

PUBLIC POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHT TO PROTECTION FROM CYBER VIOLENCE:

A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN FIELD REPORTERS

2025



Report on Public Policies Supporting Women's Right to Protection from Cyber Violence – A case study of Women Journalists.

Maharat Foundation prepared this report as part of the project “Safe Information Space to increase women public participation”, which is implemented by Maharat in partnership with Madanyat, with support from UN Women - Lebanon - and the French Embassy in Beirut.

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Public Policies Supporting Women's Right to Protection from Cyber Violence:

A Case Study of Women Field Reporters

This report was prepared by Maharat Foundation, with the support of UN Women - Lebanon - and the French Embassy in Beirut.

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Introduction

Journalists face significant challenges in their fieldwork, including violence, violations, and harassment targeting their journalistic activities. Women journalists play a pivotal role in this context, being part of the majority of the field reporters who are at the heart of political and field conflicts, often being at the frontlines of the confrontations.

The recent war on Lebanon, which started on September 23, 2024, was no different from other events, although tensions in the south had begun since October 2023, prompting many women journalists to head south to cover the conflict. We witnessed **direct targeting**, including of women journalists, with the killing of Al-Mayadeen reporter Farah Omar and the severe injury of Christina Assi, among many other journalists who were subjected to Israeli attacks over the past year.

According to Maharat Foundation's monitoring on Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP), **a growing pattern of violence against women activists in the public sphere** appeared during critical times such as protests, elections, or wars. In Lebanon, women journalists work in an environment lacking a holistic protection system, suffering from legal gaps, a lack of accountability, and an absence of clear complaint mechanisms, whether in the public or digital sphere, which contributes to reinforcing a culture of impunity.

Despite **the documentation of violations and the regular monitoring carried out by Maharat Foundation**, which shows that women journalists are subjected to violence, this has not deterred them from carrying out their roles. However, the psychological impact of the violence on them cannot be ignored, making it necessary to shed light on this phenomenon and explore available solutions to address it by improving laws, strengthening protective practices, and raising awareness of the risks of violence and discrimination against women in public life.

“The personal attacks I face on social media make it difficult for me to separate my professional and personal life, which leaves a psychological impact on me and causes constant anger and stress.”

Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence



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This report is based on a **survey conducted with 21 women** field reporters who covered the war on Lebanon during the specified period, drawing from the continuous monitoring of violence documented by Maharat Monitoring Unit. The report focuses on **studying cases of digital violence** experienced by women journalists during the war, highlighting the unique challenges they faced in this context.

The report discusses **how women journalists dealt with these digital attacks** and **reviews international guidelines and best practices for addressing digital violence** directed at women activists in the public sphere. It also sheds light on the experiences of some countries that have successfully integrated these guidelines into their laws and practices, with the aim of deriving possible and applicable solutions for Lebanon.

The report seeks to initiate a serious **discussion on the steps that can be taken to improve the digital environment and ensure greater safety for women journalists working in this vital field.**

The report includes an **analysis of the cases of cyber violence that were monitored in recent months** and provides an overview of the digital campaigns targeting women journalists, such as treason campaigns and incitement to murder. It also examines the impact of online violence on women reporters, both in terms of its effect on their professional work—where they practice self-censorship due to fear of harassment—and its psychological and physical impact, which increases their levels of stress and exhaustion.

The report examines the **strategies employed by women journalists to confront this violence**, such as blocking abusive accounts or ignoring the abuse, and highlights the urgent need for awareness of laws and policies that protect women journalists from this type of violence.

In conclusion, the report discusses the necessary recommendations to improve digital safety for women journalists, including enhancing legislation, developing protective tools on social media platforms, and providing psychological and legal support to affected journalists.

This report falls within the framework of gender-sensitive media monitoring of violence against women in politics, including activists in the public sphere, women candidates, and journalists, with the aim of monitoring and analyzing the various forms of violence and barriers faced by women, and presenting possible solutions that balance the protection of freedom of expression with the protection of women from all forms of gender-based violence. The ultimate goal is to influence public discussions on women's political participation and eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination and violence against them.



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General Context of the Political and Social Reality for Women Journalists in Lebanon

Women journalists in Lebanon work in a complex political, social, and security environment that imposes exceptional challenges on them. This environment is characterized by the interplay of volatile political factors, a fragile social structure, and security tensions, making their work fraught with risks. The nature of these challenges varies based on the media outlet the journalists represent. Women journalists working for local media institutions face different pressures depending on the media's affiliation and the audience that follows it, especially when covering sensitive political issues. The Lebanese audience tends to categorize media outlets based on their political affiliations, follow them accordingly, and form opinions about the journalists working within them, viewing them as either 'with' or 'against'. Studies in Lebanon have shown that audiences defend media outlets they believe align with their viewpoints while attacking those they see as contradictory to their views. This situation complicates the work of journalists, particularly field reporters.

One of the key factors that add to the challenges is the approach to media coverage. Women journalists who adopt critical or analytical approaches often face hostility from the audience, which can manifest as public criticism or even personal attacks.

Additionally, the physical appearance of women journalists, which is unrelated to their professional competence, can be used as a weapon for bullying or unprofessional criticism. In some cases, their personal lives are targeted as a means of pressuring them or influencing their media performance.

Cyber violence takes various forms, ranging from gender-based online harassment to direct threats. Harassment includes unsolicited messages that contain sexual comments or gender-based insults. Threats take multiple forms, including physical or psychological violence or blackmail through the publication of sensitive personal information. One of the most dangerous practices faced by women journalists is the publication of their personal information without consent, exposing them to physical violence risks. Additionally, they face campaigns of incitement to hatred and violence targeting them based on gender or political views, as well as disinformation campaigns that aim to tarnish their reputation using misleading information.



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Maharat Foundation has documented many cyber-attacks on women journalists since July 2024. These cases have ranged from treason campaigns and accusations of ‘collaboration’ due to their media coverage, to the publication of inciting content intended to turn the public against them. Gender-based violence emerged as one of the most systematic patterns, with women journalists being targeted using degrading comments or images. Intimidation and threat tactics have been used repeatedly, with threats being employed to silence journalists and prevent them from carrying out their professional duties, including explicit incitement to murder through online platforms.

This cyber violence has a profound impact on women journalists, both professionally and personally. Professionally, cyber violence restricts the freedom of women journalists to cover sensitive topics and express their opinions, leading many to practice self-censorship out of fear of being targeted, which negatively impacts the quality of media coverage. On a psychological and physical level, continuous threats result in constant tension and anxiety. The psychological pressure also contributes to physical exhaustion, affecting the journalists' performance and reducing their ability to endure the demands of their work.

