



Online Gendered **Hate Speech** Targets Women in Civic Spaces

Executive Summary

The issue of online gendered harmful content is a significant one, as it can have serious consequences for individuals and communities. Online harassment and abuse can cause severe emotional distress and potentially lead to physical harm. Women and members of marginalized gender identities are particularly vulnerable to this type of abuse, and studies have shown that they are more likely to experience online harassment than men.

Online gendered harmful content, especially when targeting public-facing women, has a particularly disastrous impact on free speech and democratic participation, as both the target and other women can be intimidated and silenced. This narrowing of public discourse limits the diversity of voices and perspectives that are represented in online and offline civic spaces and decision making.

There are various strategies to address online gendered harmful speech, including education and awareness-raising, legal action, and platform-level interventions. Yet, effective legislation is difficult to enforce, education and awareness-raising are not rigorous enough to be significant, and social media companies can be slow to respond — especially to harmful content originating from the Global South. It is crucial that individuals, communities, and online platforms work together to create safe and inclusive online spaces where everyone can participate without fear of harassment or abuse.

This report aims to answer the questions:

- What does online gendered harmful content look like globally?
- How does online gendered harmful content impact public-facing women?

Background

In the last decade, female participation in politics and civic space has increased exponentially. This is not just the case in the western world — across the Global South, women have secured impressive political victories. A first in the Arab world, Tunisia appointed [its first female prime minister](#) in September 2021. Less than a month later, Iraqi women won a [record 97 seats](#) in parliament, an increase of 14 seats over the set quota for women. From 2005 to 2018, Lebanon saw more than a [27-fold increase](#) in the number of female parliamentary candidates, from only four to 111. During Mexico's 2021 mid-term elections women led in seven of Mexico's 32 states. Until then only nine women had ever been elected to the office, and only two simultaneously. In the United States, women make up just over a [quarter of all members](#) of the 117th Congress — the highest percentage in US history.

In our increasingly digital world, political candidates [need to be active](#) on social media to spread their message. Women are no exception, yet are routinely attacked with gendered hate speech which constitutes a [direct threat to women's civic participation](#). The trend has rocketed since the pandemic and has a chilling effect on women's ambition, political participation, and willingness to speak up.

Misogynistic hate is nothing new, but its digitization now allows it to penetrate the private lives of its victims. An analysis of [candidate abuse on social media](#) during the US 2020 congressional elections found that women are far more likely than men to receive abusive content on social media. On Facebook, female Democrats received ten times more abuse than their male counterparts.

Similarly, in Germany, [almost 90 percent of female Bundestag members](#) became the target of hatred. While 64 percent said they had received hateful messages, some 36 percent had experienced physical “attacks on themselves, their offices or their home.”

Irish female parliamentarians also [reported that over 96 percent](#) of them had experienced online abuse and harassment, while nearly three-quarters had been threatened with physical violence via social media. Almost 40 percent of participants in the study reported having been threatened with rape or sexual violence, while one in five said they were worried about their family's safety.

When Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin appointed her government in December 2019, 12 of 19 ministers were women. Observers lauded this as an example of Nordic progressiveness. However, a [study examining how the coalition cabinet ministers were being discussed on Twitter](#) found that the overwhelming majority of online abuse targeted only female members of government. In fact, women ministers received about 10 times as many messages as their male counterparts. A case in point emerged when leaked footage of Marin dancing at a party in 2022 emerged, [sparking a social media storm](#), with political opponents labelling her “unfit for office” and “reckless.”

Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen leaked documents in 2021 showing that platform is keenly aware of its impact on female public figures. In November 2020 it launched its [“Strong Women, Strong Politics”](#) initiative through which it offered workshops on securing accounts, time with a psychologist if digital abuse became too severe, and simplified reporting tools to report harmful content.

An internal report detailed that the initiative “aims to minimize the risk of bad experiences with our platforms...and thus reduce the risk of having to deal with newly elected officials who have just had a really negative experience on Facebook.” That’s to say mitigating the risk of affected lawmakers personally motivated to implement tougher social media regulations.

Yet, such initiatives prove to be too little too late for female politicians who have already borne the brunt of the abuse. While social media platforms have boasted the efficacy of their automated content moderation capability, [internal documents obtained by The Wall Street Journal](#) showed significant concerns about the ability to detect problematic content. Meanwhile, [content moderation linguistic biases](#) mean that already ineffective automated systems are not picking up online harmful speech directed at female politicians in the Global South where they may often receive little or no support and protection from authorities.

Methodology

The following analysis was based on research and social media monitoring conducted by local researchers on Internews' Harmful Speech Watch (formerly UMBER) project — please follow this [link for more information](#). The project aimed to monitor, contextualize, and analyze on-the-ground implications of online harmful speech (i.e., hate speech, misinformation, harassment, coordinated inauthentic behavior, criminal activities, graphic content etc.).

Local researchers were drawn from wide demographic, linguistic, and geographic areas to provide local insight, expertise, and context to identified harmful content. The project's research team included civil society activists, journalists, academics, humanitarian professionals, and legal experts.

Country desk reviews were independently compiled ahead of the monitoring period to identify topics, relating to protection of civic space, deemed important and which sparked significant offline consequences.

