CONFRONTING STRUCTURAL SILENCING:

CHALLENGES AND RESISTANCE AMONG FEMINIST ACTIVISTS IN LEBANON

Table of Content

Acknowledgment

Executive Summary

This research examines the challenges that feminist activists in Lebanon face online, where systemic barriers undermine their ability to engage in a safe and inclusive online civic space, free from harassment or repression. Drawing from nine in-depth interviews with both individuals and organizations, as well as comprehensive desk research, the study explores how these obstacles shape activists' resistance strategies and digital activism. It highlights the structural, gendered, and intersectional contexts of their struggles, with visibility emerging as a central element in their online presence. Furthermore, the study offers recommendations to strengthen the online presence of feminist activists, taking into account the specific struggles they face.

Key Findings

Key findings indicate that activists face significant challenges due to oppressive socio-political dynamics and platform-specific policies. These challenges manifest as self-censorship, where activists limit their speech to mitigate safety risks, and strategic invisibility, a deliberate choice to remain less visible in hostile environments. These tactics stem from the persistent threats of misogynist hate speech, doxing, smear campaigns, disinformation, and organized digital harassment, alongside the very real risks of physical violence. Furthermore, activists are confronted with the misuse of legal frameworks by both state and non-state actors, weaponizing laws that criminalize online speech while their privacy is under constant threat, with personal data vulnerable to surveillance and breaches. The absence of effective data protection laws in Lebanon exacerbates these dangers, leaving activists exposed.

Social media platforms, however, are not passive actors in this equation. The algorithms that control content visibility are designed with profit-making at the core, often to the detriment of feminist voices. Feminist content in Arabic—particularly that addressing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), resistance to gender-based violence, and intersectional activism related to Palestine—is disproportionately over-moderated due to algorithmic biases and a failure to understand the linguistic and contextual nuances. At the same time, gender-based hate speech and misogynistic content remains largely unchecked.

An often-overlooked aspect of these struggles is the invisible labor required to maintain a digital presence. Activists must dedicate significant time and resources navigating platform policies, adhering to unwritten rules tied to algorithmic visibility, and producing content that aligns with shifting trends. This work demands expertise, time, and resources—assets that not all activists can afford, further deepening the divide between those who can afford to sustain an online presence and those who cannot.

As a result, many activists are retreating from online spaces, leading to what can be described as "structural silencing." This phenomenon results in the exclusion of marginalized voices from digital discourses, with activists facing multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. The erosion of in-person solidarity, worsened by Lebanon's economic crisis and the pandemic, has only deepened this digital divide. Social media platforms, driven by neoliberal values of individualism, engagement metrics, and sensationalism, undermine the collective, intersectional nature of feminist activism. In response, activists are recalibrating their strategies, moving away from performative acts towards more meaningful collaboration and risk-sharing.

The emotional and psychological toll on feminist activists is another significant consequence. Burnout, stress, and anxiety are direct results of ongoing systemic oppression and the

over-reliance on platforms that fail to protect activists' well-being. Lebanon's socio-political crises and rising attacks on marginalized groups further amplify these mental health challenges, creating a cycle of exhaustion that weakens activists' ability to sustain their work.

The research also uncovers a troubling trend of "slacktivism," where surface-level online engagement is mistakenly seen as meaningful action. Activists argue that digital actions should not replace—but complement—organizing on the ground. Online platforms can amplify movements, but they cannot replace the deep, often difficult work that is done on the streets, in communities, and across collective spaces.

The study concludes with a set of recommendations for feminist activists, donors, digital rights organizations, and social media platforms to alleviate some of these challenges and paving the way forward for strengthening the online feminist civic space within the country.

This research falls under SMEX's commitment to advancing digital rights and fostering a safe and inclusive online environment in West Asia and North Africa (WANA). As part of our dedication to advocating for human rights in digital spaces, we recognize that feminist rights are an integral aspect of human rights. In our mission to support users to engage with digital technology and media responsibly and critically, we also focus on supporting and strengthening digital advocacy in the region. Ensuring that feminist activists can continue their vital work without fear of repercussion or silencing is central to our mission.

Introduction

Social movements often begin in intimate, determined relationships of care, fuelled by a deep yearning for meaningful change. Often informal in structure, they strive to bring about societal change by mobilizing individuals around shared concerns,[1] eventually evolving into powerful engines of political and social participation.[2] Feminism, one of the most prominent social movements in modern times, is broadly defined as collective efforts to improve women's status.[3] Research has traced the origins and evolution of these movements, identifying their phases or "waves," each characterized by distinct goals.[4]

Feminism's latest wave, referred to as "fourth-wave" feminism, is characterized by young female activists (20-30s) who leveraged the power of the internet and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to shape their own narrative and advocate for social justice and gender equality through online platforms.[5]

Social media platforms transformed social movements in significant ways. Online platforms have become essential tools for organizing, mobilizing, and amplifying voices advocating for change. Facebook, Instagram, X, and others provide fast, accessible means to disseminate information, reach large audiences, and garner global support for various causes. This phenomenon, also referred to as digital activism, can be defined as "the use of mobile phones and internet enabled devices in activism campaigns with the goal of social and political change."[6] Digital activism served as a catalyst for mass mobilization movements that swept across countries in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), foregrounding the role of unconventional media in coordinating and organizing protests amid government control and traditional media censorship.[7] In this context, the significance of digital activism extends beyond sheer technological innovation[8] and incorporates social creativity and resilience.[9] These events served as a historical marker that brought women's efforts into the global spotlight, especially the role of young women as key leaders in these movements.[10] Despite varying perspectives on feminism, intersectionality, gender, and social justice, local feminists in the region continue to encounter similar challenges.[11]

---

[1] Van de Donk, W., Loader, B. D., Nixon, P. G., & Rucht, D. (2004). *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements*. Routledge.

[2] So, A. Y. (2000). [Review of the book *Social Movements: An Introduction*, by D. della Porta & M. Diani]. *Contemporary Sociology, 29*(3), 538-540.

[3] The use of the term "women" refers to anyone who identifies as a woman, including trans women.

[4] Rupp, L. J., & Taylor, V. (2013). Feminism and social movements. In D. A. Snow, D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley-Blackwell.

[5] Tazi, M., & Oumlil, K. (2020). The rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region? Cyberfeminism and women's activism at the crossroads of the Arab Spring. *CyberOrient, 14*(1), 44-71.

[6] Joyce, M. C. (2010). *Digital activism decoded: The new mechanics of change*. Idea.

[7] Khondker, H. H. (2011). Role of the new media in the Arab Spring. *Globalizations, 8*(5), 675-679.

[8] Aouragh, M., & Alexander, A. (2011). The Arab Spring: The Egyptian experience: Sense and nonsense of the internet revolution. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 15.

[9] Allagui, I., & Kuebler, J. (2011). The Arab Spring and the role of ICTs. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 1435–1442.

[10] Khamis, S. (2019). Arab women's feminism(s), resistance(s), and activism(s) within and beyond the "Arab Spring": Potentials, limitations, and future prospects. In *The Routledge handbook of contemporary feminism* (pp. 284-301). Routledge.

[11] The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship. (2023). *From histories to futures: A mapping of feminist movements in the MENA region*.

While there is no officially recognized framework for digital activism in Lebanon, women in Lebanon have utilized social media platforms as spaces for solidarity and advocacy, particularly concerning issues such as domestic violence, early marriage, custody, divorce, and sexual education. In her work on the opportunities presented by feminist activism on social media in Lebanon, Hammoud highlights how these platforms have enabled many women to amplify their voices, speak out about the violence inflicted on them, and denounce their aggressors, as well as hold legislators and political leaders accountable.[12]

In their specific line of work, women's rights NGOs in Lebanon have reported that social media platforms play a crucial role in raising awareness, encouraging women's participation, and creating supportive public opinion in activism and advocacy campaigns aimed at abolishing discriminatory laws and advancing gender equality. Additionally, social media serves as a tool for linking women facing gender-based violence with organizations' support services.[13]

There is a notable lack of understanding regarding the specific challenges faced by feminist activists in Lebanon during their advocacy work online. Scholars have studied how these obstacles manifest on a global scale, but there is no comprehensive account of the Lebanese experience and context.

This research aims to minimize this gap by comprehensively examining the obstacles digital feminist activists face in Lebanon. It also seeks to identify and understand the groups and individuals within the feminist activist environment who are systematically marginalized and silenced by broader socio-political structures, with these dynamics extending to social media platforms themselves. The study will investigate the specific ways in which structural barriers manifest and contribute to their exclusion from online discourse and visibility.

Furthermore, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- What specific challenges do feminist activists face in their ability to engage in a free, safe and inclusive online civic space?
- How do these obstacles impact their activism, and in what ways do feminist activists resist or challenge these constraints?
- What strategies can be developed to enhance the online presence of feminist activists in response to the particular challenges they encounter?

Background: The Lebanese Context

Lebanon is currently grappling with severe and overlapping crises, including a financial meltdown described by the World Bank as one of the worst globally since the mid-nineteenth century.[14] Hyperinflation has eroded the value of savings in local currency, while capital controls have made foreign currency savings inaccessible. The Lebanese pound has lost

---

[12] Hammoud, S. (2022). *Digital transformation and feminist activism on social media in Lebanon*. IEMed. https://www.iemed.org/publication/digital-transformation-and-feminist-activism-on-social-media-in-lebanon/

[13] El-Haybi, W. A. (2018). *Impact of nongovernmental organizations promoting and developing women's human rights in Lebanon* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies. https://media-ghi.ghi.aub.edu.lb/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Impact-of-Nongovernmental-Organizations-Promoting-and-Developing-Womens-Human-Rights-in-Lebanon.pdf

[14] World Bank. (n.d.). *Lebanon overview*. Retrieved June 2024, from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview

over 98% of its value since 2019.[15] The COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion have further exacerbated these crises, pushing parts of the population into poverty. Recent Israeli aggressions in South Lebanon and the ongoing war on Gaza have further strained the population, forcibly displacing large numbers internally, with women facing disproportionate vulnerability.[16]

These crises have deeply affected women's socio-economic status and overall well-being. As of 2023, the labor force participation rate for women in Lebanon was alarmingly low at 27.5%, in stark contrast to 65.5% for men.[17] This rate is not only one of the lowest in the region but also globally.[18] This gender disparity is particularly troubling compared to global figures, where women's labor force participation is just under 47% and men's is 72%.[19] Gender-based violence (GBV) is also on the rise, with 43% of women and 30% of men in 2020 reporting that they had witnessed or knew someone who had experienced violence.[20] Period poverty has also emerged as a critical issue, as highlighted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).[21] Furthermore, women's representation in Lebanon's 128-seat parliament stands at a mere 6.25%, highlighting the systemic gender inequalities that persist in the country.[22] Lebanon ranked 133rd out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index in 2024, reflecting the profound gender disparities that continue to challenge the nation's progress.[23]

Institutionalized religion and sectarianism play a central role in perpetuating these inequalities. Sectarianism divides legal authority over personal status matters among religious sects, each enforcing patriarchal laws that deny women equal rights. The political system's reliance on sectarian balance further entrenches these disparities, making legal reform challenging. Specific issues include restrictive personal status laws that limit women's citizenship rights and intrude into their family lives, and outdated Penal Code provisions that fail to address marital rape and provide leniency to rapists who declare an intention to marry their victims.[24]

In this challenging context, social media has emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge for feminist activism in Lebanon. On one hand, these platforms facilitate community building, outreach, and the expansion of women's discourse to a wider audience, enabling the formation of alliances and collaborations. On the other hand, they reinforce

[15] World Bank. (2024). *Lebanon poverty and equity assessment 2024.*
https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-poverty-and-equity-assessment-2024
[16] Diab, J. L. (2024). *Rapid assessment: Gender, conflict, and internal displacement in and from South Lebanon.* CARE International in Lebanon.
[17] World Bank. (n.d.). *Gender data portal.* Retrieved June 2024, from
https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/home
[18] UN ESCWA. (2022). *Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations.* United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA).
https://www.unescwa.org/publications/women-economic-participation-lebanon-mapping-analysis-laws
[19] https://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women
[20] UN Women. (2023). *Gender statistical profile: Lebanon.*
[21] Akik, C., Jamaluddine, Z., & Baroudi, Y. (2022). *Building further evidence for the relevance and importance of adopting sustainable solutions for tackling period poverty in Lebanon.* Report commissioned by UNFPA Lebanon Office.https://lebanon.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/final_report_building_further_evidence_for_ado pting_sustainable_solutions_tackling_period_poverty_in_lebanone_20221214_002.pdf
[22] El Ammar, M., & El Asmar, F. (2023). *Bridging the gaps: Feminist perspectives on policymaking and women's political participation in Lebanon.*
[23] World Economic Forum. (2024). Global gender gap report 2024.
[24] The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship. (2023). *From histories to futures: A mapping of feminist movements in the MENA region.*

patriarchal systems by fostering hate speech and providing a space where harmful content can spread rapidly, often with little moderation or accountability. Algorithms and 'echo chambers' created by social media platforms not only amplify sensationalist and inflammatory content but they also hinder public education and awareness-building efforts by exposing users to content that reinforces pre-existing biases and harmful prejudices. Women, particularly those in leadership positions, are disproportionately affected by online violence and attacks.[25]

As a result, women who express themselves openly or engage in social and political activism often face backlash and harassment online, mirroring pre-existing gender inequalities embedded in Lebanese society. The patriarchal system in Lebanon lies at the core of this phenomenon, establishing and perpetuating harmful societal norms and power dynamics that prioritize male authority and control while subjugating women. This ultimately leads to the intimidation and silencing of women in both physical and digital spaces.

Social tension and economic instability have spilled into the digital sphere, leading to a surge in sextortion complaints, psychological problems, and suicide among young girls after falling victim to cyber-violence.[26] Statistics obtained by SMEX from Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) indicate a significant increase in digital violence against women. Between 2020 and 2023, 80% of digital violence victims were women, while only 20% were men. In 2023 alone, approximately 650 cases of digital violence were reported to the SMEX Digital Safety Helpdesk, 135 of which specifically targeted women. These cases primarily involved online harassment, blackmail, misinformation, and account hacking.[27]

International research highlights the diverse challenges that hinder women's participation in the digital sphere. These obstacles range from the digital divide limiting access, to the limited resources of feminist groups, political repression and surveillance, and the rise of online misogyny. Additionally, the structures of social media platforms—such as commercialization, temporality, and restrictive platform rules—hinder the visibility of social movements.[28] The lack of effective governance over content moderation of hate speech affecting women resulted in many activists leaving these spaces.[29] This issue is glaringly evident in Arabic, the third most commonly used language on these platforms. Facebook's inconsistent approach to content moderation exemplifies its failings: while rigid policies against terrorism and violence stifle political expression, hate speech and misinformation targeting vulnerable groups like women and the LGBTQ+ community continue to spread with impunity.[30]

[25] Kachicho, N. J., & El Asmar, F. (2020). *Social media and women's leadership: A feminist analysis*. HIVOS. https://hivos.org/assets/womeninleadership/2020/11/WE4L-Social-Media-Report-Lebanon.pdf

[26] Beirut.com. (2024). *Local NGO launches awareness campaign on cyber sexual violence in Lebanon*.https://www.beirut.com/en/59991/local-ngo-launches-awareness-campaign-on-cyber-sexual-violence-in-lebanon

[27] SMEX. (2024). *80% of women in Lebanon face digital violence*. https://smex.org/80-of-women-in-lebanon-face-digital-violence/

[28] Şener, G. (2021). *Digital feminist activism in Turkey*. London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/working-paper-series/WP67.pdf

[29] Castillo-Esparcia, A., Caro-Castaño, L., & Almansa-Martínez, A. (2023). Evolution of digital activism on social media: Opportunities and challenges. *Profesional de la Información, 32*(3). https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.may.03

[30] Fatafta, M. (2021). *The destabilization experiment: Facebook is bad at moderating in English. In Arabic, it's a disaster*. Rest of World. https://restofworld.org/2021/facebook-is-bad-at-moderating-in-english-in-arabic-its-a-disaster/

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on capturing the nuanced experiences, reflections, and insights of the feminist activists who participated. Interviews were selected as the primary research method, as they provide in-depth understanding into the complex dynamics of feminist digital activism that cannot be fully captured through online observation alone. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the transcription of these interviews, with a focus on identifying and exploring underlying meanings, patterns, and themes within the qualitative data.

The study includes nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews with feminist activists in Lebanon, conducted between April and June 2024. These interviews were designed to explore the activists' collective, personal, and professional experiences, reflecting on their individual stories and perspectives.

Interviewees were selected based on their self-identification as feminists, either as individuals or representatives of feminist organizations online. While the majority of participants actively engage in feminist activism through social media, some have chosen to distance themselves from major platforms, a topic that will be explored further in this research.

This research does not aim to define who qualifies as a feminist activist, recognizing the lack of a singular definition of feminist activism and the lack of scholarly consensus on what constitutes feminist or women's movements. Instead, it centers on individuals who self-identify as feminists, either personally or through their organizational roles.

