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GENDERED DIGITAL HARASSMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN LEBANON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the digital harassment campaigns targeting women in Lebanon's online sphere, focusing on journalists and political figures. Drawing from nine in-depth interviews, it shows how online abuse operates as a multi-layered tool of political control, social disciplining, and gendered intimidation.

While each case unfolds in its own context, several common threads emerge. In nearly all instances, the abuse is not accidental. It is intentional, coordinated, and designed to silence. What starts as disagreement over a political statement or media appearance escalates into smear campaigns mixing fabricated narratives with sexualized insults, sectarian slurs, doctored content, and threats of physical harm. More than half of respondents reported receiving direct death threats – a staggering rate for such a small sample.

Coordination plays a central role. The campaigns are often propelled by partisan digital ecosystems, most notably networks affiliated with Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) among others, and banker-aligned media actors.[1] These networks mobilize through WhatsApp groups, cross-border bot swarms, and amplification by partisan outlets. Fabrications are tailored to each woman's social or sectarian context. Triggers are predictable: investigative reporting on corruption, positions that challenge dominant paradigms, moments of national upheaval such as the 2019 uprising, or conflicts like the recent Hezbollah-Israel war. Escalation follows a familiar script, moving from insults to sexualized denigration, to doxing, and finally to explicit threats.

The harassment rarely remains confined to the digital sphere. Seven of the nine women reported spillover into real life, whether through doxing, family intimidation, blacklisting from media appearances, or offline confrontations. In one case, abuse led to the hospitalization of a respondent's family member. Attacks were political and personal: for several participants, the abuse extended to spouses, children, and close friends, with lasting psychological toll.

Beyond reputational damage, the women described severe psychological and professional harms: anxiety, insomnia, physical symptoms, self-censorship, career setbacks, and structural exclusion. One journalist lost 32 kilograms from stress-related illness; another withdrew from political life

1 Media outlets, commentators, and digital platforms whose editorial line has consistently aligned with the interests of major commercial banks, particularly since the 2019 financial collapse. This includes the defense of bank policies, the promotion of narratives minimizing banking sector responsibility, and coordinated smear campaigns targeting activists, economists, journalists, and politicians advocating for financial accountability.

temporarily due to relentless smear campaigns. Even those who projected resilience admitted to cognitive exhaustion from constant vigilance and word calibration. As one participant noted, *"the price of visibility is different for women."*

Every participant affirmed that being a woman shaped both the form and intensity of the attacks. Political disagreement was the motive, but gender determined the weapons: sexualized slurs, honor-shaming, body policing, family intimidation, and ageist tropes. Several respondents noted that even women from within their own political or social circles joined harassment campaigns, reinforcing patriarchal norms from within. For younger or less prominent women, the lack of institutional protection often made them more vulnerable.

Additionally, legal frameworks remain inadequate; Lebanon has no definition of digital harassment, and judicial bodies are ill-equipped to respond to cross-border, anonymous attacks. State institutions intervene mainly when elites seek to silence critics. Platform responses are inconsistent and slow, with coordinated mass reporting often leading to victims' accounts being suspended while perpetrators remain untouched. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and personal networks provided some psychological or technical support, but these were ad hoc and insufficient.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has begun to appear as a new layer in this ecosystem, though not yet dominant. Respondents reported doctored screenshots, fabricated images, and suspected automated amplification. The risk is clear: as generative AI tools spread, fabricated content will become more polished, harder to refute, and more damaging to women's credibility and safety. Without legal definitions or reporting mechanisms for deepfakes and synthetic impersonation, Lebanon risks becoming a testing ground for AI-generated gendered disinformation.

Despite the severity of these challenges, none of the respondents withdrew entirely from public life. They adapted by narrowing their visibility, recalibrating their words, or seeking alternative spaces. Their refusal to disengage reflects resilience, but resilience is not protection. Without systemic reforms at the legal, institutional, and platform levels, the cycle of silencing will continue. Digital harassment in Lebanon is not only a personal ordeal but a democratic harm: it distorts information flows, narrows the spectrum of public voices, and undermines freedom of expression – a constitutional pillar in Lebanon.

I. INTRODUCTION

The digital sphere in Lebanon, once considered a refuge for expression and civic engagement, has increasingly become a confrontational playground. While online platforms still offer visibility and opportunities for participation, they have also turned into fertile ground for harassment, disinformation, and smear campaigns. Journalists and politicians – particularly women – face coordinated abuse that transcends political disagreement and operates as a mechanism of control, silencing, and exclusion.

This report explores the landscape of digital disinformation in Lebanon with a focus on women journalists and politicians. It draws on nine in-depth testimonies to explore how false and manipulated narratives operate, the ecosystems that circulate them, and the consequences for personal safety, professional visibility, and democratic participation. The aim goes beyond documenting individual experiences to understand what they reveal about the wider context: how political actors and partisan networks weaponize digital spaces, how media infrastructures amplify smear campaigns, and how institutional failures allow gendered disinformation to evolve into sustained digital harassment.

In the last 15 years, many countries have adopted laws to address online harm, and global platforms introduced stricter safeguards during the rise of ISIS, especially under Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) efforts from 2014 to 2019. But Lebanon did not develop any comparable framework to regulate digital harm, leaving the digital sphere largely open to partisan groups, coordinated networks, and cross-border actors to operate with ease and exploit gaps that neither the state nor platforms address.

This regulatory vacuum has critical implications. Civil society has borne the burden of monitoring, advocacy, and protection, while state institutions intervene selectively, often using the law not to defend victims but to silence critics. Against this backdrop, female journalists and politicians already navigating gendered inequalities find themselves disproportionately targeted. The harassment they face combines personal intimidation with structural exclusion: shaping who gets booked, who gets heard, and which narratives gain traction.

The abuse is rarely spontaneous. Testimonies reveal recurring playbooks: insults escalate into sexualized slurs, sectarian accusations, doxing, death threats, and offline consequences. Coordination dominates spontaneity, with harassment systematically mobilized by partisan ecosystems and banker-aligned media actors, and cross-border bot swarms. Fabricated narratives are tailored to resonate with each target's community and political context, turning digital platforms into echo chambers of manipulation.

For women, the stakes are heightened. Political disagreement is the trigger, but gender determines the weapons: misogynistic insults, sexualized slurs, body-shaming, and family-based intimidation. These patterns reflect and reinforce entrenched patriarchal norms. As one participant put it: "*The price of being seen as a woman is to be attacked not only for your words, but for your body, your family, and your dignity.*"

Lebanon is not alone in facing these challenges. Across the world, countries with weak digital regulation, rising authoritarian tendencies, or unresolved identity-based divisions have witnessed a similar weaponization of online spaces. In many contexts, digital harassment has become a low-cost, high-impact tool to sideline dissenting voices, especially those of women. What makes Lebanon's case particular is the coexistence of a highly polarized political landscape, a history of impunity, and the absence of meaningful legal or platform accountability. Together, these factors have created a digital environment where intimidation is both expected and largely consequence-free.

In this context, the experiences of women who remain active in public life offer a lens into how power operates online, and how quickly visibility can become vulnerability. Their stories expose the human cost of digital abuse as well as the systemic failures that allow it to continue.

The objective of this research is therefore twofold: to map how digital harassment unfolds against women in Lebanese public life by identifying the actors and mechanisms involved, and to evaluate the implications for both personal safety and democratic engagement. Through testimonies and pattern analysis, the report aims to offer a grounded understanding of the issue and outline recommendations for structural response. These recommendations would echo broader trends identified in recent Lebanese research on gendered disinformation and online violence.[2]

2 Mikhael, T. (2025). *Public policies supporting women's right to protection from cyber violence.* Maharat Foundation. https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2900/eng-vawp-report-2025.pdf

II. METHODOLOGY

DESIGN AND PURPOSE

This study employed a qualitative research design centered on semi-structured interviews with a selected group of women active in Lebanese public life. The goal was to capture lived experiences of digital harassment, disinformation, and smear campaigns, and to identify the patterns, triggers, and impacts of such abuse.

SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

A total of nine women journalists and politicians were interviewed between July and September 2025. They were selected based on their visibility in public life, their documented exposure to online harassment, and their willingness to reflect on these experiences. The sample included, in alphabetical order:

- **Medea Azouri**, independent journalist and podcast host
- **Layal Bou Moussa**, journalist for Al Jadeed and former parliamentary candidate
- **May Chidiac**, former minister and journalist
- **Sahar Ghaddar**, journalist and political activist
- **Mariam Majdoline Lahham**, journalist for MTV
- **Diana Menhem**, executive director of Kulluna Irada
- **Diana Moukalled**, journalist and co-founder of Daraj
- **Halima Tabiaa**, journalist for Al Jadeed
- **Paula Yacoubian**, Member of Parliament (MP) and former journalist

The research team also contacted other women in media and politics who met the selection criteria. Some declined participation, while others did not respond to follow-ups. Their reasons varied, ranging from time constraints to concerns about the sensitivity of the topic.

While the final group is not statistically representative, it reflects a cross-section of women from politics, independent journalism, and mainstream media. Only one respondent self-identified as aligned with the "axis of resistance," highlighting the challenges of achieving broader political diversity in the sample.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interviews were conducted privately, in Arabic or English depending on the participant's preference, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A semi-structured guide ensured consistency across conversations, covering: first encounters with harassment and its triggers; political, sectarian, and gendered dimensions; patterns of escalation and coordination; emotional, psychological, and professional impacts; perceptions of institutional, legal, and platform responses; coping strategies and support systems; and views on solutions and recommendations. Participants could remain anonymous or restrict certain details. Several requested that parts of their stories not appear in the public version of this report.

DATA TREATMENT

All interviews were transcribed and coded thematically, with categories emerging around: escalation triggers, actor ecosystems, gendered abuse, psychological and professional toll, institutional responses, and emerging technologies. Numbers and percentages are used to illustrate patterns within this group; they are not generalizable to all women in public life.

COMPARATIVE DESK REVIEW

To contextualize the Lebanese findings, a desk review examined regulatory and policy frameworks in Brazil, the United Kingdom, Türkiye, and Egypt, four countries representing diverse political systems and levels of digital governance.

The review drew on academic literature, government reports, and recent international case studies. Its aim was not to produce exhaustive legal comparisons but to identify structural parallels and policy lessons focusing on how democratic and authoritarian systems alike reproduce online gendered violence; how laws meant to protect can be co-opted to repress; and how emerging regulatory approaches attempt to define and mitigate gendered digital harm.

This comparative layer grounds Lebanon's experience within a global continuum of digital misogyny, while revealing what is distinct about its hybrid form of impunity and politicization.

AI, DISINFORMATION, AND TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Given the rapid evolution of generative technologies, the study also examined how AI tools are reshaping the dynamics of online harassment. Respondents' encounters with deepfakes, fabricated screenshots, and coordinated automated campaigns were analyzed alongside international

documentation of AI-driven gendered disinformation to assess emerging risks of synthetic amplification and algorithmic bias in moderation systems.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study does not rely on quantitative indicators. The decision to focus on qualitative narratives was intentional: the shape and texture of harm – who it targets, how it escalates, and what it leaves behind – cannot be adequately captured through numbers alone. That said, quantitative data will be essential in the future, particularly through real-time tracking and tabulation of digital attacks as they unfold. This undertaking requires dedicated monitoring infrastructure beyond the scope of this report but that the Samir Kassir Foundation is currently pursuing.

The study also acknowledges limitations: restricted access to some political constituencies, the small sample size, and the absence of quantifiable data on the use of AI in harassment campaigns.

Nonetheless, by combining firsthand testimonies, comparative review, and technological analysis, this report offers an integrated understanding of how gender, politics, and technology converge to shape digital harassment in Lebanon.

III. KEY FINDINGS

III.1 PATTERNS AND TRIGGERS OF DIGITAL HARASSMENT

The testimonies gathered in this study point to a striking regularity in how digital harassment unfolds in Lebanon. While each respondent's experience was shaped by her specific context, the triggers that sparked abuse were consistent. Investigative journalism that exposed corruption, political positions that challenged dominant narratives, or public visibility during moments of national upheaval almost invariably provoked organized campaigns of harassment. What might appear as spontaneous online anger was, in fact, a predictable reaction to women stepping outside the boundaries set for them by entrenched interests.

The 2019 uprising was a watershed moment. Several participants recalled how, almost overnight, digital platforms became battlegrounds where criticism of political elites translated into sectarian smear campaigns. Journalist **Halima Tabiaa** explained how her phone number was leaked to WhatsApp groups, turning her into the target of orchestrated abuse:

"People I knew told me those groups were literally instructing members to 'enter and curse.' I was scared: the volume of messages and calls was overwhelming, and coordinated mass-reporting even got my WhatsApp suspended. After that, I pulled back from social media. I stopped sharing opinions altogether."

The same pattern resurfaced during the 2024-2025 Hezbollah-Israel conflict, when journalists and politicians who questioned prevailing narratives were branded as traitors or collaborators. **Diana Menhem** recalled:

"During last year's war, it was mostly Hezbollah affiliates... the usual cursing and explicitly sexualized insults, plus accusations that I was a traitor. After the war, a banking-sector-led campaign flipped the script, accusing me of being pro-Hezbollah, laundering money, and being corrupt."

The scale of harassment could be staggering. **Mariam Majdoline Lahham** faced a dramatic surge during the 2024 war, after being accused on television of collaboration with Israel. At the peak, she was receiving between 2,000 and 3,000 hostile comments per day, many of which included direct threats and doxing attempts.

In all these cases, harassment always followed a familiar sequence. It began with insults, escalated into gendered and sectarian slurs, expanded into fabricated accusations, and culminated in doxing, death threats (reported by 56% of the interviewees), or physical intimidation.

Investigative journalists, reporting on significant corruption issues, faced backlash related to the topics they covered and the powerful elites they confronted. **Layal Bou Moussa**, whose television program consistently exposed political corruption, described the cycle with precision:

"Every Friday we named names: one week Jumblatt, the next FPM, then the Lebanese Forces, then the Kataeb, and so on. Each Friday, the party or leader we covered unleashed insults and partisan attacks (...). The most extreme was when we investigated Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah's senior security officer. They mounted an official attack, painting us as people who should be killed, claiming that by exposing his properties we were helping Israel locate him."

The escalation was rarely confined to digital platforms. Seven of the nine women interviewed reported some form of offline spillover: family members were harassed, reputations were attacked in their local communities, or appearances on television were quietly canceled. **Halima Tabiaa** recounted how harassment in Beirut's southern suburb even led to her being refused service in public spaces:

"I went to my university in Tayyouneh to complete some paperwork and needed a stamp from a nearby shop. The seller recognized me and refused to sell it; he'd sold stamps to two men before me, then told me to leave the area. Since then, I feel anxious even walking into a mini market; I worry the area is politically hostile or holds a grudge."

In one extreme case, relentless online threats and smear campaigns led to the hospitalization of a respondent's family member, underscoring how digital harassment translates into tangible harm.

Visibility itself becomes a risk factor: a media interview, a viral social media post, or an investigative article can act as a trigger that activates entrenched partisan and influencer networks. Once activated, these networks become identifiable through sudden spikes in coordinated posting, identical messaging patterns, or simultaneous amplification across aligned pages.

Diana Moukalled experienced the cross-border dimension of these campaigns. Whenever she commented on sensitive issues, she reported that bot swarms originating from Egypt, the Gulf, or Syria amplified the abuse, accompanied by phishing attempts to compromise her accounts.

III.2 ACTOR ECOSYSTEMS AND REPETITION

One of the clearest findings of this study is that digital harassment in Lebanon is not spontaneous. It is organized, sustained, and repeatedly activated by recognizable partisan ecosystems. Across testimonies, respondents described attacks that originated from networks tied to Hezbollah, FPM, and banker-aligned media actors. Once triggered, these networks recycled the same hashtags, conspiracy frames, and edited videos across different moments in time, creating a sense of continuity that made smear narratives stick even after the initial controversy had passed.

