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In Tunisia, women stand on the frontlines of targeted hate speech online

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A woman shouts into a loudspeaker at a protest in Tunisia, August 2013. Photo by [Amine Ghrabi](#) ^[1] via Flickr [CC BY-NC 2.0](#). ^[2]

In 2011, an uprising in Tunisia toppled the 23-year-rule of autocratic president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Since then, the Tunisian digital space has witnessed unprecedented, heated debates about politics and society.

This highly politically charged period — shaped largely by social media — has fueled tense online discussions that include harmful content, hate speech and verbal attacks against women.

These online campaigns often target women activists, journalists, and politicians in particular.

In February 2020, the Monitoring Unit of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) reported a drop in physical assaults against journalists. But the SNJT monitoring unit also warned of increased online attacks against journalists.

"There are fewer attacks compared to December 2019, but there is more violence on the internet and social media," the SNJT monitoring unit [said](#) ^[3].

Frequently, the SNJT publishes [statements](#) ^[4]condemning the spread of attacks and defamation campaigns against journalists on social media. In March, they [warned](#) ^[5] against using social media as a "field for campaigns of defamation and incitement against gender identities."

In its statement, the union referred to campaigns that targeted two female journalists: Fadwa Chtourou and Malak al-Bakari.

Chtourou, who works with the public broadcaster, Wataniya 1, was targeted in a campaign on Facebook that bullied and mocked her for covering the aftermath of a terror attack on March 6 without wearing makeup. Supporters of Chtourou launched [countercampaigns](#) ^[6] in her defense and women journalists from Tunisia and the region posted photos of themselves without makeup in solidarity.

Bakari, who works with the privately-owned Attesia TV channel, was targeted after appearing in a TV show wearing a short dress.

Women on the frontlines

Many women activists and politicians have faced campaigns of gender-based attacks since 2011.

In 2017, a report authored by the [Committee of Individual Liberties and Equality](#) ^[7] — created in 2017 by the late president Beji Caid Essebsi — recommended a set of legal reforms to enhance individual freedoms such as the decriminalization of homosexuality and equality in inheritance. The committee's president, Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, who is also a former Tunisian member of parliament, was subjected to hate speech campaigns on social media. The content became so violent that some commenters [called](#) ^[8] for her murder.

"Almost every ten minutes, there is a publication that calls for murder and spreads rumors to raise a popular and violent movement against our work," said Bochra Bel Haj Hmida in an interview published by [NouvelObs](#) ^[9] in June 2018.

The late blogger and human rights defender Lina Ben Mhenni also endured attacks online as a well-known feminist figure. On a [panel](#) ^[10] discussing violence against women online during Tunis Forum on Gender Equality 2019, Mhenni recounted her experience with online defamation campaigns, stating that in her case these attacks extended beyond Facebook comments to continuous stalking.

The Tunisian political scene online is also filled with racist speech. [Jamila Ksiksi](#) ^[11], a member of the Tunisian parliament, was subject to racist comments published by another member of parliament on his Facebook page. During a plenary session devoted to examining the 2019 Supplementary Finance Bill, Ksiksi called the deputies of PDL, Free Destourian Party, "bandits." Following this incident, Saleh Neji, a PDL deputy, posted insults on his Facebook page that targeted Ksiksi with [racist connotations](#) ^[12], referring to her as a "slave" and a "monkey."

How do victims respond to hate speech?

A [study](#) ^[13] on violence against women online conducted by the Tunisian Center for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (Credif), found that women react to their perpetrators in various ways. The most common first step is the immediate removal of perpetrators from friend lists. Some opt for silence while others respond directly to their perpetrators. Some report the harmful exchanges to relatives or file a legal complaint.

In an interview with Global Voices, feminist activist Feryel Charfeddine spoke about a series of Facebook posts that attacked her and her activist work in 2017. She told Global Voices:

As a victim of online hate speech myself, I reported the harmful content attacking me to Facebook. The platform was only responsive when I proceeded and followed the reports with the help of Access Now's helpline. I recognize that I had a privilege compared to other victims. This is why many victims choose to leave Facebook. It's not a safe place for women.

The digital rights organization's [helpline](#) ^[14] "provides rapid-response emergency assistance and digital security help for individuals and organizations around the world."

Judiciary procedures: Hate speech or freedom of expression?