The diversity of political views and activities among the interviewees reflects the broad spectrum of Lebanon's feminist movement. Their efforts encompass various initiatives, including awareness-building channels, digital media platforms, NGOs focused on policy reform and gender-based violence services, and grassroots organizations aimed at fostering social and behavioral change. Some also address issues of racial justice, decolonial practices, and the impact of privatization on the feminist internet, acknowledging the interconnections between gender-based, racial, and colonial discrimination. This diversity is intentionally chosen to highlight that, despite varied experiences and practices, feminist actors face common challenges and barriers in the digital sphere. The inclusion of personal narratives and reflections depicts the profound impact of digital activism on the lives of these feminists, both in their online and offline worlds.

The research also relies on an extensive desk review of current literature, encompassing key reports, news articles, policies, academic papers, and research articles authored by organizations, scholars, and activists in recent years. This review explores several crucial areas relevant to the study: global trends in digital activism, with a focus on feminist movements; the state of women's rights and feminist activism in Lebanon; and the influence of political parties and legal frameworks on digital spaces. Additionally, it examines how social media algorithms and content moderation policies impact feminist activism, providing a comprehensive backdrop to the study's findings.

Positionality

As a digital rights organization based in Lebanon and focused on the WANA region, SMEX advocates for online freedom of expression while ensuring digital spaces are safe from discrimination and repression. We recognize the critical role digital platforms play for

marginalized communities, including feminist movements and human rights defenders. Our work is deeply intertwined with Lebanon's socio-political landscape, shaping our perspective on the unique intersection of digital rights, gender-based violence, and political repression that affect the activists we serve.

As an organization that both observes and advocates within this landscape, we recognize the systemic pressures feminists activists face, especially as they navigate censorship, surveillance and digital attacks from both state and non-state actors, including social media platforms themselves.

As the primary researcher, I draw on my identity as a Lebanese woman working within Lebanon's civil society sector. While I am not directly involved in feminist activism, I actively support feminist values in my daily life, staying informed about feminist literature and news and following feminist voices on social media. My role at a digital rights organization, combined with my academic background in public policy and international affairs, as well as my personal experiences as a local woman, shape my understanding of the intersection between digital activism and feminist issues.

The research was conducted during a period of intense regional tension, with Israeli warplanes attacking Gaza and southern Lebanon, with sonic booms reverberating throughout the country. This atmosphere heightened the vulnerability of women, particularly in affected areas, as they faced internal displacement and increased insecurity in various forms.

These circumstances resonate with my personal experience, as well as that of human rights defenders in the country, and feminist activists who participated in this research, highlighting their ongoing fatigue, burnout, and feelings of instability. Recognizing and reflecting on these shared experiences is crucial for understanding the impact of crises on both knowledge production and the lived realities of activists.

Recognizing the ongoing risks, particularly during a time of heightened tension in the region, safety considerations influenced both the research methodology and the way findings were shared. While not all participants required confidentiality, steps were taken to protect the identities and data of those who requested it, with sensitive information anonymized as needed.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory, Feminist Theory, and Intersectionality

Critical Theory

Examining the challenges faced by digital feminist activists requires a clear framework of how relations of power dynamics exist within a society.[31] Traditionally, Critical Theory has focused on critiquing capitalist economies, mass media, and state apparatuses to reveal how these systems maintain inequalities and suppress dissent.[32] However, its scope has expanded over time to include a broader range of social injustices and power relations.

---

[31] Eschle, C., & Maiguashca, B. (2007). Rethinking globalised resistance: Feminist activism and critical theorising in international relations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 9*(2), 284-301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2007.00284.x

[32] Fuchs, C. (2020). *Communication and capitalism: A critical theory* (Vol. 15). University of Westminster Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12fw7t5

One significant evolution within Critical Theory is its growing emphasis on including and addressing the experiences and struggles of groups that have been historically marginalized. This shift allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of power dynamics. By incorporating lenses based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and geographic location, Critical Theory can better account for the complex and intersecting ways in which power operates.[33] Scholarly work has also acknowledged this theory as representing the "politics of resistance."[34]

Critical Theory will be used to analyze how digital platforms, government policies, and societal norms influence the experiences of digital feminist activists in Lebanon. By critiquing these power structures, the research aims to reveal the systemic barriers that hinder activists' efforts and perpetuate their marginalization. It is particularly concerned with the ways in which economic, political, and social systems influence individual and collective experiences. It provides a lens to understand how dominant ideologies, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism are reproduced and challenged within digital spaces.

Feminist Theory

Critical theory challenges the notion of detached, neutral observation, advocating instead for a more engaged and reflexive relationship with its subject matter. Building on this foundation, feminist theory emphasizes reflexivity and participatory research approaches (Fuster Morell 2009, Schurr & Segebart 2012, Sallah 2014),[35] placing socially and historically produced knowledge at the forefront of power expression.

By allowing participants to narrate their own lived experiences, feminist research challenges dominant narratives, empowers marginalized voices, and contributes to a more inclusive and equitable production of knowledge. This includes questioning whose voices are privileged in producing and disseminating knowledge, and whose experiences are marginalized or excluded.

This approach is foundational for analyzing the gendered nature of the challenges faced by digital feminist activists. It offers critical insights into how gender dynamics influence digital interactions and the activism landscape, supporting the research focus on fostering a free, inclusive and safe digital environment for women advocating for change.

Intersectionality

This research is also inspired by an intersectional analysis,[36][37] which attempts to comprehensively understand the diverse experiences of different groups without oversimplifying or ignoring the complexities that arise from their intersecting identities and social positions. It acknowledges that individuals and communities experience multiple forms of oppression and privilege simultaneously.

---

[33] Steinberg, S. R., & Kincheloe, J. L. (2010). Power, emancipation, and complexity: Employing critical theory. *Power and Education, 2*(2), 140-151. https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2010.2.2.140

[34] Eschle, C., & Maiguashca, B. (2007). Rethinking globalised resistance: Feminist activism and critical theorising in international relations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 9*(2), 284-301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2007.00284.x

[35] CFP: Feminism as a method – Feminist epistemologies, methodologies and methods in social sciences. (2024, March 21). *International Conference*. Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. https://cosmos.sns.it/news/cfp-feminism-as-a-method-feminist-epistemologies-methodologies-and-methods-in-social-sciences-2/

[36] Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.

[37] Hancock, A. M. (2016). *Intersectionality: An intellectual history*. Oxford University Press.

For example, within digital feminist activism, an analysis that considers the varied experiences of women migrant domestic workers, refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other 'marginalized' groups would recognize how their identities intersect to shape their distinct perspectives and challenges. This approach aims to avoid a one-size-fits-all methodology by understanding the unique ways in which different identities and social positions interact within broader social, political, and digital contexts.

Integrated Framework

To provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by digital feminist activists in Lebanon, this research employs an integrated theoretical framework combining critical theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how various power structures and social dynamics impact digital activism. By combining these perspectives, the research aims to offer a holistic view of the systemic barriers and gendered challenges within digital spaces.

1. **Systemic Analysis**: Critical theory provides the overarching framework to critique societal structures and ideologies that impact digital feminist activism.

2. **Gendered Perspective**: Feminist theory focuses the critique specifically on gender dynamics and the oppression of women and marginalized genders within these structures.

3. **Inclusive Approach**: Intersectionality ensures that the analysis considers the diverse and intersecting identities of activists, highlighting how multiple forms of oppression could intersect.

Conceptual Framework

Visibility as a Central Concept

As established, the theoretical framework provides the broad, foundational theories that guide the overall analysis of systemic and gendered issues affecting feminist activists online. It shapes the lens through which the research examines power dynamics, societal structures, and the interplay of various forms of oppression.

Examining the different ways in which specific obstacles hinder feminist activism online requires a clear framework and an understanding of the role visibility plays in advancing digital advocacy.

In this context, the conceptual framework focuses on the specific concept of visibility—which operationalizes the theoretical insights. Visibility is key to understanding the challenges feminist digital activists face. In this context, it refers to the extent to which activists, their causes, and their actions are exposed to the public through digital platforms. Visibility plays a dual role: while it can amplify activist voices, it also exposes them to risks like harassment, doxing, and backlash. This framework connects these theories to practical observations, guiding the understanding of visibility as both a tool and a constraint. This approach will assist in analyzing the specific barriers faced by activists, the ways in which they are silenced, and the strategies they employ to resist or navigate these challenges.

By integrating both frameworks, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis that is both theoretically grounded and contextually relevant.

Scholars have noted how social media empowers marginalized groups, allowing them to bypass traditional media and create their own visibility. This has led to the proliferation of counter-public spheres, where activists can influence policymaking and public discourse through a bottom-up approach.[38] [39] Activists in these spaces become "visibility entrepreneurs,"[40] actively shaping their public image and mobilizing support. Thus, gaining or being deprived of visibility is a political act. However, the power of visibility also comes with inherent risks.

In this context, digital platforms serve as both facilitators and gatekeepers of visibility. Algorithms that prioritize engagement determine which voices are amplified and which are suppressed, while content moderation policies can act as punitive measures by either removing or downranking content.[41] It has been argued by Coretti and Pica that these hidden operations "could entail negative consequences for social movements,"[42] as they are operating in a "controlled" environment of visibility.

Even when visibility is not subject to the control of algorithms or content moderation, the challenge remains in the significant safety risks that come with exposure, influencing personal choices about visibility. Activists often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between maintaining visibility for advocacy and withdrawing into invisibility to mitigate these risks.

Thompson's concept of "mediated visibility" shows how digital platforms can empower individuals but also make them more vulnerable. It refers to the way communication media enable individuals and events to reach a wide audience, even without physical presence. This visibility alters the dynamics of power and exposure. While it can help individuals, like politicians, gain support by managing how they are seen, it also carries risks. No matter how carefully visibility is managed, it can easily get out of control and lead to unexpected dangers.[43] For activists, this means using digital platforms to gather support while also being mindful of the risks visibility brings.

Activists typically practice visibility through various actions, including posting content in the form of text, photos, and videos related to their causes, resharing or reposting content, and engaging with others through comments and likes. However, visibility goes beyond these activities; it also involves actions such as being tagged in posts, participating in hashtag campaigns, and joining or hosting live streams.

While they can be powerful tools for advocacy, increasing engagement, and fostering community support, the levels of risk associated with these different types of visibility vary significantly.

For instance, being tagged in posts or images can expand an activist's visibility, but this also exposes them to unwanted attention or harassment. Similarly, commenting on widely viewed or controversial posts may invite scrutiny or backlash from a broader audience. Similarly,

[38] Meikle, G. (2016). *Social media: Communication, sharing and visibility*. Routledge.

[39] Parry, K. (2015). Visibility and visualities: 'Ways of seeing' politics in the digital media environment. In *Handbook of digital politics* (pp. 417-432). Edward Elgar Publishing.

[40] Dayan, D. (2013). Conquering visibility, conferring visibility: Visibility seekers and media performance. *International Journal of Communication, 7*, 17.

[41] Riemer, K., & Peter, S. (2021). Algorithmic audiencing: Why we need to rethink free speech on social media. *Journal of Information Technology, 36*(4), 409-426.

[42] Coretti, L., & Pica, D. (2018). Facebook's communication protocols, algorithmic filters, and protest: A critical socio-technical perspective. In M. Mortensen, C. Neumayer, & T. Poell (Eds.), *Social media, materialities, and protest: Critical reflections* (pp. 81–100). Routledge.

[43] Thompson, J. B. (2005). The new visibility. *Theory, Culture & Society, 22*(6), 31-51.

liking posts or pages may signal support for particular views, leading to associations with certain ideologies or causes, which can further impact the activist's risk profile.

Additionally, the level of risk is influenced by the type of account—public or private—and the presence of personal identifiers:

- **Personal Identifiers:**
  - Name and Face: Activists can be visible through personal details such as their name and face. Combining both identifiers increases the risk significantly, as it provides a complete personal profile that can be targeted.
  - Partial Identifiers: Having only a name or face visible still carries risks but to a lesser extent compared to having both. Activists can still be recognized or linked to their causes and face repercussions.

- **Account Privacy:**
  - Public Accounts: These accounts are fully visible to anyone on the internet, increasing the risk of exposure to harassment and doxing. Their exposure to algorithms can lead to high engagement metrics further fueling the associated risks.
  - Private Accounts: These limit visibility to followers but can still be risky. Followers can share or reshare content through other means such as screenshots or recordings, potentially exposing the activist to a broader audience.

Visibility lies at the heart of the challenges faced by feminist digital activists in Lebanon. It is crucial for understanding who gets to be heard, whose experiences are validated, and who is systematically silenced in digital spaces—and how this occurs. By situating visibility as central to the research, we can explore how various forms of oppression and marginalization intersect to shape the online presence and influence of feminist activists.

In Lebanon, socio-political factors, such as patriarchal norms, sectarianism, political polarization, and hostility towards different marginalized groups further complicate the visibility choices activists make. Strategic visibility or invisibility becomes a survival tool, with activists balancing online advocacy with the realities of their environment.

Findings and Discussion

Feminist Backlash amid Digital Repression

Socio-political factors significantly shape the online discourse of activists, often forcing self-censorship or what is referred to as "strategic invisibility." In this context, the prevailing political climate dictates how and whether certain topics can be openly addressed. This approach is not seen as a compromise but a way to outsmart the system, deeply rooted in patriarchy.

The following section will explore how different forms of digital repression have affected online feminist activism.

Testimonies presented by feminist activists who were interviewed for this research emphasize the considerations involved in deciding to be visible in online activism amid these challenges. Sarah Kaddoura, a Palestinian feminist activist, researcher, and founder/ producer of feminist digital platform Haki Nasawi reflects on her decision to make herself

publicly visible in the digital space, emphasizing safety and logistical considerations. She stated: "For me, it took a long time to decide that it was worth it to be visible in general online, with my face, name, voice, and all of that because I felt like I was in a place where I can guarantee my safety to an extent or I have the ability to distance myself a little bit."

Sarah highlights the privilege tied to visibility in feminist activism, explaining, "I was only able to become visible online when I felt I had sufficient support—when I was independent from my family and had a supportive partner." Her perspective points out how privilege, whether financial, social, or geographical, empower activists to speak out openly without fear of serious repercussions. In contrast, she acknowledges the harsher realities faced by activists in less privileged situations or those living under oppressive regimes in the region.

The focus here is on anonymity, which can offer protection for activists, allowing them to express themselves without the immediate risk of retaliation. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the darker side of anonymity: it can also shield individuals who engage in online violence and harassment, allowing harmful behavior to flourish without real-world consequences.

"Anonymity offers certain advantages," explains Kareem, "For example, some outlets can make bolder or more sensational statements because their identity remains hidden. This helps avoid the risk of tracking the individual behind it or jeopardizing the organization and its services to the community."

By choosing to remain anonymous, activists can push boundaries and make provocative statements that might otherwise invite backlash or jeopardize organizational stability or community services. Kareem Nofal is a Communications Specialist at Anti-Racist Movement (A.R.M.), a feminist grassroots collective organizing with migrants for social, economic and gender justice in Lebanon.

Women, and particularly in Lebanon and the broader Arab world encounter a range of risks influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, those from lower socio-economic strata may lack the financial resources—among other forms of support, as discussed below—to mitigate the repercussions of their activism. In this context, gender alone does not provide a complete picture, and class and social identity also significantly influence their experiences.

The intersection of these factors means that while some individuals face heightened vulnerabilities, others might experience and manage risks in different ways. Unlike Western constitutions, which recognize the individual as the fundamental unit of society—mirroring the individualistic neoliberal system—Arab constitutions regard the family as the primary social unit.

Stephan examines the dual role of kinship in women's activism, noting that while it can offer support, it can also suppress women's efforts by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting their participation in public life. In Lebanese society, social capital is often derived from family membership and nurtured through extended family networks. Stephan observes that the extent of family support varies based on factors such as social class, community, origin, and education level. This variability explains why the women's movement, both globally and in the Middle East, emerged prominently in the nineteenth century, largely due to the involvement of elite women in public advocacy. These women were often influenced by their families' commitment to social reform and justice.[44] While kinship can empower

---

[44] Rupp, L. J., & Taylor, V. A. (1987). *Survival in the doldrums: The American women's rights movement, 1945 to the 1960s*. Oxford University Press.

women economically, mentally, and socially, it can also act as a primary agent of control and suppression particularly for women who face patriarchal expectations and restrictions within family structures, as it enforces societal norms that limit their autonomy and activism.[45]

Activists living with unsupportive families can also face restricted movement due to conservative family norms,[46] which can, in some cases, escalate to the threat of eviction and homelessness. This is especially true for women who hold non-traditional religious views, promote sexual health and rights, or openly discuss these topics, as well as for those who identify as LGBTQ+, facing an additional layer of discrimination.[47] In contrast, women with greater freedom to travel and move independently face fewer obstacles in engaging in activism and networking. Those with access to financial security or independent housing are better equipped to manage these risks, especially if they reside in urban areas that provide widespread access to essential facilities such as transportation, whereby they enjoy greater freedom from family control than in remote areas and villages.[48]

Lack of access to legal resources is another critical factor. The substantial cost and unequal financial burden of personal status court battles on women has been promptly documented.[49] When it comes to activists, those without access to legal counsel face daunting legal battles and risk potential imprisonment, while those with financial resources or supportive networks may navigate these challenges more effectively.

