

# “I am drowning under the weight of hatred”: The scope and nature of technology-facilitated gender-based violence in Tajikistan



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FIRN is a network of researchers, activists and practitioners from Global South countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. FIRN focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline and to capture fully the fluidity of these spaces and our experiences with them. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights.

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# Abstract

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is an expanding and developing form of violence against women. The scale of TFGBV in Tajikistan is expected to grow as more women gain access to digital forms of communication and expression. TFGBV does not exist in a vacuum and the research explores if and how TFGBV differs from offline violence, the interconnections between the two and how societal and family norms relate to both types of violence against women. The ability of TFGBV to control an overall narrative on gender norms and the behaviour of women is explored. We consider if digital spaces give moral crusaders power to both monitor and control women’s online presence and to give large-scale visibility to women’s offline lives through social media posts. We show how these publications can allow for intimidation, threats and violence with the aim of forcing women to conform to a stereotypical image of who and what a woman from Tajikistan should be. The research further investigates whether teenagers and children are similarly at risk and the extent to which this affects other aspects of their life. Other areas of intersectionality such as disability, ethnicity and location are also considered. This research involved semi-structured interviews with 59 women, focus group discussions with 55 women and an analysis of 182 cases of TFGBV that were identified. It assessed 22 social media posts and 3,885 comments on those posts. Findings show that women are retreating from online life, self-censoring and not discussing sensitive topics around women’s rights. As a result of TFGBV, women have been driven to suicide, they have experienced physical violence, severe mental health issues and fear, have not been able to leave the house, have faced divorce and lost custody of their children, have suffered loss of property and employment, and have had to leave the country. As one woman explained, “These are not just words on a screen. These are real feelings, real pain and suffering.”

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## OVERARCHING PROBLEM

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a widespread and serious problem that impacts women across the globe as individuals, in their interpersonal relationships, in their communities and in their societies.<sup>1</sup> Internationally, levels of offline violence against women have remained largely unchanged over the last 10 years, with one in three women subjected to violence in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, there is a rapid growth in violence against women in digital contexts, particularly through social media, furthered by its scale, speed, ease-of-communication, anonymity and pseudonymity – with the impunity they afford, lack of recourse for victims of violence and insufficient legal, regulatory and policy mechanisms. Online violence against women reproduces the gender power structures, inequality, patriarchal cultural and social norms and harmful masculinities that drive all forms of violence against women.<sup>3</sup>

While there is optimism that expanding digital technology and access to the internet can reduce gender inequality and support sustainable development, there is growing concern that progress towards global gender equality will be reversed if online misogyny is not properly addressed and countered.<sup>4</sup> Social Development Direct states that:

TFGBV has serious and long-lasting impacts for many individuals, communities and wider societies, including a “chilling effect” on democratic participation [and] the normalisation of violent, misogynistic beliefs and behaviours and it is contributing to the rollback of women’s and girls’ rights and advancements in gender equality.<sup>5</sup>

In 2023, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women stated that it was “deeply concerned by the magnitude of various forms of violence, including gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by technology, and the significant physical, sexual, psychological, social, political and economic harm it causes to women and girls.”<sup>6</sup>

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  2. World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women*. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/341337/9789240022256-eng.pdf?sequence=1>
  3. Guterres, A. (2022). *Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. Report of the Secretary-General*. United Nations. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/465/68/pdf/n2246568.pdf>; Global Partnership. (2023). *2023 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/2023-roadmap-for-the-global-partnership-for-action-on-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/>
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  5. Social Development Direct. (2023). Op. cit.
  6. Commission on the Status of Women. (2023). *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*. United Nations. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/n23/081/71/pdf/n2308171.pdf>

## WHAT IS TFGBV?

There are a number of definitions of TFGBV in academic literature and reports published by international organisations.<sup>7</sup> One of the issues is the lack of an internationally accepted definition.<sup>8</sup> UN Women and WHO define it as “any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms.”<sup>9</sup>

This definition accounts for the impacts of TFGBV at the micro, meso and macro levels, and also includes how the internet of things can be used to commit violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

The forms that TFGBV can take include hate speech, image-based abuse, harassment and abuse, stalking and monitoring, device and app control, public disclosure of private information and doxxing, threats of violence, misinformation and disinformation and misogyny linked to radicalisation and violent extremism.<sup>11</sup>

## THE GLOBAL SCALE OF TFGBV

TFGBV is indeed a global phenomenon, with reports of between 16% and 58% of women affected worldwide.<sup>12</sup> One global research found that more than half of the girls and young women surveyed had suffered online violence,<sup>13</sup> while another showed that 38% of women had personal experiences of online violence and 85% reported having witnessed digital violence against other women.<sup>14</sup> Other studies yielded the following findings: 54% of women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have experienced one form of TFGBV;<sup>15</sup> 60% of women internet users had been exposed to online GBV in Arab states;<sup>16</sup> 28% of women respondents suffered online violence in Sub-Saharan Africa;<sup>17</sup> 23% of women

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7. Simonovic, D. (2018). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective*. United Nations. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g18/184/58/pdf/g1818458.pdf>
  8. Guterres, A. (2022). Op. cit.
  9. UN Women & World Health Organization. (2022). *Technology-facilitated Violence against Women: Towards a common definition. Report of the meeting of the Expert Group 15-16 November 2022*. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Expert-Group-Meeting-report-Technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-en.pdf>
  10. UNFPA. (2023). *Preventing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TF GBV): Responding to the 2030 Agenda and “Our Common Agenda” by proactively mitigating technology-facilitated gender-based violence by enhancing product design, data privacy and security, and legal frameworks to hold offenders accountable*. [https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/GDC-Submission\\_UNFPA.pdf](https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/GDC-Submission_UNFPA.pdf)
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  13. Plan International. (2023). *Free to be online?: The State of the World's Girls 2020*. <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SOTWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-EN.pdf>
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  15. UN Women. (2023). *The dark side of digitalization: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/the-dark-side-of-digitalization-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia>
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  17. Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B., & Nabulega, S. (2020). *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets*. Policy. <https://ogbv.policy.org/report.pdf>

surveyed experienced online abuse or harassment in seven developed countries;<sup>18</sup> there is an 88% prevalence rate of online violence against women in the Asia Pacific region;<sup>19</sup> and 41% of U.S. adults have experienced some form of online violence, with severe forms of harassment becoming more common.<sup>20</sup> It is having a “chilling effect” on democratic societies, it is being used by terrorist groups who exploit vulnerabilities and power dynamics in communities and it is exacerbating the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women in general.<sup>21</sup>

Global prevalence leads to global impact. Violence online leads to women self-censoring and restricting their own online activity, to women being concerned that online violence will spiral into offline violence, to women feeling unsafe and suffering mentally and to impacts on their professional lives.<sup>22</sup> There is targeting of women in public life, which in turn impedes their full and equal participation. This is particularly aimed at journalists and politicians.<sup>23</sup>

## LOCALISATION OF THE RESEARCH AREA

The study generally noted that there is a lack of data and geographic focus on evidence related to low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). In particular, there is a lack of studies conducted by researchers from the Global South and community-led research.<sup>24</sup> In an English language literature review of TFGBV, of the more than 2,000 articles assessed none were found that related to Tajikistan.<sup>25</sup>

Our literature review identified one report from UN Women that specifically considered TFGBV in Tajikistan as part of an examination of 12 countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> This report puts the prevalence rate for TFGBV in Tajikistan at 30% of women who are present online, making it the lowest prevalence of the countries studied. Of these women, 26% reported repeated violence, 41% had experienced violence online once and 33% did not know the

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18. Amnesty International. (2017, 20 November). Amnesty reveals alarming impact of online abuse against women. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>
  19. Bansal, V., Rezwan, M., Iyer, M., Leasure, E., Roth, C., Pal, P., & Hinson, L. (2024). A Scoping Review of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries Across Asia. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(1), 463-475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231154614>
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  24. Sheikh, M. M. R., & Rogers, M. M. (2024). Op. cit.; Wilton Park. (2022). *Building a shared agenda on the evidence base for Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse*. <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/building-a-shared-agenda-on-the-evidence-base-for-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/>
  25. Bansal, V., Rezwan, M., Iyer, M., Leasure, E., Roth, C., Pal, P., & Hinson, L. (2024). Op. cit.
  26. UN Women. (2023). Op. cit.

frequency of violence. The report found that most women experienced online abuse via WhatsApp and Instagram. The report listed 11 categories of types of violence. The highest reported types of violence were women who had experienced monitoring of phone calls and messages (20%) and those who had received unwanted or offensive content (19%). There was one category listed under types of violence as “other”, which was the highest category for women in Tajikistan, with 32% of women experiencing this type of violence. No explanation was provided in the report regarding what was included in this category and why the percentage for Tajikistan in this category was much higher than the 10% average for all countries. The report only included one focus group discussion with civil society organisations (CSOs) out of a total of 77 focus groups conducted across all 12 countries. This could reflect a lack of resources and attention being given to countries such as Tajikistan.

Overall, the literature review highlights the need for country-specific research in Tajikistan to fully understand the situation regarding TFGBV, as well as how global power relations and geopolitical contexts impact on knowledge-building and research processes.

## DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

It is easy to assume that the provision of infrastructure that enables universal access to the internet will result in equal access to digital services. A 2021 International Telecommunication Union report indicates that in the least developed countries 76% of the population were covered by a mobile broadband signal.<sup>27</sup> However, only 25% of those populations are online<sup>28</sup> and men are 52% more likely to have online access.<sup>29</sup> In LMICs, women continue to be less likely to own a mobile phone and have access to the internet.<sup>30</sup>

The We Are Social data collection shows that in Tajikistan the percentage of people using the internet increased by 2.8% from January 2023 to January 2024, with a population increase of 1.9% for the same period.<sup>31</sup> Fifty-eight percent of the population remained offline. This could be due to insufficient infrastructure provision, as the GSMA Index gives a score of 90 for 3G coverage and a score of 80 for 4G coverage for Tajikistan in 2022.<sup>32</sup>

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27. International Telecommunication Union. (2021). *Connectivity in the Least Developed Countries: Status report 2021*. [https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/21-00606\\_1e\\_ldc-digital\\_connectivity-rpt\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/21-00606_1e_ldc-digital_connectivity-rpt_e.pdf)
  28. Ibid.
  29. Iglesias, C. (2020, 10 March). The gender gap in internet access: using a women-centred method. <https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/the-gender-gap-in-internet-access-using-a-women-centred-method/>
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  31. Kemp, S. (2024, 23 February). Digital 2024: Tajikistan. *DataReportal*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-tajikistan>
  32. GSMA. (2022). *GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index: Tajikistan*. <https://www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/index.html#year=2022&zonelocode=TJK,TJK&analysisView=TJK>

In the same period there was a 99% year-on-year increase in the number of social media users, with a rough estimate that 15% of the population is using social media. In one study, 70% of participants from Tajikistan had never used social media platforms to access information,<sup>33</sup> again highlighting relatively low levels of usage.

