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Safer platforms, *stronger participation*

Mapping gender-based violence online in Syria

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Contents

Abstract 4
Executive summary 5

1. Introduction and background 7
1.1 Study rationale 8
1.2 Objectives of the study 9
1.3 Research questions 9
1.4 Scope and limitations 10
1.4.1 Scope of the study 10
1.4.2 Limitations of the study 10

2. Methodology 13
2.1 Study design overview 13
2.2 Desk review approach 14
2.3 Primary data collection 14
2.3.1 Key informant interviews (KIIs) 15
2.3.2 In-depth interviews (IDIs) 15
2.3.3 Focus group discussions (FGDs) 16
2.4 Sampling strategy 16
2.5 Data analysis procedures 16
2.6 Ethical considerations and data protection 17

3. Contextual overview—desk review 19
3.1 The spillover effect of violence 19
3.2 GBVO in the Syrian media and information landscape 20
3.3 Systemized GBVO against journalists, media activists and human rights defenders 23
3.4 The role of media and online platforms in GBVO in Syria 23
3.5 Media platforms scanning 24
3.5.1 GBVO as a tool to silence differences in opinion 25
3.5.2 Using ethnic and sectarian oriented GBVO comments to intensify hostility 25
3.5.3 Spread of appearance-based harassment regardless of dress or status 26
3.5.4 Using GBVO to marginalize women's presence in the public sphere 26

4. Findings 29
4.1 Findings overview 29
4.2 Forms and prevalence of GBVO in Syria 30
4.2.1 Documented forms of GBVO 30
4.2.2 Survivor testimonies and the continuum of violence 31
4.3 Target groups and perpetrators 32
4.3.1 Risk factors and survivor experiences 32
4.3.2 Perpetrator profiles, motivations, and structural role 33
4.4 Platforms and channels of GBVO 34
4.4.1 Cross-platforms escalation patterns 34
4.4.2 Asymmetry in digital literacy 35
4.4.3 Platform governance failures 35
4.5 Narratives and discourses surrounding GBVO 35
4.5.1 Victim-blaming discourse 36
4.5.2 Disciplining social norms and the erosion of collective resistance 36
4.6 Impacts of GBVO 37
4.6.1 From individual harm to collective and societal consequences 37
4.7 Legal, institutional, and community responses 37
4.7.1 Survivor experiences with reporting 38
4.7.2 Structural impunity 39
4.7.3 Community responses and coping strategies 40
4.8 Role of media in perpetuating and countering GBVO 40
4.8.1 Media as amplifier and potential counterweight 40
4.8.2 Media as key leverage point 41

5. Conclusions 43
5.1 Synthesis of patterns 43
5.2 Implications for media, civil society, and women's participation 44

6. Existing efforts 47

7. Recommendations 49
7.1 For media organizations 50
7.2 For civil society organizations 50
7.3 For policymakers and legal actors 51

References 52
Abbreviations and acronyms 56

Abstract

This study analyses Gender-Based Violence Online (GBVO) in Syria and how it shapes women's ability to speak, work, and participate in public life online. Commissioned by DW Akademie, it generates evidence to inform safer digital spaces and more gender-sensitive media practices, serving as a key resource for stakeholders and the wider international audience.

An exploratory mixed-methods design was used. The study combined a desk review with 19 Key Informant Interviews (media, civil society, legal, and policy actors), 12 In-Depth Interviews (including survivors and women journalists/activists), and three Focus Group Discussions (female media professionals, youth activists, civil society actors). It also included an exploratory scan of online spaces, especially Facebook and Telegram, to map patterns of abuse.

Findings show GBVO in Syria is normalized and systemic, not isolated incidents. It functions as social control that escalates when women become visible, and it often blends sexualized blackmail, harassment and threats, defamation campaigns, doxxing, and psychological intimidation. Platform dynamics can enable coordination in encrypted spaces and amplify harm in public ones, while victim-blaming narratives push many women toward self-censorship. The report details the human costs: fear, distress, reputational harm, and withdrawal from online and public spaces. It closes with practical, clear recommendations for media, civil society, and policymakers to strengthen prevention, survivor centered support, and accountability.

Executive summary

This study provides a foundational analysis of GBVO in Syria, commissioned by DW Akademie to generate evidence to inform interventions that promote safer digital spaces, support women's participation in public discourse, and strengthen gender-sensitive media and online environments. The research aims to equip media actors, civil society, and policymakers and the wider international audience with actionable insights to prevent GBVO, improve responses, and shift harmful norms.

The study used an exploratory mixed-methods design with a strong qualitative focus, grounded in feminist and ethical inquiry. It included: 1) a desk review of secondary data sources; 2) primary qualitative data collection through 19 key informant interviews (media, civil society, legal, and policy stakeholders), 12 in-depth Interviews with survivors and women journalists/activists, and three focus group discussions; and 3) an exploratory scan of selected social media spaces, including Facebook and Telegram. A hybrid thematic analysis was applied, triangulating evidence across sources.

Findings show that GBVO in Syria is normalized and systemic, not merely isolated incidents, functioning as a mechanism of social control that reinforces patriarchal power and restricts civic participation. It takes overlapping forms, including sexual blackmail, harassment, defamation campaigns, doxxing, and psychological intimidation. Women with visible public profiles, especially journalists, activists, and civil society actors, are the primary targets, with "visibility" acting as the key risk factor. Perpetrators range from anonymous individuals to coordinated networks aiming to silence or discipline women's participation. Abuse is facilitated by platform dynamics: encrypted spaces (e.g., Telegram) enable coordination, while public platforms (e.g., Facebook) amplify attacks. Victim-blaming narratives are widespread, encouraging self-censorship and shifting accountability away from perpetrators.

GBVO produces severe psychological distress, fear, reputational and professional harm, often driving women to withdraw from digital spaces. Collectively, this narrows public debate, undermines freedom of expression and media freedom, and weakens social cohesion. Institutional responses are widely seen as ineffective, with legal gaps, low trust, underreporting, and impunity enabling continued abuse. Media also plays a dual role, sometimes amplifying harm but also holding potential to reshape narratives and set protective standards.

Recommendations: prioritize gender-sensitive moderation and ethical reporting in media; survivor centered support, documentation, and coalitions within civil society; and legal reform, specialized institutional capacity, and awareness campaigns led by policymakers.

1. Introduction and background

This study, commissioned by DW Akademie, provides a foundational investigation into GBVO within the Syrian context. The research serves as a critical evidence base to inform project interventions aimed at fostering a safer, more inclusive, and gender-sensitive media and digital environment. By examining the manifestations, drivers, and impacts of online violence against women, the study seeks to equip media stakeholders, civil society, and policymakers and the wider international audience with the insights needed to develop effective counter strategies and promote women's safe participation in public discourse.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on socially ascribed gender roles and unequal power relations. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and socio-economic harm, as well as threats, coercion, and other forms of control that restrict autonomy and participation in public and private life. While GBV can affect people of all genders, women and girls are disproportionately impacted due to entrenched inequalities and norms that police behavior, sexuality, and visibility (UN, 2016; United Nations Inter Agency Standing Committee, 2015).

While Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of gender (UNFPA, 2025a, 2025b).

While GBVO is not yet formally codified in international frameworks, its use in this study reflects the terminology increasingly adopted by humanitarian actors to describe a specific, visibility-driven form of digital violence. In the Syrian context, GBVO is understood as a subset of TFGBV that occurs primarily in public or semi-public digital spaces, it includes targeted abuse, defamation, and moral shaming directed at women and girls, particularly activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, based on their digital presence, voice, or perceived behavior in online platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, or Telegram. GBVO exploits patriarchal norms and honor-based narratives to silence women, discredit their public roles, and reinforce gendered barriers to participation in civic and digital life (UNFPA, 2025b).

In conflict-affected contexts, these risks often intensify, as documented by OHCHR, where insecurity, displacement, economic collapse, and the erosion of protection and justice systems interact with pre-existing gender inequalities, expanding exposure to violence while limiting access to safe reporting and support pathways (Human Rights Council, 2018; OHCHR, 2023).

In Syria, UN reporting has repeatedly highlighted the gendered impacts of the conflict on women and girls, including persistent exposure to sexual and gender-based violence and the compounded barriers that survivors face in seeking protection and accountability (Human Rights Council, 2018; OHCHR, 2023). In addition to direct physical risks, GBV in Syria is shaped by powerful reputational dynamics and social sanctions, where blame is often shifted to survivors and where "honor-based" narratives can heighten the consequences of disclosure. These conditions contribute to underreporting and a climate of silence, while also reinforcing patterns of intimidation that are designed to limit women's mobility, voice, and participation in public life.

Against this backdrop, digital spaces have increasingly become an extension of Syria's social and political landscape, and therefore another arena where gendered power relations are reproduced. As internet access and digital participation expand, online platforms are more central to communication, professional networking, and civic engagement, including journalists, activists, and civil society actors. The report's desk review notes a marked increase in internet users over recent years and growing reliance on chat-based and social messaging applications, which can increase exposure to privacy violations, data breaches, and other technology-enabled harms

(Data Reportal, 2025; World Bank, 2025). At the same time, digital participation can be constrained by surveillance, polarization, and harassment, creating risks that are not "virtual" in their effects but deeply connected to offline safety, livelihoods, and social standing.

In this context, GBVO, also discussed in the literature as technology-facilitated GBV, can be understood as gendered harm perpetrated through digital technologies. It includes harassment, stalking, threats, impersonation, defamation, doxxing, and image-based abuse, often targeting women's reputations, perceived morality, and right to participate in public discourse (Henry and Powell, 2018; Hinson et al., 2018). In Syria, available evidence cited in this report suggests that GBVO is both prevalent and underreported, with patterns that frequently combine sexualized intimidation, blackmail, and reputational attacks. Another study estimated that 50–60 percent of women and girls in northwest Syria have experienced some form of GBVO, with risk expected to rise alongside greater connectivity and digital dependency (ACAPS, 2025). A field study referenced in this report similarly indicates widespread exposure to digital violence among Syrian women, with blackmail and image-based abuse emerging as particularly common and harmful forms (Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023).

Crucially, GBVO does not sit outside the broader continuum of GBV; it often functions as a mechanism of social control that punishes visibility and dissent, and it can escalate into offline consequences through reputational harm, family pressure, and threats of physical violence. The research's desk review documents how women in Syria active in public-facing fields, particularly media and public life, have faced intimidation and defamation campaigns that aim to discredit them, damage their reputations, and push them out of public participation (Human Rights Council, 2018; SNHR, 2021a). This convergence of offline gender inequality, conflict dynamics, and expanding digital participation provides the immediate grounding for the study's focus: understanding how GBVO manifests in Syria, who it targets, how it is enabled, and what practical measures can reduce harm and protect women's participation in media and civic life.

1.1 Study rationale

The rationale for this study is multi-faceted and urgent:

- **Escalating threat**
  GBVO is a growing global digital rights and gender equality concern, with women, particularly journalists, activists, and public figures, facing disproportionate harassment, abuse, and silencing tactics online. In conflict-affected Syria, this violence is intensified by political repression, patriarchal norms, and weak institutional safeguards.

- **Digital expansion and risk**
  Syria's internet penetration has risen significantly, increasing reliance on digital platforms for communication, information, and professional activity. This increased connectivity has concurrently expanded exposure to technology-facilitated risks such as cyberstalking, image-based abuse, doxxing, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

- **Evidence gap**
  While reports indicate that 50–60 percent of women and girls in northwest Syria have experienced some form of GBVO (ACAPS, 2025) comprehensive, context-specific analysis is lacking. There is a critical need to move beyond documenting prevalence to understanding the specific forms, narratives, perpetrators, institutional response gaps, and the profound impact on women's participation and well-being.

- **Foundational for action**
  The study directly supports DW Akademie's project goals by establishing a robust analytical baseline. Its findings are essential for designing targeted capacity-building for media professionals, developing ethical media content and safety policies, shaping effective public awareness campaigns, informing advocacy for stronger legal and institutional protections against GBVO, and providing a critical resource for the wider GBVO research and policy community.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The overarching goal is to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of GBVO in Syria to inform strategic interventions. Specific objectives are to:

1. Analyze the forms, prevalence, and manifestations of GBVO in Syria (e.g., harassment, doxxing, image-based abuse, disinformation).

2. Identify the key actors, targeted groups, and digital platforms central to the GBVO ecosystem, mapping both perpetrators and responders.

3. Examine the narratives, discourses, and social norms that perpetuate or challenge GBVO, with a focus on media language and online engagement.

4. Assess the psychological, social, and professional impact of GBVO on women's participation, freedom of expression, and well-being.

5. Review the existing legal and policy frameworks addressing GBVO, evaluating their effectiveness and implementation gaps.

6. Generate actionable, evidence-based recommendations to strengthen institutional safeguards, enhance media ethics, and promote digital safety and gender equality.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by the following core research questions:

- **Forms and dynamics**
  What are the predominant forms and typologies of GBVO in Syria? Which platforms and digital channels are most commonly used to perpetrate this violence, and what are the common patterns or escalation dynamics?

- **Actors and targeting**
  Who are the primary perpetrators and enablers of GBVO? Which groups of women (e.g., journalists, activists, displaced women) are most targeted and vulnerable, and why?

- **Narratives and norms**
  What dominant narratives and discourses are used to justify, normalize, or execute GBVO? How do media representation and online interactions reinforce or challenge harmful gender norms?

- **Impact and coping**
  What are the immediate and long-term psychological, social, and professional consequences of GBVO for survivors? How do women cope with and respond to online violence, and what barriers do they face in seeking support or justice?

- **Responses and gaps**
  How do media institutions, civil society organizations, legal systems, and policymakers currently respond to GBVO? What are the critical gaps in protection, reporting mechanisms, legal recourse, and coordination?

- **Pathways for change**
  Based on the evidence, what are the most strategic and feasible recommendations for media actors, civil society, and policymakers to prevent GBVO, support survivors, and create safer, more inclusive online spaces for women in Syria?

1.4 Scope and limitations

1.4.1 Scope of the study

This study is intentionally focused to provide a deep, qualitative understanding of GBVO within the Syrian context. Its scope encompasses:

- **Geographic and contextual focus**
  The primary focus is on the Syrian context, including both territories within Syria and relevant diaspora digital spaces where Syrian women participate in public discourse. The analysis is framed by Syria's specific conflict dynamics, media landscape, and socio-political environment.

- **Thematic boundaries**
  The research is centered specifically on Gender-Based Violence Online, defined as acts of harm committed through digital technologies targeting individuals based on their gender. This includes, but is not limited to, online harassment, cyberstalking, doxxing, image-based sexual abuse, gendered disinformation, and sextortion. While acknowledging the offline continuum of violence, the study prioritizes the digital manifestation and its unique impacts.

