

## Shedding light on technology-facilitated gender-based violence

### OVERVIEW:

As internet and social media use grow globally, the weaponisation of technology against women and girls, known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), is becoming increasingly widespread (UN 29/11/2023). There are multiple definitions of TFGBV. Broadly speaking, TFGBV encompasses a range of harmful actions, including online harassment, defamation, and non-consensual sharing of personal information, such as intimate images and videos (UNFPA 03/2023). TFGBV involves acts of violence committed, assisted, or amplified through digital media and information and communication technologies, directed at individuals based on socially ascribed differences between men and women (CIGI 31/05/2023).

In Yemen, people's use of internet and social media is increasing. By February 2024, there were around 3.6 million social media users across Yemen, equal to nearly 10% of the total population (DataReportal 23/02/2024). With increased access to online spaces, Yemen is also witnessing cases of TFGBV (Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024). Known types of TFGBV experienced by Yemeni women and girls include instances of online harassment, defamation, electronic blackmail, doxing,<sup>1</sup> and online threats of assault or death, among others (Salam@ 10/2023; Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 29/08/2023; FGD 11/06/2024).

TFGBV in Yemen reinforces existing unequal gender dynamics shaped by cultural and social customs, further restricting women and girl's mobility and freedom of expression, both on and offline. The consequences of this kind of violence extend far beyond the digital realm, deeply affecting the lives of women and girls offline. Survivors often face increased risk of mental health issues, forced social isolation, and severe restrictions accessing online spaces as a protective response imposed by men (Salam@ 10/2023). In extreme cases, TFGBV in Yemen can lead to threats of honour killing, forced marriage, or forced relocation (UN Women 2022; Salam@ 10/2023; KII 25/07/2024; KII 29/08/2024; Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022; FGD 11/06/2024). Yemen's challenging protection environment – coupled with the absence of specific cyber laws, strict and oppressive gender norms, continuing conflict, and ineffective law enforcement mechanisms – aggravates these challenges, leaving many women and girls with little recourse to justice or protection when experiencing TFGBV.

Yet, TFGBV in Yemen remains largely understudied and overlooked within the broader discourse on gender-based violence (GBV) and digital rights, despite its impact. This exclusion is mostly likely the result of social stigma around the topic, in a culture deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and a strong emphasis on 'honour'.

### KEY FINDINGS

- As a result of social stigma, safety concerns, fragmented state institutions, and ineffective law enforcement mechanisms, which are typically not survivor centred, **most incidents of TFGBV in Yemen go unreported**. In most cases, women and girls who experience this kind of violence choose not to disclose it.
- **The impact of TFGBV in Yemen** often results in online and offline consequences with potentially harmful effects. Such violence puts women and girls at increased risk of mental health issues, forced social isolation, and significant restrictions on their access to online spaces, curtailing their freedoms even further. In some instances, survivors of TFGBV also face threats of so-called 'honour killings', divorce, forced marriage, or forced relocation.
- **The lack of strong legal frameworks and survivor-centred application of laws to address GBV**, combined with continuing conflict and inadequate cyber laws addressing TFGBV, aggravates the challenges women and girls face seeking protection and justice when subjected to TFGBV.
- Based on available information, **women public figures, activists, and those involved in public work are at higher risk of TFGBV targeting in Yemen**. Such TFGBV often involves defamation, blackmail, and hacking, aiming to discourage women's participation in public affairs and perpetuate the status quo.
- **The threat of TFGBV significantly limits women's mobility, both online and offline, and ability to express themselves freely**. In some conservative communities, male relatives will even ban women from using smartphones and the internet altogether, partly out of fear of TFGBV, further restricting their access to public spaces and opportunities.

<sup>1</sup> Doxing is a form of online harassment involving the public revealing or sharing of someone's private information, such as their home address, phone number, email, or other personal details, without consent (Kukul 30/06/2023).

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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### Aim

This briefing note explores TFGBV in Yemen, seeking to identify how TFGBV is perpetrated, analyse its impact on survivors, and explore how women and girls navigate these challenges within a society characterised by traditional gender roles and a strong emphasis on 'honour'. This report also identifies information gaps that require further investigation for a better understanding of TFGBV in Yemen.

