

REPORT

USING BIG DATA ANALYTICS FOR INSIGHTS ON ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN LIBYA



MAY 2023
UN WOMEN



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

 **UN
WOMEN** 

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REPORT

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UN WOMEN - LIBYA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online violence against women (OVAW) is emerging as a global problem with serious implications for societies and economies around the world. For Libya, the current political and security context deepens the negative effects on women's participation and their well-being. It is clear that more research on OVAW is required to understand it and effectively confront it. This study attempts to model initial research that can bridge a gap of understanding in Libya so that social media platform administrators and experts can see the big picture effect of OVAW and become allies in shutting down harmful sources of violence.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Online and ICT facilitated VAWG – or online violence against women (OVAW)—can take root in many forms, and can be connected to and as debilitating as offline violence. While data remains limited, a recent study by UN Women Regional Office on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in nine (9) countries in the region highlights that online violence was the highest reported form of violence by respondents who witnessed or knew a woman who was subjected to violence during the lockdown.¹ Online VAWG can have severe impacts on women and girls since ICT effectively amplifies acts such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and violence against women.

In Libya, the ongoing security crisis has threatened progress made on a range of development issues, especially women's rights. Libyan women have played a crucial role in advocating for human rights, democracy, and reconciliation efforts in Libya since 2011, through local initiatives and mobilizing civil rights movements, in addition to fostering mediation at local and national levels. The rise of extremist discourse, the deterioration of security conditions, and the strength of patriarchal culture has resulted in the marginalization of women and youth. Their exclusion from civic and public spaces in Libya has meant that the specific needs of grassroots populations cannot be addressed, or appropriate resources allocated, thereby weakening the effectiveness of conflict-prevention mechanisms, and drastically reducing the opportunities for peacebuilding.

The internet and other technologies have provided women and youth in the Arab region, and especially in Libya, with different opportunities to expand, organize, campaign, blog and network, and also to create platforms for workshops and training opportunities. However, the threats are real. Women activists and politicians have faced serious misogynistic abuse and threats online.² A 2020 survey conducted by Lawyers for Justice in Libya showed that 96.3 per cent of 163 female respondents perceived OVAW to be a serious problem and 67.5 per cent of respondents said they had experienced online abuse on social media platforms.³

In 2021 alone, Meta took action against online violence by removing 41 Facebook accounts, 133 Pages, three Groups and 14 Instagram accounts for violating their policy. These included groups posting in Arabic about news and current events in the region, including the delayed elections and criticism of the rise of women in politics, society, and the media. They also created fake pages in the name of women leaders to make intentionally inflammatory remarks in order to spark a backlash.

1 UN Women, rapid assessment, the effects of covid-19 on violence against women and gendered social norms, a snapshot from nine countries in the Arab states, 2020, available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/brief-the-effects-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-gendered-social-norms>

2 Amnesty International, 'Libya 2021' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/libya/report-libya/>

3 Urgent Action Needed to Address Shocking Levels of Online Violence Against Libyan Women, 2021, <https://www.libyanjustice.org/news/urgent-action-needed-to-address-shocking-levels-of-online-violence-against-libyan-women>

While social media authorities, including Meta, have shown a commitment to root out these examples of OVAW, there is still not enough action being taken to end this type of violence that so deeply affects women's participation and well-being. In many cases, inaction is based on a lack of understanding of the subtleties of the Arabic language, where comments can quickly transition from seemingly harmless words to aggressive threats.

This study intends to provide a first sampling of concrete data around OVAW in Libya in order to better understand this form of violence. This type of data can inform policy and programming and also provide clear examples for social media authorities of where and how OVAW is proliferating so they can take urgent steps to end OVAW.

Alternative data sources present a unique medium to gain insight on OVAW. Automatic detection and classification of offensive and misogynistic content with the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) models allows for the collection of data across broad swaths of social media platforms in order to identify patterns and overall behaviors.

This research is based on 7,015 posts and the 91,978 associated comments written in the Arabic language and collected from twenty public Facebook pages. After filtering the collected data using a dedicated list of keywords, 1,228 posts and 4,199 comments were identified as data directly targeting women. Results show that misogyny is predominant in comments and posts on women. The AI models identified 3,214 (76.5 per cent) as being 'misogynistic' comments compared with 985 (23.5 per cent) which were not, and 36.5 per cent comments were classified as offensive.

This research shows how web data can provide valuable insights on VAWG and opens up opportunities to build innovative alternative indicators to monitor incidents of OVAW.

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INTRODUCTION

Background on OVAW

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, the online space has been used to inflict harm on women and to perpetrate VAWG. Online and ICT facilitated VAWG – or online violence against women (OVAW) - is emerging as a global problem with serious implications for societies and economies around the world. This situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 crisis, which has intensified a shift to the online space and has fueled both online misogyny and ICT-facilitated violence.¹

In the Arab States, very limited data is available on the prevalence of online and ICT facilitated violence. However, a recent study conducted by UN Women Regional Office documents the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in nine (9) countries in the region and highlights that online violence was the highest reported form of violence by respondents who witnessed or knew a woman who was subjected to violence during the lockdown.² The same trend was noted by civil society organizations in the region as they pointed out an increase in online violence against women.³

Online VAWG can have severe impacts on survivors, including emotional distress, loss of status, decreased productivity, and suicide. Perpetrators threaten sexual violence or disparage appearance and sexual desirability. Sexual blackmail can result in femicide on the ground of honor. ICT effectively amplifies acts such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and violence against women.⁴

The Libyan context and OVAW

In Libya, the ongoing crisis has compromised the transition to state building and democracy and reversed some of the progress made on human development. Libyan women have played a crucial role in advocating for human rights, democracy, and reconciliation efforts in Libya since 2011, through local initiatives and mobilizing civil rights movements, in addition to fostering mediation at local and national levels.

Libyan women and youth have faced several barriers in their work on gender equality, including the rise of extremist discourse, the deterioration of security conditions, the patriarchal culture, as well as the top-down approach in political participation and peacebuilding that results in the marginalization of women and youth. The exclusion of women and youth from civic and public spaces in Libya has meant that the specific needs of grassroots populations cannot be addressed, or appropriate resources allocated, thereby weakening the effectiveness of conflict-prevention mechanisms, and drastically reducing the opportunities for peacebuilding.

-
- 1 Violence against Women in the Online Space: Insights from a Multi-Country Study in the Arab States, 2021, available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/11/violence-against-women-in-the-online-space>
 - 2 UN Women, Rapid Assessment: the Effects of COVID-19 on Violence against Women and Gendered Social Norms; A Snapshot from Nine Countries in the Arab States, 2020, available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/brief-the-effects-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-gendered-social-norms>
 - 3 The Impact of COVID-19 on Violence against Women and Girls in the Arab States through the Lens of Women's Civil Society Organizations, available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/brief-the-impact-of-covid19-on-vaw-in-the-arab-states-through-the-lens-of-women-csos>
 - 4 Internet Governance Forum, 2015.

In the Arab region, and especially in Libya, social media and the internet in general remains a significant source of news, political conversations, and debate, as well as a key space for communication, campaigning, and activism for women and youth CSOs in Libya. This engagement has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the confinement measures and social distancing requirements. Technology has also proven to be an effective organizing tool through virtual connections that reduce physical distances, in support of the ongoing peace process in Libya.

The internet and other technologies have provided women and youth civil society organizations (CSOs) with different opportunities to expand, to organize, campaign, blog and network, but also to create platforms for raising awareness about the experiences of Libyan women and to organize workshops and training opportunities. However, the threats are real. Women activists and politicians, including Najla al-Mangoush, GNU's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and presidential candidates Laila Ben Khalifa and Huneida Al-Mahdi, have faced misogynistic abuse and threats online.⁵ A 2020 survey conducted by Lawyers for Justice in Libya showed that 96.3 per cent of 163 female respondents perceived OVAW to be a serious problem. Further, 67.5 per cent of respondents said they had experienced online abuse on social media platforms.⁶

New research as a basis for action

In 2021, Meta (formerly the Facebook company) removed 41 Facebook accounts, 133 Pages, three Groups and 14 Instagram accounts for violating their policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior. The individuals behind this activity posted in Arabic about news and current events in the region, including the delayed elections and criticism of the rise of women in politics, society, and the media. These networks went as far as to create pages purporting to be run by female public figures to make inflammatory statements on their behalf at which point they launched a harassment campaign by pointing to these fictitious comments.⁷

While social media authorities, including Meta, have shown a commitment to root out these examples of OVAW, there is still not enough action being taken to end this type of violence that so deeply affects women's participation and well-being. In many cases inaction is based on a lack of understanding by social media authorities of the subtleties of the Arabic language, the use of informal Arabic and very specific colloquial use of humor and phrasing that can quickly transition from seemingly harmless words to aggressive threats.

