Online Gender-Based Violence in the MENA Region:
Synthesis of Words Matter Network Findings and Recommendations

DECEMBER 2023
This report has been produced by DRI and it includes synthesis of findings from four regional social media monitoring reports produced by the “Words Matter” project partners between February 2021 and December 2023

**Author:** Sawsan Gharibeh (PhD)
Senior Gender and Social Inclusion Advisor.

---

**Words Matter**

DRI Partners

- RASED
- AL HAYAT CENTER
- Murrakiboun
- Jordan Open Source Association

**Supported by**

- [German Cooperation](https://www.bmz.de/)

December 2023

This report is available under a public Creative Commons license. Attribution 4.0 international
Acronyms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>English Abbreviations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>Artificial intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>API</td>
<td>Application programming interface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSOs</td>
<td>Civil society organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRI</td>
<td>Democracy Reporting International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender-based violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPU</td>
<td>Inter-Parliamentary Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDI</td>
<td>National Democratic Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OGBV</td>
<td>Online gender-based violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

This report builds on DRI’s regional social media monitoring reports as well as the discussions and exchanges under the DRI “Words Matter” project which focuses on countering disinformation and hate speech in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. It builds on the assumption that civil society actors, including the media, are essential to monitoring, understanding, and raising awareness of what debates and discourses are occurring online.

This report assembles findings focused on Online Gender Based Violence (OGBV) identified by contributions of DRI’s partners in Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, and Tunisia, who brilliantly focused attention on the practices and experiences, while providing data-driven content related to their specific contexts from December 2021 to November 2023. This report further synthesises four key resources offered by DRI. “Online Public Discourse in the MENA Region [Part 1, 2, and 3]”, and “Online Disinformation and hate Speech in the MENA Region”. Additionally, the report incorporates findings from previous work done by DRI in Libya between December 2021 and March 2022. These documents offered valuable insights into local and regional trends in OGBV in the MENA region. The findings and recommendations contained here have been also heavily influenced by the findings of the Words Matter Network Regional Forum, held from 31 October to 2 November 2023. The forum was held under Chatham House Rules, allowing for the documentation and presentation of ideas and statements, but only without attribution.

In a region where women have historically been underrepresented in formal politics, social media has emerged as a powerful tool, providing opportunities for women in MENA to express themselves, write, and publish. The digital space has significantly elevated their presence, offering empowerment through relatively less regulated social media platforms.

The substantial growth in research on women’s activism and participation in this digital public sphere, particularly in capturing lived realities, is noteworthy. DRI’s efforts in documenting these experiences provide valuable insights into Online Gender-Based Violence.
The consequences of OGBV, as highlighted in this report, are profound. They range from self-censorship and political disenfranchisement to adverse effects on mental health, with the risk of online gender-based violence manifesting into real-world violence.

Importantly, these negative consequences extend beyond the targeted individuals, posing a broader threat to human rights, gender equality, inclusive democracy, and sustainable development.

This report highlights the dynamic field on OGBV and sheds light on the tactics and type of hate speech used, through case studies of OGBV campaigns against women in politics and public spaces in the MENA.

Regional Trends

While OGBV is widespread across regions, the MENA region is no exception. Women are twice as likely to experience severe types of gender-based or sexual harassment than men. In the MENA, the OGBV victims focused on in the DRI reports already mentioned were high-profile women. Many were politicians, but activists and journalists were also targeted. Moreover, this report also highlights women election candidates as likely targets. Shaming and degrading puns were another distinguishing feature of OGBV in these four Arab countries. The report also captures how hashtags and counter-hashtags interplay and can compound the proliferation of OGBV. Having said that, researchers within Words Matter also noted ways in which these waves can be contained and decelerated.

National Contexts

While OGBV remains a distressing reality for women around the Middle East and North Africa, the research conducted by DRI revealed nuances in how OGBV manifests itself in different national contexts. In Jordan, analysis revealed patterns to discredit women, they include the use of religious discourse, telling women to "go back to the kitchen", or accusing women who call for gender equality of pushing a pro-Western agenda and harming Jordanian social and family values. In Tunisia, targeted women candidates focused on false narratives that painted a picture of them as untrustworthy. In Lebanon, the majority of hate speech was insults and mockery. While in Libya, form of misogynist narratives with a distinctly religious tone.

Emerging Challenges

One of the most dynamic issues discussed in the regional forum has been the focus on what has changed. The forum participants closely examined the difficulties in capturing Arabic and its Arab dialects while using the Twitter API and CrowdTangle. There are additional growing risks related to accessibility and affordability. Potential costs may impede OGBV research. Emerging TikTok tools face data sharing restrictions, limited availability, and pose research challenges with data refresh requirements. Another dangerous development in the trend of OGBV is
the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI). AI is particularly dangerous because it allows perpetrators to create highly realistic images of women in sexual and/or degrading situations. Finally, as more stringent cyber crimes laws are enacted, public conversations are already shifting into private messages apps, thus limiting access and hindering efforts to detect and counter online violence.

Limitations
The regional forum revealed common limitations. The most noted was related to content moderation challenges. Platforms lack transparency about community guidelines and content moderation policies, in addition to the rise of harmful content in the form of images and videos presents a significant challenge for content moderation systems. Building machine learning lexicons, while useful in detecting explicit words, has its limitations when it comes to local annotations, photos, or intersectionality, thus eventually requiring additional human resources. One important limitation is related to the well-being of researchers especially when being exposed to online gender based violence.

Recommendations
The report includes global, regional, and thematic observations for policy makers, political parties, civil society, journalists, and donors. Below are some of these recommendations.

For Global Actors
• Recognise OGBV as a type of gender-based violence that must be included in international women’s rights treaties and conventions.

For MENA Regional Actors: Build on Words Matter
• Leverage the Words Matter network to engage other Arab countries in contributing to knowledge about OGBV and guide policy reviews.

For Social Media Platforms
• Continuously review policies, algorithms and moderation processes, to address the evolving nature of OGBV, while working closely with women journalists and civil society groups to co-design new solutions.

For Civil Society
• Create helplines for OGBV victims to call, and work with local governments to widely publicise the telephone numbers. These lines should be staffed with mental health specialists who can provide emotional support to victims and advise them on their options for legal action.

For Political Parties
• Develop internal codes of conduct to prevent members from engaging in OGBV, and include material penalties for doing so.
For Women Activists, Politicians, Journalists, and Candidates

- Educate users on proper online behavior and the consequences of harassment. Promote digital literacy and awareness programmes, particularly for young users, in order to detect and combat online abuse.

For Donors

- Consider allocating some of their grant mechanisms towards supporting CSO initiatives on OGBV and AI for the Arabic language.