Therefore, within these systems, roles and privileges can be negotiable. Capitalism allows for the purchase of privilege, and social systems permit the use of influence or connections for immunity. The issue extends beyond an activist's commitment or determination to embrace the risks associated with visibility. It is also essential to recognize the disproportionate burden imposed on those who lack sufficient support. The primary concern lies in the additional strain faced by those who live without the necessary resources or backing to manage the challenges of being visible and active.

At times, this makes visibility a privilege rather than a choice for everyone equally. While anonymity can protect individuals from direct threats, it can limit their impact and potential in activism. The privilege of being visible comes with the ability to influence public discourse, mobilize support, and actively advocate. Thus, while anonymity could offer safety to an extent, it does not negate the systemic privileges that enable some to be openly visible activists without facing severe repercussions.

It is crucial to stress that this discussion is not aimed at demonizing individuals who enjoy privilege. We acknowledge their potential in advocacy and their important role in helping to carry the message and support the cause. This perspective is further supported by Aliaa Awada, journalist, founder, and managing director of "NO2TA" the Feminist Lab, an organization dedicated to provoke social change through feminist media production. She also serves as a campaigns and media advisor at ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality, a civil society organization advocating for gender equality in Lebanon and the region. She stated: "I see privilege as an opportunity for us to push for our activism and

[45] Stephan, R. T. (2009). *The family and the making of women's rights activism in Lebanon* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin).

[46] Freedom House. (2005). Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

[47] Meem. (2009). Bareed Mista3jil. Published in Beirut, Lebanon, by Meem organization.

[48] Osman, G. (2022). What Constitutes Feminism? A Study on Contemporary Feminist Activism in 2020 Beirut (Doctoral dissertation).https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/211332228.pdf

[49] Barakat, S. (2018). *The cost of justice: Exploratory assessment on women's access to justice in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Yemen*.

messaging." These individuals can leverage their social and economic capital to amplify the voices of more marginalized women, access platforms that may be out of reach for others, and provide critical resources and support to movements.

These insights emphasize the challenges of visibility in digital activism, where decisions to be public or anonymous are shaped not only by personal safety but also by broader socio-political contexts and support systems. They highlight the inequalities that dictate who can afford to be visible and who must remain anonymous to continue their advocacy work safely.

Hate Speech, Smear Campaigns, Death Threats, and Patriarchal Family Structures

Online violence (cyberviolence), has become a pervasive and escalating issue, particularly for feminist activists. Social media platforms often shield perpetrators with anonymity, allowing them to harass and intimidate activists behind screens without facing immediate consequences. Even when identities are disclosed, the distant nature of the online environment often downplays aggressive and hostile behavior, making it seem more "acceptable" compared to face-to-face interactions. As a result, perpetrators might feel that their actions are unlikely to result in any serious repercussions.

Until recently, there has been no standardized definition of online violence, and the phenomenon continues to develop. A recent study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has identified nine areas of online abuse. These include overt forms such as stalking, extortion, intimidation, harassment, gender-based hate speech, and non-consensual use of intimate images, as well as subtler forms like using internet-connected devices for surveillance, trolling, and doxing.[50] Feminist activists in Lebanon, like many women, face different forms of cyber violence against women and girls (CVAWG) on a daily basis, but their heightened visibility often intensifies this violence. These various forms of harassment can contribute to significant stress and trauma for activists and pressure them into self-censorship, discouraging them from speaking out. As a result, some may withdraw from certain platforms, switch to private modes, or even delete their accounts altogether.

A feminist journalist and activist who preferred to remain anonymous under the pseudonym of Rasha for personal safety reasons is involved with Sharika Wa Laken, a pioneering feminist digital news platform for women. She describes a disturbing trend of the emergence of "tools for repression": "Just as tools exist to assassinate [your character] in real life; virtual assassinations and attempts to silence voices virtually have also become prevalent." This observation was evidently portrayed in Sarah's experiences of targeted online harassment, which highlights the extent to which digital platforms have become arenas for gender-based attacks. A known YouTuber has made multiple videos spreading hateful and misogynistic misinformation about Sarah and her identity. Sarah recounts these incidents with a mix of frustration and bitter irony: "Perfect! This is amazing, you don't know who I am, […] you don't even know where I am and you're just going to spread hate about me, I love it, this is fantastic."

---

[50] European Institute for Gender Equality. (2022). *Combating cyber violence against women and girls."* https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/combating_cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls.pdf

One of the most alarming challenges outlined by Aliaa is the targeted personal attacks that extend beyond the activist on an individual level to their families coupled with doxxing: "Attacks, like when they find the pictures of your son or your family, and they start posting it. That is very dangerous, putting you, your family, and community at risk." This form of intimidation does not silence activists themselves but poses a direct threat to their loved ones. This is aggravated by targeted misinformation campaigns aimed at a certain individual: "When you put the photo and name of an activist online and say this person is encouraging xyz to corrupt our societies, it is very risky. You are sharing information about a woman and her home address, she is at risk of being stabbed on the streets at any second."

False accusations and public defamation campaigns further increase the fear faced by activists related to online smear campaigns that can escalate to physical violence on the ground at any time.

Sarah highlights a particularly disturbing aspect of the online harassment she encounters: personal attacks that involve her family, particularly male relatives. Feminist theory highlights that women often endure multiple layers of oppression, where the public sphere of online threats and the private sphere of familial backlash intersect, reinforcing their subjugation. Sarah explained that some of the backlash she experiences comes from her own family members, who hold strong opinions and attempt to impose their views on her. This type of male dominance is further legitimized in public discourse as well, as she recalls instances where people would reach out to her brother or make comments such as "your father didn't raise you," and "where are your brothers?" […] She also felt like there was an overarching theme of male dominance, where perpetrators would insinuate that if the men in her family saw her statements, she would be put back in place. These are rooted in patriarchal notions that serve as a blatant reminder that traditional social structures that prioritize male authority still exist and exert control over female behavior. In the same vein, women are seen as extensions of their male relatives—fathers, brothers, or husbands. This belief system not only allows to regulate women's behavior but also ties their honor and reputation to male family members.

Coping with this kind of hate speech is often a challenge for these women. Sarah, for instance, copes by filtering comments and deleting hurtful messages. She says that since she started filtering the comments, she is not getting as much hate as she normally would. Some of her videos, particularly on certain topics, such as one involving hymen and virginity, are often met with intense backlash.

Digital Armies, Bots, and Troll Farms

In Lebanon, the pervasive "us vs. them" narratives, deeply rooted in sectarian and tribal identities, not only reinforce conservative and patriarchal norms but also directly impact feminist activism by framing it as a threat to cultural and religious values. This cultural-religious paradigm leads to the organized suppression of feminist voices, with activists often accused of being foreign agents funded by the West to corrupt society: "Depending on the issue we're addressing [...] we are labeled as traitors," expresses Rasha.

"I think that the public is furious with righteous indignation about a thousand different things. And they are waiting and waiting for anything to attack you for. […] There is something tribal, there is deliberate—the parties and sects now have digital armies," according to Nadine Moawad, a feminist activist working at the intersection of tech, labor, and social movements. This perspective highlights how societal divisions and political factions can sometimes aid in intensifying hostility towards feminist activism in Lebanon.

Nadine also notes a shift from past interactions, where online confrontations were more like "duels," implying a certain level of fairness or equality in the exchanges. In contrast, the current climate is dominated by highly organized groups that overwhelm activists with "millions" of fake accounts. Similarly, Aliaa is also wary of this deviation in numbers: "We have hundreds, they have thousands. Sometimes it's not about solidarity but about our presence size online, and how well organized we are to stand against them, it is very difficult honestly. Since the other part understands very well the power of digital media."

These digital armies can vary in nature, ranging from bots and fake accounts to more sophisticated forms such as troll farms (organized groups that use fake accounts or automated bots to spread disinformation and disrupt online discussions). While most commonly used by the political class in Lebanon as means to spread disinformation, often as a tool to gain an advantage in elections.[51] They are also used to silence any opposing voices criticizing them by intimidating activists with fake accounts.[52] They assert their dominance by ensuring the removal of opposing content and comments from the platforms with systemic mass flagging,[53] or through online harassment tactics, including insulting and threatening activists, especially women. In these cases, the threats often take a gender-specific form, manifesting as rape threats and doxxing.[54] [55]

On one hand, bots are automated social media accounts that operate around the clock. When deployed for malicious purposes, they serve to spread disinformation, increase polarization, influence public opinion or harass and intimidate individuals, creating a hostile online environment. They can be rather hard to detect as they can vary in their level of automation. This is because "inauthentic accounts," which are the most common type of bots, may involve some level of human control or partial automation, allowing them to mimic human behavior more effectively.[56] Their danger lies in the normalization of online violence, as real users can get drawn into that emotional turmoil and join in the spread of hateful behavior, blurring the lines between genuine human-generated attacks and automated ones.

On the other hand, fake accounts are created and managed by real people. These profiles impersonate others or create fictitious identities, complete with profile pictures, posts, and interactions that can make them appear legitimate. Controlled by humans, fake accounts can post and interact in more believable ways than bots.

Troll farms represent the most organized and coordinated effort among these elements. These are groups of individuals who collectively manage multiple fake accounts and bots to manipulate online discussions, spread disinformation, and harass targeted individuals or

[51] The New Arab. (2022). *Disinformation and electronic armies: How Lebanon's political class uses fake news to win elections*. https://www.newarab.com/analysis/disinformation-and-electronic-armies-lebanons-elections

[52] SMEX. (2023). *Lebanon: Summoning journalists in Beirut and silencing voices in Mount Lebanon*. https://smex.org/lebanon-summoning-journalists-in-beirut-and-silencing-voices-in-mount-lebanon/

[53] The New Arab. (2022). *Disinformation and electronic armies: How Lebanon's political class uses fake news to win elections*. https://www.newarab.com/analysis/disinformation-and-electronic-armies-lebanons-elections

[54] L'Orient-Le Jour. (2022, August 14). *Dima Sadek denounces social media threats after commentary on Rushdie*. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1308499/journalist-dima-sadek-denounces-threats-made-against-her-in-response-to-her-social-media-commentary-on-rushdie-attack.html

[55] SMEX. (2022). *Doxxing of residential information targeting vulnerable groups: Online and offline harms.* https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Doxxing-of-Residential-Information-Targeting-Vulnerable-Groups_-Online-and-Offline-harms-Redacted.pdf

[56] Euronews. (2019). *Lebanon protests: Are bots fueling counter-demonstrations?* https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2019/10/25/lebanon-protests-are-bots-fuelling-counter-demonstrations

groups, and in this case, activists. Troll farms operate under strategic agendas, typically with financial backing, and are capable of launching large-scale harassment campaigns.

According to Nadine, the backlash against feminist activism is heavy and organized, as these threats are of deliberate and institutionalized nature. "It is institutionalized and it has financing and it has its men as backers […] all these troll farms that you see in photos online, they are frightening." She also stressed on the idea that such practices make a person rethink the space they are doing their feminist activism in, which is hostile to feminism in nature. Troll farms are against platform policies, but due to their organized and sophisticated nature, it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect them.

The gap in collective defense mechanisms and the lack of protection measures provided by platforms and regulatory bodies leave individual activists even more vulnerable to such coordinated attacks. Activists stress the importance of addressing safety and security collectively, advocating for shared strategies and political decision-making among feminist actors. This collaborative approach is a direct response to the inadequacies of social media platforms and governing bodies in regulating hostile environments. Without systemic accountability, the responsibility for protection unfairly falls on the victims themselves.

Vulnerable Communities: Facing Escalated Hostility and Threats

Feminist advocacy is inherently crosscutting and intersectional, addressing the struggles of all women and advocating for equality without turning away from marginalized groups. This commitment persists despite polarized public opinion from political or religious factions and the prevalence of hateful discourse. In Lebanon, this often means supporting individuals whose identities, existence, or value are topics of widespread moral, cultural, and political debate. This includes the LGBTQ+ community, migrant domestic workers, refugees, and advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), all of whom frequently face heightened hostility and threats, including intensified hate speech and targeted harassment. In response, many feminist organizations and individual activists have adopted cautious strategies—such as strategic invisibility, safety guidelines, and the reliance on allies—that prioritize their own safety and that of the communities they support.

This is particularly evident when feminist activists engage in discussions concerning LGBTQ+ issues. They often face hostility and backlash from both the public and the government. As Rasha observes, "When you bring up the LGBTQ+ community, there's backlash. Our challenges increase, and the attacks, hate speech, misinformation, incitement, and defamation campaigns intensify."

The intersection of feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy is critical, as both seek to dismantle oppressive systems and promote equality. However, recent escalations in hostility have led activists to adopt more cautious strategies. Ghewa Nasr, feminist,political activist, and program coordinator at FEMALE, a non-profit grassroots feminist organization based in Lebanon and committed to creating a just and safe world for women and girls in all their diversities, reflects on this shift.

"Recently, especially after the backlash, we have had to go on low visibility more often," she noted. This change follows a violent incident during the March of Freedoms on September 30, where civil society groups protesting against the crackdown on personal and political freedoms in Lebanon were surrounded by mobs on motorcycles, armed with sticks. The attackers threatened, insulted, and physically assaulted the protesters.

This violence was preceded by an online incitement campaign against the protest, led by public, religious, and political figures in the country. The campaign threatened activists with violence for protesting and falsely accused the demonstration of promoting deviancy—specifically, the promotion of homosexuality—despite the fact that the protest did not raise any demands related to LGBTQ+ rights in Lebanon.[57] This follows a recent emerging trend, where groups in Lebanon have increasingly described the use of terms like "freedoms" and "rights" as LGBTQ+ "propaganda," enhancing backlash against civil rights movements.[58]

Heeding the advice of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) regarding the online threats and in the interest of their personal safety, activists decided to hold a sit-in instead of a march. Nonetheless, eyewitness accounts and video evidence reveal that the ISF failed to intervene as attackers threw stones, shouted homophobic slurs, and physically assaulted protesters in the sit-in. Amnesty International has called for an urgent investigation into the premeditated assault on protesters, including the failure of Lebanese security forces to protect them.[59] Additionally, despite the perpetrators of these attacks openly flaunting their actions on social media with their identities clearly visible, the Lebanese judicial authorities have failed to take any necessary step toward holding them accountable.[60]

Following the incident, the backlash campaign escalated online with new ones spreading hate speech and incitement to violence. A video circulated on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, doxxing a group of feminist activists who participated in the protest by exposing personal details about their jobs, lives, and addresses.[61] Despite reporting the content to the platforms, none of them took action to remove it, leaving the activists vulnerable to further harassment and threats. The violence and subsequent personal targeting of women and girls involved in the organization forced the director and members to ensure lower visibility to protect themselves.

This case exemplifies how online and offline threats can be interconnected. For activists, what began as digital incitement quickly escalated into physical violence, and the harassment continued online through doxxing and targeted attacks on activists.

In recent years, the Lebanese government's tightening restrictions on LGBTQ+ advocacy, combined with the rise of far-right extremist groups like "Jnoud el Rab" (Soldiers of God), has intensified the climate of hostility. Activists have pointed out the severe lack of robust support systems, which forces them to carefully reconsider their visibility strategies. This cautious approach, while aimed at preserving safety, sometimes results in a form of self-censorship. "The terrifying national campaigns happening in Lebanon must also be taken into account. Therefore, you must consider the context and know if the news you publish will contribute to awareness or increase the harm to any of these groups you work with," says Ghewa.

---

[57] MENA Rights Group. (2023). *Lebanese authorities fail to protect the right to peaceful assembly during the Freedom March of 30 September 2023*.
https://menarights.org/en/articles/lebanese-authorities-fail-protect-right-peaceful-assembly-during-freedom-march-30

[58]
https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/lebanon-investigate-assault-on-freedom-march-protesters/

[59] ibid

[60] Amnesty International. (2023). *Lebanon: Investigate assault on Freedom March protesters*.
https://www.menarights.org/en/articles/lebanese-authorities-fail-protect-right-peaceful-assembly-during-freedom-march-30#_ftn4

[61] SMEX Digital Safety Helpdesk.

Activists often grapple with the dilemma of using online spaces to raise awareness about sensitive, taboo, or provocative issues like LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive health, while also trying to avoid inadvertently causing more harm to themselves and their communities. When it comes to SRHR awareness building efforts for example, abortion remains a highly controversial topic in Lebanese society. "So there are these choices that happen where you want to put this knowledge or information out there, and you want to write about something but you don't want to bring the backlash that would ruin the whole thing. We just need it to be out there for people that are looking hard enough," explained Sarah.

Digital feminist activists have been advocating for strategies that prioritize community safety over broad visibility. Sometimes this comes in the form of refraining from boosting posts on social media platforms as a deliberate safeguard against doxxing and other forms of digital harassment. Maha[62], a feminist and social activist based in Beirut, who preferred to remain anonymous for personal safety reasons, shares her experience. She notes, "When it comes posting on social media and conducting workshops, community safety is an important factor to take into consideration for us, it seems counterproductive to be boosting it where everyone isn't going to say something that is of relevance to them but might simply jeopardize their space."

