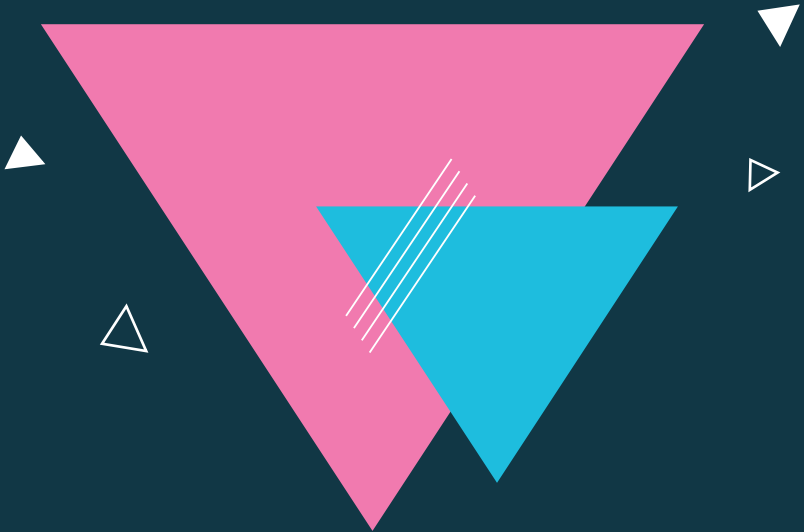


# Digital Violence based on Gender in the Northwest of Syria

(Women in Idlib city and its countryside as a model)

## Focus Research Study



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## Acknowledgment and Dedication

### “It’s your turn, doctor”

From there we started, when we did not own the land, but we wrote the story and preserved the narration, because our struggle is linked to our memory and our ability to tell the story as it is, as a narrative of truth and rights, as a narrative of man and dignity. And our narrative, we women, who are unique in a lot of stories, resembles us alone. It tells future generations about our struggle and our success despite all the superimposed structures in our oppression, our scold, our stereotyping and stifling of our voices. And to become part of history, we had to archive our lives ourselves so that subjective experience would be part of the feminist inventory.

Here, I must highlight oral history, which was considered a different epistemological method in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century by socialist historians, who only recorded the lives of people from the working classes. Then, in the seventies, the journey of archiving oral narratives as a tool to correct historical knowledge about socially marginalized groups related to race, social class or gender began. In that process, the roles of feminist movements that tried to answer about the role and position of women historically started to emerge as their experiences and voices have always been neglected and were considered as daily lived things that don’t go up to the level of history. Thus, the feminists’ demands continued till our present time in order to consider the prospective of women and the gender framework of their experiences as a unit of history analysis.

In the Syrian context, a reduced concept about the experiences of women was presented as it revolved around the lack of basic requirements of life until all lives

appeared as revolving around the primitive concept of living that is already their basic right. It neglected any speech about the roles of women in political life and the professions they worked after the Syrian revolution as well as the effect of lack of knowledge about properties on them and the hidden crimes they get exposed to electronically. Through these researches we, in Equity and Empowerment Organization, try to humanize our lives as women from a different perspective in order to reevaluate the tilted societal balance to become on a similar scale and regain the right in all of our roles.

I repeatedly tried to hide my affection while reading the four researches which are the products of twenty-five researchers that underwent this experience for the first time. I felt proud, joy, pain and belonging to them. I had only one sentence repeated in my mind: “Today you write history to be the future for you and the day will come when we write the names of all Syrian women on the sun “that never sets”.

**Hiba Ezzideen Alhaji**

**“CEO of Equity & Empowerment Organization”**



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## Study Summary and Results:

Means of communication witnessed a lot of development through the years till they reached their current state which is characterized by speed, spread, and high-level extensive social interaction with their virtual shape. The most significant communication means is the Internet which enabled members of society to access any information and news easily as it only requires the tool that enables the individual to access the Web and thus connect to the furthest point in the world. It was not difficult to acquire technology, whether computers or mobile phones and learn how to use them in a short period of time. No doubt that this saved a lot of time and increased the chances of learning and acquiring experiences and skills as knowledge is not now limited to a specific society or social class but is open to everybody with the exception of the limitations imposed on using the web by some political regimes. However, there is nothing in the history that is absolutely positive. There must be some drawbacks that accompany anything in the real life. And since the digital world is relatively recent and dealing with it had a random uncensored limit, and we mean here the humanitarian limits with their minimum levels of “stopping harm”. And with the existence of discrimination among people in real life based on specific traits like religion, ethnicity, social class, color, gender, the increase of this discrimination, inequality, and possession of power from a socially, financial, or cultural stronger class led to use it in dominating the weaker segments. The technology was used as a coercive tool to increase social injustice. Women are considered among the groups that are still struggling to obtain their rights in equality with men, and during the course of their struggle, the emergence of the Internet was positive for them, to be a platform that they can use to defend their rights, but this did not happen in a rosy manner, as the Internet was also used as a weapon to practice Gender-based violence in a digital way. Perhaps in the stable conditions of societies, the situation is not so bad, but in areas that suffer from political crises or wars and conflicts, for example, Syria, and specifically the areas of northwest Syria, as the research aimed to study a geographical area from the areas where the effects of the war are still eroding its social fabric, which is Idlib city and its countryside where the incidence of digital violence against women has recently increased. It was necessary in this research to start with a theoretical introduction to shed light on the concept of digital networks and how they link individuals who are acquainted with each other until the virtual relationships developed to become a world independent from the real identity. Hence, a distinction was made between gender-based violence in the real world and the virtual world in terms of extension and identification of patterns and implications. The literature and theories were studied with a feminist eye, not out of bias but rather in order to highlight the gap in the use of the Internet between the two genders and its implications on the entire society. Through studies and readings, it was found that there are many types of digital violence that exist all over the world and these types have their causes as well. The aim of the research is to know the most prevalent patterns in the city of Idlib and its countryside, and the role of personal, social, cultural, and legal determinants that played a role in the spread of the phenomenon and deepening its impact on the lives of Syrian women. Taking into account the accidental health event which is the spread of Covid 19 that was the cause of the increase in gender-based violence as indicated in international reports and studies, as well as the extent to which this fact is approached and applied to digital violence in the studied region.

The research is considered descriptive and exploratory research where the phenomenon was described in a specific area and the opinions of a group of experts and workers in public affairs, and civil activists in social affairs within the city of Idlib and its countryside were collected.

In addition, it relied on the study of individual cases through in-depth interviews and data collection on the studied cases that meet the study criteria. And the study concluded with the following results:

- There is a large knowledge and technical gap among women in Idlib governorate (both cities and countryside), and a lack of knowledge of how to protect their information and data from electronic abuse.
- There is no clear law in the studied region regarding those who commit digital violence against women, and electronic crimes are dealt with in the event that the incident is proven in the real world such as crimes and misdemeanors in normal circumstances.
- A small percentage of women resort to the law whether to file a complaint with the police or file a case in court.
- In most cases, women do not consult their families, but rather they resort to friends and acquaintances to stop the abuser from threatening.
- The most common pattern that the women are exposed to is emotional/sexual blackmail through threatening to use women's personal data and posting it on social media by the abuser.
- There is a relationship between the poor financial situation in the governorate and the frequent incidents of financial extortion by threatening women to publish pictures and conversations or paying for not doing so.
- There is a relationship between the unemployment spread among the youth who are able to work and the use of digital violence to obtain financial gains.
- The emergence of networks that take advantage of young people's need for money and use them as bait to trap women or men in order to blackmail them financially.
- The role of local security authorities was limited to realistically prosecuting youth harassers who stand in front of schools and universities, without paying attention to the online harassment issues.
- Socialization plays a role in the emergence of digital violence cases whether through formal or informal institutions.
- Fear and anxiety were among the most severe psychological effects for women who got exposed to digital violence.
- The thought of committing suicide was the first and most urgent thought that came to the mind of women whenever the abuser increases his pressure on the victim.
- There is a relationship between the financial loss that a woman incurs and her marital status, as the married woman loses some of her own resources or the resources of her family in exchange for stopping the abuser from publishing her data.
- The social effects on a married woman ranged from disruption in her relationship with her husband and her separation from him. And for an unmarried girl the effect leads to

disturbance in the relationship with her father or brother and keeping this relationship tense all the time even after the end of the digital violence incident.

- Most of the cases responded to the abuser's threats, whether by fulfilling his sexual or financial requests.
- The stereotypes and typical thoughts that society creates for women affect the extent of their fear and disorder in their thinking while dealing with the incident.
- Social stigma affects women seriously regardless of the type of digital violence they got exposed to and on contrary, the social stigma doesn't affect men no matter how tedious their actions were.
- There are no international or local organizations or institutions that are specialized in empowering women digitally and raising awareness among young men and women about the harm that digital violence can cause.
- There is a new emergence of feminist organizations that work to empower women digitally through digital security and digital rights training and there has been a great demand from women for these types of training.
- There have been rare cases of digital violence perpetrated by women as most of the cases were perpetrated by men and directed against woman.
- There is a weak relationship between the spread of the Covid epidemic and digital violence because Idlib governorate did not fully comply with the lockdown measures recommended by the World Health Organization, but some impact appeared in terms of the increased unemployment and the spread of online work more than it was before the epidemic.

## First chapter: Study Problem

### Firstly: Study Problem and Importance:

The Internet has created a wide and free space that increased the human ability to learn about, participate in, and keep pace with events, away from the physical constraints that require being near the source of the event, and away from political and cultural constraints, which require waiting for the event to be transmitted through official and traditional channels such as TV, Newspaper, radio and land communications. Where these channels used to make individuals passive recipients of what is happening in the world around them, and with the revolution of communications and technical development since the early nineties, and the beginning of the emergence of the World Wide Web until now, all it takes to obtain a huge amount of information and data is to make a search on the Internet. This provided the opportunity for everyone to follow up on the current issues in any part of the world and to participate in the cross-country collective interaction. However, with these multiple benefits of the Internet - and like many things in the material world - its spread was accompanied by dangers that must be taken care of. As real-life includes crimes and harm to humans against humans, the same applies to the virtual world, where this huge and rapid technological openness has the ability to change ideas, tendencies, and convictions. But there was a dark side to this, as there were many violations and abuses via the Internet which negatively affected the lives of individuals, groups, and societies and it was more harmful to women, especially in cultural and social environments that impede

the process of empowering women in society and obtaining their rights, and imposed restrictions on their ability to take strong measures to confront the various types of violence they get subjected to. It is certain that the rapid spread of the Internet, the increasing use of communication technology, and the expansion of social media engagement provided new opportunities to address violence against women, but it was a double-edged weapon, as it enabled those with authority and power to use it to harm women and girls, making it a prominent problem with social, economic and security dimensions. The challenges facing efforts to combat gender-based violence in northwest Syria abound due to societal barriers, patriarchal cultural frameworks, and restrictions on legal asylum, in addition to the fragility of laws that support women. Moreover, the harm of digital violence gets exacerbated as it has a role in deepening discrimination inside society which suffers from problems related to crises it witnessed during the conflict and this obviously hinders the process of social reconstruction that is needed after the stabilization of the security situation in Syria.