Layal Bou Moussa described the breadth of these networks and the persistence of their fabrications:

"It's a cocktail, because the attackers are a cocktail, but the common thread is that it's all built on lies. What hurts most isn't jabs at my looks or body; it's the hits to dignity and integrity. Fabrication is constant: I was labeled 'against the Lebanese Army'... I was also recast as a 'leftist,' 'anti-rich,' and 'anti-depositors,' twisting an early-crisis remark. Five years on, the money is gone, yet the smear persisted."

Diana Menhem highlighted how the same individuals and outlets recycled accusations in contradictory ways, depending on the political moment:

"At one point, Al-Akhbar ran an entire article portraying me as an agent... Later, the other side's campaign accused us of being linked to Hezbollah, Hamas, and George Soros. George Soros is the common thread between both; it's a conspiracy that seems to work everywhere."

Private messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram functioned as mobilization hubs where instructions were shared: "*enter and insult*" or "*report this account.*" Then, the harassment spilled into more visible platforms like X, Facebook, or TikTok.

This cycle of private orchestration and public amplification produced waves of abuse that quickly drowned out rebuttals. In some cases, politicians and media institutions reinforced the campaigns, lending them legitimacy and magnifying their reach.

Mariam Majdoline Lahham underlines this point:

"The rhetoric painting me as a traitor was pushed into Telegram channels followed by Hezbollah audiences. (...) After that, the volume exploded to roughly 2,000-3,000 comments per day. Clips start on TikTok, then get mobilized in Hezbollah-affiliated WhatsApp groups, then I'm flooded with DMs from profiles signaling that affiliation, including from women. They coordinate mass-reports that repeatedly shut down my WhatsApp number for days at a time, and Facebook felt so unsafe I closed it."

The identity of perpetrators was often a blend of the anonymous and the well-known. Avatars and pseudonymous accounts carried out the bulk of the harassment, but participants also pointed to named figures, including political personalities and media voices, as active contributors. This mix blurred accountability: platforms base enforcement on global community standards categories. Much of the abuse victims face (coordinated insults, sect-coded slurs, fabricated allegations) falls into grey zones that automated systems do not reliably classify as violations. As a result, harmful content remains online.

The effects extended beyond the women themselves. Families and friends were pulled into the crossfire, with private phone numbers, addresses, and even children's identities weaponized to increase pressure. Several respondents described the humiliation of seeing intimate details about their families circulated online, an escalation that made digital harassment feel like a direct invasion of the private sphere.

Sahar Ghaddar described the frustration of having to reassure people she knew that the fabricated stories about her children were untrue.

"(Accounts) fabricated a rumor that my children cry at school because I "neglect" them, that my husband married another woman; and they even published my children's photos."

Although traditional tactics remain dominant, some respondents noted the first signs of AI entering this ecosystem. Fabricated screenshots, doctored visuals, and suspiciously uniform posts suggested that automation is beginning to complement human-led campaigns. While not yet a defining feature, this shift raises concerns about the speed, plausibility, and deniability of future attacks.

III.3 GENDERED ABUSE AND THE PRICE OF VISIBILITY

If political disagreement often triggers harassment, gender determines its shape and intensity. Every woman interviewed emphasized that their experiences were not simply political disputes taken online, but attacks designed to humiliate and control them specifically as women. The insults were sexualized, the accusations framed in terms of family honor or physical appearance, and the threats extended to children and spouses. These patterns cut across ideological lines.

This gendered dimension is not accidental. It reflects how entrenched patriarchal norms are mobilized in Lebanon's polarized digital sphere. By targeting women's bodies, reputations, and families, harassment reproduces offline systems of control and silencing. The spectrum stretches from outright illegal gendered harassment, such as threats of violence or extortion to gendered disinformation, which spreads through fabricated narratives, moral-shaming, or falsified images and is far harder to counter because it falls into legal and platform grey zones. One respondent described how even women from within her own political movement joined in the pile-ons, reinforcing the very norms that excluded them. Others noted the double standard in how male colleagues were treated: men faced harsh criticism, but the criticism rarely touched their dignity, their sexuality, or their children.

On sexist framing, **Paula Yacoubian** says:

"As I see it, anyone who fights the entire system without party backing will be attacked, including men. The difference is the style. When the target is a woman, they go after family, honor, looks, and height, as if those are weak points that will hurt more than anything else. I rarely see campaigns against men framed that way in Lebanon."

Diana Menhem described how gender transformed criticism into degradation:

"I get sexualized abuse constantly and language that people generally don't use against men in politics. In my last online argument with a former judge, he told me, 'If you weren't a woman, I would have increased the dosage.' They also drag in my family in a way they don't with male politicians: 'ask her, her father is the mayor of a town in the Metn district; what did her father do?' That angle of sexualized insults, condescension, and family-based digs, exists because I'm a woman."

This gendered dimension was echoed by **May Chidiac**, who pointed to the systematic use of sexualized stereotypes to delegitimize women in public life:

"Women regardless of their political position are often accused of being mistresses or prostitutes, supposedly paid by Arab emirs or foreign governments to promote certain narratives. These are not political arguments; they are calculated efforts to discredit us, reduce our voices to sexualized slander, and strip us of legitimacy."

The testimonies also reveal how the price of visibility varies depending on position. Established women with loyal audiences or party backing sometimes faced more sustained attacks precisely because of their reach. Younger or less prominent women, lacking institutional protection, were more vulnerable to rapid exclusion. Both scenarios converge on the same outcome: women are reminded that their voice in the public sphere is conditional, tolerated only until it threatens entrenched interests.

As **May Chidiac** added:

"This kind of gendered harassment isn't just about silencing my voice; it's about dehumanizing me to discredit my legitimacy and presence in the public sphere. It reflects a broader pattern: women who dare to be visible and vocal are punished not just for what they say, but for the fact that they speak at all."

What makes this pattern especially insidious is its normalization. Respondents spoke of sexual slurs and body-shaming not as shocking anomalies but as part of the expected rhythm of public engagement. "*You toughen your skin*," one explained, "*but you still bleed inside*." The normalization of misogynistic attacks ensures that harassment works not only through dramatic silencing but also

through cumulative erosion: fewer posts, canceled interviews, quieter tones. The real harm is not only what is said to them, but the stories they stop telling, the positions they avoid taking, and the public debates that never take place.

The attacks often drew from communal references. A woman's perceived sectarian affiliation or assumed political loyalty shaped the style of the harassment. In some cases, respondents said they were accused of betraying their community by being too outspoken.

Sahar Ghaddar, highlighted:

"Because my father is a 'resistance martyr,' some expect party-line views; I stayed in the October 17 protests when Hezbollah asked people to leave because I separate border defense from state-building, which drew harassment from my own community."

III.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PROFESSIONAL TOLL

The impact of digital harassment on women in Lebanese public life extends well beyond reputational harm. It seeps into the body, the mind, and the rhythms of professional engagement. Across testimonies, respondents described a spectrum of consequences: anxiety, insomnia, chronic health issues, family strain, and a relentless cognitive burden of self-monitoring. Even those who insisted they had developed resilience admitted that the cost was real. "*You learn to cope*," one journalist noted, "*but coping is not the same as being safe*."

For some, the toll was starkly physical. One respondent lost more than thirty kilograms as stress manifested in long-term digestive problems. Others reported panic attacks, trembling at night, or phone anxiety so severe that calls from family went unanswered if the number was not pre-verified. In these accounts, harassment was a constant presence that reconfigured everyday life. **Halima Tabiaa** described how the harassment left her in a state of constant hyper-vigilance:

"Psychologically it wasn't 'fear' so much as constant nervousness and hyper-vigilance: unknown numbers trigger anxiety, and I won't pick up. Even my mother has to message me on WhatsApp first. At the height of it I spent nights trembling, wondering if someone might follow or approach me."

Professional consequences were just as severe. Several respondents admitted to declining speaking invitations, moderating their tone, or avoiding certain platforms altogether. Some refrained from writing on sensitive issues not because they lacked conviction, but because they calculated the cost of the backlash to themselves and their families.