Activists often employ strategies that target specific audiences when discussing sensitive issues. As Maha explained, instead of broadly boosting posts, they carefully select who sees their content to avoid drawing unwanted attention from groups that may engage in doxxing or other forms of harassment. In this case, they target outreach to those most impacted, supportive or interested individuals, and those on the periphery who may be aware but not deeply involved.

Migrant workers, particularly those who are undocumented, face additional layers of risk. Kareem emphasizes the importance of strategic visibility, noting that while visibility can mobilize support, it also exposes migrant activists to unique threats.

"You have to be very careful because their status in the country or activism could be used against them. They could face deportation or arbitrary arrest," explained Kareem. "This is why we choose to focus on strategic visibility rather than working on exposure."

Informed consent is crucial in this case. Activists need to be fully aware of the risks of online visibility. In extreme cases, this could mean exposure to cyberviolence and its repercussions on their wellbeing. Kareem emphasizes the need for clear guidelines in activist communities to ensure that visibility efforts support, rather than compromise, the safety and rights of those they advocate for. These guidelines and strategies vary, however. In some cases, activists might choose to hide their face, but that might undermine the human connection of seeing a real human being behind a screen. Recognizing the importance of what feels like "real" interactions, they have opted for using initials or changing names to protect identities. While these methods may seem simple, they can be essential for maintaining safety online.

Lebanon's feminist digital landscape is far from homogeneous; it includes activists from diverse backgrounds, illustrating the intersectional challenges faced by feminist advocates across the country. Syrian feminist activists, for example, face unique challenges, marked by heightened racial and xenophobic hostility. Syrian women advocating online for refugee rights in Lebanon encounter severe threats, including defamation (e.g., false accusations of prostitution), death threats, threats of abduction against their children, fabricated sexual photos, harassment through reported profiles, and fears of imprisonment or deportation. The

---

[62] pseudonym

pervasive lack of safety in Lebanon's digital spaces has even led many female Syrian activists to seek asylum abroad.[63] These dynamics have pushed vulnerable communities to strategically withdraw from the online public eye, leading to an increased reliance on allies to advocate on their behalf in hostile environments.

"And already the same thing has been happening to the Syrian refugees during the last years in Lebanon, not only the last couple of years but mostly the last year, a feeling of we're going to take a step behind, and Lebanese people or activists who can lobby on our behalf or can speak our behalf, because speaking right now brings a lot of violence which can be physical and harmful,"pointed out Sarah, reflecting on her position as a Palestinian activist residing in the country.

Kareem explained the recent surge in online backlash against Syrian refugees by highlighting how politicians, mainstream media outlets, religious leaders, and politically affiliated groups have shaped the public discourse over the past two years. Unfortunately, Syrian refugees have become scapegoats for the country's failures. The offline impact of disinformation and incitement campaigns has become more evident recently.

Maha expresses strong opposition to the visibility politics often imposed by donors, arguing that their emphasis on public exposure can endanger the safety of individuals in campaigns for queer or migrant worker rights. For instance, donors might pressure activists to include the name of a migrant woman who prefers to remain anonymous, potentially putting her at risk. She describes this situation as a double-edged sword: on one hand, visibility is crucial for raising awareness and ensuring people understand the issues at stake. At the same time, it should never come at the expense of the safety and security of those being represented. She argues that the primary goal should be to protect and advocate for vulnerable individuals, rather than to "pump up" the profiles of donors or funders.

Legal Repression, Lack of Support Systems, and Strategic Invisibility

This structural silencing extends beyond socio-political pressures and includes legal repression. Rasha stated that when dealing with issues where the law enables repression, attacking that repression essentially means attacking the law, government institutions, and the judiciary. As a result, rather than targeting the oppressor, one becomes the focus of the judicial system.

Visibility here is linked to state power and its capacity to mark and prosecute those whose visibility is perceived as challenging social norms, leading to a mode of conditioned visibility and careful self-disclosure.[64]

In this case, Sharika Wa Laken shared survivors' testimonies on its social media platforms regarding a sexual harassment case and faced a defamation and slander lawsuit by the accused. This legal action not only targeted the organization but also sought to silence the survivors' voices. Rasha recounts the events: "You know, this is always the weapon used by anyone who commits an assault, especially sexual assault. When the perpetrator filed a lawsuit, editor-in-chief Hayat Mirshad was summoned for investigation to the Cybercrime Bureau, not the Press Bureau where journalists usually face consequences."

---

[63]SyriaUntold. (2020). *The options for Syrian female activists in Lebanon: Fear, imprisonment or departure*. https://syriauntold.com/2020/05/22/the-options-for-syrian-female-activists-in-lebanon-fear-imprisonment-or-departure/
[64] Moussawi, G. (2020). *Disruptive situations: Fractal orientalism and queer strategies in Beirut*. Temple University Press.

Despite Mirshad presenting her membership card from the Lebanese Press Editors Syndicate and proving that the lawsuit was related to her journalistic work, Judge Zaher Hmedeh of the Appellate Public Prosecutor in Beirut insisted she appears before the Cybercrime Bureau.

This move was a blatant violation of the Publications Law, which stipulates that investigations related to journalistic work should be conducted by the Publications Court.[65] The Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Protection Bureau subpoenaed Hayat Mirshad, to appear before them, in response to a "libel and slander" complaint filed by the accused. In Lebanon, while the state constitution protects freedom of expression, online speech has been criminalized under articles 384, 386, and 388 of the Penal Code, which detail punishments for defamation, slander, and libel, as well as similar articles in the military code.[66]

Legal mechanisms can be abused to intimidate and silence, and this misapplication of jurisdiction acts as a tactic to legally harass journalists, deterring them from pursuing sensitive stories, and contributes to a chilling effect on free speech. This incident falls under a broader trend where government security officials pressure individuals to remove posts—mainly those criticizing government officials, political parties, or the army—from social media pages, blogs, and websites. Individuals are frequently summoned to appear before the Cybercrimes Bureau and asked to sign a pledge and delete their social media posts.[67] There have also been reports of raids targeting activists' homes on several occasions, asking them to hand over their phones.[68] The organization's legal team's advice to "tone it down" proves the constant balancing act that activists have to navigate between remaining visible, telling the testimonies of survivors, and avoiding legal repercussions. The organization was forced to adopt a more cautious approach: "Ultimately they will shut your mouth. I mean, this is something that when you are an organization, you need to adhere to, to some extent, but this adherence we're talking about is definitely not submission. You need to maneuver cleverly a bit, just as they maneuver, you need to maneuver to remain present", comments Rasha.

While the importance of survivors' testimonies is widely acknowledged, the risks of making these testimonies public are also significant, particularly when facing well-supported individuals. Rashafurther explains: "Perpetrators with strong connections or influence manipulate the law to "continue their assaults, not just sexually, but morally too [...] We stood firm because we were asked to remove the post and we did not, as we consider it a retreat and betrayal to the witnesses."

The need for evidence and careful legal arrangement becomes vital to safeguard both the safety and long term sustainability of feminist activists. Careful legal arrangement refers to the strategic preparation of legal defenses, such as gathering solid evidence and seeking legal counsel, to guard against potential lawsuits and retaliation from powerful perpetrators. If activists become entangled in expensive and lengthy legal battles, their financial ability to

[65] Sharika Wa Laken. (2023). *Hayat Mirshad summoned for interrogation… A battle of snatching freedoms and validating survivors*.
https://en.sharikawalaken.media/hayat-mirshad-summoned-for-interrogation-a-battle-of-snatching-freedoms-and-validating-survivors/
[66] SMEX. (2019). *SMEX launches Muhal, its FoE-related case online database*.
https://smex.org/smex-launches-muhal-its-foe-related-case-online-database/
[67] Freedom House. (2023). *Lebanon: Freedom on the Net 2023*.
https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-net/2023
[68] SMEX. (2023). *Lebanon: Summoning journalists in Beirut and silencing voices in Mount Lebanon*.
https://smex.org/lebanon-summoning-journalists-in-beirut-and-silencing-voices-in-mount-lebanon/

sustain their work becomes jeopardized. This is especially true when dealing with influential individuals who exploit their connections and power as Rasha explained in another similar case: "Honestly, we are living in a world of the strong and the weak. This wasn't a powerless harasser—one might wonder, 'What can he really do?'—but when dealing with someone well-supported, well-connected, and with *wasta* (nepotism or connections), the stakes are different. We know that if this influential figure decides to sue us, it will be costly, and our sustainability could be at risk." The term "wasta," which refers to the use of personal connections to gain favors, points to the arbitrary nature of the threats these activists face.

The organization is forced in this case to opt for a cautious approach which involves holding testimonies until they are "more armed" and ready to withstand potential legal battles. This strategic invisibility allows them to continue their advocacy behind the scenes while preparing for safer, more impactful public actions: "She further elaborates on the risks involved, highlighting that these dangers extend beyond the organizational level and can also impact individuals on a personal level. "Even I had to step back and look at it from the outside and say that yes, this is a risk for me. If the news goes out in my name, I would be in big trouble. […] Choosing to be invisible is related to the strength of the entity posing a threat and danger to you, their connection to the system and authority, and at the same time, the extent to which this authority provides laws that enable these individuals."

Similarly, people from the LGBTQ+ community have faced severe offline consequences due to targeted online harassment, which has led to blackmail, forced outings, family violence, arbitrary arrests and even physical violence by the country's Internal Security Forces (ISF).[69]

Migrant and refugee women face dual threats, particularly in terms of harassment and arbitrary arrests or detention. Kareem explains that the targeting of activists is linked to multiple factors: "Many of these cases are documented online on our website, which reflects our case-by-case advocacy connected to their activism." Consequently, these activists are at risk not only because of their advocacy but also due to their legal status. Kareem notes, "We're trying to understand whether the backlash is triggered solely by their activism, their undocumented status, or if they've upset someone influential who wants them out of the country, regardless of their documentation." As a result, they may face harassment or deportation not necessarily for legal violations but rather due to personal vendettas or efforts to silence their activism.

Hence, the lack of adequate support systems and protective mechanisms for activists can greatly impact their ability to engage in contentious or high-risk situations.

Sarah shares similar fears as a Palestinian activist living in Lebanon: "I feel like sometimes I avoid being in conflict with people here because I don't have someone backing me up. I don't have anything. I don't want to go through it."

"We don't have actual substantial protection mechanisms," laments Kareem. Activists face systemic challenges when it comes to addressing cyberbullying and online harassment through formal channels. For him, the fear of retaliation or being perceived as the aggressor complicates seeking recourse through official avenues like the cybercrime unit, shedding light on the limitations in legal and institutional support for activists.

---

[69] Human Rights Watch. (2023). *"All this terror because of a photo": Digital targeting and its offline consequences for LGBT people in the Middle East and North Africa*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt

In Lebanon, there is no specific law that addresses cybercrime directly. Instead, cases of libel and slander committed online and on social media are governed by the Lebanese Penal Code (Legislative Decree No. 340/1943), the E-Transactions and Data Protection Law (Law 81/2018),[70] and the Sexual Harassment Law (Law 205/2020), which includes harassment via electronic means.[71] The absence of comprehensive cybercrime legislation results in limited protection for victims and creates legal ambiguity. This situation can lead to inconsistent enforcement and the potential misuse of laws to suppress free speech, thereby contributing to increased censorship.

This underhanded and covert silencing is a manifestation of systemic inequalities that exist outside of the digital sphere. While social media and online advocacy is most commonly known for breaking barriers of privilege and accessibility, the reality for many marginalized groups is starkly different. As these examples illustrate, certain communities continue to suffer and remain chained to these barriers in various ways.

Policing within Activist Circles

Invisibility extends beyond governmental regulation, societal norms, and censorship to include the internal dynamics within online feminist activist communities themselves. Azadeh Faramarziha, Managing Partner at the Knowledge Workshop (KW, also known as "Al Warsha"), an ongoing workshop for (re)searching and gathering women's stories, for creating and sharing feminist resources through engaging women and their struggles within their communities in Lebanon, describes this self-censorship: "Personally, all of us somewhat stop ourselves from saying and writing things on social media, it happened to me so many times. It's also about the kind of behavior that social media has generated within the activist and social justice movements, where they are constantly policing each other and themselves."

To understand this dynamic, we must consider the design of social media, which inherently amplifies peer surveillance. The interconnected nature of these platforms means that every post, comment, and interaction is exposed to scrutiny by a wide audience, including fellow activists. This constant visibility creates a heightened sense of being watched and judged. Nadine links this phenomenon to Michel Foucault's concept of self-discipline, where individuals change and adapt their behavior when they believe they are being watched. In this case, social media acts as a mechanism of societal control, prompting activists to self-regulate and conform to community expectations out of fear of backlash or criticism. This often results in self-censorship and limits the expression of diverse opinions within activist spaces.

"You have this constant feeling that you're being watched. What does that do to you? You will start self-censoring. And this reminds me of gender. What is gender? It is a product of surveillance. Someone told you how to act when you were young. Your parents, your neighbors, your teachers. So you started to walk a certain way, talk a certain way, dress a certain way. When we all become surveilled in this manner, of course we will partake in self-censorship. But what is more interesting is that *we* also become the police."

---

[70] UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States. (2022). *Mapping of laws and services for online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls in Arab States.*
https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Mapping_report_laws_and_services.pdf

[71] مجلس النواب. (2020). قانون رقم 205 تاريخ 2020/12/30: قانون يرمي الى تجريم التحرش الجنسي وتأهيل ضحاياه (ج. ر. عدد 1 تاريخ 2021/1/7). الجمهورية اللبنانية.

https://kafa.org.lb/sites/default/files/2021-05/qanwn-tjrym-althrsh-aljnsy.pdf

Social media algorithms often foster negative and hateful echo chambers, as these tend to drive higher engagement, which platforms prioritize. This environment discourages activists from sharing divergent perspectives, as the risk of facing hostile backlash is amplified. Additionally, the permanence and public nature of social media posts mean that any statement made online can be scrutinized indefinitely. Activists are acutely aware that their posts are part of a public record that can be accessed, shared, and weaponized against them at any time.

"Sometimes it makes it very difficult to have an opinion that is not very popular or trendy. You basically stop yourself from saying it because you will definitely get attacked, bullied, banned or reported, or whatever rules they have on social media platforms," Azadeh explained.

The fear of backlash and "cancel culture," which has been on the rise recently, plays a significant role in this dynamic. Cancel culture refers to the phenomenon where individuals, often public figures or activists, are called out or "canceled" by a community or the broader public for expressing opinions or engaging in actions that are perceived as offensive or contrary to dominant views. This can result in social ostracization, loss of professional opportunities, or widespread public shaming on social media platforms. Cancel culture often thrives in digital spaces, where visibility is high and responses are immediate, fueled by viral trends and collective outrage.

For activists, this dynamic can create a climate of fear, where expressing opinions that deviate from mainstream or popular views within their community that can lead to harsh criticism or even personal attacks. In feminist circles, for example, expressing certain critiques or taking stances on controversial issues can trigger internal divisions and backlash. This fear of being "canceled" can be so strong that it leads individuals to self-censor, avoiding topics or opinions that could spark controversy, limiting open dialogue and stifling the diversity of perspectives within activist movements.

"Now, my biggest concern is that I want to keep myself safe, and often from the community. Having an online presence comes with a price, and the price is that unfortunately you could get attacked. I think for me the idea of safety is to be more and more private [...] not being very active, not being very loud [...] to be less and less visible." The systemic suppression of marginalized communities in digital advocacy reveals the gap between the promise of online spaces as inclusive platforms and the reality of their operation. The persistence of structural inequalities within these spaces means that marginalized voices and diverse feminist perspectives are still constrained by the very barriers online advocacy seeks to dismantle.

Privacy Under Threat: Digital Insecurity

The significant amount of personal data that social media platforms collect and retain has increasingly made privacy a pressing concern. Individuals are subjected to surveillance and data collection by both government entities and private corporations, and activists face an extra layer of risk. Nadine expresses deep concerns about the endless threat to her privacy: "My privacy is under constant attack from the government and from the private sector. I have no control over my privacy."

She emphasizes the lack of assurance in the privacy of her communications, despite being required to use certain tools that do not guarantee it. Nadine considers this the biggest threat because it can be weaponized by malicious actors.

