

Digital Harms, Gendered Targets: Women Media Makers & Gender-Based Disinformation in Tunisia



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Introduction

Digital platforms have become central spaces for public debate, civic participation, and information sharing. Yet these spaces are increasingly shaped by disinformation practices that do not affect all users equally.

While gender-based disinformation is not a new phenomenon, the rise of digital technologies, social media and AI has significantly intensified its reach and impact, increasingly threatening, intimidating, harming, and silencing women, gender-diverse, and gender-nonconforming persons in the digital media ecosystem.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, gender-based disinformation is **“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.”**¹ It is considered gender-based not only because of who it targets, but also because of the gendered narratives, stereotypes, and discriminatory tropes it deploys, the disproportionate harms it produces, and the way it reinforces existing prejudice, bias, and structural inequalities that impede gender equality and justice².

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC]. (2023). 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 (A/78/288). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/report-freedom-expression-and-gender-dimensions-disinformation>

² Ibid.

Scholars further conceptualize gender-based disinformation as a set of information activities, including the creation, sharing, and dissemination of content, that (1) attack or undermine individuals on the basis of gender and/or (2) weaponize gendered narratives to advance political, social, or economic objectives.³

In this report, we focus on investigating the nature, patterns, and consequences of gender-based disinformation campaigns targeting women media makers working on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Tunisia. It draws from the experiences of women media makers and activists working in the Tunisian landscape, providing anecdotal examples to complement the literature.

The report is divided into the following sections: The report begins with outlining the methodological approach undertaken for this study, followed by a section providing broader context on Gender-Based Disinformation (GBD) in Tunisia. The next section, on findings, delves into five key areas: Narratives, which details the dominant storylines in GBD attacks; Tactics, which covers the methods used to produce, amplify, and sustain disinformation and harassment; Actors, identifying the individuals and structures that perpetuate these campaigns; Impacts, which explores the psychological, physical, economic, and societal consequences of GBD on women media-makers; and finally, Responses, which examines coping strategies, support systems, and systemic gaps that prevail in contemporary responses to GBD in Tunisia. The report concludes with a summary of key insights and a set of recommendations tailored for key stakeholders, including social media platforms, big tech companies, authorities, law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations and media development organizations.



³ Internet Governance Forum (IGF). (2021). Exploring the concept of gendered disinformation. Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights. https://intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/248/21181

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Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methodological approach, integrating both primary and secondary data collection and analysis to develop a comprehensive understanding of online gender-based disinformation in Tunisia, particularly as it targets women media practitioners working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

The initial phase consisted of an extensive desk review of existing literature, including research reports, policy documents, and press articles from civil society, academia, government agencies, international organisations, and media. This review provided a foundational understanding of the dynamics of gender-based disinformation, allowing for the identification of preliminary patterns, emerging trends, and observable impacts on the affected groups.

The subsequent phase involved conducting key informant interviews. This stage had three primary objectives: (i) to validate and refine the preliminary findings derived from the literature review; (ii) to deepen the analysis of the nature, patterns, and consequences of gender-based disinformation; and (iii) to inform the development of contextually grounded recommendations that reflect the lived experiences and needs of women media makers active in the SRHR sector. 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, medical professionals, content creators, researchers, producers, and activists.

Building on the preliminary findings generated through the desk research, an interview guide was developed to support primary data collection. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with six women SRHR media makers, including one trans woman. The interviews were undertaken online in Arabic, French, and English. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 46 years, and represented diverse professional profiles, including journalists, content creators, communication specialists within civil society organisations, therapists, and medical professionals with a digital presence. Notably, the participants' roles were multi-faceted, including content production, research, editorial oversight, fact-checking, and investigative reporting across various media formats, such as video, podcasts, and long-form written content. They addressed a wide spectrum of SRHR topics, such as sexual health, sexual relationships and pleasure, reproductive rights, and reproductive health subjects such as menstrual health, fertility, and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), issues affecting marginalized groups including LGBTQIA+ individuals and youth, gender-based violence, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

During the interviews, detailed fieldnotes were taken after consent from interviewees, and analytical memos were drafted following each session to capture key observations and emergent themes, stored in a secure data location. These memos were subsequently synthesised to facilitate the identification of recurrent patterns, concepts, and interpretive insights within participants' accounts.

Research Limitations:

This research has limitations. First, there remains a limited body of research and documented evidence on gender-based disinformation specifically targeting women media practitioners working in the SRHR field. While prior studies, such as the She Persisted research on women in politics in Tunisia ⁴, have examined gender based disinformation targeting women in the political sphere, they did not account for the specific experiences of women media-makers. This study therefore contributes to the emerging literature by extending analysis to a group that has thus far been underexamined. To partially address this gap, the interview phase invited participants to reflect on concrete incidents they personally experienced or were aware of.

Second, although sixteen media makers were initially contacted for participation, only six ultimately took part in the interviews, which may have constrained the diversity and representativeness of perspectives captured. Participation was constrained by logistical factors such as scheduling timeframe, as well as more deeply rooted issues, including a climate of fear associated with research on human rights and engagement with civil society, concerns about exposure and potential repercussions, and general skepticism toward research initiatives. In two cases, participation was made possible through the provision of anonymity safeguards. Personal circumstances and disinterest also contributed to non-participation; however, it is acknowledged that not all reasons for non-participation were known or disclosed during the research process.

⁴ Lucina Di Meco, *Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally (#ShePersisted, 2023)*, https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf.

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Context

Digital connectivity in Tunisia

Tunisia's information and communication technology infrastructure is relatively robust and has continued to improve in recent years ⁵. With a population of approximately 12 million ⁶, individual internet usage rate and household access rate reached 74% and 57% respectively in 2024 ⁷. Additionally, mobile connectivity is widespread, with 15.7 million active connections in early 2025 ⁸. The national mobile infrastructure is extensive with 3G and 4G/LTE network coverage estimated to amount 100% of the population. Regarding affordability, an average data cost per GB is estimated at USD 1.51 making Tunisia rank 9th cheapest in Africa for mobile data in 2025 ⁹.

In recent years, Tunisia has further accelerated its digital transformation through strategic infrastructure investments and initiatives like the “white zones” project, which extended high-speed connectivity to remote underserved regions, and the “Edunet 10” program, which modernized broadband access for thousands of schools ¹⁰.

Yet, the digital divide remains a challenge in Tunisia, primarily influenced by geographic, economic, and educational variables. The geographical gap is notable, with some areas, primarily littoral governorates, exceeding 60% connectivity while others struggle to reach 15%. Urban-rural disparities are pronounced, with internet usage reaching 81.4% in cities compared to 61% in rural areas, a statistic mirrored in computer ownership (40.2% vs. 19.4%). Educational attainment remains a critical determinant, with usage rates dropping from 60.1% among those with secondary schooling to just 17.9% for those with primary education. Notably, a marginal reverse gender gap exists, with female usage (77.4%) slightly exceeding male usage (75.8%) ¹¹.

⁵ Yosr Jouini, LONDA: Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report 2023: Tunisia Country Report, (Lagos: Paradigm Initiative, 2024), 4–11, <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Tunisia-Country-Report.pdf>.