These challenges highlight the urgent need to strengthen legal and professional protection for women journalists and work towards creating a safer media environment, both in the real world and in the digital space.



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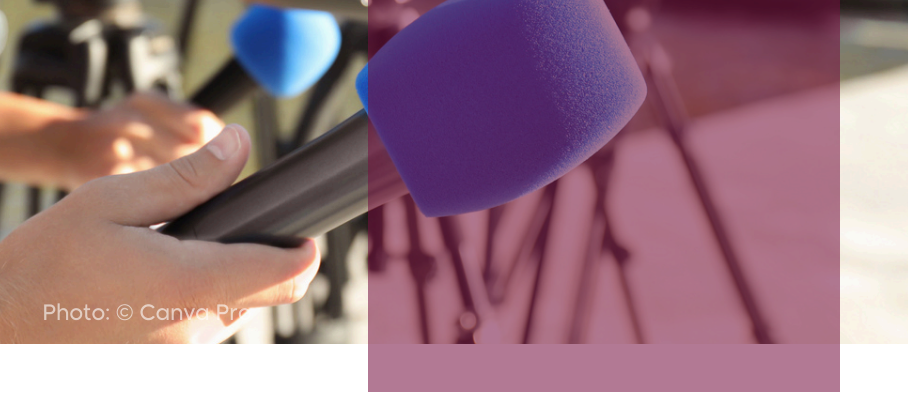


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1 | Field Reporters and Cyber Violence in the Context of the War on Lebanon

The targeting of women activists in the public sphere, including women journalists, as documented in previous studies, intensifies during times of tension. Therefore, Maharat, through this report, sought to survey the women reporters who covered the Lebanese war regarding their exposure to cyber violence, its impact, and strategies for dealing with it. A sample of women field reporters working in Lebanese and Arab media institutions, as well as independent field reporters (freelance), was selected.

Number of participants: 21 Lebanese women working as field reporters.

72%

In Lebanon, 72% of women reporters faced online violence while covering war-related events, according to a survey of 21 women reporters.

24%

24% of the reporters considered that the cyber violence they faced affected their professional activity, particularly their ability to convey information freely.

38%

38% of the women reporters believed that they faced both political and gender-based cyber violence.

86%

Cyber violence caused physical exhaustion for 19% of the journalists, and psychological effects for 67%, which were divided into mild effects (19%) and moderate effects (48%).

62%

About 62% of the women reporters who participated in the survey reported that they were not aware of any laws or policies that could help protect them from cyber violence.



48%

48% of reporters believed that online violence is linked to specific platforms, with X being the most prominent.

24%

24% of the reporters believed there was an urgent need to develop social media tools for reporting and blocking.

71%

Around 71% of the surveyed reporters considered that updating laws and improving their enforcement were additional resources they needed to feel digitally secure in the online sphere.

A number of influential and widely followed accounts on X were found to be operated by individuals who concealed their true identities. These accounts deliberately intimidate women journalists by monitoring everything they say during coverage, extracting snippets out of context, and inciting a wave of abusive comments.

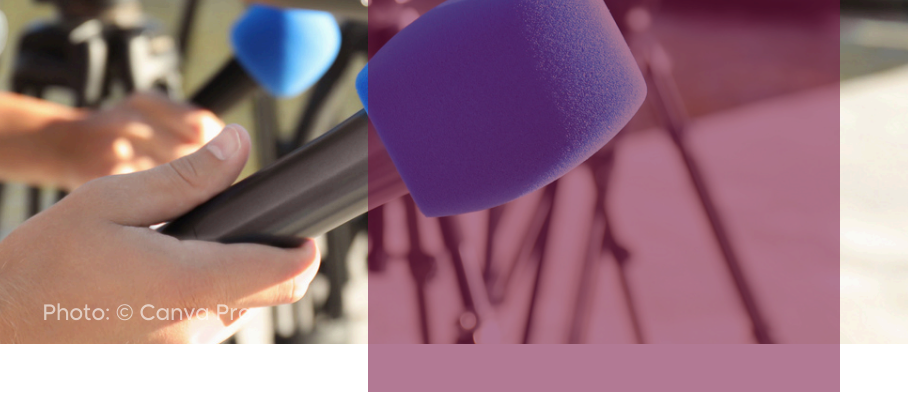
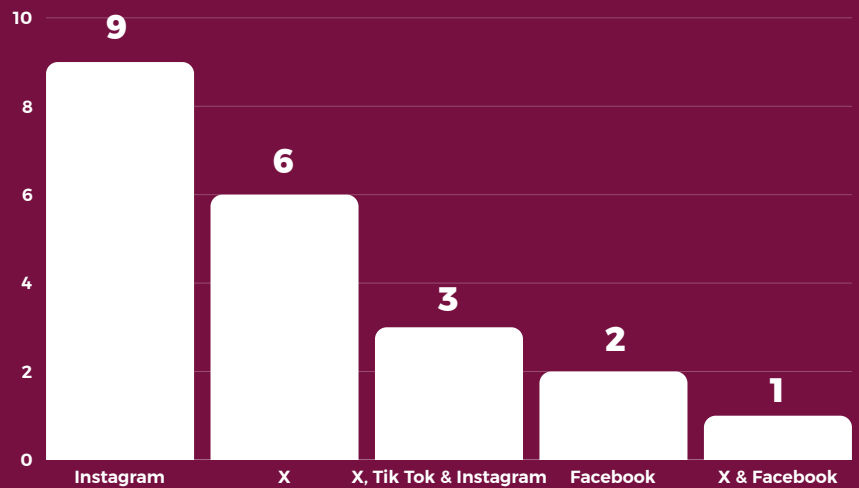


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Analysis of Survey Results: Cyber Violence Against Lebanese Women Reporters During the War on Lebanon

1. Intensive Use of Social Media Platforms and Its Impact

Distribution of Most Used Social Media Platforms by Journalists
Sample of 21 Survey Responses.



The results showed that Instagram is the most used platform by women reporters, which can be explained by the nature of the platform that allows flexibility in sharing photos and videos, making it an effective tool for delivering news and interacting with the audience.



The platform shows a clear pattern of high usage among women reporters, reflecting the nature of political and societal discussions that take place on the platform, especially during crises and wars. This intense interaction with a diverse audience increases the chances of verbal attacks and cyberbullying.



Although it is not considered the primary platform, it remains a source of violence, possibly due to the open comment feature and public groups that allow users to express their opinions in a direct manner.



