

# A STUDY ON DIGITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN EGYPT

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## Abstract

Digital Violence Against Women (DVAW) is a growing phenomenon not only in Egypt, but also worldwide. Forms of DVAW are common across countries, yet each country has a specific context that shapes which forms of DVAW are more widespread. Despite the severity of its implications, there is not enough research about DVAW in Egypt. While the Egyptian authorities have taken steps towards addressing this issue, it remains highly unresolved. This study aims to shed the light on experiences of some these women gathered by means of a survey. The study also shares insights from experts working in the field on the problem and practical solutions. This study gathered survey data from 29 Egyptian women and interviewed seven experts with background in violence against women (VAW), women's rights activism, civil society, and psychology to understand the extent of digital violence against women (DVAW) in Egypt. The study attempts to shed light on the problem: DVAW forms, drivers, harms, and impact on the women's lives, and seeks possible solutions. Findings from this study illustrate that DVAW reflect gender asymmetry and the prevalence of the abuse of women offline. The main obstacle against addressing DVAW in Egypt is that women are reluctant to talk about the abuses they experience that they do not report the aggressions, leaving all stakeholders unaware of the magnitude of the problem and leaving them to struggle alone in silence. The study ends with recommendations to policy makers and digital platforms, and highlights areas for future research.



## 1. Executive Summary

Violence against women (VAW) in Egypt is escalating. An indicator of that is the late increase in the number of women murdered, as publicised in the mainstream media. There is also a perceived escalation in Digital Violence Against Women (DVAW). This digital violence is also seen as a reflection of the escalation of violence in real life. This study explores this perceived escalation of DVAW in Egypt. The study starts with a literature review, followed by a survey to gather data from women who use the internet and may have been exposed to DVAW. The survey received only 29 responses and due to this limited number, the findings were further substantiated by seven expert interviews.

Prior to the spread of the Internet in Egypt, Egyptian women have been struggling with sexual harassment amongst other forms of violence. This attitude of men towards women migrated to the online space, leading to a hostile environment for women who are active online and resulting in a similar discomfort as that they feel walking in the streets of Egypt. The hostility further evolved with more women experiencing different and multiple forms of DVAW, including sextortion and blackmail; thus, extending to affect them beyond the confines of the virtual sphere.

The study found that Facebook and Facebook Messenger are the platforms most used to exercise DVAW. However, other platforms, especially Telegram, are also used to mobilise and organise the violence by the perpetrators. Other popular platforms in Egypt are Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and TikTok. LinkedIn and E-mail are less popular but have been mentioned as well.

The form of DVAW feared most by women is sextortion and blackmailing. This study finds that three categories of women were the main targets of these

forms of violence. The first category are young women, since the perpetrators understand that it is easy to induce fear of a scandal within them. With the conservative nature of the society placing the value of a woman on her chastity, it is easy to raise suspicion around whether the woman is virtuous or not. With young girls, the perpetrators are usually testing to see if they will succeed in inducing fear or if the victim will react by, for example, telling her parents, filing a report with the authorities, or just threatening to do so. If she takes such actions, this in some cases could suffice to end the dilemma. This indicates that spreading awareness and educating young girls on how to handle perpetrators becomes essential. Also, educating parents and educators on the parameters and consequences of such situations and how they can support the victim becomes a valuable tool in combating DVAW.

The second category is wives and partners in general. Many women discover at the time of divorce that they had been filmed during sexual intercourse with their husbands, but only the women are visible. This material could be used to suggest that the woman committed adultery and could, hence, be used to force women into custody or financial concessions or into agreeing to whatever demands the perpetrators might have. Between separated couples in general, whether previously married or not, sextortion occurs for several reasons, including demanding money, sex or simply for revenge.

The third group, receiving not only blackmail but also death threats, are feminist activists. They are seen as corruptors of women and the society and are usually blamed for the different social problems facing the Egyptian society by their promotion of women rights and freedoms.

Women's reactions to DVAW ranged from ignoring the incidents, blocking the offender, and reluctance to report to the platform or authorities because it would be 'useless.' and 'he will not be punished.'



some have also become less active online, and others changed their privacy settings to protect themselves. The effects of DVAW cases ranged from sleeplessness, depression, cautiousness when using social media platforms, change in how they express themselves online, exposure to blame from family, self-blame, loss of trust in self and others, physical pains, and lack of sleep, to thoughts of committing suicide.

Women believe that the main reason for the spread of DVAW is the lack of reporting by the affected women by DVAW, struggling in silence, and the absence of the rule of law. In the survey, the Arabic saying 'من أمن العقاب اساء الابد' which translates as 'he who is safe from punishment will be ill-mannered' was mentioned several times in response to the question asking about the reason for the spread of DVAW.

Absence of appropriate legislation and the lack of an easy (and effective) reporting process are key factors in victims' decision to not report. Additionally, the lack of sufficient psycho-social support plays a role in victims feeling further isolated, which could eventually lead them to harming themselves or even committing suicide as with the case of Bassant Khaled.

Based on the findings of this research, several policy recommendations are proposed to address the issue of DVAW in Egypt as follows:

1. Normalising women breaking their silence about their DVAW experiences. The problem can only be resolved once it is understood. Until that happens, there are many measures that could be taken, but these measures would only be managing the symptoms. These measures may not put society on the path of true healing; however, they are still very important.
2. Raising awareness to shift the general lack of trust towards women into an understanding of

women's role in the social system and that, online, everyone has the right to feel safe. This will help create a much-needed support network for DVAW victims. Hopefully, more victims will be encouraged to fight the legal battle for redress while the case gets the needed coverage in the media to be deterring.

3. Establishing a unified law combatting VAW/ DVAW. The current legislation, while being a progress, is obviously insufficient in deterring perpetrators from committing their violence.
4. Establishing an online reporting tool for DVAW cases, similar to other countries in the region, one that creates an encouraging environment for the women to report, for example by assigning a female-only staff to handle DVAW cases.
5. Training all workers to have the sensitivities needed in dealing with DVAW victims (from the first respondents on the hotline, all the way up to the court judges).
6. Building the psycho-social capacity since parents, educators, and psychologists sometimes also lack an understanding of how DVAW victims are best handled. Finally, providing free legal, psychological and technical support is proved to be necessary.

## 2. Introduction

### “THE NORMALIZATION OF MISOGYNY AND ABUSE ONLINE BOTH REFLECTS AND REINFORCES SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES.”

Suzor et. al<sup>1</sup>

Internationally, one out of three women have reported experiencing violence against women (VAW) over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> This figure is challenged when looking at Egypt. Demographically, in 2021, Egypt officially had a population of about 110 million citizens, 49.4% of whom are female.<sup>3</sup> This makes Egypt the largest population among the Arab nations and the third most populous country in Africa, after Nigeria and Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> Egypt has a conservative society where values are driven by traditions and religious beliefs.

Egypt is facing several economic challenges, the most serious of which is the situation with the Egyptian pound devaluations and the crisis in the availability of the US Dollar within the country. It has been reported that the Egyptian pound is ‘the worst-performing currency in 2023’ adding fuel to flames in a country where a third of its 110 million citizens lives on less than 2 USD a day.<sup>5</sup> Many are now questioning if Egypt is another Lebanon in the making with economists mentioning a current unofficial inflation rate of 101%.<sup>6</sup> Due to the lack of hard currency, many essential products that are usually imported are no longer available. While the economic challenges are the main concern for Egyptians nowadays, because of the impact it has on their livelihood, Egypt has other challenges including political and environmental challenges which add to the daily life stress.