- **Primary target groups**
  The research focuses on women who are most visible and at-risk in Syria's digital public sphere, particularly:
  - Women journalists and media professionals;
  - Women activists, human rights defenders, and civil society actors;
  - Female survivors of online GBV.

- **Institutional analysis**
  The study examines the role and responses of key institutional actors, including media organizations, civil society groups, legal bodies, and policymakers, within the Syrian ecosystem.

- **Methodological approach**
  The scope is defined by a qualitative, exploratory methodology. It employs desk research, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to generate rich, contextual insights rather than statistically generalized data.

1.4.2 Limitations of the study

The research design acknowledges several inherent limitations, which will be transparently addressed in the methodology and final reporting:

- **Security and access constraints**
  The volatile security situation in Syria limits physical access to certain regions or populations. Therefore, the data collection was conducted remotely via encrypted platforms, which, while necessary for safety, may affect rapport-building and the depth of some interactions.

- **Sensitivity and underreporting**
  GBVO is a highly sensitive and stigmatized issue. Fear of reprisal, social stigma, and trauma may lead to underreporting and reluctance among some participants to share full details of their experiences, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the data on prevalence, in addition to not consenting to participate in the interview for some survivors due to traumatic distress.

- **Sampling limitations**
  The use of purposive and snowball sampling, while essential for reaching "information-rich" participants in a high-risk context, means the sample is not statistically representative of all Syrian women. The findings illustrate key patterns, dynamics, and experiences but cannot be extrapolated to precise population-wide prevalence rates.

- **Reliance on self-reported data**
  The study primarily relies on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions. While triangulation methods are used to validate themes, the data is subjective and may be influenced by recall bias or personal interpretation.

- **Temporal snapshot**
  The GBVO scan captures a snapshot of GBVO within a specific time frame (December 2025 back to May 2025 (6 months) or December 2024 (12 months) for pages with less posting frequency). The rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms, conflict dynamics, and online tactics means some findings may become dated, though the core analytical framework will remain relevant.

- **Resource constraints**
  Limited time and resources preclude an extensive large-scale quantitative survey or longitudinal study. The discourse analysis of social media was targeted rather than exhaustive, focusing on a purposively selected sample of platforms and pages.

- **Anonymity and verification**
  To uphold the highest ethical standards, strict anonymity is maintained for participants, especially survivors. This necessary protection limits the ability to externally verify specific individual cases cited in the research.

- **Content deletion bias**
  The frequent deletion of offensive comments creates a systematic underrepresentation of the true scale of GBVO across platforms, toning down the extent of GBVO prevalence across platforms. Moreover, many GBVO incidents are handled offline, with survivors subjected to harassment yet choosing not to report, often out of shame or the belief that reporting will bring no remedy. As a result, the cases visible online represent only a fraction of what is happening in reality. To better capture the true scale, targeted research is needed to estimate unreported GBVO, ideally conducted in partnership with civil society organizations, especially those focused on women's empowerment and survivor support.

- **GBVO scans' results skewed towards civil society organizations, networks and associations**
  GBVO social media scans surfaced findings primarily across civil society organizations, networks and associations' pages as they are the ones which are most likely to raise issues concerning women or calling for changes in societal practices, hence were more likely to come up as a result in the GBVO scans.

Taken together, these limitations mean that the study's findings should be interpreted primarily as an evidence-based account of patterns, drivers, narratives, and impacts of GBVO in Syria, rather than as a precise measure of population-level prevalence. In particular, stigma-related underreporting, the deletion of abusive content, and the reliance on self-reported experiences likely result in a conservative picture of the scale and intensity of GBVO, even when patterns and mechanisms are clearly observable across sources. Remote data collection and purposive/snowball recruitment may also skew participation toward more digitally connected and publicly visible groups (e.g., journalists, activists, CSO actors), while under-representing women with limited connectivity, lower digital literacy, or heightened surveillance risks. To mitigate these constraints, analysis relied on systematic triangulation across the desk review, interviews, focus groups, and targeted online scanning; however, anonymization and safety requirements necessarily limit external verification of individual cases, and examples should therefore be read as illustrative of broader dynamics rather than independently verifiable incidents.

These limitations also point to clear priorities for future research. Follow-on studies could strengthen generalizability through safe, anonymous quantitative surveying (or other prevalence-estimation approaches), expand outreach to less digitally connected populations, and adopt longitudinal designs to track evolving tactics and platform shifts over time. Future work should also consider approaches that reduce "visibility bias" created by content deletion (e.g., higher-frequency monitoring, real-time capture within ethical boundaries, and partnerships with women-led CSOs that document cases not publicly visible). Together, these steps would complement the present study's qualitative depth with broader coverage and stronger prevalence estimates, while maintaining the ethical protections required for researching GBVO in Syria.

2. Methodology

This study was designed to develop a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of GBVO in Syria. Recognizing the sensitive and politicized nature of the topic, the research adopted an applied, exploratory mixed-methods approach grounded in principles of feminist and ethical inquiry (Ellsberg and Heise, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2023). The aim was not merely to document incidents but to uncover the lived realities of affected women, the institutional responses and the sociocultural narratives that sustain digital harm. The methodology was built on three interdependent phases: a comprehensive desk review, in-depth qualitative fieldwork, and a rigorous multi-method analysis, all framed within a gender-transformative, rights-based, and conflict-sensitive lens.

2.1 Study design overview

The research is positioned within the tradition of applied social research, where inquiry is directed toward generating actionable knowledge for program and policy intervention (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The design is qualitatively driven and exploratory, intended to map a complex phenomenon in a fragile context where quantitative data is scarce and risky to collect. It is structured around three analytical pillars that guide both data collection and interpretation:

1. A diagnostic mapping of GBVO's forms, prevalence, and digital geography within Syria.

2. An analytical investigation of the drivers, enabling narratives, and institutional responses surrounding online violence.

3. A formative assessment of impacts and pathways for change, leading to survivor- and expert-informed recommendations.

This tripartite structure ensures the study serves both scholarly and practical purposes, providing DW Akademie and a wide range of international stakeholders with a robust evidence base for its initiatives while contributing to the academic literature on technology-facilitated gender-based violence in conflict settings (Henry and Powell, 2018).

2.2 Desk review approach

The desk review constituted the foundational phase, establishing the historical, legal, and conceptual context for primary research. It followed a systematic, though not exhaustive, procedure to synthesize existing knowledge.

The process involved identifying and analyzing secondary sources from credible institutional websites, academic databases, and the publications of organizations known for their work on Syrian media, human rights, and gender issues. Key portals included those of the Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, recognized entities within the Syrian media and advocacy landscape.

A purposive selection criterion was applied to ensure the review's relevance and rigor. Sources were included if they:

1. Focused substantively on Syria or the relevant Syrian diaspora
2. Published between 2022 and 2025 to prioritize contemporaneity
3. Provided gender-relevant analysis or data disaggregated by gender, age, or professional role
4. Originated from reputable organizations, academic publishers, or established research institutes
5. Documented trends, patterns, legal frameworks, or qualitative experiences of GBVO (ACAPS, 2025; Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023). Search terms such as "GBVO Syria," "digital violence against journalists," and "technology-facilitated GBV" were used to locate materials.

Ethical sourcing was paramount. The team carefully vetted materials to avoid disseminating unverified or graphic survivor accounts that could cause traumatization. When citing specific cases of violence, we relied on anonymized data from professional reports or referenced incidents with utmost sensitivity to avoid identifying individuals (WHO, 2016)

Regarding the exploratory scan of social media pages, the methodology used was similar to the traditional literature review; an exploration scan of social media pages was conducted to identify and categorize instances of GBVO. Comments and posts were compiled into a structured table and classified according to typologies of abuse, including verbal harassment, reputational attacks, defamation, and related forms. The scan was conducted across Facebook and Telegram as findings from the primary data collection across KIIs and IDIs showed they were platforms with the highest rate of GBVO. Social media pages were scanned retrospectively, covering a period of six months prior to December 2025, and extending up to one year where posting frequency was lower. The time frame was adjusted to ensure sufficient data captured across pages. It was selected to capture data that reflects the country's political transition after the fall of the Assad regime. Various search words were used to scan different social media pages across Facebook and Telegram. Pages were selected primarily using two main approaches: 1) Snowballing as scans took browsing and navigating one social media page to another, and 2) searching using keywords and hashtags.

Search keywords of the scan included, but were not limited to: Syrian women voices, women empowerment, women's day, Syrian women, harassment, disappearance of Syrian women, forced disappearance, minorities, women minorities, women issues, International Women's Day, Syrian Women Journalism Network, Syrian Women Political Movement, Sot Niswa, Heba Ezzedin, 16 days of activism Syria, #مشاركة_النساء, #نساء_في_قلب_سوري.

2.3 Primary data collection

To move beyond the documentary record and center human experience, the study employed three complementary qualitative methods. This multi-method approach allowed triangulation, capturing individual narratives, professional insights, and community-level perceptions.

The disaggregation of the data collected is as per the table below:

METHODOLOGY	REACHED NUMBER
KIIs	19
IDIs	12
FGDs	3

2.3.1 Key informant interviews (KIIs)

- **Purpose**
  To gather macro-level, institutional perspectives on the structural, legal, media, and policy dimensions of GBVO.

- **Participants**
  19 experts across four categories: Media leaders and editors, civil society and women's rights organization representatives, legal practitioners and justice actors, and policymakers and governance experts. It was planned to conduct 18 KIIs with experts; however, in coordination with DW Akademie, an additional KII was conducted to enrich the findings from media leaders.

- **Format**
  Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes), conducted remotely via encrypted platforms (e.g., Signal, Zoom). Tailored interview guides were used for each category.

- **Disaggregation**
  The table shows the number of interviews by category and participant gender.

TOOL	Female	Male	Total
KII Civil society and women's rights organization representatives	2	3	**5**
KII Legal practitioners and Justice actors	2	2	**4**
KII Media leaders and editors	5	1	**6**
KII Policymakers and governance experts	0	4	**4**
Total	**9**	**10**	**19**

2.3.2 In-depth interviews (IDIs)

- **Purpose**
  To document the lived experiences, impacts, and coping mechanisms of women directly affected by GBVO.

- **Participants**
  8 women and 4 men, including journalists, activists, digital-rights defenders, and survivors of online abuse.

- **Format**
  Semi-structured, trauma-sensitive interviews (60–75 minutes), conducted in Arabic remotely. Separate guides were used for survivors and for journalists/activists.

- **Disaggregation**
  The table shows the number of interviews by category and participant gender.

TOOL	Female	Male	Total
IDI journalists, activists, digital-rights defenders)	4	2	**6**
IDI Survivors	4	2	**6**
Total	**8**	**4**	**12**

Originally, it was planned to interview only women survivors; however, during the snowball sampling, the team was referred to men survivors of online violence. Accordingly, it was decided to interview two male survivors to be able to compare the experience from different gender perspectives.

2.3.3 Focus group discussions (FGDs)

- **Purpose**
  To explore collective perceptions, community norms, and shared strategies related to GBVO.

- **Participants**
  Three FGDs with 5-6 participants each, representing: Female media professionals, Youth activists, Civil society actors working on digital rights/gender equality.

- **Format**
  Semi-structured, participatory discussions (90 mins), facilitated to encourage dialogue while avoiding pressure for personal disclosure.

- **Disaggregation**
  The table shows the number of FGDs by category and participant gender.

TOOL	Female	Male	Total
FGD 1 (Female media professionals and journalists)	6	0	**6**
FGD 2 (Civil society actors)	1	4	**5**
FGD 3 (Youth activists)	0	5	**5**
TOTAL	**7**	**9**	**16**

In FGDs 2 and 3, men were overrepresented for three main reasons: (1) overall FGD recruitment was limited, and several potential participants, especially women, were hesitant to join group discussions because the format can feel less private when the topics are sensitive; (2) FGD 1 was intentionally designed as a women-only space to allow more open and safer discussion, so the men who agreed to participate were therefore assigned across the remaining two FGDs, while women participants were prioritized for the women-only group; and (3) the gender imbalance also reflects broader realities in Syria's public sphere, where men are more visible as activists, policymakers, and advocates, while women's participation is often constrained by social norms, safety concerns, and risks linked to GBV.

2.4 Sampling strategy

Given the sensitive nature of GBVO and the challenges of conducting research in Syria, a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was essential (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Initial participants were identified based on their expertise or experience relevant to the research questions. This level of identifying the participants was based on personal connections of the research team, and a list of actors shared by DW Akademie. This was supplemented by snowball sampling, whereby initial contacts referred other potential participants from within their trusted networks, a crucial technique for building rapport and accessing hidden populations in high-risk contexts (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

Ektimisi sought maximum variation across several dimensions to capture a diversity of perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This included geographic diversity (encompassing different Syrian regions and the diaspora), professional background, and age. The sample size was determined by the principle of thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006), whereby data collection continues until no new substantive themes or insights emerge. The final sample (19 KIIs, 12 IDIs, 3 FGDs) was deemed sufficient to reach this point of informational redundancy.

2.5 Data analysis procedures

Analysis was an iterative, reflexive process moving between data, codes, and emerging themes. All Arabic transcripts were managed and coded using a structured matrix system in Excel.

A hybrid (deductive-inductive) thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Deductive coding began with a priori categories derived from the research objectives and theoretical framework ("forms of harassment," "legal barriers"). Simultaneously, inductive coding remained open to themes emerging directly from participants' narratives, allowing for context-specific insights unique to the Syrian digital landscape to surface.

This thematic analysis was complemented by a focused narrative and discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2011). This layer examined how language, framing, and sentiment in both interview transcripts and sampled online spaces serve to normalize violence, discredit women in public roles, or conversely, foster resistance and solidarity.

To bolster the validity and credibility of findings, a robust triangulation protocol was implemented (Denzin, 2017):

1. **Source triangulation**
   Comparing data from survivors, institutional actors, and community groups.

2. **Methodological triangulation**
   Cross-verifying insights from the desk review, interviews, and focus groups.

3. **Analyst triangulation**
   To support analytical rigor and minimize the risk of bias from a single-analyst process, an additional internal review step was applied during the analysis. As part of this step, AI tools were consulted to review already human-drafted findings for general alignment with the Terms of Reference, inception report, and an anonymized research matrix. The purpose was to help flag any potential gaps, inconsistencies, or areas where themes could be more clearly grouped. Qualitative inputs were referenced only through non-identifiable codes. No raw data, personal data, or sensitive information was uploaded or processed. Any observations generated through this step were carefully reviewed, interpreted, and rephrased by the analyst before being reflected in the findings.

2.6 Ethical considerations and data protection

The research was governed by the core ethical principle of "do no harm," adhering strictly to the WHO guidelines for research on violence against women (WHO, 2016). Informed consent was obtained from every participant. The process, conducted in Arabic, clearly explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to decline any question or withdraw at any time, and the detailed measures in place to protect confidentiality.

