



ALGORITHMS OF VIOLENCE

UNCOVERING PATTERNS
OF TECHNOLOGY FACILITATED
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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Introduction

The internet is an essential space for queer and transgender womn human rights defenders, as it serves as a means of communication with their target audience, enables interaction with diverse groups for the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and facilitates engagement in the public sphere. It also acts as a tool to raise awareness on womn’s issues, and the LBTQIA+ community, providing a platform for exercising their right to freedom of expression. The 2021/2022 Human Development Report noted that digital technologies are a double-edged sword; they expand opportunities for freedom of expression and information sharing in ways previously unimaginable, but they also increase risks and threats to womn and womn’s human rights defenders (WHRDs). According to a 2023 report by Irene Khan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the acts of threat, intimidation, and harm against WHRDs and individuals with non-normative gender identities have increased, aiming to silence their voices in digital spaces. Additionally, in her 2021 report to the 38th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), Khan wrote:

“In the digital age, the internet has become a new battleground in the fight for women’s rights, increasing opportunities for women to express themselves, but also amplifying the potential for suppression of women.”

Due to the ease of access and dissemination of content in digital spaces, the social, economic, cultural, and political structures, along with patriarchal and gender-based discriminatory norms, are reproduced and amplified, taking on new forms in the digital context. New types of violence have emerged in online environments, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the consequences of actions that originate in digital spaces and those that occur offline, and vice versa. And with the overlapping factors shaping gender-based violence online and offline, womn and LBTQIA+ activists who challenge patriarchal systems, stereotypes, and hegemonic models are particularly vulnerable to digital violence.

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1. Our use of the word “womn,” with an asterisk replacing part of the conventional spelling, is a political choice, aimed at challenging and redefining traditional understandings of who is included in the category of womn, and breaking the connection between the word “women” and patriarchal systems that subordinate or define women in relation to men (wo-men). Other feminist variations include: womxn, womyn, and wom_n. By inserting the asterisk, we aim to signal the inclusion of all womn, including lesbians, bisexuals, transgender women, and non-binary individuals.
 2. The LBTQIA+ community refers to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual individuals, and others. It is a collective term that encompasses shared cultures, social and political movements, and supportive organizations for people with non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities, or expressions.
 3. As previously defined, the asterisk is used to emphasize the inclusion of all womn activists working to advance and protect womn’s rights.
 4. Human Development Report 2021/2022, “Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives,” United Nations Development Programme. Available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22arpdf.pdf>
 5. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, UN, A/76/258, July 2021 – Paragraph 4. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/212/14/PDF/N2121214.pdf?OpenElement>

In 2018, Urgent Action Fund-Africa collaborated with women's human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Egypt and Tunisia to explore and understand gender-based violence in digital spaces. The research results were presented at a meeting in Casablanca, Morocco, in June 2019. It revealed that digital violence had significantly impacted WHRDs in Egypt and Tunisia due to the lack of a feminist lens that highlights the harms they face online and their limited ability to influence internet governance and regulatory strategies. As a result, one of the strongest recommendations from the WHRDs was to learn more about the experiences of queer and transgender activists in North Africa and to develop a digital safety guide tailored to them as the primary audience. This recommendation and the need it addresses represent the foundation of this research.

This research project aims to understand the current landscape and shed light on the experiences of queer and transgender WHRDs in relation to digital violence, how they have navigated and responded to it, the impact of COVID-19 on patterns of digital violence, and how it influenced queer organizing and activism in North Africa. The project also seeks to identify the most urgent needs and priorities of WHRDs in order to support them in combating the violence they face in the digital sphere.

Methodology

This research is based on in-depth interviews exploring experiences of digital violence with 20 queer and transgender women activists from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya; five WHRDs from each country. The interviews were conducted between June and August 2023, after obtaining the participants' informed consent. The interviews were transcribed and then shared with the participants for their confirmation and approval, to ensure information accuracy. Each interview spanned one to two hours, and pseudonyms were used to protect the safety and privacy of the WHRDs. In addition to interviews, the research involved a review of feminist literature on digital violence and its impact on activism and the wellbeing of defenders. Since the report also focuses on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on queer activism in North Africa and the ways in which defenders increasingly relied on digital platforms to sustain their work, we reviewed relevant reports on the pandemic's influence on activism and WHRDs' wellbeing in digital spaces.

Profiles of Participant Womn's Human Rights Defenders

The use of the asterisk (*) below denotes the use of pseudonyms to refer to the WHRDs to protect their identities.

Interviews were conducted with the following five WHRDs from Egypt:

1. **Hala***, an activist working to combat violence against womn of all gender identities and sexual orientations.
2. **Somaya***, an activist working to combat violence against womn of all gender identities and sexual orientations.
3. **Donia***, a queer feminist activist living in exile.
4. **Sally***, a transgender activist living in exile and a writer focusing on LBTQIA+ issues, womn's rights, and gender-nonconforming individuals.
5. **Faten***, a queer feminist activist who advocates for feminist issues through visual art.

Interviews were also conducted with the following five WHRDs from Tunisia:

1. **Haidy***, an activist providing emergency assistance and working on resettlement issues for at-risk individuals within the LBTQIA+ community.
2. **Inas***, a queer feminist activist and researcher, and a member of an organization that defends rights and freedoms in Tunisia.
3. **Doaa***, a queer activist.
4. **Mai***, a queer feminist transgender activist advocating for the rights of the LBTQIA+ community, womn, and gender-nonconforming individuals.
5. **Yara***, a transgender activist advocating for the rights of the LBTQIA+ community, womn, and gender-nonconforming individuals.

Interviews were also conducted with the following five WHRDs from Libya:

1. **Yasmine***, a queer feminist activist living in exile and working to defend the rights of the LBTQIA+ community and gender-nonconforming individuals.
2. **Jamila***, a queer feminist activist living in exile.

3. Sally*, a transgender activist living in exile and working in defense of the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and gender-nonconforming individuals.

4. Riham*, a queer feminist and human rights activist in exile who is working on the empowerment of the LGBTQIA+ community in Libya.

5. Shadia*, a queer feminist activist living in exile, who provides legal assistance to survivors of torture.

Interviews were also conducted with the following five WHRDs from Morocco:

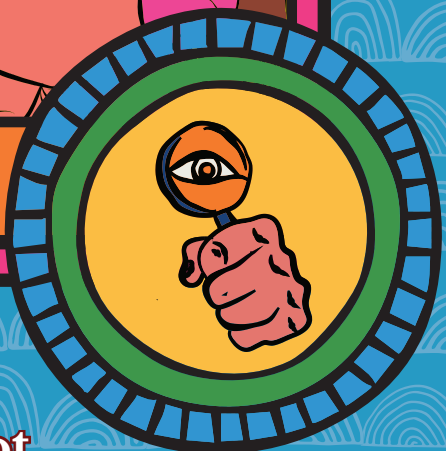
1. Amira*, a queer feminist activist advocating for the LGBTQIA+ community and founder of a gender justice organization, working to support and promote LGBTQIA+ rights in Morocco.

2. Mayar*, a queer feminist transgender activist defending LGBTQIA+ rights, and a founder and director of an organization that advocates for the rights of sex workers in North Africa.

3. Rania*, a queer feminist activist who raises awareness on queer issues through art, and founder of an initiative for the defense of rights and freedoms.

4. Dania*, a queer activist working to defend the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and gender-nonconforming individuals, and a co-founder of a feminist organization in Morocco.

5. Sawsan*, a queer feminist activist advocating for the LGBTQIA+ community and working on issues related to transgender individuals.



CHAPTER ONE

**Definition and Root
Causes of Technology Facilitated
Gender-Based Violence Against Queer
and Transgender Women's Human Rights**

This chapter aims to define the concept of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) from the perspective of queer and transgender womn’s human rights defenders (WHRDs), and to highlight its root causes based on the interviews conducted. The findings identified three interrelated and primary drivers that contribute to the intensification of this violence: first, patriarchal social traditions and the stereotypical image of womn and the LGBTQIA+ community aim to control bodies and gender roles, while maintaining societal morality and religious values. The second cause is the state’s endorsement or facilitation of violence against womn, including the role of state-owned media and religious institutions in mobilizing public opinion and reinforcing male dominance, as well as the lack of genuine, safe mechanisms and legislation to combat digital violence against womn. In fact, existing cybercrime laws are ineffective or unsafe for womn, especially queer womn and LGBTQIA+ individuals; rather, they are often used to target, criminalize, and expose their identities. The third cause is the absence of meaningful protection mechanisms on social media platforms, which encourages users to commit acts of digital violence with impunity. often used to target, criminalize, and expose their identities.

1.1 Definition of Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence from the Perspective of Womn’s Human Rights Defenders

It is important to define the term “technology-facilitated gender-based violence,” particularly in the context of violence directed at queer and transgender womn’s human rights defenders, as well as gender-nonconforming individuals. According to UN Women, technology-facilitated gender-based violence is defined as any act that is committed, facilitated, exacerbated, or amplified through the use of information and communication technologies or other digital tools, and that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, economic harm, or other violations of rights and freedoms. This definition recognizes that, like all forms of GBV, technology-facilitated GBV is both rooted in and the result of discriminatory gender norms that intersect with other forms of oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors.⁶

A 2021 report by UN Women on digital violence against women in Arab countries noted that, “60% of women experienced and reported online violence in the past year, and that this exposure often does not occur in isolation. Online violence is not usually limited to a single incident, with 44% of women who experienced online violence experiencing it more than once.”⁷ Therefore, 70% of activists and human rights defenders in Arab countries reported not feeling safe in digital spaces.⁸

Although a large proportion of womn and girls experience digital violence and discrimination, queer and transgender activists experience a distinct and systematic form of violence in numerous aspects of their daily lives, perpetrated by state institutions and individuals at workplaces, academic institutions, and at home, due to their sexual orientation and affiliation.⁹

Advocates defined technology-facilitated gender-based violence as violence that uses electronic media such as social media to harass, threaten, spread rumors, blackmail, troll, or publish private information without permission. Advocates emphasized that digital violence is a “mirror” of

6. Source: Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence: A Shared Research Agenda, UN Women [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/technology-facilitated gender based-violence-sharedresearch-agenda-ar.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/technology-facilitated%20gender%20based%20violence-sharedresearch-agenda-ar.pdf)

7. UN Women, “Violence against women in the online space: insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States,” 2021. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/11/violence-against-women-in-the-online-space>