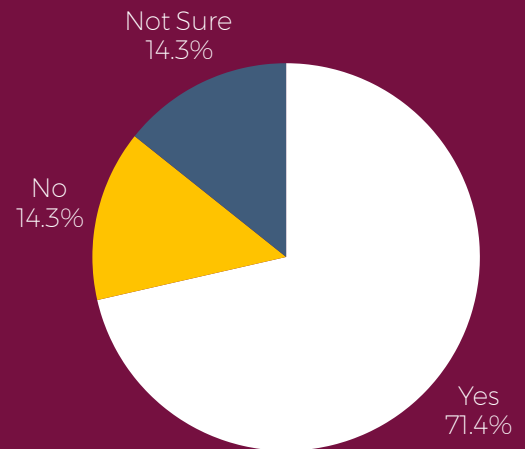
The nature of the platform, which focuses on entertainment content, may be the reason for its low usage by journalists, as it does not provide a suitable environment for news reporting or discussing serious issues, thus reducing the chances of exposure to cyber violence on it.

2. Cyber Violence: A Widespread Phenomenon

Exposure to Cyber Violence

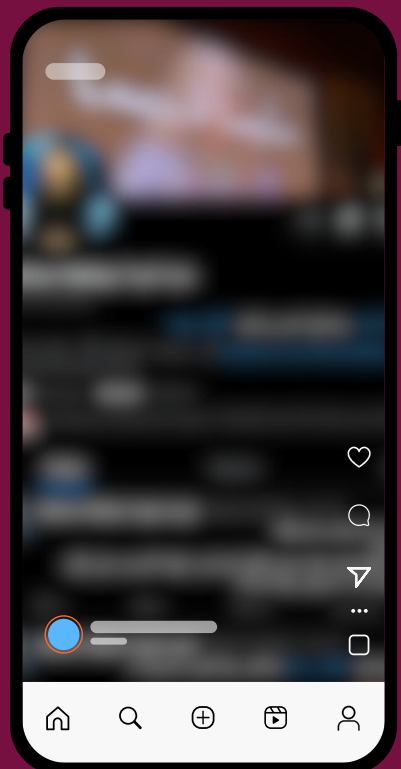
Exposure of Female Journalists to Cyber Violence

Sample of 21 Survey Responses.



A High Percentage of Journalists Are Targeted:

72% of the participants reported being exposed to cyber violence, highlighting the widespread nature of the phenomenon and its significant impact on women reporters. This percentage underscores the need to strengthen protection mechanisms on digital platforms.

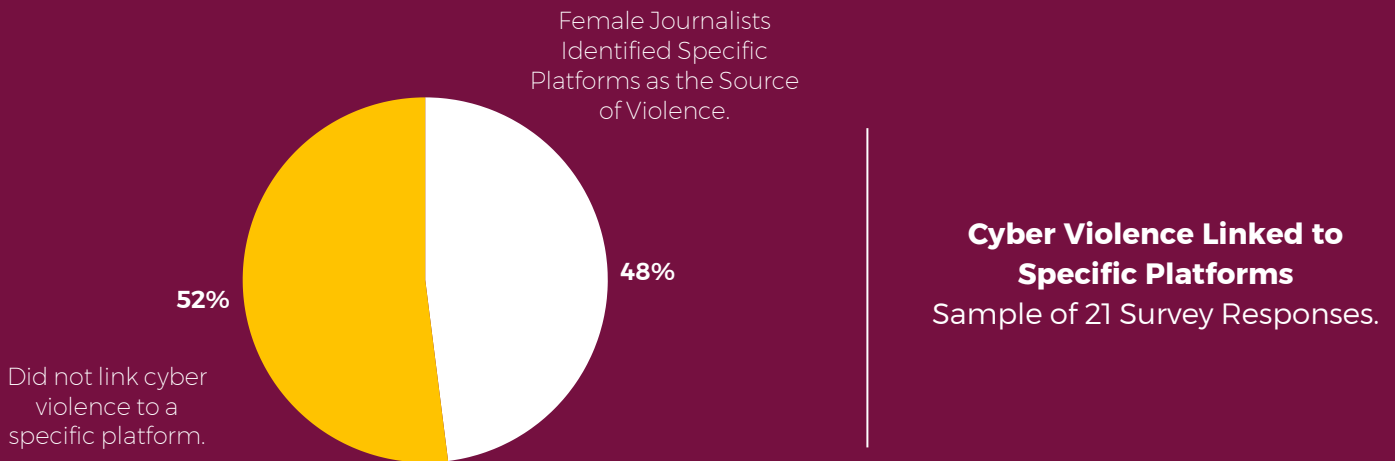


X

A post containing intimidation against journalist Halima Tabia was identified, attracting approximately 172 comments that included abuse and sexually violent content.

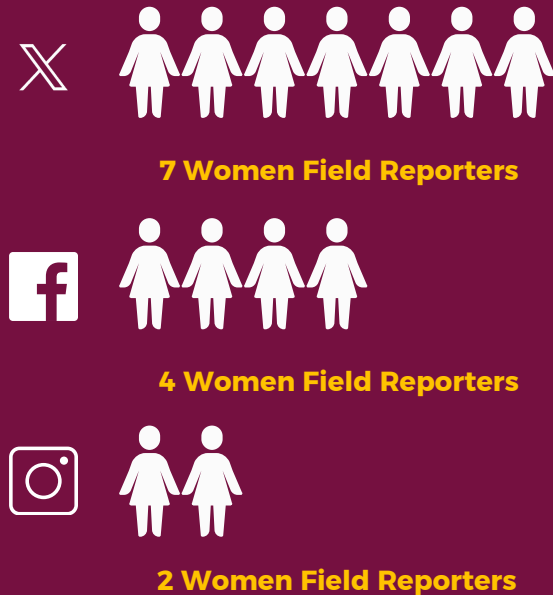
3. Specific Platforms as Primary Sources of Violence

Platforms Linked to Cyber Violence



Cyber Violence Linked to Specific Platforms

Sample of 21 Survey Responses.



X (formerly Twitter):

As a platform where much political discussion takes place, and where audience engagement is driven by hashtags, trends, and open-access content, it becomes a fertile ground for online attacks.

