AN EXPLORATION OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN LEBANON

2023

AN EXPLORATION OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN LEBANON

Abstract

The limited existing research on digital violence in Lebanon[1] indicates that women and girls are more exposed than men to violence facilitated using any form of information and communication technology (i.e., mobile phones, the Internet, social media, computer games, text messaging, email, etc.). However, the extent of exposure, harm, and potential solutions to digital violence against women (DVAW) in Lebanon are yet to be adequately explored. Through a mixed approach of surveys, interview and empirical mapping of digital data, this study aims to investigate the nature, frequency, circumstances of, and reactions to any harassment, threat, exploitation, bullying, stalking, data and identify theft or exposure, etc. that Lebanese women are encountering because of their gender during their digital activities. Findings show that the DVAW Lebanese women experience is proportional to their social or political activism. This DVAW is rooted in the patriarchal culture that establishes a gendered hierarchy. This situation is exacerbated by political and financial crises and the lack of trust in a male-dominated legal system influenced by religious parties and in a just execution of laws. The study recommends an integrative approach to combating DVAW that includes national educational institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and media outlets to foster a culture of women empowerment and cyber safety, coupled by Lebanese policy makers and social media platforms taking measures to protect women and girls against digital violence.

Lubna Mohammed is a researcher with a Ph.D. in Applied linguistics and a special interest in Gender studies, Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analysis, and computer-mediated communication (CMC). She works as an Assistant Professor at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

---

1   Violence Against Women in the Online Space: Insights from Multi-Country Research in the Arab States | Publications | UN Women – Arab States. (2022). Published by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) [Accessed Jan 29, 2023]

1. Executive summary

Violence is the exercise of force or power to violate the boundaries or rights of another human being leading to their harm. It is gender based if it targets people of a certain gender because they are perceived as vulnerable or are discriminated against in practice, politically, legally, culturally, etc. As this research confirms, there is an increased digital aggression against women in Lebanon. In addressing this, this research also addresses violence against women (VAW) can because it can take place in various forms provided by the tools made available in its context, online or offline. This study focuses on diagnosing the current legal, social, and technical situations surrounding instances of digital violence against women (DVAW henceforth) in the Lebanese virtual sphere and the severity of its effects on victims with the aim of raising awareness to this phenomenon and proposing recommendations for a safer digital environment for everybody, especially vulnerable groups.

To explore this issue through the viewpoints of the women themselves as well as using empirical data from twitter, this research collected data from an online survey posing open and closed questions to capture women's experiences of DVAW. The survey findings were triangulated with findings from six qualitative in-depth interviews with Lebanese female activists, in addition to two male participants: a Lebanese lawyer and a digital platform coordinator working with *KAFA*. To provide a further dimension to the issue, the rhetoric used in digital attacks on seven publicly active Lebanese women on Twitter was explored comparing the frequency of sexually explicit offensive terms to non-explicit ones. Such triangulated data revealed patterns that helped understand the social digital phenomenon at hand in addition to what motivates and exacerbates it.

The study finds that many Lebanese women are exposed to various forms of DVAW, especially those who openly express their opinions and engage in social or political activism. This is driven and sustained by a deeply rooted patriarchal system that dictates not only expectations of women but also the terms and tactics used for bullying them. Such a situation is worsened by political and financial crises and by the women's lack of confidence in finding justice with a legal system that is dominated by males, is influenced by religious parties, and discriminates against women in personal status laws.

Most women in Lebanon use personal devices to engage in social media platforms, mostly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Yet, Facebook and its messaging system followed by Instagram are the highest platforms in the number of DVAW incidents. This puts some responsibility on META, the company that runs them.

The most frequent form of DVAW in Lebanon is sexting, followed by emotional manipulation and unwanted frequent calls and messages, then verbal abuse and bullying. Half of the women researched were stalked or tracked online and over one third received infected files or links. Interview data support the prevalence of verbal abuse, especially targeted at women when they express their opinions. This puts social and political activists in the spotlight. The Twitter data of online attacks mapped to seven politically visible Lebanese women confirms that attacks were triggered by political opinions or commentaries made by them online or on mainstream media and shows that the majority of attackers adopted sexually explicit slurs.

Unlike the public nature of Twitter's attacks targeting women in politics, most offences occur in private; as half the women in the survey reported that the perpetrators were known to them, occasionally relatives. Three quarters of the women identified the gender of the abuser as male, and the rest as both male and female. Similarly, the interviewed experts confirm that most abusers were men.

All participants agree that the incidents of DVAW they experienced were gender-based in terms of motivation and method and that this hostile digital environment mirrors a patriarchal system where women's social and legal status is still a work in progress. Patriarchal societies are rife with shared social gender stereotypes, asymmetrical power dynamics, masculine monopoly over women, and manipulation or exploitation for control.

Women and girls are now present online and within reach to offenders as well and many of them are not technologically or legally literate. Their most common reaction is to block, directly confront the offender, and/or ignore the incident. Yet, depending on the gravity of the DVAW, certain forms require more varied responses, e.g., physical threats had the most varied reactions. It also depends on whether the victim knows the offender as emotions can impede taking serious steps to report him.

Reporting to authorities was rare. Reporting to the platform has not given many of the women satisfactory results. Generally, women report becoming more cautious when using social media platforms, isolating themselves, or tolerating familial pressure or blame. As a result, the majority of women feel unsupported, do not trust the profit-oriented platforms, or the male dominated authority offices. They were all eager for more protection mechanisms to prevent DVAW going forward.

Furthermore, this research found that DVAW may extend from the online sphere to the offline sphere, and vice versa. That is why women are cautioned to take measures to protect themselves and to report transgressions immediately.

The study concludes by highlighting current efforts and recommendations to women, girls, and their families, for national educational institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and media outlets to foster a culture of cyber security, and to Lebanese policy makers and social media platforms to take serious steps towards protecting women and girls and preventing all types of digital threats.

To mitigate the impact of the continuing crisis on women and prevent further harm on their wellbeing, this study proposes the following specific policy recommendations to address the issue of DVAW in Lebanon:

1. Create data-informed policies and legal reforms, including the unified personal status law and the criminalisation of perpetrators of VAW and DVAW, to regain women's trust in the state.

2. Sponsor awareness campaigns in the education system and for the public on human rights, laws, DVAW harms, available official and non-official reporting tools, and free technical, psycho-social, and legal support systems provided to them by feminist civil society organisations (CSOs).

3. CSOs need more governmental support, financial and logistic, to be able to help more women and to provide them with clear strategies for cybersecurity: to prevent DVAW from happening and to counter it if it happens.

4. The Internal Security Force and police offices need to include more female officers who adopt a friendly discourse with women victims. They also need to cooperate with the telecommunication companies to monitor Internet connections and identify abusers to cancel hiding behind anonymity to harm others.

5. Social media platforms ought to respond seriously to complaints of DVAW by partnering with the governmental offices and CSOs and amending their preventative and protective measures, other than the reporting tool, to provide contextually appropriate support to their users. This can include work on automatic detection mechanisms for violence and automatic digital responses to offenders.

2.   Introduction

Violence is any form of infringement of the boundaries of another person's autonomy or human rights,[2] including the right to security, liberty, dignity, sense of autonomy, or equality, resulting in mental, physical, financial, sexual, or psychological harm.[3] When this violence is focused on individuals because of their gender, then it is termed 'gender-based violence'[4] or, more specifically 'violence against women' (VAW). The *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*[5] considers all acts of VAW 'a form of discrimination against women, ... including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.'

Discrimination against women in Lebanon persists despite a long history of feminist activism. In 2021, Lebanon ranked 132nd out of 170 countries on the Women, Peace, and Security Index[6] compared to ranking 119th out of 156 countries with a score of 0.644 in a global 2022 Gender Gap Index.[7] The employment to population ratio in 2022 was 15% for females but 47.4% for males and the unemployment rate was 32.7% for females and 28.4% for males. These statistics can mean that more women relied on male members of their families for their living expenses, causing financial pressure on their husbands or fathers. Additionally, the financial crisis and the pandemic's lockdowns pushed more women online, leading to a dependence on online resources to seek or maintain jobs. Hayat Mirshad, a Lebanese activist, and the Co-director of the national NGO *Fe-Male*, affirms that the pandemic rapidly drove people to

the many digital platforms to pursue their professional and personal lives, exposing women more to increased and varied online aggression.[8] Therefore, women in Lebanon are prone to inequity and at a vulnerable position, financial or otherwise, considering the country's current financial conditions.

Some context surrounding women's legal status in Lebanese is essential to provide background to perceived discrimination and VAW. Lebanese women continue to suffer under an ununified civil code for personal status issues under 15 religion-based personal status laws with regards to child marriages, divorce, child custody, inheritance, or property rights. Also, Lebanese women, unless they are single mothers, cannot pass their nationality to their children or foreign husbands unlike their male counterparts. Ironically, when the Lebanese government created the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2016, the first minister was a man. There was never a head-of-state woman and the 97% majority in the parliament are male.

In 2014, the official definition of domestic violence was introduced into the criminal code and the Lebanese parliament passed a domestic violence law with protection measures such as restraining orders and court reforms. The law was amended in 2020 to include in its scope violence related to marriage and divorce; yet Lebanese women are still at risk of marital rape, which religious authorities do not criminalise. As for child marriage, the country committed itself to eliminating it by 2030, even among Syrian and Palestinian refugees. In 2020, a law criminalizing sexual harassment was passed by the parliament, which included in its definition harassment through any 'electronic/digital means.'

2   Rao., M. (2008). Law relating to women and children, 2nd edition.

3   Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 11 May 2011, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ddb74f72.html [accessed 1 March 2016]

4   Bloom, S. (2008). Violence against Women and Girls: A Compendium of Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators, page, 14.

5   available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ddb74f72.html [accessed 1 March 2016]

6   Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. (2021). Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Washington, DC: Lebanon - GIWPS (georgetown.edu)

7   World Economic Forum. (2022). Chapter 1: Benchmarking gender gaps in 2022 - Global Gender Gap Report 2022 | World Economic Forum (weforum.org) [Accessed December 21, 2022]

8   Fe-Male Launches "Screens Do Not Protect" National Campaign | Fe-Male [Accessed January 5, 2023]

According to the World Report of Lebanon (2022), these laws failed to meet international standards because they did not tackle harassment at work and did not provide equality to women since discriminatory personal laws persist.[9] The report highlights that labour laws like minimum wage and working hour limits or overtime pay in Lebanon exclude an estimated number of 250,000 migrant domestic workers, mainly women from Africa or South-East Asia, and their legal residency is managed by the *Kafala* sponsorship system which puts them under the control of their employers. With this minimal accountability, cases of verbal, physical and sexual abuse are reported at such a rate that the issue was raised in 2020 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ministry of Labour. Yet, no legislative orders were introduced.

VAW may be a reflection of such normative asymmetrical legal statuses, social gender roles, and gendered expectations, and therefore, when digital communication tools were introduced and Internet access became available to ordinary people, VAW acts transferred to them, resulting in digital forms of VAW (DVAW, henceforth). A digital space that is accessible yet safe is a human right to users of all forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, aggressive acts directed at women online have recently become a global concern. These acts may be perpetrated by human users or hackers, bots, malware, or viruses due to lack of familiarity with how to keep safe online, by clicking suspicious links or images or accessing unsafe documents, websites or trusting public Internet Wi-Fi connections, etc. Data derived from ongoing reports and discussions about this problem show that harassment, threat, exploitation, abuse, bullying, stalking, data and identity theft, cyberbullying,

doxing, and non-consensual sexting are as real and harmful to the targeted user's mental, physical, financial, or psychological well-being online as they are offline. The United Nations for Women Organization[10] defines DVAW as "*[a]ny act of violence that is committed, assisted or aggravated by the use of information and communication technology (mobile phones, the Internet, social media, computer games, text messaging, email, etc) against a woman because she is a woman*."

To fully understand this cyber-social phenomenon in the Lebanese Republic, one needs to understand the terrain of Internet usage in Lebanon. According to the Digital 2022 report on Lebanon,[11] of a total population of 6.73M, Internet users constitute about 6.01M (89.3%), and 46.57% of these are women. Social media users in Lebanon are found to prefer to share posts from Facebook (86.09%) than other platforms like YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram. The percentage of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram male and female Lebanese users do not vary significantly. Yet, it is noticeable that female Facebook users were found to engage more with posts (by clicking, liking, reposting, or commenting) than male users did.