For researchers on OGBV

- Enhance communities of research to utilise technology to research and detect hate speech in memes and videos. This includes prioritizing data ethics and privacy, develop OGBV lexicon in Arabic with local dialects, while considering health and safety risks for researchers.

Further areas of Research

This report aims to highlight trends, address emerging challenges, and provide recommendations. It seeks to inspire new scholars, suggesting interdisciplinary research on less explored areas of costing online gender-based violence (GBV). The report emphasizes the need for more research on the psychological and social aspects of online harassment.

Regarding capacity-building, it recommends further research to create training programs in Arabic or content addressing trauma and psychological support. The report advocates for transformative research to establish ethics and standards for researchers covering OGBV.

Ultimately, the report envisions a positive change in knowledge production and case analysis to inform decision-making, especially considering the effects of OGBV within national contexts.
Background

The Tunisian legislative elections; December 2022/January 2023
The constitutional referendum in Tunisia; July 2022

The Regional Context

This short regional paper builds on prior work conducted by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) on online gender-based violence (OGBV) in the MENA region. From December 2021 to August 2023, DRI collaborated with local research organisations to study disinformation and hate speech in Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, and Sudan. In particular, the research collected and analysed data from social media discourse during periods of national democratic processes, including:
The Case Study of the hate speech campaigns against women politicians and human rights defenders in Jordan

The Lebanese parliamentary elections; **May 2022**

The Jordanian municipal elections and the passing of the Child Rights and Hate Speech Act

The political environment following the October 2022 coup in Sudan
This paper focuses on identifying the main narratives, trends, tactics, and stories used in OGBV against women politicians during elections, against women in governmental and public positions, and against women human rights advocates and journalists. This regional paper also sheds light on the tactics and type of hate speech used, through case studies of OGBV campaigns against women in politics and public spaces in the MENA.

Methodology

The majority of the findings in this paper were derived from studies published by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) as part of its “Words Matter” project. Specifically, the author examined three DRI reports: “Online Public Discourse in the MENA Region [Part 1],” “Online Disinformation and hate Speech in the MENA Region,” and “Online Public Discourse in the MENA Region [Part 2].” These documents offered valuable insights into local and regional trends in OGBV in the MENA region. The report also integrates information from the 2023 case study on Jordanian activist Hala Ahed.

The findings and recommendations contained here have been heavily influenced by the findings of the Words Matter Network Regional Forum, held from 31 October to 2 November 2023. The forum was held under Chatham House Rules, allowing for the documentation and presentation of ideas and statements, but only without attribution. The Forum focused closely on the issue of OGBV, with the discussions including the identification of key trends and recommendations. While this report makes some broad recommendations, at the same time, we recognise the need for further discussion and research.

In addition to the primary DRI materials, the author also consulted literature from international organisations. These reports provided helpful context for understanding the causes of OGBV, its various manifestations, and its psychological and social consequences. They also offered case studies on how OGBV has been addressed by authorities in other countries.

This paper adopts a feminist intersectional approach that focuses
on the lived realities of women who have experienced OGBV. It is important to note that the cases offer a variety of experiences, depending on their geographical location, as well as on the race and socio-economic status of those affected.

**Consultation**

The international best practices outlined in these reports, as well as consultation with field activists, practitioners, and civil society organisations (CSOs) who have closely documented OGBV incidents in the MENA region, have informed the recommendations at the end of this brief.
Findings

Regional Trends

1.1. The Prevalence of OGBV

A global survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit found an alarming prevalence of OGBV. The survey revealed that the Middle East region stands out in this respect, with the highest percentage of women responding they had been affected by online violence, at 98 per cent, followed by Latin America (91 per cent), (Africa 90 per cent), the Asia Pacific (88 per cent), North America (76 per cent) and finally, Europe (74 per cent). A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that women are almost twice as likely to experience severe types of gender-based or sexual harassment than men. In 2018, Amnesty International conducted a survey that concluded that Twitter fosters a toxic and unregulated discourse of violence and abuse against women.  

1 The Economist Intelligence Unit, March 2021, “Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women.”
1.2 Targets of OGBV

The overwhelming majority of women in the MENA region have been exposed to online violence. The OGBV victims focused on in the DRI reports already mentioned were high-profile women. Many were politicians, but activists and journalists were also targeted. This is consistent with literature on political violence against women worldwide. Across the four Arab countries covered in those reports, the high incidence of politically motivated OGBV reflects patriarchal attitudes towards women, who are derided for seeking power and participating in traditionally male activities.

Globally, women human rights defenders “often face additional and different risks and obstacles that are gendered, intersectional and shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes and deeply held ideas and norms about who women are and how women should be.” Some of these risks include public shaming, stigmatisation, and attacks on their honour and reputation. Women rights defenders are derided for their efforts to create change, with their achievements belittled and them being referred to as “bad mothers”, “loose”, “immoral”, or “non-believers”.

Politicians are particular targets among women facing OGBV. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 58 per cent of women parliamentarians in Europe, and 45 per cent of women parliamentarians in Africa have been subjected to online attacks. Moreover, the IPU also found a number of aggravating factors, such as being a member of an opposition party, being under the age of 40, or being a member of a minority group. Similar findings from monitoring of the 2017 United Kingdom elections support the IPU findings, as black and Asian women MPs were targeted by 35 per cent more abusive tweets than their male colleagues. Women parliamentarians report facing intimidation, silencing, and exclusion. As noted by Jennifer Mbhatiany, the deputy governor of Bungoma County in Kenya, “Gender-based violence pushes women out of politics and discourages others from entering.”

Political candidates use social media as a means to communicate with their constituencies, share their priorities,

---

4 UN Women, 2021, “Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States.” (%60 of women Internet users in the region had been exposed to online violence in 2021.)

5 See, generally, Julie Posetti, Kalina Bontcheva, and Nabeelah Shabbir; May 2022, “The Chilling: Assessing Big Tech’s Response to Online Violence Against Women Journalists.” There is a list of research on this; see, United Nations General Assembly, August 2023, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.”