All researchers received specialized training in gender-sensitive and trauma-informed interviews to minimize the risk of re-traumatization. Interviews were conversational, allowing participants to control the depth and pace of disclosure.

3. Contextual overview — desk review

3.1 The spillover effect of violence

Journalists, media and information providers have historically carried out the noble role of shedding light on matters that affect individuals and communities, highlighting the ambitions, concerns, sufferings and violations that societies are exposed to, calling for action to give rights to those who have been marginalized or silenced, and telling the truth so that those who are in power are held to account. This is no easy task, and it comes with a brunt of responsibility and leaves them vulnerable to threats and attacks. It also has a wider effect, and it affects the state of democracy in the world, as stated by Mexican activist Diego Luna in his meeting with Volker Turk, the UN Human Rights Chief: "When a journalist is killed, we are all silenced" (United Nations, 2024)

"Media professionals around the globe face mounting perils in their pursuit of truth, including verbal abuse, legal threats, physical attacks, imprisonment, and torture. Some are even killed," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his message during the virtual global international day to end impunity for crimes against journalists on November 2, 2025 (United Nations, 2025b). He continued to zoom in on journalists in conflict areas and war zones, particularly mentioning that "Worldwide, nearly nine out of ten journalist killings remain unresolved." He noted that Gaza has been "the deadliest place for journalists in any conflict", urging "independent and impartial investigations."(United Nations, 2025a) Such violations have a spillover effect on other journalists and activists in the region, particularly a country facing similar conditions like Syria, as Ibtisam Azem, Senior Correspondent of al-Araby al-Jadeed newspaper stated in the UN 2025 International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East: "What happens in Palestine does not stay in Palestine". She reflected on how the killing of journalists and media correspondents in Palestine sends a message to the global media sphere that reporting on the truth is not safe, especially given the impunity shields against the accountability of perpetrators. The seminar also addressed, through the words of Wael al-Dahdouh, Bureau Chief of Al Jazeera in Gaza, that a biased coverage of Western and international media of Middle Eastern events leaves no choice for Palestinian, Syrian and other journalists around the world to risk their lives to fulfil their duty of reporting on the truth, simply because without them, the grotesque violations of human rights would remain unseen (United Nations, 2025).

> ***"Violations against journalists — from killings to online harassment and intimidation — have a chilling, spillover effect: Each attack sends a message that speaking the truth is dangerous, and silences many more voices.***

In 2025, violations and attacks against journalists and media activists particularly thrive in the digital space, sometimes with more intensity, as perpetrators are hiding behind their screens and expressing their views more openly and aggressively. Digital interactions online have now become a field for performances, emotional connection, and emotional release. Digital audiences now turn to online platforms to take a break between work or unwind after a long day, but this sometimes comes with emotional release after hard days, and that potentially comes with the release of anger, frustration and resentment, resulting in social tension, hate speech and other exploitative forms (Dettano, 2023).

This digital environment is where GBVO proliferates. GBVO refers to acts of harm or abuse committed through digital technologies, including harassment, stalking, non-consensual image sharing, defamation, doxxing, impersonation, and sexual exploitation (Henry and Powell, 2018; Hinson et al., 2018). It has emerged as a major digital rights and gender equality concern, as the online environment mirrors and amplifies offline patriarchal norms.

> ***Nearly 75 percent of women journalists surveyed by UNESCO have faced online violence, and one in four received physical or death threats. As AI amplifies abuse through deepfakes, doxxing, and harassment.***

According to the UN 2022 study, The Chilling, "Nearly 75 percent of women journalists surveyed by UNESCO have faced online violence, and one in four received physical or death threats. As AI amplifies abuse through deepfakes, doxxing, and harassment". The report zooms in on GBVO faced by Arab journalists and particularly those in conflict areas and war zones in which women journalists' exposure to GBV is much heightened.

3.2 GBVO in the Syrian media and information landscape

Since the 2011 uprising, Syria's political, economic, and social realities have been marked by relentless instability, uprisings, armed confrontations, displacement, sieges, proxy wars, and even natural disasters like earthquakes. The media sphere reflects this turbulence at every turn. Each time a new faction asserted control over a territory, Syrians found themselves waiting anxiously to learn the rules of the new "authorities": whether freedom of expression would be tolerated, curtailed, or reshaped entirely.

For decades, Syrians lived under a regime that normalized censorship and repression, where violations of human rights were routine and media served as an arm of the state. Then, in December 2024, the seemingly immovable regime collapsed as Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia, ending a dynasty many believed eternal. The fall of the regime, whether celebrated or met with skepticism, marked a rupture in Syria's media history as much as in its politics. Suddenly, outlets long exiled began reopening offices in Damascus, international agencies returned, and journalists tested the boundaries of a freer press (Freedom House, 2025; Index on Censorship, 2025). "Outlets that once operated from exile or from areas outside regime control have re-emerged inside Syria, reclaiming a visible role in public life. Stations and platforms such as Radio Rozana, Enab Baladi, Al Joumhouria and Aks al Seir now attract large followings, while Qatar-linked broadcasters like Syria TV and Al Jazeera continue to shape the national conversation. International news organizations have largely re-established a presence in Damascus since the regime's collapse, and even the former state propaganda outlet, SANA, has revised its editorial posture to reflect the priorities of the new authorities" (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

With the fall of the regime, many Syrians dared to imagine a more open media environment and landscape that gives them their right to freely express themselves and hold the government to account. Yet, it appears that this hope is fragile as civil society actors are witnessing violations mirroring the violations of the old regime as the practices of censorship, intimidation and information control they thought consigned to the past have resurfaced under the new authorities. This, coupled with legal ambiguity, political instability and pockets of sectarian armed conflict across the country, adds fuel to the fire.

"According to CPJ, in 2025 a clear pattern of threats against journalists emerged: reporters were killed and wounded while covering sectarian clashes and other outbreaks of violence, including the confirmed killing of a photojournalist in Suwayda in July; at the same time CPJ's alerts and features documented widespread harassment and intimidation—journalists chased, detained, shot at, and pressured by militias, armed groups and foreign forces operating in or near Syrian territory—creating a pervasive climate of fear; and access to information was routinely obstructed, with journalists blocked from conflict zones, equipment damaged or confiscated, and reporting prevented or curtailed, all of which severely undermined independent coverage and accountability" (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025).

Syria's information environment is defined by a combination of fragmented media authority, uneven connectivity, and heavy dependence on a small number of social and messaging platforms for news, debate, and community interaction. At the start of 2025, Syria had an estimated 9.01 million internet users (around 35.8 percent of the population), alongside widespread reliance on mobile connectivity, with approximately 19.5 million cellular mobile connections (equivalent to 77.6 percent of the population). These figures reflect both expansion in connectivity and persistent exclusion: a significant proportion of Syrians remain offline, while those who are connected often experience constrained bandwidth, limited device security, and inconsistent access to safe digital literacy support (Data Reportal, 2025). In this context, online spaces have become disproportionately influential

relative to offline civic arenas, functioning as sites where public reputation is built or destroyed, where political and social identities are contested, and where gender norms are policed at scale.

> ***Globally, research shows that online violence against women in public roles is frequently sexualized, reputational, and designed to silence participation.***

This digital landscape is not neutral: it is shaped by long-standing restrictions, surveillance risks, and an environment where citizens anticipate repercussions for speech, conditions that contribute to self-censorship and increase vulnerability for groups already exposed to social sanctions. Freedom House continues to classify Syria's internet environment as "Not Free," highlighting restrictions, arrests, and pressure on online expression as features of the broader ecosystem (Freedom House, 2025). Such conditions are especially relevant for women journalists, activists, and civil society actors, for whom visibility often comes with intensified reputational risk. Globally, research shows that online violence against women in public roles is frequently sexualized, reputational, and designed to silence participation, patterns that align closely with what this study documents in Syria (Posetti et al., 2020).

Within Syria, the convergence of three dynamics intensifies the relevance of GBVO:

1. The dominance of social media as a primary channel for news and social interaction;

2. The blurring of boundaries between "public" and "private" due to screenshot culture, forwarded content, and cross-posting;

3. The persistence of gendered social norms that treat women's online presence as a moral marker of the family or community.

These conditions create a high-risk setting where an online incident can rapidly spill into offline harm, through family pressure, community stigma, professional exclusion, or threats that follow women into physical spaces. As a result, GBVO in Syria must be understood not only as individual misconduct enabled by digital tools, but as a socially and politically meaningful practice that operates within a wider environment of constrained civic space, contested authority, and fragile protections.

A further defining feature of the Syrian media and information landscape is the strategic interplay between platforms. Evidence from the desk review and field data suggests that abuse often begins in semi-closed channels, where coordination is easier and perpetrators feel safer, and then escalates into mass visibility through public pages and comment sections (ACAPS, 2025; Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023). This pattern matters because it illustrates how GBVO is rarely "spontaneous" in impact: even when initiated by individuals, it can quickly become collective, amplified, and socially legitimized through likes, shares, mocking commentary, and victim-blaming narratives. The result is an ecosystem in which attacks become not only interpersonal violations but public performances, sending messages about who is allowed to speak, what is considered "acceptable" female behavior, and what forms of dissent or visibility will be punished.

> ***Abuse often begins in semi-closed channels, where coordination is easier and perpetrators feel safer, and then escalates into mass visibility through public pages and comment sections.***

The erosion of media freedoms does not occur in isolation; it directly shapes how gender-based violence is exposed, understood and addressed whether online or offline. Legal ambiguity, political instability, and economic hardship have become a welcoming environment for GBV and GBVO. When press freedoms shrink, gender-based violence and oppression (GBVO) spread more easily: intimidated or censored journalists cannot investigate or amplify survivors' stories, legal ambiguity leaves perpetrators unaccountable, and economic and security pressures push civil-society actors to the margins. The result is fewer reports, weaker public scrutiny, and diminished pathways to justice, which together create safer conditions for GBVO to persist and escalate (UN Women, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

> ***These conditions create a high-risk setting where an online incident can rapidly spill into offline harm, through family pressure, community stigma, professional exclusion, or threats that follow women into physical spaces.***

Syria is a prime example where GBVO is intensely concentrated. The country has faced a catastrophic conflict, leaving over 14 million people food insecure (UN OCHA, 2025). This vulnerability exacerbates exposure to violence. According to the OCHA GBV Syria Overview of 2025, women and girls bear the brunt, with neither private nor public spaces safe, and adolescent girls being easy targets for Technology-Facilitated GBV (TFGBV) (UN OCHA, 2025).

Evidence indicates that TFGBV is widespread across Syria, though underreported. ACAPS and UNFPA report that in northwest Syria women and girls have experienced some form of GBVO, a proportion expected to rise with growing internet access and more people returning to NWS (ACAPS, 2025). A 2023 field study by SecDev found roughly 60 percent of Syrian women have experienced digital violence, primarily on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, with 90 percent of respondents flagging blackmail with personal images as a very common harm (Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023; SalamaTech, 2023) Humanitarian partners report encountering new incidents weekly, with spikes during crises like the COVID-19 lockdowns and the 2023 earthquake, as perpetrators exploit increased digital dependency.

> ***In 2023 roughly 60 percent of Syrian women have experienced digital violence, primarily on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.***

Forms and Tactics: (ACAPS, 2025) The forms of GBVO in Syria are diverse, frequently overlapping, and often cumulative in their impact. Drawing on ACAPS analysis, this study identifies nine of the most commonly reported forms of technology-facilitated TFGBV, listed below in order of reported prevalence (ACAPS, 2025):

- **Image-based abuse**, means using images to coerce, threaten, harass, objectify, or abuse a survivor, and includes a wide range of behaviors involving taking, sharing, or threatening to share intimate images without consent. These images may be manipulated or sexual in nature, in which case we speak of 'image-based sexual abuse'.

- **Impersonation**, is a process of stealing a person's identity in order to threaten or intimidate them, as well as discredit or damage their reputation.

- **Defamation**, involves the public release and spread of exaggerated or false information that causes reputational damage with the intent to humiliate, threaten, discredit, intimidate, or punish the survivor, public figures in particular (for example, public officials, activists, and journalists).

- **Online (gender/sexual) harassment** involves the use of technology to repeatedly contact, annoy, threaten, or scare a person via unwelcome, offensive, degrading, or insulting comments and/or images. This type of harassment is committed by individuals or mobs of male perpetrators, who target people because of their gender, sexuality, or sexual orientation.

- **Cyberstalking** involves the use of technology to monitor and stalk a person's activities in real-time or by collecting past digital traces.

- **Sexual exploitation** through gaming platforms is now an increasing trend in NWS. Women and girls are being exploited via mobile games and various chat applications.

- **Doxxing** is a gendered form of online harassment consisting of the non-consensual public disclosure of personal information.

- **Creepshots** (digital voyeurism) is an offline form of TFGBV involving the taking of non-consensual photos or videos, mainly of women and girls, in public places—such as stores, public bathrooms, locker rooms, classrooms, or on the street—as well as in the target's own apartment and spaces considered 'safe'. Such attacks frequently escalate offline. In extreme cases, leaked images have triggered "honor"-based violence, revealing how digital abuse intersects with patriarchal social norms and offline harm.

The content of online violence in Syria often centers on policing women's morality and stifling their voices. A common tactic is to frame a woman as "dishonorable" or "immoral" to justify attacking her. Abusers will seize on any pretext a photo without hijab, a friendly chat with a male colleague, a bold opinion; and blow it into a scandal.

> ***Many of these violations involved defamation campaigns aimed at damaging the reputations and dignity of the women involved.***

3.3 Systemized GBVO against journalists, media activists and human rights defenders

According to a study developed by Euromed rights, "in Syria, the opposition was, and still is, the victim of cyber-attacks carried out by the government." (Lannazzone et al., 2021). While this report was published in 2021, the reality still holds true in 2025, according to documentation by the Syrian Centre for Media Freedoms at the Syrian Journalists Association, there has been a surge in violations against journalists and media workers, particularly females, since early May 2025 amidst security voids, political volatility and limited safeguards to ensure press freedom (Levant News, 2025). This will be strongly extended to digital spaces, in which "women human rights defenders, journalists, and politicians are especially susceptible to information and communications technology (ICT)-related violations linked with their engagement in the public sphere and their visibility online." (Human Right Council, 2018). This was also exasperated following the COVID-19 pandemic in which internet users in Syria have approximately increased from 6.3 million in 2019 to 9.01 million in early 2025 (roughly 35 percent penetration rate), in addition to the increase in chat-based applications and social messaging applications in which personal data is being more widely shared (Data Portal, 2025; World Bank, 2025).

