Afghan Witness

Part I: Qualitative Investigation

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) targeting politically engaged Afghan women.

April 2023

1 Executive Summary

This qualitative analysis is the first in a series of two reports which examine the following themes and questions:

1. **Afghan women's online presence and social media usage.** Has this changed since the Taliban's takeover and how, focusing specifically on politically engaged women?
2. **The nature of technology facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) targeting Afghan women.** What are the most prominent types of TFGBV targeting politically engaged Afghan women online and how is it being carried out?
3. **Attribution.** Who appears to be engaging in TFGBV of politically engaged Afghan women and is there any evidence of organised or coordinated campaigns?
4. **Impact.** What are the online and offline impacts of TFGBV on Afghan women's lives?

The findings in this report are based on a qualitative analysis of a sample of posts targeting politically active women between early 2021 (pre-Taliban takeover) and early 2023 and on six in-depth, key informant interviews with politically active women from a diversity of background. The findings corroborate previous, quantitative research by Afghan Witness (AW) into trends surrounding online abuse of women in 2022. This quantitative research will be updated and deepened in a further, forthcoming quantitative study.

1.1 Afghan women's online presence and social media usage

Despite access constraints, social media has provided an important platform for Afghan women's right activists to advocate, mobilise and attract international attention and support on a range of political, social, economic, and human rights issues. This trend, which preceded the Taliban takeover, has been amplified by the Taliban's crackdown on the women's protest movement, participation in public life and on independent media – which leaves social media as one of the few platforms of expression for Afghan women in Afghanistan. Twitter has emerged as a particularly important platform, due to the enhanced possibilities for interaction with international audiences and stakeholders. All key informants interviewed for this study emphasised the significance of women's online campaigns, and the amplification of women's domestic movements online, for Afghan's women's voice and visibility.

However, this rise in women's online advocacy has been accompanied by a rise in online abuse and harassment, which is having a chilling effect on women's participation. This has been amplified post-Taliban takeover. Fear of being targeted by the Taliban ban for their online activism, and of experiencing online abuse and harassment has led some women to restrict their online presence – anonymising their accounts, increasing self-censorship and limiting their online activism.

1.2 The nature of TFGBV targeting politically active Afghan women.

Politically active Afghan women experience a wide range of abuse, including (but not limited to) sexual, gendered, religious, political, and ethnic abuse. This abuse is communicated both publicly - via comments on women's public posts and privately in direct messages. The latter is reported to be more extreme, reflecting lack of moderation.

Four common narratives used against women were identified. These include claims that they are sexually promiscuous; violate cultural and religious norms; are agents of the West; and that they are making false claims in order to secure asylum abroad. Interviewees believe the propagation of such narratives creates and perpetuates false perceptions about women with a public and online presence.

Qualitative analysis revealed numerous examples of **highly explicit sexualised and gendered language being used against politically active women**, accusing them of prostitution and promiscuity. Interviewees report receiving direct messages including pornographic content, sexually explicit photos and threats of sexual assault, rape, and death. Abuse which targeted women on the basis of their political affiliation was also frequently gendered, for example by accusing women of having relations with relevant politicians.

AW also observed the c**ommon use of ethnic slurs among the abusive comments politically active women receive.** While not possible to quantify in this qualitative study, there was a perception that women from ethnic minorities, particularly Hazara women, face higher degrees of abuse online.

Gendered disinformation is used to discredit and undermine politically Afghan women. This includes spreading false or inflammatory information about the women themselves; discrediting the sources of their content; and creating fake accounts and pages using the women's names and faces, which are then used to spread disinformation and abuse about other political figures and groups.

1.3 Attribution

AW found evidence that **perpetrators of TFGBV against politically active Afghan women come from a range of political affiliations, ethnic groups, and backgrounds**.

Low-ranking Taliban and pro-Taliban social media users appeared to be responsible for the majority of the abuse, likely reflecting both the Taliban's increased presence on social media and women's increased resistance against Taliban restrictions. High-level Taliban authorities typically do not directly engage in online harassment and hate speech, instead positioning themselves as protectors of women's rights.

NRF supporters also engage in online abuse, predominantly targeting pro-Taliban/ anti-resistance women figures; and women who take a stance on sensitive cultural norms.

Sexual slurs such as “cunt” and “prostitute” are widely used by all groups. The use of ethnic-based slurs varied according to both the ethnic background of the women attacked and the perpetrator.

The vast majority of perpetrators in content analysed by AW were male. AW also identified a very small number of accounts that present as female and supportive of the Taliban engage in online abuse of women who speak out against the Taliban.

1.4 Impact

TFGBV impacted the daily lives of the women interviewed on a personal, societal and professional level – with interviewees stressing that the online and offline worlds are intertwined. All interviewees reported one or more negative impacts on their online and offline behaviours; mental health; personal safety; their ability to work and on their family relationships.

TFGBV had a chilling effect on women’s participation. Online, this manifested as: i) avoidance and minimisation of online interactions; ii) self-censorship and minimisation of online activities and iii) periods of silence and reappearance. Women also reported minimising face-to-face interactions and community events out of safety fears.

The most common mental health consequences experienced by the interviewees included: **fear and anxiety; stress and mental pressure; low morale and lack of confidence**. Interviewees reported TFGBV strengthened male family members authority over women’s behaviour and clothing, with concerns that online abuse could lead to inter-familial violence.

TFGBV also negatively affected women’s professional lives. Female journalists reported having less access to online sources and information and visibility compared to male counterparts.

All interviewees strongly believed that **TFGBV conducted with impunity helped encourage and normalise violent attitudes towards women** in wider society and **increased women’s vulnerability to real-life violence.**

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2 Introduction

Women in Afghanistan won the right to vote in 1919, only a year after women in the UK. Afghan women did not enjoy these rights for long. Women's freedom and rights became increasingly restricted in the years of war that followed and later, during the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001, women were almost entirely erased from public life.

After the fall of the Taliban's regime in 2001, Afghan women fought for and won many fundamental rights and freedoms. When the Taliban took over in August 2021, their rights were again erased. The Taliban have implemented numerous regulations and orders that have restricted women's freedoms and liberties, including (but not limited to) access to livelihoods, education, healthcare, political participation and freedom of movement and expression. This current situation offers a stark resemblance to the oppression that women suffered during the previous Taliban regime.

In recent years - and as further explored in Section 5 of this report - social media has become an increasingly important platform for women's rights activists in Afghanistan. Afghan female activists carved out a notable presence on online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where they established communities, campaigned for women's rights, and sought to establish a degree of political involvement. In doing so, they faced significant risks.

In March 2022, Afghan Witness (AW) delivered its first report on online hate speech and harassment of prominent women in Afghanistan. This report found that Afghan female activists faced significant harassment and abuse on online platforms. Online hate speech and harassment targeting influential Afghan women generally increased during significant events or incidents related to advocacy and women's rights.