7 Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, “Sexism, harassment and violence against women Parliamentarians.”


and underline their messages. This engagement, however, exposes them to abuse; women candidates were victims of OGBV in both the Lebanese and Tunisian case studies. This is part of a broader global trend of online aggression towards women running for office. In a study of the 2020 congressional elections in the United States, researchers found that women candidates were “far likelier” to experience OGBV than their male counterparts.11 A similar study conducted in Uganda found that women candidates in the 2021 general elections there faced higher rates of online abuse than male candidates, with the majority of the comments directed at the women's appearance.12 While data is limited on the links between OGBV and election outcomes, anecdotal evidence from elections in the United States suggests that excessive online abuse can impact election results, by leading women candidates to withdraw from races entirely.13

Online gender-based violence is also directed against women in cabinet or ministerial positions. The DRI reports include OGBV targeting a women minister in Jordan. There is also the case of Finland, where, in 2020, 11 of the members appointed as ministers in the 19-member cabinet were women. The appointment of this cabinet coincided with a COVID-19 lockdown, where social media became a platform for public reactions, often hostile. Among the thousands of abusive tweets targeting members of the Finnish Government, a disproportionate number were aimed at women ministers.14 Women ministers were overwhelmingly victimised by misogynistic abuse attacking their values and questioning their leadership capabilities, and were targeted with gendered expletives.15

Women Journalists were the fourth category identified in the case studies.16 Women journalists, including bloggers, YouTube personalities, and other media actors, often disproportionately experience OGBV.17 For women journalists, OGBV is not necessarily linked to what they advocate for or report on, and not necessarily to their espousing feminist views. For many women journalists, OGBV against them was triggered by their being women who ventured into writing about sectors that have always been reserved for men, such as technology and sports.18

---

11 Cécile Guerin and Eisha Maharasingam-Shah, 2020, “Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media.”
13 New York Times, August 2018, 14, “For Female Candidates, Harassment and Threats Come Every Day.”
18 See generally, Caroline Criado-Perez, “‘Women that talk too much need to get raped’: What men are really saying when they abuse women online,” in Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2016, “Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists.”
Negative gender narratives have been invoked against women journalists, sexualising them and attacking their character, integrity, appearance, and intelligence, as a way of discrediting their reporting and discouraging them from continuing their work.

1.3 General Features of OGBV

Shaming and degrading puns were another distinguishing feature of OGBV in these four Arab countries. Expletives were commonly used to describe these prominent women, suggesting that women’s political activism is equated with loose morals. This degrading and sexualised terms are common characteristics of OGBV worldwide, part of a strategy of intimidating, shaming, and discrediting vocal women. While intimidation – the use of death threats, rape threats, and other violent language – is perhaps the most recognizable form of OGBV, these other tactics are equally damaging, and perhaps more pervasive. Indeed, in the DRI case studies from the MENA, the majority of abuse against these women fell under the “shaming and discrediting” category. Aggressors leveraged their culture’s conservative gender norms, using inferences about the women’s sexuality to soil their reputations and question their ability to govern.

Another feature that linked the case studies was the way in which offensive content was produced and disseminated. Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were common platforms used by perpetrators to spread hateful messages. In comparing Twitter posts attacking four women Arab activists (Loujain Hathloul, Dima Sadek, Ghada Oueiss, and Tawakkol Karman), the researcher found a “malicious relationship between digital space and violence against women” and concluded that the platform’s inaction contributes to the hate content. By mentioning the woman’s username in their post, Twitter users were able to direct hateful messages straight to their victims’ accounts. The use of hashtags, another Twitter feature, allowed users to create a lexicon of obscenities for each activist. These hashtags served as keywords for others to reference in their own posts, multiplying the hateful content. Interestingly, in studying these offensive hashtags, the researchers discovered that a series of “counter-hashtags” emerged in defense of these women. The researchers also found, however, that these “counter-hashtags” were eventually hijacked by critics, who used them to spread further gendered hate speech. In this way, social media amplified violent content and ensured its rapid dissemination.

Researchers also highlighted a shared feature concerning ways to limit the

---

19 Nina Jankowicz et al., January 2021, “Malign Creativity: how gender, sex, and lies are weaponized against women online,” page 8.
acceleration of hate speech. The focus is on curbing violence and preventing it from reaching broader audiences. Despite the role of social media in accelerating the spread of hateful content, it also offers opportunities for tracking such content. By studying the tweets directed at these activists, researchers were able to trace violent content back to a handful of original posts. This suggests that early detection and removal of violent posts may prevent the content from reaching a wider audience.

1.4 National Contexts and Country-Specific Findings

While OGBV remains a distressing reality for women around the Middle East and North Africa, the research conducted by DRI revealed nuances in how OGBV manifests itself in different national contexts.

JORDAN

DRI reports have covered three case studies in Jordan: those of Hala Ahed, Roula al Hroub, and Wafaa Bani Mustafa who were targeted for their prominent stances on women’s rights and gender equality, which generated a backlash among conservative portions of Jordanian society. The rigorous work by researchers offers interesting patterns. First, many offensive comments used religious discourse – particularly related to the hijab – to undermine the credibility of women. One commenter wrote, “May Allah curse you. You have harmed the reputation of the Hijab; take it off.” Another complained, “Why does this lady wear the Hijab? Women in Jordan have all of their rights, which she was given through religion. The place for a woman is home, where she keeps her religion and her children.” The cases of Ahed, al Hroub and Mustafa highlight the high incidence of religious targeting in Jordan, which is in line with most surveys of values conducted in the country.

This points to a second feature of the hate speech – the use of gender stereotypes. The researchers noted that, in Jordan, OGBV against women activists based on stereotypes tended to follow one of two patterns: 1) telling women to “go back to the kitchen” (a recurring theme); or 2) accusing women who call for gender equality of pushing a pro-Western agenda and harming Jordanian social and family values. The first pattern represents an attempt to domesticate the public sphere in order to ensure maintaining and/or perpetuating inequality. The discussions view social media as an “intermediary

---

21 See, generally, Arab Barometer, September 2022, “Gender Attitudes and Trends in MENA;” and 2017 & 2012 PEW polls on Muslim attitudes toward political life (while there is general support for the general principle of gender equality, there is less enthusiasm for gender parity in politics, economics and family life).
structure between the political system and the private" 22. Therefore, it is a dominant pattern aimed at transforming social media into “a very large home,” and consequently, subjecting female public figures to the same gendered expectations they face in the private sphere. This is what Suad Josef coined as “political familism,” which is explained as deploying family institutions, ideologies, and praxis into politics.23

The second pattern observed in the comments is more specific to women's cultural duty, namely, that women are often perceived as the guardians of tradition, honor, and nurturing functions. Women in politics and those visible in social media are viewed as disrupting power dynamics and betraying “authentic culture,” by adopting “western agendas.” While this argument has historic roots dating back to the beginnings of the Feminist movement,24 it is targeted at women regardless of whether they wear the hijab (Ahed and Mustafa) or not (Al Hroub) and used to discredit outspoken women and question their credibility.

Hala Ahed is a Jordanian lawyer and women rights activist. She chaired the Legal Committee of the Women's Union, and gained media attention for her role in defending the Jordanian Teacher's Syndicate in its 2020 legal dispute with the Jordanian government. She is also a recipient of the Front Line Defenders Award. Despite her commendable work, Ahed has faced various forms of violence and threats. In January 2022, an investigation by Access Now and Front Line Defenders revealed that her phone had been infected with Pegasus Spyware since March 2021.

