



Title: "Online Spaces in the Pandemic: Havens of Violence and Harassment? A Gender-focused Case Study from Jordan"

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Note: This research is a part of a comprehensive study encompassing various aspects of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), and gender roles in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Abstract**

This case study delves into the prevalence and types of gender-based violence, with a particular focus on cyber violence, experienced by individuals in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aims to identify the primary online platforms where such violence is heightened, understand the societal and cultural factors influencing this trend, and offer insights and recommendations for addressing and mitigating online harassment and violence in the context of a global health crisis.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and data analysis. It draws on a sample of 700 participants, both male and female, distributed across various regions in Jordan. The findings shed light on the alarming rise in cyber-harassment targeting women and girls, with societal and cultural influences playing a significant role in this surge. Psychological and verbal harassment emerged as the most common forms, while online platforms, particularly social media, proved to be prevalent venues for such abuse.

Participants' responses revealed that many of them resorted to self-protective measures, such as blocking harassers on social media or messaging apps. However, the study highlights the reluctance of victims, often due to fear or cultural norms, to report these incidents or seek external support.

The research concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to combat cyber violence against women in Jordan, including policy measures, awareness campaigns, and support services. It underscores the importance of addressing this issue to ensure the safety and well-being of women and girls in online spaces during pandemics and beyond.



## **Literature Review: Online Gender-Based Violence in the MENA Region Amidst COVID-19**

### **Forms of Technology-Related Violence Against Women**

The rapid expansion of digital technology in the MENA region has led to the emergence of several insidious forms of gender-based violence against women. These manifestations often find their roots in prevailing societal norms but are accentuated by the anonymity and reach of the digital medium.

Cyberbullying is a prominent form where women are frequently subjected to threats, derogatory remarks, and harassment, often due to their gender or perceived deviations from societal expectations (Bakarman et al., 2018). Parallely, online harassment encompasses a range of malevolent activities, from disseminating harmful material and cyberstalking to the creation of deceptive profiles aimed at intimidating or demeaning women (Moussa et al., 2020). The non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, colloquially termed "revenge porn," poses severe psychological and reputational risks to its victims (El Tinkrati, 2019). Another concerning trend is doxxing, which involves the unauthorized release of private information online, thereby jeopardizing women's safety and privacy (Badran & Yerosusis, 2020). The situation is further complicated by honor-based violence and hate speech in the digital realm, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive solutions involving varied stakeholders (Wagner et al., 2019; Palermo & De Stefano, 2018).

### **Impact of Technology-Related Violence on Women's Lives**

The repercussions of technology-related violence against women in the MENA region are vast and multifaceted. Psychologically, victims often grapple with feelings ranging from anxiety and depression to a profound sense of powerlessness, as highlighted by incidents of cyberbullying, harassment, and revenge porn (Bouguila et al., 2021). Economically and educationally, such violence can act as a deterrent for women, hindering their active engagement in digital arenas and consequently limiting their opportunities in employment, education, and broader social participation (Al-Khonaizi et al., 2020). From a societal perspective, the ramifications of technology-related violence can extend beyond the digital realm, jeopardizing women's physical safety. The region's honor-centric values further amplify these threats, leading to societal rejection, ostracization, and in extreme cases, familial violence directed at the victim (El Tinkrati, 2019).



Women in the MENA region face exacerbated challenges when seeking redress for technology-related violence. The societal stigma, combined with often ineffective legal structures, serves as a significant deterrent to reporting such incidents (Fakih et al., 2017; Palermo & De Stefano, 2018). Moreover, a pervasive lack of digital literacy among women can be a barrier in collecting evidence and navigating the complexities of legal procedures (UNESCO, 2019).

### **Strategies for Preventing and Addressing Technology-Related Violence Against Women**

To combat technology-related violence against women, efforts in the MENA region have been multifaceted, encompassing legislative, institutional, and societal dimensions. Several countries, including Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have strengthened their legal frameworks to address various facets of technology-related violence, such as cyberbullying, hacking, and online harassment (ICT Watch & Association for Progressive Communications, 2018; Elshenawi & Alhaddad, 2016; Abbas, 2019). On an institutional front, initiatives like Egypt's "Qawem" have been pivotal in providing victims with essential support services, from counseling to legal assistance (Younis & Rajeh, 2020). From a societal perspective, NGOs like the Arab Women Organization and UN Women have been at the forefront of reshaping societal norms, emphasizing the imperative to raise awareness about technology-related violence's severity (AWO, 2019; UN Women, 2019).