Since DVAW is a relatively new phenomenon, the *UN Women (2022)*[12] published a comprehensive study report to understand online VAW in eight Arab States, namely Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen, with nearly 12,000 participants. In the study, the proportion of women who experienced DVAW and reported it last year is 60% in general. However, no results were highlighted in the report about the proportion of male respondents who may have experienced it. The focus on men was mainly to report that 27% of them admitted to committing a DVAW. The DVAW cases were escalating in

9   World Report 2022: Lebanon, Human Rights Watch: World Report 2022: Lebanon | Human Rights Watch (hrw.org)

10   Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls | UN Women – Headquarters. [Accessed Jan 24, 2023]

11   Digital 2022: Lebanon — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, February 2022. [Accessed Jan 20, 2023]

12   Violence Against Women in the Online Space: Insights from Multi-Country Research in the Arab States | Publications | UN Women – Arab States. (2022). Published by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) [Accessed Jan 29, 2023]

these countries since, of the overall percentage of women who reported DVAW, 44% said it was transferred to the real world in 2020 after Covid19, compared to only 15% at other times. The most common form of DVAW was sexting and 60% of the victims indicated that it was perpetrated by someone they did not know. The social media platform where most digital violence against women were committed were Facebook (43%) and, to a lesser extent, Instagram (16%).

Moreover, this study shows that female activists were often singled out in digital attacks with 35% having some of the DVAW extend offline and 6% stating that it extended offline all the time. This may be a result of their visibility, yet many ordinary women mentioned they were attacked for no obvious reason. In effect, incidents of DVAW have had dire consequences on the women mentally and physically, especially with evidence that the harm could transfer to the offline world. With a perception of women's online presence and expression of voice as challenging to male authority, this phenomenon has led to the narrowing of women's online space and expression as they are forced to ignore DVAW incidents and their effects unless they are grave and/or change their online behaviour.

This study surveyed 1198 participants aged 18+ from Lebanon, only 4% of the men and women lived in refugee camps and half of the participants in general were women. The report shows that 35.2% of women suffered DVAW at least once and it was interesting to note that 25% of men admitted to perpetrating it. The *UN Women* study also investigated the perceptions of online violence in Lebanon. 43% of men and 41% of women think it is not a serious crime if it is online, and 62% of men in addition to 69% of women believe women are more exposed to online violence than men. Around 37% of men and 35% of women argue that it is enough if Internet platforms provide better policies to combat such violence, but 27% of

men and 30% of women think that police action is called for. According to this report, Efforts cited to counter online violence included expanding the harassment law (205/2020) to include harassment through digital means, government-provided helpline services to receive complaints and civil society organisations (CSOs) like *KAFA* provided reporting tools and psychosocial and legal support for its survivors. To give meaning and context to these numbers, this research shared some of these findings with a number of stakeholders in the interviews.

According to data retrieved from the Internal Security Forces Directorate in Lebanon (known as the ISF) shared by the Lebanese non-profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO) *Fe-Male*,[13] more than 100 cases of various forms of cyber violence are reported by women and girls on a monthly basis, such as 'harassment, exposure to public morals, sextortion, extortion, defamation threats, degrade and defame, electronic identity theft, including social media accounts, email among others.' The Lebanese ISF also report that there has been a 184% increase in all cybercrimes directed at women and girls after the national lockdowns of COVID 19 because there were 43 complaints from December 20, 2019, to February 20, 2020, compared to 122 complaints from February 21, 2020, to April 21, 2020. The effects of such cyber VAW on the lives of women and girls were so disastrous that two girls exposed to blackmail committed suicide and one attempted it in 2019 alone. This digital hostility has increased after the global Covid19 crisis, reflecting a rise in on-the-ground violence against women during the national lockdowns. Yet, it is good to consider that the Internet is also a platform for raising awareness of VAW, providing access for sharing, and for reporting.

Politically active women in Lebanon are considered 'soft targets' as violence against them is largely normalised. They are exposed to ubiquitous sexual harassment and misogyny and many call for them to

13   Fe-Male Launches "Screens Do Not Protect" National Campaign | Fe-Male [Accessed January 5, 2023]

be tough and cope with it and to prioritise women's and children's rights. Experiences of VAW in Parliament were documented in the 2018 elections, showing that 78% of candidates or ministers have experienced some form of violence, whether property damage, defamation, or ridicule, etc. and that it was perpetrated predominantly online with a percentage of 60% on social media platforms.[14] Another UNWomen report (2022) focuses on the experiences of a number of women politicians whose opponents launched online campaigns of a sexist nature to attack them.[15] These attacks were so aggressive that even their families were harassed and intimidated, and the offline-online cycle of harm was apparent. Many of them believe that such abusive and derogatory criticism would not have been used against a male politician.

Activists, too, Roa Dandashi,[16] a feminist activist, confirms in an interview with *Sharika wa Laken*, the digital platform that documents the news and achievements of women and girls in the Arabic speaking world. She explains the challenges that women activists face in the midst of worsening financial crises in Lebanon, including unsafe streets and inflation. "*We prefer to work from home; for our security*," she said, adding that activists find it difficult to commute to attend meetings, rallies, or activities because of the taxi prices. She contends that "*[d]igital safety is almost zero and when we express our opinions we are bullied, threatened, and attacked... When we are scared, we cannot be as productive as when we are feeling safe in a society that hears us and accepts our ideas...the legal services and the Internet connection have deteriorated so much after the explosion of August (2020), which affects us as activists who work remotely*."

Several digital platforms were created to encourage Lebanese women to continue their political engagement and not be deterred by opposition, online or offline. *Fifty-Fifty,*[17] for example, is a major Lebanese NGO that includes both male and female supporters and aims at creating 'a balanced Lebanon,' empowering women in the public and private sectors with a focus on women's right to political activism in their country. It has created an online platform and search engine featuring women decision making positions and in Parliament '*Women Power Lebanon.*'[18] They launch campaigns during the elections for MPs and municipalities with themes such as '*Stronger with Women*,' '*Let's talk*,' '*Girls' Education*,' '*Women Revolution in Politics*,' and '*Women win*.' These campaigns are to spread awareness, put strategies in place, lobby men on their side, create research centres, increase the quota of women members, and establish partnerships with the media to build enough momentum for social and political change.

As for the situation of the refugees, there are 900,000 registered Syrian refugees in addition to around 500,000 who are unregistered plus 174,000 Palestinian refugees living in the camps and facing difficulties with rights to work, education, health services, and owning property.[19] Women in refugee camps suffer similar VAW and DVAW as women elsewhere, yet they are more vulnerable. For example, VAW was considered as one of three major problems Syrian female refugees face in addition to sexual exploitation, harassment, and early marriage by the International Rescue Committee. This is often connected to the lack of privacy and safe spaces for women in the overpopulated refugee camps, itself a form of violence. Harassment is often heightened if the women seek help, especially that the perpetrators are often relatives or people inside or outside the camps, whether Lebanese or Syrian. It is argued that the camps seeped with patriarchy and masculine power structures that many female refugees are often driven to flee the camps, exposing them to more perils.[20] Several international organisations, such as the UNHCR Refugee agency,[21] look after the conditions of refugees in the camps around the world including Lebanon. Due to their marginalisation and vulnerability considering their living conditions, there are also national organisations, such as '*Women Now*'[22] and '*Najdeh* Association'[23] that work with and for Syrian and Palestinian refugee women, respectively.

VAW in the refugee camps can be expected to be mirrored online and, therefore, efforts to combat violence against women are also made online. In partnership with the Norwegian People's Aid, *Najdeh* provides a safe hotline service covering many refugee camps with the aim of empowering women

14   El Kaakour. H. 2020. Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation: Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections. UN Women. Available at: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/02/pursuing-equality-in-representationin-lebanon-2018-elections, Page 21[Accessed November 19, 2022]

15   UNW Lebanon CO-Women at the Table Report.pdf (unwomen.org), page 21-22 [Accessed January 25, 2023]

16   An interview with Roa Dandashi, Sharika wa Laken. مقابلة مع الناشطة اللبنانية رؤد دندشي (sharikawalaken.media)

17   Fifty Fifty (fiftyfiftylb.com)

18   Women Power (womenpowerlb.com)

19   Key Findings report En-636566196639789418.pdf (lpdc.gov.lb), 2017 [Accessed December 20, 2022]

20   Tashjian, Y. (2016). Gender-based violence against Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Gender-based violence against Syrian refugees in Lebanon (By Yeghia Tashjian) ‹ New Eastern Politics [Accessed April 1, 2023]

21   UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency

22   Women Now For Development - Empowering Syrian Women (women-now.org)

23   home page- جمعية النجدة الاجتماعية (association-najdeh.org)

to participate in politics. There seems to be an understanding in the camps that visibility will lead to heightened acts of violence as well. So, in 2022, in collaboration with the Norwegian Labour Party's training project '*Women Can Do IT*' (WCDI)[24] for empowering women to participate in the public sphere, they also launched the hashtag شفتك_كشفتك# (which translates as #ISawYouICaughtYou) to bring attention to and document cases of DVAW among refugee women and empower women to stand up for themselves and guide them on what to do to fight violence.

Active steps were made nationally by CSOs and NGOs to support women offline and online on various fronts with or without collaboration with official entities. As an important official national body that is directly linked to the Council of Ministers, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) was established in 1998. It aims to protect and fulfil human rights and equality for women and girls, partnering for its national campaigns with *the Lebanese Council of Women*, *the League of Lebanese Women's Rights*, *the National Committee for the Follow-up of Women's Issues*, *the National Coalition for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, *the Lebanese Democratic Women Gathering*, *the European Delegation to the Republic of Lebanon*, etc. in addition to co-operating with local NGOs like *KAFA* and *Fe-Male*.

A major agent of change is the feminist CSO '*Fe-Male*,' a youth movement which was registered in 2013, to promote gender equality, empower women, and break gender stereotypes. One of their latest national campaigns to combat violence against women in 2020 was directed against DVAW after the increase of cases during the Covid 19 lockdowns and after. Advocated by Lebanese celebrities and influencers, the hashtag campaign '#ScreensDoNotProtect'[25] and '#الشاشة_ما_بتحمي' made quite an impact on women and girls (also parents) in general and used a rhetoric that mainly speaks to young girls on TikTok. It reached more than 9 million people nationally and regionally and tens of women responded to the hashtag with their stories. One of the success stories was Rania's (2021).[26] Rania was blackmailed for sex by her boyfriend using her pictures for three years from the age of 16. The campaign, she reported, informed her of her right to report the crime to the ISF and freed her from her fears. Her abuser was confidentially arrested and received a warning of facing charges and imprisonment if he would contact Rania again.

KAFA[27] (i.e., Enough Violence and Exploitation!), another key advocate for women in Lebanon, is a feminist, non-profit organisation established in 2014. It focuses on countering discriminatory practices against women, domestic violence, human trafficking, and, more recently, preventing technology-facilitated abuse and violence against women and girls. *KAFA* offers prompt assistance and follow up for cases of VAW with a help line and a website. It uses mediated technologies to increase its outreach to and engage a large audience, transforming the private and the familial into national social issues to be discussed and addressed with a wider support.[28] In 2021 in partnership with *UN Women*, *KAFA* developed the first reporting mobile application in Lebanon called '*Nafas*' to facilitate remote access to their services. *Nafas* app is directly linked to the ISF for intervention where needed. This application was evaluated in an evaluation report project,[29] when it was afforded to candidates, observers, voters, women, and girls with real-time support to prevent VAW in politics at pre-, during, and post- Election Day in 2022. In addition to collecting data from digital surveys, focus group discussions, and the reporting tool itself, this project also aimed to review the scoping and objectives of published reports of other stakeholders engaged in preventing VAWP, such as *Lade*, *Maharat*, *Madaniyat*, *Fifty-Fifty*, etc.) to identify gaps in the literature and to evaluate how they can all collaborate efficiently in future elections. The project finds that 50% of the female candidates who responded suffered exposure to VAW not only during elections but months after, and the majority stated that psychological abuse with mockery, bullying, and discrimination was typical. In some cases, offenders direct DVAW against them, posting distorted pictures of them on social media, cyberbullied them, and blackmailed them. One of the limitations the report mentions, however, was the low rate of responsiveness of the candidates, which was not explained.

Maharat is another foundation that engages and informs the community to promote social and political changes that advance democratic societies, human rights, and freedom of speech in Lebanon and the MENA region. Its joint VAW in politics (VAWP) report[30] with *Madaniyat* to monitor technology facilitat-

24   The Norwegian Labour Party's training project - WCDI: Kvinnenettverket (arbeiderpartiet.no)

25   Screens Do Not Protect | Fe-Male

26   Rescued from Years of Online Blackmail: The Story of a Survivor. Screens Do Not Protect Case Study (fe-male.org)

27   كفى عنف واستغلال | كفى (kafa.org.lb)

28   Partain, L. (2020). Speaking emissaries: Lebanese women's rights NGO KAFA and its media use for audience mobilisation. Gender Place and Culture A Journal of Feminist Geography, 28(6). Speaking emissaries: Lebanese women's rights NGO KAFA and its media use for audience mobilization: Gender, Place & Culture: Vol 28, No 2 (tandfonline.com)

29   This project was supplied to us by KAFA, entitled "Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics on Election Day by Providing Reporting Mechanisms." November 2022.

