOCIETY AND CONTRIBUTES TO SILENCING THEIR VOICES IN THE ARAB STATES

Women who experienced online violence were largely left unsupported and there is evidence that this contributed to their **self-censorship or exclusion entirely from online spaces.** Over 1 in 5 women (22 per cent) who experienced online violence deleted or deactivated their accounts. Over 1 in 4 women (26 per cent) who experienced online violence reported being careful about what they put online.

1 in 5 women who experienced online violence deleted or deactivated their social media accounts.

This was particularly relevant for the online violence experienced in the past year. Women who experienced online violence this year were more likely (27 per cent) to report that they deactivated or deleted their account, or that they missed school or work because of the incident, than women whose online violence incident did not occur this year.

Deactivate
Delete
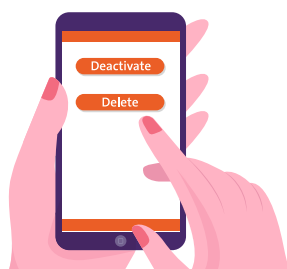
According to the qualitive insights from civil society organizations in the region, **women are attacked because of their increased presence in the online space.** Online presence of women,

particularly those deemed to have transgressed social norms may trigger a sense of outrage and entitlement to silence women and girls or even remove them from the online spaces. CSOs shared that this is linked to perceptions of masculinity and controlling behaviour. Therefore, the perpetrators are seeking to control and dominate these women. These include perpetrators having different religious views, perpetrators unable to confront the survivors in person and who prefer to hide behind the anonymity, perpetrator's sense of entitlement, namely perpetrators thinking it is their right, and the perception that women are "asking for it". Misogyny and patriarchal norms offline are replicated online, resulting in the attack of women and girls who discuss women's issues (feminism, gender equality, challenges to male authority) as well as expressing themselves online.

Families may also respond by limiting or forbidding women's and girls' access to digital devices. These further isolates women and girls and denies them their right to information and technological advancement as well as freedom of expression.
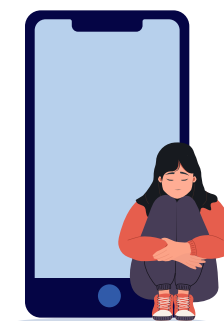
Furthermore, as laws on cybercrimes often do not give sufficient attention to online VAWG, they are sometimes used to prosecute survivors or suppress their political views. Instead of focusing on the non-consensual nature of dissemination of intimate images, survivors have been prosecuted for debauchery or crimes against morality or public sentiments.

DESPITE ITS IMPLICATIONS ON WOMEN'S LIVES, ONLINE VIOLENCE IS TRIVIALIZED AND NORMALIZED

Violence in the online space is shaped by various social norms but is mostly considered a "women's issue" that should not be taken seriously and for which women should be blamed and held accountable. **The majority of respondents believe that "Women are exposed to online violence more than men", (66 per cent of women compared to 60 per cent of men).** Like for the other forms of violence against women, women are blamed for it and expected to accept it. **36 per cent of women who experienced online violence were told to ignore it, 23 per cent were blamed for the incident, and 21 per cent were told to delete social media.** Only 20 per cent report that their family were supportive of them, and 32 per cent of female victims report that their friends were supportive.

Following an online violence experience, women:

36%	23%	21%	12%
Were told to ignore it	Were blamed for it	Were told to delete social media account	Were submitted physical violence by the family
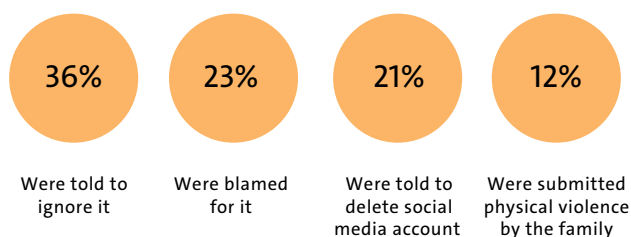
According to the study findings, 1 in 2 men and 4 in 10 women (41 per cent) from the eight participating countries agree **that "women who display their photos and videos should accept that the material could be used against them by the viewers"**

Nearly half of the men (48 per cent) and 41 per cent of women agree that **Online violence is not a serious matter as long as it remains online.**

The majority of women who experienced online violence say they were attacked for "no specific reason" (51 per cent). Among women who believe

they know why they were subjected to online violence, the largest share (23 per cent) believe it was because of their physical appearance. This is followed by the fact that they're a feminist (16 per cent), indicating a gendered aspect of online attacks.