### Methodology

This report is based on a qualitative research methodology, drawing on existing TFGBV data in Yemen as well as other literature, including academic publications, NGOs publications, and media articles, which helped to provide more context.

Alongside reviewing the limited secondary data on this emerging topic, ACAPS also triangulated data from primary sources, including key informant interviews (KIIs) and a focus group discussion (FGD).

- **Key informant interviews:** four KIIs were conducted with humanitarian responders with expert knowledge in the fields of gender, protection, GBV, media, and the Yemeni sociopolitical context. One interview was conducted with an expert covering areas controlled by the de-facto authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis), and three with experts covering areas controlled by the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRG).
- **Focus group discussion:** one FGD was conducted with Yemeni civil society representatives and humanitarian responders. As there are significant security concerns, the FGD was held online and involved both men and women from across Yemen, from both DFA and IRG-controlled areas.

**Scope:** while this report covers the whole of Yemen, it does not provide detailed analysis of TFGBV in both DFA and IRG-controlled areas, as the data remains limited.

### Limitations

There is a general scarcity of data on TFGBV in Yemen. Available secondary data often adopts an open-source journalistic style, primarily consisting of anecdotal evidence rather than in-depth analytical insights.

Given Yemen's traditional societal norms, topics such as TFGBV, like other forms of GBV, are perceived as sensitive. This perception severely limits the extent to which TFGBV can be openly discussed, disclosed, or addressed through formal and informal mechanisms, as well as limits the amount of information publicly available.

As it is a relatively new area of focus in the GBV sector, TFGBV terminology, definitions, and measures are still developing and, as a result, are often inconsistent. In the secondary data, terms such as 'cyberviolence', 'blackmailing', and 'extortion' are used interchangeably, making it difficult to differentiate between different types of TFGBV.

## TFGBV IN YEMEN

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### Types of TFGBV in Yemen

In Yemen, TFGBV is mostly perpetrated via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. One KII explained that TFGBV is most often perpetrated via WhatsApp, as it is the most popular channel for online communication in Yemen, as most people with smart phones have access to this platform (KII 25/07/2024). The small sample size, however, means that it is not clear how widely other online platforms are used to commit TFGBV in Yemen.

The hacking of personal smartphones through malicious hyperlinks and targeting of mobile phones via text message appear to be common tactics used by perpetrators (Salam@ 10/2023; FGD 11/06/2024). Technology has also contributed to anonymous individuals or groups perpetrating TFGBV with impunity (UNFPA 01/12/2021). Online harassment by an unwanted contact or anonymous individual has also been reported and disproportionately affects women and girls (KII 02/07/2024; FGD 11/06/2024).

There are reported cases of sextortion, where perpetrators gain access to private photos of women and girls and use them for the purpose of blackmail (Fair Planet 27/01/2023). In most cases, perpetrators get access to private photos by luring women and girls into 'romantic relationships' in digital spaces, where they are then manipulated, through deception, to share photos (Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022). In other instances, private photos are stolen by phone technicians when women leave their phones for maintenance (UN Women 2022; FGD 11/06/2024).

Hacking is another means by which private photos are accessed, as perpetrators breach personal accounts to steal private images. Once such images are obtained, perpetrators may blackmail survivors in exchange for money or coerced sexual acts, threatening to make the images public if their demands are not met (Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022). Participants in the FGD noted that perpetrators frequently remain anonymous or unknown, often hiding behind private numbers or phones traced to Saudi Arabia, making identification difficult (FGD 11/06/2024).

### Perpetrators of TFGBV in Yemen

Available evidence suggests that TFGBV in Yemen, like other forms of GBV, is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women and girls. A survey conducted by Mansati 30 – an online questionnaire platform for Yemeni youth – revealed that, among those with access to online spaces, approximately 69% of women have experienced some form of cyberviolence, including TFGBV, compared to 32% of male respondents (Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024). There have also, however, been isolated reports of women engaging in gender-based defamation campaigns against other women and girls, particularly those not adhering to conservative dress codes (KII 02/07/2024).