> ***"Women human rights defenders, journalists, and politicians are especially susceptible to information and communications technology related violations linked with their engagement in the public sphere and their visibility online.***

According to a report released by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, women that are active in various fields, particularly politics and media have been exposed to several instances of assault and intimidation (107 were documented in the year between 2020 – 2021). "Many of these violations involved defamation campaigns aimed at damaging the reputations and dignity of the women involved, with some perpetrators using social media to spread false information about them." (SNHR, 2021). SNHR further documents that fear of retaliation, social stigma, and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms significantly constrain women's ability to report violations or seek protection (SNHR, 2024). These conditions amplify the impact of GBVO against women journalists and human rights defenders, where online threats and harassment operate within an already hostile environment that discourages visibility and public engagement.

This had disastrous effects on the lives of women in politics and/or media as some of them have thought about suicide, suffered from depression or had to leave their jobs. Before the fall of the Assad regime, the European Agency for Asylum documented violations against journalists and media workers by the Government of Syria (The Assad Regime), The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), The Syrian National Army, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), and ISIS (Syrian Independent Public Interest Media Organizations, 2024).

3.4 The role of media and online platforms in GBVO in Syria

After the fall of the Assad regime, the media sector has hope and strong demands (Syrian Independent Public Interest Media Organizations, 2024) for the freedom of the media sector allowing for freedom of speech, and relatedly the protection of journalists and media activists to be able to operate in a safe and regulated landscape. Syrian media institutions, particularly alternative media, and Civil Society Organizations, and International Media Development Organizations have exerted efforts to fight GBVO through research studies and documentation of violations, case studies, and personal stories, psychosocial support, awareness raising campaigns, training programs for journalists and reporters, campaigning and advocacy, warning messages, and support groups. The most recent initiative is a local version of the Global UNITE UN campaign to end violence against women, in which a seminar was held in Damascus in November 2025 to gather stakeholders and discuss areas of tackling such an issue (UNiTE!, 2025). The initiative is fostered by the Syrian bar association, in which it aims to safeguard women against all types of violence including psychological, physical and most urgently digital (United in Ending Digital Violence: A Legal and Societal Initiative to Protect Women in Syria — The Syrian Observer, 2025). There are ample initiatives online including Salamatech, Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) and Equity and Empowerment Organization (E&E) that have run awareness campaigns on digital GBV. Several organizations have supported GBV survivors, yet not necessarily GBVO survivors.

Online platforms and other reporting mechanisms, including the regulatory framework, are weak, and many survivors do not file a complaint as most of the time the perpetrator is anonymous, which makes penalizing them very challenging. According to the Syrian Women Journalists and Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Space study conducted in 2021, Facebook is the platform where most harassment takes place, followed by WhatsApp and Instagram. Similarly, the Digital Violence against Women in Syria study conducted in 2023, Facebook and WhatsApp were the most cited spaces for harassment, blackmail, and defamation campaigns, followed by Telegram. Even if such platforms have reporting mechanisms, their enforcement in Syria is quite weak (Afef Abrougui and Rula Asad, 2021; Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023).

> ***In 2021 Facebook was the platform where most harassment took place, followed by WhatsApp and Instagram.***

In addition to media efforts, women-led and feminist civil society organizations (CSOs) appear to be leading the fight against GBVO online. However, it has been observed in the exploratory scans and primary data collection that the Civil Society sector faces reputational challenges among segments of the Syrian public, as they are often accused of being financially opportunist. This reputation is even more so for women-led and feminist organizations as they are accused of being "homewreckers". That does not negate the harassment and GBVO faced by individuals, yet GBVO oriented comments were observed to surface in response to the discussions around women, which are usually captured and reported by CSOs and women focused networks. Efforts to fix such reputational issues such as the anti-feminist backlash campaign in the MENA region exist, yet this negative perception undermines their credibility and hampers the effectiveness of their initiatives to combat GBVO. Rather than reinforcing trust and solidarity, these reputational constraints limit the reach and impact of their advocacy, making it more difficult to mobilize broad support for addressing GBVO. An example from our GBVO monitoring stated: "Shut up, you associations of lies and exaggeration about women; all cases of divorce and the destruction of homes are caused by you.", "Only when you leave the country alone and let the people live, would we be able to achieve peace." and "Now everyone supports and employs women at organizations and associations, but since the liberation of Syria, we have not seen anyone monitoring or holding these organizations accountable. We all know how much they exploited the Syrian people and the blood of the free Syrian people. Those who run these organizations have become billionaires, while in the past they didn't even have enough to buy a loaf of bread. What is the reason for that?"

3.5 Media platforms scanning

The exploratory scan of GBVO across social media pages highlighted social rifts not only along gender lines, but also across ethnicity, religion, and political sectarianism. Following major shifts in Syria's conflict, areas that were once cut off from each other are now reconnecting, creating new, and often tense, forms of online engagement. Much of this interaction takes place between communities that have lived for years under different governance and security arrangements and, as a result, developed distinct political narratives and social norms: the northwest and northeast have been shaped by separate conflict-era authorities and institutions, while much of the south has remained more closely connected to Damascus-based structures; the coastal governorates are also frequently referenced as a distinct context given their particular history and sensitivities. Against this backdrop, online exchanges frequently carry sectarian and political undertones, and disagreements across these divides can quickly escalate into harassment and GBVO, further fueled by local flashpoints such as the internal tensions in the Sweida area (NGO Sphere, 2025; OHCHR, 2023). Individual attacks and systemized campaigns disproportionately target individuals who voice dissenting views, with women subjected to sexualized and verbal attacks that aim to silence and discredit them.

> ***Individual attacks and systemized campaigns disproportionately target individuals who voice dissenting views, with women subjected to sexualized and verbal attacks that aim to silence and discredit them.***

This polarization is evident in comments directed at both men and women, as those who voice divergent political opinions face intense defamation and reputational harm. Female activists, in particular, are disproportionately targeted: they are subjected to sexual harassment and accused of betrayal for failing to stand in solidarity with other minorities or social factions. These dynamics are highlighted in the experiences of well-known female

activists such as Farah Yousef, Ziena Shahla, and Hiba Ezeldin. The analysis further revealed discursive patterns that confine women's roles to domestic spaces, question their ability to drive or lead, and subject individuals with differing political views to sexualized and verbal harassment, reflecting deep societal polarization. While male activists are also attacked, women face heightened moral shaming and reputational damage. This pattern is often justified under sectarian or political labels and is frequently used as a form of moral erasure against anyone who voices different political opinions. Moreover, some comments extend to the civil society sector, accusing organizations that empower women or build their capacities of insincerity or financial opportunism.

> ***Some comments extend to the civil society sector, accusing organizations that empower women or build their capacities of insincerity or financial opportunism.***

Analysis of the GBVO comments collected during the scan revealed four recurring patterns in which such comments appeared. These themes appeared to be non-exclusive, as multiple forms often appeared within the same comment—for instance, a single post could be both sectarian-oriented and appearance-based. The four themes include: using GBVO to silence differing opinions; deploying ethnic or sectarian insults to escalate hostility; spreading appearance-based harassment regardless of dress or social status; and using GBVO to marginalize women's presence in the public sphere.

3.5.1 GBVO as a tool to silence differences in opinion

In the dataset of scans, it was observed that GBVO comments are mostly offensive and hate-filled, as comments ranged from direct insults and slurs to reputational threats and sexualized shaming. While men and women both face abuse, women are especially vulnerable because social norms expect them to remain quiet, and gendered attacks are used to push them further to the margins. For example, "She is the ridiculous TV presenter who, a few months ago, mocked the absence of slave women in the coastal area and ridiculed our pain. A TV presenter with many faces and colors." "It is amusing that some call for equality while there is no platform or organization for men to express their opinions or defend their rights. The violence that women exercise against men has become a rampant crime due to your inciting speeches against the opposite gender on a global level, and you will bear the responsibility soon." and/or "I feel sorry for you and see you as a suitable case study for psychiatric clinics. You are a mixture of moral depravity, lying, deceit, and homosexuality, with a little faith and some psychological issues. I am sure you are a hopeless case. Psychiatry has reached an advanced level in medical and behavioral treatments, but there is no cure for the disease of lying." The result is not only immediate harm to individuals but an effect on public discussions: many potential contributors, especially women, choose silence over engagement, narrowing the space for diverse perspectives and accountability (ACAPS, 2025; Al-sakkaf and Alsayed, 2023; Mobaderoon co, 2025; UNFPA, 2024).

3.5.2 Using ethnic and sectarian oriented GBVO comments to intensify hostility

Many GBVO incidents combine gendered abuse with ethnic and religious sectarian hostility, for example those who publicly condemned the Sweida clashes (Al Jazeera, 2025) were accused of being Assad allies, further stigmatizing and silencing dissenting voices. For example, the case of Ziena Shahla, which surfaced during the GBVO social media scans and KIIs, illustrates how dissent becomes a trigger for gendered harassment. When Ziena Shahla, a journalist and activist, joined a peaceful "Syrian blood is sacred" vigil to denounce the Suwayda bloodshed, she was singled out with coordinated verbal attacks and reputational smears. Examples of attacks include: "A whore and sectarian woman who works for the #Zionists claimed to oppose Bashar al-Assad, and today she shows her support for the Israeli gangs" and "This is extremely painful; damn you all. What is this silence? Why don't you stand with the Sunnis in Sweida? Children have their heads cut off while still alive, and women are raped and burned amidst their suffering. What kind of society allows such atrocities to happen? You are from the minority and a collaborator with the Zionists". Additionally, the violence against Ziena Shahla extended from the online sphere towards the physical world where she was physically attacked and injured.

> ***Many Gender-Based Violence Online incidents combine gendered abuse with ethnic and religious sectarian hostility.***

Another case is journalist Yara Halabi, who presented an episode about the women of Sweida who have been kidnapped, raped, and forcibly disappeared. Comments used accusatory, rhetorical questions portraying her as a traitor or collaborator, linking her to alleged support for Israel and disregarding violations committed by Al-Hijri (Druze's Spiritual leader) against Bedouins and Bedouin women, for example: "Where is the girl from Sweida among those who raise the Israeli flag in Al-Karama Square and demand independence from Syria? And where is she in relation to the crimes of al-Hijri against the Bedouins, such as beheadings, the rape of Bedouin women, and their expulsion from Sweida after the rapes and detention? Where is the Syrian Observatory? And where is the girl from Sweida in the face of the crimes of al-Hijri and his followers?".

> ***God damn her. That's how women's rights organizations are, defending any woman except chaste Muslim women. Like their Western masters, they don't care about the hundreds of thousands of Muslim women who have been killed in Syria or tortured in prisons. The only thing that concerns them is the following question: Will women wear the hijab?***

Another example is Hiba Ezeldin who leads a women's-rights organization and has publicly criticized forced marriages and discussed dress-code policies in women-only spaces, which opponents have seized on and distorted to claim she insults Islamic norms (Front Line Defenders, 2025). Examples of GBVO comments against her include "God damn her. That's how women's rights organizations are, defending any woman except chaste Muslim women. Like their Western masters, they don't care about the hundreds of thousands of Muslim women who have been killed in Syria or tortured in prisons. The only thing that concerns them is the following question: Will women wear the hijab?". As in the case of Ziena Shahla, Hiba Ezeldin threats affected her real life where she had to close her social media accounts until her life was secured and the "trend" was over.

3.5.3 Spread of appearance-based harassment regardless of dress or status

Although high-profile campaigns against Ziena Shahla, Farah Yousef, and Hiba Ezeldin attract public attention and fuel further gender-based violence and online hate speech, many GBVO incidents never surface because survivors stay silent to avoid escalation. Our monitoring indicates that perpetrators do not restrict their attacks to a single profile: women who are conservative and non-conservative, prominent and less visible, are all targeted. There is no consistent correlation between a woman's dress or social status and the likelihood of being attacked; instead, attackers exploit whatever vulnerabilities will most effectively shame or delegitimize the target.

> ***Women should first learn to walk on the street before learning to drive the car.***
>
> ***I think it is better for you to devote your attention to your children and home only and leave driving to men.***
>
> ***The original role of a woman is to stay at home. A woman's place is in the kitchen, not among men.***

Online abuse frequently combines sexualized offenses with sectarian and political accusations to maximize harm and social exclusion. For example, Latifa Al-Droubi (Syria's First Lady) has been subjected to explicitly sexual and derogatory language intended to humiliate and erase her credibility. These patterns show that GBVO functions both as immediate personal violence and as a broader tactic of social control: by shaming individual women, attackers aim to deter other women from speaking out or participating in public life. Comments include: "Latifa Aldroubi, she looks like a man," "Latifa Al-Droubi is a whore," and "Her moustache is longer than mine."

3.5.4 Using GBVO to marginalize women's presence in the public sphere

Commentary marginalized women's presence in public life by combining sarcasm, moral policing and outright exclusion. Many voices mocked women drivers as a social inconvenience or joked that women should master walking the street before learning to drive, while others insisted women belonged at home and should prioritize childcare over public mobility. Some accepted limited mobility only under strict conditions, no mingling with men and demonstrable "responsibility", and a minority escalated to dehumanizing rhetoric that framed women as a social threat. Examples captured in the scans included comments such as: "Women should first learn to walk on the street before

learning to drive the car.", "Only when it is necessary and in accordance with legal and ethical guidelines, while avoiding mingling with men, and when a woman shows responsibility, there is no harm in that. This makes it easier for her to take care of herself or her children.", "I think it is better for you to devote your attention to your children and home only and leave driving to men.", "Women do not face challenges; on the contrary, it is men who face women and the challenges.", "The original role of a woman is to stay at home." and "A woman's place is in the kitchen, not among men".

> ***These patterns show that GBVO functions both as immediate personal violence and as a broader tactic of social control: by shaming individual women, attackers aim to deter other women from speaking out or participating in public life.***

The pattern became even more visible during the public celebrations on the first anniversary following the fall of the Assad regime on the 8th of December 2024, where women's presence in the streets drew public criticism: "This victory was not meant for girls to dance in the streets, to raise their voices and sway in public. To take pictures with the flag draped over their shoulders. This victory is a gift from God, born of blood and destruction, of the sounds of shelling and rockets. This flag that you now use to decorate the squares has turned into coffins filled with tragedies. It is nothing but a symbol covered in blood and dust, from the minarets of mosques and the tears of mothers".

> ***This victory was not meant for girls to dance in the streets, to raise their voices and sway in public. To take pictures with the flag draped over their shoulders.***

4. Findings

4.1 Findings overview

This chapter synthesizes the indicative findings from multi-stakeholder research on GBVO in Syria. Data collected from focus group discussions, key informant interviews (media, legal, policy, civil society), and in-depth interviews with survivors and journalists reveal that GBVO is not a series of isolated incidents but a normalized, systemic mechanism of social control. It operates within and reinforces existing gender hierarchies, restricts civic participation, and thrives in an ecosystem of technological affordance, legal impunity, and social tolerance.