The content monitored focused predominantly on Facebook, due to the platform accounting for the highest level of social media penetration across the globe. However, the project also encompassed other platforms and attempted to gauge cross-platform migration.

Partners used their local knowledge of social media environments to identify problematic accounts, groups, pages, and other online content. Their monitoring was supported by [CrowdTangle](#), a social media analytics tool used to track how content spreads around the web.

Harmful Speech Watch relied on a manual process for collecting and categorizing online harmful speech. Content was classified according to platform defined content violations, as well as categories which partners deem violating in the given context, considering the influence of the author and potential to incite violence.

The project employed discourse and content analysis to examine potential hate

messages within each social and political context to understand meanings, motivations, and ideologies behind harmful content. Partners also compiled and tracked linguistic features and nuance (such as non-standard spelling and grammar, veiled or coded language, allusions, metaphors, slang, and the use of multiple languages) to shed greater insight on harmful terminology that may not be detected by software.

UMBER did not track trends in frequency or location, but aimed to shed light on the construction and manifestation of harmful online narratives how it may influence recipients.

Summary of Findings

Women's safety in the online sphere needs to be guaranteed to support democratic progress and improve gender equality in public life.

Internews' online harmful speech monitoring clearly uncovered that many of the trends already well documented in the western world, were reflected across all regions covered by the project.

The trends identified by Internews' researchers broadly fell into three categories:

- **Gendered Hate Speech/Sexualization of Female Politicians**
- **Victim Blaming of Public Figures**
- **Anti-Feminist Rhetoric**

In many cases, these trends led to women withdrawing from offline civic spaces and curbing their online activity.

Gendered Hate Speech/ Sexualization of Female Politicians

Female politicians are not only disproportionately targeted but also exposed to different forms of harassment and abuse. Attacks targeting male politicians tend to smear their professionalism, whereas online harassment directed at female politicians focuses more on physical appearance, sexuality, and bringing their moral character into question, often including threats of sexual violence, and humiliating or sexualized imagery.

Unfortunately, the result can dissuade women from running as electoral candidates, participating in public online debates, and can also cause women to withdraw from political participation. Online attacks and disinformation achieve this by undermining women's political credibility and questioning their decision-making capability.

In the run-up to Iraq's October 2021 Parliamentary Election, many female candidates were targeted both online and offline. Due to the prevalence of the problem, Iraq introduced steps to protect women candidates. The Interior [Ministry dedicated telephone hotlines to receive complaints](#) from female candidates, so they could directly report violence to judicial investigators instead of having to notify the police first.

In Iraq's patriarchal, conservative society, one of the [most devastating attacks](#) can be on a woman's moral character. Allegations concerning a woman's "unlawful" sexual activity can lead to intimidation, harassment, and potentially death. An example appeared on [Al-Mawsaliya Facebook news page](#) describing the opposition activist-led Al-Imtidad Movement's candidate for Baghdad, Alaa al-Yasiri, as "audaciously" portraying herself as a symbol of "honor and chastity" yet bragging with photographs of herself and her lover, Major-General Muhammad al-Qaisi. The post appears to

Figure 1. Post from [Al-Mawsaliya news page](#) — since removed.



have evaded automated detection by breaking up the word “Shar’iyah – شريعة/ارش” (legal) with a forward slash — indicative that users may be aware of community standards and actively attempt to evade them.

In the **Philippines**, researchers similarly noted a vast volume of sexualized hate speech against female politicians. Unfortunately, this is also manifested offline via high profile figures, including former President Rodrigo Duterte. Since assuming his position five years ago, Duterte has ordered soldiers to [shoot female opposition fighters “in the vagina,”](#) joked about [raping Miss Universe](#), and equated having a second wife to keeping a [“spare tyre” in the trunk of a car](#).

More recently, he [openly attempted to discredit](#) Senator Leila de Lima in a speech, calling her “immoral” and accusing her of having a “driver and lover.” De Lima, a lawyer, human rights activist, politician, law professor, and vocal critic of Duterte’s administration, had announced her intention to run against the president in the 2022 elections. She has now been in police custody for over seven years on allegations that she accepted bribes from drug lords during her term as justice secretary.

Other examples target Vice-President Leni Robredo, another candidate for the Philippines’ 2022 Presidential Elections. Internews’ researchers observed that sexist hate speech is being commonly used by the Duterte regime and its supporters to attack female opposition candidates.

Since her 2011 landslide electoral victory, Thailand’s former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has also been the subject of misogynistic, sexualized attacks. Opponents have picked on her gender to chalk up easy political points and media manipulation has become part of this process. Photos that captured seemingly [unintentional flirtatious interactions](#) between Shinawatra and US President Barack Obama, during his visit to Bangkok in November 2012, were selected to showcase her as being “slutty.”



Figure 2. Post describes De Lima as a “Penis Queen.”

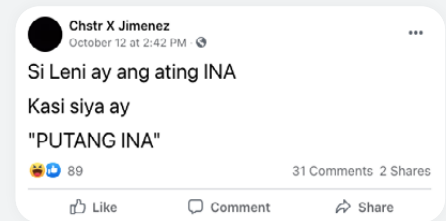


Figure 3. Post describing Robredo as a “whore mother” — since removed.