Egypt had an Internet penetration rate of 72.2%, with 69.72 million users of mobile Internet in September

2022 based on the indicators of the Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2020, Egyptian males had an overall Internet access of 73.2% compared to 70.9% of females. The bigger disparity is seen between urban and rural access with men having an access of 85.9% in urban areas and 63.1% in rural areas in comparison to women who have an even higher access of 87.0% in urban areas but only 56.7% in rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these figures, in their pilot study in 2022, the Gender Digital Divide Index found Egypt to have a digital gender gap of 55.76%. The percentage is calculated looking at three aspects, foundation (digital infrastructure, accessibility, affordability, data protection and cyber security), enablers (digital and gender inclusion policies, transparency, digital skills and DVAW combatting measures), and impacts (gender gap in access to the Internet, mobile phone usage, and digital payments, gender balance in decision-making in the public and private sectors). Egypt scored 68.23% in foundations due to limited access to the web, 44% in enablers with limited financial resources being one of the contributors to the low score, and 55.05% on impacts due to the low percentage of women in the labour force.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian government has been actively trying to reduce the gap through different initiatives such as the ‘Her for a Digital Future’ initiative (2021). The initiative was a partnership between the government, the *United Nations Development Program* and the multi-national Information Technology company *Cisco* and aimed at reducing the gender digital divide through building the digital capacities of 5000 women including government employees, universities and schools’ staff, and civil society workers. The initiative also had a train-the-trainers component.<sup>9</sup>

The majority of Egyptian women experienced either sexual harassment on the streets of Egypt, domestic violence, or other forms of violence because they are women.<sup>10</sup> With the spread of Internet usage, these forms of violence found a new platform to manifest themselves. While the Internet has provided women a space to learn about VAW, to share experiences, and to build collective awareness, it has also become a space where they are frequently exposed to

1 Suzor, N., Dragiewicz, M., Harris, B., Gillett, R., Burgess, J., & Van Geelen, T. (2018). Human rights by design: The responsibilities of social media platforms to address gender-based violence online. *Policy & Internet*, 11(1), 84–103. doi:10.1002/poi3.185

2 World Health Organization. 2021. Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence. <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>

3 World Bank. 2021. Population, total - Egypt, Arab Rep. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=EG>

4 CIA. The World Fact Book - Egypt. 2023. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/egypt/>

5 The Economist. To save Egypt's economy, get the army out of it. 2023. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/01/26/to-save-egypts-economy-get-the-army-out-of-it>

6 Cathrin Shaer. 2023. Economic crisis: Is Egypt the ‘new Lebanon?’. DW. <https://www.dw.com/en/economic-crisis-is-egypt-the-new-lebanon/a-64469810>

7 Gender ICT Statistics. International Telecommunication. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

8 The Gender Digital Divide Index. 2022. <https://gddindex.com/>

9 Mohsen Abdelrazek. 2021. ‘Her for a Digital Future...a New Initiative to Reduce the Gender Gap. Almasry Alyoum. <https://www.almasyalyoum.com/news/details/2457831>

10 UNFPA Egypt. Gender-based Violence in Egypt. <https://egypt.unfpa.org/en/node/22540>



a different and novel form of VAW - Digital Violence against Women (DVAW).

As a form of VAW, DVAW is defined by the United Nations for Women as “any 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.”<sup>11</sup> It is a global phenomenon where perpetrators use technology to commit previously known forms of VAW, such as stalking and to engage in new forms of violence that are facilitated by the aid of new technologies, such as photoshopping, and fabricating photos.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, DVAW is not confined by geography or distance, since perpetrators and victims can be located in different countries.<sup>13</sup> Forms of DVAW include, but are not limited to, cyber stalking, cyber bullying, cyber harassment, cyber blackmailing, sextortion, and sharing of private data (doxing). This research study aims to shed light on DVAW in Egypt, looking at the situation and its implications on women, the legal landscape, and efforts to combat it.

In order to understand DVAW in Egypt, one needs to first understand VAW in Egypt. Egypt is plagued with VAW to an extent that it has become a part of its culture and tradition. According to the Gender Equality Index of 2021 by the UNDP, Egypt ranks 109 out of 169 countries in terms of gender equality indicating a substantial disparity between both genders mostly

driven by the labour market dynamics.<sup>14</sup> A report by the UN in 2013 revealed that 99.3% of Egyptian girls surveyed have experienced sexual harassment.<sup>15</sup> Another report by the UNFPA, the National Council for Women and the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics revealed in 2015 that 7.8 million Egyptian women experience gender-based violence annually.<sup>16</sup> Egypt is also a country where mass-assault against women including rape was a frequent occurrence prior to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, female genital mutilation is still widely adopted in an attempt to suppress the female’s sexual desire.<sup>18</sup> Regarding domestic violence, a public discussion was launched in 2022, both on social media and traditional media, about whether it is the right of a man to hit his wife according to Sharia law. This discussion was instigated by a proposed reform of the law to criminalise domestic violence and demand a deterring penalty.<sup>19</sup> Despite the many reports of sexual violence in Egypt, the majority of VAW cases go unreported, so we are unaware of the real extent of the issue. The under-reporting of VAW cases is explained by the fact that victims of sexual violence in Egypt are stigmatised, and that victim blaming is also part of the culture,<sup>20</sup> if a victim dares to report.

As a result of the 2020 global lockdown, people were forced to stay and work from home, spending more time on the Internet. This has led not only to the increase in domestic violence but also in DVAW. Many studies have investigated the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on VAW/DVAW.<sup>21</sup> A conference held

11 UN Women. Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence>

12 Suzie Dunn, “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview” (2020) Centre for International Governance Innovation: Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 1

13 *ibid*

14 UNDP. 2021. Gender Equality Index. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>

15 UNFPA Egypt. Gender-based Violence in Egypt. <https://egypt.unfpa.org/en/node/22540>

16 *ibid*.

17 Nina Burleigh. 2014. Gang rape, the dark side of Egypt’s protests. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/03/opinion/burleigh-rapes-tahrir-square/index.html>

18 Langer, A. 2018. ‘Stop Taking Your Daughters To Be Mutilated’. Spiegel International. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/tomorrow/genital-mutilation-in-egypt-stop-taking-your-daughters-to-be-mutilated-a-1199322.html>

19 Elhekaya, 2022. A heated discussion between Amr Adib and the guests about the characteristics of wife-beating, for which the husband deserves imprisonment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gd65FgmKWbE>

20 Langer, A. 2018. ‘As an Egyptian Woman, You Spend Your Entire Life Dealing with Sexual Violence’. Spiegel International. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/tomorrow/almost-every-egyptian-woman-is-subjected-to-sexual-harassment-a-1198328.html>

21 Associated Press. May 23, 2020. UN Warns Cybercrime on Rise During Pandemic. [https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic\\_un-warns-cybercrime-rise-during-pandemic/6189806.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_un-warns-cybercrime-rise-during-pandemic/6189806.html)

by the United Nations in the early days of the pandemic conveyed that the world has been witnessing an increase in cyberattacks alongside the increase in 'digital dependency', mentioning the occurrence of a cyberattack every 39 seconds in addition to a 600% increase in malicious emails. All of this has coincided with the inevitable reduction in the availability and speed of support services for VAW/DVAW victims due to the pandemic. Therefore, DVAW in Egypt appears to be as an extension of the already existing VAW practices and culture, and often both online and offline VAW complement each other.