⁶ National Institute of Statistics (INS), “Estimated Population on January 1st (2019-2024),” Statistiques, last updated July 29, 2024, <https://www.ins.tn/en/statistiques/111>.

⁷ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), “Tunisia ICT Development Index 2025”, <https://datahub.itu.int/dashboards/idi/?e=TUN&y=2025>

⁸ Simon Kemp, Digital 2025: Tunisia, (DataReportal, March 3, 2025), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-tunisia>.

⁹ “RAMP Index Insights, Quarter 2, 2025,” Research ICT Africa (RIA), July 24, 2025, <https://researchictafrica.net/2025/07/24/ramp-index-insights-quarter-2-2025/>.

¹⁰ Paradigm Initiative, “Tunisia Country Report,” in LONDA 2024: Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report, (September 2025), <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Tunisia.pdf>.

¹¹ Institut National de la Statistique (INS), “Accès et usage des Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication (TIC)” [Access and usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)], INS, 2024 Census Data, p. 1, September 2025, <https://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files-ftp3/files/publication/pdf/TIC-FR.pdf>.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights governance in Tunisia: Historical evolution and realities

Following independence in 1956, Tunisia established itself as a regional leader in reproductive policies through liberal reforms, which prioritized state-sponsored contraception and abortion to curb fertility rates¹². Since the enactment of Law 73-3 of 26 September 1973, abortion has been legally authorized in Tunisia during the first trimester of pregnancy and available for free and with complete anonymity. Beyond this three-month period, the procedure is permitted only in cases involving risks to maternal health, fetal malformation, or disability.¹³ While consensual heterosexual relations outside of marriage are not explicitly criminalized, the judiciary often penalizes such acts by reclassifying them as non-conforming marriages or as crimes related to prostitution. In contrast, consensual same-sex relations are directly criminalized with penalties of up to 3 years in prison under Article 230 of the Penal Code. Apart from a singular judicial precedent recognizing the right of an intersex individual to amend their legal identity, human rights advocates characterize the broader justice system as maintaining a hostile stance toward the recognition of the rights of the LGBTQI+ community¹⁴.

Additionally, national initiatives utilized a multidimensional and multisectoral plan to enhance Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services accessibility through their systematic integration into public health facilities, including school and university health centers¹⁵. However, scholars identified a shift toward “stratified reproduction”¹⁶, where the state’s foundational commitment to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) has become contingent upon volatile political and social pressures¹⁷. Triggered by late 1990s and mid-2000s demographic transition toward replacement-level fertility and subsequent anxieties over an aging population, this shift was intensified by post-2011 economic and political instability. Access to public reproductive health services have become increasingly contested and stratified by social class and marital status marked by institutional neglect and the moral policing of reproductive choices¹⁸.

¹² Irene Maffi and Malika Affes, “La santé sexuelle et reproductive en Tunisie. Institutions médicales, lois et itinéraires thérapeutiques des femmes après la révolution,” *L’Année du Maghreb* 17 (2017): 173–189, <https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/3228>

¹³ Republic of Tunisia, Décret-Loi n° 73-2 du 26 septembre 1973, portant modification de l’article 214 du code pénal, *Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne* n° 36 (September 26, 1973): 1496, <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-73-2-du-26-septembre-1973-portant-modification-de-l'article-214-du-code-penal/>.

¹⁴ EuroMed Rights, *Situation report on discriminations against women in Tunisia*, (Copenhagen: EuroMed Rights, 2023), https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/factsheet-Tunisia_EN.pdf.

¹⁵ Atf Gherissi and Francine Tinsa, “Les services de Santé Sexuelle et Reproductive en Tunisie. Résultats d’une recherche qualitative auprès des jeunes usagers,” *L’Année du Maghreb* 17 (2017): 133–150, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.3218>.

¹⁶ Agigian, A. Stratified Reproduction. In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, G. Ritzer (Ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss280.pub2>

¹⁷ Irene Maffi, “The Persistence of the Modernist Narrative in the Post-Revolutionary Reproductive Governance in Tunisia,” *Medical Anthropology* 40, no. 8 (2021): 760–773, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2021.1941004>.

¹⁸ Irene Maffi, “The Persistence of the Modernist Narrative in the Post-Revolutionary Reproductive Governance in Tunisia,” *Medical Anthropology* 40, no. 8 (2021): 760–773, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2021.1941004>.

International Human Rights Obligations of Tunisia

Tunisia's international Human Rights commitment is characterized by an extensive engagement with global and regional human rights regimes, including the ratification of 14 United Nations treaties alongside key regional instruments¹⁹. Since 1969, the state has been a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). However, the application of the latter remains constrained by the non-ratification of its Optional Protocol. The state's commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified in 1985, evolved from a partial adherence to a comprehensive mandate following the 2008 adoption of its Optional Protocol and the landmark 2014 withdrawal of all substantive reservations²⁰. Tunisia is the first Arab state to withdraw all reservations on CEDAW. Furthermore, the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), specifically Article 6, extends protections to the intersectional needs of women with disabilities.

At the regional level, since 1983, Tunisia has been a party to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights Charter, which promotes and protects a range of civil, political, and social rights, including the right to information, freedom of expression, and reproductive health and rights. This was further strengthened by the 2018 ratification of the Maputo Protocol, which specifically covers the Rights of Women in Africa²¹.

A turbulent online information environment

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has experienced significant changes in its digital media landscape. The emergence of numerous independent online news platforms alongside established traditional outlets has significantly diversified the national information ecosystem. This expansion has facilitated a more pluralistic discourse by incorporating a broad spectrum of perspectives from various social, economic, and political actors²².

Moreover, social media platforms have provided an unprecedented forum for free expression, catalyzing novel forms of digital political activism and civic engagement, particularly among the youth demographic. Within the context of a transitioning democracy, these digital spaces have become essential for amplifying the voices of historically marginalized groups and fostering a more inclusive public discourse²³.

¹⁹ Hivos, Freedom of Expression in Tunisia: Legal Mapping, (The Hague: Hivos, 2024), <https://hivos.org/document/freedom-of-expression-in-tunisia-legal-mapping/>.

²⁰ Shams Radhouani Abdi, Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Tunisia, (NOVACT, 2025), <https://novact.org/en/publicacio/womens-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-in-tunisia2/>.

²¹ Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), "Tunisia," Protocol Watch, https://soawr.org/protocol_watch/tunisia/.

²² Freedom House, "Tunisia," in Freedom on the Net 2024, (October 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2024>.

²³ Democracy Reporting International, Les impacts de la transformation digitale sur la transition démocratique en Tunisie, (Tunis: Democracy Reporting International, May 2025), [Page Number], <https://democracy-reporting.org/en/office/tunisia/publications/impacts-of-digital-transformation-on-democratic-transition-in-tunisia>.

For context, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Tunisia with 7.80 million users. YouTube maintains a similarly pervasive presence with an identical reach of 7.83 million users, primarily serving as a hub for both entertainment and news consumption. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok continue to capture significant youth engagement with the number of users reaching 3.45 million and 5.18 million users respectively in 2025 ²⁴.