The legal framework in Lebanon that governs people's right to privacy remains largely fragile, as the country doesn't enjoy a dedicated personal data protection law.[72] In 2018, Law No. 81 on Electronic Transactions and Personal Data was passed, but its official implementation by the Ministry of Economy has never seen the light,[73] despite ongoing concerns raised by civil society organizations.[74]

Data protection is mentioned under different regulations, including article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to freedom of expression and information access. This indirectly protects citizens' right to privacy through all forms of communication. Additionally, Law No. 140 of 1999 on the protection of the secrecy of communications, stipulates the right to the confidentiality of local and international communications, by any means, whether wired or wireless connections. However, another article in the same law undermines the right to privacy by introducing exceptions to it "in case of extreme necessity." This broad condition was not defined in the law nor governed by specific standards, leaving room for relative interpretations.[75]

Civil society organizations stated in a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) submission, a process under the United Nations Human Rights Council where countries' human rights records are reviewed, that lacking a solid data protection framework impose restrictions and limitations on activists' anonymity. The report mentioned that "there have been unconfirmed reports of extralegal methods used to identify anonymous online users [...] When anonymity is challenged or undermined this means that citizens, and in particular those speaking out against the government, have little or no protection from surveillance, facilitating the government's efforts to monitor and identify them."[76]

Within Lebanon's clientelist system, where the interests of the state and private sector often converge, state institutions such as the Ministry of Communications, alongside private telecom companies, oversee the collection and dissemination of citizens' data—frequently without their knowledge or consent.[77] In 2022, an investigative report by the Electronic Frontier Foundation and mobile security firm Lookout revealed an espionage campaign

---

[72] Privacy International, Social Media Exchange, & Association for Progressive Communication. (2015). *Universal periodic review stakeholder report: 23rd session, Lebanon: The right to privacy in Lebanon*. https://privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/Lebanon_UPR_23rd_session_Joint_Stakeholder_s ubmission_0.pdf

[73] Guest Blog. (2024). *The Electronic Transactions and Data Protection Law in Lebanon: Empowering Lebanese companies in the digital age*. *Legal Business*. https://www.legalbusiness.co.uk/co-publishing/the-electronic-transactions-and-data-protection-law-in-lebano n-empowering-lebanese-companies-in-the-digital-age/

[74] SMEX. (2018). *An "ugly" new data protection law in Lebanon*. SMEX. https://smex.org/an-ugly-new-data-protection-law-in-lebanon/

[75] SMEX. (2018). *State of privacy: Lebanon*. SMEX. https://smex.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/State_of_Privacy_01_18.pdf

[76] Privacy International, Social Media Exchange, & Association for Progressive Communication. (2015). *Universal periodic review stakeholder report: 23rd session, Lebanon: The right to privacy in Lebanon*. https://privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/Lebanon_UPR_23rd_session_Joint_Stakeholder_s ubmission_0.pdf

[77] Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. (2023). *Lebanon: Data protection law fails to protect people's privacy and data*. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5630/Lebanon:-Data-protection-law-fails-to-protect-people%E2%80%9 9s-privacy-and-data

linked to the Lebanese security agency, which was accused of stealing smartphone data from activists, soldiers, lawyers, journalists, and others.[78]

Ghewa contrasts the support for digital activism across different regions, emphasizing the stark differences in legal protections. In Europe, several policies and laws have been enacted to protect online activists, creating a safer environment for digital advocacy. For example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) provides strong protections for personal data and privacy, which are crucial for activists who often face threats of doxxing and surveillance. Additionally, the Digital Services Act (DSA) aims to enhance transparency and accountability of online platforms, ensuring that harmful content is swiftly addressed while protecting freedom of expression. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) also offers robust safeguards for freedom of speech, allowing activists to challenge unjust content removals.

In West Asia and North Africa, such legal frameworks remain missing, leaving activists, and particularly feminist activists, at the disproportionate risk of gender-based violence, misogyny, and threats that exploit their visibility. Their activist activity also makes them vulnerable to doxxing, cyberviolence, and government surveillance. Without regional equivalents to the DSA, targeted individuals have little recourse when their content is wrongfully removed or censored by social media platforms.

Feminist actors are constantly exposed to digital security risks. "NO2TA," for example, avoid sharing sensitive information on their platforms, knowing the repercussions of data breaches and unauthorized access. Despite their precautions, Aliaa acknowledges the persistent danger: "When your data gets out and is shared everywhere; that's the tragedy. You can never take it back and get it permanently removed."

The permanence of digital information means that even a single breach can lead to long-term consequences, including targeted harassment, damage to someone's reputation, or compromised safety. Nadine expresses concern about the inability to fully delete her data from company servers, noting, "I can only remove it from public view. Meanwhile in Europe they have a 'right to be forgotten' law, and data protection mechanisms." She acknowledges global disparities in data protection and admits the big challenges of being safe online despite efforts to maintain privacy and control over her online content.

In 2023, the Digital Safety Helpdesk at SMEX recorded 71 instances of online violence against women, with 40% of cases involving hacked social media accounts. This trend strongly indicates a rise in hacking targeting women's social media accounts.[79]

What happened at FEMALE further demonstrates this vulnerability: "We reached out to SMEX during a time when our page was hacked after we took on the case of an abused woman. This coincided with a period where we were expressing the intersectionality of our cause with Gaza. [...] We were hacked for about ten days until we were able to recover our page. This, of course, is the price you pay when you raise your voice for just causes." recounted Rasha.

---

[78] Lookout. (2018). *Dark Caracal: Cyber-espionage at a global scale*. Lookout.
https://info.lookout.com/rs/051-ESQ-475/images/Lookout_Dark-Caracal_srr_20180118_us_v.1.0.pdf
[79] SMEX. (2024). *80% of women in Lebanon face digital violence*. SMEX.
https://smex.org/80-of-women-in-lebanon-face-digital-violence/

Social Media Platforms: Gatekeepers of Activism

The Illusion of Control and the Attention Economy

Most feminist activists interviewed expressed a profound sense of losing control over their online presence due to algorithmic governance. Azadeh describes the algorithm as a "double-edged sword": "It is not something you decide about. You are giving your data and everything you have to a machine or corporation to decide who is going to see it and who is not. I think by relying on the algorithm so much we lose the little control we have left over our content."

According to Etter and Albu, social media algorithms aim to handle the overwhelming amount of information on these platforms by organizing and prioritizing content.[80] This process involves various functions[81] such as sorting, filtering, and ranking[82] to tailor users' experiences and boost engagement.[83] Social media corporations have been widely criticized for the commercialization of their platforms, as "commercial interests dictate data distribution and user interactions through a 'techno-commercial' process" [84]

In their analysis, Riemer and Peter argue that recent methods of monetizing user activity on social media have created new challenges for free speech. Central to their argument is the role of algorithms in deciding which messages users see. These algorithms prioritize content that maximizes user engagement for targeted advertising, thereby disrupting the direct communication between speakers and their audiences. Instead of communicating directly with followers, users now have their messages filtered and adjusted by algorithms to boost platform profitability. The authors claim this practice hampers freedom of speech in ways not seen before the digital age. This interference, which they term "algorithmic audiencing," affects the equitable exchange of ideas by altering how messages are distributed, often in arbitrary and opaque ways. This interference is often overlooked in free speech discussions because it impacts who gets heard rather than who gets to speak.[85]

Nadine emphasizes the importance of not conflating the rest of the internet with social media platforms: "This is a very privatized section of the internet." This distinction is crucial because it highlights the privatization and commercialization of what should be a public and open space. Social media platforms, unlike the broader internet, are controlled by private corporations with specific business models that prioritize profit over public good.

To fully grasp the social and political impact of algorithms, it is essential to recognize that they are intertwined with complex social, cultural, and political contexts, rather than existing as isolated technical tools. Algorithms are not neutral; they are shaped by the biases and perspectives of those who design and manage them. This includes patriarchal, racist, sexist, and homophobic norms that influence algorithmic design and implementation. Overlooking this interconnectedness can obscure how these algorithms perpetuate existing inequalities

---

[80] Etter, M., & Albu, O. B. (2021). Activists in the dark: Social media algorithms and collective action in two social movement organizations. *Organization, 28*(1), 68-91.

[81] Neumayer, C., & Rossi, L. (2016). 15 years of protest and media technologies scholarship: A sociotechnical timeline. *Social Media + Society, 2*(3).

[82] Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication, 1*(1), 2-14.

[83] Leonardi, P. M., & Vaast, E. (2017). Social media and their affordances for organizing: A review and agenda for research. *Academy of Management Annals, 11*(1), 150-188.

[84] Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2015). Social media and the transformation of public space. *Social Media + Society, 1*(2).

[85] Riemer, K., & Peter, S. (2021). Algorithmic audiencing: Why we need to rethink free speech on social media. *Journal of Information Technology, 36*(4), 409-426.

and discrimination,[86] including gender biases. Within the broader global trend of datafication—the process of converting social actions into quantifiable data[87]—algorithms can exacerbate gender discrimination by reinforcing pre-existing patterns of underrepresentation or misrepresentation of certain groups.[88]

The introduction of algorithms has significantly altered how feminist narratives are disseminated and received. According to the majority of interviewees, the backlash is not only societal but also a consequence of an algorithmic system designed to incite backlash. When the algorithm is programmed in a way that prioritizes high engagement-generating content, which can lead to a "black hole" effect, where toxic content such as fighting, doxxing, naming, shaming campaigns and online harassment escalates, trapping users in a harmful environment with no easy way to escape.

In discussing feminist narratives and algorithms, Merlyna Lim draws on Sara Ahmed's theories about emotions to understand their impact in digital environments.[89] Ahmed explores how emotions shape social and cultural boundaries, influencing our interactions with others and our understanding of the world. In the context of social media, where interactions are mediated by algorithms, emotions play a crucial role in how content, including feminist messages, is perceived, shared, and engaged with. Emotions such as anger, joy, or sadness drive user interactions such as liking, sharing, and commenting. This emotional engagement can determine the visibility and reception of feminist narratives, resulting in algorithms that may amplify or suppress these messages.[90]

Following this logic, algorithms are more likely to present provocative feminist posts to individuals who are more inclined to react negatively, thereby fueling backlash. Conversely, content that presents feminism in a more nuanced and agreeable manner may be less likely to be promoted, as it does not provoke the same emotional response. This phenomenon is illustrated by Sarah's experience with an educational video about hymens and virginity. Despite its educational intent, the video's provocative nature led the algorithm to amplify it, resulting in a sudden influx of negative engagement: "It got a lot of engagement that was mostly negative, and it got millions of views, and thousands of comments of men commenting violent things."

This is in contrast with other feminist educational posts she had shared, which did not generate the same number of views, reach, or hostility. This demonstrates how the algorithm's prioritization of content it deems as "provocative" not only influences engagement patterns but could also dictate who its audience will be. It is related to the notion of the "attention economy," where platforms profit from capturing and holding users' attention and the time they spend on their platforms. Online feminist activism is forced to operate within this "attention economy."[91]

[86] AlgorithmWatch. (2024). *How and why algorithms discriminate*. AlgorithmWatch.
https://algorithmwatch.org/en/how-and-why-algorithms-discriminate/
[87] Treré, E. (2018). From digital activism to algorithmic resistance. In *The Routledge companion to media and activism* (pp. 367-375). Routledge.
[88] AlgorithmWatch. (2024). *How and why algorithms discriminate*. AlgorithmWatch.
https://algorithmwatch.org/en/how-and-why-algorithms-discriminate/
[89] Ahmed, S. (2013). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
[90] Lim, M. (2020). Algorithmic enclaves: Affective politics and algorithms in the neoliberal social media landscape. In *Affective politics of digital media* (pp. 186-203). Routledge.
[91] Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.
https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11316rx

In a study conducted by KRYSS Network (Knowledge and Rights with Young people through Safer Spaces) on understanding how social media algorithms obstruct feminist expression and how Malaysian women navigate the challenges, one example illustrates the algorithm's preference for sensational and provocative content over substantive discussions on important social issues. They shared the case of a woman whose TikTok video of her dancing in a cartoon onesie without a bra garnered sexually offensive and slut-shaming comments. Meanwhile, the content she posts addressing feminism and social justice issues received significantly lower engagement, with views sometimes as low as 500, despite having 71,000 followers at the time. This case perfectly illustrates how TikTok's algorithm actively promotes objectification and sensationalism while marginalizing feminist content, making it difficult for social movements to gain visibility and traction on the platform. Social media platforms like TikTok bear significant responsibility for perpetuating these harmful dynamics because they design and control the algorithms that determine what content is seen by users. These algorithms prioritize content that keeps users on the platform longer to boost ad revenue instead of promoting ethical or socially beneficial engagement.[92]

Many documented cases reveal a prevalent systemic discrimination in social media algorithms and content moderation practices, specifically against women. In one case, Instagram restricted hashtags related to women of color.[93] In another, it deleted posts about sexual assault because of an "algorithmic error."[94] It has also been proven that algorithmic bias favors influencers who wear more revealing clothes, particularly women,[95] while those who are overweight are downranked on timelines and face disproportionate deletion of their posts without explanation.[96]

In 2021, a letter signed by over a hundred feminists, artists, activists, psychologists, photographers, writers, filmmakers, sex workers, educators, therapists, creators, journalists, and advocates, as well as individuals from marginalized groups, including those from the LGBTQIA+, racialized, plus-size, disabled, and neurodivergent communities, denounced the growing censorship of minority voices on social media platforms. This censorship includes the removal or shadow banning of posts addressing critical social issues, the silencing of voices speaking out against sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination, and the disproportionate moderation of content related to these communities. The letter also highlights the failure of social media platforms to effectively address harmful content such as hate speech, cyberbullying, and violent rhetoric, while disproportionately censoring the work and voices of activists advocating for marginalized groups. The signatories demand that

[92] KRYSS. (2022). *The hidden codes that shape our expression: Understanding how social media algorithms obstruct feminist expression and how Malaysian women navigate the challenges.* KRYSS.
https://firn.genderit.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/The_hidden_codes_that_shape_our_expression.pdf
[93] Gerrard, Y. (2020). Social media content moderation: Six opportunities for feminist intervention. *Feminist Media Studies, 20*(5), 748-751.
[94] Hertie School Center for Digital Governance. (2021). *French feminist influencers are taking on Instagram's discriminatory content moderation.*
https://www.hertie-school.org/en/digital-governance/research/blog/detail/content/french-feminist-influencers-are-taking-on-instagrams-discriminatory-content-moderation
[95] AlgorithmWatch. (2020). *Undress or fail: Instagram's algorithm strong-arms users into showing skin.*
https://algorithmwatch.org/en/instagram-algorithm-nudity/
[96] The Guardian. (2020). Instagram 'censorship' of black model's photo reignites claims of race bias. *The Guardian.*
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/aug/09/instagrams-censorship-of-black-models-photo-shoot-reignites-claims-of-race-bias-nyome-nicholas-williams

these platforms take strong action to address this ongoing discrimination.[97] These cases showcase the lack of transparency in Instagram's content moderation practices, and how it perpetuates existing power dynamics and reinforces societal biases.

This constant need for new, attention-grabbing content means that important stories and issues can quickly fade from public view. Poell studies the temporality of social media in relation to social movements and activism, highlighting how these platforms not only facilitate activist communication but also push activists towards specific types of content and interactions that reinforce the episodic focus of the 24-hour news cycle. These platforms continually reconnect users with new content, making it challenging to maintain sustained public attention on any single issue.[98]

Nadine further explained this phenomenon: "The algorithm wants your attention so it has to give you new issues. There is no follow up on stories. I mean, a story disappears, and you're left wondering what happened to this or that person?

For feminist issues, this means that once a story loses its initial shock value, it is quickly replaced by the next trending topic. This cycle leads to a lack of continuity and follow-up, which is detrimental to feminist movements that require sustained attention to drive change. For instance, cases of gender-based violence or systemic patriarchy may receive a burst of attention but are soon forgotten as the algorithm pushes new content to the forefront. This can desensitize users, making them less likely to engage with feminist issues on a deeper level.

(In)visible Labor and Unwritten Rules: Consistency, Aesthetics and Visibility

The reliance on algorithmic rules to remain visible on social media imposes a significant burden on feminist activists. The need to consistently mass-produce content that aligns with ever-changing trends demands a considerable amount of time, knowledge, training, and resources— something not all activists possess or can afford.

Algorithmic awareness has become a crucial aspect of digital literacy for activists. It involves not only knowing how to use the internet but also understanding how algorithms shape what people see and engage with. The gap between those who grasp these algorithmic effects and those who do not highlight a new kind of digital divide.[99] This issue is particularly pressing for feminist activists, who face unique challenges due to algorithmic biases that marginalize their content and increase their risk of online harassment. Posts addressing sensitive topics such as gender equality and women's rights are often met with hostility and threats.

Sarah expressed her frustration with this requirement of always keeping up with trends in order to sustain the rank of her content on platforms as she explained, "It's hard to catch up with [the trends], especially since I didn't decide, 'oh I want this to be my job.'"

---

[97] Mediapart. (2021). *Stop à la censure des minorités sur les réseaux sociaux*. https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/150221/stop-la-censure-des-minorites-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux

[98] Poell, T. (2020). Social media, temporality, and the legitimacy of protest. *Social Movement Studies, 19*(5-6), 609-624.

[99] Gran, A. B., Booth, P., & Bucher, T. (2021). To be or not to be algorithm aware: A question of a new digital divide? *Information, Communication & Society, 24*(12), 1779-1796.