Libyan women voiced their concern to the UN Human Rights Council's Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya explaining their frustration that "social media companies do not sufficiently moderate debates or proactively monitor them." These women recommended that social media platforms have Arabic speakers on their teams, and specifically people who understand the Libyan context and dialect to truly grasp the nature and seriousness of threats in these online spaces. The Mission reviewed several messages in which harassers used a mix of Arabic and English letters, signs and numbers to avoid detection by content moderation algorithms."⁸

This study intends to provide a first sampling of concrete data around OVAW in Libya in order to better understand this form of violence. This type of data can inform policy and programming. It also provides clear examples for social media authorities of where and how OVAW is proliferating so they can take urgent steps to end OVAW.

5 Amnesty International, 'Libya 2021' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/libya/report-libya/>

6 Urgent Action Needed to Address Shocking Levels of Online Violence Against Libyan Women, 2021, <https://www.libyanjustice.org/news/urgent-action-needed-to-address-shocking-levels-of-online-violence-against-libyan-women>

7 Recapping Our 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Enforcements, Meta <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/01/december-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report/>

8 Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya - 27 June 2022 (released 29 June 2022) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/libya/index>



METHODOLOGY

1.1

DATA SOURCE IDENTIFICATION

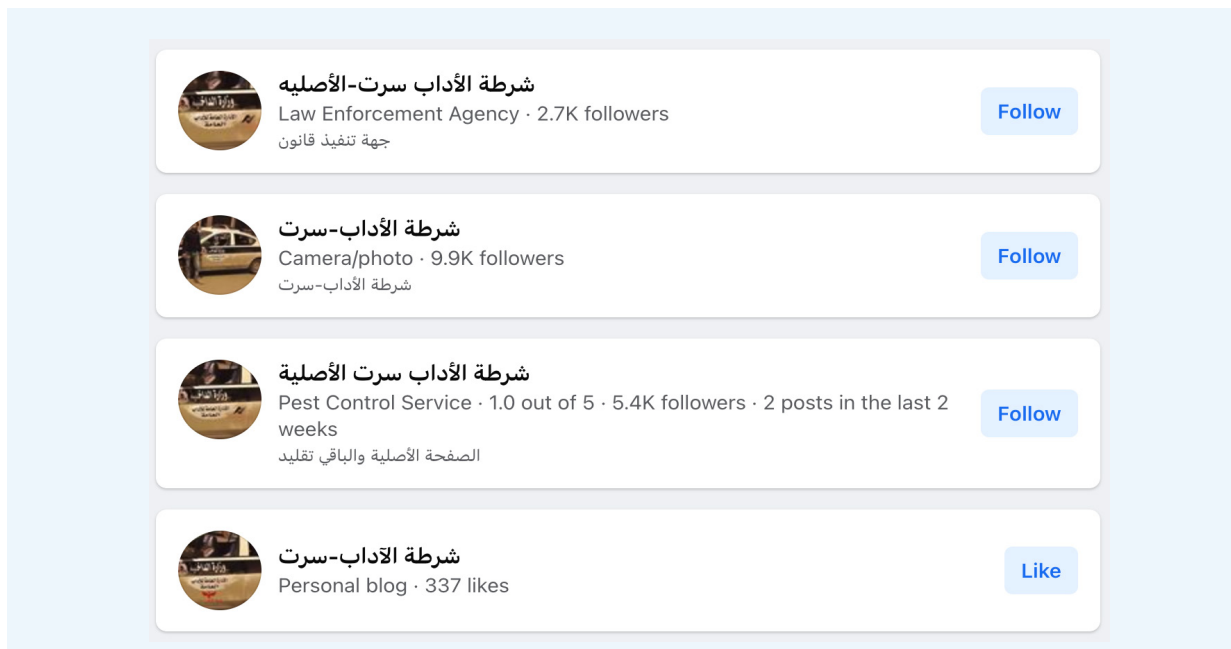
The process of data source identification consisted of 1) determining the most commonly used internet platform among Libyan web users; and 2) selecting the relevant data to analyse. To achieve this goal, the first step towards establishing a list of data sources was listening to the recording of an online focus group organized by UN Women on OVAW. The focus group was organized on 21 April, 2022 with the participation of a dozen Libyan female activists.

Throughout the discussions, Clubhouse and Facebook were cited by the participants as the most commonly used platforms. Clubhouse was referred to as an emerging alternative space for discussions in closed groups, while Facebook was presented as an enabler of defamation, fake news propagation and public opinion manipulation through publicly accessible pages.

One Facebook page was cited multiple times by participants as a venue which specializes in cyber-libel, specifically targeting women in Libya.⁹ Despite the page having been closed multiple times by Meta upon request, the page has been consistently re-created. Participants also declared that they had experienced some form of online violence through private Facebook messages, including messages with profanity, aggression, and threats. This study cannot assess the magnitude of this phenomena as private messages are personal and are not accessible for analysis.

The discussion among the focus group's participants was the basis for creating an initial list of public Facebook pages which included profiles of women activists in Libya and other pages sharing news and current events in Libya.

FIGURE 1
Screenshot on 25/12/2022



⁹ شرطة الأداب-سرت-الأصليه, Home [Facebook page]. Facebook. Retrieved December 25, 2022, from <https://web.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100083538401062>

The initial list was enriched with additional popular pages provided by UN Women. Additionally, a questionnaire¹⁰ was created and shared using Google Forms. The form invited participants to indicate URLs of pages sharing offensive or misogynistic content targeting Libyan women. Seven anonymous participants filled-out the form and the proposed URLs were inspected. At the end of the process, 20 public Facebook pages were identified as relevant to this study. These Facebook pages are categorized into five categories:

1. **Popular:** Pages with a considerable number of followers, sharing a variety of content including humorous exchanges, stories and incidents;
2. **Activists:** Pages highlighting activist initiatives and specific women activists;
3. **News Platforms:** Pages dedicated to sharing news;
4. **Ministers:** Pages featuring the names of national Libyan Ministers and National Ministries;
5. **Defamation:** Pages dedicated to libel.



10 Monitoring online violence against Libyan women on social media, (questionnaire), created on October 24, 2022, as Google Form: <https://forms.gle/VY4LTmVWVjPgshzc7>

1.2

DATA ACQUISITION

Data was acquired from public Facebook pages and was used exclusively for research purposes. The data will be deleted 15 days after the end of this study. Acquired data consists of posts and associated comments. Tables 1 and 2 show meta-data that

was collected for posts and comments, respectively, beside their content (i.e. text). In total, 7,015 posts and 91,978 comments were collected.

TABLE 1
Posts meta-data

Meta-data	Description
Id	Post identifier
Name	Name of the post's author/ source
Shares	Number of shares
Likes	Number of likes
Loves	Number of <i>love</i> reactions
Wow	Number of <i>wow</i> reactions
Cares	Number of <i>care</i> reactions
Sad	Number of <i>sad</i> reactions
Angry	Number of <i>angry</i> reactions
Haha	Number of <i>haha</i> reactions
Reactions_count	Number of all reactions
Comments	Number of comments
Posted_on	Date on which the post was published
Video	Video featured in the post, if available
Image	Image featured in the post, if available
Post_url	URL to access the post

TABLE 2
Comments meta-data

Meta-data	Description
Comment id	Comment identifier
Profile name	Name of the comment's author/ source
Likes	Number of likes
Loves	Number of <i>love</i> reactions
Wow	Number of <i>wow</i> reactions
Cares	Number of <i>care</i> reactions
Sad	Number of <i>sad</i> reactions
Angry	Number of <i>angry</i> reactions
Haha	Number of <i>haha</i> reactions
Reactions_count	Number of all reactions
Time	Date on which the comment was created

1.3

DATA FILTERING

A list of keywords was created to select relevant content from acquired data. The developed list is composed of Arabic nouns referring to women and adjectives in feminine form. These include eleven

(11) base words and twenty-five (25) other words which are inflections, synonyms or equivalent words of the base words. As a result, the final list has in total 36 keywords.