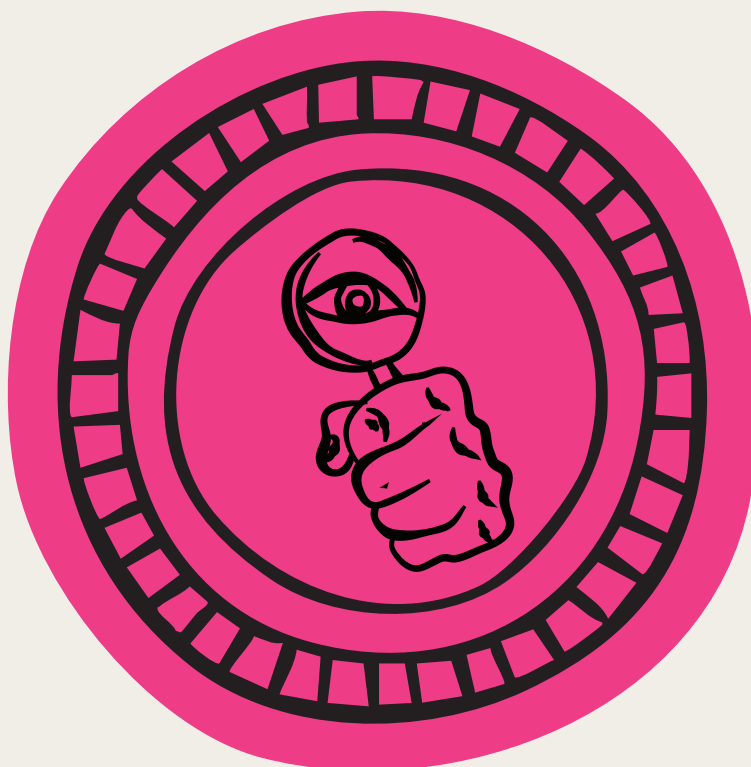
8. Ibid.

9. To view the research in English: <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2108/2108.10096.pdf>

real-life violence against women, but it is more harmful because it is invisible and, in many contexts, unrecognized as a form of violence against women. The defenders also agreed that their experiences of digital violence are not isolated or isolated incidents, but rather systematic practices that reflect patriarchal social structures aimed at silencing the voices of women in general, and queer women in particular.

WHRDs defined technology-facilitated GBV as any form of violence that uses digital platforms, such as social media, for harassment, threats, rumor-spreading, blackmail, doxxing, or sharing private information without consent. They emphasized that digital violence is a ‘mirror’ of real-life violence against women, but it is often more harmful due to its invisibility and the lack of recognition in many contexts as a legitimate form of GBV. WHRDs unanimously agreed that their experiences with digital violence are not isolated incidents, but rather systemic practices rooted in patriarchal structures aimed at silencing women in general, and queer women in particular.

All the WHRDs interviewed spoke about the severe psychological impacts of technology-facilitated GBV, including constant fear and anxiety, depression, and a tendency to isolate by staying home to avoid further harm. Many WHRDs reported feeling under constant threat. In more extreme cases, some WHRDs experienced suicidal thoughts as a result of helplessness and despair caused by repeated attacks and a lack of adequate support. These psychological consequences highlight the urgent need for effective protection and support policies for WHRDs, an issue that will be addressed in subsequent sections of this report.



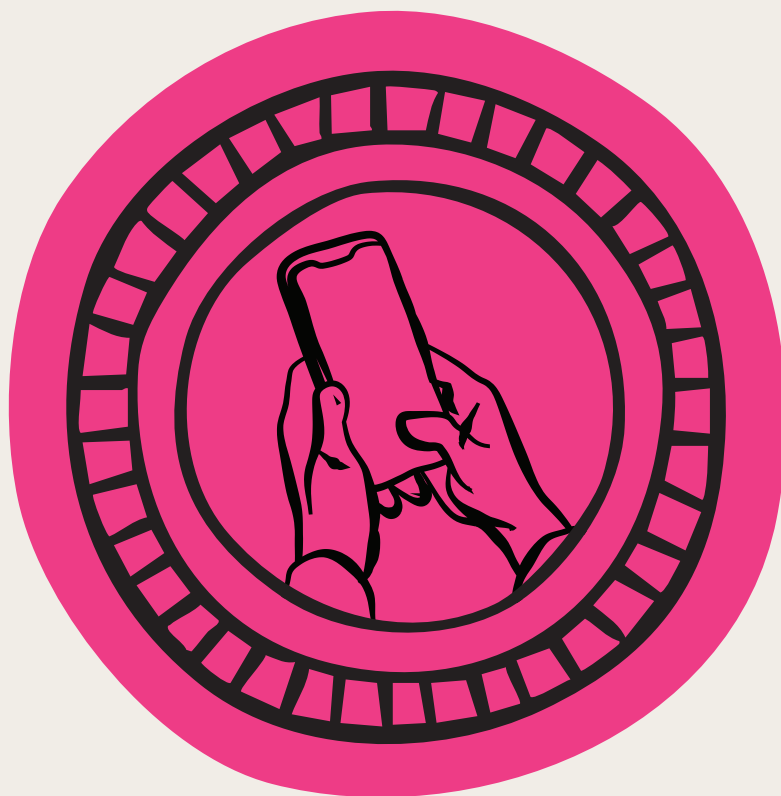


**“We always feel
a kind of insecurity.
I might delete all
my stories and posts
out of fear.”**

Queer WHRD from Tunisia

1.2 Causes of Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Against Queer and Transgender Women's Human Rights Defenders in North Africa

While the causes of violence vary by context, across social, economic, political, and legal levels, there are also overlapping factors among the four focus countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco. This report focuses on those common root causes across these contexts.




1.2.1 *Reproducing Patriarchal Dominance Through Womn*

Social traditions and norms continue to assert their control over the internet and public spaces. Cultural and societal expectations often dictate users' behavior online, enforcing moral codes aligned with prevailing values. As a result, when womn participate in the public sphere through online platforms, their presence is often perceived as a disruption to societies that still uphold traditional gender roles, particularly when addressing gender issues or advocating for queer and transgender rights, which are often considered sensitive topics in relation to norms and traditions. Consequently, the activism of queer and transgender WHRDs is viewed as a direct challenge to these cultural structures, which in turn legitimizes the use of violence against them as a form of gender-based discrimination. Patriarchal societies maintain a sense of entitlement over womn's bodies and seek to control them. One WHRD from Egypt expressed, "Girls are photographed in the street and their pictures are posted online without even knowing they've been photographed. I've seen men filming their own wives while they're married, just so they can blackmail them to give up their entitled rights if they get divorced."

Because patriarchal societies consider womn's bodies and behaviors as a reflection of societal morals and values, WHRDs are often accused of undermining moral codes or traditional institutions, such as the family or religion, when they work to eliminate discrimination against the LBTQIA+ community. As a result, their reputations are attacked by questioning their femininity and morality, which are viewed as violations of the moral standards and social rules built on patriarchal ideologies.





**“We live in
a society
that sees us
as infidels”**

Queer WHRD from Tunisia

1.2.2 *The Role of the State and its Legislative, Media, and Religious Institutions*

The state often uses “morality” as a tool to control women’s bodies and behaviors, violating their rights under the guise of protecting public morals. Cybercrime laws are among the state’s mechanisms to exercise control, censorship, and suppression of online content that challenges patriarchal narratives or traditional beliefs about women. These actions are usually justified by the need to protect the moral fabric of conservative and religious societies, as well as to reinforce state-approved definitions of what is acceptable or forbidden. The state plays this so-called “moral” role by enacting vague and broad laws to assert both political and patriarchal dominance. Although all four countries studied, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco, have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), they lack comprehensive national laws and legislation to effectively address violence against women for three main reasons: first, there is no standalone law to combat violence against women. Even when legal reforms are introduced, the laws often lack a comprehensive definition of violence against women, frequently limiting their scope to domestic or family contexts only.¹⁰ Second, most cybercrime laws are limited to issues on media regulation, misinformation, or public morality, rather than addressing the actual forms of online violence experienced by women. These laws were not designed with a gender-sensitive or inclusive perspective in mind. Third, governments use cybercrime laws to suppress dissent and undermine freedom of expression. According to 2023 reports published by Human Rights Watch concerning Tunisia,¹¹ Egypt,¹² Morocco,¹³

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10. Indicator 5: Existence of laws specifically addressing violence against women and girls. Available at: <https://www.efi-rcso.org/ar/%D9%81%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%B3/%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-vawg/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%B4%D8%B1-5-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1>
 11. In Tunisia, the state has used Decree No. 54 to silence critics, issuing the first two prison sentences under this law in December 2023. “Tunisia: Cybercrime Decree Used Against Critics: First Two Prison Sentences Under Tools Used to Suppress Free Speech,” Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/19/tunisia-cybercrime-decree-used-against-critics>
 12. “All This Terror Because of a Photo: Digital Targeting and its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa,” Human Rights Watch, February 21, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt>
 13. Ibid.

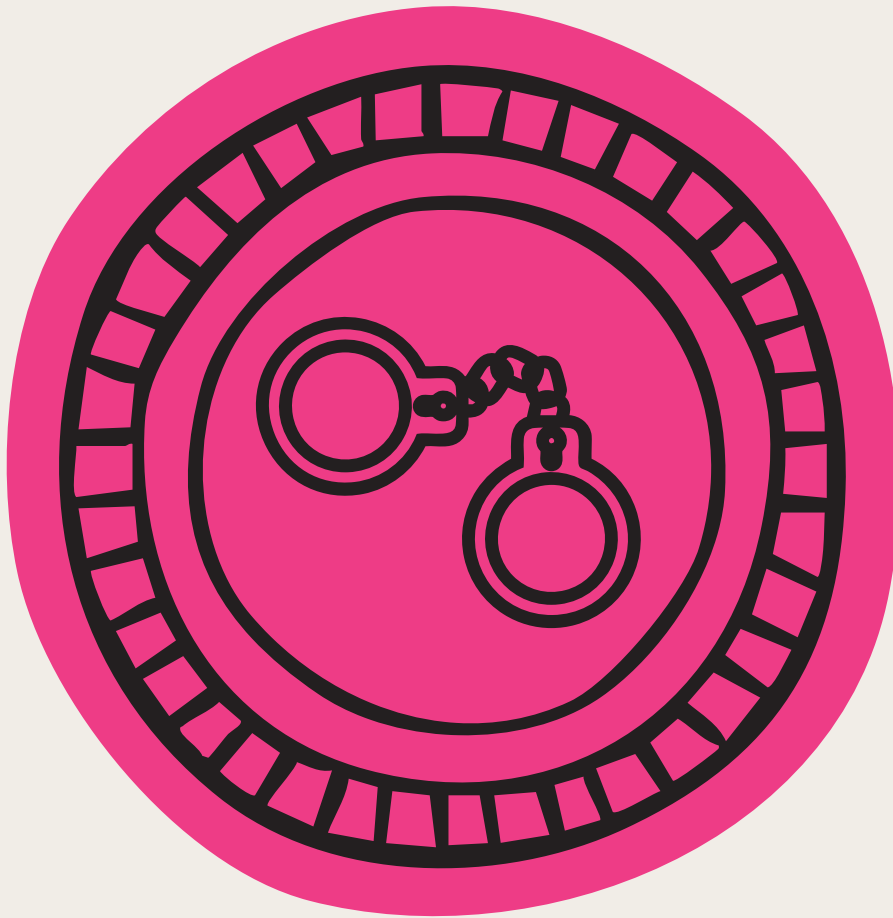
and Libya,¹⁴ cybercrime legislation is regularly used as a tool of repression, representing major obstacles to the development of effective and legitimate legislation for addressing digital violence and contributing to growing mistrust in state institutions.

