

ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE MENA: EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS



INTRODUCTION

Technology-mediated violence against women is a new form of misogyny that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face daily. It is, however, a well-known byproduct of patriarchal norms. Women only need to express themselves online to be subjected to gendered and sexualized attacks. This is amplified when women speak out about feminist issues, expose harassers, or challenge authority. Misogyny can be found in both public and private spheres, and there are strong parallels in how misogyny is perpetuated in both. For centuries, feminists have questioned the urban design of public spaces that creates unsafe streets and squares. They have done the same in private spheres such as homes, schools, and workplaces, constantly questioning who controls the design and sets the rules of space to facilitate between—figure and - often - normalize violence against women? The same can be said for the internet. Whether they are evident on the public network or utterly anonymous in a private group chat, feminists face the trials of an internet that initially promised to liberate us all from gendered bodies daily. Today, we pose a new but familiar question: how can technological design and policy make digital engagement safer and more accessible for women and trans people everywhere?

To this end, Fe-Male in partnership with The International Center for Non-profit Law (ICNL), wanted to explore the experiences and perceptions of online violence among WHRDs and feminist activists in the MENA. This report is based on an online survey that collected data in February and March 2021 and guided by shared experiences of online threats and attacks our feminist community has faced and witnessed over the past decade. The specific goal of this report is to influence the design and content of training resources that can support MENA WHRDs in navigating technology with more confidence and security. Indeed, the exponentially rapid tech developments, along with the unchecked amalgamation of tech giants taking over the public sphere, present us with unprecedented threats to our privacy, autonomy, and freedoms. And like our feminist ancestors grappled with technological advancements for centuries, we too must fight the gendered particularities of these threats and build an open, accessible, and safe internet for all.

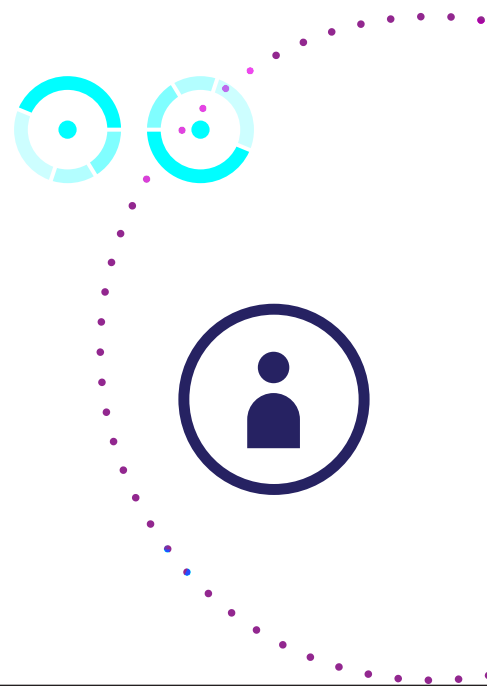


METHODOLOGY

The survey was created based on instruments from APC's Global Monitoring Survey¹ (2014) used previously to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and practice of sexual rights activists worldwide. It is a self-administered survey online through SurveyMonkey. The sample was a convenient one, including women, trans*, and non-binary activists in the network of the founders of Fe-male and the primary consultant on this project. These activists were from different countries within the Arab Region. They were contacted via email to fill the questionnaire and then sent two reminders as a follow-up.

The questionnaire was translated to Arabic and piloted for a couple of days before starting data collection.

This survey had a few limitations. First of all, the data is not generalizable to all feminist activists in Lebanon and the region. The sample was a convenient one, targeting the network of the leading researchers. Additionally, it is limited in size, and as we are not aware of the total number of female activists on social media, we cannot optimally calculate the sample size needed. Furthermore, the respondents were mainly based in Lebanon and much less in other countries in the regions. Finally, the significant respondents of the surveys were women, and there were few non-binary respondents and one trans*. Therefore, we have focused our analysis on the most apparent and statistically relevant trends encompassing the experiences of this sample group.



RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics-*+

A total of 115 participants filled the survey. The majority filled it in English (63%, n=72). The average age of the respondents was 34.35 ± 9.44 years old, with a minimum of 18 years old and a maximum of 65 years old. Showing the diversity in age groups. As for gender, the majority was women with 96.5% (n=111), 3 non-binary there was also 3 (2.6%) non-binary respondents and 1 (0.9%) trans*. Participants were from multiple countries in the Arab region, with about half from Lebanon (46.1%, n=53), 12.2% (n=14) from Egypt, and 9.6% (n=11) from Tunisia, as for the other countries, each represented less than 8% from the total sample (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of participants by their country

Country	N	%
Libya	3	2.6
Lebanon	53	46.1
Egypt	14	12.2
Palestine	9	7.8
Jordan	8	7.0
Syria	7	6.1
Tunisia	11	9.6
Morocco	2	1.7
Algeria	3	2.6
Iraq	1	.9
Saudi Arabia	1	.9
Kuwait	1	.9
Qatar	1	.9
United Arab Emirates	1	.9
Total	115	100.0

Demographics - Activism

Participants were asked to describe their activism and engagement; 37.4% (n=43) were active with established NGOs, and 27.8% (n=32) considered themselves as independent human rights activists (Figure 1). The activism of respondents encompassed different activities, notably raising awareness and campaigning for the issues they work on (59.1%, n=68) and training and capacity building (41.70%, n=48). Also, more than a third were engaged in advocacy and policy reform (39.10%, n=45) and documentation, research, and knowledge production (36.50%, n=42) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: The self-reported types of activism respondents are engaged in