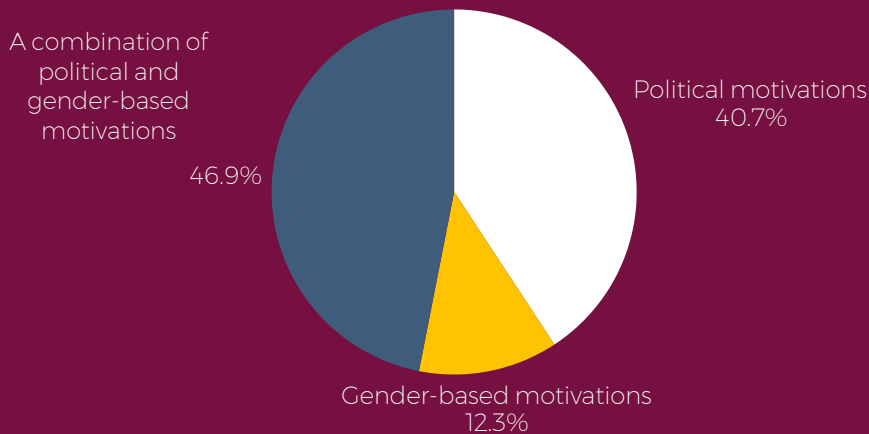
Facebook and Instagram:

Facebook and Instagram rank as the second and third significant sources of violence, possibly due to the open interaction feature in comments and posts, which allows perpetrators to express their offensive opinions easily.

No Link to a Specific Platform:

The fact that violence was not linked to a particular platform in 52% of cases indicates that the issue is not confined to a single platform but rather reflects a general user behavior across various platforms.

4. Motivations for Violence: Political and Gender-Based Motivations for Cyber Violence



Origins of Cyber Violence Faced by Female Journalists
Sample of 21 Survey Responses.

- **Most Common Political Motivations:**

33% of the cyber violence is attributed to political motivations, reflecting the sensitivity of the work of women reporters who operate in a politically tense environment. This type of violence reflects attempts to silence them or limit their influence in conveying the truth.

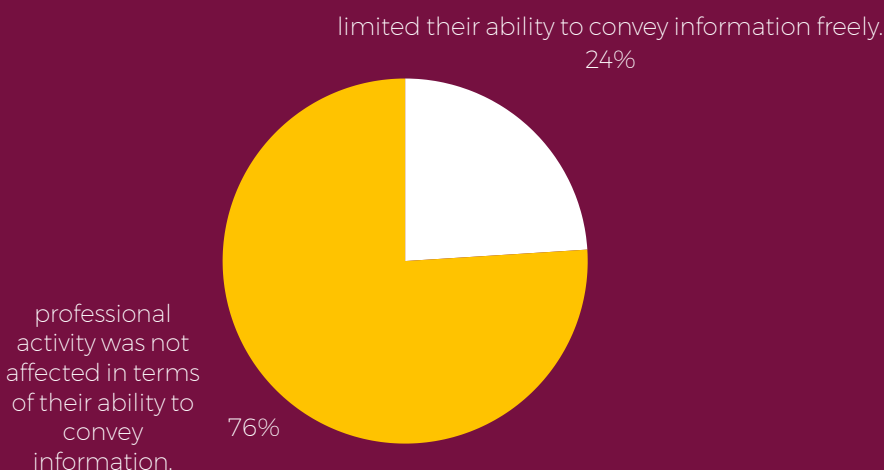
- **Gender-Based Violence:**

10% of the journalists indicated that the violence they faced stemmed from being targeted as women, highlighting gender-based violence as one of the main obstacles to achieving a safe digital environment for women.

- **Mixed Motivations:**

38% of women reporters experienced a combination of political and gender-based violence, suggesting the intersection of political issues with gender discrimination, making cyber violence more complex and impactful.

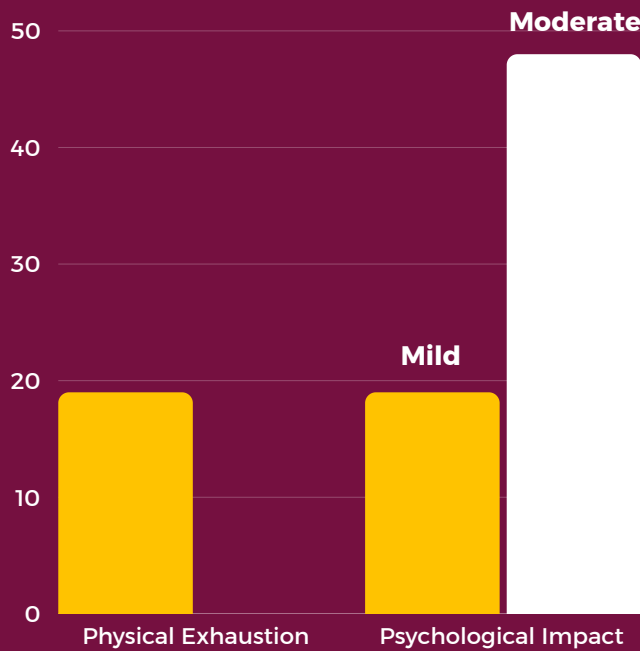
5. Impact on Professional Work and Mental Health



Cyber Violence and Its Impact on Professional Work
Sample of 21 Survey Responses.

- **Professional Impact:**

24% of the journalists stated that cyber violence restricted their freedom to convey information, indicating that the violence is not just personal abuse but extends to undermining media freedom.



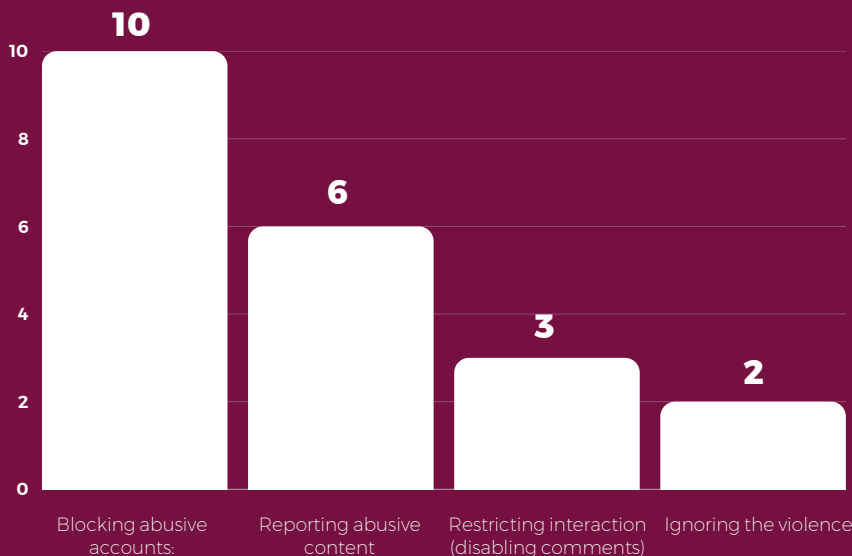
Cyber Violence and Its Physical and Psychological Impact
Sample of 21 Survey Responses.