30   MARSAD (UN WOMEN)- edited version.docx (maharatfoundation.org)

ed VAWP during Lebanon's 2022 Elections through analysis of their social media discourses suggests that harmful discriminatory stereotypes of women are perpetuated. They identified actors involved in the VAWP and main user accounts (of candidates and abusers) and focused on the lexicon used in these attacks. Some mainstream media channels were monitored, too, finding that male representation on TV ranged from 78% to 93% in the period between March and May 2022 compared to 7% to 22% of female representation. They conclude by inviting policy makers to provide reporting mechanisms for VAWP and engages both judicial institutions and media outlets in the process. They urge civil societies to collaborate to empower women in the political sphere by providing them with feminist platforms with a shared agenda to find VAW in all its forms. An all-inclusive and gender-sensitive culture needs to be fostered.

Through advocacy campaigns, providing digital advice, and research, *SMEX* is another active Lebanese NGO that aims to work with people in Lebanon and across the Arab world to provide them with a safe online space that empowers them to enjoy freedom of speech on the Internet, without fearing censorship or backlash for expressing themselves. With a helpdesk accessed through a variety of options online (website, media technologies, WhatsApp, etc.), they specifically target human rights' defenders,

feminist activists, and political candidates, providing them with digital safety information to protect themselves as they engage with others online. *ABAAD* is another resource centre for gender equality and women empowerment that has been operating from Lebanon since 2011. It works with other CSOs to promote gender equality and equal participation as a requirement for achieving sustainable social and economic development in the MENA region through advocacy campaigns, equality programs to increase women's participation in the government, developing new policies, legal reforms, and eliminating stereotypes and discrimination. Additionally, the Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF)[31] as one of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (or OCHA) country-pooled funds, was established in 2015 to support an increasing number of VAW prevention projects with the objective of supporting vulnerable communities and responding to their growing needs in Lebanon.

'UNITE! By 2030' is an annual and a global 16-day activism campaign led by international civil society that highlights efforts by the UNWomen and country-based partner programmes and initiatives to transform the lives of women and girls worldwide. In line with it, a 16-day campaign was launched in November last year[32] to counter VAW, celebrate the Women's Rights Movement in Lebanon, and highlight the importance of activism to encourage so-

---

31   The Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF)

32   UNITE! Campaign, 2022: Concept Note for engagement: Microsoft Word - UNiTE Campaign 2022_Concept Note_16 Days_EDITED_Hira (unwomen.org)

cial change. It included social media campaigns on the hashtags 'سوا_ضد_العنف#' and '#16Days' and the theme of the 2022 campaign was 'UNiTE! Activism to End Violence against Women and Girls.'

In the same way, there have been similar individual efforts by Lebanese activists to bring the issue of DVAW into the attention of the public using the same technological tools used to perpetuate it. This is exemplified by creating support Facebook groups such as 'متحرش كمشتكا' (translated as 'Catch a harasser,' which had such an impact that it spread to other countries in the Middle East, but due to the psychological pain it caused its creator and the fear of getting legally prosecuted for defamation, the Facebook account was voluntarily closed. Another individually launched campaign on Twitter is the hashtag 'مايبتزك_نحن_حدك#' (translated as #DontLetHimExtortYouWeAreWithYou). It was so impactful that the ISF's verified Twitter account participated in it to announce their awareness and cybersecurity campaigns and have worked with the campaign's owner Latifa Hassanieh to take corrective measures with the victims on the ground.

Therefore, there is not comprehensive study in the literature in the MENA area or in Lebanon that studies the DVAW phenomenon and hears from the women who suffer its consequences.

3.   Research questions

This research aims to find answers to the following main questions:

1. To what extent are women exposed to DVAW in Lebanon?

2. What are the commonly experienced forms of DVAW?

3. What are the driving forces behind the spread of the phenomenon?

4. What are the reactions of women to incidents of DVAW?

5. What impacts does DVAW have on women and what support systems are available to them?

6. What solutions are accessible to women to limit DVAW and protect them?

7. What are practical and policy recommendations needed to foster a safe online environment for women and girls?

4.   Research methodology

This research included several different data collection tools to provide a comprehensive understanding of DVAW in Lebanon and answer the research questions. It included a desktop search to understand the global and national perception of what VAW and DVAW are. Then, data was collected about the Lebanese population, the terrain of Internet usage, social media adoption, and the local cultural and legal context concerning offline and online VAW in Lebanon, including efforts to combat them.

An anonymous online questionnaire in Arabic was disseminated from the end of December, 2022 until mid-February, 2023 to collect data from a random sample of women who live in Lebanon about their online behaviour, including: a) some demographic information about them; b) the devices they connect from, the digital platforms they use, the frequency of usage and of publishing material online, exposure to any form of DVAW, the frequency with which it happens (if it happens), and the identity of the perpetrators; c) the women's reactions to DVAW incidents and their impact (psychological, physical, social, professional, etc.); d) ways in which women subjected to DVAW were helped or they wish they could have been helped but were not, to make recommendations.

Unfortunately, despite efforts to reach a large number of participants, very few women responded to the survey. There were 49 responses but only 30 completed and 8 were removed because the respondents did not live in Lebanon. This weak response could be explained by the fact that this was an online survey compared to one which could have addressed women directly to solicit more responses. This low rate of responses seems to echo that of political candidates, representative of various geographical areas of Lebanon, to surveys and focus group discussions during *KAFA*'s evaluation report of VAW in the 2022 elections. Such reluctance to share their stories could also be significant in its own right, pointing to important cultural, economic, and/or political factors playing out in the context of Lebanon leading to a projected sense of desperation, mistrust, and surrender to a silencing culture among women. Hence, the question of why there was a weak response to our anonymous online survey was raised with experts in the interviews, and an alternative data collection tool was added to shed light on the kind of discourse used in the DVAW attacks against publicly engaged Lebanese women on Twitter. The method and results of this case study will be detailed later under Findings, Section B: DVAW on Twitter: Politically active women from Lebanon as a case study.

By contrast, activists were quick to respond to our invitation for in-depth interviews to speak from their experience on behalf of women in Lebanon, including refugees, offering explanations for the general fear and stigma associated with speaking about these topics. The interviewees were encouraged to add their recommendations to supplement the results of this study. Ethical consent forms were obtained from participants, allowing them the choice of speaking anonymously where any would feel vulnerable for security purposes.

The in-depth interviews were conducted digitally with participants who were involved in responding DVAW cases to provide different perspectives and identify existing and proposed mechanisms to address this harmful behaviour. So, the qualitative data was derived from conversations with eight interviewees, two male and six female, and included journalists, activists, lawyers, political candidates. Most of the female participants were targeted with DVAW as members of CSOs that advocate for the protection of women and girls, three of whom asked to remain anonymous and will be referred to as A1, A2, and A3 where A stands for 'Anonymous.' Similar questions as the survey were raised to verify its results and listen to testimonies that illustrate the impact of online violence. Then, steps taken to help its victims were discussed highlighting challenges faced while supporting them. While victims were encouraged to speak out anonymously in the survey and to participate in the interviews, only a few cooperated to provide testimonial cases, and those who added their contact numbers for further communication decided later not to continue. Also, despite trying many times to reach out to refugee women in Lebanon who have experienced DVAW and organisations that support them such as the UNHCR Refugee Agency, '*Women Now*,' and '*Najdeh* Association,' we were able to receive no response to include the voice of refugee women in this study. Yet, we have tried to learn about the issue from members of civil societies active in supporting survivors of VAW and DVAW equally and with no discrimination between citizens or refugees. The matter was also taken up in the interview with a Lebanese lawyer.

5.   Research findings

This study confirms the limited previous research into DVAW in the Middle East and Lebanon. The online sphere is a reflection of what goes on in the real world and women find themselves more vulnerable where they sought to find freedom. This study relies on triangulated data derived from an online survey, interviews, and finally, empirical data sampled from Twitter attacks on visible Lebanese women, the results of the analysis of the data is as follows.

5.1   Findings from surveys and interviews

Because this study is focused on the virtual sphere within the Lebanese Republic, there remained 22 women respondents to the survey after removing those located outside Lebanon. Due to the low response to the survey, its results were considered indicative only in as much as they are validated by the desktop search results and the interviews. In terms of demographic information, most of them are urban from various parts of Lebanon, young, married, and educated with a university degree, or above, and they came from different career backgrounds.

5.2   Exposure to DVAW: where, what, by whom, why?

Most respondents connect to the Internet and social media platforms using their own personal devices. Mariam Yaghi, a feminist activist and journalist, the editorial coordinator for the *Sharika wa Laken* website, contends that most women use private devices when connecting to the Internet in Lebanon: "*As a working woman who understands the importance of cybersecurity, so I connect to the Internet through my own devices for social media access unless I am using the system at work*."

With more than 50% reportedly engaged in publishing and writing online predominantly using a personal mobile device, they posted mainly about human rights, women's rights, empowerment, violence against women, equality, justice, feminism, advocacy campaigns, and their personal opinions. They rarely published personal pictures or videos of themselves, yet they reposted generic pictures or videos they enjoyed with an average of once a week. Most frequently, they reposted textual material they liked on

social media with an average of several times a week but published general or personal written points of view at least once a week.

WhatsApp was the first social media platform used most often followed by Facebook then Instagram. Participants to the interviews in this study, whether those who personally suffered DVAW or those who helped survivors of it invariably attest to this result. While A1, a participant who wishes to remain unknown, supports the popularity of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp, she adds that recently Signal and Telegram are used by activists to a lesser extent, mainly with the VAW victims or other personal uses, for confidentiality. Generally, she states, "*[w]omen in Lebanon do not have access to secure devices, or to information, or to anything, therefore, any woman is vulnerable, and all that makes it difficult for her to report an incident for many reasons.*" Yet, "*[m]ost activists and human rights defenders try to use a secure device which has properties that make hacking less of a concern. Personally, I have a delete folder because so many women and girls send me their cases on Instagram or to my phone, so I make sure to take screenshots that I upload to iCloud and delete the messages to protect them.*"

Similarly, Zahraa Dirany who is a feminist activist and journalist from Beirut confirms the survey's results that, as a youth, Facebook and Instagram are the best platforms for engaging people with similar interests as hers. "*Each has a distinct audience and Facebook is older than Instagram, so people are more used to it. I post heavy stories there because my account is not open. I use Instagram to share information and post light personal stories and opinions, but this has changed lately. I feel less secure online and I don't feel like sharing personal material, which could only be related to me maturing as a person. I also use Twitter in campaigning, whenever we need to disseminate news, mobilise people, advocate for something or just to amplify an opinion. I also need to use private messages to reach out to pages I need to communicate with for work-related matters.*"

Another interviewee, Samar Alhalal, is a network and system engineer who has always been into volunteering. She works for *SMEX* as the technology unit leader and digital safety helpdesk manager for the last couple of years. For *Fe-Male* and other NGO organisations, she conducts digital safety training sessions for human-rights, social, or political activists and journalists to keep themselves safe online and empower them to express their opinions. She ascertains that "*[a]bout 75% of women in the Arab world go online to express their opinions,*" compared to a lower percentage of women in Europe, which may not be a positive trend but a symptom: "*The Internet became a platform for women to vent because if I can't speak*

What are the social media platforms that you have experienced online violence in and how often did it happen to you there?
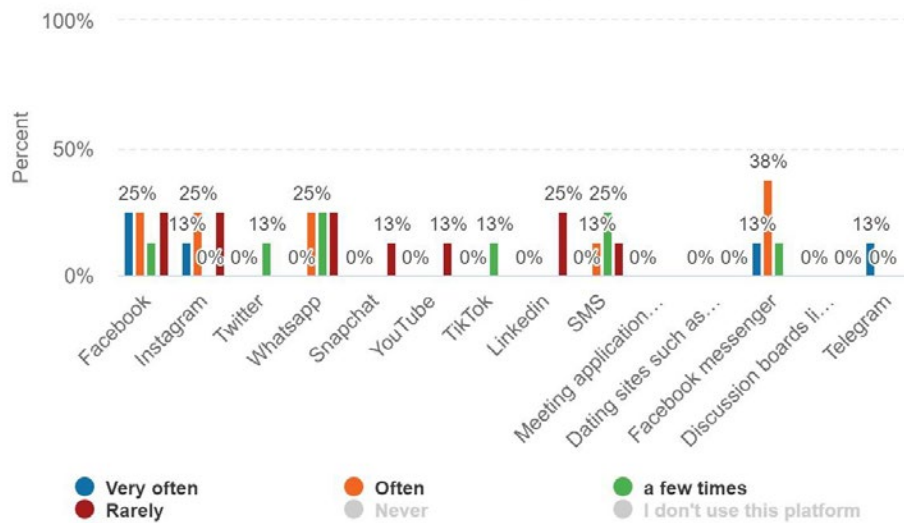
Figure 2: The social media platforms where DVAW happens according to the respondents in percentages (without 'never' and 'I don't use this platform').

my mind at home, I can do it online, anonymously." According to her, the preference of which social media platform to use depends on age: "*Among teenagers, TikTok and Facetime are popular, with older folks, Instagram is on the lead and Facebook's use has decreased in popularity recently around the world, not just in Lebanon... Twitter is also popular for political conversations and campaigns*."