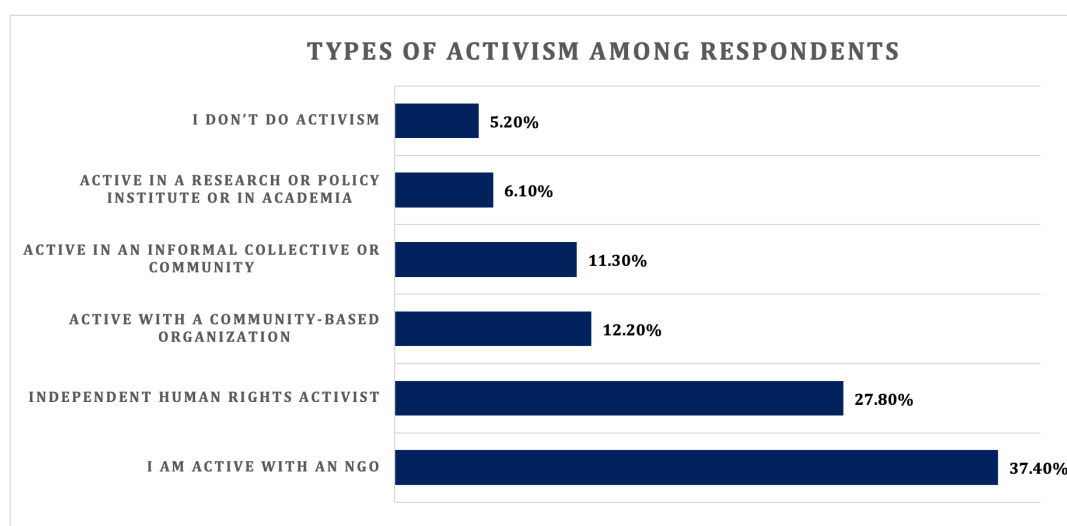
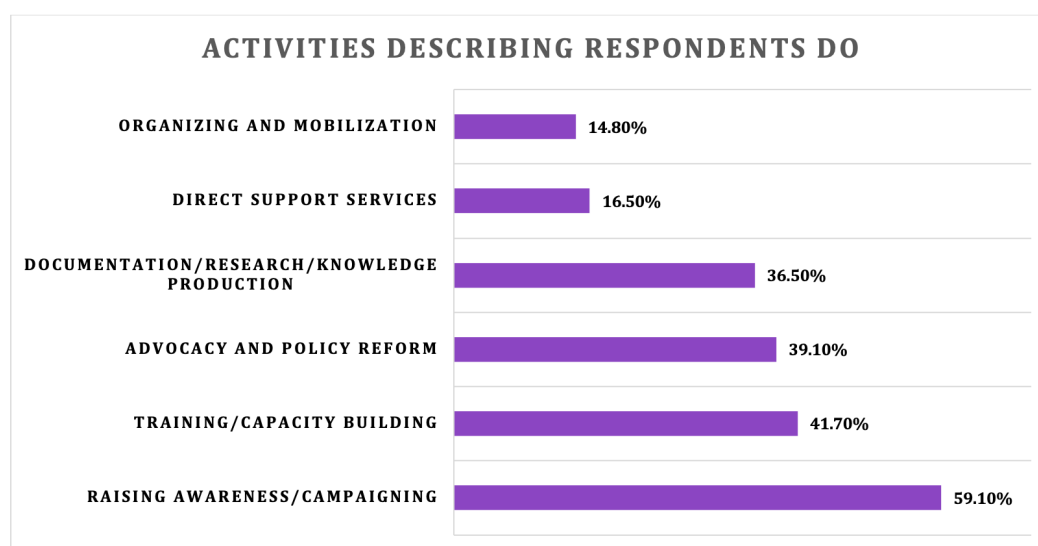


Figure 2: The self-reported activities describing what respondents do



Visibility Online

Respondents were asked about their online visibility, whereby more than half (52.2%, n=60) are very publicly online, 30.4% (n=35) use the internet regularly but maintain a level of personal discretion, and the rest are not publicly online (Figure 3). There is no significant difference between being publicly online and your age when looking at different age groups. The highest difference was for the category of very publicly visible, whereby surprisingly, the younger (≤ 30 years old) were less publicly online with 47.6% (n=20), compared to 57.1% (n=36) in the above 30 years old group (Figure 3a).

Figure 3: Online presence reported by respondents

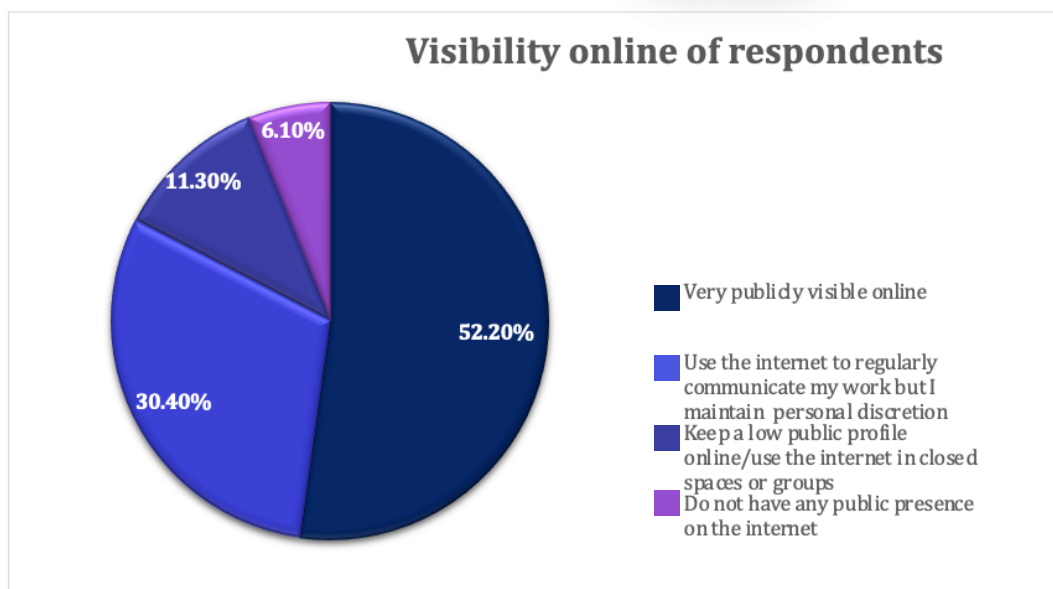
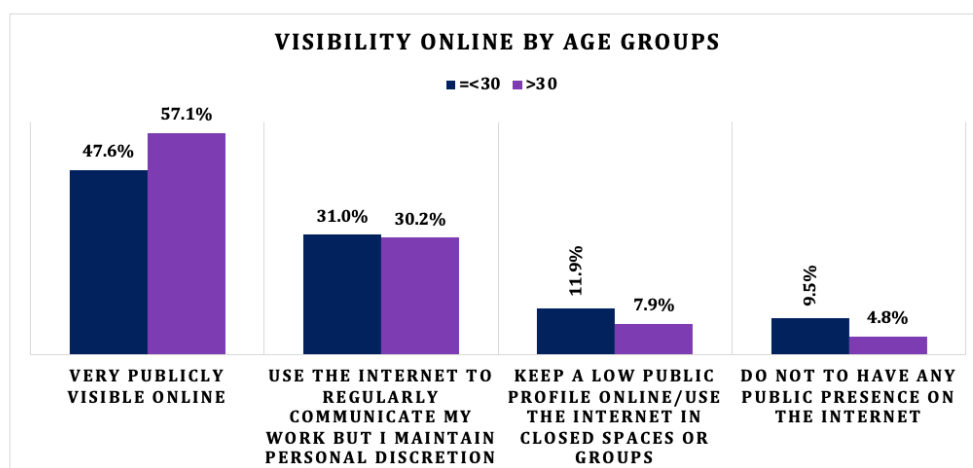