- **Physical and Psychological Impact:**

The results showed that 67% of the journalists suffer from psychological effects ranging from mild to moderate, while 19% reported experiencing physical exhaustion. These figures confirm that cyber violence is not just viewed as a professional issue but a crisis affecting overall health.

6. Strategies for Dealing with Violence

Strategies for Dealing with Cyber Violence



Strategies for Dealing with Cyber Violence
Sample of 21 Survey Responses.

Individual Strategies:

- The results showed that ignoring the violence is the most common approach (95%), reflecting a lack of effective protective strategies and the journalists' sense of helplessness in addressing the issue.
- The use of blocking mechanisms was limited (48%), and reporting tools were used by only (14%), which could indicate a lack of trust in the effectiveness of these tools.

7. Lack of Awareness of Laws:

62%

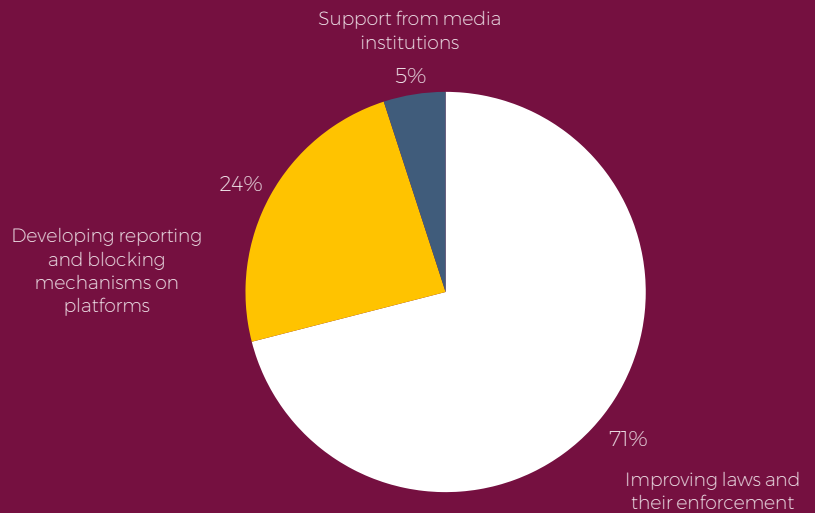
Awareness of Policies and Laws:

62% of the reporters were not aware of the laws and policies that could protect them from cyber violence.

8. Needs to Enhance Digital Safety

Needs to Enhance Digital Safety

Sample of 21 Survey Responses.



Improving Laws and Their Enforcement:

The majority (71%) considered updating and effectively enforcing laws as a key priority for enhancing digital safety.

Developing Reporting and Blocking Mechanisms on Platforms:

24% emphasized the importance of improving reporting and blocking mechanisms, highlighting the role of digital platforms in protecting users.

Support from Media Institutions:

Although only 5% indicated the importance of support from media institutions, this support is a crucial factor in enhancing journalists' sense of digital safety.

The results show that cyber violence against women reporters in Lebanon is an increasing threat that intersects with both political and gender dimensions. This violence impacts not only the mental and physical health of the journalists but also extends to their ability to perform their work freely and safely.

The current strategies for dealing with the violence, which mainly rely on ignoring or using basic mechanisms, are insufficient to tackle the problem. This calls for greater efforts to improve laws, develop protection mechanisms on platforms, provide legal awareness, and increase institutional and journalistic support.

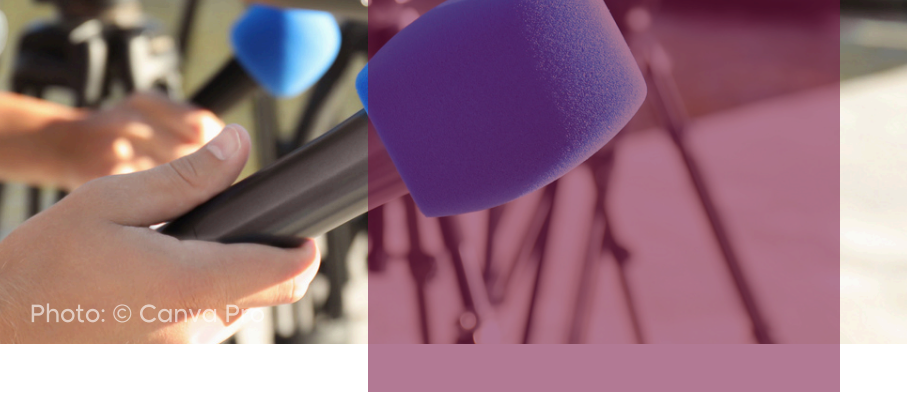


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Recommendations as Identified by Female Journalists in the Survey

1- Call for Improving Laws and Policies:

- Work on updating laws to address cyber violence, with a focus on integrating a gender perspective.
- Ensure the effective implementation of existing laws and hold perpetrators accountable.

2- Accountability for Social Media Platforms:

- Collaborate with platforms to develop more efficient mechanisms for reporting and blocking abusive accounts.
- Provide rapid response mechanisms for complaints from women reporters.

3- Support from Media Institutions:

- Encourage media institutions to implement internal policies that support women reporters facing cyber violence.
- Provide legal and psychological support services for journalists.

4 -Training and Awareness:

- Organize workshops on digital safety and preventive strategies for women reporters.
- Raise awareness about available laws and reporting mechanisms.

5- Building Support Networks:

- Establish support networks among women journalists to exchange experiences and strategies.
- Launch awareness campaigns to counter the stigma surrounding the discussion of cyber violence against women journalists.



Photo: © Canva Pro

2 | Case Study: Manifestations of Cyber Violence Against Women Reporters

Maharat Monitoring Unit has documented campaigns of violence against women journalists and reporters who were active on social media, as well as the responses of these journalists to the violence on these platforms. The violence displayed a consistent pattern that can be categorized into the following:

1- Campaigns of Treason Accusations and the Stigma of Collaboration:

- Several female reporters were subjected to campaigns accusing them of treason and collaborating with the Israeli enemy due to their journalistic work. These attacks persisted on social media to the extent that some reporters became constant targets of violence. Whenever the issue of collaboration was raised, their names were repeatedly mentioned, and they were blamed for the deaths of civilian victims.

