Supporting Safer
Digital Spaces

# MENA Region
# Highlights

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Text adapted from global Supporting Safer Digital Spaces: Highlights report.

Full global report available at:

www.cigionline.org/safer-internet

## About the Authors

MENA REGION HIGHLIGHTS

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# Context

Digital technologies are being used to inflict significant harm online, known as technology-facilitated violence (TFV). In particular, harm affects certain groups based on their gender, which is known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). This modern form of violence perpetuates inequality and has significant impacts on its targets, including silencing the voices of women and other gender minorities online.

Urgent attention is needed to address this form of violence and make digital spaces safer for all.

In our technologically saturated world, modern tools such as social media platforms, digital cameras and instant messaging have been weaponized and misused by abusers, causing significant systemic and individual harm. Women, girls and other gender minorities are disproportionately harmed by TFV and they are more likely to be targeted. Hate speech, image-based sexual abuse, threats, doxing and cyberstalking are some of the forms of TFV that have become commonplace in digital spaces. The harms caused by TFV impact people in their everyday digital and physical lives, which are inseparable. Those targeted by TFV often experience increased mental distress, heightened feelings of fear, economic losses, reduced ability to engage online safely and, in some cases, physical attacks, which sometimes even result in death.

**Modern tools such as social media platforms, digital cameras and instant messaging have been weaponized and misused by abusers, causing significant systemic and individual harms.**

# Project Overview

When the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) agreed to partner on the project Supporting a Safer Internet, there was an understanding that the research would be groundbreaking.

This is one of the first large-scale quantitative international surveys of women and gender minorities' experiences with online harms that predominantly focused on countries in the Global South. This project aimed to remedy that data gap and to provide concrete evidence of those experiences to both inform and, ultimately, influence policy.

An international survey was conducted by Ipsos on behalf of CIGI, through which data was collected from 18,149 people of all genders in 18 countries (Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Germany, India, Jordan, Kenya, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA], South Africa, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates [UAE] and the United States), although participants in Algeria, Jordan, the KSA, Tunisia and the UAE were not asked to report their sexual orientation or gender identity due to safety and legal limitations in those countries. For this reason, this version of the Highlights report has been developed with a specific focus on the data gathered from participants in those countries (the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] or Arab region).

There is a noticeable lack of academic and policy research investigating the experiences of Arab women and girls and the violence they experience in digital spaces, mostly because they are females, and as well as because of their activities in the public sphere in domains such as politics,

media, legal and business leadership. With support from IDRC, the SecDev Foundation embarked on a pioneering MENA-wide qualitative and quantitative research and advocacy project in 2021 to unpack the severity and complexity of TFV against women, explore potential solutions and create a community of practice of local experts in the region. Qualitative and contextual data from the SecDev Foundation has been utilized in this report to complement and provide a deeper understanding of the statistical data derived from this project.

It is worth noting that the majority of respondents from the UAE and the KSA were non-nationals, which should be taken into consideration when reading the country-specific findings from the quantitative survey.

Previous research has identified various methods of TFGBV. This prior research informed the types of harms surveyed for this study, which focused on the influence of gender on people's experiences with online harms. Additionally, this survey is limited to online gender-based violence (OGBV), rather than the broader TFGBV, which includes non-internet-connected digital technologies.

The following figure outlines the 13 forms of online harm selected for the survey.

# Forms of Online Harm

**1** Physically threatened online (e.g., a death threat, rape threat, threat of physical harm)

**2** Blackmailed online (e.g., someone threatening to post private information about them unless they did something in return, including sextortion)

**3** Monitored, tracked or spied on online (e.g., by GPS location, or someone keeping track of what they say or do online)

**4** Someone accessing devices or social media accounts belonging to them without permission

**5** Called discriminatory names or derogatory cultural terms (e.g., sexist or racist names)

**6** Personal nude or sexual images of them shared or shown to someone else or posted online without permission (non-consensual use of intimate images)

**7** Unwanted sexual images sent to them

**8** Having personal contact information or address posted online without permission (doxing)

**9** Lies posted online about them (defamation)

**10** Online impersonation (e.g., someone makes a fake account of them)

**11** Repeatedly contacted by someone they do not want to be contacted by

**12** Networked harassment (e.g., a group of people organized online attacks against them)

**13** Experienced harassment online because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, gender expression or other marginalizing factors (gendered harassment)

Data was collected from

# 18,149
people of all genders in

# 18
countries.



| | |
|---|---|
| Algeria | Germany |
| Argentina | India |
| Brazil | Jordan |
| Canada | Kenya |
| Chile | KSA |
| China | South Africa |
| Colombia | Tunisia |
| Ecuador | UAE |
| France | United States |

# 5,043

participants were, at the time of the survey, living in Algeria, Jordan, the KSA, Tunisia or the UAE. Forty-three percent of the MENA region respondents were women (2,165).