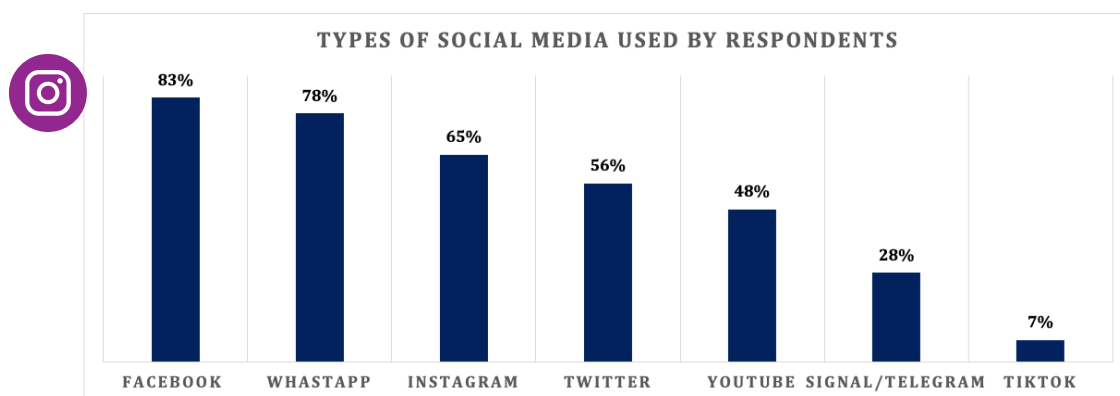
Figure 3a: Visibility online by age groups



Type of Social Media Used

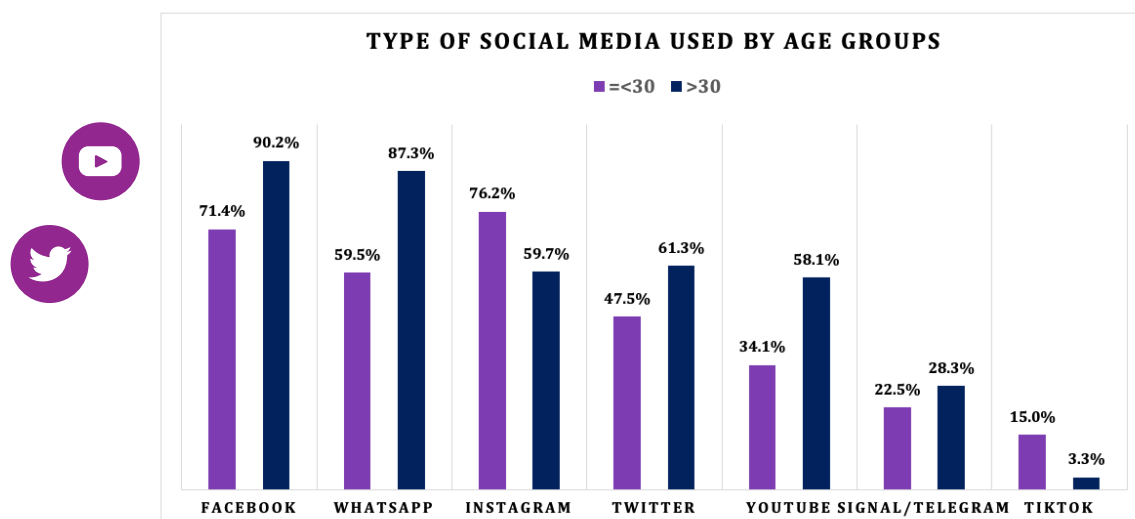
Participants were asked to rank from “not used at all” to “used a lot” different types of social media outlets. The category “used” and “used a lot” were aggregated together into one category labeled as “used,” which is detailed in figure 4. As such, the most used social media outlets are Facebook (83%, n=93), WhatsApp (78%, n=89), Instagram (65%, n=74), Twitter (56%, n=62) and YouTube (48%, n=54). Signal/Telegram and TikTok are less used despite their widespread popularity in the past year. When it comes to age groups and social media use, those above 30 years old are present on almost all social media platforms from Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Youtube, and Telegram/Signal with 90.2%, 87.3%, 61.3%, 58.1%, and 28.3% respectively. While those younger are mostly on Instagram and Tiktok with 76.2% and 15.0%, respectively (Figure 4a).

Figure 4: The different types of social media outlets used by respondents



*5 respondents mentioned also using other types of social media, such as LinkedIn and MeWe

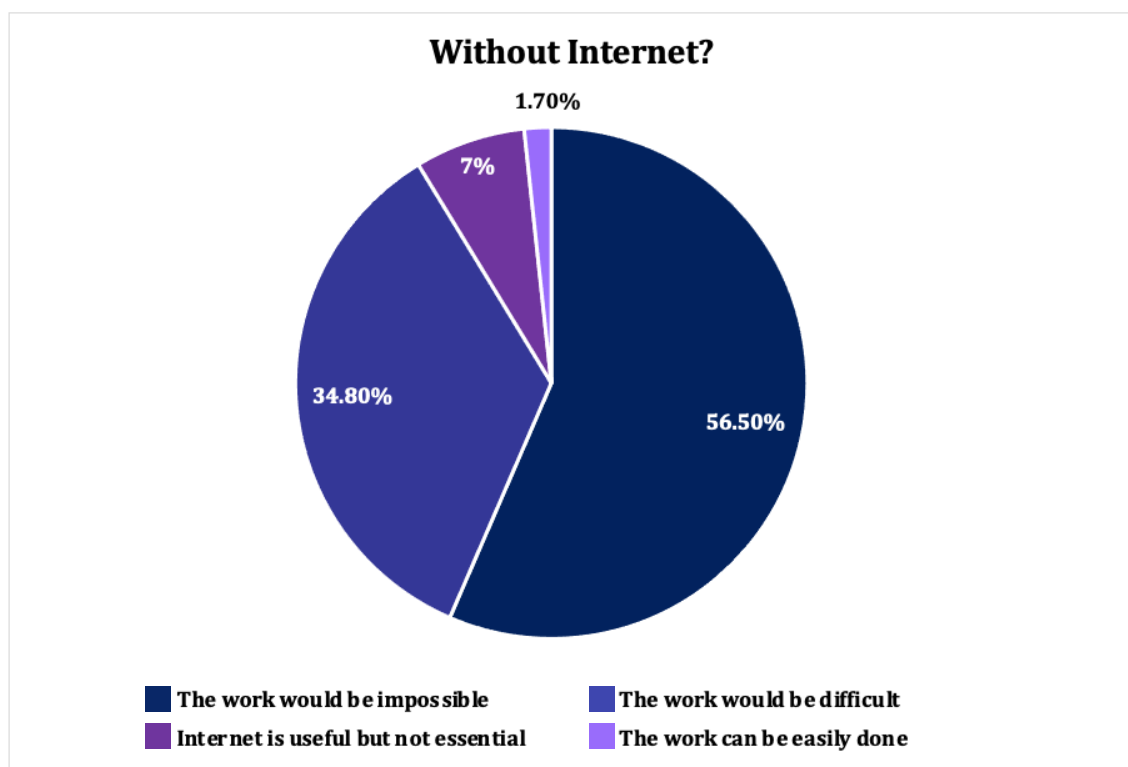
Figure 4a: The different types of social media outlets used by age groups of respondents



