



Afghan Witness

Capping Paper

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

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1 Introduction

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, social media platforms have emerged as increasingly important for Afghan women to create communities, campaign for women's rights and establish a degree of political involvement. In doing so, politically engaged Afghan women face various risks online, including gendered disinformation, abuse, harassment and hate speech.

Afghan Witness (AW) carried out a two-part study to examine gendered hate speech and abuse in the Dari/Farsi and Pashto information environment and the technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and hate speech directly targeting politically engaged Afghan women.

The following study is divided into three parts: a qualitative study, a quantitative study and a section on recommendations, created from a focus group that AW carried out.

1.1 Part I - Qualitative Investigation

The qualitative study focused on understanding the gendered hate speech and abuse that politically engaged Afghan women receive online, by looking at Afghan women's social media presence and usage; the most prominent types of TFGBV targeting politically engaged Afghan women; the perpetrators carrying out the abuse; and the impact TFGBV has on women's lives. This study was based on social media analysis combined with six key informant interviews with politically engaged Afghan women.

1.1.1 Key findings

1. **Afghan women's online presence and social media usage.** There has been a rise in women's online advocacy accompanied by a rise in online abuse and harassment since the Taliban took over in 2021. AW noticed that the main platform used by Afghan women is X (formerly Twitter).
2. **The nature of TFGBV targeting politically engaged Afghan women.** Politically engaged Afghan women experience a wide range of online abuse, including (but not limited to) sexual, gendered, religious, political, and ethnic abuse. AW also noticed that gendered disinformation was spread against Afghan women to discredit and undermine them. 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.
3. **Attribution.** Perpetrators of TFGBV against politically engaged Afghan women came from a range of political affiliations, ethnic groups, and backgrounds, with low-ranking Taliban and pro-Taliban social media users being responsible for posts targeting politically engaged Afghan women. AW found that supporters of the National Resistance Forces (NRF) and resistance-attributed accounts would also engage in online abuse. AW did not find any evidence of high-level Taliban authorities directly engaging in online harassment and hate speech, but rather they portray themselves as protectors of women's rights.
4. **Impact.** TFGBV impacted the daily lives of the interviewees on a personal, societal and professional level, with interviewees stressing that the online and offline worlds are intertwined. The online world has repercussions on the offline one as 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 in online activities. 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.

1.2 Part II - Quantitative investigation

The quantitative study provides a deeper understanding of the scope and scale of gendered hate speech and abuse by looking at the Dari/Farsi and Pashto information environment as well as the hate speech directly targeting politically engaged Afghan women. The quantitative study is based on a collection and analysis of over 78,000 tweets/posts targeting politically engaged Afghan women from June 1, 2021 - December 31, 2021 and from June 1, 2022 - December 31, 2022.

1.2.1 Key findings

- 1. Scope and scale of gendered hate speech in the Dari/Farsi and Pashto information environment.** Overall, the volume of Dari/Farsi and Pashto gendered hate speech increased significantly in 2022 as compared to 2021. This finding remains true even when corrected by filtering out event-triggered hate speech, such as after the protests broke out in Iran in September 2022 following the death of [Mahsa Amini](#), a young woman who collapsed in custody and later died after being detained by Iran's morality police. Although a lot of the hate speech and abuse might still not target Afghan women specifically per se, it negatively impacts perceived safety and freedom of Dari and/or Pashto speaking women online.
- 2. Scope and scale of targeted hate speech and abuse.** AW recorded an increase of 217% in posts containing gendered hate speech and abuse terms and the names of prominent Afghan women from the period June to December 2021 and from June to December 2022. This substantial increase could be related to various factors, including (but not limited to) developments in the region; X (formerly Twitter)'s changing environment; and a generally more hostile environment towards women. Before and during the Taliban takeover, spikes in gendered hate speech could be connected to major advancements the Taliban were making in the country. Spikes in gendered hate speech during the second half of 2021 and the second half of 2022 were usually connected to policies and bans that the Taliban imposed on women, ultimately restricting their rights and freedoms. The hate speech was mainly directed at the Afghan women who protested against these policies and bans.
- 3. Nature of hate speech and abuse.** Hate speech and abuse directed at Afghan women was overwhelmingly sexualised. Over 60% of the posts in 2022 contained sexualised terms used to target Afghan women. Overall, an 11.09% increase in the proportion of sexualised terms targeting politically active Afghan women occurred from 2021 to 2022.

1.3 Part III - Focus Group Recommendations

In part 3 of the report, AW carried out a focus group with the six politically active Afghan women interviewed for the qualitative report to facilitate the understanding and the creation of useful recommendations.

1.3.1 Key findings

- 1. Further research.** Afghan women's experiences and the abuse they face online remain hugely understudied. Thus, it is crucial to continue such studies and raise more awareness on the gendered hate speech and abuse Afghan women receive online. One of the main difficulties with carrying out more research is the limitations that social media platforms have in place. As experienced during this investigation, X (formerly Twitter) has become increasingly hostile towards data scraping, regardless of whether the official API or a third part scraping tool is being used. In a similar way, Facebook has also made it difficult to collect data, requiring the use of an API.
- 2. Platform accountability.** Social media platforms should take more steps to protect women online, promote accountability and tackle the culture of impunity regarding gendered hate speech.
- 3. Expand language capabilities for monitoring hate speech.** Some regional dialects are harder to detect and therefore, social media platforms might not be capable of fully monitoring and taking down hate speech in these dialects.
- 4. More education and awareness.** Strengthen and increase Afghan women's capabilities and awareness, especially those who use social media, to make sure they feel safe online.
- 5. Network or alliance building.** The creation of an alliance of politically engaged Afghan women could serve as a space where women can have a more proactive role in creating a healthier online environment.



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