For example, on February 17, 2023, Libyan authorities arrested two women, a singer and a content creator, accusing them of violating Law No. 5 of 2022 on Combatting Cybercrime, which was enacted in Libya in 2022.¹⁵ They were also accused of violating “honor and public morals.” Libya’s Ministry of Interior stated that the arrests were justified by the womn’s alleged offenses to “the dignity of the virtuous and honorable Libyan woman in our conservative society, through foreign and inappropriate behaviors that offend our customs, traditions, and noble religion.”¹⁶

In Egypt, according to a press release by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights,¹⁷ Haneen Hossam and Mawada Eladhm, two online content creators on TikTok and Likee, were arrested in April 2022 for violating Law No. 175 of 2018 on Combatting Cybercrime. Their arrests marked the initiation of a new pattern in which the Egyptian Public Prosecution began criminalizing forms of online expression based on vague moral standards that are not clearly defined by law or judicial bodies. This pattern notably targeted young womn from specific socioeconomic backgrounds, whose published content closely resembles that of womn from other social classes. More than 15 womn and girls were investigated or prosecuted due to content they posted online, particularly on TikTok, with charges of “violating family values” applied in all cases that proceeded to court.

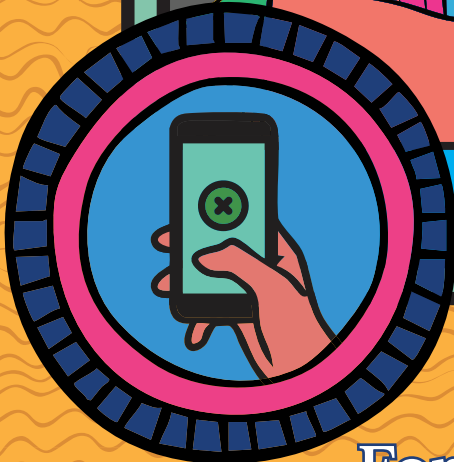
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14. “Libya: Revoke Repressive Anti-Cybercrime Law: Release People Held Merely for Peaceful Expression,” Human Rights Watch, April 2, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/04/02/libya-revoke-repressive-anti-cybercrime-law>
 15. 15 Law No. 5 of 2022 on Combatting Cybercrime: <https://lawsociety.ly/legislation/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-5-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2022-%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%A7/https://lawsociety.ly/legislation/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-5-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2022-%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%A7/>
 16. “Libya: Revoke Repressive Anti-Cybercrime Law: Release People Held Merely for Peaceful Expression,” Human Rights Watch, April 2, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/04/02/libya-revoke-repressive-anti-cybercrime-law>
 17. Press release by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights: “A Guide to the Case of Mawada and Haneen – A Report on the Harsh Sentences Against Online Content Creators on Human Trafficking Charges,” August 24, 2021. Available at: <https://eipr.org/press/2021/08/%D8%AF%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89>

In contexts where digital violence legislation exists, such as in Morocco, WHRDs face significant barriers in accessing legal protections. This is due to several factors, including the embedded discrimination and bias within the legal system, where the authorities responsible for implementing the law are often prejudiced against queer WHRDs. In many cases, their complaints are not taken seriously, or worse, they may be subjected to further violence.



“It’s very hard for me to use the [Cybercrime] law as a transgender woman because I’ll be exposed to more violence just because of my gender identity. Very few trans women have the ability to access justice.”

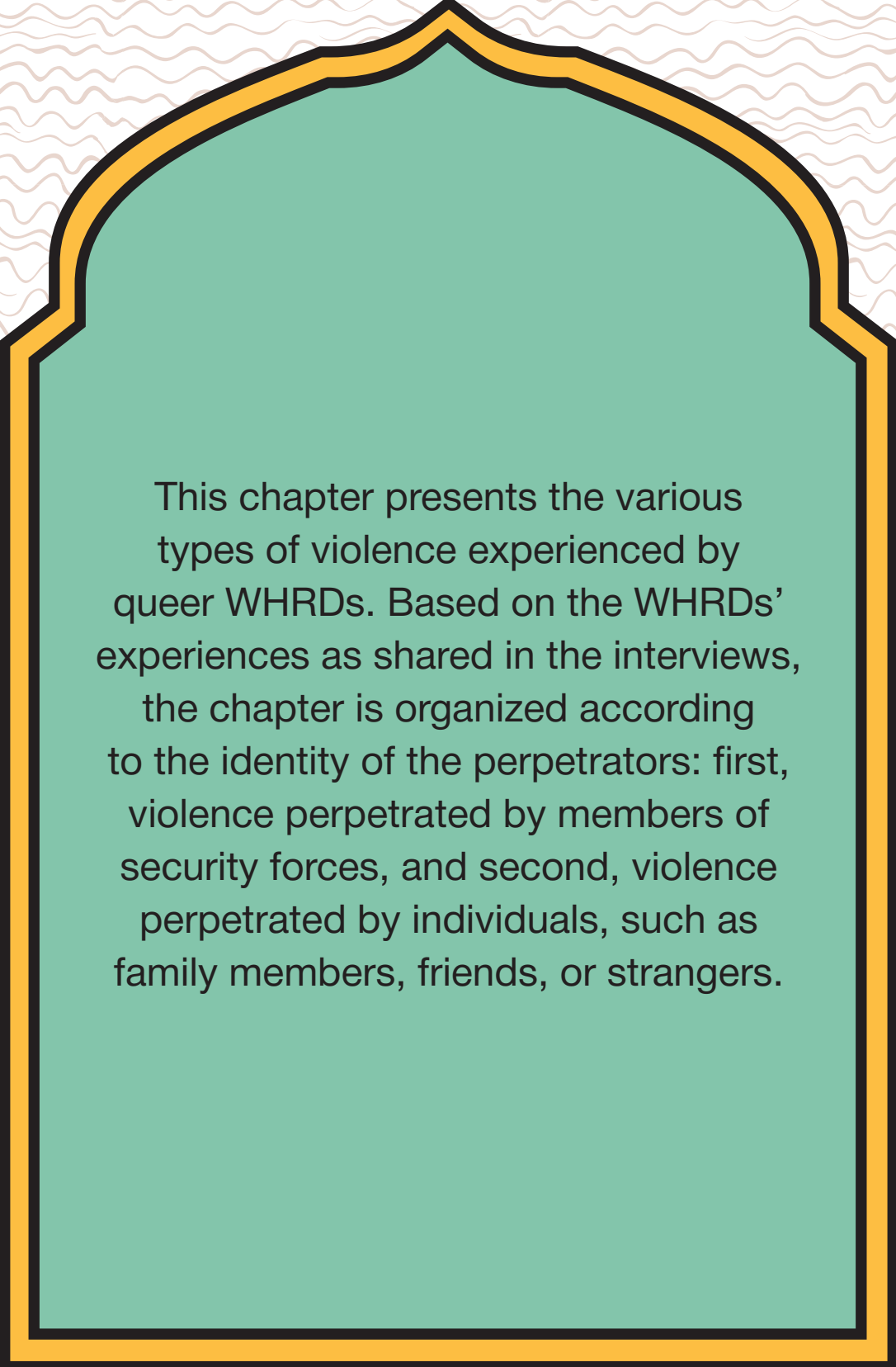
Transgender WHRD from Morocco



CHAPTER TWO



**Forms of Technology
Facilitated Gender-Based
Violence and its Perpetrators**



This chapter presents the various types of violence experienced by queer WHRDs. Based on the WHRDs' experiences as shared in the interviews, the chapter is organized according to the identity of the perpetrators: first, violence perpetrated by members of security forces, and second, violence perpetrated by individuals, such as family members, friends, or strangers.

2.1 Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence by Security Forces

This section addresses the ways in which security personnel engage in digital attacks against queer WHRDs, and how these attacks affect their lives. The issue here is not government surveillance through advanced spyware; rather, it concerns how individual officers collect or fabricate digital information, by monitoring social media platforms and creating fake profiles impersonating members of the queer community or transgender individuals.

In all four countries of focus, security forces have targeted queer WHRDs on digital platforms through blackmail, incitement, and non-consensual outing of their sexual orientation or gender identity. These acts commonly target the queer community on dating apps like Grindr or social media platforms like Facebook. Further harassment also includes publicly revealing personal information of queer WHRDs, such as home addresses, phone numbers, and outing their identity online, especially those involved in protests.



Smear Campaigns and Doxxing by Security Forces

All the WHRDs interviewed for this report were subjected to different forms of smear campaigns, often involving the public exposure of sensitive information about their sexual orientations. These campaigns aim to discredit them, especially in societies that stigmatize queer and transgender individuals purely based on their identities. The ultimate goal is to silence WHRDs and instill fear and anxiety about what might happen if their identities/information are disclosed, thereby distracting them from their activism.

Notably, several women interviewed from Tunisia referred to the protests that followed the death of Sarah Hegazi¹⁸ as an event that led to widespread targeting by security forces in both Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, Haidy noted that security forces routinely photograph all demonstrators during protests, including the solidarity protests held at the Egyptian Embassy after Sarah Hegazi's death. After Haidy's participation in those protests, she discovered that photos of her appeared on the official Facebook page of the Tunisian security unions.¹⁹ Haidy's photos received significant attention and comments from Facebook users, many of whom called for the murder or physical assault of the participants in the protest if they were seen in public.



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18. Sarah Hegazi is a queer, feminist, and communist activist from Egypt. She was arrested and tortured in prison for three months after raising the rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Cairo in 2017. She was forcibly exiled to Canada, where she later died by suicide in 2020.
 19. Security unions in Tunisia are organizations that represent personnel from security institutions such as the police and national guard. They aim to defend the professional and social rights of their members and engage in dialogue with the government on issues like working conditions, salaries and benefits.