The Importance of the use of the Internet for your Activism

When asked about the importance of the internet in their work, 56.5% (n=65) of participants mentioned that it is impossible to do work without the internet. Another 34.8% (n=40) said it would be difficult to do the job. Only 8.7% consider that the internet is not essential (Figure 5).

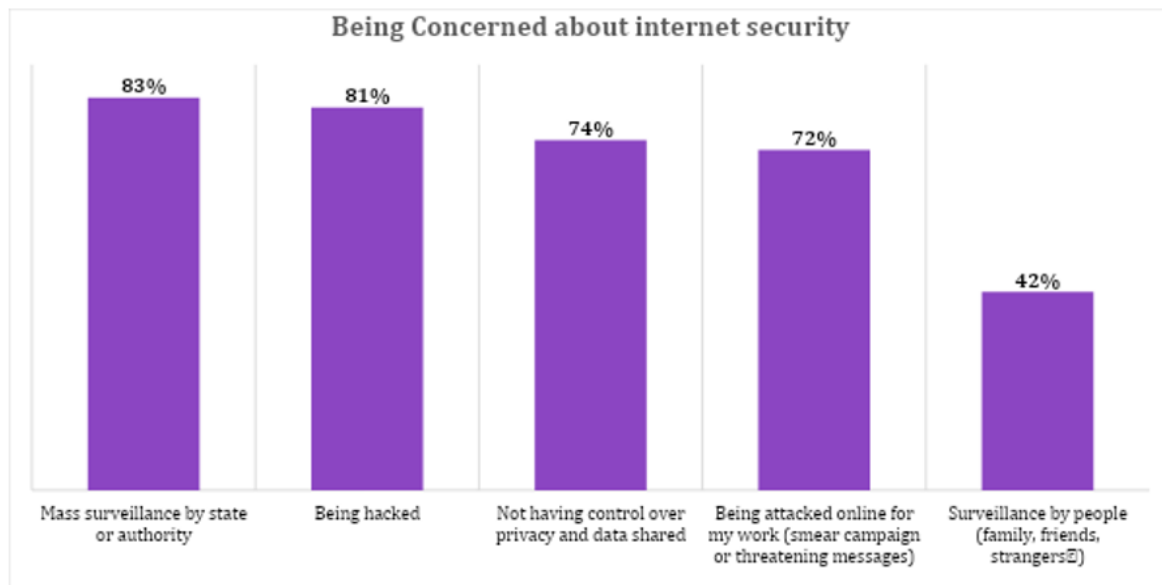
Figure 5: The importance of the internet for the work of respondents



Concerns about internet security

Participants were asked a set of questions related to internet security with answers ranging from “not concerned at all” to “very concerned.” The options of “concerned” and “very concerned” were lumped together. Accordingly, 83% (n=85) of respondents were worried about mass surveillance by the state of authority, 81% (n=84) were concerned about being hacked, 74% (n=77) were concerned about not having control over their privacy and data shared, 72% (n=75) were worried about being attacked online for their work. Finally, less than half of the respondents (42%, n=43) were concerned about surveillance by other people (Figure 6).

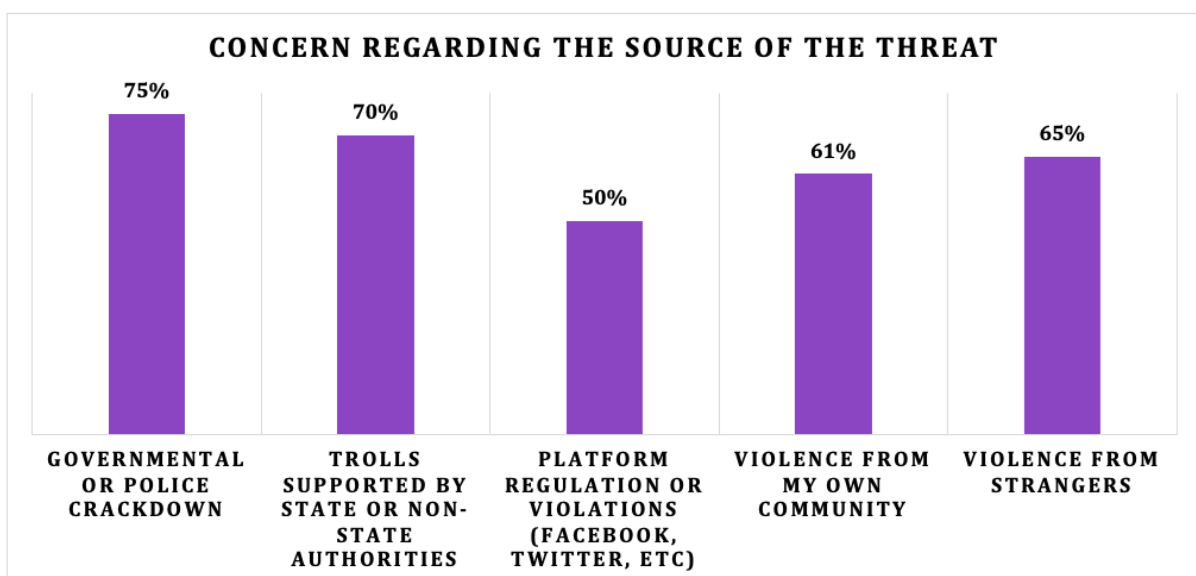
Figure 6: Levels of concerns about internet security, privacy, and surveillance as reported by respondents



Concern regarding the source of the threat

Figure 7 details concerns about the source of the threat. Like statements in figure 6, the origins of threats were ranked from “not concerned at all” to “very concerned.” Also, the categories of “concerned” and “very concerned” were aggregated to obtain one type, and the source of threats was classified. About a quarter of respondents were most concerned about governmental or police crackdowns (75%, n=77) and trolls supported by state and non-state authorities (70%, n=71). This is in sync with being majorly worried about surveillance from the government and state.