TUNISIA

JORDAN

ALGERIA

UAE

KSA

# Results

The data demonstrates the widespread nature of online harms and the greater negative impact of online harms on women and girls globally and in the MENA region.

- Almost 60 percent (59.7 percent) of all participants of all genders and sexual orientations had experienced at least one of the 13 forms of online harm surveyed. This percentage was higher in the MENA region, where almost 67 percent (66.7 percent) of all participants had experienced at least one of the 13 forms of online harm surveyed.

- However, when it came to the impact, women were more likely to report negative impacts from online victimization than men.

- The global Ipsos survey data shows almost half (49.7 percent) of the perpetrators were classified as male by the participants compared to 18.9 percent of the perpetrators who were classified as women.

- Globally and in the MENA region, women were much more likely to rate the various forms of online harm as harmful compared to men.

The data also emphasized the serious implications for participants' mental health.

- At the global level, around one-third (29.4 percent) of women reported very negative impacts on their mental health compared to 21.8 percent of men.

- In the MENA countries, 39.9 percent of women reported very negative impacts on their mental health compared to 25.5 percent of men.

**Globally and in the MENA region, women were much more likely to report a negative impact from online harms compared to men.**

At the global level, almost

# 60%

of participants of all genders have experienced at least one of the 13 forms of online harm surveyed.

Looking at the MENA region only, this percentage rose to

# 66.7%

A higher proportion of women globally reported that being targeted online very negatively impacted their desire to live. In the MENA region, the percentages are much higher.

Global women  15.8%

MENA women  24.0%

Global men  13.6%

MENA men  17.8%

" I was subjected to insults, threats and obscene words from people in other Arab countries, not just from Jordan. People started contacting my family and were heaping insults and threats to me and my children.

—a female journalist from Jordan, quoted in Jordanian Network to Combat Digital Violence Against Female Journalists (2022)

A visibly higher percentage of respondents living in the five MENA countries viewed online violence as a very big problem when it came to them personally compared to the perception of the problem for others. Online violence is also perceived to be a very big problem for women more than for men across the board.

At the global level, a significantly higher proportion of participants recognized that OGBV was a serious issue for women compared to men. When participants were asked who OGBV was a big problem for:

• 44.3 percent reported that it was a very big problem for women; and

• 22.7 percent reported that it was a very big problem for men.

Survey results from the MENA countries only show slightly higher percentages:

• 46.36 percent reported that it was a very big problem for women; and

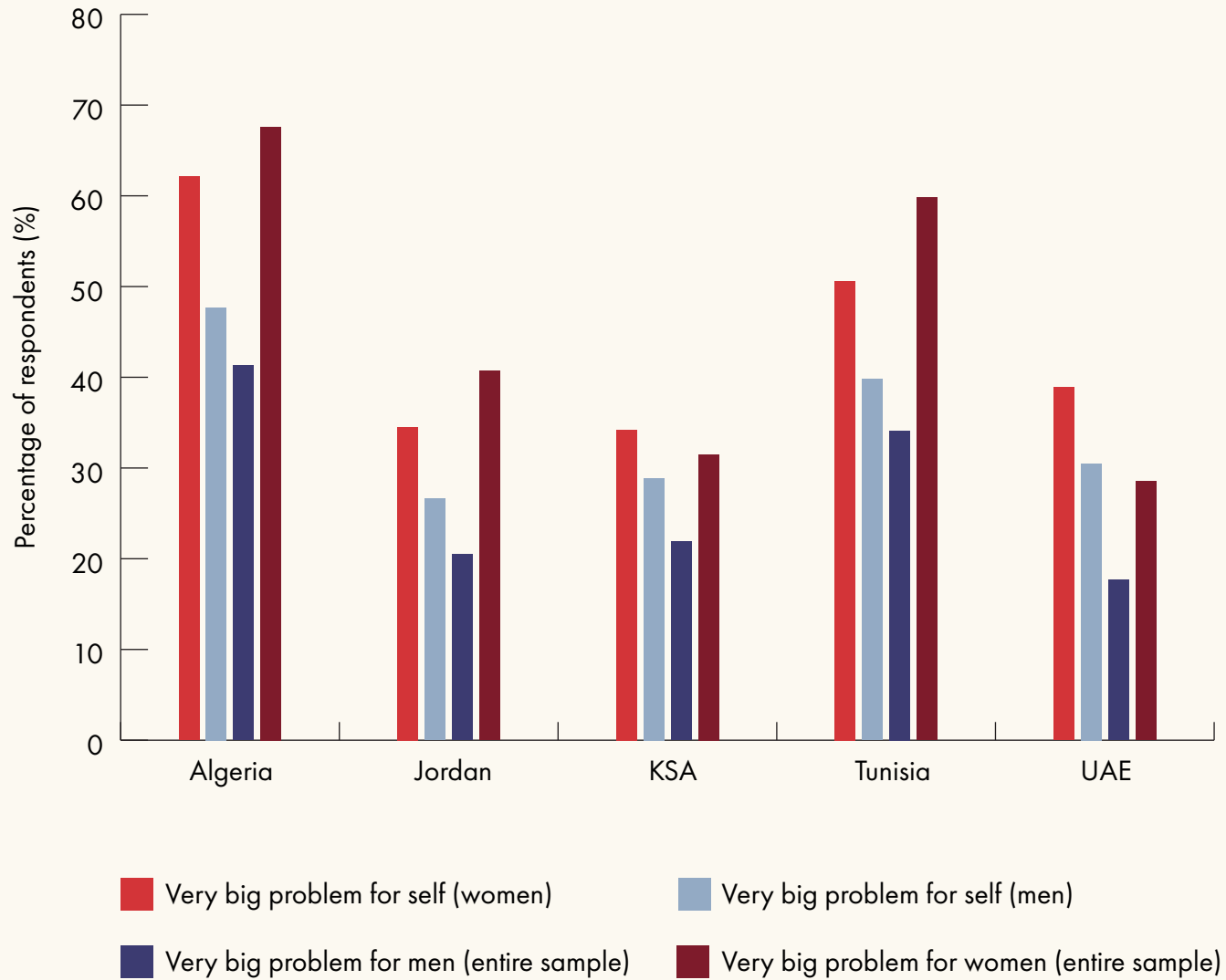• 27.42 percent reported that it was a very big problem for men.