### **Online Gender-Based Violence in Jordan Amidst COVID-19**

#### **Context**

Jordan's science and technology sectors are burgeoning rapidly, paralleling the nation's demographic profile, which leans towards a youthful populace. Internet engagement is notably high in Jordanian households, with almost 89% connected. Interestingly, the gender gap in internet usage is minimal: women constitute 47% of internet users, while men make up 53%. This information comes from a comprehensive survey conducted by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

This broad internet engagement, however, isn't without its downsides. Women, in particular, face risks online. Sisterhood Is Global Institute's (SIGI) research details that electronic harassment against women



isn't limited to just one form. It ranges from cyberstalking, blackmail, electronic extortion, to more serious offenses like human trafficking for illicit purposes and identity fraud. While many Jordanian women are technologically adept, using mobile phones and the internet regularly, they are unfortunately left exposed to cyber-violence, often due to a lack of sufficient legal safeguards and community support.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual realm's significance has escalated in Jordan. Given the confinement measures, online platforms became a lifeline for many, particularly when there were potential domestic violence threats. Yet, the virtual world's double-edged nature came to light when 28% of women, who had faced online violence, contemplated reducing their online presence.

### **Online Forms of VAW**

Even before the pandemic, Jordanian women were no strangers to online harassment. A noteworthy study on sexual harassment in the country highlighted a troubling reality: about 44% of women reported having faced online violence from unknown males. The Jordanian National Commission for Women, through this study, sought to challenge and change the societal narrative that tends to dismiss or deny sexual harassment's prevalence. A staggering 86% of harassment victims were identified as young, educated, unmarried women. The study further established that the majority of them were exposed to harassment primarily via the internet and social media platforms. Over 80% had faced at least one form of cyber sexual harassment. Physical appearance emerged as the predominant trigger for such unwanted attention. Yet, the majority refrained from filing official complaints, even with entities like the Cyber-Crimes Unit and the Family Protection Department available. As a result, many resorted to blocking the cyberbullies.

VAW isn't just a phenomenon limited to private individuals. It also extends to the public sphere, affecting women in prominent roles or seeking to enter public office. A vivid example is the November 2020 parliamentary elections in Jordan. Due to COVID-19, most campaigning shifted online, heightening the visibility of women candidates. Regrettably, a significant number of them faced electronic and traditional campaign attacks. A particularly unsettling incident involved a visually-impaired woman candidate, who became the target of an extensive cyberbullying campaign. Beyond the digital realm, the pandemic posed



other challenges: some women, due to societal expectations, couldn't make it to polling stations as they were bound by familial responsibilities.

## **Legal Framework**

In the realm of Jordan's legal system, online violence isn't expressly categorized as a form of violence against women (VAW). The primary legal touchstone addressing online violence is the cyber-crime law, which doesn't cater to gender-specific issues. Jordan's perspective on VAW, similar to Lebanon, is primarily seen within the domestic sphere. The 2017 Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (No. 15) anchors this stance. However, this law poses limitations. It doesn't ensure protection to every woman, irrespective of her marital status, a deviation from the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Moreover, it doesn't distinctly enumerate domestic violence offenses but points to definitions in the Penal Code (Article 305 and 306). These articles, while addressing sexual violence and verbal harassment in public spaces, fall short of specifically tackling online harassment.

In 2019, Jordan introduced the cyber-security law, which replaced the 2015 Electronic Crime Law No. 27. The latter law, aimed at penalizing online hate speech and defamation, faced substantial criticism for vaguely defining hate speech and fake news, as well as for infringing on freedom of expression. This led to activists initiating a social media campaign, marked by the hashtag '#withdraw\_cybercrime\_law', urging its withdrawal. The newly established law set up a national center for cyber security, dedicated to preserving national security and safeguarding individuals, properties, and data. This center possesses the authority to inhibit, nullify, or incapacitate communication networks and systems in cases of cyber-crime activities.

While the 2015 Electronic Crime Law was not without its flaws, it still played a role in safeguarding victims from online abuses, evidenced by court cases, especially concerning online harassment on platforms like Facebook. Provisions like Article 9, which dealt with malicious acts and pornography through IT systems, and Article 11, which tackled online defamation, proved beneficial. The prevailing hope is that the new cyber security law will continue this trajectory, while also ensuring freedom of speech isn't compromised.