TABLE 3
List of keywords used in data filtering

Keyword	Inflected forms- Synonyms - Equivalent words	English Meaning
وحدة	وحدة (Typo)	One (feminine form)
عاملة	مرشحة، وزيرة، سفيرة، محامية، عاملات (Plural)	Worker
بنت	بنات (Plural), بنتك (Possessive form)	Girl
سيدة	سيدات (Plural)	Lady
امراه	نساء (Plural)	Woman
أخت	أختك، أخته (Possessive forms)	Sister
زوجة	زوجتك (Possessive form), زوجات (Plural)	Wife
ورفلية	ورفليات (Plural)	Woman from Ouarfalla
فتاة	صبايا (Plural), صبية (Synonym), فتيات (Plural)	Young woman
محتجزة	سجينات (Plural), سجينة (Synonym), محتجزات (Plural)	Detained
مزيتة	مدمنات (Plural), مدمنة (Synonym), مزيتات (Plural)	Insults

1.4

DATA DESCRIPTION

The collected data (posts and comments) is shown in Figures 2 and 3 along with distribution source (Facebook page) and category, respectively. Figure 4 presents data size before and after filtering. It shows that 1,228 posts and 4,199 comments mention at least one of the filtering keywords (Table 3). Posts which mention at least one of the filtering keywords essentially belong to Activists Pages or News Platforms, as shown in Figure 5.

The filtering reveals also that some pages, such as **شرطة الأدب سرت**, page often share content associated with women. In fact, 50% of posts in Defamation Pages have mentioned at least one of the keywords from the identified list (Table 3).