The increasing reach of these digital platforms has been closely accompanied by a surge in the proliferation of disinformation, creating a complex challenge for information integrity. According to a 2022 national survey of 2,000 Tunisians, 96% of the population has reportedly encountered misinformation on social media, with nearly 40% reporting daily exposure ²⁵. The data reveals a critical “behavioral gap” in media literacy: While 76% of respondents expressed confidence in their personal ability to detect false content, 45% admitted to having inadvertently shared inaccurate information in the past. ²⁶ This discrepancy suggests that self-perceived media and information literacy does not necessarily translate into effective discernment in practice. It is notable that the manipulation of Tunisia’s digital public sphere is not uniform but rather intensifies during critical national junctures, with disinformation peaking during electoral cycles ²⁷, the health crisis ²⁸, and other periods of acute political tension ²⁹.

The proliferation of disinformation is particularly concerning given that a large number of the Tunisian public now relies on the internet as their primary conduit for news and information ³⁰. In relation to SRHR, the internet serves as the predominant source of sexual health and contraceptive information for 84% of Tunisian high school students, according to 2022 survey data. The study, which included 100 participants aged 15–18, found that reliance on this medium was particularly high among males at 90%, compared to 79% among females, highlighting the central role of the internet in adolescent sexual health education ³¹.

Previous research by RNW Media ³² indicates that youth in Tunisia are primarily driven by curiosity, social anxiety, and fear of stigma when seeking SRHR information online.

²⁴ Simon Kemp, Digital 2025: Tunisia, (DataReportal/Keipios, February 2025), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-tunisia>.

²⁵ BBC Media Action, Social Media and Information Disorder in Tunisia: Research Summary, (London: BBC Media Action, October 2022), 2–4, https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/documents/research-summary_tunisia_social-media-info-disorder_oct-2022.pdf.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Yosr Jouini, “How Misinformation and Disinformation Disrupted Tunisia’s 2019 Elections,” Global Voices, October 21, 2019, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/10/21/how-misinformation-and-disinformation-disrupted-tunisia-2019-elections/>.

²⁸ Yosr Jouini, “Tunisia’s Fight Against COVID-19 Unmasks Shaky Ground for Digital Rights,” Global Voices, January 19, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/01/19/tunisia-fight-against-covid-19-unmasks-shaky-ground-for-digital-rights/>.

²⁹ Arab Reform Initiative, Online Narratives and Manipulations: Tunisian and Regional Panorama, (Arab Reform Initiative, January 2025), <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/online-narratives-and-manipulations-tunisian-and-regional-panorama/>.

³⁰ Yosr Jouini (host) & Arwa Kooli (guest), Daily fact-checking and the ethical considerations for journalists, Digitally Yours Podcast (Spotify episode, Feb. 26, 2022), <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5VdSaFr0cMKfe7Ehr9hCq0>

³¹ Toumi et al., “Exploring contraceptive knowledge and sexual behavior among high school students in a middle-income country: a cross-sectional study in Tunisia,” BMC Public Health 25, no. 1 (September 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-23030-6>.

³² RNW Media, Analysing Dis/Mis/Mal-information on SRHR in Digital Media in Jordan and Tunisia, (Haarlem: RNW Media, December 2023), <https://www.rnw.media/index.php/resources/analysing-dis-mis-mal-information-on-srhr-in-digital-media-in-jordan-and-tunisia/>.

However, these efforts are often hindered by systemic barriers, including the lack of inclusive, comprehensive sexuality education that reaches the wider youth demographic. The same research highlights the proliferation of mis/disinformation around SRHR topics such as Comprehensive Sexuality Education, LGBTQIA+ rights, and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) ³³.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) and Gender-Based Disinformation (GBD) in Tunisia

A growing body of scholarship has increasingly studied the prevalence of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in Tunisia, with more recent research expanding its focus to include the emerging threat of gender-based disinformation (GBD). According to a national study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), nearly one in two women in Tunisia has experienced at least one form of online violence, with risk increasing alongside frequent internet use and disproportionately affecting younger women ³⁴. These findings align with data from the Center for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) ³⁵, which identified platforms such as Facebook as a particularly unsafe space, with high levels of verbal abuse, dehumanizing discourse, sexual harassment, and threats, leading many women to self-censor and withdraw from online engagement. The case study by CREDIF, titled “Violence Against Women in Social Media: Facebook as a Case Study”, reported that a substantial 89% of women surveyed had experienced violence on Facebook at least once. Furthermore, a majority of the women interviewed (60%) reported feeling that Facebook is an unsafe environment for them ³⁶.

While the prevalence of TGBV is high, a research paper analyzing gendered exposure to and impacts of online attacks against political candidates during the 2019 parliamentary election campaign in Tunisia nuances these findings by showing no statistically significant gender difference in exposure to online violence on public Facebook pages ³⁷. However, the impacts were clearly gendered. Women candidates reported more severe psychological

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Tunisia, Les violences fondées sur le genre dans l'espace numérique en Tunisie, 2022, https://tunisia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/rapport_les_violences_fondees_sur_le_genre_-_unfpa.pdf.

³⁵ Center for Research, Documentation, and Information on Women (CREDIF), AL-'unf al-raqmi didda al-nisa' wa-al-fatayat fi Tunis [Digital violence against women and girls in Tunisia], January 2022, <https://portal.salamatmena.org/publication/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d9%86%d9%81-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d9%82%d9%85%d9%8a-%d8%b6%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%86%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81%d8%aa%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%aa/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Holm, Malin, et al. “Comparing Gendered Exposure and Impact in Online Election Violence: Tunisian Political Candidates Targeted on Facebook.” *Politics & Gender*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2024, pp. 879–902. Cambridge Core, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X24000163>.

harm and were more likely to perceive online abuse as a deterrent to political participation, whereas male candidates tended to normalize such attacks as inherent to political competition. This underscores the importance of distinguishing between exposure and impact when assessing gendered online harm.³⁸

Studies focusing on activists and journalists further reveal that TGBV in Tunisia operates at the intersection of gender and political engagement.³⁹ Feminists, women human rights defenders, and female journalists are subjected to hate speech, threats, defamation, and coordinated harassment campaigns, often involving organized networks. A report by ShePersist, *Monetizing Misogyny*, documents cases of Tunisian women leaders, activists, and public figures being systematically targeted through GBD campaigns designed to undermine their credibility and legitimacy.⁴⁰ Furthermore, research conducted by the Tunisian local organization, Aswaat Nisaa, indicates that the prevalence and growing frequency of violence against women, particularly cyber violence, is facilitated by a societal tolerance of such behavior.⁴¹ The study identified the broader political climate and environment as a key factor contributing to violations of women's physical and moral integrity.

Overall, this body of evidence demonstrates that TFGVB and GBD in Tunisia are not only widespread but also politically consequential, functioning as gendered mechanisms of exclusion that constrain women's participation in public, civic, and political life. Although a small body of scholarship has begun to address GBD in Tunisia, the existing literature remains limited in scope and depth, underscoring the need for further investigation, which this paper seeks in part to address.



³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Fathia Saidi, *Al-'unf al-raqmi al-iftiradi al-musallat 'ala al-nashitat fi al-majal al-'amm* [Digital-virtual violence against women activists in the public sphere], Aswat Nisaa, April 2023, <https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cyberviolence-2.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Lucina Di Meco, *Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally* (#ShePersisted, 2023), https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf.