These smear campaigns often coincide with waves of arrests targeting WHRDs, which they interpret as a strategy to legitimize the closure of public space under the pretense of targeting “unnatural” identities and orientations, supposedly to protect society and its morals. In Libya, the Internal Security Agency in Tripoli carried out a wave of arrests in 2021 targeting members of an initiative that Riham belonged to. Following the arrests, Riham found photos of herself and other members of the campaign circulating on various Facebook pages, accompanied by false claims that they were arrested for being atheists. The impact on Riham was severe; she received numerous threats on Facebook, including messages threatening her with assault, rape, and death. Overwhelmed by fear for her safety, she decided to delete her Facebook account.

Threats

The situation in Libya differs from the other countries covered in this report, as Libyan militias control different parts of the country and play a pivotal role in both the political and security landscape. The context is complicated, with the country divided between two rival governments, east and west, each aligned with various armed groups. Libyan WHRDs shared that the violence perpetrated by militias is distinct from that of state institutions, as militias rely on extreme violence as a tool for achieving their objectives, something governments are typically more restrained in. Sally, a transgender activist, shared that in 2019, she was active in a Facebook group focused on raising awareness about the existence of transgender people and advocating for medical and legal solutions to the challenges they face. Sally explained that a militia called the Special Deterrence Force, which operated in the area where she lived, had what she described as a “cyber army.” This cyber army started sending her direct threats, including real execution videos. One particular video stood out in her memory: a man lying on the ground with a pit bull eating his genitals. Sally interpreted this as a brutal and explicit threat directed at her, causing a deep psychological impact:

“I love animals so much. But ever since then, whenever I see a pit bull, I enter a state of panic. I get terrified. I start shaking and experience a trauma response just seeing that type of dog. Even though I really love dogs, and animals in general, I’ve reached a point of psychological breakdown because I can’t process the level of threats or grasp how dangerous the situation really is.”

On The Ground Security Persecution

WHRDs shared a collective belief that it is not fruitful to separate violations into ‘online’ and ‘offline’, as they are deeply interconnected. Many digital threats escalate into physical violations, and online abuse reflects the broader patriarchal structures shaping their lived reality. WHRDs also emphasized that this separation risks downplaying the severity of online violence, treating it as “not real,” when in fact it has deeply psychological and material consequences. For example, one defender from Libya shared that militias from Janzour²⁰ raided her home and pursued her after she had posted publicly about her gender identity on her Facebook page, stating the following reason:

“Because they linked it to religion: as long as you openly disclose your gender identity on social media, it automatically means you don’t have a religion ... They wanted me to repent and take back my statements, but through the use of weapons. So, I fled to Tunisia.”



20. The “Janzour Knights” are an armed militia group based in the Janzour area, west of Libya’s capital, Tripoli. These militias were established during the Libyan crisis and have been involved in various conflicts and clashes within the country. The term “militias” or “brigades” became widely used in Libya following the February 17 Revolution and the subsequent war between supporters of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi and his opponents. These groups were initially formed by individuals with varying ideologies who declared their main goal was to overthrow Gaddafi’s regime and build a democratic and pluralistic state. While some group leaders and members of the former Transitional Council claimed that their roles would end once the regime fell, many militias continued to operate beyond that point, and in some cases, began enforcing their own interpretation of law.

Some of these groups later merged with others or evolved, altering their goals over time.

Contexts marked by instability and violent conflict (such as that in Libya) are especially dangerous for marginalized groups, who often become easy targets for attacks that are often justified based on religious and societal rhetoric that is deeply rooted in many communities. Such justifications offer a populist strategy to mobilize public support by stirring moral panic about “perversion,” framed as a threat to society.

Hala, an Egyptian activist working to combat violence towards womn of all gender identities and sexual orientations, challenged the idea that online threats are not as “serious” as those that happen offline:

“Activists are targeted offline for any views or ideas they share online that contradict state narratives. This makes most WHRDs extremely anxious about their safety.”

Filming and Broadcasting Forced Confessions on Facebook

Security authorities in Libya publicly expose the personal information of individuals associated with liberal ideas, civil society, and the LBTQIA+ community. Shadia, a Libyan defender, shared that in 2022, security forces launched a crackdown on human rights defenders and LBTQIA+ individuals. It began with the arrest of a journalist who belonged to the LBTQIA+ community after he published an article about the poor conditions faced by refugees in Libya. The journalist was tortured and forced to confess the names of LBTQIA+ individuals and anyone perceived to be an atheist or a supporter of liberal values, with the confession video-recorded and published on the official Facebook page of Libya’s Internal Security Agency. Following this incident, more LBTQIA+ individuals were arrested, and the same tactics were used to extract information about others involved in queer or human rights organizations. Shadia added that another video was published on March 15, 2023, in which another individual, clearly under pressure and coercion, was asked about public figures and acquaintances. He mentioned Shadia by name, along with the organization she founded, claiming that it aimed to connect networks of homosexuals and atheists.

Shadia’s testimony shows how state security bodies in Libya strategically use the internet and social media, especially Facebook, to foster a climate of public fear, weaponizing digital platforms as powerful tools for shaming and discrediting WHRDs. These regimes are no longer passive observers of social media; they have become active and powerful users of it.

2.2 Violence Perpetrated by Family and Close Relations

Queer and transgender WHRDs also experience violence committed by their families.

Many WHRDs expressed that this type of violence creates an intense feeling of isolation and fear, forcing them to constantly monitor what they share online out of fear that family members might discover their sexual orientations or gender identities. This violence often involves surveillance, tracking, and in some cases, being confined or expelled from the family home upon the discovery of their identities or activism.

Doaa, a queer activist from Tunisia, made sure to block all her family members from viewing her posts on Facebook. However, her brother managed to see a post she had written for her intimate partner. He then shared the post with their parents, who forced her to delete her Facebook and Instagram accounts. Her mother threatened to kick her out of the house if she found out she was still communicating with her partner. Doaa narrated that her parents' surveillance only intensified, as her father demanded she hand over all her account passwords so he could monitor whether she had stopped contacting her partner or any of the "deviant" people she had been talking to.

As such, the family often becomes a primary source of threats and blackmail for WHRDs. Faten, a queer feminist activist from Egypt, had received threatening messages via Facebook from anonymous accounts, warning her that they would inform her family about her sexual orientation and human rights work. Faten is certain that the account owners are people who know her, as she only shared details of her activism with a small, supposedly trusted circle, and had never publicly disclosed her orientation. To Faten, these threats made her realize that the people she thought were safe to trust may not be trustworthy, making her rethink her network of trust.



2.3 Violence by Unknown Individuals

All the WHRDs interviewed reported experiencing violence by unknown individuals, something which has become a central part of their online experiences. While the methods vary, WHRDs noted that the most common forms of such violence include memes, threats, disinformation through Facebook pages, and the creation of fake accounts for the purpose of blackmail and intimidation.

According to WHRDs from Tunisia, memes are used as a tool for harassment and cyberbullying, widely circulated in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. Memes are powerful in shaping public attitudes and beliefs, as they rely on stereotypes and offensive language that is delivered in a humorous or casual tone. As such, they spread harmful ideas quickly and reinforce a culture that normalizes discrimination and violence, leaving no room for critical reflection or dialogue. WHRDs explained that memes thrive in online communication because they meet the core requirements of social media: brevity and simplicity, two traits that make them highly shareable.

Dania, a queer activist and co-founder of a feminist organization in Morocco, shared that creating memes and humorous videos on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to mock LGBTQIA+ topics is widespread in Morocco. She added that it is difficult to predict which memes will go viral. For example, in mid-2024, Dania participated in a TV interview about queer rights in Morocco. The interview went viral after a meme using her name was created and widely shared, something she had not anticipated. The meme brought unwanted attention to the interview, which her family saw. She started receiving threats from anonymous accounts and her social media profile attracted a lot of attention. Manipulated clips from her interview and photos were posted in a Facebook group called “Alpha Man,” which targets, mocks, and attacks feminists and queer people. The group (with over 100,000 followers) mobilizes its members to collectively harass and threaten specific accounts.

Dania participated in Facebook-organized discussion groups about the kind of support needed by feminist and queer defenders. She also tried to contact Facebook’s support team to take down the viral memes, but never received a response. The intensity of the harassment eventually forced her to deactivate her Facebook account.

Riham, a queer feminist and human rights defender in exile who works on empowering the queer community in Libya, had a similar experience. In 2016, her photos were shared in a large Facebook group run by users with strong misogynistic ideologies, alongside captions such as:

“This person is an atheist, a deviant, spreading values that destroy our society. If you see her in the street, kill her”.

Several WHRDs also recalled specific incidents that triggered a surge in the threats and violence they experienced. One key moment was the death of Sarah Hegazi. After sharing a post about Hegazi, a WHRD from Egypt received death threats via Facebook messages in 2017 from numerous strangers for having written the post. Faten, a queer feminist from Egypt, had commented “May Sarah rest in peace” on a post about Hegazi. Someone replied to her comment by tagging others and asking if Faten was a student at their university. Faten felt deeply unsafe about the possibility of people recognizing her at the university and chose to stay home for several days to avoid any potential danger.

Reflections on the Evolving Nature of Online Violence

WHRDs emphasized that the internet nowadays (especially social media) has drastically changed since they began their online activism in 2010–2011. Back then, social media provided spaces for connection, organizing, and solidarity, and profit motives were less prominent. While online attacks did occur, they were not a defining feature of the activist experience. At the time, the defenders mostly received threats from people whose identities were known. That has changed with the rise of bots and coordinated attacks, which use keyword tracking to launch waves of abusive messages and threats. WHRDs remember that, back then, the internet felt safer. Governments lacked the expertise and tools to monitor activists or even comprehend what to monitor, and with this freedom, social media thus provided unprecedented space for organizing, planning, and networking.

Defenders now argue that we need to reframe how we talk about the internet. The familiar narrative: that the internet offers unprecedented freedom and that the main threat is — mostly— state surveillance, no longer reflects reality. This narrative ignores many developments in the underpinnings of social media, most importantly algorithms: complex sets of rules and calculations that platforms deploy to determine the content that users see. Defenders highlighted that online GBV is fueled by social media algorithms, which are driven by the logic of profit and engagement within the data economy. These algorithms analyse user behaviours, ideologies, and preferences to personalise content and maximise interaction. The algorithms,

therefore, play a crucial role in shaping user experiences by influencing the messages, ads, and recommendations they see. As the data economy focuses on monetising all aspects of human life and relationships, constantly fine-tuning these algorithms enables social media platforms to increase user engagement and retention. Social media algorithms present content that is likely to keep users engaged for longer, which in turn enables data mining, such as age, gender, location, political ideology, preferences, etc., to be used to predict suggested products for users to purchase, based on targeted advertising as a dominant business model.