Figure 7: Concern about the source of the threat reported by respondents



Experiences of Violence

Respondents reported different violence experiences; more than half of them (55.70%, n=64) received sexist, racist, and/or homophobic messages and experiences. Additionally, a striking 30.4% (n=35) received direct attacks or threats of violence, and 21.70% (n=25) stated that they did not experience any of those options (Figure 8). Figure 9 shows the gendered ways of the attacks, more than half were victims of sexist attacks (53.90%, n=62), and only 3 (2.6%) were not victims of gendered attacks.

Figure 8: Experiences of violence as described by respondents

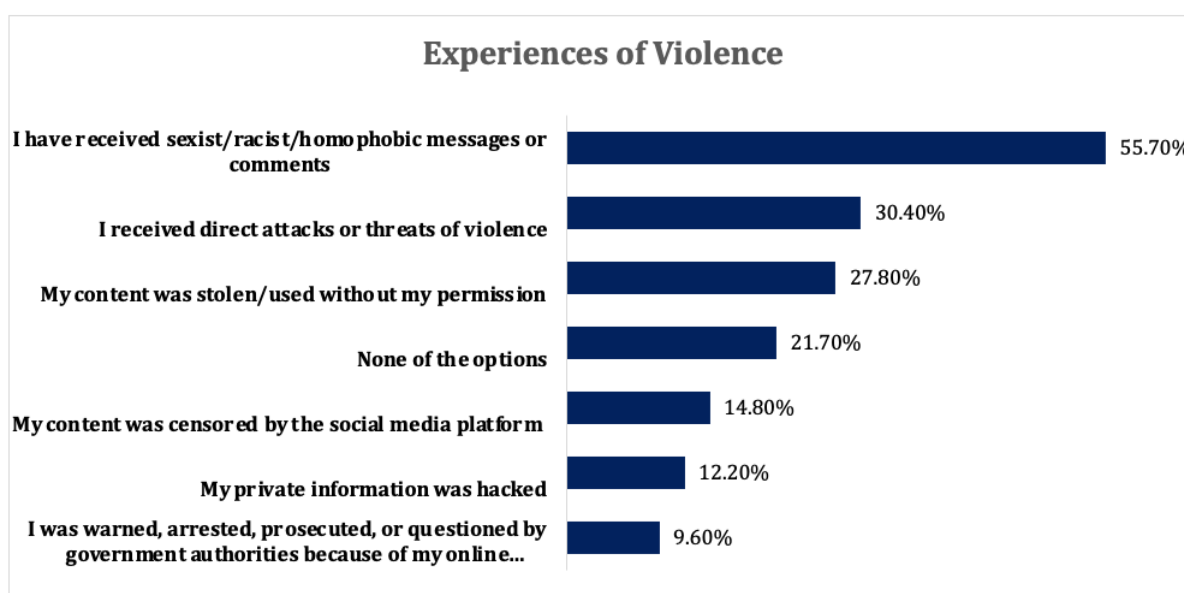
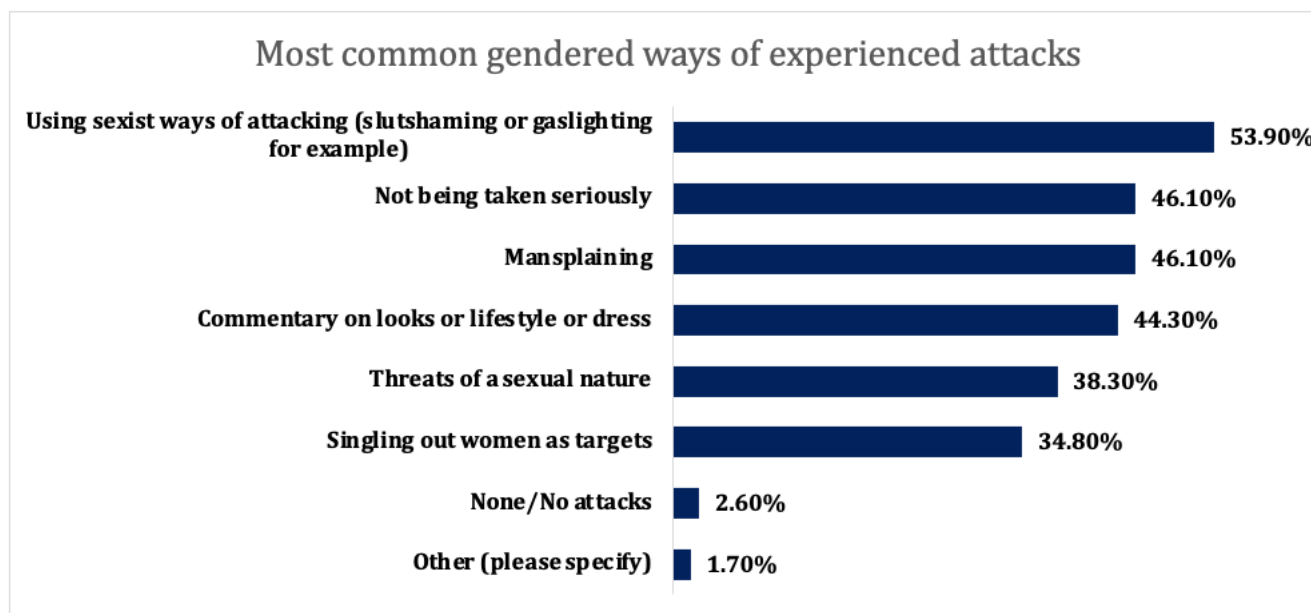


Figure 9: The common gendered way of experienced attacks reported by respondents



Response to the attacks in the past year

Taking actions against the attacks, threats, or experiences of violence was not very common as more than a third of participants did not take any action in the past year (33%, n=38). About a fifth (21.70%, n=25) reported the incident or used legal strategies, or campaigned/protected (18.3%, n=21) about the attack and threat (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Ways of responding to the attacks in the past year as reported by participants