It was interesting to note from the SecDev research in Jordan that educated women identified TFGBV as a very big problem more than women with lower education (Alsrayra 2022). The rationale is that they recognized what was happening to them and were able to report on it more than women with less education who may have normalized the violence they faced, or they did not realize that what they were facing was a form of violence in the first place.

Another finding from the MENA countries showed that when a country has a strong digital security system, digital violence is less prevalent. Results from SecDev research in Saudi Arabia and the UAE show that culprits from within the country hesitate before attacking others online as they know that their every move online is monitored. UAE and KSA studies on digital violence against women show that there are several apps, such as the Alameen app in the UAE[1] and the Kollona Amn app[2] in KSA, that are available for citizens and residents to report any suspicious digital activities or harmful behaviour and that due to their strict digital security policies, the Gulf country states take these matters very seriously and perpetrators can be heavily fined and even jailed.[3]

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1  See https://alameen.gov.ae/.

2  See https://x.com/kamnapp?lang=en.

3  See Salam@ Research Team (2023) and Al-Sakkaf and Mohammed (2024).

# How Big a Problem Is OGBV in Your Country?



Legend:
- Very big problem for self (women)
- Very big problem for self (men)
- Very big problem for men (entire sample)
- Very big problem for women (entire sample)
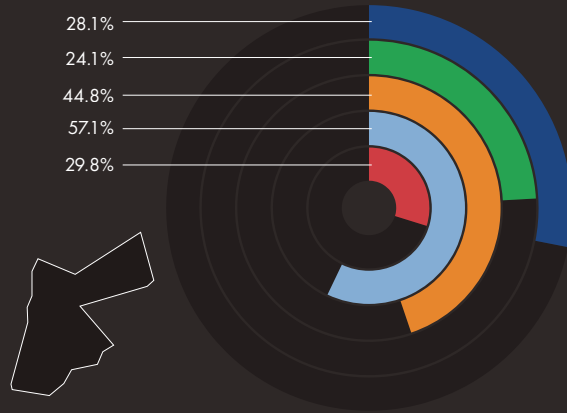
# Women's Experiences of Harm