Not all TFGBV is committed by strangers. In fact, one key informant noted public incidents of women appearing to follow personal agendas when committing TFGBV. For instance, the key informant recalled an incident of a female family member taking a photo of a girl, without her consent, sitting on her brother's lap in a crowded car. This photo was then widely disseminated online, also without consent, accompanied by false claims of inappropriate behaviour, threatening the girl's safety, dignity, and future prospects (KII 25/07/2024). As such, it is clear that not all TFGBV is committed by strangers; it can also be perpetrated by family members or known people.

### Groups particularly at risk of TFGBV in Yemen

Women and girls are at risk of TFGBV, even if they lack online access and regardless of whether they live in IRG or DFA-controlled areas (KII 02/07/2024). Available data suggests that certain groups of women are at heightened risk of TFGBV, including activists, journalists, civil society representatives, influencers, and public figures (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies 04/09/2023; SMEX 19/06/2023; KII 02/07/2024; KII 10/07/2024). It seems that targeting women visibly involved in taking up public space is meant to discourage them from participating and engaging in public affairs (Yemen Policy Center 12/2022; KII 10/07/2024). A striking example of this was a vicious smear campaign against a University of Taiz professor who advocated for

Yemeni women's right to obtain a passport without the approval of a 'guardian', with an online electronic newspaper describing her as having 'questionable character' and falsely accusing her of 'attacking Islam' (Salam@ 10/2023)

One key informant noted that it is common for women activists to be targeted on platforms such as X for their political or civic stances, with perpetrators resorting to defamation, hacking, and blackmail to pressure women into publicly changing their position (KII 04/08/2024). In some cases, the online gender-based harassment of public figures and women activists can evolve and lead to direct threats or the spread of fabricated images or information as an act of defamation (Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024; KII 02/07/2024).

Across Yemen, civil society work, including both the humanitarian and development sectors, has faced intense public criticism, with women in this sector facing defamation campaigns and accusations of immorality (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies 04/09/2023). Documented acts against women activists and aid workers include detainment, imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, and organised online campaigns ridiculing them both in Yemen and the diaspora (ACAPS 23/11/2023). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in areas under DFA control, where such women are undermined by the DFA and portrayed as 'foreign agents' or 'soft power' serving Western agendas (DAWN 15/03/2023; KII 10/07/2024). As such, women activist and aid workers are at risk of being subjected to defamatory content by social media influencers, especially in DFA-controlled areas (KII 02/07/2024; DAWN 15/03/2023). For example, a recent disinformation campaign on social media attempted to associate Yemeni women involved in civil society and peacebuilding organisations with foreign networks allegedly seeking to 'ruin' Yemen and advance hidden agendas (DAWN 15/03/2023).

TFGBV is not limited to women activists or those engaged in politics, however. All women and girls who take up public space or are public figures are at heightened risk of TFGBV. In one case, the DFA imprisoned a fashion blogger under the pretext of indecent behaviour, as the outfits she wore online were considered too revealing (KII 10/07/2024).

## IMPACTS OF TFGBV IN YEMEN

### Secondary victimisation and further violence induced by TFGBV

In a society where honour is deeply tied to family reputation, any incident of TFGBV that casts doubt on a survivor's 'honour' can have severe consequences. Cases of so-called 'honour killings' are extreme manifestations of this, where the perceived dishonour brought by TFGBV against a female member can lead families to inflict further violence on her, resulting in her death (Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022; FGD 11/06/2024; KII 25/07/2024). One KII noted that it is difficult to estimate the number of so-called 'honour killings' linked to TFGBV, as TFGBV is rarely reported at all and deaths are rarely reported as honour killings: "We've seen some cases of women and girls being subjected to TFGBV and, as a result of the 'shame' brought on the family, she was killed. The family denies there was an honour killing, saying that the girl or woman in question died of natural causes" (KII 25/07/2024).

Another KII noted that, to 'preserve' the family's reputation, female survivors of TFGBV have also been forced to marry against their will, including to their male perpetrators (KII 02/07/2024).

In some cases, TFGBV can escalate into intimate partner violence. In one instance, a woman's private photos of herself not wearing hijab were stolen by a phone technician and uploaded to Facebook without her permission, leading to her death at the hands of her husband (UN Women 2022).