FIGURE 2
Data distribution by page

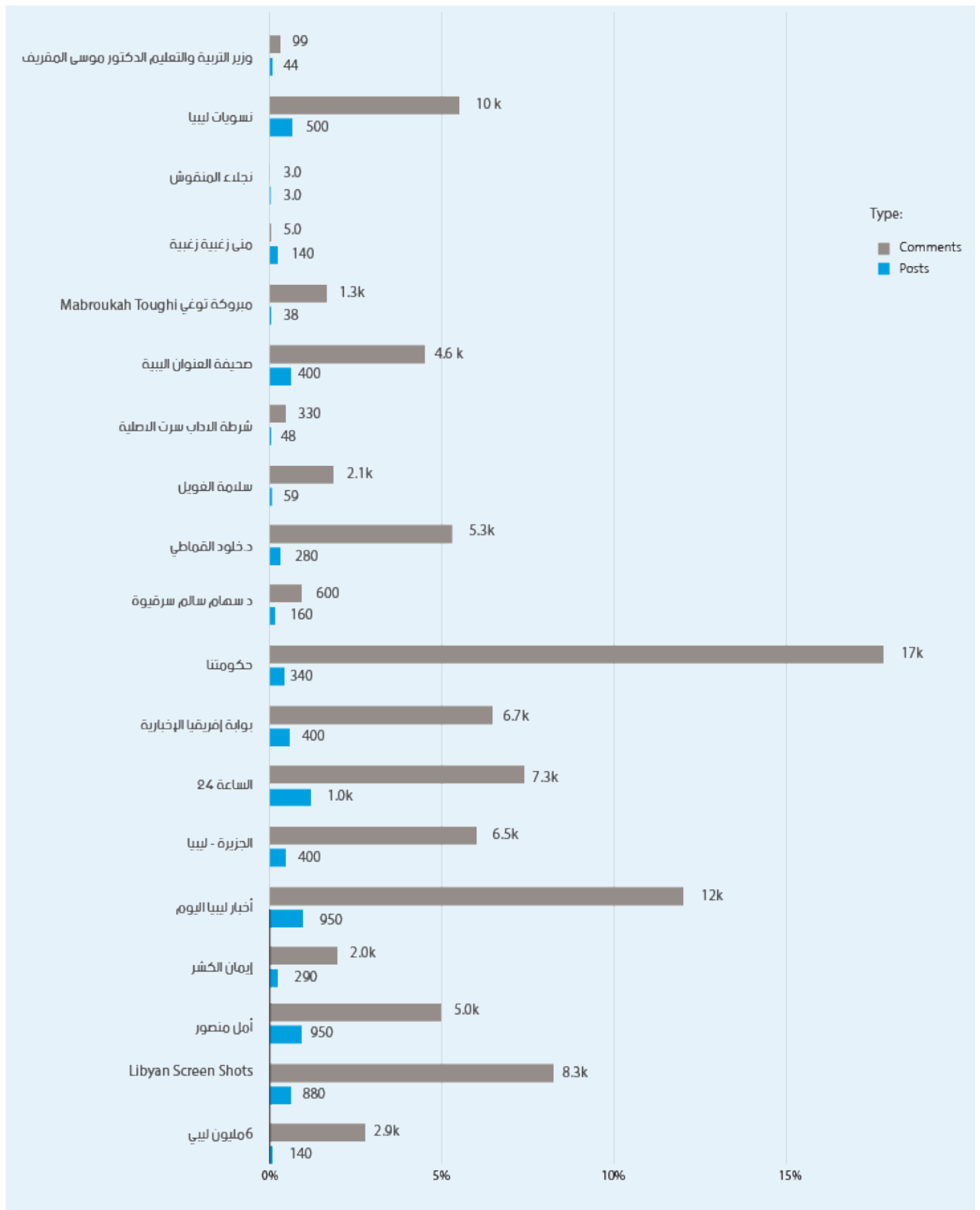


FIGURE 3
Data distribution by category

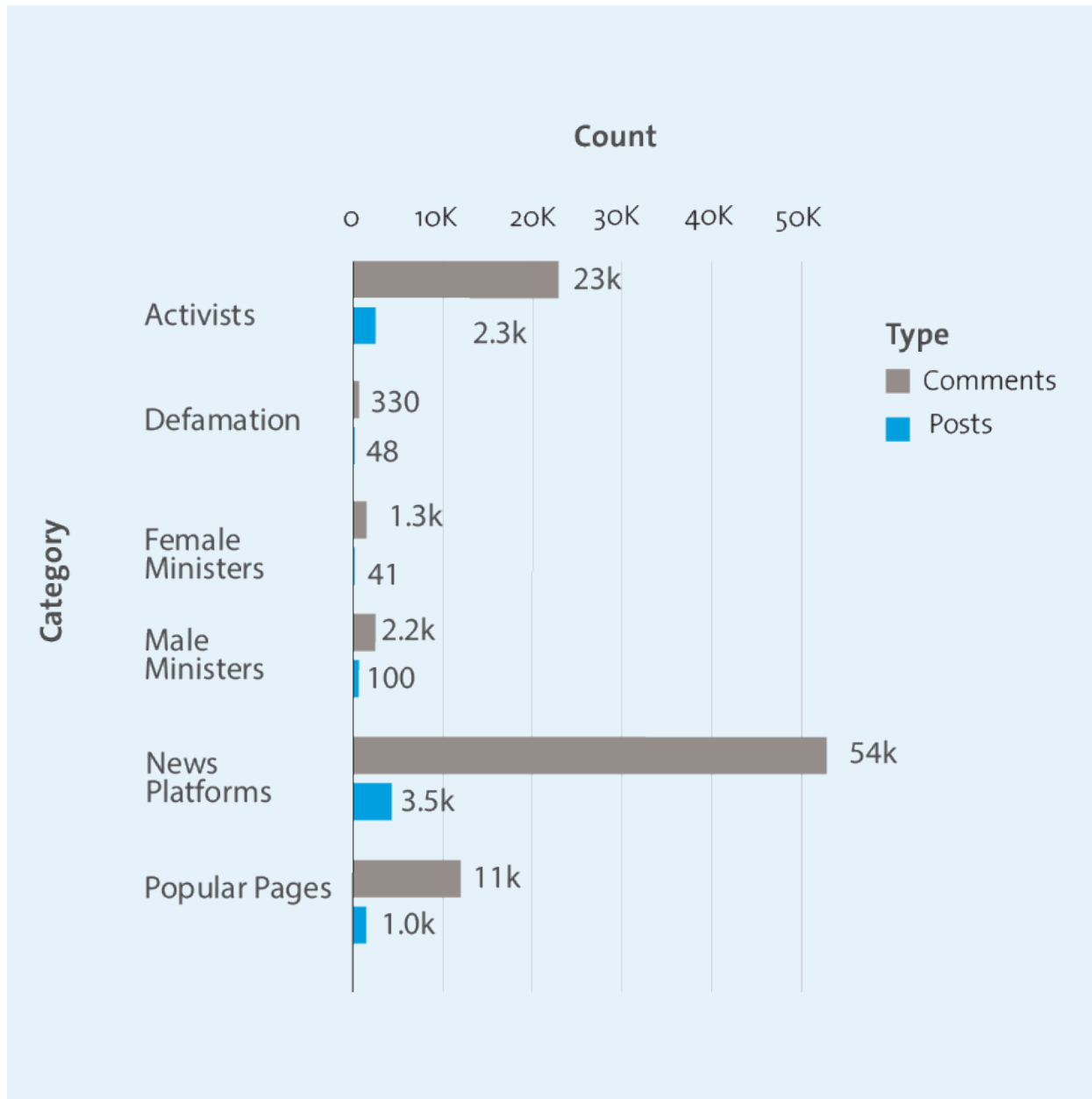


FIGURE 4
Number of comments and posts on women

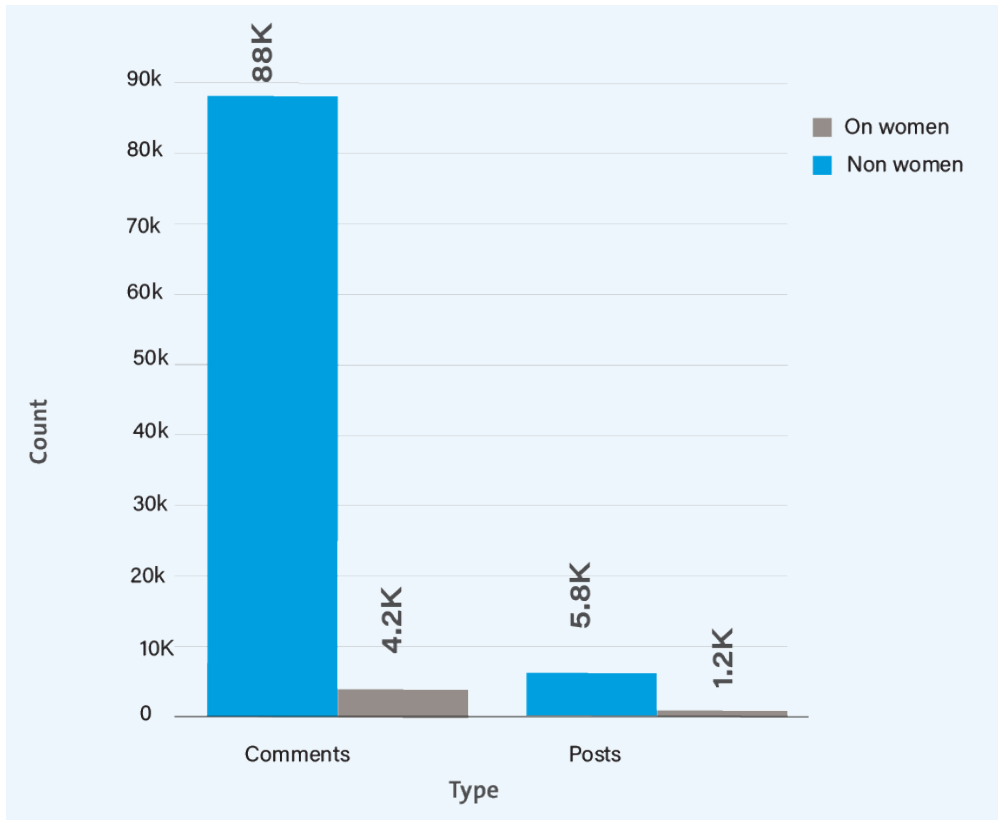
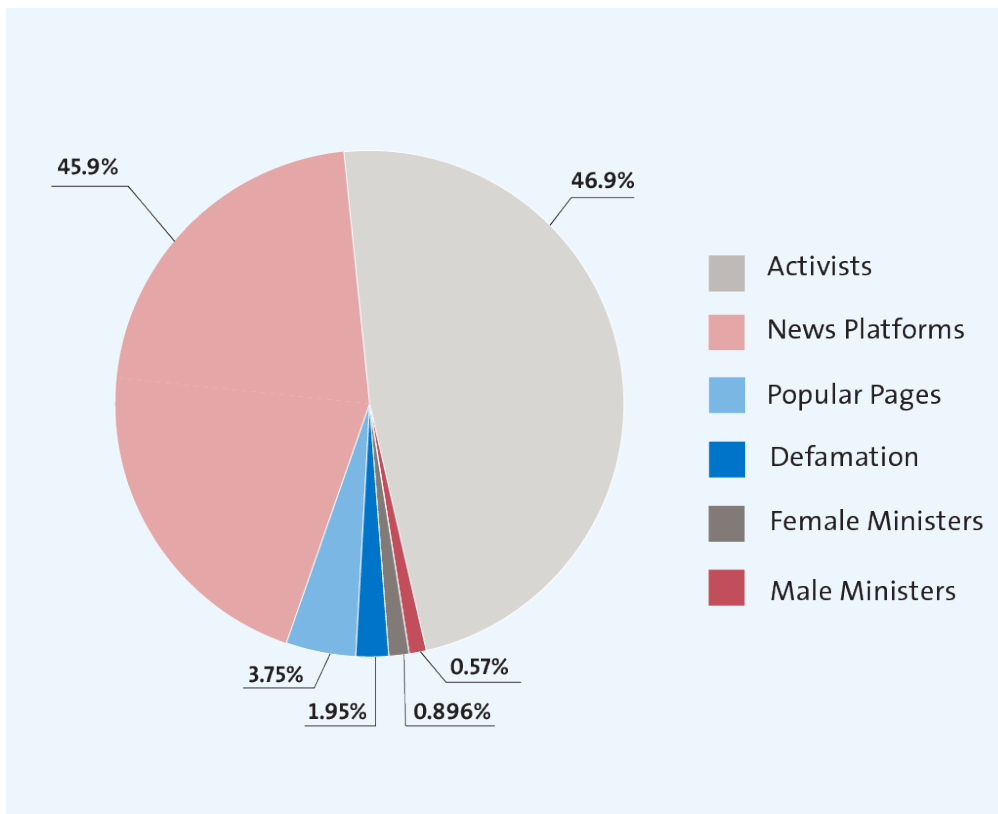


FIGURE 5
Distribution of posts on women by category



The image features a vertical split background. The top half is a solid blue color, and the bottom half is a solid orange color. A large, light blue curved shape, resembling a stylized 'C' or a partial arc, spans across both the blue and orange sections. In the blue section, the word 'ANALYSIS' is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, underlined. In the orange section, there is a light orange, semi-transparent rectangular shape that appears to be a stylized 'L' or a partial 'Z' shape, extending from the left edge towards the right.

ANALYSIS

2.1

META-ANALYSIS

Figure 6 shows the subset of the 1,228 posts, obtained after filtering, that elicited at least one of the seven types of reactions. The following figures describe the posts as represented by “women bubbles,” which represent visually the proportion of shares that each post received. The bigger the circle, the higher the number of shares that post received. The color of the

circle identifies the page category of the post. The position of the circle depends on the numbers of likes and comments it obtained.

Posts from female Ministers obtained more reactions compared to male Ministers, as featured in Figure 12.