This paper is the first of two follow up reports (one qualitative, one quantitative) which aim to increase understanding of the opportunities and risks of social media as a platform for Afghan women's advocacy and voice. It uses key informant interviews and social media analysis to present insights into how Afghan women use social media and how their online presence and behaviour have changed since the Taliban takeover. It analyses the nature of TFGBV against Afghan women; evaluates who the perpetrators appear to be; and assesses how these risks and experiences have impacted women's lives online and offline.

This report will be followed by a study examining the same research questions from a quantitative lens, adding insights into the scale of abuse and social media platform accountability, and a capping paper presenting consolidated implications and recommendations.

To avoid possible re-traumatising of women who faced online, AW has blurred all instances of abuse that show target's faces or show incendiary language directed at the individual. Usernames of individuals who are not well known have been redacted in compliance with GDPR.

3 Methodology

Afghan Witness conducted a mixed methods qualitative investigation combining social media analysis with six key informant interviews (KIIs) with politically active Afghan women, including journalists, former Afghan officials and women's rights activists. Quantitative analysis is currently ongoing and will be released as Part II to this report.

3.1 Research Scope

Informed by lived experience interviews and social media user demographic estimates for Afghanistan, this qualitative research is focused on Afghan women's experiences on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

- Within this study, 'Afghan women' refers to women living in Afghanistan and Afghan women living in the diaspora.

- 'Politically engaged' encompasses women politicians, activists, and prominent women who, for simply excelling in their field and receiving public recognition for it - may be viewed as engaging in women's rights activism and/or politics.

- Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is violence committed and amplified using information and communications technologies or digital spaces against a person based on gender (UNFPA). The analysis considers a wide range of online violence experienced by Afghan women - from sexualised language to doxxing and death threats – and, where possible, includes issues of intersectionality, such as ethnicity.

3.2 Women's remaining presence and online activity

AW conducted a qualitative investigation to assess women's remaining **presence and activity** across major social media platforms, predominantly Twitter and Facebook, by observing the online activities of politically active women identified in AW's 2022 study. Six key informant interviews (KIIs) provided additional insight into politically engaged Afghan women's social media use, and how their online presence and behaviour has changed since the Taliban took power in 2021.

3.3 Determining the nature of TFGBV targeting Afghan women

Focusing on Facebook and Twitter, AW conducted a qualitative study of social media posts to examine the **nature of abuse** targeted at Afghan women online since the Taliban takeover. Key informant interviews provided further context, insights into the nature of hidden abuse (such as that contained in direct messages) and points of comparison to the period before the Taliban took over.

The qualitative analysis examined evidence of abuse and harassment in the comment sections of posts written by 25 politically engaged and influential Afghan women, predominantly on Twitter. This was the platform highlighted as the most important for political engagement by the KIIs. AW used an extensive range of search terms determined and validated by Afghan analysts on the team to identify abusive posts in comments on each women's Twitter posts. Several team members reviewed the search terms to ensure that abuse targeting women of different backgrounds and political opinions was captured in addition to general, misogynistic terms. AW analysts manually collected the abusive posts and logged data on key variables pertaining to the type of abuse, whether and how the abuse violated platform policies, and abuser and abuse target demographics. AW included abuse coming from all profiles, even non-Afghan ones. This qualitative analysis was complemented by insight gathered from the research team's experience of monitoring the online environment as part of the wider Afghan Witness project.

3.4 Examining Attribution

AW conducted a qualitative evaluation of a sample of 20 publicly viewable perpetrator profiles to gain insights into perpetrators of the abuse. AW logged publicly available profile and/or group information, noting demographic variables, evidence of coordination, and links with official, political channels, individuals or groups. AW also considered the narratives, imagery and language used in abusive posts attacking women online. Some of these factors feature in the attribution toolkit developed by Meta's Threats team. This qualitative analysis was complemented by insight gathered from the research team's experience of monitoring the online environment as part of the wider Afghan Witness project.

3.5 Determining Impact

AW interviewed six politically active Afghan women to gain insights into the personal and professional impact of TFGBV. The interviewed women come from various fields and backgrounds, including two journalists, two former senior government officials and two women's rights activists. The interviewees discussed their personal experiences with online harassment and shed light on the overall impact it had on women's online presence and real life.

AW asked the interviewees the following core questions:

1. Can you introduce your background? How do you think the abusers became aware of you and/or your political activities or beliefs?

2. Regarding online abuses, please describe what happened – including when and how you were targeted, noting any relevant social media platforms, the language or tactics used to bully you, and others' reactions.

3. How widespread do you think the problem of online abuse against women from Afghanistan is?

4. Do you think online abuse against women from Afghanistan corresponds to treatment of or attitudes towards women 'on the ground'?

3.6 Research Limitations

The findings in this report should be regarded as a sample of the wider patterns of abuse facing politically active women in Afghanistan, which will be further examined in Afghan's Witness forthcoming quantitative analysis of this topic. The findings presented here are likely to underestimate the scale and severity of the problem. This is a result of:

- **Data Limitations**. In-depth interviews found that much of the abuse women experience online is sent to them through direct messages - a dataset unavailable to the researchers, although explored through the KIIs. The in-depth qualitative approach meant that Afghan Witness focused on a sample of the abuse targeting selected politically active women; rather than conducting a large n-analysis, a limitation which AW hopes to address through the next phase of quantitative research. Many women were also reluctant to come forward to speak about their experiences, even on the condition of anonymity.

- **Possible takedowns**. While Afghan Witness found many examples of abuse targeting politically active women remaining live months after they were posted, some publicly available abuse, particularly the most egregious, will likely have been removed by platform moderators before researchers could archive and analyse it.

4 Women's online presence and social media usage

4.1 Summary

Despite access constraints, social media has provided an important platform for Afghan women's right activists to advocate, mobilise and attract international attention and support on a wide range of political, social, economic, and human rights issues. This trend, which preceded the Taliban takeover, has been amplified by the Taliban's crackdown on the women's protest movement, participation in public life and on independent media – which leaves social media as one of the few platforms of expression for Afghan women in Afghanistan. Twitter has emerged as a particularly important platform, due to the enhanced possibilities for interaction with international audiences and stakeholders. All key informants interviewed for this study emphasised the significance of women's online campaigns, and the amplification of women's domestic movements online, for Afghan's women's voice and visibility.

However, this rise in women's online advocacy has been accompanied by a rise in online abuse and harassment. This has been amplified post-Taliban takeover. Fear of being targeted by the Taliban ban for their online activism, and of experiencing online abuse and harassment has led some women to restrict their online presence – anonymising their accounts, increasing self-censorship, and limiting their online activism. These dynamics are explored further in chapter 7 on Impact.