While survivors' accounts reveal the lived consequences of online violence, KIIs and FGDs situate these experiences within broader structures of power, including media practices, platform governance, social norms, and legal gaps. Together, the data shows that GBVO functions not only as harassment but as a mechanism of silence and exclusion that shapes who can participate safely in public and digital life.

While individuals of different genders experience online harassment, the findings show that gender fundamentally shapes the form, intent, perceived risk, and consequences of online violence. Women are disproportionately targeted through sexualized abuse, moral judgment, and threats linked to reputation and family, whereas men more often experience online violence framed as political or professional hostility. These differences are evident across forms of abuse, platforms used, social narratives, coping strategies, and impacts.

Importantly, GBVO is not experienced only at the individual level. The findings indicate that online violence has collective implications for media freedom, civic participation, and public discourse, contributing to the exclusion of women's voices and reinforcing existing power inequalities.

The predictability and normalization of abuse across survivor accounts, professional observations, and collective discussions suggest that online violence has become embedded in everyday digital interactions, particularly for women with public visibility. This normalization lowers expectations of protection, discourages reporting, and shifts responsibility from perpetrators and institutions to individuals.

The data also demonstrates that GBVO functions simultaneously at multiple levels:

- **Individual:** psychological harm and self-censorship
- **Institutional:** lack of protection and accountability
- **Societal:** exclusion of women's voices from public discourse

These levels reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which violence leads to withdrawal; withdrawal reduces visibility of harm, and reduced visibility perpetuates impunity.

> ***Gender emerges not simply as a variable, but as a structuring force that shapes how violence is enacted, interpreted, and responded to.***

Gender emerges not simply as a variable, but as a structuring force that shapes how violence is enacted, interpreted, and responded to. The differential experiences of women and men illustrate that GBVO is not gender-neutral online harm, but a mechanism that reproduces offline gender hierarchies in digital spaces. This has direct implications for media freedom and civic participation, positioning GBVO as a governance and rights issue rather than solely a safety concern.

4.2 Forms and prevalence of GBVO in Syria

Across the matrix, GBVO is documented as taking multiple, overlapping forms, including harassment, gendered insults, threats, blackmail, reputational attacks, impersonation, and coordinated smear campaigns. These forms are widely reported across regions and respondent groups, indicating high prevalence and normalization.

A key finding emerging across the data is that GBVO in Syria is experienced as a compound harm, not a single act. Survivors and experts describe patterns in which one form of abuse becomes the gateway to others: an insulting comment escalates into coordinated harassment; harassment becomes doxxing or impersonation; doxxing enables stalking; and the perceived loss of reputation increases the credibility and fear attached to threats. This layered escalation is consistent with how technology-facilitated violence is documented in other conflict-affected settings, where the digital sphere enables rapid repetition, replication, and distribution, often at low cost and with minimal accountability (ACAPS, 2025; Mihácsi and Kyander, 2025).

Across Syria, sexualized blackmail and extortion is especially significant because it leverages the highest-stakes social vulnerability for many women: the risk that family and community responses will punish the survivor rather than the perpetrator. In such cases, perpetrators do not need to prove authenticity to cause harm; the threat itself can be sufficient to force silence, extract money, pressure women to withdraw from online spaces, or compel public "apologies" and retractions. Conflict conditions and displacement intensify these dynamics: fractured support networks, economic hardship, and insecurity can increase susceptibility to coercion, while fragmented governance and weak institutional recourse reduce deterrence (ACAPS, 2025). This is also one reason why survivors repeatedly describe GBVO as an issue of safety and control, not merely "offensive speech."

The study's evidence also suggests a growing concern around manipulated content, including the use of edited images, fabricated screenshots, and, reportedly, AI-assisted sexualized fabrication. While not every case involves advanced tools, the perceived possibility that content can be generated or altered increases women's sense of vulnerability and expands perpetrators' options for coercion. Globally, online violence against women journalists has increasingly included misrepresentation via manipulated images and networked attacks tied to disinformation tactics, and the Syrian context reflects similar logics even when the technological sophistication varies (Posetti et al., 2020). In practice, the fear of digital fabrication strengthens perpetrators' leverage, because it becomes harder for women to "prove innocence" once a narrative is circulated.

Public defamation campaigns operate differently but have comparable effects. Here, the goal is not always private coercion but public delegitimization, portraying women as immoral, politically disloyal, sectarian, or socially deviant. These campaigns often rely on symbolic triggers (a photo, a public appearance, a quote taken out of context) and are sustained through comment sections and repost cycles, where repetition makes accusations feel "true." Even when individuals initiate the first post, amplification by pages, groups, or coordinated accounts can create an environment in which women are forced to defend themselves continuously or withdraw. Over time, these attacks also normalize the idea that women in public life are legitimate targets, making violence predictable and therefore harder to contest.

Importantly, harassment and hate speech in this context is rarely gender neutral. Women are repeatedly targeted through language that ties their credibility to sexual morality, "family honor", and perceived obedience to social norms. This is why insults are not merely emotional harm: they are signals of social discipline, aimed at making women's presence costly. The overlap of these forms, sexual threats, reputational attacks, impersonation, doxxing, and intimidation, demonstrates that GBVO functions as a continuum of violence, extending offline gender inequality into digital life while also creating new vectors for harm through platform affordances (Mihácsi and Kyander, 2025).

4.2.1 Documented forms of GBVO

The research identifies several core manifestations of GBVO:

- **Sexualized blackmail and extortion:** Frequently involving threats to release private photos or AI-generated explicit content. The participants in the FGDs highlighted knowing cases of being blackmailed with their photos or AI-generated sexualized photos, which usually use WhatsApp and Telegram when blackmailing.

- **Public defamation campaigns:** Coordinated attacks employing gendered and sectarian narratives. According to two FGDs and two KIIs, defamation campaigns usually target women, and adolescents more than adults, it peaks during "trends" in certain events, such as political events or religious holidays.

- **Harassment and hate speech:** Including body-shaming and insults to "family honor". According to the participants in one of the FGDs, specific social media platforms are used to circulate hate speech and GBVO, namely Facebook and Telegram.

- **Impersonation and doxxing:** Creating fake profiles and publishing private information. KIIs with media activists mentioned well-known cases where private conversations and messages were leaked to the public to be part of a public "trend" against activists when expressing their opinions that are different from theirs.

- **Psychological intimidation:** Explicit threats of physical violence or rape. As per a KII media activist, such threats are received and posted in the comments section during public defamation campaigns. This was also noted in the media scanning of the GBVO comments.

4.2.2 Survivor testimonies and the continuum of violence

Survivors' testimonies consistently portray GBVO not as isolated "online incidents," but as a predictable and escalating continuum of harm that intensifies with women's visibility and persists over time. Across IDIs, survivors described how abuse often begins with harassment or sexualized insults, then shifts into more coercive tactics, most notably reputational threats, intimidation, and privacy violations, that are designed to pressure women into silence and withdrawal from public space.

A dominant pattern across survivors accounted for the use of reputation and family-related consequences as leverage. Survivors repeatedly emphasized that the most effective threats were those that invoked social standing, family relationships, or community judgment, because these threats extend beyond the digital sphere and carry tangible risks in women's daily lives. One survivor captured this dynamic directly: "The threats were about my reputation" (Survivor IDI—Woman). Professionals interviewed for this study echoed that this reputational framing is widely used because it exploits gendered social expectations and the unequal consequences women face when targeted.

> ***"The threats were about my reputation."***
>
> **Survivor IDI—Woman**

Survivor testimonies also demonstrate that GBVO commonly unfolds through overlapping forms of abuse rather than single categories. Harassment, threats, reputational attacks, and blackmail were frequently described as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For many survivors, the experience was characterized by escalation, moving from public attacks (comments, posts, humiliation) into more invasive practices such as attempts to obtain private data, impersonation, or targeting through personal networks. The longer a survivor remained visible or continued expressing public opinions, the more likely abuse was described as persistent and intentional, suggesting that perpetrators often aim to erode resilience through repetition and exhaustion rather than through one-off harm.

Importantly, survivor narratives indicate different levels of affectedness, shaped by exposure, perceived credibility of threats, and the survivor's social context. Women in public-facing roles, such as journalists, activists, or civil society actors, described higher exposure and faster escalation once they became identifiable. At the same time, survivors embedded in more conservative family or community environments reported that reputational threats carried heightened weight, as the potential consequences could include family conflict, restrictions on mobility, loss of work opportunities, or forced withdrawal from public engagement.

In the most severe accounts, survivors described GBVO as producing deep insecurity and a sense of being constantly watched, particularly among those who had previously experienced offline persecution or repression. One survivor drew a direct comparison between the fear generated by online targeting and the fear she experienced after release from detention, emphasizing how privacy violations and intimidation revived earlier feelings of vulnerability:

> ***"There were two phases where I didn't feel safe. The first was in 2013 after I was released from prison. The second phase, since the fall of the regime, people have begun to violate my privacy because of my opinions on certain public matters.***
>
> **Survivor IDI—Woman**

While not all survivors articulated such an acute parallel, this testimony illustrates how prior experiences of threat or trauma can amplify the perceived credibility and psychological impact of GBVO, intensifying avoidance behaviors and self-censorship.

Overall, survivor testimonies show that the continuum of GBVO is sustained not only by the frequency of attacks, but by their predictability and social enforceability. The expectation that abuse will follow women's visibility normalizes harm and makes withdrawal appear rational, reinforcing GBVO as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates who can participate safely in public and digital life.

4.3 Target groups and perpetrators

The findings consistently identify women journalists, activists, civil society actors, and young women with visible online profiles as primary targets of GBVO. Visibility itself emerges as the key risk factor.

4.3.1 Risk factors and survivor experiences

Across IDIs and KIIs, respondents rarely framed GBVO as random. Survivors and professionals described a set of recognizable "risk conditions" that increase the likelihood of being targeted and shape how quickly abuse escalates. While these factors overlap, they were consistently discussed in terms of (1) visibility and recognizability, (2) expressing dissenting opinions or politically sensitive views, and (3) gender and "respectability" norms.

1. Visibility and recognizability (especially for women)

The most consistently cited trigger for women was being known or identifiable, regardless of the specific content posted. Survivors linked the onset of abuse to recognition, once their name, face, workplace, or public role became known, attacks intensified and spread more quickly.

> ***When people knew me, the attacks started.***
>
> **Survivor IDI — Woman**

This was echoed by media professionals who emphasized that "presence" itself can be framed as provocation in gendered online spaces:

> ***Visibility is the main trigger. Content does not matter as much as presence.***
>
> **KII — Media professional**

Visibility expands reach, makes targeting easier (tagging, mass reporting, coordinated harassment), and raises the "social cost" of attacks for women through reputational stigma.

2. Expressing dissenting opinions or politically sensitive views (stronger for men, also present for women)

A second major risk factor, raised across interviews, was public disagreement with powerful actors, dominant narratives, or influential groups. Male survivors particularly highlighted that the trigger was often the stance itself, especially when opinions challenged authorities or prevailing political/sectarian positions.

> ***This is due to the policy of silencing dissent adopted by some sectarian or political group.***
>
> **Survivor IDI — Man**

Dissent is framed as disloyalty or threat, increasing likelihood of coordinated intimidation, doxxing, and efforts to obtain "evidence" for blackmail or coercion.

3. Gender and "respectability" norms (women targeted through moral policing)

For women, respondents repeatedly pointed to gendered social expectations as a structural risk factor: women are targeted not only because they speak, but because speaking publicly is treated as a violation of norms. Attacks often shift quickly into sexualized language, morality accusations, or insinuations about "family honors", meaning women can be punished even for neutral content once they are visible.

Perpetrators exploit social stigma to make threats credible and costly, increasing pressure on self-censor.

4.3.2 Perpetrator profiles, motivations, and structural role

FGDs further highlighted that perpetrators range from anonymous individuals to coordinated networks:

> *"Some attacks are organized, not spontaneous.*
>
> **FGD—Media actors**

Perpetrators are motivated not only by disagreement, but by an intent to discipline and deter women's participation in public discourse and by the perceived absence of consequences. This is reflected in the way KIIs and survivor IDIs describe attacks that aim to silence, discredit, or pressure women out of public visibility, alongside cases where perpetrators act opportunistically because they expect no accountability.

> *"Among the most significant driving factors are the absence of legal deterrents and differing political or sectarian ideological opinions.*
>
> **KII—Media professional**

The consistent targeting of women journalists, activists, and civil society actors highlights that GBVO is closely linked to visibility, influence, and perceived authority, rather than individual behavior. In multiple IDIs, women explained that once they became identifiable (name, face, public role, affiliation), abuse intensified regardless of the specific content, suggesting that visibility itself is treated as a challenge to norms around who is "entitled" to speak, lead, or shape narratives.

The presence of both anonymous perpetrators and coordinated networks suggests that GBVO operates across a spectrum, from opportunistic harassment to organized intimidation. In the matrix, this spectrum is reflected in (a) survivor accounts describing attacks by anonymous or fake profiles that quickly "pile on" once a woman is visible, and (b) journalist and media accounts describing patterns that appear coordinated, repeated messaging, cross-page amplification, and attacks linked to political/sectarian polarization, particularly when content touches contested public issues. Coordinated attacks indicate a strategic dimension, where online violence is used deliberately to silence women, undermine credibility, or deter participation.

These findings position perpetrators not merely as individuals expressing hostility, but as actors, sometimes loosely organized, who contribute to maintaining gendered power relations. GBVO thus becomes a tool for enforcing informal rules about women's participation in public life, especially in politically sensitive or contested spaces, where IDIs describe intimidation as a way to punish dissent, and FGDs describe attacks as a predictable reaction to women's public visibility.

The data suggests that "perpetrators" are best understood as a spectrum of actors operating in different degrees of organization and intent, rather than a single profile. At one end are opportunistic individuals who exploit visibility and platform anonymity to insult, sexualize, or intimidate women in public threads, often joining attacks once they see others doing so. Survivors repeatedly describe this as a high-volume pattern enabled by anonymity and the social normalization of harassment; the interviewees attributed these types of actions due to "psychological disorders" and "the need to feel in control". This "pile-on" behavior is significant because it converts a targeted incident into a social event, where participation in abuse becomes normalized and even rewarded through engagement. Global research on online violence against women journalists similarly finds that unknown or anonymous sources constitute a major share of attackers, contributing to an environment where accountability is difficult and responses are limited (Posetti et al., 2020).

A second category involves perpetrators linked to interpersonal relationships (including acquaintances, ex-partners, or family-connected networks), where online harm is used as an extension of offline control, coercion, or retaliation. This is evidenced in survivor IDIs and FGDs that identify socially proximate perpetrators (e.g., people connected through family or prior relationships) and describe motivations such as revenge and deliberate harm. In these cases, the perpetrator's access to personal information, photographs, or social circles increases risk, particularly when "family honor" narratives are activated. Survivors' emphasis on reputation and private threats aligns strongly with this dynamic: the harm is not only what is said online, but what the content could trigger offline.

