

# Digital Violence Against Women in the United Arab Emirates

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# Acknowledgments

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## Additional credits

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*This study is also available in Arabic [here](#).*

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# Abstract

This study sheds light on the context, prevalence, impact, and solutions to digital violence against women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It explores the legal system, highlighting the contexts of the emirates and the government's response to DVAW cases, in addition to existing research in the literature. The data, gathered from 11 interviews with stakeholders and 72 survey responses from Emirati and Arab women residing in the UAE, offered insights from women and experts that provided a comprehensive picture of DVAW in the UAE. It should be noted that the aim of this work is to provide a better understanding of this global phenomenon and present policy recommendations and ways forward.



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## Executive Summary

In an era where technology profoundly shapes our lives, digital violence against women (DVAW) has emerged as a pressing issue globally. Despite being one of the leading countries worldwide in terms of gender equality,<sup>1</sup> some concerns remain regarding women's safety online, especially since the UAE is highly advanced digitally, with over 93% of its inhabitants accessing the Internet daily.<sup>2</sup>

There is limited research on the digital safety of women in the UAE; however, a quantitative global study on technology facilitated gender-based violence, conducted after the global lockdowns ended in 2021, showed that 64% of the women in the UAE experienced some sort of harm while being online, 44% of them reported that the harm they faced was because they were women.<sup>3</sup>

This research explores the common forms of DVAW encountered by women (UAE nationals and Arab expats) and examines the driving forces behind the spread of DVAW, the reactions of women to incidents of digital violence, the impact of DVAW on women's mental and physical health, and the support systems available to them, whether technical, legal, or psychosocial. It also aims to identify accessible solutions to women that would reduce exposure to DVAW and keep women and girls safe online.

Initially, the study at hand reviewed the legal and institutional systems and found that the cyber laws in the UAE are some of the strongest in the region; however, they do not cater specifically to preventing digital aggression against women. Yet, findings from the primary data collected through surveys and interviews in this study showed that nearly a quarter of the women who are active online in the UAE have reported being exposed to at least one form of digital violence because they are women. This is a low percentage, considering that the UAE has a digital gender parity of 1, which means that men and women have equal access to digital platforms and services, and over 90% of the citizens, men, and women, are connected to the Internet.

This research reveals that the UAE government has shown commitment to addressing digital crimes, even though not explicitly against women, through various initiatives, including awareness campaigns, helplines, and dedicated units within law enforcement agencies. Interviews with activists also revealed a growing recognition of the issue's significance and a willingness to tackle it comprehensively. Despite intensive efforts, it was not possible to obtain general or gender-based statistics of cybercrimes from authorities,<sup>4</sup> but there is evidence from court cases and awareness campaigns by the UAE Ministry of Interior and Cyber Crime Units demonstrating that DVAW, such as intimidation and harassment, will not be tolerated and that there are several apps linked to security apparatus to report incidents.

In the legal framework governing cybercrimes in the UAE, there is a Cybercrime Law, which plays a crucial role in addressing digital violence. It criminalizes actions, such as online harassment, cyberbullying, and the unauthorized dissemination of personal information (doxing). Still, the interviewed participants highlighted the need for the continued refinement and adaptation of these laws to stay ahead of evolving digital threats.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender Inequality Index | Human Development Reports ([undp.org](http://undp.org))

<sup>2</sup> Share of Internet usage UAE 2021, by frequency, Published by Salma Saleh, Jun 16, 2023

<sup>3</sup> Suzie Dunn, "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview." (2020).  
Centre for International Governance Innovation: [Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 1: UAE Findings](#).

<sup>4</sup> The authorities do not report statistical data on prevalence or types of digital crimes and did not respond to requests for such data.

In summary, this research has uncovered several **key findings**:

- 1. Exposure:** Women continue to encounter violence in the digital realm, one in four women in the UAE faces some sort of digital harm online. The most common forms of DVAW were repeated unwanted contact, verbal abuse, or offensive photos. Many of the perpetrators, who are often men, reside outside the UAE.
- 2. Culture:** Efforts towards the conservation of the Emirati identity and culture in respecting women and empowering them to take on leadership positions are evident. This culture dominates the digital world as it does the physical world and obliges women to conform with tradition in their digital presence and men to respect their digital presence.
- 3. Digital safety tools:** There are ample tools available for both citizens and expats living in the UAE, men and women, to report incidents and remain protected online. The authorities take digital crimes very seriously and have strong legislation against it. In comparison to other emirates and on the federal level, it is most serious in Dubai, followed by Abu Dhabi.
- 4. Underreporting:** Despite government initiatives, DVAW incidents seem to remain largely underreported due to women's fear of stigma, leading them to mostly ignore the incidents.

Overall, DVAW is a complex issue requiring an integrated approach. The government's initiatives, supported by robust cybercrime legislation, have laid the foundation for progress in safeguarding women in the digital sphere. However, our findings illuminate the critical need for further actions. Considering the advanced digitized system that the country has implemented for several years, this study provides a point for taking stock of lessons potentially learned for other countries in the region in the face of rapid digitization and technological advancements. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute to the broader conversation around gender-based violence and digital rights in the MENA region.

Based on its findings, this paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders to make the Internet a safer place for women in the UAE and, by extension, all other vulnerable groups. These **recommendations** are as follows:

- 1.** Facilitating data collection and research collaboration in service to victims of DVAW, not only in the UAE but also regionally and globally.
- 2.** Promoting cybersecurity education and best practices for individuals and organizations to protect their digital privacy.
- 3.** Continuously reviewing and modernizing the existing Cybercrime Law to ensure its effectiveness in addressing emerging cyber threats, with specific reference to those committed against women and girls.
- 4.** Creating dedicated support centers equipped to provide counseling, legal aid, and expert digital security assistance tailored to the unique needs of female victims. There is an opportunity for the UAE government to support the establishment and active involvement of civil society organizations with victims of digital violence.
- 5.** Developing partnerships with relevant authorities in other countries to ensure that harassment by perpetrators from outside the UAE is adequately dealt with.

## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced a major transformation in recent years, with technology playing an increasingly significant role in shaping the country's social and economic landscape. The UAE exhibits a significant level of Internet penetration, with 99% of the population reported to have used the Internet in 2019, according to the findings of a survey conducted by Dennis et al.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 93% of the population in the UAE used the Internet on a daily basis in 2021.<sup>6</sup> About 56% preferred Internet browsing on mobile phones while about 42% preferred using laptops and desktops.<sup>7</sup>

In a Google Survey on smartphones' use conducted across 26 countries, the UAE stood out with the highest percentage of residents owning smartphones—61% of all mobile users.<sup>8</sup> The country has made substantial strides in e-government, exemplified by Dubai's government services, which are accessible through websites or apps. The country ranked fourth worldwide in investment in telecommunications services and in the digital adaptation of its legal framework, in the United Nations E-Government Survey, which assesses the e-government development status of all United Nations Member States.<sup>9</sup> The 'Smart City' project also aims to establish free Wi-Fi spots throughout Dubai. In fact, in December 2021, Dubai announced that it was the world's first 100% paperless government.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the UAE ranked 30<sup>th</sup> worldwide in the Network Readiness Index (NRI) in 2023, securing the first place among Arab States. The NRI offers a comprehensive framework for evaluating the influence of Information Communication & Technology (ICT) on societal dynamics and national development. The assessment covers 134 economies, analyzing 58 indicators within four dimensions of digital readiness: technology, people, governance, and impact.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding gender equality, the UAE stands out as a prominent advocate for it within the Gulf region, as evidenced by its high ranking in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum.<sup>12</sup> According to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 2023, the Gender Inequality Index (GII)<sup>13</sup> is a composite metric of gender inequality using three dimensions, namely reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market. It scored the lowest GII value among Arab states, which indicates low inequality between women and men and vice versa. Furthermore, the UAE's dedication to fostering women's inclusion, justice, and security is evidenced by its 22<sup>nd</sup> ranking in the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security's (WPS) Index of 2023, out of 177 countries.<sup>14</sup>

The UAE has laws and regulations in place to address workplace harassment. Labor Law (Federal Law No. 8 of 1980) contains provisions related to workplace conduct, including provisions that prohibit harassment and discrimination based on gender, race, religion, or nationality. The UAE's Penal Code criminalizes various forms of harassment, including sexual harassment, and outlines penalties for offenders. However, specific provisions related to workplace harassment may vary depending on the emirate and the nature of the harassment.

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis E. E., Martin J. D., Hassan F. 2019. *Media use in the Middle East, 2018: A Seven-Nation Survey*. Northwestern University in Qatar.

<sup>6</sup> *Share of Internet usage UAE 2021, by frequency*, Published by Salma Saleh, Jun 16, 2023

<sup>7</sup> *Distribution of internet browsing preference UAE 2021*, Published by Salma Saleh, Jun 16, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> El Sayed & Al., 2015. *Social Changes & Social Media Usage among Emirati Female*. International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design Proceedings (16 - 18 May 2015 Dubai – United Arab Emirates).

<sup>9</sup> Department of Economic & Social Affairs, (2022) "E-Government Survey 2022, The Future of Digital Government", United Nations.

<sup>10</sup> "Hamdan bin Mohammed: Dubai has become the world's first paperless government," Government of Dubai Media Office (11 Dec 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Press release for The NRI 2023 Report, "Trust in a Network Society: A crisis of the digital age?" The Portulans Institute.

<sup>12</sup> *The Global Gender Gap Report 2023*. World Economic Forum 2023.