The data economy is closely tied to treating human attention as a scarce resource. The more time and attention we spend on a product, service, post, tweet, or video, the more data can be generated. This constant data stream in digital spaces encourages companies to compete for users' attention more aggressively than ever before, to maintain their browsing and engagement with specific content. This logic privileges controversial content, which often spreads hate speech or mocks the work of WHRDs, while suppressing feminist efforts to promote alternative narratives that challenge patriarchal discourse.

Although the roots of online GBV lie in structural inequalities, this violence is also partially the result of the core aim of algorithms: to generate high engagement. Misinformation, controversy, and polarising content often produce high levels of interaction on social media platforms. Moral outrage is a particularly familiar, arguably the most widespread, online sentiment. And while waves of moral outrage on social media are not detached from existing social and political issues, algorithms tend to “reward” such content with more likes and shares. As such, the underlying logic of algorithms to amplify “provocative” content means that any form of online attack or violence, regardless of the harm it may cause, sends a positive signal to the algorithm. Once algorithms label such content as worthy of amplification, it is often too late for anyone to remove the original post or contain the violence, attacks, or threats directed at WHRDs.

WHRDs described that the way algorithms work is opaque, as they do not understand why or how some of their content reaches individuals who are specifically hostile toward feminists and queer people. Why does not it also reach those who are ideologically aligned with WHRDs? Why does some content go viral while other posts remain almost entirely unseen? This ambiguity around the mechanisms of algorithms is one of the reasons WHRDs identified this as a new way of interfering with our freedom of expression that often goes unnoticed. Understanding social media algorithms and their impact on online GBV and freedom of expression through a feminist lens requires more than examining their technical features, which are often inaccessible or deliberately obscured. It also demands that we question the logic that drives the technology: the logic of profit within a capitalist framework.

Given this design, WHRDs asked: Is this design likely to contribute to eliminating GBV online? Since profit is the primary purpose of social media platforms, is it realistic to expect them to be redesigned?

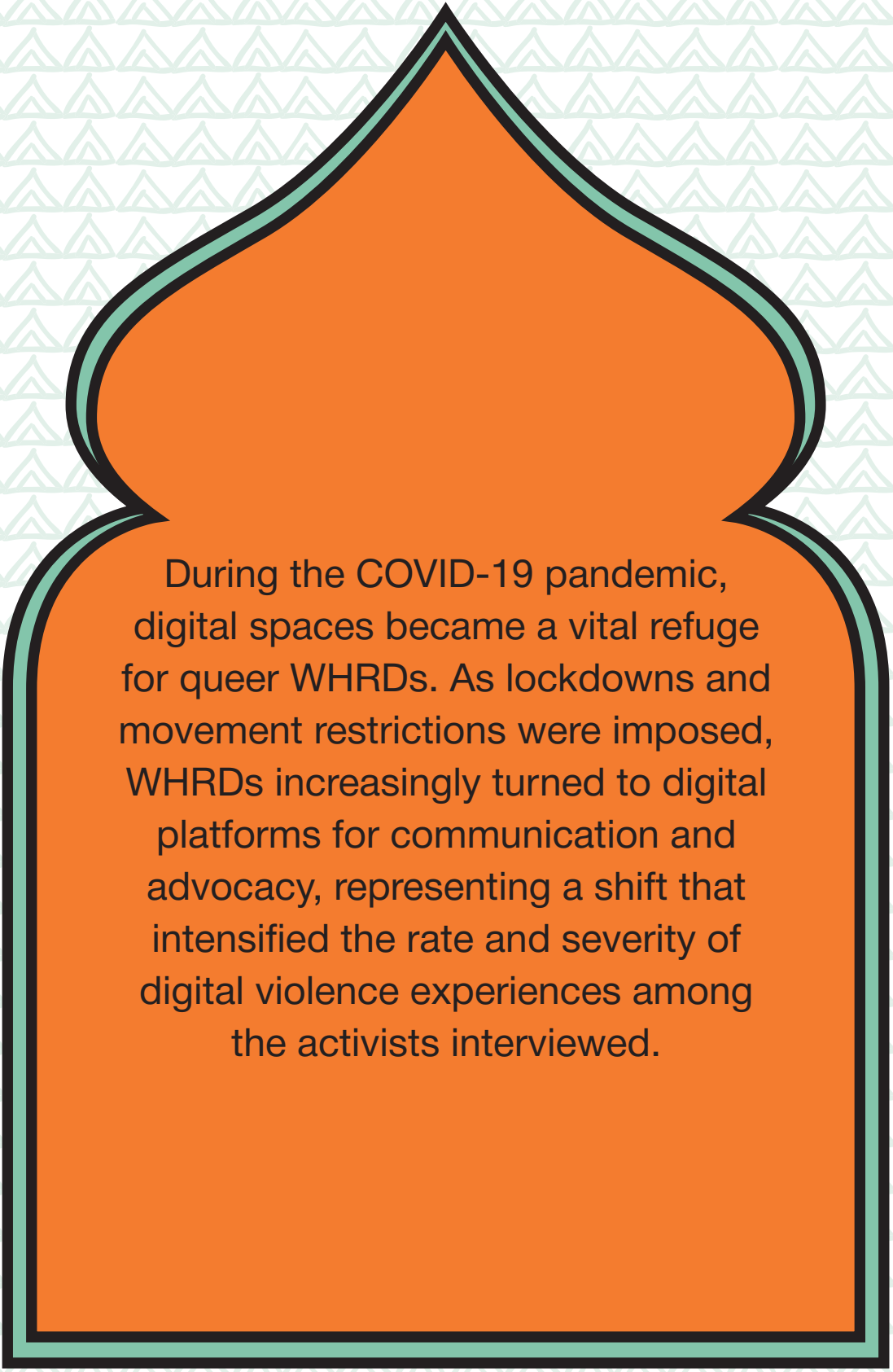
“Social media feeds a violent capitalist machine. It doesn’t care about me or anyone at risk. The algorithm doesn’t serve me. It just wants maximum engagement. So, it works against me. Facebook is a for-profit company that constantly wants people interacting, and it doesn’t care what the consequences are.”

Queer Activist from Egypt



CHAPTER THREE

**Technology Facilitated
GBV During COVID-19 and
its Impact on Queer Activism**



During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital spaces became a vital refuge for queer WHRDs. As lockdowns and movement restrictions were imposed, WHRDs increasingly turned to digital platforms for communication and advocacy, representing a shift that intensified the rate and severity of digital violence experiences among the activists interviewed.

Queer WHRDs found themselves facing a dangerous escalation of cyber threats and online violence.²¹ In Tunisia, between the lockdown initiation and May 2020, 6,693 cases of violence were reported via the national helpline, including verbal, moral, physical, and sexual violence.²² The same report notes a significant increase in violence against women in Morocco during the lockdown. Between March 16 and June 30, 2020, a total of 750 cases of violence were recorded, 45 of which involved digital violence.²³ Intersectionality compounds the challenges faced by defenders; WHRDs who are also part of the queer community are subjected to multifold and intersecting forms of discrimination, as online attacks often target not only their activism but also their gender identities and sexual orientations.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a critical case study of the ways in which GBV is deeply embedded in our societies and how it erupts in times of crisis. It also sheds light on defenders' experienced violence in the absence of supportive networks, whether due to lockdown measures or health-related isolation. It is essential to highlight the rise of online GBV during the pandemic; if feminists were striving to draw attention to GBV during this period, a crisis that many governments failed to prioritise,²⁴ then what was the situation of online GBV?



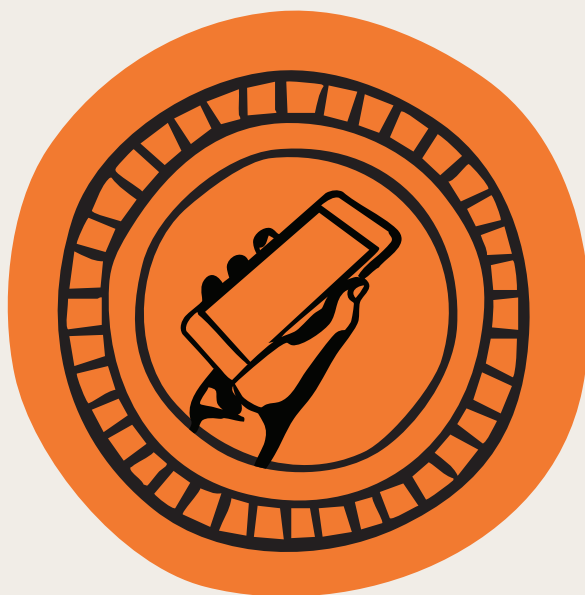
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21. Online and ICT-Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls During COVID-19. UN Women. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Brief-Online-and-ICT-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-COVID-19-en.pdf>
 22. Spaces of Violence and Resistance: Women's Rights in the Digital World – The Scenario in the MENA Region, EuroMed Rights, May 2021. Available at: <https://south.euneighbours.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Online-gender-violence-in-MENA-region>.
 23. Ibid
 24. Kelly A, Pattison P. "A Pandemic of Abuses: Human Rights Under Attack During COVID, Says UN Head." The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/22/human-rights-in-the-time-of-covid-a-pandemic-of-abuses-says-un-headpdf>

3.1 Technology Facilitated GBV During COVID-19

Decades of research have shown that technology-facilitated GBV is prevalent across all contexts. However, during crises, disruptions in services meant to prevent and address such violence often led to increased levels of abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly concerning in this regard. Social distancing, lockdowns, and movement restrictions placed women at greater risk inside their homes. In addition, heightened health, psychological, and financial pressures triggered by the pandemic led to increased levels of violence. These intersecting factors led the United Nations to describe GBV as the “shadow pandemic” occurring in parallel with COVID-19 on a global scale. Estimates projected that an additional 31 million cases of GBV would occur globally within the first six months of the pandemic.²⁵

According to interviewees, 55% of WHRDs reported an increase in technology-facilitated GBV during the pandemic compared to pre-COVID levels. They attributed this rise to widespread anger stemming from health and economic crises, and a general atmosphere of fear and anxiety. While this might suggest that the increase in GBV during COVID-19 was inevitable, defenders emphasised that the pandemic did not cause the violence; instead, it exacerbated existing risks and amplified pre-existing patterns of discriminatory behaviours and beliefs, which intensified under the pressure of a global health crisis.

Yasmine, a Libyan queer feminist activist working from exile to defend queer individuals, remembered that digital violence was less severe before COVID-19:



25. United Nations Population Fund. “Millions More Cases of Violence, Child Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, Unintended Pregnancy Expected Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/millions-more-cases-violence-child-marriage-female-genital-mutilation-unintended-pregnancies>

“Ordinary citizens were busy with their personal lives: work, family, school. During COVID, people retreated inward and spent more time online, which became an outlet for the anger and anxiety everyone was feeling.”