4.2 The online presence of Afghan women before the Taliban takeover

In a world that is increasingly shaped by social media, the use and spread of digital technology in Afghanistan are relatively low. In 2021, 4.40 million people were present on social media in Afghanistan, approximately 11.2% of the total population (Hootsuite, 2021). Access to the Internet and internet-enabled devices remain a key barrier to social media usage in Afghanistan. In 2021, Afghanistan had approximately 8.64 million Internet users, with Internet access standing at 22% at the start of that year. (Hootsuite, 2021). Afghan women are disproportionately less likely to have access to social media than men. Even though women made up 48.7% of the total population, they only constituted between 4-21% of all social media users in Afghanistan in 2021.[1]

Despite these access constraints, Afghan women had successfully carved out a presence on social media platforms in recent years and launched campaigns, such as the #WhereIsMyName campaign in 2020, to advocate for women's rights and voice. Key informants reported an increasing number of Afghan women identifying themselves publicly online in the years prior to the Taliban takeover, calling this a 'breaking of taboo' around women's visibility on social media. One interviewee commented:

[1] Range variable - different social media platforms

"Ten years ago, you could barely find women putting their actual photos as their profile pictures. They either put photos of their children or male family members or a photo of a flower or other things. In the recent three or four years, women have broken that taboo. More women put their own photos, and lately, they put their photos on Instagram and TikTok".

In doing so, women faced significant risks of harassment and abuse. In 2016, research by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford showed the risks of being an Afghan woman online. Out of 100 women interviewed, 70% opted to remain completely anonymous[2] when using social media. The primary reason given for this decision was fear of recrimination. Only 10% used their names and personal photos. All reported having faced threats or harassment, either online or offline. In 2018, Internews and Altai reported that fears of online harassment or public shaming shaped the way the majority of Afghan women used social media. All women interviewed by AW had personally experienced harassment online, and expressed their belief - based on interactions with peers and online observations - that every Afghan woman on social media platforms, especially those with public profiles, has faced abuse and harassment online in one way or another.[3]

4.3 Women's movements, protests, and online campaigns since August 2021

Social media began to play a more significant role as women's rights and freedoms again came under attack after the Taliban takeover in 2021. Women's rights activists used online social media platforms to grow their activism as well as to give rise to a force of civil resistance against the Taliban. With the Taliban's severe restrictions on media and economic challenges greatly inhibited press freedom in Afghanistan, Afghan women turned to social media to publicise and generate international coverage of their protests and campaigns. AW's interviewees believe:

"[…] without social media, the women's movements in Afghanistan, which are spontaneous movements [emerging as reactions to Taliban restrictions as opposed to being more formally attached to specific groups or figures], could not reach us as we do not have free media anymore."

In the weeks following the Taliban's takeover, women's movements held frequent outdoor protests and marches on the streets in big cities such as Kabul, Balkh and Herat. Between October and December 2021, AW observed a surge in protests and the emergence of women's

[2] Using a false name and unidentifiable picture

[3] Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

groups and movements. Women filmed and shared their indoor and outdoor protests online, established new groups and held press conferences.

Following the reported detention of a number of female protestors in January 2022, including the prominent activist Taman Zaryab Paryani, outdoor protests decreased. The detentions were coupled with the Taliban suppressing the protests on the streets and pro-Taliban social media accounts launching disinformation campaigns and targeting the protesters online. The restrictions on outdoor protests and threats to the protestors resulted in a visible increase in indoor protests. In these, women, mostly with their faces covered, hold individual and group protests and share their videos online. Figure **1** is an example of an indoor women's protest.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Twitter post by Zan TV about an indoor women's protest that reads: "Today, Friday, October 21, a team of women protesters called 'The Movement of Powerful Women of Afghanistan' protested against the genocide committed against Hazaras and Tajiks in Afghanistan and demand its end." Source: Twitter

Online campaigns in support of women's rights, such as #DoNotTouchMyClothes, #Letherlearn and others demanding the release of women activists, were launched by Afghan women activists and supported by activist worldwide, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Screenshot of a tweet by "The Main Movement of Powerful Women of Afghanistan" that reads: "Lets unite and demand the release of Tamana together." Source: Twitter

All of the interviewees for this report emphasised the significance of the women's movements and online campaigns and how they contributed to making Afghan women more visible in public life and their voices heard following the Taliban takeover. One of the interviewees said:

> *"A clear example of women's presence on social media is that in the past one and half years, the only source of resistance against the Taliban has been women, who first marched on the streets, which led to them sacrificing a lot. Then they turned to social media, and through social media, they could keep their resistance alive, and they still post their videos and pictures of indoor protests".*

4.4 Amplifying voices: Twitter over Meta

Twitter has emerged as the most important social media platform for politically engaged women after the Taliban takeover. All women interviewed for this report have active Twitter accounts, but not all have active accounts on Facebook, Instagram or other platforms. *"On Twitter, I think women have been quite visible and used the platform for advocacy and campaigning,"* said one of the interviewees. "*I now mostly use Twitter and only recently created a Tiktok account, like about one or two months ago,"* said another interviewee.

On Twitter, Afghan women can directly interact with international audiences, foreign governments and human rights organisations, while on Facebook and other platforms, their audiences are predominantly Afghan. Activists frequently tag and mention the UN, human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and the UN Special Rapporteur, Richard Bennett, on their posts and online campaigns. These international organisations and figures also tag Afghan women and their Twitter accounts in their posts.

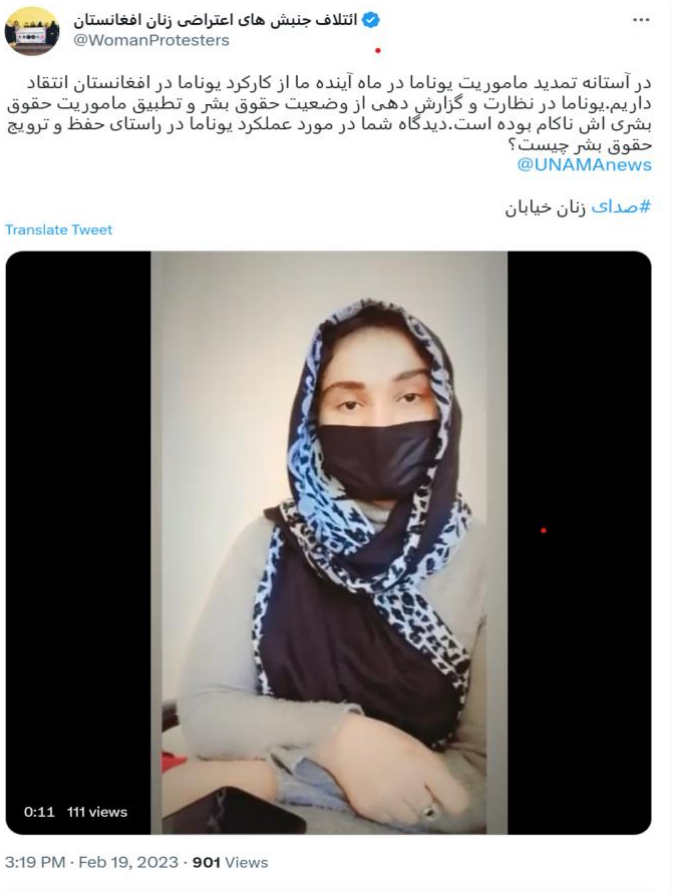

Figure 3: Screenshot of a Twitter post by "Coalition of Afghanistan Women Protesters Movement" that has mentioned The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and reads: "As the UNAMA mandate will be renewed in the coming month, we express our objection to the organisation's work. UNAMA failed in its mission to monitor and report the human rights situation in Afghanistan. What are your thoughts about UNAMA's work towards protecting human rights in Afghanistan?" Source: Twitter