Often, the pressure was compounded by family expectations. **Diana Menhem** explained how online abuse reverberated through her household, creating pressure to disengage:

"The abuse has taken a huge toll on my personal life. My mother voiced the same concerns, and my father asked, 'What do you want from this?' The message was to stop for the family's sake."

Sahar Ghaddar's testimony underlines the psychological cost and family spillover:

"The insults spread to my family. My children saw things written about me online. That's when it stopped being about me as a journalist and became an attack on my private life. It changes how you work, how you write, how you even use social media."

Mariam Majdoline Lahham's testimony underscores the psychological toll that persists beneath defiance and resilience.

"I feel split between mind and body: my mind tells me to keep going, but my body can't always follow. I'm still pushing ahead because it's the right thing to do, yet the psychological toll is heavier than before, and it has started to affect how visible I am and what I take on..."

Structural exclusion compounded these pressures. Women reported being quietly removed from television lineups, uninvited from panels, or sidelined from newsroom decisions because their presence was deemed too "controversial" after smear campaigns. These exclusions were rarely justified on the grounds of safety; instead, they were framed officially as editorial or political pragmatism, while, in essence, they represented outright blacklisting and information suppression.

On this newer tactic of harassment – blacklisting – **Paula Yacoubian** explained:

"The goal is obvious: to get rid of me. You can see it clearly on social platforms through videos that package false news and fabrications, sometimes fronted by journalists. This round also has a new feature: money is paid to keep me off air. Instead of people paying to appear, there are payments to blacklist me. "Paula is not allowed on live TV." Others are blacklisted too, including Change MPs and journalists like Mounir Younis; but the scale against me is larger and across more channels. Multiple television stations told us directly that money was paid and that I am blacklisted."

Even when women refused to retreat, they adapted their visibility in ways that narrowed their space of expression. **Diana Moukalled** reflected on how harassment altered her online presence:

"These campaigns are designed to silence people, and sometimes they succeed. They haven't silenced me, but they have changed my behavior: I choose my battles, try to depersonalize my interventions, and make sure any opinion, article, or investigation is as well-supported as possible to reduce openings for bad-faith attacks, even if I know it may still give me a headache."

The result was the same: diminished visibility, not through choice, but through gatekeeping shaped by harassment.

Many respondents emphasized their resilience, their refusal to be silenced, and their determination to keep speaking. Yet this resilience coexists with exhaustion, health complications, and reputational costs that accumulate over time. The insistence on endurance should not obscure the fact that the digital environment is systematically reshaping careers and constricting the public sphere.

III.5 INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND THE ABSENCE OF PROTECTION

Despite the severity of the harassment they endured, very few of the women interviewed reported receiving meaningful support from institutions. The overwhelming pattern was one of absence, passivity, or even complicity. This failure deepened the impact of the abuse, signaling to perpetrators that harassment carries little to no consequence.

Most respondents described their engagement with legal or institutional channels as frustrating at best. Lebanon has no clear legal definition of digital harassment, leaving courts ill-equipped to distinguish between legitimate criticism and orchestrated campaigns of abuse. When cases were reported, judicial responses were slow, politicized, or quietly discouraged. Even in instances involving death threats or doxing, security bodies and cybercrime units provided little more than procedural acknowledgment. The absence of enforceable frameworks transformed what should be a protective system into a hollow formality.

For **May Chidiac**, the lack of a safe environment for reporting was particularly alarming:

"Protecting women in public life from digital harm requires urgent legal, institutional, and cultural measures. Creating a safe environment for reporting incidents without fear of retaliation or stigma is crucial."

Employers and political parties were equally unreliable. Some women were advised by their institutions not to escalate, on the grounds that drawing attention would only worsen the abuse. Others were told harassment was simply "*part of the job*." In several cases, respondents felt that their visibility was welcomed when it served organizational goals, but when that same visibility attracted harassment, responsibility shifted back onto them. This culture of silence and deflection reinforced the notion that women must absorb the costs of participation alone.

Medea Azouri situates harassment within journalistic vulnerability and the absence of protection:

"If the state cannot guarantee basic safety for women offline, it is unrealistic to expect it to protect us from online harassment."

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and rights groups partially filled the vacuum. Respondents acknowledged receiving psychological support, digital safety training, or public visibility from groups such as the Samir Kassir Foundation and Maharat Foundation. Yet these interventions were ad hoc and reactive, arriving after the damage had already been done. Few offered sustained protection, and none had the institutional authority to deter perpetrators.

Platform responses were inconsistent and often counterproductive. Coordinated reporting by partisan networks frequently led to women's accounts being suspended, while those spreading disinformation or threats remained active. Appeals through official reporting channels rarely resulted in timely action. In a context where Lebanon is not a priority market for major platforms, escalation pathways were either unavailable or symbolic, leaving women with little recourse.

On the silence of institutions, several respondents expressed frustration with institutions that failed to stand up for them, including syndicates, newsrooms, and CSOs supposedly tasked with journalist support.

The net effect is a system in which digital harassment is tolerated, even normalized. Women who endure abuse thus learn not only that they are targets, but also that their protection is negotiable, contingent, and in most cases, nonexistent. This institutional vacuum transforms harassment into a challenge for the democratic system itself.

Diana Moukalled explained how the broader environment of discrimination against women exacerbated online harassment:

"If women aren't protected in real life, you can't protect them online. Our laws, society, and culture already discriminate against women; when social media is weaponized inside that system, the injustice deepens. You are on a battlefield that you cannot control."

III.6 AI, DISINFORMATION, AND THE SHIFTING TERRAIN

While the bulk of harassment campaigns in Lebanon still rely on familiar tactics (insults, fabrications, and coordinated large-scale attacks), respondents highlighted signs that the terrain is beginning to shift. Several women noted the appearance of doctored images, fabricated screenshots, and suspiciously uniform posts that suggested automated amplification. Even when not certain of the technical tools used, they sensed that some campaigns bore the hallmarks of AI: speed, volume, astroturfing, and a veneer of plausibility that traditional rumor mills could not easily produce.

This perception matters as much as the technology itself. In an environment already defined by distrust and manipulation, the suspicion that AI may be involved deepens the sense of vulnerability. For women who are targeted, it is no longer only about fighting lies; it is about proving their own authenticity against a flood of synthetic distortions. One journalist recalled how a fake statement attributed to her spread at a pace she could not contain. It began as a misrepresentation in one outlet, but within hours it had been reposted across partisan pages, WhatsApp groups, and anonymous accounts, each adding new layers of outrage. As she tried to correct the record, the fabrication kept mutating and circulating faster than any clarification could reach. The experience left her questioning whether human opponents alone could have sustained that pace of amplification.

May Chidiac explained how harassment repeatedly targeted her body and appearance, including through the use of AI-manipulated images:

"They manipulate AI-generated images to distort my facial features, making me look old or unattractive, or even likening me to grotesque figures like the horror character Chucky. They also attack my physical condition and emotional resilience, deliberately avoiding engagement with my ideas or arguments."

The danger lies in AI augmenting older harassment methods. Fabricated content becomes harder to trace, and once released into partisan ecosystems, it circulates with even greater speed. Coupled with mass reporting and bot swarms,[3] these tools give political actors and their supporters new ways to silence women while maintaining plausible deniability. AI does not need to dominate the harassment landscape to be effective; its very presence increases uncertainty and erodes trust in what is real.

Lebanon's lack of legal or regulatory safeguards compounds this risk. With no framework to address deepfakes, synthetic images, or AI-driven amplification, women who are attacked have little recourse. Platforms remain slow to intervene, and institutions are either unwilling or unable to respond. In this

3 Beyer, J. N., & Böswald, L.-M. (2022, June). *On the radar: Mapping the tools, tactics and narratives of tomorrow's disinformation environment.* Democracy Reporting International & Disinfo Radar. https://democracyreporting.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/images/62c8333ec3aea.pdf

vacuum, the digital sphere becomes a testing ground for new techniques of manipulation, where women in public life bear the brunt of experimentation.