Amira, a queer feminist activist from Morocco, experienced an intense surge of digital violence in 2020, including verbal harassment and death threats. She believes this surge was a result of the internet becoming an outlet for deep-seated hatred against feminists and gender-nonconforming people. Amira also explained that under lockdown measures, governments were unlikely to prioritise investigating threats or violence against LBTQI+ individuals, given their preoccupation with the COVID crisis, which allowed for bolder violations to occur. She stated that the COVID-19 period exposed what had already existed: deeply rooted transphobic beliefs and the longstanding abuses WHRDs have been facing. Doaa, a queer activist from Tunisia, adds that the rise in digital violence during the pandemic served as a reflection of the violence occurring in real life, and perhaps even worse in digital spaces, because it is neither seen nor acknowledged.

3.2 Did Queer Activism Change During COVID-19?

WHRDs stated that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many organisations to explore new ways of online organising and to develop their digital skills for feminist and queer activism. Somaya, a queer activist from Egypt, said that during the pandemic, psychological and legal support became available to individuals in more remote, marginalised areas thanks to the use of Facebook, which had not been used for such purposes before COVID-19. At that time, she realised that many NGOs lacked the capacity to effectively use the internet to reach wider audiences, saying: “They’re still stuck in forums, meetings, conferences, and outdated advocacy methods.”

In Morocco, Dania remembered:

“Everything moved online: capacity-building workshops, meetings, artistic projects, content creation, and advocacy campaigns through Zoom. Everything changed, and activities were redirected to the internet. This was good because many people, organisations, and collectives began to feel empowered to initiate and engage in queer-related work.”



Dania said that this increased online openness had some positive outcomes, particularly in fostering solidarity:

“There was online solidarity from people we hadn’t known before COVID-19; people who discovered our work during the pandemic.”

Despite some of the positive outcomes, the wider use of the internet during the pandemic also led to increased surveillance by security forces targeting queer content and human rights activism on digital platforms. Riham, a queer feminist woman defender from Libya, shared that during COVID-19, LBTQI+ individuals in Libya became more active on Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), as the pandemic made it difficult to gather in traditional physical spaces. As a result, queer content became more visible online, which led to a wave of arrests targeting LBTQI+ activists, with the Internal Security Agency focusing on digital spaces.

This pattern of surveillance and online violence did not end with the pandemic. In May 2023, the Libyan Internal Security Agency issued Decision No. 436/2023 to establish an official religious body, the General Authority of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, to oversee a program titled “Guardians of Virtue.”²⁶ This program aimed to combat what the authorities described as “religious, intellectual, and moral deviance.” On December 28, 2023, the Internal Security Agency published videos on its official Facebook page showing 14 individuals, including four women and a 17-year-old girl, being forced to confess to so-called crimes such as “spreading atheism,” “apostasy,” rejecting religion, and homosexuality.²⁷

One of the biggest challenges WHRDs faced during the pandemic was their inability to support one another effectively. Hala, a queer activist from Egypt, recalled that during the pandemic, there was a particular struggle within the queer movement around the lack of emotional solidarity when a WHRD was forced to return to her family home, where she had previously experienced violence, after losing her job. Lockdown restrictions made it difficult for other WHRDs to offer emotional support in moments like these.

“Solidarity is essential in our work. It’s what keeps us going. During COVID, it was hard; we couldn’t see each other or check in. Some had to go back to their abusive family homes, and that was the hardest part.”

26. [Adalla for All (AFA), “Session I: The Ongoing Human Rights Violations Against the LGBTIQ+ Community in Libya,” 30 October 2023

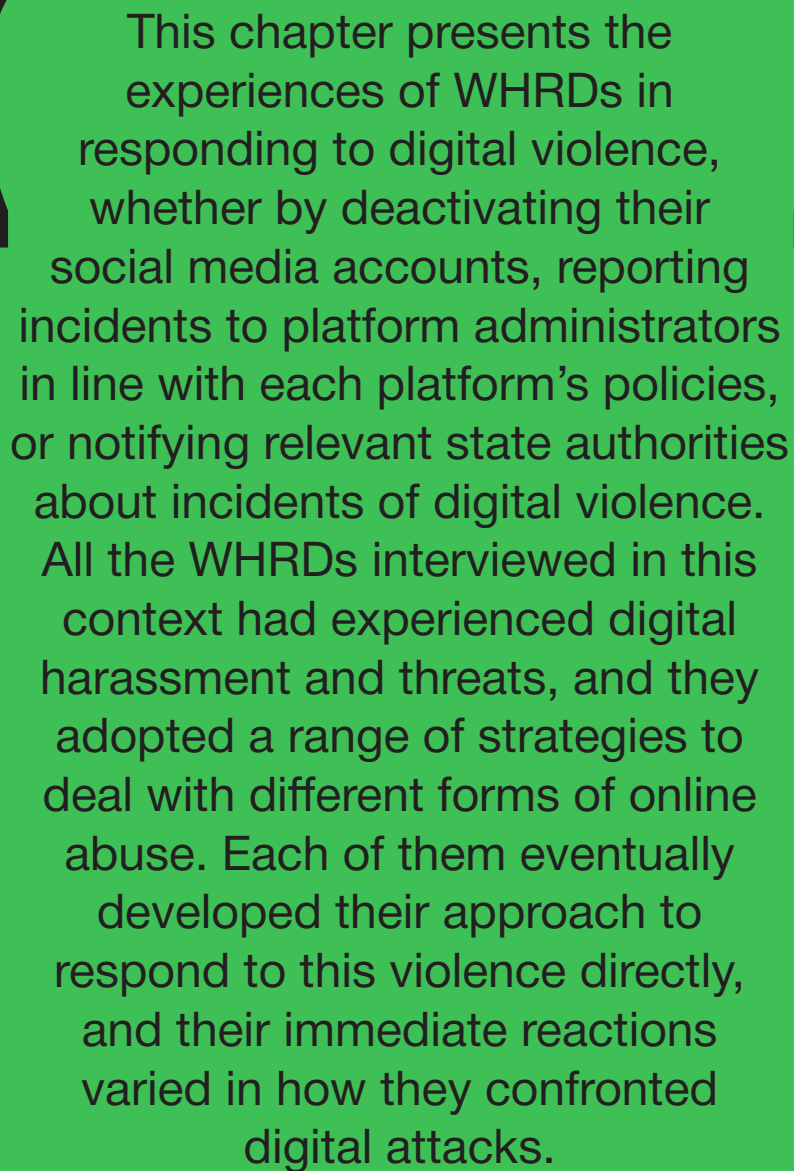
27. “Libya: Internal Security Agency must end Abuses in the Name of ‘Guarding Virtue.’” Amnesty International, 14 February 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/libya-internal-security-agency-must-end-abuses-in-name-of-guarding-virtue/>



Many WHRDs described the pandemic as a deeply “bleak” period, during which they felt intensely isolated. This sense of loneliness was heightened by their inability to meet with other WHRDs or to share what they were going through. For some, the isolation led to withdrawal from queer activism altogether. Donia*, a queer activist from Egypt, said that during the pandemic, she concluded that it was safer for her to step back from queer activism completely. She realised that if she were arrested, no one would know, and WHRDs would not be able to support her due to the lockdown. Donia described her overwhelming feelings at the time as fear and a sense that “the world was ending.” She understood that her energy needed to be focused simply on staying alive: that her existence, in and of itself, was a form of resistance.



How Queer and Trans
WHRDs Respond to
Technology Facilitated GBV



This chapter presents the experiences of WHRDs in responding to digital violence, whether by deactivating their social media accounts, reporting incidents to platform administrators in line with each platform's policies, or notifying relevant state authorities about incidents of digital violence. All the WHRDs interviewed in this context had experienced digital harassment and threats, and they adopted a range of strategies to deal with different forms of online abuse. Each of them eventually developed their approach to respond to this violence directly, and their immediate reactions varied in how they confronted digital attacks.

4.1 Deactivating Social Media Accounts

WHRDS respond in different ways to the perpetrators of digital violence, ranging from completely disregarding them to temporarily/permanently deactivating their accounts until the violence subsides or the viral spread of content comes to a halt, in order to give themselves time to mentally recover before re-engagement. Doaa, a WHRD from Tunisia, temporarily deactivates her social media accounts for as long as possible and disappears until she feels that the situation has passed. Faten, a queer feminist WHRD from Egypt, said she used to feel afraid of the threats she received, which led her to deactivate her accounts on social media platforms. WHRDs explained that closing/deactivating their social media accounts was often a response to fear or psychological exhaustion from constantly dealing with online violence. It was also a reflection of their awareness that the nature of their human rights work in the region requires adopting protective practices, the most effective measures among which are either deactivating accounts or completely ignoring the abuses.



4.2 Reporting Abuse to Social Media Platforms

Facebook’s Help Center provides policies and procedures for reporting inappropriate or abusive content, fake accounts, or fraudulent activity. However, WHRDs note that these policies fail to consider gender perspectives or the specific political and social contexts of the region. According to a 2023 Human Rights Watch report titled “All This Terror Because of a Photo,” the organization spoke with LGBTQI+ individuals in the MENA region who had submitted complaints to Facebook and Instagram regarding online harassment and harmful content. Despite these complaints, the platforms refused to remove the reported content, claiming it did not violate community guidelines. The content, presented by Human Rights Watch, included the non-consensual outing of individuals’ sexual orientation or gender identity, the publication of identifying information, and death threats — all of which had severe consequences for LGBTQI+ people. This harmful content was not detected by automation, and even when reported, automated systems failed to remove it. As a result, there was no effective mechanism to protect LGBTQI+ individuals, given that Facebook and Instagram rejected the submitted complaints.²⁸



Although Facebook is the mostly used social media platform by WHRDs they also described it as one of the most unsafe and psychologically harmful platforms, due to three main reasons:

28. The full English report is available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/23/questions-and-answers-facebook-instagram-and-digital-targeting-lgbt-people-mena>

1. First, the slow response to reports. WHRDs shared that when they report the digital violence they encounter on Facebook, the report takes a long time to review, by which time the smear campaigns have already spread widely and are difficult to control. WHRDs also stated that it is common for reports to go unanswered or rejected on the grounds that they do not violate Facebook's policies. This prompted 25% of WHRDs to believe that reporting inappropriate or offensive content, fake accounts, or smear campaigns against LBTQ+ and transgender individuals is often futile.
2. Facebook's Community Standards and Guidelines do not reflect an understanding of the context in the Arab region. Donia*, an Egyptian activist, and Shadia*, a Libyan activist, believe that Facebook is only interested in gaining the highest engagement rate and earning the highest profits because it is fundamentally a capitalist system, and does not care about protecting the platform's users. Yasmine, a Libyan activist, believes that reports submitted to the platform are genuinely reviewed because the responses are readily available. This led to her being banned from commenting for nearly a month after a post she published was reported, which she considered a form of digital tyranny. Many WHRDs believe that Facebook is unaware of the issues that women and the LBTQ+ community face in the region, and believe that the report reviewers are conservative, which could explain why they reject their reports against offensive content targeting the LBTQ+ community.
3. The challenge of different local Arabic dialects: Inas, an activist from Tunisia, says there are multiple words and dialects in the Maghreb society. While a statement in Tunisian might be normal, it could be considered an insult in Morocco and the rest of North Africa. A 2021 article noted that between 2019 and 2020, Facebook invested in increasing the number of employees fluent in local languages, including Arabic, as well as in country-specific expertise to expand the number of languages and dialects for content review. Samia, an activist from Egypt, says:



“I attended meetings with Facebook staff in the MENA region, talking to them about the hate speech and incitement to violence that is happening against the queer and LGBTQ+ community in a terrifying, clear, and direct way. They responded that responding would require a large number of staff because the system cannot monitor all content.”