In June 2023, Ahed was targeted by a hate speech campaign, following a public invitation to a session on feminism hosted by the CSO Ahel. After Ahel published a public invitation for the session, a negative discourse began to surround it, specifically because of the use of the word “feminism” in the post, as the term has negative connotation in Jordanian society. This negative misconception about feminism mainly focuses on the idea that feminism seeks to destroy the traditional family in Jordan, and to employ a Western agenda against traditional Jordanian values. The negative comments on feminism aimed at Ahel grew into a hate speech campaign against Ahed, as a speaker at the event. As shown in their analysis of the Ahed hate speech campaign, the Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA) team noticed three main trends in the attack on Ahed, which were: 1) Sexist and homophobic speech;
2) Demonisation of feminists, and feminism in general; and 3) Hate speech content with religious basis.

Religious discourse was also used in hate speech against Wafaa Bani Mustafa, a prominent lawyer, former MP, and current Minister of Social Development. At the time of the incidents, Mustafa was Minister of State for Legal Affairs and the Chairperson of the Ministerial Committee for the Empowerment of Women. On numerous occasions, she had lamented the political and economic status of Arab women, and called for gender equality in positions of leadership and decision-making.

The DRI team gathered over 3,000 comments related to Mustafa and her statements, and found that over one-third contained hate speech.

In July 2022, a DRI report highlighted how Mustafa became the target of online harassment after calling for women to be more present in entrepreneurship, then for speaking about women's participation in politics, and again later, during a national debate around the Constitution and the inclusion of women and men in the chapter dealing with rights and responsibilities. The draft, which laid out extensive provisions around equality, was the first of its kind to be introduced in the Jordanian parliament. Proponents of the bill, including the Jordanian government, argued that its passage was

---

necessary to “preserve the status of women in Jordanian society, stressing that the amendment is compatible with the rest of the articles of the constitution". The heated online discourse included disinformation and hate speech, of which she was a target. Her statements were met with hostility from conservative members of Jordanian society, who accused Mustafa of betraying her Islamic beliefs. In one comment, a critic wrote that Ms. Wafaa's views were inconsistent with her religion, and that she should take off the hijab, while another comment accused her of being a “mouthpiece promoting CEDAW and feminism.”

In attempting to examine harmful language posted on Jordanian social media platforms, researchers encountered difficulties interpreting culturally specific metaphors and expressions. According to the data collection team, while training "Nuha," a Jordanian AI model designed to detect OGBV against women, researchers had to teach the algorithm to recognize violence couched in metaphors. Many offensive Jordanian comments made heavy use of irony and sarcasm, which AI algorithms did not detect as "hate speech." In one instance, a commenter pejoratively referred to a women activist as "not a woman," an insult that the researchers classified as gendered. Such a statement, however, could easily go undetected by moderating software, as it does not contain any offensive language.

One comment criticised Mustafa for supporting the feminist amendment to the Jordanian Constitution, writing "we should return to the days of Abu Jahal." The researchers classified this seemingly innocuous comment as a "death threat," explaining that it advocated for a return to the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide. In this way, these references serve as a way to denigrate women without using overtly violent language that would be blocked by moderators. A tactic that is often used on social media globally and was noted in the report is where “users who attack women on social media use metaphors to by-pass content-moderation algorithms.” Understanding these metaphors requires both a lexical and semantic analysis, demonstrating the level of cultural nuance that a moderating algorithm would need in order to effectively detect OGBV. Taken together, these vignettes underscore the challenge of relying on technology to identify OGBV, and emphasize the need for culturally sensitive moderating software.

TUNISIA

Another case study of OGBV examined by DRI focused on the Tunisian legislative elections of December 2022/January 2023. The researchers noted a “worrying”
increase in OGBV during these elections. Women candidates were disproportionately targeted by OGBV; 45 per cent of women candidates reported being targeted by gendered comments, despite making up only 11.5 per cent of the candidate pool.

The majority of these comments were not religiously tinged. Instead, most of the hate speech accused women candidates of engaging in illegal or suspicious activities. Critics of one candidate, Fatma Mseddi, accused her of sending young Tunisians to Syria, and another, Syrine Mrabet, was criticised for her connections to prominent officials. Both of these women were targeted by false narratives that painted a picture of them as untrustworthy.

LEBANON

During the Lebanese parliamentary elections of May 2022, DRI researchers observed a significant amount of hate speech directed at women. Out of 100 accounts of politically active women, a significant percentage – 43 per cent – had been targeted with OGBV. Of those offensive posts, 85 per cent were classified as "insults or mockery." The remaining content was classified as sexual violence (6 per cent) and comments about the candidate's ages and appearance (6 per cent). 28

The use of mockery and insults to degrade women is not limited to politics, however. Women journalists are also victims of online violence in Lebanon, as demonstrated in the case of television presenter Dalia Ahmed. Ahmed became the target of a negative social media campaign after she made disparaging comments about Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah. Critics took to social media with the hashtags #Dalia_Ahmed and #itahseen_nasel_kaleb ("improving dog strain"). A month later, in February 2022, she again criticized Nasrallah, the speaker of the parliament, Nabih Berri, and other prominent Shia figures. This prompted a second round of hate speech, more overtly racist and sexual than the first. Commenters made fun of her dark skin, calling her an “Ethiopian black,” “black dog,” “Sudanese bastard,” and “the damned black witch.” 29 These racist attacks were accompanied by those of a sexual character, with comments calling her an “illegitimate girl,” a “prostitute,” and a “thug’s wife.” 30 These attacks echo common refrains observed in other cases of OGBV: outspoken or politically active women are portrayed as immoral, immodest, or unattractive.

By targeting a woman’s appearance and dress, critics are able to direct attention away from her message, undermining her position and silencing her voice. In addition, comments of a sexual or racist character aimed at these women

---

reinforce the harmful stereotype that a woman’s appearance is the most important thing about her.

LIBYA

From 1 December 2021 to 15 March 2022, DRI monitored Libyan social media to identify trends in online harassment of women. Researchers followed the accounts of 51 prominent Libyan women active in government and politics, comparing them to the accounts of 17 prominent men involved in the same area. The study found that OGBV in post-conflict Libya took the form of misogynist narratives with a distinctly religious tone. Much like in Jordan, perpetrators used religion – particularly the symbol of the headscarf – as a weapon with which to attack women. Another form of OGBV observed in Libya was the use of targeted disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting prominent women politicians. Foreign Minister Najla Al-Mangoush, for example, was subjected to a series of false accusations and the dissemination of a fake resignation letter. 31 This type of disinformation echoes similar tactics used against women politicians in Tunisia.