A third category includes financially motivated cyber extortionists, who use threats of exposure, especially image-based exposure, to demand money, services, or compliance. Survivors described attempts to obtain incriminating material to enable blackmail, including for financial reasons, and KIIs described economic gain as a primary driver for some perpetrators. Evidence from

Northwest Syria highlights that blackmail is among the most commonly reported technology-facilitated harms and is reinforced by limited digital literacy, weak response pathways, and shame-based community reactions (ACAPS, 2025). In practice, the economic dimension matters: financial pressure can both motivate perpetrators and constrain survivors' ability to seek help, relocate, change devices, or pursue legal routes.

At the more organized end of the spectrum are perpetrators operating through coordinated networks, sometimes linked to political, sectarian, or ideological divides. Here, GBVO functions less as personal hostility and more as a tactic to punish dissent, deter participation, and shape narratives about legitimacy and belonging. This is supported by journalist IDIs describing "organized campaigns" tied to sect/religion dynamics and by survivor accounts describing silencing tactics by political/sectarian groups. Coordinated attacks often carry recognizable features: synchronized posting, repeated phrases, amplification by pages or groups, and the rapid spread of defamatory claims across multiple spaces. This pattern mirrors global findings that online violence against women in public roles frequently intersects with disinformation tactics designed to silence and discredit (Posetti et al., 2020).

Across these categories, motivations consistently converge around a small set of drivers:

1. Disciplining women's visibility and enforcing norms about who can speak evidenced in multiple women's IDIs linking targeting to recognizability and public presence, and KIIs describing women as strategically "easier" to discredit through stigma.

2. Punishing political or social opinions framed as betrayal, "dishonor", or "threats" to community identity: survivor IDIs, especially men, and journalist IDIs describing attacks connected to contested public issues and polarization.

3. Extracting economic gain through blackmail: evidenced in survivor accounts describing blackmail attempts and KIIs identifying economic motivation.

4. Revenge and interpersonal retaliation: evidenced in survivor IDIs describing intentional harm/revenge motives and FGDs noting perpetrators can be known to survivors.

5. Structural impunity, reinforced by low reporting, limited enforcement capacity, and weak platform moderation, acts as an enabling condition across all perpetrator types, reducing deterrence and allowing attacks to recur as a routine feature of the digital environment, consistent with KIIs explicitly linking the problem to the absence of legal deterrents.

This also clarifies the "structural role" of perpetrators in Syria's online space: regardless of individual motive, the cumulative effect is to reproduce gendered hierarchies and shrink civic participation. Perpetrators, including loosely coordinated groups, become informal enforcers of social control, signaling to women that public engagement will carry a reputational and psychological cost, and to others that women's exclusion is acceptable or even justified.

4.4 Platforms and channels of GBVO

GBVO occurs across social media platforms, messaging applications, and online media comment sections. However, different platforms facilitate different forms of abuse, such as Telegram for coordination, Facebook for public smear campaigns, and WhatsApp for personal blackmailing.

4.4.1 Cross-platforms escalation patterns

Women survivors described heightened fear in private channels, while media professionals explained how platforms are used strategically:

> ***Telegram is used to coordinate attacks, then Facebook is used to spread them.***
>
> **KII — Media professional**

FGD participants noted the role of public comment sections on social media pages as being very intensive in targeting women if they have public profiles or as speakers on public pages.

Platform affordances, anonymity, weak moderation, and amplification combine with gendered vulnerability to shape exposure and harm.

The variation in abuse across platforms/social media demonstrates that GBVO is shaped by platform design and affordances, rather than occurring uniformly across digital spaces. Messaging applications and anonymous platforms intensify fear by creating proximity and uncertainty, while public platforms amplify abuse through visibility and collective participation.

4.4.2 Asymmetry in digital literacy

The strategic use of platforms, coordinating attacks in less visible spaces and amplifying them in public ones, was described by participants as deliberate and sustained, and it was also linked to an uneven distribution of digital literacy and digital safety knowledge between perpetrators and many targets. In the FGDs, participants explicitly identified a "lack of digital literacy" as a factor that increases women's vulnerability, including limited knowledge of digital protection practices and, in some cases, uncertainty about how to report abusive accounts; they also noted that young women and adolescent girls can be particularly exposed due to limited experience with digital protection. KIIs reinforced this point, with respondents referencing weak cybersecurity awareness and limited technical/digital literacy among segments of society, alongside calls for digital safety awareness-raising and training to address these gaps. Survivor IDIs similarly connected risk to limited familiarity with digital platforms and security practices, framing this as a vulnerability that perpetrators can exploit for escalation, including blackmail. Taken together, these accounts suggest that the disadvantage is not merely that perpetrators "know the platforms," but that many targets, especially women with less access to guidance or institutional support, lack key protective and response knowledge, which reduces their ability to prevent compromise, contain reputational exposure, and navigate reporting pathways when abuse intensifies.

4.4.3 Platform governance failures

From a systems perspective, platform governance failures, weak and slow moderation, inconsistent enforcement, and reporting pathways that are not survivor-centered, were explicitly identified across data sources as enabling GBVO to flourish. FGDs noted that survivors often face no meaningful response after reporting, with participants stating that there are "no real response mechanisms" and "no real benefit or response to reporting," alongside the absence of clear institutional responsibility. FGDs also indirectly evidenced platform gaps by detailing what is currently missing: participants called for effective and fast reporting tools, a clear and accessible report button, follow-up within 24 hours, support teams trained in gender issues, protection of personal information, and rapid documentation for threats, which collectively signals that current platform mechanisms are experienced as inadequate for GBVO cases. KIIs similarly linked recurrence to governance and enforcement failures, emphasizing that "the absence of legal deterrents" is among the key drivers enabling perpetrators to act with impunity (KII—Media professional), while also describing how perpetrators exploit platform design and weak controls by coordinating in closed spaces and amplifying in public ones.

The findings therefore suggest that without addressing these structural features, including effective moderation, consistent enforcement, and survivor-appropriate reporting and follow-up, individual-level digital safety interventions will remain insufficient, because they place the burden of protection on survivors in an environment where participants describe accountability as limited and response pathways as unclear or ineffective.

4.5 Narratives and discourses surrounding GBVO

According to the data, GBVO is sustained by a set of recurring discourses that do not merely "comment" on women's presence online but produce social permission for abuse and shift accountability away from perpetrators. Across IDIs, FGDs, and KIIs, participants repeatedly described (i) victim-blaming and self-censorship advice as a normalized response to GBVO; (ii) moral delegitimization (shame, "honor," respectability policing) as a routine mechanism used to justify attacks against women; and (iii) political/sectarian delegitimization narratives that frame outspoken women (and sometimes men) as threats, traitors, or illegitimate voices. Participants also described narratives that target the sector around women (journalism, civil society, women-led organizations), presenting women's rights work as socially harmful or externally driven, which further normalizes backlash and weakens solidarity.

The media scan reinforces and concretizes these patterns by showing how these narratives appear in public comment spaces: women are framed as illegitimate public actors "stay home," "kitchen," "leave public life to men", attacked through sexualized shaming and reputation destruction, and delegitimized through "foreign agenda" accusations. The scan also shows an explicit discourse

of women's public presence as a social threat, including during high-visibility moments (e.g., public celebrations), where commentary frames women's visibility as morally offensive and politically inappropriate, thereby converting women's participation itself into "provocation" and rendering abuse predictable.

4.5.1 Victim-blaming discourse

The findings indicate that victim-blaming is not only an attitude but a structured discourse that positions women as responsible for preventing GBVO by limiting their voice and visibility, effectively presenting withdrawal as the "solution." This was captured directly in the FGD evidence:

> ***"Women are told to stop speaking to avoid problems."***
>
> **FGD — Women activists**

The media scan illustrates how this discourse operates in practice, by translating "stop speaking" into a broader logic of exclusion and conditional participation. Rather than condemning perpetrators, comments frame women's presence in public life as the root problem and propose restriction as common sense: "A woman's place is in the kitchen, not among men," "The original role of a woman is to stay at home," and "I think it is better for you to devote your attention to your children and home only and leave driving to men." In high-visibility moments, the same logic becomes more explicitly disciplinary, as in the December 8, 2025, anniversary of the Assad regime fall in 2024, commentary that framed women's public celebration as illegitimate and morally offensive "This victory was not meant for girls to dance in the streets …", effectively arguing that women should regulate their behavior to avoid provoking backlash.

Victim-blaming also appears in sector-focused variants that shift responsibility onto women-led civil society and women's rights actors, an empirical pattern flagged in the matrix and strongly visible in the scan. Women-led organizations are portrayed as the cause of social breakdown "home wreckers", and public hostility is redirected from perpetrators to women's empowerment work. The scan examples "Shut up, your associations of lies … all cases of divorce … are caused by you," and accusations of financial opportunism and exploitation demonstrate how this discourse discourages reporting and solidarity by reframing GBVO prevention efforts as illegitimate or corrupt.

Crucially, the scan shows that victim-blaming rarely stands alone; it interlocks with other dominant narratives that intensify justification for abuse:

- Foreign agenda delegitimization used to reframe women's speech as betrayal rather than civic participation (e.g., the "Zionists" framing in attacks documented against public female figures).
- Threat to traditional values framing, where women's rights advocacy is treated as an attack on religion or morality (e.g., the discourse around hijab and "Islamic norms" in commentary targeting women's rights leaders).
- Political/sectarian moral erasure, where disagreement is recorded as disloyalty and then punished through gendered shaming and reputational attacks.

Together, these narratives legitimize violence, discourage reporting, and normalize women's withdrawal as an acceptable, sometimes even desirable, outcome. They also help explain why GBVO is experienced as predictable: when public discourse treats women's participation as conditional, deviant, or externally driven, abuse becomes socially "explainable," and therefore easier to repeat.

4.5.2 Disciplining social norms and the erosion of collective resistance

The dominance of victim-blaming and silence-oriented narratives reveals that GBVO is not sustained by technology alone, but by deeply entrenched social norms. By framing violence as a consequence of women's visibility or expression, these narratives legitimize abuse and shift accountability away from perpetrators.

Such discourses serve a disciplining function; they communicate that participation in public life comes with costs that women are expected to manage privately. This reinforces self-censorship and normalizes withdrawal as a rational response, rather than recognizing it as a loss of rights and representation.

The persistence of these narratives also weakens collective resistance to GBVO. When violence is individualized and moralized, it becomes difficult to mobilize institutional or community-level responses. Challenging these discourses is therefore central to any strategy aimed at reducing GBVO.

4.6 Impacts of GBVO

GBVO produces significant psychological, social, and professional impacts. Survivors described fear and emotional distress, while others hesitated to participate on social media or express their opinions on political or social issues due to their concerns about being attacked. GBVO not only harms individuals, but shrinks civic and media space, reducing diversity of perspectives. Additionally, differences were observed between men and women survivors.

4.6.1 From individual harm to collective and societal consequences

The impacts of GBVO extend well beyond immediate emotional distress, and the data evidence allows these impacts to be described more explicitly across psychological, social, and professional/civic dimensions.

Psychologically, survivors repeatedly linked online targeting to fear, anxiety, and longer-term distress that shapes everyday wellbeing. Women IDIs described direct harm to mental and emotional health:

> ***On an emotional level, I am deeply and negatively affected. Yes, it definitely affected my mental health.***
>
> **Survivor IDIs — Women**

Media KIIs similarly emphasized that sustained online attacks can produce serious psychological deterioration, including isolation and depression, and in severe cases escalating to medication use or suicidal behavior. This helps explain why many survivors describe fear as both experienced and anticipated, a condition that persists even when no new incident occurs.

Socially, the data shows that fear translates into protective behavioral changes and self-restriction that narrow women's participation and reshape relationships. Women survivors described limiting interaction and visibility through measures such as refusing suspicious contact, tightening boundaries between personal and professional communication, and avoiding engagement that could trigger escalation. This anticipatory self-censorship is central to GBVO's silencing effect: women reduce topics, visibility, and participation not only after attacks, but to prevent them. By contrast, the data also captures variation by gender in how far harm travels beyond the digital space: One male survivor described withdrawing from platforms due to safety concerns while still feeling physically safe offline:

> ***I've started distancing myself from social media ... but I still feel confident in real life.***
>
> **Survivor IDI — Man**

Indicating that for some men the felt impact may remain more contained within the online environment, whereas women more often described threats as socially consequential due to reputational and community dynamics.

Professionally and civically, the data points to withdrawal as both a personal coping strategy and a collective cost. Media KIIs described that one of the most consequential outcomes is women stepping back from public-facing work and civic participation after attacks, with some women avoiding public roles altogether due to fear of defamation and reputational damage. When these individual withdrawals accumulate, the effect is structural: public debate becomes less diverse and less representative, reinforcing existing power imbalances and weakening accountability. The true cost of GBVO is therefore not only borne by survivors, but also by society, through the erosion of inclusive participation that undermines media freedom, democratic dialogue, and social cohesion.

4.7 Legal, institutional, and community responses

Trust in legal and institutional mechanisms is low. Survivors expressed fear of reporting, legal experts highlighted the ineffectiveness of existing mechanisms due to legal and institutional gaps, the reprioritization of cybercrimes, and a lack of qualified human resources within the relevant departments. As a result, both women and men do not report such incidents, leading to their underreporting and, consequently, their continued low prioritization.

Low reporting is not simply the result of lack of awareness. The data evidence suggests it is often a risk-managed survival strategy, and women's responses sit on a spectrum rather than a single outcome. Some women do withdraw fully from public-facing engagement, temporarily or for longer periods, especially after reputational

threats, blackmail attempts, or coordinated pile-ons. Relevant examples from the interview scan are closing or deactivating accounts, stopping posting, avoiding appearing on public pages, or stepping back from media/advocacy visibility to protect family relationships and reduce offline spillovers. A media KII who supports GBVO survivors noted that women activists can withdraw from both digital and public life after attacks, indicating that for some women, coping can indeed entail reducing public profile in ways that may directly affect their work and role as public figures.

However, withdrawal was not the only pattern. Other women described partial disengagement rather than quitting: limiting interaction to trusted circles, avoiding high-risk topics (politics/sectarian issues), changing how they engage (lurking rather than posting), and shifting visibility, supporting causes "behind the scenes" rather than as named spokespersons. This is consistent with the broader finding that GBVO produces anticipatory self-censorship even without new incidents, because women are constantly weighing uncertain protection against predictable social costs.

