

Studies and Economic Media Center (SEMC)

Cyberbullying Against Yemeni Women Journalists

Causes, Consequences, and Remedies

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Cyberbullying

against Yemeni Women Journalists

Causes, Consequences, and Remedies

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This study was conducted by the Media Freedom Observatory (MFO) in Yemen, a platform affiliated with the Studies & Economic Media Center (SEMC). The MFO focuses on monitoring and documenting cases of violations against freedom of opinion and expression in Yemen.

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Summary of the Study

Summary of the Study

A survey study titled "Cyberbullying against Yemeni Women Journalists: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies" concluded that cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists is prevalent. 72% of the female journalists participating in the survey revealed that they were subjected to cyberbullying.

The survey included 79 female journalists and media activists on social media from various Yemeni governorates. The purpose was to know the magnitude of cyberbullying against female journalists, the reasons for this phenomenon's spread, and its effects on their social and professional life.

This survey also included interviews with experts in the psychological and legal fields and digital protection to come up with accurate conclusions and an in-depth analysis of this dangerous phenomenon that threatens the safety of Yemeni women journalists.

The study results showed that most targeted Yemeni female journalists were repeatedly subjected to cyberbullying on social media sites. Ninety percent of cyberbullying cases happened on Facebook.

The types of cyberbullying against female journalists vary. The most prominent were the abusive comments on their posts, unwanted private messages, and hacking of their personal accounts. This confirms that enormous violence still occurs out of sight. Ninety percent of the female journalists in the study attributed the spread of this phenomenon to social and cultural factors in a society that still considers the appearance of women a shame. This is a dangerous indicator demonstrating the social acceptance of the increasing attacks on Yemeni women journalists on the Internet in light of the lack of deterrent and protective laws.

Introduction

Introduction

Social media platforms have succeeded in providing the opportunity for Yemeni female journalists to be in direct contact with the local and foreign world. These platforms have enabled them to speak and present their ideas and opinions, especially in light of the current war in Yemen and the decline of traditional media due to the eroding press freedoms or other economic and administrative reasons. The politically-motivated media outlets affiliated with the parties to the conflict in Yemen have been inappropriate environments for independent female journalists and those seeking independent journalistic institutions.

Despite the importance of social media to female journalists and activists in online publishing, these journalists' use of social media is not free from threats, which pose a substantial future challenge. The cyberbullying phenomenon against female journalists has grown remarkably in recent years, leading hundreds of them to refrain from benefiting from social media tools, expressing their opinions, and adopting women's issues and Yemeni society's issues in general. Working female journalists face challenges in all countries worldwide. However, the female journalists' job in Yemen is a great adventure and is fraught with many risks and violations.

The civil war has been ravaging Yemen since its breakout in 2014, resulting in the collapse of state institutions and their security apparatuses. Moreover, social awareness has declined amidst the dominance of the patriarchal culture and society's unfavorable view of women's roles. All these factors have resulted in an attitude that can be described as hostile towards female journalists, which is one of the main obstacles to continuing their professional activity in a job described as a trouble profession.

Out of belief in the importance of the role of Yemeni women journalists in contributing to shaping the awareness of Yemeni society and expressing their opinions freely, this unique study is conducted. It sheds light on "cyberbullying" and its various dimensions. The study diagnoses this phenomenon, its causes and its consequences. It also provides several essential tools to overcome this phenomenon and help women journalists work in an appropriate and encouraging environment.

The conclusion of this study emphasizes the need for serious and responsible work by all concerned sides to reduce this dangerous phenomenon and ensure the right of women journalists to work and express their opinions freely, without restrictions or guardianship of any kind, and under any justification .

Media Freedom Observatory - Yemen (MARSADAK)



The problem of the Study

Social media sites (Facebook - WhatsApp - Twitter - Instagram etc.) have largely spread, and Yemenis' use of these platforms as a media source during wartime magnified due to their reluctance to follow the warring parties' media outlets. Therefore, cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists has emerged at a worrying level. Many of them are repeatedly subjected to campaigns of incitement and bullying because of their media and journalistic activities or their opinion on public and private affairs on various platforms.