## ALGERIA

22.2%
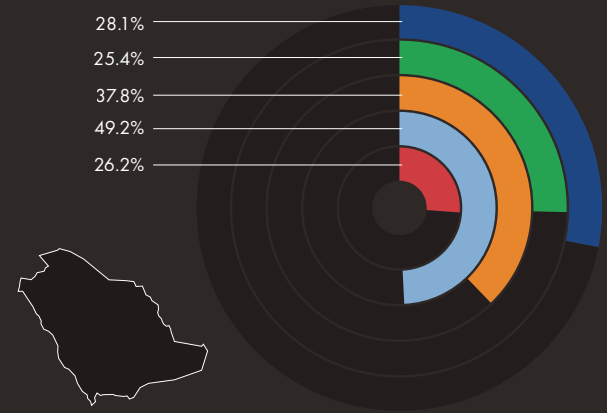21.9%
32.5%
40.6%
18.3%
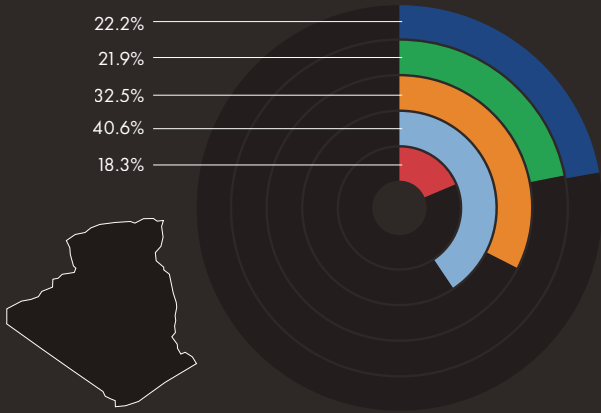
## JORDAN

28.1%
24.1%
44.8%
57.1%
29.8%

## KSA

28.1%
25.4%
37.8%
49.2%
26.2%

## TUNISIA

23.1%
18.6%
27.6%
43.9%
21.8%
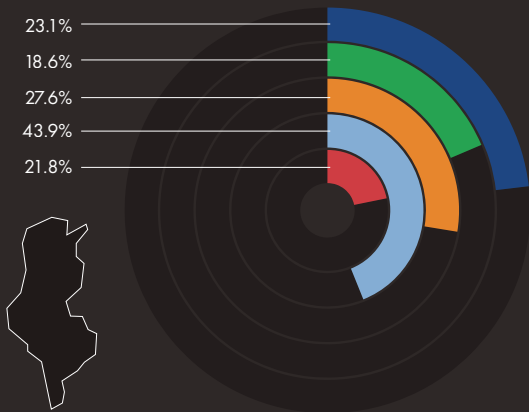
## UAE

24.7%
18.7%
29.3%
43.4 %
25.3%
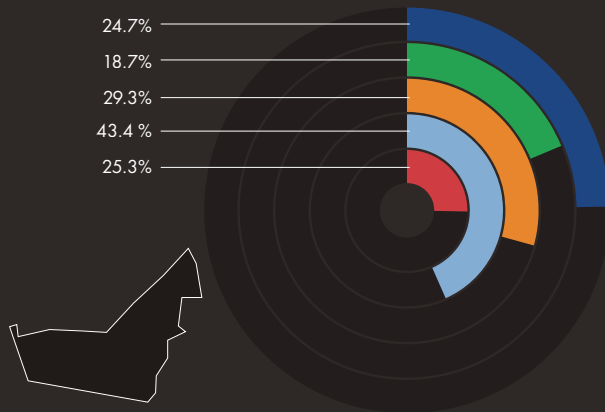
Hacking

Discriminatory names

Unwanted sexual images

Repeatedly contacted

Harassment because of gender, race, etc.