### Research Importance:

Digital violence is inseparable from the types of violence in the real world in which we live. Its spread was increased by technological progress and the increasing expansion of the Internet without censorship and strict laws that guarantee non-aggression, making it a global problem with negative social and economic consequences. Challenges increase in front of preventing electronic violence in cultural environments with political and social structures that don't empower women. The percentage of women in the Arab countries who were exposed to incidents of digital violence once during their life reached 16% whereas the percentage of women who were exposed to incidents of digital violence during the year 2021 reached 60% as one in every three men between the ages of 18 and 24 years admitted that they committed a form of electronic violence against women. Among the women who experienced violence in the past year, 44% of women reported that the incident transcended the virtual space to become violent in real life.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the study comes from the need to dismantle the phenomenon of digital violence in the city of Idlib and its countryside in order to probe the depths of the phenomenon, analyze the most common types and patterns of this violence, and know the impact of the social environment in which women live on their way of thinking and the intensity of their emotions, and its impact on their behavior during getting exposed to digital violence. This is because of the importance of the role that digital violence plays in depriving women of their right to use the Internet and deepening gender discrimination in obtaining information, participating in social and political activities, and expressing opinions with complete freedom. The Sustainable Development Goals state that gender equality is essential and main for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.<sup>2</sup>

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1- <sup>1</sup> (UN Women, 2021). <https://bit.ly/3lyir9b>

<sup>2</sup> (Abd Alaziz, 2018) <https://bit.ly/3C5ByFi>

Moreover, civil society in northwestern Syria focuses on offline violence without giving much attention to the lasting effects of digital violence on women and their families, especially in an intellectually marginalized environment that has been exposed to conflicts and catastrophes that affected the system of social values.

### Reasons for Choosing the Research:

**Scientific reasons:** There are no previous studies on digital violence in northwest Syria and this study will be conducted in the city of Idlib and its countryside, which are demographically, politically, and economically important areas. These areas gained their importance from the conditions of war and military divisions as what applies to areas of disasters and conflicts does not apply to other areas in a situation of stability.

### Subjective specific reasons for the institution sponsoring the study and the researcher:

These reasons are due to the experience of the sponsoring organization of the study and its specialization in working on digital security for women in the city of Idlib and its countryside, and its knowledge of many incidents of digital violence that women are exposed to in the study area, in addition to the researcher's accumulation of scientific and practical experience after working for more than 15 years in the field of protecting Syrian women from Gender-based violence.

### Research Objectives:

- Detecting the types of digital violence that Syrian women are subjected to in the city of Idlib and its countryside.
- Knowing the impact of digital violence on the private and public life of Syrian women in Idlib city and its countryside.
- Knowing the psychological and social challenges that contribute to the exacerbation of the problem of digital violence in the city of Idlib and its countryside.
- Knowing the mechanisms of individual and societal response to cases of digital violence based on gender in Idlib city and its countryside.

### Research Questions:

- What are the types of digital violence directed against women in Idlib city and its countryside?
- What are the psychological effects on Syrian women who get exposed to incidents of digital violence in Idlib city and its countryside?
- What are the social effects on Syrian women who get exposed to incidents of digital violence in Idlib city and its countryside?
- What are the economic effects on Syrian women who get exposed to incidents of digital violence in Idlib city and its countryside?
- What is the impact of personal and societal factors on the way women deal with digital violence incidents?

## Research assumptions:

- There are many types of electronic violence that women get subjected to in Idlib city and its countryside.
- There are psychological effects of digital violence against women in Idlib city and its countryside.
- There are social effects of digital violence against women in Idlib city and its countryside.
- There are economic effects of digital violence against women in Idlib city and its countryside.
- Is there a relationship between women's psychological and social conditions and the way they respond to incidents of digital violence that they get exposed to?

## Fields/Scope of the Research:

**Temporal:** From the beginning of February to the middle of March 2022.

**Spatial:** Northwest of Syria, Idlib city and its countryside.

**Human:** A number of women who have been subjected to electronic violence and a group of persons working on cases related to women and those who receive complaints from women related to incidents of digital violence.

## Research Methodology:

The research relied on the qualitative, descriptive approach in its scientific and analytical way which attempts to focus on the phenomenon as it is in its current form based on a descriptive analysis of the data collected during the research and investigation.

### **Methods and tools:**

- In-depth case study through semi-structured interviews.
- Focus discussion group.

### **Unit of measurement:**

- Women who got exposed to digital violence.
- Workers on cases related to women.

### **Basic definitions and procedural definitions:**

**Gender-based violence against women:** "Any violent act that is motivated by gender bias and that results in, or is likely to result in, harm or suffering to women, whether from a physical, sexual or psychological point of view, including threatening of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether this occurs in public or private life, and included psychological, physical and sexual violence".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> (United Nations 1993) <https://undocs.org/ar/A/RES/48/104>



**Digital Gender-Based Violence Against Women:** Technology-related violence, and is part of a group of gender-based violent acts directed on the basis of discrimination based on religion, color, position, political opinions, and ideological tendencies that are perpetrated, instigated, or exacerbated by the use of information and communication technology such as phone, internet, and social communication. This type of violence includes electronic stalking, electronic harassment, hate speech, etc. And this is done by allowing the practice, imposing, and renegotiating of social norms via the Internet in the spaces that were formed by patriarchal and heterosexuality, which is an extension of the gendered secession of society. In addition to attempts to impose control and masculine power in the virtual public and personal life and this is an extension of the attempts to impose control in the real life of women.<sup>4</sup>

**Definition of digital violence according to UN for Women's Affairs:** It is a form of using force and exploitation rooted in discrimination through the web and it is a serious violation of basic human rights. It includes any form of deliberate harassment that includes insult and assault.<sup>5</sup>

- **The procedural definition of digital gender-based violence directed against Syrian women:** It includes any woman residing in northwestern Syria (Idleb city and its countryside) over the age of 18 and was subjected by any person, regardless of his or her gender, and because of the gender factor for being a female, to one of the forms of psychological, social, physical and economic violence through the Internet with all its applications, platforms, and sites or through social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. And this behavior was repeated with the aim of intimidating or provoking the targets with it or tarnishing their reputation and blackmailing them.
- **Digital violence in general:** It is the practice of intentionally repeated harm to people with the aim of intimidating, terrifying, manipulating, suppressing, and threatening the reputation and safety of the recipient and humiliating him, by manipulating the removal and publication of a person's image in disgusting ways, or manipulating the theft and penetration of a person's account and identity, impersonating his or her identity, and preventing or excluding groups,, fabricating false statements and actions, stealing information and accounts, and destroying data or devices.
- **Internet:** It is the global system of communication network which is a huge communication network consisting of a group of web pages located on the communication network of computers that we call the Internet. It has been available since the end of the eighties.
- **Cyber Security:** It is a culture and a system that deals with the Internet to avoid various types of digital threats as a result of human or technological danger, by establishing mechanisms to protect the Internet service provider, computers, information programs and electronic networks from any unauthorized entry and from malicious attacks.
- **Social networks on the web:** It appeared with the second generation of the web which allows communication between individuals in a virtual community structure that brings them together according to interest and affiliation through direct communication services such as sending messages or viewing the personal files of others and knowing their news and

<sup>4</sup> (2021,ACI.) <https://bit.ly/3MvDICX>

<sup>5</sup> (UN Women, 2020). <https://bit.ly/3vzWrHh>



information that they make available for display so that they communicate with each other. This makes them feel as if they are a real community. The Digital world depends primarily on its users to operate it and feed its contents. (Kedwany 2015<sup>6</sup>)

## Previous Studies:

### 1. Study of the European Institute for Gender Equality on the Internet, with the tile Cyber violence as a form of gender-based violence, 2017.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the types of violence against girls and women by an intimate partner, and the study was carried out through a sample survey, targeting all countries of the European Union. The study was conducted over 8 years, in order to track the growth of the phenomenon and the response of official bodies to it, and it used the analytical method and the method of asking questions about electronic stalking and electronic harassment. The study found that the most frequent violations were sexual harassment and messages with sexual content where digital sexual violence had the same effect as psychological violence and most of the cases got affected their work or their reputation while obtaining a job after the incident. The study concluded that it is necessary to enact strict laws related to digital violence, to have a phone to receive and follow up on electronic complaints, and to work to include the term misogyny in the articles of conventions related to electronic crimes. And this was after the survey results showed that 90% of pornographic material was directed at revenge from women and it was found that the criminal justice sector was insufficient, for example, 61% of complaints of electronic violence in Britain were not taken into consideration.<sup>7</sup>

### 2. Nawal Wsar's study, digital violence against women... The Extension of the phenomenon and the expansion of forms, Al-Riwaq Journal for Social Studies, 2021.

The study focused on the manifestations of violence against women in the digital space in general and how to confront it in the Arab environment. The study followed the descriptive approach and found that Arab women are subjected to all forms of electronic violence on most websites, but Facebook was the site where women were most exposed to digital violence through hate speech directed against women by making value and moral judgments about what they publish. The verbal violence on the Internet was the most common happen against women by denouncing negative attributes of society and nicknamed them with names of animals and then describing them with words to detract from their mental abilities

### 3. Syrian Women Journalists Foundation, Rola Asaad, Afaf Abrouki, 2021.

An exploratory survey report that relied on the reports of the United Nations and civil society organizations working to monitor violence against women in the region, through studying cases

• <sup>6</sup> Sherine Mohamed Kadwany (2015), Youth use of online social networks and its relationship to democratic transition in Egypt, Assiut University <https://bit.ly/3tmSing>.