2- Disinformation and Incitement to Hatred and Violence:

- The presence of women reporters in areas targeted by Israeli airstrikes was exploited to promote the idea that they had prior knowledge of the raids. This made them targets of cyber violence, intensifying the rhetoric directed at them. As a result, they faced physical harassment and had their camera equipment broken during field coverage. In some cases, they were even barred from entering certain areas.

3- Gender-Based Violence:

- Sexually abusive and provocative comments were posted on social media against some journalists, including calls for rape and sexually charged insults.

4- Intimidation and Incitement to Murder:

- Cyber violence escalated to the point of incitement to murder women reporters. In some cases, followers were encouraged to "spill the blood" of journalists due to their media work, further increasing the risk of real-life attacks against them.



Photo: © Canva Pro

Ways to Prevent and Deal with Cyber Violence by Women Reporters:

Responding to Campaigns of Violence:

1

Some women journalists dealt with cyber violence campaigns by directly responding to false accusations and disinformation, attempting to calm the audience and clarify the facts.

“ These campaigns make me feel confused. There is a constant need to justify and provide clarifications. ”

.....
Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence

Self-Censorship:

2

Due to the intensity of the media campaigns directed against them, some women journalists practiced self-censorship in their coverage, avoiding details that might raise further doubts about them.

“ Violent campaigns create a kind of pressure and make me reconsider expressing my opinion on certain topics. ”

.....
Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence

Restricting Comments:

3

Some women journalists used social media platform features to restrict the ability to comment on their posts in order to limit cyberattacks

“ I ignore the abuse, or work on limiting interactions (such as blocking or restricting users), delete, or avoid controversial posts. ”

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Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence



Photo: © Canva Pro

Ways to Prevent and Deal with Cyber Violence by Women Reporters:

Ignoring Comments:

4

Some women journalists used the strategy of ignoring comments as a way to deal with cyber violence, helping them reduce online abuse and focus on their journalistic work.

Cyber violence leads to anxiety and mental distraction, weakening my ability to focus on work. However, I ignore the comments to maintain my focus and continue my work effectively.

“

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Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence

Psychological Support:

5

It was notable that there were messages of support for the journalists who were exposed to cyber violence from their colleagues in the profession and followers. This helped alleviate the psychological impact of the cyber violence they experienced.

there is no doubt that cyber violence is disturbing and has a significant psychological impact, but the support of colleagues and family helps alleviate this effect.

“

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Response from a Journalist in Maharat's Survey on Female Journalists' Experiences with Cyber Violence

These experiences represent a significant model of cyber violence against women in journalism. They face multidimensional violence, ranging from accusations of treason and incitement to violence to digital defamation. It is crucial to provide preventive and protective measures, develop strategic ways to counter systematic violence campaigns, and create a supportive environment to ensure their continued work.

3 | Addressing Cyber Violence in Legislation: International Experiences and Comparison

In response to the increasing prevalence of cyber violence, especially against women and journalists, countries have begun developing legislation aimed at criminalizing this type of crime and protecting victims. These efforts ensure a balance between combating abuse and safeguarding fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression. International experiences reflect a variety of legal and legislative approaches to address this phenomenon, tailored to the cultural and social contexts of each country.

International Experiences in Countering Cyber Violence



At the Level of United Nations Bodies, Agencies, and Organizations

- International resolutions have considered countering violence directed against women as part of addressing all forms of discrimination against women.

The United Nations General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) on gender-based violence, issued by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), contributed to strengthening the conceptual and legislative framework for countering gender-based violence. The recommendation called for recognizing forms of digital violence as an extension of traditional gender-based violence, emphasizing the need for effective legal measures to protect women and girls from all forms of cyber abuse.

Additionally, the 2018 recommendations from the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, focused on cyber violence against women and girls in the online environment. These recommendations provided an international human rights perspective that contributes to guiding national policies. They highlighted the importance of addressing this type of violence within a comprehensive human rights framework, stressing the need to:

- **Developing Comprehensive National Legislation:** National legislation should align with international commitments and protect women from digital threats such as harassment, blackmail, and defamation.
- **Strengthening Partnerships with Technology Companies:** Collaborating with tech companies to ensure digital platforms comply with providing mechanisms for monitoring and removing abusive content and protecting women's privacy.
- **Incorporating Cyber Violence into National Human Rights Reports:** This ensures that progress in eliminating this type of violence is tracked and reported.

These frameworks emphasize the importance of combining legislative tools with practical protection mechanisms to create a safe and sustainable digital environment while ensuring these efforts align with international human rights standards.

International Experiences in Countering Cyber Violence



European Union:

The legal frameworks established by the European Union serve as an important reference in countering cyber violence against women journalists and activists, providing effective protection and support mechanisms. Some of the key frameworks include:

- **Victims' Rights Directive:** This directive ensures broad rights for victims, including legal and psychological support, and protects them from further assaults. This framework helps to build trust among women journalists and activists, enabling them to report cyber violence without fear of repercussions.
- **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR):** One of the strongest legal tools in the world for protecting personal data. It addresses the misuse of personal data, including sharing sensitive data without consent, which is a common form of cyber violence against women journalists. The regulation imposes strict penalties on violators, deterring harmful actors and enhancing digital safety.
- **EU Digital Safety Strategies:** These strategies include raising awareness about digital risks and providing tools for individuals and organizations to counter cyber violence. They also support training initiatives for women journalists and activists on how to secure their data and protect their privacy.

These frameworks represent a pioneering step in addressing cyber violence, offering an integrated approach that combines legal protection, psychological support, and digital privacy guarantees, making it a model to follow in the context of protecting women journalists and activists globally.

Experiences of Some Countries:

- Countries such as **France** and **Germany** focus on criminalizing hate speech online.



- The **United States** relies on state laws, in addition to federal laws such as cybercrime laws sanctioning blackmail, threats, and the sharing of personal information without consent. The Violence Against Women Act also provides specific support for women victims of cybercrimes, including harassment and blackmail.

