



ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
ISSUE Tackling the Issue of Cyber Harassment of Women in the MENA Region
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Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed every aspect of modern life. Along with the opportunities presented by cyberspace, new forms of violence have emerged. A worrying example is online harassment against women, a gender-based extension of violence into the digital realm. This problem has become widespread and deeply concerning. In the Middle East and North Africa, social norms and gender inequalities already hinder women's participation in public life, and online harassment exacerbates their insecurity. This undermines women's rights, freedoms, and overall well-being.

Online harassment often extends beyond the virtual world, causing real-life harm, excluding women from the public sphere, and limiting their opportunities for education, employment, or participation in public discourse. As a highly pressing issue, it requires immediate attention from the international community, governments, civil society, and technology companies.

Definition of Key Terms

Cyber Harassment - Repetitive or serious act of harassment perpetrated through digital platforms with the intent to intimidate, threaten, humiliate, or target a specific individual. In this context, it specifically refers to gender-based cyber harassment targeting women.

Online Gender Violence - Various forms of gender-based violence perpetrated through digital technologies and online platforms. This includes cyber harassment, cyberstalking, threats, hate speech, and the dissemination of private photos without consent.

Technology-facilitated violence - Harmful behaviors perpetrated or exacerbated using digital tools such as social media, instant messaging applications, artificial intelligence, and

surveillance technologies. This term emphasizes how technology amplifies and exacerbates abusive behavior.

Non-Consensual Private Image Sharing (NCII) - The dissemination or threat of dissemination of another person's private sexual photos or videos without their consent. NCII is often referred to as "revenge pornography," but is more accurately described from a legal and ethical perspective.

Online stalking - Continuous monitoring, sending of messages, or tracking of others through digital platforms, causing fear, distress, or a sense of threat.

Digital Anonymity - The ability to interact online without revealing one's true identity. While anonymity can protect privacy and freedom of expression, it can also be abused by criminals, enabling them to harass women with impunity.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - Refers to computer systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence. In the field of cyber harassment, AI can be abused to create abusive content, automate harassment, or produce deepfake material.

Freedom of Expression - A fundamental human right recognized by international law, allowing individuals to express their views without the threat of censorship or retaliation. Cyber harassment often restricts women's ability to safely exercise this right online.

Digital Safety - Digital safety refers to the ability to use digital platforms safely without fear of harassment, surveillance, or abuse. Digital safety includes privacy protection, reporting systems, and user education.

Content Moderation - The processes online platforms use to monitor, moderate, and remove harmful or abusive content. Weak moderation systems often contribute to the persistence of cyber harassment.

General Overview

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND DIGITAL CONTEXT

Over the past two decades, the internet and social media have dramatically enhanced connectivity in the Middle East and North Africa. This transformation has reshaped political discourse, economic participation, education, and community building. From the Arab Spring of 2011 to the digital expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms have been crucial for freedom of expression and civic engagement. Social media empowers youth, women activists, and marginalized groups, enabling them to share experiences, organize movements, and challenge traditional norms.

However, with increased internet access, women face greater online risks. With the emergence of more digital tools, perpetrators - whether strangers, partners, or institutional figures - have found new methods of harassment, often going unreported. Cyber harassment is no longer merely an individual act of misconduct, but a systemic means of suppressing women's public voice.

Statistics highlight the severity of cyberbullying in the Middle East and North Africa. In some countries over 80% of women report experiencing online sexual harassment; in Egypt, the rates of women suffering from indecent images, harassment, and psychological harm are high.

SOCIAL REALITY AND GENDER NORMS

Cyberbullying in the Middle East and North Africa is intertwined with existing social norms, gender expectations, and family structures. Many women feel unsafe online, and online harassment is often accompanied by pressure from family and community. Women's online behaviour can lead to accusations, humiliation, or restrictions on their freedom of action and autonomy. In some cases, cyberbullying can even lead to physical threats, forced isolation, and psychological trauma. In conservative or patriarchal societies, publicly expressing personal experiences can trigger strong backlash.

In some countries, state actors and government agencies use internet policies and surveillance to suppress women's voices in various ways, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Internet surveillance, arrests for online speech, and punitive cybercrime laws fail to adequately protect victims, further exacerbating the the difficult situation of women's safety and freedom of expression.

PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS

Cyber harassment in the Middle East and North Africa takes many forms, including:

- Private and peer-to-peer harassment, often involving young men sending sexist, threatening, or sexually harassing messages to women;
- Organized groups using cyberattacks, doxing, and deepfakes to defame or intimidate women;
- State agencies or institutional actors using digital surveillance and stringent cybercrime laws have a particularly severe impact on women activists, journalists, and critics.
- Victims span all ages and backgrounds, from students and social media users to journalists, human rights defenders, and political leaders. Activists advocating for women's rights or political reform often face targeted attacks aimed at damaging their online and offline reputations and safety.

AFFECTED COUNTRIES

Cyber harassment affects all countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but its prevalence and patterns vary. Data shows that the following regions have higher levels of cyber harassment

Cyberbullying affects the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; however, some countries are particularly relevant due to high incidence rates, legal developments or lively public debate.