<sup>7</sup> Spurek, Sylwia, (2021): Gender-based cyber violence: The new face of an old enemy, The Parliament Magazine.. <https://bit.ly/3K9PWz3>

whose experiences and opinions were taken about digital violence against Syrian women, especially women workers in public life, and how to improve institutional policies and digital security trainings. The most prominent results were that the Internet is an open and chaotic space that does not fully grant privacy and freedom to women. Out of 14 participants, 13 were subjected to gender-biased speeches at least once, 8 of them were threatened with physical abuse and murder and 3 were subjected to violence during the study. The study concluded that the most important consequences of digital violence on women are psychological harm and women's reluctance to interact in public affairs.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. Nevin Ahmed Ghobashi study: Women's perception of the dangers of social networking sites and the extent of their exposure to cyberbullying, 2018.**

The study relied on the descriptive analytical approach through a sample of 200 Egyptian women who were subjected to digital bullying. The study focused on a basic hypothesis which is the role of the power of interaction via the Internet in raising women's awareness about cyber through detecting and labeling their reactions towards digital violence. It was found that woman is more likely to be bullied through photos with a percentage of 37.6%, through account hacking with a percentage of 73%, and finally through blackmail with photos and incidents with a percentage of 45%. The study concluded that there is a correlation between the number of social media sites that women interact with and their exposure to bullying, and at the same time, there is a relationship between being bullied and the increase in their awareness and ability to protect themselves from cyberbullying.

#### **5. A survey conducted by the United Nations Commission for Women Affairs, with the title: Violence against women in the digital space, visions from a multi-country study in the Arab countries, 2021.**

The study was based on a survey that included more than 11,500 male and female users, aged over 18 years in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen, to find out the extent of electronic violence in the Arab region and its impact on Arab women and girls and its consequences on them. Moreover, the study focused on the obstacles that prevent survivors from accessing services and submitting reports. It also presents qualitative research on online violence experiences through the perspective of civil society organizations, activists, and service providers, and through examining current laws and services related to electronic violence that is facilitated by information and communication technology. According to the report, 49% of female internet users in the Arab region said they did not feel safe about facing cyber-harassment, and 36% of women from Arab countries who were exposed to cyber-violence in the past year were advised to ignore the incident, and 23% were blamed, and 21% were told to delete their social media accounts. The study revealed that the most common form of cyber violence affecting women in the region is receiving "unwanted images or symbols with sexual content" (43%); The percentage of women who have been subjected to "direct sexual blackmail

<sup>8</sup> Syrian Women Journalists Foundation, Rola Asaad, Afaf Abrouki, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3vxkNBu>

via the Internet” is 22%, and the percentage of women who have been subjected to online violence on the Facebook application is (43%).

## Second Chapter: Theoretical Framework of the Study

### Firstly: Communication between individuals from reality to virtual reality:

#### 1. Definition of electronic public space:

Social communication used to happen through the meeting of a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic in the frame of physical existence. But with the development of means of communication and the emergence of the Internet, this communication has moved to a virtual public domain that enables individuals to directly access a space that enables them to express themselves freely away from censorship and the need for a material medium to transmit dialogues and opinions. The multiple discussions and interactions that happen daily on the internet and which are available for everybody indicate the increase in the communication space and personal freedom. The need for the Internet appeared in the mid-eighties due to the scientific need for a variety of sources of education, then network groups emerged in the early nineties, and then the Internet world got diversified with the emergence of digital societies and the expansion of the spread of the Web. Therefore, we can approach social gatherings in the real world with virtual societies, in terms of a group of individuals communicating and interacting socially to form digital social networks through which ideas and opinions are exchanged and electronic public opinion is formed. (Alabed, 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Social networks have also contributed to providing equal opportunities for women to express their opinions freely through virtual social activities. And this became an encouraging factor for political or social changes by gaining the attention of other users and drawing the world's attention to issues that concern women everywhere and at all times. . (Almahdi.2018)<sup>10</sup>.

#### 2. Social networks and virtual identity:

##### Digital social networks:

Through the statistics and numbers that give a picture of the increasing use of the Internet in 2021, we find that 4.80 billion people around the world use the Internet, with an increase of 316 million, and the number of users of the means of communication currently constitutes 56.8% of the world's population. Moreover, the ordinary person owns accounts on more than 9 different communication networks, and 91% of these users access them through their mobile devices. Additionally, social media is characterized as user-centric as it focuses on the user it creates, and

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- <sup>9</sup> Alabed, Lynda (2018): Digital identity and the virtual citizen in cyberspace, Journal of Social Sciences, Arab Democratic Center. <https://bit.ly/3IH6GNS>
  - <sup>10</sup> Almahdi, Amani (2018): The public sphere from actual reality to the virtual world: standards of formation and obstacles, the Arab Democratic Center. <https://bit.ly/3McUOoD>

this media is participatory and spreadable. (Aldalkamony, 2021) The number of the monthly active users on the most important social platforms.

- Facebook contains 2.85 billion active users, and it is the third most visited site. And it is considered the second most downloaded application by users, and the Facebook Messenger application comes in seventh place with 1.30 billion monthly users.
- YouTube contains 2.29 billion monthly active users who watch more than 500 billion videos per day on YouTube, and this constitutes more than 1 billion hours of YouTube videos per day. YouTube is the second most visited website in the world, surpassed only by Google.
- WhatsApp has 2.00 billion monthly active users.
- Instagram contains 1.38 billion monthly active users, and 23% more people interact with Instagram photos than they interact with Facebook photos,
- TikTok has 732 million monthly active users, and about 13 million new videos are uploaded to TikTok every day.
- Telegram: 550 million active users.
- Snapchat: 514 million active users.
- Twitter contains 397 million active users, and more than 500 million tweets are sent daily through the Twitter application.

The highest percentages were for the following applications in terms of obtaining and accessing news content: Facebook 44% YouTube 29% WhatsApp 23% (Aldalkamony, 2021)

### **Digital identity:**

It is a relatively new term so the mechanism by which the differences between our online personalities and our offline personalities evolve has not been historically monitored. However, the Internet is considered a powerful tool that can be used to connect like-minded people and societies with societies that are different intellectually and culturally.

Technology has dismantled the connection of time, place, and geography in the light of multiple and attractive cultures with the aim of creating a universal human with hypothetical specifications. However, this carries a danger in itself, as disguising the digital identity - which may not reflect the reality of the person - allows the self to express away from the rules imposed by formal and informal institutions (Al-Abed, 2018)

### **3. The Internet in the context of feminism and gender sensitivity:**

The systemic patriarchal practices that women suffer in daily life extend to the electronic reality, especially in the context of rapid development and the increasing spread and expansion of the number of users. Girls and women still face many challenges in the digital space such as discrimination, violence, and limited access to the Internet. With the growth of the number of

users around the world, the digital gender gap is deepening as the number of Internet users increased between 2011 and 2021 from 2.2 billion to 4.9 billion users (CNN, 2021).<sup>11</sup>

Different systems of oppression intersect to form the relationship of women with technology, as at a time when many suffer from not accessing their right to education and work, their possession of technical equipment is seen as a luxury and something unnecessary and secondary. According to the statistics of the International Federation of Communications women in most countries around the world can't benefit from digital technology. Half of the world's total female population (52 percent) has not yet used the Internet, compared to 42% of all men.

In a society with a masculine mentality, we find that the relationship between the privacy of women and the social system she lives in and the abuse and injustice it contains is a dialectical relationship that ends in favor of establishing unequal power relations that include the private and public sphere of women. The patriarchal system places women in a special framework within its general framework, so we find that the link between what happens to women during their daily lives inside the home, and the systems of oppression that operate and are culturally reproduced within society in an institutional way leads to domination over the decisions, choices, work, and ideas of women in the context of the world also.

**There is also a correlation between the gender gap in owning mobile phones and the gender gap in using the Internet;** As countries with a wide gender gap in mobile phone ownership also have a large number of women who do not use the Internet, given that mobile phones are the most widely used means of accessing the Internet. Out of 85 countries that provided data on mobile phone ownership, the number of countries in which the percentage of men owning mobile phones is higher than that of women is 61. The importance of having justice in the use of mobile phones is because of the importance of this to protect women from violence, as they are able to report cases of sexual abuse over the phone in public places <sup>12</sup>(ITU, 2019).

The social role assigned to women under the modern patriarchal system confines women to roles of reproduction in actual reality, and this deprives them of knowing the production tools. Therefore, we find the field of technology and programming dominated by men. Women represent only 20% of the cybersecurity workforce.<sup>13</sup>

And just as the existence of the Internet has its downsides, there are many advantages that women have benefited from in the public and private spheres, the most important of which are:

- Optimization of levels of life-enhancing health through health and reproductive awareness that become easily available.

• <sup>11</sup> Economic report, (2021): Despite global growth. 2.9 billion people do not have access to the Internet, CNN in Arabic. <https://cnn.it/3KprKJd>

• <sup>12</sup> New International Telecommunication Union data show the growth of internet usage with a widening digital gender divide, ITU Media Center, 2019 <https://bit.ly/3tgv3v8>

• <sup>13</sup> Fe-Male Organization (2020): Gender Mainstreaming in the Digital World: Online Safety for Women and Girls. <https://bit.ly/344E029>

- The ability of women to continue studying and learning, especially in environments that place restrictions on the movement of women.
- Achieving access to political platforms and participation in public affairs away from the man's monopoly in the circles of power.
- A space for expressing different identities and searching for models that suit what women want which the actual society may reject and punish for.
- Search and access to modern knowledge on an equal basis with men.
- A space for sharing similar experiences and solidarity through advocacy and support groups.
- A memory of women's struggle over the days that transcends geographic borders, which enables women to maintain a narrative that fits the scale of women's sacrifices and their resistance to marginalization.
- Economic empowerment through skill development through online courses and workshops, as well as facilitating access to work through the wide online job market.
- A place to express feelings and discuss problems that cannot be disclosed outside the Internet, and we find this in closed women's groups on social media.
- Helps to understand the institutional nature of patriarchal and masculine practices that permit the use of violence in order to impose power on women. And this accelerates the disruption of the balances of power that are already based on discrimination.

## Secondly: An overview of gender-based digital violence against women:

### 1- Gender-based violence in the real world and the virtual world (differences and intersections):

Digital violence is not seen as a real thing and this is due to the difficulty of tracking and monitoring it like violence in the real world, even if the language used in it is more severe and hostile. Additionally, it is not a new phenomenon because it is just one episode of the multiple violence that women and girls face outside the Internet and it was difficult to imagine violence in the electronic world thirty years ago. And this is because the means of committing violent acts through the web weren't available at that time. The electronic dimension that violence has taken in real life has made it take a new form of hurting and mistreatment, relying on the same tools of power and control in addition to the development of digital technology. It didn't change as a concept but entering the electronic space is the new shape of violence. This made the challenges facing measures to reduce gender-based violence more complex and solid, especially with the gender gap, which creates a violent reaction against the empowerment of women, and the methods used to support the current situation that has entrenched gender discrimination are becoming increasingly insidious.