Over the past decade, Jordan has made commendable strides, especially in policy structures. The Comprehensive National Human Rights Plan (2016–2025) stands as a testament to this progress. This plan



actively receives addresses, and pursues complaints regarding violations of women's rights. It also endorses awareness initiatives aiming to shield women from all violence forms, with a particular emphasis on the marginalized regions. Furthermore, the Ministry of Social Development's adoption of a new program for women's shelters signifies progress. This program provides sanctuary for women facing threats, supplanting the contentious administrative detention previously in place for women vulnerable to honor-based violence.



### **Objective:**

To investigate the prevalence and types of gender-based violence, particularly cyber violence, experienced by individuals in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aims to identify the primary online platforms where such violence is heightened, understand the societal and cultural factors influencing this trend, and offer insights and recommendations for addressing and mitigating online harassment and violence in the context of a global health crisis.

### **Methodology:**

To gauge the prevalence of cyber harassment and its exacerbation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Focusing on the digital sphere, in-depth interviews were carried out with project stakeholders. Comprehensive data from these discussions were meticulously analyzed. Field visits were made to various associations in targeted regions to distribute questionnaires that were tailored to elicit detailed experiences of online harassment. Intensive training sessions for the field research team on administering these questionnaires were held in Amman and the Mafraq province. Appointed liaison officers in these regions supervised the survey process, having been trained in effective communication techniques. The sample comprised 700 individuals, balanced by gender, and chosen based on a set of specified criteria; the distribution was also proportional to population density in the studied areas. Associations in both Amman and Mafraq collaborated closely for a smooth data collection process. Captured data was organized in Excel and subjected to rigorous analysis in SPSS.

### **Validity and Reliability of Study Tools:**

The questionnaire's validity and reliability were ascertained through the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. This measure checks the internal consistency of the questionnaire, ensuring all included questions accurately capture the phenomenon under investigation. A high Alpha score is indicative of a reliable set of questions.

**Studied Areas:** The research spanned four major associations located in Amman and the Mafraq province:



- Hamza Bin Abdul Muttalib Association in Marka
- The Orphan Boy Association in Al-Hussein Camp
- Tabarbour Association in Tabarbour
- Sama Al-Badiya Association in the Mafraq province

#### **Limitations:**

Although the research offers significant insights into cyber harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are limitations to note. Given its qualitative nature, the data is perceptual and can be influenced by several factors, such as cultural norms, individual experiences, or potential biases. The geographical scope is limited to Amman and Mafraq, hence might not offer a complete picture of the national situation. Extensive research is recommended to make generalizations at a broader level.

#### **Basic Characteristics of the Study Population:**

Of the participants, 62% were female and 38% were male. The predominant age group was 30-35 years, representing about 31%. Most male respondents fell into the 25-29 years category. The majority were from the Amman governorate, with the remainder from the Mafraq governorate. Urban areas were the primary residence for a significant portion of the sample. Variability in marital status was observed, with approximately half of the participants being single.

#### **Exposure to Cyber Harassment:**

During the pandemic, a marked increase in cyber-harassment aimed at women and girls was reported by approximately 60% of our respondents. The surge in such incidents was primarily attributed to societal pressures, with cultural nuances and media portrayal also playing substantial roles. While psychological and verbal forms of harassment were reported most frequently, instances of sexual harassment were comparatively rarer. As for the mediums through which this harassment took place, homes remained the primary venue. However, online platforms emerged as a significant medium for harassment, especially for females. From the female respondents' perspective, 29% reported the internet as the main platform





for abuse, compared to 25% of males. Harassment through phone calls, specifically via WhatsApp, was less prevalent, with 14% of males and 10% of females identifying it as a medium of abuse.

When participants were asked how they responded when faced with cyber harassment, the majority of respondents mentioned that they blocked the harasser on social media or messaging apps. Many felt that this was a practical and immediate way to protect themselves from further harassment.

It's worth noting that some respondents expressed reluctance to inform anyone about the harassment, citing concerns about potential social stigma or fear of escalation. However, a few participants, particularly girls, mentioned that they confided in their elder sisters as a source of support and guidance.

This highlights the complex and often private nature of cyber harassment experiences, where individuals may resort to self-help strategies like blocking while hesitating to involve others or authorities due to various social and personal factors.