A female participant who asked to remain anonymous (A2 hereafter), is a politically engaged strategy and communication expert with over 20 years of experience in auditing, translation, and management of national and UN or EU funded projects. "*I use Facebook and Twitter... I have something to say every day on what is going on in my country,*" she says. She points to struggles women face when they express their opinion on national and political matters: "*We have social and political demands that we would like to see happen. We have freedom of speech in Lebanon and there are no restrictions, but there would be attacks from opposing political parties and their allies*."

This is rendered in the survey as exactly half the respondents reported not having been exposed to any online violence while the other half did, commenting that it was of the following types: abusive or intimidating messages after expressing their political opinions, harassment, bullying, and identity theft on social media platforms. Only the latter half continued the survey.

As to where these DVAW incidents commonly occurred, Facebook and Facebook Messenger were

first on the list of social media platforms, followed by Instagram then WhatsApp. Figure 2 illustrates this order.

Zahraa supports that harassment happens mostly on Facebook, its messaging system, and Instagram: "*We all received direct messages with unwanted content, even on Twitter there is harassment and extortion*." This puts current protection and preventative policies of META company, the business behind all these platforms, and their terms of use in the spotlight. However, A1 argues that although these platforms have almost the same reporting and protection measures, the problem is not with their end-user policy because "*[w]hen we sit with the META team in round table focus groups, we speak about how to make the privacy settings on their platforms more protective of women and girls, and they always highlight that when we, as users, sign up for an account, we should be reading their policy before we click 'agree'. So, as a principal stakeholder, the problem may not be the policy terms themselves.*" She suggests that the problem my reside in "*the way the terms are explained; whether they are clearly telling their users what they are allowed to do and what not, and what they can do to protect themselves when they get blackmailed other than the reporting button.*" She continues, "*[f]rom my point of view, the platforms have enough deterrents, but Facebook could also be sending an offender an email telling them you are not welcome on our platform anymore and remove them because they violated this term or that.*" Hence, these platforms need to be stricter in dealing with such behaviour.

What kind of online violence did you experience and how often did it happen to you?
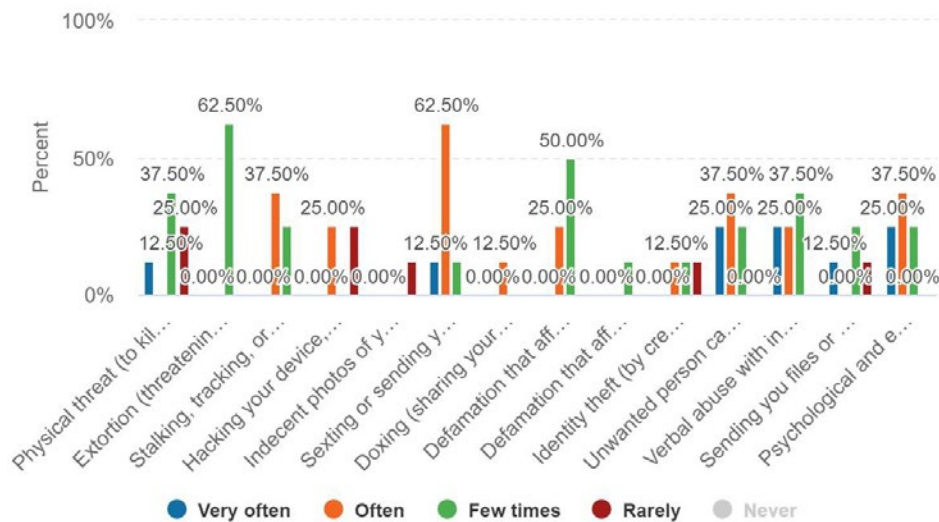

Figure 3: The forms of DVAW experienced by the respondents in percentages
(without accounting for the 'never' option)

Bassel Abbas is a registered lawyer at the lawyers' Union in Beirut who has worked at the Court of Appeals since 2011. He is an active defender of human rights. He confirms that the cases he had seen or heard of mainly happened on Facebook and WhatsApp, but lately, he adds, "*[a] third platform is alarmingly inspiring more ideas about harassment. Tik-Tok is attracting more users recently and is used in the wrong way, encouraging prostitution and human trafficking as well as dropping out of school because of all the trends and the easy money coming from it.*"

When Samar pulled data from *SMEX*'s support and digital safety system to validate, with numbers, on which platform most cases of DVAW such as bullying, hate speech, harassment, sextortion, doxing, or abuse, occurred in Lebanon from January 2022 to the end of February 2023, she confirms that they "*received 300 cases in 2022 in the MENA region, but from Lebanon alone, Facebook has always been the most violent with 23 cases reported on Facebook and 5 on Twitter, less in other platforms*."

Another anonymous participant (A3 onwards) is a campaign coordinator at a non-profit feminist organisation in Lebanon. She asserts that "*[m]any of the DVAW stories are from Facebook; sometimes, we need to seek an immediate intervention because there would be a group of people sharing pictures of someone. Unlike Instagram, there could be a clear threat of murder on Facebook. For instance, it would require a legal intervention when people would be reporting someone because he had been posting his threats on the public page*."

Based on the survey results, the most frequently experienced form of online violence is non-consensual sexting followed by psychological or emotional manipulation and non-stop calls and messages from unwanted persons in similar proportions. Verbal abuse targeting them because they are women came next. The least experienced form of digital VAW is organised defamation campaigns with only one participant exposed to it a few times. Blackmailing for sex or money was not experienced prevalently in the survey sample while threats of physical harm was experienced more than once by one respondent. As for online offences that require high tech expertise, more than half the women mentioned being stalked or spied on, and the rest were either hacked or their identity on social media was overtaken. One third of the respondents who suffered DVAW received files or links infected with a virus, spyware, or malware at least once. Figure 3 above helps point to how these women were not spared a single DVAW form listed in the survey question.

When asked to report an incident from their experience, the following are examples of the survey participants' responses (translated from Arabic):

- "*It was verbal harassment because of a personal photo of myself that someone considered provocative.*"

- "*Threats of possible harm- killing in case I continue to be active in issues related to my rights as a woman, defamation several times, offensive messages and psychological manipulation.*"

- *"Blackmail because I refused to respond to the person or ignored him."*

- *"I made my Instagram account private because of the daily violence I used to experience when anybody could see the content of my page and comment freely on my pictures; they think that they have the right to do that and sext me privately only because I have not activated my privacy options?"*

- *"I was exposed more than once to harassment because of cases I followed or posted about. One journalist [a known figure, name excluded by researcher] caused a lot of noise when he called my husband, called me names, and reposted what I wrote on his page to instigate a backlash against me, asking his followers to report me to Facebook until I received a warning on my FB account. I tried to write to the company, but they did not respond. I experienced verbal abuse and sexual suggestions from male users because I evaluated their patriarchal content. I was subjected to threats of murder after adopting cases of women and bringing them to public attention."*

The participants of the interviews shared DVAW cases that happened to them and to others, some of which with grave consequences. Zahraa spoke of an older acquaintance who was financially extorted by a member of a cyber gang once she joined Facebook, "threatening her of telling her husband that she replied to him." A male friend of hers divorced because a woman started sending his wife false news about him until she believed her and then she fell into the net of cyber gangs. Perpetrators on Instagram, she continues, hunt for girls who react to sexually explicit or sensitive videos with a 'like' to harass them.

Fe-Male and KAFA make referrals as CSOs collaborate; they focus on digital advocacy and literacy, digital security, and providing digital training kits, tool kits, legal or psycho-social assistance for survivors of DVAW, as necessary. A woman may share her pictures with consent, but a woman's device could also

be hacked, which means her data would be taken without her consent and may be abused. A girl visited one of Fe-Male's centres seeking advice because she was digitally blackmailed by someone from a different Arab state using photos that she shared with him, and she was referred by Fe-Male to SMEX's helpdesk.

Many DVAW cases illustrate the link between the virtual and offline worlds. A man posted images of coffins in public as a threat to his ex-wife and her children, who are also his, and people started reporting him, so "[w]e made sure he was arrested," A3 as she explains the dangers of such abusive behaviours emphasising that that they are often preceded by abuse on the ground and, thus, require immediate interference.

Bassel recounts an incident where a government official used his job to extract a married woman's information and then extorted her because he liked her. Since she was not technologically literate, she believed him and did not talk to a lawyer immediately until the issue became very annoying to her that she had to report it. Another case he witnessed was that of a girl who fled from her house and turned her phone off that suicide was suspected. Her compassionate but worried father begged him as a lawyer to help her and tell her that he was ready not to speak of what happened again if she wished; all he wanted was for her to come back home safely, and, luckily, she did.

"It is important for women to understand that you never know someone until conflict of interests arises," Bassel continues, telling of stories of divorced women extorted by their ex-husbands using intimate pictures and of another woman who was in a relationship with her boss and when they had differences over a contract, he started blackmailing her with their photos together. What shocked and hurt her the most, he affirms, was his violent behaviour, not the loss of the contract or the money. Bassel also commends the perseverance of one DVAW survivor

in courts against her offender despite the restraining order he signed and the delays of the court's verdict due to continuous strikes lately, only to make sure he does not harm another woman and he becomes a lesson for others.

We also asked interview participants about the situation facing refugee women when they are exposed to DVAW. The responses revealed that, for all CSOs, they are treated, assisted, and included in training and awareness sessions as Lebanese women are. A refugee woman would not face any problem reporting an incident to law enforcement if she is registered in the Lebanese refugees' system. However, if she is not registered and her papers are incomplete, her care report will be accepted and will take its legal course, but action will be taken against her for public security purposes. This is why refugee women feel more vulnerable and prefer to remain silent, in fear of getting deported. However, a refugee victim of DVAW may get help from CSOs if she seeks them, where they would coordinate with the ISF or a judge to give her a week's chance to register as her DVAW reported case proceeds in parallel. A1 mentioned helping a refugee woman after a breakup, the man started threatening her of exposing her pictures; she was so scared and vulnerable of losing custody of her children if her ex-husband knew.

There are virtually focussed acts of online violence that can cause emotional pain to women or harm their reputation. Mariam highlights the irony that it is so frequent that young men privately send photos of their genitals to women, but when a girl expresses her freedom and posts a revealing picture of herself on her page, all the replies and comments she receives are offensive claiming that she is exposing herself. Many times, photos of decent, sometimes hijabi, women are fabricated, "[t]here was this Lebanese religious woman who worked in the media, so they put her face on an exposed body just because she always dressed trendy, and she was pretty. The comments used different terms from patriarchal recommendations to curses and slanders to threats, e.g., from 'chameleon,' 'she doesn't have an adult male in her family,' 'not well raised,' to 'whore,' 'ill-mannered,' or 'feminist,' all of which are gendered and offensive terms… even emojis like the tongue out one are used… the offenders have created a big dictionary [of insults]."

Since verbal abuse and bullying are frequent forms of DVAW as 4 of the 6 interviewed female participants complained that they were exposed to defamation attacks on social media platforms, it was decided to carry a case study of empirical data from Twitter to count the occurrences of selected terms from two types of lexicons, explicit and non-explicit. This is to investigate which gendered discourses are weaponised more by offenders against women, the sexually loaded offences or those limiting social roles ascribed to, yet used to shame, women. Method and findings of this part are found in the next section in **DVAW on Twitter: Politically active women from Lebanon as a case study**.

Most online offences were said to occur in private, not in public, i.e., in front of other Internet users. Half of the women mentioned that the violence was frequently perpetrated by unknown people while the rest reported that it was by people they knew on a personal or professional level, occasionally relatives, too. The offenders, it was agreed, were mostly male at 75%. This shows that the gender of the perpetrator is always clear to them despite the anonymity affordance of the Internet.