Women receive the abuse that extends beyond their own real-world communities where there are no geographic restrictions on membership and where users can contribute to ridicule and harm by responding to and engaging in offensive content through retweeting it. Moreover, the person that causes cyberbullying is not necessarily known or related to the woman, and this



constitutes a differentiation from violence in the material reality in which it is often known who is the person who causes it to the woman, so its effect is sometimes worse than the mistreatment of a known person. (Hackett 2016).<sup>14</sup> .

According to a United Nations report, 73% of women were exposed to digital violence around the world in 2015, and the reality of the continuous increase on the Internet must have increased the percentage to more than that, (United Nations, 2015).<sup>15</sup>

Violence occurs on all online applications such as Facebook and Twitter, on messaging applications like Messenger and WhatsApp, and in the electronic comment sections on public page sites and chatting, even in games that require a connection to a group of people.

Systemic factors of gender inequality – in light of uncontrolled means of communication, and the continuity of harmful data to spread through its re-dissemination and distribution – create the fertile environment for violence to flourish. In 2014, Google's search engine removed more than 580,000 links from search results due to individual requests to remove offensive content by order from the European Union.<sup>16</sup>

## 2- The most common types of digital gender-based violence:

**Harassment:** It includes constant disturbance through continuous messages and comments on a permanent basis, and may escalate to intimidation and threatening.

**Online stalking:** Tracking using technology and monitoring the victim's activities and behaviors both now and in the past such as GPS.

**Hate speech against women:** Speech that is based on race, gender identity, body image, and an individual's sense of power and control where women get hated only because they are women, and this hate speech constitutes incitement to hatred against a specific woman or group of women, especially those who participate in public life. In a four-year study, after analyzing 19 million tweets, it was found that there were nearly 5 million instances of misogyny on Twitter alone (Hackett, 2016).

**Piracy:** (Special Interception - Communications): Using technology to gain unauthorized access to systems in order to manipulate personal information and defame him, for example; hacking passwords and gaining control over computer functions.

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- <sup>14</sup> Liam, Hackett (2016): United Nations, Cyberbullying and its Effects on Human Rights, UN Chronicle. <https://bit.ly/3vAjscW>
  - <sup>15</sup> Commissions\Broadband Commission(2015): activities\WG Gender Report 2015 <https://bit.ly/3pt7ftU>
  - <sup>16</sup> The European parliament,s,2018 <https://bit.ly/3C7lceZ>

**Identity theft:** Using technology to download the victim's identity to obtain private information in order to embarrass the victim such as sending abusive mail and calling the victim from an unknown number to avoid contact blocking.

**Suicide counseling or genocide advocacy:** Through comments that direct a person towards harming himself or others.

**Trafficking:** Using scamming posts, ads, dating sites, employment opportunities and illegal trading through chat rooms.

**Sex trade:** Advertising sex and luring victims through social media. And using a fake account to lure women into sexual relations.

**Distribution of non-consensual pornography:** Between partners and without the victim's consent, such as photos and clips that were taken with or without the victim's wish.

**Public defamation:** By perpetrating direct or indirect violence through the sharing and dissemination of private and public information about a person, especially women.

**Sexual blackmail:** Threatening a woman to publish sensitive private information that would cause problems to her in society if she refused the abuser's requests to provide sexual images, sexual services, or money.<sup>17</sup>

### An overview of reasons and results:

There is no justification for violence, but highlighting some of the factors that contribute to the occurrence of digital violence is a must for a deeper understanding of the roots of the phenomenon and an attempt to limit its negative effects on women.

Thus, there are several fundamental causes that contribute to gender-based violence that can be explained within the framework of theories that explained digital violence. As these studies consider that human behavior is interlinked with environmental conditions and personal cognitive factors that are related to the desire to obtain strength. These factors interact with each other in a complex manner and also interfere with the laws of learning such as behavioral reinforcement and material and moral rewards received for repeating the behavior. (Adam, 2021)<sup>18</sup>

### 3- Effects of digital gender-based violence:

Cyber violence goes beyond females to males, but it affects more young women compared to the impact of violence on women in real life. The effects can be divided into three categories:

<sup>17</sup> Un Women,2020) <https://bit.ly/3vzWrHh>

<sup>18</sup> Spurek,Sylwia,(2021): Gender-based cyber violence: The new face of an old enemy, The Parliament Magazine.. <https://bit.ly/3K9PWz3>



- **Psychological effects** which represented in mental and psychological illnesses such as depression and high levels of anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, a pessimistic view of the use of the Internet and modern technologies, a feeling of helplessness, and a lack of confidence in the ability to control one's private life, feelings of shame, isolation and insecurity, emotional distress after feeling a loss, as well as thinking of committing suicide.<sup>19</sup>
- **Societal results:** Such as exposure to physical and psychological violence by those around the victim, if an incident of digital violence is discovered. In addition to depriving women of their human rights to protection, support, and justice, withdrawing from social interaction and alienating women from the desire to participate in political life. Consequently, reducing the role of women in public life, and increasing hate crimes, exacerbates violent discriminatory behaviors against women and immigration and leaves the place to get rid of people in the actual social environment for fear of social stigma.
- **Economic results: Wasting** financial resources related to women that gets spent on protection or stopping the digital violence they are exposed to or seeking legal and psychological services. Studies have proven that the average cost associated with technology-based abuse was 1,200 Dollars, while the cost of treating a case of violence in real life was 500 Dollars.<sup>20</sup>

This is in addition to the gender wage gap due to women's withdrawal from the Internet and their loss of opportunities to raise their capabilities, which makes male skills and capabilities higher, and this gets reflected in improving job opportunities and wages. As well as loss of productivity and desire to work, absenteeism and job loss, increased unemployment and its impact on the macro economy due to the withdrawal of women from the labor market, and finally the increase in the knowledge gap between the sexes in terms of access and control over the content, the development of knowledge and technical skills for women, and job security.

#### 4- Gender-Based Digital Violence and the COVID-19 Epidemic:

The health measures recommended by the World Health Organization and the policies followed by countries to address the virus led to an increase in the demand for the Internet during the pandemic, as the number of Internet users increased from 54% in 2019, that is, before the outbreak of the pandemic, to 63% of the population in 2021. Especially what was caused by the general and partial closure, staying indoors for long periods of time, and the inability to go out without bearing responsibility. The connection to the Internet has enhanced the need to access governmental, educational and health services and other services needed by the individual, so the use of the Internet has become a vital necessity for work, learning, access to basic services, and staying connected and communicating with others due to isolation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> (Lomba,2021) <https://bit.ly/3C6RVkP>

<sup>20</sup> YWCAK ,2017) <https://bit.ly/3hryl9s>

- <sup>21</sup> An economic report, (CNN, 2021), despite global growth. 2.9 billion people do not have access to the Internet, CNN Arabic. <https://cnn.it/3KprKJd>

Most of the already marginalized segments that suffer from discrimination were exposed to digital violence during the closure and quarantine. For example, cybercrime in Lebanon increased to 84%, most of which are related to extortion and sexual harassment. Socially active women in public life were also more vulnerable to digital violence including activists and journalists, as well as political workers as the focus was on their work more than in the time before the epidemic. (FE-MALE, 2020)

And according to the interpretation of the crime within the framework of lifestyle theory, the abuse was linked and increased through electronic networks to the transfer of routine and usual activities to the home after the temporal and spatial proximity between the perpetrator and the victim was the source of violence. The European Union has announced that one in every ten women over the age of 15 has experienced electronic harassment during the pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

As a first and emergency measure, the European Union took fast measures what are: approving proposals in December 2021, deeming digital violence a serious crime with a transnational dimension, and working to link human rights, democracy, and legislative measures to combat violence against women via the Internet as well as emphasizing the importance of these measures, especially in the field of prevention, protection, and effective prosecution.<sup>23</sup>

#### **5- Gender-based digital violence from a human rights perspective:**

Some achievements have been made with regard to digital violence, including the resolution of the Security Council which states that the human rights that a person enjoys offline must be applied in the cyberspace, including gender-based human rights issues. Moreover, the United Nations has acknowledged the phenomenon of gender-based violence and stated that it can be processed through international agreements, for example, the European Convention, Budapest, Istanbul, and the Lanzarote Convention, but without the existence of specific international laws and legislation to combat cyber violence.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, there is a wide range of methods to deal with the phenomenon in the countries of the European Union as the majority do not provide any measures that take into account the gender and electronic dimension of these types of crimes against women in real life, rather, they rely only on the general provisions for offline crimes to be applied in these cases. EU legislations are still silent on the subject of gender-based cybercrimes.<sup>25</sup>

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- <sup>22</sup> Un,2021) · Lyons, Helen(2021) ,Gender based cyber violence To be added To EU Crimes List the Brussels Time .  
<https://bit.ly/3vpAgUa>
  - <sup>23</sup> Lyons, Helen(2021) ,Gender based cyber violence To be added To EU Crimes List the Brussels Time .  
<https://bit.ly/3szZf56>
  - <sup>24</sup> (2018 (The European parliament's <https://bit.ly/3C7lceZ>

<sup>25</sup> ((SPUREK,2021. <https://bit.ly/3K9PWz3>

## Chapter three- Field section:

### Firstly: Methodology

This field section of the study aims to clarify and identify the phenomenon of digital gender-based violence against women in northwestern Syria, specifically in the city of Idlib and its countryside, through the micro-sociology analysis method for a sample of 12 women. After the samples were chosen in a semi-random, intentional way, where the women were chosen according to certain criteria that were formulated to serve the research question in general but without specifying specific cases for special considerations in order to avoid the problem of giving biased information. As for the criteria that were set for selecting women: Age is over 18 and currently lives in the city of Idlib, was exposed to an incident of digital violence. Additionally, each woman was considered an analysis unit in order to closely identify the phenomenon and know the extent of its impact and the mechanism used by the respondent during the incident, and its impact on her and the social environment around her. This was conducted through a questionnaire that contains closed and open-ended questions and deals with the following topics:

Firstly: The woman's main data such as the variables of age, marital status, financial status, work and educational level.

Secondly: Information about the incident of violence, how it started through open questions that try to reach the hierarchy of events to know the mixing of the incident with the surrounding community and individuals.