Labor remains a rather often overlooked aspect within feminist digital movements.[100] This type of digital labor mirrors traditional feminized labor, such as care or domestic work, which is often unpaid, underappreciated, and emotionally demanding. Scholars like Richardson have critiqued how such labor in the digital economy is frequently overlooked and undervalued.[101] For feminist activists, this means their efforts involve significant emotional and practical work that is not always acknowledged or compensated. Thus, their challenge is not only about creating and sharing content but also about managing the often-unrecognized effort and emotional strain required to remain visible and make a meaningful impact in a biased digital environment.

 "I don't want to be posting more than I need to be posting...Eventually, I start to feel like, okay, when I put something out there that I worked on and want some visibility for, it's not gonna get as much reach if I haven't posted anything in two weeks...This is very frustrating because I feel like I don't want to fall into this trap of having to just put anything out there to stay relevant and have user engagement," explains Sarah. Thus, this illustrates the inner conflict that many activists experience, between satisfying the algorithm all the time while maintaining the quality and integrity of their content.

Although previously cited testimonies highlighted the strategic decision of feminist activists to focus on reaching a specific audience rather than a broad one, this does not negate the impact of algorithms on the visibility of their content. Algorithms influence not only the reach of content beyond the existing follower base, but also the visibility within the intended audience, including both current and potential followers.

Donor practices further complicate the landscape for organizations when it comes to measuring the success of online campaigns as they often engage in "check-the-box" practices, focusing on quantitative metrics such as likes, shares, and comments as indicators of success. These quantitative measures become a standard that activists are pressured to meet to fulfill donor requirements. Azadeh points out that while this approach is problematic and reflects the current reality of donor expectations, much effort from activists and organizations is focused on shifting these expectations by challenging traditional metrics and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of success in activism.

Moreover, activists often feel compelled to comment on current events or create content that may not necessarily align with their interests or expertise, simply to maintain engagement and numbers, as algorithms tend to favor active accounts. The pressure to comment on every trending issue, despite feeling that there is "already enough content," lies at the heart of the struggle between online advocacy and the demands of the attention economy. As a result, many activists prefer to "reshare what people are doing" rather than adding redundant commentary, opting for a more collaborative and supportive approach.

In the algorithm realm, there is often a focus on aesthetics and visual appeal to capture users' attention. Within the context of aesthetics, Mark Fisher argues that 21st-century capitalism emphasizes a "turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship."

The interviews reveal a rather conflicting relationship between aesthetics and feminist activism within digital content creation. Participants recognize that aesthetic labor—efforts to make content visually appealing and competitive—is crucial in the social media landscape.

[100] Scharff, C. (2024). Feminist activists discuss practices of monetisation: Digital feminist activism, neoliberalism and subjectivity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 27*(3), 408-423.
[101] Richardson, L. (2016). Feminist geographies of digital work. *Progress in Human Geography, 42*(2), 244-263.

This aligns with Eloise Lucia Burchell's argument[102] that aesthetic labor is extensive,[103] often invisible,[104] and never-ending.[105] To participate effectively in the "visual economy" of social media, feminist activists must prioritize visual appeal to drive engagement.[106] For example, activists might invest significant time in perfecting the design of social media posts, choosing vibrant graphics, selecting striking images, or meticulously editing videos. Despite these efforts often going unnoticed by the audience, they play a vital role in making posts stand out amidst a flood of content. The visual appeal of a post—whether through high-quality images, engaging infographics, or attention grabbing color schemes and fonts—can greatly influence how frequently it is seen and interacted with. In practice, this means that activists may spend hours crafting posts to ensure they are aesthetically pleasing and aligned with current visual trends.

This aligns with Burchell's concept of "aesthetic entrepreneurship," where individuals and organizations adopt capitalist strategies of self-quantification and measurement to enhance visibility.[107] This approach involves applying business-like strategies to make content more attractive. In practical terms, this means investing in high-quality design, professional graphics, and effective marketing to ensure that content stands out. Organizations and individuals track metrics such as likes, shares, and views to gauge the success of their content and adjust their strategies accordingly. The aim is to enhance visibility and impact by appealing to the audience's visual preferences and engagement habits.

For feminist activists, this is another challenge they face. While these aesthetic strategies are essential for gaining visibility online, they also reflect a disparity in resources. Content creators with larger budgets can afford professional design services and high-end production tools, giving them an edge in creating visually compelling content. In contrast, many feminist activists and small organizations operate with limited budgets and human resources making it difficult for them to compete on the same level in the crowded digital space.

Rasha points out the dual nature of aesthetics as both an opportunity and a challenge, stressing the importance of adaptability and diversity in content to maintain engagement, especially on platforms like TikTok that are rapidly evolving everyday. The necessity of holding training and improving the skill set of staff on such issues is part of this adaptability.

For Aliaa, design plays a big role in enhancing the effectiveness of communication. By employing good design, digital content creators can mitigate initial negative reactions from viewers, making them more receptive to the content. This approach suggests that aesthetically pleasing visuals can facilitate engagement with challenging messages by reducing defensiveness and increasing accessibility.

---

[102] Burchell, E. L. (2023). Algorithms, aesthetics and agency: An exploration into the performance of the self amongst young women on TikTok. *re: think-a journal of creative ethnography, 4(1)*.

[103] Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). Aesthetic labour: Beauty politics in neoliberalism. In *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 3-49). Palgrave Macmillan.

[104] Cherry, M. A. (2016). Virtual work and invisible labor. In *Invisible labor: Hidden work in the contemporary world* (pp. 71-86). University of California Press.

[105] Braun, V. (2017). Rethinking Ruskin's wife's vulva. In *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 67-82). Routledge.

[106] Ross, S. (2019). Being real on fake Instagram: Likes, images, and media ideologies of value. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, 29*(3), 359-374.

[107] Banet-Weiser, S. (2017). 'I'm beautiful the way I am': Empowerment, beauty, and aesthetic labour. In *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 265-282). Routledge.

On the other hand, Rasha's viewpoint addresses the difficulties in presenting serious issues in a manner that is both trendy and respectful of the content's gravity. She notes that while trendy formats can boost engagement, they may not always align with the depth required for addressing serious topics, potentially leading to a dilution of the message: "We sometimes try to present issues in a light-hearted way. However, our issues are usually heavy, and it's not always possible to present their realities in a trendy manner." This analysis reveals a key tension in digital content creation: balancing the need for aesthetic appeal to attract and engage audiences while preserving the integrity of serious issues.[108] The aesthetic demands set by platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, which are primarily based in the Global North, directly affect how activists and creators from the region present their struggles. Feminist issues in this region, including femicide, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in conflict zones, and the trauma of displacement and death, are often forced into formats that favor lightness, playfulness, and engagement over the unfiltered realities of these experiences.

It makes trauma a consumable product, detached from its emotional and human roots, leading to a desensitization of some audiences who view these issues from a distance. This expectation to package pain into an appealing, curated narrative mimics colonial dynamics where the colonizer dictates how the colonized should present themselves and their experiences. In this case, the platforms of the Global North set the framework for how the pain, struggle, and activism of women in West Asia and North Africa should be made visible.

This is coupled with the sensationalization of serious issues like sexual violence and femicide. The algorithmic environment has played a role in reducing these issues to mere statistics or shocking headlines, dehumanizing the individuals involved and detracting from the gravity of their experiences. As Nadine puts it, "When headlines read something like a new woman added to the list of femicide victims, it reduces the individuals affected to numbers rather than honoring their stories and identities often for the sake of engagement."

The pressure to create short, trendy content for high algorithmic ranking versus longer, more nuanced videos reflects the need to ensure messages aren't drowned out in the overwhelming volume of digital content, rather than a personal desire for virality. Sarah and Maha illustrate this conflict, noting that while shorter content may gain more views, it often sacrifices depth and complexity. They express a preference for longer, more detailed content that can provide a richer understanding of issues, even if it risks lower engagement: "For me, it's problematic because when I make videos, I want to give you a history lesson not a 30-second clip. I want you to know everything from 1987 till today," acknowledged Maha.

"When I first started to create content, I used to ask people on Instagram if they preferred shorter or longer videos, and the answers were kind of split. I really wanted to delve into topics in a more critical way and I am removing so much of the nuance by reducing the length of the video and trying to narrow it down or being brief. [...] I was doing something that I didn't really want to do just because I felt like it would be more relevant or viral or easier for people to consume. I've been changing that in my latest videos. The shortest video is seven minutes long and I cannot do any less than that." asserted Sarah.

---

108 Beard, A. (2022). *Activism, aestheticized: Instagram infographics, visual politics, and online advocacy* (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University).

Patriarchal Constraints and Platform Failures

Rasha questions the safety we experience in practice, highlighting that existing institutions—both legal and political— serve to uphold patriarchal norms and values. She argues that despite claims of offering freedom of opinion and expression, these freedoms are ultimately constrained by their views on what constitutes freedom and how it is implemented. "As long as these freedoms are shaped by a patriarchal system and lack adequate protections, this is reflected on social media,"meaning that the same inequalities and limitations are present online as in traditional institutions.

Ghewa adds to this critique, highlighting that platforms like Meta inadequately address hate speech and defamation, particularly when content is in Arabic or related to human rights activism. The linguistic and cultural gaps in content moderation are glaring. Facebook, for example, lacks transparency about the linguistic skills of its moderators, especially their proficiency in different Arabic dialects. Hate speech against women and feminist activists requires nuanced understanding, which is often lacking. This failure in moderation disproportionately impacts feminist activism in Lebanon, where women and marginalized groups face heightened online abuse.

Moreover, Meta's algorithms often fail to handle Arabic-language content effectively. For instance, 77% of Arabic content is incorrectly deleted by these systems, stifling legitimate expression and critical discourse on issues affecting women, such as potential war crimes.[109] In Lebanon, the issue is even more complicated due to the diversity of dialects used by social media users in the country. These include modern standard Arabic, Lebanese dialect, Anglo-Arabic, and Franco-Arabic (Arabic words transcribed into a combination of Latin script and Arabic numerals).[110]

The neglect is particularly severe when it comes to content targeting historically oppressed groups, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook significantly fail at detecting hate speech in Arabic Internal documents leaked from Facebook in 2020 indicate that only 6% of Arabic-language hate content was detected on Instagram before it made its way onto the platform. This is compared to a 40% takedown rate on Facebook. Ads attacking women and LGBTQ+ individuals were rarely flagged for removal in the region, indicating patriarchal bias. These shortcomings suggest that social media platforms are not only neglectful but also complicit in allowing harmful content to proliferate in the Arabic-speaking world, particularly when it targets marginalized communities.[111] Kareem emphasizes this further based on his daily observations: "If I were to split online content into racist content vs anti-racist content, there's a lot more racist content out there."

Meta's over-reliance on automated systems and insufficient investment in human content moderators severely hampers its ability to manage content effectively. This is particularly evident in the inconsistent handling of LGBTQ+ content. Posts intended to empower LGBTQ+ folks are sometimes wrongly censored, while harmful content targeting this group

---

[109] Fatafta, M. (2021). *Facebook is bad at moderating in English; in Arabic, it's a disaster*. Rest of World. https://restofworld.org/2021/facebook-is-bad-at-moderating-in-english-in-arabic-its-a-disaster/

[110] Abrougui, A., Ghanem, M., & Rasmi, F. (2023). *Hate speech in Lebanon: The shortcomings and responsibilities of social media platforms*. SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom - Samir Kassir Foundation. https://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/News/Reports/27-07-2023/10772

[111] Scott, M. (2021). *Facebook did little to moderate posts in the world's most violent countries: The Facebook Papers*. POLITICO. https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-content-moderation-posts-wars-afghanistan-middle-east-arabic/

is not always removed swiftly, even when it clearly violates Meta's policies. This is especially the case when a post covering an LGBTQ+ topic faces heavy attacks online, gets mass reported and removed by Meta, revealing how automated content moderation systems often fail to effectively differentiate between legitimate advocacy and malicious reporting or hate-driven attacks.

Ghewa further underscores the significant challenges activists face when addressing topics such as crimes against women, highlighting the frequent flagging or removal of content. She explained that discussions on these critical issues are often met with resistance, not only from individuals or groups holding regressive or patriarchal views but also from the platforms themselves, whose moderation systems are ill-equipped to grasp the context and intent behind such posts. This is particularly problematic when posts are flagged or reported based on conflicting perspectives, leading to unnecessary censorship.

Social media companies' lack of cooperation and responsiveness makes matters worse. "Our posts may get blocked or removed," Ghewa explained, "and we end up having to wait a long time for a response." Many have reported long waiting periods before social media platforms review and potentially restore content that was wrongfully blocked or removed.

Sarah recounts her personal experience with TikTok, where her attempts to post feminist content were met with swift removal and censorship. She notes that TikTok's content moderation appears particularly harsh, especially for content related to sex, gender, and feminist issues. This contrasts with her experience on other platforms like Instagram, where the moderation of similar content has been less severe. Sarah is disheartened by the lack of consistency and fairness in content moderation, especially when responding to hate speech or sexist content, noting how it's disproportionately easy for users to report content related to sexual health or gender as sexism or sexual content, especially when presented from an educational perspective. In the Arabic-speaking context, Sarah's videos that address sexist or hateful content are frequently removed, while the original offensive content remains. This suggests a bias in the moderation process that disproportionately affects Arabic speaking feminist content creators. This disparity in moderation, coupled with her frustration over the lack of fair oversight, has led her to feeling discouraged about engaging in feminist discourse on TikTok and quitting the platform.

The findings from a 2024 study conducted by SMEX on the social media suppression of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) content in the WANA region reveal significant challenges faced by organizations and content creators. Restrictions include content takedowns, account removals, ad rejections, and limited organic reach, often based on platforms' policies regarding "sexual" and "adult" content, while contradicting platforms' exceptions for educational, medical, or artistic SRHR-related content.[112]

Rasha stresses the responsibility that platforms like Meta have in shaping their approach to digital activism. She argues that Meta needs to "establish feminist policies to support this activism" or at least avoid "patriarchal policies that can, in certain contexts, facilitate male dominance and harassment through the platform without being able to put a stop to it." This lack of supportive measures has led many women, including feminist activists, to withdraw from digital spaces or even shut down their accounts, as they no longer feel safe. Rashanotes that this issue extends beyond feminist activists: "The lack of digital security is one of the challenges that female journalists, feminist activists, and women in general face, even if they are not feminists." This widespread digital insecurity affects all women, regardless of their stance on feminist or patriarchal norms.

---

[112] SMEX. (2024). *From sharing to silence: Assessing social media suppression of SRHR content in WANA.*

Meta's real-name policy, for example, requires users to use their real names on the platform, which can disproportionately impact women and LGBTQ+ individuals by exposing them to increased harassment and doxxing, particularly in politically-sensitive or activist contexts.

Meta's recent policy changes on Instagram and Threads, which algorithmically limit the reach of "political content," including content related to social topics, can be viewed as deeply problematic for feminist expression. This issue is tied to the depoliticization of social issues and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures.

Meta's definition of "political content" is inherently broad, encompassing anything that might mention governments, elections, or social topics affecting a group of people or society at large. This vague definition casts a wide net, potentially sweeping up feminist content under the label of "political" such as women and reproductive rights, racial discrimination, gender pay gap, awareness and legal reform that deals with gender based violence, and LGBTQ+ rights for example and thus limiting its reach. By defining social topics as political, Meta is essentially politicizing aspects of people's identities, such as gender, sexuality, and race. These are integral parts of individuals' lived experiences, not just abstract political issues. The lack of transparency and user choice in implementing these changes is also concerning, as many users are unaware that they are no longer seeing such content.

Depoliticization occurs when social and political issues are stripped of their political context and reduced to personal or private matters, often to diminish their perceived importance. When feminist content is labeled as political, it risks being treated as controversial or divisive, rather than an ongoing struggle for social justice. When discussions around the underlying issues and structures in place are depoliticized and framed as matters of personal opinion or debate, we should be aware that these types of decisions are in no way neutral. After all who decides what's political is itself political.[113]

Furthermore, this policy reflects and reinforces patriarchal values by marginalizing content that challenges existing power structures. Feminist expression often critiques patriarchal norms and advocates for social change, making it inherently political in nature. By limiting the reach of such content, Meta is effectively stifling feminist voices and preserving the status quo, which is inherently patriarchal. By treating gender issues as merely "political," Meta risks trivializing them, making it more difficult for activists to convey the importance of their work. A striking example of this is the experience of Ky Polanco, the co-founder of the world famous Instagram news page @Feminist, which covers topics related to women's rights and abortion. After the policy changes, the page witnessed a drastic decline in reach plummeting from 10 million users to just 800,000.

The experience of platforms like Jeem, an Arabic media outlet, showcases how this issue also manifests in local contexts. For instance, Jeem's Instagram post titled "Four feminist tools to resist violence against women" initially garnered minimal engagement, with only three likes within the first three hours. The drastic underperformance led Jeem to alter the post's caption by removing the word "resistance," a term that Meta frequently flags as "political" or violent, particularly in relation to sensitive topics like Palestine. Following this change, the post's engagement increased to 33 likes, highlighting how Meta's algorithmic practices fail to consider the context in which feminist content is produced.