In social media use there is a wide gender gap, with women representing only 24% of users.<sup>34</sup> The gender gap not only exists in social media but also extends to mobile phone ownership and internet use in general, with the 2022 GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index rating gender equality in Tajikistan at 16%.<sup>35</sup> Low use of technology and digital tools in Tajikistan is linked to the restriction of women's access and to control over how women use them.<sup>36</sup> Internationally, there are recognised factors that influence the gender digital divide, including privacy and safety, ownership, awareness, agency and relevance.<sup>37</sup> The gender digital divide in Tajikistan is significant, due to existing social norms and gender stereotypes that extend into control over how women access and use technology. Patriarchal values are embedded within the social norms of Tajikistan, which is closed off in terms of information use, and where the power of shame and honour controls women's lives.<sup>38</sup> One woman comments, "My husband is strict and does not permit me to use the internet."<sup>39</sup>

## STATUS OF WOMEN IN TAJIKISTAN

The positive and negative aspects of technology and its associated use for the perpetration of TFGBV are strongly related to the cultural context of its country of usage.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, digital spaces are shaped by idiosyncrasies of local history and specific manifestations and patriarchal social norms.<sup>41</sup>

In this respect, it is important to consider the historical and current status of women in Tajikistan and how this influences access to technology. Tajikistan ranks 111 out of 146 countries in the latest global equality index.<sup>42</sup> The 2021 World Bank Tajikistan Country Gender Assessment revealed that in 2017 women earned 60% of what men earned.<sup>43</sup>

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33. Khashimov, S., & Wood, C. (2020, 29 September). In conservative Tajikistan, Gen Z activists are using Instagram to fight for feminism. *The Calvert Journal*. <https://www.new-east-archival.org/articles/show/12165/feminism-tajikistan-instagram-internet-activism-post-war-civil-liberties>
34. Kemp, S. (2024, 23 February). Op. cit.
35. GSMA. (2022). Op. cit.
36. Khashimov, S., & Wood, C. (2020). Op. cit.; Dall'Agnola, J. (2022). "Tell Me Sister" – Social Media, a Tool for Women Activists in Tajikistan. *Central Asian Affairs*, 9(1), 119-147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30965/22142290-12340018>
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38. Dall'Agnola, J. (2022). Op. cit.
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42. World Economic Forum. (2023). *Global Gender Gap Report*. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)
43. Rajabov, A., Weber, B., & Seitz, W. H. (2021). *Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment*. World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/874641637562869105/pdf/Tajikistan-Country-Gender-Assessment.pdf>

In Soviet times women were considered as the alternative “surrogate proletariat”<sup>44</sup> and forced unveilings known as *hujum* were undertaken to emancipate women and achieve gender equality.<sup>45</sup> It is generally accepted that during this period a large degree of gender equality was achieved for women in public life, but both Soviet ideals and historic local identities required women to continue focusing on domestic work and child-rearing.<sup>46</sup>

During the Tajikistan civil war that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, families faced huge economic challenges and this is said to have reinforced sexist gender stereotypes and significantly undermined the social and economic status that women had gained in Soviet times.<sup>47</sup> Women are expected to act in conformity with promoted national values, to display proper social behaviour and to appropriately bring up their children.<sup>48</sup>

The literature on gender in Tajikistan paints a complex picture of women’s roles in a society negotiating between deeply rooted traditional norms and the demands of social and economic transformation. While Tajik women continue to occupy traditionally subordinate positions within the family and society, shifts in labour markets, migration patterns and state policies are gradually reshaping those roles. For instance, with the large-scale male outmigration, particularly to Russia, women are increasingly becoming *de facto* heads of households and are more actively involved in decision making and income generation.<sup>49</sup> However, these shifts do not necessarily dismantle patriarchal structures; rather, they often result in a double burden, where women are expected to manage both traditional domestic responsibilities and new economic roles.

In the agricultural sector, rural women have assumed critical responsibilities in farming and community life due to male absence, yet they remain marginalised in access to land and resources.<sup>50</sup> While women’s participation in public life has increased in some areas, their autonomy is still constrained by cultural

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50. Mukhamedova, N., & Wegerich, K. (2018). Op. cit.

expectations and limited institutional support.<sup>51</sup> These post-Soviet gender regimes are reinforcing traditional roles under the guise of national identity and social stability.<sup>52</sup>

Even though women face pressure to conform to dominant heteronormative standards of femininity and purity around the world, such pressure is particularly acute in Central Asian countries.<sup>53</sup> The family model is patrilocal and patrilineal, with hierarchical power relations that give parents the right to control their sons for life, and demands respect for elders.<sup>54</sup> In what is defined as hegemonic femininity,<sup>55</sup> older women become the gatekeepers of traditional gender relations, ensuring that these power dynamics are preserved across multiple generations.<sup>56</sup>

As gatekeepers of traditional gender norms, older women often shape the behaviours and expectations of younger women – including attitudes towards technology use. In contexts such as Tajikistan's, where hegemonic femininity reinforces ideals of modesty, domesticity and obedience, access to and engagement with technology may be discouraged for women, especially when it is perceived as a threat to moral or cultural values. This social regulation can manifest as limiting girls' use of mobile phones, internet access or participation in digital spaces, effectively reproducing digital inequalities across generations. As such, intergenerational transmission of gender norms not only preserves traditional roles but also acts as a subtle barrier to technological empowerment.

## LINKS TO OFFLINE VIOLENCE

It is generally accepted that online violence exists on a continuum with the forms and patterns of offline violence, which are rooted in power, entitlement, control and decision making,<sup>57</sup> and that TFGBV is reproducing existing gender

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57. UN Women. (2022). *Accelerating Efforts to Tackle Online and Technology Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en_0.pdf); UN Women. (2020). Op. cit.; Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K., Harrison, J., & Waisbord, S. (2020). Op. cit.; Guterres, A. (2022). Op. cit.

norms in digital spaces.<sup>58</sup> Domestic violence for many women includes control and abuse through the use of digital tools, and online hate speech provides a means of continuing the societal control of women.<sup>59</sup> The prevalence of offline violence in Tajikistan is illustrated by the 2018 Demographic Health Survey that yielded a spousal violence abuse rate of 31% among “ever-married women” – a seven percentage point increase over the previous five years.<sup>60</sup> It is likely that this number is underreported due to cultural norms. Moreover, this subject is under-studied in Tajikistan, where it is taboo to seek help and there is a general culture of honour and shame.<sup>61</sup> More enlightening is the 2018 report produced under the project “Zindagi Shoista Living with Dignity” in rural Tajikistan, which found that in the 12 months prior to data collection 60% of women had suffered from sexual, physical or emotional abuse, rising to 100% in the 18-24 age group.<sup>62</sup> Women are socialised to believe that violence is an integral part of married life,<sup>63</sup> with nearly three quarters of women in Tajikistan accepting intimate partner violence (IPV) inflicted for one of five reasons: going out without telling her husband, neglecting children, arguing, refusing sex and burning food.<sup>64</sup> Ninety-one percent of women are afraid of their husbands most of the time or some times and 81% of women are subjected to some form of controlling behaviour linked to higher rates of IPV.<sup>65</sup>

The 31% rate of violence against ever-married women aligns with the findings of a UN Women study that indicated a rate of 30% for TFGBV in Tajikistan.<sup>66</sup> However, if other studies provide evidence of higher levels of offline violence in Tajikistan, then this is also likely to be reflected in a higher and more accurate rate of TFGBV. Digital abuse is increasingly recognised as mirroring and amplifying patterns of in-person violence. Research indicates that individuals who experience offline violence are more likely to encounter online harassment, and vice versa. For instance, a study conducted among youth in Central Thailand found significant associations between offline violence and online harassment, suggesting that these forms of abuse are interconnected and may reinforce each other.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, research among university students revealed that 90% of those who experienced online dating violence also reported offline victimisation, highlighting the overlap between digital and physical abuse.<sup>68</sup>

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58. UNFPA. (2024). *An Infographic Guide to Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence (TFGBV)*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/An%20Infographic%20Guide%20to%20TFGBV.pdf>
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63. Haarr, R. N. (2008). Local Justice and Victim Support for Battered Women in Tajikistan. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 32(2), 195-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2008.9678786>
64. Joshi, M., & Childress, S. (2017). Op. cit.
65. Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. (2018). Op. cit.; Chernyak, E. (2018). Op. cit.
66. UN Women. (2023). Op. cit.
67. Ojanen, T. T., Boonmongkon, P., Samakkeekarom, R., Samoh, N., Cholratana, M., & Guadamuz, T. E. (2015). Connections Between Online Harassment and Offline Violence among Youth in Central Thailand. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 44, 159-169. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.001>
68. Jaureguizar, J., Dosal-Santamaria, M., Redondo, I., Wachs, S., & Machimbarrena, J. M. (2024). Online and offline dating violence: same, but different? *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica*, 37(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41155-024-00293-3>

This co-occurrence underscores the need for integrated approaches to address GBV across both online and offline contexts. The European Institute for Gender Equality emphasises that online abuse is not a separate phenomenon but an extension of existing gender-based violence, facilitated by digital technologies.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, a report focusing on women journalists in the UK found a strong link between online threats and offline attacks, particularly stalking, illustrating how digital harassment can escalate into physical danger.<sup>70</sup> These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive strategies that address the full spectrum of GBV, recognising the interconnectedness of online and offline experiences.

Accurate measurement is crucial for all types of violence against women, to ensure the correct responses from government and civil society. Gathering data of on-ground violence against women in Tajikistan is difficult. After the seventh Tajikistan Country Review in February 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) voiced concern over the “lack of systemic data collection on gender violence against women.”<sup>71</sup> If TFGBV is considered as integrally linked to offline violence, data collection needs to be expanded to include TFGBV as well. This is underway internationally. In 2023, the UN Statistical Commission “took note of the need for methodological work to measure technology-facilitated violence against women and existing efforts to address this gap.”<sup>72</sup>

## COMPLEXITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Studies agree that an intersectional perspective should be applied to TFGBV, as it is to offline violence.<sup>73</sup> The most common forms of online violence reported are misinformation and defamation, cyber harassment and hate speech.<sup>74</sup> Women in their diversity suffer from multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Those with intersecting identities, such as women in politics, journalists and women with disabilities, are easily targeted online, with age, ethnicity, class, religion, nationality, immigration status and urban and rural locations also being factors in this sense.<sup>75</sup> Women from traditionally marginalised sections of society are often the target of the most vicious form of hate.<sup>76</sup> In Tajikistan

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69. European Institute for Gender Equality. (2024). *Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work*. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2020-report/when-gender-based-violence-goes-digital>
70. University of Sheffield. (2022, 7 November). New report reveals link between online and offline violence against women journalists. <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/new-report-reveals-link-between-online-and-offline-violence-against-women-journalists>
71. CEDAW. (2024, 20 February). *Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Tajikistan*. United Nations. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/045/64/pdf/n2404564.pdf>
72. UN Statistical Commission. (2023). *Report on the fifty-fourth session (28 February - 3 March 2023)*. United Nations. [https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session\\_54/documents/2023-37-FinalReport-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_54/documents/2023-37-FinalReport-E.pdf)
73. Stern, E., van Der Heijden, I., & Dunkle, K. (2020). How people with disabilities experience programs to prevent intimate partner violence across four countries. *Evaluation and program planning*, 79(101770). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2019.101770>; Crenshaw, K. (2013). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In K. Maschke (Ed.), *Feminist Legal Theories*. Routledge.
74. UN Women. (2020). Op. cit.; The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). Op. cit.
75. Simonovic, D. (2018). Op. cit.; Guterres, A. (2022). Op. cit.
76. Di Meco, L. (2023). *Monetizing misogyny: gendered disinformation and the undermining of women's rights and democracy globally*. #ShePersisted. [https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted\\_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf](https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf)

intersectionality extends to single women, whether divorced, widowed or unmarried, who are seen as sexually available.<sup>77</sup> This applies to women who are already facing additional and amplified discrimination and violence online. However, intersectionality is also related to the factors that prevent women from accessing technology and how that technology is used as a means to extend offline violence to online violence. For example, disability is known to increase the level of offline violence against women in Tajikistan.<sup>78</sup> Further information is required to determine whether the intersectionality that amplifies the risk of offline violence is replicated in TFGBV, and if not, to identify where the differences lie.

## SUMMARY

There is a growing body of both academic research and general reports that attempt to determine the prevalence of TFGBV and its scope. This is, however, hindered by the lack of internationally agreed definitions and methodology and a lack of studies from the Global South and non-English speaking countries.<sup>79</sup> A greater general understanding of the different manifestations of TFGBV and its harmful effects will help in developing effective legislative and policy responses, and regular studies are needed to allow both research, civil society, government and policy to keep up with technological change.<sup>80</sup> In Tajikistan, access to the internet continues to grow and women's digital participation is increasing, but the extension of patriarchal and societal control over women into digital spaces has the potential to limit women's access and result in a rollback of gender equality and women's visibility in public spaces, as well as undermining the personal health and wellbeing of women.

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77. Thibault, H. (2021). "Are You Married?": Gender and Faith in Political Ethnographic Research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 50(3), 395-416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241620986852>

78. International Alert. (2022). *The intersection of disabilities and violence against girls and women in sixteen districts of Tajikistan*. <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/intersection-disabilities-and-violence-against-girls-women-sixteen-districts-tajikistan/>

79. Guterres, A. (2022). Op. cit.; Social Development Direct. (2023). Op cit.; Wilton Park. (2022). Op. cit.

80. UNCTED. (2024). *Civil Society Perspectives: Advancing Accountability for Sexual and Gender Based Violence linked to Terrorism*. United Nations. [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/un\\_cted\\_-\\_cso\\_perspectives\\_on\\_sgbv\\_linked\\_to\\_terrorism\\_-\\_april\\_2024.pdf](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/un_cted_-_cso_perspectives_on_sgbv_linked_to_terrorism_-_april_2024.pdf); UN Women. (2023). Op. cit.