⁴¹ Fathia Saidi, *Al-'unf al-raqmi al-iftiradi al-musallat 'ala al-nashitat fi al-majal al-'amm* [Digital-virtual violence against women activists in the public sphere], Aswat Nisaa, April 2023, <https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cyberviolence-2.pdf>.

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**Gender-based
disinformation
targeting women
media makers working
on SRHR in Tunisia**

Prevailing Narratives in Gender-Based Disinformation

This research study has found that gender-based disinformation targeting women media makers working on SRHR in Tunisia relies on repetitive narrative framings that delegitimize, sexualize, and morally criminalize women and gender-diverse people who speak publicly about sexuality, rights, and bodily autonomy. These narratives do not emerge in isolation. They exploit deeply embedded patriarchal, religious, and social discourses that are recognized in the specific context and therefore easily mobilized. Across both literature and key informant interviews, the following five dominant narrative clusters emerged consistently:

1. Sexual objectification and Morality Policing:

Evidence from the qualitative interviews suggests a systematic trend wherein practitioners and media-makers speaking of sexuality online are denied their professional or educational status by online audiences. Rather than being engaged with as specialists, these content creators addressing sexual and reproductive health were frequently framed through the lens of moral deviancy and sexual promiscuity. This narrative strips the practitioner and media-maker of their expert authority, replacing their professional identity with a sexualized caricature that is then used to justify subsequent abuse, disinformation against them, and unsolicited sexual advances.

An interviewed sex therapist with an online presence on Instagram, Youtube, Facebook and Spotify reported receiving unsolicited sexual propositions masked as professional consultations:

“

“They were suggestions to ‘do this’ or ‘I’ll come to you for that”

Similarly, Nourchenne Cheguenni, a midwife and SRHR content creator, reflects on her experience in the digital space said in a podcast interview⁴²:

“I talk about contraception, abortion, and sexuality in a serious and educational way, but the reaction is always sexualizing or moralizing me as a person. Instead of discussing the content, they attack my dignity as a woman. I received insults like, ‘You were clearly raised in the streets,’ or ‘No respectable woman would talk about these things publicly.’ It’s like the moment a woman talks openly about sexual or reproductive health, she automatically becomes immoral in their eyes.”

⁴² Deep Confessions Podcast, “Season II: DCP W/ Nourchenne Cheguenni | Chapter 47,” YouTube, April 28, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vJjipeGw8A>.

This narrative is not restricted to health practitioners. Women content creators sharing SRHR content also receive direct attacks questioning their sexual morality. Morality policing in its core systematically seeks to shame, humiliate, and drive women away from public discourse, reinforcing the expectation that “respectable women” remain silent about sex.

2. The “Haram”⁴³ and religious rhetoric

Attacks we documented are frequently couched in religious language, transforming abuse into moral correction specifically positioning women, but mostly LGBTQIA+ individuals, as violating divine order.

For Maram Ben Dhafer, a trans woman and president of Trans Unity Coalition Tunisia, religious condemnation was one of the most consistent attack narratives. She told RNW Media:

“

“The most common narratives are always religious: ‘haram’, ‘shame’, ‘God didn’t say so.’(..) When religion enters the argument, they (the attackers) feel morally superior and justified in spreading hate. It gives them a kind of social legitimacy to attack me.”

By framing content as morally wrong or sacrilegious, perpetrators not only appeal to broader social norms but also use this narrative to legitimize hostility.

3. “Foreign and Western Agenda” Narrative

Another common theme across the literature and interviews is the framing of gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, and sexual and reproductive health education as Western impositions threatening local identity, sovereignty, and culture. Women and gender-diverse creators are accused of “working for foreign interests,” “destroying traditions,” or “importing immorality” into society.

This narrative is reinforced when creators advocate for socially controversial rights such as abortion or LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Nourchenne Cheguenni, a midwife and SRHR content creator, described how gender rights discourse is easily recast as external infiltration rather than lived social realities:

⁴⁴ Deep Confessions Podcast, “Season II: DCP W/ Nourchenne Cheguenni | Chapter 47,” YouTube, April 28, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vJjipeGw8A>.

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“They see us like we are bringing something from outside... not that these are issues lived here [in the country] by real people.”⁴⁴

By nationalizing gender hostility, GBD and subsequent harassment becomes framed not as hate, but as patriotic duty. The narrative legitimizes digital aggression as cultural defense.

4. “Attack on Family Values” and Social Fabric Narrative

Linked to religious rhetoric and nationalized narrative, SRHR content is frequently framed as undermining the family unit and the broader social order. It is also portrayed as a threat to ‘childhood innocence’, particularly in relation to young, unmarried individuals. Talking about contraception, abortion, consent, or menstruation becomes framed as morally corrupting and socially dangerous.

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“When I defend women or defend LGBT rights, I know I will receive a bunch of hate. That’s guaranteed.”

Women content creators repeatedly described being told they were undermining families, destroying culture, or endangering children. Syrine, a tiktok content creator, noted that backlash intensifies particularly when topics relate to consent, LGBTQ+ support, or women’s autonomy:

5. Demonization of Feminists, Women’s Rights Defenders, and LGBTQIA+ Advocates

A final dominant narrative systematically delegitimizes all feminists, SRHR advocates, and LGBTQIA+ organizers, portraying them as extremists, corruptors, or socially dangerous actors. Their work is recast as destabilizing, unnecessary, or psychologically deviant.

Both the literature review and key informant interviews found that GBD severity increases where gender intersects with other marginalized identities. Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw⁴⁵, highlights how various social identities (like race, gender, class, sexuality, ability) shape individuals’ experiences of oppression and discrimination.

⁴⁵ Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

This was the case of Bochra Belhaj Hmida, a Tunisian lawyer, politician, and a prominent advocate for women's rights and LGBTQIA+ issues, who was the head of Tunisia's Individual Freedoms and Equality Commission. She was the target of multiple gender-based disinformation campaigns and severe online violence for her activism, political views, and work. ⁴⁶ These disinformation campaigns have falsely framed her as corrupt and unpatriotic, alleging that she "misled" Tunisian women with "false feminism" and sought to penalize the traditional practice of circumcision. The result has been large waves of online abuse, including death threats, which have even been incited by well-known public figures. For instance, in 2018, a radical Islamist preacher used Facebook to call for the public stoning of Ms. Belhaj Hmida and the commission members as a means to "purify" the country.

Reflecting on the pervasive nature of this abuse, Ms. Belhaj Hmida stated in an interview that year,

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“Almost every ten minutes, there is a post that calls for murder and spreads disinformation to arouse a popular and violent movement against our work.” ⁴⁷

Feminist discourse and advocates for gender equality in Tunisia have also faced systematic opposition, during the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections ⁴⁸. Women pursuing progressive reforms were subjected to defamation campaigns, often labeled as “radical” or “foreign agents.” These attacks served to misrepresent their political agendas and undermine the broader legitimacy of feminist perspectives. Furthermore, prominent groups both in SRHR advocacy and civic and political rights support such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) have been frequently targeted with smear campaigns questioning their credibility and legitimacy ⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Yosr Jouini, “In Tunisia, Women Stand on the Frontlines of Targeted Hate Speech Online.” Global Voices Advox, 22 May 2020, advox.globalvoices.org/2020/05/22/in-tunisia-women-stand-on-the-frontlines-of-targeted-hate-speech-online/.