Thirdly: Focusing on the cognitive and emotional structure that determines how to behave in order to stop digital violence.

Fourthly: Effects on the woman after the end of the incident.

A guide to questions was developed by the researcher for use during the data collection process, after those workshops were conducted with the team to clarify information and include ethical guidelines for working with survivors of gender-based violence. A (trained team) participated in the data collection process that continued from February 10 to February 20, 2022, under the supervision of the main researcher and the management of the organization that sponsors the research. The field research team was selected from among the trainees who were trained over a period of two months on research methodologies and data collection and who are eligible for the conditions that serve the research including knowledge of the studied areas and the nature of the composition of their cultural and political structure. The gender diversity factor was excluded due to the sensitivity of the topic in conservative environments, so the interviews were conducted by female researchers only.

As for the reasons for the small size of the sample, it was due to the difficulty of reaching cases, as researchers relied on personal relationships and acquaintances to find cases, and the ability

to conduct an interview, in addition to conducting another method of collecting qualitative data, which is the "focus group" in order to expand the picture and see the phenomenon from all sides. Therefore, the sample was not necessarily representative of the northwestern region of Syria completely, as it is not possible to apply the same responses that were taken from the research sample to the rest of the women, which requires a comprehensive survey that is hindered because of some current conditions. However, the importance of this sample reflects the experience of 12 women in Idlib city and its countryside who have experienced digital violence and got affected by it till now.

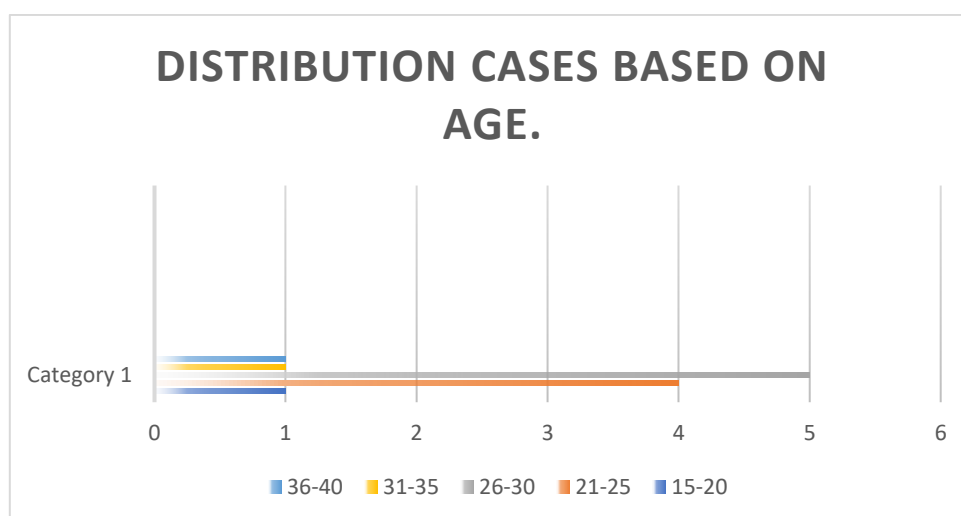
In order to understand the broader aspects of the phenomenon and to get out of the lived experience to an examining and auditing opinion from the outside, a focus group was conducted through Zoom application, after selecting eight activists and actors in social, civil, and humanitarian work, in the following fields: (Media - Teaching - Law - Mental Health - Protection....) And also have knowledge and familiarity with the social environment and the situation of women in the city of Idlib and its countryside. Despite the consistency of the sample due to this criterion, the selection of people with different experiences maintained the heterogeneity and obtained richer information. This was done by presenting three broad axes related to the topic of the research (an overview of the phenomenon - the main actors / activists- the role of formal and informal institutions in limiting the phenomenon - reaching suggestions according to the summary of the group's views). Each topic was divided into three questions.

This field part came after a theoretical, descriptive, and analytical study was conducted to give a clear picture of the digital violence incident in the study area, relying on data and documents from internationally and locally approved sources, in order to brief the phenomenon from all its general aspects.

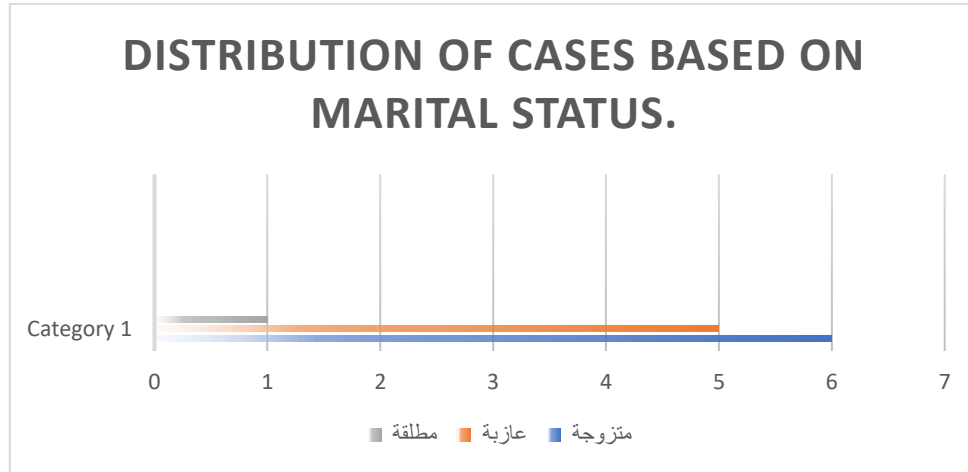
## Secondly: Analytical framework:

### 1- Cases study:

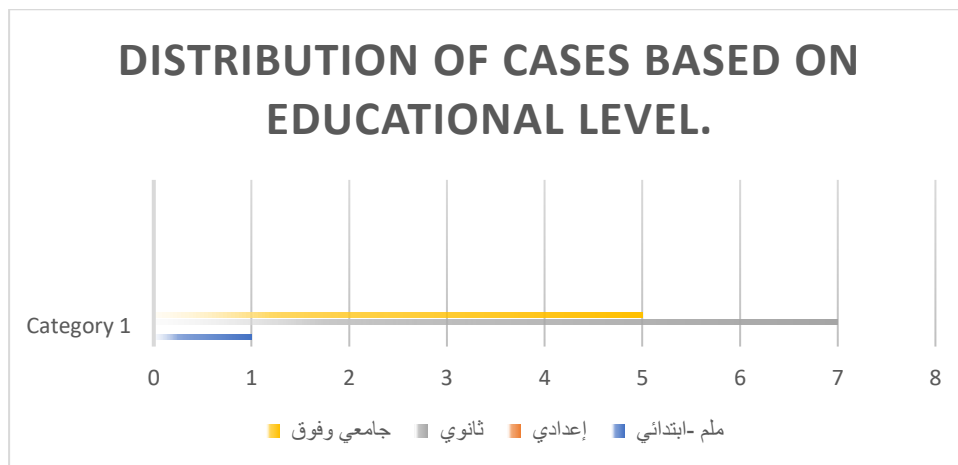
Analysis at the overall level (number of studied cases 12):



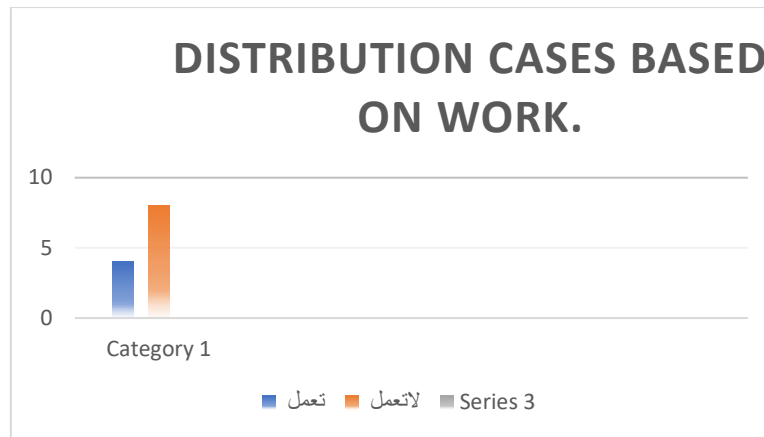
The age groups that get mostly exposed to digital violence in the studied cases are women aged (30-26), followed by the age group (21-24), due to their ability to own mobile phones and the presence of space to use the Internet without parental supervision, which is more severe on the groups of younger age.



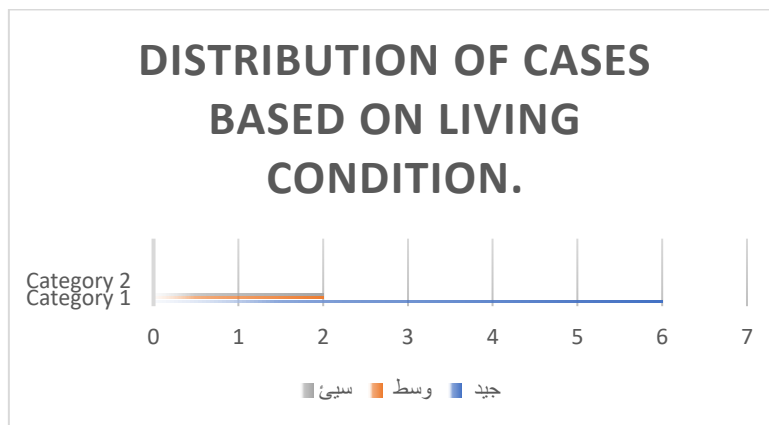
There are no clear differences between the exposure of married women to digital violence and the exposure of single women due to the fact that the abuser does not necessarily have knowledge of the victim, where the goal is violence in itself and the gains that it will achieve regardless of identifying the victim with certain characteristics.



Cases of violence increase in the intermediate stages of education because females at this stage are vulnerable to school dropouts. Thus, there are many girls who got dropped out of school in the community in the preparatory and secondary school stages.