The analysis involved a variety of methods to understand the prevalence, impacts and consequences of TFGV. These methods included online and social media monitoring, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Previous research and publications were also reviewed.

Online and social media monitoring was conducted between the months of June and September 2024. Twenty-two posts with 3,885 comments from Facebook and Instagram were analysed. The posts were on the topics of women's identity, violence against women in the home and in public, women's conduct in public places, women's conduct on social media and women's clothes.

Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Tajikistan were conducted with 20 women. These stakeholders were from the field of human rights activism, mainly working in non-governmental organisations or international donor organisations, and were involved in protecting human rights and women's rights. Of these stakeholders, 45% had been victims of TFGBV themselves, so that the dividing line between their professional opinion and their personal experience was blurred.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with an additional 39 women. Of these women, 74% had personally experienced at least one instance of TFGBV. These interviews were held in person, over video/audio calls and through messaging, with questions and answers in written or voice messages. Interviews were conducted in Tajik, Russian or Uzbek, depending on the interviewee's preference. All interviews were then translated into Russian and English. Interviewees were from three regions of Tajikistan: Sughd, Districts under Republican Subordination, including the capital, Dushanbe, and Khatlon. The geographic scope was not even and it was not designed to represent differences between regions of Tajikistan.

Of the 59 interviewees, 64% had personally experienced TFGBV, 20% stated they had not experienced TFGBV and 15% did not state their personal experience.

This high incidence of TFGBV cannot be applied to the general population. Interviewees were explicitly chosen for their likelihood of encountering TFGBV, and the snowball selection technique also reinforced the bias of finding interviewees who had experienced TFGBV. The breakdown of the employment status of all 59 interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Type of profession	% of interviewees
Own business / employed	31%
Human rights activist	24%
Journalist	9%
Journalist & local politician	3%
Education professional	10%
Arts	9%
Student in higher education	5%
Housewife	3%
Medical professional	3%
Pensioner	3%

Table 1 - Breakdown of interviewees by profession

Focus groups were held in three districts of Tajikistan, all in Sughd oblast: Khujand city, Chorbogh village in Istaravshan district and Krush village in Spitamen district. Of these, the two rural areas were Uzbek-speaking villages. In the focus groups, women with disabilities were also included. There were eight focus groups with 55 women participating in the focus groups. The focus groups met two or three times, depending on the needs and wishes of participants.

## **ETHICS AND DATA LIMITATIONS**

Not all interviewees gave a complete account of their own experience, with some preferring to speak in general terms and some wanting to withhold details of their own experiences. There were cases of interviewees who shared their own experiences before or during the interview process, but did not consent to their inclusion in the research.

One in four people refused to be interviewed, due to concerns of confidentiality, because they did not want to relive the trauma or because they held an official position in government or law enforcement that prevented their participation. Trust was a major issue and this had to do with the research topic. With technology-facilitated violence, control has been lost over personal photos, communication and identity. This consequently means trust has been lost. The individual fears that things considered private and confidential will be exposed. Someone has violated their trust and caused violence, and for that reason, it is very difficult for these women to participate. Since the risks of breach of

anonymity for interviewees were high, no initials, ages or profession were stated when including direct quotes.

Women felt fear. They had deep trauma. They were afraid people would know who they were from their stories. They feared that by participating in the research their abuser would find them again. They were generally fearful and mistrustful of digital communications. They were worried that their phones contained spyware and that someone would somehow find out.

There was one woman who cut short her interview and did not give permission to use it. There is a theory that we can never fully recover from trauma, but instead, we learn to live with it. Revisiting trauma to tell your story can be very painful; some women understood this and, therefore, they only gave very vague details of what had happened to them, with some even refusing to be interviewed. Others agreed to do it, but felt terrible afterwards. One woman had a brain cyst and said that following the interview, she had headaches and felt ill from remembering all the bad things that had happened.

This also affected the researchers. In the most extreme cases of violence, this had a severe impact on the researchers who conducted the interviews. In one case, the interview lasted many hours and the woman shared every photo, message and intimate detail with the researcher. In this case, the researcher was an experienced social worker with a long history of working with women victims of gender-based violence. Even so, after this interview the researcher became physically ill. In focus groups, participants shared information of neighbours, friends and family who had been murdered, committed suicide or experienced severe mental health issues in cases of violence against women. In a number of cases, the life stories shared by the interviewees seriously impacted researchers.

Everyone holds biases and during the research process conflicting information was identified. There were differences in accounts given as personal viewpoints and first-hand descriptions of cases of TFGBV. Interviewees who described their viewpoint stated that something was not happening because they had not seen it. These interviewees may have displayed cognitive bias, where they believed something and subsequently sought evidence to confirm this. In the research, we have highlighted those accounts that given viewpoints that contradict first-hand reports, acknowledging that the personal views of interviewees in some cases contradict the evidence. These contradictions also highlight TFGBV as a nuanced and multi-layered subject.

The issue of reflexivity is recognised with the acknowledgement that the opinions and experiences of researchers may impact their interpretation. In this respect, the analysis focuses on precisely what the data shows and tries to eliminate any bias by acknowledging it.



Through the interviews and the focus groups, a total of 182 cases of TFGBV were identified. Not all these cases included complete information. When retelling their own experiences or the experiences of others, interviewees only gave all the details some of the time. As a result, in the cases where details were not stated, they cannot be analysed as not having occurred. This incomplete data set made correlations harder to assess.

The content of the interviews and focus groups was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which allows for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences. There were no predetermined categories for analysing the results. Instead, categories were created while reading and re-reading the data. The initial themes were identified from the coding, and additional reading of the data was undertaken to ensure data was fully captured with regard to the coding. These themes included the nature, scope and type of experience of TFGBV, with the aim of achieving a better understanding of forms of TFGBV in Tajikistan. Intersectionality and factors such as age, location, profession and the impact of TFGBV on the woman were also considered.

The research shows a high prevalence of TFGBV, with 64% of the women interviewed having personally experienced this type of violence. There are differences in individual risk levels for TFGBV and the prevalence of TFGBV in the research cannot be extended to the population as a whole. Generally, younger women are more at risk, which would match the profile of victims of offline physical violence.<sup>81</sup> There are high levels of intra-family violence in the offline sphere and this is matched in the online sphere, where 54% of cases of violence were linked to intimate partners, former intimate partners and other family members. This is double the prevalence of violence from unknown persons (27% of cases). Domestic violence remains a pervasive and deeply rooted issue in Tajikistan. Estimates suggest that up to 80% of women have experienced some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime. A 2022 UNICEF study revealed that over 40% of respondents believed that beating a woman could be justified under certain circumstances, such as refusing to obey or arguing with her husband.<sup>82</sup> Nearly half of the respondents also considered violence against women a family “private matter”, reflecting societal norms that often hinder intervention.<sup>83</sup>

The prevalence of violence from unknown persons is generally linked to the prevalence of hate speech. In Tajikistan, hate speech is used to control women

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81. World Bank Group. (2021). *Tajikistan: Country Gender Assessment*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/874641637562869105/pdf/Tajikistan-Country-Gender-Assessment.pdf>; International Alert. (2018). Op. cit.
82. UNICEF. (2022). *Short Summary of Baseline / KAPB study. “Spotlight Initiative” to End Violence against Women and Girls*. [https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/Spotlight\\_Baseline\\_-\\_KAPB\\_Summary\\_0.pdf](https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/Spotlight_Baseline_-_KAPB_Summary_0.pdf)
83. Nurmagambetova M. T. (2024, 9 March). Tajikistan’s Epidemic of Domestic Violence Against Women. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/tajikistans-epidemic-of-domestic-violence-against-women>

and enforce conformity with gender norms. In this regard, women who are willing to speak out against gender and social norms are most at risk, particularly those willing to do so online. Many respondents noted organised attacks on women for daring to speak out, with the aim of silencing them. The most common forms of hate speech are insults and humiliations. Women were called “the shame of the family”, “tradition violators” and “shameless”, with their moral character and behaviour questioned. Activists were threatened with physical violence and rape, while slander and false information were used to undermine their reputation. In many cases the desired result was achieved and women self-censored their outputs. In this respect a clear divide was seen between rural and urban areas, with no rural women found to be speaking out online.

Younger women are more at risk of violence, perhaps because they wish to express themselves, in order to find a partner or a general desire to be active online. Or is it that older women are already self-censoring in an effort to protect themselves? While many activists defend women’s rights offline, they are not willing to extend that defence online. Journalists noted that many women had left the profession and those who remain are careful about what they write and have strategies to protect themselves from hate.<sup>84</sup>

## OVERALL NATURE OF TFGBV IN TAJIKISTAN

The 182 cases of TFGBV identified through the interviews and the focus groups revealed two different types of common TFGBV:

1) Harassment and stalking (29% of cases). This was characterised by the actions of one or two people aimed at harming a woman or a child, mainly perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Although it could result in widespread publication of materials and condemnation, it mostly involved a direct personal grievance or blackmail (20% of cases), rather than a reaction to online activity (as is the case with hate speech).

2) Hate speech (25% of cases). This was characterised by a mass online reaction to content posted by the victim and was mainly perpetrated by strangers.

Table 2 gives the full breakdown on the types of violence that were reported. Some interviewees had experienced more than one case of violence, and in some cases more than one type of violence was involved in the same incident. As a result, the totals do not add up to 100%. There were 18 forms of TFGBV identified, highlighting the diversity of threats that women face through digital tools.

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84. Asia-Plus. (2024, 29 April). Media project “By the Rules of uyat”: How journalists from Central Asia talk about violence despite the fear. *Asia-Plus*. <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20250429/media-project-by-the-rules-of-uyat-how-journalists-from-central-asia-talk-about-violence-despite-the-fear>

Type of violence	% of cases
Harassment and stalking	29%
Hate speech	25%
Slander and verbal abuse	23%
Blackmailing	20%
Distribution of harmful images (including threats)	18%
Distribution of intimate images (including threats)	16%
General control of all online communication	14%
Doxxing (including threats)	9%
Location tracking	8%
Hacked account (including attempts)	7%
Receiving unwanted (including sexual) photos	6%
Spyware installed on phone	6%
Receiving unwanted messages	4%
Setting up fake profiles	4%
Deep fakes (including threats)	3%
Unwanted requests for intimate photos	3%
Unwanted filming / photos / CCTV	3%
Grooming	1%

Table 2 - Types of TFGBV

## **CONFORMANCE TO GENDER -BASED NORMS**

The overarching conclusion from the research is that there is a need (or perhaps a desire) among society, the government and individuals for women to conform. Women who do not conform (in varying ways) are in the minority. In every family and in every community, there is a defined view of what a Tajik woman should be. There may be nuances from family to family and between different geographical areas, but there is an expected profile to which women should adhere. This has always been enforced, even during women's liberation in Soviet times, but now technology can greatly assist enforcement efforts. In circumstances that reflect tactics used in Afghanistan and Iran, women are subjected to online shaming, personal defamation, blackmailing and organised attacks, including by the police, to maintain societal order and control.

## **CONTROL IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

Power and power exercised through control is a standard part of family relationships in Tajikistan. Girls are expected to obey their fathers and brothers and once married to obey their husbands and serve their husband's family. This control has now extended into the realm of technology, determining whether women can own phones, have access to the internet and which sites they are allowed to use. Technology thus allows family members to control women's activities, relationships, how they can access news and information, who they can engage with, in short, everything. Nothing is private for women.

## **PERPETRATORS OF TFGBV**

The need for women to conform to societal gender-based norms and the requirement to be submissive and obedient in family relationships are reflected by the perpetrators identified in the research's findings. Table 3 shows the perpetrators of violence. Twenty-seven percent of cases were committed by unknown people, roughly matching the prevalence of hate speech. Fifty-four percent of cases were linked to family relationships of some kind, of which 43% involved current or former intimate partners and the other 11% were related to family violence (including fathers, brothers, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law). Six percent were perpetrated by men seeking unwanted relationships and 13% by contacts linked to work, school and general life.

