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Why Do They All Hate Us Online?

**Digital Threats and Resilience of
Yemeni Women in the Public Sphere ●**

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FELLOWSHIP ON TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ●

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SMEX is a nonprofit dedicated to safeguarding human rights in digital spaces across West Asia and North Africa. We advocate for safe and uncensored access to the internet, mobile services, and networked spaces for people in the region and the diaspora. Recognizing the inseparable link between digital rights and human rights, SMEX focuses on the impact of technology on fundamental freedoms.

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Abstract

This paper explores the rising challenge of cyberbullying faced by Yemeni women active in public spaces, particularly those engaged in activism, journalism, and advocacy. Through firsthand accounts from affected women and an examination of Yemen's complex socio-political landscape, the study reveals the varied and persistent online threats these women encounter, such as trolling, misinformation, and doxxing. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are commonly used to propagate such abuse, with these attacks often rooted in deep-seated political, cultural, and gender-based biases. Social and religious norms frequently frame women's public participation as a challenge to traditional values, fueling and justifying online harassment.

The impact on these women is significant, extending beyond the digital realm to affect their mental health, social lives, and professional engagements. Many report experiencing chronic stress and health issues and feel pressured to self-censor or even withdraw from public life altogether. Despite these challenges, Yemeni women have developed a range of resilience strategies, both individually and collectively, including conducting digital security training and forming support networks, often in partnership with NGOs and tech companies.

This paper emphasizes the critical need for policy changes, such as gender-sensitive cybercrime laws, and calls on NGOs to enhance their support frameworks for women in public roles. Additionally, it recommends that technology companies improve their reporting processes and provide tailored support to combat gender-based online abuse. Through these efforts, the study aims to support safer digital spaces, ultimately contributing to the empowerment and protection of Yemeni women as they pursue their work in the public sphere.

Introduction

In the last decade, cyberbullying has emerged as one of the major challenges facing women worldwide, driven by the increasing number of women internet users and the proliferation of social media platforms where sexism and hostility toward women have migrated. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993). This broad definition encompasses not only physical violence but also the more insidious forms of abuse that women frequently encounter online, such as cyberbullying.

Internationally, women in the public eye, such as politicians, journalists, and activists, face significant cyber harassment, particularly when advocating for social or political change. For instance, in the United States and Europe, prominent women politicians, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sanna Marin, have reported frequent online attacks targeting their gender, appearance, and policies. Similarly, women journalists and activists worldwide, including Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, face coordinated online harassment campaigns aimed at discrediting their work and discouraging their advocacy. UNICEF¹ defines cyberbullying as “bullying with the use of digital technologies. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms, and mobile phones. It is repeated behavior, aimed at scaring, angering, or shaming those who are targeted.” This form of digital violence can include actions such as spreading false information, sharing private or embarrassing content without consent, sending threatening messages, and impersonating victims to harm their reputation.

This phenomenon is especially prevalent in more conservative regions, where women encounter religious, social, economic, or political barriers to participating in the public sphere. In the WANA region, such as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, cyberbullying has had tangible consequences for women activists and public figures. For example, the “TikTok girls”² A case in Egypt saw several young women arrested following intense online criticism, highlighting the dangers these attacks pose. In Saudi Arabia, activists like

¹UNICEF. (n.d.). *Cyberbullying: What it is and how to stop it*. UNICEF.
<https://www.unicef.org/eca/cyberbullying-what-it-and-how-stop-it>

² Amnesty International. (2020, August 17). *Egypt: Survivors of sexual violence and online abuse among prosecuted women TikTok influencers*. Amnesty International.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/08/egypt-survivors-of-sexual-violence-and-online-abuse-among-prosecuted-women-tiktok-influencers/>

Loujain Al-Hathloul³ have faced extensive digital violence, with social media campaigns amplifying accusations that undermine their activism. Similarly, in Iraq, women in public roles, including MPs and activists, encounter cyberbullying as a form of political repression.

In Yemen, a highly conservative country torn apart by sectarian conflicts, cyberbullying against women in the public sphere, especially journalists and activists, is an increasing phenomenon. In 2021, Yemen ranked 155th out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index⁴, emphasizing the barriers women face, such as movement restrictions and limited participation in the public sphere. The rise of internet use and social media development in Yemen has furthered this trend, creating an unsafe environment for women. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying against women in Yemen, analyze the social, cultural, and political factors that contribute to its persistence, and explore possible legal and social measures to mitigate its effects. Through a detailed review of existing literature, strengthened by a series of interviews, this paper aims to provide insights into the causes and consequences of cyberbullying and offer recommendations for creating safer digital spaces for Yemeni women.

The objectives of this research are to identify the nature and root causes of online attacks, explore their impacts on Yemeni women's rights defenders, and develop practical tools to enhance resilience against digital threats. The study seeks to answer key questions, including what online threats Yemeni women's rights defenders face, why they are targeted, and the consequences of these attacks, as well as the tactics they use to mitigate or reduce these threats. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the fields of digital rights and women's activism, its relevance to broader discussions on digital security for vulnerable groups, and its practical impact in offering solutions for Yemeni women's rights defenders navigating hostile online environments.

³ European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights. (2021). *Silencing dissent: The case of Loujain Al-Hathloul and digital violence in Saudi Arabia*. European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights.

<https://www.ecdhr.org/silencing-dissent-the-case-of-loujain-al-hathloul-and-digital-violence-in-saudi-arabia/>

⁴ United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). *Promoting access to gender justice*. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org/yemen/projects/promoting-access-gender-justice>

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the complex and nuanced experiences of Yemeni women activists facing online harassment and cyber threats. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the need to capture personal, lived experiences, a qualitative approach was chosen as the most effective way to gain insight into participants' perspectives, resilience strategies, and coping mechanisms in response to digital threats. This approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of how these activists navigate digital harassment within Yemen's sociopolitical and cultural context.

Data Collection

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Yemeni women activists online, three primary data collection methods were utilized:

1. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, including women activists (some of whom had experienced cyber harassment), Yemeni women journalists, influential male defenders, digital security experts, and representatives from feminist NGOs and networks. The sample included participants both within Yemen and in the diaspora, providing a range of perspectives on digital threats, risk factors, and resilience strategies. Using semi-structured guides allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences while giving the researcher flexibility to explore emerging themes.
2. **Case Studies:** Specific cases of online attacks targeting high-profile Yemeni women activists were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of how digital harassment manifested in various contexts. Documented incidents of harassment, doxxing, cyberbullying, and other forms of online violence against Yemeni activists were examined to identify recurring patterns in the nature of these threats, the rhetoric used, and the impact on activists' public and private lives.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants, ensuring diversity in experiences and perspectives across different regions and backgrounds. The sample included activists within Yemen, who faced direct forms of cyber harassment, as well as members of the Yemeni diaspora, who encountered unique challenges related to their geographical distance and differing levels of digital literacy and resources. This approach

ensured a balanced representation of insights from those directly affected by online harassment and those who support or advocate for Yemeni women activists' safety.

Ethical Considerations

The sensitive nature of the research required rigorous attention to ethical protocols to protect participants' safety, privacy, and well-being. The following measures were implemented:

- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To mitigate risks associated with sharing personal experiences of online harassment, the study ensured participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Identifiable information was removed from reports and transcripts, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.
- **Informed Consent:** Participants were given detailed explanations of the study's objectives, methods, and potential risks before providing consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.
- **Handling Sensitive Information:** Recognizing the potentially distressing nature of recounting harassment experiences, interviews were conducted in a supportive and respectful environment. Participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing, and resources for psychological support were provided as needed.
- **Digital Security:** To safeguard the data collected, secure digital protocols were followed. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted devices, with access restricted to the research team.

Theoretical Background

Gender, Digital Rights, and Activism

The intersection of gender, digital rights, and activism serves as a foundation for analyzing the unique experiences of women activists in online spaces. Gendered experiences in digital spaces are heavily influenced by socio-political contexts, as Banaji and Moreno-Almeida⁵ discuss in their study on youth networks in the WANA region. Digital platforms offer a dual nature for women's activism: they amplify marginalized voices but simultaneously expose women to gendered forms of cyber harassment. This aligns with Shade's⁶ feminist perspective on digital rights, which highlights that digital

⁵ Banaji, S., & Moreno-Almeida, C. (2021). Politicizing participatory culture at the margins: The significance of class, gender, and online media for the practices of youth networks in the WANA region. *Global Media and Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766520982029>

⁶ Shade, L. R. (2015). Feminist reflections on digital labor, digital rights, and the urban landscape. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(6), 955-971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1105938>

platforms empower women by enabling visibility and activism while also subjecting them to amplified risks of backlash and hostility. This feminist perspective emphasizes how digital spaces, often celebrated for promoting equality, can paradoxically reinforce gender-based inequalities when women face backlash for challenging patriarchal norms.

This aspect of the framework considers that women in West Asia and North Africa, who are often socially restricted from participating in public activism, turn to digital spaces to challenge traditional norms. Digital platforms become critical tools for activism, as well as sites where societal resistance to their roles becomes visible. Therefore, examining the intersection of gender, digital rights, and activism sheds light on how digital spaces empower women and simultaneously become arenas where conservative social structures are asserted and enforced through harassment.

Power Hierarchies and Public/Private Space Theories

Power hierarchy theories, particularly Foucault's (1977)⁷ concept of surveillance, contribute to understanding how digital harassment is weaponized as a tool for controlling women's behavior. Foucault's theory posits that surveillance enforces conformity by inducing individuals to self-regulate in anticipation of being observed. In the context of online spaces, digital surveillance through constant scrutiny and harassment serves as a deterrent, pressuring women activists to conform to socially accepted roles or silence themselves to avoid criticism. By exerting digital surveillance, both individual harassers and organized groups reinforce societal power hierarchies, seeking to intimidate and silence women activists who challenge patriarchal expectations.