Figure 4. Post saying Shinawatra falls in love with Obama.



Figure 5. Bangkok anti-government protest banner.

In 2013, Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the opposition Democrat Party, called Shinawatra a “[stupid bitch](#)” in a public address, while anti-government protesters in 2014 displayed huge posters describing her in [crude terms](#) or showing her with phalluses. Poet Phaithoon Thanya posted on his Facebook [page a poem by mentioning](#) her vagina in wordplay.

[UN Women](#) expressed its concern, noting that women's participation in Thai politics and political leadership remains low. The report stated that political participation was limited by age, gender, social status, and religious beliefs. It added that sexual remarks, sexual defamation, violation of privacy, intimidation, threats, hate speeches and other forms of violence against women made political careers unattractive and discouraged women from entering politics.

Similar [viral content](#) was observed in **Mexico**, which sexually linked deputy of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) Geraldine Ponce with President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The content claimed that she only reached her position within Obrador's party due to a supposed sexual relationship, rather than her qualifications, achievements, and policies. Internews researchers noted that despite winning the municipal elections in Nayarit, her performance was significantly impacted by media campaigns against her that employed this type of sexualization.

Other posts in the lead up to the Mexican mid-term elections, focused on the sexualization of female candidates with users inferred that “sexy” candidates were not credible politicians. This type of rhetoric clearly impacts female performance in democratic processes. It encourages voters not to take them seriously and discourages women from participation for fear of humiliating smear campaigns that may impact their relations with their families. In a [report released in 2019](#) by the Mexican National System of Public Security and the National Statistics and Geography Institute (INEGI), it emerged that 43.9% of Mexican women aged 15+ had faced assault from their husband or partner. Moreover, [about 75% of all murdered women were killed by their husbands](#).

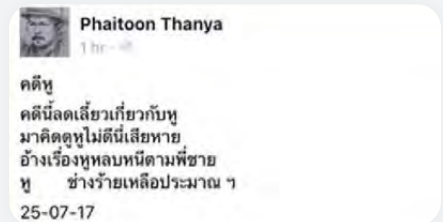


Figure 6. Thanya's lewd poem — since removed.



Figure 7. “I have hole, I'm waiting for your d*ck to get in.”



Figure 8. “Are 4T husbands toxic?”



Figure 9. “If she says so, who are we to believe weekend?”

During the run-up to **Honduras** elections, several pages were identified by Internews researchers' that targeted female opposition candidates with defamatory speech and appeared to have been created for the sole purpose of spreading hate speech. In the case of one of the pages, despite having only 67 likes, its interactions were extremely high. For instance, the examples to the right garnered more than 2,000 likes, which is incongruent.

The creation of these type of false accounts has been a practice for many years. In 2019, [Facebook closed more than 1,500 pages](#) of this type for spreading disinformation and disseminating content in favor of the National Party.

All the page's posts exhibited political agendas, attacking both the leftist Freedom and Refoundation Party (LIBRE) [front-runner](#) Xiomara Castro and Liberal Party candidate Kritza Perez with hate speech that accused them of offering sexual services in exchange for money and political favors.

Other LIBRE representatives were targeted with extreme physical violence on the ground. In early October LIBRE mayoral candidate Nery Fernando Reyes [was assassinated](#). Hours later, Honduran LIBRE party Congresswoman Olivia Marcela Zúniga Cáceres was beaten by four men inside her own home.

The trend is echoed across Latin America, with this type of sexualized, derogatory content also observed in **Colombia**. Several posts emerged slamming Bogota Mayor Claudia López criticizing her political record with the use of sexual references.

These types of online attacks are disturbing in the Colombian context since there is already a strong precedent for extreme physical violence against female political candidates. In the weeks running up to the 2019 Colombia local elections, seven candidates were assassinated. Among them was [mayoral candidate Karina García](#), who was found shot and incinerated in her car in the Cauca



Figure 10. "It makes me angry that there are no such candidates in my area."



Figure 11. "The sexy candidate of Medellín...her intention to run was not well received."



Figure 12. "When they ask you to justify your tastes ... but they are invested in your surgery."

department of southern Colombia. For weeks, García had reported receiving threats — including online — and asked the government for increased protection during campaigning.

Colombian women's organizations consider attacks on female political candidates to be [shaped by gender dynamics](#). They also confirm that female political participation is still lacking because of the fear and the lack of guarantees for their security.

Brazil also displays similar misogynistic rhetoric and violence against women remains at high levels, compared to the rest of the world. Women's rights groups have [cited](#) an increase in femicide and rape as a result of President Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power. Prior to his election, he told congresswoman Maria do Rosário: "I would never rape you because you don't deserve it." The incident was viewed as representative of the typical language Bolsonaro uses against women, homosexuals, and Afro-Brazilians.

A 2016 study found that 84% of comments on social media platforms that addressed women, race, and LGBTQ were negative. The right-group [Movimento Brasil Livre \(MBL\)](#) is noted as a prominent online antagonist against women.

The example shown in [Figure 15](#), noted from Twitter, suggests that Congresswoman Joice Hasselmann should go into "therapy" with a well-known porn actor, as well as fat-shaming her by calling her "Peppa Pig."