What emerges is a shifting environment where harassment evolves alongside technology. The old playbooks of partisan mobilization remain intact, but they are increasingly supplemented by tools that make fabrications more convincing and campaigns more efficient. For women who already pay a disproportionate price for visibility, this evolution represents a deepening of the asymmetry between those who seek to silence and those struggling to be heard.

IV. COMPARATIVE DESK REVIEW

The dynamics observed in Lebanon mirror broader global patterns. Experiences from Brazil, the United Kingdom, Türkiye, and Egypt reveal how different governance models – liberal, hybrid, and authoritarian – grapple with the same tension between safeguarding women's online spaces and preserving freedom of expression within polarized and patriarchal societies. The following synthesis draws key lessons from these experiences, focusing on what they reveal about the links between governance, gender, and digital harm.

IV.1 BRAZIL: REGULATION WITHOUT ENFORCEMENT

Brazil offers one of the world's most advanced legal frameworks for digital rights, yet its experience shows how progressive regulation can coexist with persistent online misogyny. As early as 2014, the country adopted the *Marco Civil da Internet*, often called the "Internet Bill of Rights," which enshrined privacy, freedom of expression, and net neutrality. It was followed by the 2018 General Data Protection Law, and more recently by a 2025 Supreme Court reinterpretation of Article 19 on freedom of expression, which introduced a "duty of care" obliging platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent foreseeable harm, including hate speech, online abuse, gender-based violence, and automated misinformation. These reforms expanded the legal recognition of digital harm and explicitly classified offenses such as hacking, non-consensual image sharing, stalking, and the spread of misogynistic content as punishable acts.

Despite this ambitious framework, online harassment against women remains endemic. Studies[4] show that 74% of female mayors elected in 2020 were subjected to false information campaigns, while 66% faced online threats, slurs, and hate speech. The narratives follow predictable patterns[5] of hypersexualization, moral policing, insinuations of prostitution or "moral defect," and attacks on professional competence. These attacks often blend gender with other social markers such as class or race.

4 Tavares, P., & Borges, G. (2023, September). *Disinformation and online political violence against women in Brazil.* Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/disinformation-and-online-political-violence-against-women-brazil

5 Martins, F. K., Valente, M., Borges, E., Tavares, C., & Gomes, A. (2020, November). *Violence against women online and the courts: Preliminary observations.* InternetLab. https://internetlab.org.br/en/news/violence-against-women-online-and-the-courts-preliminary-observations/

Research also links this harassment to democratic erosion.[6] Online misogyny reduces female candidates' visibility, adds emotional labor to their campaigns, and can even drive women to withdraw from politics, thus undermining sustainable development goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and representative democracy.

Yet enforcement lags far behind legislation. Low public trust[7] in law enforcement and courts leaves victims reluctant to report offenses, and many cases are misclassified[8] as domestic violence even when the abuse occurs in public online spaces.

Brazil's experience demonstrates that laws alone do not protect women: without institutional accountability, a culture of impunity persists, allowing digital spaces to reproduce the very inequalities the "Internet Bill of Rights" was meant to overcome.

IV.2 UNITED KINGDOM: PROGRESS IN LAW, PERSISTENCE IN HARM

The United Kingdom offers one of the most comprehensive frameworks for regulating online conduct and protecting users' rights, yet its experience underscores that legislation alone cannot eliminate digital misogyny. From the Computer Misuse Act (1990) to the Criminal Justice and Courts Act (2015) against "revenge porn" and the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) targeting threats to disclose intimate images, the UK has steadily expanded protections against digital abuse. The most significant step came with the Online Safety Act (2023), which imposed legal duties on platforms to remove illegal and harmful content, protect children, and empower adult users to filter abusive or misogynistic material. It also criminalized cyberflashing (the act of sending unsolicited sexual or obscene images to someone through digital means without their consent), false or threatening communications, and online incitement to self-harm, granting Ofcom (UK's independent regulator for broadcasting, telecommunications, and the internet) unprecedented enforcement powers with fines reaching GBP 18 million or 10% of global turnover. However, the Act remains highly contested: its age-verification requirements raise concerns around privacy, exclusion, and algorithmic bias, and civil society groups warn that some of its mechanisms may restrict legitimate speech without effectively curbing abuse.[9]

6 Koch, L., Ghawi, R., Pfeffer, J., & Steinert, J. I. (2025, August). Online misogyny against female candidates in the 2022 Brazilian elections: a threat to women's political representation? *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2551604

7 Valente, M. G. (2023, June). *Online gender-based violence in Brazil: New data insights* (Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 4). Centre for International Governance Innovation. https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet_Paper_no_4.pdf

8 Martins, F.K., et al., *op.cit.*

9 Collins, P. (2025, August). *No, the UK's Online Safety Act doesn't make children safer online.* Electronic Frontier Foundation. https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2025/08/no-uks-online-safety-act-doesnt-make-children-safer-online

Despite this robust legal foundation, harassment against women in public life remains severe and pervasive. Amnesty International[10] and Ofcom[11] have documented how abuse intensifies during political campaigns or high-salience events, creating what researchers call a "silencing effect": women withdraw, self-censor, or alter engagement patterns to avoid hostility. Black politicians and journalists are 84% more likely to face online abuse[12] than their white female counterparts, and in 2017, Diane Abbott – the longest serving and the first female black MP in Westminster – alone received over 45% of all abusive tweets sent to women MPs.

The consequences are both personal and political. Over half of women MPs report anxiety, stress, or panic attacks linked to online abuse, and several have considered stepping down from public office.[13] Surveys of female parliamentarians reveal that the hostility often comes not only from anonymous users but also from constituents and fellow politicians, blurring the line between public accountability and gendered harassment. Participants described online hate as a "constant everyday experience," often triggered by routine actions such as commenting on policy issues.

While the UK's institutional architecture is far stronger than Lebanon's, implementation gaps remain strikingly similar. 68% of women believe current legislation is ineffective, 57% say police lack resources, and 71% of those who report abuse are dissatisfied with outcomes.[14] Many victims noted that online stalking or harassment is still not recognized as such by law enforcement.

The British experience shows that strong laws alone are not enough when institutions lack the capacity or will to enforce them. The lesson for Lebanon is not to only replicate UK-style laws, but to anticipate the fact that strong regulation must be paired with proactive implementation, responsive policing, and a broader cultural change that redefines online abuse as a democratic, not just individual, harm.

IV.3 TÜRKIYE: REGULATION AS REPRESSION

Türkiye's approach to internet governance illustrates how laws originally designed for online safety can evolve into tools of political control. The 2007 Internet Law[15] (No. 5651) marked the start of formal regulation, granting authorities powers to block websites under the pretext of

10 Amnesty International. (2018, March). *Toxic Twitter – The Silencing Effect: Chapter 5.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-5-5/

11 Ofcom. (2025, July). *Experiences of online hate and abuse among women in politics.* https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/research-statistics-and-data/online-abuse/experiences-of-online-hate-and-abuse-among-women-in-politics.pdf

12 Gayle, D. (2018, December 18). *Diane Abbott: Twitter has 'put racists into overdrive'. The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/dec/18/diane-abbott-calls-for-twitter-to-clamp-down-on-hate-speech

13 Amnesty International UK. (n.d.). *Online abuse of women widespread in UK.* https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-abuse-women-widespread

14 Shelton, K. (n.d.). *OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across the UK.* The Open University. https://research.open.ac.uk/news/ou-research-reveals-shocking-level-online-violence-experienced-women-and-girls-across-uk

15 Kaya, M. B. (2021, January). *The Turkish Internet Law – Full translation.* https://mbkaya.com/turkish-internet-law

combating crimes such as child abuse or gambling. Subsequent amendments in 2014 and 2015 expanded this authority dramatically:[16] the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA) gained the power to remove content within hours, while the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) was allowed to access private communications data without a court order. What began as a regulatory effort to protect users quickly institutionalized state surveillance.

The 2020 Social Media Law entrenched government oversight further by requiring major platforms to appoint local representatives and store user data inside Türkiye, effectively placing global platforms under domestic jurisdiction. A year later, the government withdrew from the Istanbul Convention[17] – the Council of Europe's treaty to combat gender-based violence – arguing that it conflicted with "family values." This move symbolized a retreat from gender protection norms.