According to the limited existing literature, one of the most common forms of DVAW discussed is digital sexual harassment, which is understandable given how widespread sexual harassment is in the country. A study conducted in 2017 surveyed 2,350 female students from Beni Suef university about cyber sexual harassment and revealed that 80% of them were exposed to DVAW, specifically cyber sexual harassment, within the last six months, with many having experienced it more than once. Participants of the study mentioned anger, fear, hatred, and sorrow as their emotional reactions to these experiences.<sup>22</sup>

A different study by Hassan et. al. (2020) collected data from 356 women from across Egypt and it found that 41.6% of the participants experienced DVAW in the previous year, and 45.3% of the victims suffered multiple incidents. The forms of DVAW they mostly experienced included receiving indecent, demeaning, or violent images or symbols, insulting e-mails, or messages, offensive or humiliating posts or comments, or malicious files through emails, and only 14.9% of the victims reported being hacked. Like the study mentioned earlier, the victims were left feeling anger and fear, but they also reported feeling worried, having suicidal thoughts, or a desire for revenge. Also, 13.9% of the victims reported self-isolating from Internet activities.<sup>23</sup>

Another study by Eltokhy et. al. (2022) found that out of 324 female subjects, 85% experienced DVAW and that almost 64% had experienced it three times or more. The study showed that almost 53% of the victims were assaulted via social media and 43.3% via

mobile phones. In terms of how the victims responded to the experienced attack, 32% indicated that they ignored the offender, 24% responded directly without seeking any help, 25% sought support from their family, and 10.5% from their friends, while only 4.36% reported the incident to authorities. The psychological impact varied between anger, worry, fear, seeking revenge and suicidal thoughts. Respondents also expressed having experienced physical and financial harm due to the experience.<sup>24</sup>

A study by the parliament in 2019 revealed that 1038 cybercrimes were reported by individuals in September and October, most of which were blackmail of women and girls with fabricated pictures. As a result, the study also mentioned that the Ministry of Interior arrested 300 citizens accused of cybercrime within 60 days only.<sup>25</sup>

At the very beginning of 2022, Egypt witnessed the first publicised incident of DVAW that motivated the spread of awareness regarding DVAW. Bassant Khaled, a 17-year-old, faced online extortion by means of fabricated photos. When the word and images spread and she could not get support from her family, she committed suicide.<sup>26</sup> This was the first of many incidents to follow in the same year.

Another exposed form of DVAW was men-only WhatsApp groups sharing nudes of women, mostly their girlfriends. The most famous was a group of 50 male students and alumni of the American University in Cairo exchanging nudes of women in their circles. It was said that this group had been existing for six years at the time it was uncovered. The existence of such groups was so widespread amongst university students that it became a 'culture' amongst Egyptian men. What aggravated the situation for the women was that the men in these groups were publicly advocating for women's rights pretending to be allies, hence creating a further layer of mistrust.<sup>27</sup>

According to journalist Rania Helmi, photos of women and nudes that could be used to blackmail them are shared by men with each other and sold to others. These photos are, not only of partners, but could also be of any female relatives such as mothers and

22 Arafa, A., Elbahrave, R., Saber, N., Solima, S. and Abbas, A. 2017. Cyber sexual harassment: a cross-sectional survey over female university students in Upper Egypt. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*. 55. 61-65. doi: 10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20175763.

23 Hassan, F., Fatma, N., El Desouky, E., Salem, M., and Ali, Mona. (2020). Cyber violence pattern and related factors: online survey of females in Egypt. *Egyptian Journal of Forensic Sciences*. 10, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41935-020-0180-0>

24 Rabab Eltokhy; Amal Mahmoud; Shimaa Ahmed Alsaeed. "Assessment of cyber abuse during the years 2020 and 2021 among a sample of Egyptian females". *The Egyptian Journal of Forensic Sciences and Applied Toxicology*, 22, 2022, 47-56. doi: 10.21608/efjsat.2022.126994.1253

25 Amin Saleh. 2019. Parliament Study About Cybercrimes. <https://www.youm7.com/story/2019/11/5/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-1038-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84/4486999>

26 Abdou, Mona. 2022. Two Arrested for Blackmailing Egyptian Girl Who Died by Suicide. *Egyptian Streets*. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2022/01/05/two-arrested-for-blackmailing-egyptian-girl-who-died-by-suicide/>

27 AboShady, A. 2020. AUC Nude-Sharing Groups: The Complicity And Masculine "Norms" We Don't Talk About. *Identity Magazine*. <https://identity-mag.com/auc-nude-sharing-groups-the-complicity-and-masculine-norms-we-dont-talk-about/>



Figure 1: A screenshot from a confession on Cairo Confessions Facebook page.

sisters.<sup>28</sup> Groups selling sexual content are usually formed on Telegram for the convenience of not having to share telephone numbers or any personal details. To become a member of the group, the person needs to send the admin of the group sexual content of women he personally knows. To confirm that the woman is a personal connection, he would also have to share her social media accounts with the admin. Another form of confirmation would be a clue in the picture such as a certain hand gesture that was previously agreed upon. There are distinct groups for diverse types of content, she claims, including content of children and underaged girls. The admins mention that the groups are safe from being blocked by authorities.

In the article, she mentions that many of the victims, males and females, approached Qawem,<sup>29</sup> an initiative supporting victims of DVAW and combatting online blackmailing. The founder of Qawem, Mohamed Al Yamani, is reported to say that if the case is dealing with an individual, Qawem can negotiate with them. However, if the case is being blackmailed by criminal dealers and groups, the only support that can be provided by Qawem is mental support and assistance in reporting to the authorities.

The following image in Figure 1 above is an example of a case where a perpetrator's blackmail attempt

fired back at him. It is a confession by a 26-year-old young man on a Facebook page called Cairo Confessions,<sup>30</sup> confesses to blackmailing his ex to defame her because she left him after waiting two years and a half for him to make their relationship official. He said he was just blackmailing her out of pain because she left him when he had just started to fall in love with her and when he most needed her. The plot twist, and the reason he shared this confession, was that the girl came back after a while to blackmail him with his texts blackmailing her, telling him that if he did not give her money, she would report him to the police. He was both scared and in pain.

It is interesting to witness how different technology platforms are being leveraged to spread DVAW. At the time of conducting this research, there was an active public group on Telegram of more than 8000 members, with the name of 'دشمّل' *Dashmel* and the aim of connecting to conspire for DVAW. Admins of the group collect screenshots of posts or comments by women on Facebook which they believe to be inappropriate. Then, they link these screenshots to the women's profiles and any of their male relative to be able connect to them. They invite members of the group to send messages to the male relatives to tell them what 'their' women are doing online. Concurrently, they started a Facebook page and on the next page is a screenshot of a pinned post<sup>31</sup> (Figure 2) in

28 Rania Helmi. "The Nudes Business: How your body could be used for profits without your knowledge". Raseef22. 2022. <https://raseef22.net/article/1086130-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%B2-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%83-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83>

29 Qawem. <https://www.facebook.com/qawem.community>

30 Cairo Confessions. 2023. Post #189676. <https://www.facebook.com/cairoconfessionsofficial/posts/pfbid0mYdMwNf2SpMU7iEVhS8YXC9WwU8mM7sv3MfBFZj1tD3QwXRNsDwGv2833t8DbI>

31 Pinned post from the Facebook page of Dashmel <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=108585432133870&set=a.107188388940241>



which they are shaming Egyptian men for not controlling the behaviours of their daughters who are having non-marital sex. The post continues to say that Egyptian men do not mind their daughters to be promiscuous as long as it happens in secret so that the daughters can still get married. They used religion to inspire such acts and spoke of how forgiveness cannot be granted to the kind of women they are targeting or their male relatives. The group was later closed to become private, with access available only to members of the group.