In the same way, all the interviewees confirm that the perpetrators are often male without completely dismissing the possibility of a female offender to either a man or a woman. Bassel submits that "*[t]here is no single rule to apply here, the perpetrator of DVAW could be a relative or a stranger, could be a husband, an ex-husband, or an ex-lover. The purpose of the violence by the anonymous is usually a material benefit, such as money, sex, or the involvement of a woman/girl in the transfer of some (prohibited) merchandise or prostitution while if the perpetrator is known, then*

it is often motivated by sexual desire, revenge, jealousy, gloating, or grudge." It is most dangerous, he reveals, "*[w]hen the anonymous perpetrator is part of a criminal network trying to pull a woman's leg into their illegal business. So, she had better report and trust that the court will protect her and her reputation and that there are lawyers and civil society organisations that are there to assist her.*"

On whether the victim knows the offender or not, A1 suggests that "*[i]t is impossible that she does not know him at all, at least from the cases I've worked on, they at least have each other on Facebook or Instagram because if she doesn't know him it is easier for her to report him, but if she knows the guy, it becomes difficult for her to report… ok she'd say 'we were intimate and I sent him a nude, but this does not give him the right to share it; I sent it to him alone,' and now it is used against her because you could never know someone well enough.*"

A1 complements the portrayal of the perpetrators of VAW in terms of age. She suggests they are usually adults over 18 because "*[w]e live in the MENA region where the man is convinced that he has the authority to control everything related to women and girls, whether a woman is his mother, sister, fiancé, girlfriend, wife, or whatever… Superiority is always there.*" So, she asks, "*[i]sn't he the same man who is now using the Internet? What background did he come from? Of course, from this hegemonic offline environment, he brought all the male domination he learned with him behind the screen, the discriminatory habits, and the societal ideologies against women… Unless there are valid deterrents. With this, we have not succeeded.*"

There was consensus amongst the surveyed women that they had been targeted by this kind of violence only because they are women. One survey respondent justifies it with the idea that the offenders "*think of me as weak because I come from a certain background, and they use my circumstances to abuse me*" while another respondent claims that "*[i]n her reality, she had never heard of a young man being exposed to this kind of violence.*" The theme of the 'weakness of women' emerges in the interviews several times since. Samar contends that "*DVAW is growing because a woman is considered fragile, and offenders know she is not protected in our communities.*"

Another respondent asserts that the very definition of physical and sexual abuse involves that it is practised on women. In her words, "*[t]he male kind addresses us with the superiority of his 'organ,' saying things like 'I would never even rape you because your kind shouldn't multiply,' shows their understanding of machismo and male domination over our bodies, seeing women as sex objects, or believing in our need for male virility. It also shows what power dynamics are at play here.*"

Participants to the interviews unanimously agree, too, that it is women who are most subjected to DVAW. Zahraa confirms that, based on studies and statistics, DVAW remains "*a violence that discriminates based on gender; yes, there are men who may be exposed to violence online, but they happen for other reasons that are not gender based and not at the same high rate.*" A1 agrees with Zahraa: "*Even when someone blackmails a man with a photo for example, it is easily forgotten as if nothing happened, no matter how far the threat goes. We saw examples of that on the media, now forgotten… Yes, this kind of crime is not restricted to a certain age, but these people are able to control girls of 15-23 years whose cases we encounter in the ISF's office because these girls are so scared that it is easy to extort them.*" Samar confirms that of the DVAW cases, registered as 'female,' that are seeking assistance from *SMEX*'s helpdesk, the majority were reported by a male person on their behalf: "*Women tell a man to reach out to us instead because they do not want to confront what happened. These cases are a 100% gender based.*"

Bassel asserts the presence of this forgiving culture of men's misdemeanours "*because of our Middle Eastern traditions and norms, a man is allowed to err more than a woman is although Sharia law does not discriminate between men and women in wrongdoing… So, man is proud of his violence when he hits his wife for example, the rapist is rewarded by marrying his victim* [this law has changed recently according to A1]*, and if he sends a photo of his genitals to a woman online because he is a man who is not flawed by anything, receiving the photos becomes her fault.*" He also agrees with A1 that the younger the woman, the easier a target she becomes. Until the age of 24 or 25, a young woman would be passionately seeking to experience life and explore her options. When she is at university, she wants to show her family that she is aware and confident and can take her own decisions. That is when an abuser tries to manipulate her passion for life and her lack of skill. "*That is why I tell parents to be honest with their daughters and grant them freedom in a calculated manner but keep them close to them so they can protect them,*" he contends.

Mariam expands the argument to include that the more active online a woman is, the more exposed she is to DVAW: "*Everyone is exposed to it, but the politically engaged is a woman who goes public, and you know her more and you know what she gets subjected to because she is at the front lines. If she ignores that information about her is being abused and/or directly reports incidents as such, she may have high end connections that could provide her with a support system. The real danger awaits the women whose voices are not loud. Even I, an ordinary woman, have a louder voice* [as a feminist activist]*, although I don't have connections, I still have my voice and I could do something to*

avoid the physical and mental consequences of the online violence." She speaks of the psychological pain and pressure activists suffer as they listen to DVAW stories to the extent that they need support as well. "*We, the feminists, are at the frontline, so all the accusations, curses, and slurs are targeting us directly... It so often happened that I find myself suddenly added to a porn group on Facebook because the algorithms on social media allow a user to add anyone to a group and all you can do is just remove yourself from it.*"

A2 recounts a touching story of an Egyptian woman in politics who was attacked and, as a result, stopped her political career. She comments that this means the male hegemonic ideology has won, "*[a]ll the other women should have supported her to win this battle over! We can proceed with our political goals, we can succeed, and we can protect ourselves meanwhile, each in her own way.*" She argues that VAWP is often perpetrated by the opposite party and "*is directed at women because men feel that a woman is weaker, especially when she is an independent candidate, and she does not have a ruling political party backing her.*" She recommends that laws are needed to regulate this behaviour to protect political democracy: "*Women and girls are exposed more and because of the cultural traditions, the consequences are often dire, especially if she is married and fears for her reputation and her kids that her mental health is affected, particularly if she is active socially, economically, or politically, and so she retreats from the field or from all social media... We want to encourage more women into the public sphere, so we need to break this cycle by establishing the right laws.*" Zahraa further explains that digital antagonism gets mobilised by opposing political parties as a tool to silence any voice that challenges their authority.

"*If I speak about the legal situation of women,*" A3 expands, "*[w]omen are being discriminated against,*" referring to the personal status laws in Lebanon, and she continues, "*[i]f I speak about their social status, women's status is also weak, whether in terms of traditions or judgements and expectations of them, and if I speak about their political status, the defamation they often get exposed to always focuses on their honour.*" If she were a man, she points to the forgiving culture of men, "*[n]o one speaks about him even if he has had so many sexual harassment victims and this is not only on the social level. In the small environments of small towns, or even within the family relations, if a girl wants to get married, everyone has a say in it and if she wants to join the municipal elections, she can be exposed to domestic violence. Even if she were joining the parliamentary elections on the national level, the situation still stands. Because of this hierarchical structure, of course women will suffer violence the most.*"

When survey respondents were asked about the drivers for DVAW, they reported that DVAW is motivated by many context-sensitive social and cultural norms, to use their words: '*The backwardness of society*', '*gender stereotypes*', '*the lack of awareness of women's status and role*', '*the continuous suppression and stifling of women's voices*', '*extremist religious and racial ideas*', '*Eastern masculine need for patriarchal displays of power and dominance in both politics and social life*' as well as '*the recent accessibility to visual and textual lust irritants causing such frenzy recklessness with women.*' One respondent argues that "*[m]others bring up their boys with a sense of entitlement that causes them to find it difficult to take no for an answer and, if brought up in abusive home, this can lead to such abusive patterns to repeat themselves offline and online.*"

To sum up, DVAW's prevalence is explained by the absence of active legal mechanisms to combat VAW, the gender gap at the workplace, and discrimination against women in personal status laws. Another factor also adds that the unstable political, financial, and psychological situation all lend comfort to the offender to practise transgressions against women on the digital space knowing that their behaviour will go unpunished. Ignorance and lack of awareness of how such VAW affects women, their families, and society at large was also mentioned as a contributor. Other suggested drivers of VAW in the survey include the randomness of social media platforms, favouritism and the support of religious and political parties, the silence of women as they wait for feminists to speak on their behalf instead of supporting them publicly, politics being dominated by males with the marginalisation of women in the public sphere, and the pervasive forgiving culture in favour of men's behaviour.

Responses in the interviews expand on these ideas. Bassel views the increase in DVAW in Lebanon as "*a direct reflection of the reality of discrimination against women in our societies after the proliferation of social media networks, especially during Covid19. Life now exists on social media, so its rise is normal. Harassment used to permeate in public transportation and at work; every era has its issues and at this time and age social media contributes to more harassment. We are in the social media era where we do most of our talks, courses, meetings, and work tasks online. People don't need to meet in person anymore*." At the same time, A1 believes that the Internet has provided access to women and girls like never before, "*[e]ven 15-year-old girls now have phones and access to different platforms... Since women and girls are now present online, everywhere, it's easier now for him* [an offender] *to reach them, and this is dangerous because he is aware of the culture and what to use against those girls*."

Zahraa agrees, "*[d]igital violence is the same as the violence women are subjected to on the ground, but it transformed with the use of new tools that are free on the Internet and social media platforms; therefore, the things we used to be exposed to have taken new forms, whether extortion, blackmail, theft, bullying, or harassment. What is different now is this gratuitousness of such violence, using various programs to manipulate information and our pictures with the affordance of keeping the perpetrator's identity hidden. Add to that the patriarchal and male hegemonic system which does not respect women and girls, making them easy targets for all kinds of cybercrimes, including human trafficking, the kind we witness a lot of today on TikTok, commodifying women's bodies on the Internet*." She explains how that works: "*A young girl was lured through the Internet by someone who blackmailed her. When he first asked her to send her picture, she sent it gullibly, not knowing that this someone is malicious. Then, she got scared because we* [women and girls] *don't have the means to protect ourselves from electronic blackmail or from this repressive intimidating system in our society.*"

Zahraa also suggests that women's issues are often politicised, "*especially when the male offender belongs to a political party unlike when the offender does not belong to one, so the digital violence might extend offline and the female victim will suffer, and her case may never get resolved in the courts*." A1, however, disagrees. The problem with women's issues is that they are under the mercy of religious, not political, groups in the country because "*[i]n the parliament, most parties support projects and laws related to women and girls, but then religious clerics in these sects politicise the issue; that is the real danger, so our first battle is with those clerics not with the politicians*." Before any law is passed in the parliament, it must be sent first to the heads of sects and be approved. So, if activists call for something that a sect does not support, regarding child custody for example, they can be attacked by that sect's court, judges, and by extension, followers.

It is unfortunate, albeit predictable, according to Mariam, that as women started to think of the Internet as a space to express themselves, they discovered that the same discriminatory practices that exist in the offline world are reproduced: "*As much as she is looking for a place to vent, there is a male person who is also looking for a place to vent his toxic masculinity on... It is important to understand that gender plays an important role in targeting women because they are women, the current* [financial or political] *circumstances are extra factors. If a woman were given all her freedoms and was not facing any problem, she would still be on social media and someone she had never met before could still decide out of nowhere to curse her, accuse her in her honour with a word that is even allowed in courts.*" She concludes that "*[w]e need to acknowledge that we have gender discrimination in the heart of our social structure translated in mentality and everyday behaviour to the extent that some people do not even know that these practices are discriminatory.*"

5.3   Women's reactions to DVAW and its impact

The number of respondents to the question about their reactions to DVAW and after dropped to seven and their reactions were in the following order of preference: 'blocking' the offender, confronting

What is your usual reaction to any of the following forms of online violence?
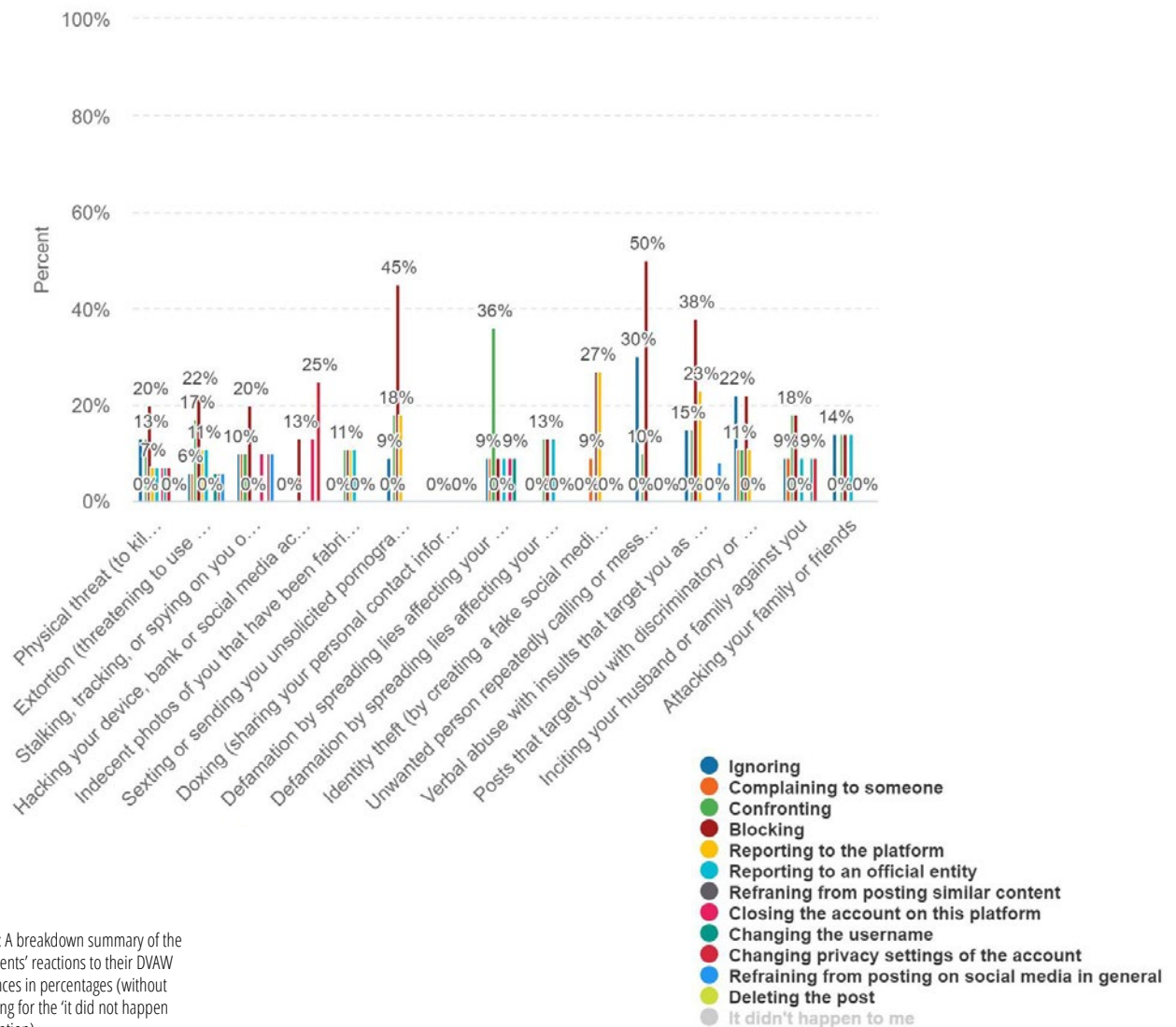
Figure 4: A breakdown summary of the respondents' reactions to their DVAW experiences in percentages (without accounting for the 'it did not happen to me' option)