Theories of public and private spaces are also central to understanding online harassment. Fraser (1990)⁸ discusses how traditional gender roles have confined women to private spaces, with any public visibility challenging these boundaries and provoking societal backlash. When women transgress these boundaries by entering digital public spaces to advocate for change, it disrupts the entrenched gender norms, triggering responses that attempt to "correct" their presence in the public eye. Women's online presence thus becomes a site of resistance and vulnerability, as their activism in public digital spaces defies cultural norms and often results in targeted harassment.

In conservative societies, such as Yemen, digital harassment functions as a mechanism for upholding social hierarchies that segregate women from the public sphere. Women activists, who utilize digital platforms to assert their voices, are seen as transgressors

⁷ Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.

⁸ Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>

and are thus disproportionately targeted in attempts to reinforce these gendered boundaries. Theoretical perspectives on public and private spaces explain how digital harassment in these regions can be viewed as an effort to push women back into traditional private roles by making the public sphere unsafe.

Digital Resilience and Psychological Impacts of Online Harassment

The psychological impact of online harassment on women activists and the resilience strategies they adopt are critical aspects of this framework. Banet-Weiser's⁹ resilience theory in digital feminist spaces provides insights into how women navigate hostile online environments. This theory emphasizes the importance of building resilience through solidarity, networks of support, and anonymity as mechanisms that help women cope with digital threats. For instance, women activists often turn to strategies such as sharing experiences with supportive communities, creating anonymous profiles, or developing mental resilience to withstand harassment. These resilience mechanisms reflect an active engagement with the hostile digital landscape, allowing women to continue their activism while managing the emotional toll of cyber harassment.

Furthermore, psychological frameworks on the impacts of cyberbullying, as outlined by Kowalski et al.¹⁰, underscore the severe mental health effects of persistent online harassment. Their research identifies anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal as common responses to digital bullying, effects that are amplified for women in conservative societies where social stigma may prevent them from openly discussing these experiences. Understanding the psychological impact of online harassment is essential for examining how cyberbullying restricts women's freedom, diminishes their participation in activism, and forces them to adopt avoidance strategies that limit their visibility and influence.

Combining these theories creates a holistic framework that captures the multi-layered experience of women activists facing digital harassment. The intersection of gender and digital rights explains why women face particular challenges in online activism, while power hierarchy and public/private space theories contextualize the backlash women encounter when they become visible in the public sphere. Digital resilience and psychological frameworks allow for a deeper understanding of how women respond to and cope with these challenges. This integrated approach reveals that digital harassment is not merely an individual issue but a systemic problem rooted in socio-political dynamics that reinforce traditional gender norms.

⁹ Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

¹⁰ Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 1073–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>

For women activists in West Asia and North Africa and Yemen, this theoretical framework explains the paradox of digital spaces: while these platforms are empowering tools for social change, they also mirror and amplify societal restrictions and hostility, serving as battlegrounds where patriarchal power structures are continuously negotiated. In conservative or conflict-affected societies, online harassment against women activists functions as both a form of social control and a political tool, with implications for their mental health and the broader trajectory of women's rights in these regions.

Global Overview of Online Threats Against Women Activists

The global phenomenon of online threats against women activists has intensified over the past decade, driven by an increase in women internet users and the prominence of social media as a platform for public engagement. These online threats are often gendered, leveraging social biases and targeting women who advocate for political, social, or gender rights. Scholars like Sobieraj¹¹ highlight that women who occupy public roles, such as journalists, politicians, and activists, are frequent targets of online harassment. This harassment is not limited to hostile comments but includes more invasive forms like doxxing—where personal information is publicly exposed without consent—and "SWATing," which involves making false police reports to intimidate the target (Poland, 2020)¹².

The tactics employed by harassers vary in form and severity. Jane¹³ and Sobieraj (2020) point to the use of cyberbullying, trolling, and anti-feminist "digilantism" as mechanisms to silence women activists. Trolling, a form of online provocation aimed at eliciting negative emotional reactions, is frequently employed against women who challenge social norms, using demeaning language to undermine their credibility and professionalism. This kind of digital mob behavior often includes doxxing and SWATing, both of which can be psychologically devastating, inducing fear and driving activists to self-censor or abandon public advocacy. Poland (2020) emphasizes that online harassment frequently escalates into threats of physical harm, transforming the digital space into an arena of real-world fear and stress.

The impact of these threats is especially severe in conflict zones, where conservative values and political instability amplify the risks associated with online harassment. For

¹¹ Sobieraj, S. (2020). *Credible threat: Attacks against women online and the future of democracy*. Routledge. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=RPH6DwAAQBAJ>

¹² Poland, B. (2020). Gendered harassment, abuse, and violence online. In *Gender violence, 3rd edition: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. De Gruyter. Retrieved from <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.18574/nyu/9781479801817.003.0021/pdf?licenseType=restricted>

¹³ Jane, E. A. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 30(2), 284-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1166560>

instance, in regions like West Asia and North Africa and North Africa, online threats frequently target women's activism and are used as a form of political repression. Gelms¹⁴ observes that, in conflict settings, visibility on digital platforms can make women particularly vulnerable, as their advocacy is often perceived as a challenge to traditional gender roles or political authority. This is evident in cases like Egypt, where the "TikTok girls" case saw women detained following fierce online campaigns that branded them as social outliers. In conservative environments, these online attacks do not remain confined to the internet; they evolve into real-world repercussions, including arrests, physical threats, and social ostracization (Sobieraj, 2020; Jane, 2016).

In non-conflict regions, the threats are often less likely to escalate into physical violence but remain damaging in terms of psychological harm and professional impact. Posetti, Lu, and Shabbir¹⁵ note that women journalists around the world face significant digital harassment, which undermines their professional credibility and threatens press freedom. The UNESCO study underscores the need for robust legal protections, particularly as threats can have lasting impacts on mental health, often driving women to disengage from public life and activism.

The literature underlines the urgent need for effective strategies to counter online violence. Gelms¹⁶ and Posetti et al. (2022) argue for comprehensive legal reforms that protect women from digital harassment and recognize the psychological harm of online violence. Such reforms could standardize international legal approaches to online threats, ensuring that women activists have the necessary support to continue their work safely. Digital security tools and support from platforms, Posetti et al. (2022) suggest, are also essential to create safer online environments. These studies collectively demonstrate that online harassment not only challenges individual women's mental health and freedom of expression but also restricts societal progress by silencing voices that advocate for equality and human rights.

Regional Context

West Asia and North Africa presents a challenging environment for women activists due to entrenched cultural, political, and social factors that amplify digital attacks on their work. Research by Shirazi¹⁷ indicates that socio-political contexts across the region

¹⁴ Gelms, B. (2018). Volatile visibility: The effects of online harassment on feminist circulation and public discourse. *OhioLINK*. Retrieved from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

¹⁵ Posetti, J., Lu, A., & Shabbir, N. (2022). Legal and normative frameworks for combatting online violence against women journalists. *UNESCO*. Retrieved from https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/UNESCO_GlobalStudy_LegalChapter_v3.pdf

¹⁶ Gelms, B. (2018). Volatile visibility: The effects of online harassment on feminist circulation and public discourse. *OhioLINK*. Retrieved from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

¹⁷ Shirazi, F. (2013). Social media and the social movements in the Middle East and North Africa: A critical discourse analysis. *Information Technology & People*, 26(1), 28-39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09593841311307123>

create a restrictive framework where traditional gender roles are enforced, often causing backlash against women who visibly challenge these roles online. Political instability and authoritarianism exacerbate this, as seen in Khamis's¹⁸ exploration of Arab women journalists and activists during the Arab Spring, where online harassment was used as a tool for silencing dissent, often targeting gender-based roles and expectations. Banaji and Moreno-Almeida¹⁹ further illustrate how social media in the WANA region has become a critical tool for women's rights activism, but one that exposes them to coordinated campaigns of cyber harassment aimed at reinforcing societal norms.

We've seen these dynamics play out clearly in Egypt. Women like Esraa Abdel Fattah, one of the founders of the April 6 Youth Movement, have been subjected to relentless online smear campaigns aimed at discrediting their activism by attacking their personal lives²⁰. These gendered attacks often frame outspoken women as immoral or socially deviant, making it clear that the harassment is not just about politics, it's about enforcing patriarchal norms. Similarly, feminist activist Amal Fathy faced an online campaign labeling her a threat to "egyptian values" after she spoke out against sexual harassment²¹. Not long after, she was arrested, showing how digital harassment can translate into real-world consequences.

In Tunisia, despite the country's progressive reputation on gender rights, women activists face similar challenges. Amina Sboui, a former member of Femen, sparked outrage when she posted a topless photo to protest women's oppression. The backlash she received online, including death threats, revealed how deeply entrenched conservative values remain, even in a country with relatively liberal laws²². Her experience shows how women who step outside of prescribed roles are targeted not just for their ideas but for how they present their bodies and their identities.