Figure 11: Level of confidence in technical skills reported by respondents

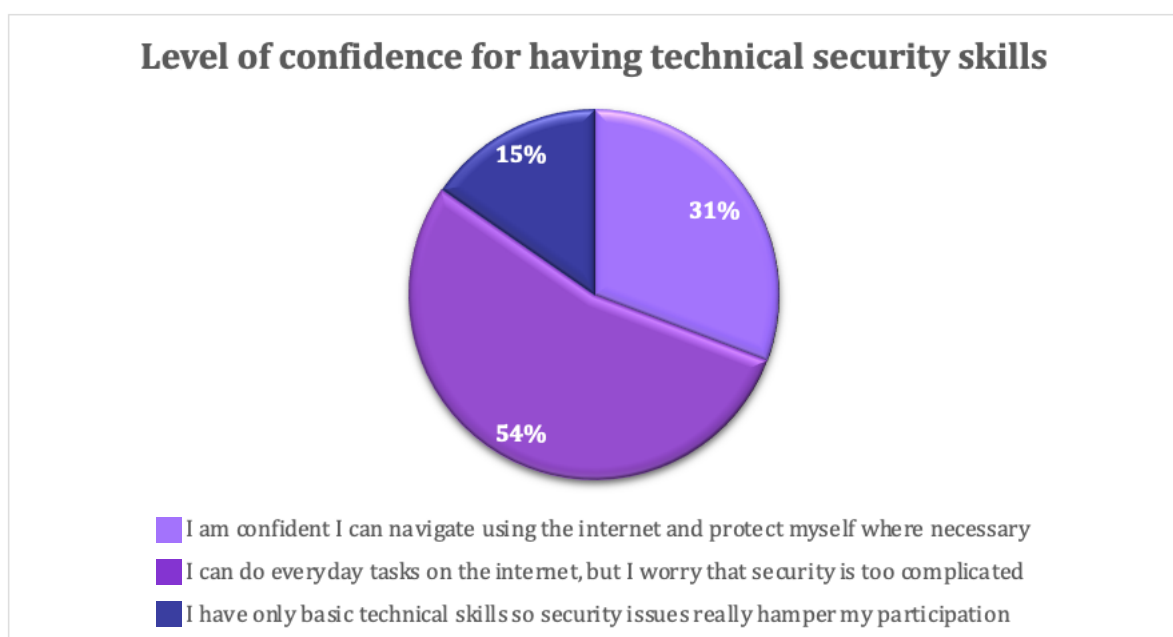


Figure 11 presents the level of confidence of respondents in their technical skills. About half (54%, n=56) stated that they could do everyday tasks, but cybersecurity is complicated. Then 15% (n=16) have only basic skills, with security issues hampering their participation. Figure 12 looks at the previous capacity building of respondents in terms of cybersecurity. Interestingly 52% (n=54) did not take any workshop, while 9% (n=9) took but do remember nothing.

Figure 12: Attending previous cybersecurity workshop

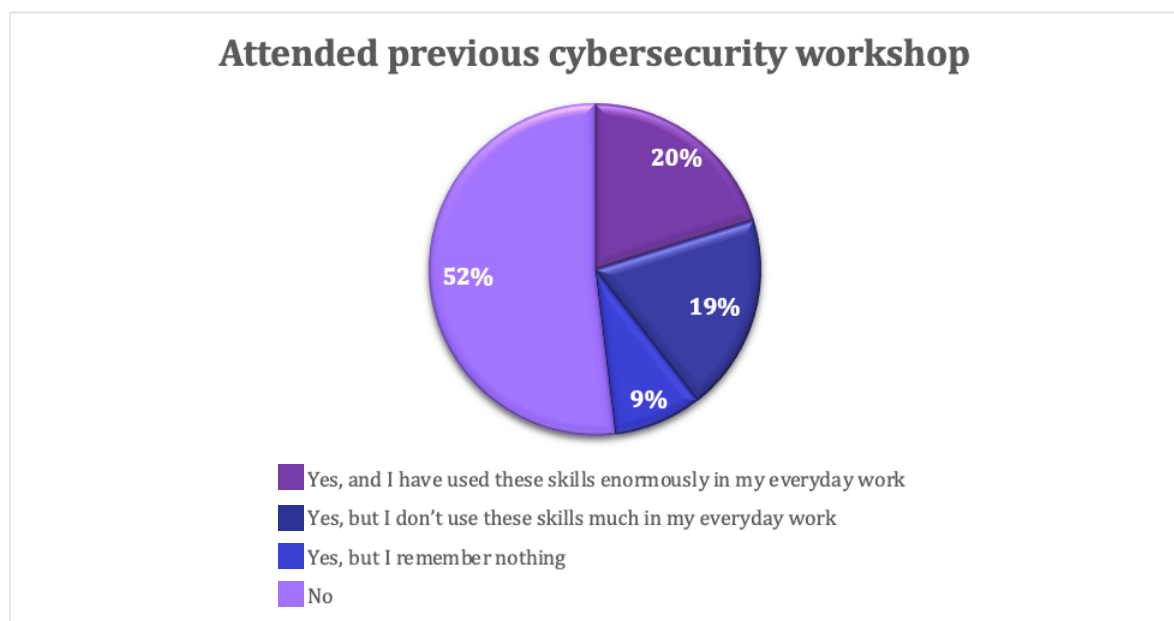


Table 2: Not using these skills because (for those who answered “Yes, but I don’t use these skills much in my everyday work”) (N=20)

Reason	Frequency	%
I’m not that invested in putting in the time or energy	7	35.0
It is not common practice around me, so I am not encouraged or reminded	7	35.0
I don’t see the point	1	5.0
The secure tools are not easy to use	10	50.0
Other	0	0

To what extent do you agree with the statements below:

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked about agreeing with a set of statements. The answers ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The categories of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” were lumped together. As such, 97% (n=99) of respondents agree that “the internet is an important public sphere for advancing the issues they work on,” 63% (n=63) agree that “the ability to be anonymous online facilitates violence against women”, and slightly less than half agree that “the ability to be anonymous online is a critical component of safety” (49%, n=50), and “in my circle most women most women activists take cybersecurity issues seriously” (48%, n=48).