⁴⁷ Lucina Di Meo, Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally (#ShePersisted, 2023), https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf.

⁴⁸ Holm, M., Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2024). Comparing Gendered Exposure and Impact in Online Election Violence: Tunisian Political Candidates Targeted on Facebook. *Politics & Gender*, 20(3), 879–902. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x24000163>

⁴⁹ Business News, “Tunisia – Massive petition against the demonization of the ATFD,” October 27, 2025, <https://businessnews.com.tn/2025/10/27/tunisia-massive-petition-against-the-demonization-of-the-atfd/1369916/>

4

Tactics and Techniques of Gender-Based Disinformation

Gender-Based Disinformation does not circulate randomly; it is produced and amplified through identifiable tactics that strategically target credibility, dignity, psychological resilience, and personal safety. Interviews revealed a layered ecosystem of tactics ranging from everyday trolling to deliberately orchestrated harassment campaigns.

1. Attacking the Person, Not the Content

Rather than engaging arguments, GBD frequently targets identity, or appearance. Interviewed women frequently reported attacks focusing on looks, gender expression, voice, and perceived femininity rather than their content.

Maram Ben Dhafer, a trans woman and president of Trans Unity Coalition Tunisia, told RNW Media:

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“They rarely engage with what I actually say. They don’t criticize the information or the argument. They focus on my face, my body, my voice, my appearance. So the attack is never about content, it’s about dehumanizing me as a person.”

Maram, is also the host of the podcast “Hear From Us,” on trans rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Tunisia. She has observed a disparity in the online comments: male guests whose appearance aligns with societal norms do not face the same level of hate and gender-based discrimination that she receives. This suggests that appearances conforming to dominant societal beauty norms are perceived as more socially legitimate and acceptable, thereby attracting less hostility, while deviations from these norms, particularly for women and in this case transwomen, provoke heightened scrutiny, hate, and gender-based discrimination.

2. Fabrication, Distortion, and Baseless Claims

At the core of GBD are deliberate fabrications of false allegations, and baseless claims that rarely engage with the substance of the content. Instead, they target character and perceived respectability.

For instance, in December 2019, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) filed a defamation and insult complaint in Tunis against a man who attacked an activist on Facebook. The activist worked with Beity, a nonprofit supporting victims of domestic

violence. The man’s post, which initially named and cited the activist’s profession, accused her of being a sex worker, claiming a man paid her for sex. He further alleged that this man’s abused wife was supported by Beity.⁵⁰

Tactics sometimes extend to attacks on families and threats against children or other members.

Prominent human rights defender and feminist, Sana Ben Achour, was targeted for expressing political views. GBD attacks were not only against her but also her family and ancestry. These attacks often employed rhetoric like, “Look who’s talking? The daughter of Ben Achour who went with the Eucharistic Congress, meaning he allied with France, as they say, where does that ladle come from? It comes from that tree.” The objective of these comments, which fall within the verbal register of populist discourse, is to cast doubt, devalue, and belittle the activist and her family.⁵¹

3. Sexualized Abuse and Coercive Messaging

In addition to employing sexualization narratives, the research found that using sexually explicit vocabulary, invitations, explicit comments, harassment, erotic fantasies, and threats of rape are common tactics of perpetrators described by interviewed creators as “very disgusting... violent sexual messages”. This tactic seeks to intimidate, shame, and ultimately silence the content creator.

4. Emotional Manipulation and Outrage Optimization

Attackers exploit platform algorithms that privilege engagement. They intentionally generate inflammatory, misogynistic discourse designed to trigger anger, fear, and mass response. This transforms harassment into a visibility strategy for perpetrators.

One interviewee reflected on influencers sharing content intended for education on SRHR for LGBTQI+ community:

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“They look for buzz... sharing our content to troll and get views.”

⁵⁰ Yosr Jouini, “In Tunisia, Women Stand on the Frontlines of Targeted Hate Speech Online.” Global Voices Advox, 22 May 2020, advox.globalvoices.org/2020/05/22/in-tunisia-women-stand-on-the-frontlines-of-targeted-hate-speech-online/.

⁵¹ Aswat Nissa, The Reality of Cyber-Violence against Women in Tunisia: Between the Absence of Legislation and the Impunity of Perpetrators (Tunis: Aswat Nissa, 2023), <https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cyberviolence-2.pdf>.

5. Platform Exploitation and Tactical Use of Features

Attackers strategically exploit certain digital media spaces, particularly TikTok livestreams, where comments disappear, and accountability diminishes.

As Syrine, a TikTok content creator, explained:

“TikTok lives are the worst. They insult me there because they know the comments disappear and there is no proof. They know the platform won’t hold them accountable. And the more outrageous they are, the more engagement they get. Outrage works for them, it feeds the algorithm.”

This finding aligns with scholarly research findings that identify live streaming environments as high-risk areas for gender-based attacks.⁵² Some country-specific reports have documented how live formats are leveraged to target women through rapid, anonymous, and ephemeral forms of harassment that are difficult to trace or sanction.⁵³ At the same time, moderation research indicates that live-stream chat architectures, marked by high message velocity, and lack of thread structure, facilitate norm violations and pose significant challenges for detection and remediation compared to static comment systems.⁵⁴ While these findings point to a consistent pattern of heightened vulnerability in live-streaming contexts, the specific interactions between platform design, moderation practices, and GBD remain insufficiently explored and merit further investigation.

6. Fake Accounts, Bots, and Anonymity Shielding

Anonymity is weaponized to ensure impunity. Interviewed women reported being targeted by: fake profiles, anonymous accounts, suspected bot networks. “Fake profiles... most of the time I don’t know the person.” (Key informant Interview)

An interviewee linked this to broader political disinformation systems:

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“Sometimes you see the same repetitive language, the same type of accounts, clearly fake. It overlaps with political disinformation networks.”

⁵² Arantxa Vizcaino-Verdú, “‘Who’s the girl now?’: The #GamerGrrrl togetherness on TikTok,” *index.comunicación* 14, no. 2 (2024): 265–293, <https://doi.org/10.62008/ixc/14/02Whosth>; Ruberg, Bonnie; Cullen, Amanda L. L.: Feeling for an Audience. The Gendered Emotional Labor of Video Game Live Streaming. In: *Digital Culture & Society*, Jg. 5 (2019), Nr. 2, S. 85–102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/21856>

⁵³ “TikTok’s Somali Problem: When Live-Streams Become Tools for Harassment.” Shabelle Media, 2024, <https://shabellemedia.com/tiktoks-somali-problem-when-live-streams-become-tools-for-harassment-somali-social-media-digital-violence-against-women>; Yin, Q., & Binti Abdullah, K. B. (2024). Analysis of Gender Discourse Bias and Gender Discrimination in Social Media: A Case Study of the TikTok Platform. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 24(2), 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i2.802>.