Perpetrator of violence	% of cases
Unknown	27%
Intimate partner	25%
Former intimate partners	18%
Other family members	11%
Men seeking unwanted relationships	6%
General acquaintances	6%
School (involving either classmates or teachers)	4%
Through business or using professional services	3%

Table 3 - Perpetrators of violence

One interviewee described her husband's reaction when she received a message from one of her former classmates on her Facebook page. This ended up destroying a happy marriage of 17 years. Upon learning about this message, the respondent's husband began to humiliate her, accuse her of wrongdoing, insult her, beat her and sexually abuse her. The woman endured the humiliation for a long time due to a sense of guilt. There were days when she missed work because of the beatings. Her husband took away her phone and forbade her from going to work. The woman could not prove her innocence and eventually filed for divorce. However, after the divorce, her ex-husband continued to torment her. He began to manipulate their children, sending text and WhatsApp messages, forcing their eldest daughter to report her mother's every move. He sent WhatsApp photos of his new wife to their daughter, after which the girl had a nervous breakdown and stopped communicating with her mother.

Another interviewee provided details on how intimate partners use technology to monitor their wives:

I know it's quite common for Viber or WhatsApp to be connected to the desktop, with husbands monitoring their wives' every communication. Women, due to their lack of digital literacy, may not even realise that their messages are being read. For instance, there was a young woman who was texting with her friend and they discussed her previous relationship before marriage. Her husband found out, which led to a major family argument. He beat her severely and she lost the child she was carrying. They divorced five or six months after their wedding. I know of another case where a jealous husband forced his wife to give him the password to her Facebook account, checked all her messages and treated her even more brutally. He beat her and immediately divorced her.

In both these cases online and offline violence were connected.

## HARASSMENT AND STALKING

Intentional and repeated actions characterise harassment and stalking cases. Fifty-four such cases were recorded, accounting for 29% of all cases and making them the largest type of TFGBV. Eleven of these cases were direct experiences reported by interviewees, meaning that 19% of respondents had personally suffered this type of TFGBV. The average age of the women who had been victims of this type of violence was 28, which is lower than the average age of 31 for women who had experienced all kinds of TFGBV. Offline violence was reported in 24% of all harassment and stalking cases, in line with the 25% prevalence reported by women experiencing all types of TFGBV. It should be noted that interviewees were not explicitly asked about offline violence, so that the level is likely to be underreported and is not considered representative of the lived experiences of the interviewees. The location was stated in 19 cases out of 54, with 10 occurring in urban areas and nine in rural areas and small towns, suggesting that this is not a critical factor in harassment. Only seven women (13%) indicated they were particularly active online and just six stated they were bloggers. An active online presence of women was not a contributing factor in this type of TFGBV. Harassment could happen to anyone and it was more likely linked to offline violence.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the perpetrators of harassment and stalking. Intimate partners and former intimate partners account for 52% of all cases.

Perpetrator	% of cases by type of perpetrator
Former intimate partners	30%
Unknown	24%
Intimate partner	22%
Men seeking unwanted relationships	11%
Other family members	7%
School (involving either classmates or teachers)	6%

Table 4 - Cases of harassment and stalking by perpetrator

Intimate partners use technology as a way of controlling their partners. As one interviewee described:

[T]he husband used technology to control his wife. He installed hidden cameras in their house and in their car, and also listened in on her phone calls. Her every action was analysed and condemned, and when she tried to resist, he threatened to post her personal photos on social media to humiliate her in front of family and friends. This woman lived in a state of constant fear, knowing that her every step was under control, and she felt completely helpless. She managed to leave her husband only after she found support from friends and a psychologist.

Another interviewee who works to defend women's rights described another case:

[H]er husband, who returned from abroad, began to harass her, accusing her of infidelity. He demanded access to her social media and phone and then began distributing photos from her personal page, accompanied by insults. These actions dealt a serious blow to her reputation and we helped her through the court to protect her rights and get her husband's accounts blocked.

Former intimate partners are the highest category of perpetrators, accounting for 25% of all cases. In these instances, the man is looking for revenge, to continue to control the woman and/or to continue the violence against her in any way he can. One interviewee described her personal experience:

[M]y image and personal data were published on social media with threats and insults. The stalker was my ex-husband who couldn't accept that we got divorced and I left him. I received a lot of negative comments and I had to change my phone number and social media accounts. My ex-husband, he wanted revenge.

Harassment and stalking by unknown persons account for 24% of all cases, and men seeking unwanted relationships account for 11% of all cases. In another case, there seemed to be no particular motive behind violence from an unknown man. An interviewee recalled:

[A] friend of mine had been receiving abusive and threatening messages from an unknown number for several months. He tried to intimidate her, claiming that he knew where she lived and worked. She tried to ignore these messages, but eventually had to change her phone number and contact cybersecurity specialists.

In one of the most disturbing cases reported in the interviews, a young woman was stalked and harassed after getting her phone repaired. She was told they had intimate photos of her, they threatened her and subjected her to a systematic attack. She said:

[O]ne night, when I was feeling particularly vulnerable, I received a message with a threat: If I didn't meet them, the consequences would be terrible. They sent an address and, under pressure, I went there, hoping I could somehow end it, negotiate. But it was a trap. When I arrived, two men met me, and they began to threaten and mock me. They were cruel, devoid of any compassion. These people enjoyed my fear, taking pleasure in the fact that they had full control over the situation. At that moment, I realised I had entered hell. They didn't just insult and intimidate me; they broke me physically and psychologically, humiliating me so that I would lose faith in myself and my future forever. Every second in that house was unbearable. They used me, took pictures, recording everything on cameras. For them, this was a way to show their superiority and power. I became the object of their cruel games, with no right to protection or resistance.

These photos were then distributed publicly on the internet. There were no requests for money, it was just to have power over a woman.

Across all types of harassment and stalking, the primary methods used by perpetrators are sending abusive messages (35% of cases) and sending harmful photos (30%). These photos are not intimate, but rather pictures that may portray the woman in a derogatory way or with a negative text added to the photo. There are differences in the methods used depending on the type of perpetrator, as shown in Table 5. When intimate partners conduct harassment and stalking, they have an above-average use of abusive messages, abusive photos, blackmail, hacking and total control of women's communications. When considering former intimate partners, there is a broader variety of techniques used. These perpetrators are more likely than average to send unwanted (including sexual) photos, distribute intimate images of the woman and set up fake profiles. Harassment and stalking from unknown perpetrators include abusive messages in 69% of all cases and abusive photos in 46% of all cases. They also have a higher than average incidence of sending or threatening to send intimate images. They are more likely than average to make unwanted requests for intimate photos and they publish personal information (doxxing) twice as much as perpetrators in general.

Type of TFGBV	% of cases for all types of perpetrators	% of cases for intimate partner violence	% of cases for former intimate partner violence	% of cases with an unknown perpetrator
Slander, verbal abuse and unwanted messages	35%	42%	25%	69%
Distribution of harmful images (including threats)	30%	33%	13%	46%
Blackmailing	24%	33%	6%	23%
Receiving unwanted (including sexual) photos	15%	0%	19%	15%
Doxxing (including threats)	13%	8%	13%	31%
Distribution of intimate images (including threats)	11%	8%	13%	15%
Hacked account (including attempts)	11%	17%	6%	0%
Setting up fake profiles	9%	0%	13%	0%
General control of all online communication	7%	17%	0%	8%
Spyware installed on phone	6%	8%	0%	0%
Unwanted requests for intimate photos	6%	0%	0%	8%

Table 5 - Types of TFGBV in cases of harassment and stalking by perpetrator

In cases of harassment and stalking, 19% of the women said they received threats of physical and sexual violence, 35% reported changing how they interacted with social media, 24% removed themselves from social media, 7% changed how they interacted with online communications and 2% sold their phone. Thirty-nine percent of the women reported severe mental health issues as a result of the violence. In seeking help and responding to cases of harassment and stalking, 39% of the women went to the police. Of these women,

67% reported a positive response from the police and 29% reported that the perpetrator was brought to justice. Only 4% sought help from a social media or cyber expert. Nine percent of the women reported seeking help from a family member. Six percent of the women reported being afraid to leave the house, while 13% said they had moved away (including to another country) either temporarily or permanently.

Another interviewee explained how online violence led to physical violence with one woman she knew:

[This was] a woman who an ex-partner was stalking. At first, it started with messages and threats on social media, but soon he started showing up at her house. He hacked into her accounts, threatened her new family and even posted personal photos on the internet. Despite all her efforts to protect herself, including contacting the police and blocking accounts, the threats turned into real physical aggression. One day he attacked her near her house. Fortunately, passers-by were able to intervene and he was arrested. But this incident left a deep mark on her life, and she still cannot feel completely safe, even in her own home.

## **BLACKMAILING**

Although blackmailing only accounted for 20% of all cases, it had some of the most devastating effects on women. Women were blackmailed by family members, work colleagues and business-related individuals and opportunists. In one case, a woman's children accidentally uploaded her intimate photos onto her social media. She saw the post and deleted it within five minutes, but the damage was already done. Someone had saved her photos, posted them and blackmailed her. In order to pay the blackmailer, she sold her flat. In the process, her husband divorced her and she lost custody of her children. She was left with nothing.

There were 37 cases of blackmailing from a sample size of 182 cases of TFGBV. Of these, nine were personal experiences of the women interviewed. The main perpetrators are shown in Table 6, with unknown people and former intimate partners accounting for most blackmail cases. Former and current intimate partners combined accounted for 43% of all blackmail cases. Sixty-eight percent of blackmailers were men, 5% were women and the gender of the rest was not stated. Of those women who reported blackmailing, 12 reported offline violence (30%), which is higher than the 24% reporting level for the whole sample.

Perpetrator	% of blackmail cases by type of perpetrator
Unknown	30%
Former intimate partners	27%
Intimate partner	16%
Men seeking unwanted relationships	8%
School (involving either classmates or teachers)	8%
General acquaintances	5%
Other family members	3%
Through business or using professional services	3%

Table 6 - Blackmail cases by perpetrator

One interviewee described that a friend, “who lives in Dushanbe, once got repeated calls from a young man, who accurately stated her address. He threatened that if she didn’t arrive at a certain place within five minutes, he would distribute her photos, find her wherever she was and rape her.”

The average age of the person being blackmailed was 26 years old, which is notably lower than the average age of 31 for women experiencing all forms of TFGBV. The youngest victim of blackmail was a 14-year-old girl. In 35% of cases, the blackmailing involved daily harassment and stalking and in 41% it included the use of intimate image distribution or the threat of distribution.

Blackmailing for material gain is often disguised as a way of defending public morality and protecting traditional values. One easily transforms into the other. It can be said that the “moral entrepreneurship” of conservative internet stalkers often turns into simple criminal “entrepreneurship”, with no barriers between the two. An interviewee described another case:

[A] young woman faced aggression from a stranger on an online messaging app. It all started when she posted a photo of herself in a swimsuit on her Instagram page. One of her followers, whom she didn’t know personally, began sending her insulting messages, accusing her of being “immoral” and a “disgrace to the nation”. Over time, the messages became more aggressive and threatening: he began blackmailing her, threatening to send these photos to her parents and employer unless she complied with his demands.

According to our research, account hacking as a form of TFGBV is less common than other cybercrimes (since it requires more internet skills), but it still occurs frequently enough to cause alarm. One interviewee reported:

[A] year ago, when I was in Moscow, my Instagram account was hacked and I was blackmailed. They wanted to broadcast my personal information. So I immediately spoke with friends, reconfigured my account and blocked those people. It was obvious they were beginners, but what if they had had more experience? All my documents, photos, videos and other information could have been spread everywhere. My life would have burned up in an instant.

As a result of blackmailing, 46% of women reported severe mental health issues, 14% of the cases resulted in divorce, 11% of the women paid the blackmailer and 5% blocked the blackmailer. Twenty-four percent sought legal advice and 41% went to the police. Of those who went to the police, 80% reported that the police were helpful and 33% reported that the blackmailer was brought to justice. The number of blackmailers brought to justice may be underreported, as there is a notable difference with the percentage of women who were happy with the police response.

## **DISTRIBUTION OF INTIMATE IMAGES**

The distribution of intimate images also includes the threat of distribution. These include real and fake images. There were 29 cases identified, of which seven were the direct experience of the interviewee. The average age of women who had experienced this type of TFGBV was 29.

Table 7 details the breakdown of the perpetrators of intimate image abuse, of which former intimate partners are the main perpetrators, followed by unknown persons.

Perpetrator	Perpetrator type by % of cases
Former intimate partners	48%
Unknown	21%
Intimate partner	14%
Not stated	7%
Men seeking unwanted relationships	3%
Acquaintance	3%
Business-related	3%

Table 7 - Intimate image abuse by perpetrator type

Actual distribution of intimate images made up 59% of all cases, with the other 41% being threats to distribute the pictures. In 94% of cases, these were real photos, with fakes accounting for only 6%. Seven percent of the cases included images made under coercion.