5 Online abuse targeting women

In March 2022, AW found that the emergence of women's movements, the increased usage of social media platforms as tools for advocacy and campaigns and the overall reactions to the Taliban's severe restriction of women's rights, correlated with a surge in online abuse targeting Afghan women. All of the interviewees AW spoke to acknowledged the increase in online abuse and hate speech against women, especially against those who are more vocal and visible. One of the interviewees stated that she believed that "*compared to before* [the Taliban takeover]*, online abuse against women has increased. Women currently raise their voices against injustices more than men since women have suffered the most".*

5.1 Women silenced on social media when speaking about Taliban intimidation

The majority of the interviewees believe that thanks to the online campaigns, movements and protests, Afghan women have gained more visibility online after the Taliban takeover. However, the interviewees also believe that this visibility is relative, and that the Taliban takeover has simultaneously pushed many Afghan women to retreat or restrict their online activity. AW observed that with the Taliban government, a number of women (including former women's rights activists, government officials and NGO workers) have limited their online visibility.[4] As one of the interviewees stated:

> *"We should not forget that after the Taliban takeover, the social media sphere also changed and slowly, women who criticised the Taliban or who protested against them removed their pictures from their accounts on Facebook and tried to hide their identities due to the fear of being captured and for the safety of their families."*

Several women protestors also refrained from using social media after the Taliban detained their colleagues and other protestors. In June 2022, AW conducted interviews with two female activists who had been detained by the Taliban. Interviewees reported being forced to pledge to the Taliban that they would stop their activism and engagement with the media. "I have observed that women have been self-censoring themselves on social media for fear of intimidation and pressure from the Taliban in the past year," one of the interviewees said. AW monitored the Twitter accounts of protestors reported to have been detained by the Taliban and identified multiple examples of women giving up or restricting their online activism after their arrest (details withheld for privacy reasons, but available on request).

[4] The impacts of online abuse and hate speech on women's presence on social media are covered in Section 8 of the report.

6 Nature of online abuse

6.1 Summary

Qualitative analysis and key informant interviews reveal that politically active Afghan women experience a wide range of abuse, including (but not limited to) sexual, gendered, religious, political, and ethnic abuse. This abuse is communicated both publicly – via comments on women's public posts – and privately in direct messages. The latter is reported to be more extreme, reflecting lack of moderation.

Common narratives used against women include claims that they are sexually promiscuous; violate cultural and religious norms; are agents of the West; and are making false claims in order to secure asylum abroad. Interviewees believe the propagation of such narratives creates and perpetuates false perceptions about women who dare to have a public and online presence.

Qualitative analysis revealed numerous examples of highly explicit sexualised and gendered language being used to publicly abuse politically active women, accusing them of prostitution and promiscuity. Interviewees report receiving direct messages including pornographic content, sexually explicit phones and threats of sexual assault, rape, and death.

Abuse which targeted women on the basis of their political affiliation was also frequently gendered, for example by accusing women of having sexual or personal relations with relevant politicians.

AW also observed the common use of ethnic slurs among the abusive comments politically active women receive. While not possible to quantify in this qualitative study, there was a perception that women from ethnic minorities, particularly Hazara women, face higher degrees of abuse online.

Gendered disinformation is used to discredit and undermine politically Afghan women. This includes spreading false or inflammatory information about the women themselves; discrediting the sources of their content; and creating fake accounts and pages using the women's names and faces, which are then used to spread disinformation and abuse about other political figures and groups.

6.2 Types of abuse and common narratives

Qualitative analysis of the comments on posts by politically active Afghan women shows a wide range of abuse, including (but not limited to) sexual, gendered, religious, political, and ethnic abuse. Two of the most common themes used by the abusers are sexualised abuse and false claims of espionage or affiliation with the West (see 'Sexual and gendered abuse' section below). Other common themes include accusing women of violating religious and cultural norms and making false claims about the situation in Afghanistan to secure asylum abroad. One of the interviewees explained to AW how women are accused, saying,

> *"[women] are accused of prostitution, of espionage or that [they] want to seek asylum abroad. I have seen these three trends, which have been*

orchestrated in a way that a person who is not very aware of such things might perceive that the women truly are like that and the accusations are true,”.

Women receive these types of abuse in comments on their posts and in direct messages (DMs). All the women interviewed by AW faced abusive comments concentrated with hate speech and harassment. One interviewee told AW, *“Now, for instance, when I post something on Twitter, I receive like 20 comments, and among them, 15 to 16 comments are insults,”.*

6.2.1 Sexual and gendered abuse

Women’s online presence and visibility is a culturally and socially sensitive issue in Afghanistan. Women who have a public profile and are visible on social media face misogynistic hate and are targeted for being women. One of the interviewees told AW that *“Women who work outside and are famous are deemed promiscuous and even whores. This mindset has naturally penetrated social media,”*.

Half of the interviewees believed that women face online abuse mainly because of their gender, no matter where they come from or what ethnic group they belong to. According to them, what mattered the most was the degree of their visibility online; the more vocal and visible a woman is online, the more abuse she is subjected to.

Qualitative analysis revealed numerous examples of sexualised and gendered language being used to abuse political active women, as illustrated below.

Figure 4: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Lina Rozbih, a renowned journalist. The comment reads: “You are still being fucked, and now you are talking about Afghans. Have some shame, you cunt and prostitute.” Source: Twitter

Figure 5: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Zarmina Paryani, a women's rights activist. The comment reads: "You are a cunt. You have no shame. You are a Western bitch." Source: Twitter

All interviewees experienced questioning, criticism and bullying online over moral issues, their appearance, clothing, and their way of life. They were also accused of promiscuity and prostitution. The interviewees believe the propagation of such narratives creates and perpetuates false perceptions about women who dare to have a public and online presence.

In the examples below, the perpetrators accused two women's rights activists, Tamana Paryani and Munisa Mubariz, of being prostitutes and of working in the Bagram airfield[5]. AW has observed frequent use of the word "Bagram" written as "بگرام" in Farsi/Dari and "بګرام" in Pashto against women and combined with slurs such as "prostitutes". Abusers tend to use the word to accuse women of being affiliated with the West and its previous military presence in the country. Narratives around this usually focus on calling out politically active women for having worked as prostitutes and spies for the Western forces.

Below is an example of a sexually abusive comment directed towards Tamana Paryani, a women's rights activist.