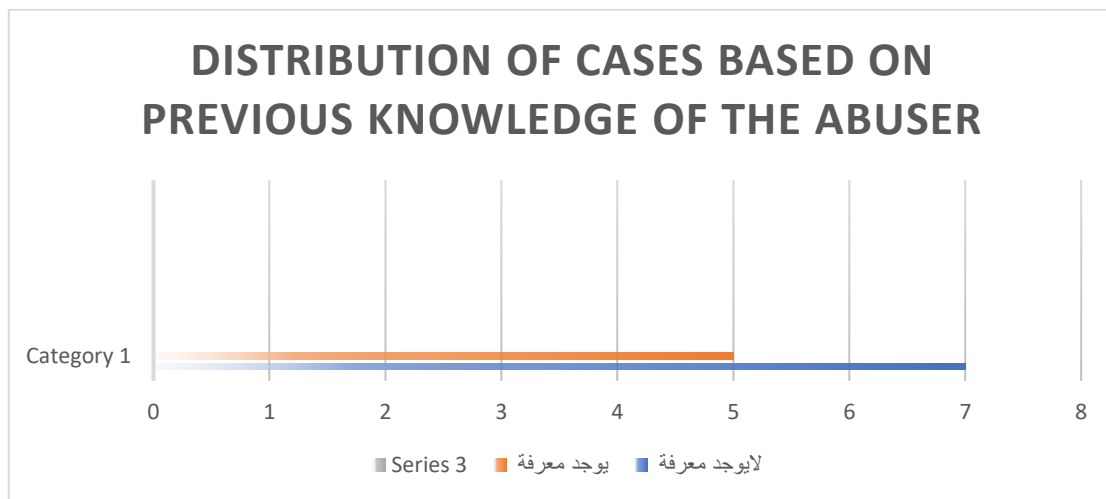
Cases of violence increase in cases of non-working women, due to free time and spending more time on the Internet, especially on open social networking sites. As the more time you spend aimlessly, the more likely you are to enter sites that may pose a digital privacy threat.



Women with a good financial situation are more exposed to digital violence, especially financial extortion and this happens after the abusing person knows her situation and her financial capabilities.



There is a clear difference among the number of cases who get exposed to violence for one time as the incident makes them more attentive and careful, so they avoid falling again to violence, as only one case was exposed to digital violence twice out of 12 cases studied.



Lack of prior knowledge of the abuser prevails over previous knowledge, as there is no single criterion for selecting victims, and in many cases, cybercrimes depend on randomness and experimentation.

#### Results at the case study level:

- By studying the cases in-depth, it was found that most cases of digital violence in the city of Idlib and its countryside mostly include sexual extortion and after a while, it develops into financial extortion.
- The way cases deal with digital violence incidents varies according to the presence of support from family or friends, the more lack of support and the strained social relations, the more severe the effects and consequences of digital violence.
- In most cases, the common effects that include cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and economic dimensions were:
  - **Psychological and emotional:** Fear, depression, anxiety, sleep, and eating disorders.
  - **Cognitive:** Lack of focus - the inability to think about the problem in a realistic way as anxiety amplifies the incident to the point that the woman loses her strength.
  - **Behavioral:** Executing the requests of the abuser for fear of stigma.
  - **Economic losses:** Cases of violence in most cases of threatening with pictures and personal information ended by paying sums of money in order to stop the abuser from publishing what was stolen and hacked. Additionally, there were cases that had to leave work and lose their source of income and pay sums of money in return for technical services and change the number.
  - **Social:** Increasing troubled relationships with parents or husband that may end in murder or divorce.
- There are a few cases that resorted to an official complaint and faced violence from their social environment.

- Symbolic violence is associated with digital violence as it is embodied in the dominance of discriminatory concepts in society and it is regarded as indirect violence that enhances the power of other types of violence.
- Digital violence can disguise by false romance.
- Gender-based cyber violence is an evolving issue in terms of the complex cultural situation in Idlib city and its countryside.
- Interventions included prevention rather than deterrence and accountability.
- The prevalence of online violence has increased due to the lack of effective measures to prevent, contain and address it.
- Although most cases occurred in the last two years which is during the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, there is a weak relationship between Corona and digital violence due to the region's non-compliance with the closure procedures, but the deteriorating economic conditions and unemployment made some young people search for victims to blackmail them for money.
- Offline and online violence is a manifestation of the systematic marginalization of women.
- There are no organizations that work to specifically protect survivors of digital violence. However, there are some temporary initiatives such as courses on digital security - and awareness-raising through group and individual sessions.
- There are extortion networks that include technicians with a high level of experience with malware.
- Most of the cases had a great lack of knowledge of how to protect their data and privacy from electronic infringement.

### Answers related to the type of digital violence experienced by the studied cases:

The types of study units were listed as follows:

Type of digital violence	Number of studied cases 12											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Unauthorized access to data	*	*			*	*	*	*			*	*
Control and manipulation of information					*					*		
Monitoring and tracking				*								
Hate speech			*									
Harassment						*						
Threats of violence and physical harm				*								
Non-consensual sharing of private information												
Blackmail	*	*						*	*			*
Slander			*									



**Sexual abuse and exploitation**

*	*		*					*	*	*	*
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- The most prevalent type of digital violence in the sample was the unauthorized access to data through piracy and the use of methods to access pictures and information about the respondents, and this was repeated 8 times.
- Followed by sexual abuse and exploitation, with sexual requests that were repeated 7 times.
- Then comes the sexual and financial blackmail, which was repeated 5 times.
- While control and manipulation of information through identity change were repeated twice in the sample, and the least frequent was monitoring and tracking, one of them said:

**“The first thing was that every time I spoke with my family or friends, my brother-in-law’s daughter used to come and sit with me, I said it was normal, but then I noticed that she was recording everything I say, and one day I noticed that someone was monitoring my WhatsApp, and I found out that she was that person”**

- As for hate speech, electronic harassment, and slander, each of them was recorded only once. Noting the exposure of cases to more than one type of digital violence.

**Answers related to the abusive person:**

- **Gender:** The gender of the abusive person in 10 of the cases was male, and two cases were subjected to digital violence by females.
- His/ her relation to the studied cases: 5 cases had prior knowledge of the abusive person before the incident, compared to 7 cases who never knew the abusive person.
- As for the hierarchy of the behavior of the abusive person, there was a direct threat without introduction in 5 cases, through the use of messaging applications Messenger or WhatsApp after stealing some data, especially private photos of the respondents.
- Through starting a romantic relationship and promises of marriage: 4 cases in which emotional promises and promises of serious relationships, engagement, and marriage were used. And after a short period of no more than months, he starts with sexual requests, whether sexual words or nude pictures and videos and then financial requests in order not to publish pictures and data on social networking sites.
- One case included hate speech, and this was through publishing a video clip of her doing an atypical act, and then she faced the criticism and violence from the people of her region.
- In one case, the violence was from a woman that is a relative to the respondent, and had a family relationship with her as a matter of revenge.

**Answers related to the respondents’ interaction with the digital violence incident:**

When an individual gets exposed to a traumatic event outside his ability to control, the personal components interact in order to confront this event, so the responses are divided in terms of intellectual, behavioral and emotional sides:

- **Intellectual:** The ideas that frequently came to the minds of cases during the incident of digital violence included dispersal of thoughts, mind wandering, and lack of focus in 8 of the cases, while 3 cases went extreme in terms of thinking about suicide with a woman actually trying to commit suicide, and 3 cases thought about escaping and leaving the social environment to get rid of the problem without getting rid of the problem even if the abuser didn't execute his threats.

One of the respondents expressed her thoughts by saying:

**"The most thing I've been thinking about is to end my life and rest, I don't want to live and see my scandal and see my family when they know, the world turned black in my eyes, I no longer trust anyone, not even my sisters or anyone, I hate myself, I just want death to rest, my relationship remains tense with My father and my cousin for a while, then I drank a poisonous substance to get rid of shame and stigma, and I had stomach problems and my family's pressure on me became less."**

- **Emotions:** Anxiety and fear throughout the exposure period were what 10 cases felt, and then feelings of nervousness and anger most of the time in half of the sample 6 cases, and the intensity of sadness was the same in half of the sample.
- While the least intense feeling was the feeling of guilt which was repeated in 4 of the cases.
- **Behavior:** Abstaining from the Internet was the definitive behavior in 6 of the cases, and it is noticeable that half of the sample members fulfilled the aggressor's requests, whether sexual or financial.

One of the respondents said:

**"I was very afraid of him and the next day he sent messages via WhatsApp and came back with the same request and I refused that and asked him to give me any solution other than pictures, and in the end, he asked for my own phone in exchange for deleting the pictures and closing the issue and I agreed on that"**

As for seeking help from others, only 3 cases resorted to the law and they themselves resorted to a technical person to solve the problem, while 3 cases resorted to the parents or husband. Two cases resorted to acquaintances and friends to solve the problem, one of the cases resorted to the law.

### ***The initial action was taken by the respondent***

**"I told my husband and my family and then I complained about him to my manager at work and the law. My family stood with me and my manager dismissed the offender from his job and the police imprisoned him after an investigation with him."**

**Answers related to the effects of the digital violence incident on the studied cases:**

**Psychological effects:** The most frequent psychological cases were sleep and eating disorders (lack of appetite - persistent nightmares) in 6 of the studied cases, and they persist in 4 cases even after the end of the digital violence incident.

Loss of trust in others in 3 cases, they still do not trust anyone, not even family members.

Isolation and introversion in 4 cases as they did not return to their interaction with the social environment as it was before the incident.

**Societal effects:** Stressed relationship with parents or husband in 8 cases, one of them ended in divorce.

**"The incident affected me with my husband's lack of confidence in me for a while, and he became suspicious of me and beat me when he found out about the incident, and the problems remained because of this issue until he was sure of the truth of my words that I did not know him."**

And one case left the region after everyone knew her story, and two cases were beaten and physically abused by their husband or family.

One of the respondents said:

**"I filed a complaint with the police, but my cousin at that time beat me and started saying that I had blackened the family's face because I resorted to the police, and I also filed a complaint against the technical employee in my workplace because he told the employees about the incident, but the administration did not take any action, but they accepted my resignation and dismissed the employee because he did not Maintain employee confidentiality"**

The incident affected the completion of the education of two cases that were single, and they lost the school year because they were afraid to leave the house. One of them says:

**"I dropped out from the school and I failed in my university exams, I didn't have any wish to do anything in this period".**

The incident positively affected one case, and her relationship with her husband, who supported her, improved. She says:

**"The incident affected me positively and made my relationship with my family better, specifically my husband. I also became more concerned in protecting them from such violence and asserted on everyone around me not to answer on strange numbers or click on strange links"**

**Economic effects:** The most frequent financial losses were the technical costs of stopping the abuser, as 5 cases paid (the cost of the expert person - buying a new numbers), but among the biggest losses were 3 cases that provided money to the abusive person, two of which the amount

was withdrawn from their own resources and one of them took the money from the husband. Additionally, two cases lost their job and by this, they lost their source of income.