Of women reporting this type of TFGBV, 59% reported severe mental health issues, 20% ran away from their homes or had to move, 10% lost their homes and 10% of the cases resulted in divorce. In only 24% of the cases did the woman said she sought help from the police, which is quite lower than in cases of blackmailing (41%) and harassment and stalking (39%). Of these, only 56% reported that the police were helpful, compared to 80% and 67% for blackmailing and harassment, respectively. This lower reporting level may be due to the sensitivity of the images involved.

## SLANDER AND DEFAMATION

An interviewee reported:

[T]his is common practice. If a woman succeeds, some men may easily feel envy and try to undermine her achievements. In one case, a successful 25-year-old businesswoman became a victim of online bullying by her competitors. She actively maintained an Instagram blog, shared her achievements and talked about her business and motivation. However, her success sparked jealousy among some male competitors who began spreading slander, insults and even false rumours about her personal life online. The bullying lasted for several months and it got to the point where someone posted her home address and intimate photos online, allegedly proving her "immoral behaviour". This caused serious problems for her in

both her family and business. She went to the police, but the investigation was slow and she had to temporarily suspend her activities and delete her social media accounts to avoid further harassment.

Perpetrators can arbitrarily combine personal photos of victims obtained from open sources with defamatory information. A cybersecurity trainer interviewed recounted cases of bullying of schoolgirls active on social media: “Girls suffer mainly because their photos and contact details are posted online, making it appear as if they are offering sexual services.”

Defamation and false story building are common throughout the different types of TFGBV. This gendered disinformation is a structured means of using technology to perpetrate violence against women. Gendered disinformation can include targeted smear campaigns involving the spreading of false accusations that undermine the reputation of women, especially activists, journalists and public figures. It uses stereotypes and creates narratives that question women’s moral character, professionalism and competence. And it results in social exclusion through digital attacks, pressuring women to self-censor or withdraw from public space entirely. This mechanism is especially effective because it uses social prejudices as a weapon. For example, if a woman is accused of “immoral behaviour”, even without evidence, it can destroy her career, personal life and social status.

## **HATE SPEECH**

Forty-five cases of hate speech were identified during the research. Some of the most prominent cases were mentioned by multiple interviewees and these cases were recorded as one. Of the 45 cases, six came from women interviewed as stakeholders, 12 from women interviewed as individuals and 27 were reported as having happened to friends or seen online. First-hand accounts represent 40% of all cases.

In 16 cases, the age of the victim of hate speech was recorded, with the average age being 31, the youngest being 19 and the oldest 44. In 50% of the cases, the location was stated as urban, while in the other cases the location was not stated. There were no cases where rural women were reported to be active online and experienced hate speech. Hate speech is a form of TFGBV where the urban-rural divide does seem to play a role.

Eighty-seven percent of the cases were women with a public profile online. In 44% of the cases, the respondents were identified as bloggers, meaning they regularly posted opinions and views across social media outlets. In 49% of the cases, women received hate speech for posting about issues regarding women’s rights. Thirty-one percent of the cases were related to women not adhering to

social norms. This included posts about their professional life in a profession seen as undesirable. Thirteen percent of the cases were related to comments about their appearance, either their dressing style, the absence of a headscarf or the use of make-up. Twenty-two percent of the attacks included religious motivations and 16% of the cases mentioned organised and systematic attacks on women.

## **HATE SPEECH BY PROFESSION**

The professional activity of women is related to the level of hate speech that they face. The full breakdown of the data is shown in Table 8. Of the nine journalists in the sample, eight had been targets of hate speech. The only journalist who had not been subjected to TFGVB lived in a remote rural area, was not active on social media and only had articles published in print form. Journalists reported that there are subjects they can cover that are seen as safe and do not elicit online attacks. However, any news stories that relate to women's rights and violence against women will immediately provoke hate speech.

Of those women in business or in formal employment, 28% had experienced a case of hate speech. For the women who had experienced hate speech, 85% of such cases had to do with the fact that they had a public profile online and 50% of the cases were related to them promoting ideas that were seen as not conforming to social norms.

In the research sample, 22 women were identified as writers who discussed women's rights in the online sphere. One hundred percent of these women had experienced hate speech. The average age of these women was 32 years old. No rural women were identified. In 45% of the cases, the women who had written about women's rights had received threats of physical harm, sexual abuse and death. In 27% of the cases, the personal information of the woman, which could include her address and place of work, was circulated online. Two women were subjected to physical violence by an unknown attacker as a result of hate speech.

Profession	Prevalence of hate speech by profession
Journalist	89%
Arts	50%
Politician	50%
Medical profession	50%
Human rights activist	33%
Business-related	28%
Higher education student	27%
Education professional	9%
Housewife	0%
Pensioner	0%
School pupil	0%

Table 8 - Prevalence of hate speech by profession

Women journalists are targeted in Tajikistan in a similar manner as they are around the world. However, in Tajikistan violence is particularly targeted at journalists who write about women's issues, women's rights and violence against women and articles that challenge accepted social norms. One interviewee explained, "Well, LGBT, of course, tops the list of hate speech, it's the language of hatred, the aggression is just colossal."

The journalists interviewed described the techniques they use to protect themselves from the impact of online hate. They reported hiding online comments on their work, using the monitoring team in the organisation to delete offensive comments and ignoring the comments. They also mentioned not writing about provocative issues, self-censoring and reducing the content on sensitive issues available in the country. One journalist interviewed said:

I received many negative comments, threats, and humiliating, offensive reviews, but thank God it was all online, and there was no physical impact in real life. I know several female journalists who left the profession because of the hate, threats and harassment. As for me, I developed a kind of immunity.

Although politicians are exposed to hate speech worldwide, the sample size in this research was small, similar to the size of medical workers. For women in the arts, there was a 50% prevalence of hate speech. These women reported that their profession, their appearance and their artistic expressions were not seen by some segments of society as acceptable in terms of conforming to social norms, and for this reason they experienced hate speech.

Human rights activists – which in this sample includes those working for non-governmental organisations and as lawyers in connection with women’s rights and gender-based violence – had a prevalence of 33% for hate speech. This is lower than might be expected for this profession. However, many of these women are not active online in their human rights work. They have already decided to refrain from working in the public online space, a decision that protects them from hate speech. Only nine out of 21 human rights activists (43%) were active online. Moreover, the age profile of human rights activists in the sample was different from the overall age profile of women who had experienced hate speech. Human rights activists were older, with an average age of 43, with the youngest being 30 and the oldest 69 years old.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS**

There are many human rights activists who either have been silenced by violence or self-censor to avoid violence. One woman was active in her personal capacity, creating social media output to promote women’s rights. However, after an orchestrated campaign against her, she became afraid to post anything further online. In the interview she said:

[S]ocial media was a means of self-expression for me, but now it has become a source of fear and stress. Facebook, Instagram, I actively used them to share my work and thoughts about women’s equality. Initially, it brought me joy. I communicated with like-minded people and sincerely believed that my work could improve something. But after my posts about equality caused a wave of hatred, I began to publish less. Threats and insults forced me to close my profiles and restrict access to personal information. I remember after one of my publications about domestic violence, they started writing me to say that people like me should keep quiet. They even threatened to come and do to me what they have done to others. At some point, I realised that these were not just empty words but a real threat, and I became afraid for my life. The internet became a platform for hostile actions: people posted my photos, distorted them, created false accounts to intimidate me and other women who dared to talk about their rights. I felt defenceless and alone in this world of hate. This aggression was especially painful because I always believed that the internet could be a place for support and mutual help. Instead, I found myself in the midst of

bullying and every new message caused me fear and anxiety. Every time I tried to return to my passion, I was seized with fear again. I deleted posts that I once proudly imagined and I no longer felt free. It was excruciating. I looked at my work and couldn't understand how it turned into a source of pain. My blog became faceless, commercial, without content and I lost touch with what was important to me. This is a loss not only of creative freedom, but also of a part of oneself. I dream of rebuilding my platform, but the fear of a repeat situation holds me back.

In other cases, women activists choose not to post on social media in order to protect themselves. One woman who heads a non-governmental organisation working with violence against women and women's rights explained her position:

As a public activist, I use only Facebook out of all the social networks, with a personal page. I am not active in this regard. The organisation has Facebook and Twitter pages, where working moments are posted. They will put more on the pages of the organisation regarding work that they have done with women themselves and where they have been successful. That is, a success stories about women. In this direction, a positive move can be made by giving positive examples. Because in most social networks they will write comments too negatively and everyone will immediately come out against it, they will hate it.

Another head of a non-governmental organisation said, "Personally, I have not encountered such cases, since in my time there was neither the internet nor social networks. Now I also do not pay much attention to comments, since I am no longer of the age to worry about it." In the sphere of human rights, women try to protect themselves and their organisations by staying offline. Younger women who are working as individuals and do speak out are taking serious risks with their personal safety.

## **HATE SPEECH AND BLOGGING**

Blogging, especially by women, is a relatively new phenomenon in Tajikistan. It is appealing to many women because it offers them the opportunity for visibility and for finding their voice and even commercial success. Monetisation of social media in Tajikistan through official payments from Instagram and YouTube is not common, as the function for monetisation is not available in Tajikistan. Instead social media users build up followers and then get paid for adverts and content from local businesses. Women bloggers strive to attract attention to their accounts by any means, including posting photos with obvious erotic content. Many lack a well thought-out strategy for promoting their blogs and do not fully understand the dangers they may face online. According to one expert interviewed, "Amateur bloggers who sometimes post provocative, sexually

charged videos and images for the sake of hype, become easy prey for stalkers, attracting the wrong kind of attention and comments that they did not anticipate.” In this case, as with many other online actions, women have to make decisions on how to balance their personal safety online and their desire and right for freedom of expression. The interviewee explained:

[W]hen hate escalates on social media, it generates a lot of unhealthy interest. Humiliating comments and insults are read by neighbours, relatives, colleagues and classmates. It is a severe psychological shock for the victim. This can mentally destroy a woman, pushing her into deep depression. Insults can ruin a reputation in seconds, destroy a business or break up a marriage. The consequences can be suicide or divorce.

In Tajikistan society and the state combine to enforce gender norms and traditional, modest behaviour for women. There are situations where women trying to draw attention to themselves as bloggers may also become the target of police. As one interviewee explained, “Cases of bloggers being detained by the police for indecent behaviour and posts have become more frequent. Their photos are published in police reports. Journalists are also guilty of this: they freely publish photos of women and children in articles without their consent.”

In one incident the official Instagram account of the police in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, reported the detention of a young woman with the following reasoning:

M.A., a resident of M. district, was detained for regularly distributing immoral video clips. The above-mentioned individual opened her Instagram account and used obscene language that promoted indecency, thus tarnishing the image of women and mothers. Such behaviour could lead to the moral deterioration of youth. Considering that she has an underage child, the court imposed an administrative fine.

The report then reveals her full name, year of birth and district of residence, along with her photographs. This was routine practice between the months of June and September 2024. In social media comments, many local people approved of such police action and shared the official viewpoint that this behaviour is immoral and sets a bad example for young people.

In June 2024, for almost a week, social media in Tajikistan was filled with discussions about a short video published on Instagram by the well-known blogger Ruzievaa<sup>1</sup>.<sup>85</sup> This short, simple clip – a little over 30 seconds long –

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85. <https://fb.watch/uKg3xMAqkS>

features nine young women saying just two phrases each: “I am a Tajik woman and I run a business... I box... I am single and have never been married... I freely express my opinion... I do not do housework or cooking... I work as a model... I am a blogger... I freely express my opinion... I dress as I want.” This small manifestation of the right of Tajik girls to independently choose their lifestyle sparked a storm of reactions and lengthy discussions on Facebook and Instagram.

The post had over 25,000 views and more than 2,500 comments in just the first five days. Of these, 65% were condemning comments about disregarding traditions, culture and the native language of Tajikistan, 21% were negative comments containing threats and insults (hate speech) and 14% were neutral or supportive.

The overwhelming majority of the comments (77%) were made by men, while only 23% were from women, the very group the video seemed to address. More than half of the comments were negative or critical, including comments from women. This is very indicative of the patriarchal machinery that reproduces its values regarding the oppression of women. The primary source of dissatisfaction was that the women in the video were proposing unconventional lifestyles that differed from those expected in traditional society. Comments included “True Tajiks do not behave like that,” “So what if they’re Tajik? Pride comes not from dressing freely, but from respecting their nation, language and national mentality,” “Why display such promiscuity?” “Where is Tajik culture? Where is their upbringing?” “I am Tajik, and I know you are tarnishing the reputation of other women,” and so on. Another common argument in condemning comments was related to the fact that the video was recorded in Russian. Other respondents also stated that they had received abuse for speaking in Russian or having Russian ethnicity. This is again seen as challenging the societal expectation of who and what a woman from Tajikistan should be.