[5] The airfield, also known as Bagram Air Base, is located in the Parwan province of Afghanistan and was previously the largest US military base in the country

Figure 6: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Tamana Zaryab Paryani, a women's rights activist, that reads: "Shut up, you Western prostitute. You were selling your body every night and day in Bagram. You prostitute now speak. The followers of Ahmad Ezak[6] are either an asshole or prostitute." Source: Twitter

[6] Ezak is a derogatory word used for non-binary people

Figure 7: Screenshot of a comment to a post by an account attributed to Munisa Mubariz, a protester and women's rights activist. The comment reads: "You are a big prostitute, and believe me, you were an employee of the Bagram Airfield." Source: Twitter

The interviewees have also received DMs from abusers containing pornographic content (including images of their genitalia) as well as sexual assaults and death threats. Two interviewees described their experiences of sexualised abuse.

> *"In my DMs on Twitter and Facebook Messenger, they send images of their private parts and sex videos. Even when sometimes someone sends a normal photo, my heart beats fast, and I think someone has again sent something vulgar,"*.

Another of the interviewees told AW the following:

> *"I have an official Facebook page and sign in only occasionally, and I see 10 – 15 sexually degrading messages. Messages where the sender attaches an image of his private body parts. They write things like, 'Do you want me to do this to you* [referring to a sexual act]*' or 'Send over an image of that part of your body.'"*

A third interviewee highlighted the ease with which false sexualised claims about women that are disseminated online can be accepted:

> *"From a social perspective, online abuse against women creates false narratives and mindsets; if you are an active woman and have a presence on social media, you are seen as a prostitute. In a country like Afghanistan, where the majority of the people are illiterate and do not have the ability to analyse and fact-check information shared online, they fall for it and believe it".*

6.2.2 Political abuse

Women experience abuse based on their political stance, with different terms of abuse used against women depending on whether they oppose or support the Taliban, and whether they served in the former Afghan Government. In the example below, the perpetrator uses the gendered, derogatory terms "Jigar General" and "Fazli's girlfriend". Both terms, and in particular "Jigar General" (or "sweetheart General"), have been used on social media to target senior female appointees of the former Afghan government. In the screenshot below, Hosna Jalil, who was appointed to a senior security position by former President Ashraf Ghani was targeted with these derogatory terms.

Figure 8: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Hosan Jalil, former Deputy Interior Minister, that reads: "How are you Fazli's girlfriend? You are still there, hahaha, Fazli's Jigar General." Source: Twitter

Another example of a former government official who received online hate is Marjan Mateen[7] who worked as the Deputy Minister of Education. Mateen's online presence has significantly decreased since the fall of the former government. She occasionally retweets but has no other visible interactions beyond that.

[7] AW did not interview Mateen.

Figure 9: Marjan Mateen's response to the hate speech she faced shortly after the government collapsed to the Taliban in August 2021. Source: Twitter

6.2.3 Religious and ethnic abuse

Women's ethnicities and religious beliefs also affect the scale and nature of abuse they are subjected to. For example, one of the interviewees stated that:

> *"Hazara women, for instance, face more hate and abuse online. Every post by a Hazara woman receives ten to twenty comments like, 'Hazara women are promiscuous, whores, dancers etc.' Mainly because Hazara women have been pioneers in protesting, civil society activism, and in arts and cinema".*

When talking about political affiliations as well as ethnicity, another interviewee told AW:

> *"These factors have a role. I think the reaction to what a Tajik or Hazara woman posts on social media is very different from the reactions to a Pashtun woman. There are cases where people took stances based on their ethnicity".*

AW also observed the common use of ethnic slurs among the abusive comments politically active women receive. In the example below, the abuser commented on Shaharzard Akbar's post, calling her 'Kolabi' and 'Landaghar', among other things. The two words are used as derogatory terms for ethnic Tajiks, Panjshiris and pro-NRF individuals. In this Twitter post, Akbar, who is a former Head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and Uzbek, shared her concerns about the Taliban's alleged war crimes in Panjshir.

Figure 10: Screenshot of a comment to post by Shaharzad Akbar, former Head of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, that reads: "Don't eat the shit, you cunt, prostitute, Kolabi and Landaghar." Source: Twitter

Abusers have also questioned the religious belief of women activists from all backgrounds, accusing them of being atheist or non-believers.

Figure 11: Screenshot of an abusive comment to post by Spesali Zazai, a women's rights activist that reads: "She is an atheist woman. Let's all block her. That would be better." Source: Twitter

6.3 Gendered disinformation and discrediting of women activists

AW identified three types of activity designed to discredit and undermine political-active women: gendered disinformation directly targeting the women themselves and designed to discredit and harm their reputation, for instance by spreading of false information about them; attacks on the credibility of their sources and the quality of their work; and the creation of fake accounts in the target's name. The four key abuse narratives identified in chapter 6.2 were also prevalent here. However, this strategy did not generally involve direct interaction with the affected women (e.g. through comments on their posts, direct messages or by tagging them), meaning that the women did not always immediately realise the harm/abuse.

6.3.1 Gendered disinformation about the target themselves

Several interviewees shared experiences of seeing their photos circulating on social media, particularly on Facebook and Twitter, with captions using false narratives and incorrect information. In some cases, social media accounts and pages with a considerable number of followers were involved. A former government official described disinformation that circulated about her and her background to undermine her qualifications and experience: "*[…] the first thing I read about myself was rumours that I worked as a model in the US and had no knowledge or experience of working in the education sector. It was funny and painful,".*

Another shared that *"One morning, I woke up and saw that a page with over 200,000 followers had shared a photo of mine - not a leaked photo but the one I had shared myself - showing me sitting among a group of people and said that I had declared my support for the LGBTQ+ community in Afghanistan"*. LGBTQ+ issues are highly sensitive and new to Afghan society. The community does not identify themselves publicly due to fear of being targeted by religious extremists and the Taliban. Similarly, famous public figures do not endorse the LGBTQ+ at least publicly due to the fear of rejection, defamation, and intimidation.

In the example below, the abuser, shared an old photo of Shukria Barezkzai, former member of Parliament, falsely accusing her of prostitution for foreign forces.

Figure 12: Screenshot of a standalone post by a Twitter account with over 900 followers that reads: "Shukria Barekzai who was a pimp (providing girls) for the Americans and was having sex with them, is now barking against us from the camps. Her picture clearly shows who she is." Source: Twitter

In another example below, the abuser tweeted a photo of Journalist Farahnaz Forotan and says her vulgar photos have been leaked. The perpetrator further accuses Forotan of embezzling foreign funding for Afghan women.

Figure 13: Screenshot of a tweet targeting Journalist Farahnaz Forotan that reads: "Her vulgar and romantic photos by the sea have also been released to the market. She made millions of dollars from the money of the projects she took in the name of Afghan women and finally ran away...Her name: Farhanaz Forotan."

6.3.2 Discrediting sources used by women online

A typical example of this shown below in relation to the journalist Hasiba Atakpal. The comment does not target Hasiba Atakpal herself but refers to the woman shown in the video she shared. The video features a protester, allegedly beaten by Taliban forces during a protest in Kabul. The abuser accuses the woman in the video of forging a case to seek asylum outside the country.