<sup>13</sup> *Gender Inequality Index | Human Development Reports (undp.org)*

<sup>14</sup> *Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023: UAE*. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security.

The UAE has consistently ranked the highest in terms of gender equality with regards to legal protection compared to other countries in the region. It has been making efforts to make legal reforms for the protection and inclusion of women in recent years. *Women, Business and the Law* data report of the World Bank<sup>15</sup> identifies the UAE as one of the top scoring economies which historically had a large gender gap but has gained the highest annualized growth rates in legal reforms since the year 2000. These reforms include the 2020 revisions to the Personal Status Law, which impacted women's mobility and eliminated the requirement of obedience, as well as amendments to the Federal Labor Law requiring equal pay for equal work.

In terms of digital inclusion, which refers to the female-to-male composite ratio of Internet and mobile users extracted from the International Telecommunication Union's database, the UAE achieved a parity of 1, according to a 2020 McKinsey study on women at work in the Middle East region.<sup>16</sup> This has the potential to significantly boost the presence of women in professional and technical roles as well as future job opportunities, given the implementation of suitable conditions.

Despite this parity, Internet use and online behavior differ between men and women in the UAE as they do elsewhere, and social norms that govern the offline world are often transferred to the online space. Even though it is considered relatively old, the findings of a 2010 study that explored the perceptions of male and female university students in the UAE about the Internet as a tool for socialization were validated to a large extent by the study at hand. The 2010 study showed that men are more inclined to utilize the Internet for social interaction, while women are likely to turn to it for information-seeking purposes.<sup>17</sup> The study attributes this to the notion that men typically enjoy greater freedom to connect and communicate with women online, whereas Emirati women often experience strict societal and family control regarding communicating with men, online or offline. Another key discovery of that study is that, although the Internet has the potential to address social exclusion and gender segregation, it may paradoxically contribute to "reinforcing preexisting norms within newly networked traditional communities."<sup>18</sup>

However, gradually as the UAE becomes increasingly digital, UAE women have also been gaining more courage to participate online, especially since the Internet can provide them with freedoms that they may not have offline. A 2017 study on digital gender divides and e-empowerment in the UAE confirms this. It showed that while the Internet has facilitated communication for both men and women with people outside their social circles, men use the Internet much more than women to communicate with others, especially with strangers, even if they were from the same sex or were colleagues.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the same study showed that when it comes to communication through social media, a substantial number of women (51% on Facebook, 19% on X, and 18% on WhatsApp) indicated that they communicated with individuals disapproved of by their families. In contrast, only a negligible number of men reported doing so (0% Facebook, 2% X, and 5% WhatsApp), underscoring the prevalent gender power dynamics, as men generally do not perceive any prohibition or denial in communicating with individuals disapproved of by their families. The study also revealed that 36% of the sampled men believe that a husband should always supervise his wife's use of social media, compared to only 11% of the sampled women. However, when it

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<sup>15</sup> The information for the legal protection index is derived from the World Bank's *Women, Business, and Law 2019* report p.15: [Women, Business and the Law 2023 \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/publications/women-business-and-law)

<sup>16</sup> Assi, Rima and Marcati, Chiara (2020) *Women at Work: Job opportunities in the Middle East set to double with the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. McKinsey.

<sup>17</sup> Sokol, D., & Sisler, V. 2010. "Socializing on the Internet: Case Study of Internet Use Among University Students in the United Arab Emirates". *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 16

<sup>18</sup> Sokol, D., & Sisler, V. 2010. "Socializing on the Internet: Case Study of Internet Use Among University Students in the United Arab Emirates". *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 16. Page 30

<sup>19</sup> Ben Moussa, Mohamed & Seraphim, Joanna (2017), *Digital gender divides and e-empowerment in the UAE: A critical perspective*, *International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology (IJEDICT)*, 2017, Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 145-161



was the other way around, it was interesting to note that more men agreed that wives should supervise their husbands' social media (53%) than women (47%). The authors explained that the results suggest that men seek control to a greater extent than women due to their relatively greater freedom. In environments characterized by double standards, there is tacit acceptance that women may have more influence within marital relationships but wield less societal power in the public sphere.

Against this backdrop, it is clear that technological advancements may pose new challenges, particularly for women. One of the most pressing issues that has become a global concern is digital violence against women (DVAW). With the fast-evolving nature of technology, women may be vulnerable to DVAW in the MENA region as other women are worldwide.

## Research Questions

This research aims to address the following main questions:

1. To what extent are women in the UAE exposed to DVAW?
2. What are the commonly experienced forms of DVAW in the UAE?
3. If it is widespread, what are the driving forces behind the spread of the phenomenon?
4. What are the reactions of women to incidents of DVAW?
5. What impacts does DVAW have on women, and what support systems are available to them?
6. What solutions are accessible to women to limit DVAW and protect them?
7. What are practical and policy recommendations needed to foster a safe online environment for women and girls?

## Methodology

To comprehensively understand the safety of digital spaces and DVAW in the UAE, if any, this research utilized a mixed-methods approach. First, a desktop search on DVAW in the Arab region and the UAE was conducted, taking into consideration the legal context and available governmental and civil society initiatives of support for DVAW victims. The study also collected data using a quantitative survey with 72 respondents and engaging 11 women from diverse backgrounds, including victims, activists, civil society members, psychologists, and social media influencers, through semi-structured interviews. This is to gather different perspectives and insights into the nature, causes, and consequences of DVAW. Of the 11 interviewees, 3 were Emirati. 6 of the remaining 8 Arab resident interviewees asked to remain anonymous and were thus given fake names.

The survey was disseminated electronically, and responses were collected anonymously in Arabic, with respondents having the option of sharing details if they wished to participate in the interview phase. It consisted of 30 questions, mostly multiple-choice, with open-ended questions to allow respondents to comment. It covered various aspects of the subject, such as common online behaviors and DVAW forms, frequency of use, preferred platforms, identity of perpetrators, reactions to DVAW, the impact it caused, the support needed, and rating of potential solutions. This study focused on female participants aged 18 years and older living in the UAE and not necessarily UAE citizens, who may or may not have experienced digital violence in different forms.

Building on the structure of the surveys, the interviews provided a comprehensive view of the issue, triangulating the data, validating the survey findings while uncovering new insights, and identifying solutions through the reflection of the stakeholders themselves.

## Context of Digital Violence Against Women in the UAE

DVAW is defined by the UN Women<sup>20</sup> as “any act of violence that is committed, assisted or aggravated by the use of information and communication technology (mobile phones, the Internet, social media, computer games, text messaging, email, etc.) against a woman because she is a woman.” According to UN Women, online violence can include cyberbullying, non-consensual sexting, and doxing. Cyberbullying involves sending intimidating or threatening messages, non-consensual sexting involves sending explicit messages or photos without the recipient’s consent, and doxing involves the unsolicited public release of private or identifying information about the victim.

The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), in collaboration with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), has published a report that sheds light on the state of online safety in the UAE. The study, conducted from June 25 to September 2, 2021, revealed key findings, including alarming statistics that 73% of men and 64% of women in the UAE have experienced online harm. Additionally, 44% of the affected women believed that their gender identity played a role in being targeted. Further emphasizing the importance of this research, 57% of the surveyed women reported negative impacts on their mental health due to online harm, with 32% taking social media breaks as a result. These findings lay a critical foundation for a later comparison in this research.<sup>21</sup>

Emirati women were identified as proficient users of X (Twitter), according to Strong and Hareb (2012),<sup>22</sup> with a preference for X over Facebook, primarily due to privacy considerations. The anonymity provided by X, allowed young Emirati women to engage with others online without the need to share personal photos, a practice that was previously more common on Facebook. Both Snapchat and Instagram Stories gained significant popularity among Emiratis, due to the ephemeral nature of their story posts. This ephemerality of content provided young people with a sense of authenticity, as highlighted by Hurley in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

Even though digital platforms are open to everyone and lack organizational control which, one would expect, make them gender-neutral, women tend to participate to a lesser extent. According to a 2020 study on women at work in the Middle East, women tend to be more cautious in online freelance job marketplaces.<sup>24</sup>

The emergence of Emirati women politicians on social media has introduced a fresh backdrop for conversations regarding the role of women in politics and within the Emirati society. Varying backgrounds and life experiences influence how Emirati women perceive and interpret social reality, as demonstrated in studies such as Eroglu et al. (2019)<sup>25</sup> and Whiteoak et al. (2006).<sup>26</sup> In terms of online behavior, women politicians in the UAE present themselves carefully, and their accounts are largely impersonal, as found in a 2022 study on how young Emirati women make sense of Emirati women politicians’ gender and identities

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<sup>20</sup> Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls UN Women official website.

<sup>21</sup> Supporting a Safer Internet, United Arab Emirates Findings (2022), Center for International Governance and the IDRC.

<sup>22</sup> Strong C. S., Hareb H. 2012. “Social media Fashion among Digitally Fluent Arabic Women in the UAE.” *Journal of Middle East Media* 8(1): 1–21.

<sup>23</sup> Hurley Z. 2019. “Imagined Affordances of Instagram and the Fantastical Authenticity of Female Gulf-Arab Social media Influencers.” *Social Media + Society* January–March: 1–19.

<sup>24</sup> Assi, Rima and Marcati, Chiara (2020) *Women at Work: Job opportunities in the Middle East set to double with the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. McKinsey.

<sup>25</sup> Eroglu M. S., Rod M., Barragan S. 2019. “Contextualizing Arab Female Entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates.” *Culture and Organization* 25(5): 317–31.