# Impact of Harm on Personal Life



| Category | Men | Women |
|---|---|---|
| Ability to engage freely online | ~23.5 | ~29.5 |
| Ability to focus | ~22 | ~28.5 |
| Close relationships | ~23.5 | ~26.5 |
| Desire to live | ~18 | ~24 |
| Freedom to express political or personal views | ~24.5 | ~28 |
| Mental health | ~25.5 | ~40 |
| Employment | ~20.5 | ~20 |
| Personal reputation | ~27 | ~31.5 |
| Physical safety | ~19 | ~22 |
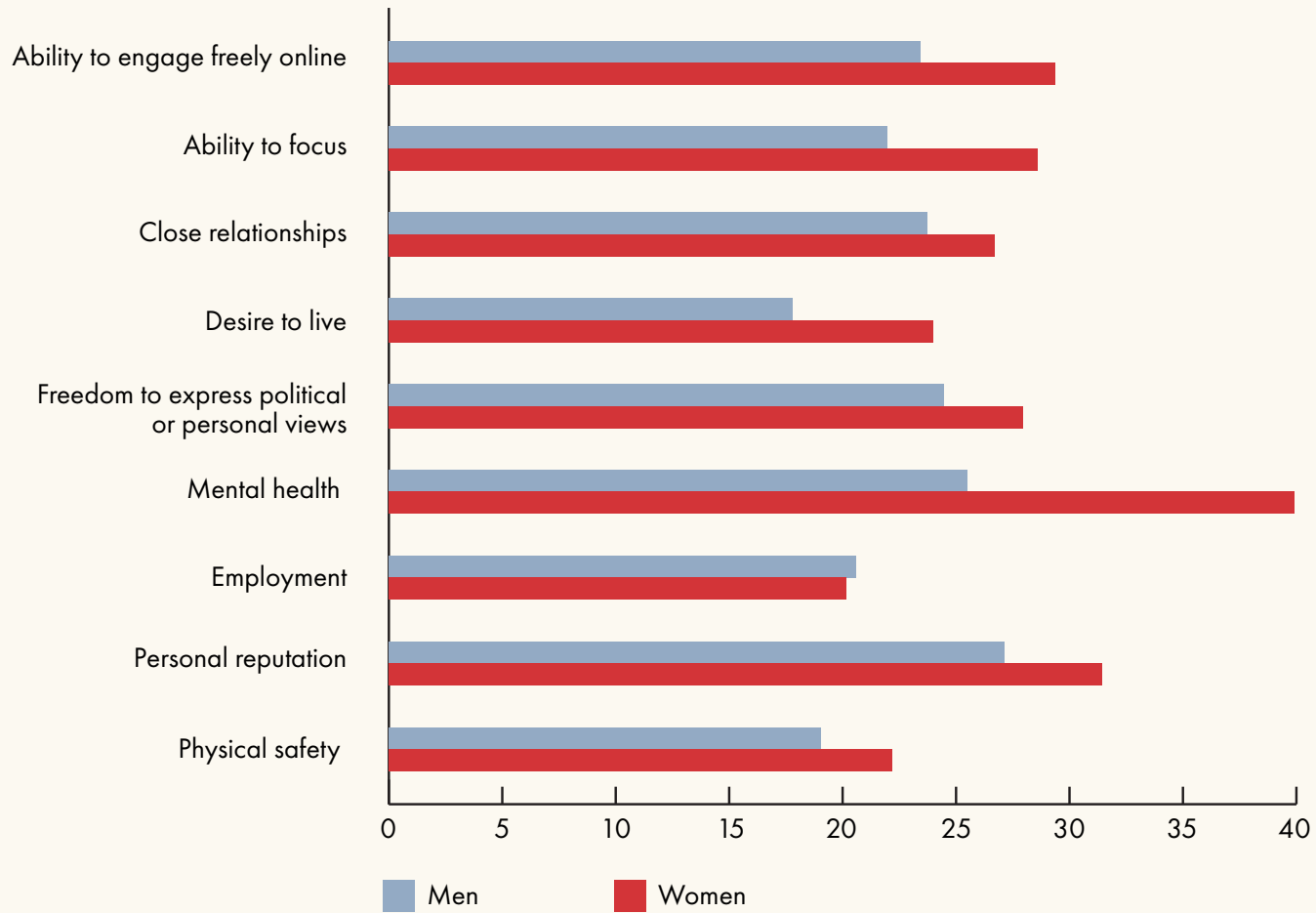
*Note:* Averages for the five MENA countries; percentage who reported it having a very negative impact.

Findings from SecDev's qualitative research on TFGBV in Algeria showed that sexual harassment and blackmail (83 percent) was the most common type of online harm women experienced, particularly in regards to demanding sexual favours, followed by insults and harassment (60 percent) (Hamadouche and Kessai 2022, 6).

Female activists in Tunisia have highlighted the consequences of digital violence. At the personal level, this includes threatening messages and photoshopped photos, memes and comments that intentionally violate women's dignity, cause stress and have a psychological impact on female activists and their family members (Youssef and Garbouj 2021).

## Ipsos survey participants showed an awareness of the disproportionate challenges that women and girls face in digital spaces.

The Algeria qualitative study referenced above also found that women were severely affected by the violence they faced online, to the extent that they became depressed, isolated, changed their behaviour online and offline and generally became more fearful (Hamadouche and Kessai 2022, 10).

## Gender differences were also apparent in who perpetrated the various forms of online harm.

The data from the global survey showed that men's behaviour in digital spaces contributes to much of the most harmful forms of online harm, including OGBV. A

high proportion of participants reported that men were the perpetrators of the most serious incidents of online harm they experienced:

- At the global level, close to half of all participants (49.7 percent) — the highest proportion of all categories — reported that a man perpetrated the most serious digital attack they personally experienced. In the MENA countries, a slightly lower percentage of respondents reported that a man was behind the digital attack (46.7 percent).

- More than half of women (57.7 percent) at the global level reported that it was a man who targeted them, compared to 42.9 percent of men. In the five MENA countries surveyed, the percentage was slightly lower: 54.6 percent of women said they were targeted by a man, compared to 41.0 percent of men.