The legal environment further complicates reporting. While cybercrime legislation exists, it is widely critiqued by digital rights organizations as overly broad and susceptible to misuse in ways that suppress online expression. For example, analysis of Syria's Cybercrime Law No. 20 of 2022 emphasizes that expanded definitions can criminalize a wide range of online content and enable enforcement discretion that discourages people from engaging authorities, especially where trust is already low (Fatafta, 2023; STJ, 2022). This is significant for GBVO because survivors may fear that approaching official systems will expose them to scrutiny, retaliation, or moral judgment, particularly in cases involving intimate images, private communication, or politically sensitive speech. "... the legal procedure is unclear and there is no privacy for women." (Legal KII).

Institutional capacity constraints also shape outcomes. Even where relevant units exist, cybercrime is often deprioritized relative to other security and governance pressures. Furthermore, technical investigative capacity (digital forensics, evidence preservation, chain-of-custody procedures) is limited. The result is a weak deterrence environment: perpetrators expect minimal consequences, while survivors expect minimal protection. This expectation becomes self-reinforcing: low reporting produces limited caseload visibility, which contributes to low prioritization and underinvestment, which further reduces trust.

Women's coping strategies described across the qualitative findings from KIIs, IDIs and FGDs can be grouped into four practical clusters:

1. **Visibility management (harm reduction rather than silence)**
   - Reducing posting frequency; avoiding public comment sections; not appearing as a speaker on high-traffic pages
   - Moving from public content to private/closed groups or limited audiences
   - Temporarily "going quiet" until the trend/pile-on passes

2. **Account and privacy protection (digital safety behaviors)**
   - Tightening privacy settings; limiting who can message/tag; restricting profile visibility
   - Changing passwords, enabling additional security steps, avoiding suspicious links
   - Separating personal and public accounts; reducing identifiable information online

3. **Social and institutional buffering (seeking protection through networks)**
   - Relying on trusted peer networks for advice, documentation, emotional support
   - Consulting media/CSO actors who provide guidance or support to survivors
   - Informal reporting/flagging through contacts rather than formal channels (because formal reporting is perceived as risky)

4. **Psychosocial coping (managing stress and fear)**
   - Seeking psychosocial support where available; disengaging to reduce anxiety symptoms
   - Self-monitoring and boundary-setting to prevent re-triggering and escalation

4.7.1 Survivor experiences with reporting

Across IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs, reporting was described as selective and often informal, rather than a routine step after GBVO. Most commonly, participants described self-managed responses (blocking, tightening privacy, deleting comments, pausing activity) and limited disclosure to trusted people, while formal reporting, to platforms or authorities, was depicted as uncertain, risky, or ineffective.

> ***Women are left to deal with this alone.***
>
> **FGD—Civil society actors**

In terms of where people report, the clearest pattern is that reporting is more likely to happen within personal or civil society support circles than through official channels. Several survivors described selective disclosure to trusted individuals: one woman reported sharing only with her husband and not wider circles, while another noted that discussing cyberbullying with family or friends can itself generate stigma. In parallel, some survivors and journalists described seeking support through hotlines or organizations, or relying on networks to mediate reporting, e.g., one journalist described that through a human rights network, reporting may be filed via friends to secure the right to a safe online environment. These accounts point to a preference for buffered, relationship-based pathways when support is sought.

By contrast, platform reporting appeared in the data mainly as an extension of individual coping (block/report/delete) but was repeatedly framed as limited in effect. Journalists described actions such as blocking accounts, reporting profiles, closing/freezing accounts, and permanently deleting obscene comments, indicating that platform tools are used primarily for immediate harm reduction rather than justice. FGDs conveyed skepticism about what reporting achieves in practice; youth activists explicitly questioned what happens after reporting and concluded: "There is no real benefit or response to reporting." (FGD—Youth activists). This helps explain why many participants described disengagement or retreat from public interaction as the more "reliable" protective step.

Reporting to authorities or pursuing legal complaints was described as rare and widely seen as unsafe or unclear. A legal KII stated plainly: "I haven't heard of any girls or women using legal complaints to protect themselves." (KII—Legal). Another legal KII emphasized the perceived lack of safe, reliable pathways by noting:

> ***There is no clear legal text, no clear enforcement bodies, and I cannot guarantee that these complaints will be safe.***
>
> **KII—Legal**

Journalists reinforced the practical barriers from an operational perspective, describing gaps in mechanisms and difficulties in identifying or apprehending owners of defamatory pages. Taken together, these accounts portray low formal reporting not as passivity, but as a response to limited trust and limited expected return.

Participants' motivations for not reporting clustered around risk and predictability. In FGDs, women described fear of scandal and social stigma, and the expectation that complaints may backfire or worsen exposure; they also noted secondary victim-blaming, including accusations that women "caused" the harm by being visible or by sharing content. Survivors echoed this logic through selective disclosure and reluctance to widen awareness of incidents, particularly where reputational harm can spill into family and community consequences. Men's accounts showed some overlap but also a different balance of perceived risk: one male survivor described never involving acquaintances or family because it "only complicates matters further" (Survivor IDI—Man), and another described legal support as ineffective or pointless beyond the idea of justice, suggesting that reluctance can be driven both by stigma concerns and by low expectations of remedy.

Patterns also differed by role and exposure. Journalists and activists described higher likelihood of using professional coping and semi-formal pathways, blocking/reporting, tightening digital security, using networks for advice, and, in principle, considering lawsuits where possible. Survivors without institutional backing more often describe silence, selective sharing, and retreat as the safest options. Across groups, the same structural reality kept resurfacing: when response pathways feel weak and consequences feel high, reporting becomes a calculated decision, and many default to withdrawal from high-risk spaces or regrouping within trusted, like-minded networks as a form of protection.

4.7.2 Structural impunity

The lack of trust in legal and institutional responses reflects a broader environment of structural impunity, and this was explicitly articulated by participants rather than inferred. KIIs respondents stressed that survivors rarely use legal complaints and that pathways are unclear and unsafe, signaling low confidence in formal remedies: "I haven't heard of any girls or women using legal complaints to protect themselves," and "There is no clear legal text, no clear enforcement bodies, and I cannot guarantee that these complaints will be safe" (KII—Legal). Media

and youth FGDs similarly reinforced low expectations of follow-up in practice, with participants stating that reporting does not lead to meaningful response and questioning what happens after a report is submitted. Journalist IDIs also illustrated how impunity is reinforced operationally: participants described difficulties in identifying the owners of defamatory pages and the limited effectiveness of action against anonymous or coordinated attackers.

Together, these accounts substantiate the statement that legal gaps, low prioritization, and limited capacity are not abstract conditions but experienced realities that shape behavior. Survivors' and professionals' reporting decisions reflect a rational calculation: if perpetrators are anonymous, procedures are unclear, privacy cannot be guaranteed, and outcomes are unlikely, then reporting becomes both risky and low return, reinforcing the perception that GBVO will continue without consequences.

4.7.3 Community responses and coping strategies

Community responses that encourage silence or self-protection further entrench this impunity by reinforcing individual responsibility rather than collective accountability. As a result, coping strategies tend to focus on withdrawal or retreat into closed networks, which may provide short-term safety but contribute to long-term exclusion, often in ways that prioritize reputation management over accountability. This is evidenced in FGDs where participants described social guidance that normalizes silence and withdrawal, such as discouraging women from speaking publicly to avoid further harm, and framing disengagement as the safest option rather than confronting perpetrators or seeking formal remedies. The previously reported findings above also illustrate this dynamic through survivors' selective disclosure: some women reported telling only a trusted person (e.g., spouse) while avoiding wider sharing due to anticipated stigma, while other accounts noted that discussing cyberbullying with family/friends can itself produce social pressure or judgement.

These community dynamics shape coping strategies. Rather than encouraging formal reporting or collective action, many responses implicitly place responsibility on the survivor to reduce risk—through silence, self-protection, or reputation containment. As a result, coping strategies described across the reporting section and related KIIs/IDIs tend to focus on withdrawal from public-facing spaces, limiting visibility, or retreating into trusted circles and like-minded networks for safety and support. While these strategies can provide short-term protection, participants and professionals also linked them to a longer-term consequence: women's exclusion from public debate and reduced civic participation, which further entrenches impunity by reducing the likelihood of collective challenge and accountability.

This finding underscores that GBVO cannot be effectively addressed without strengthening institutional accountability and shifting responses from reactive, individual coping to proactive, systemic protection.

4.8 Role of media in perpetuating and countering GBVO

Across KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs, media was described as a central arena where GBVO becomes visible, escalates, and is socially interpreted. Participants discussed "media" broadly, covering news outlets, alternative media, public pages, and platform-linked media spaces where comments circulate, highlighting that editorial choices, moderation practices, and the way incidents are framed can either reinforce harmful norms or create conditions for accountability and safer participation. This dual role matters because survivors' exposure is often mediated through public-facing media spaces, while survivors' options for redress and public understanding are shaped by how media institutions respond.

4.8.1 Media as amplifier and potential counterweight

Participants provided concrete examples of how media can amplify GBVO when spaces are left unmoderated or when safeguards are absent. A media professional noted directly that:

> ***"Media platforms sometimes allow abusive comments to stay."***
>
> **KII—Media professional**

This aligns with journalist IDIs describing a wider context of an "unregulated virtual space" and the absence of restrictions or guidelines that would prevent abusive dynamics from taking hold. In practice, interviewees described amplification through public comment sections and high-traffic pages where defamation, humiliation, and gendered insults remain visible long enough to spread and normalize. Journalists also referred to the need to remove harmful pages and content, including calls to delete unofficial pages and permanently delete obscene comments, reflecting that in many cases the harmful content is not only produced, but also left standing long enough to shape public perception and intensify reputational harm.

> ***GBVO is not a series of isolated incidents but a normalized, systemic mechanism of social control.***

At the same time, participants also described ways media can act as a counterweight, not only by improving content and moderation, but by using institutional influence to reduce harm. Journalist IDIs provided examples of counter actions such as pressuring platforms to delete pages that contain defamation, blackmail, or humiliation, and sharing research with decision-makers to improve monitoring and reduction of defamation; some also referenced the need to reactivate cybercrime-related measures administratively as part of deterrence efforts. In addition, KIIs described initiatives that aim to build resilience and professional safety, including projects that train women journalists in digital security and embed organizational commitments such as gender quotas, as well as support efforts that include containment and response strategies for survivors. Importantly, respondents also noted limitations: some efforts were described as present but uneven or episodic, suggesting that without sustained moderation capacity and clear institutional policies, countering remains partial.

> ***The expectation that abuse will follow women's visibility normalizes harm and makes withdrawal appear rational, reinforcing GBVO as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates who can participate safely in public and digital life.***

4.8.2 Media as key leverage point

Participants' accounts position media institutions as leverage points because they can act at multiple levels simultaneously: preventing harm inside their own spaces, influencing platform behavior, and shaping the broader discourse that either normalizes or challenges GBVO. At the operational level, interviewees pointed to the need for clear internal measures and policies, including consistent moderation, defined thresholds for removing abusive content, and proactive action against pages that circulate defamation and blackmail. At the professional level, examples in the data emphasize capacity-oriented approaches, such as digital safety training for journalists, and institutional supports that reduce individual exposure and strengthen collective response. At the societal level, respondents stressed that media framing can shift norms by treating GBVO as a rights violation and a form of exclusion rather than "online drama," which in turn can reduce victim-blaming and increase the perceived legitimacy of reporting and protection.

5. Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of GBVO within the complex and evolving Syrian context. The findings, drawn from a multi-method qualitative inquiry, reveal that GBVO is not a peripheral issue of digital misconduct, but a central mechanism of social control, exclusion, and gendered repression. It operates within and reinforces Syria's patriarchal structures, exploiting digital affordances to silence women, police morality, and restrict civic space. The conclusions below synthesize the core patterns identified and outline their profound implications for key societal actors and wider audiences concerned with gender equality and digital rights.

5.1 Synthesis of patterns

The research demonstrates that GBVO in Syria is characterized by several interconnected and reinforcing patterns:

1. **Systemic normalization, not isolated episodes**
   GBVO has become a predictable and normalized feature of digital life for women, particularly those with public visibility. The expectation of abuse functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, regulating women's access to and participation in online public discourse. This normalization lowers the threshold for acceptable behavior, discourages reporting, and shifts the burden of safety onto individuals.

2. **A gendered continuum of violence**
   While online harassment affects all genders, its form, intent, and impact are profoundly shaped by gender. Women are disproportionately targeted through sexualized abuse, reputational attacks linked to "family honor", and moral policing. This contrasts with the more politically or professionally framed hostility often directed at men. GBVO thus acts as a digital extension of offline gender hierarchies, specifically designed to intimidate and discipline women who challenge traditional roles.

3. **Visibility as the primary catalyst**
   The single greatest risk factor for experiencing GBVO is public visibility. Women journalists, activists, human rights defenders, and civil society leaders are primary targets precisely because their voices and presence challenge established power dynamics. The attacks are less about the specific content of their speech and more about their audacity to speak at all.

4. **Platform-enabled ecosystem of harm**
   GBVO thrives in a digital ecosystem where platform design, weak governance, and anonymity converge. The research identifies a strategic use of platforms: encrypted apps like Telegram are used for coordination and direct threats, while public platforms like Facebook are leveraged for widespread defamation and smear campaigns. This asymmetry in platform literacy and the failure of moderation systems create an environment where abuse can be easily orchestrated and amplified with impunity.

5. **Dominance of victim-blaming narratives**
   Societal discourse surrounding GBVO tends to police women's behavior rather than hold perpetrators accountable, but it does so through distinct narrative frames that are particularly salient in Syria. These include respectability and "honor" policing (casting women's visibility as the provocation), domesticity and exclusion narratives (asserting women belong in private roles and should withdraw from public life), political/sectarian delegitimization (branding outspoken women as traitors or enemies and punishing dissent through moral shaming), and "foreign agenda" tropes used to discredit women journalists, activists, and civil society actors. Together, these narratives legitimize harassment, normalize self-censorship as "responsible," and weaken collective resistance and institutional accountability.

6. **Cycle of impunity and institutional failure**
   A near-total lack of effective legal, judicial, or institutional recourse creates a self-perpetuating cycle of impunity. Survivors, facing stigma, fear of reprisal, and a justifiable lack of trust in authorities, overwhelmingly choose not to report. This underreporting, in turn, allows institutions to deprioritize the issue, leaving perpetrators shielded and the structural drivers of GBVO unaddressed.

5.2 Implications for media, civil society, and women's participation

The patterns outlined above carry significant implications for Syria's social fabric, democratic potential, and pursuit of gender equality:

- **For media and the information ecosystem**
  Media organizations are at a critical juncture. By failing to moderate their digital spaces, adopting sensational or victim-blaming framing, and lacking internal safety protocols, they become unwitting amplifiers of GBVO. This not only harms individual journalists but degrades the quality of public discourse, reduces the diversity of sources and perspectives, and erodes public trust. Conversely, media holds unparalleled potential to set new norms, expose structural injustices, and model ethical digital engagement.