### Forced social isolation and limitations on mobility

In Yemen, women's exposure to digital violence has led to forced social isolation and decreased participation in social activities, limiting women's on and offline mobility and ability to express themselves freely, further perpetuating the status quo dominated by male authority (Salam@ 10/2023). In some cases, especially in conservative settings, women and girls have been banned from using smart phones and internet technology altogether under the guise of protection from TFGBV. Such was the case in Bani Hushaysh district – a rural community in Sana'a governorate – where an unofficial document signed by male community members prevented women from using smart phones (KII 04/08/2024; ACAPS 05/11/2021). Women and girls are also pressured into hiding their identities online, with some girls using male usernames in online spaces, to gain some sense of cyber freedom (The Media Line 20/03/2023).

In one instance, a TFGBV survivor had to relocate to another city as a result of death threats (Salam@ 2023). TFGBV affects not only individual women and girls, but also entire families and communities. In some cases, entire families had to relocate to other neighbourhoods or other parts of Yemen to escape 'the shame' of a female family member experiencing TFGBV. Relocating often involves losing access to work and even a family's surrounding support network. Incidents of forced relocation are especially applicable to more conservative communities (KII 25/07/2024).

### Impeded access to essential services and increased risk of psychological and other impacts

TFGBV increases women and girls' risk of psychological consequences, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, paranoia, and (in extreme cases) suicidal thoughts leading to suicide or attempted suicide (Humanitarian Law and Policy 04/01/2024; Salam@ 10/2023). Such was the case with a famous Yemeni activist, who attempted suicide after being subjected to months of blackmail by her neighbour (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies 04/09/2023; CIGI 31/05/2023; Salam@ 10/2023). Social stigma around TFGBV aggravate these psychological consequences, with KII and FGD participants noting that Yemeni women and girls are frequently blamed for their own exposure to TFGBV (KII 02/07/2024; FGD 11/06/2024). This is particularly applicable when women are taking up public space through involvement in activism, with one interviewee highlighting that exposure to TFGBV is seen as 'the price' women pay for activism (KII 10/07/2024).

TFGBV also leads to women and girls' reduced access to essential services. As a result of societal pressures and the culture of blame associated with instances of TFGBV, women and girls may be forced to drop out of school or university, depriving them of the opportunity work and earn a living (Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022; KII 02/07/2024).

## EXPLORING THE DRIVERS AND AGGRAVATING FACTORS OF TFGBV

### Harmful gender norms

In Yemen, GBV is a pervasive issue deeply rooted in gender norms that not only normalise violence against women and girls, but also drive and aggravate TFGBV. As in many other contexts, GBV against women and girls has become normalised, with survivors sometimes blamed for ‘inviting’ violence (ACAPS 23/11/2023). This might be the reason why TFGBV survivors, like GBV survivors, are hesitant to seek support, as fear of being blamed and the potential repercussions are extreme (KII 10/07/2024; KII 04/08/2024; KII 25/07/2024; Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022). This fear is likely to be particularly acute in more conservative families, where there may be a greater likelihood of women being blamed or accused of bringing shame on the family (KII 10/07/2024; KII 04/08/2024; KII 25/07/2024; Al Mawqea Post 30/10/2022).

Sociocultural norms around shame and ‘honour’ put GBV survivors at risk, discourage reporting, and enable perpetrators to escape accountability. Seeking legal assistance for GBV can be viewed as a violation of accepted cultural norms, potentially leading to even further violence (ACAPS 23/11/2023).

Similarly, particularly around so-called ‘honour killings’, societal norms mean that most women and girl survivors do not feel safe or comfortable reporting TFGBV, as most seek to avoid any potential complications associated with the social stigma of TFGBV, especially if such incidents are publicised (Fair Planet 27/01/2023; Salam@ 10/2023; KII 10/07/2024; KII 02/07/2024). By August 2024, most women and girl survivors of TFGBV did not feel safe reporting such violence to formal institutions (Salam@ 10/2023).