Regarding the laws that address DVAW, Egypt issued a general Anti-cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law in 2018, which includes 45 articles addressing various aspects of cybercrimes with penalties reflecting the different nature of these crimes, such as threats, blackmail, defamation, or extortion. The penalty includes both imprisonment and fines, e.g., punishment for cyber blackmail starts at six months and the perpetrator could be fined up to 200,000 Egyptian pounds. The law was later amended to ensure the anonymity of the victims of these crimes.<sup>32</sup>

Despite being helpful in combating cybercrimes in general, the *Anti-cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law* has its critics. First, the law has been criticized for justifying both Internet censorship and full surveillance of the Internet. *Access Now*, an organization working on digital rights, condemned the law asking for its immediate withdrawal. In their analysis of the law, *Access Now* mentions article 7 of the law exercising censorship by giving authorities access to block websites. Article 2 of the law violates privacy rights of citizens by allowing authorities access to all data of telecom users including voice calls, messages, browsing history, app usage and more, allowing them complete surveillance of citizens' digital communication. Furthermore, Article 4 grants these access rights to governments of foreign countries as well through facilitating exchange of data between Egypt and other countries. The language of the law has been criticized by *Access Now* for its vagueness which allows the law to be used to incriminate political activists. The vagueness of the language also further provides the authorities with more censorship power in terms of what they see fit or not fit with the morals and values of the Egyptian society.<sup>33</sup>

There have been several government and civil society initiatives to combat DVAW in Egypt. For exam-



Figure 2: Pinned Post from the Facebook Page of Dasmel.

ple, another law that is used to address some of the DVAW incidents, is the law addressing sexual harassment 306(a) and 306(b), and it was amended in 2021 to include sexual harassment incidents that happen on social media.

The specialised unit dealing with all the complaints and reported cases is called the *Cybercrime Directorate* in the *Ministry of Interior* in addition to an *Online Harassment Monitoring unit* in the *General Prosecutor's office*. Additionally, there are several hotlines to help victims in the *Ministry of Interior* and in the *National Council for Women* and in the *General Prosecutor's office*.

The Centre for *Egyptian Women Legal Assistance* has been calling for a unified law to combat VAW. The cybercrime law, while providing an important basis to combat DVAW, is still problematic. In cases of extortion, victims need to provide either written evidence or two witnesses in case the threat was verbal. In case the victims cannot provide either, their cases are dismissed. They address this issue during their Facebook 16 days of activism campaign to combat VAW and explain it with caricatures that can be seen on their Facebook page.<sup>34</sup> *The New Woman Foundation*, a feminist non-governmental organisation (NGO) working on women empowerment, has also been campaigning for the enactment of a unified law to combat violence against women mentioning

32 El-Behary, H. 2018. "All You Need to Know About Egypt's First Cybercrime Legislation." *Egypt Independent*. <https://egyptindependent.com/all-you-need-to-know-about-egypts-first-cybercrime-legislation/>

33 Access Now. 2018. Egyptian Parliament approves Cybercrime Law legalizing blocking of websites and full surveillance of Egyptians. <https://www.accessnow.org/egyptian-parliament-approves-cybercrime-law-legalizing-blocking-of-websites-and-full-surveillance-of-egyptians/>

34 Center for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance. 2023. Facebook Campaign promoting a unified law combatting violence against women <https://www.facebook.com/cewla.eg/posts/pfbid0yhukaj5UQtikp53ejZm35LP22JHf3isC-FaaCt7xG7f5jGQPhUbgd7VGMmhsU19EWI>



Figure 3: A screenshot of a post from the Facebook page of Qawem.

Morocco and Tunisia as Arab countries who have successfully enacted such a law. The importance of this step lies in the need for unity in legislation and definitions regarding violence and crimes against women with suitable punishments for each crime.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to reforming the law, the government is also active in spreading public awareness regarding DVAW. One example is a dialogue conference launched by the Ministry of Social Solidarity in 2022 with the title 'متخافيش... اتكلمي' 'Don't be Afraid ... Speak Up'<sup>36</sup>. The target of the conference was to combat digital harassment and extortion by educating girls of the different forms of DVAW, methods of preventions and actions to take if needed.

Civil society plays a significant role in combating DVAW and in deploying the Internet to combat VAW in general. A mapping study conducted by UN Women indicates several initiatives to combat DVAW.<sup>37</sup> *Assault Police*, an initiative to combat sexual violence in Egypt, was active up until November 2021 on both Facebook and Instagram. It initiated what seemed to be an Egyptian '#MeToo' anti-sexual harassment movement gathering testimonies anonymously against perpetrators. *Motoon* is an Information Technology Consultancy that provides technical aware-

ness trainings on digital safety. They also conduct research on the intersection of technology and VAW, e.g., the joint research paper entitled '*Technology Role in Combating Violence Against Women.*'

Another initiative is *Qawem*, which was, as previously mentioned, launched by Mohamed Al Yamani after he came to learn about a 16-year-old girl who committed suicide because of online extortion.<sup>38</sup> Because stories like hers were not known to the press to avoid bringing shame to their families in such a conservative society, he decided to start *Qawem*, an online Facebook page to support anyone who is facing online extortion before the problem escalates. His page has grown to gain more than one million followers with hundreds of female volunteers responding to the cases they receive. The initiative was a success that it has now become an established NGO. In 2021, *Qawem* would receive around 500 requests for help per day against sextortion, resolving around 200 of them per week.<sup>39</sup> They also provide digital advice for women and girls. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, for example, a post<sup>40</sup> (Figure 3) advises women to make sure that their husbands are not using their phones during intimate times because many of them film their wives without their knowledge and later use these videos to blackmail them.

35 New Woman Foundation. 2023. "A unified law to combat violence against women". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4jvNZ7PkQ>

36 Egypt Today. 2022. Don't be Afraid... Speak up: Egypt launches campaign to combat electronic harassment. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/117193/Don%E2%80%99t-be-Afraid-Speak-up-Egypt-launches-campaign-to-combat>

37 UN Women. 2022. Mapping of laws and services for online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls in Arab States. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/03/mapping-of-laws-and-services-for-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls>

38 Zidan, I. 2021. Qawem group saves Egyptian women from sextortion. Qantara. <https://en.qantara.de/content/egypt-and-social-media-qawem-group-saves-egyptian-women-from-sex-tortion>

39 Ibid.

40 Qawem. 2023. Advice for Wives. <https://www.facebook.com/qawem.community/posts/plbid0brPkWwXK4PINfY7TR9bApjyqVdnBZGn87MCRhCezu3yYARg/wFxFH4seiRGIVRI>



*The Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance (CEWLA)* is also an NGO that focuses on providing legal assistance to women. It also conducts research, training, and awareness. *CEWLA* is active in supporting women with DVAW cases and in advocating for a unified law to combat violence against women. As mentioned earlier, the *New Woman Foundation* is a feminist NGO working on women empowerment and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Their significance draws not only from their efforts in advocating for a unified law to combat VAW, but also from their provision of free legal advice for women and many of the handled cases are DVAW cases.

### 3. Research questions

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

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

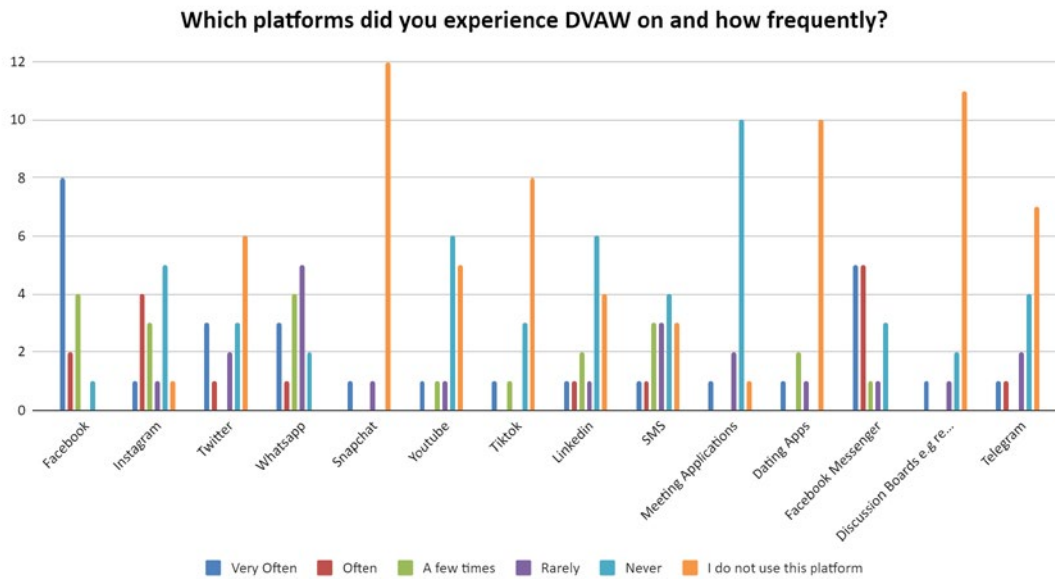


Figure 4: Survey Results on Platforms where DVAW is experienced.

