



POLICY BRIEF

# FOSTERING SAFER, INCLUSIVE, AND RELIABLE DIGITAL MEDIA SPACES IN WANA

**A CALL TO ACTION ON TFGBV**

## GLOSSARY

**Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV):** The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines TFGBV as “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 based on gender.”<sup>1</sup>

**Anti-rights movement:** A globally connected network of state and non-state actors that espouse far-right ideologies and conservative values and 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).<sup>2</sup>

**Bullying:** This is a form of online harassment, defined by the UNFPA as “the constant and intentional infliction of damage through digital technologies to undermine a target’s self-esteem.”<sup>3</sup>

**Hate speech:** “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.”<sup>4</sup>

**Misogynistic speech:** Misogyny literally means hatred of women. Misogynistic speech is thus a form of hostile and violent hate speech towards women.<sup>5</sup> Its perpetrators “seek to spread, incite, promote, or justify hatred of women.”<sup>6</sup>

**Non-consensual sharing of intimate images:** A form of image-based sexual abuse that involves taking and/or sharing intimate pictures of someone without their consent.<sup>7</sup>

**Sextortion:** A type of blackmail where perpetrators threaten victims with publishing intimate images/videos or private information if they do not agree to their demands, often for money or sex/ sexual acts.<sup>8</sup>

**Harassment:** “Repeated conduct that threatens, pesters, scares or abuses someone by sending degrading, offensive or insulting comments or images.”<sup>9</sup>



<sup>1</sup> UNFPA. “Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence.” <https://www.unfpa.org/TFGBV>

<sup>2</sup> 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/>

<sup>3</sup> UNFPA. “Digital Violence Terms.” <https://www.unfpa.org/thevirtualisreal-background#glossary>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. “Understanding hate speech”. <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>

<sup>5</sup> Sękowska-Kozłowska, K., Baranowska, G. & Gliszczyńska-Grabias, A. Sexist Hate Speech and the International Human Rights Law: Towards Legal Recognition of

the Phenomenon by the United Nations and the Council of Europe. Int J Semiot Law 35, 2323–2345 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-022-09884-8>

<sup>6</sup> Carlson, Caitlin R. (2019) “Misogynistic Hate Speech and its Chilling Effect on Women’s Free Expression during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign,” Journal of Hate Studies: Vol. 14, Article 6. DOI: 10.33972/jhs.126 Available at: <https://repository.gonzaga.edu/jhs/vol14/iss1/6>

<sup>7</sup> UNFPA. “Digital Violence Terms.” <https://www.unfpa.org/thevirtualisreal-background#glossary>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

**Unsolicited communication:** Any form of communication such as messages, calls or emails, that is unwanted by the receiver and is sent to them without their consent or despite their objections. These communications can involve sending unsolicited sexual images or texts and they are considered as a form of harassment.

**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.<sup>10</sup>

**Doxxing:** The practice of sharing someone else's personal information—whether accessed through publicly available sources or obtained through unauthorised access—with the purpose to harass and intimidate.

TFGBV is a global and pervasive threat to women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly those active in the public sphere.<sup>11</sup> In West Asia and North Africa (WANA),<sup>12</sup> TFGBV is not only widespread, but given entrenched gender norms and insufficient legal protections, its impacts can be severe.<sup>13</sup>

This brief provides an overview of TFGBV in WANA, the tactics and narratives deployed by perpetrators and their impacts. It also provides a list of recommended actions grounded in today's regional and global realities that have not only exacerbated the spread of TFGBV but made it more difficult for civil society organisations (CSOs), media and other actors to respond to it.

## THE CONTEXT

Despite years of documentation, campaigning, and advocacy, tech-facilitated gender-based violence remains a persistent problem with far-reaching consequences for the region's most marginalised voices and communities. Today's regional and global multilayered contexts have further complicated the strive for safe and nondiscriminatory digital spaces for women, girls, and queer communities. In recent years, large technology companies, whose platforms have amplified the spread of harmful content,<sup>14</sup> including TFGBV, have not only actively stripped resources and capacity in trust and safety teams and processes but also changed their policies to allow

<sup>10</sup> "A/78/288: Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression". 2023. UNHCR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78288-gendered-disinformation-and-its-implications-right-freedom>

<sup>11</sup> Posetti, J., Hellmueller, L., Williams, K., Renaud, P., Aboulez, N. and Shabbir, N. UN Women. "Tipping point: The chilling escalation of online violence against women in the public sphere." UN Women. December 2025. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/tipping-point-the-chilling-escalation-of-violence-against-women-in-the-public-sphere-in-the-age-of-ai-en.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Also referred to as the Middle East and North Africa, MENA.