the offender directly to understand what he wants, then 'ignoring,' and 'reporting' the incident to the platform. Ignoring which may also be accompanied by blocking, one respondent explains, is the best response because "*[w]hoever spread lies was not worth the attention.*" Ignoring was also driven by the women's rejection of being put in a position where they feel they have to "*justify the things they did or did not do*," or by their "*fear of going against the political or religious parties the perpetrator belongs to.*" Confronting was mostly used with an individual who spread lies about them online, incited their husbands or family against them, stalked them, sent them unsolicited sexual content, or attacked their family and friends. With hacking attacks, they generally preferred to use technological measures like blocking and closing their accounts or changing their privacy settings. Respondents opted for the most varied reactions when exposed to physical threats, extortion, defamation,

and hacking, which shows the gravity of such attacks. Reporting to the platform was a measure they took mainly with identity theft and verbally, racially, or sexually abusive messages. Reporting to authorities was selected primarily where fear and insecurity were instigated, such as when family or friends were attacked, when their honour is in disrepute by a person or a group, when family is pushed against them, and when extortion takes place. These responses are illustrated in Figure 4.

When asked about whether their reaction would be different if they had known the perpetrator, the majority of respondents to the survey dismissed the possibility, mentioning in the comment that "*[w]hat is wrong is wrong, and the reaction may vary depending on the privilege (or not) of a woman, but it is also the feminist's duty to speak out.*"
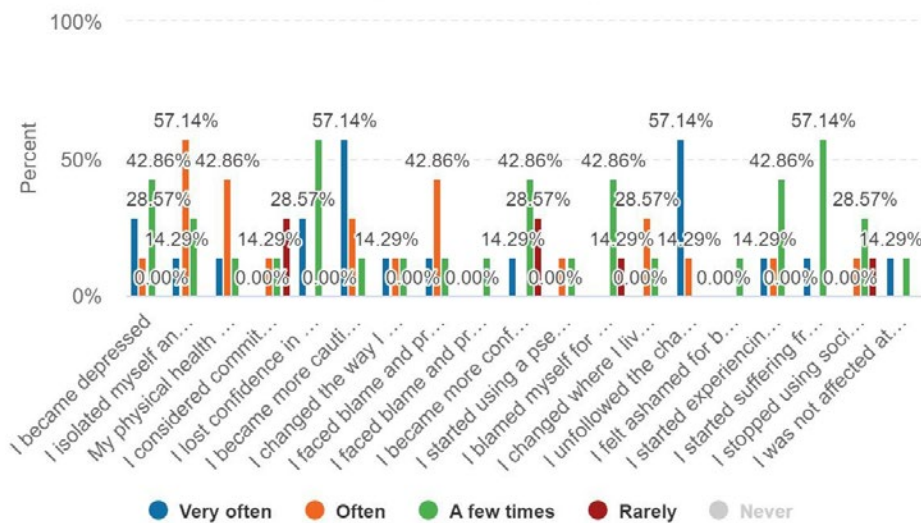
Figure 5:
The harmful effects experienced after DVAW in percentages.

Bassel disagrees. He believes that the reaction of the woman would be different depending on whether she knows the perpetrator or not. If she knows him, there could be feelings of trauma, depression, fear, disappointment, and rejection and there are suicide cases because of this. She comes out of such an incident distrusting of and hostile to all men. If she does not know him; he was just someone she was venting with, then she is overtaken by fear: '*Who is he?*,' '*does he know me?*,' '*does he know my family?*,' or '*who is behind him?*' Samar makes the same distinction and associates knowing the perpetrator with emotions getting in the way of reporting, especially if he were an ex or a relative, or fear if he were of a political affiliation. Then, there would be nothing much to do than isolating herself, depression, leaving the country, or theft: "*Do you know how many victims tried to break into someone's house just to take a USB disk that person stole their data on?*"

Therefore, as regards the effects of being subjected to an act of DVAW, all the proposed effects on the survey, which were based on the literature on digital violence, seem to have resonated with the women in various proportions. The most prevalent reactions were increased alertness when using social media, desire to isolate from social life, physical health problems, and pressure or blame within their households. Committing suicide seems to have occurred to them at least rarely. Such patterns may be linked to the female respondents' character and strength and how supportive (or not) their immediate environments are, but they also indicate that women do not feel safe online as the digital space has become hostile to women. These results are shown in figure 5.

Based on the interviews, self-blame is an important consequence of DVAW and the social stigma surrounding women falling prey for an incident: "*We ask women why do you not report? Their answers include: 'because they'd blame me and tell me that I'm the one who sent him my photo;' 'they'll say I allowed myself to speak to a stranger,' ... or 'because we don't have a place we can report him to'... Not reporting is caused by fear from society, what is known as honour, and all these pressures placed on women and girls in addition to the lack of support from their families and the existing discriminatory social expectations,*" A1 adds. Generally, she argues, the reaction of women to DVAW is different from one woman to the other. Many women change their habits online due to what they are exposed to, and some go completely offline, then come back using pseudonyms. To one woman, it may not matter, but to another, it could mean she has to end her life: "*I was exposed to a three-day Twitter attack online... by a religious group. The attack was unprecedented and unacceptable. I couldn't sleep, and I am a strong woman who knows how to protect herself and others. It was an army of a hundred accounts... This created panic and stress... So, the effects are huge, short term and long term, including distrust of others, less use of social media platforms, anxiety, and it can also affect the development of a girl's character.*"

On whether this online violence was transferred to real life, most survey respondents agree that it did

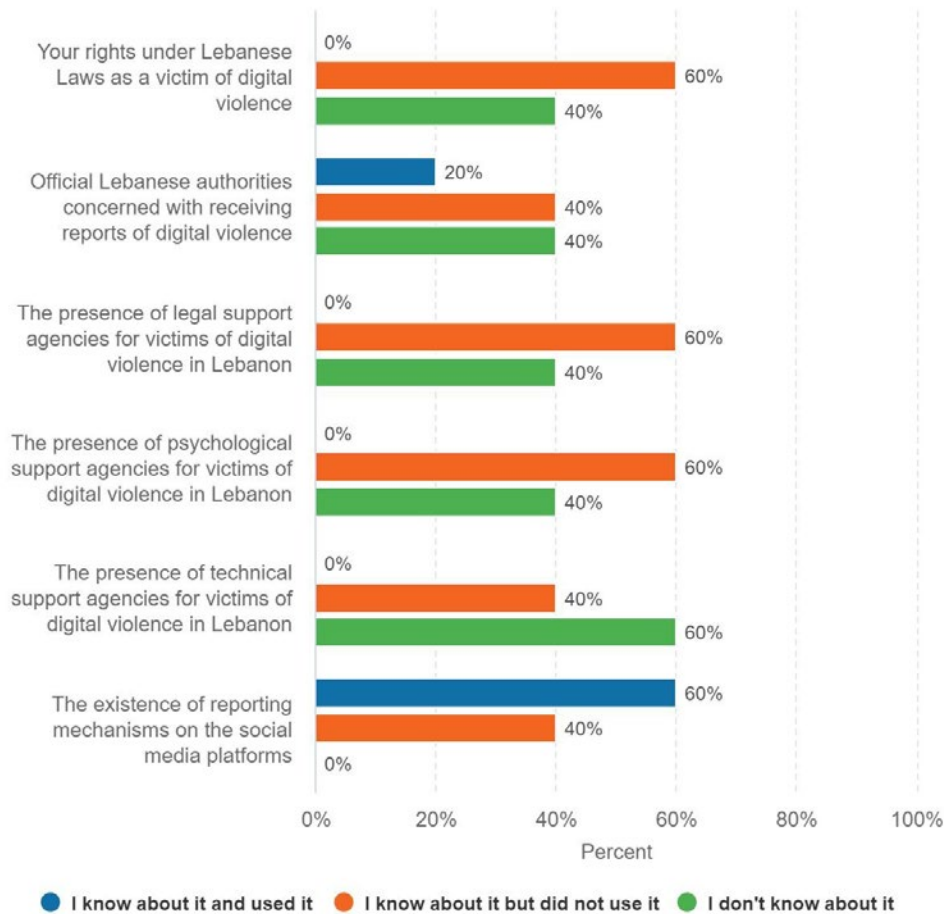## To what extent are you aware of the following:

Figure 6: A summary of the results on awareness of the existence of and use of various support mechanisms to survivors of DVAW in percentages.

not transfer. One survey respondent, however, commented that the online violence she experienced transferred from real life to the online space as "*[m]y ex-husband tried to incite people against me in reality and when I did not break and continued to be active online, he moved to abusing me online.*" Conversations with the interview participants further demonstrate the potential transfer of violence between the online and offline spheres and the extent of the consequences of online violence affecting the women subjected to it. Police intervention would immediately be needed if the harasser were violent. Therefore, even the way the case is managed, by the ISF or by CSOs, would be different from one case to the other but help is provided accordingly. Based on A3's experiences, "*[s]ometimes we need to understand the background of the perpetrator, his personality, and his behaviour to assess the risks involved.*" To attest to severe cases showing the extent of online-offline violence transference, Mariam mentions that *"[i]n 2019, the ISF's website reported that two girls committed suicide and a third one attempted suicide because of digital extortion.*"

Interview participants emphasise the need for a strong support circle for the DVAW victims. Families and workers in VAW/DVAW prevention centres need to learn how to listen to the girls; awareness needs to be raised to these issues even at schools and universities, addressing both the girls and the boys. A girl would not tell her family in fear, not only of it turning into a scandal, but also of it extending to domestic physical or verbal violence. The rhetoric of a DVAW victim, according to Mariam, sounds like '*[i]f I tell my family, I could get beaten or even killed; if I tell authorities, I could get harassed or blamed also. If they don't blame me, the best-case scenario is that they'd start giving me patriarchal recommendations, such as 'don't ever send your pictures.*' Many of the ISF's instructions to women regarding violence against them online focus on limiting women's freedoms, telling them what to do and what not to do, which is not constructive. It reiterates the rhetoric that online offenders use against women. Through creating digital 'inconveniences,' abusers take advantage of the weak support system surrounding women and the fact that women's personal spaces and freedoms are

narrowed by such masculinized authoritative regularisations to stop them from expressing themselves online. Once an incident has occurred, it needs action from security forces to protect the woman; the victim does not need advice then, Bassel confirms.

5.4   Solutions to DVAW

Before moving on to considering solutions to DVAW, it was important to survey how aware Lebanese women are of their rights and the support systems provided for them in their country. Figure 6 illustrates that there is a chasm between knowing and using available support mechanisms. More than half the respondents, as survivors of DVAW cases, acknowledged being aware of their legal rights in the Lebanese Law, official reporting channels for DVAW, and organisations that provide legal and psycho-social support; however, very few reported the DVAW to the police. All knew about the 'report' option on social media platforms, but only a few used it. Many did not know about technical support provisions for victims of DVAW while a few knew but never used them. Why they have not used these options was not clarified in the comments' section.