The problem of the study is the rise of what is called "cyberbullying" against Yemeni women journalists on social media. This study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the magnitude of cyberbullying spread against Yemeni women journalists? What are its effects on their personal and professional lives? What proposals can enhance the protection of women journalists against this phenomenon?

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to identify the magnitude of cyberbullying against female journalists in Yemen, the reasons for its spread, and its effects on their personal and professional lives. The study also seeks to provide proposals and recommendations to enhance the protection of women journalists and support them in carrying out their work.

Study Methodology

The study used the descriptive approach to diagnose and analyze "cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists." This approach effectively identifies the magnitude of the phenomenon, its types, the reasons for its spread, and the way that can help Yemeni women journalists overcome its effects. The data needed for this study was collected, classified, processed and analyzed. Therefore, the study came up with results and recommendations that aim to address this phenomenon and enhance the protection of Yemeni women journalists according to the circumstances of the Yemen context.

Data Collection Tools

The study utilized the following tools to analyze and interpret the data related to the rise of cyberbullying phenomenon against Yemeni women journalists:

Questionnaire:

The study was conducted from April to July 2022. An online questionnaire was shared with the targeted sample of 79 female journalists. The participants in the study were requested to answer more than twenty questions in the questionnaire. The variables presented in the questionnaire included the extent of the rise of cyberbullying, its types, the causes of its spread, and its effects on the work of Yemeni female journalists.

Interviews:

Three experts in legal, psychological, and digital protection fields were interviewed to discuss the results of the field study and come up with inferences that contribute to presenting an in-depth analysis of the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists,

Additionally, 4 women journalists and social media activists subjected to cyberbullying cases were interviewed. The purpose of conducting these interviews is to consolidate the study results, present practical and realistic proposals that are effective for combatting the phenomenon in line with the Yemeni context, and ensure the activation of safety and protection measures for women journalists against repeated attacks on virtual reality.

Sample of the Study

The study sample consisted of 79 female journalists working in various media outlets, media institutions and centers, and activists on social networking sites in various Yemeni governorates. This inclusive sample aims to find out the types of cyberbullying female journalists were subjected to and its effects on their personal, social and professional lives.

Moreover, interviews with psychology, law and digital protection experts were conducted to discuss the results and come up with accurate conclusions to tackle the reasons for the exacerbation of this dangerous phenomenon that threatens the safety of Yemeni women journalists. Another purpose of the interviews is to propose measures to enhance their protection from repeated attacks on the Internet.

Characteristics of the Sample

44% of the respondents are aged between 25 and 35 years. 31% of the respondents are aged between 35 and 45. 18% are aged between 18 and 25, and 6% of the respondents are over 45.

38% of the sampled female journalists had a media experience of less than five years. 37% had more than nine years of experience, while 25% had experience ranging from five to nine years.



Regarding the female journalists' work role, it was found that 42% of the respondents work as editors for websites and newspapers, while 33% are media activists on social media networks. 21% of them work in media institutions in various roles, and 10% work in radio and television channels. The results indicate that many of them work in more than one media outlet, having multiple roles.

The following figure also shows that the majority of the sampled female journalists work in private media outlets with 65%.

19% work in governmental media institutions, and 4% work in partisan media outlets. 12% of them work in local civil society organizations and international organizations.

Ownership of media outlets



Terminology of the Study

Cyberbullying

In this study, cyberbullying means all the attacks and violations that harm Yemeni women journalists through the use of digital and electronic means, such as computers, mobile phones, and social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc.). The violations and attacks are represented by slander, insult, contempt, defamation, and promotion of the abusive words with the aim of directly or indirectly humiliating female journalists, causing them psychological, sexual, or physical effects and suffering as a result of being deceived, threatened, exploited, harassed, coerced, or punished. The aim of muzzling their voices is to force them to leave the profession of journalism.

Yemeni Female Journalists

They are all female journalists working in Yemeni media outlets and institutions and are media activists on social media platforms in Yemen.