---

[113] McMullin, T. (2024). *Why we need "political content" on social media*.
https://www.whatworks.fyi/p/why-we-need-political-content-on

Hidden Censorship: Feminist Activism, Intersectionality and Palestine

The issue of visibility and invisibility of feminist voices and content on social media platforms is often not self-imposed but is rather a form of censorship inflicted by the platforms themselves when it comes to certain topics that do not align with their politics. This phenomenon can manifest in multiple ways, either through content moderation practices, where certain posts get deleted, or by shadow-banning, which systematically restricts the visibility and reach of certain content. In the case of our study, disproportionately affecting feminists advocating for intersectional and liberation movements.

Maha discusses the automatic censorship of Palestinian content on platforms like Meta and TikTok, explaining, "When talking about intersectional feminism, you can't ignore Palestinian liberation...the algorithm often works against liberation movements and feminism, especially if it doesn't fit within the box of white liberal feminism. These platforms are run and owned by white people, maintaining the status quo." This automatic censorship forces activists to adopt elusive methods to communicate their messages, such as using symbols to bypass algorithmic filters, a strategy Maha describes as "absurd."

Indeed, the content suppression favors a narrow form of feminism, often aligned with western-centric feminism, which neglects the struggles of marginalized women, particularly those in conflict zones like Palestine. This bias reinforces an exclusive narrative that fails to address the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women globally. By censoring content related to the Palestinian struggle, social media platforms perpetuate a form of feminism that is selective and fails to embody the principles of true intersectionality.

The drastic effect of these shadowbanning tactics is evident in the drastic reduction of engagement metrics for content related to Palestine. Maharecounts, "I used to get 800 to 1000 views, and 1400 if my face was in the post. But now, when I post about Palestine, it's no more than 205 views. This has been the case since 2021, with the Sheikh Jarrah events." This stark contrast draws attention to the selective suppression of content that may not align with the politics of these corporations.

Rasha validates this experience, noting that shadowbanning extends to a wide range of activist efforts: "The shadowbanning is wide, and the attack is multi-faceted from patriarchal and capitalist entities."

Similarly, another instance shared by Aliaa reveals how shadowbanning disrupted their coverage of Gaza at "NO2TA" even though though they adopted a human-centered approach and prioritized storytelling: "We were shadowbanned by Facebook when we started covering Gaza...although our way of covering the topics wasn't a news moderation model, we were covering through reels, videos and carousels related in specific to the price of war on women, girls and children in Gaza. Instagram shadowbanned us for around two weeks. Our stories had 0 views. None of our followers could see the content on their home feed." This form of censorship not only hinders the reach of activist content but also forces them to resort to alternative methods to maintain visibility, such as collaborating with influencers to bypass algorithmic suppression in this case.

"We are suffering from many problems, especially when we are publishing topics related to colonialism, the current economic system, or any feminist activism that belongs to the post-colonial school. Unfortunately, many times, and especially recently, the reach has been different between posts about Palestine and posts or news about other topics." As Ghewa notes, these platforms' actions are "very cunning [...] they do not respect the Arab context very much, nor do they possess what the Arab context requires to make the algorithm safer

for users. They do not respect freedom of expression, which these companies are supposed to be representing."

When talking about the boosting of content and the suppression of Palestinian content on Meta platforms, Kareem speaks out about the ethical dimension behind financially empowering the corporations that are enforcing this suppression: "this is one of the policies that we feel like we don't want to financially or economically contribute to, we know how META deals with content about Palestine and the censorship that it does."

From Collective Struggle to Digital Fragmentation

As digital platforms increasingly shape the nature of activism, the dynamics of engagement, visibility, and solidarity have fundamentally changed. This section explores how these shifts have impacted feminist movements, highlighting the ways in which neoliberal values, algorithmic pressures, and performative activism have influenced the nature of feminist organizing.

Amid this environment, feminists stress on the need to rethink how digital activism should be practiced.

Initially, the approach emphasized widespread outreach aimed at maximizing audience reach. However, recent developments indicate a strategic pivot towards fostering meaningful collaborations rather than focusing solely on audience size. Azadeh notes that "We have to rethink the idea of who are the people we want to reach out to... Before, it was more about reaching as many people as possible; now, it's about finding individuals and groups with whom we can collaborate and work together, rather than focusing on a large audience." This change in strategy reflects a growing understanding that the quality of engagement often outweighs quantity. Kareem further elaborates on this by emphasizing the significance of building an organic community over the use of paid promotions to enhance visibility. He points out the ethical and practical challenges of using mainstream platforms whose politics may not align with feminist values. Instead of focusing solely on growing a large audience, there is now a conscious effort to nurture a loyal, engaged community that resonates with the movement's core principles.

The fragmentation within the feminist movement is well-documented, with divisions arising from various factors such as ideological and strategic disagreements, and differences in priorities. However, a new dimension of fragmentation has emerged. According to Sarah, external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis, have accelerated the digitalization of activism. This shift has introduced new challenges in sustaining momentum and unity, as opportunities for in-person engagement have diminished. This strong sense of community and solidarity is hard to replicate online.

Additionally, the neoliberal order has influenced the nature of digital feminist activism worldwide. Today, free-market capitalism, individual entrepreneurship, and the privatization of public services have undermined the values of community-building and activism for social change, prioritizing profit-driven motives. Activists are increasingly incentivized to participate in content creation, often as experts or leaders in their fields, turning their activism into a form of personal enterprise. While this can increase visibility for certain issues, it can also lead to the commodification of feminist discourse, where the value of activism is measured by its marketability and engagement statistics rather than its tangible impact on communities. The monetization of feminist activism aggravates this issue. Economically, it intensifies the trend of generating income from activism. Ultimately, activists' emotional investment and passion for political change become tied to profit-making. On the level of

subjectivity, the digital economy prompts activists to engage in self-branding, thereby creating neoliberal subjectivities. [114]This means that activists may begin to shape their identities and actions to fit the demands of the marketplace, which aligns with neoliberal ideals of individualism, self-promotion, and profit maximization.

Although many activists do not support or intend to promote such values,—and can even reject them—they inevitably operate within a system that influences their actions. The underlying structure of their social media practices is thus shaped by and reinforces neoliberal values such as self-improvement, personal investment, entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, and the sharing economy. [115] Nadine concisely captured this issue: "You are incentivized to become a gender influencer rather than working together to build collective power. Collectiveness is not really incentivized much today. You can make more money...become famous and feel like you are making a difference as an individual. But feminism is a collective politic. Its impact can only be meaningful when it is expressed in collective practice.

This trend towards individualism is often at odds with the foundational principles of feminism, which emphasize solidarity and collective struggle.

In this context, performative solidarity can create the illusion of widespread support without requiring substantial commitment or follow-through on addressing systemic issues. "On the internet where you feel like your followers, your friends, your family are watching you, you have to perform in a certain way. With time, this performativity will become you. You become what you are performing." However, Nadine also points out that there are meaningful ways to express solidarity online. For instance, if one activist's article is removed from a platform for challenging oppressive systems, others can show support by republishing it on a different platform, continuing the resistance despite the censorship.

This emphasis on visibility and individualism has introduced several challenges. Primarily, it has led to competition among activists. As Sarah noted: "I don't know if I can call it a movement, it feels like a bunch of different actors and people, and it feels like there's always competition even on who is producing more, who is more visible on the algorithm, it's really sad." This fragmentation is evident in the experiences of many who long for the public feminist spaces, organizations, cooperatives, events, and activities that once fostered a sense of harmony and movement.

Moreover, there was a common feeling between many activists on how the concept of solidarity, a cornerstone of feminist movements, has been diminished in the digital era, now often manifesting as a superficial online gesture, such as a tweet or a like.

"I think one of the things that also shows the idea of being individuals, alone, lonely, showing itself, is that solidarity is only one word, basically a tweet. The way I see it now it's one tweet, whereas for me solidarity is more than that. I am sure that there are many ways, especially online, where you can actually do something. I am not saying I am hopeless, but I think we are not there yet, it hasn't happened, I am sure it will eventually. The way I see it is it is basically one sentence, " Azadeh observed.

---

[114] Scharff, C. (2024). Feminist activists discuss practices of monetisation: Digital feminist activism, neoliberalism and subjectivity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 27*(3), 408-423. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231188224

[115] Saraswati, L. A. (2021). Pain generation: Social media, feminist activism, and the neoliberal selfie. In *Pain generation*. New York University Press.

This reductionist view fails to capture the essence of mutual support and collective struggle. Nadine expressed this concern, stating, "Solidarity means taking the same risk.They are attacking you because you said something, my solidarity with you is that I too will talk. From this came the 'Me Too'... I know that I will receive backlash, but I will also take this risk with you because we are stronger when we take this kind of risk together." This approach distributes the burden of attacks—whether legal threats or hate speech—across multiple individuals or organizations, rather than concentrating the risk on a single activist or group.

One of the important points highlighted in this regard by some of the interviewees was the need to have conversations between different actors on an ongoing basis, especially when it comes to addressing safety and security. This is seen as crucial to creating a space for collective decision-making and sharing struggles related to digital activism, helping bridge the gaps caused by fragmentation by fostering a sense of community and unity. By regularly engaging in dialogue, activists can better coordinate their efforts, align their strategies, and provide mutual support, thereby countering the isolating effects of digital platforms.

Psychological Pressure, Burnout, Activism Fatigue

It comes as no surprise that feminist activists face an array of psychological challenges that affect their ability to pursue their advocacy efforts.

A prevalent issue is the pervasive sense of helplessness, a feeling articulated by Rashaas stemming from the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that activists confront daily.

"The feeling of helplessness isn't something we invented because we want to feel it, but because we exist in a situation where a system is so entrenched with patriarchal norms embedded in its foundation, and you're trying to push against it."

As previously explained in detail, the challenges faced by feminist activists online are hugely systematic, meaning they are deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political structures that activists are trying to challenge. Activists, including Nadine, must contend with these oppressive systems in their personal lives. Nadine refers to Donna Haraway's concept of 'Kin in the Chthulucene' to express this struggle, stating that one can say "the patriarchal system of the sectarian family in Lebanon is oppressing me…but in the end, you'll return to your parents' house and you'll have dinner with them." Her experience shows the difficulty of negotiating patriarchal spaces while building resistance to systems of oppression.

In the context of digital activism, this metaphor extends to how feminist activists navigate systemic silencing online. They must use these platforms to maintain visibility, and reach their audience while being acutely aware of how they perpetuate different kinds of oppression, including patriarchal norms, capitalist corporate interests, political power dynamics, legal and institutional failures and social hierarchies.

Indeed, activists have huge dependence on these platforms despite the burden that comes with their visibility on them, a product of these power structures. This has profound effects on their psychology and mental health. As we have previously seen, this burden includes constant exposure to hostility, toxic digital spaces, societal and family backlash, legal threats, surveillance, and the risk of physical violence. All these factors contribute to chronic stress, heightened anxiety, and pervasive feelings of insecurity and isolation.

Activists are forced to engage with social media platforms to maintain visibility and impact while managing the mental and emotional toll these systems involve. In this case, the repercussions operate in a cyclical nature. Systemic violence and oppression undermines

activists' online presence and affects their mental health. This, in turn, diminishes their ability to advance their advocacy efforts. As their capacity and safety are further compromised, these challenges reinforce the very structures they seek to dismantle, perpetuating a vicious cycle where systemic issues are continuously reinforced.

Activists are humans, not robots, a fundamental truth often overlooked amidst the relentless pace of activism in Lebanon, which exacerbates burnout and slows down any attempt at strategic planning. This lack of strategic clarity is then directly translated into online activism, where the focus shifts from long term goals to immediate issues. Maha reflects on the difficulty of managing trauma responses and maintaining a strategic focus amidst constant setbacks: "The biggest challenge a lot of us have is consistently not being reactive but having enough space to plan a strategy or the next step. There's no time for reflection, it's a constant go go go go." This constant reactivity to events such as the economic crisis, electricity cuts, shortage of fuel and medicine, pandemic, port explosion, the war on Gaza and Lebanon, contribute to feelings of helplessness and burnout of the activists living in Lebanon.

Recent events have intensified this fatigue and frustration. Sarah describes how the onset of the war in Gaza, coupled with backlash against LGBTQ+ and Syrian communities in Lebanon, has eroded any renewed energy activists had. This diminished sense of agency reduces their ability to maintain a strong and consistent presence, and can even lead to their withdrawal from online spaces as they feel powerless in comparison with the scale of the issues they are facing. Sarah conveys a pervasive sense of disempowerment and frustration: "Everything just makes you feel like whatever you do is not enough and you feel like you don't have any agency or political power, and that's very frustrating. Everyone feels like what we have is not good enough, but also that we are too tired to do 'good enough,' to create our good enough spaces."

Economic constraints accompanied by these events further compound the psychological strain on activists, Ghewa raises the issue of financial insecurity and its impact on activists' ability to sustain their work. The significant time investment and invisible labor required to maintain visibility, coupled with the scarcity of funding and economic instability, limit activists' capacity as they become preoccupied with basic survival needs, contributing to activism fatigue. This constant struggle for survival diverts their focus and energy from advocacy efforts, adding to the feelings of helplessness and burnout.

Additionally, the uneven distribution of resources means that some activists can practice their online advocacy within the framework of their work, benefiting from the NGOization and institutionalization of feminist activism. These individuals are somewhat more fortunate, as their activism is supported by organizational structures, providing a measure of stability and resources that independent activists lack. While this phenomenon can offer stability for some but also risks creating dependency on institutional frameworks, potentially limiting the radical potential of the movement, leading to a compromise in activist autonomy and power. Maha further explains that "Advocacy and activism have kind of become a vocation, and it wasn't before. [...] We were working as collectives, we were all free, we all worked as volunteers, and some of the things we're always conversing about is have we been pacified? Has the NGO-Industrial Complex pushed us to become neutral or submissive? How can we fight against it? I hope it enables us to reject funding, to say no to particular projects, you know make a decision that other organizations might find very difficult."

Sarah expresses feelings of isolation and depression, exacerbated by the lack of offline feminist spaces. Offline spaces often serve as vital support systems that provide a sense of belonging, mutual support, and collective energy, which are essential for sustaining the

emotional and psychological well-being of activists. Without these physical spaces, these types of connections are harder to achieve through digital means alone, making activists feel isolated and disconnected, which can negatively impact their motivation and mental health.

She notes, "I feel like the people that I learnt the most from that made the offline feminist movement for me even though they were very much online, I feel like these people are depressed and isolated, and feeling the same way on the non-existence of feminist spaces offline." Economic instability, political disillusionment, and the multiple crises mentioned intensify these feelings, creating something akin to an existential crisis for activists. "It's the crisis, COVID alone affected how much people can afford spaces if they are not funded, how much they can afford being in a physical space, having the fluctuating financial situation throughout the crisis as well, feeling like you might have some money at some point and then feeling like everything you have is worthless. You don't have savings, you don't have the means to be present and engaged in things anymore without relying constantly on things that are paid."

All of the factors explained above, which contribute to this sense of burnout and fatigue, push activists towards a difficult dilemma: "Everyone in my generation is suddenly faced with the question of whether to stay or leave. Do I even have a choice?" questions Sarah. For many, the decision to stay or immigrate becomes a matter of survival and opportunity. This is reflected in the significant rise in the number of Lebanese activists who have recently left the country. While they may not be legally recognized as refugees, they nonetheless feel "forcibly displaced" due to the deliberate inaction of the ruling powers.[116] The situation is especially challenging for digital activists, who are not only navigating through these restrictive circumstances but also facing amplified attacks online. The most recent backlash against comedian Shaden Fakih is one of many examples. After one of her sketches on Islam and religious figures was leaked and broadcasted online, Shaden found herself at the center of a severe controversy. The digital platforms became conduits for a smear campaign, threats of violence, and calls for her prosecution by prominent religious authorities. Faced with rape threats and an increasingly hostile online and offline environment, Fakih decided to leave Lebanon temporarily, stating, "I didn't want to leave the country, but the state cannot protect me." She announced that she would not return immediately, citing as reasons the need to safeguard her mental health and the state's inability to ensure her safety.[117]

From Clicks to Action: The Gaps Between Digital Engagement and Physical Mobilization

The transformative impact of social media is evident in how it has facilitated the introduction and normalization of terms like queer identities, feminism, and *Nasawiyya* (feminism in Arabic) [118]within communities where these ideas were once unfamiliar. For feminist digital activists, the increase in visibility has been essential in making these previously niche topics more accessible. However, as the interviews reveal, the disconnect between online engagement and offline participation presents significant challenges for feminist activism.

---

[116] Geha, C. (2024). Activists escaping Lebanon: Disruption, burnout, and disengagement. *Migrations in the Mediterranean, 153*.