A number of activists and civil society organizations express fears that countering hate speech may be used as a pretext to exclude political opponents and restrict freedom of expression.

"As an advocate against prison sentences, I couldn't proceed with legal procedures against my aggressors, however, I respect the decision of those who chose to do so," said Charfeddine.

In a similar context, in December 2019, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) filed a [complaint](#) ^[17] about defamation, insults and gossip at the primary court in Tunis, against a man who attacked one of the association's activists, Wafa Fraoues, via Facebook.

Fraoues works with Beity, a nonprofit organization that seeks to end all forms of discrimination against women and supports women victims of domestic violence.

The subject of the complaint was a [Facebook post](#) ^[18] explicitly using Fraoues' name and profession to insult her and publish accusations. The man who posted it later removed her name. He wrote that a man paid Fraoues for sex. He also wrote that this man's wife had received support from Beity after she was physically abused by him.

In March 2020, the first instance court sentenced the perpetrator to a six-month suspended prison sentence and a fine for the post.

In a published joint [statement](#) ^[19], the ATFD and Beity described the court's decision as:

...[a]n appropriate judicial response to the demand of feminists and women in the necessity of stopping the impunity and it may be an incentive for women victims of violence, including digital violence, to resort to the judiciary in cases of moral, sexual, economic, political or physical abuse that affects them, regardless of their perpetrators.

The organization previously [called](#) ^[20] on authorities to implement [Law No. 58 of 2017](#) ^[21] on countering violence against women "to protect women and specifically women human rights defenders from violence, and combat impunity."

Translating legislation into community practice

In 2017, Tunisia [adopted](#) ^[21] an organic law on the elimination of violence against women which mandates the state's engagement in prevention, prosecution of perpetrators and providing support for victims. In an [unprecedented ruling](#) ^[22], on May 8, a Tunisian court pronounced a [protection order](#) ^[23] in favor of victims of online harassment that turns into stalking based on Article 33 of the [law](#) ^[22], which allows family judges to issue restraining orders.

In October 2018, the Tunisian parliament [passed](#) ^[24] the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination Act — a law that defines and criminalizes racial discrimination.

This new legislation — in addition to the 2014 constitution that guarantees freedom of conscience and thought as well as freedom of expression — provides a strong legal framework against hate speech.

International standards on freedom of expression

International human rights standards enshrine the rights to freedom of expression and opinion. However, these standards allow for limited and non-arbitrary restrictions to freedom of expression for "legitimate" purposes. The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) ^[15] (ICCPR), to which Tunisia is a state party, allows restrictions if they are "provided by law" and "necessary" for "the respect of the rights or reputations of others." While the [International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) ^[16] calls for a ban on "all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred."

However, most of this legislation does not explicitly cover cases of harassment and attacks on the basis of gender and race that takes place online.

Government and nongovernmental actors must ensure that magistrates are aware and properly educated on the implementation of legal provisions and appropriate referrals for cyber-hate speech victims.

Political parties can also play a role in raising awareness among citizens on their human rights online. Last year, during parliamentary and presidential election campaigns, a number of civil society organizations including Article 19 and the Tunisian League for Human rights (LTDH) called ^[25] on candidates to "raise [their] voice in favor of minorities and vulnerable groups and to condemn hate speech and any other discriminatory actions against them."

Gender-based violence and hate speech online takes a major toll on victims' mental health ^[13].

Combatting this kind of harmful content online is the responsibility of multiple stakeholders: Beyond the legal and technical solutions, targeted victims must receive ample support to deal with the serious consequences to their mental health and well-being.

This article is part of a series called "The identity matrix: platform regulation of online threats to expression in Africa." These posts interrogate identity-driven online hate speech or discrimination based on language or geographic origin, misinformation and harassment (particularly against female activists and journalists) prevalent in digital spaces of seven African countries: Algeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia and Uganda. The project is funded by the Africa Digital Rights Fund ^[26] of The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA ^[27]).

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[2] CC BY-NC 2.0.: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

[3] said: <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Culture-and-Media/12312548-attacks-against>

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<https://www.mosaiquefm.net/ar/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3/703255/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B6-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%83%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%82%D9%86%D9%8A>

[5] warned:

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[6] countercampaigns: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-51783662>

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individual_Freedoms_and_Equality_Committee_\(Tunisia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individual_Freedoms_and_Equality_Committee_(Tunisia))

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