Results of the Field Study

The prevalence of cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists:

> The phenomenon of cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists is one of the most widespread forms of violence in Yemen. Its exacerbation poses a big threat to the safety of women journalists, which may lead them to stop their journalistic work in a country exhausted by war, and where women represent the weakest population category.

Cyberbullying targets most the Yemeni female journalists

72% of the total sample of 79 female journalists reported that they had been subjected to cyberbullying, while 28% said "no." At the same time, 64% of those who answered "no" confirmed that they had witnessed cases of cyberbullying against other female colleagues.

19%5#10



This result is a dangerous indication of the increasing attacks targeting Yemeni women journalists on the Internet, threatening their right to freedom of expression and opinion.



Facebook is the most widely used tool

The result shows that Facebook is the number-one tool used for practicing cyberbullying against Yemeni female journalists, with 91%. WhatsApp follows it with 43%, Twitter with 23%, and e-mail with 10%.







This result is in line with the increasing use of Facebook by Yemeni women journalists as a means of interaction more than any other means. It also concurs with a result of a previous study conducted by the Mansa Foundation that revealed that Facebook ranked first in terms of Yemenis' interests and usage with a rate of 98.7%, WhatsApp ranked second with 92.7%, and Twitter 59% ¹.



The continued rise of cyberbullying cases

The result of the study shows that most of the cyberbullying cases that Yemeni women journalists were subjected to happened in 2021 and 2022 with 37%. 25% of the cases happened in 2020 and 22% occurred in 2019. The percentage of cyberbullying cases during 2012-2017 was 16%. More than half of the sampled respondents, 52%, confirmed that they had been subjected to 1 to 5 times of cyberbullying. Moreover, 32% of them said they had been subjected to cyberbullying more than ten times. 15% of them confirmed that they had been subjected to repeated cases of cyberbullying, ranging from 5 to 10 times. Most of the targeted Yemeni women journalists attribute the reason for their repeated targeting to the violators' failure to subjugate them and/or stop their media activity despite repeated attacks.

"The frequency of cyberbullving and the threats I was subjected to have increased since September 2013. My page was hacked, and then the threats reached my doorsteps. All that happened because of what I wrote about terrorist organizations and the recruitment of children and youth in Aden. In October 2015, they wanted to kill me, directly running over me. I sustained severe injuries, and that happened in conjunction with writing a series of posts on Facebook about attempts to plunder a public garden near my house in Mansoura district. The attempted murder was preceded by a campaign of bullying and threats on social media, and those who attacked me were not the ones trying to rob the garden, and this means that they [The attackers] are from the terrorist groups that threatened me previously."

Journalist Ibtihal Al-Salihi

The phenomenon of cyberbullying against Yemeni women journalists is rising frequently. The bully uses various means and applications, in particular Facebook, and "pseudonyms or anonymous" top the list of sources of cyberbullying against the sampled Yemeni women journalists. This matter complicates the process of investigation and makes it difficult to hold perpetrators on the Internet accountable, leading further to the spread of phenomenon. The result of the study also reveals the importance of developing and taking practical technical measures to tackle this dangerous phenomenon technologically, by strengthening coordination and cooperation, and educating and training Yemeni women journalists to increase digital protection in

order to reduce repeated attacks on them via the Internet.



Cyberbullying methods:

The following chart reveals the existence of various methods of cyberbullying according to the responses of the sampled female journalists who were exposed to different types of cyberbullying. Verbal abuse ranked first with 88.64%, then threats with 47.73%, accusations with 43.18%, incitement with 36.3%, and account deactivation with 31.82%, fabrication of images and leaking information with 18.18% each, and faking an account in the name of a female journalist with 4.55%.





Bullies are mostly anonymous

The chart above shows that most of the sampled female journalists were subjected to cyberbullying by «unknown persons» at a rate of 51%. Co-workers committed 21% of the cyberbullying cases, and friends committed 15%. Moreover, 8% of the cyberbullying cases were committed by relatives, while political parties/sides committed 5% of the cases.