**Answers related to the opinion of the respondents about the reason for the incident they got exposed to:**

8 cases see that the cause of the incidents was a lack of knowledge of technical matters, especially those related to digital security. 9 cases considered that the discrimination that exists in the first place is the reason why women in the city of Idlib and its countryside get subjected to more violence, and the same cases related the discrimination to women's low self-confidence due to the oppressive view of society towards women.

One of the cases that got exposed to hate speech incident said:

**“They changed the video that I made, I made it as I mentioned that the woman really needs to drive, she is able to do so and nothing prevents her. they distorted the video, and said that I am a rebel and brought the stories of religion, customs, and traditions, and the abusive and mocking comments started from all people.”.**

While the reason for not caring for the woman's feelings by the husband or not containing them by the parents was the basis in 6 studied cases.

One of the respondents said about the reasons for accepting the demands of the abusive person from her point of view:

**“I responded to him, I had to talk to a man other than my husband because of my husband's neglect of me, while society justifies his extramarital relations.”**

- 4 cases linked the increase in digital violence to the lack of clear laws in terms of text or application.
- Poverty and financial need among young people were the only reason in 3 of the cases.
- The desire for revenge was the viewpoint of 2 of the cases.
- 3 cases saw that the lack of awareness among young males about the danger of electronic crimes and the lack of awareness-raising about the dangers of using the Internet negatively on society.
- Two cases stated that the rush to give trust to others is the reason for their exposure to digital violence.
- While one woman saw that the reason was the lack of a competent authority to assist women in this matter.

**Content of focus discussion session:**

**The aim of the focused discussion session was** to gather the opinions, experiences, perceptions and suggestions of a group of people working in civil work, and social and

humanitarian activities about the phenomenon of digital violence in Idlib city and its countryside.

**The main themes that were raised during the focus group session:**

**First question: When did the phenomenon of digital violence begin to increase, and who is directing this type of violence in Idlib city and its countryside?**

- The phenomenon of digital violence increased in the last years of the war.
- There are cases of digital violence against females and males, but women are targeted much more. The cases of digital violence by women that are directed against men are very few.
- Cases of violence were kept secret and now it is possible to discover them and talk about them.
- The development of programs, applications, and electronic games that have space for communication and chat, such as (Blue Whale game) has caused suicide cases because there are young immature age groups that cannot control their emotions and use the Internet without restrictions, with the increasing gap in technical knowledge among males and females.

**Second question: What are the psychological, cognitive, and social reasons related to women and make them vulnerable to digital violence more than men in northwest Syria?**

- Women's fear of the social stigma.
- Women are considered the most emotionally and financially needy, according to the opinions of the participants, so this need gets exploited.
- Young teenage women are the most targeted group, especially those who have dropped out of education, making them more vulnerable to violence, but another opinion from the group said that the age group that is most exposed to digital violence among women is between (22 and 40).
- 75% of the cases that I encounter in the region got exposed to violence because of thinking about their emotions without realizing the danger, especially in the teenage group.
- The women's fear of discovering the incident makes them do what the abuser asks for fear of community punishment (imprisonment, forced marriage, divorce, or even murder).
- In my field of work, I am frequently exposed to similar cases that got exposed to digital violence, regardless of whether she had sent pictures or communicated with a young man, or was putting her phone on charging at her neighbor's house and while that a young man came and stole her pictures from her phone and started threatening to publish these pictures.
- Women's lack of knowledge about setting personal boundaries and protecting these boundaries.

- Female activists and journalists in the region are exposed to more digital violence and offensive comments whenever they publish a post or a report as there is an electronic army stalking them.
- The woman's conviction that he will not be held accountable by law and society makes her more vulnerable to secrecy and avoiding reporting him.

**The third question "Are there personal and social reasons related to the person who commits the digital violence incident?"**

- Whoever practices digital violence suffers from a psychological or moral problem.
- We receive cases of digital violence perpetrated by people with power and money such as a camp manager or a service provider who blackmails and harasses the woman electronically, as the abuser knows the woman's environment well and knows that she has no social support, therefore, he dares to pursue digital violence, especially the demands of financial and sexual extortion.
- A way to relieve stress and frustration over the Internet.
- Unemployment is a major factor where there is a lot of free time that goes for entertainment or because of financial need, so he finds electronic extortion as a way to get money without exerting effort.
- The lack of having a purpose in life such as education. The opinions of the group were divided between those who say that the abuser is often uneducated and another opinion that says that this is not a rule as there are university professors that exploited female students by providing sexual services via the Internet in exchange for success.
- The abusive person often uses experts to carry out electronic violence.
- The victim chooses married women because the fear is greater and the social stigma is devastating to her life.

If the abuser is known to the woman and her family, or from the same area, he can be reached quickly and the violence can be stopped.

**Second theme: Social and security factors:**

**First question: Does the conflict that took place in Syria have a role in the growing phenomenon of digital violence in the studied region?**

- The poverty caused by the war made parents marry off girls to get rid of their expenses.
- Digital violence crimes are prevalent all over the world, even in developed countries - it is not related to reality and war - since the nineties of the last century with the spread of technology, the phenomenon of bullying, harassment, and digital violence has spread all over the world, as we find some developed countries that do not suffer from wars and impose laws with imprisonment for a period of 3 or 5 years for such crime. The virtual world is not related to the conditions of the place in which we live, we are all the same in that.
- It is possible that the war contributed to increasing digital violence as young men and women left their homes without accompanying any of their families and getting in contact with strange societies they never met before. Indeed, the war made everybody separated from his own family.

- The increase in the percentage of unemployed youth after stopping work due to the unstable security conditions.

**Second question: Is there a role for the religious and security authorities in stopping the phenomenon of digital violence?**

- There is a role for the religious authority, such as the “Hisba” that used to stand in front of schools to prevent young people from harassing girls. As for the internet, the matter is limited to some speeches that warn of suspicious relationships with people through social media, as well as some religious websites.
- Sometimes the story is resolved in the event of a complaint by what is called the “payment of a fine” where the man is not affected by any legal action, but the woman is the one who gets stigmatized.
- There are obstacles that prevent from going to the police and suing the abuser, and these obstacles are the customs and traditions that blame women for everything.

**Third question: Is there a role for the various institutions of upbringing (the family - the school) in the phenomenon of digital violence?**

- Customs and traditions that encourage early marriage as I get cases of 12-13 years old that are married and when they reach the age of 18, they get divorced or widower with children, and this increases their lack of awareness and makes her more vulnerable to online violence.
- Parents' fear of stigma puts more pressure on women who start looking for a partner for marriage and find that the available and easiest way to do that is through Internet applications.
- Family's lack of monitoring and awareness-raising has led to the decline of moral control among young people of both sexes.
- There is a role for education, just like other deviations such as lying, theft, and murder. The matter is related to morals, which are formed from educational accumulations when there is a sound upbringing that does not resort to violence.
- The matter is not related to the development of social media. When we raise children at home on the good morals that lying, exploitation, and abuse are not permissible, they will have an internal deterrent.
- Some organizations conduct sessions on the emotional void for young women, including raising awareness of these dangers as a precaution for them. Moreover, families can be targeted, as the idea of awareness is the prevention factor so that we do not fall into danger and reach violence.
- The spread of online lessons and courses due to Corona has helped spread numbers and accounts, and women have become more vulnerable to digital violence.
- The absence of a culture of dialogue with females, in particular, makes them feel not safe in normal times, and this doubles when they are exposed to an incident of violence, so they cannot solve the problem without the support of the social network.



- Restrictions on women's exercise of their personal freedom make women subject to violence if they post a picture or write a post that does not fit the collective opinion in the region.
- All forbidden is desirable, as the policy of early separation between males and females led to the formation of secret relationships in secret which develops through uncontrolled electronic communication.

### Third theme: Technical and numerical data related to the phenomenon of digital violence in northwest Syria?

#### First question: Technical part:

- The use of the mobile phone has made photos, calls, and recordings more vulnerable to hacking.
- A person does not have to be a technical person to engage in digital violence as he may rely on other people with experience with the techniques.
- We actually live differently from virtual reality, as in virtual reality there is an open and free space that makes penetration of privacy easy and accessible.
- When getting bullied on the Facebook platform, a report can be submitted to its management and it may close the abuser's page, but he can create a new page in moments and repeat the process again. There are no controls inside social media platforms.
- In Idlib, there is a page called the "Electronic Crime Unit" which is a team that works to help people who have been exposed to incidents of digital violence. It provides support until the attacker's account is hacked and all photos and documents are withdrawn from his/her account in full confidentiality. Additionally, this page publishes awareness-raising posts.

The spread of programs and applications that give financial profit through constant communication with people and responding to emails and phone numbers related to others, and makes them more vulnerable to threats and exploitation.

#### Second question: Legal part:

- Regarding legal prosecution, today, under the conditions of development in social media, there is great difficulty, especially since most of the names and numbers are fictitious or not registered. We do not have an entity that gives documented numbers attributed to their owners with fundamental records to go back to in order to know who is the person who has committed digital violence, but when the number is registered, it is easy to prosecute the person by filing a complaint and following up the case in front of the competent judiciary.
- Harassment is a crime where there is a perpetrator and a victim, and the perpetrator of a digital crime is cautious and technology enables him to hide, so it is difficult to detect him. Thus, the solution is avoidance, prevention, and caution.
- The courts receive a lot of these cases, and the offender often takes his punishment. A while ago, there was a person in a border city that take pictures of girls and publish these pictures on his account, and despite the poor possibilities, he was arrested and



prosecuted. The accountability exists and the laws are still stated in the constitution. Although I have not received any such case, but any case gets received is considered by the criminal court, and the offender is prosecuted after the case has been initiated.

- In most developed countries in the world, this issue gets referred to the court because it is a crime and we are talking about a crime of harassment. In most of those countries, there are laws and articles in the constitution that hold this crime accountable through specialized courts. Today, there is no other authority that can get justice for this girl who got exposed to blackmail and scandal other than the court, where there is no other deterrent.
- Using a false name and a fake account makes it difficult to catch the abuser.
- There is no real, clear, and explicit law for issues of digital violence in Syria.