The situation in Saudi Arabia is even more extreme, with digital harassment of women activists often orchestrated by the state. In 2018, a wave of arrests targeted women's

¹⁸ Khamis, S. (2016). Five questions about Arab women's activism five years after the 'Arab Spring'. *CyberOrient*. Retrieved from

https://cyberorient.kreas.ff.cuni.cz/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/03/CyberOrient_Vol_10_Iss_1.pdf

¹⁹ Banaji, S., & Moreno-Almeida, C. (2021). Politicizing participatory culture at the margins: The significance of class, gender, and online media for the practices of youth networks in the WANA region. *Global Media and Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766520982029>

²⁰ Hosni, D. (2017). Egyptian cyber feminisms within the Arab Spring: A gateway to transnational democracy? In E. Maestri & A. Profanter (Eds.), *Arab women and the media in changing landscapes* (pp. 163–180). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62794-6_11

²¹ Amnesty International. (2018, August 9). *Egypt: Amal Fathy referral to trial a shocking case of injustice*. Retrieved from

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/egypt-amal-fathy-referral-to-trial-a-shocking-case-of-injustice/>

²² Butler, A. (2017). "Fuck your morals": The body activism of Amina Sboui. In N. Yaqub & R. Quawas (Eds.), *Bad girls of the Arab world* (pp. 132–145). University of Texas Press. <https://doi.org/10.7560/313350-012>

rights activists like Loujain Al-Hathloul, who campaigned for the right to drive²³. Online, she and others were attacked by state-backed troll armies accusing them of dishonoring the nation and spreading Western values. These digital attacks didn't just stop at harassment — they were part of a broader strategy to silence dissent, which included imprisonment and reports of torture.

These examples show that online harassment in West Asia and North Africa is not random. It reflects a broader effort to police women's behavior and enforce traditional gender roles. Social media might offer new spaces for activism, but it has also become a battleground where women activists are forced to fight not just for their rights but for their reputations and safety. As they continue to challenge norms, they face a digital space that mirrors the same social and political struggles they confront offline.

In Yemen, the socio-political landscape intensifies these digital threats. The country's conservative values and patriarchal social structure create significant challenges for women's participation in the public sphere, as documented by Al-Mahbshi²⁴. Women in Yemen face additional scrutiny and harassment, exacerbated by the country's ongoing conflict, which has led to heightened tensions and an increase in online attacks against women who defy societal norms. Wheeler (2017)²⁵ points out that, in Yemen, cyberattacks often target women journalists and activists, not only to suppress their voices but to maintain patriarchal dominance in public discourse. Political and religious actors in Yemen frequently mobilize online networks to harass women under the guise of preserving social and religious values, creating a hostile environment that deters women from public engagement.

The situation in Yemen highlights the intersection of conflict and cyber harassment, where digital spaces mirror the country's broader conflicts. Mahloulou²⁶ emphasizes that, in Yemen, cyber harassment is often used as a form of political repression against women who engage in activism, with these attacks rooted in both local patriarchal values and the political actors' attempt to silence opposition voices. These insights underline the need for robust support systems and digital protections for women

²³ Hassan, J. (2019, May 24). 'What they did to me was so horrific': Brutal silencing of a Saudi feminist. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/may/24/what-they-did-to-me-was-so-horrific-brutal-silencing-of-a-saudi-feminist-loujain-al-hathloul>

²⁴ Al-Mahbshi, S. (2022). Shebas reclaiming spaces: Yemeni women political participation in the peace process (2014-2019). *University of Lethbridge Theses*. Retrieved from https://opus.uleth.ca/bitstream/10133/6383/1/ALMAHBSHI_SARA_MA_2022.pdf

²⁵ Wheeler, D. (2017). *Digital resistance in the Middle East: New media activism in everyday life*. OAPEN. Retrieved from https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/93549/1/external_content.pdf

²⁶ Mahloulou, D. (2023). Digital political cultures in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings. *Torrossa*. Retrieved from <https://www.torrossa.com/gs/resourceProxy?an=5456357&publisher=FZ0661>

activists across the region, as they confront unique threats at the intersection of social norms, political repression, and digital vulnerability.

Background on the Public Sphere in Yemen:

Yemen's political landscape is deeply fragmented due to years of conflict, corruption, and weak governance structures. There are many competing political factions representing regional, tribal, and sectarian interests, all of which contribute to instability and fragility. The collapse of the central government has empowered non-state actors, including tribal leaders and militias, who often wield significant influence and operate autonomously from the state²⁷. The authority in Yemen is divided in a complex way involving multiple actors. This decentralization of power has weakened the state's ability to govern effectively, resulting in the erosion of rule of law and the widespread violations of human rights.

Since the popular uprising in 2011 and the consequent civil war that began in 2015, Yemen has been engulfed in violent conflicts that have claimed over 233,000 lives²⁸, displaced more than 4.5 million people internally, and caused widespread destruction of infrastructure. Various armed factions, including the Ansar Allah (Houthis), the internationally recognized government forces, the Southern Transitional Council forces, and other armed groups, compete for control over different regions of the country, hindering peace and recovery efforts. The conflict has destroyed many health and educational facilities, leading to severe shortages in basic services. The government struggles to extend its control across the entire country, and the increasing activity of extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, further complicates the security landscape²⁹. Yemen suffers from widespread proliferation of weapons among armed groups and civilians, which increases the risk of violence. Women and children are the most affected, with women facing gender-based violence and marginalization, and children facing forced recruitment by armed groups and deprivation of education and healthcare³⁰.

²⁷ Salisbury, P. (2017). *Yemen: National chaos, local order* (Research Paper). Chatham House – The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-12-20-yemen-national-chaos-local-order-salisbury2.pdf>

²⁸ United Nations. (2020, December 1). *UN humanitarian office puts Yemen war dead at 233,000, mostly from indirect causes*. United Nations Operational Support.
<https://operationalsupport.un.org/en/un-humanitarian-office-puts-yemen-war-dead-233000-mostly-indirect-causes>

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations. (2023, March 28). *Yemen crisis: Background and developments*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/yemen-crisis>

³⁰ Save the Children. (2022, March). *No place is safe in Yemen: The impact of seven years of conflict on children in Yemen*. Save the Children.
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/no-place-is-safe-in-yemen-the-impact-of-seven-years-of-conflict-on-children-in-yemen/>

The breakdown of legal institutions has made it increasingly difficult to ensure justice and protect citizens' rights. Yemen's justice system is now fragmented, with parallel legal structures emerging in regions controlled by different authorities: the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG), Ansar Allah, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC)³¹. Women, children, and minority groups, like Muhamasheen³², have been particularly vulnerable facing increased difficulties in accessing justice during the war. Widespread corruption, nepotism, and clientelism within the government further undermine accountability and prevent meaningful reform³³. In 2023, Yemen ranked 175 out of 180 countries in the most recent Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International³⁴. Despite attempts at anti-corruption reforms in the mid-2000s, including the establishment of the Supreme National Anti-Corruption Commission (SNACC), these measures largely failed due to weak enforcement and lack of political will.

Civil society organizations, which could play a vital role in advocating for human rights and holding the government accountable, face significant challenges. About 94.3% of the local organizations reported being directly subjected to arbitrary restrictions, violations, and violent and flagrant reprisals outside the law during the period of armed conflict making it difficult for them to operate effectively³⁵. These impacts encompassed forced permanent or temporary cessation of activities, reduced levels of field work, and the implementation of low-impact activities due to direct arbitrary control. The restrictive environment limits the ability of civil society to foster a participatory culture, which is essential for democratic governance and long-term stability.

The Rise of Cyberbullying in Yemen

Yemeni civil society, however, faces even further challenges to those mentioned above. According to Ismail Al-Aghbary³⁶, the increasing number of internet users and the lack of

³¹ International Legal Assistance Consortium. (2021, December). *The impact of the war on Yemen's justice system*. International Legal Assistance Consortium.

<https://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Impact-of-the-War-on-Yemens-Justice-System.pdf>

³² (the term that was adopted by members of the community itself to escape the derogatory term of 'Akhdam' ('servants') by which they are often referred. There are controversies about the ethnic origins of the group. Some believe they are descended from African slaves or Ethiopian soldiers from as far back as the sixth century. Others nevertheless think they are of Yemeni origin) Minority Rights Group International. (2018). *Muhamasheen*. Minority Rights Group International.

<https://minorityrights.org/communities/muhamasheen/>

³³ IBIDEM.

³⁴ DevChampions. (2020). *Rethinking Yemen's economy: Economic policies and political dynamics in Yemen* (Report No. 4). DevChampions. https://devchampions.org/files/Rethinking_Yemens_Economy_No4_En.pdf

³⁵ *Repression and challenges in Yemen* (Field study). ReliefWeb.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/civil-society-space-dynamics-repression-and-challenges-field-study-civil-society-space-yemen-during-conflict-period-2014-2023-enar>

³⁶ Al-Aghbary, I. (2024, April 11). *Cyberbullying on the rise in Yemen*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/04/cyberbullying-on-the-rise-in-yemen?lang=en>

specific legal protections are primary factors in the rise of cyberbullying in Yemen. This rapid expansion of internet access enhances opportunities for electronic interaction, providing a larger space for cyberbullying. Women, especially public figures like artists, activists, and journalists, are particularly vulnerable to harassment that mocks their physical appearance or personal traits. A survey³⁷ showed that women in Yemen are the most affected, with a staggering 69% women participants reporting incidents of cyberbullying compared to 32% of men. Al-Rawi (2021) describes how conflict zones become digital battlegrounds where online harassment, radicalization, and cyberbullying flourish due to weakened governance and amplified societal divides. In Yemen, this has meant that social media becomes a stage for expressing grievances, intensifying gender-based harassment toward visible figures and activists. Al-Sowaidi³⁸ further suggests that the crisis has intensified vulnerabilities, particularly among women in conflict zones, who are disproportionately targeted. The war has weakened legal institutions, leaving online spaces inadequately regulated. And in the context of Yemen, Al-Jeddawy³⁹ explores how the war has shifted youth priorities, leading to increased incidents of online aggression, with young people often expressing frustration through cyberbullying. The paper indicates that cyberbullying becomes an outlet for the anger and disenfranchisement young Yemenis feel, exacerbated by economic hardships, social dislocation, and restricted freedoms due to the conflict. According to Amnesty International⁴⁰ The Yemeni Organization for Development and Technology Exchange (YODET) recorded 115 cases of cyber-extortion between 2023 and April 2024, most of which targeted women. By mid-2023, Sanad said it was receiving at least four cases of cyber-extortion every day, and 95% of survivors were women.