The largest share of perpetrators say that the main reason they perpetrated online violence is **"because it is their right"** (26 per cent). This is followed by 23 per cent who say that they perpetrated online violence **"because it was fun".**

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND TRUST, VICTIM BLAMING AND FEAR OF RETALIATION PREVENT WOMEN FROM REPORTING ONLINE VIOLENCE

Less than 1 in 3 (31 per cent) women who experienced online violence reported the incident.
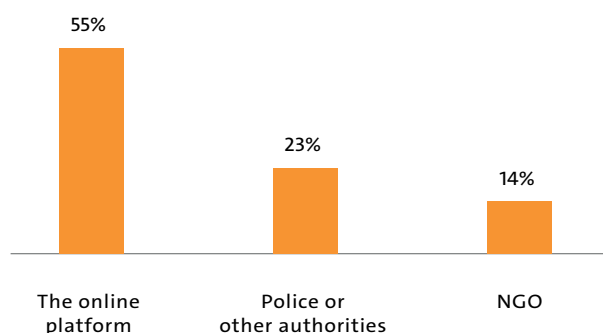
The most common reason that women said they did not report their case of online violence was that they "didn't think it would make any difference" (41 per cent). This is followed by 27 per cent of women who said they "didn't know who to report it to".

Reasons for not reporting online violence

27%	15%	17%	41%
Didn't know who to report to	Didn't trust reporting it	Felt scared	Didn't think it would make a difference
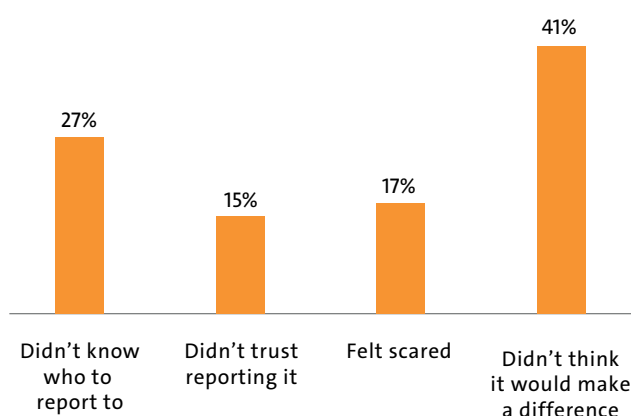
The majority of women who reported online violence, did so to the platform itself (55 per cent). 23 per cent reported the incident to the police and 14 per cent to an NGO.

Reporting points by women who were subjected to online violence

Bar chart:
- The online platform: 55%
- Police or other authorities: 23%
- NGO: 14%

Recommended actions to combat online violence in the Arab States, by sex

Bar chart (Male / Female):
- Police action: Male 28%, Female 36%
- Internet and Intermediaries and Social Media Platforms: Male 40%, Female 35%
- NGOs: Male 16%, Female 14%
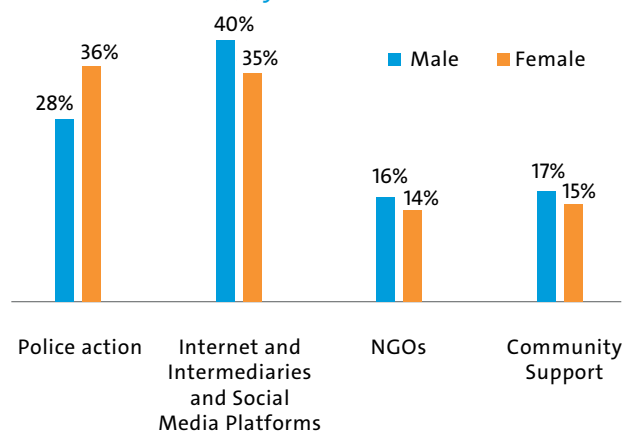- Community Support: Male 17%, Female 15%

Through the qualitative findings, CSO interviewees similarly identified victim-blaming as a critical reason why women do not seek help. Survivors are afraid of being reproached and blamed for having shared their images or for having been bold about their activism. This includes fear that the police may also blame them or inform their families of their predicament. These social norms and attitudes combine to create near insurmountable obstacles against women seeking help.