[117] L'Orient-Le Jour. (2024). *Comedian Shaden Fakih leaves Lebanon after controversy over one of her shows*. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1420712/comedian-shaden-fakih-leaves-lebanon-after-religious-controversy-over-one-of-her-sketches.html

[118] The term "nasawiya" is derived from the Arabic word for "feminism"

One major challenge is the phenomenon of "slacktivism," where minimal online actions give the illusion of meaningful contribution without leading to tangible, on-the-ground change. For feminist activists working on critical issues like gender-based violence or discrimination that continue to prevail in both Lebanese society and legislation, this can be particularly frustrating. The perceived effort required for offline actions, such as attending protests, often seems disproportionate to the perceived reward, especially when online actions offer immediate, albeit superficial, satisfaction. Azadeh critiques digital tools like Facebook events, noting that they often inflate expectations of support, resulting in disappointing turnouts at physical protests: "you imagine that my cause spoke to all of these people but at the end of the day the people that showed up are the people that know you. Mostly based on your circle, your network." This reflects a core challenge feminist digital activists face—while their causes may garner widespread digital attention, translating that support into genuine, structural change beyond online spaces remains difficult.

The lack of follow-up on online campaigns advocating for feminist issues further contributes to this gap as the initial energy and visibility generated by online campaigns can fizzle out. For feminist causes—especially those addressing deeply entrenched issues like gender-based violence, discrimination, and reproductive rights—the loss of momentum can severely hinder progress. Activists may find themselves repeating efforts to regain attention, which can be draining and delay policy change.

Activists highlight that while online spaces may offer relative safety, the physical risks associated with public demonstrations are more considerable, especially when addressing issues deemed as controversial. Economic barriers further complicate participation, as women from marginalized communities—who often form the backbone of feminist movements—may lack the financial flexibility to miss work for protests or advocacy efforts.

Feminist activists argue for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between online and offline activism. Aliaa asserts: "For me, whenever I am using digital media to achieve a change this is for me digital activism. If I spent 15 minutes writing a tweet, and this tweet got retweeted by the speaker of parliament or whoever, this is digital activism." This demonstrates the complexity of aligning online engagement with offline action, and the different expectations associated with each, as some of the activists interviewed find that the two often serve distinct purposes. Digital activism can raise awareness, build pressure, and engage public discourse, but should not be expected to always translate directly into street mobilization. Rather, digital actions contribute to a broader strategy that often functions to amplify pressure, build momentum, and keep issues in the public eye.

There is a consensus among activists about the complementary nature of online and offline activism. Digital platforms are crucial for supporting and amplifying on-ground efforts, as they allow campaigns to transition into traditional media and physical protests, increasing public awareness and media coverage. This synergy is illustrated by cases where online initiatives escalated into broader public engagement, particularly when the issue is local.

Rasha cites the example of Kuwaiti journalist Nadia Ahmad who has been detained by Lebanese authorities for refusing to surrender her daughter to an abusive ex-husband.[119] Despite a previous court decision granting her custody, Nadia faces arbitrary detention: "The

---

[119] Sharika Wa Laken. (2023). *Injustice prevails: The detention of Nadia Ahmad sparks outcry against patriarchal oppression*.
https://en.sharikawalaken.media/injustice-prevails-the-detention-of-nadia-ahmad-sparks-outcry-against-patriarchal-oppression/

media pressure we exerted resulted in Nadia being imprisoned, and we were also summoned on this basis." Following the legal repercussions, when the situation demanded immediate action, the battle transitioned from digital advocacy to on-ground protest. A demonstration in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Baabda was organized, which garnered significant media coverage on the issue. This transition from digital to traditional media showcases how different forms of advocacy can complement each other in feminist activism.

This statement highlights the importance of timing and strategic transitions, which should be based on the urgency and nature of the issue at hand. The Anti-Racist Movement (A.R.M.) further advocates for a more integrated approach, emphasizing the continuous interaction and reinforcement of online and offline efforts.

For instance, A.R.M's approach reflects this integration through their community-based advocacy. They emphasize that their platform functions as an "emergency platform," primarily dedicated to posting about critical incidents such as deportation, physical abuse, exploitation, or mistreatment of migrant workers in both domestic and public spaces, rather than maintaining constant online engagement. Kareem emphasizes that in contexts like the COVID-19 pandemic and the early stages of the economic crisis, the visibility of migrant domestic workers was not optional but imperative. "Sometimes there was context when it came to the visibility of migrant workers, specifically migrant domestic workers in Lebanon where to be visible or invisible wasn't really an option. This is especially true during covid and during I guess the beginning of the economic crisis where a lot of employers were abandoning their migrant domestic workers, leaving them stranded on the street. So there wasn't really an option on whether to be visible or not. The strategy was okay, how can we utilize this visibility to our advantage?" This method helps prevent saturation and allows their digital presence to be more impactful during emergencies. For example, when advocating for the release of NM, a Kenyan activist, their strategy involved both offline and online efforts working in parallel. During NM's detention at the airport, where there was an attempt to illegally deport her amidst widespread distractions, their coordinated advocacy efforts—offline community support and online visibility—worked synergistically. In this context, Lebanese authorities are breaching international laws by deporting a registered asylum seeker despite the UNHCR's mandate as she will face severe risks from her family and community upon her return.[120]

Recommendations and Ways Forward

As Ghewa expresses: "I believe that the word "resistance" encapsulates everything happening and outlines the future of feminist activism in Lebanon despite any challenges we may face and everything we have endured so far." Although the research findings reveal a rather grim reality, with deeply entrenched structural barriers that cannot be resolved overnight, particularly through technical solutions alone, this section aims to provide a pathway forward.

It offers targeted recommendations based on both our analysis and insights gathered from interviewees. These recommendations are designed to engage each stakeholder in playing

---

[120] The New Arab. (2022). *Kenyan activist threatened with deportation from Lebanon*. https://www.newarab.com/news/kenyan-activist-threatened-deportation-lebanon

a crucial role in improving digital safety and alleviating the burdens faced by feminist activists in the online realm.

Feminist organizations and digital rights groups are pivotal in **advocating for comprehensive cybercrime legislation** that specifically addresses gender-based online violence. This advocacy should include promoting clear definitions of online harassment, threats, and abuse, while acknowledging how these issues disproportionately impact women and marginalized groups. Concurrently, there should be a **push for robust data privacy legislation** to ensure that all users' privacy and security are protected. Collaboration with policymakers is also essential to ensure these issues are prioritized on the legislative agenda.

Equally important is the **systematic documentation** of instances of online harassment, threats, and doxxing. Such documentation is crucial for building cases against perpetrators and pressing platforms to take appropriate action. This effort necessitates a coordinated approach: individual activists and organizations should diligently record incidents, and digital rights organizations like SMEX can support this by escalating cases to social media platforms through their helpdesk services.

In terms of capacity-building, **feminist organizations** should prioritize **digital literacy** training tailored specifically for activists.

This includes prioritizing digital security by safeguarding their online identities and data through secure passwords, two-factor authentication, encryption tools, and VPNs. Regularly implementing cybersecurity best practices, conducting digital checks, and protecting personal data are essential. Additionally, ensuring safety extends to the platforms used for communication and includes encouraging the use of secure communication tools, such as encrypted messaging apps and invite-only digital spaces for protecting sensitive information and fostering safe interactions.

In today's age, **digital literacy must go beyond its traditional definition** of basic ICT skills and security. It requires **a critical awareness** of the profit-maximizing models employed by digital platforms, driven by ad revenue and data collection. It also involves understanding the functioning of algorithms, their deliberately addictive nature, and the psychological triggers they exploit. Digital literacy must address how algorithms shape content visibility, including the creation of echo chambers, and the processes behind content moderation, with their systemic biases and gaps in moderation practices. Individuals engaging with digital platforms should also be aware of the presence and role of bots and fake accounts: why they exist, how they influence discourse, and their intended purposes. This expanded view of digital literacy is essential for everyone navigating the digital space, but especially for feminist activists, whose ability to mobilize, communicate, and advocate for change is often influenced and undermined by these dynamics.

Multidimensional training in digital literacy provides an opportunity to discuss these challenges and the disproportionate impact they have on feminist voices and causes. Such training would support activists and digital rights organizations to better understand how to navigate and challenge these platforms. Practically, this means, identifying key trends and utilizing available tools and strategies to bypass these limitations.

While feminist organizations have a deep understanding of the challenges faced by their communities and are well-positioned to deliver context-specific workshops, they may also need support in building digital literacy skills themselves. **Donors play a crucial role**, given

the financial limitations many organizations face in conducting these training sessions. **Investing in grants and funds** specifically aimed at enhancing digital literacy and cybersecurity training within the framework of supporting women's rights and digital safety is essential. **Digital rights organizations** can provide **technical expertise and support** in conducting these trainings and workshops, while also advocating for broader systemic changes.

Given the challenges posed by the monopolization of social media and the associated loss of control and increased dependency for activists, **exploring alternative and decentralized platforms** may be beneficial. Encouraging the use of forums, blogs, and other digital spaces that are less influenced by algorithmic prioritization and commercialization can help mitigate these issues and provide more control over online presence.

And lastly, support networks play a crucial role in this landscape. It is beneficial for feminist groups to **organize regular strategic conversations** to address safety, security, and online challenges. These discussions could help in establishing support networks that offer mutual aid, risk-sharing, and collective responses to attacks, fostering solidarity and reducing isolation.

Beyond security concerns, these meetings might also encompass a variety of other important areas. For example, they could serve as platforms to explore and refine advocacy strategies, share effective techniques, and discuss campaign approaches. Conversations could include **best practices** for engaging with digital platforms, such as developing content creation strategies that address the ephemerality of social media and sustaining attention over time. Additionally, discussions might cover legal threats and trends when it comes to freedom of expression, judicial and governmental intimidation.

For Social Media Platforms:

The following recommendations are aimed at encouraging social media platforms to adopt practices that support the rights and safety of feminist activists online. These suggestions also serve as advocacy guidance for feminist civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual activists to help drive accountability and reforms on these platforms.

- **Conduct reviews over the policies of account integrity and authentic identity.** Platforms should conduct human rights impact assessments and reviews on how the real name policy enforcement impacts feminist and queer activists, in addition to their ability to enjoy freedom of expression and access to information. Although account integrity and authentic identity is important to prevent impersonation and identity misrepresentation, activists whose real names are exposed, lose the privilege of anonymity or invisibility, making them more vulnerable to privacy violations and serious threats to their personal safety.
- **Consider improving measures that address abusing flagging mechanisms.** Feminist activists are regularly exposed to smear campaigns, massive hate speech storms and digital armies that are directed to censor them and remove their content online. Platforms should address the practice wherein a group of users massively report content or accounts to silence them. Repeat abusers should be banned from reporting or flagging content in the future.

- **Detect and remove content generated by bots and troll farms.** Anti-feminist entities and individuals, as well as some authoritarian governments, have been involved in using commercial tools like bots and troll farms to generate content that seeks to attack feminist organizations and individuals. Users reported cases where such content is widely circulated as part of larger smear and attack campaigns, spreading disinformation or engaging in coordinated harassment.
- **Improve content moderation in the Arab region.** Platforms should improve their content moderation policies and practices in Arabic and its dialects spoken in the Arab region in order to incorporate contextual understanding. Feminist content, such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), LGBTQ+ advocacy, or reports of sexual violence and assault, is often restricted or removed, while harmful content, including gender-based online violence and hate speech targeting activists, frequently goes unchecked. Addressing this disparity requires several measures, including the recruitment and training of diverse content moderation teams who are sensitive to the needs and contexts of different communities and local dialects.
- **Review the policies that trigger restrictions of content in the Arab region, including the DOI policy.** The accounts of Lebanese feminist organizations face online restrictions due to their engagement with local and regional political events, on the level of sharing newsworthy content or expressing their positions. Policies should take into account the organization or the individual's identities, and they should also notify users when they take such actions, including their reasons, and means of appealing to these restrictions.
- **Be transparent about users' data collection.** The privacy rights of users in Lebanon and other parts of the Arab region are vulnerable to online violations due to the lack of sufficient personal data protection regulations. However, this is not a pretext for social media platforms to enhance these violations. Platforms need to be transparent about practices of data collection in the Arab region, and should work on implementing best practices that comply with human rights conventions and agreements in protecting users' data.
- **Meta Should Ensure Transparency and Default Access for Political Content:** Social media platforms should implement transparent content moderation policies that clearly distinguish between harmful political speech and advocacy for social justice. This would ensure feminist and marginalized voices are not unfairly limited under broad "political content" restrictions. Additionally they should reverse the current opt-in system for viewing political content, making full access to social and political content the default. Users who wish to limit such content should have the option to opt out instead.
- **Increase Algorithm Accountability**: Social media platforms should offer greater transparency about how their algorithms influence content visibility, particularly around feminist activism and advocacy efforts. This includes providing clear explanations to users about how content is ranked or suppressed and offering more control over feed customization. Platforms should also conduct regular internal reviews to address biases and ensure that algorithms do not disproportionately suppress marginalized voices.

Conclusion

This research highlights the pervasive and multi-layered nature of challenges feminist activists in Lebanon stemming from the intersection of patriarchal repression, socio-political dynamics, and restrictive policies imposed by social media platforms.

Drawing on personal testimonies and focusing on the structural, gendered, and intersectional barriers in the online feminist space, visibility emerges as both a powerful tool for advocacy and a significant source of risk.

These risks manifest in several ways. Activists face gendered cyberviolence, including hate speech, doxing, and threats to themselves and their families, driven by entrenched patriarchal norms and societal misogyny, exacerbated by the lack of comprehensive cybercrime legislation. Political groups use digital tactics to target and silence activists, while legal intimidation and the misuse of laws further constrain their freedom. Peer surveillance and internal policing amplify the scrutiny they endure. Activists supporting marginalized communities—such as LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, migrant workers, and those advocating for SRHR—are especially vulnerable, with online hostility frequently escalating to physical violence. Additionally, poor data protection and privacy frameworks leave activists exposed to hacking and surveillance.

The accumulation of these pressures imposes significant barriers on activists, leading to mental health strain, a lack of safety in various forms, and both organized,deliberate suppression, and censorship of feminist discourse. Activists often engage in various forms of self-censorship to avoid the repercussions associated with their visibility, including opting for a certain level of invisibility or withdrawing from certain platforms altogether. This results in a structural silencing of feminist activists, driven not only by their activism and gender but also by their identities, or support for causes deemed controversial for the public opinion. In response, many activists and organizations have adopted different means of resistance, often in the form of advocacy strategies which prioritize safety over visibility and take into consideration the different local and contexts they are operating in.

Social media platforms are not neutral spectators from the sidelines in this situation. Once viewed as tools for democratizing activism, they have increasingly become gatekeepers that undermine feminist movements and entrench harmful stereotypes and social norms towards feminists and women in general. Biased algorithms undermine activists' control over their online presence, limit the visibility of important social discussions that are vital to feminist activism, and amplify the spread of hate and violence geared towards them.

The unwritten rules for activists to maintain visibility online involve considerable invisible labor, which often goes unnoticed. This labor includes mastering algorithmic literacy and meeting various demands imposed by algorithms. These demands are both resource-intensive and time consuming; they include maintaining posting consistency, creating content of shorter length, adhering to visually appealing, trendy aesthetics, monitoring engagement metrics and analytics, and engaging in ongoing training and skill development, among other factors. This reveals the rise of a new dimension of digital literacy and inequality, where those who cannot keep up with these demands risk being silenced.

Social media platforms fail to effectively address gender-based hate speech in Arabic and its diverse dialects due to reliance on automated tools and inadequately trained moderators who lack local context. Meanwhile, feminist content itself is overly moderated and disproportionately censored by the same systems, especially when they fail to detect malicious flagging. Other harmful policies include Meta's "real name" and political content

policy, which do not take into consideration their impact on feminist activists and marginalized communities in general.

Additionally, platform censorship, which includes shadowbanning and selective content suppression, disproportionately affects intersectional and liberation movements, particularly feminist and Palestinian content, reinforcing narrow, Western-centric narratives and stifles diverse voices.

In an alarming shift towards digital fragmentation, feminist activists are increasingly prioritizing meaningful collaborations over broad outreach. Yet they continue to face challenges, including the neoliberal emphasis on individualism promoted by social media platforms, reduced in-person interactions within the movement, a rise in performative solidarity, and increasing competition. In response, some activists are advocating for a more nuanced form of solidarity, one that focuses on risk-sharing and alleviating the burdens of visibility.

The oppressive systems they resist, combined with ongoing crises, economic instability, and a lack of offline feminist spaces, contribute to burnout, activism fatigue, and feelings of helplessness. These factors not only discourage activists but also slow their advocacy efforts and push many towards immigration or withdrawal from their work.The disconnect between digital engagement and physical mobilization, described as "slacktivism," is another significant issue. Minimal online actions often replace substantial offline efforts, making it difficult to translate digital support into tangible change. Despite this, online and offline activism are seen as complementary, with effective advocacy involving strategic transitions between the two.

In conclusion, the research calls for legislative reforms that safeguard activists against the threats they face, as well as a re-evaluation of the role of digital platforms in feminist activism and emphasizes the need for these platforms to provide safer, more inclusive environments that support, rather than hinder, the efforts of activists. It also advocates for continued efforts to strengthen digital advocacy strategies that prioritize collaboration and strategic dialogue, community building, and digital safety awareness.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by feminist activists in Lebanon, offering what we hope to be valuable insights for future advocacy and policy-making efforts in Lebanon, and in the region.