The situation is aggravated by cultural norms and societal attitudes that increase the severity of harassment faced by women, particularly when they engage in activities deemed inappropriate for their gender. The lack of specialized laws addressing cyberbullying, despite some provisions in the Yemeni Penal Code⁴¹, leaves victims vulnerable and without adequate means of redress. Therefore, it is crucial for Yemen to

³⁷ The "Cyberbullying Against Women" survey, conducted in collaboration with the "Wujood for Human Security" Foundation, is part of the "Women, Peace, and Security" project implemented by Manasati 30, under the supervision of RNW Media and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Care Netherlands.
<https://manasati30.com/society/17241/>

³⁸ Al-Sowaidi, B. (2024). A socioecological and maqāṣidi analysis of domestic gender-based violence in Yemen. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 26(5), Article 12. Retrieved from
<https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3252&context=jiws>

³⁹ Al-Jeddawy, Y. (2022). The impact of the Yemen war on the priorities and needs of youth. *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*. Retrieved from <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16177>

⁴⁰ Amnesty International. (2024, November 1). *Yemen authorities and Meta must address online gender-based violence*. Amnesty International.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/yemen-authorities-and-meta-must-address-online-gender-based-violence/?utm>

⁴¹ Republic of Yemen. (1994). *Yemen: Republican Decree, By Law No. 12 for 1994, concerning crimes and penalties*. Refworld. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/1994/en/34402>

develop and implement modern legal frameworks that protect internet users and curb the trend of online harassment, ensuring a safer digital environment for everyone.

Cyberbullying Against Yemeni Women Journalists

Ahmed Al-Aghbari (2023) discusses the challenges faced by Yemeni women journalists, where a recent study⁴² by the "Media Freedoms Observatory" at the Center for Studies and Economic Media found that 72% of the women journalists surveyed had experienced some form of cyberbullying. This study, which included 79 journalists and media activists from various Yemeni governorates, showed that most targeted Yemeni women journalists were repeatedly subjected to cyberbullying, with a significant focus on Facebook, which accounted for over 90% of the incidents. According to Al-Rawi⁴³ The rising use of social media in Yemen provides both a platform for journalistic expression and a breeding ground for online abuse, leaving women journalists particularly vulnerable. This hostile digital environment is intensified by the conflict; as Ashraf Al-Rifi⁴⁴ points out, the atmosphere is charged with hate speech and incitement, making online harassment of journalists even more pervasive. The same Center for Economic Media highlighted similar findings, with women journalists facing offensive comments, intrusive messages, and hacking of private pages, all of which reflect social and cultural attitudes that perceive women's visibility in the public sphere as a challenge to traditional values.

Bakhash, Zran, and Fahmy⁴⁵ note that the hostile digital environment in Yemen, exacerbated by the conflict, has intensified self-censorship among women journalists, who often face not only public attacks but targeted campaigns meant to silence critical voices. This cyberbullying environment is rooted in cultural and social norms, as Al-Nasrawi⁴⁶ highlights in her study of cyber violence in the Arab region. She explains that Yemeni women's visibility in the public sphere challenges traditional gender expectations, provoking further online hostility. Ninety percent of the journalists attributed the spread of this phenomenon to social and cultural factors in a society that still views women's appearance as a disgrace. The frequency of cyberbullying and threats

⁴² Sharaf, M., & Al-Kadasi, M. (2022). *Cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists*. Center for Economic Media. <https://economicmedia.net/en/?p=3066&utm>

⁴³ Al-Rawi, A. (2020). *Women's activism and new media in the Arab world*. Routledge.

⁴⁴ Al-Rifi, A. (2023). The impact of conflict and hate speech on cyberbullying in Yemen. *Center for Economic Media*.

⁴⁵ Bakhash, A., Zran, J., & Fahmy, S. S. (2024). Silencing the voices of discontent: How the new digital communication environment reinforces the spiral of silence in the Yemeni crisis. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*. Retrieved from https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/jammr_00088_1

⁴⁶ Al-Nasrawi, S. (2021). Combating cyber violence against women and girls: An overview of the legislative and policy reforms in the Arab region. In *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*. Emerald. Retrieved from <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211037/full/pdf>

faced by journalists has increased since 2013⁴⁷, leading many to withdraw from using social media to express their opinions or to address women's and societal issues.

Yemeni law does not explicitly include the term "cyberbullying," though certain forms of online abuse fall under existing criminal codes, such as the Penal Code No. 12 of 1994, as noted by Al-Nasrawi (2021). This legal gap leaves women journalists to rely on coping mechanisms like blocking, ignoring, and reporting incidents to protect themselves, as Bakhsh et al⁴⁸. describe self-censorship as a survival strategy in a country where robust legal recourse is lacking. Al-Rifi⁴⁹ further adds that mitigating the impact of cyberbullying requires multi-faceted approaches, such as reporting cases to social media platforms, remaining calm in response to threats, and seeking psychological counseling for support. Additionally, journalists should turn to press institutions and unions to help monitor instances of cyberbullying and work towards accountability for offenders. The study showed that cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists is one of the most prevalent forms of violence, with its escalation posing a significant threat to journalists' safety, often leading them to consider ceasing their work. The primary effects of cyberbullying include stress, psychological pressure, family and social problems, and a withdrawal from publishing or participating in the media. To counteract these impacts, targeted journalists are calling for increased media awareness, the activation of electronic accountability tools, government oversight of cyberbullying cases, and support from entities such as the Journalists' Syndicate and Media Freedoms Observatory to initiate legal action against aggressors.

The platform "Mansati 30"⁵⁰ conducted a survey on cyberbullying against Yemeni women, with 1172 young Yemeni men and women participating. The results showed that societal attitudes are the primary driver of bullying, with 85% of participants stating that they had not been involved in an incident of cyberbullying. However, only 16 participants admitted to bullying others, while 175 said they had been victims of cyberbullying. The results indicated that girls under the age of 20 are the most exposed to bullying at 60%, while the age group between 20-24 years is the most active in bullying at 21%. Additionally, the results confirmed that women are more susceptible to bullying at 69% compared to men at 32%. The forms of bullying ranged from fabricating photos and videos to identity theft and attacking women's social status. Participants pointed to the main reasons for bullying, including societal attitudes, the absence of

⁴⁷ Slaughter, A., & Newman, E. (2020, January 14). *Journalists and online harassment*. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. https://dartcenter.org/resources/journalists-and-online-harassment?utm_source

⁴⁸ Bakhsh, A., Zran, J., & Fahmy, S. S. (2024). Silencing the voices of discontent: How the new digital communication environment reinforces the spiral of silence in the Yemeni crisis. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*. Retrieved from https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/jammr_00088_1

⁴⁹ Al-Rifi, A. (2023). The impact of conflict and hate speech on cyberbullying in Yemen. *Center for Economic Media*.

⁵⁰ Mansati 30. (n.d.). *The societal view is leading the cyberbullying of Yemeni women: Survey results*. Mansati 30. <https://manasati30.com/survey-the-societal-view-is-leading-the-cyber-bullying-of-yemeni-women/>

deterrent laws, and the psychological disorders of the bullies. Ninety-three percent of participants suggested reforming and strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks to combat the phenomenon, and 89% called for adopting advocacy campaigns to confront cyberbullying.

Women's Response to Cyberbullying

Ahmed Al-Najjar⁵¹ highlights Yemeni women's responses to cyberbullying, emphasizing their reluctance to reveal true identities online to avoid harassment or verbal abuse for posting pictures, comments, or opinions. According to UNICEF, bullying is described as repeated behavior aimed at intimidating, angering, or defaming individuals. Cyberbullying can be defined as bullying with the use of digital technologies. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. It is repeated behavior, aimed at scaring, angering or shaming those who are targeted⁵². Cultural norms and societal attitudes often exacerbate the suffering of women, with activists repeatedly calling for stricter laws against cyberbullies. Al-Nasrawi⁵³ further underscores the impact of cultural expectations in Yemen, where traditional norms reinforce online hostility toward women who step into the public sphere. Bakhsh et al. (2024) point out that these entrenched values often prevent women from expressing themselves freely, with many resorting to coping mechanisms like silence, self-censorship, and reliance on anonymity for self-preservation. The types of cyberbullying experienced include harassment, defamation through rumors, impersonation, and unwanted contact, with frequent cases of threats and hate speech. Al-Sowaidi⁵⁴ observes that such online abuse can have devastating psychological impacts, leading to depression, isolation, eating disorders, and self-harm. The forms of abuse range from harassment to extortion involving personal photos or information, with El Asmar⁵⁵ emphasizing the urgent need for stronger protective policies to ensure the safety of women online.

⁵¹ Al-Najjar, A. (2022). Yemeni activists and anti-cyberbullying campaigns. *UNICEF*.

⁵² UNICEF. (n.d.). *How to stop cyberbullying*. UNICEF.