Figure 13: Agreeing with the below statements

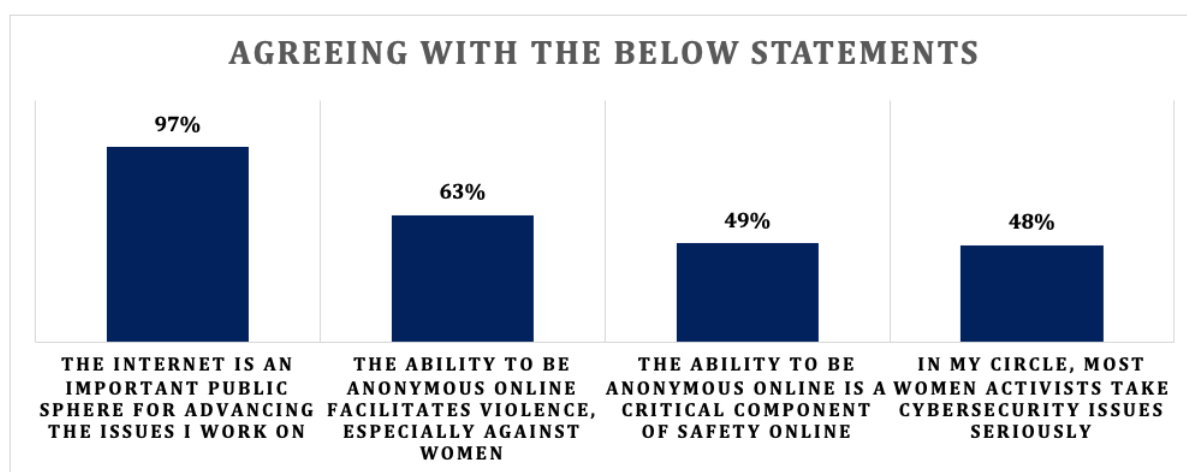


Table 3: The positive things that have come as a result of using the internet

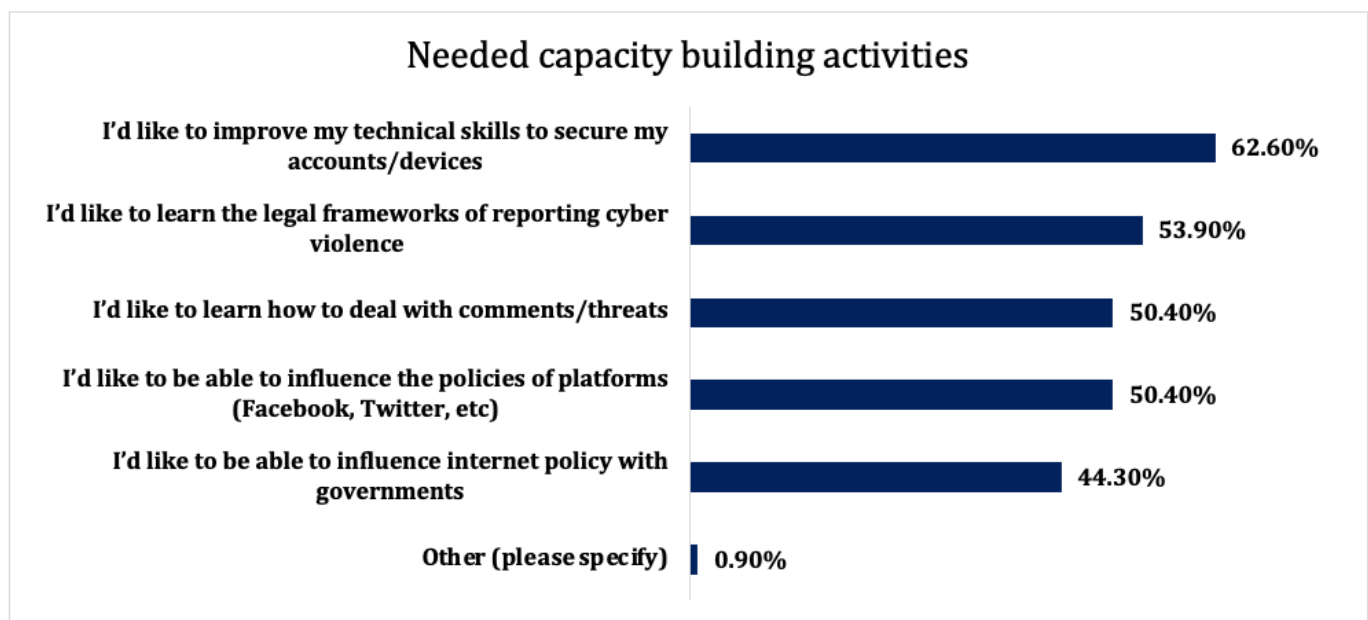
<i>The positive things</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
My work has amassed much bigger audiences	67	58.3
I have received more opportunities/jobs	52	45.2
I feel like the internet has played a considerable role in advancing our causes	87	75.7
I have connected to like-minded people	82	71.3
I have received personal support	52	45.2

1. The positive outcome of the internet, as mentioned by participants, were mainly the significant role the internet played in advancing their cause (75.7%, n=87), connecting with like-minded people (71.3%, n=82), and their work amassed bigger audiences (58.3%, n=67). Other benefits were received more opportunities and jobs and personal support (both: 45.2%, n=52).

Useful Capacity Building Activities

Respondents stated multiple needed capacity-building activities to support their activism; figure capacity-building practical 13 to 14 shows these needs classified decreasingly. It should be noted that four conditions were mentioned by more than half of the respondents. At the same time, one need, which is “being able to influence internet policy with government,” was said by slightly less than half of the respondents (44.30%, n=51).

Figure 14: Needed and useful capacity building activities



KEY THEMES

Perhaps the starkest contrast in this report is the importance of the internet for these activists' work vs. the very high reporting of violence experienced by these same activists online. **91.3% of the WHRD respondents said their work would be difficult or impossible without the internet.** Most of them use the internet for campaigning and raising awareness on gender issues, and the overwhelming majority (82.6%) are publicly visible work online, 52.2% of which reported being very publicly visible. A clear **97% of respondents agree that "the internet is an important public sphere for advancing the issues they work on."**

This undeniably shows how important it is to have an open, free, and safe internet for WHRDs in the MENA. And yet, the price they pay personally and professionally for their digital activism raises serious concerns. **78.3% reported experiencing violence online**, the most common of which was sexist, racist, or homophobic messages (55.7%). An alarming 30.4% reported receiving direct attacks or threats of violence. And **9.6% faced legal action because of their online activities.**

When asked about particularly gendered experiences of online attacks, an **overwhelming 97.4% of respondents reported at least one form of gender discrimination.** This included 53.9% receiving sexist attacks (slut-shaming; the or gaslighting as examples), commentary on looks or lifestyle or dress (44.3%), or threats of a sexual nature (38.3%).