FIGURE 6
Number of posts by reaction type

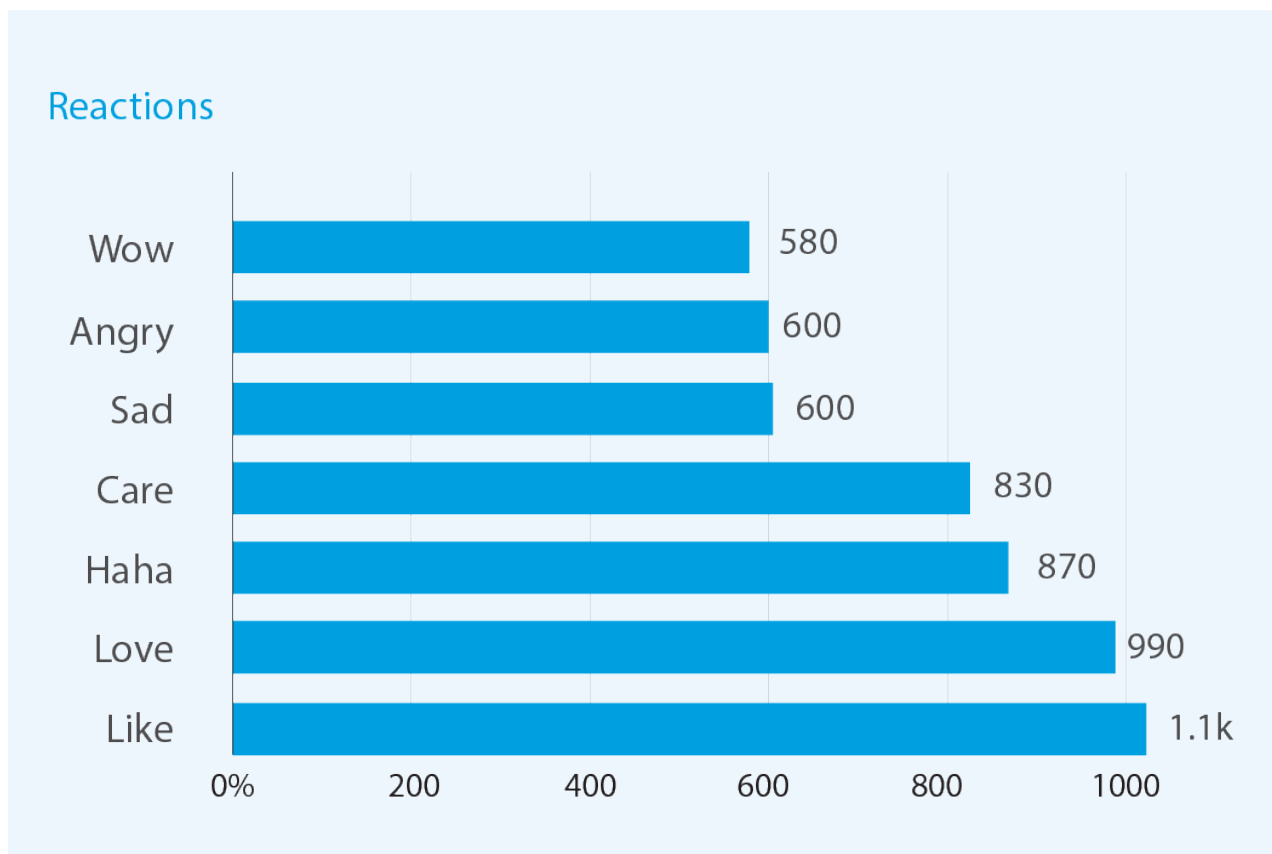


FIGURE 7

'Like' reaction to posts on women with number of shares and comments

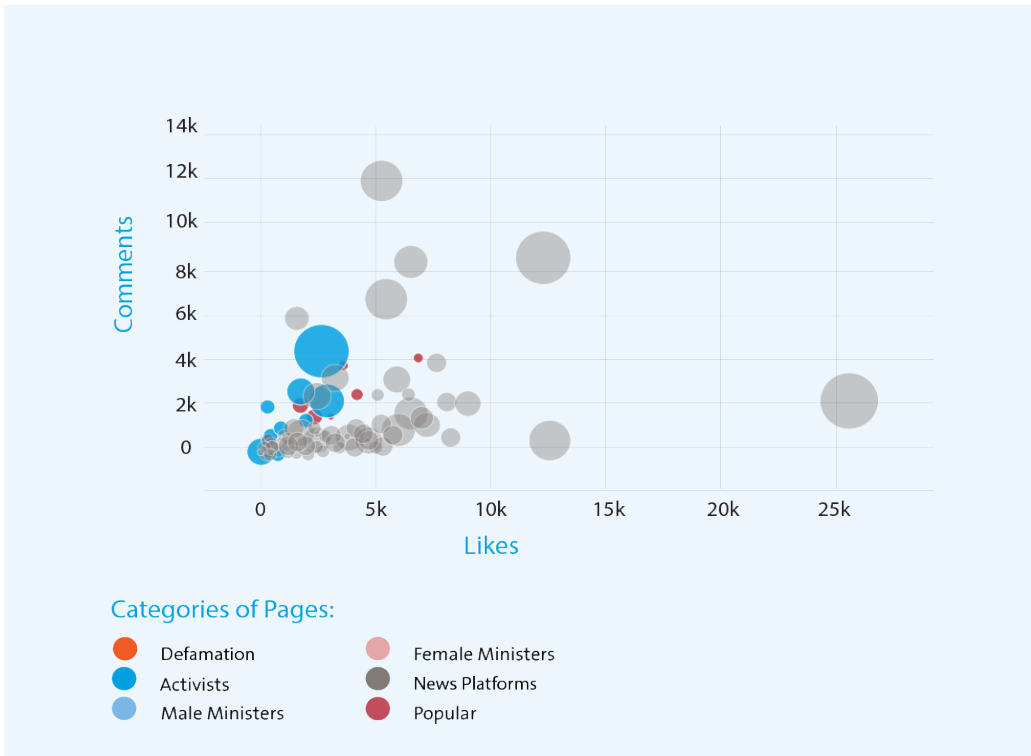


FIGURE 8

'Angry' comments and shares of posts on women by category

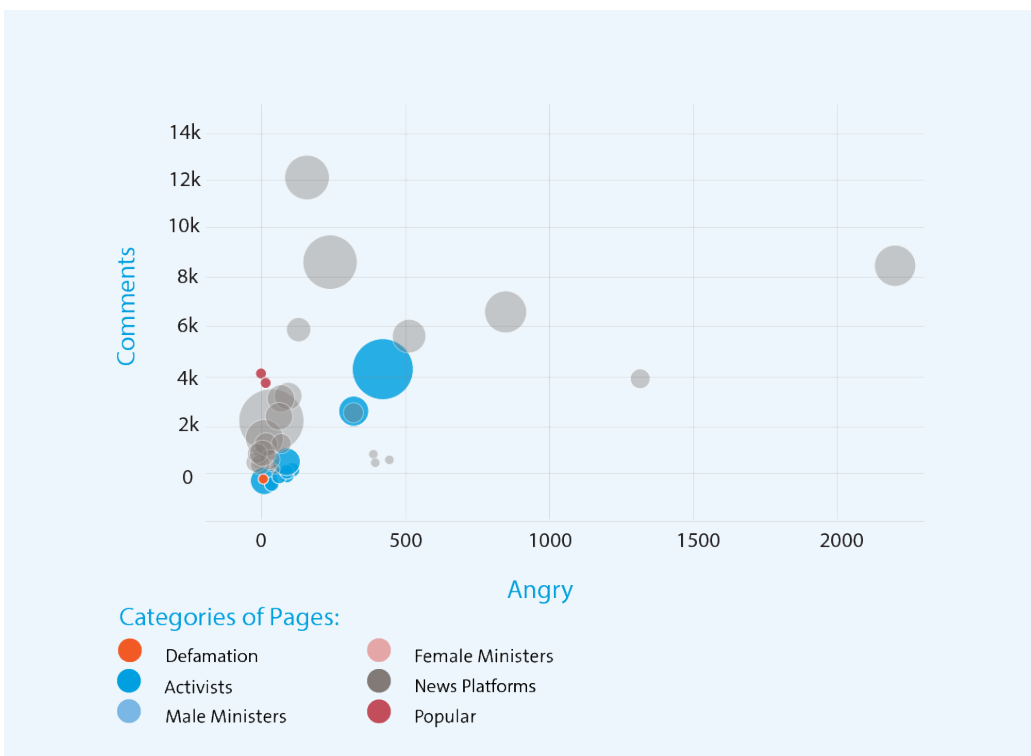


FIGURE 9

