The World Wide Web Foundation is working with Social Finance and members and affiliates of the Women’s Rights Online Network to address online gender-based violence and develop responses that lead to lasting and systemic change. This regional summary is part of a research project aiming to develop a global landscape of the responses to online gender-based violence (OGBV) from civil society, tech, and governments. It has a particular focus on Morocco and Tunisia.

Executive Summary

In the MENA region, internet penetration varies greatly, as does the rate of women’s access to the internet more specifically. Women’s experience online is characterised by patriarchal attitudes offline as well as the broader political and cultural context. Tech companies’ lack of engagement and transparency when it comes to OGBV is exacerbated by language barriers in the MENA region. Arabic is one of the most used languages in the world, but it has not been prioritised by tech platforms, meaning there is a lack of understanding of its dialectal differences and that content moderation is poor. Where governments have ratified international agreements to protect women and create a safe digital space, this has not always been incorporated into national law and where it has, women have not been made aware of their legal rights. To better address OGBV in the region, there is a need to bridge the gap between civil society organisations that work on feminist issues and those that address digital rights.

Regional partners

- Marwa Azelmat
The rate of internet penetration in the Middle East and North Africa region varies greatly between countries. In Morocco the rate stood at 84% of the total population at the start of 2022, whereas in Syria it was 49%, and in Yemen 27%. A common thread in each of these, in line with the global trend, is that the rate of Internet penetration is typically increasing year on year.

Facebook is one of the most used social media platforms, along with YouTube. In Northern Africa there are approximately 103.9 million active Facebook users, with Egypt alone having at least 45.9 million.

The gender gap in the use of social media in the region varies according to both platform and country. For example:
- In Morocco, Facebook’s advertisement audience was 38% female and 62% male. However, on YouTube, this split was more equal at 49% female and 51% male.
- In Yemen, the gender gap appears much greater; Facebook’s advertisement audience was 13% female and 87% male.

As in the rest of the world, women’s experience of OGBV in this region is interlinked with their offline experiences. In Syria, for example, online violence is closely connected to the ongoing conflict setting, while in Palestine a woman’s occupation can exacerbate the repercussions of OGBV.

Surveillance of women’s online activity is common in this region. Both state and familial surveillance create a hostile environment for women online. For example, a number of Egyptian women were arrested for “inciting debauchery” with online content, one of whom was detained for speaking out about sexual assault. In 2017, authorities in Saudi Arabia arrested a woman after a video went viral of her wearing a miniskirt in one of the nation’s most conservative provinces. In 2019, Issra Ghrayeb was tragically murdered in an ‘honour killing’ after relatives found a photo of her with her fiancé on Facebook.

Self-censorship and cultural impunity is also a key issue relevant to OGBV in the MENA region: OGBV is a silent crime and one which does not yet have a strong history of being punished. The cultural stigma that women in the region face makes it hard for them to speak up while simultaneously enabling perpetrators to harass, blackmail, and push victims to disengage from the online world. Women typically withdraw from public discourse as a result of a hostile environment: an Amnesty study shows that a vast majority of women are apprehensive about using the Internet after being targeted, while others refrain from sharing specific kinds of content or close their accounts entirely.

OGBV prevalence and data

As we see in global trends, online violence against women is a growing phenomenon in the region, but is one which lacks a standard definition.
- More research is needed to determine the types of online violence that different groups of survivors face, the types of online perpetrators, and the impact of the issue on different social groups. Given that it is typically younger, more educated women who have better access to digital spaces,
they tend to be more exposed to the violence and abuse that takes place online.

- Existing data suggests that certain groups of women and girls face a heightened risk of OGBV. For example, women who challenge rigid gender norms, women working in the public eye, and unmarried women face increased risk of online violence.

- In general, the lack of a common definition of OGBV and understanding of its different forms limits the ability for action to be taken. Among legal professionals there is a lack of knowledge and awareness of OGBV, and police often trivialise OGBV and abuse against women.

- **Data on OGBV in this region is incomplete, partly due to underreporting. For example:**
  - A [2019 Moroccan study](#) revealed that only one in ten women reported OGBV to the authorities
  - The Sisterhood is Global Institute in Jordan said that not enough women are aware of the new laws that protect them and thus still do not report harassment.

## Tech company initiatives

- **As can be seen in the rest of the world, tech companies’ responses to reports of harmful content on their platforms is typically insufficient in this region. In the MENA region, this is also exacerbated by language barriers.** For example:
  - Despite being the third most common language on Facebook, the misunderstanding and cultural nuances of the Arabic language and its dialectical spectrum lead to poor and uneven content moderation on social media platforms. Arab activists and journalists are regularly censored and removed from Facebook while they use the platform to document human rights abuses - [this is done most commonly under the pretext of terrorism](#).
  - Meta has only just begun translating the Internal Implementation Standards and Known Questions into dialects of Arabic that its content moderators use.
  - In 2020, Meta spent over 3.2 million hours searching, labelling, or removing ‘false or misleading’ content, but [only 13% of those hours were spent working on content outside of the US](#).
  - In 2020, Facebook employed only 766 content moderators to manually moderate the content published by its 220 million users in the Arabic-speaking world.