Similarly in **Kenya**, opposition electoral candidate Martha Karua received a barrage of online abuse based on her appearance and marital status. Karua is a divorced single mother, successful lawyer, former Justice Minister, and prominent democracy activist. Yet thousands of posts shamed her for not being part of a traditional nuclear family.

Ahead of the 2022 General Election, the Kenya Women Parliamentary



Figure 13. Reads "Libertines" in the caption against Castro's image and the slogan "for the right to choose abortion."

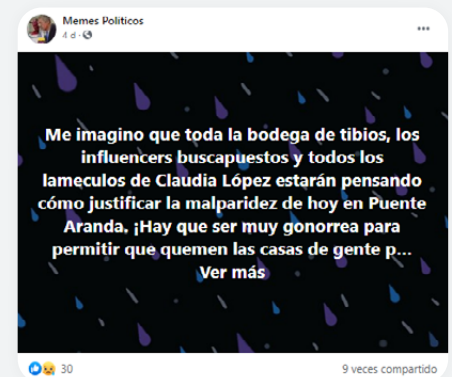


Figure 14. "I imagine this warehouse is full of nothing but lukewarm influencers, job seekers and Claudia López's brown-nosers. I am certain that they are planning on how to justify today's fuck up in Puente Aranda [A Bogota district that López ordered the [eviction of poverty-stricken residents](#) from to requisition the land]. Only the gonorrhoea-ridden would have allowed for the burning of the homes of the poverty stricken."

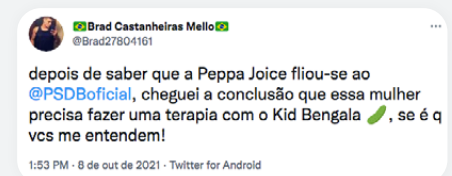


Figure 15. "This woman needs to go to therapy with [porn star] Kid Bengala if you understand me!"

Association and Google Kenya launched a video campaign, dubbed [#HeshimuDada](#) (Respect Women), calling on the public to curb online abuse and harassment as well as physical violence against female politicians.

Victim Blaming of Public Figures

Internews' research demonstrates how social media content across the globe tends to reproduce misogynistic stereotypes that associate masculinity to violence, domination, independence, aggression, and power, while women are primarily linked to their sexual 'value.' Many posts that targeted women tended to represent women as victims and as responsible for the violence of which they were victims.

A good example is the case of **Honduran** journalist and former candidate for deputy of the Freedom and Refoundation Party (Libre) [Riccy Moreno](#). In October 2021, her lover Enrique Peña Ramírez attacked her by driving into her vehicle. Moreno was severely injured and transferred to hospital, where she eventually recovered. However, her lover later committed suicide. Social media users took to Facebook, slamming her for his death. Overwhelmingly, comments on news items detailing the [story](#) described her as "worthless" and calling for "the man's family [to] take revenge on that bitch." She was also slammed as being a ["home wrecker"](#) as Ramirez was married.

Mexican YouTuber Ixpanea (1.23m followers) was also target of hate speech when she reported that fellow YouTube influencer Yayo Gutiérrez (2.07m followers) had captured intimate images of her, and others, without their consent. Many of the comments [accused her of making this statement](#) to attract more views and revenue.



Figure 16. "A two times divorcee now says she'll be submissive and subjective to Mama Ida's husband."



Figure 17. "Martha Karua you cannot be a deputy president without a husband."



Figure 18. "This woman has no conscience...she ruined a marriage...her name is not Riccy, her name is Jezebel."



Figure 19. "With all due respect but these kind of women are worthless they lack principles and values."



Figure 20. "Prepaid that one...hopefully the conned man's family will extract repayment with bullets for that bitch."

Similar victim-blaming has been noted to occur in **Syria**, where researchers reported derogatory comments directed at women who had been targeted with “sextortion.” A man was reprimanded for blackmailing women with the release of intimate images and footage if they did not pay him. The below post garnered over 1,600 comments, most of which claimed that the women deserved to be extorted because they put themselves in this position by not being “chaste” or “decent” and talking to men online.

Sexist speech is [widespread and constant on Syrian and Arab social media](#). Researchers noted several instances of female social media users becoming victims of sexual harassment and violence.

In one instance, a student from [Deir al-Zour's Al-Furat University](#) recorded her professor masturbating during an online tutorial. The incident was widely commented on, with most users shaming the student and justifying the professor's actions. The sentiment was [echoed by the head of Syria's leading private radio network Sham FM](#).

In June 2022, **Egyptian** student Naira Ashraf was brutally murdered by a jilted suitor in front of horrified onlookers and in full view of security cameras. Images of her body spread on social media after she was almost decapitated outside the entrance of her university. Rather than condemning her killing, former Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at Al-Azhar University Mabruk Attia posted a [15-minute video on Facebook](#) blaming the victim for the attack due to her not wearing the hijab and supposedly wearing “immodest, inappropriate” clothing.

“Go ahead. Let your hair down and wear tight clothing,” Attia commented in the video. “[Men] will hunt you down and kill you. Go on — personal freedom.” He added: “A woman should be veiled to live. She should wear loose clothing so as not to provoke [...] you are amid monsters. If your life is precious to you, leave your house looking like a sack.”