'Haha' comments and shares of posts on women by category

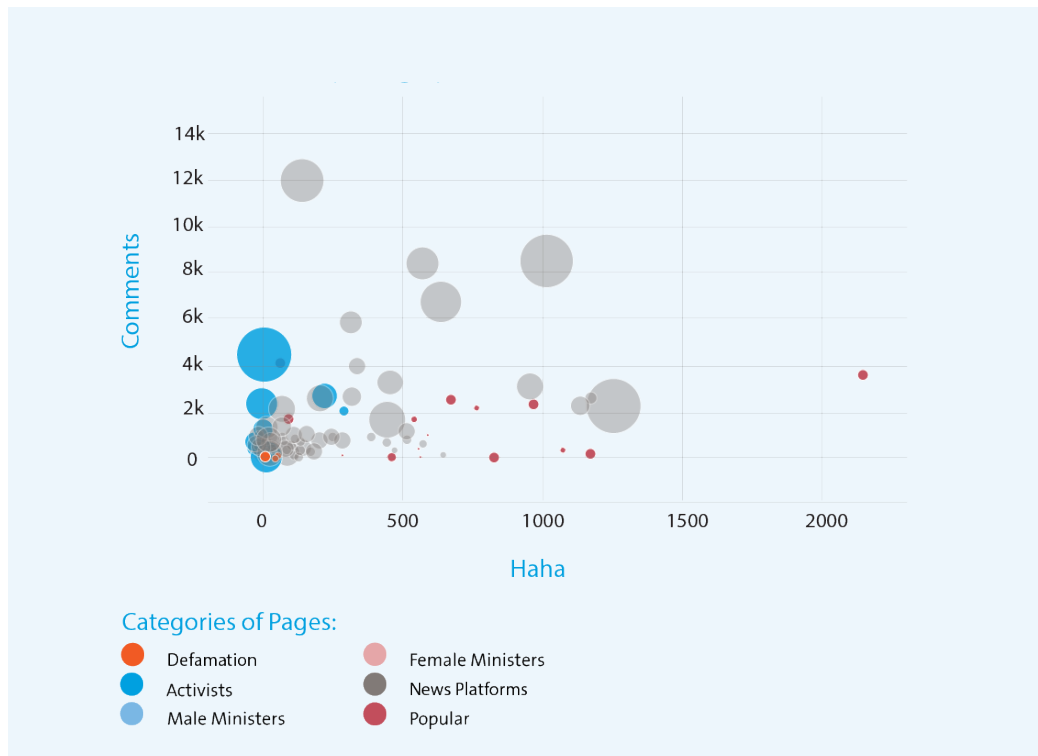


FIGURE 10

'Care' comments and shares of posts on women by category

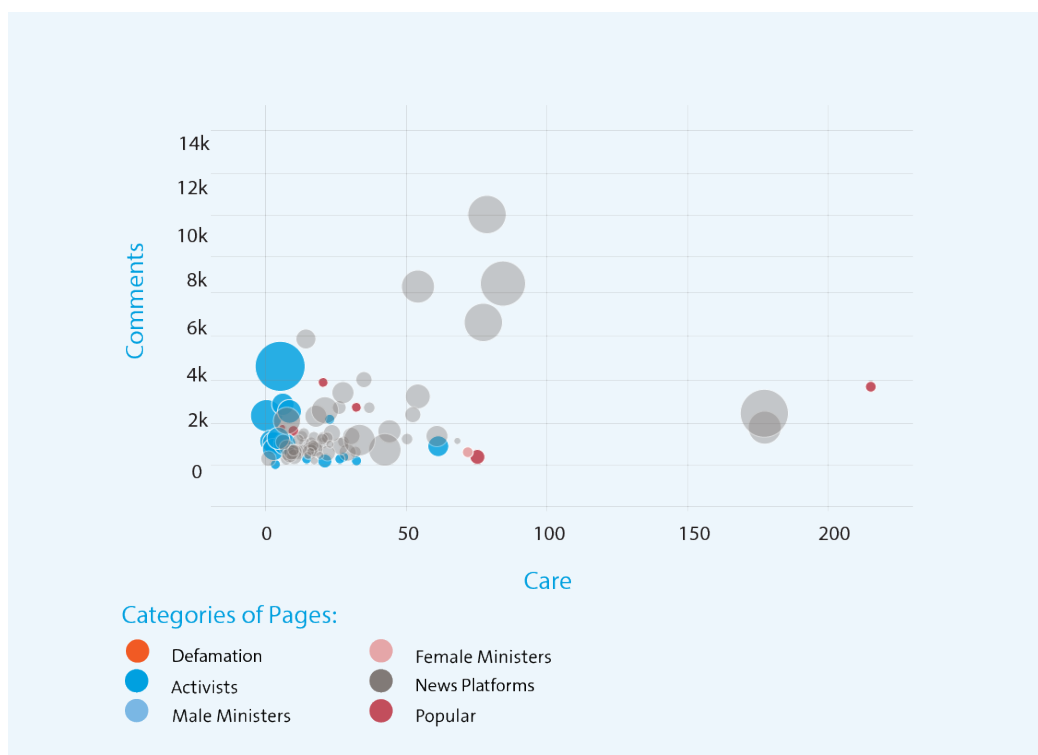


FIGURE 11
 'Sad' comments and shares of posts on women by category

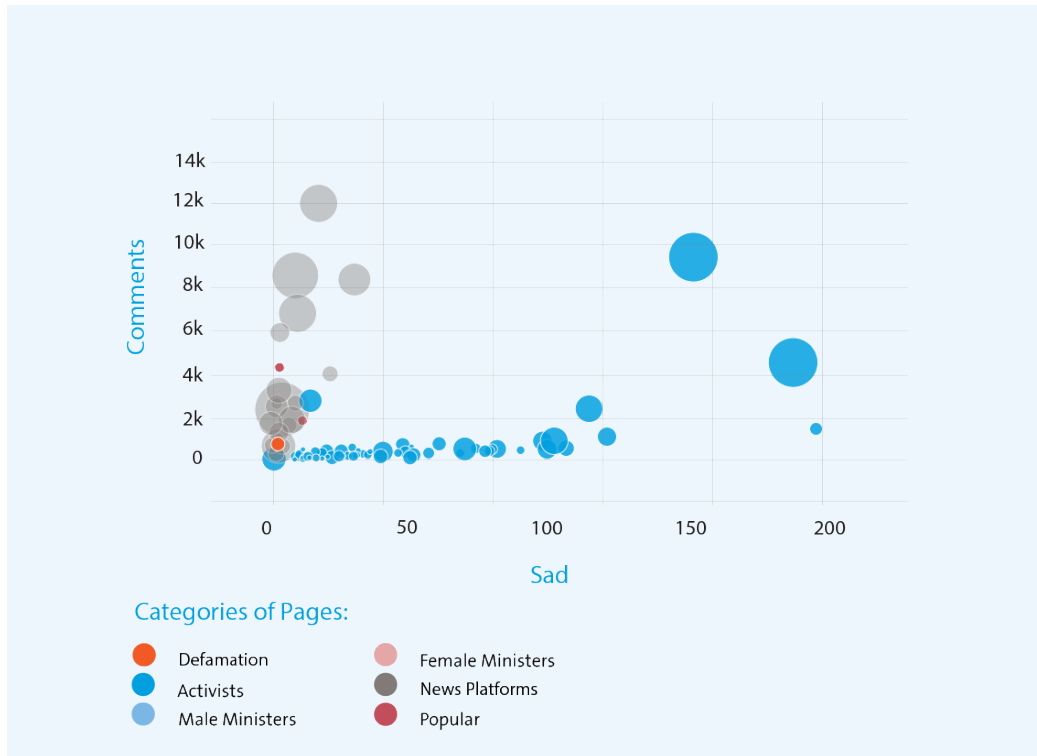
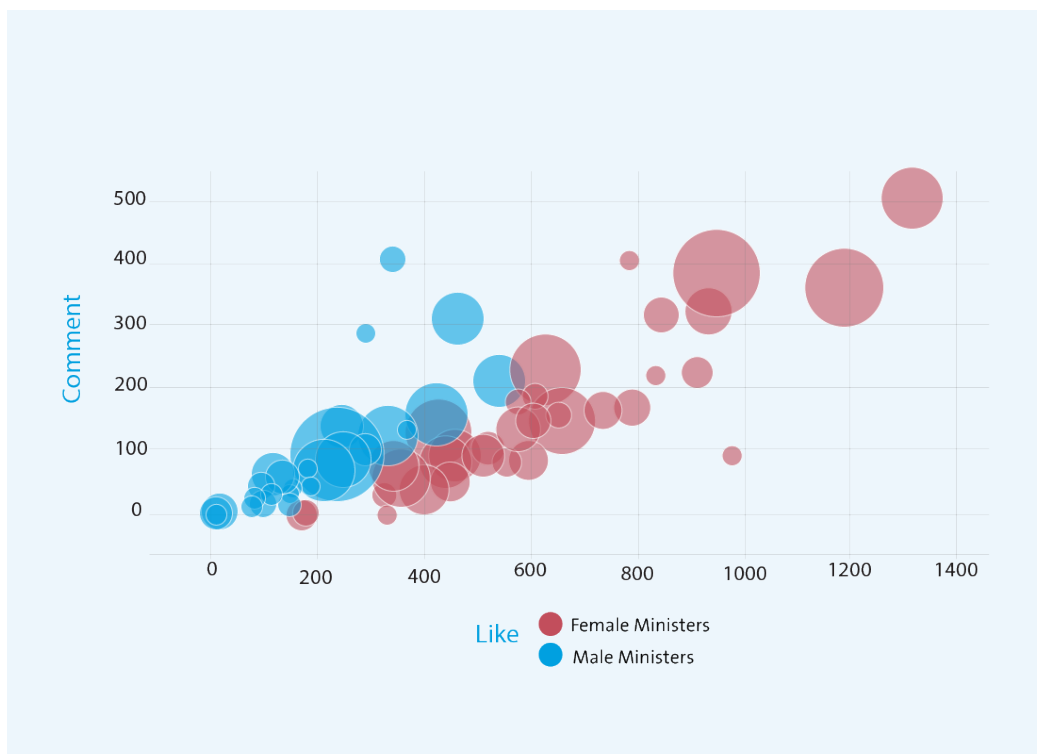