<sup>26</sup> Whiteoak J. W., Crawford N. G., Mapstone R. H. 2006. “Impact of Gender and Generational Differences in Work Values and Attitudes in an Arab Culture.” *Thunderbird International Business Review* 48(1): 77–91.

on social media.<sup>27</sup> This study showed that when analyzing the profiles of UAE politicians on social media, female politicians were viewed positively. They were described as influential and empowering due to the measures they – and their media persons by extension as it is likely that it is not them personally who write the posts – take to maintain a formal image and protect themselves from receiving potential criticism or violence as a result of their public exposure, considering their positions. However, UAE female politicians were considered symbolic figures who appeared to be somehow disconnected from reality. Younger generations of female UAE social media users expressed a desire for a more genuine portrayal, expressing interest in the everyday lives of women politicians beyond formal events. Participants expressed that many of these leading women have inspiring and amazing personalities that are not carried on to the virtual world because of social restrictions.

Although the study concluded that female politicians were viewed positively on social media, the impact of their online presence remains questionable. Taking into account family expectations and social norms, female politicians may face social and cultural limitations in sharing information on social platforms that are not equally applicable to male politicians who enjoy greater freedom to disclose personal details. There is an unwritten law of self-conduct in public domains, including the Internet, which obliges women, especially those in positions of power, to be more restrained in their expressions and information sharing, as they are in the limelight, with more exposure to potential criticism.

A vivid example of this deep impact of social norms on the digital sphere is the extreme backlash faced by nine Emirati women when a video of them celebrating Emirati Women's Day in September 2022 went viral. The women chose to express their Emirati identity as they understood it rather than adhere to its traditional sense. Many of them wore what could be interpreted as western style clothing with piercings, which was the main trigger for hundreds of thousands of angry commentators.<sup>28</sup> The women, who were somewhat known as influencers on TikTok, received death threats and were harassed extensively online that the creators had to remove the video within hours of posting it.<sup>29</sup>

That said, the UAE has taken several steps to address digital violence as it did on the ground. For instance, the UAE Electronic Government Portal has a dedicated section for Cyber Safety and Digital Security, which not only presents relevant laws and measures for data and digital protection, but also provides an easy and secure way to report incidents.<sup>30</sup>

The Digital Wellbeing Council also launched a support hotline in February 2020 as one of its first initiatives to assist families and youth in their navigation of the digital world: *"The support line provides professional advice from dedicated experts for all members of the family on practical daily situations we face in the digital world."*<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the UAE has a secure intragovernmental data security system called 'FedNet' with a secure digital communication architecture responsible for monitoring online communication and taking necessary actions in case of violations.<sup>32</sup> Other initiatives include 'Cyber Pulse,' which aims to raise public awareness of dubious online activity and the precautions that can be taken to avoid falling victim to ePhishing. The program offers

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<sup>27</sup> Storie, L., & Marschlich, S. (2022). Identity, Social Media, and Politics: How Young Emirati Women Make Sense of Female Politicians in the UAE. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(4), 789-807.

<sup>28</sup> Sandysaul, "There's been a lot of backlash on Twitter from Emiratis about the video that went out on Emirati Women's Day" (29 August 2022), Reddit.

<sup>29</sup> Middle East North Africa Financial Network – Khaleej Times, 6 Sept 2022, UAE: Viral Emirati Women's Day Video Faces Backlash, But It's The Trolls Who Cross The Line.

<sup>30</sup> Cyber safety and digital security page, UAE Electronic Government Portal

<sup>31</sup> Emirates News Agency, *Launching the Digital Wellbeing Support Line*, published on 12 February 2020 (in Arabic).

<sup>32</sup> Federal Network (FedNet), Connected Government

cybersecurity education, including training sessions, seminars, and lectures as well as advice on how community members, especially women and youth, may remain safe online.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps, the most well recognized service is the 'Al-Ameen' app, which was launched in 2003 by the Dubai Police agency in collaboration with the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority (TDRA) of the UAE, receiving reports from citizens, residents, and tourists, to maintain the safety of the community.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, the Abu Dhabi Police has its own service for community safety and stability, known as the 'Aman Service'.<sup>35</sup> However, these two services are not limited to digital crimes and address security incidents in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in general, but the Dubai Police also has an 'E-crime' portal, a self-service platform that enables the general public to confidentially submit and track the progress of complaints related to digital aggressions and cybercrimes, whether they pertain to personal or financial concerns.<sup>36</sup>

The Cyber Blackmail Awareness Campaign, launched by TDRA in 2015, aimed to raise the awareness of school and university students and their parents to ensure their vigilance against potential digital risks.<sup>37</sup> The campaign involved conducting surveys among victims of blackmail to better understand the underlying circumstances and driving motives and inform the development of a comprehensive policy to effectively address and mitigate the impact of blackmail.

In 2019 and at the Federal level, the Attorney General introduced 'My Safe Society,' a small but smart phone-downloadable app that allows the public to report crimes or suspicious activities observed on social networking sites that could potentially undermine national and/or social security, disturb general order, or have adverse effects on public opinions. According to the UAE *Sharik* website, which is a public engagement digital platform encouraging digital participation and feedback on government services, the primary goal of this app is to encourage community engagement and active participation in enhancing security against cybercrimes by facilitating direct communication with the UAE Attorney General's Office.<sup>38</sup>

## Laws and Regulations Addressing DVAW

The UAE functions as a federation that comprises seven emirates. The leaders of these emirates form the Federal Supreme Council, which serves as the nation's governing body. They participate in the election of the president and vice-president every five years.

Historically, cyber safety and digital security have been considered serious issues in the UAE.<sup>39</sup> The UAE was the first country in the region to adopt a law against cybercrimes. In 2012, the Cybercrime Law No. 2, issued in 2006, was updated with Federal Decree-Law No. 5 on Combating Cybercrimes. Enacted since by the UAE Ministry of Justice, the cybercrime law imposes restrictions on various online activities.<sup>40</sup> Prohibited actions include (1) criticizing government officials, religion, or sharing information that could negatively depict an individual or entity; (2) posting photographs of others without their consent; (3) disclosing information belonging to others; (4) sharing information that may subject a person to public animosity; and (5) posting content inconsistent with Emirati morals, such as being un-Islamic or blasphemous, or advocating for sinful

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<sup>33</sup> Emirates News Agency, *GWU launches first Cyber Pulse training course for women, families*, published on 23 June 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Ameen ([alameen.gov.ae](http://alameen.gov.ae))

<sup>35</sup> Al Aman service page at Abu Dhabi Police website.

<sup>36</sup> E-Crime portal by Dubai Police

<sup>37</sup> TDRA, *The UAE TRA launches Cyber Blackmail Awareness Campaign*, published 8 March 2015.

<sup>38</sup> My Safe Society blurb on UAE electronic government portal

<sup>39</sup> Wilkinson, Dino (2022) *UAE updates cybercrime law*. Clyde & Co.

<sup>40</sup> UAE Ministry of Justice. 2012. "Federal Decree-Law no. (5) on Combating Cybercrimes."

activities. The impact of these social media regulations is reflected in an increase in self-censorship, as observed in recent years according to Freedom House (2020).<sup>41</sup>

As part of the UAE's ongoing legal reform program, the country's national cybercrime legislation, which has not been updated since 2012, has been replaced by two recent laws in 2021. The first is the newly enacted Federal Decree-Law No. 34 against rumors and defamation, also known as the 'New Cybercrimes Law.'<sup>42</sup> The second law is Federal Decree-Law 31, which focuses on the Penal Code.

The application of the New Cybercrimes Law, effective from January 2, 2022, has been expanded to encompass the perpetration of cybercrimes that are premeditated, planned, supervised, or funded within the UAE, or those that undermine the interests of the UAE or its citizens and residents. The New Cybercrimes Law also introduces a provision that renders it a criminal offense to unlawfully collect, store, or process the personal data of UAE nationals or residents, in contravention of other relevant laws.

It is worth noting that the criminal penalties prescribed by the New Cybercrimes Law are applicable in addition to any sanctions specified in the data protection law or similar legislations. For instance, Article 6.1 of the New Cybercrime Law confirms that engaging in unauthorized disclosure of personal data may result in imprisonment for a period of up to six months, as well as a fine ranging from AED 20,000 to AED 100,000.

Furthermore, the New Cybercrimes Law expressly prohibits the monitoring, disclosure, and retention of individuals' location data without their consent. This newly recognized privacy breach is now explicitly addressed in the UAE legislation, alongside pre-existing offenses such as the interception of communications without authorization, unauthorized photography, and the dissemination of harmful information pertaining to individuals.<sup>43</sup>

Under UAE legislation, the act of publishing defamatory statements on social media is treated as a criminal offense, equivalent to its publication in traditional media forms, such as newspapers, books, and magazines. However, according to specialized attorneys Susie Abdel-Nabi and Alexandra Lester of Clyde & Co, the repercussions can be more severe, given the accessible and informal nature of social media, which can catch individuals off guard.<sup>44</sup> The experts explain that the risk of harm through social media is argued to be higher than it is through traditional print media due to the immediate and uncontrollable dissemination of content on social media platforms, potentially reaching a broader audience than originally intended.

With a highly sophisticated digital system that is able to trace any post to its source, the UAE is widely known for its strict regulations governing Internet use. Any defamatory remarks posted (anonymously or not) on digital means, encompassing platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, websites, SMS, and email, may lead to criminal charges for defamation under the newly enacted Cybercrimes Law. Article 43 of this law makes it an offense to insult others or attribute incidents to them that may subject them to punishment or contempt by others using computer networks or information technology. Penalties include imprisonment and/or fines ranging from AED 250,000 to AED 500,000.