<https://www.unicef.org/end-violence/how-to-stop-cyberbullying>

⁵³ Al-Nasrawi, S. (2021). Combating cyber violence against women and girls: An overview of the legislative and policy reforms in the Arab region. In *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*. Emerald. Retrieved from

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211037/full/pdf>

⁵⁴ Al-Sowaidi, B. (2024). A socioecological and maqāṣidi analysis of domestic gender-based violence in Yemen. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 26(5), Article 12. Retrieved from

<https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3252&context=jiws>

⁵⁵ El Asmar, F. (2020). Claiming and reclaiming the digital world as a public space: Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa. *Oxfam*. Retrieved from <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/621103>

Awareness Efforts

A recent event organized by the "Voices of Yemeni Women" platform via Zoom focused on digital security and strategies to combat cyberbullying. The session brought together a diverse group of experts and participants, providing an interactive space to discuss mechanisms for enhancing digital security and addressing the growing threat of cyberbullying. Moderated by journalist Sakina Mohammed, the event aimed to equip girls and women in Yemen with practical tools and insights to navigate digital spaces safely.

Throughout the event, the speakers shed light on the multifaceted challenges Yemeni women face regarding digital security, particularly how cyberbullies and extortionists exploit existing vulnerabilities. The discussions underscored the widening digital divide, exacerbated by rapid technological advancements and limited access to reliable internet services. This digital gap leaves many women exposed to online risks, further amplified by the prevalence of digital illiteracy among Yemeni women⁵⁶. The psychological toll of cyberbullying was a recurring theme, with experts emphasizing that digital insecurity directly impacts mental well-being, fostering feelings of isolation, fear, and helplessness.

The event highlighted the critical need for raising digital awareness and providing educational resources to bridge these gaps. Empowering Yemeni women to protect themselves online is essential for their broader social empowerment. The speakers collectively stressed the importance of creating safe digital environments, fostering community support, and acknowledging women as integral social contributors.

Dr. Angela Al-Maamari, Assistant Professor in the Department of Mental Health at Taiz University, opened her talk by exploring the root causes of bullying. She noted that differences in opinion, cultural background, and inadequate emotional development often trigger bullying behaviors. Dr. Al-Maamari emphasized that social media platforms have become primary arenas for bullying, amplifying its impact. She delved into the psychological effects of cyberbullying, highlighting how it can lead to social withdrawal, insecurity, and long-term emotional distress.

Engineer Noor Khaled contributed a technical perspective by discussing the role of digital security in combating cyberbullying. She highlighted that women are disproportionately targeted in digital spaces due to their perceived silence and vulnerability. Khaled also pointed out that social violence often compounds digital harassment, creating a vicious cycle that intensifies the victims' suffering. Her

⁵⁶ Ghanem, R. A. (2023, January). Digital violence against Yemeni women leaders: A field study. Salamat WANA. Retrieved January 8, 2025, from <https://portal.salamatWANA.org/en/publication/digital-violence-against-yemeni-women-leaders-a-field-study/>

presentation called for urgent action to address these issues, including increasing digital literacy and promoting proactive security measures.

Towards the end of the event, the experts offered practical advice to help reduce cyberbullying and enhance digital security. Key recommendations included:

- Promoting community involvement in identifying and addressing cyberbullying cases.
- Raising awareness about the psychological and social impacts of cyberbullying.
- Encouraging women to acquire data protection skills and report incidents of online abuse.
- Providing support systems for victims of cyberbullying.
- Advocating for the implementation of laws and regulations to safeguard individuals from digital violence.

The session concluded with a call to action for participants to share success stories of cyberbullying survivors. These narratives can serve as powerful tools to inspire and empower others, demonstrating that overcoming digital harassment is possible and that safety in digital spaces can be achieved. By amplifying these stories, the platform hopes to foster a culture of resilience and encourage more women to take proactive steps in securing their online presence.

The Role of Social Media in the Fight for Women's Rights

The research paper "The Role of Social Media in the Struggle for Women's Rights"⁵⁷ by Mireia Farro Sarats discusses how social media has become a vital platform for communication and social activism. Despite the digital divide, these platforms empower marginalized voices and enhance feminist movements, addressing challenges such as online ridicule and cyberbullying. Social media facilitates feminist movements through campaigns like #MeToo, which highlights issues of harassment and gender-based violence. This view is supported by Locke, Lawthom, and Lyons⁵⁸, who analyze how digital platforms, while offering unprecedented visibility for feminist causes, present a dual-edged environment where supporters and critics converge, with anti-feminist hate speech and ridicule often accompanying feminist discourse online.

⁵⁷ Farro Sarats, M. (2022). The role of social media in the fight for women's rights. European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed).

⁵⁸ Locke, A., Lawthom, R., & Lyons, A. (2018). Social media platforms as complex and contradictory spaces for feminisms: Visibility, opportunity, power, resistance and activism. *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(2), 187–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517753973>

The positive impact of social media as a unifying platform for women's rights activists is highlighted in studies like that of Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller⁵⁹, who explore the transformative power of digital activism in the #MeToo movement. They note that social media not only spreads awareness but also fosters solidarity among women globally, empowering them to challenge social norms and demand justice. Similarly, Jones-Virma⁶⁰ found that social media enables Ethiopian women's rights movements to raise awareness and challenge traditional gender norms. However, these authors acknowledge that, despite its empowering potential, online spaces are also contested, with frequent encounters of resistance and hostility toward women's activism. Gheytañchi and Moghadam⁶¹ discuss how, in Middle Eastern and North African contexts, social media has allowed women to mobilize across borders despite restrictive environments, such as during the Arab Spring. However, their findings indicate that the visibility provided by social media can also place women at heightened risk of digital and physical retaliation, as seen in the backlash against women in Iran who utilized social media to voice feminist demands. This highlights the need for enhanced digital protections, especially in regions with limited legal safeguards against harassment and abuse. Vardeman and Sebesta⁶² argue that while social media amplifies women's voices and creates a space for dialogue on women's rights, it also complicates activism by exposing activists to trolling, cyberbullying, and threats, which can discourage participation and silence vulnerable voices. They propose that successful digital activism requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes both online solidarity and systemic support for victims of digital harassment.

In Yemen, social media has played a critical role in providing a platform for women's rights activists to voice their demands and challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. However, this digital activism is fraught with unique challenges due to the country's ongoing conflict, economic collapse, and limited internet infrastructure. According to Amnesty International⁶³ Yemeni women activists face significant risks when engaging

⁵⁹ Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2018). #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), 535–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1467787>

⁶⁰ Jones-Virma, M. (2021). Women's rights movements in Ethiopia: The role of activism via social media on traditional gender norms and attitudes. *Digital Activism and Societal Change*, 11(3), 45-67. Retrieved from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1589238/FULLTEXT03.pdf>

⁶¹ Gheytañchi, E., & Moghadam, V. N. (2014). Women, social protests, and new media activism in the Middle East and North Africa. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 40(1), 45-66. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43496487>

⁶² Vardeman, J., & Sebesta, A. (2020). The problem of intersectionality as an approach to digital activism: The Women's March on Washington's attempt to unite all women. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 32(1-2), 20-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2020.1716769>

⁶³ Amnesty International. (2024, November). *Yemen: Authorities and Meta must address online gender-based violence*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/yemen-authorities-and-meta-must-address-online-gender-based-violence/>

online, including cyberbullying, blackmail, and threats of physical harm. These risks are compounded by societal attitudes that discourage women from participating in public discourse, further isolating those who attempt to advocate for gender equality. Despite these challenges, Yemeni women have utilized social media to launch campaigns like #YemeniWomenDemandPeace⁶⁴, which highlights their call for an end to the conflict and their exclusion from peace negotiations. The platform has allowed women to share personal stories of suffering, resilience, and advocacy, creating a sense of solidarity across the Yemeni diaspora.

A study by the International Media Support⁶⁵ found that online platforms have become essential for spreading awareness about women's rights, particularly in rural areas where traditional media is inaccessible. However, the study also notes that digital literacy remains a barrier for many Yemeni women, limiting their ability to fully participate in online activism. The lack of digital protection laws in Yemen further exacerbates this issue, leaving women vulnerable to online abuse without legal recourse. Al-Aghbary⁶⁶ emphasizes that the absence of clear legal frameworks to address digital harassment and cyberbullying in Yemen increases the risks faced by women activists, making it imperative for international organizations to provide support and advocacy for better digital protections. The report also highlights the efforts of grassroots organizations in Yemen, such as the "Yemeni Women's Voices" initiative⁶⁷, which provides digital security training and awareness campaigns to help women protect themselves online.

While social media offers Yemeni women a critical space for activism, it remains a contested and risky environment. Addressing these risks requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving digital literacy, implementing legal protections, and fostering a supportive community that recognizes and amplifies women's voices. Without these measures, the empowering potential of social media in Yemen may remain underutilized, leaving women vulnerable to both digital and physical threats.

Interview Findings and Discussion

The narratives of Yemeni women activists and defenders illustrate the profound challenges they face as they navigate online and offline realms of public life. Each story—from Kholoud Bashrahil's pursuit of personal freedom in Hadhramaut, to

⁶⁴ Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). (2023, February 21). *Towards feminist peace in Yemen*. <https://www.wilpf.org/towards-feminist-peace-in-yemen/>

⁶⁵ Al-Kaisy, A. (2024). *A gender analysis of the media landscape in Yemen*. International Media Support.

⁶⁶ Al-Aghbary, I. (2024, April 11). *Cyberbullying on the rise in Yemen*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/04/cyberbullying-on-the-rise-in-yemen?lang=en>

⁶⁷ Al-Hassani, M. (2023, March 20). *Local initiatives create a safer digital space for Yemeni women*. The Media Line. <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/local-initiatives-create-a-safer-digital-space-for-yemeni-women/?utm>

Samiha's grassroots activism in Hodeidah, to Noura Al-Jarawi's fierce defense of detainees' rights—reflects the societal pressures, institutional gaps, and personal costs these women endure. Collectively, their experiences emphasize how Yemen's socio-political and cultural landscape converges with digital dynamics to marginalize women, while also showcasing their resilience in the face of targeted cyber harassment.