### **Discussion:**

The digital landscape, while offering a plethora of opportunities, has also ushered in unique challenges. One such challenge, prevalent across nations and cultures, is the increased vulnerability of women to online gender-based violence. This is particularly palpable in the MENA region, with countries like Jordan standing as notable examples.

Based on the literature review and the presented case study from Jordan, several salient points emerge, corroborated by primary data:

#### **1. Demographics and Online Engagement:**

The study population is skewed towards a younger demographic, with the majority of respondents falling between 25-35 years. This age group, being technologically adept, is likely to be more engaged online. With 62% of the respondents being females, it provides a perspective that is often underrepresented in many tech-related discussions. Given that most participants reside in urban areas, particularly in cities, their exposure to digital platforms and online interactions is expected to be extensive.

#### **2. Gender Disparity and Violence Perception:**



The fact that 60% of respondents believe that abuse against women and girls has surged since the pandemic is telling. It aligns with the literature review, suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic, despite making online platforms indispensable, has also amplified the challenges faced by women in the digital realm.

### 3 Online Platforms as Sites of Abuse:

The data suggests that while home remains the primary site for abuse, online platforms are not far behind. This dovetails with our understanding from the literature review about the rising trend of online harassment faced by women in Jordan and other countries. This further emphasizes the importance of educating and training women to navigate the digital realm safely, particularly in a country where almost equal proportions of males and females are internet users.

### 4. Implications and Future Steps:

As the majority of the study's respondents hail from urban areas, it would be essential to consider the experiences of those in rural settings, where access to resources and exposure to digital literacy initiatives might differ.

There's a compelling need for interventions at various levels — from policy changes that address online harassment more directly to community initiatives that work towards changing entrenched patriarchal norms. The pandemic, with its multifaceted impact, underscores this need, calling for an integrated approach to tackle both online and offline forms of gender-based violence.

### **Conclusion:**

The case study of Jordan offers an illuminating perspective into the complexities of online gender-based violence in the digital age, particularly against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The nation, despite its commendable strides in women's empowerment and policy structures, grapples with deep-rooted societal norms that have manifested in both physical and virtual realms. The rapid proliferation of technology and the indispensable nature of online platforms, accentuated by the pandemic, have made it imperative to address the vulnerabilities faced by women. This case study underscores that while Jordan



has made significant progress, the road ahead remains multifaceted, demanding comprehensive strategies to ensure a safer environment for its female populace.

### **Recommendations:**

1. **Digital Literacy Programs:** Expand digital literacy programs, targeting women and young girls, focusing not just on technical skills but also on safe online behaviors, identification of potential threats, and response mechanisms in case of online harassment.
2. **Legal Reforms:** Review and amend the existing cyber-crime and cybersecurity laws to incorporate specific provisions that address online gender-based violence, offering clear definitions and stringent penalties.
3. **Awareness Campaigns:** Launch nationwide campaigns to raise awareness about online gender-based violence, emphasizing its harmful consequences and offering avenues for victims to seek help.
4. **Community Engagement:** Engage community leaders, religious figures, and influencers in dialogues to challenge and change patriarchal norms, fostering an environment where women's rights are universally respected.
5. **Training for Law Enforcement:** Equip the Cyber-Crimes Unit, Family Protection Department, and other relevant bodies with the necessary training to understand, identify, and effectively respond to complaints of online gender-based violence.
6. **Safe Online Platforms:** Collaborate with tech companies and social media platforms to introduce robust reporting mechanisms, algorithmic checks, and safety features that can proactively detect and curb online harassment.
7. **Mental Health Support:** Establish helplines and counseling centers specifically catering to victims of online harassment, offering them psychological support and guidance.



8. Research and Data Collection: Continually invest in research to understand the evolving nature of online gender-based violence, collecting data that can inform policies and intervention strategies.
9. Inclusion of Rural Areas: Ensure that initiatives, policies, and programs are inclusive, addressing the unique challenges faced by women in rural areas, who might have limited access to resources or digital literacy programs.
10. Collaborative Initiatives: Foster collaborations between governmental bodies, NGOs, tech companies, and international organizations to create a holistic and unified front against online gender-based violence.

In moving forward, it's imperative for Jordan to adopt a multi-pronged approach, drawing from its past successes while innovatively addressing emerging challenges in the digital realm. The nation's commitment to women's rights offers hope, and with targeted interventions, a future free from online gender-based violence can be envisioned.



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