To explain not using these support channels, Mariam suggests that many of the victims lost confidence in protective measures and law enforcement despite commendable efforts by the ISF and their online 'Report it' service: "*Whenever I advised them to report the DVAW incidents to the ISF, their response goes as 'First, things are currently loose, second, are you telling me to go to the ISF in a patriarchal male dominated state, what for?'... Yet I have followed up cases with them that they followed through earnestly... but women drop the charges or stop following up with their cases because of the blaming culture, the associated stigma, and the fear of having fingers pointed at them*."

Although respondents expressed awareness of technical provisions on social media platforms to report any transgression, when they answered the next question of whether they received any such support, the majority reported that they were not adequately assisted with their problem by the platform specifically. On this, a respondent commented: '*I sought the help of Facebook when I emailed them upon the recommendation of someone from the UNWomen, but I did not receive any support or protection; rather I received threats of closing my account*.' None received technical assistance regarding digital security and all, except one, also mentioned not going to official governmental entities like the police station or the ISF because they did not trust they could help them or did not know about them. The majority of them

seem to prefer to talk to friends, work colleagues, administration, or compassionate Internet users. Lastly, they seek a civil community or organisation such as *KAFA* or *Fe-Male* to advise them and this was found useful where it was used. They variably mentioned seeking help from female members in their families more than they did from male members.

The majority of survey respondents mentioned that sometimes they wanted to seek support, but they did not know where to find it. This is interesting because it points to how most incidents of DVAW are dealt with by silence and dismissal despite their major effects on the wellbeing of women. Women feel unsupported in reality despite or because of the inadequately publicised provision of these supportive apparatuses. Figure 7 summarises how all respondents encourage preventative and corrective measures towards a safer online space for women and girls. There was consensus amongst the survey's participants (80-100%) that all the suggested protection mechanisms were extremely useful. These include promoting cultural and cybersecurity awareness to rid the Lebanese society of DVAW, involving families to help and support their daughters unconditionally, creating institutions for providing free psychological, technical, and legal sustenance for survivors of DVAW, criminalising and penalising digital harm, pressuring social media platforms into providing better protection and penalty policies, involving educational and professional institutions in the public and private sectors, and training members of governmental and civil first responders to provide needed aid to victims of DVAW. These mechanisms were supported by the interview participants as well.

Several recommendations can be distilled from the interviews to combat DVAW in Lebanon, institutional (to government authorities, ministries, and offices), legal (laws), technical (to social media platforms and female users), or social (to women, girls, boys, and families). Many of the survey respondents and interview participants point to the discrimination against women in the personal status laws based on the various religious sects as the root cause of VAW and that there is a need for a unified system because "*[u]nless a woman feels that her state is supporting her as a citizen, how can she feel safe?*" Women do not feel safe at home, at work, in the street, in governmental institutions, and on social media, so a girl prefers to stay silent or just close her social media accounts or she starts using pseudonyms instead of her name to ease the effect of any possible DVAW. Mariam recommends that people need to get used to the presence of women everywhere, in the streets at any hour of the day, at the workplace, on the Internet, and public spheres they are no longer restricted from. Until that happens, regulations are needed. She also insists that more trained females

How important are the following measures to protect women on the internet?
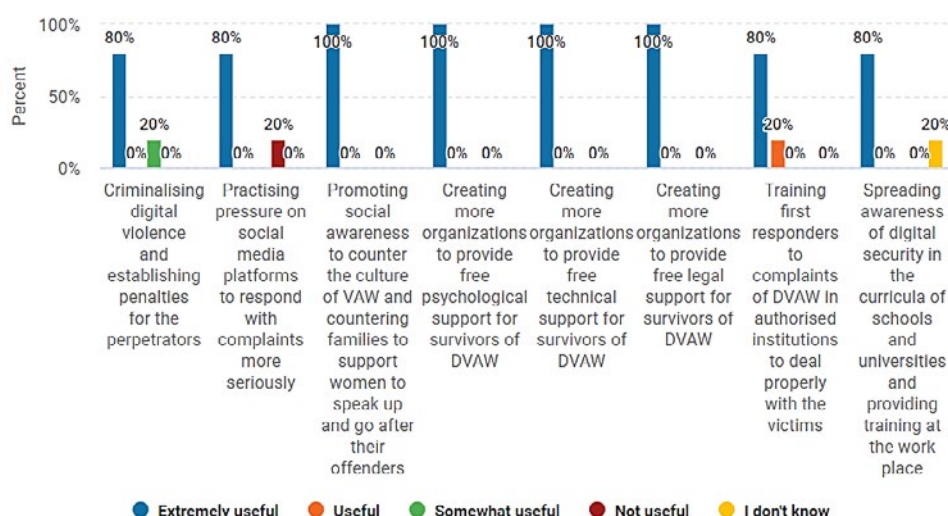

Figure 7: A summary of the respondents' evaluation of suggested measures to combat DVAW.

need to be employed by the ISF and official authorities like police stations that use a discourse friendly to women and girls to put VAW and DVAW victims at ease to talk. Gender equity in personal status laws, freedoms, job market, security, law, politics, and the Internet, is the answer to equilibrium. The ISF, however, is male dominated environment, and the discourse is often not friendly to the female victims during investigations, so training and employing more female officers is important.

Mariam concludes by saying: "*Women have the right to feel safe wherever they are, including the digital space and they have the right to express themselves however they want... I have the right to know that my country, my legal system, my security people care for my personal space and are establishing (and executing) laws and procedures that grant me safety from any harm in this personal space... rights come as one package... because these digital platforms are used today for the advocacy campaigns and to uncover cases of violence and harassment, we worry more that this digital space would be hijacked from us.... We, women, suffer doctrinal transgressions, sexual transgressions, transgression in every aspect of our lives, and now they want to take away my personal digital space that I resort to whenever I feel helpless, when as a woman who may not be even allowed by her family to work or to even go out to the street... This is really dangerous and it's time we deal with it*."

It is essential to highlight that most efforts against DVAW and VAW are individual or CSO, with a positive response and, sometimes, collaboration from the ISF. Participants encourage that these efforts be adopted by government institutions continuously, but this could be a little problematic as the mentality of these environments is not in harmony with that of activists. It would be useful, it is suggested, if the government specifies a budget to support and protect women from violence in all its forms. Concurrently, an office needs to be assigned by the state to specifically document and follow up statistics of such important social issues. The Ministry of telecommunication and service providers could also be involved since they are responsible for the extreme freedom with which people use their phones and SIM cards are not registered to the national ID of the users. "*If mobile phone shops knew that they would be asked about the number of SIM cards they sold and to whom every month, this chaotic use of mobile connections would not have happened. We need this monitoring not only to stop harassments, but also to stop other crimes like fraud and human trafficking,*" Bassel suggests.

Likewise, technological platforms have responsibility towards their users. They need to clearly specify their preventative and protective policies and inform their users of them in a concise way. No one reads the long terms of use upon agreeing to join the platform and the document seems purposefully long that way. Small steps like stopping users from adding other users to groups without their permission on Facebook could be helpful. They, as a main stakeholder, are also called upon to penalise abuse of their applications so that they illustrate to the public that they do care about the safety of women. It could be as simple as banning this person from

joining their platforms for a period of time.

Most importantly, the Lebanese government is invited to execute a legal reform to counter VAW in general and DVAW in particular, "*I was happy to know that Jordan and Morocco have instituted a law against digital violence, and I respect them for that. We always call for laws that protect women and men online and offline.*" Offenders, wherever they choose to execute their violence, should be criminalised with a deterring penalty, and no tolerance should be accepted. There is no direct law that covers all forms of DVAW. When it is extortion, it falls under Article 605 in the Lebanese Penalty Code. When it is defamation or threat of it, it is Article 209 and 578, and so on. This law can be annexed to the Code or added independently. This would be helpful because whenever there is a specific law, according to Bassel, it would supersede the previous general ones, e.g., extortion, defamation, etc. The newly formulated law should be specific yet flexible as DVAW today is expansive, which is why he calls upon experts of technology, communication, and legislation to work together to state it, and it should include what should be done if this DVAW was perpetrated by someone overseas. A2 further recommends initiating a regional collaboration between activists in this regard to unify laws protective of women so that the offender could not leave the country to escape punishment in one country or the other.

Finally, "*[e]xecuting the laws is more important than just having them; the perpetrators need to be held accountable,*" Zahraa affirms that proper laws could deter offenders from practicing VAW/DVAW. "*If only one person is imprisoned because of online harassment* [and this gets publicised enough], *the number of cases will decrease,*" Samar suggests. There is always a public right that the court pursues with the perpetrator, but there is also a personal right for the victim. Mariam believes that dropping this personal right should be halted because it allows abusers to put pressure on the victim and her family.

Elio Najm, the digital platform coordinator at *KAFA*, gives a positive prospective for instant reporting tools reaching the public. He explains how '*Nafas*' app, launched in 2021, was built with affordances that have the VAW and DVAW victims' safety and best interest in mind, from allowing them to share as much information as they are comfortable with, the constant emergency button on the screen, the automatic sign out, to camouflaging the app's icon when it is not on screen. Elio believes that such reporting apps in general create this social deterrent, "*I mean when people know that eyes are wide open on those who practise violence, you create this deterrent, that before I do anything, is it possible that someone may be watching me? Can someone be monitoring me?*

This is the strongest deterrent and the police all over the world rely on the people themselves for law enforcement, so that when they see something not right going on, they call and report. Therefore, we hope when this app reaches enough people, prevention results."

Female users of social media platforms are often advised by experts to not click any link without knowing the sender, to have strong passwords, and to activate two-factor authentication of their accounts, and when at loss, to seek help, for example, from *SMEX*'s helpdesk through their website or through WhatsApp. *Fe-Male* and *KAFA* make referrals to *SMEX* for DVAW victims in case they need to have a forensic analysis of their devices to remove any malware or spyware, to gain back their accounts, or to help close a malicious account since they have a trusted partnership with META.

Additionally, women and girls are often advised to first take all security precautions to prevent and protect themselves from any kind of cyberviolence and to quietly document any transgression through screenshots, recordings, or videos, which can be used to report the transgressor to the ISF when needed, seek help from a lawyer, or get referred to one of the safe online spaces provided by CSOs. Bassel encourages women to report immediately and not leave matters to chance as the extorter could be part of a criminal network. A3, however, suggests that the 'no-reaction' may be initially a safer option depending on the character of the abuser while still documenting the case because safety planning, she asserts, is essential. Samar shares her concern that women and girls nowadays are easily tracked with geolocation and suggests that girls and women need to understand that nothing that is posted online will ever disappear and anyone can have access to it, so women should not share what they do not want others to see.

Based on the interviews, an overarching motive for the CSOs engaged in helping women in distress, online or offline, is to educate and empower women so that they could stand up for themselves and not allow any transgression in the future. Government-sponsored social awareness campaigns on the mainstream media, social media, schools, and universities, are needed to guide girls, boys, and families on how to deal with incidents of DVAW, how families support their daughters, what reporting systems and feminist safe spaces are available, and what women's rights are, including their right to report any harm caused to them, online or offline. It is the duty of the family to assist their children, trust and listen to them; if a DVAW occurs, punishing the girl or advising her is best delayed until the case is closed, and her safety is ensured. Perpetrators can abuse and cause actual harm if they realise the girl

is on her own with no close support network. Boys should hear about how harmful such acts of transgression against women and girls are and be advised not to commit any, motivated by religious or legal drivers.

At the outset, as mentioned before, the online anonymous survey only received 22 responses after removing partial responses and women from outside Lebanon. It was observed that responses to questions towards the end of the survey decreased from 11 (the number of respondents who suffered a DVAW) to 5, as if most engaged more in the patterns of their use of technology and social media platforms, less so in diagnosing the DVAW they were subjected to and evaluating the problem, i.e., other users' virtual offensive acts directed at them, and least in discussing solutions to the problem. This may reveal that the problem, to them, seems bigger than the solutions. So, the question of why women were reluctant to engage in responding to the survey was discussed with the interview participants. The participants' explanations ranged from people's exhaustion because of political and financial instability, the recent increase in online polls and surveys, an eagerness to avoid serious subjects and focus on entertainment, and a distrust in authorities and survey senders, to fear and the culture of silencing women.

Bassel believes whether the victim's case is closed, (un)resolved, or still standing could be a reason for her not to want to talk about it whereas A1 brings up the issue of how girls and women are conditioned from childhood not to express themselves, "*[w]e are not telling good stories, let alone stories the society considers bad. If we express ourselves, the culture cancels or rejects us*." Mariam highlights that the low interaction with a survey about an issue that touches women's daily lives raises many questions.

The interview participants confirm that this low response rate is not representative of the phenomenon in the Lebanese digital sphere since some of them have witnessed hundreds of 'shared-in-confidence' cases of DVAW, keeping in mind that there are thousands more that often go unreported due to the silencing of women or their fear of a scandal. Women have been marginalised and were brought up since childhood to avoid attracting too much attention and to "*keep what goes on at home a secret,*" A1 says. A1 is a digital content creator and a political and feminist activist who worked with non-profit international and national organisations, launching several individual and NGO organisations initiatives to influence social behavioural change in favour of women and vulnerable communities in Lebanon. She goes to the root of the issue when she asks:

"How do you expect a woman who is restricted in the private sphere, by personal status laws, to demand a right in the public sphere?"