FIGURE 12
 'Like' comments and shares on Ministers posts by gender



USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO QUANTIFY MISOGYNY AND OFFENSIVENESS

Two AI classifiers, which are artificial intelligence computer models, were trained to automatically identify misogyny and offensiveness in comments and posts. To train the misogyny classifier, three training sets were used:

2.3.1 LetMi: Model trained on binary labels of the LetMi dataset (misogyny/none).

2.3.2 ArMis: Model trained on ArMis – The Arabic Misogyny and Sexism Corpus with Annotator Subjective Disagreements (misogynistic/sexist and not misogynistic/not sexist).

2.3.3 LetMi and ArMis: Model trained on both datasets combined.

After evaluation, the created models were used to quantify misogyny and offensiveness in collected data. Figures 20 and 21 show results on comments while figures 22 and 23 present results on posts. Results show that misogyny is predominant in both comments and posts on women.

FIGURE 20
Assessing misogyny in filtered comments

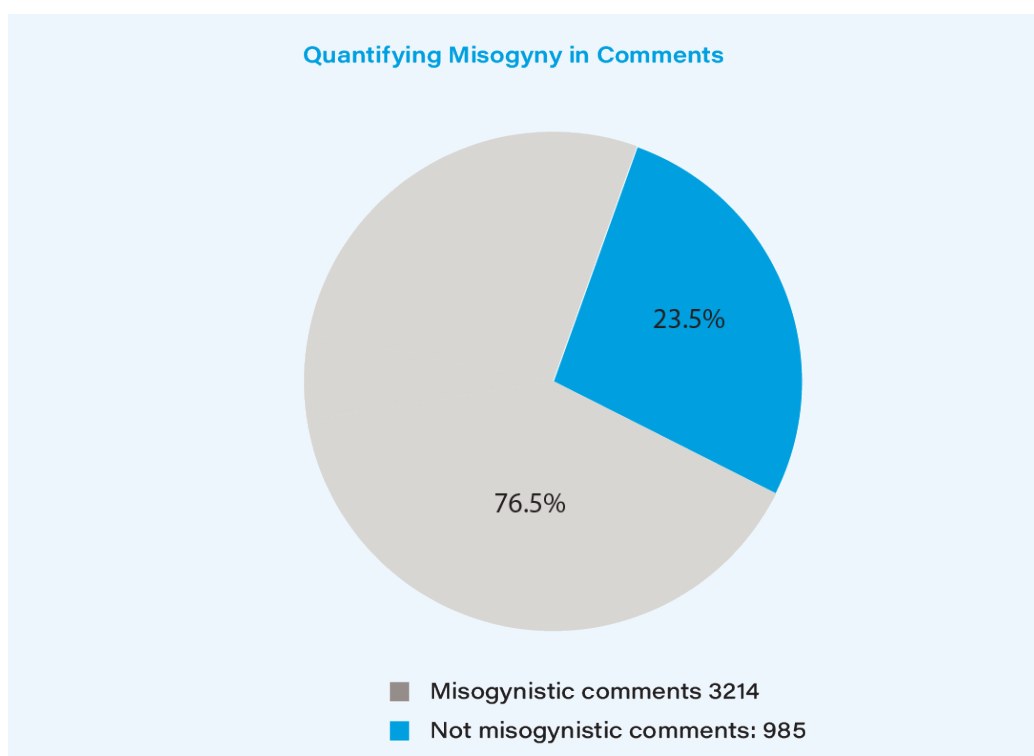


FIGURE 21
Assessing offensiveness in filtered comments

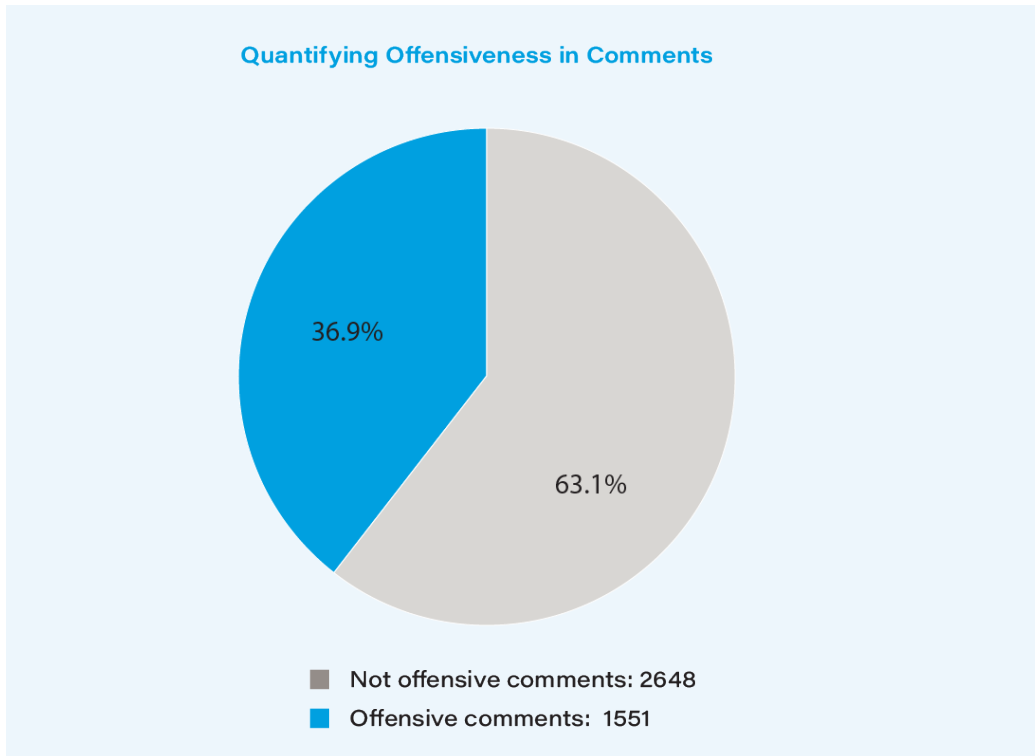


FIGURE 22
Assessing misogyny in filtered comments

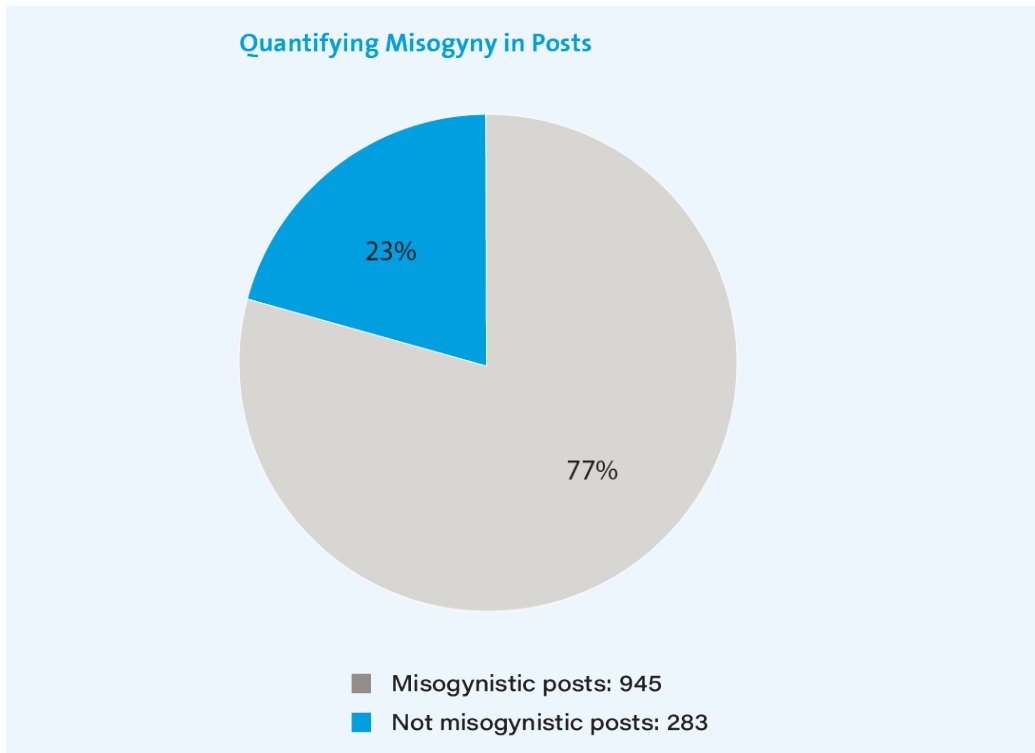
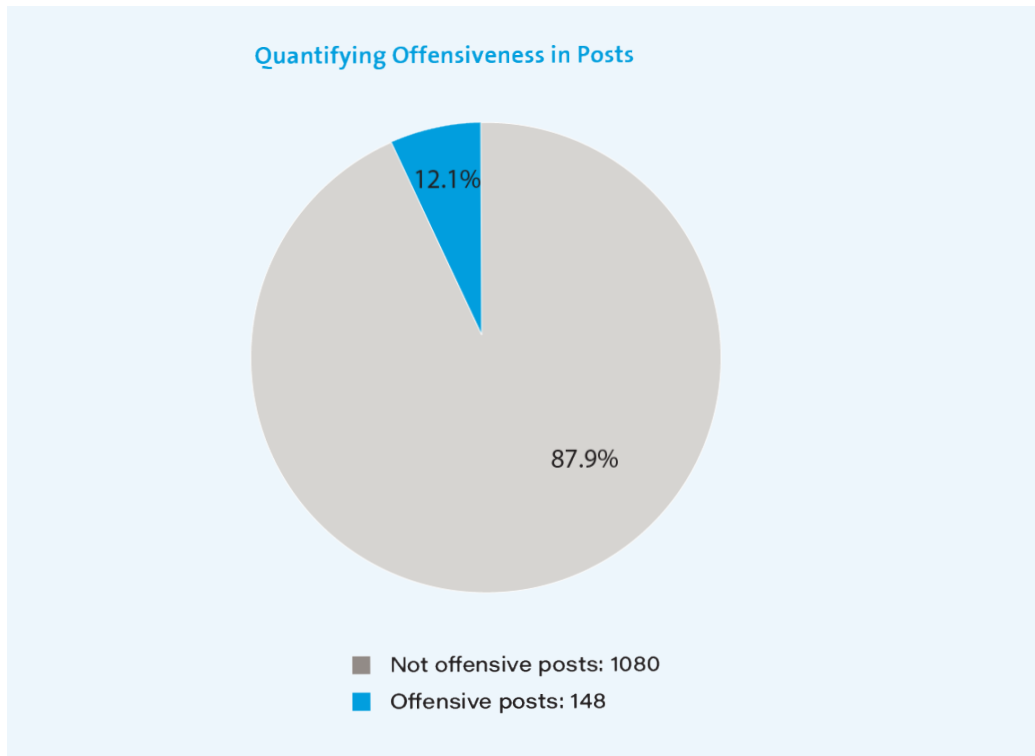


FIGURE 23
Assessing offensiveness in filtered posts



2.4

DEFAMATION PAGES: A CLOSER LOOK

Despite the banishment of شرطة الأداب سرت by Facebook in the past, the creator(s) of this page continues to have impact and keeps sharing the same kind of content -- essentially libel-- through multiple back-up pages. The content shared on these pages deliberately shares

private, personal information such as names and surnames (Figure 25), personal photos (Figure 26) and screen shots (Figure 24) from "closed" Facebook groups that are supposedly accepting only female members to join.

FIGURE 24

Post from شرطة الأداب سرت displaying personal information (Last visit 25/12/2022)



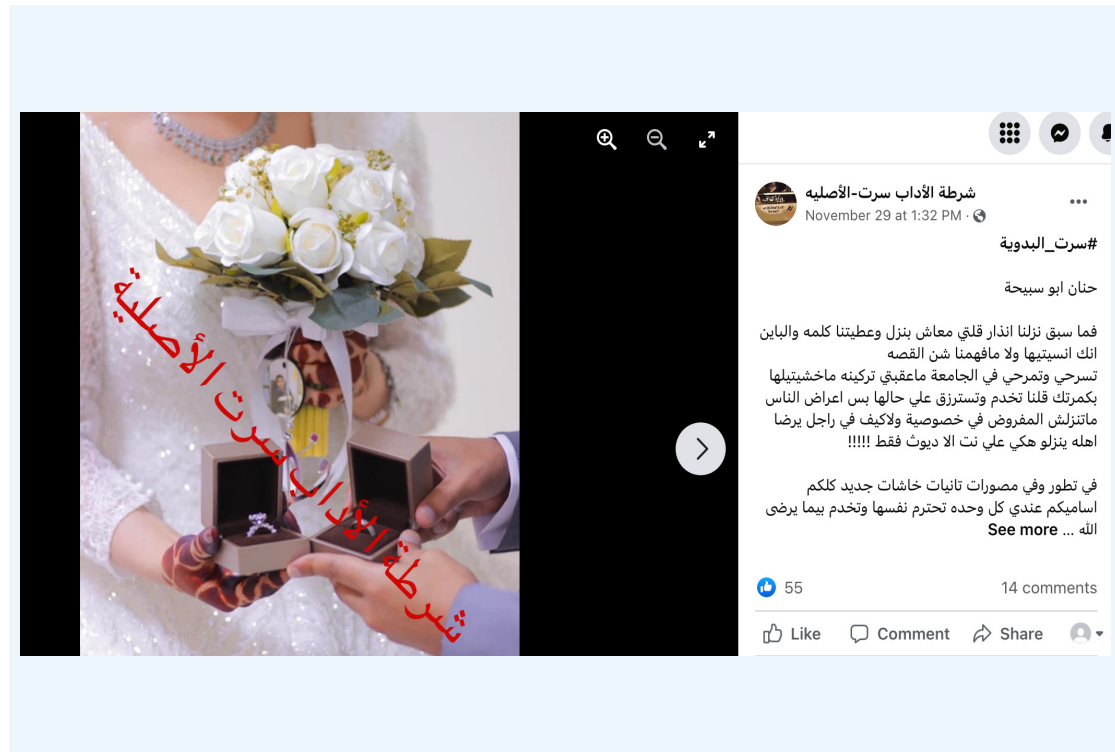
FIGURE 25

Post from شرطة الأداب سرت displaying personal information (Last visit 25/12/2022)



FIGURE 26

Post from شرطة الأداب سرت displaying personal information photo (Last visit 25/12/2022)



CONCLUSION