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<sup>41</sup> Freedom House. 2020. "Freedom on the net 2020: United Arab Emirates."

<sup>42</sup> Text of the law in Arabic.

<sup>43</sup> [www.u.ae/en/resources/laws/cyberlaws](http://www.u.ae/en/resources/laws/cyberlaws)

<sup>44</sup> Abdel-Nabi, Susie & Lester, Alexandra (2022). Defamation and social media in the UAE, revisited. Clyde & Co.

The New Cybercrimes Law also prohibits websites, information network owners, and operators from facilitating legally punishable crimes. Internet service providers, website owners, and administrators of social media platforms storing or providing illegal content may face penalties if they are aware of such content. Website and group administrators can be held accountable for inappropriate posts by members and should implement measures to mitigate this risk.

These updates to the cybercrimes law occurred not only to meet international standards in response to evolving advancements in technology but also in response to the increased traffic and growing digital offenses following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the social media context. Example cyber offense cases include a woman convicted of insulting her uncle via WhatsApp and four individuals sentenced to imprisonment for exchanging insults on Twitter.<sup>45</sup> A similar incident occurred in May 2022, when the prosecution and civil courts ordered a man to pay 35,000 Dirhams for sending indecent messages to a woman and calling her mentally ill via WhatsApp.<sup>46</sup> The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff based on Article No. 282 of the Civil Code.

A few months later, in September 2022, the national newspaper Albyan published a story about a man who was ordered by a family court and a civil court in Abu Dhabi to pay 5000 Dirhams and legal costs to a woman who accused him of causing her emotional and economic damages through a text on WhatsApp that says: *"You are lying to me and manipulating me."*<sup>47</sup>

Such incidents are the reason why the General Attorney carries out regular awareness campaigns and publishes on various social media accounts educational videos on the punishment for insult and defamation using social networks.<sup>48</sup>

## Research Findings

Nearly two-thirds of the female survey respondents (64%) were Arabs residing in the UAE and the remaining one-third (36%) were Emirati nationals. A little less than two-third (62.5%) were from the Emirate of Dubai, fewer were from Abu Dhabi (16.7%) and Sharjah (11%), and the remaining were from Ajman, Fujairah, and Umm Al Quwain.

All respondents were over the age of 18, but the majority were between 18 and 49, and only 12.5% were over 50. Around half were single and one-third were married. The majority of the sample was highly educated with a university degree and above. Their professional backgrounds varied significantly, but while most worked in the private sector, the rest worked in the fields of research, training, or consultation, and only a few worked in the public sector or on their own, and fewer were not currently working.

As for their online engagement, about a quarter reported consistent participation across various online platforms while more than half were engaged in less frequency and intensity, and a few reported minimal or no engagement online. Most women preferred to use their real names and photos (73.6%) when using social media platforms while fewer used their real names without personal photos (15.3%) or adopted a variation of those on various platforms (8.3%).

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Emarat Alyoum, *A WhatsApp message costs a young man 35 thousand dirhams*. Published on 31 May 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Albyan, *A young man was fined 5,000 dirhams because of a message to a girl on WhatsApp*. Published on 21 Sept 2022.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see <https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395303067776>

## Exposure to DVAW: What, Where, by Whom?

Regarding the question of the most used social media platforms in the UAE, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook were the top three favorite platforms among the respondents in this survey, followed by Email, TikTok and LinkedIn, meeting applications (Zoom, Skype, or Google Meet), and then, unexpectedly, Twitter (X) and SMS.

Lara has been a cybersecurity expert working in the IT field for more than 15 years. When interviewed, she confirmed Instagram's popularity in the UAE: *"Instagram is visually appealing and its focus on images and videos resonates well with users who want to showcase their experiences, lifestyles, and creativity. In a culturally diverse and visually rich country like the UAE, this interactive platform provides an ideal outlet for self-expression ... features, such as likes, comments, and direct messaging, which encourage user engagement and foster a sense of community and connection. This makes it the preferred platform for staying in touch with friends and family as well as following news about influencers and celebrities."*

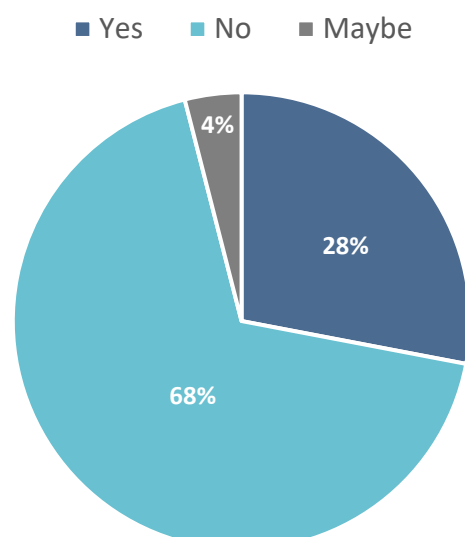
Shahd Alkabi' is a women's rights advocate and the president of the Youth Advisory Council on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the UAE. Her online presence is mostly on Instagram, where she shares content related to arts and opportunities for rising artists. She also uses her social media accounts to talk about sustainable development and youth empowerment in general. She also mentioned that, generally, more men use Snapchat and social media in general in the UAE to post about themselves than women, not because women are afraid to do so, but because they do not feel the need to. *"The truth is that I use social media mostly to be informed on what is going on rather than engage in discussions because I have real-life platforms whether through the meet ups with like-minded peers and friends on a social level or through professional activities and public events here in the UAE,"* said Shahd.

Shahd explained why she preferred real-life platforms to discuss critical issues: *"For me, it is more conducive to discuss issues that I am passionate about with decision makers and stakeholders through events such as COP28, which I participated in to represent civil society. We can achieve more through these channels than for example having a post on X (Twitter previously) seen by a thousand people who are not directly relevant or influential to my cause."*

In terms of the content shared on social media, a few of the respondents to the survey said they published wide-ranging non-personal images or videos on a daily or monthly basis while about a quarter did so weekly, and about half reshared posts, videos, and photos on general topics on a weekly basis; however, one-third shared personal photos or videos on a regular basis. A few, however, preferred to write textual posts about general topics daily, and fewer wrote about personal topics.

As for the question about the extent of exposure to DVAW because of their gender, 20 out of the 72 survey respondents acknowledged that they had experienced it (27.8%, Figure 1). However, only 19 participants answered the remaining survey questions.

**Figure 1: "Have you experienced DVAW?"**



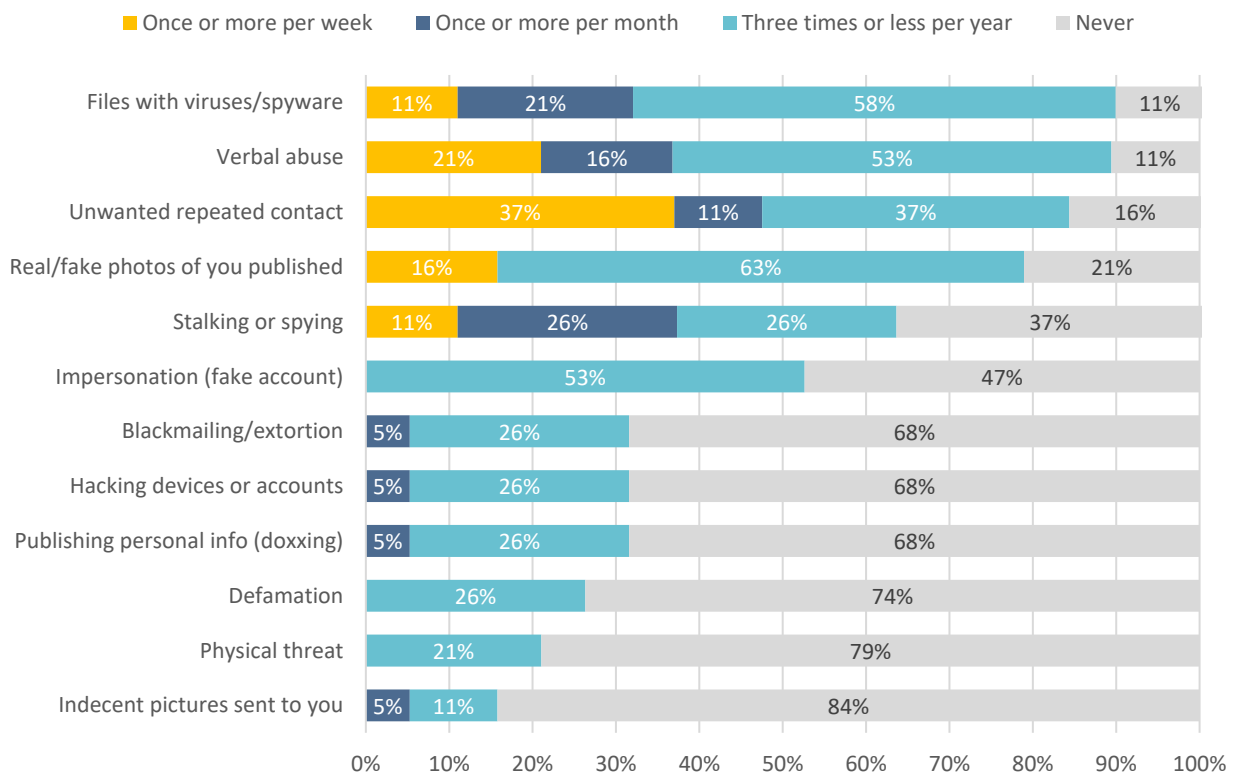
According to Karen, a legal researcher and consultant, this relatively limited number of victims of DVAW in the UAE is due to the increased awareness and support measures provided by authorities. The association between online violence and the proactive actions taken by governing bodies to address this issue cannot be understated: *“In response to the alarming rise of digital violence [globally], various mechanisms have been established in the UAE to facilitate the reporting of incidents and the mitigation of such behavior.”* She added that *“[t]he UAE has taken impactful initiatives to curb the acts of cyberbullying in the nation. Cyberbullying, including threatening, impersonation, and fake accounts, is now termed as a criminal offense.”* Since DVAW perpetrators could currently have a life sentence and a fine varying between Dh 50,000 and Dh 3 million, according to the New Cybercrimes Law, Karen continued that this *“provides a comprehensive legal framework to address the concerns related to the misuse and abuse of digital technologies,”* and it has enhanced the level of protection of women from online harm.