EXPERIENCES WITH ONLINE VIOLENCE

More than half the respondents chose to elaborate on their experiences, many of whom received **multiple forms of violence.** One respondent cited:

"[I have received] attacks online, sexual harassment, threats of rape, shot down my Instagram twice, , "accessible I couldn't log in anymore because of reports. My organization's account on Twitter was disabled because of reports, my Facebook post videos constantly deleted, my organization's account on Facebook was blocked 13 times. [They created] fake profile accounts in my name on Facebook. I reported it many times, but it still was not deleted. They used my name to spread fake news about me, threats for my life, sexual blackmail, hostilities, slut-shaming every day."

Many respondents also reported **frustration with platform regulation** regarding reporting harmful content and losing access to their accounts or their organizations' funds because of writing campaigns. This is in addition to dealing with hacking as a form of retaliation against feminist or political content.

"The organization's Instagram account was hacked for a full day, and we have confidential data for people who directly contact us and didn't want any of the content to be exposed or manipulated."

"I want to find a way to stop Facebook from silencing our voices and restore my accounts, not only for me but for all the activists I know they struggle with this."

It was also noteworthy that many respondents discussed **prolonged online attacks that continued for months or years**, not single instances, escalating at various occasions. Most of these were related to content posted by the WHRD around feminist issues.

"Over more than a year, I received direct death threats and intimidation, that was extended to kidnapping from a powerful political party, followed by a lawsuit against me at the military court and threats of prison."

"I receive constant private messages of nudity and sexual content and harassment."

Attacking WHRDs' reputation was significantly reported as a sexist silencing tactic, including creating fake profiles or spreading false rumors.

"The most two difficult experiences were when (1) I was cyberbullied with a fake account and threats after posting a concern as a statement on Facebook. (2) A campaign was created a few years ago also on Facebook attacking my family and me because of a published article in a daily newspaper. The online threat became a reality, and I was also attacked several times while driving."

Attackers also commonly resort to patriarchal social norms to attack the person looks or lifestyles of feminist activists, accusing them of ruining the culture and agitating women.

“ I received messages that were insulting and undermining the overall work done for women, claiming we are destroying society and women don't need further rights.”

These attacks also extend to WHRDs' children, one reported receiving “insulting messages attacking my personal life, my son and my career.” Another said receiving threats against her 10-year-old daughter after a media interview about women's sexual rights. One woman reported:

“They manipulated my posts and used them out of context to defame me. They posted open calls for my family to kill me as atonement.”

“I receive sexual harassment and threatening messages from lots of men because I challenge religious patriarchy. My ex-partner also threatened to kill me and kidnap my children because, he said, I was immoral being a feminist.”

And so, women who speak out against sexism and discrimination end up bearing the brunt of harmful online campaigns against them - using the same tools they are denouncing in the first place. There is no line drawn between the private lives of WHRDs and the content of their public posts online. Indeed, a **common strategy by attackers is to expose or threaten to expose personal details about feminists** as a form of attack.

“I used to receive sexist comments such as: do you even consider yourself a female with this hair? You look like a guy.”

“The most difficult experience of my life was being attacked on social media after a TV interview, in which I was advocating against child marriage and polygamy. I was accused of debauchery and blasphemy.”

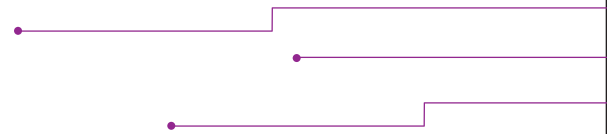
“Whenever I share a post showing my support for LGBTQ community, I get shamed by men in private and public messages, called derogatory words for LGBTQ and sent pornographic content.”

While **sexuality content was cited as a significant provoker of misogynistic comments**, WHRDs whose activism is centered on broader human rights issues also reported receiving sexist attacks just because they were women speaking out:

“The toughest experience was receiving hate mail and verbal violence because of my posts related to freedom of expression and belief.”

“My Facebook account was monitored, and they arrested me because of my activism on documenting human rights violations.”

“The state has been focused on persecuting women human rights defenders and getting them to sign pledges that they will stop using Twitter. It doesn't matter if you have a private or public account or the number of followers - all feminists are under severe threat.”



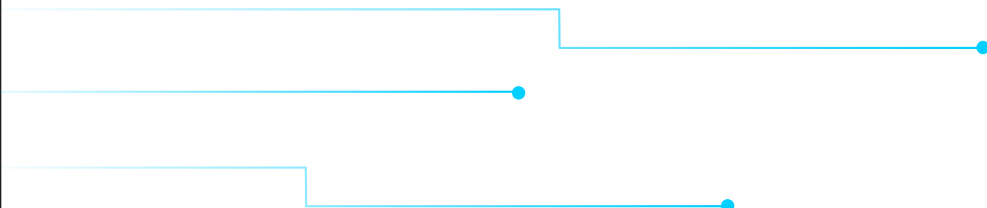
EFFECTS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

Attacks for feminist activism online take a **significant toll on WHRDs' wellbeing**. The smear campaigns often impact their access to jobs or social networks, as well as severe psychosocial damage. This is coupled with a feeling of **constant surveillance**, which also drives women away from public internet spaces.

“I get hurtful messages, often with sexual slurs. I try to ignore them, but I spend the whole day worried about them.”

“I was summoned for security interrogations where I was threatened. I have a constant feeling of being watched.”

“I have received threats of violence and accusations that I am corrupting society. I constantly feel unsafe and afraid.”



RESPONDING TO ONLINE VIOLENCE

One respondent cited: “After so many attacks online, I have become afraid of using the internet. I feel like I always have a target on my back.” The severity and consistency of online attacks have perhaps affected the actions these WHRDs reported in response to the violence. **The highest number (33%) reported not taking action at all**, and 15.7% stopped what they were doing or removed the content. The numbers of steps taken were considerably low. The highest reported response was only 21.7% (reporting to platforms or using legal strategies).

The survey probed on the technical levels of confidence among respondents, among which **52% have not attended cybersecurity workshops** in the past. This number should motivate digital security trainers and organizations to do more work targeting MENA WHRDs as the need is very high. Among those who have attended security workshops, less than half reported using these skills consistently in their everyday work. This raises questions about the efficacy of digital security workshops.

28% of participants said they did attend a digital security workshop but either remember nothing (9%) or have not used the skills much (19%). When probed on why they didn’t use the skills much, only one respondent said because they didn’t see the point. The rest cited security tools being not easy to use as the main reason, followed by the time and energy investment needed and the lack of network uptake needed to encourage or remind folks of security measures.

“The topic of cyberbullying must be addressed more and especially with its survivors because they also need psychosocial support and empowerment on how to deal with such events.”

“It’s really important that we take cyberviolence seriously and combat it as a serious and dangerous form of violence.”

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