

Online-Gender-based **Disinformation** in MENA:

narratives, tactics, and impacts



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We also thank the survey respondents.

Key terms

Anti-rights movement: a globally connected network of state and non-state actors that espouse far right ideologies and religious and conservative values, seek to influence national politics and international spaces to undermine gender equality, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, and the rights of black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC).

Generative AI (or Gen AI): A type of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that generates content such as texts, audio, video, and images.

Deepfake: Synthetic images, videos, or audio generated with the assistance of Gen AI to mimic how people look and talk, spread often with the purpose to deceive, such as by committing fraud, and spread disinformation. ¹

Gender-based disinformation (GBD): a form of disinformation that is gendered in nature. Often also a form of gender-based violence, GBD is deployed to target and silence women and gender nonconforming people by deploying gendered attacks and reinforcing gender-related biases and prejudices. ² While GBD can take place offline, for instance in traditional media, the nature of digital technology has made it easier to spread online. This report focuses on online GBD.

¹ Somers, M. (2020). "Deepfakes, explained". MIT Management Sloan School. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/deepfakes-explained>

² Khan, I. (2023). 'Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression'. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/288>



Manosphere: a loose network of online communities opposed to feminism, and gender equality which they claim are the source of men's struggles. Many of these communities spread misogyny and harmful attitudes towards women.³

Red pill: a reference to the movie, The Matrix, this term is a prominent ideology, espoused by many in the manosphere, that those who are "redpilled" have woke up to a hidden reality that men are not privileged and that women hold power over them.⁴

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): SRHR refers to "SRHR as a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. We also believe that achieving sexual and reproductive health rests on realising sexual and reproductive rights, such as the right to control one's own body, define one's sexuality, choose one's partner, and receive confidential, respectful, and high-quality services."⁵

Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV): according to the United Nations Population Fund, TFGBV is "an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of gender."⁶ Its many forms include sexual harassment, stalking, misogynistic speech, sextortion and non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

Women media makers: women media makers in the report refers to any woman involved in the making of any online content in any format to raise awareness about or advocate for SRHR. This includes journalists, writers, podcasters, content creators, researchers, producers, and activists.

³ UN Women (2025). 'What is the manosphere and why should we care?' <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>

⁴ UN Women (2025). 'What is the manosphere and why should we care?' <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>

⁵ "Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)". Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/about-us/what-we-do/srhr/>

⁶ 'Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: A Growing Threat'. United National Population Fund. <https://www.unfpa.org/TFGBV>

Introduction

In MENA, TFGBV is widespread. According to a 2021 UN study, 60 percent of women respondents and 70 percent of women activists and human rights reported feeling unsafe online.⁷ Given the stigmas surrounding many SRHR topics such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sex outside or marriage, abortions and same-sex relations, organisations, media outlets, activists and content creators publishing and speaking about these topics online are also subjected to TFGBV. They face threats of violence, insults, defamation, and harassment, among other forms of TFGBV aimed at silencing them.⁸

Gendered-based disinformation is one TFGBV strategy deployed to target and silence women and gender non-conforming people, particularly activists, journalists, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), women's rights defenders, and feminists, including those advocating for SRHR.

While previous research has extensively covered TFGBV and its different forms and uses, online gender based violence (GBV), as a TFGBV tactic¹⁰, still needs to be better understood and investigated in MENA, particularly considering generative AI developments and the rise of anti-rights actors that deploy gendered disinformation, among other tactics, and silence those advocating for gender equality.¹¹

This research contributes to the existing body of literature and addresses a key gap by uncovering patterns in the tactics, narratives, and perpetrators of online GBV, conducted within the framework of the Masarouna programme. Conducted as part of the Masarouna programme, it sheds light on the experiences of SRHR women media makers in MENA, with a focus on five countries covered by Masarouna: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Masarouna is a consortium of four organisations (**Fe-Male**, **SMEX**, **RNW Media** and **Oxfam Novib**) working together with the objective of reaching out to young people so they can claim their Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights (SRHR).

The report is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of the global context that is exacerbating the spread of gender-based disinformation and the deployment of TFGBV and online gender-based disinformation in MENA based on desk research and the an online survey. The second section provides an overview of the tactics and narratives deployed to target women media makers in the SRHR field, focusing on the deployment of organised campaigns and concerns associated with the use of deepfakes. The third section delves into the perpetrators of GBD and their motivations. The fourth section explores the impacts of gender-based disinformation, especially women media makers' freedom of expression, their ability to do their work, and their wellbeing. It also discusses how women cope with gender-based disinformation and assesses responses (or lack thereof) from relevant actors. Finally, in the conclusion, recommendations are provided on how different actors can prevent GBD, improve responses to it and support survivors.

⁷ UN Women. (2021). "Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States". https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2021/11/Summary_Keyfindings_Final_EN.pdf

⁸ Nabulsi, M. (2023). "Navigating Taboos: Exploring social media policies and SRHR content restrictions in WANA". SMEX. <https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MiraNabulsi-SRHR-Mariam-al-Shafei-Fellowship-2023.pdf>

⁹ Audureau, W. (2024). "Paris Olympics: The disinformation campaign against Algerian boxer Imane Khelif". Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2024/08/09/paris-olympics-the-disinformation-campaign-against-algerian-boxer-imane-khelif_6712033_8.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com#

¹⁰ EU Disinfo Lab. (2021). "Gender-Based Disinformation: Advancing Our Understanding and Response". <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/gender-based-disinformation-advancing-our-understanding-and-response/>

Methodology and limitations of the study

The methodology consisted of collecting and analysing secondary (desk research) and primary data (a survey and interviews). Desk research of relevant publications (such as news articles, civil society and UN reports, and media coverage) was first conducted to identify initial patterns and trends in online gender-based disinformation in addition to key gaps. Based on this review, an interview guide was developed, and 7 semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven women media makers in the SRHR field. The interviews were conducted between 30 July 2025 and 14 August 2025. The interviewees were aged between 27 and 38, mostly journalists, but this number also includes a social worker, and a projects director. In all cases, the interviews combined different functions, which include production and creation of content, research, overseeing content production, fact-checking and investigations. They worked in different formats, namely, podcasts, radio, written format, photojournalism, and video format. The interviewees covered a wide range of SRHR topics such as sexual health, sexual relationships and pleasure, reproductive rights, reproduction and menstruation during war, struggles of marginalized groups such as migrant workers, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people living with disabilities, and youth, gender-based violence, sexually-transmitted diseases, family, and female genital-mutilation.