## 4. Research Methodology

The initial planned methodology was to conduct a survey to understand the situation regarding DVAW in Egypt. The survey would provide insights into the most common platforms women face violence on, the types of violence, the support available to the victims, the victims' responses to DVAW experiences, and the latter's impact on their lives. The survey questions were mostly multiple-choice questions, but respondents were encouraged to elaborate through a text box. The survey was designed to include five sections as follows:

**General Information:** this section included eight questions. The purpose of this section was to understand the demographics of the respondent in terms of location, age, occupation, marital status, education level, living arrangement, whether the respondent was active online and whether she ever experienced DVAW. Only respondents who had DVAW experience can continue the survey.

**Social media usage:** this section included three questions to explore patterns of the respondent's usage of the Internet and social media, with a focus on devices the respondent uses to access the Internet, social media platforms she uses, her activities on social media, and the frequency with which she posts.

**Digital Violence Against Women:** this section was composed of eight questions aiming at understand-

ing the extent and forms of the DVAW experienced by the respondent, the identity and gender of the perpetrator, the social media platform where she experienced DVAW, and whether she believes the DVAW she faced was gender-based.

**Impacts of DVAW:** this section has three questions that investigate respondent's reaction to DVAW, whether she knew the perpetrator or not, and the impact of the DVAW incident on her.

**Solutions:** the concluding section of the survey was dedicated to solutions and included 5 questions to investigate the respondent's knowledge of support systems available to her, the quality of the support services, and the suggested measures needed to protect women from DVAW.

The survey was published on social media channels of Digital Arabia Network starting the 11th of December 2022 until mid-February 2023 and the research team also created other social media channels on both Twitter and Instagram to increase its outreach and spread. Unfortunately, only 29 responses were gathered, an indication of the real crisis regarding DVAW in Egypt, which is that women do not want to talk about their experiences. To compensate for the lack of responses, the survey was followed by interviewing a panel of seven experts working on DVAW in Egypt. The expert panel included three lawyers, one civil society member, two women's rights activists and one psychologist. They were six females and one male.

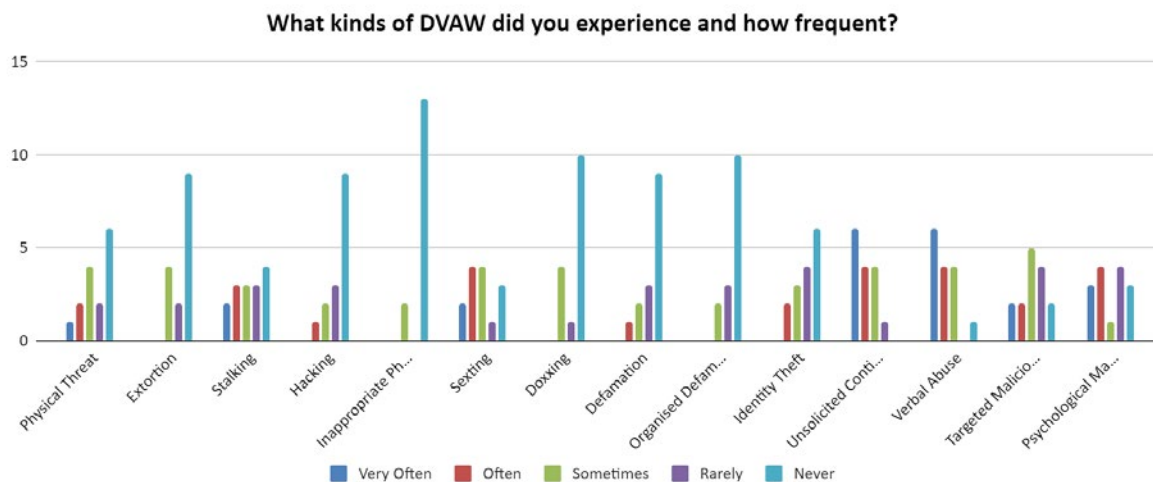


Figure 5: Survey Results on Forms of DVAW Experienced and Frequency.

## 5. Research Findings

The results indicate that more than 50% of the respondents were from Greater Cairo and in the age bracket between 19 and 30 years. Seven of the respondents have mentioned that they did not experience DVAW. These seven were mostly in the age bracket between 30 and 49. Private phones, personal computers, or laptops, were the devices most used by the respondents.

### 5.1 Exposure to DVAW: where, what, by whom?

Results show that Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, and TikTok were the most commonly used among respondents. Facebook and Facebook Messenger, however, were the platforms where most of the DVAW incidents were perpetrated as shown in Figure 4 left above.

The interview results confirm this result. Facebook is the main platform where DVAW abuses happen, however, it has been observed that different platforms are used for different forms of DVAW. Interviewee #7 mentions that "Twitter is a platform that perpetrators commonly use to share sexual content of victims." Telegram is also where groups can form to mobilise action and promote VAW/DVAW. The different privacy policies of the different platforms are

utilised to exercise such violence in every form possible.

The most common forms of DVAW, according to the survey responses, were unsolicited continuous contact whether through calls or messages and verbal abuse as shown in Figure 5. One of the respondents mentioned that every day for a month at 7:00 a.m., she received a call from a number from outside of Egypt. Whenever she answered, he talked in an inappropriate manner. So, she started to answer the call and put him on mute until he stopped calling. Another respondent reported that she received a voice note from a man insulting her while ejaculating. The following survey responses illustrate the shocking regularity of the occurrence of verbal abuse:

*"The comments usually contain abuse and also private messages asking to offer them my body. I also continuously find pictures of male genitalia and threats of death."*

*"In university, I was subjected to verbal and threats of physical harassment when they found my personal social media accounts."*

*"A colleague of mine at university shared my number in a group so I received an enormous number of calls from strangers asking me for sexual services."*

Attacking women because of expressing their opinions online is also a common form of DVAW. One survey respondent says that "[t]here is not a time I comment on a public page without receiving respons-



es full of insinuations that have nothing to do with the topic just because I am a woman, and my picture is attractive. That is also accompanied with being contacted and harassed in my inbox." This is confirmed by another respondent who said that she was insulted on Facebook.

Another form of violence is receiving rape and death threats, especially when the women are exhibiting non-conforming behaviours. One case is reported by a respondent who recently took off her veil. She said that she had to turn off her phone due to the number of messages she received including sexual content and threats of rape.

The expert testimonies confirm that the Egyptian digital sphere is generally a hostile environment. Interviewee #5 mentions that "[t]his form of DVAW is not talked about enough despite it being a form experienced by all women on the Internet just by them being present online, as the focus when discussing DVAW usually goes to sextortion due to its impact." Interviewee #7 adds "[a]s a public space, the Internet is considered a space for men. Women who dare to be present in these spaces deserve reprimanding whatever the form is." This hostility could come in the form of violent comments, or even connecting with male members of a woman's family to inform them of what they perceived as the woman's 'inappropriate' behaviour online. "Men within the society have taken on the mission of reforming the behaviours of women who do not fall within the standards these men have set for women," as mentioned by interviewee #7.

It is worth mentioning here that the social system in Egypt is more complex than any other context. Given that the Egyptian population is over 110 million persons with widely different sub-cultures, social standards differ within each community. Yet, social media has merged these cultures and conversations and opened them up into one conversation causing confusion and furthering violence. For instance, a

post including a picture of a veiled woman praising her modesty is both celebrated by some and criticized by others for not being modest enough. It is believed by several of the experts that group efforts like those of the telegram *Dashmel* group mentioned earlier are organized. They are not individual initiatives. It is also believed that these groups and the hate they are instilling in the minds of young men are a main driver of the many femicides Egypt has witnessed over the last couple of years from young men against young women.