Structural Barriers and Legal Limitations

Yemen faces significant legal and social challenges in addressing digital violence against women, primarily due to the lack of a clear law that specifically targets this type of crime. Without a dedicated law for cybercrimes, women, in particular, are left exposed to online threats and harassment with no effective legal protection. Another obstacle is the delay in updating existing laws or introducing new ones. Yemeni legislation has not kept pace with technological advancements or the rise of social media, which has become a main platform for digital violence.

The suspension of legislative work can be traced back to the political turmoil after the Houthi coup in 2014 and the ongoing war, which disrupted legislative institutions, including the Yemeni parliament. The parliament has not met regularly, and no new law proposals or amendments have been made during the war, which has delayed any progress on laws protecting women from digital violence.

According to Ghanem,⁶⁸ at present, digital violence cases are handled under the **Crimes and Penal Code No. 12 of 1994**, which covers issues such as defamation, threats, and privacy violations. **Article 291** defines defamation as accusing someone of an act that, if true, would result in legal punishment or public shame. **Article 292** specifies that defamation carries a penalty of up to two years in prison or a fine. Additionally, **Article 256** addresses privacy violations, including eavesdropping and recording private conversations or taking pictures without consent, while **Article 255** penalizes tampering with mail or telegraphic messages.

However, these laws are outdated and fail to tackle the evolving digital threats women face today, such as online harassment, cyberbullying, and the non-consensual sharing of private images. As a result, such cases are processed by regular courts and prosecutors, but there is no specialized or comprehensive legislation to handle the complexities of digital crimes.

⁶⁸ Ghanem, R. A. (2023, January). Digital violence against Yemeni women leaders: A field study. Salamat WANA. Retrieved January 8, 2025, from <https://portal.salamatWANA.org/en/publication/digital-violence-against-yemeni-women-leaders-a-field-study/>

According to Al-Yousifi⁶⁹ In 2014, a proposed law aimed at combating violence against women and girls in Yemen was introduced to Parliament by the Women National Committee and legal experts under the Ministry of Human Rights. Despite some amendments being approved, the bill was suspended due to the war. The bill sought to protect women from violence, including domestic abuse, rape, and honor killings. Additionally, a 2013 draft Constitution included provisions for women's rights, but the conflict disrupted the planned referendum.

Social barriers also prevent many women from reporting these crimes. The fear of being blamed or shamed for their online presence, combined with the risk of retaliation from perpetrators, creates a culture of silence. Women often worry about the repercussions of reporting, including threats of violence or damage to their reputation.

Furthermore, there is a lack of support structures to assist women in these situations. Without institutions dedicated to addressing digital violence, women feel isolated and powerless in the face of online abuse. This has led feminist civil society organizations to push for more comprehensive laws to combat digital violence. However, their efforts have been hampered by the ongoing political and social instability, which continues to delay meaningful legal reforms.

Amnesty International⁷⁰ said in its examination of the cases of seven Yemeni women who were subjected to cyberattacks on Facebook that the authorities in Yemen have failed to address blackmail and gender-based harassment on Facebook, protect women's right to privacy in online spaces, and provide redress for survivors. The organization added that these attacks occur in the context of Meta's lack of adequate safeguards regarding online protection. Fahmi Albaheth, a 35-year-old IT engineer and digital rights advocate, highlights the institutional shortcomings that exacerbate these issues. *"Cybercrime laws are limited and inactive, and effective cooperation with judicial authorities is a challenge,"* he says, explaining that these legal shortcomings embolden attackers. Albaheth's role as a trusted partner to Meta reflects his deep understanding of these challenges; he points to the difficulties he faced in conveying Yemen's unique social and cultural context to global platforms, initially struggling to make them understand why something as simple as sharing a photo of a veiled woman could pose a serious risk. *"Community standards are meant to be universal, but the problem is that what might be dangerous in one culture might be normal in another,"* he notes. According to Amnesty International, under international human rights standards, including the UN Guiding

⁶⁹ Al-Yousifi, M. (2023). *The cybercrime epidemic targeting Yemeni women*. FairPlanet. https://www.fairplanet.org/story/the-cybercrime-epidemic-targeting-yemeni-women/?utm_source

⁷⁰ Amnesty International. (2024, November 1). *Yemen authorities and Meta must address online gender-based violence*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/yemen-authorities-and-meta-must-address-online-gender-based-violence/>

Principles on Business and Human Rights, Meta has a responsibility to respect human rights globally. “They must empower users with robust privacy tools and adapt their policies to reflect cultural contexts, including by leveraging country-specific expertise in content moderation and engaging civil society voices in Yemen in meaningful ways.”

Laila Ahmed, a 27-year-old cybersecurity trainer, echoes these challenges from her experience on the frontlines in Yemen, where she often supports women at risk. Laila notes that women seeking help from law enforcement face other obstacles, with police departments lacking women officers and specialized cybercrime units. *“Support for women in emergencies often comes from individual initiatives rather than the police,”* she explains. These restrictions mean that many cases are dropped or left unresolved, as women lose confidence in the system’s ability to protect them. Laila’s role in training activists and journalists highlights an alternative path to safety, although the need for comprehensive legal protection remains unaddressed. While some governorates have specialized cybercrime units, including in Sana’a, Aden, Hadramaut and Taiz, only one woman interviewed by Amnesty International was aware of them. The presence of this unit indicates that the lack of legal knowledge and information on how to combat cyber-extortion constitutes a significant obstacle to women’s access to justice.

The Amnesty International report echoes Laila Ahmed’s argument that societal restrictions and a lack of trust in the police are justified as barriers to women’s access to justice. Two survivors who filed criminal complaints in Taiz and Aden governorates described how police officers and prosecutors blamed them for targeting them. One woman said the prosecutor insulted her and said she had been blackmailed, pointing to her ornate abaya and long fingernails as evidence. Three survivors told Amnesty International that they had been forced to pay bribes to police officers and prosecutors so that they could investigate their complaints.

It is worth noting that Amnesty International sent letters to the Yemeni authorities on 13 and 14 August 2024, and to Meta on 15 August 2024, requesting a response to its findings and recommendations. On August 29, Meta responded saying it was unable to respond within the timeframe provided, and shared links to the company’s publicly available policies. No response had been received from Yemeni authorities at the time of publication.

Socio-Cultural Drivers of Cyber Harassment

The socio-cultural forces underpinning online harassment in Yemen are deeply rooted in patriarchy and are exacerbated by religious and societal pressures. Nashwan Al-Othmani, a human rights advocate and journalist, highlights the complicity of security forces, religious authorities, and even societal norms in reinforcing control over women’s

public and private lives. *"It's no longer just about facing religious leaders," he explains, "these ideas have become embodied in the behavior of security forces and authorities, sanctioned by society."* Al-Othmani's insights reveal the broader socio-political context in which women's voices are systematically silenced, as their public presence threatens deeply entrenched hierarchies.

Nesma Mansour, a 30-year-old feminist activist and policy officer at Masar Al-Salam, underscores this issue by pointing to the divide between public and private spaces in conservative Yemeni society. *"Digital violence cannot be separated from the structural violence that women in Yemen experience,"* she states. Mansour argues that Yemeni women are "punished" for occupying public spaces, where their visibility is often met with criticism, accusations, and threats, amplified by the reach of social media. This theme of "guardianship" extends to Kholoud Bashrahil's experience as well, where societal expectations for her husband to "control" her choices led to persistent threats against them. *"They told him to keep me in check,"* Kholoud recalls, *"saying it was his duty as a man."* This patriarchal control over women's behavior, exacerbated by religious justifications, intensifies the backlash faced by women like Bashrahil when they attempt to express themselves publicly.

The Psychological and Socio-Economic Impact of Cyber Harassment

For these women, the effects of cyber harassment extend beyond immediate psychological distress to disrupt all aspects of their lives. Laila Ahmed describes the profound emotional impact these attacks have on women, noting that *"most women enter a state of hysteria due to the psychological pressure of seeing their names, images, or stories—whether true or fabricated—circulated widely."* This psychological toll was particularly evident in Samiha Al-Mansour's experience, where ongoing harassment pushed her to leave social media for extended periods. "Sometimes I have to retreat from social media and disappear for a while, but it always affects my health too. I developed irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) from the stress," she confides.

The economic impact is equally significant. Huda Al-Rahman, the 31-year-old executive director at the Al-Nour Legal Foundation, explains that Yemeni women often face "economic isolation as a form of punishment." For women like Laila Jamil, a 29-year-old journalist and researcher, this isolation has immediate implications, as she notes the professional setbacks and financial insecurity that come with constant harassment and social stigmatization. Financial independence, once compromised, directly limits these women's freedom and autonomy, as exemplified in Samiha's story of harassment that drove her to hide her activism while traveling. Huda's insights highlight how public shaming can disrupt women's career prospects, diminish their economic security, and reinforce their dependence on patriarchal structures.

Resilience Mechanisms and Collective Strategies

Despite these daunting obstacles, Yemeni women have demonstrated resilience by devising individual and collective strategies to cope with and resist cyber harassment. **Mona Faris**, a 40-year-old protection officer with **Masar Al-Salam**, emphasizes the role of the Feminist Solidarity Network in supporting women activists. "*We recently released a self-referral guide for women defenders facing violations,*" **Mona** explains, enabling women to connect with resources and assistance independently. Additionally, she describes her organization's cautious approach to advocacy, avoiding public statements that might endanger more women in the network.