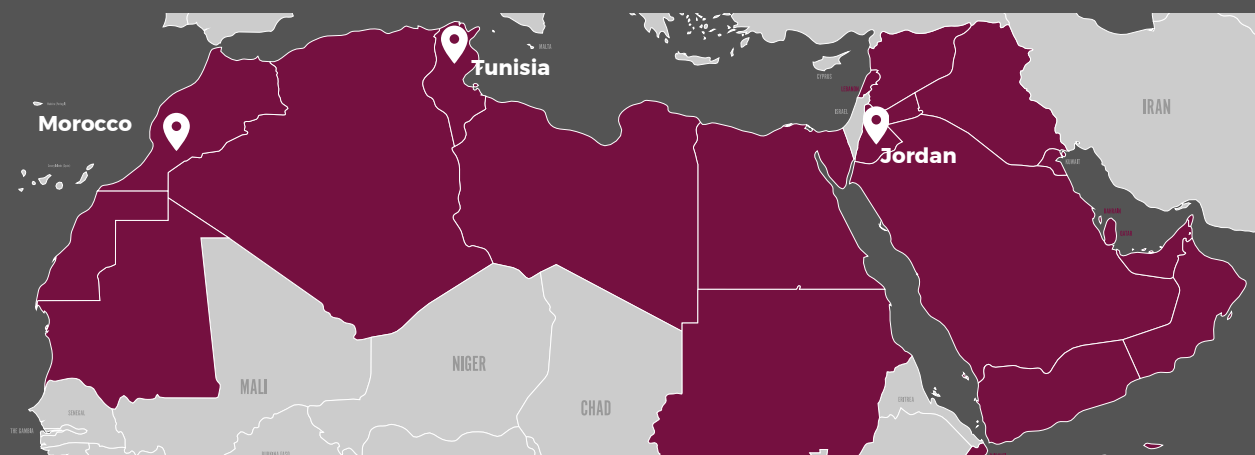


- In **Australia**, the eSafety Commissioner oversees the protection of individuals from cyber abuse, including issuing orders to remove harmful content.



Legislative Experiences in Arab Countries and Their Impact on Freedom of Expression

Several Arab countries have taken significant steps to adapt their criminal laws and enact new legislation related to cybercrimes and sexual harassment to combat violence against women and girls in the digital space. However, this approach raises concerns about freedom of expression, as many Arab countries have weak systems for protecting this right.



- **Tunisia:**

The Organic Law No. 58 of 2017 is one of the most advanced legislative frameworks in the Arab region for combating violence against women. It aims to prevent all forms of violence, prosecute and punish perpetrators, and ensure adequate protection for victims. Among its provisions, the law criminalizes harassment of women in "public spaces," demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing this issue. However, the use of broad terms such as "harassment" could lead to potential restrictions on certain forms of expression if not clearly defined.

- **Morocco:**

Morocco has made significant progress in this area with Law No. 103-13 on combating violence against women, which came into effect in 2018. The law imposes specific penalties on those found guilty of defamation or verbal abuse targeting women based on their gender, with fines reaching up to 120,000 Moroccan dirhams (approximately \$11,000 USD). However, the criminalization of defamation and verbal abuse could, at times, serve as a pretext to restrict legitimate criticism or suppress dissent under the guise of protecting women.

- **Specialized Agencies:**

Countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco have established specialized agencies to counter violence against women and girls, including cyber violence. These agencies aim to provide legal and psychological support for victims, raise awareness about the dangers of digital violence, and strengthen the role of institutions in protecting women and girls in the virtual world. Despite this, these agencies often operate in restrictive legislative and human rights environments, raising questions about their ability to balance protection with ensuring freedom of expression.



Photo: © Canva Pro

Challenges Associated with Freedom of Expression

Despite the importance of countering cyber violence, new legislations may be exploited in countries with restricted freedom of expression, where laws related to cybercrimes are sometimes used arbitrarily against journalists and activists, including women journalists and activists.

- **Weak Legal Protection:**

In many Arab countries, the legal framework safeguarding freedom of expression is insufficient, leaving cyber violence-related legislation open to abuse for suppressing critical viewpoints or discussions of sensitive topics.

- **Risk of Excessive Censorship:**

Vague and poorly defined laws could stifle open debate on the internet, leading to increased censorship and undermining digital freedoms.

Legislation related to cyber violence against women in Arab countries should include clear safeguards to prevent its misuse against freedom of expression. Efforts to protect women and girls should be balanced with a commitment to safeguarding other fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of speech and the right to privacy, in order to ensure a safe and free digital environment for everyone.



The Legal Framework for Cyber Violence Against Women in Lebanon, with a Focus on Protecting Women Journalists

1- Legal Framework for Cyber Violence

Despite legislative efforts in Lebanon to address cyber violence, the existing legal frameworks remain incomplete and ineffective in providing comprehensive protection for women, especially women journalists and activists who face specific challenges in the digital space.



Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Protection Law of 2018:

This law establishes general principles for the protection of personal data but does not include clear provisions to address cyber violence against women or provide support for victims. Additionally, data protection remains limited for both the public and private sectors, with the absence of strong mechanisms to ensure confidentiality of communications and the safety of women's data used for abuse.

Lebanese Penal Code of 1943 (Amended):

The penal code covers a range of crimes applicable in the digital space, such as threats, blackmail, defamation, and verbal abuse. However, these provisions often lack a precise definition of cyber violence and do not provide the necessary measures to address it.

Law on Criminalizing Sexual Harassment and Rehabilitation of Victims (2020):

This law allows women, including women journalists, to file lawsuits against cyber harassment if the behavior is proven to be:

- Repetitive.
- Sexual in nature, violating privacy or feelings.
- However, victims face challenges such as the lack of simplified legal pathways, lengthy procedures, and the potential exposure to discriminatory practices.



Photo © Getty Pro

2. Protecting Women Journalists in the Digital Space

Despite the importance of general legal provisions, women journalists face unique challenges, notably:



Threats and Blackmail: The Penal Code punishes cyber threats or blackmail, but weak enforcement mechanisms make deterrence limited.



Defamation and Abuse: Defamation is defined as any act that tarnishes a person’s honor, punishable by fines or imprisonment. However, women rarely file lawsuits in cases of cyber violence.

How do female journalists file a complaint based on cyber violence?

Characteristics of a Cyber Abuse Lawsuit from the Perspective of Violence Against Women:

1



A person accuses a woman activist in the public, civil, or journalistic field, such as accusing her of collaborating with the enemy.

2



A person directs an insult to a female activist that includes slander, cursing, and expressions that indicate contempt and humiliation, including sexual or gender-based expressions.

3



The lawsuit is filed personally against the perpetrator.

4



The lawsuit is submitted to the Judicial Public Prosecution and can be filed personally without the need for a lawyer’s power of attorney.

5



The case is referred to the Cybercrime bureau to listen to both parties. It may also be referred to another security agency, such as the Criminal Investigation Office, in cases of incitement to hatred and violence.