WHRDs interviewed shared that violence on X and Instagram is much lower than on Facebook because they are not as widely used. Statistics confirm this. In Tunisia, there were approximately 431,700 X users and 2.75 million Instagram users, compared to 6.55 million Facebook users at the beginning of 2023. Similarly, in Morocco, there are approximately 1.05 million X users and 8.7 million Instagram users, compared to 17.3 million Facebook users. In Libya, X had approximately 548,100 users, and Instagram had 1.6 million users, compared to five million Libyan Facebook users. Finally, in Egypt, there are approximately 5.8 million X users and 15.35 million Instagram users, compared to 42 million Facebook users.

The relative unpopularity of X and Instagram encourages many defenders to use them. Yara, a transgender activist from Tunisia, shared that she uses Instagram more frequently than Facebook because she feels safer on the platform. Heidi, another advocate from Tunisia, said she decided not to use Facebook for psychological comfort, as it is a major reason she feels digitally unprotected.

Deciding not to Report to Relevant Authorities

We observed that out of the 20 WHRDs interviewed across the four countries, only one activist from Morocco resorted to the authorities to take legal action against an individual responsible for defamation campaigns, and he was indeed imprisoned. The remaining WHRDs explained that they did not resort to state institutions for reasons mentioned at the beginning of this report (including the use of cybercrime laws to suppress dissenting opinion and undermine freedom of expression, the enactment of vague/broad laws that criminalise forms of online expression based on undefined moral standards, and the lack of trust in state institutions not only because they are women, but also due to their gender and sexual identities, political and human rights activism, and general experiences with state institutions characterised by violence against them).

and general experiences with state institutions characterised by violence against them). Despite the existence of cybercrime laws in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, there is notable fear of resorting to them. Faten from Egypt says that resorting to the state for protection is “a losing battle.” Similarly, Dania from Morocco says that turning to the state may be easier for those who have no connection to civil society or do not display their gender identities or orientations. Still, it is much more difficult for trans individuals.

4.3 Attempting to Apply Digital Safety Measures

WHRDs shared that they try to apply measures to protect their accounts and ensure their digital security. These measures include accessing Facebook through a private network and not installing the application on their phones. They also regularly change their passwords and add symbols and numbers to make them more complex. Additionally, they link their accounts to two-factor authentication to avoid potential hacking, and consciously avoid clicking on external links via Facebook. Faten also ensures to log out and delete her account when travelling in an attempt to protect herself. Meanwhile, Heidi does not accept friend requests from people she does not know. Most defenders reduce the amount of personal information shared on Facebook and limit the sharing of personal content such as opinions and information. Finally, most WHRDs interviewed attend digital protection and safety workshops to enhance their protection tools and thus work in a relatively safer environment.





CHAPTER FIVE

**The Impact of
Technology Facilitated
GBV on WHRDs**

5.1 Self-Censorship and Withdrawal

Incidents of technology facilitated GBV have a significant impact on WHRDs, as all of them noted the psychological consequences of continuous exposure to digital violence. The psychological impact varies - some defenders choose to self-censor what they share online due to the ongoing violence.

For example, all WHRDs from Libya (all in exile) said they are extremely cautious when making social media posts out of fear that family members or acquaintances residing in Libya might be harmed. Sally says her posts are “very tame because I’m afraid someone might get hurt through me.” Yasmine from Libya says that the subconscious mind responds poorly to the accumulated effects of digital violence over time, leading WHRDs to become more inclined to withdraw from the scene to avoid becoming a target of this continuous violence.

The reason for withdrawal from digital activism among most WHRDs is their feeling of futility regarding the entire digital activism space. Donia, a queer feminist activist from Egypt in exile, says she does not have the energy to deal with people who lack the minimum level of humanity and understanding. Somaya agrees, saying she knows she is not protected on Facebook and will not be protected from any form of violence, which is why she completely stopped posting anything.



5.2 The Impact of Technology Facilitated GBV on the Wellbeing of WHRDs

On a psychological level, Inas, a defender from Tunisia, stopped posting anything online because of the psychological pressure caused by technology facilitated GBV, which affected her focus on her human rights work. Amira, a defender from Morocco, says digital violence made her stop her activism entirely for a year due to her deteriorating mental state to the point of fearing public spaces. Doaa, a defender from Tunisia, said she noticed a decline in her online activism over the past years because she had suffered greatly from psychological disorders that made her anxious most of the time, to the point of panic, which affected her studies and feminist activism. Most defenders stated that maintaining their wellbeing is a priority for them because it is essential for continuing their activism. Still, they find it difficult to do so due to the frustrating economic and political context, which makes any additional online violence extremely difficult to bear.



Many defenders from the four countries consider feminist activism extremely difficult, due to the lack of financial return from working with civil society organisations, making it hard to ensure their physical and mental safety, which includes affording health and psychological care. WHRDs shared that they could avoid the “physical” violence that results from online violence if they had lived in safer areas, but these are places they simply cannot afford. Hala, an activist from Egypt, points out that the wages most WHRDS earn through their work with human rights organisations are relatively low, especially when compared to their need to live in safe housing, which often comes with high rental costs. Similarly, Yasmine, an activist from Morocco, also highlighted several challenges tied to the support provided by donor institutions for WHRDs at risk due to online activism. Most notable among these is the lengthy process involved in reviewing support requests, which often does not match the urgency of the situation. Yasmine explains:

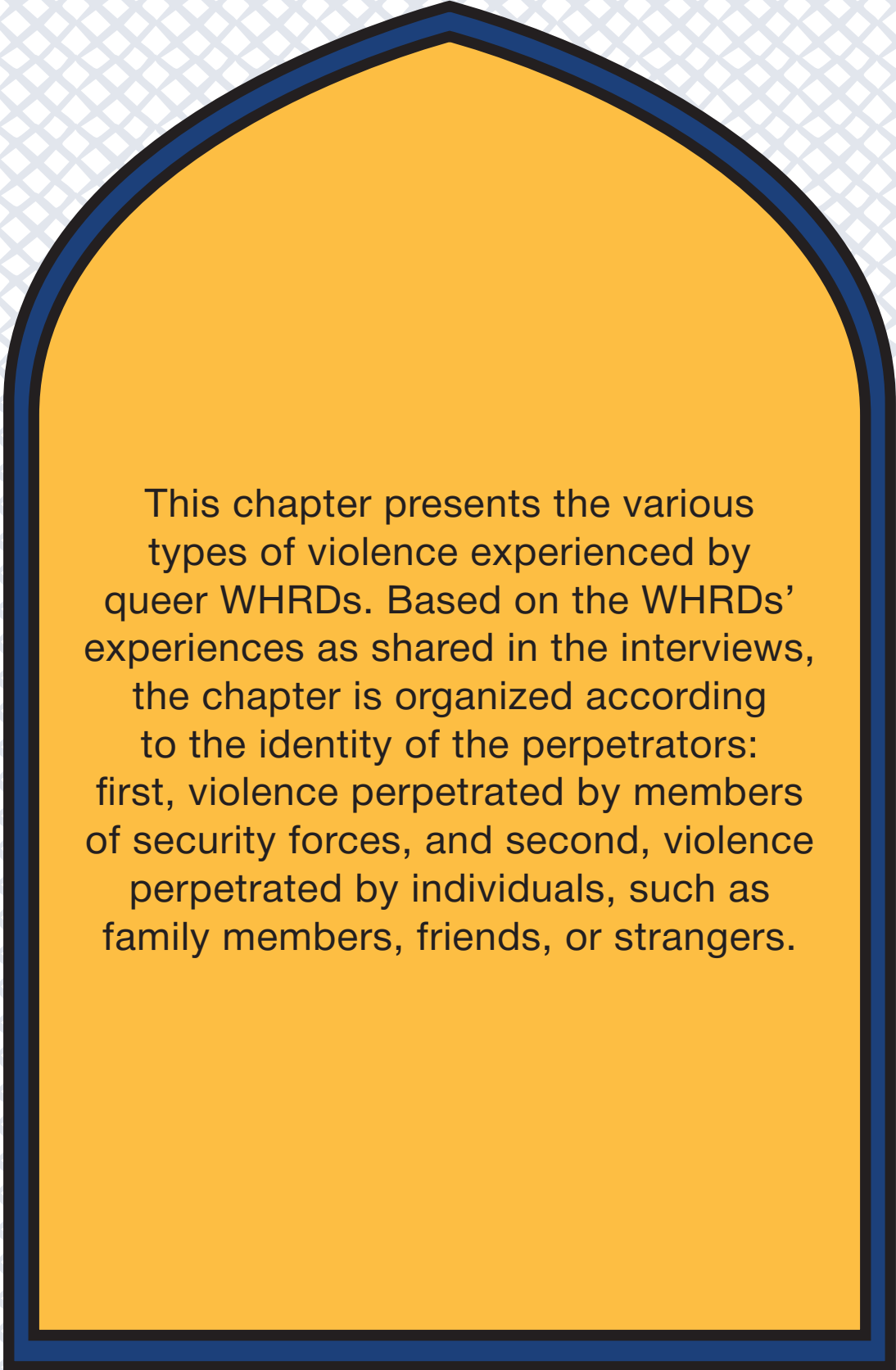
“Because we as defenders are in a sensitive and increasingly dangerous situation that does not allow for more time, this makes some defenders reconsider whether activism is worthwhile due to the lack of real support to protect them.”