Additionally, RNW Media conducted a brief online survey and disseminated it in Arabic and English to better understand youth's exposure to, and understanding of gender-based disinformation in MENA.

This research has limitations. The survey did not generate a large enough data set to fully understand how people in the region experience GBD. While 26 survey responses were submitted, only 18 were received. However, the majority of these (18 responses) were excluded from the analysis due to their incompleteness, as they did not address any of the key questions.

Additionally, there is limited existing research and coverage that document specific cases of GBD that targets women media makers. We attempted to address this gap in the interviews, asking women to share specific attacks that targeted them or have previously heard of. Additionally, the deployment of GenAI and deepfakes remains an under-researched topic in MENA despite concerns.



1

Setting the context:
global anti-rights
movement and
pervasiveness of
TFGBV in MENA

Setting the context: global anti-rights movement and pervasiveness of TFGBV in MENA

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression defines gender-based disinformation as “both a strategy to silence the free expression of women and gender nonconforming persons and a form of online gender-based violence in certain circumstances”.¹¹ The report further explains the gendered aspect of gender-based disinformation:

“

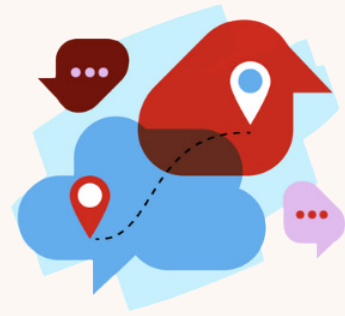
Gender-based disinformation is gendered because it targets women and gender nonconforming individuals, because of the gendered nature of the attacks and their gendered impact, and, very importantly, because it reinforces prejudices, bias and structural and systemic barriers that stand in the way of gender equality and gender justice.”

Gender-based disinformation is not a new phenomenon in the region. Due to entrenched patriarchy and gender norms, women and LGBTQIA+ communities have long faced smear and defamation campaigns aimed at discrediting, harming and silencing them.

Over the past few years, attacks and campaigns that deploy gender-based disinformation have also been taking place in a global context that has grown increasingly hostile to human rights, feminism and gender equality. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression:¹²

¹¹ Khan, I. (2023). ‘Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression’. United nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/288>

¹² Khan, I. (2023). ‘Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression’. United nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/288>



“

Gender-based disinformation thrives in contexts where gender equality and women’s freedom of expression are constrained. Increasingly, it is apparent not only in authoritarian States but also in emerging and established democracies as part of a dangerous pattern of backsliding on human rights and pushback on women’s rights.”

The anti-rights movement, a globally connected network of state and non-state actors that espouse far right ideologies, religious and conservative values, seek to influence national politics and international spaces to undermine gender equality, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, and the rights of black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC). ^{13 14}

One of the tactics commonly deployed by anti-rights actors is disinformation, including gender-based disinformation and content and narratives deployed by the global anti-rights movement in the west have been gaining ground in the region. ¹⁵ This is particularly manifested in the spread and localization of dangerous narratives adopted by the global manosphere in the region. ¹⁶

¹³ Ong-Alok, G. (2025). 'Recap: The Rise of the Anti-Rights Movement – How Should We Respond?' PARTOS. <https://www.partos.nl/nieuws/recap-the-rise-of-the-anti-rights-movement-how-should-we-respond/>

¹⁴ Shameem, N. et al. (2021). 'Rights at Risk, Time for Action: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report'. AWID. https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/RightsAtRisk_TimeForAction_OURsTrendsReport2021.pdf

¹⁵ Isa, S. (2023). “أفق من الظلم؟” Jeem. <https://jeem.me/authority/1250>

¹⁶ Farah, A. (2023). “أب د” كرجل جيولوجي وسوسه بارقم” Red Pill”. Maysaloon for Culture, Translation and Publishing. <https://maysaloon.fr/archives/12253>

TFGBV and gender-based disinformation in MENA

Throughout the years, civil society organisations, activists, and journalists have documented numerous cases of attacks and campaigns that deploy gender-based disinformation.

For instance, it was previously deployed in Egypt to blackmail a teenage girl, who as a result died by suicide.¹⁷ In the same country, those previously targeted by gendered-based disinformation included Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and women's rights defenders¹⁸ and in one instance dating back to 2020, a rape victim and witnesses in her case.

GBD is particularly deployed against those who are vocal and active in public life such as HRDs and women's rights defenders, journalists, activists, protesters, politicians, and feminists and content creators broaching topics that challenge patriarchy and traditional gender norms, such as sex and sexuality, abortion and contraception, and LGBTQIA+ rights.

¹⁹

According to a 2023 pilot study by Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the social media experiences of HRDs and journalists in the MENA and East Africa regions, "interviews with HRDs and journalists, as well as organisations that support women HRDs and LGBTQI+ communities, reported a gendered dimension" to attacks they face on social media, and some of tactics cited included "smear and defamation campaigns based on sexualization, in some cases using pictures of them (including fake images) that damaged their reputation."²⁰

People with intersecting marginalized identities such as LGBTQIA+ individuals or those perceived to be gender-non-conforming, and refugees face heightened risks of attacks.²¹

¹⁷ BBC (2022). 'Two arrested in Egypt after teenage girl's suicide sparks outrage'. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-59868721>

¹⁸ Fathy, A. (2024). 'Egypt: Online Violence Against Women on the Rise'. SMEX. <https://smex.org/egypt-online-violence-against-women-on-the-rise/>

¹⁹ Shea, J. (2020). 'Disinformation Campaign Targets Rape Victim and Witnesses in Egypt'. THE tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. <https://timep.org/2020/10/08/disinformation-campaign-targets-rape-victim-and-witnesses-in-egypt/>

²⁰ "Results overview: Pilot study on experiences with social media and communication platforms in MENA and East Africa regions," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, June 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/civicspace/Results-overview-of-pilot-study-on-experiences-with-social-media-and-communication-platforms-in-MENA-and-East-Africa-regions-June-2023.pdf>.

²¹ OHCHR (2021). "A/76/258: Gender justice and freedom of expression - Report of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression". <https://undocs.org/en/A/76/258>

For instance, in 2023, an influencer in Tunisia started a campaign of hate and incitement against the country's LGBTQIA+ community that deployed disinformation.²² According to local independent news website, Meshkal, which reviewed his videos:

“

He claimed that non-heterosexual people were sick and should be forced to be treated medically. He spoke of foreign financial support for LGBTQ associations and causes as well as support for sexual deviancy in general, framing himself as a patriot defending traditional society from foreign interference.”