### **Third question: Recommendations and suggestions according to the opinions of the participants in the session**

- Avoid publishing personal information and data as they must be used on a narrow and specific scale. And this will reduce their spread and thus exposure to electronic violence.
- Spreading the cases of the abusers who a complaint was filed against them so that the community knows that this is a social stigma on the male who committed digital violence.
- Raising awareness among youth about the difference between real and virtual worlds.
- The necessity of not responding nor dealing with strangers and not accessing unknown links that might expose them to direct danger.
- Putting a safety plan for those who got exposed to digital violence and ask them not to respond to any unknown numbers and if she does communicate with anybody, she shall not send any personal pictures to him.
- Raising awareness about the protection of personal e-mail, the use of verification codes in WhatsApp, the cloud or the vault for images that can be protected through a password or a code through email.
- Moreover, there are devices that have better security than others, as many devices have protection, but we are not aware of them, so girls, young women and women must be made aware of the need for protection. These points need a lot of awareness sessions and lessons in order to reach full knowledge and awareness.
- Assisting women through youth and this would be very good if implemented. As we ask that young people be safe incubators and be kind to girls, and that they be keen on women and their safety and this can be done by spreading public awareness. This is in addition to intensifying awareness-raising activities by targeting all groups and alerting people to the dangers of extortion as a source of livelihood.
- Raising awareness and showing deterrent punishment.
- We are all responsible with no exception, and there are, as we know, circles of protection and awareness that start with the individual and the family and go to relatives, then the community and the role of organizations come with awareness and empowerment.

### Thirdly: Suggestions and recommendations:

- Working to change social attitudes through informal frameworks (schools - universities - mosques). Internet abuse should be understood as a serious challenge that individuals need to identify as a form of violence that both sexes can be exposed to.
- Changing the tendencies that support blaming women for being victims of digital violence through community awareness sessions in cooperation with influential people and local leaders in the city of Idlib, taking into account the privacy of the social, economic and political environment.
- Educating the category of young women who use information and communication technology through various formal and informal educational institutions by including a subject on digital security and communication technology in the classroom since the middle school stage.
- Changing misconceptions about digital violence that the Internet is not a cause of digital violence - and that staying away from the Internet will prevent digital violence so that the gender gap in the use of technology does not deepen, by spreading the concept that "no one deserves to be humiliated online."
- Funding researches related to digital violence in all regions of Syria to discover where this phenomenon goes within society.
- Providing electronic resources in the Arabic language on the principles of digital security in an easy and simple language with a manual of instructions for dealing with the Internet.
- Safeguards must be implemented to secure safe spaces online and this requires the attention of actors and stakeholders.
- Developing awareness-raising strategies such as cyber safety training programs.
- Giving internet companies a role in better treating and protecting users through standards and guidelines that require internet users to adhere to.
- Involving women in manufacturing and developing the technology sector in order to build a new view of communication technologies within the framework of a feminist vision.
- Developing digital empowerment policies that are accessible to all women.
- Setting multi-layered security systems, meaning two password security systems, the original password for access and the other password gives an order to erase the data.
- Training technical women to provide maintenance and programming services for devices.
- Setting deterrence activities away from the law by building a societal base and engaging individuals and stakeholders to address this phenomenon.
- Setting deterrent penalties related to laws of violence against women and developing them to include digital gender-based violence and ensuring law enforcement mechanisms.
- Commitment to human rights principles for a safe internet by companies and internet intermediaries.
- Developing new regulatory frameworks and legislation that address violence and clearly clarify legal regulations.
- Finding a mechanism to remove digital violence, especially hate speech against women in the region, from digital platforms.

- Taking the electronic gender dimension of crimes against women and not relying on the general provisions of crimes in actual reality only.
- We need a gradual approach and a combination of preventative and educational measures.
- Forming committees to communicate directly with the departments of social networking sites in order to develop sensitive policies for women, taking into account their different contexts.

## Study Annexes

### Case Study Form:

#### Information related to the form:

Date of interview:

Name of the moderator:

Interview duration:

Place of interview:

#### General information of the respondents:

1. Code:

2. Age:

3. Marital status:

4. Single Married Separated Divorced Widow

5. Place of residence:

6. Displacement: displaced ( ) resident ( )

7. Place of residence before 2011:

8. Number of children:

9. Educational level:

Illiterate ( ) well-versed ( ) primary ( ) middle school ( ) secondary ( )  
university ( ) postgraduate ( )

10. Persons that live with you in the same house:

Lives alone ( ) with her family ( ) with the husband and children only ( )  
with the husband's family ( ) with one or more members of the  
husband's family ( ) with other relatives ( ) with neighbors and  
acquaintances ( )

11. Number of families that live in the house:

One family ( ) 2-3 families ( ) More than 3 families ( )

12. Number of marriages:

13. Age at the first marriage:

14. Professional status: Working ( ) doesn't work ( )

15. If working, what is the nature of work: Full-time ( ) Part-time ( )  
Voluntary ( )

16. If not working, why: Lack of educational qualifications ( ) Lack of  
experience ( ) No job opportunities ( ) Study ( ) I do not want to work ( )

- Family men don't agree (parents - husbands) ( ) Social customs and traditions ( ) nepotism ( )
17. Living condition: Very bad (<600) Bad 600-1000- Medium 1001-3000- Good 3001-6000 -Very good Above 6000
18. Do you have your own financial resources: Yes ( ) No ( )
19. Do you have the freedom to use your resources?
20. Can you explain to me how you solve the problems that you face in general?
21. Can you talk about your relationships with the people around you in general?
- Your relationship with your husband:
  - With family:
  - With friends:

### Primary information about the incident:

1. Did you get exposed to digital violence incident: Yes ( ) No ( )
2. If yes, how many times have you had an incident of this type:
3. When was the date of the incident that affected you the most:  
A day ago Up to 6 months ago ( ) 7-12 months ago ( ) one year for two years ( ) three years and more ( )
4. Type of digital violence you got exposed to: Threatening with pictures or conversations ( ) emails on your private account ( ) Theft of your account and posting about you ( ) Impersonation ( ) getting insulted after interacting with an Internet platform ( ) Posting shared photos in a non-interactive manner ( ) Using spyware on your location ( ) Recording your calls and seeing your messages ( ) Filming and posting pictures or videos without your permission ( ) Verbal or written insults and abuse on your personal photos that you put on social media ( ) Electronic exclusion of you in one of the groups for a discriminative reason without breaching group standards ( ) other, mention.....
5. Name of the website or application where you have been subjected to electronic violence? Facebook Messenger accident Email Twitter Telegram Other Remember ( )
6. Relationship to the person or group causing the digital violence before the incident:  
I know him and he is one of my relatives ( ) I know him and he is one of my acquaintances and friends ( ) I know him and he is one of my neighbors ( ) I never knew him before ( )

### Detailed information about the incident:

1. The first thing done by the abusive person that do digital violence:
2. Woman's first reaction to this (the behavior she did at the beginning):
3. Did the abuser's behavior get repeated in the same way: Yes ( ) No ( )
4. If no, how did he act afterwards?
5. Can you describe your feelings during the process of digital violence that you experienced?
6. Can you list the most common thoughts that came to your mind during your digital violence?
7. What actions did you take during the digital violence incident:  
Resorting to the family ( ) resorting to the husband ( ) resorting to the help of friends and acquaintances ( ) resorting to a person who is an expert in technology ( ) The Law ( ) Reporting his personal page ( ) Banning him ( ) I did not take any action and ignore the matter ( ) Respond to him and facing him via the Internet ( ) do what he asks ( ) other, mention.....
8. What happened after this action?
9. How long did the digital violence you have been exposed to continue?
10. Were other people involved in the incident: Yes ( ) No ( )
11. If yes, who are they?
12. What was their role?
13. What did they do?
14. Did the incident affect your internet usage? Yes ( ) No ( )
15. If yes, how did this happen?  
Deleting my accounts and personal pages ( ) Changing my number ( ) removing electronic communication programs from the phone ( ) Changing my real information with fake information ( ) stopping using the Internet most of the time ( ). Other, mention.....
16. Can you describe the abusive behavior of the offender and how you acted in chronological order from start to end:  
.....
17. Did your work get affected with that? Yes ( ) No ( )
18. If yes, how? .....
19. Did your study get affected? Yes ( ) No ( )
20. If yes, how? .....
21. Did the incident affect doing your house stuff? Yes ( ) No ( )
22. If yes, how? .....
23. Are there financial losses for the digital violence incident? Yes ( ) No ( )
24. If yes, how did this happen?
25. Did your relationship with one or more members of your family get affected during the incident? Yes ( ) No ( )
26. If yes, who got affected?

27. How do you describe this effect?
28. What are the causes of digital violence against women in our society from your point of view?
29. What are the most important difficulties that women face in order to address incidents of digital violence against women in our society?
30. What are the most important negative feelings that accompany you when you remember the incident?  
Fear ( ) anxiety ( ) confusion ( ) sadness ( ) shyness ( ) indifference ( )  
anger ( ) distrust of others ( ) other, mention ( )
31. Do you suffer from any of these problems after the incident:  
Sleep disturbances ( ) Eating disorders ( ) Nightmares ( ) Lack of  
concentration ( ) Introversion ( ) other, mention..... ( ).



## 2- Focus discussion session:

### Main information

<b>Date of interview:</b>	2022/2/18
<b>Time of interview</b>	12pm-1,30pm
<b>Information related to the members of the group</b>	

Psychological supporter - case workers - lawyer / program manager in a civil society organization - mental health specialist - civil activist in the field of peace building - case manager - monitor and evaluation officer for a women's organization - field project manager - journalist-media

<b>Preparations for the interview</b>	
<b>Objectives of the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gathering the opinions, experiences, perceptions, and suggestions of a group of people working in civil work and social and humanitarian activities about the phenomenon of digital violence in northwest Syria.</li> <li>• Developing a joint vision to identify the phenomenon in a procedural and specific manner in the city of Idlib.</li> <li>• Completing the information related to the research of digital violence in all its aspects from the point of view of the people outside the problem, but it is dealt with in order to complement the data collected in the case study phase.</li> </ul>
<b>Time line of the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 minutes- Introduction: Introducing the entity in charge of the session, introduce the group, and presenting the topic and purpose of the session.</li> <li>• 75 minutes, performing the session: It is divided into 3 main themes (each theme includes three sub-questions and the length of each theme is 25 minutes).</li> <li>• 5 minutes: Closure of the session- 5 minutes</li> </ul>

### General notice:

**The topics and questions that branch from them was designed by the main researcher who worked on the research of the digital gender-based violence in northwestern Syria (Idlib as a model), in order to fit the research data and serve its main idea.**

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أَنْتِ وَأَنَا، فَعَا نَسْتَطِيعُ حِينَمَا نَرِيدُ