Figure 21.



Figure 22. Shows a prominent journalist's exoneration of the professor.

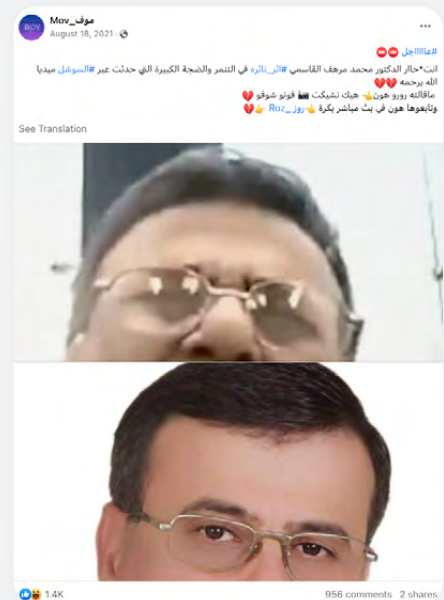


Figure 23. False information that the lecturer committed suicide and was the “innocent victim of bullying.”

The fact that the author is a figure linked to the Islamic world's most prominent and respected seat of learning and Islamic jurisprudence lends the video worrying credibility that will certainly lead to offline harm and the perpetuation of beliefs that attacks against unveiled women are permissible, if not indeed warranted.

In a similar vein, **Ethiopian** social media has also been awash with posts blaming victims of its civil war. News outlets have widely documented the horrific way many Tigrayan women were targeted for [rape and other sexual violence](#) by fighting forces aligned to the Ethiopian government. In the below example, a user is observed to blame the victim, saying: "It is a Tigrayan habit to cry when it rains on them after they break their umbrella."

The story was originally reported by [Al-Jazeera in March 2021](#). However, the story became controversial when her father appeared in a video refuting her claims. It is possible that his report was made under duress.

In a rare government acknowledgement of the toll on civilians, Ethiopia's minister for women confirmed that rape has occurred "conclusively and without a doubt" in the embattled Tigray region. She later [resigned her post](#) after unsuccessfully trying to end the use of rape as a weapon of war.

Unfortunately, there are numerous examples in Ethiopia of users ridiculing women who have come forward to report their ordeals. As in the case in [Figure 26](#), where a woman reporting rape was deemed by social media users as too ugly to "merit" being raped and as being more likely to rape men.

This disturbing trend was also observed in the **Philippines**, where users were noted to similarly trivialize rape experiences, especially of those suspected of communist-affiliations and subjected to torture and abuse while imprisoned by former dictator Ferdinand Marcos.



Figure 24. "The [Story of the] Murdered Girl of Mansura University So Others Do Not Follow."

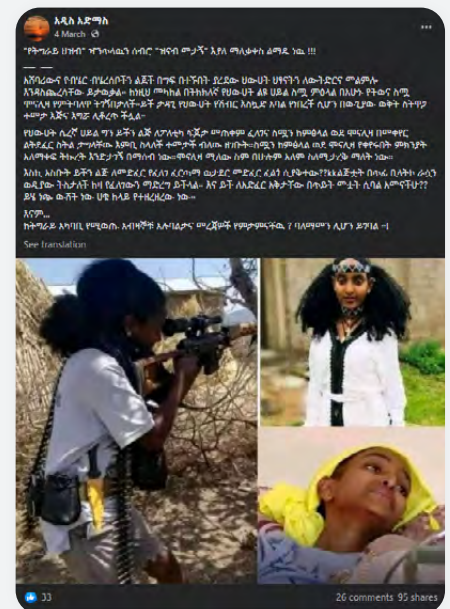


Figure 25. "The habit of Tigray people is to cry when it rained on them after they broke their umbrella."



Figure 26. "No one would rape this woman, but she would rape men hahahahaha."

In [this instance](#), the post is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, baseless “red tagging” not only harms the reputation of the people who are being targeted, but also puts them at risk of being charged under the Anti-Terror Act. Moreover, rape “jokes” harm women by perpetuating and normalizing the already prevalent rape culture.

The country’s rape culture came under spotlight during an investigation into the case of Philippine Airlines flight attendant [Christina Dacera](#), who was found in a hotel room’s bathtub. It was revealed that she had been gang raped and the cause of death was a ruptured aortic aneurysm. An investigation ensued, and it was revealed that on the night of her death she had been partying with 11 men. As a result, the story witnessed a shift of blame onto the victim, rather than the perpetrators.

Anti-Feminist Rhetoric

Feminist activists and NGO workers (especially those working on gender-related violence) are notably targeted with online hate speech. Stereotypes may suggest that this plays out mostly in Muslim-majority societies. However, the trend has been observed to be most prominent in Latin America.

This is echoed on the ground. Globally, El Salvador and **Honduras** stand out with rates of more than 10 female homicides per 100,000 women. [The level of violence](#) affecting women in El Salvador and Honduras exceeds the combined rate of male and female homicides in some of the 40 countries with the highest murder rates in the world, such as Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Tanzania.