⁵⁴ Moon, Jihyung, et al. “Analyzing norm violations in live-stream chat.” *Proceedings of the 2023 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*. 2023. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.10731>; Cai, Jie, et al. “Hate raids on twitch: Understanding real-time human-bot coordinated attacks in live streaming communities.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 7.CSCW2 (2023): 1–28. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.16248>

7. Harassment Waves and Coordinated Piling-On

GBD actors weaponize volume. For some creators, GBD and harassment frequently appear in waves, overwhelming victims emotionally and structurally by flooding posts, comments, and live sessions with abuse. While not always formally organized, their synchronized appearance mimics coordinated campaigns. Corroborating findings from previous research on gender-based disinformation (GBD) in the MENA region, these tactics become particularly dangerous when deployed through coordinated and systematic campaigns.⁵⁵

As one content creator who was interviewed noted:

“

“Sometimes I get waves... like when I am live, there are 80 men who come at the same time to insult me.”

8. Generative AI & Deepfakes: An Emerging Concern, Not Yet a Dominant Tactic

While staggering amounts of harmful AI-generated online content are being recognized as enablers of TFGBV⁵⁶ and GBD globally⁵⁷, this study did not find evidence of generative AI and deepfakes being directly used against interviewees or their communities at the time of data collection. However, interviewees demonstrated growing awareness of AI’s role in disinformation and expressed concern about its future misuse in gender-based attacks, with one warning: “I don’t exclude that AI will be used in the future. It’s probably already happening, but I haven’t seen it yet.”

This anticipatory concern aligns with a growing body of research which warns that generative AI can significantly amplify gender-based disinformation by lowering the cost, speed, and scale of producing deceptive content.⁵⁸ While such tactics were not yet observed in this study, participants did report the use of fake accounts, bot-like behaviour, and coordinated amplification, suggesting that automation already plays a role in scaling abuse, and may serve as a precursor to more advanced AI-enabled harm.

⁵⁵ Afef Abrougui. Online Gender-Based Disinformation in MENA: Narratives, Tactics, and Impacts. RNW Media, 2024, www.rnw.media/index.php/resources/online-gender-based-disinformation-in-mena-narratives-tactics-and-impacts/.

⁵⁶ UN Women, “AI-Powered Online Abuse: How AI Is Amplifying Violence against Women and What Can Stop It,” UN Women Articles, November 18, 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/ai-powered-online-abuse-how-ai-is-amplifying-violence-against-women-and-what-can-stop-it>.

⁵⁷ Anne Peterscheck, “Artificial Intelligence and Gendered Security,” CREST Research, September 15, 2025, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/artificial-intelligence-and-gendered-security/>.

⁵⁸ Afef Abrougui. Online Gender-Based Disinformation in MENA: Narratives, Tactics, and Impacts. RNW Media, 2024, www.rnw.media/index.php/resources/online-gender-based-disinformation-in-mena-narratives-tactics-and-impacts/; Marília Gehrke and Eedan R. Amit-Danhi, “Gendered Disinformation as Violence: A New Analytical Agenda,” Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, June 26, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-177>.

Key Actors

Interview evidence suggests that GBD is neither entirely organic nor entirely orchestrated. Instead, it is driven by intersecting groups, each with different motivations and capacities but collectively contributing to a hostile environment. Literature review and qualitative data highlighted several types of actors involved in gender-based disinformation in Tunisia affecting women media makers in SRHR field:

Individuals: These actors exploit digital anonymity to evade social accountability and ensure impunity.

Networked Misogyny: Individual actions often escalate into collective, “synchronized waves” of digital swarming or mobilization. This collective action is fueled by shared reactionary ideologies, even without centralized coordination.

Influencers: Some influencers deliberately incite harassment against other content creators to boost their own visibility, engagement, and financial gain. As one interviewee stated, “Influencers looking for buzz... sharing our content just to troll and get views.”

State Actors: Critically, these dynamics are increasingly validated by state actors through inflammatory political discourse. For instance, President Saïed’s rhetoric regarding “demographic change” and “Great Replacement”⁵⁹ in Tunisia has functioned as a top-down catalyst, fueling coordinated digital campaigns against migrants⁶⁰ and women rights groups.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Anti-immigrant groups frequently employ the “demographic change” and “Great Replacement” rhetoric, alleging that welcoming immigration policies are a deliberate scheme to undermine or “replace” the political power and culture of white populations in Western countries. In the Tunisian context, the same terminology has been utilized by the president and anti-immigrant movements to claim that immigration from Sub-Saharan African countries is intended to alter Tunisia’s demographic composition and eradicate its Arab-Islamic identity.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International, “Tunisia: President’s racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans,” March 10, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/>.

⁶¹ Fathia Saidi, Al-’unf al-raqmi al-iftiradi al-musallat ‘ala al-nashitat fi al-majal al-’amm [Digital-virtual violence against women activists in the public sphere], Aswat Nissa, April 2023, <https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cyberviolence-2.pdf>.

Impacts of Gender-Based Disinformation

GBD has profound and layered consequences for media-makers. Its effects extend far beyond digital discomfort, shaping emotional health, social participation, professional stability, and physical safety. Interviews revealed impacts across three primary domains: psychological harm, professional silencing, and escalation into offline violence.

1. Psychological and Emotional Harm

Participants described deep emotional strain, distress, and erosion of identity caused by persistent GBD and subsequent harassment. This emotional climate deeply affects self-perception. During intense harassment periods, an interviewee describes dissociation and loss of stability:

“When I was receiving a lot of hate, it was affecting my self-image... I was kind of disconnected from what I look like and who I am... it was very bad.” she continues, “At the beginning it really affected my self-image. You start doubting yourself. Even if you know they are wrong, repetition does something to you.”

For another content creator, these attacks directly destabilized mental health, intersecting dangerously with a pre-existing condition:

“

“Sometimes yes, it was very hard emotionally... I have borderline personality disorder... when I was receiving a lot of hate, it was affecting my self-image... I was disconnected from who I am.”

Maram Ben Dhafer, a trans woman and president of Trans Unity Coalition Tunisia, similarly describes heavy emotional labor simply to survive online:

“

“It’s exhausting. I spend two to three hours every day deleting hateful comments. Even when you are strong, it gets inside your head. It drains you emotionally. It makes daily life heavy.”

Documented psychological harm is therefore structural and chronic, not incidental.

2. Silencing Effects, Self-Censorship and Curtailed freedom of expression

GBD does not always force women offline, but it shrinks what they are allowed to say. Several participants described strategic silence. They do not withdraw completely, but deliberately limit speech to survive. This often manifests as: softening feminist and LGBTQ+ allyship messaging, avoiding explicit SRHR education framing, moderating language to appear “less provocative”, choosing “safer” content formats, and declining activism even when passionate about issues.

An interviewer explicitly acknowledged changing how and when she speaks:

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“It changed my way of posting... sometimes I wanted to be more safe... I wasn’t ready to receive it.”

She recognized limiting activism at times because attacks escalate when defending women and minorities:

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“Definitely when I am defending LGBTQA+ rights, if I am defending a minority... I’m gonna receive a bunch of hate.”

A sex therapist with an online presence told RNW media:

“

“I had big plans. I wanted to do workshops, public talks, and more education. But I stopped. I realized society is not ready. I protect myself by reducing my visibility and avoiding certain topics. So yes, it works. It silences us.”

3. Economic Consequences and Income Control

For some women media-makers, visibility and online presence is tied to livelihood. They therefore feel forced to negotiate survival by softening content. Thus, GBD becomes an economic enforcement mechanism: silence or loss of income.