## **IMPACT OF HATE SPEECH**

Not everyone was similarly affected by hate speech. Thirty-two percent of the women felt supported by their families. The same percentage went to the police, with 71% obtaining a conviction against the perpetrator. By contrast, 27% reported severe and long-term mental health issues as a result. One woman went into hiding, another was afraid to leave the house and three women moved to a different town or country. Five women reported that their friends and family condemned them. One woman interviewed said, “I am drowning under the weight of hatred.” Another interviewee said, “I want people to understand that cyber violence is not just words on a screen. These are real feelings, real pain and suffering.” A third interviewee said, “I dream of a world where women can freely express their thoughts without fear of violence.”

## PROFILE OF TFGBV AGAINST CHILDREN

There were 12 cases of TFGBV against girls reported in the research, accounting for 7% of all cases. No direct experiences were reported, as the research did not work with minors. The 12 cases came from five different interviewees. The picture for children and teenagers is quite complicated. In interviews, respondents stated that this was not an issue among children in Tajikistan. One interviewee stated:

[F]irst, there aren't many girls among social media users: they are simply forbidden from having their own accounts. Second, any deviation is categorically condemned and society does not tolerate it. Girls under 16 and older women in the role of wives and mothers are less likely to be attacked online or face violence in general. Many parents forbid their daughters from having social media accounts. There are a lot of restrictions on girls; fathers and brothers prohibit social media, controlling their activity and forbidding them from posting photos.

Many interviewees stated that girls were not at risk of TFGBV, as they did not have phones or access to the internet and were highly controlled in their daily lives by their fathers and brothers.

However, the cases that are reported here reflect that violence against children exists. It is a sensitive subject. Cases are not widely known and reported and those without first-hand experience know very little about the subject. It is assumed that girls in Tajikistan are not sexually active due to societal expectations, but one of the 12 cases included in this research concerned a girl who had become pregnant. In one focus group, the case of an 11-year-old girl who had been raped and became pregnant was mentioned.

The age profile of the girls is shown in Table 9, with a median age of 16. The perpetrators of violence shown in Table 10 are relatively mixed, with violence perpetrated by unknown persons, in school settings, in the family and by boys and men in intimate partner relationships (as official boyfriends but not necessarily sexual partners) and boys and men seeking relationships.

Age	14	15	16	17	Not stated
% of cases	8%	8%	42%	17%	25%

Table 9 - Age profile of cases of TFGBV against girls

Perpetrator	Unknown	School setting	Family	Intimate partner / official boyfriend	Seeking relationship
% of cases	33%	25%	17%	17%	8%

Table 10 - Profile of perpetrators of TFGBV against girls

Violence in the school setting accounted for 25% of cases against children. One mother interviewed stated, "Recently, I discovered a private WhatsApp group my high school daughter was part of, for chatting with classmates. I was horrified by the level and content of communication between them; it was full of profanity, insults and the sharing of inappropriate videos and photos.

School conflicts also periodically lead to severe cyberbullying. One of the human rights activists interviewed provided an example:

[O]nce we were contacted by the family of a 15-year-old girl from a suburban area. The girl became a victim of cyberbullying in a popular social network. She had a conflict with several classmates, and they started posting false, humiliating posts about her, spreading her personal photos with offensive comments. However, the situation worsened when one of the classmates gained access to her private messages and began blackmailing her, threatening to reveal confidential information unless she complied with his demands. The girl experienced severe psychological stress, was depressed, and feared reporting this to her parents or teachers.

Violence against girls from fathers is common among both children and teenagers. This is another area where offline and online violence are linked. An interviewee described the following:

[I]n a small village, a 16-year-old girl became a victim of domestic violence from her father. He was strict and controlled his daughter's every step and when he found out she was communicating with a boy through messaging apps, he began beating and verbally abusing her, calling her "a disgrace to the family". The girl tried to find support from relatives, but they sided with her father, believing that he was right and that she had indeed acted wrongly by breaking family rules. Even the neighbours supported the father, considering his actions justified as part of "disciplining". The girl felt completely isolated and helpless. This story ended tragically: the girl ran away from home but was found a few weeks later in a severely weakened state. Her health had been seriously compromised.

Despite suggestions that sexual violence against girls does not exist, this was not supported by the research. One case of grooming was identified, where an interviewee described the following situation:

A 14-year-old girl was exposed to threats and control from an adult man who made her send him private photos through a messaging app. The man initially pretended to be her peer in order to start a virtual relationship with her, then demanded increasingly revealing photos, threatening disclosure and violence if she failed to comply with his demands. The girl hid the situation from her parents for a long time, feeling great fear and guilt.

In another case, a girl was tricked into sending intimate photos to someone whom she thought was a doctor.

## **PROFILE OF TFGBV AGAINST STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The research includes 11 cases where students were found to be victims of TFGBV, representing 6% of all cases of TFGBV identified. Of these, three cases were personal experiences of the interviewees and eight cases were recounted as the experience of others. The victims ranged in ages from 18 to 23 years old, with a mean age of 20.5 years. In 36% of these cases, the woman was never married, in 9% she was divorced and in 55% the marital status was not stated.

The students did not report being particularly active online, with only 18% saying they had their own personal blog. Thirty-six percent reported suffering offline violence, with 75% of this violence coming from their father and 25% from unknown stalkers. This offline violence prevalence is higher than the 25% prevalence rate for the whole sample. This could represent a higher level of violence or it could reflect a greater openness to talk about violence. The respondents were not specifically asked about instances of offline violence and it was only recorded if they mentioned it.

In four cases (36%), the women had faced violence from more than one perpetrator. In total, 18 perpetrators were identified from the 11 cases. Women students in higher education faced a wide range of violence, as shown in Table 11. Thirty-six percent of these women reported violence from unknown persons and 36% reported violence from men seeking unwanted relationships. The next most common categories were former intimate partners, other family members and intimate partners (including official boyfriends and relationships without sexual contact). This spread of different perpetrators is far more even than in other subsets of the data, suggesting that these women in higher education are facing a broader spectrum of violence than other subsets.

Perpetrator type	% of cases involving this perpetrator
Unknown person	36%
Men seeking unwanted relationships	36%
Former intimate partners	27%
Other family member	27%
Intimate partner	27%
Acquaintance (including classmates)	9%

Table 11 - TFGBV cases against students by perpetrator type

As might be expected with a wider range of perpetrators, the types of TFGBV that were experienced by students was also much greater and evenly spread than in other subsets. Table 12 shows the prevalence of different types of violence.

Type of TFGBV	% of cases reported
Slander, verbal abuse and unwanted messages	45%
Harassment and stalking	45%
Distribution of harmful images (including threats)	36%
Blackmailing	27%
General control of all online communication	27%
Hate speech	27%
Threats of doxxing	18%
Distribution of intimate images (including threats)	18%
Unwanted requests for intimate photos	18%
Receiving unwanted (including sexual) photos	9%
Setting up fake profiles	9%
Spyware installed on phone	9%
Deep fakes (including threats)	9%
Unwanted location tracking	9%

Table 12 - Type of TFGBV against students

Fourteen different types of TFGBV were reported by 11 women and on average each woman experienced three different types of violence. Harassment and stalking and abusive messages were the most commonly reported types of violence, both identified in 45% of all cases. Students had harmful images distributed (36%), were blackmailed (27%), experienced hate speech (27%) and had online communications controlled by others (27%).

Among this sub-group, the number of women who said they sought help is much lower than in other sub-groups. This could be due to them not feeling confident about receiving support from others or to the interviewees not relaying the steps they took to seek help. While 36% of respondents mentioned serious mental health issues as a result of the violence, 82% of respondents included details that indicated a serious impact on their life. These impacts included divorce, loss of their home, removing themselves from online spaces, threats of physical violence, actual physical violence, self-isolation, fear and condemnation from friends and family. Only 18% went to the police. Only 18% got help from a family member. Only 27% reported feeling supported.

Boyfriends are also using TFGBV to control girls in a similar way to how husbands behave towards their wives. It illustrates how social constructions of masculine gender roles are also exhibited in teenage boys. An interviewee explained:

[I]n the youth environment, sexting is somewhat normalised. They do not think that sending intimate photos to each other is something out of the ordinary. As a result, this creates the risk of being subjected to blackmail or extortion. I know of girls committing suicide because they were blackmailed in this way. It starts as a romantic relationship, where young men demand certain photos to prove love and affection. And after some time, when the romance fades and the relationship starts to fall apart, this becomes a way to keep someone "on the hook", again as a means of control. Or it turns into extortion, demanding money in exchange for silence, to avoid having those photos posted somewhere.

This reflects the trend in general blackmailing, where it can be done for money or control.

Another interviewee explained:

[I]n one case, an 18-year-old girl, a student from a large city, became a victim of online harassment. Her ex-boyfriend, after she had broken up with him, began publishing her private photos and messages online, accompanied by insulting comments. His goal was to humiliate her and force her to return to him. The situation worsened when many mutual friends and classmates of the girl sided with her ex-boyfriend, believing she had

acted wrongly by ending the relationship. The girl faced not only online bullying but also real-life shunning. People began avoiding and judging her, and she lost many friends. Her parents also reacted painfully, blaming her for being “reckless” and “indiscreet”. The story ended with the girl being forced to transfer to another university and move to a different city to start fresh. This left a deep scar on her psychological state and she suffered from depression and isolation for a long time. Although the situation was never resolved legally, she chose to distance herself from those who bullied her.

Teenagers are in a stage of transformation in terms of control. They are being subjected to control from their fathers and brothers, while at the same time they are exploring relationships and looking for long-term partners. Students in higher education had a much higher incidence of offline violence than other subsets and experienced more types for TFGBV, more often and with multiple and diverse perpetrators.

The research showed that teenagers are less likely to ask for help, from either authorities or family members. This leaves them very vulnerable. One girl was being bullied at school and that bullying then moved online. An interviewee described the situation:

[T]hey created fake accounts, posting compromising photos under her name, severely damaging her reputation at school. The girl felt increasingly isolated and many of her friends turned away from her. Her parents noticed changes in her behaviour, but the girl denied anything was wrong. She feared that seeking help would only make things worse. Eventually, the emotional strain became unbearable, and the girl tragically took her own life.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY**

The research has highlighted three main areas of TFGBV: (1) online violence that is a continuation of offline violence; (2) hate speech against prominent women, women discussing women’s rights and women challenging the narrative of a stereotypical Tajik woman; and (3) online violence from strangers that can happen to anyone.

Within these three areas we have seen that age is an important factor in intersectionality, with students and young women particularly affected. We have discussed the overlap of controlling behaviour by men, as young women marry and move from their family to that of their husbands, and a desire by younger women to use technology as a means of expression. We have seen that older women are more likely to self-censor and to post less public information online.

In our focus groups that included women with disabilities, we had in-depth discussions on the interconnection between disability and TFGBV. One woman with a disability described being contacted online by a stranger who was demanding money. Another participant recounted the experience of one disabled woman who was deceived online. She trusted a man, became pregnant with his child out of wedlock and then attempted suicide. The focus groups highlighted as a positive aspect that women with a disability are able to meet potential husbands through online chats, where they can hide their disability while they build a relationship. However, participants were concerned that eventually the woman's disability would be discovered and she could be humiliated and made to feel ashamed. Most participants in the focus groups felt that women with disabilities were more susceptible to TFGBV, as these women are seen by society as more trusting. Most communities thought that these women needed protection online. However, the women with disabilities in the focus groups did not report a high incidence of TFGBV against them or other women with disabilities. The perceived vulnerability of these women and the desire to protect them mirrors current offline stereotypes of women with disabilities, where they are discouraged from leaving the house or from social interactions as a means to protect them from exploitation.

Rural communities are tightly knit with high connectedness within the population. Participants in the focus groups described how technology can enable slander and defamation to spread quickly through these communities. Rural women spoke about the importance of online communication to keep in touch with male relatives who had migrated to Russia for work. Participants also explained how technology allowed men to control their wives from abroad. Most participants felt that technology had brought negative impacts on family relationships and recounted many examples of families destroyed as a result of TFGBV.