One interesting finding from the Libyan study was the relative absence of women politicians online. Researchers noted that women political activists were much less active on social media than male politicians. While over two-thirds (69 per cent) of the men sampled had public social media accounts, less than half (43 per cent) of their women counterparts did. This gender disparity was especially obvious on X (then Twitter), where just two out of the fifty-one women politicians had verified accounts, compared to more than half of the men. Of the few women that did have Twitter accounts, their followings were much smaller than those of the men. 32 These figures indicate that women political activists in Libya are virtually absent from online spaces. Their withdrawal from the digital political arena suggests that social media remains a hostile space for Libyan women in general, and for politically active women in particular.

Taken together, these findings reinforce how women public figures in the MENA region are disproportionately targeted by OGBV. The evidence from the case studies also suggests that cultural and social context plays a large role in shaping the nature of OGBV, and any strategy to combat this violence must take into account local dynamics.

Emerging Challenges

Researchers Cannot Rely on the Goodwill of Platforms

DRI reports highlighted the difficulties in capturing Arabic and its Arab dialects while using the Twitter API and CrowdTangle. Moreover, the discussions at the regional Forum alluded to the difficulties in the detection of sarcasm and irony when utilized as hate speech. The risks have even spread, however, to the accessibility, affordability, and continuity of such tools. The potential costs of such tools will significantly hinder public-interest research on OGBV. Losing such tools would significantly hinder efforts of measuring and tracking OGBV. Having said this, the new emerging tools for TikTok also pose some challenges, including restrictions related to data sharing, retention, and licensing agreements, and it is still not available to researchers outside of the United States and the EU. Most APIs require researchers to refresh data in order to remove content that platforms have taken down and is no longer available. This, in itself, is a research challenge, and at odds with how research works.
Another dangerous development in the trend of OGBV is the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI). AI is particularly dangerous because it allows perpetrators to create highly realistic images of women in sexual and/or degrading situations. A study conducted on the prevalence of these “deepfakes” on the internet found that 96 per cent of subjects portrayed in fake pornographic images were celebrities – including women politicians. As these false images become more and more sophisticated, (for example, those produced by DALL-E2 and Stable Diffusion), it will become increasingly difficult for victims to disprove their authenticity. The threat of AI is the use of a combination of such tools, which is making disinformation campaigns and false evidence more believable and harder to debunk. More notable is the use of such tools to discredit democratic institutions or institutions of trust.

33 Aja Romano, October 2019, “Deepfakes are a real political threat. For now, though, they’re mainly used to degrade women.”
Linguistic Challenges to Monitoring OGBV

One unique challenge in monitoring OGBV in the MENA region is that detection software (the Twitter [now X] API and CrowdTangle) is not sophisticated enough to understand regional differences in the Arabic language. The variance between standard Arabic and its many dialects makes it difficult to identify offensive vocabulary. The more local or niche a dialect, the report notes, the more difficult it becomes to moderate. Technically, adapting models to comprehend the intricacies of various Arabic dialects poses a formidable challenge, as it requires refining algorithms to understand the linguistic nuances specific to each region. Additionally, creating a comprehensive and accurate corpus for training these models becomes complicated by the vast array of dialectical variations, adding a layer of intricacy to the technical endeavors in OGBV monitoring.
Stringent Laws Are Being Enacted in the MENA Region

One of the potential unintended consequences of the introduction of laws against cybercrimes is the risk that most public conversation will move to private messaging apps, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, which will create closed networks, providing researchers with less access to detect and help counter online violence in online spaces.

Defining OGBV

Another regional trend is a lack of consensus about what constitutes OGBV. While it is pervasive across the region, OGBV remains understudied and ill-defined. This is not unique to the MENA region, however – there is no universal definition of what constitutes hate speech, leaving each country and organisation to define the concept for itself. In the cases examined by DRI, however, there seems to be closer consensus of what constitutes OGBV.
Impacts of OGBV

The negative consequences go far beyond the targeted individuals, ultimately undermining human rights, gender equality, inclusive democracy, and sustainable development.

Self-Censorship

OGBV silences women by causing them to restrict what they post online, or to withdraw from social media entirely. According to the DRI study of OGBV in Jordan, 11 per cent of content published by women was taken down within six months (likely by the women themselves), suggesting that women are choosing to self-censor out of fear of OGBV. A UN survey distributed across the Middle East found a similar tendency to self-censor, noting that the threat of violence online discourages women from speaking out in public forums. Of the respondents in that survey, 22 per cent deleted their accounts after experiencing OGBV, and 26 per cent reported being "careful" of what they posted online following the incident. 34 Globally, one in three women think twice before posting any content online. 35 This well-founded fear of online violence constricts women’s free expression on the internet, further marginalising their voices.

NDI engaged in a study to explore the behavior of women before and after online attacks. The first study focused on politically active women on twitter (now X) from Columbia, Indonesia, and Kenya. The study measured how attacks affected their posting frequency, and whether they left the platforms permanently or took a break. In conclusion, NDI found that online abuse does affect women’s willingness to continue engaging in social media. 36

---

34 (UN Women, 4)  
35 The Economist Intelligence Unit. March 2021. “Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women.”  
Political Disenfranchisement

Gendered disinformation has been found to dissuade women from entering politics or journalism, or from engaging in activism. 37 A 2016 NDI report discussed the effect of violence against women politicians and whether it has effects beyond the targeted individuals. The report found that, while the targets of the attacks are individual women, such attacks could scare other women who are either in politics or politically active, or those who might consider engaging in politics. 38

"The scope of violence that targets politically active women extends beyond formal political spaces such as parliaments and political parties: it affects not only candidates and officials but also any woman attempting to exercise her political rights or participate in any aspect of the political arena, from elections to policymaking to activism, at local, national and regional levels alike." 39

38 National Democratic Institute, 2016, "#NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics."
40 Democracy Reporting International, February 2023, "Online Disinformation and Hate Speech in the MENA Region: Regional trends and local narratives," page 41.
It is worth noting that, in Lebanon, only eight out of 118 women candidates (6 per cent) won their races in the May 2022 parliamentary elections. By comparison, 120 male candidates were elected out of a pool of 601, reflecting nearly a 20 per cent success rate. By undermining their qualifications and sullying their public image, OGBV subjects women politicians – who are already at a disadvantage – to additional electoral hurdles. Further research into ways of mitigating the risks of OGBV and its potential effects of OGBV on election results and the development of new solutions will be needed in the future.

OGBV is particularly harmful to the aspirations of young women and girls, according to a global study indicating that one out of four girls felt less confident about sharing their views, one out of five girls stopped engaging in politics or current affairs, and 46 per cent of girls felt sad, depressed, stressed, worried, or anxious as a result of online misinformation and disinformation.

Declining Mental Health

Growing research indicates that OGBV has a significant negative impact on mental wellbeing and feelings of security. In the UN report on OGBV in the Middle East, 35 per cent of victims reported feeling sad or depressed after being targeted, 35 per cent lost trust in the people around them, and 12 per cent expressed suicidal ideation.