“

“If I go fully and talk very openly, no brand will call me anymore... I have to make money... society is not ready and I will lose everything financially.”

(Key Informant Interview).

Persistent stigma also limits professional opportunities and growth undermines credibility, and discourages collaboration particularly for SRHR professionals.

A health provider with an online presence reflected in an interview:

“

“People don’t want to be associated publicly with sexuality. They are afraid, so they don’t collaborate, don’t support, don’t sponsor. It limits my work and opportunities. It keeps sexuality education in the shadows.”

4. Offline Violence and Physical Risk

While often framed as “online or virtual” violence, Gender-Based Disinformation (GBD) in this study demonstrates a direct pathway from digital hostility to real-world physical danger. Harassment escalates into assaults, stalking, attempted kidnapping, and serious life-threatening violence.

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“I have been the victim of attempted murder... attempted kidnapping and rape... physical assaults in the street.”

For one interviewee, Maram, a trans woman and activist, online hostility escalated into physical violence and danger.

she told RNW Media. Her experience demonstrates a clear escalation trajectory: persistent demonization normalizes violence, emboldening attackers to act offline. She explicitly links the social acceptability of online hate to the real-world belief that she can be harmed without consequence.

What intensifies harm is a systemic absence of protection. When an Interviewee sought help, institutions responded with suspicion and criminalization rather than support. Reporting to authorities did not reduce danger, it expanded vulnerability:

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“I was terrified when I reported... The police were not engaging with my assault complaint... they focused on whether I was homosexual... they tried to shift the narrative... I knew such insinuations could lead to my imprisonment.”

Instead of delivering justice, the response from law enforcement in this case reinforced fear and risk. Protection becomes conditional and uncertain, leaving survivors exposed.

5. Societal Impacts: GBD reshapes Culture, Empathy and Democracy

Participants emphasized that gender-based disinformation does not only harm its immediate targets; it reshapes society at large.

Maram Ben Dhafer, a trans woman and president of Trans Unity Coalition Tunisia, warned that growing masculinist rhetoric does not simply “attack women”. It conditions heterosexual men to feel entitled, hostile, and emotionally detached, normalising a worldview where women’s suffering is trivial and political backlash against gender equality becomes culturally acceptable. As she explained, misogynistic campaigns train men to see women not as social equals but as opponents or objects, thus, producing generations of men who are less empathetic, more radicalized, and socially rewarded for aggression.

This aligns strongly with the UN Special Rapporteur’s findings that identity-based attacks online erode freedom of expression and public life. At the societal level, gender-based disinformation erodes civil liberties, diminishes public discourse, undermines the knowledge ecosystem that informs governance, and transforms participation into a punishment risk rather than a democratic right. As the Special Rapporteur notes, these attacks do not merely silence individual women; they teach all women that visibility, speaking their mind, activism and public service are dangerous and undesirable paths ⁶².

Growing global evidence confirms what participants described experientially: gender-based disinformation dissuades women from entering politics, journalism, public commentary, and activism. Women watching public campaigns of targeted humiliation learn the consequences of speaking, and many choose withdrawal as the safer option. The result is not just fewer women in public leadership, it is a profound democratic distortion, where half the population is systematically discouraged from participating in shaping their societies.

Participants’ testimonies also reinforce research demonstrating that online gender-based violence facilitates offline violence and creates what scholars call “climates of unsafety.” Even those who are never personally attacked absorb the message: women and LGBTQIA+ people can be punished at any moment for existing publicly.

In this sense, GBD is not simply interpersonal harm but has cultural and political repercussions. It exacerbates patriarchal power, socializes boys and men into hostility, restricts pluralism, and structurally narrows who is allowed to be visible, authoritative, and safe, both online and offline

⁶² UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Gendered Disinformation and the Freedom of Expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Call for Input (Geneva: OHCHR, 2023), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/report-freedom-expression-and-gender-dimensions-disinformation>.

Coping with gender-based disinformation and support measures

1. Personal Coping Strategies: Emotional Labour as Survival

Interviewed women and LGBTQIA+ creators describe developing complex psychological and behavioural coping strategies simply to remain present online. These include:

- emotional distancing and reframing of abuse
- restricting content to reduce backlash
- carefully curated “neutral” tone to avoid escalation
- deliberate avoidance of certain topics, especially sexuality, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, or politics
- active self-repair through therapy and introspection

One creator described spending weeks rebuilding self-image after waves of harassment, explaining that hate “affected my self-image... I was disconnected from who I am”, and ultimately required therapy and conscious resilience-building to stabilize. Another emphasized that survival online demands daily psychological maintenance, deleting comments for hours, consciously resisting internalising the abuse, and reminding herself of her worth.

2. Collective Coping: Women’s Informal Care Networks

Respondents relied heavily on women’s solidarity networks. These are typically informal, emotional communities built through friendships, followers, online feminist spaces, queer communities, or spontaneous gatherings.

Women described receiving compassion and affirmation from female audiences, turning to other women for advice and validation and building communities online and offline for support.

Nourchenne Cheguenni a midwife and SRHR content creator, explained that women users frequently step in to challenge abusive men, validate her expertise, and defend her right to speak ⁶³:

“For me, women themselves have been a major source of strength. When I post videos, men start criticizing or mocking me, but then you’ll find a woman replying to him, saying: ‘You use this kind of language in the street, so let us be. We have a member of the

⁶³ Deep Confessions Podcast, “Season II: DCP W/ Nourchenne Cheguenni | Chapter 47,” YouTube, April 28, 2025, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vJjipeGw8A>.

medical staff here explaining information to us that we were ignorant about.’ Seeing women, and even some men, defend me became a source of strength.”

This reflects how women’s informal solidarity networks function as protective shields, emotionally sustaining content creators, and challenging public misogyny in real time.

Similarly, Syrine, a TikTok content creator, repeatedly describes women followers and women-only spaces as emotional anchors and survival communities:

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“You think people disappear...but they are always there. Sometimes what shocks me most is that even when there are a lot of insults and swearing, there is always a small minority that is always there for you.”

She frames these women-led spaces as places of safety and emotional grounding:

“

“There are spontaneous offline gatherings of women...we support each other maybe without even knowing it. I go there when I want to feel safe.”

Similarly, Maram Ben Dhafer, a trans woman and SRHR podcast host, even amid violence and abandonment by institutions, spoke of the supportive role of trusted circles and civil society:

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“I have great friends for support, I lean towards them when things are really heavy.”

Although women’s solidarity offers emotional protection and restores dignity in hostile (digital) environments, this form of support remains precarious and unsustainable. It depends entirely on unpaid emotional labour, individual courage, and the willingness of women to repeatedly confront abuse; rather than on systems designed to support and keep them safe. These informal care networks can soften the impact of GBD, but they cannot replace structural accountability

In the case of Maram however, she confirms that NGO and community solidarity played a critical role in ensuring survival and legal protection:

“

“I got support from an NGO... they got me a lawyer quickly. and offered psychological support too”

Beyond offering immediate psychosocial and legal support, NGOs function as key stakeholders in countering the impacts of TFGBV and GBD in Tunisia by documenting abuses, facilitating access to safe spaces ⁶⁴, and amplifying survivors’ voices in public and policy arenas through advocacy ⁶⁵, awareness-raising, and institutional engagement ⁶⁶.