- **For civil society and collective action**
  The current civil society response to GBVO is fragmented and often inadequately resourced. The focus remains predominantly on offline forms of GBV, leaving a critical protection gap. Without specialized, survivor-centered support, including digital safety resources, psychosocial care, and legal advocacy, civil society cannot effectively safeguard women's right to participate. Furthermore, the chilling effect of GBVO threatens the very existence of a vibrant, gender-inclusive civic space, weakening collective advocacies for all rights.

- **For women's participation and democratic futures**
  The most profound impact of GBVO is the systematic silencing and exclusion of women from public life. The psychological toll, fear of escalation, and anticipated abuse lead to widespread self-censorship and withdrawal. This individual retreat aggregates into a collective loss: the narrowing of Syria's civic space and the impoverishment of its public debate. A democracy cannot function without the full and equal participation of all its citizens. Therefore, combating GBVO is not merely a "women's issue" or a digital safety concern; it is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable peace, inclusive governance, and a genuinely representative post-conflict society.

In conclusion, GBVO in Syria is a multifaceted crisis that sits at the intersection of technology, gender-based violence, and shrinking civic space. Addressing it requires moving beyond isolated technical fixes and toward a holistic, systemic response that targets the social norms, institutional failures, and platform infrastructures that allow it to flourish.

6. Existing efforts

Women-led and feminist CSOs are at the forefront of efforts to address GBVO in Syria, particularly in the absence of consistent institutional pathways that survivors perceive as safe, confidential, and effective. Their efforts span prevention, survivor support, and evidence-building, and are often delivered through a mix of online engagement and community-based approaches. Examples include:

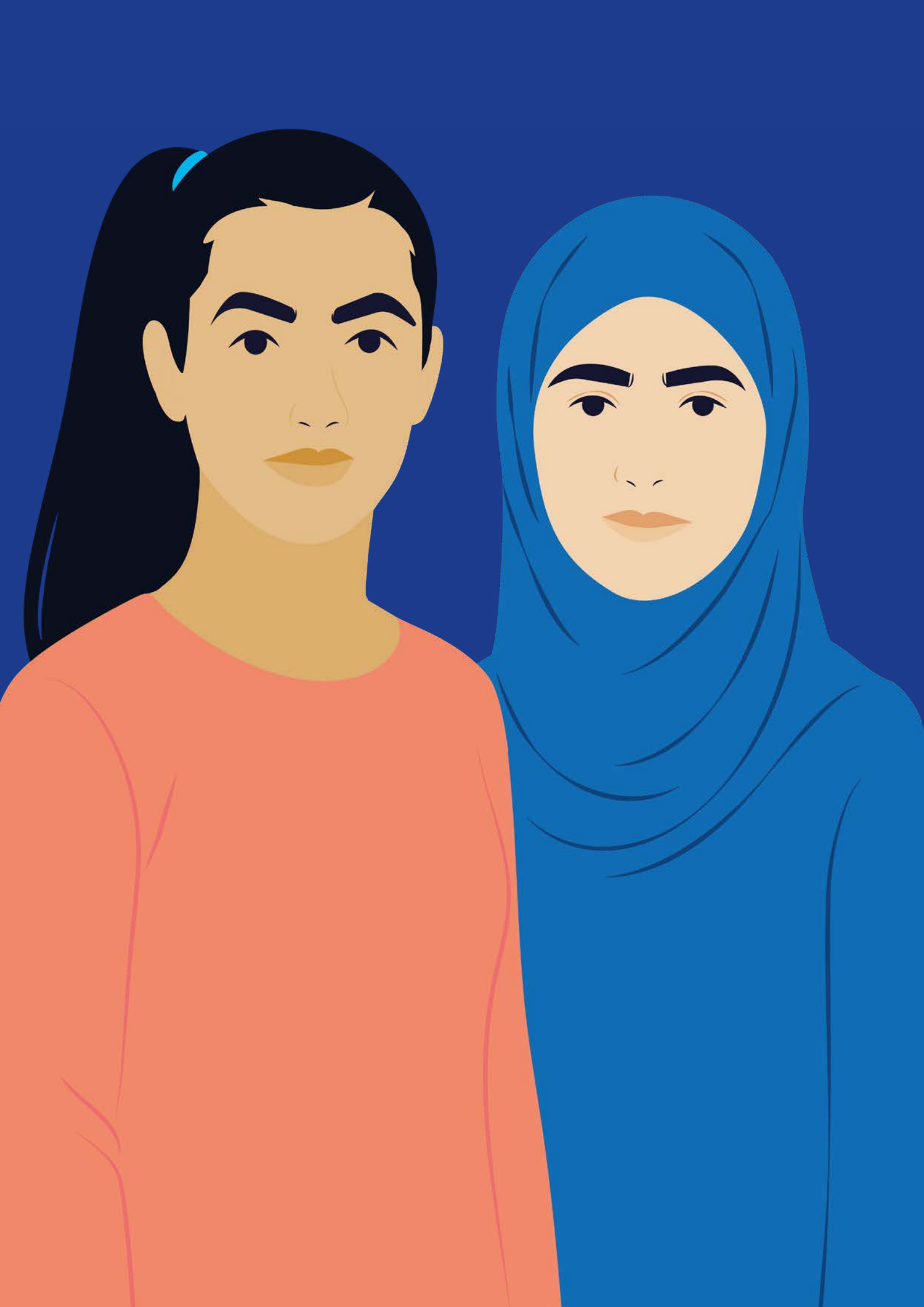
- Online support groups like كونيي حذرة (Be careful) and امدق تنإ (You can handle it) including invitations to educational webinars and resources.
- Physical storytelling and psychosocial support sessions by (Mobaderoon).
- Research studies and reports by SecDev and the Syrian Feminist Lobby.
- Online initiatives like Salamatech and Peace Circuit.
- Awareness raising videos and reels by Mobaderoon, the Syrian Female Journalists Network and the Syrian Feminist Lobby.

Exploratory scans and primary data collection reveal that the broader civil society sector faces reputational challenges among segments of the Syrian public, often being accused of financial opportunism. These perceptions are particularly acute for women-led and feminist organizations, which are sometimes accused of being "home-wreckers." While initiatives to counter such reputational issues, such as those addressing anti-feminist backlash in the MENA region, do exist, negative public perceptions continue to undermine their credibility and weaken the effectiveness of their GBVO interventions. Such backlash is not merely rhetorical; it functions as a barrier to prevent and response by undermining credibility, discouraging survivor disclosure, and limiting the ability of CSOs to mobilize broad-based support for addressing GBVO. In practice, reputational pressure can shrink civic space further, pushing organizations toward defensive communication and reducing the reach of advocacy that depends on public trust and community solidarity.

At the policy level, there are early indications of official attention to online harm. In December 2025, the Minister of Information publicly referenced efforts to establish a professional code of conduct for the media sector intended to regulate practice and address harmful content and disputes within the media environment (SANA, 2025). However, available evidence suggests that these steps remain concentrated within the media portfolio and are not yet reflected in coordinated measures with the justice sector to ensure accessible remedies and accountability for perpetrators of GBVO, particularly in cases involving threats, extortion, or image-based abuse.

Similarly, the 2025 Constitutional Declaration includes explicit language on women's rights and protection, stating in Article 21 that the State shall "guarantee the social, economic and political rights of women, and protect them from all forms of oppression, injustice and violence" (Constitution.net, 2025). Nevertheless, constitutional recognition does not automatically translate into protection in practice. Without executive regulations, implementation mechanisms, and survivor-centered procedures that make reporting safe and remedies realistic, these provisions remain largely declarative, particularly in a context where survivors' primary barriers include fear of escalation, reputational consequences, and limited confidence in institutional response.

Overall, existing efforts demonstrate a growing ecosystem of women-led prevention, support, and documentation initiatives, alongside emerging policy signals. Yet the effectiveness and reach of these efforts continue to be constrained by anti-feminist backlash, reputational attacks, and gaps in coordinated legal and institutional response, reinforcing the need for stronger referral pathways, duty-of-care standards within media institutions, and survivor-centered support options that are trusted, discreet, and practically accessible.



7. Recommendations

Based on the evidence and conclusions presented, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders. These are designed to be strategic, context-aware, and aligned with a gender-transformative approach that seeks to address root causes while providing immediate support to survivors.

To be actionable in Syria's constrained and fragmented operating environment, the recommendations below should be approached as a sequenced package rather than as a menu of standalone actions. The findings show that GBVO is sustained by mutually reinforcing drivers: platform affordances and governance gaps, weak institutional accountability, and social norms that normalize disciplining women's visibility. Addressing only one layer, such as digital safety skills for individuals, will reduce harm for some survivors but will not shift the conditions that make GBVO predictable and widespread. Effective response therefore requires parallel movement on 1) prevention and norm change, 2) safer media and platform practices, and 3) credible support and accountability pathways.

A practical way to implement these recommendations is to prioritize early actions that reduce immediate risk while building toward longer-term structural change:

1. Establish minimum duty-of-care standards in institutions that shape visibility (especially media organizations and civil society networks). This includes internal response protocols, confidential reporting channels, and active moderation of official pages and comment sections. These steps can reduce amplification, provide immediate support, and signal that abuse is not tolerated.
2. Strengthen survivor-centered support options that are discreet and trusted. Given the evidence of low trust in formal reporting, support should not depend solely on police or courts. Instead, referral pathways can connect survivors to psychosocial support, digital safety assistance, and legal counseling in ways that protect confidentiality and minimize exposure, especially for cases involving blackmail or intimate image threats.
3. Develop accountability measures that are realistic under current constraints. Where legal recourse is weak or feared, accountability can also be pursued through institutional sanctions (banning offenders from media pages; formal responses by employers; documentation for advocacy), and through structured engagement with platforms to improve reporting responsiveness, content takedown practices, and context-sensitive moderation.
4. Embed learning and adaptation. Because perpetrator tactics evolve, particularly where manipulated content and coordinated campaigns are present, stakeholders should treat GBVO response as an iterative practice, regularly updating risk assessments, training materials, and moderation protocols based on documented trends and survivor feedback.

This sequencing does not replace the stakeholder-specific recommendations below; it clarifies how to apply them in ways that match the study's core finding: GBVO operates as a systemic mechanism of exclusion and must be met with systemic, coordinated countermeasures.

7.1 For media organizations

Media institutions must transition from being passive spaces where GBVO occurs to becoming active architects of safer, more inclusive digital environments.

1. **Develop and Institutionalize ethical safeguards**
   - Adopt and enforce gender-sensitive content moderation policies for website comment sections and official social media pages, with clear protocols for removing abusive content and banning repeat offenders.
   - Create internal editorial guidelines for reporting on GBVO and covering women in public life, mandating trauma-informed, non-sensationalist language that avoids victim-blaming frames.
   - Establish mandatory digital safety and security training for all staff, with specialized modules for editors and managers on creating a supportive workplace for staff facing online abuse.
2. **Build internal support and accountability**
   - Implement confidential, internal reporting mechanisms for journalists and staff who experience GBVO, linked to clear response protocols that may include psychosocial support, legal advice, and public advocacy from the institution.
   - Appoint safety focal points or committees responsible for monitoring online threats against staff and developing institutional response plans.
3. **Leverage editorial power for change**
   - Proactively produce and amplify content that investigates the structural causes of GBVO, highlights survivor resilience (with informed consent), and promotes positive norms of respectful online dialogue.
   - Partner with civil society organizations and digital rights groups to cocreate public awareness campaigns on digital citizenship, privacy, and countering hate speech.

7.2 For civil society organizations

CSOs, particularly women's rights and digital rights groups, are essential frontline responders and advocates. Their work must be strengthened and expanded.

1. **Enhance direct support services for survivors**
   - Develop and widely disseminate tailored digital safety toolkits and resources in Arabic, addressing platform-specific risks and secure communication practices.
   - Integrate GBVO response into existing GBV support services, ensuring case workers are trained to handle technology-facilitated abuse and can provide relevant psychosocial and legal guidance.
   - Create safe peer-support networks and solidarity groups for women journalists and activists to share experiences and coping strategies in a protected environment.
2. **Strengthening documentation and strategic advocacy**
   - Systematically document cases of GBVO using secure, ethical methodologies to build a robust evidence base for advocacy. Publish periodic reports analyzing trends, perpetrator tactics, and institutional response gaps.
   - Launch targeted advocacy campaigns directed at social media companies (e.g., Meta, Telegram) demanding more effective, context-aware content moderation and transparent reporting mechanisms for the Syrian user base.
   - Advocate for national policymakers and legal bodies to recognize GBVO as a serious crime and develop appropriate legal frameworks (see 7.3).
3. **Foster collaboration and capacity building**
   - Build coalitions with media unions, journalist associations, and tech initiatives to present a unified front against GBVO and share resources.
   - Conduct capacity-building workshops for community leaders, educators, and youth on identifying and challenging online gender-based hate speech and victim-blaming narratives.

7.3 For policymakers and legal actors

Creating an environment of accountability requires decisive action from state authorities and the judicial system.

1. **Reform and enforce legal frameworks**
   - Enact or revise cybercrime and electronic transactions laws to explicitly criminalize all forms of GBVO, including non-consensual image sharing, doxxing, cyberstalking, and online threats of sexual or gendered violence. Ensure definitions are clear and penalties are proportionate and dissuasive.

   - Harmonize legislation to ensure that GBVO is recognized as a form of gender-based violence within broader GBV and anti-discrimination laws.

2. **Build specialized institutional capacity**
   - Establish dedicated cybercrime units within law enforcement agencies staffed by officers trained in digital forensics and trauma-informed, gender-sensitive investigation techniques.

   - Provide specialized training for judges and prosecutors on the nature, impact, and legal adjudication of GBVO cases to ensure sensitive and effective handling in courts.

3. **Promote multi-stakeholder governance and prevention**
   - Initiate and fund national public awareness campaigns that shift social norms, challenge victim-blaming, educate the public on digital rights and responsibilities, and promote positive bystander intervention.

   - Facilitate formal dialogue and cooperation protocols between government agencies, social media platforms, and civil society to improve the reporting and processing of GBVO cases originating in Syria.

   - Allocate funds to support independent research and data collection on GBVO to continuously inform evidence-based policy and monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ACAPS	Analysis, Coordination and Assessment Project
AI	Artificial Intelligence
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DW	DW Akademie
E&E	Equity and Empowerment Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GBVO	Gender-Based Violence Online
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDI	In-Depth Interview
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	(UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SFJN	Syrian Female Journalists Network
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNiTE / UNITE	UNiTE to End Violence against Women
WHO	World Health Organization

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