The CSO survey identified concerns about privacy and confidentiality as the main reason why survivors do not report or seek services for ICT VAWG followed by fear of retaliation by perpetrator.

ADDRESSING IMPUNITY HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS THE BEST ACTION BY WOMEN TO ADDRESS ONLINE VIOLENCE

Women are most likely to believe that the best way to combat online violence is "Police taking action against perpetrators of online violence" (36 per cent of women compared to 28 per cent of men), particularly in Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine. Men in turn are more likely to believe that online platforms should improve their policies to protect users (40 per cent of men compared to 35 per cent of women).

CONSIDERABLE EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO ADDRESS ONLINE VIOLENCE IN THE REGION

A number of Arab countries adapted their Penal Codes, sexual harassment and domestic violence legislations to incriminate online VAWG. Tunisia's Law 58 of 2017 mentions different types of VAWG, including "physical, moral, sexual or economic harm against women in the private or public sphere". Art. 33 of Tunisia's Law No. 58 of 2017 also allows victims of online violence to issue restraining orders against offenders, but only if the harm becomes physical[5].Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco have done similar efforts. Legal texts in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia specifically criminalize online violence and penalize harassment occurring through "social media platforms" and "modern technology". Morocco's Penal Code refers to various forms of online violence including "written messages by phone or any other electronic device, recordings, and procurement or creation images of a sexual nature for sexual purposes", "the distribution of someone's messages and photos, without prior consent" and "the dissemination of false allegations aimed at harming or defaming someone's private life, by any means including digital tools".

A number of countries, such as Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia have also established specialized agencies for combating online VAWG.

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5   Lannazzone, S., Clough, L., & Griffon, L. (2021, May). EuroMed Rights (Rep.). https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Online-gender-violence-in-MENA-region.pdf

Furthermore, Arab countries have made concerted efforts to respond to online VAWG through government-provided services: fifteen out of twenty-two Arab States have introduced helplines for victims of online violence. Many of them address the issue under online embezzlement. This includes Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and United Arab Emirates. Some countries introduced online portals, forms or emails to report VAWG incidents.

Government services that pertain to online VAWG are often provided through the security apparatus: Government services that tackle online violence are often supervised by cybercrime units in the National or General Security across Arab States.

Civil Society Organizations have made commendable efforts to raise awareness, provide online portals or complaint submission mechanisms and helplines, provide legal and psychological aid. Nonetheless, these efforts need to be more organized and made known to the general public. Additionally, more partnerships with the government are needed to frame these efforts, broaden their scope and coverage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Online violence against women is a serious concern in the Arab States and poses a threat to women's physical safety and mental wellbeing. It also threatens women's presence and participation in the online space and contributes to silencing women's voices. In a region where women's participation to public life is undermined by patriarchal social norms and the high prevalence of sexual harassment and domestic violence, the online space emerged as a safe haven for women to connect and express themselves. However, women do not feel safe or equipped to address online violence; hence the need to work with them to raise awareness about this form of violence and capacitate them to address it.

The exposure to online violence increased with the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the costs of the shadow pandemic of violence against women.

With the continuation of the COVID-19 crisis and inevitable shift to the digital space, online violence may contribute to the exacerbation of the digital divide, already important in the Arab States. It may also hamper women's access to services including to remote education, legal support or other essential services. It is then important to carefully track the implications of COVID-19 as it relates to violence in the online space.

Online and offline violence are interconnected. It is often difficult to distinguish the consequences of actions that are initiated in digital environments from offline realities, and vice versa. This was particularly relevant during COVID-19 as reported by study participants. There is a need to address violence against women in a comprehensive manner be it online or offline.

Similarly to other forms of violence, online violence remains underreported. Informing Internet users about the protocols, where to report cases of online and ICT facilitated VAWG, and how to access essential services online is thus an important component in the national responses to end VAWG. There is a need to work with governmental service providers, particularly the police sector, civil society organizations and internet intermediaries to develop appropriate and survivor centered accessible services. Furthermore, the capacities of justice and police officers specialized in addressing online violence should be strengthened.

Internet intermediaries should set high-level and clear commitments to upholding women's safety in online spaces and provide accessible and transparent reporting and complaints procedures for online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls including social media sites, and access to cost-free helplines and age-appropriate services in local languages. They should continue to invest and collaborate with feminist tech companies and civil society organizations in the development of solutions in the short, medium, and long-term.