The second most common form of DVAW in Egypt is blackmail or sextortion, according to the experts. Three categories of females were mostly discussed. First, young girls and women are highly subjected to sextortion and blackmail. With the conservative nature of the society, it is easy to find materials to blackmail the victims with. Usually, the perpetrator will be testing to see the response of the victim and to see whether he can further abuse her or not. One example was that of a victim who received a message in her 'others' inbox from someone who is on a Facebook group with her. He then took a snapshot of the conversation and manipulated the text using a photo-editing software to make it appear as though they were having a sexual chat. Following that, he started to blackmail her using this image. She responded by publicly sharing the chat conversation and saying that she is being blackmailed and asked if any of her friends received this to please connect with her. That was enough of a response to end the situation.

Nevertheless, not every situation is like that, some are more sensitive if personal photos of the victims are involved and more so if these photos are real. Some DVAW perpetrators stop once they have been informed that a police report has been filed. These examples highlight that, if females were empowered to respond, it would sometimes be sufficient to resolve the situation. But, as mentioned previously, it



is not always that simple. Young girls who have been raised in protected environments could find themselves in complicated situations where they are isolated in fear of dealing with a scandal in a culture that does not trust or forgive women. The young girls also fear sharing the abuse they are experiencing with their parents as confirmed by five of the interviewees. According to interviewee #2, *"[t]he first and most common question we get from young girls considering filing a report is 'Will my parents know?' and even the ones who file, usually do not continue."*

Second, wives and intimate partners are another common category targeted with blackmail or sextortion by intimate partners, spouses, or exes. This happens for many reasons, but common patterns can be detected. For married couples who are going through a divorce, the husband may use videos of their sexual activities that were filmed without the knowledge of the wife and where he did not appear on the screen to make it seem as if she committed adultery. According to interviewee #1, *"[t]hese videos are used to force the woman to make concessions during the divorce process."* There are other reasons that drive men to blackmail women after divorce, too. Interviewee #1 mentions, *"[t]his is done usually to force her to come back, to ask her for money, or simply to force her to engage in sexual activities with him."*

Another form of blackmail and sextortion is common between non-married couples. If a woman was in a relationship with a man and she then broke up with him, he starts to blackmail her. In extreme cases such as that of Nayera Ashraf this could even escalate to the point where the man murders the woman.<sup>41</sup> Young men nowadays have an issue with being

rejected, which may be related to their upbringing. For instance, there was a song released by Tameem Younes, with the name 'سالمونيلا (عشان تبقي تقولي لا)', Salmonella (because you rejected me) displaying the difference in attitudes between when a girl accepts and rejects him. The video of the song was violent with much display of blood. Upon its release, the song started a heated debate because it was seen as encouraging such behaviour<sup>42</sup>. The singer later removed the song with an apology,<sup>43</sup> only to share a sound version of it on his YouTube Channel in November of 2022.<sup>44</sup>

Several women have been murdered over the last couple of years. Unfortunately, when news such as this spreads, it inspires other men to take similar actions. In the case of Nayera, a case "that has shaken young women and is stuck in their memories," according to interviewee #4, the murder was not the end. They continued to defame her after her death. They hacked her social media accounts and shared personal videos and photos of her to further shame her and provide excuses for the actions of the criminal.

The last most sextorted group are feminists. Following the rise of the '#MeToo' movement worldwide and in Egypt, feminists have been continuously targeted on and offline. Interviewee #7 mentions that "[f]eminists are not only blackmailed but are also threatened with other forms of harm." This has also been echoed by interviewee #2 who adds that "[w]hat further complicates the situation, is that while women who do not identify as feminists might receive the sympathy of authorities who view their role as protectors of these vulnerable women, feminists

41 Egypt Today. 2022. Killer of Nayera Ashraf appeals death sentence before Court of Cassation. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/118283/Killer-of-Nayera-Ashraf-appeals-death-sentence-before-Court-of>

42 Tameem Younes. 2020. Salmonella (because you rejected me). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26Z4zH44sB8>

43 King Editor. 2020. Tameem Decides to Remove the Salmonella Song and the Reason for that. <https://youtu.be/Q7nxLqbwazc>

44 Tameem Younes. 2022. Salmonella (because you rejected me). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0hpFH3pREQ>

do not receive any kind of sympathy." Feminists have reported death threats they have been receiving online to no use. Also, it is not only the feminists who are subject to DVAW, but also any female who interacts with their content. Hence, feminists have been warning women to not engage with their content to avoid becoming victims of DVAW themselves.

With regards to the question of whether these women respondents are being targeted online because they are women, the following quotes confirm that the incidents are gender based:

*"Because I am an activist, I would be exposed to digital violence whatever my gender is, but the intensity, the audacity and the comfort of the perpetrators and the kinds of violence I am subjected to, stem from me being a woman."*

*"Responses are full of aggression and resentment just because I am a girl."*

Following the discussion on which platforms are most commonly used for DVAW, and the different forms of DVAW, comes the discussion regarding those committing DVAW, the perpetrators. In terms of gender, eleven of the respondents mentioned that the perpetrators were mostly men, four mention that the abuse was inflicted by men and women equally, and one mentioned that she did not know the gender of the perpetrators. The respondents also mentioned that the abuse came mainly from people they did not know and mostly in private. Eleven respondents confirmed that abuse was perpetrated frequently by people they did not know, while four mentioned that the abuse came from people they knew, and one respondent mentioned that abuse occurred from her relatives. Ten respondents mentioned that the abuse happened frequently in private, while only three mentioned that it is frequently in public. These results were also confirmed by the interviewees.

## 5.2 Women's reactions, and the impacts and drivers of DVAW

Respondents mostly react to DVAW by ignoring it or blocking the offender(s). One respondent believes that *"[i]gnoring is sometimes the only way to stop the violence because getting into a confrontation with the person will probably lead to more violence from his side. Blocking and deleting the person becomes a convenient solution."* Another respondent confirms this by saying that she *"feels that taking action is useless. The person will not be punished because their actions are considered trivial."* This indicates the sense of

helplessness victims of DVAW feel and their lack of hope in finding redress.

Sharing her story, a respondent writes *"[a]t the beginning, I liked being active with posts and comments, but I faced a lot of violence and harassment. There were also those who approached me in private and insulted me because I expressed an opinion that is different from theirs. I stopped being active like before. That made my personality weak because as a female I did not know how to answer or to insult the perpetrator back. I also could not tolerate being humiliated by him. If you talk about how to solve this issue that would be great. We need to learn how to respond without fear and boost our confidence."*

Another respondent explains her reaction to the DVAW she was exposed to when she removed her veil: *"When I took off my veil and started expressing my somewhat liberal views a while ago, the violence I was subjected to came from a wider circle of relatives and acquaintances. And I started to feel insecure about everyone. I blocked most of my acquaintances and I closed my accounts for a long time until I was able to create new social circles that were safer."*

Some respondents have tried to report the incident to the social media platforms to no use. One respondent says *"I write a normal comment and it is found by some men as provocative. They insult me with the worst of insults both in private and in the comments. Inappropriate insults and threats of rape. Tens of comments insulting me. And if I have a personal photo of me, they start bullying me and making fun of my looks. Once, my Instagram account was stolen. Another time a guy took one of my comments and posted it on his page. I reported to Facebook that this is defamation, but Facebook took no reaction."*

The respondents reported that these DVAW experiences had impacted them in different ways, including, but not limited to, depression, being more careful when using social media, changing the way they express themselves online, facing blame by family and society, blaming themselves, losing trust in herself and others, leaving social media, and not being able to sleep. They have affected their physical health, and some expressed that they had suicidal thoughts in consequence.

