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Wafic Khalife

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Corresponding author: Wafic Khalife

Author contact: wafic.khalife@lau.edu

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## Social Media: A Curse or a Blessing?

Wafic Khalife

Computer Science Major

### Abstract

Social media gave women a place to express themselves. But in the digital space, women face virtual verbal violence and gender-based constraints such as bullying, body shaming, sexual harassment, and many others. Thus, digital gender safety in the Arab region is an important issue to address. This paper discusses digital gender safety through the concepts of sexualization, sexist language, and gender roles that women face on social media in the Arab region. The paper asks how women can be protected in these spaces, and the types of policies needed to promote women's empowerment across social media platforms.

**Keywords:** social media; online violence; gender-based violence

### Introduction

The exponential growth of internet usage has led to major social changes: Today, social interaction is not only facilitated by technology but progressively dependent on technology. Social media is one key platform for these social interactions. It has become a place where people can share their opinions and express themselves freely. At first glance, social media seems to be a place for open discourse and community engagement. However, in the Arab region, and especially in Palestine, social media has become a space of gender inequality. In these spaces, women, girls, and gender minorities face several constraints. These constraints can

be classified into various categories, for example, gender-based violence (GBV), racism, sexualization, sexual harassment, censorship and ostracization, and threats to their physical safety. These constraints highlight the important issue of digital gender safety on social media platforms. This paper will discuss the multiple constraints delimiting women and girls' use of social media. It will focus on key concepts such as sexualization, sexism and sexist language, symbolic annihilation, gender roles, and gender stereotypes to understand these constraints. The paper will also propose methods and solutions that can empower women and girls to fight against these constraints to achieve gender equality in the digital world. To give more focus to this research, this paper will use Palestinian women and girls' experiences on social media as a brief case study. Following an in-depth literature review, the paper will examine the case of social media and gender equality in Palestine. Lastly, the paper will make several recommendations that can help make social media a gender equitable space.

### **Literature Review**

Women from the Arab region face many barriers as social media users. These barriers are both personal, stemming from their own families and communities, and structural. Some of these constraints include strict censorship from the state and other governance actors. It is well known that many Arab states monitor social media accounts, including those of citizens, for behavior that "violates" social norms or challenges the state (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). For example, 300 Palestinians were arrested in 2021 because of social media posts (Odeh, 2018). Censorship does not only come from the state. Instead, strict censorship laws have created an environment where people fear that their online activities might be in violation of societal norms and standards, which could consequently put their families, their communities, and even

themselves in danger (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). This fear then causes social media users to preemptively censor themselves. In certain cases, women have made fake social media accounts to avoid criticism and to feel a sense of freedom and safety, and to avoid censorship (Al Omoush et al., 2012; Radsch & Khamis, 2013, as cited by de Vries & Majlaton, 2021).

Social media censorship also occurs through the enforcement of traditional gender norms, which dictate how women and girls can behave or the things that they can discuss on social media. Women and girls who violate these social norms often face threats to their personal safety, making them vulnerable online. Gender-based violence (GBV), sexual harassment, and bullying are common in the virtual world, leaving many women and girls feeling unsafe, especially without adequate protections from governments to protect social media spaces. This is exacerbated by the fact that many countries in the Arab region do not have substantive GBV laws to protect women and girls; many countries do not even recognize online violence and harassment of women and girls as a form of GBV (Odeh, 2018). Without legal support, survivors and victims often turn to their own families in some instances to “take care of the issue,” which can often lead to simply ignoring the incident or pretending that it did not happen (Odeh, 2018). In some cases, certain forms of online GBV, including blackmail, sexual abuse, and the non-consensual dissemination of explicit photos, are considered “shameful” to family members, something that the survivor or victim herself might then be wrongfully punished for. Further, most perpetrators of online GBV are not punished, something which is exacerbated by the fact that online users can remain anonymous using fake accounts and fake names. Consequently, this virtual sphere allows aggressors to do things that they would never dare to do in real life.

## **Social Media and Gender Inequality in Palestine: A Brief Overview**

In Palestine, women's freedom of expression has been almost shut down. Strict cultural norms and expectations of women to act in a certain way, such as staying at home to serve as the primary caregiver for children and families, act as barriers between women and freedom of speech (Alyan et al., 2012; Berger, 2017, as cited in de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). In addition, women in patriarchal families are the "pride" of the family and a source of family "honor." Therefore, their actions are often read through this lens, meaning that their actions are always heavily scrutinized for whether they are bringing "shame" or "offense" to the family's reputation (Choudhury & Al-Araj, 2018; Odeh, 2018, as cited in de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). This patriarchal environment locks women out of society and strengthens men's power over them. For that reason, freedom of speech often does not apply to women, especially those in the public sphere, as it is considered a violation of this patriarchal order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, as cited in Odeh, 2018). Collectively, these constraints have worked to silence women in digital spaces and have rendered them vulnerable to violence.