Mexican social media was observed to be replete with anti-feminist content. The country suffers pervasive violence that kills more than



Figure 27. “Just like Etta Rosales who claimed that she was repeatedly raped 3 times during the Martial Law...That’s the communist mentality! Just be glad that that’s the only thing they did to you, you should have been killed so that you couldn’t spread destruction.”



Figure 28. An anti-feminist meme group

10 women a day and forces many more to live in fear. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) faced mounting anger over a candidate for governor from his party who faced five accusations of sexual abuse, including rape. The outcry against him spread to prominent women in the party, who last month called on its leadership to remove the candidate. AMLO's policies have done little to address the epidemic of sexual violence in the country and he has suggested that women's groups are being [manipulated by his enemies](#) to discredit him. He even cast doubt on rising rates of domestic violence during the pandemic lockdown, suggesting that [most domestic violence calls were fake](#). In another particularly notorious declaration, he attributed femicide to the "neoliberal policies" of previous administrations.

These kinds of narratives have spurred a wave of anti-feminist rhetoric, with many anti-feminist Facebook pages emerging. Most comments ridicule female activists and describe them as "*femi-nazis*" or "*femichairos*" (*chairo* is a pejorative term to describe an individual who holds a far-left ideology). However, some go so far as to actively incite violence as in the following example where a user posted a photo (post removed) captioned: "Me and the boys after butchering a feminist and throwing her corpse in a bag."

These sentiments are vindicated by statements made by AMLO, but also by social media posts that claim that feminists are "gangs of hooded women, criminals, anarchists, that take to the streets to commit robbery, looting, graffiti, and destruction."

On September 28, due to the [Global Day of Action for Access to Legal and Safe Abortion](#), many women in [Colombia and Latin America came out to protest](#). Peaceful protests calling for women's reproductive rights were countered by many people opposed to the protests who attempted to undermine the protesters.

Posts appearing on the day [deriding protesters](#) as "feminazis," "drug addicts," "mindless," "sick," "terrorists" that were "paid by the communist left" and should "be put in jail." Other posts were observed

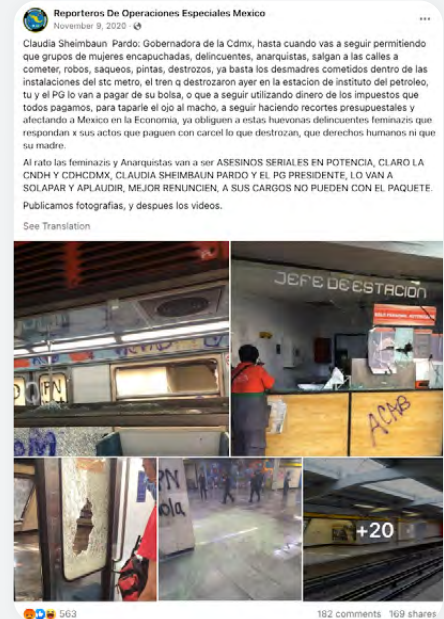


Figure 29. Vandalism allegedly committed by feminist protesters.

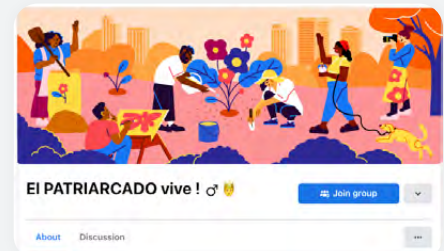


Figure 30. Anti-feminist group advocating for patriarchy.



Figure 31. "Wonderful and risky man dances in front of a feminist with a t-shirt that says: 'Feminism is cancer.' Thank you for sharing this @radiolibertariaofficial" — since removed.

to use more vulgar language, suggesting that the feminist protesters were “whores.” In this [instance](#), the author replaces some vowels with numbers to avoid detection i.e., VIOLAD4S= (*violadas: raped*); PuT4S (*putas: whores*).

In the **Philippines**, attacks on feminist activists often manifest as red tagging, which can be a more effective weapon in silencing activists given the sensitivity of leftist affiliation. Nica Ombao, regional spokesperson of women’s rights group [Gabriela](#), was attacked on social media by users who attempted to slander her and accuse her of recruiting for communist causes. Gabriela has faced a lot of red-tagging and several red-tagged [Gabriela members have been arrested](#).

In **Thailand**, Internews researchers observed similar vulgar misogynistic attacks against student pro-democracy activist Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul. She is a prominent figure within the monarchy reform movement and spokesperson for the opposition Pheu Thai Party, which calls for abolition of the *lese majeste* law. The law decrees that anyone criticizing the monarchy could be jailed for up to 15 years.

Rung has faced attack both online and offline. She was arrested on [charges of sedition and royal defamation](#) for which she served 59 days. She is also often the target of abuse online, as in the example ([Figure 33](#)) that insults her using dehumanizing speech, but also seeks to spread misinformation about her political goals. The picture has been doctored to show the slogan “we don’t want reform; we want a revolution.”

Pervasive attacks on feminists can also be witnessed on the ground and online in the Middle East. Alongside the usual patriarchy, tradition, and religious conservatism, feminism in the Middle East is often discredited, by governments and critics, because it is associated with colonialism and “western values.”