- Almost one-quarter of participants globally (24.8 percent) could not identify the gender of the person (for example, when the person used an anonymous user profile that did not indicate their gender). MENA data shows a slightly higher percentage: 29.6 percent of participants living in the region could not identify the gender of the perpetrator.

- A smaller percentage, 18.9 percent, of participants globally reported that a woman was the person who targeted them. MENA data also show a smaller percentage (15.5 percent) of attackers as being women.

# Data showed that men's behaviour in digital spaces contributes to much of the most harmful forms of online harm.

SecDev's qualitative research of the region agrees with this finding indicating that most of the offenders are male. The dominant patriarchal thinking that denies women their rights and freedoms to express themselves was identified as the root cause of digital violence against women in the Arab world. Additionally, in some contexts socio-economic factors prioritize men's education over women and hence contribute to their more advanced use of digital communication technology compared to women, who consequently become vulnerable because of lack of knowledge.

## The identity of an individual played an important role in why they were targeted.

Of the most serious incidents of online harm experienced, many participants reported that they were targeted because of their gender identity, i.e., being women compared to being men:

- At the global level, women (32.5 percent) were more likely to report they were targeted because of their gender identity than men (16.9 percent). In MENA countries, this number was much higher: 39.8 percent of women reported that they were targeted because of their gender compared to 18.0 percent of men.

The issue of intersectionality was very evident from the qualitative data: women who are considered activists, feminists or political leaders faced twice as many attacks that transfer from their digital spheres into their physical worlds. The intersection of gender and occupation for activists and journalists plays a large role in the severity of attacks faced by women in the MENA region as they are seen as challenging the social gender norms and authority. Women who are considered activists, feminists or political leaders, for example, are even more likely to experience TFGBV.

One of the women interviewed in the SecDev study, a 34-year-old Algerian female activist, narrated an attack she received on Facebook because of her political activities. She explained that the attacker said: "It's not just 'you're an enemy of the country,' it's 'you're a whore AND an enemy of the country'" (quoted in Hamadouche and Kessai 2022, 13).

At the global level, the Ipsos survey data showed that participants often did not speak to others about experiencing online harms and had difficulties accessing effective support and resources, with 59.0 percent saying that they did not reach out to anyone.

However, of those who did in the five Arab countries surveyed, they reached out mostly to friends (21.0 percent) followed by family (14.1 percent), police (8.8 percent), their spouse (7.9 percent), an online platform (6.9 percent), government services (4.5 percent), a lawyer (4.3 percent), a helpline (3.8 percent) or a counsellor/therapist/mental health worker (3.2 percent).

The qualitative data from Jordan showed that women's first response when faced with violence online is to report to the platforms. Around half of the surveyed and interviewed women in Jordan said they used the reporting tools on the platforms, although they were not sure whether they would be effective.

A large number of participants globally did not speak to anyone about their experience. Almost 59 percent of the participants who had experienced a serious incident of online harm in the five Arab countries surveyed did not reach out to anyone for help. Of those who did reach out for help, few formal mechanisms were rated as "very effective," showing that there is a long way to go in creating and improving support for victims/survivors of online harms.

In the MENA region, in response to the question "How effective were the people or organizations you contacted in helping you with the incident?" in the quantitative survey, 58 percent of women who reached out to their spouse after experiencing an incident of OGBV found their support to be very effective. For the women who reached out to family, 52 percent found their support to be very effective.

Qualitative data findings from the MENA countries show that there is a positive correlation between the severity of violence and the reaction. If the harm extended to their family or reputation, women were more likely to report it or take more serious measures, such as reporting to the police or even confronting the attacker; in other circumstances, they were more likely to not take any further measures.

**Almost 59 percent of the participants who had experienced a serious incident of online harm in the five Arab countries surveyed did not reach out to anyone for help.**