Survey responses indicated that the social media platform where most of the DVAW incidents occurred was Instagram, followed by Facebook or its messenger, WhatsApp, and then equally dating apps and SMS.

In response to the question regarding the form of online violence they experienced, respondents, as depicted in Figure 2, indicated that the two most prevalent forms they had encountered were being repeatedly contacted by individuals they did not wish to communicate with and experiencing verbal abuse. Next, indecent photos sent to them were less frequent followed by being stalked or spied on online. Receiving infected files, doxing, hacking, or extortion were low in prevalence.

When asked to recount incidents of online abuse specifically targeted at them because of their gender, the participants shared several experiences. These incidents ranged from sexist comments and derogatory messages to unsolicited explicit content and threats of harm. Feedback from the women indicated that they regularly get contacted by men who ask for romantic relationships; some even daring to send inappropriate

**Figure 2: "What forms of DVAW were you exposed to?"**





images and videos. As will be explained later in the study, most women ignore such advances as they rationalize such harassment as a reaction to their online behavior. *“Just because I shared a bold picture of me on social media, some guy thought that he could take advantage of that and he started sending me inappropriate pictures of himself, nonstop,”* said one respondent.

Waed, an interviewed victim of DVAW and a resident in the UAE, shared her story involving an individual sending unwanted messages and indecent pictures through WhatsApp and highlighted a significant instance of taking action against DVAW: *“One unknown person keeps [sic] communicating with me and sending me messages and I did not want to be contacted by him. He keeps [sic] repeating the same for so many days.”* Waed said that she had reported him to the police.

The majority of respondents believed that the violence originated from unknown individuals who had fake accounts and fewer respondents thought that DVAW ‘sometimes’ came from relatives or work acquaintances. A similar majority attested to DVAW harm occurring in private on social media platforms, rather than on public pages.

Loyal, a researcher and an activist who lives in the UAE, confirmed the survey findings on this question saying that DVAW often comes from fake accounts because people can hide their identity behind screens. This anonymity feature of social media platforms makes them feel less accountable for their actions, leading to harmful online behavior.

Regarding the sex of the offenders, nearly two-thirds of the respondents (63.2%) confirmed that the aggressors were mostly men, and an equal percentage of 15.8 believed it was equally men and women or that they were not certain about the sex of the aggressor(s). Only 5% mentioned that the offenders were mostly female.

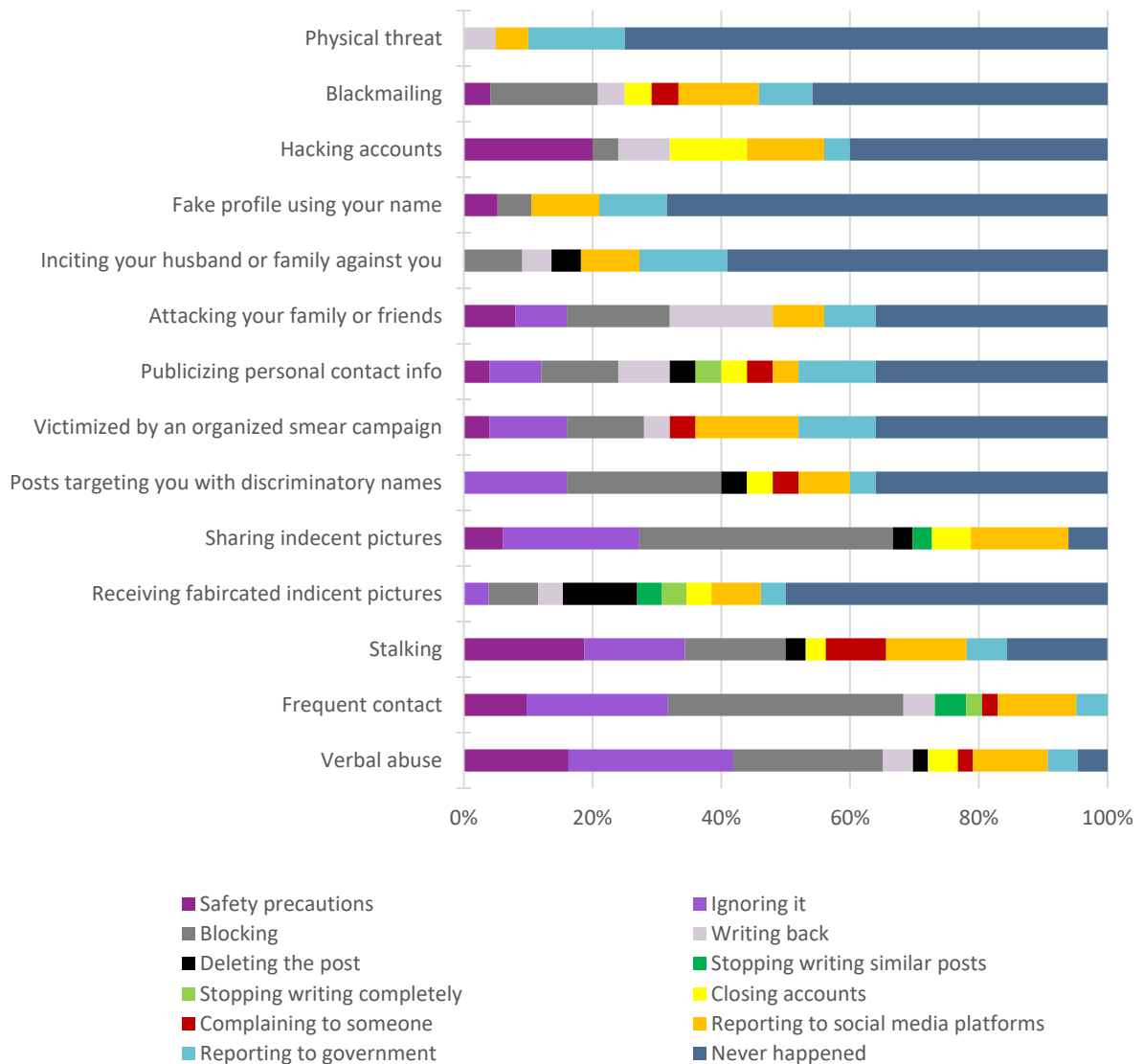
Survey responses to the question about whether the respondents would have been exposed to the same form(s) of digital violence if they were men illustrated power-dynamics of the sexes in the Arab world and the connection between culturally shared perceptions of women as ‘weaker’ or ‘more vulnerable’ or ‘easily targeted’. One respondent commented: *“Absolutely not. The reason I was targeted is because I was feminine and did not want to do sexual things with guys, which made them dislike me and want to isolate or pressure me.”*

## Women’s Reactions, Drivers, and Impacts

When the survey respondents were queried about their reactions to various forms of DVAW they encountered, the most common reaction was ‘blocking the offender.’ It was selected for almost all forms of DVAW but was especially high in response to unwanted repeated contact (36.6%) and receiving offensive photos (39.4%) (Figure 3).

‘Ignoring’ was the second reaction common in the responses (between 8% and 25.6%), mainly to verbal abuse, unwanted contact, stalking, fabricating and sharing personal photos, stalking/spying, organized defamation campaigns, receiving offensive photos, racist or sexist posts, doxing, or attacks on family and friends. The next common reaction was ‘confronting the offender,’ which was selected by 3.9% to 16% of the respondents, particularly when friends and family were attacked or when hacking, verbal abuse, doxing, defamation, or unwanted offensive photos occurred. The least common reaction was ‘complaining to someone’ (9.4%) which was used when exposed to stalking. Also not popular among the participants were ‘ceasing to publish’ and ‘closing the account’, which demonstrates these women’s eagerness to practice equal rights as men in publishing whatever material they wish to share without restriction and expect respect for it in return.

**Figure 3: “Your usual reaction to the following DVAW forms?”**



The reporting patterns indicated some trust in available technical and official assistance. Reporting ‘to the authorities’ was deemed important between 5% and 15% in more serious incidents involving physical threats, impersonation, inciting family, defamation campaigns, doxing, and stalking. Reporting ‘to the platform,’ however, was slightly higher; it was selected by 8% to 16% when repeated unwanted contact or photos, defamation, verbal abuse, stalking, or attacks on family took place.

Deleting original posts was less common, selected only by 11.5% when fabricated photos were published and adjusting account’s privacy settings was used by 4% to 20% mainly when hacking, tracking, or verbal abuse are involved. Although these technical tools, in addition to blocking and reporting, are provided by social media platforms and may seem to be significant coping or defense strategies in the face of digital harm, the results above show the reluctance of the surveyed women to use these options in response to DVAW incidents.