Figure 14: Screenshot of comment: "She is forging an asylum case abroad." Source: Twitter

6.3.3 Discrediting women through impersonator accounts

The creation of fake accounts and pages using women's names and photos is another tactic used by online abusers to discredit and harm politically active Afghan women. The accounts AW observed mimicked the targets' real accounts, including sharing the same photos as the targets' real accounts. These fake accounts spread disinformation about other political figures and groups and targeting others in abusive language. For instance, this fake Twitter account under the name of Munisa Mubariz, a renowned women's rights activist, has over 4,000 followers and tweets frequently.

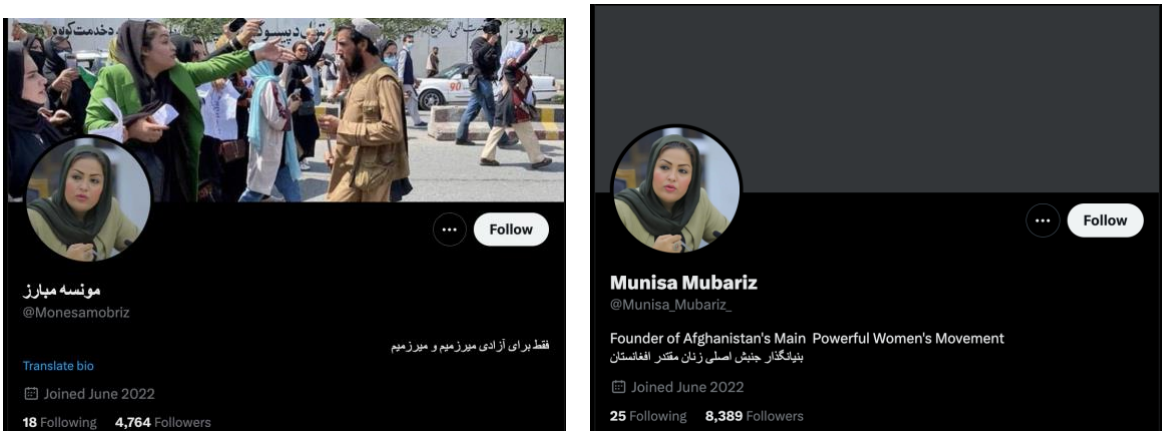

Figure 15: Screenshots of the fake account of Munisa Mubariz (left) and the real one (right). The most noticeable differences are the number of followers and the description of the account.

Likewise, AW found several impersonator accounts on Facebook under the name of Farahnaz Forotan (written in Farsi/Dari), a prominent journalist. One of the accounts, featured below, has over 6,000 followers and has been active since December 2021.

Figure 16: Screenshot of a fake Facebook account of Farahnaz Forotan with over 6,000 followers. The account has used Farsi/Dari version of Forotan's full name.

Figure 17: Screenshot of Farahnaz Forotan's official Facebook page with over 500,000 followers.

7 Attribution

7.1 Summary

All the women interviewed for this report believed the perpetrators of TFGBV came from different ethnic groups, political affiliations, backgrounds, and in some cases, different genders. Perpetrators assessed through the qualitative study came from a range of different backgrounds and political affiliations.

Low-ranking Taliban and pro-Taliban social media users appeared to be behind most of the abuse, likely reflecting both the Taliban's increased presence on social media and women's increased resistance against Taliban restrictions. High-level Taliban authorities typically do not directly engage in online harassment and hate speech, instead positioning themselves as protectors of women's rights.

NRF supporters also engage in online abuse, predominantly targeting pro-Taliban/ anti-resistance women figures; and women who take a stance on sensitive cultural norms.

The vast majority of perpetrators in content analysed by AW were male. AW also identified a very small number of accounts that present as female and supportive of the Taliban engage in online abuse of women who speak out against the Taliban.

The four key disinformation/abuse narratives identified in Section 6 (accusation of prostitution; espionage or affiliation with the West; violations of religious and cultural norms and staging fake scenarios to secure asylum abroad) were used by the full range of perpetrators. Sexual slurs such as "cunt" and "prostitute" are widely used by all groups. Ethnic-based slurs are also quite common and varied according to the ethnic background of the women attacked and the perpetrator.

7.2 Identifying the perpetrators of the abuse

AW's qualitative analysis found that political affiliations and ethnicity are the two main variables pertaining to attribution. Relevant political affiliations included Taliban/pro-Taliban accounts and pro-NRF/resistance accounts, at times overlapping with what appears to be ethnically motivated abuse.

7.2.1 Taliban and pro-Taliban attributed accounts

Overall, online abuse and hate speech against women in the qualitative study mostly came from low-ranking Taliban, pro-Taliban social media activists and users. This could be due to: i) the Taliban and their supporters' increased presence on social media, especially on Twitter, post-takeover and; ii) women's increased resistance and advocacy against the Taliban's restrictions. *"The Taliban are very active on Twitter; they were active before as well, as Twitter is a very open*

and unlimited platform. But after August 2021, the Taliban largely swarmed Twitter," one of the interviewees told AW. *"On Twitter, there are Twitter spaces in which the Taliban exclusively talk about women, about suppressing and intimidating them".*

Prior research by AW (available on request) found that high-level Taliban authorities do not directly engage in online harassment and hate speech but rather portray themselves as protectors of women's rights.

Taliban-supporting perpetrators tend to use Pashtu, Farsi/Dari and, rarely, English to target women.

Below is an example of a Taliban supporter targeting Zarmina Paryani, a Tajik and a women's rights activist and protester. The perpetrator commented under one of Paryani's media interviews in which she spoke about her experiences in Taliban detention. The perpetrator, with 140 followers, is apparently a Pashtun and Taliban supporter and targeted her with graphic, sexualised abuse.

Figure 18: A screenshot of an abusive comment to a post by Zarmina Paryani, a women's rights activist and protester, that reads: "Death to you and death to your like-minded whores who, in a young age, took on the task of satisfying the sexual desires of the crusaders." Source: Twitter

7.2.2 Pro-NRF and resistance attributed accounts.

Pro-NRF and resistance-attributed accounts appear to mainly target two groups of women: pro-Taliban and anti-resistance activists, as well as women who publicly object or take a stance against sensitive cultural norms. They propagate the common disinformation narrative that their

targets are sexually promiscuous, Western-affiliated and violate Afghan norms, albeit with less intensity than Taliban supporters. Identified perpetrators mostly come from supporters rather than NRF members themselves.

The example (screenshot) below shows a tweet with a photo featuring the activist Diva Patang, an ethnic Pashtun who is known for her pro-Taliban stance. The tweet with the caption "Discotheque prostitute, Diva Patang" was shared by the perpetrator, who shares pro-NRF, pro-Tajik and anti-Taliban content.