Similar campaigns targeting LGBTQIA+ communities, sometimes with links to offline harassment and violence, have been documented elsewhere in the region, for instance in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.²³

In another instance, in September 2024, a coordinated campaign that exploited disinformation, including the use of deepfakes, appeared on X that falsely claimed that displaced Lebanese women and girls from southern Lebanon as a result of Israel's war were receiving aid in exchange of sex.²⁴

According to Arabi Fact Hub, which investigated the campaign:

“

Participants in the wave of posts under the campaign hashtag used sarcastic and derogatory language, promoting hate speech against displaced women and, more broadly, displaced individuals from southern Lebanon. Some posts included sexually charged terms intended to degrade women, aiming to propagate a narrative of sexual exploitation of displaced women.”

²² Belhadj, C.L. (2023). "Tunisia's LGBTQ Activists Fight Back After Hate Campaign". Meshkal. <https://meshkal.org/tunisias-lgbtq-activists-fight-back-after-hate-campaign/>

²³ Nabulsi, M. (2023). 'Navigating Taboos: Exploring social media policies and SRHR content restrictions in WANA'. SMEX. <https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MiraNabulsi-SRHR-Mariam-al-Shafei-Fellowship-2023.pdf>

²⁴ Arabi Facts Hub (2024). "Basket Jihad": A Coordinated Hate Campaign Against Lebanese Female Refugees ". <https://arabifactshub.com/en/articles/details/43341>

Survey results: experience and understanding of gender-based disinformation

Based on 8 complete survey results submitted, half of respondents said they have previously heard of the term gender-based disinformation. Survey respondents shared that the most common tactic tends to be spreading fake news to damage a woman politician's reputation and creating fake social media accounts to harass gender activists, as examples of gender-based disinformation. Seven out of eight respondents said that they have often seen content that unfairly targeted women because of their gender. Tactics deployed in gender-based disinformation that respondents have come across the most are trolling or verbal abuse, spreading fake rumours or stories, and use of manipulated face images or videos. In terms of narratives, respondents came across the narrative of undermining family values/traditional family roles the most, followed by the narrative of undermining religious values. They overwhelmingly considered gender-based disinformation to be a very serious problem and half of them said they were personally subjected to it. In other cases, it was someone they know who was subjected to gender-based disinformation. Respondents overwhelmingly expressed interest in learning more about how to identify and stop gender-based disinformation, particularly through information campaigns and short videos/reels around gender-based disinformation.

2

**Gender-based
disinformation targeting
women media makers
working on SRHR:
tactics and narratives**

Gender-based disinformation targeting women media makers working on SRHR: tactics and narratives

Previous research conducted by SMEX, a digital rights organisation based in Lebanon, found that several tactics are deployed online to silence SRHR activists, groups, media makers and content creators. These include harassment, violent threats, falsely reporting content on social media for takedown, and baseless claims.²⁵ In interviews conducted by the organisation, SRHR content creators reported that:

“

they were subject to the following abusive behaviours: negative comments, including trolling or insults and belittling of people's knowledge and expertise; sexual and sexualized comments; female users receiving multiple add requests from men they do not know anytime they comment or engage with these pages, hateful speech(...)unsolicited sexual images in private messages(...).

Some of the baseless claims and disinformation commonly repeated by perpetrators of these attacks are “takfir,²⁶ and accusations of serving Western political and cultural agendas through the spread of sexual education and awareness around sexuality and sexual rights (see examples in the screenshots below)”, the report found.

Whether they have directly experienced it or not, gender-based disinformation represents a concern to women media makers in the SRHR space, based on interviews conducted by RNW Media. It is deployed as part of attacks that aim to smear, denigrate, target and silence them or their organisations.

Gender-based disinformation happens in some cases as part of isolated incidents and in other cases it is deployed as part of coordinated and systemic campaigns. It is usually deployed in response to specific content women or their organisations posted or to coincide with specific events that happen offline.

²⁵ Nabulsi, M. (2023). 'Navigating Taboos: Exploring social media policies and SRHR content restrictions in WANA'. SMEX. <https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MiraNabulsi-SRHR-Mariam-al-Shafei-Fellowship-2023.pdf>

²⁶ "The pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim. This type of speech is harmful in a conservative society as it can result in discrimination and even violence." Source: Nabulsi, M. (2023). 'Navigating Taboos: exploring social media policies and SRHR content restrictions in WANA'. SMEX. <https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MiraNabulsi-SRHR-Mariam-al-Shafei-Fellowship-2023.pdf>

“Essentially, since I started journalism, I have faced attacks all the time”, Samia Allam, an editor at Raseef22 told RNW Media. She recounted attacks she faced when she wrote an opinion article for a Tunisian magazine on the dark side of motherhood and postpartum depression based on her own experience as a new mother. This was the “most awful” of attacks she faced in her career as a journalist, she said. “I faced an unbelievable level of attack...most of the attacks came from women, it was horrifying and scary”, Allam recalled. Despite citing scientific studies and elaborating on the positive aspect of motherhood in her article, reactions to her article were all negative and mainly attacked her as undeserving of motherhood.

“Most of the time there is false information or information that distorts the truth in ways that suit those publishing it and the standards or the social mold in which women exist in this society”, Inas Abdelhassan a journalist with KirKuk Now, an independent news website that covers Iraq’s disputed areas, said. While Abdelhassan and her organisation have not previously been subjected to organised campaigns that targeted them with digital disinformation, they regularly receive comments on social media, particularly Facebook, that propagate false claims about the nature of the work they do and motivations behind their work.

Even for those who have not been subjected to it directly, the risk of gender-based disinformation is a concern.

Chrystine Mhanna, a Lebanese journalist based in Beirut, launched a podcast in 2023 titled Bala Label, which has so far covered several SRHR topics such as reproduction and puberty during war, and SRHR topics for people living with disabilities and migrant workers. Prior to starting Bala Label, Mhanna was the SRHR project manager at Raseef22. “As someone who was working mostly behind the scenes like managing production and content with journalists, I wasn’t the one who was being on the front line of these topics...But of course, [at Raseef22], we faced a lot of these examples where we see that so many people are being attacked because they wrote something for us”, she said.

At the time of the interview, Mhanna and her Bala Label team have not been subjected to gender-based disinformation but as the podcast grows, this remains a concern. She said:

“

I think there is a stage where we will have to start developing, of course, some safety measures and policies on that front specifically, and how we can protect people who contribute with us. But so far, we don’t have many people contributing with us.”



Narratives and tactics

Perpetrators of gender-based disinformation deploy a range of narratives and tactics to target the discussion of SRHR, LGBTQIA+ rights, gender equality and feminism. They spread false claims with the purpose of denigrating, defaming and slandering media makers.