These findings demonstrate that, overall, receiving repeated unwanted contact, sexually offensive photos, or verbal abuse were quite common among the survey sample and that ‘ignoring the incident’ or ‘blocking the abuser’ were the most common responses to DVAW as a means of self-preservation. This was explained by a respondent: *“It’s just easier to block and ignore, pretend as if it never happened to comfort myself,”* while another said: *“When I ignore, the attacker gets bored and stops because I didn’t give him the attention he sought.”*

Even though this finding agrees with the results of the CIGI report,<sup>49</sup> in which 44% of the respondents blocked or muted offenders following an incident of online harm, it shows that DVAW has been normalized and demonstrates how victims attempt to minimize the danger of DVAW incidents, which explains why they are underreported. Such meanings were articulated in one of the interviews with a victim, Sara, as she expressed her concerns: *“Digital violence has become so normalized that individuals, including myself, may not recognize it as a significant issue or may minimize its impact, leading to underreporting. I personally have privacy concerns as well; I don’t want my personal information to become public during the reporting process or the potential investigation leading to a loss of privacy and safety.”*

When asked whether their response would be different if they knew the harasser, 33.3% said ‘yes’ and a similar percentage said they did not know if their reaction would be different while 26.7% said ‘no’ and 6.7% said ‘may be.’ One respondent commented that *“[a]ll the attempts so far were general so I don’t know how I would react if I had known the person.”* Yet, another confirmed that *“knowing the attacker will make reporting him to the authorities easier or if I knew him closely it will make it easy for me to reach out to his parents,”* while others asserted that the reaction *“would have been more aggressive,”* or that they *“would have confronted the abuser and asked him to stop”* and, if he continued they abuse, *“would have reported him to the police.”*

Regarding the survey question on the reason(s) behind the spread of DVAW, several factors that contributed to women’s lack of safety in the digital space in the UAE, as in other Arab countries, were cited by the respondents, including the lack of respect for women by some people, culprits thinking they can get away with it, victims’ reluctance to report because of fear or cultural stigma, and some women’s lack of awareness or technical knowledge regarding online safety and privacy.

Respondents also suggested that social stereotyping of women as weak individuals is one of the main drivers of DVAW, which entails them becoming easy targets of DVAW. Such stereotypes often originate from long-standing societal beliefs that unfairly portray women as irrational and passive, which, according to the respondents, can lead individuals who lack religious motivation, integrity, or awareness to think that, on social media platforms that provide anonymity, they can mistreat women because they have now become easily accessible online, because their personal accounts are public and they overshare, or because women will be acting based on emotions or fear and would not be able to stand up for themselves or seek help. Many women perpetuate these socially shared perceptions by adopting and projecting them in their negative or passive responses to DVAW incidents when they decide to ignore harmful incidents that affected them and to not report them or seek support, or when they self-blame.

There seems to be a common understanding that women are targeted because of Arab male dominated mentality, that utilizes the geographically unbounded aspect of the Internet alluding to the fact that harassment is carried out by men outside the UAE, as also confirmed by interviewees: *“Because she is a woman, and a woman is always exposed to judgment and criticism for how she looks and because society is generally male dominated.”* That said, it was noted that male UAE nationals often fear the cultural

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<sup>49</sup> Supporting a Safer Internet, United Arab Emirates Findings (2022), Center for International Governance and the IDRC. Available at

repercussions of carrying out harassment against women because it is unacceptable culturally and Arab men living in the UAE would fear being deported should they break the law and therefore do not engage in digital violence for the most part.

An Emirati expert in gender and empowering women, who requested to remain anonymous, explained that the existence of digital harm through synchronous or asynchronous social media platforms, such as WhatsApp or games, is the result of rapid and huge advancements in information and communication technologies and their ability to break through geographical and social barriers. In the UAE, she confirmed, the government positively encourages women to work in the public sphere to enable them to take leadership positions in society. *“That is why I do not think that there is anyone in the UAE who would perpetrate violence against women due to their unconventional [leadership] roles, and most likely it is perpetrated to extort her for money or sex, in occasional cases which should be tackled when they occur. This is a global phenomenon that is not exclusive to the UAE,”* she said. She also pointed to the potential that digital harm is mostly initiated from outside the UAE, and that there are regional and international institutions that aim to coordinate efforts between various countries to handle cases where the perpetrator(s) of digital harm reside in a different country.

Laila Hatahet, Program Specialist and UAE Liaison Office for the GCC at UN Women, agreed with the anonymous Emirati gender expert confirming that from her experience at the personal and professional levels, she noticed that UAE nationals in general have high regard for women and would not engage in any form of gender-based harassment. *“The UAE is a traditional society where cultural values are highly respected. Everyone knows everyone, and nationals usually hold themselves at a high level of behavior. Unfortunately, most of the violence comes from outside the UAE targeting locals through phishing techniques for financial gain.”*

Shahd, the youth, women, and sustainable development advocate, said that people in the UAE, especially women, do not have much time to spend on social media and are careful regarding what they say because they know that there are strong laws penalizing harassment. In fact, the law even criminalizes offensive emojis and those of sexual nature. To Shahd, the solution to DVAW goes beyond having strict laws; it is the political will to implement them and maintain a culture that does not tolerate violence against women. *“Because if it was socially acceptable to harass women, be it online or offline, the people would find loopholes in the legal system or those working in the system would be less inclined to enforce it in favor of the women,”* she explained. For example, she said that female social media influencers who enjoy visibility and have made a career do so without any fear of harassment or being subject to violence because they know they have the law and state institutions in their corner.

A link between the spread of DVAW (or lack of it) and technical knowledge or awareness can be established, which underscores its influence in combating and reporting instances of digital violence. This connection may explain why only 27.8% of the survey sample were subjected to it on the UAE’s digital sphere since, according to the UAE gender balance council,<sup>50</sup> the literacy rate in the UAE is high, with 95% of female high-school graduates pursuing further education at tertiary-level institutions, compared to 80% of males. The educated majority of Emirati women may have led to some understanding of responsible and cautious online conduct and the potential risks associated with malicious behavior.

Abrar Mikkawi is an Emirati digital strategist working for more than a decade at one of the largest educational institutions in the UAE and she has been responsible for the institution’s social media platforms and digital communication. Reflecting on women’s online digital behavior in the UAE, Abrar Mikkawi noted

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<sup>50</sup> Facts ([gbc.gov.ae](http://gbc.gov.ae))

that the more educated the woman is, the less she is subjected to digital violence, especially since there are several tools, such as the 'Alamin' app which is available for citizens and expats alike to report any abuse, digital or otherwise. *"I am personally very careful in the way I present myself on social media. My Facebook and Instagram are private, and it is only through LinkedIn that I get some unwanted advances from men targeting me because I am a woman,"* she said.

Loyal confirmed this, mentioning that "[e]ducated individuals tend to be more adept at identifying and avoiding potentially harmful situations online. This heightened awareness acts as a protective buffer, allowing them [women] to swiftly respond to threatening behaviors and, in some cases, sidestep them. By equipping themselves with the knowledge and skills to navigate the digital landscape prudently, educated women are better positioned to safeguard their online presence and mitigate the chances of becoming victims of digital violence."

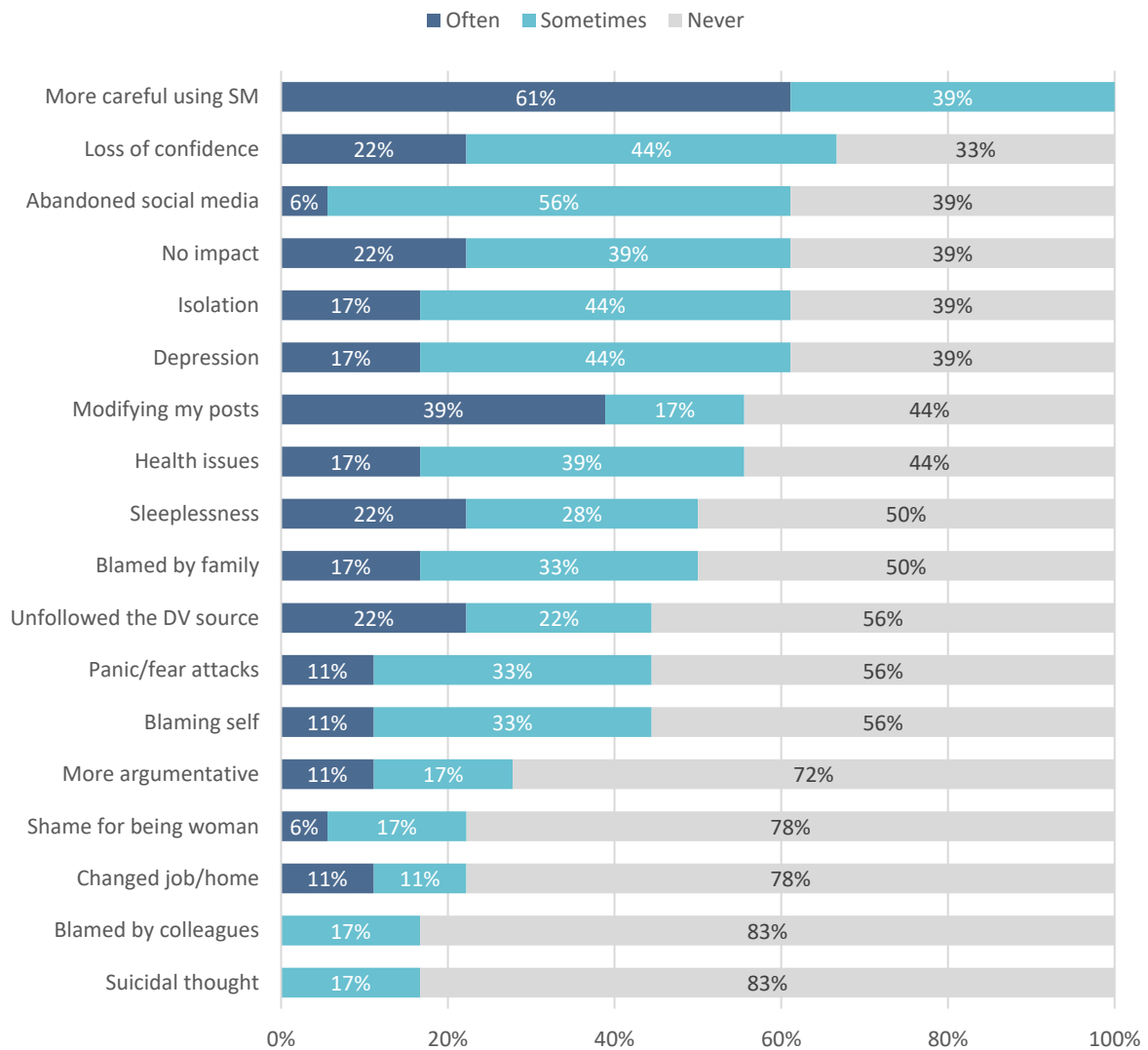
As an expert, Lara considered the connection between safeguarding personal information and reducing DVAW significant: *"Ensuring the security of personal data can act as a shield against potential online violence acts,"* and it *"can reduce the risk of cyberbullying, harassment, and other harmful online actions."* She continued to recommend that women should *"enhance their online safety by being mindful of the data they share,"* which involves limiting the personal details they share on social media.