Examples observed in the Middle East include not only direct attacks

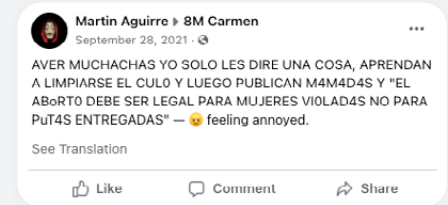


Figure 32.



Figure 33. “Opportunist recruiter of the [Communist] New People’s Army — takes advantage of women’s vulnerabilities” — since removed.



Figure 33. “The bitch pung (female elephant) Rung is following the bastard penguin (pro-reform youth activist Parit Chiwarak) [to prison].”

on feminists, but also on female human rights activists and women's employment. A prominent example of anti-feminist hate speech occurred at the death of famous Egyptian feminist Nawal al-Saadawi. Al-Saadawi had an outspoken brand of radical feminism having written on controversial topics including polygamy and female circumcision. Throughout her life she had angered the establishment, receiving numerous death threats, as well as having been imprisoned by former President Anwar Sadat in the 1980s.

Al-Saadawi continued to raise ire even in death, with some social media users celebrating the death of [“the old witch...after a long battle with Islam.”](#) They decried her as a “woman in whom the devil lived so she started resembling him in appearance and in content.”

Some Iraqi social media users were noted to launch similar attacks on prominent Iraqi feminist Hanaa Edwar, also known as the Mother Theresa of Iraq. She has been a human rights, women's rights, and democracy activist for about 50 years. Pages affiliated to Iraq's conservative Shiaa factions labelled her a “devil” who had destroyed the “reputation of Iraq and the thoughts of its women.” Internews' researchers considered the ubiquitous content attacking her to be dangerous and could possibly result in her assassination. Edwar has already [survived several attempts](#) on her life.

While these types of attacks on prominent feminists are troubling in their own right, the rise of this type of anti-feminist rhetoric impacts women across Arab society.

Syrian social media has increasingly exhibited a tendency for attacking women who advocate for women's rights or work for NGOs. Users accuse the women of being “recruits” of the United Nations and “centers of takfir [apostasy].” Women who use the words “liberation” or “gender” are often targeted.

A women's center in the opposition-held northwest of Syria held several courses [raising awareness of domestic violence and sexual abuse](#). Their post publicizing the course attracted almost 900



Figure 34. “The devil Hanaa Edwar...an activist for loose women and filthy communists” — since removed.



Figure 35. “The activist that destroyed Iraq's reputation...share this video to uncover this filthy spy.”



Figure 36. “Women are learning about liberation....so the prophet's teachings and Shar'iah no longer work for you?”

comments, mostly from men attacking the initiative. Some even justifying the pre-Islamic practice of burying women alive.

Other posts targeted [media specialist Rowaa Asfour](#) for “deliberately” attempting to destroy family structures through media training and encouraging women to work. Asfour received particular attention as she has been highlighted by prominent Syrian National Coalition member [Ayman al-Jamaal](#) (and a member of the Syrian Islamic Council) who targeted her specifically in a number of posts. ([Link 1](#); [Link 2](#); [Link 3](#); [Link 4](#)).

Asfour was offering a training course on media coverage of gender-related issues, including women’s rights and gender-based violence for journalists. Asfour issued a statement to clarify her intentions, but Al-Jamaal published another post, repeating his accusations. Many comments on Al-Jamaal’s post called for her to be punished.

Prolifically anti-feminist, Al-Jamaal was noted by researchers to have [deleted a post](#) where he claimed that feminists were responsible for domestic abuse (including homicide) and that their activism made them as culpable as the perpetrators and guilty of “destroying” the family unit.

Al-Jamaal tempered his original statement in response to a backlash, but [reiterated](#) that “feminism is fatal for society, spoiling men, women, and children. The statistics show that it is the main reason for breaking up families, increasing divorce, and increasing violence.” Internews’ researchers have observed Al-Jamaal to make numerous attacks on [feminists via his Facebook account](#).

A prominent and extreme example of this normalization of anti-feminist rhetoric appeared in user responses to news of a girl in Syrian Kurdistan being killed by her family after trying to elope. Many users commented with statements such as: “God bless them ... they did a great job” and “great guys ... this is how shame should be washed.”



Figure 37. “Do you now understand why we used to bury them alive?”



Figure 38. “The destruction of the family and the dismantling of society are great for our enemies...”



Figure 39. “Courses on corrupting the family under the umbrella of ‘Protecting Women and Women’s Rights.’ These courses incite women to disobedience and straying.”

A report by the [United Nations in October 2021](#) showed that ongoing insecurity, a deepening economic crisis, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic converged in 2021 to exacerbate the risks of gender-based violence for Syrian women and girls. Women and girls reported higher levels of intimate partner violence in 2021, predominantly associated with men spending longer periods of time at home, either due to COVID-19 restrictions or unemployment.

Concern surrounding the normalization of anti-feminist rhetoric is not unfounded. Last year, Syrian women's rights journalist Nour al-Shalo was [detained and threatened with execution](#) by Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the ruling authority in northwest Syria) for her outspoken activism. She was reportedly accused of various moral and criminal acts, which served as the basis for her detention. Similarly, the prominent case of [feminist and human rights activist Razan Zeitouneh](#), kidnapped in 2013 by the Islamist opposition militia Jaysh al-Islam and still missing, also enforces the dangers of such prevailing sentiment.