Given the stigma surrounding some SRHR topics, particularly those related to sex and sexuality, women media makers broaching these topics are sexualized or are attacked as lacking morals and targeted in relation to their “honour” and reputation

For instance, because of her work, Dr. Sandrine Atallah, a Lebanese physician specializing in clinical sexology, is often stigmatized and sexualized online. On TikTok, Atallah sometimes reflects on her experience in the digital space as a content creator and physician focusing on sex and sexuality.²⁷ In one case she was described as a “decadent”.²⁸ In another post reflecting on the attacks she is subjected to, she wrote:

“

Unfortunately, the digital space has become a suffocating space for women instead of being a safe space for discussion and knowledge. Any woman who talks about sexual awareness gets inundated with anonymous comments full of harassment and attacks. The most painful is that these same people share in their stories pornographic segments that humiliate and denigrate women.”

Women media makers covering these topics, particularly those related to sexual pleasure and sexuality, are also seen as “available” to speak with or date men they have never met before. This has been previously experienced by Raneem Hijazi, a director of projects at Hikayat Center, a Jordanian social development non-profit. Hijazi oversees mawadda.org, the center’s platform dedicated to raising awareness about sexual and reproductive health and targeting specifically married people, those about to get married, and parents. In an interview with RNW Media, she said:

²⁷ Post by @drsandrineatallah on TikTok dated May 2, 2025: <https://www.tiktok.com/@drsandrineatallah/video/7499909360802352402>

²⁸ Post by @drsandrineatallah on TikTok dated June 29, 2025: <https://www.tiktok.com/@drsandrineatallah/video/7521279300348185864>

“

Personally, because I work in this field and I engage with doctors I get pestered and asked “why do you write about these topics” or even face harassment as if I’m available to talk with anyone on any topic. I get harassed mostly through messages and get depicted in obscene words, and this can also come from people in the same field such as doctors or writers. So, I get harassed as someone who oversees this type of content or looks for content writers and media makers. Or maybe I’m at a meeting or event and we explain our work, and then during a break, someone comes to talk to me about his relations, and I don’t know him. It’s as if there are no boundaries, when you start talking on these topics from the perspective of health and rights, it’s as if you are available to talk [with them].”

She added:

“As someone who oversees the platform and I have a meeting or a panel discussion and whatever, after a while, someone obtains my number but not for work, rather for stalking and harassment through messages.”

In addition to the stigma, a major challenge for safely discussing SRHR topics is attributed to a general environment that is hostile to feminism and LGBTQIA+ communities. Feminists, women’s rights defenders and LGBTQIA+ individuals / organisations, a key group that speaks out about SRHR, are disproportionately impacted by TFGBV, including gender-based disinformation. Commonly deployed narratives use protection of religion, societal and family values and that media makers and organisations are serving a foreign agenda.

“The argument they use is ‘you are paid from specific foreign parties or organisations, and you are trying to change society’s ways of thinking, and the nature of society which conform to our conservatism and social values’, said Abdelhassan. Her organisation previously received comments on Facebook that aimed to minimize the relevance of these topics in the Iraqi context:

“

These comments are a must particularly on Facebook such as ‘you covered all the topics, no [other] topics left for you [to cover] and now you start seeking engagement [with such topics]’ or ‘these topics are forbidden and should not be discussed in this way’ or ‘what you publish on social media are private topics and are related to the body and we’re like this as a society’.”

For those advocating for protection of LGBTQIA+ communities, their sexual orientation can also be questioned. According to Allam:

“

First of all, your sexual orientations are put into question, you advocate on behalf of these people because you're one of them or you're like them or you want this to be the normalized, or you advocate for them so that you're seen as open or an intellectual...so it's smearing, I'm not viewed as someone with an opinion and a just cause that I believe in, but instead that I am not convinced by the cause, and I'm hiding or scared. The idea that someone is paying you to serve a foreign agenda because I'm with Raseef22, and because Raseef22 receives foreign funding and they tell you what to say and what to do. It's very horrifying. There is also the idea that you are being manipulated.”

As part of their tactics, perpetrators of gender-based disinformation also reframe content that has previously been published by media makers and their organisations and take it out of context to serve their agendas.

For instance, when Clubhouse, an audio-based social media app, was launched in 2020, conversations hosted on Iraqi feminists' chatrooms were disrupted by individuals and conservative groups affiliated with the manosphere. During their attacks, they not only offended the activists but also recorded conversations which they later manipulated by taking the activists' words out of context and “and then reshaping and reframing them to divert and distort their messages to escalate people's attacks on them and reinforce the misconception that feminists are evil and dangerous to society.”²⁹

Elham Maswadeh, a social worker with the Palestinian Counselling Center, an organisation that provides mental health and psychological services, recalled a similar case:

“

One of the activities we conducted involved girls and boys and it was a youth camp that has nothing to do with sexual and reproductive health, we were accused of [serving] CEDAW [the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women], and that 'these are orientalist'. At that time, unfortunately many platforms took a video of girls and boys conducting activities and reframed it, 'look, how they allow boys to hold hands or girls and how they are ruining society, etc'.”

²⁹ Mustafa, B. and Abd, R. 'The Iraqi Right and the Manosphere: United Against Women': <https://jummar.media/en/5700>

Organised campaigns

Gender-based disinformation can get particularly dangerous when it is deployed as part of coordinated and systematic campaigns, interviewees said. While not all of media makers interviewed have experienced such campaigns directly or indirectly when their organisations have been targeted, in the contexts in which they work, such campaigns are common and a major cause of concern. According to Abdelhassan:

“

The easiest thing to do in Iraq is organizing campaigns to discredit and defame...any person with animosity towards a woman or a public figure can easily make a video or photo, even a fabricated one, even if it's made with AI, or make a recording, even with AI, and publish it. The easiest thing is to be subjected to a campaign of denigration, or hate campaigns on Facebook, most of the campaigns happen on Facebook or X. So, recordings or a video or photos are uploaded, or they look up a very old post or opinion or comment written by a public figure and they reshare it and state, 'you were this and that' and this is a common tactic in Iraq in general.”