"The motives for practicing cyberbullying against Yemeni female journalists are due to the bully's background, which is often vengeful. Also, a percentage of those who behave in a violent manner were exposed to violence when they were young. So, they do not hesitate to release their inside repression against any group they think is weak when they have the opportunity to do so."

Dr. Angela Al-Maamari, a mental health expert at Taiz University

Reasons for the cyberbullying spread:

Cyberbullying is deliberately practiced against some Yemeni women journalists. Their presence and frequent appearance on the Internet may arouse the ire of some extremist voices that oppose the work of Yemeni women, considering their work as a violation of the so-called social and cultural customs. In addition, the absence of deterrent laws against the perpetrators in Yemen is another crucial reason. Accordingly, Yemeni women journalists have weak protection and defense of their right to freedom of expression in the digital space, not to mention the lack of awareness of the importance of freedoms and diversity.

The absence of punishment exacerbates the phenomenon

Most of the sampled Yemeni female journalists attribute the spread of the cyberbullying phenomenon to several reasons, foremost of which is the bully's sense of impunity and the inability of the bullied journalist to pursue him and hold him accountable. This reason accounts for 95.12% of cyberbullying cases. Social reasons, false culture, and poor awareness account for 90.24% of the cases. The absence of control over cyberspace and lack of legal regulations accounts for 85.37%. Moreover, reasons related to masculine behaviour account for 82.93%, and the use of technology for hiding the bully's identity through pseudonyms accounts for 80.49% of the cyberbullying cases. Political reasons aimed at subjugating and suppressing opinions of opposing female journalists account for 78.05%, and the bully's claim for defending virtue, religious values, and societal norms and traditions account for 73.17%. Gender-motivated Jealousy over the frequent media appearances of female journalists and activists on social media accounts for 70.73%, and religious reasons account for 68.29 % of the cyberbullying cases against women journalists. Regional and racist reasons due to the journalist's regional or social affiliation account for 60.98%, and the absence of direct contact between the bully and the bullied female journalist accounts for 56.10% of the cases. The bullied female journalist's silence over blackmailing for fear of social and religious reactions accounts for 34.15% of cyberbullying cases.

"Yemeni law does not include the term cyberbullying, but cyberbullying cases can be referred to the Crimes and Penalties Law No. 12 of 1994 . The forms of cyberbullying crimes are found in the Crimes and Penalties Law. That is how we measure it [cyberbullying] in Yemen. The threat, defamation, insult, and reputational damage have been mentioned in the law and each of them is considered a crime in itself."

Raghda Al-Maqtari, lawyer

How female journalists deal with cyberbullying cases:

The use of "Block" to confront cyberbullying

There are many options that female journalists adopt to confront cyberbullying. 100% of the sampled female journalists collectively said they used the Blocking method to deal with cyberbullying. 80.49% of them said they tend to ignore bullies. Moreover, 63.41 resort to reporting the perpetrators, and 51.22 resort to resistance. 43.90% remain silent towards the perpetrators, and 21.95 resort to the law.

"I was subjected to bullying on social media, especially after 2011. I was publishing true news on Facebook, and I was directly exposed to waves of insults, threats, and verbal violence in the comments that were based on racism and sectarianism. I remember my participation in the "My Passport Without Guardianship" campaign, and wrote posts advocating the campaign. I was subjected to a torrent of insults and accusations because of that. I was also exposed to bullying during my coverage of events on the field. Even fellow journalists bullied me. The truth is that the effects of the face-to-face bullying are more difficult than the effects of cyberbullying. With regard to the cyberbullying that I was subjected to, it caused me problems with my family and relatives. I had no choice but to block and delete offensive comments because there is no legal entity that can hold bullies accountable."

Journalist Wafaa Al-Walidi

"I changed my phone numbers and my data on social media, and closed my Facebook account because my attempts to resort to the competent authorities did not bear fruit.