The reasons for the spread of DVAW can be divided into several categories. The key reason is the lack of serious consequences or punishment for perpetrating it. The Arabic phrase *'من آمن العقاب اساء الادب'* was repeated several times in the responses, and it translates as *'he who is safe from punishment will be ill-mannered.'* Respondents believe that this mutual understanding amongst perpetrators that they can get away with the online aggressions they commit





gives them a sense of entitlement and empowers them to further abuse women online.

What further empowers perpetrators of DVAW is the fact that women often take no action. One respondent explains the spread of DVAW by saying that perpetrators feel *"comfortable knowing that victims are mostly incapable of sharing."* There are many reasons why women do not report to authorities, one of which is that *"[c]omplaining and reporting to the authorities consumes time, energy, and efforts."* Another reason is that they could implicate others during the report as with one respondent says: *"I attempted to report an incident, but there was a lot written about other persons in the same message. So, it was hard to continue with the report because these were their personal secrets. And, despite not being afraid of the harasser, I decided not to proceed with the report when I was informed to bring my phone with me so the investigator can go through the messages."*

Culture plays a vital role in the spread of DVAW, including *"society's double standards"* and the *"wrong inherited traditions, the focus of preachers on women issues and that she exists to serve and support men and that men are more powerful and have full control."* This is confirmed by another respondent who mentions that the reason of the proliferation of DVAW in Egyptian society is *"[t]he view of women as inferior, as created by false religious ideas based on male-driven interpretations of religion. Also, all lawmakers who make laws that enable rapers and harassers to avoid punishment are men."* Furthermore, the rise of the feminist movement is another contributor, accord-

ing to one respondent who believes it is *"triggering more violence as a response from those who support the patriarchal culture."*

Finally, some respondents believe that the current increase in DVAW cases in Egypt that we are witnessing is organised. One respondent says *"[t]hese are organised campaigns that aim to impose a certain culture on society. Unfortunately, many of the weak youth are dragged into these actions, even if they do not follow the same school of thought that aims at restricting the society, because it empowers them with a delusional sense of manhood, virility, and control."*

Therefore, there are many issues that need to be addressed to contain the escalating situation of DVAW in Egypt. All these issues, however, link back to one main problem: victims are not able to voice what they are experiencing and are left to struggle in isolation as confirmed by all interviewees. They lack the social, legal, and psychological support required to handle such a situation. This could be explained in several ways.

In cases of sextortion or blackmail of any kind, women are mostly not capable of seeking the help of their family. Given how conservative the society is, if their families were to become aware that their daughters were engaged in non-marital sexual activities, this could possibly put her life in danger from her family themselves. If the photos are fabricated, her family might not believe her, and she could still face a violent reaction from the family. Even when they believe her, the social scandal and stigma would still

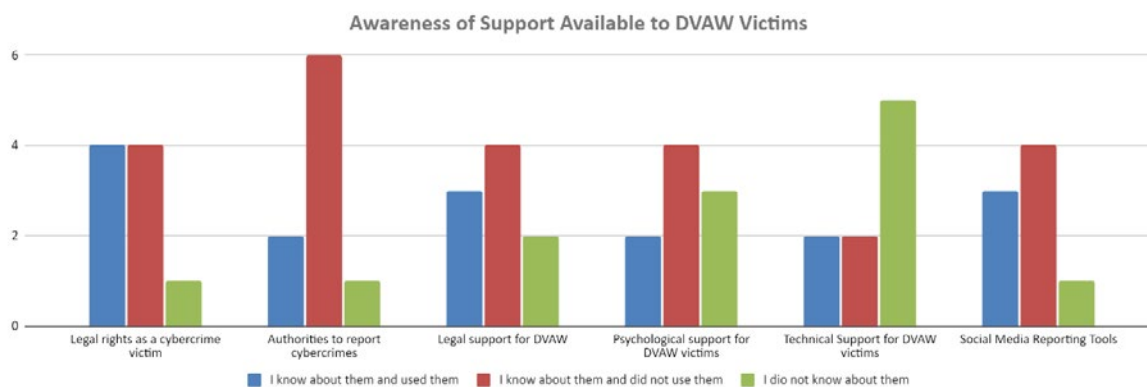


Figure 6: A summary of the results on the awareness of the existence of and use of various support mechanisms to survivors of DVAW in percentages.

be in effect. This shows that the culture is the main challenge women are standing up against here, a culture that does not trust women and this in turn makes them an easy target for blackmail. Blackmail does not need to happen through sexual photos. Interviewee #4 says “[i]n some cases, normal photos of the women with their uncovered hair could suffice for blackmailing.” Finally, there are also parents who understand the spread of DVAW and that their daughters could be victims to it, “but they do not know how to talk with their children about such matters,” as reported by interviewee #4.

Another issue victims encounter when dealing with DVAW is that “[m]ost of those working in law enforcement are men,” as mentioned by interviewee #3. This creates another hurdle in terms of reporting since victims do not want to relive the experience once again by sharing it with a male, sometimes several times. For a victim who is already traumatised, this could prevent them from wanting to report altogether. Furthermore, as confirmed by interviewee #2, “[w]hile the perpetrators commit their crimes online behind the screen from the comfort of their couch, the victim needs to go physically to a station to report which adds to the inconvenience.” Lastly, in cases where victims want to report their husbands, they are sometimes asked questions by those receiving the reports such as ‘Do you really want to report your husband?’ according to interviewee #1. Such statements are used to discourage the victims from reporting.

Overall, there is an experience of shaming and victim blaming during the process given the conservative Egyptian culture, even when dealing with officials. The process is also lengthy, which translates into many women dropping the cases. According to interviewee #2, “[t]he current status is that there are no precedents for any public opinion DVAW cases of

women who are alive and where the victim has won the cases.” The DVAW public opinion cases are cases where the victims have died whether the homicide was committed by a criminal, or it was self-homicide such as the case of Bassant Khaled. Women are also discouraged from reporting to authorities because of the rhetoric that they encounter when they report. From a psychological perspective, interviewee #4 suggests, “[t]here is an overall lack of training for all those dealing with victims of DVAW, even the psychologists themselves, who usually resort to treating the cases pathologically.” Social workers, lawyers, civil society, and law enforcement officials all lack the gender and psychological sensitivities required to handle DVAW cases. Similarly, there is a global lack of training and there is scarce research on the psychological impact and the treatment of victims or survivors of DVAW.

Finally, as interviewee #3 argues, “[t]he worsening economic situation of Egypt is also a major contributor to the spread of DVAW.” Deteriorating economic conditions lead to overall increases in violence, DVAW included.

### 5.3 Solutions to DVAW

Before discussing solutions to DVAW in Egypt, it was essential to explore the support options provided to women who experience it. As seen in Figure 6 above, the majority of the responses indicate an awareness of the different available support services for DVAW victims in Egypt, but more respondents report not using them despite knowing about them. The one service that most respondents were mostly not aware of was the technical support services for victims which indicates an opportunity for a positive intervention.