## Government initiatives

- **The region is characterised by legislation that is inadequate and/or conflicting, as well as entrenched patriarchal norms, which affect the broader**
understanding of violence against women both socially and legally, and often perpetuates a culture of impunity. In many cases, women are not aware of the laws and procedures available as means to report violence, and when they are aware and do make a report, they are often not taken seriously. For example, in Tunisia, despite the government passing a law on the elimination of all forms of violence against women, prosecutions for online abuse and harassment against women remain rare.

- **Legislation in some countries does not address offline violence against women in the first place.** In countries where there are laws to address it, the definition of violence against women is often incomplete and overlooks cyberviolence. Laws around cybercrime and media are often not gender-sensitive. For example:
  
  - Palestine and Egypt do not have specific, stand-alone laws to prevent and combat violence against women offline.
  - Tunisia’s Violence Against Women law adopts a comprehensive approach, based on protection, care and prosecution. It enshrines a broad definition of violence, encompassing its different forms. However, it makes no mention of any form of violence online.
  - Tunisia’s constitution states that all citizens have equal rights and duties and commits the State to protecting women’s accrued rights and to working to strengthen and develop them. Even though Tunisia’s legal framework on women’s rights is seen to be one of the most progressive in the region, there are still challenges to its implementation, and it remains absent of references to OGBV.
  - In May 2018, the Tunisian Council of Ministers approved a draft cybercrime law that was aimed at preventing and combating cybercrimes of information and communication. Civil society was not consulted in the drafting or review of the bill.
  - Tunisia also has an Organic Law 2004-63 on personal data, which ensures protection of personal data when being processed, but forms of online violence are not addressed within it.
  - The *Commission Nationale de Contrôle de la Protection des Données à Caractère Personnel* in Morocco has jurisdictions that extend to cases of online violence under the mandate of ‘online embezzlement’. The next step would be to amend existing laws to be more gender-sensitive, and to make online violence a stand-alone section, with clear processes.

- **As we see the legislative landscape rapidly evolve on a global level, in the Middle East and North Africa region there is disparity between international agreements and the domestic legal framework.** Although many countries in this region have ratified international conventions, such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), these do not have supremacy over the national legislation.

- **Furthermore, governments across the MENA region appear to use laws with a different purpose than the one originally intended, often as a means of restricting freedom of expression.**
  
  - In Palestine, Jordan and Algeria among others, cybercrime laws and provisions for online hate speech have been used to silence dissent and undermine freedom of expression, rather than to protect victims from harmful content and harassment.
  - In Tunisia, Decree-Law 2022-54 on Cybercrime was issued in September 2022, and is being used to open criminal investigations against a number of
people. This decree-law does not set clear conditions for approving surveillance and data collection measures to ensure that they respect human rights. It permits judicial authorities to order the surveillance of people’s internet use and the collection of their personal data from service providers on the vague grounds that it may help reveal the truth or be necessary to the investigation.

- **There are a few examples of national efforts to increase women’s safety online in Morocco:**
  - The National Union of Moroccan Women established a national online platform to file reports of domestic violence via a mobile app in response to higher risks of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. In case of potential danger, the platform is directly linked with National Security, the Royal Guard and the prosecution, to report cases and intervene quickly.
  - New provisions that deal specifically with cyberviolence were introduced into the Moroccan law on the elimination of violence against women. There is punishment in the form of imprisonment from six months to three years, or a fine of 2,000 to 20,000 dirhams for individuals who share publicly words, information or photographs that were issued in a private setting without consent of the authors. Although this law penalises cyberviolence, it does not define it, meaning its efficacy is limited.

**Civil society initiatives**

- **While the feminist movement in the MENA region is well established, there is a need to bridge the gap between these organisations and the digital rights movement.** Collaboration will enable a stronger approach to tackling OGBV, as women’s rights and digital rights are inherently linked.
  - [The Sisterhood is Global Institute, Jordan](#) is an organisation that aims to increase women’s knowledge on the benefits and protections they have under the new amendments to the income tax law, labour law, civil retirement law and social security law in Jordan, by training and working with community based organisations and groups, young women activists and working women.
  - The [Morocco Cyberconfidence Space](#) has tools and training for safer use of the internet.

*This is not an exhaustive list, please find further information on civil society organizations working in this region [here](#).*

**Case studies**

- [Pen America and the National Democratic Institute developed a guide](#) to provide those affected by OGBV with strategies and resources to continue having an online presence. This has been recently translated into Arabic to support Arabic-speaking communities for the first time in this way.

**Selected reports**
Below are some selected reports on OGBV in MENA. For an extensive list of reports, see here.

- **Virtual violence, real harm: Promoting state responsibility for Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence against Women in Morocco.** A research report that aims to create a knowledge base on OGBV in Morocco and promote state accountability in responding to it. *(Mobilising for Rights Associates, 2019)*

- **Violating Network: Gender-Based Violence against Palestinian Women in the Digital Space.** A research report that aims to monitor OGBV in the Palestinian digital space, looking at the causes, impact and repercussions of the phenomenon in order to make concrete recommendations to combat it. *(Ali, Nijmeh, 2022)*

- **Mapping Digital Rights MENA.** A research report covering the state of legislation, policies and behaviour in relation to OGBV in Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco. *(Innovation for Change and Tamleth - Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, 2021)*

- **Combating Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: An overview of the legislative and policy reforms in the Arab Region.** A research paper arguing that technology contributes to increasing levels of OGBV and that legislation can help to limit this. *(Al-Nasrawi, Sukaina, 2021)*