The damage I suffered was not only physical. I was subjected to a state of constant anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, insomnia and fear, which hindered my ability to practice my normal life. I felt all sides let down even the media outlet I used to work for. After that, I left the country for treatment at my own expense. In 2019, I tried to return to Aden, which I had left since the beginning of October. However, the messages of threats and comments on Facebook returned again, and those messages included malicious accusations against me. All I got from the bodies that were supposed to protect me was statements of solidarity, denouncement [of perpetrators], and letters of reassurance that did not prevent my exposure to attempted murder."

Journalist Ibtihal Al-Salihi

"There are two ways to deal with cyberbullying. The first method is to communicate with the platform management to remove the bullying that occurred against the female journalist. The second method is to resort to the law.

Fahmy Albahith, a researcher specializing in digital security and defending digital rights

Effects of cyberbullying and suggestions by Yemeni women journalists to overcome its consequences:



The above chart reveals the most important effects of cyberbullying against Yemeni female journalists according to the answers of the sampled respondents. These effects are pressure and psychological tension with 82.93%, family and social problems with 53.66%, avoiding making posts and leaving the media field with 41.46%, losing job opportunities, and deactivating personal accounts on social media with 29.27% each, and loss of public confidence in the content provided by women journalists with 17.07%.

"They hacked

my phone, my accounts on social media, and my emails. I was accused of spreading bad ideas among women. My morals were defamed, and my family was incited to prevent me from work. They sent obscene and fabricated pictures to my brothers, and that caused me to be threatened with weapons.

They created a fake Facebook account in the name of my brother, and published from it that my family disavows me. I was also subjected to a massive defamation campaign on Facebook that amounted to fabricating malicious accusations against me and presenting them to the judiciary to discredit me in front of the community and deprive me of its sympathy.

After interrogating me for late hours at the Public Prosecution office, I was forced to sign statements of confessions that I had nothing to do with, and guarantees and commitments not to engage in any activities. My physical and psychological health was damaged. I lost my family's trust in me, and I became an outcast in the society because of the defamation campaign they carried out against me. I lost the ability to work, and I did not find the legal and psychological support that might help me."

A.S., a media activist working with a media outlet that opposes the group that controls the area in which she resides.

"I feel hatred for my country because of the cyberbullying I was subjected to. I went through a difficult start. Because of it, I was affected at home, and caused me to delay enrollment at the university."

Journalist Lamia Al-Sharabi

"The grave moral damages of cyberbullying may radically change the personal and professional lives of Yemeni women journalists, and prevent them from discussing public affairs issues or participating actively in the political and social life. The deep effects of cyberbullying may cause female journalists serious psychological disorders that are difficult to overcome, especially in light of their presence in a conservative society governed by certain customs and rules."

Dr. Angela Al-Maamari, a mental health expert at Taiz University



The figure above shows that 53.66% of the 41 female journalists who answered the question said they do not need help at present, while 46.34% said that they currently need specific assistance to cope with the effects of what they have been exposed to. The essential assistance that women journalists mentioned they needed was psychological counseling, training and rehabilitation, legal protection, psychological and material support, journalistic work tools, and travel abroad.

The female journalists who answered the questionnaire demanded measures be taken to reduce the exposure of Yemeni female journalists to cyberbullying. The measures include using the media to raise awareness among people appropriately and acceptably, activating electronic accountability and government tools for following up on cyberbullying issues, giving male and female journalists training on gender, and exercising societal power.

Other measures include continuous networking between media platforms and institutions that provide digital security services to report accounts that violate privacy, providing training courses for women on cyber protection and how to deal with the pressure and tension of abusive campaigns, enacting deterrent laws that criminalize this phenomenon, creating a moderate religious discourse, enhancing the female journalist's self-confidence, educating them about ways to deal with cyberbullying properly, supporting and validating the victims, implementing ongoing awareness campaigns, and forming an advocacy group and code of honor for journalists.