Huda Salem's story exemplifies an organized response to digital harassment. At 40, **Huda's** defense of women's rights, especially detainees subjected to abuse in Houthi prisons, made her a target of Houthi-led digital campaigns that branded her with labels like "apostate" and "Zionist." In response, she and her colleagues formed a committee to document all defamatory content, seeking support from Amnesty International to pressure platforms into removing the posts. "We managed to shut down 12 Houthi-affiliated websites," she notes, a significant victory that not only removed harmful content but also forced the Houthis to expend resources on countering their efforts. Such actions highlight the power of organized, collective strategies in countering digital harassment, even in contexts where legal recourse is unattainable.

The strength of familial support is also an essential component in resilience. For **Samiha Al-Mansour**, her family's unwavering backing has helped her navigate the public backlash. "My family has always supported me, and I think having that and the awareness to handle these things has helped me face the attacks," she notes. However, she recognizes that not all women have similar support networks, adding, "Women with stable family or financial situations are more likely to fight back. Not everyone is in the same position." This disparity in support systems illustrates how individual circumstances, including access to resources, family dynamics, and economic stability, shape each woman's ability to cope with and resist harassment.

Toward a More Inclusive Digital Landscape

These narratives underscore the urgent need for both national and international reforms to protect Yemeni women from digital violence. As Fahmi Al-Baheth and Laila Ahmed emphasize, the establishment of comprehensive cybercrime legislation is essential to curb the abuse women face online. At the same time, partnerships with global tech organizations, as Noura and Nesma's work suggests, can empower local activists by providing technical support to remove harmful content.

Key Findings

Types of Online Threats Faced by Yemeni Women's Rights Defenders

Yemeni women's rights defenders encounter varied and severe forms of online harassment that include trolling, misinformation campaigns, and doxxing, all aimed at undermining their credibility and silencing their voices. The harassment often involves personal attacks based on appearance, accusations of moral misconduct, and intentional misrepresentation of their statements to discredit them. Doxxing, or the public sharing of personal information, is particularly dangerous in Yemen, where public exposure can lead to real-world threats. Key platforms perpetuating these attacks include social media channels like Facebook and Twitter, where hostile actors can reach large audiences quickly. Fake accounts and anonymous forums amplify these attacks, enabling a wider spread and, consequently, a more significant impact on their targets.

Root Causes and Motivations

The root causes of online harassment against Yemeni women activists stem from political, cultural, and gender-based dynamics. Politically motivated attacks are often directed at women whose advocacy is perceived as opposing the interests of powerful groups, including political factions and religious authorities. In Yemen's conservative society, social and religious norms dictate rigid gender roles, and women who challenge these roles by engaging in public activism are seen as threats. There is a prevailing view that women's visibility in the public sphere undermines traditional societal values, sparking hostility and resistance. Religious and social norms are often weaponized to justify attacks on women, framing their advocacy as morally corrupt or as attempts to destabilize social order, thus rallying public support for these digital assaults.

Impact on Women's Rights Defenders

Personal Impact: The psychological toll on women activists is substantial. Online harassment leads to fear, anxiety, and a profound sense of social isolation, as many women feel unsafe participating in social or public events after being targeted. Constant exposure to negative and sometimes life-threatening messages erodes mental well-being, often resulting in stress-related conditions such as insomnia, headaches, and even physical symptoms like irritable bowel syndrome. The risk of public shaming and stigmatization causes some women to retreat from public life entirely, thereby silencing their voices and limiting their participation in advocacy efforts.

Professional Impact: The professional consequences are also significant. Persistent harassment disrupts women's digital advocacy and hinders their ability to engage in

activism. Reputational damage, often achieved through the spread of misinformation, can discredit women's work, making it difficult for them to continue their advocacy. Many women activists find themselves needing to take extended breaks from their work or limit their online presence, affecting their visibility and impact. In some cases, the reputational harm extends to women's family lives, where familial or societal pressure forces them to abandon their roles in activism altogether.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience:

Individual Strategies: Women activists in Yemen employ various personal strategies to counter online harassment, including blocking and reporting abusive accounts, engaging in self-care practices to mitigate stress, and pursuing legal action, though this remains challenging due to limited legal protections. Some women also anonymize their social media presence by using pseudonyms or restricting their online visibility to close circles, though this can limit their reach and influence.

Collective Strategies: Collective strategies have proven vital for resilience among Yemeni women activists. By forming support networks and advocacy groups, women share resources, encourage each other, and strategize ways to withstand digital attacks. Digital safety training provided by local and international organizations offers practical skills for defending against cyber threats. Partnerships with technology companies have also been instrumental, as some women gain access to dedicated support for reporting abusive content and managing privacy settings. These collective efforts are central to building a robust support system that enables Yemeni women activists to persist in their advocacy despite ongoing digital threats.

Conclusion

This research has shed light on the significant challenges Yemeni women face in navigating digital spaces, especially those involved in activism, journalism, and public advocacy. The combination of cultural norms, political instability, and a lack of legal protections has fostered an environment where online harassment flourishes, reflecting and reinforcing broader societal inequalities. Despite these obstacles, Yemeni women have shown extraordinary resilience, employing creative and collective strategies to protect themselves and continue their work.

To address this issue effectively, it is essential to implement comprehensive legal reforms, provide better digital literacy education, and ensure that technology companies adopt culturally informed policies to protect users. Empowering women to engage safely in digital spaces is not only crucial for their individual rights but also for advancing broader social and gender equality. By amplifying their stories and tackling the systemic issues behind digital harassment, both local and international stakeholders can work toward creating safer, more inclusive online environments.

This study underscores the importance of collective action, policy reform, and sustained advocacy to challenge the structures that perpetuate online violence. The resilience of Yemeni women is a powerful reminder that even in the face of adversity, change is possible when individuals and communities come together to demand justice and equality.

Recommendations

For Women in the Public Sphere

1. **Digital Security Best Practices:** Women engaged in public roles should adopt digital safety practices to minimize risks associated with online harassment. Recommended practices include using two-factor authentication, setting up strong and unique passwords, and choosing secure communication tools like encrypted messaging apps. Monitoring one's online presence through tools that alert users to mentions of their names or images can provide an early warning system against potential threats. Additionally, maintaining strict privacy settings on social media and limiting online connections to trusted individuals are proactive steps that reduce exposure.
2. **Self-Care Strategies for Managing Psychological Impact:** Managing the psychological toll of online harassment is essential. Accessing mental health support, whether through professional therapy, peer support groups, or stress management techniques, can be highly beneficial. Regular breaks from social

media, establishing healthy boundaries for online engagement, and connecting with supportive networks can alleviate stress. Sharing experiences and resilience strategies within peer networks is also valuable for fostering solidarity and resilience.

For Policy Makers and NGOs

1. **Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Digital Security for Women Activists:** Policy makers should work to establish comprehensive cybercrime laws that address gender-based digital harassment and ensure accountability for online violence. Laws should be clear on definitions around public morals to avoid misuse, specifying the types of online behavior that constitute harassment. Additionally, developing specialized cybercrime units within law enforcement, staffed with trained women officers, can improve the safety and accessibility of the reporting process for women.
2. **Supporting Women's Rights Defenders Through Training, Resources, and Legal Assistance:** NGOs can support women activists by offering training in digital security, providing knowledge and tools to protect against cyber harassment. Psychological support services and legal resources can also empower women who face harassment to seek redress. Emergency funds from grants specifically for digital security training and support in crisis situations would provide an added layer of security for those facing significant threats.

For Technology Companies

1. **Recommendations for Social Media Platforms to Reduce Gendered Online Violence:** Technology companies should develop policies that consider cultural nuances, especially in conservative societies where women's online visibility may increase their vulnerability. Platforms can achieve this by involving cultural consultants who understand how regional sensitivities may shape online interactions. Implementing algorithms and moderation policies that account for these specific needs can significantly reduce risks for women.
2. **Improving Reporting Mechanisms and Offering Support for Targeted Women Activists:** Social media platforms must streamline reporting mechanisms to prioritize cases of gender-based harassment and provide swift resolution. Improved reporting tools that are accessible and prioritize such cases will enhance protections for women facing targeted harassment. Furthermore, providing direct access to digital safety teams to assist with content removal and privacy measures, and forming partnerships with NGOs, will ensure that resources reach the most vulnerable women in need of urgent support.

Annex

Stories

Khulood

Kholoud Bashrahil's journey is emblematic of the struggles faced by young Yemeni women who attempt to carve out spaces for personal freedom and self-expression in conservative settings. Born to a father from Hadhramaut and a mother from Sana'a, Kholoud spent most of her life in Sana'a before the war forced her to relocate to Mukalla in Hadhramaut. At 20, she had already experienced significant change and challenge, including marriage to Yahya, a man two years her senior who had previously been affiliated with a militant group but, by her account, had since "become enlightened and supportive." "He really understood me and supported my work," she reflected. "He believed in my right to express myself."

With her husband's support, Kholoud pursued unconventional work, juggling roles as an English teacher, hotel receptionist, and most notably, as a model specializing in fashion and makeup. Modeling became a source of both income and identity for Kholoud, a path she had followed passionately for five months. However, from the outset, their choices stirred controversy. Yahya, who had grown to be her ally, began receiving threats from various individuals who pressured him to "control" his wife, citing traditional values that deem men as guardians of women. *"They told him to keep me in check,"* she explained, *"saying it was his duty as a man."* The threats, sometimes escalating to death threats, were accompanied by accusations that they were acting against social and religious principles. Eventually, the pressure led Yahya to separate from his family, moving with Kholoud to a private location where she could live more freely, including removing her hijab when she felt comfortable. *"We just wanted a place where we could live on our own terms,"* she said.