She referred specifically to a 2024 online coordinated campaign in support of proposed amendments to the personal Status Law and targeting those speaking out against the proposal.³⁰ One provision was proposed to decriminalize marriage contracts conducted outside the Personal Status Court by allowing those getting married to choose whether to follow the Personal Status Law or the provisions of specific schools of Islamic jurisprudence.³¹ This particularly raised concerns among women's rights and human rights groups and women's rights activists that girls as young as 9 and boys as young as 15 would be permitted to get married in addition to undermining women's rights in marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance.³² While eventually the adopted amendment stated that the minimum age of marriage cannot contravene the Personal Status Law, and women's rights groups efforts were successful in retaining some protections when it comes to marriage, custody, and spousal disputes, it still allowed for marriages to be conducted in accordance with the provisions of the Shia Ja'afari school of Islamic jurisprudence (known as mudawana), undermining the rights of women married under it in marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance.³³

As some MPs, women's rights groups and activists voiced their opposition to the amendment, religious Shiite factions organised online to conduct “coordinated and

³⁰ Arabi Facts Hub (2024). “Shiite Factions in Iraq Launch Online Campaign in Support of Child Marriage Law”. <https://arabifactshub.com/en/articles/details/42074>

³¹ Sanbar, S. (2024). “Iraq's Amended Personal Status Law Could Make 9-Year-Olds Brides”. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/iraqs-amended-personal-status-law-could-make-9-year-olds-brides>

³² Ibid.

³³ Human Rights Watch (2025). “Iraq: Personal Status Law Amendment Sets Back Women's Rights”. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/iraq-personal-status-law-amendment-sets-back-womens-rights>

inauthentic activities “aiming to amplify the narrative in favor of the amendments, using fake accounts to discredit opponents of the changes”, Arabi Facts Hub, which investigated the campaign found. ³⁴ As part of the campaign, women’s rights defenders, were targeted with “offensive and inflammatory language” and gender-based disinformation aimed at discrediting them and associating their work with immorality and lack of religious values, collaborating with foreign powers, particularly the U.S., and supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, which is a crime in Iraq. ³⁵ Additionally, “unverified personal information targeting the activists’ private lives” were disseminated. ³⁶

In Palestine women human rights defenders who advocate for the implementation of CEDAW, which the State of Palestine ratified, are also subjected to organised campaigns. In 2022, Palestinian women’s rights defender Sama Aweidah faced a gender-based disinformation campaign online for supporting the implementation of the Convention accusing her of “promoting deviance”. ³⁷ Years after it was ratified by Palestine, CEDAW’s implementation has continued to face fierce criticism and opposition from religious groups and Islamist parties. ³⁸

“During one period, there were many voices that link any work with women to CEDAW, and at that time they monitored many organisations in a systematic manner to isolate these organisations,” said Maswadeh as she recalled campaigns targeting individuals and organisations supporting or perceived to be supporting the implementation of CEDAW. She further explained that such campaigns often originate from mosques:

“

Mosques are deployed a lot as a tactic, anyone who wants to fight a group of people talking about sexual and reproductive health and rights, say at mosques ‘these people are ruining [society]’ because they know others would join, and then this moves from mosques to the internet and other spaces.”

At other times, the attacks were “more random”, she said, attributing this to a general lack of understanding when it comes to these topics. She explained:

“

At times it was systematic, at times for sure there were different social or personal agendas at play. As Palestinian organisations we are targeted in general and at times there are people who are just afraid to veer from the norm, so a lot of time people subject us out of fear not from a place of understanding, awareness and study.”

³⁴ Arabi Facts Hub (2024). “Shiite Factions in Iraq Launch Online Campaign in Support of Child Marriage Law”. <https://arabifactshub.com/en/articles/details/42074>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Regional Coalition of WHRDs in the Middle East and North Africa (2022). ‘نظمت نسوة منظمات حقوقية في المنطقة العربية حملة إلكترونية لدعم قانون زواج القاصرات’. <https://www.whrdmena.org/2022/03/31/%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84/>

³⁸ Medfeminiswiya (2021). ‘CEDAW faces a fierce battle in Palestine’. <https://medfeminiswiya.net/2021/03/22/cedaw-faces-a-fierce-battle-in-palestine/?lang=en>

Generative AI and deepfakes

One emerging tactic that could exacerbate the spread of gender-based disinformation and pose additional risks to the work of SRHR media workers is the use of generative AI to create fake content targeting them. While creating fake content and attributing it to someone else with malicious intent is not new, Generative AI can be used to create deepfake, which can be more difficult to detect particularly from average users lacking digital and fact checking skills. Deepfakes can be used in photos, video content and to mimic someone's voice, based, for instance, on existing recordings or videos. As with TFGBV and gender-based disinformation, deepfake disproportionately impacts women, particularly those active in the (digital) public sphere.

According to Mhanna, this development represents “a danger and a threat in general to any activist, to any journalist, anybody working in the field and it adds another layer of censorship, and another layer of having to understand how to protect yourself in digital spheres.” She added, “For me personally, as a journalist, I always wonder if, for example, switching to a private profile on social media would be more important and interesting.”

“

Honestly, we can't deny that it contributes more to the spread of disinformation. You can see the image of a person and hear her speak, but she did not do that. It was another photo, and it's been proven that it was inaccurate and that it was fabricated and taken out of context. Before you know it, the fake content has already spread and it's impossible to convince people otherwise” said Allam. She added though that GenAI can still be used to support this mission or SRHR media makers: “It does provide more capabilities for disinformation, but at the same time we have this ability to, if we're willing, to use it differently, to clarify and explain facts.”

“The problem is that many people are still incapable of telling apart AI-generated content from real content. We do not have this culture of going back and checking before writing a comment or before a particular institution publishes content, what's more important is the speed at which a scandal is circulated”, Abdelhassan noted with concern.

Actors and their motivations

Previous reporting and research about gender-based disinformation in addition to interviews conducted by RNW Media point to a range of state and non-state actors, that enable the spread of gender-based disinformation, most notably ruling regimes and officials at the highest levels of government, religious leaders and institutions, political parties and conservative individuals.

“This is a very sensitive topic that prejudices religion, customs and traditions so there are many people who consider this topic ‘haram’ (forbidden). So, from this perspective, there are always zealous or extremist people who are behind these attacks”, said Allam. She further explained that the role of religious institutions in these attacks differ from one to another the region:

“

I don't think there is a specific religious institution that is funding or supporting this, whether publicly or implicitly. In Egypt, for instance, we don't have, as in Lebanon or Iraq, specific religious parties that people follow or a religious or spiritual leader who influences people, we don't have this in Egypt and that's an advantage. Probably for other colleagues and friends from other countries it is different.”

While Hijazi and her organisation, Hikayat Center, have not faced campaigns before, they still receive comments containing gender-based disinformation from individuals.