The Media Freedoms Observatory provides support to journalists and media workers who face psychological pressure as a result of their journalistic work. The support includes psychological counseling, in addition to direct psychological support sessions by psychologists. To submit a request for psychological support, <u>click the</u> <u>link below.</u>

Instructions and advice

Legal instructions and advice to enhance legal protection for Yemeni women journalists ²:

- Determining the type of cyberbullying or assault the female journalist was subjected to.
- Documenting the assault (when was it? How much was it? Who did the cyberbullying? Was it the same person or many people), and taking screenshots of the cyberbullying the journalist was subjected to.
- Protecting the social networking sites used by the female journalist by enrolling in courses that enhance her knowledge of digital security.
- Resorting to friends for advice.
- Submit a complaint to the Journalists Syndicate or the Media Freedoms Observatory to push for filing a lawsuit against the bully.
- Submitting a report to the concerned authorities when the female journalist clearly knows who is the one doing the cyberbullying.
- Resorting to organizations that work with female journalists and take care of their issues, support them, and protect them from being subjected to cyberbullying again.

2 - Ragdah Al-Maqtari, a Yemeni lawyer and legal activist, interview via Zoom

Instructions and advice to enhance the protection of the mental health of Yemeni women journalists ³:

- Resorting to a trustworthy person to talk to him/her about the problem.
- Staying away from social media temporarily to avoid doubling the psychological impact until the journalist regains her strength and ability to think properly and in a balanced manner.
- Taking a vacation and rest if bullying occurs in the work environment.
- Obtaining psychological support sessions from a specialist in order to be able to continue working without thinking again about the cyberbullying case (according to the sessions, the level of psychological impact on the female journalist is determined, and whether she needs only sessions or the intervention of some medications).
- Psychological support for the victim's family.

Prevention strategies to counter the psychological effects of cyberbullying ⁴

- Practicing sports activities.
- Breaking the daily work routine.
- Creating a barrier between work and home (don>t bring work worries home).
- Practicing hobbies and personal skills to relieve pain and psychological stress.
- Sound sleep
- Paying attention to the quality of food.

- Establishing friendships and non-negative social relationships.
- Find ways to have fun and positive energy.
- Obtaining psychological support and counseling from time to time to help overcome difficult phases and reduce the magnitude of the harm sustained.

Instructions and advice to enhance the digital protection of Yemeni women journalists ⁵:

- Avoid posting too much personal information because it allows bullies to use it negatively (Are you obligated to publish this information? Do they need to know it?).
- Ensuring that your privacy settings are set.
- Avoiding getting into violent discussions or responding to bullies on the digital space.
- Talking through secure means such as Signal.
- Informing the social media platform of being subjected to cyberbullying, regardless of the speed of the response of those in charge.
- There are no government agencies in Yemen that a female journalist can turn to protect herself digitally. However, other international organizations deal with these cases, such as Access Now, which technically assists victims, especially male and female journalists.
- Resorting to youth initiatives that help victims overcome the problem: A group of youth initiatives has direct contact with some networks to report any content that could cause harm to others.
- Seeking help constantly from reliable sides: Before approaching a specific organization that is not legally regulated, information about it must be investigated.
- Closing personal accounts may sometimes be a solution.

Recommendations: Let's act now

- Pressuring for passing clear laws to deal with cyberbullying and repeated attacks against Yemeni women journalists to ensure deterrence and accountability of perpetrators and limit their impunity.
- Training female journalists on digital security and mechanisms for dealing with cyberbullying.
- Educating society about women's right to work and promoting a positive masculinity culture.
- Using digital reporting tools provided by social media platforms and building the capacities of Yemeni women journalists to use these tools.
- Implementing awareness campaigns about cyberbullying, its forms and risks, and ways to confront and limit it.
- Working in partnership with social networks to impose restrictions on fake, extremist and provocative accounts.
- Establishing specialized centers for providing psychological support for female journalists who have survived cyberbullying.
- Continued networking between media platforms and institutions that provide technical support services.
- Creating strong blocs that advocate for and defend women journalists, issues.
- Providing legal support to female journalists and activists on social media.

The Studies & Economic Media Center is one of the most important Yemeni civil society organizations working in economic affairs, raising awareness of economic issues, promoting transparency, good governance, citizen engagement in decision – making, and creating professional media.





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