CHAPTER SIX

**Feminist Internet
and Fostering a New
Feminist Environment**



This chapter presents the various types of violence experienced by queer WHRDs. Based on the WHRDs' experiences as shared in the interviews, the chapter is organized according to the identity of the perpetrators: first, violence perpetrated by members of security forces, and second, violence perpetrated by individuals, such as family members, friends, or strangers.

A feminist internet is an extension of her understanding of feminism, saying:

“Feminism means I create a space for everyone and speak safely for everyone. When I defend my own right, it doesn’t mean I want to deprive you of yours. I defend any right, even if it’s not my own.”

Amira conceptualises a feminist internet as a safe internet for everyone, free of discrimination, defamation, and violence, and is primarily intersectional, because feminism is rooted in intersectionality, meaning it must take into account the ways in which risks are highly dependent on the identities of users. Therefore, assuming that all women experience the internet in the same way will not work to decrease the extent of the violence faced by queer women.

Donia, a queer feminist activist from Egypt in exile, imagines a feminist internet as one “with a face,” meaning a space where they feel like they’re sending complaints to people, not to a set of algorithms that don’t understand WHRDs’ contexts. Some trans activists pointed out that the term “feminist internet” might sound undesirable due to their exclusionary experiences within the feminist movement by some feminists. Trans activists remind us of the importance of critiquing many feminist spaces that exclude them, and the need to reflect on and review our spaces so that the term “feminist internet” does not bring up painful memories.



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Based on the interviews conducted with WHRDs, there are two ways to build inclusive and safe digital spaces for everyone from their perspectives. First, the role of technology companies²⁹ such as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, Grindr, and YouTube, in providing services and tools for protection against digital violence. Sally, a trans activist from Egypt, believes that these companies must address the content policies driven by algorithms aimed at maximizing user engagement and allowing impunity for harmful content against womn and LGBTQIA+ individuals online. Riham recommends the existence of clear and accessible reporting mechanisms for users to report harassment and violence.



29. “Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Access to Information through a Multistakeholder Approach.” UNESCO, 2023. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387339> Multistakeholder

A feminist approach emphasizes that the goal of creating a safe internet is to positively impact the greatest number of people, in all their diversity and complexity. A feminist approach, therefore, is not simply an add-on to already existing policies, but must take the form of systemic change. This is because, to bring about such change, the feminist perspective recognises that digital security threats affect people differently depending on gender and intersecting forms of oppression, such as race and class. A feminist internet contributes to addressing various forms of violence and oppression, which is why it can be seen as a radical transformation of how the internet is structured, how it functions, and the policies that govern it.



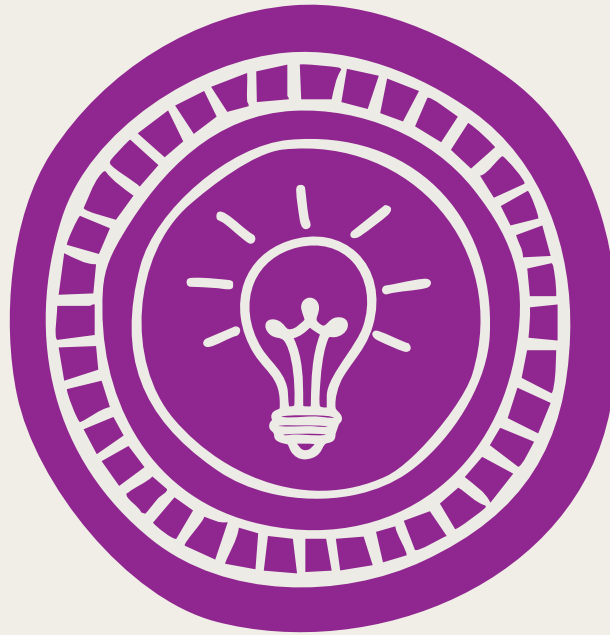


CHAPTER SEVEN

What Forms of Support and Knowledge do WHRDs Need?

WHRDs unanimously highlighted technical support as one of the most urgent needs. This includes regular digital safety workshops, guidance, and awareness articles on the latest developments and digital threats targeting human rights activism, all in Arabic and tailored to the specific context of each country. Egyptian WHRDs noted that while many digital safety workshops occur, they often target the same individuals, mainly WHRDs who speak English.

They highlighted the need to provide workshops and guidance in clear, comprehensible Arabic, as many WHRDs felt that the existing Arabic content is incomprehensible as it had been rigidly translated from English. Defenders described reading it as “reading a foreign language.” Finally, they emphasised the importance of having a contact point with a technical person in their countries to communicate with in case their accounts are hacked.



All WHRDs also stressed the need for psychological support as a form of response to online violence. This is due to the constant self-monitoring required for digital safety and the experience of receiving threats from a large number of people at once, which does not happen in “offline” violations and triggers continuous anxiety and fear. Somaya says that digital safety is inseparable from mental safety, because:



“Both are important. They complement each other. It’s time we stop seeing digital safety as separate from psychological safety; they must go together.”

Sally believes that psychological support is important to prevent WHRDs from reaching a point of normalisation with digital violence and harassment. She anticipates that, over time, this form of normalisation would affect their safety as their sense of danger would gradually fade with constant exposure to violence. WHRDs also highlighted legal support as an urgent need, especially the presence of lawyers for defence and assistance with relocation in times of danger. Some WHRDs added that methods of urgent and rapid support must be improved, as the procedures are often too long, increasing the risk and psychological and emotional impacts on them and diminishing their trust in some donor organisations that claim to support WHRDs.



WHRDs emphasised that their experiences with digital violence should not be seen as a series of isolated incidents, but as part of a broader context and an indicator of systemic violent practices. Technology is loaded with biases already embedded in our culture, laws, and practices. And although many forms of violence manifest only through the internet (such as misuse of images without consent, online bullying, spreading false information, and using geolocation data without consent), this violence does not happen only online; rather, there is a continuum of forms of violence, between online and offline violence. The roots of this violence are the same, even if it manifests in new spaces and through different mediums.



Conclusion

This report addressed digital violence against queer WHRDs in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco, due to the nature of their feminist activism and advocacy for queer rights, or because of their gender identities and sexual orientations. The report presented the ways in which the spread of GBV online is yet another form of violence rooted in patriarchal beliefs and violent practices targeting WHRDs because of their identities and the nature of their activism. Online GBV feeds on algorithms that are driven by encouraging users to constantly engage, in order to sustain the data economy, which is built on capitalism and the use of all aspects of human life and relationships, perceived as freely extractable resources. The experiences of WHRDs revealed that online GBV is deeply rooted in our cultures, laws, and practices and that any attempt to reduce it must address the chain of violence that extends both online and offline. This rootedness of violence is evident in the lack of concern from state institutions, and even their roles as actors responsible for violence against women, often using cybercrime laws (where they exist) to suppress and target WHRDs. For this reason, automated interventions alone, such as content regulation using artificial intelligence by social media companies, will always be limited, as it cannot take into account the complexities of context, the imbalance of power dynamics, and the inequalities in exercising freedom of opinion and expression.

WHRDs deal with online violence in different ways, including blocking, muting, and reporting abusive content and violence. The block list, a feature on X that allows users to block multiple people and share their blocked account lists, is seen as helpful in filtering out bullies and aggressors. Although most of the WHRDs who participated in the research reported incidents of violence to social media platforms, they agreed that their complaints were often not taken seriously, or that the platforms responded by claiming that the offensive content or accounts did not violate community guidelines. In such cases, blocking is a temporary and superficial solution to the hostile environment on social media platforms. It also sends a message of shifting responsibility away from social media companies regarding how to deal with violence: just block, mute, but that does not mean the violence will stop. As we heard from defenders, violence can continue across different digital spaces, in addition to their “real world.”

All WHRDs emphasised the importance of care and emotional and psychological wellbeing as essential responses to online violence. This is often overlooked, as the focus tends to be on technical support to stop the violence and ensure the defenders’ physical safety. In a climate of intense violence against WHRDs, all of them stressed the importance of having an alternative digital infrastructure based on alternative methods of content creation with different rules on how content reaches users, in order to reduce the stimuli of social media platforms. Such alternative infrastructure contributes to developing a slower and calmer communication environment and includes interventions that can delay or restrict violence. WHRDs asked: is it possible to design such an infrastructure to eliminate online GBV? Given that the primary goal of social media platforms is profit, is it realistic to call for their redesign? These questions cannot be answered within the scope of this research, although WHRDs expressed doubt about the possibility of such change taking place.

Glossary of Technical Terms and Expressions

Arabic Term: اي جولوونك تال هل هسرت يذلي عامت جال عون لى لع مئاق ل فنعال
English Term: Technology facilitated gender-based violence

Definition:

Any act committed, facilitated, exacerbated, or amplified using information and communication technologies or other digital means, that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, economic harm, or other violations of rights and freedoms. This definition recognizes that technology facilitated gender-based violence, like all other forms of gender-based violence, is rooted in discriminatory gender norms that intersect with other forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors, and is a result of them.

Arabic Term: يمقر لاءاضف ل جراخ فنعال
English Term: Offline violence

Definition:

Violence targeting WHRDs outside the online space, with its effects extending into their physical lives, families, and homes.

Arabic Term: ةي و ب أ ل ةي روك ذل
English Term: Patriarchy/Patriarchal masculinities

Definition:

A social system of male dominance over woman and people with identities and sexual orientations that are different from the mainstream ones.

Arabic Term: تامي م ل
English Term: Memes

Definition:

Refers to ideas, behaviors, or styles that spread rapidly among people, specifically images paired with sarcastic captions intended for satirical humor.

Arabic Term: فيضارتفا ةصاخ ةكبش

English Term: Virtual Private Network (VPN)

Definition:

A network that allows encrypted connection over the internet. It provides security mechanisms, such as encryption, enabling VPN users to securely access the internet from different locations.

Arabic Term: يئانثال قيثوتل

English Term: Two-step verification/authentication

Definition:

A method that allows users to verify their identities with a service provider using two different authentication methods. The first might be something the user knows, like a password or PIN, and the second might be something the user possesses, like a phone, wireless access key, or fingerprint.

Arabic Term: يريوكال عم تجم ل

English Term: Queer Community

Definition:

An umbrella term for people whose gender identities, sexual orientations, or gender expressions do not align with traditional societal expectations.

Arabic Term: ةيردنجل ةي وه ل

English Term: Gender Identity

Definition:

Refers to ideas, behaviors, or styles that spread rapidly among people, specifically images paired with sarcastic captions intended for satirical humor.

Arabic Term: يسنجل روبع ل باهروأ اي بوف سنارت

English Term: Transphobia

Definition:

Actions and sentiments that are hostile toward transgender individuals, considered a form of racism and discrimination based on gender identity.

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