“

I am not sure if they are conservative, but they have this patriarchal ideology which has some form of authority over these topics and what knowledge can be accessible to people. They feel that they are to some extent jealous over society, so it's possible that they just represent themselves because we use a conservative language and we are talking here about a platform that reaches a million people from the Arab region on Facebook(...). For these, only a few of them attack us and whoever attack us only represent themselves because we know people are accepting in the way we are daring in this topic while being conservative and detailed in how we approach it, so that we gain society's trust instead and they are not hostile to our style and approach.”

In Iraq, while most of the times it is individuals who are behind gender-based disinformation, when it is deployed as part of a coordinated campaign, the perpetrators are a combination of religious and political entities, Abdelhassan said:

“

If it's a campaign targeting someone specifically as in the case of the personal status law, then there are always entities that are involved and it's not just individuals. When it's a project on gender equality or on the amendment of the personal status law, or projects on women empowerment or on sexual and reproductive

rights, then campaigns, which can be systematic, are launched by certain parties. I don't have very detailed information on who these parties are, but it is clear since the centers of power are not secular or democratic but rather affiliated with political parties that are pseudo religious. In this case, you always see a systematic campaign such as the one we saw in relation to the personal status law, which was systematic in Iraq from the government, members of parliament, and there were even interventions from parties outside Iraq. This was bigger than individuals, there were individuals involved but these individuals were influenced by the systematic campaigns."

This is a similar observation made by Maswadeh on campaigns conducted in Palestine, particularly, in relation to the implementation of CEDAW, where people mobilized from mosques before campaigns spread online.

The manosphere

Those participating in the manosphere, a loose network of online communities opposed to feminism, and gender equality and spreading misogynistic narratives while they claim to address men's struggles, have also been increasingly involved in gender-based disinformation in the region. While it is challenging to trace back campaigns or attacks in the region specifically to the manosphere, these spaces are exacerbating the spread of narratives that make it challenging for women media makers in the SRHR field to do their work and disseminate information and resources.

As mentioned earlier, the region is not immune to the global backlash against feminism and gender equality, spurred by the rise of anti-gender and anti-rights movements and government policies rolling back previous gains.³⁹ While TFGBV is not a new phenomenon, the manosphere is giving rise to narratives and tactics adopted from the west. In an article from 2024, Palestinian feminist activist researcher, and creator of "Haki Nasawi" channel on feminism, described the manosphere "as a form of intellectual colonization."

“

Feminism in the Arab and Arabic-speaking region is often portrayed as a Western import by anti-feminists, who ignore the indigenous roots of the decolonial feminist struggle in the region. Yet the intrusion of the manosphere into the Arab digital sphere is a clear

³⁹ Bergsten, S.S and Lee, S.A. (2023). 'The Global Backlash Against Women's Rights'. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights>

Further, the design of algorithmic recommendation systems on social media platforms exacerbate the spread of this type of content.⁴⁵ Such systems reward viral, divisive and sensationalist content to keep users engaged with highly personalized feeds which helps generate revenues from targeted advertising for tech companies and those creating and spreading the content.⁴⁶

For Hijazi, “anything is exacerbated online because of wider dissemination, and anyone can write about it without caring”. She added:

“

Among most influencers in the region, there is a big orientation toward masculinity and patriarchy, and this attracts many young men. Every generation thinks that the following generation will be more aware, then a new trend appears proving that we are still resisting this type of speech such as the red pill.”

According to Mhanna:

“

These (manosphere) platforms are increasing. Before, you must do the fight only in the physical world mainly, but less likely to have it in the digital sphere unless it's an attack on you, which of course, existed. But now it's also narratives that you're trying to impact online. So, I think that the digital sphere in general used to be a place that you had the opportunity to switch a narrative through. But now diverse narratives are coming up against feminist narratives”

There are also those who are motivated by financial gain. In fact, the algorithmic systems of social media platforms create motivations for some of those seeking to monetize their content such as influencers and content creators to prioritize engagement over substance.

“There are still platforms that are conservative and talk consciously, but there are people who talk about GBV as a non-existent problem not from the motivation to disinform but to follow the trend to make money,” said Maswadeh. She added:

“

So honestly there are many influencers or others who just follow the trend and care about how much a material will bring them money and additional views more than what's factual or not. There are people who are trying to have informed discussions that take into consideration the local community and have discussions without disinformation but unfortunately what governs our societies today are the numbers of views and how much money can be made.”

⁴⁵ Khan, I. (2023). 'Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression'. United nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/288>

⁴⁶ Ibid.



3

Impacts of attacks on women media makers, responses and strategies

Impacts of attacks on women media makers, responses and strategies

As a form of TFGBV, gender-based disinformation can have detrimental effects on the exercise of fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression and information and freedom of opinion, both online and offline. Those affected may choose to resort to self-censoring themselves, altering their behaviours online, and in the most extreme cases even quit social media or their work altogether.

Women media makers interviewed by RNW Media mentioned refraining from appearing on videos when discussing these topics, approaching these topics in a careful way, refraining from publishing under their real names or covering certain topics, and reducing their posting on social media.

“Despite having many women writers, they cannot appear on video because they fear getting attacked. Most of the time it is accepted when men are media faces or appear on video on social media and talk about these topics”, Hijazi said about women contributing to Mawadda, her organisation’s SRHR platform.

Bwar Mohammed, an independent journalist working in Iraq’s Kurdistan region, mentioned in one case refraining from citing her name on a podcast episode she hosted on female genital mutilation. “I can’t hide myself, It’s visible, I’m a female from the sound. So, I didn’t mention my name in the introduction. It’s a big issue; you don’t say your name” she told RNW Media, adding “protecting myself comes before everything.”

In other cases, women approach SRHR topics in a way that is more socially acceptable.

“When I draft a particular material or content, I try my best not to delve deeply into some details or not clarify it in an explicit way in order not to shock people”, Abdelhassan said. She added:

“

I try to simplify the information and communicate it in a way that suits them [the audience] and not to receive backlash that can result in some comment or something else. When it comes to this, I am a sensitive person to the point where when I create content at Kirkuk Now, and they ask me to appear on a video and narrate the content, I always demur from appearing by face or on camera(...). Negative comments may not have to do with the quality of the content I’m providing and can get personal...I am always careful in this area and I always try to address topics graphically or a post on Facebook or the website...It is better when it’s on the website because only people with certain educational level and awareness go to the website and read articles and materials uploaded there.”

She attributed her approach to the potential impacts on her mental wellbeing: “From a personal point of view, these comments are very impactful and I try as much as I can to avoid getting subjected to any kind of campaign or comment or anything which I find unnecessary to expose my mental health to.”