Other research, by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, found that nine out of ten women human rights defenders in the Indo-Pacific region reported that online violence is harmful to their wellbeing. The report noted that women reported experiencing “anxiety and social anxiety” after the abuse. In many cases, OGBV left the women rights defenders “feeling stressed and overwhelmed”. Some of them stated that they experienced post-traumatic stress disorder after the OGBV incidents.

Incitement of Violence Can Turn into Actual Violence

Perhaps one of the most distressing consequences of OGBV is that it does not always remain online. According to a 2021 UN Women report, one in three Arab women surveyed reported that online violence against them moved offline. For women who experienced OGBV at the hands of someone they

---

40 (UN Women, 4-3)
41 The Economist Intelligence Unit, March 2021, “Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women.”
knew, more than half (51 per cent) reported that the online aggression escalated into real-life violence.\textsuperscript{45} This was particularly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which 44 per cent of Arab women respondents experienced OGBV that then became physical.\textsuperscript{46} This phenomenon is international, as evidenced by a UNESCO report on violence against female journalists. One-fifth of women surveyed globally reported that the offline attacks against them were associated with online violence. This creates a persistent fear for women, who can never be sure that the online harassment and threats they are experiencing online won’t follow them home.

While the crossover from online violence to real-life violence threatens women worldwide, Arab women are disproportionately at risk. The UNESCO report noted that Arab women respondents were “significantly more likely to experience offline attacks, harassment, and abuse associated with online violence than other racial/ethnic groups.”\textsuperscript{47} A disturbing 53 per cent of Arab women surveyed experienced offline attacks that were associated with prior online violence.\textsuperscript{47} For these women, OGBV is not merely a problem that affects them in the digital world; it poses a tangible threat to their physical safety. Furthermore, the fact that this threat appears greatest among Arab women underscores the urgent need for comprehensive legislation around OGBV in the MENA region.

\textsuperscript{45} UN Women, 2021, “Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States,” page 3.
\textsuperscript{46} UN Women, 2021, “Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States,” page 3.
Limitations are better captured by zooming into four cases that capture lived realities that were shared during DRI’s regional Forum. In 2023, during the course of the Words Matter project, DRI supported numerous initiatives and national efforts to detect and research OGBV. Some of these initiatives used AI, and others did not. Whether AI-supported or not, one of the areas of regional collaboration was in classification and subclassification.

1. **Content moderation challenges:**
   
   a. Platforms lack transparency about community guidelines and content moderation policies, a fact that was especially captured in the case studies of hate speech against journalists and human rights activists. (DRI 2023 Words Matter Forum)
   
   b. The rise of harmful content in the form of images and videos presents a significant challenge for content moderation systems. Unlike text-based content, visual elements require more sophisticated algorithms for detection, making them inherently more difficult to identify and address.
   
   c. The dynamic nature of online content, and even its sources, requires continuous adaptation of moderation tools and techniques.
   
   d. Private messaging platforms and Facebook private groups pose monitoring challenges, due to their concealed nature.
   
   e. The lack of transparency about harmful content removal by platforms limits researcher’s ability to accurately synthesize the content of posts and comments.

2. **Limitations in building machine learning lexicons:**
   
   a. Lexicon lists capture explicit words and language, but have difficulty identifying symbols and sarcasm.
   
   b. Machine learning modules still depend on text analysis, but assessing hate speech in photos without accompanying text poses an additional challenge.

---


c. Assembling local annotating teams requires the necessary human resources and building technical capacities into annotation tools. In the case of Jordan and Tunisia, it required at least five individuals to contextualize large datasets.

3. Researchers who were involved in the analysis were themselves negatively impacted by the frequency of profanity they were exposed to, and reported that it affected their mental wellbeing. ⁵⁰

4. The difficulty of accessing the X (formerly Twitter) API is a limiting factor for research. ⁵¹

5. Capturing intersectionality adds another layer of difficulty. It is possible, however, as demonstrated by the case of anti-immigration hate speech in Tunisia. ⁵²

Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by the research conducted by DRI and its local partners, as well as deliberations and discussions at the DRI Words Matter Network Regional Forum, held from 31 October 31 to 2 November 2023.

For Global Actors

- Recognise OGBV as a type of gender-based violence that must be included in international women’s rights treaties and conventions.
- Recognise OGBV as a type of cyberviolence, as it is, for example, by the Council of Europe. 53

For MENA Regional Actors: Build on Words Matter

- Leverage the Words Matter network to engage other Arab countries in contributing to knowledge about OGBV and guide policy reviews.
- Build on the findings of the cases towards a broader pan-Arab cooperation between tech communities, academia, civil society, and women’s rights organisations. 54
- Consider inter-regional programmes and initiatives, and strengthen collaboration across the region and Africa, as well as collaboration with other regions, such as South America and the Asia Pacific.
- Collaborate with regional governments, academics, and CSOs to produce Arabic-language monitoring software that can account for dialect variations, as well as non-traditional words and phrases. 55
- Encourage collaboration among tech companies, scholars, and non-governmental organisations to better understand the dynamics of online abuse and create effective remedies. 56

For Policymakers

- Establish, in a participatory manner, clear policies for OGBV that would then guide the drafting of laws and regulations. 57
- Organise regular national workshops, composed of women’s rights activists, legal

---

53 Council of Europe, Retrieved November 2023, “Types of Cyberviolence.”
experts, policymakers, CSOs, and representatives from social media companies, to develop strategies to combat OGBV. 58

• Define effective policies for detecting and penalising repeat offenders, to prevent the same abusers from assuming new online identities after actions such as suspension or de-platforming have been taken.

• Strengthen data protection laws to ensure that users' personal information is kept private, while still allowing researchers to gather data relevant to OGBV. 59

• Amend the relevant current cybercrime legislation with specific provisions for online gender-based violence: 60
  - Jordan: “Law No. 17 of 2023”
  - Lebanon: “Law no 81/2018 related to Electronic Transactions and Personal Data”
  - Libya: National Cyber Security Strategy (in progress), to be implemented by the National Information Security and Safety Authority and the Ministry of Communications and Informatics. 61

• Authorise and equip relevant government agencies to investigate OGBV crimes. More importantly, encourage the sharing of regular reports to allow researchers the opportunity to analyse trends:
  - Jordan: The Cybercrime Unit of the Public Security Directorate; the Cybercrime Office within the Prosecution Directorate; and the National Centre for Cyber Security 62
  - Lebanon: The Office of Cybercrime and Intellectual Property 63
  - Libya: The National Information Security and Safety Authority; the Anti-IT Crimes Administration (under the Ministry of Interior) 64
  - Tunisia: L’Agence Nationale de la Sécurité informatique (the National Information Security Agency); L’Agence Technique des Télécommunications (the Technical Agency for Communications) 65