Ethnicity also played a role in TFGBV, with the research identifying violence against Tajik women who spoke in Russian and ethnic Russians living in Tajikistan. In both cases, these women were seen as not complying with the social norm of a proper Tajik woman and faced online abuse as a result. Specific impacts on other ethnicities were not identified.

Overall, trends for online violence match those for offline violence and intersectionality also follows these general trends. There was no evidence of specific vulnerabilities online that would contradict those experienced offline.



Technology in Tajikistan is being used as a means to further control over women, both in the family and in society. In society there is a very important dynamic of “being seen”, being visible.<sup>86</sup> This dynamic involves exhibiting visible religious piety, external conformance with traditions and norms, and visibility in good deeds such as caring for the sick or for elderly relatives. This visibility also extends to the concept of shame, where public shaming is used as a control method. The impact of technology means that visibility is now possible on a much larger scale. The use of social media and messaging apps can amplify a personal projection of individual visibility, but it also amplifies negative reactions to a person (often a woman) and reactions to perceived non-conformance by an individual.

## **CONTROL IN FAMILIES**

Control is part of a known social contract between families. According to an interviewee, “There’s a new trend wherein a groom sets conditions for the bride before marriage: no social media accounts, no posting of photos and no using messaging apps.” Full control of all digital interactions of the future wife is now almost a condition of the marriage contract. Another interviewee provides more details:

[P]reviously, some agreements would be made before marriage and in-laws would give guarantees, such as allowing the bride to continue her studies or work. Nowadays, her participation in the online space can be the subject of the agreement. They might allow or forbid her to use a smartphone or determine whether she will be allowed to have her own social media account or not. After the wedding, the woman must provide full access to all her devices. For example, if you have a social media account, you give your husband the phone password and the account password. The woman doesn’t have access to the man’s phone, but he has complete access to all her messages, social media, contacts and photo galleries. You have no personal space. You don’t have the right to it. This is 100% a condition of marriage, even at the stage of initial meetings and the beginning of the relationship.

This shows the interlinked nature of TFGBV, where violence offline and online are a continuum, not something that women encounter online for the first time after they have accessed technology. Even the ways in which women access technology are subject to violence, fear and with no privacy or power of ownership.

86. Borisova, E. (2023). Op. cit.

Control over women via digital devices has been firmly incorporated into everyday life in Tajikistan and it has become a routine practice. It is effectively an element of the gender regimes of many families. One interviewee recounted how this works in practice: “Every time we meet in a circle of friends, one or more of them will always turn on the feature to show their husbands their location and their surroundings. The phone has made control easier; husbands are more willing to let their wives go somewhere, knowing they can check on them any time.”

Another interviewee provided additional details: “I personally know men who link their accounts to their wives’ accounts to track geolocation, to see where she is and for how long.” Another interviewee described a different situation:

[A] few months ago, my friend complained that her husband constantly reads the messages in her WhatsApp chat where she communicates with her sisters. She rarely saw her sisters and online communication with them was the most convenient and accessible. Every time he looked at the chat, he made snide comments about what he read, sometimes even mocking certain messages. Occasionally, without asking, he would write in the chat on her behalf and send irrelevant emojis. Gradually, the woman stopped communicating via chat.

This constant presence of men in their communications results in women becoming more isolated.

These control measures and their consequences are very serious for families. The mere possibility that a woman could communicate with someone in a space beyond her husband’s control is perceived as a major emergency, a threat to the very foundations of the traditional family’s gender regime. A woman interviewed gave the following example:

[T]his kind of manipulation is common in our region. Men monitor the communication of their wives and daughters and older brothers obsessively control their sisters’ interactions. Some men, unwilling to spend time on such control, simply forbid their wives and daughters from using social media and messaging apps. My aunt’s son installed a bug on his wife’s phone, listened to her conversations for a long time and then began hurling accusations and insults at her. Eventually, their relationship ended in divorce.

## **TECHNOLOGY FOR REVENGE**

In divorce situations, former intimate partners use TFGBV and threats of TFGBV as a means of revenge, as a way of continuing control, to try to make the woman

come back to them and to secure personal legal gains. One interviewee explained, “Husbands’ threats are direct, not anonymous, and are linked to other conditions, such as taking the children away, leaving women penniless, without a roof over their heads, etc.”

Former intimate partners regularly use TFGBV as a method of revenge. According to one interviewee:

[V]iolence from ex-partners is widespread. They try in every possible way to prevent women from starting a new life. Our communities are small and close-knit and any information in the online space spreads across the country immediately. Everyone knows each other. Many women leave the country after they divorce just to start a new life and free themselves from all kinds of harassment.

Even after divorce, men have the power to destroy women’s lives online.

## **WOMEN AS DEFENDERS OF THE PATRIARCHY**

The research showed that TFGBV perpetrators in Tajikistan can also be women. Their motives may vary, including personal conflicts and business competition, but they most commonly act as defenders of their male relatives’ interests, becoming guardians of “proper” gender conditions. One woman interviewed said:

I will give an example from my cousin’s experience. She was divorcing her abusive husband and throughout the divorce process, her husband harassed her with obsessive messages on WhatsApp and Telegram, often engaging in gaslighting. His sister joined in, sending her constant voice messages, trying to persuade her to return to the family. These messages caused the woman significant stress because no one in her family approved of her choice to leave, even though she had good reason to do so (physical and psychological abuse).

Women, especially older women, often act as defenders of the patriarchal gender order, as changes to it threaten their family values and even undermine their personal life choices made in accordance with that order. They frequently join in harassing women who seek autonomy and distance themselves from the “patriarchal bargain”, sometimes even initiating such harassment. The patriarchal bargain shows the diverse roles that women play, not just as victims but also as perpetrators, and highlights the diverse range of issues connected with TFGBV. These cases were frequently mentioned in our interviews. Former husbands’ relatives not only personally harassed them but also spread false defamatory information. One interviewee described an instance:

[A] woman approached me whose family was going through a divorce. Her sister-in-law wrote about her on Facebook, claiming that the woman, who worked as a teacher at a private school and was responsible for educating and raising children, was a thief who had allegedly stolen things from her husband's home and was getting divorced from the family. According to the sister-in-law, the woman herself wanted to annul the marriage contract. The sister-in-law's post further questioned how such immoral teachers could be trusted to educate children. The school administration called the woman in and reprimanded her.

This case had a typical ending: although the victim sought legal advice and considered filing a defamation suit, she ultimately decided against it, fearing that it would cause an even bigger scandal and further defamation by her husband's relatives. Even her own mother did not support her in her attempt to defend her rights, as she felt she did not have the resources to back her up. Thus, community members with more social capital feel they can engage in bullying with virtual impunity, including through online platforms. Ultimately, the victim gave up on defending her reputation, quit her job and left the city.

## **USE OF SHAME TO CONTROL WOMEN**

In Tajikistan there has always been a strong element of shame in the efforts to control women. Women are afraid of bringing shame upon their families and threats that their actions will result in shame allow others to control their behaviour. There is a very strong personal connection with shame and women adapt their behaviour so as not to feel shame. In this respect, offline violence has less power to create shame. If a woman is abused in the home, she can try to hide this from her neighbours, from her work colleagues and from her wider family. However, when the abuse is online for everyone to see, this violence can have a much more powerful impact on the woman. This has allowed for family violence to escalate into a much more public space. It is important to make this connection between the online and offline violence experienced by women.

## **CONTROL IN SOCIETY**

The state remains an active player influencing the gender order in the Republic of Tajikistan. When considering state policies, it is important to acknowledge that they are being implemented in a poor country that experienced a major war only a generation ago and where many citizens still hold deeply conservative views. As in many other countries in the region, Tajikistan's political leaders are concerned about the growing influence of radical Islamism. This threat seems quite real for Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, currently governed by the Taliban, especially considering that over a quarter of Afghanistan's population is made up of

ethnic Tajiks. In this situation, the Tajik government, while acting as an agent of the country's modernisation, is forced to adopt a very cautious and measured gender policy.

Certain measures have been taken to combat gender-based violence: the Government of Tajikistan introduced the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence in 2013 and the State Program for the Prevention of Domestic Violence for 2014-2023 to reduce the incidence of domestic violence and encourage victims to seek support. Women's entrepreneurship is also being encouraged.

At the same time, state policy towards women is ambivalent. In essence, it provides them with limited agency, within which their opportunities are gradually expanding, but only within defined boundaries: they should not face excessive violence, but neither should they be overly emancipated.

A clear illustration of this political course is the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Regulation of Ceremonies and Traditions, adopted on 19 June 2024. Section 5, Article 18 states that individuals and legal entities in Tajikistan are required to observe elements of national culture, including speaking the state language and wearing the national dress. The law prohibits the import, sale and promotion of clothing foreign to national culture, as well as the wearing of such clothing in public places.<sup>87</sup> In practice, this law bans both "Westernised" clothing, such as short skirts and ripped jeans, and the hijab. The government of Tajikistan justifies this law as an effort to maintain the state's secular character and prevent extremism. The ban on religious clothing in public places is seen as a central element of the law, while the prohibition of overly liberal "secular" clothing is likely intended to offset this measure and present a "balanced" approach. In any case, this law specifically regulates women's appearance, limiting both their religious freedoms and their right to self-expression.<sup>88</sup>

Public opinion generally does not oppose such initiatives, supporting the guidelines on appearance set by the new law, from which it is undesirable to deviate in either direction. One interviewee explained the nuances:

[T]his is bidirectional here: girls wearing hijabs are also hated by a certain group of people. And girls who wear more casual, let's say, freer clothes, or are, as some young people are called, "nonconformists", also provoke aggression. God forbid a girl does a modern dance to a national song, especially if she's dressed in something very modern like a crop top, ripped jeans or has piercings – this is when the hate just goes off the charts, even leading to direct aggression like "find and destroy".

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87. <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=159751>

88. This picture presents examples of "appropriate" clothing for Tajik women, with significant deviations from these examples being undesirable and potentially punishable by fines: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-42jW20c-2/?igsh=NTdyanhrMTIzNWE0>

The adoption of this law also supports and legitimises various local initiatives aimed at restricting women's autonomy and aligning them with conservative views on "proper" appearance, which easily turns into harassment and cyber-bullying. An interviewee described how this works in practice, highlighting that "activists take advantage of this by photographing women on the streets and posting [the photos] online with judgmental comments. They upload videos and photos from parties or streets without consent, showing women who are inappropriately dressed. Misogyny is rampant and these posts attract a lot of hate." Social media and technology are used to control women and assert the patriarchal agenda and sociocultural values on the country.

More often, however, the online space is perceived as a new public sphere where the same norms and rules of gender behaviour, characteristic of society as a whole, apply, along with all their conflicts and contradictions. The difference, however, lies in the fact that all these contradictions, typical of the transition from a traditional gender order to a post-traditional one, are greatly magnified on digital platforms. They become more pronounced, attracting many participants to the discussion who may be even more uncompromising than in "ordinary" life. In this situation, numerous voluntary "guardians" of gender norms emerge, actively fighting to control women's behaviour by using various TFGBV mechanisms. This kind of pressure easily escalates into outright blackmailing. One interviewee explains:

I can give another example of how some platforms (Hodisa TV, Parviz TV) often publish photos and videos without consent. They take compromising videos recorded with hidden cameras and make them publicly available. They have around 450,000 subscribers or more, [these are] very popular platforms. Many join in on the bullying. There are videos of women dancing at private parties, behaving loosely, dancing, smoking and drinking. These platforms act like vice police. The state does not combat them, nor does it restrict their activities in any way. There have been cases where women offered money to have their videos removed from the platform. Or they begged for the videos not to be posted and the platform's administrators demanded money for that.

Unfortunately, these kinds of actions are fully normalised in the eyes of public opinion and occur without hindrance or punishment. Another interviewee provided more details: "They posted videos of couples meeting and they beat both the woman and the man. They carried out vigilante justice. The police didn't react and there were many supportive comments like, 'Her husband is out working while she's unfaithful, living a loose lifestyle – so she deserves to be shamed.'"

## RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS

The gender order in Tajikistan means that women must navigate between being “excessively” and “insufficiently” religious. Deviation from the imposed norm in either direction can result in sanctions.

One interviewee described a case where a woman faced TFGBV as a result of being seen as an “Islamist threat”:

I know of cases of blackmailing and extortion of girls who participated in a WhatsApp group where they exchanged cooking recipes and shared photos and videos of the dishes they prepared, along with comments. Among the other information were harmless religious expressions, verses from the Holy Quran, and sayings of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). The girls were accused of attempting to preach Islam and spreading banned information. There were threats and blackmailing and in the end, the girls were “rescued” by paying the sum demanded.