<sup>13</sup> IDRC. "From online harm to hopeful responses in the Middle East and North Africa." November 14, 2025. <https://idrc-crds.ca/en/research-in-action/online-harm-hopeful-responses-middle-east-and-north-africa>

<sup>14</sup> BBC News. "Twitter's algorithm favours right-leaning politics, research finds." October 22, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-59011271>

for more hateful speech and disinformation<sup>15</sup>, in an alignment with Donald Trump's administration in the U.S. for ideological and business-related reasons.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, rising authoritarianism and the increasing influence of the anti-rights groups<sup>17</sup> are further tightening what little margin of freedom civic space actors have to document, report, raise awareness, and express their opinions. For instance, in 2023, Iraqi authorities instituted a ban on the use of terms "gender" and "sexuality."<sup>18</sup> Further, extensive foreign aid budget cuts have weakened the ability of organisations to respond to TFGBV, forcing them to scale down or, in some cases, completely end their operations.<sup>19</sup> These cuts, spurred in part by the rise of anti-rights agendas and right-wing governments in funding countries such as the U.S. and the Netherlands, have especially targeted and affected marginalised groups such as girls and women, feminist groups, LGBTQIA+ communities, immigrants and refugees, and people living with HIV.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the region's multiple and interrelated crises— wars, migration and refugee crises, human rights crises, and worsening socio-economic inequalities—not only overburden actors providing support and protection services but further expose marginalised groups to all forms of violence, including TFGBV.<sup>21</sup>

## TFGBV TACTICS AND IMPACTS

TFGBV is routinely deployed by state and non-state actors to discredit and silence those active in the public sphere and the civic space such as human rights defenders, politicians, journalists and media-makers, activists, and protesters. People with intersecting marginalised identities such as LGBTQIA+ individuals or those perceived to be gender-non-conforming face heightened risks of attacks, which can lead to life-threatening situations given a climate of hostility and criminalisation.<sup>22</sup>

TFGBV tactics deployed in WANA include bullying, incitement to and threats of violence, including rape and sexual violence, gender-based disinformation, hate and misogynistic speech, harassment and unsolicited messages and calls, sextortion, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Exposure to TFGBV is further heightened for those challenging patriarchy and traditional gender norms and broaching subjects perceived to be taboo, such as sex and sexuality, gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights.

<sup>15</sup> Benavidez, N. "How Social-Media Rollbacks Endanger Democracy Ahead of the 2024 Elections." December 2023. Free Press. [https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2023-12/free\\_press\\_report\\_big\\_tech\\_backslide.pdf](https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2023-12/free_press_report_big_tech_backslide.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Barrett, P.M. "Tech's Love Affair with Trump Grows Stronger By the Day." Tech Policy Press, October 23, 2025. <https://www.techpolicy.press/techs-love-affair-with-trump-grows-stronger-by-the-day/>

<sup>17</sup> CIVICUS. "Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-Rights Groups." November 2019. <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/action-against-the-anti-rights-wave/AgainstTheWave-summary-en.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International. "Iraq: Authorities must immediately reverse media ban on the terms 'homosexuality' and 'gender'." August 9, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/iraq-authorities-must-immediately-reverse-media-ban-on-the-terms-homosexuality-and-gender/>

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Funders Network. "Funding at a Crossroads: Foreign Aid Cuts and Implications for Global Human Rights." September 2025. <https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Funding-at-a-Crossroads-HRFN-Sept-2025.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kanaaneh, A. "War and Digital Shadows: Palestinian Women Between Voice Confiscation and Body Exposure in Digital Space." 7amleh. July 2025. <https://7amleh.org/storage/posts/pdf/1aaf5095-b6ff-495c-a635-41b8da6d858a.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Tunisia: Police Arrest, Use Violence Against LGBTI Activists." February 23, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/23/tunisia-police-arrest-use-violence-against-lgbti-activists>

A 2025 study by RNW Media, focusing on women media-makers in WANA, found that perpetrators of gender-based disinformation, often a form of TFGBV, deploy a range of narratives and tactics to target women media-makers in the field of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).<sup>23</sup> They spread false claims with the purpose of denigrating, defaming, and slandering women media-makers. Given the stigma surrounding some of these topics, women media-makers are sexualized or are attacked as lacking morals, and targeted in relation to their “honour” and reputation.