6



If the identity of the person committing the cyber abuse is unknown due to the use of a pseudonym or an anonymous account, the security agency must take all legal measures to uncover the identity of the person. If the identity cannot be determined due to technical difficulties related to the protections provided by social media platforms, the case remains under investigation or is dismissed for failure to identify the perpetrator.

7



The personnel of the agency in charge of the investigation prepare an official report and contact the Public Prosecutor to take the appropriate legal action.

8



If the Public Prosecutor finds that the crime requires further investigation, it will be referred to the Investigating Judge. If the investigation is deemed sufficient, it will be referred to the competent single judge in the case of a misdemeanor.

9



The woman bringing the case may appear as a complainant before the criminal judge without needing a lawyer.

10



The defendant convicted of defamation and public cyber abuse is punished with imprisonment for up to three months and a monetary fine, or one of the two penalties.

11



The judge may exempt one or both parties from the penalty if the defendant's actions were provoked by unjust conduct or if the defamation was mutual.

12



Pursuing legal action against anyone who engages in cyber abuse against women becomes a burden, especially for women active in the public sphere, human rights defenders, or journalists, as they may be daily targets of such crimes through both known and anonymous accounts.

The media institution can file a parallel lawsuit to the one filed by the journalist if the harassment she has been subjected to is related to her work at the institution and her affiliation with it.



3. Legal Obligations on Digital Platforms

- Lebanese law requires technical service providers to remove illegal content, but the penalties outlined (3-6 months imprisonment and fines of up to 50 million Lebanese pounds) are ineffective in compelling global companies to comply.

4. Weaknesses in the Lebanese Legal System

- **Lack of Comprehensive Protection:** There are no specialized legal provisions to protect women from all forms of cyber violence.
- **Traditional Judicial Procedures:** The judicial process is burdensome and not designed to meet the needs of women subjected to cyber violence, making it a limited deterrent.
- **Challenge of Anonymous Accounts:** Weak coordination with social media platforms makes it difficult to track abusive accounts, hindering justice for victims.

What actions should be taken regarding legislation and policies?

- **Establish specialized and comprehensive legislation to protect women from cyber violence, with a particular focus on women journalists.**
- **Develop simplified legal mechanisms for reporting and judicial follow-up, ensuring that victims are not subjected to discriminatory practices.**
- **Strengthen cooperation with technology companies to ensure the removal of abusive content and the identification of anonymous accounts involved in cybercrimes.**



Enhancing Local Legislation According to International Practices



A. The Need to Update Legislation:

- Provide a clear and comprehensive definition of gender-based cyber violence, including harassment, threats, blackmail, and defamation.
- Develop specific legislation to combat the misuse of technology to target women, considering modern forms of violence.

B. Developing Comprehensive Legislative Policies:

- Determine appropriate penalties: Ensure that penalties are proportional to the severity of the actions and their impact on the victim.
- Identify criminal acts: Include emerging actions such as:
 - Publishing personal information without consent.
 - Threatening with physical or sexual violence online.
 - Posting intimate content out of revenge.

C. Aligning Laws with Fundamental Rights:

- Ensure that laws are in compliance with freedom of opinion and expression, while also committing to protecting women from the psychological and social harms caused by cyber violence.

The Importance of Involving Key Stakeholders

Effectively addressing cyber violence requires collaboration among relevant parties:

- Legislators and policy makers: To ensure laws are updated in line with technological advancements.
- International and local organizations: To provide research, guidelines, and technical support.
- Social media platforms: To take responsibility for monitoring and quickly removing harmful content.



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4 Recommendations to Counter Cyber Violence Against Women in Lebanon

Cyber violence against women in Lebanon represents an increasing threat to human rights, taking multiple forms that impact their personal and professional lives. While there are some initiatives, the legal system still requires improvements in law enforcement and raising societal awareness to provide effective protection for women, especially activists in the public sphere, particularly journalists and political activists.

International Cooperation

Countering cyber violence against women requires enhancing comprehensive international cooperation, including:

- Developing local and international laws to counter cyber violence against women.
- Providing adequate support for victims and establishing effective mechanisms for reporting and investigation.
- Raising community awareness about the risks of cyber violence and how to protect women.

Local Legislation

- Developing Legislation for Cyber Violence: Improve reporting and protection mechanisms for women and update the legal framework to ensure a digital environment free from gender-based violence.
- Amending the Lebanese Penal Code: The legal texts dating back to 1943 need to be reviewed to keep pace with technological developments and cyber violence, such as threats and blackmail.
- Establishing Mechanisms to Implement Legal Frameworks: Laws like the sexual harassment law require effective institutional implementation, with the allocation of the necessary human and financial resources.

Legal and Executive Institutions

- Enhance Police and Judge Training: Ensure effective handling of cyber violence cases against women in courts of law.
- Support Relevant Institutions: Provide the necessary resources and conduct annual evaluations of gender-based violence risks and methods for mitigating them.

Digital Platforms

- Develop Mechanisms to Counter Cyber Violence: Focus on protecting women activists in the public sphere, such as journalists and human rights activists, from online attacks.
- Strengthen Collaboration with Civil Society: Build partnerships to develop policies that improve digital safety for women and encourage their participation in online public discussions.



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Civil Society Actions

- Awareness and Training on Protecting Women Online: Enhance awareness on how to protect women from harassment and abuse on social media, such as blocking and reporting abusive individuals.
- Launch Community Awareness Programs: Aim to educate the community about the risks of cyber violence and ways to protect against it, while supporting collaboration with NGOs to provide assistance to victims.
- Create Support and Guidance Platforms: These platforms should enable women exposed to cyber violence to receive immediate consultations and support, alongside awareness campaigns to help them combat such practices.
- Ongoing Documentation of Violence Against Women and Assisting in Developing Reporting Mechanisms

Hotline for Maharat to Report Cyber Violence Against Women Activists in the Public Sphere

Maharat and Madanyat launched an initiative to support women activists in the public sphere who face cyber violence on social media platforms. A hotline has been established for their assistance (+96176971616). Maharat works through its partnership with Meta (the owner of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram), using direct reporting methods provided by this partnership to address any content that violates the community policies of these platforms.



Maharat Foundation is part of the reporting and referral mechanism launched in collaboration with several organizations, including the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), the Lebanese Union for the Physically Disabled (LUPD), Transparency International Lebanon - No Corruption, Madanyat, Fifty-Fifty Foundation, and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University. This initiative aims to provide protection for women from political violence. Additionally, activists can use the "NAFAS" app, developed by KAFA Organization (enough) Violence & Exploitation, to report any violations they may encounter.

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