3. Platform Responses: Unequal Protection and Punitive Moderation

Social media platforms were widely described by interviewees as inadequate, inconsistent, and in some cases punitive. Interviewees reported that abuse reports are ignored or dismissed, users issuing death threats or sexual violence threats rarely face sanctions, hateful comments during TikTok Lives disappear and leave no trace, enabling impunity, and that creators, not abusers, are often penalised for responding, thereby the moderation burden falling entirely on victims and survivors.

One participant explained that TikTok “never bans” attackers, but routinely deletes her responses, illustrating how moderation frameworks often discipline women rather than protect them. Another participant noted she spends several hours daily deleting hate comments, doing unpaid labour that platforms should be taking accountability and action for.

4. Learning to Protect Oneself: Rights Awareness, Digital Competence and AI literacy

Several participants framed education, not only of audiences but of themselves and peers, as a critical coping and prevention strategy. These creators emphasized the importance of understanding legal rights, platform mechanisms, and emerging technological risks as a form of self-protection. This included learning how to document abuse, recognize disinformation tactics, and anticipate future threats such as AI-generated manipulation.

⁶⁴ UNFPA Tunisie, Cartographie des services destinés aux femmes victimes de violences ou en situation de vulnérabilité en Tunisie, 2016, tunisia.unfpa.org/fr/publications/cartographie-des-services-destine%CC%81s-aux-femmes-victimes-de-violences-ou-en-situation-de.

⁶⁵ “Le CREDIF lance une campagne de sensibilisation pour la lutte contre la violence numérique à l’égard des femmes en Tunisie,” Nessma TV, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nessma.tv/fr/nationale/actu/le-credif-lance-une-campagne-de-sensibilisation-pour-la-lutte-contre-la-violence-numerique-a-l-egard-des-femmes-en-tunisie/280484>.

⁶⁶ Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui, Les associations qui œuvrent pour l’égalité des chances entre les femmes et les hommes en Tunisie, CREDIF/UNFPA, 2013, www.cawtarclearinghouse.org/storage/AttachementGender/Les-associations-qui-%C5%93uvrent-egalit%C3%A9_Tunisie.pdf.

This need for knowledge was particularly evident among women who enter content creation later in life. Nadia Cherif, founder of Omoubou, a project centered on personal and intimate narratives of motherhood, explained that many women begin creating digital content after becoming mothers and actively seek training, to gain skills in digital work, content creation and networking:

“

“There are many women like me, women in their forties who become content creators... often after motherhood. What we really want is training: learning how to work online, how to work digitally, and how to build connections.”

Beyond technical competencies, she also stressed the importance of legal awareness as a safeguard against digital harm and conflict:

“As a content creator, I would also have liked to be better informed about my rights and my obligations. This is an activity that exists without a clear legal framework, and that is quite frustrating, especially since I would like to develop this work further. I think that knowing your rights, avenues for legal recourse, what aspects you are protected on, as well as your obligations, such as declaration requirements, can be crucial in cases of attacks or conflicts on social media.”

Other participants echoed this emphasis on anticipatory education, especially regarding emerging technologies. Syrine Benaba, a TikTok content creator, underscored the need for AI literacy so that individuals can recognize manipulated or synthetic content before it causes reputational or psychological harm, arguing that understanding how such technologies work is becoming essential to digital safety.

Overall, these testimonies show that creators increasingly view education as a form of self-defence, one that compensates for the absence of clear regulation, platform accountability, and accessible institutional support. However, while rights awareness, digital skills, and AI literacy offer important protective tools, the responsibility for acquiring this knowledge continues to fall disproportionately on women themselves.

5. State & Institutional Support: Absence, Risk, and Re-Traumatization

Participants reported little to no recourse to governmental or institutional support. In one case, interacting with authorities increased danger rather than reducing it. One interviewee who experienced extreme violence described police prioritizing morality-based suspicion over protection, interrogating her identity rather than addressing assault. This demonstrates not only neglect, but secondary victimization.

Conclusion

Gender-Based Disinformation (GBD) targeting women media makers in the SRHR field in Tunisia, as revealed through interviews and a literature review, is characterized by its highly sexualized, moralizing, and identity-targeted nature, often interwoven with religious narratives, “family values,” and patriarchal social norms. Women, including transgender women, face attacks simply for their online presence. Harassment escalates when they challenge gender norms or advocate for sexual and reproductive rights. This harassment is diverse, ranging from coordinated online ‘piling-on’ and threats of sexual violence to religious condemnation, identity erasure, and the creation of moral panic using terms like “perversion” and “foreign agenda.” Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, especially their live features, are identified as high-risk environments due to low traceability, which attackers exploit. Key actors identified in these attacks include anonymous men, fake accounts, influencers, and, at times, AI bot networks. The impacts of GBD are severe, encompassing psychological distress, threats of extreme offline violence, pressure for censorship, and victims’ self-regulation of their online safety and expression.

Recommendations

Recommendation for the authorities

- Streamline reporting mechanisms by establishing fast-track, victim-centered procedures for digital crimes, addressing delays that currently deter survivors from seeking justice.
- Strengthen digital privacy protections by updating the 2004 Data Protection framework to safeguard women's online identities and personal data from misuse and exploitation.
- Provide specialized training for law enforcement, including judicial police and youth brigades, on digital forensics and the gendered dynamics of online abuse to prevent victim-blaming and mishandling of cases.
- Integrate digital citizenship education into school curricula, focusing on consent, online safety, and data protection, particularly for adolescents.
- Implement programs engaging men and boys to challenge online misogyny, hypersexualization, and the culture of impunity that fuels digital harassment.
- Convey multi-stakeholder consultations to identify pathways for holding technology companies accountable for gendered harms through enforceable transparency standards, due process protections for users, and mandatory human rights and gender due diligence.

Recommendations for social media platforms and Big Tech

- Digital platforms should simplify access to reporting channels and ensure effective follow-up on all complaints or reports submitted against Gender-Based Digital Violence (GBD).
- They must revise, develop, and enforce their policies to adequately reflect the severity of GBD as a threat, particularly to those most vulnerable to it and its harm, including women and girls, LGBTQIA individuals, and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs).

Recommendations for Media development organisations

- Provide targeted training for women journalists, content creators, and media makers on digital security, platform reporting mechanisms, legal rights, documentation of GBD, and coping strategies, including anticipatory guidance on emerging risks such as AI-generated disinformation.
- Review and expand age limits and eligibility criteria in media development programmes and training to ensure inclusion of women entering digital and media work at different life stages, including caregivers and late-entry creators.
- Advocate for platform accountability in addressing TFGBV and GBD across diverse national contexts
- Enable journalists and media-makers to challenge harmful and biased public discourse and narratives on/about survivors of TFGBV and GBD through gender-sensitive, survivor-centred and rights-based reporting practices and approaches

Recommendations for Civil Society

- Strengthen civil society monitoring capacities through digital observatories that document trends and patterns of cyber-violence beyond official statistics.
- Create safe, stigma-free digital support spaces where survivors can access peer solidarity and professional guidance without fear of judgment or retaliation.

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RNW Media

Nieuwe Havenweg 51-H
1216 BL Hilversum

www.rnw.media