Figure 19: Screenshot of a Twitter post that shared a photo of Diva Patan, an activist, along with two men. The writing on the photo reads: "Discoteque prostitute, Diva Patang." Source: Twitter

The example (screenshot) below, shows a Twitter post by Tamana Zaryab Paryani, a Tajik and prominent women's rights activist and protester. In the post, she shared her photo with a burned burqa in hand and spoke against compulsory hijab and a case of the Taliban allegedly beating women in Badakhshan province over hijab. The perpetrator is apparently a Tajik and pro-NRF, with over a thousand followers. He targets Paryani saying, "You are evil and a prostitute [and] do not represent the mujahid and hijab lover province [Referring to Badakhshan province]. They are […] prostitutes. Don't take them seriously. Your asylum case is all sorted out, and you will disappear. Shut up. You have brought shame on yourself."

Figure 20: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Tamana Zaryab Parwani, a women's rights activist and protester, that reads: "You are evil and a prostitute [and] do not represent the mujahid and hijab lover province [Referring to Badakhshan province]. They […] prostitutes. Don't take them seriously. Your asylum case is all sorted out, and you will disappear. Shut up. You have brought shame on yourself." Source: Twitter

7.3 Attributing abuse which targets intersectional issues

As per AW's observations and the KIIs, perpetrators who abuse the targets over intersectional issues vary and come from different ethnic groups and political affiliations. The examples below show the diversity of the perpetrators in terms of their ethnicity and political affiliations. They do not illustrate any other trend, underlining the complex nature of intersectional abuse.

As outlined in chapter 5, the words "Kolabi and Landaghar " are used as derogatory terms for ethnic Tajiks, Panjshiris and pro-NRF figures. One of the authors of such an ethnic abuse tweet analysed by AW (Figure 21) had an account name that read "پښتون" or "Pashtun". The account follows the Taliban's Spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid, Mobeen Khan, a staunch pro-Taliban social media activist and a pro-Taliban propaganda account, "Watan Dostan Afghanistan."

In the example below, the perpetrator targets Saleha Soadat, a journalist and ethnic Hazara, calling her, among other things, “Hazara-e-mosh khor,” which is an ethnic slur used against Hazaras and means “Hazara mouse eater” in English. The perpetrator has only 40 followers and has no posts on his timeline. AW, however, observed the account’s other online interactions, which mostly happened in Pashtu. Additionally, the perpetrator posted anti-Taliban comments under posts by pro-Taliban accounts.

Figure 21: Screenshot of a comment to post by Saleha Soadat, an ethnic Hazara and journalist, that reads: “You cunt, whore, that wasn’t an officer, it was a kidnapper, Hazara -e- mosh khor.” Source: Twitter

In the example below, the perpetrator targets Zarifa Ghafari, an ethnic Pashtun and former Mayor of Maidan Wardak, by calling her “a terrorist” and “Awghan” equivalent of Afghan. Both terms are used as derogatory against Pashtuns. The perpetrator’s account has a blue Twitter tick and has 435 followers. In the bio, he identifies himself as “a Persian from Panjshir”. The perpetrator also mostly shared pro-Tajik content on his timeline.

Figure 22: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Attia Mehraban, the perpetrator targets Zarifa Ghafari by saying: "Zarifa Ghafari is a born terrorist and is an Awghan supporter of terrorists like her brothers, Zarifa knows that the defeat of his Awghan Taliban brothers is the failure of Awghan hegemony, and by creating secret channels with the Haqqani network, she goes to Afghanistan again to show a human face of his Taliban on behalf of Afghan women." Source: Twitter

8 Impact

8.1 Summary

All interviewees reported one or more negative impacts on their online and offline behaviours, on their mental health, sense of safety, their ability to work and on their family relationships. TFGBV impacted the daily lives of the women interviewed on a personal, societal, and professional level – with interviewees stressing that the online and offline worlds are intertwined.

AW found that TFGBV had a chilling effect on women's participation online. This included: i) avoidance and minimisation of online interactions; ii) self-censorship and minimisation of online activities (particularly affected women inside Afghanistan) and iii) periods of silence and reappearance (particularly affecting former Afghan Government officials in the context of widespread online abuse in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover). Women (particularly in the diaspora) also reported minimising face-to-face interactions and community events out of safety fears.

The most common mental health consequences experienced by the interviewees included: fear and anxiety; stress and mental pressure; low morale and lack of confidence. TFGBV impacted on their family lives, including strengthening male family members authority over women's behaviour and clothing, with concerns that online abuse could lead to inter-familial violence in the context of conservative, patriarchal norms and where so-called "honour killings" are a major cause of concern.

TFGBV negatively affected women's professional lives. For example, interviewed journalists report having less access to online sources and information and visibility compared to male counterparts. All interviewees strongly believed that TFGBV conducted with impunity helped encourage and normalise violent attitudes towards women in wider society and increased women's vulnerability to real-life violence.

8.2 Online consequences

AW identified three major trends in how politically engaged women respond to hate speech and how it impacts their presence online: i) avoidance and minimisation of online interactions; ii) self-censorship and minimisation of online activities and iii) periods of silence and reappearance.

Avoidance and minimisation of online interactions. Most of the women interviewed tend to ignore abusive comments and messages on social media, block the abusers, and close down their comments and direct messages (DMs) in order to avoid receiving abuse and hate altogether. "*I closed my official Facebook account's messenger; I no longer open message requests to my personal accounts, and I no longer read the comments I receive on Twitter,"* said one of the interviewees, a renowned female journalist in exile.

To reach the level of simply ignoring online abuse, survivors of the abuse had to go through a period of defensiveness, where they replied to abusers and tried to convince them they were wrong. "*At first, I usually tried to reply to each individual, but now I ignore or block people. I no longer want to bring myself down to that level," s*aid a women's rights activist.

Self-censorship and minimisation of online activities. The key informants residing within Afghanistan reported they had to take measures beyond minimising online interactions, to self-censor and limit their online appearance and activities more broadly. This was the result of both the online abuse and fear of being identified and tracked by the Taliban.

AW's observation of the online environment following the Taliban takeover in August 2021 shows that politically engaged women who remained in the country locked their online profiles, changed their names and profile pictures, and even deleted their accounts. This was particularly true of women who were prominent under the previous Afghan Government, such as former Parliamentarians. Online self-censorship also applies to women who temporarily reside in third countries[8] and wait for resettlement to safer countries, particularly when their families still reside in Afghanistan. An AW interviewee who is a former people's representative and journalist and resides in one of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries shared her concerns regarding her safety and the safety of her family who remain in Afghanistan, saying, ***"****I can no longer share my views as I did before because my family is in Afghanistan, and where I am now is not safe."*

Silence and reappearance. This particularly affected Afghan women who worked with the former government in senior positions, who went completely silent in a context of widespread online hatred and abuse following the fall of the government to the Taliban. Interviewees report that they were heavily harassed and targeted online for their affiliations with the former government. A former senior government official told AW, *"[...] people saw all those who worked for the former government as accomplices to what happened to the country and that we did not have the right even to have a presence on social media,"*.