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Surveillance is a core component and enabler of TFGBV. Girls, women and queer communities face unprecedented levels of policing and societal scrutiny over even their most basic behaviours and decisions, such as appearance, how they talk, their movements, relationships, etc. This gendered surveillance can have severe repercussions on fundamental freedoms and bodily integrity and autonomy of women and queer people when state and nonstate actors weaponise sensitive information— collected through the use of spyware, hacking, doxxing and other privacy-infringing practices— against them in campaigns of defamation, violence, and abuse.<sup>24</sup>

Ebtisam Al-Saegh, a Bahraini human rights defender, whose phone was targeted multiple times between August and November 2019 with the Israeli NSO’s Pegasus spyware previously stated that as a result of the surveillance, she no longer felt safe at home, which used to be “a place for personal freedom where I can take off the veil and exercise my religious and social freedoms without limits.”<sup>25</sup> In Palestine, Israeli military occupation weaponises information on sexual behaviours to blackmail Palestinians into collaborating with its agencies.<sup>26</sup> While this form of sextortion targets people regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation, it has disproportionate impacts on women and queers Palestinians. Since October 7th, 2023, queer Palestinian women living in Israel mentioned to 7amleh that they faced threats from Israeli users

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Tunisia: Police Arrest, Use Violence Against LGBTI Activists.” February 23, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/23/tunisia-police-arrest-use-violence-against-lgbti-activists>

<sup>23</sup> Abrougui, A. “Online Gender Based Disinformation in MENA: Narratives, Tactics, and Impacts.” RNW Media, 2025. <https://www.rnw.media/index.php/resources/online-gender-based-disinformation-in-mena-narratives-tactics-and-impacts/>

<sup>24</sup> Fatafta, M., and Front Line Defenders. “Unsafe Anywhere: Women Human Rights Defenders Speak Out About Pegasus Attacks.” Access Now, January 17, 2022. <https://www.accessnow.org/women-human-rights-defenders-pe->

[gasus-attacks-bahrain-jordan/#skip-to-content](https://www.accessnow.org/women-human-rights-defenders-pe-gasus-attacks-bahrain-jordan/#skip-to-content)

<sup>25</sup> Kirchgaessner, S. “Two Female Activists in Bahrain and Jordan Hacked with NSO Spyware.” The Guardian, January 17, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jan/17/two-female-activists-in-bahrain-and-jordan-hacked-with-nso-spyware>

<sup>26</sup> AlQaws. “قي رامعت سالا طاقس إلالا قس ايس” [Colonial Entrapment Policy].” April 11, 2023. [https://alqaws.org/%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9?category\\_id=0](https://alqaws.org/%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9?category_id=0) .

and colleagues of being outed (i.e. having their gender identity or sexual orientation disclosed without their permission) for not expressing support for Israel and its genocidal war in Gaza.<sup>27</sup>

TFGBV exacerbates a climate of fear and self-censorship. It has a detrimental impact on survivors' ability to express themselves and engage in public affairs, as well as on their livelihood and economic freedom, with those affected resorting to self-censorship, altering their behaviours, or quitting social media or their work altogether. It erodes their sense of safety, and it is also detrimental to survivors' mental and physical health. A 2021 report by the Syrian Female Journalists' Network on TFGBV targeting Syrian women human rights defenders and journalists, found that survivors who participated in the study experienced stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression as a result of the violence.<sup>28</sup>

TFGBV and its impacts do not abate in times of conflict and wars, but can rather intensify. According to research by 7amleh, published in July 2025, on TFGBV experienced by Palestinian women in wartime contexts, women are subjected to "political gender violence" as "a weapon of war and a tool of political repression" and "social gender violence" as part of their daily lives with perpetrators exploiting the lawlessness and chaos brought about by Israel's genocidal war to inflict more gender-based violence." In this regard, TFGBV "functions either as an Israeli warfare tool against Palestinians—aimed at destabilising the values and moral systems underpinning Palestinian societal cohesion—or as an opportunistic practice exploiting women's heightened vulnerability amid difficult humanitarian conditions, or as a social practice concealed by war-induced chaos, or as routine patriarchal behaviour unashamed of its consequences", the study concluded.