In 2022, the so-called Disinformation Law[18] criminalized the act of "spreading false information" that might threaten national security or public order, carrying prison sentences of up to three years. Its vague wording has allowed authorities to prosecute journalists, opposition figures, and feminist activists, institutionalizing what can be described as "networked misogyny." By 2025, Türkiye had experienced eighteen nationwide internet restrictions since 2015,[19] confirming its transformation into one of the world's most tightly controlled digital environments.

Surveys show that 48% of women in Türkiye report harassment through direct messages, 20% say this led to physical assault or offline abuse,[20] and nearly half (46%) report cyberstalking.[21]

Although Türkiye's government presents its digital laws as efforts to curb disinformation and online harm, enforcement is deeply asymmetrical. Protections against harassment are rarely applied, while vague legal tools are used to silence dissent and feminist expression. With no dedicated legal mechanism to prosecute digital violence, victims face a void of protection. Türkiye's experience warns of the opposite danger from Lebanon's vacuum: when regulation exists without judiciary independence, safety laws become instruments of repression rather than protection.

16 Freedom House. (2018). *Freedom on the Net 2018: Turkey*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2018

17 Council of Europe. (2021, March 22). *Turkey's announced withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention endangers women's rights*. https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/turkey-s-announced-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-endangers-women-s-rights

18 Coşkun, A. (2022, December 19). *Turkey's new disinformation law affects more than meets the eye*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/12/turkeys-new-disinformation-law-affects-more-than-meets-the-eye?lang=en

19 Basaran, E. (2025, September 8). *Turkey restricts internet access amid opposition-party standoff*. Euronews. https://www.euronews.com/2025/09/08/turkey-restricts-internet-access-amid-opposition-party-standoff

20 Toprak, S. (2025, May). *Climate of impunity fuels online abuse of Turkish women journalists*. Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/14/climate-of-impunity-fuels-online-abuse-of-turkish-women-journalists/

21 Hürriyet Daily News. (2024, January). *Cyberstalking affects 46 percent of women in Türkiye*. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/cyberstalking-affects-46-percent-of-women-in-turkiye-189421

IV.4 EGYPT: PATRIARCHY THROUGH LAW

Egypt's positioning as one of the region's most repressive online environments illustrates how the rhetoric of "cybersecurity" can conceal an architecture of control. In the early 2000s, Egypt's internet was largely unregulated, and the rise of independent blogs briefly expanded civic expression. That openness ended in the mid-2010s, when a series of laws formalized state dominance over digital life. The Anti-Terrorism Law (2015)[22] authorized website blocking under broad security pretexts. Three years later, the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law[23] and the Law on Press and Media[24] institutionalized sweeping powers for the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) to block or suspend online accounts accused of violating "public morals" or "national security." By 2020, these controls had deepened: surveillance expanded, VPNs were restricted, and even social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers could be classified as media outlets,[25] effectively turning influencers into regulated journalists.

This tightening legal regime transformed the internet from a space of empowerment into a mechanism of surveillance and punishment. Women have borne the brunt of its enforcement. Egypt has witnessed a wave of prosecutions of female creators and influencers for alleged "indecency" or "violating family values."[26] Since 2020, dozens of young women on TikTok have been imprisoned under morality or anti-trafficking pretexts, their visibility reframed as a threat to "public virtue."[27]

Online harassment of women in Egypt is deeply gendered and politically charged. Feminist journalists, artists, and influencers report sexualized insults, moral policing, and defamation campaigns, often coordinated through pro-government or religious networks. The Freedom on the Net index now classifies Egypt as *"Not Free,"* with digital violence compounded by arrests, pretrial detentions, and systematic legal intimidation.[28] The psychological and professional toll mirrors regional patterns: many women withdraw from public platforms, self-censor, or abandon activism altogether.[29]

22 Human Rights Watch. (2015, August). *Egypt: Counterterrorism law erodes basic rights.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/19/egypt-counterterrorism-law-erodes-basic-rights

23 Soliman & Partners. (2021, June). *Cybersecurity in the era of data protection: A quick overview of Law No. 175 of 2018 on cybersecurity crimes.* ADSERO. https://adsero.me/cybersecurity-in-the-era-of-data-protection-a-quick-overview-of-law-no-175-of-2018-on-cybersecurity-crimes/

24 Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2019, May). *The law regulating the press, media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation.* https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SCMR-Law-5-15-2019-1.pdf

25 BBC News. (2018, July). *Egypt to regulate popular social media users.* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44858547

26 Amnesty International. (2021, July). *Women influencers jailed for 'indecency'.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/MDE1244432021ENGLISH.pdf

27 Human Rights Watch. (2025, September). *Egypt: Mass crackdown targets online content creators.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/10/egypt-mass-crackdown-targets-online-content-creators

28 Freedom House. (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024: Egypt.* https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-net/2024

29 Posetti, J., Shabbir, N., Maynard, D., Bontcheva, K., & Aboulez, N. (2021, April). The chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists. UNESCO. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/The%20Chilling_POSETTI%20ET%20AL_FINAL.pdf

Legal recourse remains challenging. Although the 2018 cybercrime law nominally protects victims of digital harassment, only 11% of complaints lead to prosecution, while 41% are dismissed without action.[30] Women rarely report abuse, fearing family backlash or countersuits. Even minors cannot file complaints without a guardian's consent. In some cases, victims who sought help online were themselves prosecuted, as in the case of influencer Menna Abdelaziz.

Egypt's experience reveals how laws enacted under the pretext of protection can be weaponized to repress. Under the guise of moral order and national security, the state has turned online visibility into vulnerability. The targeting of women's bodies and voices online is not an accident of enforcement but an extension of patriarchal power. Egypt is a proof that digital spaces reflect and inflate, rather than disrupt, the hierarchies of the societies that govern them.

IV.5 LEBANON AMID INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

The Lebanese experience of online violence against women in politics and public life mirrors global trends but also exposes a distinct pathology: a state too fragmented to protect, and too politicized to regulate. When examined alongside Brazil, the United Kingdom, Türkiye, and Egypt, Lebanon emerges as a hybrid case: neither an authoritarian regime codifying repression through law, nor a consolidated democracy enforcing accountability. It is instead a vacuum in which digital harassment flourishes through neglect, partisanship, and moral double standards.

In Brazil and the UK, regulation and weak enforcement coexist: laws exist, yet institutions falter. In Türkiye and Egypt, the opposite occurs: regulation becomes an instrument of surveillance, punishing dissent under the guise of public order or morality. Lebanon sits uneasily between these poles. It has ratified international conventions and debated digital safety policies, but implementation is virtually absent. This absence performs the same controlling function as over-regulation elsewhere: women remain exposed, silenced, and blamed.

Normalization and Emotional Attrition

Maharat Foundation's 2025 study documents how online violence in Lebanon is rarely spontaneous.[31] It is organized, instrumentalized, and often politically outsourced. Networks of partisan trolls and affiliated media actors target women journalists, politicians, and activists through gendered and sectarian language to accuse them of immorality, Western allegiance, or social deviance. Harassment thus operates as political communication: a low-cost mechanism of intimidation that requires no legal cover. In a system where impunity defines power, the state's inaction becomes a form of endorsement.

30 Williams, F. S. (2024, December). *Breaking the silence: The hidden epidemic of digital violence against Egyptian women*. Women of Egypt Network. https://www.womenofegyptnetwork.com/post/breaking-the-silence-the-hidden-epidemic-of-digital-violence-against-egyptian-women

31 Mikhael, T., *op.cit.*

Unlike Türkiye or Egypt, where censorship is centralized, Lebanon's repression is informal and diffuse. Political parties, influencers, and online outlets act as semi-autonomous enforcers of a patriarchal code, using misogyny as a shared vocabulary across ideological divides. This informality provides plausible deniability to perpetrators and shields them from accountability.