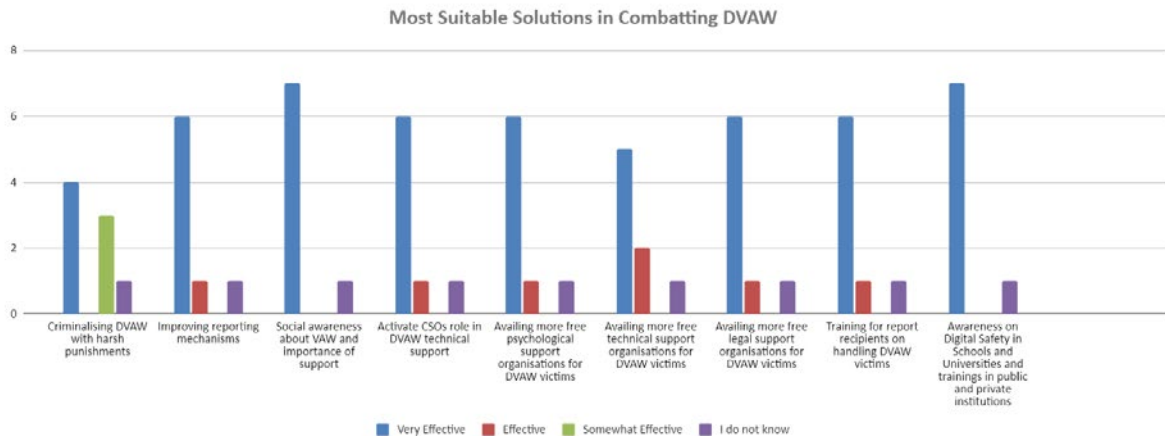


Figure 7: A summary of the respondents' evaluation of suggested measures to combat DVAW.

Figure 7 also relays the opinion of the respondents on the most effective measures for combatting DVAW. The measures seen to be most effective were efforts to spread social awareness about DVAW and awareness and training on digital safety in universities and schools. These measures were followed in preference by the need for more technical, legal, and psychological support, in addition to training first responders to DVAW reports on how to handle DVAW victims.

The importance of awareness was also confirmed during the interviews. While some activists, who are running awareness campaigns, commented that there is not much interaction with awareness posts, it is important to remember, as interviewee #1 mentions, that "[a]wareness is cumulative." Therefore, despite the low interaction, it is essential that awareness regarding DVAW continues to be raised.

"Awareness is not only needed for the women, but for parents, and for boys and men," interviewee #7 argues. Attention needs to be directed towards the parents who are the first line of support for women, especially young women. Also, it is vital towards the boys and men who are essentially the main perpetrators for such crimes but who might witness DVAW cases and could possibly interfere to support victims when they are present. It is believed that men are more inclined to listen to such messages when they come from men, so men need to be recruited for the awareness campaigns and the support services.

Interviewee #6 suggests that "[a]wareness campaigns targeting young women should happen on university campuses and at schools," confirming results from the survey. Women organizations and anything relating to feminism have recently developed a bad reputation in Egypt due to the continuous defamation of feminists. On the contrary, universities are

trusted by families and the women are already going there to receive their education, so it could be easier and more trustworthy to deliver awareness campaigns through education institutions. A final remark regarding awareness, mentioned by interviewee #6, is that "[a]wareness needs to be a continuous effort and more funds are required to sustain these ongoing campaigns."

In terms of legislations and law enforcement, the participants call for the establishment of a specific law addressing DVAW. Also, as mentioned by interviewee #7 "[t]his law needs to take into consideration the social and psychological impacts of DVAW."

Furthermore, both investigative and judiciary arms of law enforcement need to be trained on DVAW. For example, interviewee #5 says: "Experiences in other countries such as Tunisia have proven that when judges are trained, this leads to more suitable sentences for DVAW cases." Interviewee #3 recommends that "[a]ll those dealing with female DVAW victims should be females from the beginning to the end of the process," to reduce the trauma experienced by victims having to further recite the incident during investigations. This has been a common observation in all interviews.

To further encourage victims to report, and to make it easier for them to do so, interviewee #3 says that "[t]he filing of a report process should be simplified, and it should be initiated online." This has also been echoed by interviewee #2 who mentions that "[t]his already exists in Egypt for other courts such as with commercial cases." Additionally, this should also be introduced for other transgressions committed on the Internet. The investigation time needs to be reduced to minimize psychological pressure on victims, so they do not withdraw their cases.

*"Immense training is required for all those working with victims of DVAW,"* according to interviewee #4. They need to be trained both on understanding what DVAW is, its impacts and how to provide psycho-social support to the victims. The social and official workers who support victims also need psychological support themselves. Having to work with such cases on a daily basis could be traumatic for them as well. Hence, efforts need to include supporting them psychologically as well.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the intensity of this report and its findings, this research only scratched the surface of DVAW in Egypt. It is safe to assume that women are struggling in reality much more than what is found here. As mentioned, the ability to understand the gravity of the DVAW situation in Egypt and its real impacts is hindered by the women's inability to share their experiences. Apart from already experiencing violence through DVAW, having to struggle in silence is even a worse crime committed against these women. It is one issue to be vulnerable and subject to DVAW, but it is another to not feel safe enough to seek support in one's home or community. This unfortunately, leaves even the experts dealing with the issue on a daily basis, incapable of fully understanding the real ramifications DVAW has on women and girls and on society at large. This is the most important finding of the research.

Based on the findings of this research, there are several policy recommendations that can be made to address the issue of DVAW in Egypt. These include:

**Breaking the silence:** Efforts should be invested in normalising women speaking out about their DVAW experiences. The problem can only be fully addressed once it is understood. Until that happens, there are many measures that could be taken, but these measures would only be managing the symptoms. These measures may not put society on the path of true healing; however, they are still particularly important.

**Awareness campaigns:** It is important to work on raising awareness to shift the general lack of trust towards women into an understanding of women's role in the social system and that, online, everyone is a possible victim. This awareness will help in creating a safer digital space for women, teaching women how to not be easy targets for potential perpetrators. It will also help create a support network for DVAW targeted women, something which is currently lacking. Victims should not be left to bear the burden alone. Hopefully, through spreading awareness more victims will be encouraged to fight the legal battle till the end while the case gets the needed coverage in the media to discourage other men from engaging in such practices. This would set a precedent over a known case that gains attention only because the victim has already died.

**Legal reform:** As previously mentioned, it is essential to have a unified law combatting VAW/DVAW. The current legislation, while being a progress, is



still insufficient in deterring perpetrators from committing their violence. Also, the procedural and legal processes of DVAW incidents need to be shortened to reduce the suffering of the victims during the investigation, which would reduce the drop-out rates.

**Technological solutions:** For reporting, it is vital to first establish an online reporting tool for DVAW cases, combined with the creation of an environment that would encourage the women to report, for example by assigning a female-only staff to handle DVAW cases.

**Capacity building:** Capacity building is essential on various levels. All workers dealing with DVAW victims need to be trained starting from the first respondents on the hotline, all the way up to the court judges. Furthermore, an immense effort should be invested in psycho-social capacity building since parents, educators, and psychologists sometimes also lack an understanding of how DVAW victims are best handled. Finally, providing free legal, psychological and technical support is proved to be necessary.

**Research:** As mentioned earlier, this research is just scratching the surface of the issue. A mapping of support available for victims legal, technical, social, and psychological is needed. Women should have easy and quick access to support, and a continuously updated mapping would help women reach the support they need. Most discussions about DVAW in Egypt are about sextortion, but the organized creation of a generally hostile online environment is an issue that needs to be studied. Even women who are not blackmailed directly experience this violence by

observing it being inflicted on other women online. This further leads to fear and withdrawal from the online space. Further research is required on the psychological impact of DVAW and best solutions for psychological support for both victims and those working to support them, especially in cases where prevention mechanisms were not sufficient.

DVAW is a complex issue involving a diverse spectrum of stakeholders. It may also become more complicated with the further development of innovative technologies. Hence, combatting it requires multi-layered solutions and ongoing continuous efforts. Feeling safe is a basic human need, not a luxury. The inability of women to feel safe on the streets, in their homes, on and offline is not only a problem that women have to deal with, but a major contributor to other social and economic issues with women withdrawing from the different spaces where they are exposed to harm. This study is a call for action to invest more efforts in creating a safer online environment that is inclusive of everyone, and to spread awareness on DVAW, its implications, the need for digital safety capacity building, and strategies victims can follow in response. Most importantly, this study is for all women out there to know that they do not need to struggle alone. This is a spreading phenomenon and there are experts around who can and want to help. Stay safe!