In fact, gender-based disinformation can have a psychological impact on survivors, sometimes long lasting.

Looking back at the article she wrote about the dark side of motherhood over a decade ago, Allam described initially “going into a state of depression, shock and horror.” Then she moved on to restrict access to her personal data. To this date, Allam still minimizes publishing on social media and rethinks carefully whether to write an article and how. She explained:

“

Personally, I started to think twice before publishing. There is an article I published under a pseudonym and another article I wrote and published under my name, but I did not post on social media. This is one of the annoying things and I am very sad to say it since I have the right to be happy about my work particularly if I am convinced about it and particularly if it has an impact(...). There are many ideas related to SRHR that I would like to work on but I did not publish them(...). It's been ten years or less since the publication of this article, but I still remember it, and maybe I faced many other things, but it was not very much related to me being a mom, my humanity and personality so this has left a big impact.”

Even for women who have not been directly subjected to gender-based disinformation, campaigns that target their own organisations still affect them and cause worry. When the Palestinian Counselling Center published research on the struggles parents of gay children and youth face and how they can speak with them and support them, Maswadeh and her colleagues were concerned and worried about potential backlash. The center was eventually “deliberately” targeted for this research to “to silence us, repress us and prevent us from talking”. She said:

“

I was very worried when it all started because I am very sensitive and did not want something like this and the center is socially accepted and considered a reference for its research and methodologies. So, I was very worried, but to be honest when we started meeting with management and I saw how steadfast they were, I felt better.”

Coordinated systematic campaigns can even result in offline violence since they deploy false and dangerous pretexts of protecting religious, and socio-cultural traditions and family values, and associating gender equality and feminism with foreign powers. ⁴⁷

While gender-based disinformation initially silences women media makers, it has an impact on society in general as it erodes availability and accessibility of essential SRHR resources to the wider society, particularly those who need it the most such as women, teens, LGBTQIA+ individuals, groups facing higher risks of sexually transmitted diseases, etc. This is particularly the case for MENA, where various obstacles prevent people from enjoying their SRHR, ⁴⁸ taboos and stigma still surround the discussion of SRHR topics and sex education programmes are lacking in the region. ⁴⁹

GBD further contributes to the spread of harmful stereotypes and narratives that sexualize this type of work and stigmatizes women publishing about SRHR, affecting them in their work and personal lives.

“In some of the contexts of places I work, I can’t say that I am a sexual and reproductive health advocate, so I say I work in the health field because as soon as I mention sexual health, I could be subjected to some of the things I hear about... As soon as I mention this to someone I’m dating or in the context of work, they think I’m working in sex and not in health”, Hijazi said about the impact on her work and personal lives. She added:

“

This honestly bothers me, even sometimes when I write posts on LinkedIn, since LinkedIn is general, and I am in general a director of projects not just in relation to these topics, and I advocate for this cause. So, I started saying ‘women’s health’ instead of sexual and reproductive health, because I fear that I will be stigmatized and face criticism that I am not ready for. So, I feel scared sometimes because of the harassment I faced before, this made me more careful in other places.”

⁴⁷ Arabi Facts Hub (2024). “Shiite Factions in Iraq Launch Online Campaign in Support of Child Marriage Law”. <https://arabifactshub.com/en/articles/details/42074>

⁴⁸ Abu Habib, L., Abdel Khalik, Z., and Naji, O. “Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Arab Region”. UN Women. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/2021/07/SRHR-Policy%20Paper-EN.pdf>

⁴⁹ Oraby D. Sexuality education in Middle East North Africa Region: a window of opportunity. Glob Health Sci Pract. 2024;12(1): e2300282. <https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-23-00282>

Coping with gender-based disinformation and support measures

Given the detrimental impacts of gender-based disinformation, in some cases, SRHR women media makers have found ways to minimize the possibility of being the target of campaigns and mitigating their impacts when they happen. As mentioned in the previous section, they cope, for instance, by minimizing access to their personal data online, reducing publishing or publishing anonymously in some cases, or broaching these topics in a language that is unlikely to be met with backlash.

While it is essential for appropriate response measures and policies to be in place from the part of organisations/ employers, social media platforms and governments, these are often lacking.

“I was very upset at the magazine in which the article was published because they did not remove the negative comments, and this was one of the reasons why after writing 2 - 3 articles, I stopped writing for them because they did not take into account what was said about me and these were harmful despite the fact that I contacted them. So, this was a good source of frustration for me”, said Allam about the magazine in which she wrote her article on motherhood and the lack of support on their part. Allam, who is currently an editor at Raseef 22, highlighted some of the measures and policies they currently have in place, which include changing attribution and publishing under a pseudonym, taking the material down if necessary even if the author was paid, removing negative comments, and adopting a no tolerance policy towards incitement to violence, gender-based disinformation and hate.

Hikayat Center also has a safeguarding policy that addresses harassment and other forms of GBV including gender-based disinformation.

Support from leadership and other civil society groups such as through solidarity statements can also make a difference in mitigating the impacts of gender-based disinformation. In some cases, those affected choose not to directly engage with the attacks and campaigns and instead continue to focus on their work.

According to Maswadeh, whose organisation faced a campaign over research on the struggles of parents of gay children and youth, they opted to mainly “let things calm down”:

“

At that time the center released a statement of condemnation [of the campaign] and clarified that this is research and that these attacks are deliberate from people who lack awareness and understanding and that there are people and specialists who are concerned by this issue. And there was also a statement of condemnation from more than one organisation denouncing what the center was subjected to, from the union and different organisations.”

She explained the reasoning behind her organisation's approach:

“

We remain silent in a conscious way and at the same time we go to the media to present about topics related to sexual and reproductive health or violence against women or how young men express their feelings, so we go back to presenting these materials and meet with people who are concerned about these topics.”

While women media makers interviewed mentioned using the block and report features, they described the response from social media platforms as lacking, and in some cases “disappointing” and “horrifying”.

“At Meta I am not sure if there are clear reporting mechanisms, we use the block and report features. I do remember reporting someone but no one communicated with me,” said Hijazi. She added:

“

We don't trust platforms, specifically Meta. There is no follow up, maybe because in the Arab region, we're not important for Meta, maybe there is no strong Arab team that focuses (on the region)”.

Allam's experience with the company was no different:

“

Facebook is a horrifying place; I have reported several times posts that incite hatred and contain gender-based disinformation but still were not taken down. Facebook was a source of disappointment. Mechanisms of support and help were not even available”.