# Effectiveness of Resources
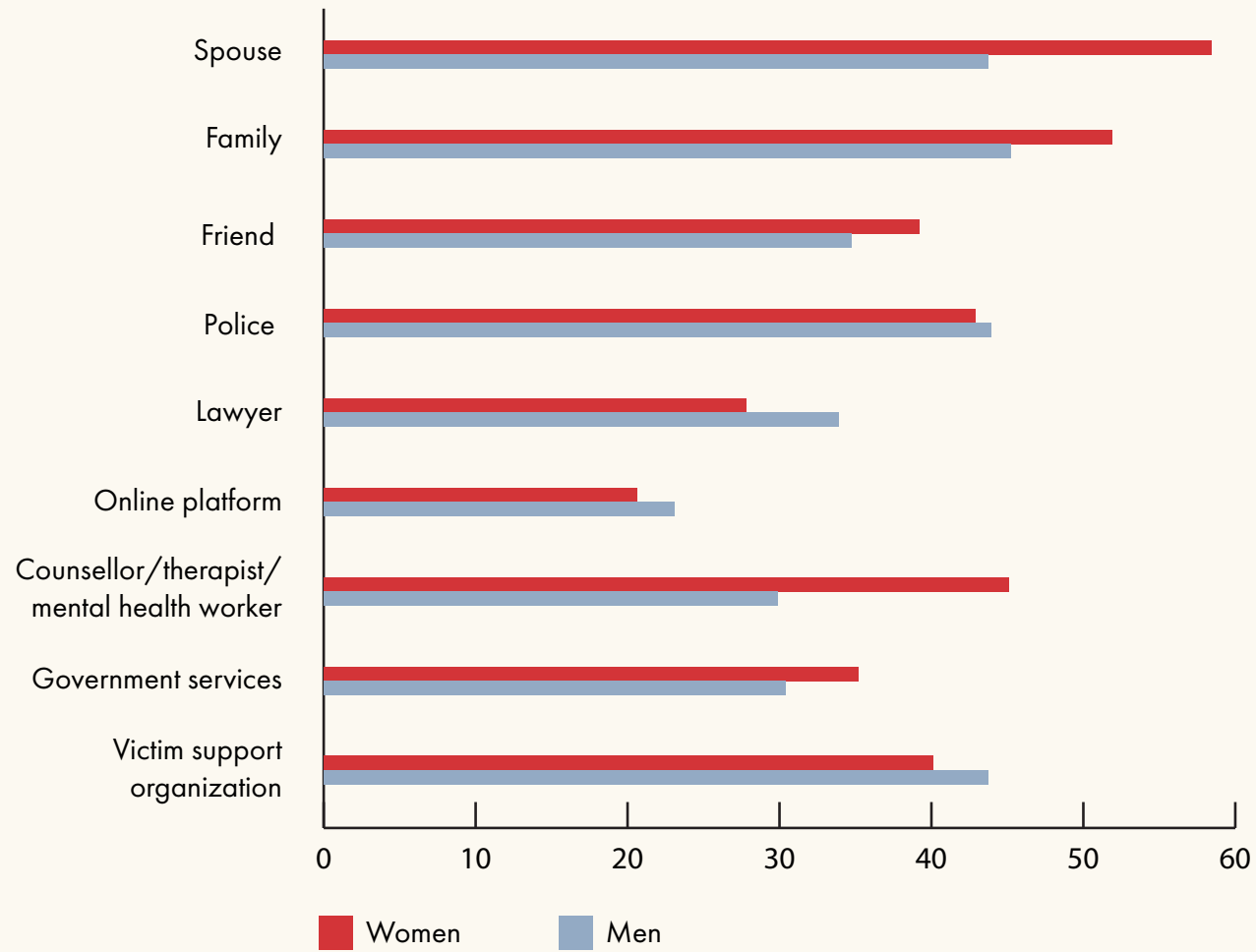


*Note:* Averages for the five MENA countries; percentage who reported support was very effective.

Interviews from the qualitative research in Tunisia on TFGBV show that feminists and activists create support groups for each other as a form of solidarity beyond the personal support systems each individual may have. A female politician stated, "[TFGBV] will not stop except with more feminist involvement in public affairs. The more women engage in political activity, the more their existence is normalized. In addition, the circle of societal acceptance will expand, the family pressures on the hesitant women will ease, and the level of violence against them will decrease" (quoted in Youssef and Garbouj 2021).

The need for support is particularly relevant in the Global South, where there are often fewer laws related to TFV in place, there may be challenges with the rule of law and there are fewer resources available for victims/survivors of TFV.

Among the most serious incidents of online harm:

- Almost 40 percent (39.6 percent) of the participants who had experienced a serious incident of online harm did not reach out to the mentioned services for help, not even friends or family. In the MENA region, this number is even higher. Nearly 60 percent (58.98 percent) of respondents reported that they did not reach out to any of the support systems mentioned in the survey.

- Very few (10.1 percent or less) sought formal support from online platforms (i.e., social media companies), government services, the police or civil society organizations. MENA data is even lower: only 6.9 percent sought support from online platforms.

A Saudi woman victim of TFGBV shared her experience: "I was stalked online and intimidated, so I decided to delete all my social media accounts except WhatsApp because I needed to stay connected with those I trust" (quoted in Salam@ Research Team 2023).