### Yemen’s fragmented state and weak legal framework for addressing TFGBV

Yemen’s legal system lacks the necessary framework to address offline GBV, offering insufficient support to survivors while reinforcing the gender inequalities that perpetuate such violence (ACAPS 23/11/2023). Alongside the already rigid and unequal legal framework, continuing conflict has impeded the development of a robust, survivor-centred system for addressing GBV, as well as civil society efforts to combat GBV. In 2014, the Yemeni Women National Committee and legal experts submitted a draft law for combating GBV to the Yemeni Parliament. While some of the draft’s amendments were approved, the bill was suspended as a result of the conflict. Similarly, between 2013–2024, the National Dialogue Conference saw all Yemeni political parties agree on a draft of the new constitution, which was also halted by the conflict (Fair Planet 27/01/2023).

As far as the online space is concerned, continuing conflict has meant that current legislation and official institutions find it challenging to modernise and keep up with digitalisation. As such, the country still lacks officially designated institutions and laws specifically addressing crimes and cases related to technology-facilitated violence, including TFGBV (Salam@ 10/2023; Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024; SAM Rights and Liberties 07/12/2022). In some instances, if digital bullying escalates to blackmail, it could be interpreted as punishable under Law No. 12 of 1994, which contains provisions addressing various digital crimes, including electronic piracy (Art. 257), defamation (Art. 292), and extortion (Art. 313). These articles are not specifically designed to combat cyberbullying, however, as they are embedded within the Press and Publications Law No. 25 of 1990 (Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024). The Press and Publications Law is not applicable in many cases involving TFGBV, as any violations committed on social media fall outside its scope (Salam@ 10/2023). In some cases, laws covering certain violations seem to be entirely absent. In one reported incident, a technician stole personal photos from a woman’s phone when she sent it for maintenance, but the technician was not arrested because the law lacked provisions to hold the perpetrator accountable (UN Women 2022).

At present, when cases are reported, the authorities resort to provisions in the Penal Code to address technology-facilitated violence and its consequences (Salam@ 10/2023; Carnegie Endowment 11/04/2024). Available information on TFGBV in Yemen does not clarify, however, whether this law is consistently applied in both IRG and DFA-controlled areas.

All in all, women might find themselves discouraged by the State’s lack of action. A notable example is the case of a female public figure and activist who attempted suicide after being blackmailed by her neighbour. Although police identified the perpetrator, they failed to take any action for months (Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies 04/09/2023; KII 25/07/2024).

### Weak GBV response capacity, including insufficient access to survivor-centred services for addressing TFGBV

Overall, the lack of a comprehensive, survivor-centred legal framework coupled with the lack of social support in addressing GBV has impeded women from seeking justice and reporting (ACAPS 23/11/2023). As a result, when it comes to offline GBV, women often find themselves relying on informal security providers for support and protection, such as community sheikhs and (particularly) female members of a sheikh’s family (Yemen Policy Center 04/2022). Similarly, the State’s weakened and ineffective law enforcement mechanisms and victim blaming culture make it difficult for women in both rural and urban areas to access formal protection against TFGBV (KII 25/07/2024).

Quite often, given the lack of information on how to report, TFGBV survivors are unsure of where or how to get legal or institutional help, and instead seek advice from friends, colleagues, or family members when it is safe to do so (KII 10/07/2024). Two KIIs also noted that some survivors seek mediation from public figures, such as influencers or individuals working with civil society (KII 25/07/2024; KII 04/08/2024).

Some civil society organisations (CSOs) also provide case management and psychological support for TFGBV survivors (UN Women 2022). When survivors feel safe seeking legal support and their case falls within the scope of Yemeni law, a study found that women might turn to civil institutions offering free legal advice, which is particularly valuable given the high cost of legal services and growing poverty (Salam@ 2023). Many CSOs are involved in raising awareness and knowledge of TFGBV, educating the public and promoting safety procedures in online spaces (FGD 11/06/2024; KII 28/09/2024 KII 10/07/2024; KII 02/07/2024). One CSO mentioned providing technical support for reporting social media accounts that do not follow accepted codes of conduct and engage in TFGBV. In other cases, CSOs help provide psychological support or refer survivors to psychological services (KII 28/08/2024). The full extent to which CSOs are equipped to provide meaningful support in the event of TFGBV, however, remains unclear.