• Create accessible legal channels for OGBV victims to report abuse

---

to the local authorities. These resources should be available virtually, so that victims do not need to report crimes in person. 66

- Activate the role of national human rights institutions to play an important role in monitoring and investigating the situation of human rights defenders, and assist them with the independence and resources to achieve these aims. 67

For Elections:

- Increase the profile of official governmental social media pages, particularly during elections, so that citizens can access factual information free from misleading or violent content. 68

- Amend local and national electoral laws to penalise political candidates who engage in OGBV against opponents. 69

- Amend electoral laws to consider gender-based hate speech against women candidates as an electoral violation. 70

Awareness and Prevention:

- Introduce cyber literacy/anti-bullying programmes in primary schools, to inform and empower students to recognise and report OGBV. 71

- Require OGBV training courses in relevant governmental bodies (Ministries of Technology, Security and Education, Election Commissions etc.) so that officials are properly informed about OGBV. 72

- Recognise mental health issues related to OGBV as an area for capacity-building among medical professionals. 73

For Social Media Platforms

- Continuously review policies, algorithms and moderation processes, to address the evolving nature of OGBV, while working closely with women journalists and civil society groups to co-design new solutions. 74

- Be more transparent about content moderation methods, particularly for content in Arabic. 75

- Create more effective content moderation tools that provide sufficient support for all languages/dialects in which their services are offered (including vernacular or slang), and that are sensitive to contextual and cultural norms. 76

---


71 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (2023) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI.


74 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (2023) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI.


• Review reporting policies for survivors of OGBV, to make them more empathetic and ensure that reporting processes do not inflict additional trauma.  


84 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI


• Develop a different reporting track for women journalists under attack, recognising the implications for freedom of speech.  


• Report transparently on how human moderators and artificial intelligence algorithms are trained to detect online abuse.  


For Civil Society

• Create helplines for OGBV victims to call, and work with local governments to widely publicise the telephone numbers. These lines should be staffed with mental health specialists who can provide emotional support to victims and advise them on their options for legal action.

• Raise awareness, so that people can be watchful for manipulated content, and also educate them about the prospect of new technologies being used in disinformation campaigns.  


• Collaborate with religious leaders and scholars to elevate discussion around gender issues from a religious perspective.

For Political Parties

• Develop internal codes of conduct to prevent members from engaging in OGBV, and include material penalties for doing so.  


• Stay updated on new forms of OGBV, particularly the use of AI, as it relates to deepfakes or gendered disinformation.  


For Women Activists, Politicians, Journalists, and Candidates

• Educate users on proper online behavior and the consequences of harassment. Promote digital literacy and awareness programmes, particularly for young users, in order to detect and combat online abuse.  

84 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI

• Create helplines and support services for survivors of online harassment.

• Provide tools for mental health support to people who have been targeted by OGBV. 86

• Work with schools and religious organisations to educate women and girls about their rights to report OGBV, and the tools available to them.

• Collaborate with prominent women politicians and celebrities to create awareness-raising campaigns that reduce the stigma around discussing and reporting OGBV. 87

• Implement a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach to protecting women journalists from online violence that brings together all platforms, women journalists, civil society, news organisations, governments, and independent experts – at the national and international levels. 88

• Lead annual surveys to document the magnitude of OGBV.

• Promote greater investment in education and training, which are vital to expanding the pool of qualified professionals in this domain. 89

For Donors

• Consider allocating some of their grant mechanisms towards supporting CSO initiatives on OGBV and AI for the Arabic language.

• Consider allocating built-in well-being funds for researchers, annotators, and teams who are working to counter the rise of hate speech generally, and OGBV in particular.

• Ensure that all their programme consultants are equipped through training and by providing the necessary resources to counter post-traumatic stress disorder and Vicarious Trauma among those researching harmful content on social media.

• Streamline gender aspects in all digital media monitoring or election observation missions.

• Engage with different stakeholders and listen to women in the front line in their communities to guide the process of creating innovation application processes to address and counter OGBV in both the global and local contexts.

For Researchers on OGBV

Based on the insights and experiences from building an AI model to detect OGBV in the Jordanian dialect, we recommend the following for developers, teams, and stakeholders:

• Enhance communities of research to utilise technology to research and detect hate speech in memes and videos. 90

• Prioritise data ethics and privacy, adhering to the local data protection laws of their respective countries. 91

---

86 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI
87 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI
88 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI
89 JOSA, Fourth Regional Report: Nuha Technical Documentation (20223) Forthcoming, draft on file with DRI
90 DRI, Words Matter Network Regional Forum, Oct 2023 31 – Nov 2023 2, Chatham House Rules Sessions
• Work with social media companies to conduct more research into the extent and impact of OGBV in the MENA region. 92

• Foster effective collaboration between researchers, CSOs, and, most importantly, tech companies. 93

• Develop OGBV lexicons in the Arabic language and its local dialects to detect different types of hate speech. This will require collaborating with social media companies to access Arabic-language data on which content moderation software can be trained. 94

• Consider developing specialised digital archiving tools tailored for research on OGBV. 95

• Conduct further collaborative research. There is an opportunity for industry-academia collaboration in the areas of OGBV and the Arabic language.

• Consider health and safety guarantees for staff and researchers who are exposed to a large volume of offensive language and content. 96

Further research needs

• Research on the direct and indirect costs of OGBV. There are studies on the costs of gender-based violence in general, but there is much less on the costs of OGBV.

• Research on the psychological and social aspects of online harassment, in order to develop more focused interventions. 97

• Further research to design training programmes in Arabic or training content that addresses trauma and psychological support.

• Further research to develop a set of ethics and standards for researchers to cover OGBV. 98

• Further research and case analysis in order to inform decision making, especially in considering the effects of OGBV within national social, cultural, and religious contexts. 99

• Further research on immigration and migrant workers.

• Research that studies the extent of OGBV in the region and its effect on women’s political and social participation. Ideally, these studies should be conducted in Arabic, to increase the body of Arabic-language data available to MENA region researchers.

• Research into the effects of OGBV on election results. 100

---

96 DRI, Words Matter Network Regional Forum, Oct 2023 31 – Nov 2023 2, Chatham House Rules Sessions
100 DRI, Words Matter Network Regional Forum, Oct 2023 31 – Nov 2023 2, Chatham House Rules Sessions
References


   https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings


   https://www.coe.int/fr/web/cyberviolence/types-of-cyberviolence


https://www.cfr.org/blog/artificial-intelligence-enters-political-arena-0


About Words Matter

Contact: menahub@democracy-reporting.org

DRI has been increasingly active in the field of social media monitoring (SMM) since 2017, strengthening local capacities to monitor social media during elections, sharing information and evidence gathered in different countries, bringing together expert organisations, producing methodologies, and informing public and expert debate.