The data demonstrates that online harms are a rampant and serious issue that needs more attention, and that particular attention must be paid to the experiences of women, who are more significantly impacted by online harms.

Furthermore, participants identified police (23.0 percent), governments (19.4 percent) and policy makers (17.8 percent) as the organizations with the most responsibility to address OGBV, demonstrating that there is a desire for legal and governmental intervention into these issues.

In terms of the MENA data, 31.4 percent considered the police as most responsible for addressing OGBV, followed by governments at 18.7 percent, law/policy makers at 14.2 percent, and then social media companies at 13.8 percent. This was followed by schools/universities at 10.61 percent and other internet users/community members at 8.46 percent. Civil society organizations/non-government organizations came last at 2.88 percent.

# Recommendations

Specific selected recommendations, drawn from the project's special report, *Supporting Safer Digital Spaces,* are targeted toward governments, technology companies and civil society organizations, researchers, academics and think tanks. For all of these recommendations, stakeholders should take a human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric and intersectional feminist approach. Recommendations from the MENA region agree with the Ipsos global survey recommendations that follow.

## Governments

- When addressing TFV through laws, policies and resource distribution, engage with specialists in TFV, including civil society organizations, victims/survivors and academics who specialize in working with equity-seeking groups impacted by TFV to ensure the approaches and remedies governments propose fully address the real needs of those who have been harmed by TFV. Ensure that there are independent civil society organizations that are properly resourced to provide direct supports to victims/survivors of TFV.

- Take a clear public stance against TFV, in particular, forms that are disproportionately harmful to equity-seeking groups, such as women, girls and other minorities, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and members of racial, ethnic and religious groups who are discriminated against.

- Ensure concepts of freedom of expression, agency, and privacy rights use a human rights-

based approach. Take into consideration the silencing effect of TFV and the rights of equity-seeking groups to express themselves safely and authentically in digital spaces.

- Review existing laws that could apply to TFV to ensure that the language of those laws is able to capture TFV. Avoid an overreliance on criminal law solutions and ensure that there are non-criminal legal options available to victims/survivors, such as civil laws, privacy/data protection laws, human rights laws, administrative options or government-funded community-based solutions, that address TFV.

- Provide adequate and appropriate training to all actors in the justice system — from police to judges — to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to properly address TFV using a human rights-based approach, including knowledge on various technologies, digital evidence, human rights, racial bias, and gender-based violence.

## Technology Companies

- Avoid business practices that prioritize content views and user engagement over ensuring platforms and products are compliant with human rights and safe for users.

- Continue to develop and improve technical tools that users can use to protect themselves from TFV and provide clear information on how to use them. Provide adequate investment in these tools and education. Ensure that any algorithmic tools used do not amplify discriminatory content or discriminate against equity-seeking groups.

- Invest in local language (Arabic) artificial intelligence and algorithms that can pick up digital violence and hate speech and create close partnerships with developers in the region to advance such technology.

- Ensure that content moderation policies effectively address TFV using a human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric and intersectional feminist approach.

- Meaningfully engage with civil society organizations, researchers and academics with expertise on TFV, as well as victims/survivors, to improve policies and responses to TFV. Ensure that content moderation policies are transparent and easy to use. Rules should be clear, and users should be able to determine what content is harmful according to those companies' policies. This should include clear appeal processes to challenge decisions.

- Work collaboratively with civil society organizations that support victims/survivors of TFV to help facilitate fast-track channels related to incidents of TFV reported to those organizations.

**Ensure that content moderation policies are transparent and easy to use.**

## Civil Society Organizations, Researchers, Academics and Think Tanks

- Engage with community members and victims/survivors to create culturally relevant education campaigns and supports with a human rights focus aimed at preventing and addressing TFV, including the root causes of TFV entrenched in cultural and institutional biases against minorities.

- Develop and expand on human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric, and intersectional feminist research and supports. Provide information on best practices for staying safe in digital spaces, and where to report and how best to manage incidents of TFV.

- Prioritize research agendas that examine the impact of TFV on equity-seeking groups, as well as the effectiveness of educational campaigns, policies, regulations, laws and supports available to victims/survivors of TFV.

- Work with governments and technology companies to develop policies, regulations and laws to address TFV, but also hold governments, technology companies and other stakeholders accountable for promises and actions to end TFV and mobilize actions where necessary.

- Participate in global meetings with multilaterals and the private sector to push the agenda to end TFV and business models that benefit from or fail to address TFV and develop networks with other civil society organizations and academics to share research and support a global effort to end TFV.

**Prioritize research agendas that examine the impact of TFV on equity-seeking groups.**

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## Centre for International Governance Innovation