Censorship of women and girls on social media in Palestine takes many forms. Kinship monitoring is when family members monitor each other's activities on social media. Families make sure that all posts on the social media accounts of women from their family abide by traditional societal and cultural expectations of Palestinian women (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). In some cases, families go as far as using tracking and surveillance technologies such as mSpy and other smart phone applications to monitor the calls and texts of family members under the guise of "supervision" (Odeh, 2018).

## Discussion

This literature review has analyzed a few of the many constraints that women in the Arab region face as social media users. It showed that families and society more broadly are responsible for threatening women's freedom of expression. Women's freedom of expression is often denied or monitored through various types of censorship performed by different actors, including the state, families, and communities. It also argued that women's vulnerability when using social media highly affects their engagement rates in virtual spaces. In fact, the increasing prevalence of GBV on social media has led women and girls to fear this space, and to mistrust the patriarchal government that chooses not to protect them from this violence.

However, social media is also a powerful tool for those fighting on behalf of gender equality in the Arab region. First, social media awareness campaigns about the importance of women's freedom of expression on social media, as well as campaigns about gender discrimination, can lessen the current censorship that women face in the virtual space. An example of a successful campaign is the Saudi Arabian campaign about women's right to drive (Agaral et al., 2012, as cited in Hurley 2019). Such campaigns are key to educating people about feminist issues, discrimination against women, and social injustice more broadly. Social media has made it easier to disseminate such information and awareness-raising campaigns to a much larger audience.

Second, social media has become a key tool for mobilizing protesters in response to various issues, including online GBV. Facebook has been a particularly important platform for mobilizing protesters across the Arab region (Salem & Mourtada, 2012). The growth of social media usage or interactions on major topics can influence the government and can change how

governments choose to respond to certain issues (Salem & Mourtada, 2012). Importantly, social media tools, for example hashtags, have made it easier to bring certain issues to the attention of people far beyond the region. These tools must be used to raise awareness about the prevalence of GBV on social media and to demand that governments act.

An example of an initiative where the digital space has helped women is HarassMap. HarassMap is a smart phone application that allows people to report instances of sexual harassment. The application allows the user to input information about the location of the attack, which is then made public so that other users can see exactly where sexual harassment is happening in real time. HarassMap gives survivors and victims the opportunity to talk about their experiences and to work together to protect others from experiencing the same violence. HarassMap offers support and empowerment messages from fellow users to give women a sense of safety and offers them an online space free of violence and censorship.

Similarly, an Instagram account called “pervsoflebanon” has been exposing sexual harassers in Lebanon. Survivors and victims are encouraged to share details about their own stories of assault with the page, whose administrators go on to expose the harasser on social media. The goal of the platform is to raise awareness about sexual violence and harassment in order to protect others. In fact, I know people who, after reporting their experiences to this Instagram account, felt empowered because they exposed their perpetrators. They felt that reporting to this page was an important way for them to make a change following such a horrible experience.

Finally, the rise of social media has led to a movement identified as “cyberfeminism” (Al Rawzi et al.; 2014, as cited in Tazi & Oumlil, 2020). Cyberfeminism is when a group of feminists

who specialize in technology, including social media, can use the power of technology to oppose gender inequality and other social and political constraints that affect women and girls, as well as other marginalized groups (Baumgardner et al., 2011, as cited in Tazi & Oumlil, 2020). Alongside cyberfeminism, access to social media more broadly has contributed to women's empowerment. Social media has given women and girls access to information, it has increased communication between feminists and other social networks, and it has helped to raise awareness about political and social issues (Wheeler, 2007, as cited in Beninger et al., 2016). Consequently, if policies were implemented to support the increasing use of social media by women, online aggressors would be forced to think twice before committing any offense against women because it would be a punishable crime. In this way, the state can help women become less afraid when using social media, thus reestablishing a bit of trust between women and their respective governments. This will also make social media a safer space for women. Moreover, social media platforms should themselves provide their users with an abuse-free environment, as it is their responsibility to ensure the safety of their platform for their users.

## **Conclusion**

Access to a safe online space can empower women even more than it already has, especially if policies are put in place to fight against gender inequality in these spaces. In the Arab region, protecting women and girls in online spaces allows them to fully benefit from social media in the ways discussed above. Rather than allowing social media to remain a dangerous space for women and girls, one that is rampant with GBV, it is important for governments and other key stakeholders to fight back. It is important to challenge GBV and other types of violence that disproportionately affects women and girls, and gender minorities, across social media



spaces because of how useful social media can be for empowering marginalized groups. The goal should be to support women and girls on social media to empower themselves, fight for change, put an end to the patriarchal order, and to continue building progress toward gender equality in the region.

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