Within the framework of the “Words Matter” project, DRI and its partners seek to contribute to strengthening the safeguarding of democratic processes and societies’ resilience to online disinformation and hate speech in the MENA region.

DRI works with partner organisations from four countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia), strengthening local capacities to monitor and analyse online disinformation and hate speech during key national democratic processes, while building a regional network to allow for comparative analysis and peer learning.

“Words Matter” aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Capacity-building for project partners to acquire institutional skills to design sound social media monitoring methodologies, to effectively monitor disinformation and hate speech online, and to enhance evidence of the impacts of disinformation and hate speech online on civic or political participation and human rights.

- In the countries of project partners, improved awareness and resilience of civic target groups, and concrete action by decision-makers to transparently combat online hate speech and disinformation.
About the Digital Democracy Program

Contact: info@democracy-reporting.org

DRI's Digital Democracy (DD) programme protects online democratic discourse by exposing disinformation, manipulation and hate speech, strengthening the capacity of CSOs for monitoring and advocacy, and ensuring appropriate and evidence-based responses from governments and tech companies.

DRI is well-positioned to address online threats and disinformation, due to its research on manipulated media content, deepfakes as potential disinformation tools, and its current focus on identifying new potential threats and emerging technologies in this field. As part of our diverse toolbox, we have, for example, integrated machine learning models to help us identify emerging trends in the disinformation space. Our work on information manipulation is also complemented by analysing and publishing guides on gender-based under-representation and harassment online.

An important activity within the DD programme for exposing and fighting hate speech and disinformation is social media monitoring (SMM). SMM is the objective analysis of democratic discourse and political actors on social media platforms. This is far more complex than traditional media monitoring, with a myriad of actors and content, combining official democratic institutions (e.g., political parties, politicians, media) and unofficial actors (e.g., individuals, political influencers, partisan groups). This is why DRI published the Digital Democracy Monitor Toolkit, the first social media monitoring methodology that helps civil society, journalists, and academia to research social media and democracy.

Our methodology was tested and used for conducting social media monitoring in 12 countries (including Germany, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria and Sri Lanka), focusing on disinformation, hate speech and political advertising before, during and after the elections. By using a holistic approach to analyse social media, our toolkit engages with disinformation and hate speech by looking at the message or content, the active messengers, and the messaging, thus both the forms and the channels of distribution.

Based on the findings of our SMM, we have advocated for the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) commitments, which could strengthen the fight against disinformation at the EU level and contribute to the debate about content-ranking systems, a major challenge when it comes to the dissemination of dis/misinformation. DRI has also lobbied for the implementation of the EU’s Digital Service Act, a potential milestone in the effort to increase accountability across social media platforms.

In launching the Arabic version of the SMM toolkit, we hope to empower the MENA region in the same way.
About DRI

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. We strengthen democracy by supporting the institutions and processes that make it sustainable, and work with all stakeholders towards ensuring that citizens play a role in shaping their country. Our vision is grounded in globally agreed upon principles of democracy, stemming from the democratic governance championed by the United Nations and international law.

DRI’s work focuses on five key themes of democracy: Justice, Elections, Local Governance, Digital Democracy and Human Rights. By working at both the national and local level, we use five intervention approaches in our projects: awareness-raising, capacity-building, fostering engagement between different stakeholders, supporting the building of democratic institutions, and advising on the drafting and implementing of policies and laws.

DRI’s work is led by a Berlin-based executive team and supervised by an independent board of proven democracy champions. DRI maintains country offices in Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Ukraine. Through our networks of country offices and partners, we are in a unique position to track, document, and report developments and help make tangible improvements on the ground.
About DRI Partners

Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development: is a non-governmental civil society organization founded in 2006. The center has expanded to become one of the leading NGOs in Jordan. Al-Hayat’s overall mission is to promote accountability, governance, public participation, and tolerance in Jordan and the region within the framework of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and gender mainstreaming in public policy and actions.

Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA): is a non-profit organization based in Amman, Jordan. The association is among the few non-profits registered under the Jordan Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship. JOSA’s mission is to promote openness in technology and to defend the rights of technology users in Jordan. JOSA believes that information that is non-personal – whether it’s software code, hardware design blueprints, data, network protocols and architecture, content – should be free for everyone to view, use, share, and modify. JOSA’s belief also holds that information that is personal should be protected within legal and technological frameworks. Access to the modern Web should likewise remain open.

Lab’TRACK: is a laboratory for monitoring, analysis and reflection on political disinformation phenomenon on social networks, in particular the Facebook network. The laboratory is a collaboration between Mourakiboun and IPSI.

MOURAKIBOUN: Mourakiboun is a domestic electoral observation network that was launched in 2011 and is today a key player in this field with multiple national and international partners. Since 2014, Mourakiboun has been diversifying its actions by adding accountability of public services and support to the Tunisian decentralization process to its portfolio. Mourakiboun has a network of over 100 volunteers in all regions of Tunisia and excellent access to local structures and stakeholders. Mourakiboun has adopted an IT approach to its activities, thereby increasingly reaching Tunisian youth. During the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Mourakiboun conducted social media monitoring activities focused on the interactions of FB users with the speeches of candidates during electoral campaigns.

Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l’Information (IPSI): was established in 1967 and became a
non-departmental public institution enjoying financial autonomy and legal personality in 1973. The Institute is known as Tunisia’s leading university for the education of journalists and media workers. IPSI’s research in the field of information and communication sciences has been met with international acclaim. IPSI has a network of national (INLUCC, HAICA, UFP) and international partners (Deutsche Welle Akademie, UNESCO, UNDP, Article 19 among others). Through this cooperation, IPSI provides specialized training sessions and hosts experts and internationally renowned speakers to introduce students to innovative practices in the field of communication.

**MAHARAT:** a women-led, Beirut-based organization, working as a catalyst, defending and advancing the development of democratic societies governed by the values of freedom of expression and respect for human rights.

Maharat advances the societal and political conditions that enhance freedom of expression and access to information, both online and offline. Maharat engages and equips a progressive community in Lebanon and the MENA region with the skills and knowledge necessary to create change.

**Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA):** In light of the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan, our valued partner from Sudan, The Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA), has regrettably been unable to continue their participation in the project. We deeply appreciate the significant contributions they made during their active involvement. While they are no longer with us due to these challenging circumstances, their dedication and expertise have left a lasting impact on the project's progress. As we move forward, we honor their commitment and extend our hopes for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Sudan.
Democracy Reporting International (DRI) was founded in 2006 by an international group of experts on democratic governance and elections.

DRI works on research and analysis to direct engagement with partners on the ground to improve democratic structures and safeguards across the countries where we work.

Elbestraße 28/29 12045 Berlin, Germany
info@democracy-reporting.org
wordsmatter@democracy-reporting.org
www.democracy-reporting.org/