In essence, then, the lack of privacy in the digital world can make individuals more susceptible to digital violence. Oversharing of personal information, emotions, locations, and experiences online can inadvertently expose individuals to various forms of online abuse because perpetrators may exploit such information to target and extort their victims. Abrar emphasized that the online world is open, and if a woman is not careful with her data, she is likely to be a victim of people from all around the world because of the boundless nature of digital communication. She further raised an important concern: *"Younger girls in the UAE and elsewhere are more vulnerable because of their carelessness in protecting their personal data and photos. They are also less assertive in terms of responding to abusers; this is why it comes down to the families to educate their children in the first instance."*

As for the impact of DVAW on victims, Sara said that her DVAW experience was emotionally draining and distressing. Her overall wellbeing was affected: *"In thinking about the worst instance of digital violence I've encountered, I can confirm that there were psychological, social, and technical effects. It led to a high sense of anxiety, affecting my mental well-being."* These and other impacts from the literature were selected to ask about in the survey and the results, as shown in Figure 4, demonstrate that the effects of DVAW are clearly spread over the chart.

All respondents (100%) became more cautious when using social media. While 61% mentioned that they were not affected by the incident, more than half reported losing confidence, quitting social media use, and experiencing depression and isolation, and changed the way they expressed themselves online and had physical pains because of DVAW. Half the respondents mentioned other common impacts as well: facing blame, experiencing insomnia, and deciding to unfollow the channel from where the abuse originated. 44% started having panic attacks and to self-blame. To a much lesser extent, the respondents reported becoming confrontational online, needing to change living or working location, or feeling ashamed of being a woman. Having suicidal thoughts was rare, although it remains alarming, with 16.7% of the respondents contemplating suicide. Commenting on this question, one respondent added that man hating resulted from DVAW: *"I have a very bad image of men,"* consolidating what another felt: *"anxiety and distrust around men."*

**Figure 4: "How did you respond to DVAW incidents?"**



Some of the above findings were confirmed in the interviews. Sara added that when a woman becomes a target of online harassment or cyberbullying, she frequently experiences a profound sense of isolation. Fearful of further abuse, she withdraws from online and offline social interactions, retreating into a self-imposed solitude that disrupts her sense of connection and belonging. In some cases, victims of online harassment face blame from individuals in their social circles. Moreover, the impact may extend to her friends.

According to Jenny, a psychologist, the effects include "insomnia, panic attacks, severe anxiety, and a sense of humiliation," and they may escalate to extreme levels and cause permanent change of character, leading to distorted self-image and, at times, self-harming behaviors. She suggested that victims who "feel upset, scared, or angry" can manage these emotions: "They can talk to friends or counselors and remind themselves that it's not their fault. It's important to seek support and use healthy coping strategies." However, "[f]riends who may not fully grasp the emotional toll of digital violence might distance themselves from the victim. They may struggle to comprehend the gravity of the situation, potentially diminishing their support or empathy," she said.

## Potential Solutions for DVAW

Regarding the question on the extent of awareness and use of available support systems for victims of DVAW in the UAE, the majority of respondents said they were not aware of the presence of official authorities concerned with receiving reports on DVAW. More than half did not know about the psychological support available to them, and a similar percentage did not know of any legal or technical provisions. Responses to the next question explained these results. A quarter of the remaining respondents mentioned that they did not use many of these options because they did not need them, while fewer said they did not report to authorities or seek technical or legal help because they were afraid to share their information and experience. About 11% thought that reporting to the platform was useful, and a similar percentage described their experience as 'harmful,' but 6% stated that they did not report because they did not trust the platform would help them. Only one respondent knew about her rights as a woman against online harassment and claimed them by reporting the incident to official authorities and making use of psychological and legal support.

When Waed was harassed by unwanted contact on WhatsApp, *"[o]ne challenge has been lack of understanding or responsiveness from online platforms. . . On WhatsApp, I could block him; however, he kept sending me messages and contacting me from other numbers. I could not limit and face this, and I did not find any way from the app to set. Maybe there is a way, but I did not know about it."* Her swift response then was to reach out for assistance through a direct call to the police number (999): *"I reported the incident to the police, and they provided me with the necessary help and support. In fact, I called the UAE police to report the incident, and I was not sure about the response. By [sic] a phone call only, I provided all the info needed and, in the afternoon, I received a call back that everything was solved, and he would no longer contact me. Honestly, I was so happy and surprised at the same time."*

Besides fostering trust in authorities to protect women and their rights, building their self-confidence is essential. Dr. Mariam Ketait, a leading Emirati expert in digital transformation and a respected public figure, said that she had witnessed the evolution of online spaces and platforms since the dawn of the Internet, from professional tools to artistic communities, and advocacy networks. While she did not personally face online violence, she recognized the vulnerabilities young users, particularly girls, might encounter and emphasized the importance of self-confidence and building resilience, explaining how she personally avoids toxic engagements and hate speech online.

Although she acknowledged that current legal frameworks might not explicitly address DVAW specifically due to historical biases, she highlighted the existing tools and support systems that can be utilized, urging individuals to seek help, if needed. She cited positive experiences from using apps, especially 'Alameen' app, to report security risks and invasions of space and using the block and filter tools in many platforms to help DVAW victims who had reached out to her.

Understanding the potential impact of online harm, Mariam encouraged open discussions and community-based education initiatives. By promoting awareness and reminding individuals of their rights, creating a more inclusive and positive online environment for everyone is possible, she affirmed. For this reason, at the personal level, she is actively engaged in the Emirates Safer Internet Society's 'e-safe' program, which teaches children and adolescents practical skills for responsible and safe online engagement, she explained.

Laila Hatahet explained that the UAE has come a long way in terms of the laws and systems set in place to support women and combat violence in general. *"However, I think more needs to be done in terms of raising awareness at the community level, especially among young girls, to know about the tools available for them should they face any kind of harassment online. Also, defining digital violence needs to be clearer to include*

*all types of gender-based violence and it needs to be included within the larger scope of domestic violence legislation."*

The Emirati gender expert supported that "[t]he laws in the UAE are efficient and available for those who wish to use them..., and they treat citizens and non-citizens the same way because the general aim is a safe environment for everybody." The fact that Waed, who was non-Emirati, immediately received the necessary help illustrates this and the responsive nature of UAE authorities in addressing such issues as well as the importance of prompt intervention and the collaborative efforts between legislative bodies, law enforcement agencies, and online platforms to combat DVAW.

Waad further mentioned that her friends were in disbelief when they heard about how authorities handled her case: "Some people don't grasp the severity of the problem or may not consider it a significant issue. All my friends normalize it, but when I got the right support, they were shocked and surprised positively about what happened." Therefore, Waad suggested "creating more awareness about our rights to face the violence and about the measures that can be taken to protect us as women." "When the women see in front of her [sic] a practical way to submit a complaint, next time she [sic] face [sic] a similar case, she [sic] will use it," she said.

In terms of support, most survey respondents reported receiving it mainly from friends (70.5%). Next, more than half of the respondents said they sought support from female members of their families while an approximately similar percentage sought support from male family members. Fewer sought support from social media platforms, colleagues at the workplace, or reported incidents to the police (17.7%). The results illustrate that none of the respondents reached out to civil society organizations, which could provide a window for improvement by establishing more of them and activating their role in society to provide psych-social, technical, or legal assistance to Emirati or non-Emirati victims of DVAW.

When the surveyed women were asked to evaluate the current research's suggested measures to combat DVAW, all recommendations were considered useful. The most useful measures, according to them, were spreading social awareness of the harms of DVAW and providing free technical and legal support circles (100%), followed by educating the public at schools and workplaces about cybersecurity, activating the role of civil society organizations, and providing training for first responders on how to establish sensitive communication with DVAW victims. Criminalizing and penalizing offenders and pressuring digital platforms to change the way they handle DVAW complaints were considered useful or somewhat useful by most respondents.