Maharat's interviews and SKF's research for the purpose of this report reveal that women working in journalism or politics have largely internalized this hostility. They describe harassment as "part of the job," a background noise that shapes how and when they speak. The pattern resembles what British researchers call the 'silencing effect,' but in Lebanon the emotional toll is intensified by proximity: the same individuals who harass online may be colleagues, sources, or even editors. Over time, this normalization erodes participation not through prohibition, but through exhaustion.

The Political Economy of Harassment

Another distinctive feature, absent from most global studies, is the 'political economy' of digital harassment. In Lebanon, abuse is often monetized and rewarded. Online attackers are linked to party-affiliated media, marketing firms, or social media 'armies' funded through well-resourced networks. Harassment, disinformation, and reputational sabotage merge into a single industry of influence. Women journalists who expose corruption or critique political elites risk professional isolation, loss of advertising revenue, or targeted smear campaigns. The gendered dimension of this economy lies in its distribution of vulnerability: women's reputations are the currency through which political messages are traded.

Institutionally, Lebanon's justice system reproduces this dynamic of reversal. Victims who report abuse often face suspicion or countersuits for defamation. Security agencies sometimes treat complainants as potential offenders.

As in many countries, the boundary between online and offline violence is porous. Lebanese women who are doxxed, stalked, or vilified online frequently encounter real-world repercussions: surveillance, threats, and physical intimidation. Families may intervene by restricting their mobility or urging them to abandon public work, thereby extending digital control into domestic space. The continuum from online attack to offline constraint, identified in Maharat's report, mirrors global evidence from Türkiye and Egypt but operates here without the need for coercive law. Social pressure replaces state prosecution; reputational destruction substitutes for arrest.

Comparative analysis underscores the fact that legislation is meaningless without platform accountability. Brazil and the UK have forced major social media companies to introduce moderation standards and reporting protocols. In Lebanon, Arabic-language abuse remains poorly detected,[32]

32 Abrougui, A., Ghanem, M., & Rasmi, F. (2023, July). *Hate speech in Lebanon: The shortcomings and responsibilities of social media platforms.* Samir Kassir Foundation & Ranking Digital Rights. https://www.skeyesmedia.org/documents/bo_filemanager/RDR-SKF-SM-Hate-Speech-Policies.pdf

and coordinated harassment rarely triggers content removal. A structured partnership between government, civil society, and technology firms is essential to localize moderation tools and make redress mechanisms accessible in Arabic.

Ultimately, Lebanon's case reveals a form of hybrid impunity: digital harassment is neither punished nor systematically encouraged, but tolerated as a substitute for institutional authority. It reflects the broader post-war pattern in which the state delegates coercion to partisan networks while maintaining the appearance of pluralism.

IV.6 AI AND THE INTERNATIONAL EVOLUTION OF GENDERED HARASSMENT

Around the world, digital harassment against women is being reshaped by the rise of AI. What began as manual trolling and rumor-spreading has evolved into a more sophisticated and, often, more anonymous ecosystem of abuse. Synthetic images, automated amplification, and algorithmic bias now add new layers to an old problem: gendered disinformation as a tool of silencing.

Lebanon is only at the early edge of this transformation, yet the signs are already visible. To understand what lies ahead, it is useful to look at how other countries have experienced this shift and what lessons they offer for prevention and accountability.

Global Trends and Emerging Risks

The evidence from global monitoring reveals that the vast majority of AI-generated "deepfake" content is directed against women: an estimated 96% of synthetic videos online are pornographic and feature women without consent.[33] These images are rarely produced for financial gain alone. They are weaponized to discredit women in politics, journalism, and public life, exploiting cultural taboos to undermine their credibility.

The scale of this abuse is expanding rapidly. Reports from digital safety authorities show that non-consensual synthetic sexual images have increased by more than 550% annually since 2019.[34] Victims report anxiety, trauma, and reputational destruction comparable to those of sexual assault survivors.[35]

33 Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. (n.d.). *Deepfakes and image-based abuse.* New York State. https://opdv.ny.gov/tfgbv-deepfakes-and-image-based-abuse

34 Inman Grant, J. (2024, July). *Addressing deepfake image-based abuse.* Australian Government eSafety Commissioner. https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/addressing-deepfake-image-based-abuse

35 Flynn, A., Powell, A., Eaton, A., & Scott, A. J. (2025). *Sexualized deepfake abuse: Perpetrator and victim perspectives on the motivations and forms of non-consensually created and shared sexualized deepfake imagery. Journal of Interpersonal Violence.* https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605251368834

Yet most jurisdictions remain unprepared. Only a few countries, such as Australia and some EU states, have created distinct legal definitions for deepfake-based image abuse.[36] Others, including Lebanon, still rely on outdated provisions of defamation or cybercrime law that fail to capture the synthetic and viral nature of these attacks.

AI's impact extends beyond the creation of fabricated images. Algorithms and automated bots can now amplify harassment at unprecedented speed and scale. What once required coordinated networks of supporters can today be achieved through a few lines of code. This automation makes abuse cheaper, faster, and harder to trace.

Women in public life around the world are increasingly targeted by such hybrid campaigns, which mix human and automated accounts. These tactics flood social platforms with uniform messages and erode public trust in any counter-narrative. As falsehoods multiply faster than they can be disproved, the online environment becomes one of epistemic instability, where truth itself appears negotiable.

AI Bias and the Reproduction of Inequality

AI also inherits the prejudices of the data it learns from. Studies show that image-generation models reproduce racial and gender stereotypes,[37] depicting women less often in positions of authority and more often in sexualized or submissive contexts. This means that even tools intended for creativity or communication can reinforce the same hierarchies that digital harassment seeks to exploit. In patriarchal societies, these distortions take on a political dimension. By manipulating women's bodies and appearances, AI reasserts symbolic control.

What makes AI-based harassment particularly dangerous is that it blurs the boundary between fabrication and authenticity. When an image, voice, or statement can be synthetically generated, the burden of proof shifts to the victim. Perpetrators can claim that any evidence is "fake," while victims must prove that it is not. This dynamic creates a chilling effect that goes beyond individual attacks. It weakens public confidence in all digital content, undermining journalism, advocacy, and democratic debate alike.

As generative technologies continue to evolve, the question is no longer whether AI will reshape online abuse, but whether Lebanon can respond before the next wave of synthetic manipulation deepens the asymmetry of harm.

36 Equality Now & Alliance for Universal Digital Rights. (2024). *Deepfake image-based sexual abuse, tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and the law* (AUDRi Briefing Paper). https://audri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/EN-AUDRi-Briefing-paper-deepfake-06.pdf

37 Sun, L., Wei, M., Sun, Y., Suh, Y. J., Shen, L., & Yang, S. (2023, May 17). *Smiling women pitching down: Auditing representational and presentational gender biases in image generative AI*. School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin–Madison. https://arxiv.org/pdf/2305.10566

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The women interviewed for this study did not ask for sympathy. What they asked for, repeatedly and in different ways, was protection, clarity, and accountability. Their requests are neither abstract nor unrealistic. They stem directly from lived experience and from the recognition that the current system cannot prevent abuse and is not equipped to respond to it.

1. Strengthen platform accountability

- Establish specific escalation channels for CSOs with major platforms (Meta, X, TikTok) to ensure rapid response to coordinated reporting, doxing, and explicit threats.
- Introduce mechanisms to throttle repeat offenders and remove swiftly fabricated or manipulated content of sexual nature and verified disinformation, rather than leaving the burden of proof on the victim.
- Encourage partnerships between platforms and local CSOs already documenting digital violations, providing them with direct points of contact rather than symbolic consultations.

2. Reform the legal and regulatory framework

- Amend the penal code and cybercrime provisions to define digital harassment, doxing, coordinated mass reporting, and deepfake abuse as distinct, punishable offenses.
- Create fast-track administrative procedures for urgent cases such as death threats or dissemination of private data, reducing reliance on slow judicial pathways.
- Ensure that reforms strike a balance: protect speech while punishing harassment, preventing political elites from using new laws as tools of censorship.

3. Build institutional responsibility

- Encourage and support newsrooms and political parties to adopt digital safety protocols, including incident logging and access to legal or psychological support.
- Establish a legal aid hotline dedicated to online threats, offering survivors immediate access to counsel and guidance.
- Pilot a National Digital Harassment Unit, civilian-led but with judicial liaison, to provide a trusted and stigma-free reporting mechanism that victims can use without fear of reprisal.