Given the grave nature of OVAW, its recent proliferation over a short period of time, and its potential to create such negative impacts on women's participation and well-being, urgent action is needed. While other UN and national partners are currently exploring mechanisms to analyse OVAW, those efforts have been focused primarily on the upcoming elections in Libya and the impact on candidates for those elections.

This current study is unique in that it offers a pilot perspective on the kind of information and nuanced language that experts, and those administering social media platforms globally, need to know in order to take concrete actions to end violence against women in online spaces in Arabic-speaking regions, specifically in Libya. Those nuances include not only idiosyncrasies related to the Arabic language but also the informal nature of that language and the colloquial context. For instance, there are situations in which humor is subtly distorted into aggression and threats.

Since not all social platform administrators can understand these delicate subtleties it has previously fallen to civil society and women's organizations to alert social media authorities. However, to date those calls to action have not received an adequate response in large part due to the lack of understanding of these complex subtleties in language. Here, UN Women intends to fill the gap, bridging its ability to convene civil society partners—where women activists have explained the current issues in listening sessions—with the social media authorities who can take effective action to close down accounts related to harassment.

More research is needed to come to a fuller understanding of how OVAW occurs, whom it affects most, and how to effectively disable it. Answering those questions will be a key dimension to ensuring women's rights in Libya, and the meaningful participation of women in building a stable, democratic and prosperous country for all Libyans.

UN Women is the UN Organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes, and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to all national development planning and budgeting.

UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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