Several former officials, however, reappeared after they left the country. Interviewees reported a relative decline in hatred compared to the surge in hateful activity targeting them in the first months of the Taliban takeover. *"Right now, I think we have passed that harsh episode. I still sometimes receive such harsh comments and messages,"* the former government official added.

8.3 Offline consequences

Online abuse and hate speech have had significant offline impacts on the lives of politically engaged women. Most of the interviewees believe that online and offline spheres are intertwined: the online environment is a reflection of life on the ground and what happens online has

[8] A country in which someone will temporarily reside while in the process of resettling in another, second, country in the longer term. E.g. For an Afghan woman hoping to resettle in the US but waiting for documentation while residing in Pakistan, Afghanistan would be her country of origin, the US would be the 'second country', and Pakistan where she temporarily resides, would be the 'third country'.

consequences in real life. All of the interviewees stated that online abuse had grave consequences on their lives offline. "*The people who abuse and harass women online exist in our real lives,"* said a women's rights activist.

8.3.1 Personal consequences

Mental health. Online abuse heavily impacts women's mental health. For example, a study conducted by Amnesty International in 2017 looking at online experiences of women in eight countries found that 55% of the survivors of online abuse and harassment experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks.

All of the interviewees acknowledged the impacts that online abuse and hate speech had on their mental health and that of their peers. The degree and scale of the mental health challenges, however, were experienced differently among the women. The most common mental health consequences experienced by the interviewees include (but are not limited to) fear and anxiety over the possibility of re-encountering online abuse; stress and mental pressure; fear of threats to physical safety (theirs and of their families); and low morale. One of the interviewees talked about how the online abuse made her feel, saying, *"[...] each of such messages keeps bothering me for at least two to three days. They are psychologically traumatic for me. I feel unsafe." [...]* "*I saw some of my own former colleagues that online abuse broke them down. They started to doubt themselves."*

In the case of the women in the diaspora, interviewees report minimising their real-life interaction with Afghan communities abroad and avoiding appearing in gatherings as they fear threats to their physical safety. One of the interviewees shared about the fear she has been carrying for her physical safety, saying, "*I sometimes feel very unsafe because I know there are people, overwhelmed by extremism, who do not even care about being put in prison. They can do anything and can hurt me."*

Personal and family relationships. Afghanistan is deemed a largely conservative society, where rigid gender roles and patriarchal norms shape family settings. Privacy, especially around women, matters extremely as women are seen as the preservers of their family's honour. Thus, women's online presence, especially those with public profiles, has been sensitive and not always digestible.

> *"In the beginning, when I had a Facebook account, I always faced inappropriate and bad words, such as, 'Good girls do not go out. Good girls are not on Facebook.' When I replied to some of them that if they had sisters at home, they would come back to say, 'Our sisters are not on Facebook,'"* said one of the interviewees.

The impact of online abuse and hate speech has been tangible in the interviewees' personal relationships and family lives. One of the interviewees, who was a representative in a provincial council before the Taliban takeover, talked about how her male family members reacted to the online criticism and hatred that she received after having appeared on a TV show saying, *"I used to not fully cover my hair when I appeared in the media and people criticised that too and said why I was not observing the hijab properly. On Facebook and Instagram, they discussed these things, and it pressured my family. My uncle and my male cousins said how they could allow me to go to the council and sit at the same table with men."*

Interviewees also expressed concerns that social media abuse had or would lead to violence towards women by family members.

8.3.2 Professional and societal consequences

The impacts of online abuse and harassment go beyond the survivors' personal lives. They negatively affect women's professional and social lives and encourage and help normalise real life violent attitudes towards women in society.

This can be seen in the wider literature on the impacts of online abuse. For example, In March 2022, the Australian e-Safety Commissioner published a report entitled "Women's experiences with online abuse in their working lives." This research found that online abuse pushed women in Australia to retreat from their professional lives and public forums. Around 22% of the women interviewed for the report admitted to temporarily halting work-related online activity.[9] Afghan women, too, have reported that online abuse has severely negatively affected their personal and professional lives, as illustrated in examples below.

Access to information and sources. Online abuse can have more of an impact on the professional lives of women who are journalists or whose work is heavily reliant on social media. Afghan female journalists interviewed pointed out to having less access to sources compared to their male colleagues, and less access to important online information as a result of minimising their online interactions. One interviewee stated:

> *"As a journalist, I have many times lost my sources because I do not read comments and do not read the messages. My husband's sources come from social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. He freely gets in touch with everybody, adds himself to various groups, and gets information from different sources. But I, as a young woman whose photos are widely seen online and everybody knows me,* [fearing potential abuse

[9] eSafety Commissioner (2022) Available at: WITS-Womens-experiences-with-online-abuse-in-their-working-lives_0.pdf (esafety.gov.au)

and harassment] *cannot send messages to everybody or add myself to different groups or keep my messenger open to everyone to message me."*

Instigation and normalisation of real-life violent attitudes towards women. Online abuse and harassment is not detached from the offline world. All the interviewees believed that online abuse and hate speech impacted their lives on both a personal and a wider level.

> *"I think the impacts are mutual; real life impacts life online and the online world impacts real life,"* said one of the interviewees.

Online abuse and harassment with unhindered impunity can encourage and normalise violent attitudes towards women in real life. The women interviewed gave examples of their own and other women's vulnerability to real-life violence due to the abuse and harassment they faced online.

> *"Afghan women face difficulties, and they are vulnerable in real life due to online abuse. They face difficulties at home and work, especially if the situation becomes a bit bold and viral,"* said one of the interviewees.

The situation has worsened following the Taliban takeover as authorities have severely curtailed women's rights and freedoms and Taliban supporters have targeted women activists and protesters in the online sphere. Women under the Taliban remain unsupported and have no access to justice vis-a-vis online and real-life abuse and violence. Even before the Taliban, online abusers acted with impunity as the former government lacked the institutions and procedures to counter online abuse and violence against women. In some cases, women were ridiculed for complaining to the police. Survivors of online abuse and hate speech see the impacts in real life and fear the consequences, as explained by one of the interviewees:

> *"If I was reachable to the people, they would do the same to me, accusing me of blasphemy. I think the hatred they show on social media does not differ from what they feel in real life, and if they face you, they will show the same hatred."*

9 Conclusion

Afghan Witness' qualitative study into online abuse targeting politically engaged Afghan women shows the severe impact online abuse is having on women's lives. The abuse has significant implications for how women can engage in public life and political conversation. This contributes to the gradual erasure of women's participation in society, both online and offline.

To deepen understanding into the scope and scale of abuse, complementing this qualitative study, Afghan Witness is carrying out quantitative research into the issue, analysing thousands of Tweets to track changes over time and provide findings based on large-n datasets. Quantitative findings, coupled with the impact demonstrated in this report, may help hold social media companies accountable in cases where user safety has been neglected, and provide robust recommendations to platforms and policymakers based on large volumes of data and Afghan women's lived experience of navigating online spaces.


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