Despite the richness and clarity of what needs to be done to combat DVAW, the country's current financial crisis creates challenges to such constructive aspirations. It is argued that many official offices do not have enough office supplies, that not all security centres have computers and Internet connections, and that people are unable to get passports. In addition, teachers, judges, prosecutors, and clerics are often on strike. These conditions impede any progress in solving DVAW or even any resolution for standing cases which are still in courts since Covid 19.

5.5 DVAW on Twitter: Politically active women from Lebanon as a case study[33]

This part of the study employs an empirical approach to unearth evidence of various forms of DVAW against a select 7 samples of highly visible politically active women from Lebanon. Using Twitter premium APIs, the study searched Twitter historical data for mentions of the name and Twitter username of each of the samples together with contextually specific lexicon in Arabic, the use of which is known to be devaluating, demeaning, hurtful or intimidating to women. The timeframe of the search was January 2019- February 2023.

Two sets of lexicons were used separately. The first set includes Arabic explicit sexually offensive slurs and racially offensive terms (7 words, e.g., واطية e, meaning low class).[34] The second set includes non-explicit degrading terms of women (12 expressions, namely كبير ماعندها OR عقل ناقصة OR ضرب تستاهل OR قبيحة OR المطبخ مكانك OR المطبخ مكانها OR تربية ناقصة OR بشعة OR مربابة مش OR شكمها ما زوجها OR فلتانه OR نسوية) (Roughly translates to: She doesn't have a big family member, she has incomplete mind and religion, she deserves beating, ugly, your place is at the kitchen, she isn't well raised, she isn't well controlled by her husband, ill-mannered, and feminist).

The resulting 14 datasets underwent cleaning to remove any false positives then anonymised. To identify communities and nodes of influence that can provide insight into what rhetoric is prominently used against women in these online attacks, the study used graph theory. However, it is the largest dataset that emerged in the search that helped to under-

stand the Twitter network structure while the smaller datasets did not produce meaningful networks. The offensive terms that appeared in tweets, replies to, and quote retweets were counted. Retweets were included due to their role in amplifying the offensive content against the women in the original tweets, even when retweeting does not necessarily mean an endorsement.

The subsequent enumeration of the explicit terms is summarised below.

Account Post Type	A	B	C	D	E	F	*G	Total
**Replies to	7734	346	119	117	185	92	45	8638
Tweet	1552	110	19	26	27	47	26	1807
Retweet	1187	56	48	60	61	5	12	1429
Quote Tweet	1152	11	3	20	9	9	5	1209

Table 1: Summary of the number of explicit terms in Twitter attacks against 7 sampled politically active women in Lebanon from 2019-2023

*This sample does not have a known Twitter account. **'Replies to' refers to tweets by other users who directly engaged with the tweets of the sampled women.

In comparison, the following table summarises the numbers of occurrences of non-explicit terms used to attack the sampled women on Twitter in the same period of time. As the totals on the right show, the difference in the numerical values clearly points to the prominence of using misogynistic and sexually offensive slurs in the DVAW attacks against these women, triggered by their expression of political opinions.

Account Post Type	A	B	C	D	E	F	*G	Total
Replies to	607	42	31	35	40	22	5	782
Tweet	5	3	0	0	3	1	5	17
Retweet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quote Tweet	22	0	1	0	3	0	1	27

Table 2: Summary of the number of non-explicit terms in Twitter attacks against 7 sampled politically active women in Lebanon from 2019-2023

*This sample does not have a known Twitter account. **'Replies to' refers to tweets by other users who directly engaged with the tweets of the sampled women.

The Twitter analysis shows that each woman in the sample was targeted by at least one offensive Arabic term. The explicit sexual slurs are the most used. The non-explicit lexicon was occasionally used against the women in a demeaning manner. This is represented in the aggregate table below without 'retweets,' where the numerical gap is clearly huge (Table 3).

---

33 This part was conducted in collaboration with Mr. Helmi Noman, the project's research and data science consultant, Gender-based Lab (https://gbvlab.org/)

34 Due to the sensitive nature of these words, they are not mentioned in full here but if more clarification is needed, please contact the research team.

Type of search keywords	The selected keywords	# of keywords
Explicit	واطية (i.e., low class).,e.g	11654
Non-explicit	ماعندها كبير OR ناقصة عقل OR تستاهل ضرب OR قبيحة OR مكانك المطبخ OR مكانها المطبخ OR ناقصة تربية OR بشعة OR مش مربية OR ما شكمها زوجها فلتانه OR نسوية (Roughly translates to: She doesn't have a big family member, she has incomplete mind and religion, she deserves beating, ugly, your place is at the kitchen, she isn't well raised, she isn't well controlled by her husband, ill-mannered, and feminist).	826

Table 3: An aggregate summary of the total numbers of original tweets, 'quote tweets' and 'replies to' containing explicit and non-explicit terms in Twitter attacks against 7 sampled politically active women in Lebanon from 2019-2023

However, it is the largest dataset that emerged in the search that helped lexicon used by the attackers was visually represented for one of the sampled women of the largest dataset to analyse the network of users involved in the DVAW. In the graph below, each colour represents a distinct community with a topical attention within the larger common theme. To understand each topical attention in depth, a discourse analysis of the tweets is needed to label each cluster, but this could be of interest for further research. Generally, each community is triggered by a political opinion expressed by the target woman.
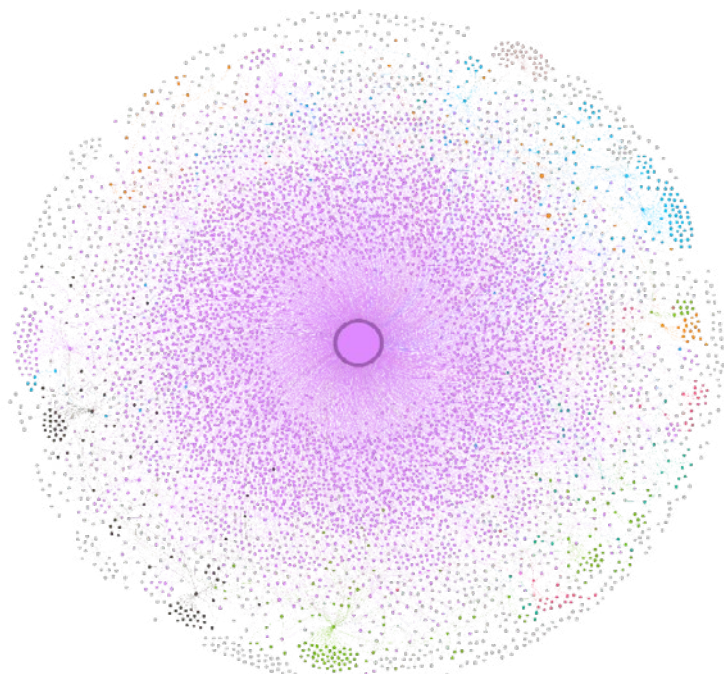

Figure 1: Network graph: An analysis of the network of Twitter users participating in VAW behaviour using explicit terms against one politically active Lebanese woman.

The above network graph shows a large node in the centre which represents the subgraph of accounts who posted their offences as 'replies to' posts originated by the targeted woman. The other smaller communities are densely connected subgraphs of authors of original tweets (nodes of influence) mentioning the username of the woman, and their amplifiers. The nodes on the periphery of the graph are accounts that are loosely connected. They mention the target's name, but do not 'mention' her username. Hence, analysis of the graph reveals the following:

- Contentious Lebanon-focused political issues are largely the key triggers of the offensive content. The offending accounts target the women over political commentary they make on Twitter or other media, especially on TV. The offenders chose to target the women personally instead of engaging in a civil conversation with the women's opinions.

- A targeted politically active Lebanese woman with a dark skin colour was targeted with not only gender-based slurs, but also with several racial slurs such as *monkey, black, bag of coal*, or *descendant of a jungle*.

- The vast majority of the offending accounts post the offensive content as direct replies to tweets by the targeted woman. Others post original tweets mentioning the Twitter handle of the woman, apparently to draw her attention to the offensive content. Fewer users post the offensive content with only the name of the targeted woman.

- Some of the authors of the offensive content emerge in the network graphs as nodes of influence with users amplifying their content by retweeting or quoting them.

- Some of the offending accounts post the name of the targeted woman and an offensive term as a hashtag to raise visibility to their offence and to start a trend. Once such an offensive hashtag becomes a trend, the accounts brag about that and post evidence from hashtag performance measurement tools.

- The offenders include public figures, some of whom have verified accounts.

- The offending accounts sometimes add sexually or racially offensive photos.

- A few accounts threaten the targeted woman with rape or killing.

In summary, the samples of highly visible politically active women from Lebanon were targeted with slanderous comments as a reaction to their political opinions. The use of the offensive terms spiked

around certain opinions or political commentary made by the women. The comments included reprehensible explicit sexual slurs, misogynistic language, and racist vocabulary. Public figures, some of whom have verified Twitter accounts, appeared among the offenders, and did not feel a need to hide their identities. The offensive slurs, however, appeared throughout the scope of the timeframe of the study (January 2019-February 2013) for some of the women, which indicates that such offensive behaviour is not a passing phenomenon. This case study reveals that contentious Lebanon-focused political issues are the triggers behind the offensive behaviour.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the proliferation of the Internet and mobile connected devices has created a new digital form of violence, which was found to be directed mainly at marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, including women and girls, reflecting offline realities. This paper explored DVAW in Lebanon through a mixed data collection methodology, including desktop search review, online surveys, interviews, and empirical data mapping from Twitter. In agreement with the scarce existing literature on DVAW in Lebanon, it is found that it is caused by a combination of a patriarchal culture and inadequate laws that generally discriminate against women. There are many efforts to support women online, individually by activists or collaboratively by CSOs with the ISF as a governmental authority; however, much still needs to be done. The DVAW has taken many forms, using the new digital affordances on various social media platforms, and affecting women's physical and mental health. Everyone involved in this social and technological context ought to take part in the prevention of such violence to provide a safer digital space for women and girls, private and public. Women engaged in the public sphere appear to be at the frontline and have been exposed to more and crueller acts of DVAW that could extend from the virtual world to the physical world.

To combat DVAW in Lebanon, several policy recommendations were suggested, including:

Legal reforms: Human rights and freedoms need to be granted for women as they are for men. The very prominence of DVAW illustrates that current laws are not enough to protect women. It has become necessary to introduce a well formulated law that addresses digital violence by criminalising its perpetrators and providing women with a satisfying closure to their traumatic experience of DVAW, which could help to regain trust in governmental support for its citizens, regardless of their gender. In principle, a unified personal status law cannot be ignored within this reform and execution of present and future laws, with no exceptions, is the only way to assess their effectiveness in giving results.

Awareness campaigns and training: Women's legal and technological illiteracy require immediate action. They need to be educated about their rights, what DVAW is, and available channels for protecting their spaces online or for reporting DVAW. They are encouraged to document any transgression and to take steps towards protecting themselves. The role of families in strengthening their daughters' positions as they counter any act of DVAW is vital and it can help scare off offenders or/and prosecute them. Men and boys could be helped to realise the gravity of the harm caused by abuse of digital spaces and the legal, perhaps technological if digital platforms get involved, consequences of committing such behaviours. Everyone needs to learn how to use novel digital spaces responsibly. Activists expressed interest in participating in such campaigns in schools, universities, mainstream media.

Capacity building: Supporting CSOs in assisting women to counter DVAW is essential. This can be done by assigning an office to document and monitor incidents of violence in numbers, allocating a budget to assist in the protection of vulnerable women, and training and employing more female officers in the ISF offices and police stations to create a safe space to which victims of DVAW would resort. Institutionalised partnerships between government entities and the CSOs are needed to increase their capacity to help women all around the country. Coordination between ISF and telecommunication companies may also be expanded to monitor mobile connections and identify abusers.

Technological solutions: Governments may practise pressure on social media platforms to respond seriously to complaints of DVAW by partnering with them and with CSOs to amend their preventative and protective measures that provide adequate support to users across nationality, age, and gender. In addition to the available reporting button, these platforms may also work on automatic detection and tracking mechanisms for violence and automatic digital responses to the offenders, possibly using Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Research: Research could be done on why women do not respond to digital research surveys. This may also help when the study is duplicated from within Lebanon where participants could be easily reached. As explained in the introduction women were reluctant to share their experience and rely on feminist activists to speak on their behalf. Further research could explore, in particular, the connection of DVAW with the current economic crisis on women and DVAW, the challenges activists face when they assist women and girls, the private or public discourses used to attack women online to understand the abusers' topical attention. Similar studies, as the present one, are needed to focus on case studies of ordinary Lebanese women and/or refugee women who were exposed to DVAW in Lebanon.