Jordan has recorded the highest rate of online harassment against women, and discussions on cybercrime legislation are ongoing.

In Egypt, several high-profile cases involving female influencers and activists have been reported, highlighting the intersection of online harassment, morality laws and digital regulation.

In Turkey, high levels of online gender-based violence have been reported, particularly against women in journalism and politics.

In Lebanon, significant online abuse against female activists has occurred, particularly during times of political instability.

Morocco and Tunisia have introduced legislative measures to combat violence against women, including elements related to digital harassment, although implementation varies.

Major Parties Involved

Jordan: Reports indicate widespread online sexual harassment, reflecting challenges in the country's legal framework and online protection.

Egypt: Women not only suffer harassment but also face broader digital surveillance, with punitive measures by state actors exacerbating women's cybersecurity issues.

Turkey: Research shows that many women in Turkey have experienced cyberbullying, raising concerns about freedom of expression and cybersecurity.

Palestine: Numerous reports indicate that Palestinian women have suffered cyberbullying.

Lebanon, Morocco: Cyber gender violence is particularly prominent (especially among women participating in public or political discussions).

Timeline of Events

Before 2010 - Early Digital Applications: The rapid spread of the internet and mobile networks in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 21st century paved the way for new modes of communication, community building, and activism.

2011 - The Arab Spring and Digital Mobilization: The Arab Spring marked a pivotal period in the application of the internet. Women used social media to organize events, document protests, and amplify the voices of marginalized groups. However, with the rise of digital activism, negative online commentary and surveillance also emerged.

2015-2020 - Growth and Awareness of Cyber Harassment: As global and regional awareness of gender violence increased, digital gender violence gradually became a recognized problem.

Movements such as “Take Back The Tech!”, which began in 2006, have made significant progress in addressing violence against women in the information technology field.

2020-Present - The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased internet usage in the Middle East and North Africa, leading to an increase in online harassment. During this period online violence increased against women particularly on social media.

2024-2025 - UN Women and other UN agencies have prioritized paying focus to the increase in digital violence against women. Movements such as Action 16 have highlighted the need for stronger protections and legal reforms globally. This report highlights the role of artificial intelligence, anonymity, and weak accountability mechanisms in fuelling persistent online violence.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

POLICY AND LEGAL RESPONSES

Some Middle Eastern and North African countries have attempted to address online harassment, but didn't succeed. Some countries have revised their criminal codes to incorporate cyberbullying into broader gender-based violence laws.

For example:

- Some North African and Levantine countries have added cyberbullying provisions to their women's rights laws, but enforcement remains weak.
- Some countries' cybercrime laws target cyberbullying, but often lack specific details or fail to protect freedom of expression. For example, Jordan's 2023 cybercrime law, while addressing some cybercrimes, has been criticized for its vague provisions that could harm digital rights and suppress freedom of expression.

UNITED NATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

UN agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia have prioritized cyber violence against women in their global advocacy efforts. Through research, advocacy campaigns, and regional dialogues (e.g., “Cyberspace, Real

Consequences: Ending Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls”), they have raised public awareness, summarized best practices, and driven legal reform.

SPECIFIC CASES IN THE MENA REGION

Cyberbullying in the MENA region is not only theoretical, but has also been demonstrated in many high-profile cases that illustrate its seriousness. In Egypt, several female social media influencers were arrested under cybercrime and morality laws after online campaigns targeted them with harassment and accusations, demonstrating how online abuse can lead to escalating legal and social consequences. In Jordan, female journalists and activists reported coordinated online harassment campaigns designed to discredit their credibility and silence their political views, especially after discussions on amending cybercrime laws. In Lebanon, women involved in public activism during the 2019 protests reported significant online abuse, including threats and the distribution of personal images without consent.

These cases illustrate how cyberbullying in the MENA region often intersects with political expression, cultural norms, and legal systems, becoming a social and structural problem rather than an isolated individual abuse.

WHY IS THIS PROBLEM DIFFICULT TO ADDRESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA?

While cyberbullying is a global phenomenon, certain regional factors make the situation particularly complex in the Middle East and North Africa.

Traditional gender norms often discourage women from speaking out online, and victims are often blamed rather than helped. This contributes to widespread underreporting.

However, while some countries have introduced laws on cybercrime, these often lack gender-sensitive provisions or raise concerns about freedom of expression. As a result, protection mechanisms remain limited and enforcement is inconsistent.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

CONCLUSION

Cyber harassment against women in the Middle East and North Africa is a complex challenge requiring approach. The digital space holds immense potential to empower women through economic participation, online education, political engagement, and social action. However, many women remain unable to use the online environment safely due to a lack of adequate legal protections, digital literacy and effective reporting mechanisms.

Persistent cyber harassment not only violates women's rights to safety, dignity, and freedom of expression but also undermines the broader goals of gender equality and sustainable development. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort from all parties: strengthening the legal system, improving digital literacy education programs, holding technology companies accountable, and enhancing data collection. As the UN Commission on the Status of Women, representatives should seek solutions that balance protection, freedom of expression, digital inclusion, and responsibility.

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