In the interview results, Waed believed that "[i]ncreasing awareness through campaigns is essential because, for me, I know the [phone] number of the police and I have taken the necessary action; however, many people don't know what to do in a similar case." She also supported holding training programs for women on digital safety and protection "because such programs can empower women to protect themselves online and raise awareness about digital violence. We need more attention to this issue. We think that violence can happen only in real life; however, it is becoming so viral now with the technology [sic] progress."

The UAE gender expert affirmed the availability of existing cybersecurity awareness programs in schools and for parents offered by national and civil organizations. She encouraged their persistence in fostering a culture of reporting aggression and seeking support because "[i]t is impossible not to find help when it is sought." "Breaking the fear of a scandal or of blame needs to be done at the individual level... It is true that the Emirati community is conservative, but it will not be so on the expense of women and girls and, lately, there is an interest in striking a balance between technological advancement and the conservation of Emirati identity," she said. She further suggested that the focal point in awareness campaigns should be encouraging women, especially girls, to adopt smart digital behaviors to protect themselves while interacting with others in the digital sphere, so that they do not share personal information that could put them in vulnerable



positions; in case digital harm occurs, they would know which tools and support apparatuses are available and would trust the service providers to protect their confidentiality.

Lara supported that personal data “*shared using technology, especially in [sic] social media, spreads quickly;*” therefore, awareness campaigns must promote protection of private data as a priority online. Women and digital platforms should consider ways to protect data and privacy from different angles because oversharing can put users at risk and make them more susceptible to online harassment. Lara’s suggestion does not dismiss the fact that women who are inactive online or do not share any personal data are exposed to DVAW by their mere presence on the Internet.

Lara then reiterated the importance of regularly updating privacy settings, utilizing strong and unique passwords, activating two-factor authentication, making use of filtering, blocking, and reporting features for harassers on social media and being selective in accepting friend requests or connections. Moreover, she advised women to be cautious about unfamiliar links and emails to prevent phishing attacks. By adopting these practices, women can create a safer online space and reduce their vulnerability to digital threats.

Jenny recommended that women should pay attention to warning signs suggestive that a DVAW is underway: “*There can be red flags that suggest digital violence might escalate to physical harm or stalking in the real world. These may include repeated threats, attempts to track one's location, or sharing personal information without consent. It is crucial to take such signs seriously and seek help or involve authorities to ensure safety.*”

“*Not only are there tools to protect women online, [sic] there are also consequences for false reporting or fabricated claims. This means that protection goes both ways and the various awareness campaigns especially on WhatsApp educate residents in the UAE on how to stay safe, and how to document evidence of violence and use it to report incidents should they happen,*” Abrar added. She also remarked that governmental establishments are mandated by law to have legal units/departments responsible for protecting their staff/students against any form of violence, including digital violence, adding that official authorities in the UAE take such matters very seriously.

Conserving the local culture in light of being a minority compared to the expats in the UAE has led the government and its people to be on their best behavior as a form of self-preservation and owning the narrative regarding their own values as a people. “*We are not a conservative society regarding women's rights, but we are a society that wants to conserve our culture,*” said Shahd. Regarding the gender power balance in society, which directly affects the spread of VAW, whether online or offline, Shahd said that Emirati women are extraordinarily strong, and they are well respected and protected. “*Empowering women has been an important part of the survival of our ancestors. So, for example, men would go sea diving for months and women would take care of the household for months. This includes taking care of domestic and outdoors responsibilities which resulted in gaining respect from society and reinforced women's role as active rather than passive.*”

Nevertheless, Shahd noted that support structures already exist in the Emirati social system. Legal and security institutions are already well trained to protect women and provide gender responsive services. In addition, there are many women working in the police force. Shahd joked that she had tried to join the police force and was told there is a long waiting list of women who applied before her. She added that the culture of the *Majalis*, or the councils at the local and federal levels, which are an outlet for the residents, whether nationals or expats, allows them to raise their grievances with decision makers and relevant authorities. These councils have been institutionalized based on the traditional norms of resolving disputes and discussing community issues, which are presently made more accessible through online platforms and digital apps.

When the suggested solutions were mentioned to Sara, she responded affirmatively: *“These measures are very important. Criminalizing digital violence can create a safer online environment. I think there is a law in the UAE for criminalization; however, I don’t know what to do and how to apply for complaints, so I used to normalize it, but I believe that conducting awareness campaigns, encouraging family support, and activating educational and civil society roles can help prevent and address digital violence effectively. Providing psychological, technical, legal, and community support, along with training complaint receivers, are crucial steps in protecting women online.”*

Layla, however, does not place the responsibility solely on women and social media platforms and suggests the collaboration of all stakeholders to protect women from DVAW. She suggested the need for a strong stance against DVAW, adopting a comprehensive approach when dealing with DVAW attacks: *“Promoting media literacy, fact-checking, collaboration with digital platforms, and public awareness campaigns are all part of the strategy... Collaboration between psychology, sociology, technology, ethics, communication, law, education, mental health, criminology, cybersecurity, economics, AI, and conflict resolution is a key component of promising multidisciplinary approaches for addressing digital violence. These partnerships may result in complete treatments that take into account societal, technical, legal, and psychological factors. Through research centers and workshops, researchers from many fields may collaborate to create successful solutions to the complexity of cyber violence.”*

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research shows that the UAE is potentially one of the safest countries for women’s online activities, provided that they use the various tools offered to them by the government.

Findings from this study show that just over a quarter of the female survey sample in the UAE have experienced some form of DVAW. The most common forms of DVAW they have been exposed to are receiving repeated unwanted contact, offensive photos, or verbal abuse. DVAW occurs mostly by anonymous male users in private communication, generally on the most popular platform in the UAE: Instagram.

Findings from the interviews indicate that many of the perpetrators reside outside the UAE, as either UAE nationals or residents are wary of the consequences since there are strict laws regulating digital communication. The most common reaction for victims is to ignore the incident or block the user, which contributes to underreporting. The most common impact of DVAW on them is becoming more cautious on digital platforms and changing online behavior. The most sought-after support system is other women from their families, and all interviewees and respondents to the survey support the suggested policy recommendations of extending psychosocial, technical, and legal provisions to support victims and counter DVAW.

Emirati women are still adherent to social norms in the offline world, which govern and restrict their online presence more than they do for men. Therefore, they prefer to avoid triggering attention online and ignore it when it occurs. Existing efforts to protect women from digital harm in the UAE are mainly commended based on the interview results, and the country’s efforts to maintain women’s dignity and conserve its national identity and culture, including respect for women, are mainly highlighted. The study also finds that more can be done to spread awareness of the available laws and tools to encourage women to use them, especially younger and adolescent women.

While this study acknowledges the efforts made by the UAE authorities to combat digital violence in general and the sensitivity of its system in dealing with women victims, it underscores the necessity for continued vigilance in adaptation to the constant advances in technology. A few policy recommendations can be made

that are founded on the experiences and insights of both victims and experts to suggest a roadmap for further progress and support existing national efforts to address the issue of DVAW in the UAE. These include:

### **1. Continuous Improvement of Cybercrime Legislation**

Initially, a clear definition of what DVAW as a cybercrime constitutes. While the cybercrimes law needs to be continuously amended to catch up with the accelerated tempo of technological advancements, especially after the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), specific clauses need to be created that particularly address digital violence directed at women and girls. Social media platforms need to be pressured by governments to take DVAW cases seriously, responding to them and combating them transparently using their tools. First responders, police personnel, and law enforcement authorities require training on the various of forms and impacts of DVAW and how to develop the sensitivities needed to deal with the victims, provided there are more female officers that tackle their cases.

### **2. Legal, technical, and psychosocial support**

A collaboration is needed between the various institutions (familial, educational, research, technical, or legal), government authorities, and civil society organizations to provide victims with free support and consistent follow up. Law enforcement agencies should be informed of clear instructions with procedures and measures to tackle DVAW cases and enabled to act urgently to protect the women victims. The expansion of the role of civil society in the UAE is necessary since people find them less intimidating than the police. To help in providing awareness programs, they will also require institutional support, data, and funding.

### **3. Cross border intelligence**

Rapid communication, mitigation, and response mechanisms to protect women in the UAE digitally must be created to ensure safer Internet for them. Therefore, since most digital harm is coming from outside the country, relations with other nations based on the prevalence of harassment must be fostered, especially regionally, to homogenize cybercrimes laws and penalties and prosecute perpetrators. Additionally, this effort can extend to have police cooperation with the INTERPOL or EUROPOL when needed.

### **4. Public awareness campaigns**

Because establishing deterring laws and penalties is not enough, public awareness campaigns and educational programs are needed. They should be consistently planned and executed to reinforce knowledge of digital safety and responsible digital behavior (plus awareness of potential risks of exposure to digital violence) in addition to spreading awareness about the available support services for victims in schools, universities, and mainstream media. Younger generations, parents, educators, journalists, and legislators should be targeted. Such programs aim to remove social stigma and empower a substantial portion of the community to report digital aggressions, which needs to include cultural initiatives to encourage discussions in the country and provide safe spaces for these discussions. DVAW could also be included as part of the domestic violence campaigns and initiatives.

### **5. Research and data sharing**

There is limited research on digital safety, especially gender based in the UAE. Information sharing is key; it would be helpful to publish gender segregated data about the phenomenon, authorized by a national research or information center. Fostering collaboration among academic researchers, data experts, and government agencies can ensure up-to-date data collection and analysis of the prevalence and impact of DVAW and ways to mitigate it.