This arrangement, however, did not shield them from public scrutiny. The turning point came when Kholoud posted a photo of herself on a beach without her hijab—an act she viewed as simple self-expression in modest clothing but which others perceived as defiance of social norms. Almost immediately, a campaign against her erupted on social media. *"I didn't know where it was coming from,"* she said. *"I was still new to Mukalla and didn't know many people."* Many people, especially those in Mukalla who were largely strangers to her, filed complaints, accusing Kholoud and Yahya of *"violating public morals."* The criticism intensified when Kholoud shared an anniversary photo with her husband, sparking further outrage. *"It was just a photo,"* she insisted. *"A memory we wanted to share."*

Samiha

Samiha Al-Mansour's story reveals the personal cost of community activism for young women in Yemen. At 28, she has spent years navigating both public and private challenges that often accompany a woman's attempts to make an impact in conservative communities. Originally from Hodeidah, she relocated to Sana'a in 2017 following the conflict in her hometown. A journalism graduate from Sana'a University, Samiha is both a journalist and a community activist, focusing on climate, youth, and women's issues. Reflecting on her journey, she recalls, *"I started my activism in 2014 in Hodeidah as a volunteer, and people loved me because I was independent and had no political affiliations."*

However, her prominence brought backlash. *"Some of the people from Tihama started a campaign against me, accusing me of being a Houthi supporter,"* she explains, referring to accusations made after she led a delegation that successfully mediated a local electricity crisis. *"They claimed I was aligned with the Houthis, but I was simply a community mediator."* In 2015, when she represented young women from Hodeidah during a visit from the UN envoy's office, another campaign emerged on Facebook under the slogan "Buy Samiha for a Juice Box." This campaign was powerful, and she reflects on how vulnerable she was: *"I was only 20 at the time. I could have continued as a community mediator, but the hostility made me hate community work."* The campaign's initiators were largely supporters of the Yemeni government, with some later apologizing to her, yet the memory lingers. *"They attacked me because I was a woman,"* she reflects. *"I was young, and Hodeidah is conservative; they thought I was somehow supporting the Houthis."*

Her difficulties only intensified after her family home in Hodeidah was bombed. Like any civilian grieving a loss, she expressed her sadness and anger toward Saudi Arabia on Facebook, but her words were again used against her. *"That post made people more convinced that I was a Houthi supporter,"* she says, *"and the campaigns against me grew even stronger."* People accused her of "using the situation for show," ignoring the real pain and loss she felt. The pressure and accusations forced her offline for seven months, halting her activism. The hurt was compounded when she realized some of her attackers were familiar faces, including young people and women she had known personally. *"I was just a kid. I didn't understand... why lie about me?"* she recalls, still grappling with the personal betrayal.

More attacks followed. A prominent activist accused her of stealing his idea for a charitable project—a bakery that provides bread to 90 families in Hodeidah. Samiha had openly credited him, noting it was inspired by his project in Sana'a, yet he accused her of theft. *"He bullied me relentlessly, calling me names like 'the seal' and accusing me of*

stealing donations on his account and through fake accounts," she recalls. The abuse continues to this day, making her the target of ongoing harassment since 2018. Even simple gestures were misconstrued; when she attended a conference in Mukalla and made a peace sign in sign language, fake accounts accused her of promoting Freemasonry. *"I can't even be myself without someone twisting it,"* she says.

Despite these challenges, Samiha notes that Hodeidah remains conservative, with few campaigns targeting women online due to the strict norms. *"Most women, even journalists, work in extreme secrecy here,"* she explains. However, one social media figure from Hodeidah, Rashid Maruf Mukhboot, has stirred controversy by creating a fake Twitter account under a woman's name, accusing women workers of immoral behavior during conferences in Aden. Reflecting on this environment, Samiha admits, *"When the campaign was at its peak, I even stopped mentioning my civil society work while traveling between cities, sticking to just saying I was a journalist."*

These campaigns, both spontaneous and coordinated, have left a profound mark on her life. The attacks have taken a psychological toll, leading her into "a state of existential questioning" about her choices, her appearance, and her purpose. *"The mental impact is enormous,"* she says. *"Sometimes I have to retreat from social media and disappear for a while, but it always affects my health too. I developed irritable bowel syndrome from the stress."* The ongoing harassment affects her professional life as well, often resulting in conflicts with employers and leading to breaks from work. *"There are days I simply can't work,"* she confides. *"I've had to stop working multiple times because of the stress."*

Despite it all, Samiha finds strength in her family's support and her understanding of the broader landscape of women's struggles. *"My family has always supported me, and I think having that and the awareness to handle these things has helped me face the attacks."* However, she recognizes that not all women have the same resources. *"Women with stable family or financial situations are more likely to fight back. Not everyone is in the same position,"* she explains. *"This is an issue that drains you mentally, socially, and financially, and I believe it's a challenge for women worldwide, not just in Yemen."*

Noura

Noura Al-Jarawi's story is one of resilience in the face of severe harassment and smear campaigns, a common experience for Yemeni women in the public sphere. At 40, Noura, originally from the Al-Bayda governorate, spent much of her life in Sana'a, where she married, raised two children, and became a prominent activist. She now lives as a refugee in the UK, having fled Yemen two and a half years ago. She heads the Women's Alliance for Peace and the Association for the Protection of Abused and Prison Survivors, focusing on women detainees who have suffered abuse in Houthi prisons.

Reflecting on her activism, she shares, *"The violence and attacks against women are designed to erase us from the political and public scenes by using every form of pressure."* Her conflicts with the Houthis began in 2017 when she was arrested for her affiliation with the General People's Congress, the party of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. But it was in 2023 that the most intense campaign against her began. "I defended one of the survivors from Houthi prisons and spoke about the sexual violence women face in detention. That's when they came after us." The intensity of the campaign even led to her case being mentioned in the United Nations Security Council. *"The violence wasn't just physical,"* she says. *"They attacked us digitally—from Facebook posts and comments to websites and videos, even creating fake images and videos."* The Houthis and their online operatives accused her of everything from prostitution and human trafficking to espionage, apostasy, and Zionism. *"They called for our blood,"* she recalls.

The majority of this harassment came from Houthi-affiliated accounts, but Noura notes that community voices joined in, believing the allegations or using the campaign to silence her and other women. *"The campaign was ugly,"* she says. *"Even civil society leaders and youth activists, people who publicly support rights and freedoms, joined in simply because we are women working in public. They just wanted our annoying voices gone."* The extremists were largely from conservative religious backgrounds, using modern tools and styles, which made them even harder to counter. Noura explains, *"Many in society justify these attacks by saying that women who experience sexual violence should stay silent and avoid exposing the perpetrators because 'a respectable woman keeps quiet.'"*

Noura and her colleagues responded with a range of strategies. *"The first thing we did was form a committee to document every post, comment, image, and video that targeted us,"* she says. Determined to fight back, Noura personally responded by sharing and commenting on the offensive content to defend herself. *"I felt too strong to ignore it,"* she asserts. They reached out to Amnesty International and the UN Sanctions Committee, sharing all the documented evidence with them. Through Amnesty, they connected with organizations that helped report and remove the content. *"We managed to shut down 12 Houthi-affiliated websites,"* she notes proudly. Some local organizations condemned the attacks, but Noura declined an official statement from the Feminist Solidarity Network, fearing it would expose more women to similar dangers.

The impact of these campaigns was profound. *"I was terrified for my family, especially those still in Yemen,"* she admits. During this time, she was living in Egypt, but the pressure on her family persisted. *"My ex-husband used this campaign to threaten me, saying he'd take the kids because I was 'unfit to raise them.'"* The stress left her emotionally and physically drained, causing constant headaches and sleepless nights. *"I attended psychological support sessions and relied on sedatives and medication for a*

long time.” At her job with the British Red Cross, she faced difficult questions from colleagues, who struggled to understand why Yemeni women were often targeted with sexualized attacks. “If I were still in Yemen,” she says, “they would have arrested me, raped me, and killed me.”

The attacks left Noura questioning everything she had built. “I saw comments on the hateful posts saying death would have been kinder to us than this campaign,” she recalls. *“It felt like everything I had worked so hard for, personally and professionally, was destroyed in an instant.”* Despite the immense toll, she refused to disappear or remain silent. *“I was exhausted, the headaches were unbearable, but I couldn’t let them win. I feared if I stayed silent, people would believe the rumors and think I fled because I was guilty.”*

The accusations against her constantly changed, from prostitution to Zionism and whatever else could incite public outrage. *“In Houthi-controlled areas, there’s no legal recourse,”* she explains. *“I challenge anyone to say you can confront them legally. Even if I could file a lawsuit, who would I sue? There are too many attackers with real and fake names.”* For Noura, the idea of returning to Yemen is impossible. *“Even if I escaped the Houthis, I wouldn’t be safe from others,”* she says. *“They systematically destroyed my reputation, and the damage will last for years.”*

Although she received no financial support, the technical assistance to remove harmful content was invaluable. *“It was a relief not just because the content disappeared, but because it forced the Houthis to waste resources—they lost time, money, and effort.”* This experience left her feeling “grateful” and “lucky,” and she hopes that more women’s organizations and rights activists will be connected to these kinds of technical support networks to fight digital campaigns. *“When content is removed from the internet, people forget it,”* she says. *“But if it stays, it leaves a permanent scar that affects activists’ lives.”*

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