4. Support survivors directly

- Fund digital safety training tracks for women in politics and media, equipping them with tools to mitigate risks and secure their online presence.
- Provide psychological support services that recognize harassment as a form of trauma with lasting health consequences.
- Involve survivors directly in the design of protection mechanisms, from hotline scripts to newsroom protocols, ensuring that solutions reflect their practical knowledge.

5. Anticipate the next frontier: AI and disinformation

- Introduce early safeguards against the malicious use of AI-generated content, including clear legal definitions of deepfakes, synthetic impersonation, and AI-amplified harassment.
- Mandate that platforms remove or flag AI-generated disinformation and harassment content with equal urgency to other forms of defamation or abuse.
- Combine algorithmic detection tools with human moderation teams trained in gender sensitivity to ensure context-aware enforcement.
- Support independent fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy programs that help audiences identify and challenge manipulated content before it spreads.
- Encourage academic and civil society research to monitor how AI tools are being used in harassment and disinformation campaigns, ensuring that Lebanon does not become a regional testing ground for unchecked technological abuse.
- Promote regional and international collaboration on AI ethics and online safety, ensuring Lebanese actors participate in the global dialogue on protecting women from algorithmic harm.

At the heart of these recommendations is a simple principle: women in public life should not carry the burden of protection alone. The responsibility must shift from individuals to institutions, platforms, and the state. Only then can digital harassment be curbed, and only then can Lebanon's public sphere begin to reflect the diversity of voices it claims to uphold.

No single reform will be enough on its own. The problem described in this report is structural, cultural, and political. Addressing it will require more than better reporting tools or stronger platform policies. It will require a broader shift in how institutions understand harm, and in how seriously they take the protection of women in public life.

At its core, the issue is not just about technology or speech. It is about who gets to participate in shaping the public narrative, and under what conditions. The recommendations outlined here are not intended to be exhaustive. They are a starting point.

VI. CONCLUSION

The stories documented in this report reveal a system of silencing that has become embedded in Lebanon's political and media landscape. Women in public life are targeted because of what they say and what their presence represents: a challenge to entrenched interests, a disruption of patriarchal norms, and a reminder that visibility is power.

For the women interviewed, harassment was never just digital. It spilled into their families, their careers, and their health. It reshaped how they speak, what they say, and when they say it. The cumulative effect narrows democratic life. Every canceled interview, every withdrawn article, and every silenced voice represent a loss for Lebanon's already fragile public sphere.

Resilience, while striking, should not be mistaken for protection. The fact that none of the women withdrew entirely from public life reflects determination, not safety. Their endurance carries a cost, measured in stress, health, reputational damage, and professional exclusion, that no individual should be asked to bear alone.

What is at stake is larger than individual dignity. When harassment becomes normalized, it alters the very terms of public debate. It decides who is heard, which narratives gain legitimacy, and how truth is contested. It undermines freedom of expression, distorts democratic participation, and corrodes trust in institutions.

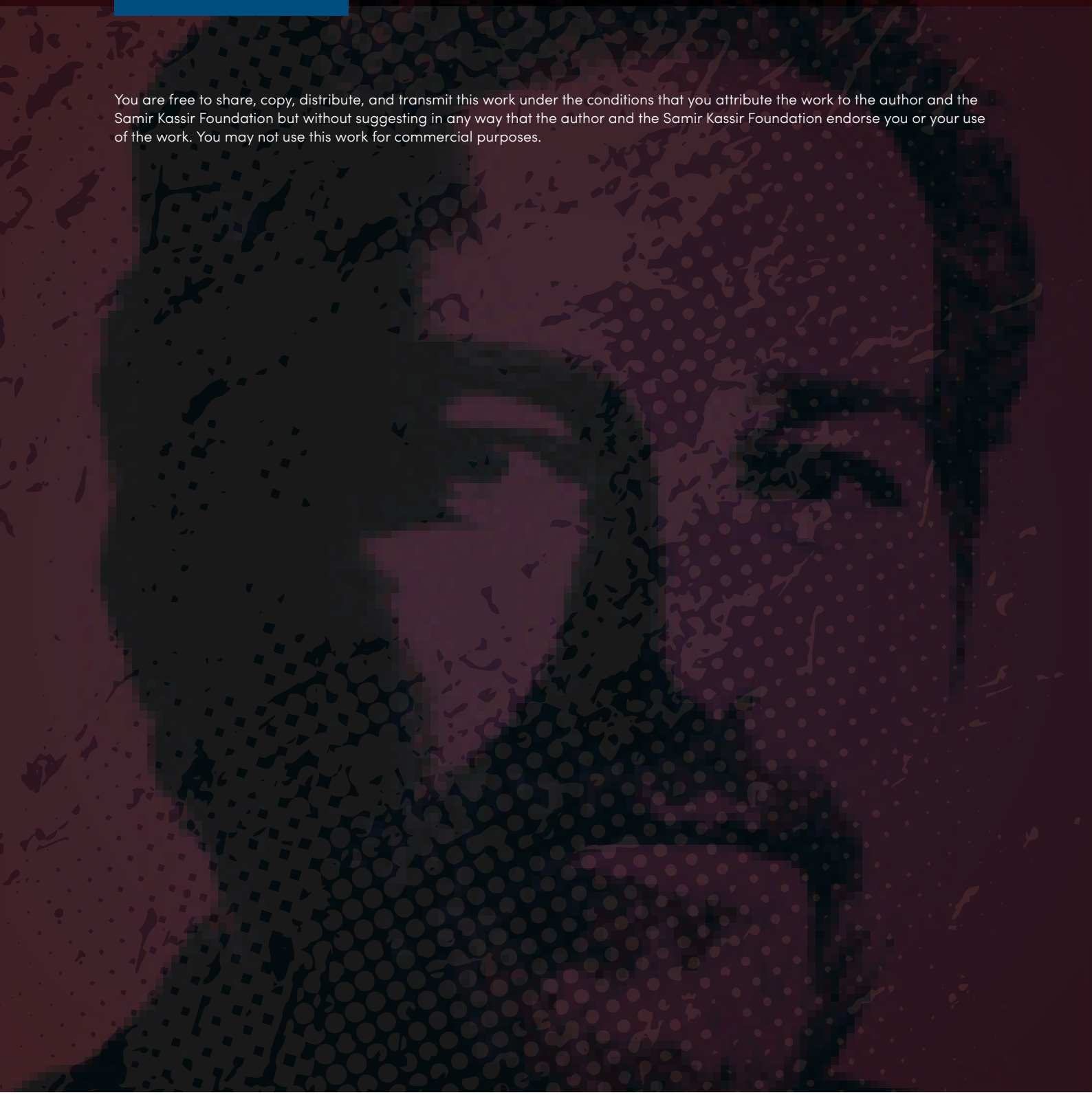
The evidence is clear: digital harassment in Lebanon is not an inevitable byproduct of free speech. It is a weapon of control, hiding in plain sight. Addressing it requires shifting responsibility away from individual resilience toward collective action. Platforms must be held accountable, institutions must defend those who represent them, and the state must build legal and regulatory frameworks that protect women rather than silence critics.

Lebanon's digital ecosystem already exhibits many of the structural weaknesses that allowed such threats to escalate elsewhere: limited moderation in Arabic dialects, the absence of legal definitions for synthetic manipulation, and a culture of impunity in cases of online harassment. The country's polarized media landscape, coupled with emerging AI tools for image editing, text generation, and bot amplification, makes it a likely testing ground for gendered synthetic disinformation.

The Lebanese response must link AI governance with women's safety. Preventing digital violence in the age of AI requires not only more modern laws and reporting mechanisms but also a moral and

institutional commitment to protecting authenticity itself and guaranteeing the right of every woman to speak, appear, and be believed as who she truly is.

Until such changes take root, women in Lebanon will continue to speak under conditions of intimidation. Protecting their voices is a condition for the survival of democratic life.



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