Even when there is a response to complaints from platforms, it remains inadequate. Abdelhassan said about her experience with Facebook:

“

Sometimes, there is excessive freedom, so I report a specific comment or post which I see as threatening or racist or hateful or is discriminatory, but what's surprising is the response you get from Facebook stating that it does not violate our community standards. I am very disappointed because it's not one or two times [that this happens]. I report many posts, and I always get the response that they follow their privacy policy and do not violate their [community] standards”.

She added:

“

For other platforms, I think it is the same rules and for X it's even exaggerated freedom and I see it is difficult to change. They will take it as freedom of expression and democracy, but it's very far

from being freedom of expression and democracy. I see that it needs a lot of changes. As a person, I am very disappointed when it comes to these policies, if there is change, why not? If there isn't, we've gotten used to it."

There is some hesitation from the media makers when it comes to reporting these incidents to the law enforcement authorities given the lack of robust regulations on this type of content and online violence or authorities not taking complaints seriously. Still the role of State actors remains essential in helping to effectively combat gender-based disinformation and TFGBV in general.

"There are no efforts at all [in this area] and I don't think they consider it as one of the most important topics that need dedicated people working on it or something urgent that needs to be one of the state's priorities in need of a budget and specialist employees with their office', said Abdelhassan about the situation in Iraq. "I hope that soon we will have institutions like this and more organisations that provide support. This will bring a lot of additional value and maybe even help save someone's life," she added.

Similarly, in Jordan, "resorting to a legal department doesn't help a lot, because I feel that the laws are not supportive", said Hijazi. She previously resorted to the courts after being harassed online but eventually the harasser received a lenient sentence. Support from the authorities also "depends on the whims of individuals" working at relevant institutions, where certain officers can choose to blame survivors or question their behaviours such as what photos they posted online or share or what they were wearing. She explained:

“

Some people have positive experiences and others negative ones depending on the employees who were working at the time. Employees of institutions such as the protection of family institutions and the cybercrime unit should be trained more to listen to survivors and should publicize more that they provide this service.”

"There is a need for clear policies and measures and an active judiciary that has laws that respect individuals and punish in case there is disinformation. It is possible that the judiciary is not activated enough in these types of cases", Maswadeh noted. She also added that sometimes people can get afraid to speak out when they face digital violence highlighting the need for "awareness raising on the societal level in a clear, smooth and systematic manner since people can use these platforms to harm or disinform."

4

Conclusion and **recommendations**

Conclusion and recommendations

Gender-based disinformation poses a serious challenge to the work, safety and wellbeing of women media makers in the SRHR field. Given the taboos and stigma surrounding some SRHR topics, particularly those related to sex, sexuality and LGBTQIA+ rights, false claims that associate their work with foreign agendas, immorality, or undermining family values or religious values, can put those targeted to risks of verbal abuse, harassment, threats and intimidation, and even risk of offline violence, particularly when these attacks happen as part of organised campaigns. Further, as adoption of Generative AI became more available, its deployment in gender-based disinformation, particularly to create (sexual abuse) deepfake, which disproportionately affect women, is a concern for SRHR women media makers interviewed as part of this research.

State and non-state actors, including MPs, government entities and officials, religious institutions and leaders, political parties, and socially conservative individuals are behind gender-based disinformation in the region, including campaigns that target those advocating for SRHR, women's rights and gender equality.

Individuals, groups and communities that adopt dangerous narratives of the manosphere are also exacerbating the spread of gender-based disinformation, adding to the challenges SRHR women media makers face in their work. Often the manosphere's narratives are borrowed from their peers in the west, translated into Arabic and localized to fit the region's contexts. The manosphere is a key characteristic of the global backlash against feminism and gender equality, spurred by the rise of anti-rights movements and the far right.

The narratives, tactics, and actors behind gender-based disinformation may differ from one case to another but the motivations are similar: silencing those who speak out and advocate for SRHR, women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality, maintaining the patriarchal status quo and resisting any possible gains and change for the better.

It is essential for different actors to act to stem the rise of gender-based disinformation particularly as narratives spread by global, often loosely connected anti-rights actors and the manosphere continue to gain traction globally and in the region. The spread of GBD narratives and tactics are aided by the algorithmic systems of social media platforms which are designed to reward viral, divisive and sensationalist content to keep users engaged.

Recommendations

Civil society

- Organisations should have in place internal policies on how to address gender-based disinformation and what forms of support they will provide when those they work with are targeted. They should treat GBD as a form of gender-based violence and include it as part of their policies that address violence and harassment.
- Support provided should be discussed with survivors to minimize any additional harm or stresses. Support can include legal support, publishing statements of support, including condemning and debunking the disinformation being disseminated, and mental health support.
- Operators of digital safety hotlines must widely disseminate information about their services to respond to GBD so that those in need of support know where to turn to.

Media development organisations

- Media and journalists have a responsibility not to exacerbate GBD and to consider potential impacts on survivors' safety, and physical and mental well-being before publishing content. They should refrain from circulating news that could further harm survivors and disseminate GBD.
- Fact-checking and media organisations should invest in further research to examine and investigate gender-based disinformation, including the role of AI and the manosphere, actors behind GBD and their motivations, including the globally connected nature of GBD and how that manifests in MENA. Investigations should also focus on how men are also victims of gender-based disinformation.
- Media development organisations must advocate for platform accountability for addressing TFGBV, and GBD should be part of the advocacy agenda for media development nationally, regionally and globally.

Funders

- Funders should ensure sustainable support to digital protection programmes and hotlines so that they are able to expand support to those subjected to TFGBV, including gender-based disinformation.
- Funders should also ensure regular support to fact-checking and media and media development organisations so that they can be proactive in actively monitoring emergent GBD attacks and undertaking campaigns to debunk them and help minimize harm against those targeted.

Tech companies & social media platforms

- Platforms need to ensure follow-up on reports/complaints submitted against GBD and reporting channels should be easier to access and find.
- They should also modify, develop and implement their policies to reflect the seriousness of this threat to those most likely to be subjected to it and be harmed by GBD such as women and girls, LGBTQIA individuals, and HRDs.

Authorities

- Governments should ensure that police units and units dealing with GBV have adequate training, support and resources to investigate cases of TFGBV, including gender-based disinformation. Officers receiving and investigating complaints should refrain from victimizing survivors, and instead enable a safe space and listen to them.
- Relevant units should also make sure to adequately publicize their support and services so victims are aware of them.
- Legislators should adopt gender-based violence laws, or amend existing ones, to criminalize TFGBV, including GBD. Laws should cover all forms of violence based on gender, regardless of the perpetrator or the context in which this violence takes place, online or offline.

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