Conclusion

The above posts clearly show that there is a distinct global online trend targeting women who express themselves in civic space—whether as politicians, activists, or even as outspoken victims of violence.

While Internews' research only encompasses a limited number of instances, the negative impacts of social media and digital media on women have been extensively documented. As far back as 2015, the Broadband Commission for Digital Development reported that [almost three quarters of women](#) had been exposed to some form of violence online.

Female policymakers have led numerous efforts to criminalize online



Figure 40. “Feminism is fatal to society, corrupting men, women and children, and statistics indicate that it is a major reason for the destruction of the family, increased divorce, and increasing violence against women, men, and children alike... the Western world is striving to destroy values and morals, dissolve identity and violate privacy. It is the duty of the faithful and reformers to resist corrupt appearances and preserve identity.”



Figure 41.

gender-based violence in many countries. In 2020, Mexico ratified a law [criminalizing “digital violence”](#) against women. Similar laws have passed in other countries, including Brazil, which makes both [online and offline violence against a woman candidate a crime](#) punishable with fines and imprisonment of up to six years.

In the European Union, the [2022 Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#) has been a landmark effort setting “clear obligations for digital service providers, such as social media or marketplaces, to tackle the spread of illegal content, online disinformation and other societal risks.” However, such legislation does not encompass violations occurring further afield and, as this report shows, gendered harmful speech is an international problem, requiring a global solution.

Moreover, legislation is difficult to enforce when dealing with huge volumes of offending content, particularly when many users are anonymous. As such legislation targeting the platforms themselves needs to be developed to “incentivize” companies to take more effective action.

Andrea Simon, director of [Britain’s Coalition to End Violence Against Women](#), said: “Tech companies continue to profit from women’s abuse — whether that is so-called ‘revenge-porn’ uploaded to porn sites, or from advertising revenue gained through users’ time spent on their platform abusing women and girls, and much more. This is not a problem that can be solved through the criminal justice system alone. It’s bigger than that — our world has moved online, and our online experiences are completely intertwined with our daily lives. This is about regulating the platforms that profit from our online activity and the issue of abuse of women and girls must be laid at the door of tech companies to address, with penalties for non-compliance.”

Facebook has already come under fire for not doing enough to mitigate online threats to women. In 2020, a [letter from female members](#) of the U.S. Congress such as Speaker Nancy Pelosi and top female politicians from the European Union demanded that Facebook remove posts that threatened candidates or glorified violence against women, eliminate hate speech targeting women, and remove manipulated videos, images, and offending accounts.

Despite such steps though, social media companies remain under fire for insufficient investment in making their platforms safer spaces. [Facebook whistleblower Frances](#)

[Haugen](#) told the US Senate that the “company’s leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer but won’t make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people,” substantiating her evaluation with leaked documentation showing the company’s efforts to reduce its spending on moderating hate speech.

Facebook denied that the document called for “budget cuts” and claimed that no such cuts were made regarding its content moderation.

“This document does not advocate for any budget cuts to remove hate speech, nor have we made any. In fact, we’ve increased the number of hours our teams spend on addressing hate speech every year,” the spokesperson said. “The document shows how we were considering ways to make our work more efficient to remove more hate speech at scale.”

Notwithstanding, it has proven complex and challenging to push social media platforms to implement more rigorous content moderation measures to protect vulnerable individuals and communities. Consequently, activists, civil society and non-profit organizations play an essential role in keeping the spotlight on the prevalence and impact of online harmful content.

Donors are key to facilitating the kind of impact that is required to secure meaningful solutions. Greater funding for projects and research dealing with gendered harmful speech is crucial to understanding the problem to formulate evidence-based, coordinated responses to toxic and violent narratives on a global level, as well as curtailing its sources, spread and impact. In turn, civil society organizations and non-profits must bolster their mainstreaming of gender, technology, and democracy into all their programs as the negative intersections of these issues have proven to be extremely detrimental to pluralistic political and social participation.

Organizations such as Internews should dedicate coordination effort to mapping the weaponization of social media and other digital technologies to facilitate vicious attacks on human rights and inclusive participation.

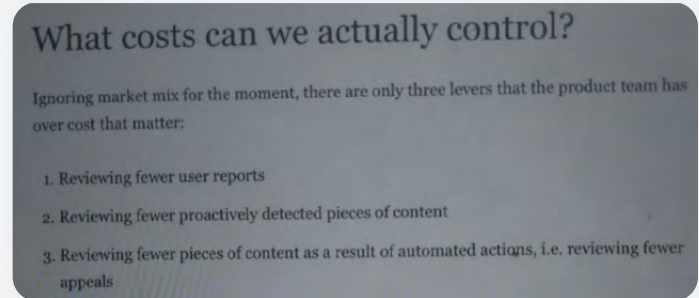


Figure 42. Leaked Facebook report notes that costs could be reduced by reviewing fewer user reports, reviewing fewer proactively detected pieces of content, and reviewing fewer appeals.