At the same time, being “insufficiently religious” can also become a source of problems for women, leading to pressure from family members, particularly husbands. One interviewee gave an example of a classmate’s husband, “who systematically monitors his wife’s browsing history to see what articles she reads. He forbids her from reading non-religious books and articles, arguing that such information could weaken her faith and lead to disobedience of religious rules.”

A different interviewee described another case:

[A] student posted a photo on social media wearing a tight-fitting dress. This photo sparked outrage among religious groups, who deemed her appearance inappropriate. Some members of these groups began harassing her online, leaving offensive comments and threatening her and her family. They also spread her photos with comments containing threats of physical violence unless she removed the images and “corrected” her behaviour. The student was shocked by this reaction, as she hadn’t expected her personal choice of clothing to provoke such aggression. Physical threats became real when one harasser attempted to attack her near the university, accusing her of violating traditions. Fortunately, she avoided serious consequences, but fear and societal pressure forced her to move to another city and temporarily halt her studies.

“Moral crusaders” who rely on religious and traditionalist arguments are widespread in the Tajik segment of social networks. Essentially, they represent another layer of gender control, in addition to relatives, close circles and state institutions. The research showed that there are organised groups reacting to

these posts online to control women and enforce conformance. The presence of self-organised groups of religious enforcers adds another dynamic to TFGBV. This form of violence is a vast, multi-layered phenomenon that occupies a significant part of the internet space. As a result of the actions of these groups, many victims choose complex and costly measures for self-protection, such as relocating to another city (and often even another country) to “start a new life”.

## **USING HATE SPEECH TO CONTROL THE NARRATIVE**

Public figures who are victims of TFGBV include politicians, journalists, women’s rights activists and anyone who is seen as an undesirable figure. Technology allows for multiple and diverse actors to combine, sometimes systematically and sometimes organically, to silence these voices. This is a combination of state and society that maintains that status quo and preserves existing gender norms.

A woman politician and journalist interviewed said:

I was subjected to a collective cyberattack during my candidacy for parliament. There were offensive caricatures and posts from the opposition and not only from them. They wrote that I was single and led an immoral lifestyle, that I was allegedly a “mistress”, giving specific names. Those attacks came from both anonymous accounts and specific people: former colleagues and mere acquaintances. Masses of people expressed anger and irritation, publicly humiliating and insulting me.

It is important to highlight that not only female politicians or civil activists but literally any public figure can become a potential victim of politically motivated TFGBV. One interviewee explained:

[A] woman who was a photographer exhibited her works online. One of her projects, dedicated to women’s independence and freedom of expression, provoked a negative reaction in certain circles. She began receiving insults and threats from strangers, accusing her of immorality and violating traditional values. Some of them formed a group and began systematically harassing her online, sending offensive photographs and threatening her with physical violence.

The consequences for daring to speak out against gender and societal norms are huge. Another interviewee described “a young woman [who] was active on social media and expressed her views on gender equality. Her accounts were hacked and personal photos were published without her consent. This case caused her enormous stress; she was afraid to leave her house and even considered emigrating from the country.”

The tools of TFGBV can be quite effective in silencing figures considered undesirable. One interviewee described a well-known case:

[O]ne girl, a civil activist, was gathering signatures for a petition to the President. However, the girl became the target of the internal security services. She was summoned and interrogated multiple times. Immediately afterwards, a sexually explicit video featuring her appeared online. The girl was morally destroyed, and since then, she has not been seen or heard from. They say she left the country.

Another interviewee added more details to the case explaining, “A fake date was arranged with a man who filmed her during sex. Everything was done professionally, clearly showing that a prepared individual was involved in setting her up.”

An important aspect of TFGBV against such public figures is the extremely high level of aggression. It is not just negative comments, hate speech or bullying. Doxxing is a common phenomenon, with personal information, including home addresses, being published and threats of physical violence being made. Many activists have noticed surveillance of themselves.

This indicates a very high level of confrontation between aggressive supporters of “traditions” and the patriarchal gender order and defenders of women’s rights.

A number of interviewees gave examples of the violence they had faced. One interviewee described her experience:

[A]fter my speech at an international women’s rights conference I received several hundred aggressive comments and messages on social media. These messages contained not only insults but also direct threats of physical violence. For example, one user wrote, “people like you should be punished” and posted my home address online. I went to the police, but they were only able to hold one perpetrator accountable since most of them used anonymous accounts. This situation had a serious impact on my life. I was forced to temporarily leave my home and rethink my public activities. It was a period of great stress, accompanied by feelings of helplessness and fear for my life and the lives of my loved ones.

Another interviewee told of her personal experience:

Working in women’s rights often provokes negative reactions, especially from those with conservative views. I’ve had to deal with online insults, threats and attempts to discredit me. Sometimes these were anonymous messages and other times they were open attacks on social media. I was accused of “destroying families” and “promoting Western values”. These people were complete strangers to me, yet they felt entitled to judge me and threaten my life.

One interviewee explained:

Those who actively express their position on social or political issues are the most vulnerable, especially if it concerns gender equality, women's rights, or criticism of traditional foundations. In addition, minority women, whether ethnic, religious or sexual, are also often subjected to aggression. Such women not only become victims of cyber violence, they also face public condemnation, which complicates their situation.

Another incident in this sense was described by an interviewee:

[A] close friend of mine, a women's rights lawyer, experienced severe online harassment after she publicly spoke out against discrimination of women in the workplace. Her statements sparked a genuine hate campaign: her social media accounts were flooded with threats, she was accused of destroying traditional values and false information about her personal life was published. This was incredibly painful for her. Her family also came under attack, and her husband had to defend her honour at work and among acquaintances. She was forced to temporarily shut down her accounts and withdraw from the public eye to protect herself and her loved ones.

These well-known and public attacks on those who speak out not only have serious impacts on the woman and her family, they have also contributed to human rights activists working only in the offline sphere and to a widespread reluctance to speak about any issues related to women's rights online.

## **GETTING SUPPORT**

The local community, unfortunately, does not always side with the victim. This aligns with views on offline violence where both men and women condone violence against women, particularly in the case of perceived mistakes in conduct and in connection with household tasks and child rearing.

In order to be condemned, cyber violence has to cross the boundary of what is considered "acceptable" and "explainable" in the context of the patriarchal logic, for example if the victim dies or is severely injured. If the issue concerns reputational damage, the victim is often blamed for ruining her own reputation, while the stalker's actions are treated with sympathy.

As outlined in Table 13, the research showed a correlation between the type of perpetrator of TFGBV and whether the woman received support or condemnation from friends and family.

	Women supported by family and friends	Women condemned by family and friends
% of cases from unknown perpetrators	58	36
% of cases from intimate partners	25	64
% of cases from men seeking unwanted relationships	17	0

Table 13 –Women receiving support or condemnation by perpetrator type

Of all the cases, 12 women reported general support and 14 women reported condemnation from friends and family. Of those that received support, 58% of such cases involved perpetrators who were not known to the women. Of those that were condemned, 64% of these cases involved husbands or ex-husbands. The women interviewed reported that when they were not supported this was a continuation of the violation of trust that had occurred with the initial violence.

One interviewee explained the additional pain that was caused as a result of relatives, acquaintances and society judging her and blaming her for the violence:

[M]y photos were still circulating on the internet and every time I went outside, I felt the judgmental and disdainful stares. I had to move to another country to try to start over. I knew that I had permanently lost a part of my life, trust in people and confidence in myself... I face opposition and condemnation almost at every step. In our society, people often tend to blame the victim rather than seek justice. There is a stereotype that if something like this happens, the woman herself is to blame—she “dressed inappropriately”, “behaved inappropriately” or “provoked it”. These words hit like blows to a wound that hasn’t yet healed. When all this happened, many people who learned about my story through the internet believed what they saw in those fake photos and videos. They judged me, talked behind my back, saying I deserved what happened. Some acquaintances and even relatives turned their backs on me. I became an outcast, without even getting a chance to explain. It was unbearably painful because in such moments, what you need most is support, not judgment.

There are many cases of obsessive cyber control leading to real physical violence from family members. Since husbands and fathers are viewed by the local community as legitimate authorities, their “corrective” actions often go unchallenged and are even seen as preserving the existing (patriarchal) gender order. Both the family environment and the reaction of local communities in Tajikistan currently offer little protection for victims of TFGBV.

Fortunately, there are “pockets of resistance” to gender violence in the form of civil society organisations. One interviewee gave an example of such work:

I particularly remember a case when a woman reached out to us after her explicit photos were posted on several websites without her consent. It was a heavy blow for her. She felt a deep sense of shame, fear and helplessness. The woman was afraid not only of being judged by her acquaintances but by society as a whole. Her self-esteem was seriously damaged and she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. We helped her not only legally but also emotionally, providing support and assistance so that she could restore her psychological state. We drafted an appeal to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and thanks to our efforts, the perpetrator was held accountable. This case also contributed to changes in the Criminal Code of Tajikistan to include responsibility for inciting social hatred, although we insisted on adding a gender component.

## FINDING JUSTICE

In addition to finding support from friends and family, obtaining justice and protection from law enforcement is equally important. Domestic violence itself, unfortunately, remains largely legitimised in the eyes of public opinion and is often seen as a logical development of family conflict, with the victim frequently blamed. When the conflict extends into the online space, the response of law enforcement can be unpredictable. Women sometimes make the issue public to try and secure protection and justice, but often this does not help. One interviewee described a case of offline violence she had seen online:

[N]ot long ago, a girl posted a photo of herself with bruises. Social media sometimes helps to bring the issue to the public eye and pressure law enforcement into quick action. In this case, law enforcement immediately contacted the girl and started an investigation. To my surprise, just a few days later, they reported that the act of violence could not be confirmed. Isn't that strange?

Thus, reporting to the police in cases not only for protection from TFGBV but even in instances of direct physical sexualised violence is quite problematic for victims.

There are varying views on the effectiveness of law enforcement. One interviewee said:

[P]olice are not trustworthy. They are abusers themselves! They will question the victim back and forth, savour the details and if there are videos or other materials, they will watch them over and over again. The woman victim will experience yet another round of abuse from the police.

[...] I personally don't trust our police. They may be effective in other types of crimes, like thefts, murders and kidnappings, but in cases of gender-based violence and discrimination, they behave like typical Tajik men with all the stereotypical and patriarchal views. Maybe they act within their competencies, but they lack gender sensitivity and are very subjective in their views.

The research showed differences in the people who approached the police and the responses to it. In 41 cases (23%), interviewees stated that the victim had sought help from the police. Eight cases (6%) were recorded where the woman sought legal help but did not go to the police. Thus, in 29% of the cases some kind of legal response was initiated. In total, 17 convictions of perpetrators were recorded, which represents 9% of all cases and 41% of cases reported to the police. Of those who went to the police, 68% stated that the police were helpful and 15% that they were unhelpful, with the remaining 17% not providing such details. However, there were differences between types of TFGBV. Women contacting the police were above the average percentage in the case of blackmailing (41% of cases), harassment and stalking (39% of cases) and hate speech (32% of cases). However, in cases of non-consensual sharing of intimate images, 24% of women contacted the police and only 18% of students sought help from the police. In cases involving intimate images of students, the cases of violence may seem too sensitive for the women to seek help or the women may fear backlash for seeking help in these cases.



The research demonstrates that online violence against women exists as a continuum with offline violence, patriarchal values and established gender norms that have power over women and are used to control them. Women and girls from all walks of life are impacted by TFGBV, with 64% of the women interviewed personally experiencing this form of violence. Harassment and stalking, blackmailing, slander, defamation and non-consensual sharing of intimate images have been shown to be present in rural and urban locations alike, regardless of how active the woman is on social media. These forms of TFGBV are linked to offline relationships with husbands and family members and the risk factors that expose women to violence in these offline relationships are replicated in the online setting. Current or former intimate partners are the perpetrators of violence in 43% of cases.

Teenagers are particularly at risk of multiple forms of online and offline violence. Sadly, they are less likely to seek support in dealing with violence. The impacts on women and girls are profound and painful and tend to lead them to retreat from online life, self-censor and not discuss sensitive topics connected with women's rights. The research shows that as a result of TFGBV many have been driven to suicide, experienced physical violence, severe mental health issues and fear, felt unable to leave the house, had to divorce, lost custody of their children, suffered property or employment loss and had to abandon the country.