<sup>27</sup> Kanaaneh, A. "War and Digital Shadows: Palestinian Women Between Voice Confiscation and Body Exposure in Digital Space." 7amleh, July 2025. <https://7amleh.org/storage/posts/pdf/1aaf5095-b6ff-495c-a635-41b8da6d858a.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Abrougui, A., and Asad, R. "Digital Safety is a Right: Syrian Women Journalists and Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Space: Risks and Threats." Syrian Female Journalists Network, 2021. <https://media.sfin.org/en/digital-safety-is-a-right/>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital platforms' alignment with far-right agendas and their rollback of trust and safety policies, in addition to the rising influence of anti-rights actors and decreased funding for civil society and independent and public interest media, require urgent measures and a rethink of strategies and tools to counter TFGBV and its impacts. In this regard, prioritising direct support to survivors and groups most at risk of TFGBV, particularly girls, women and LGBTQIA+ communities, journalists and media-makers, feminist activists and groups, human rights defenders, and protesters, remains a pressing need. Conducting context-sensitive awareness-raising campaigns, both online and offline, and also targeting boys and young men, is essential to countering harmful gender narratives and stereotypes. When possible, CSOs can conduct advocacy targeting local authorities, tailored to the realities of each country / sub-region and the lived experiences of those most affected.



## CIVIL SOCIETY & MEDIA DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

- Digital rights protection organisations should design support programmes in a way that takes into account the lived experiences of survivors and those most at-risk of TFGBV. They should widely disseminate information about their services so that those in need of support know where to turn. For instance, they can work with local activists, feminist and queer groups, and independent media in each country to disseminate this information along with tips on how to protect oneself from TFGBV.
- Support should be provided before attacks occur to enhance digital safety knowledge and practices among those at-risk, for instance, by enhancing privacy settings of accounts and devices and spreading tips on how to protect oneself from hacking, phishing, and spyware attacks.
- CSOs, media organizations, and activist groups should put in place policies and protocols on how to address TFGBV when directed at their employees and those affiliated with them. Since the severity of TFGBV and its impacts can change depending on the actors behind it, protocols should take into account different scenarios, for instance, when the perpetrator of TFGBV is **1)** affiliated with the employer **2)** related to the survivor **3)** or is a state or non-state actor.
- When it comes to civil society efforts to advance platform accountability, digital rights and human rights groups engaged in this area should work together to explore collective and newer strategies that could better meet the reality of technology companies' disengagement from human rights and their alignment with far-right agendas.



## MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND CAMPAIGNERS

- There is still a need for awareness-raising campaigns that are context-sensitive about TFGBV and its impacts, particularly among boys and men and, in some cases, women who can also perpetrate this type of violence against other women and gender non-conforming people. CSOs, media organizations, and campaigners should explore a variety of awareness-raising methods depending on the contexts in which they are working. It is important that this should take place through different means, and not just online, but also via print, art, broadcasting media, events and gatherings, and at schools and universities.
- Media organisations should also invest in bolstering rights-based and gender-sensitive reporting on TFGBV and related issues, enabling media reporting and narratives that offer counter and alternative narratives on gender equality, addressing TFGBV from a survivor-centred and systemic lens that serves public interest and drives accountability and action rather than sensationalism.
- Media organisations and journalists' unions should put in place guidelines for reporting on TFGBV from a rights-based and gender sensitive lens to challenge and shape inclusive and stigma-free narratives about TFGBV survivors in public discourse.



## FOR PHILANTHROPY AND FUNDING STAKEHOLDERS

- Funders should increase support for digital protection services and helplines in WANA and fund across the region's countries new grassroots initiatives, led by women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, that provide support to those most at risk of TFGBV.
- Funders should fund organisations to implement internal policies and protocols to respond to TFGBV. They can also fund the development of templates that organisations can use to develop their own policies, for instance, with the support of TFGBV and digital protection experts
- Funders should fund organisations investing in deep narrative change work that addresses root causes of TFGBV and other forms of violence, thereby enabling more preventative interventions to counter TFGBV, in addition to establishing functional support systems after the abuse or violence has already occurred.



## FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

- In contexts where the regulatory and political environment allows it, civil society organisations and feminist and women's rights groups can engage with the local authorities to criminalise TFGBV in a way that is consistent with international human rights standards to avoid unnecessary and disproportionate provisions that could infringe on freedom of expression and information. This is particularly important with the growing concerns regarding deepfake sexual abuse, which disproportionately impacts girls and women.
- International and local groups working on gender-based violence should train local authorities on how to receive, investigate TFGBV complaints, and provide support to survivors by providing a safe nonjudgemental space to hear their complaints and without stigma. Governments should ensure that relevant police units have adequate resources and gender diversity in staff.

For more information and resources on TFGBV, please access:

[www.rnw.media/index.php/resources](http://www.rnw.media/index.php/resources)



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