

# The Fight for Women's Rights Online and Offline

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The 10th anniversary of the signing of the Istanbul Convention in 2021 caught the world amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting complex political scenario. Covid-19 twisted the old power structures and highlighted the lack of humanitarian resources, placing vulnerable groups in an even more vulnerable position, leading to severe human rights violations. Human rights have always been on the edge of oblivion, in particular when it comes to reacting to an international humanitarian crisis. Women's rights no less so, and with the pandemic, violence against women increased dramatically.<sup>1</sup>

The Istanbul Convention is a Council of Europe human rights treaty to fight violence against women and domestic violence. This treaty's objective is not only to prevent gender violence but also to protect the victims and find ways to end the impunity of the perpetrators. By March 2019, 45 countries had signed the Convention, ratifying their will to fight against human rights violations. This included Turkey in 2012, which was the first country to ratify the treaty, providing an example for others to follow. The agreement lasted ten years in Turkey, until on 1 July 2021 the Turkish Government decided to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention.

Under the slogan "You will never walk alone", many women took to the streets when Turkey made this decision two months before the withdrawal. In an International Meeting

of Women Journalists and Communicators of the Mediterranean Region organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), and held in Barcelona at the beginning of November that year, Burcu Karakas, a Turkish journalist, specialist in human rights and, in particular, gender issues, revealed that Turkey's decision to remove the convention was "to save the integrity of the family, because it is seen as the most important representation of the unity of society. And the governments think the concept of family is failing."

Being a journalist, but especially a woman, is not easy. More than 2,100 women have been killed over the last 20 years (2021) and over 400 were imprisoned, accused mainly of anti-state behaviour. As the data shows, the number of cases increases progressively every year as if go-

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1. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/covid-19-pandemic-tackling-the-dramatic-increase-in-cases-of-violence-against-women#:~:text=Back-,COVID%2D19%20pandemic%3A%20tackling%20the%20dramatic%20increase%20in,cases%20of%20violence%20against%20women&text=Since%20the%20outbreak%20of%20the,Council%20of%20Europe%20member%20states>

ing backwards in the history of the world instead of working towards a fair and equal society. Cases of violence against women journalists in Europe – physical assault, legal harassment, threats of violence and intimidation, organised troll campaigns on social media, arrest and sexual harassment, amongst many others – are reported periodically. However, the fact that these actions are reported or condemned does not only strictly mean that violence is increasing – which it is – but also that has been more widely reported in the press and online. Violence against women has always been an intrinsic part of society, something systematised. It does not mean that structural violence is over, not even close, but the women's revolution and the eagerness to change their situation is on the rise.

## The Faces of the Struggle

It was John Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and mathematician, who in 1969 introduced the concept of structural violence for the first time, referring to it as “the violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.”<sup>2</sup> This so-called structural violence has been affecting women in all areas of their life: work, health, wealth or education, amongst many others. Although existing data clearly indicates that there is a high percentage of gender violence in all its forms, including structural, there is a huge lack of proper data.

As experts point out, violence against women in all its forms – physical, psychological,

sexual and economic, etc. – is a global epidemic. Women have to face many challenges throughout their lives, from childhood to teenagerhood to womanhood.

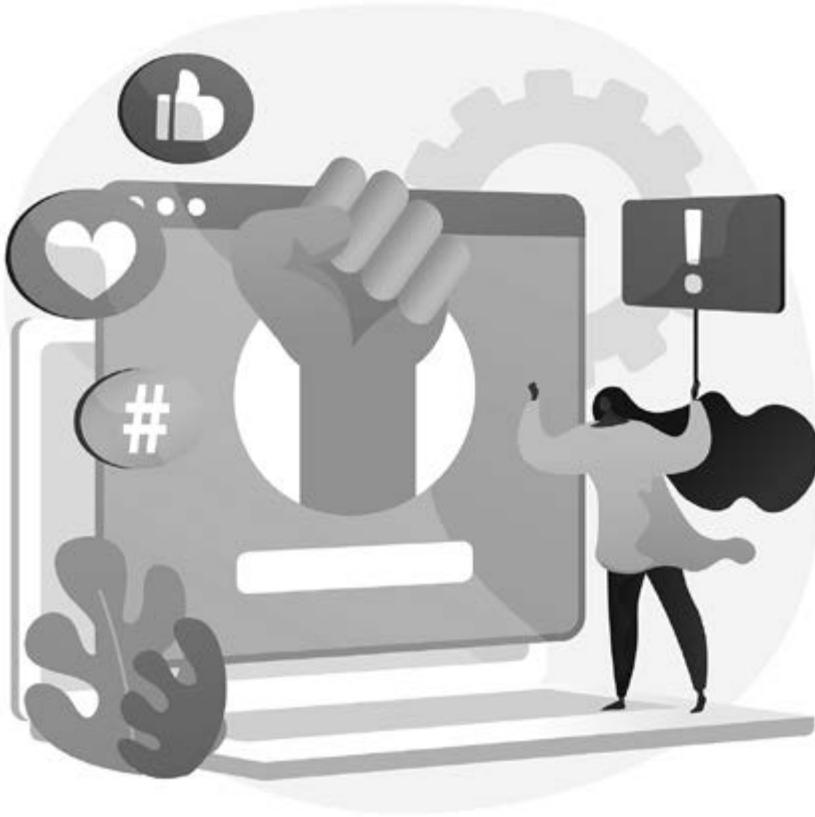
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International organisations consider that violence against women is increasing alarmingly,<sup>3</sup> while social movements are on the rise. The cases are indeed increasing, and the more killings there are, the more outbursts of anger. The fact is that when a woman is killed, harassed or abused, and the case is reported or raised on social media, the reaction is massive. This is a positive growing trend to condemn cases of gender violence and harassment, to make it visible. This growing trend is in part due to the emergence of social media, a tool that empowers women to find community and to speak up. Contributions include several online platforms that activists use as a tool to spread their protest messages against gender-based violence by means of protest tweets, Facebook posts, the use of profile and memetic pictures, hashtags, icons or slogans, and so on. The presence of social media is growing stronger, yet the digital gap is still wide, for instance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Around 63 million women in the region still have no access to the internet.<sup>4</sup> This impedes a certain part of the female

2. Andrew Dilts, Yves Winter, Thomas Biebricher, Eric Vance Johnson, Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo and Joan Cocks, “Revisiting Johan Galtung’s Concept of Structural Violence”, *New Political Science*, 2012, 34, 2, e191-e227, DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2012.714959

3. United Nations, “Remarks on International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women”, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-11-22/elimination-violence-against-women-remarks>

4. Alexander Farley and Manuel Langendorf, “COVID-19 and Internet Accessibility in the MENA Region: Maximizing digital skills and connectivity for economic recovery”, Wilson Center, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MEP\\_211129\\_OCC%2040%20v4.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MEP_211129_OCC%2040%20v4.pdf)



Fe-Male Feminist Organization.

population from joining the new revolution and making their voices heard. Therefore, there is a silenced part of society, and that is what I call the “inside”, the hidden domestic violence that is not reported. What about all these women hidden behind the curtains at home afraid of their partner, neighbour, society? What about all these women and girls silenced with fear and threats? Violence against women should be properly addressed at all levels, with special efforts to identify this type of silenced violence.

The “outside” is the part of society that has access to the internet, mainly privileged

women in some countries, which allows them to speak up and make their voice heard. These are two different scenarios, among many others, to understand how domestic violence should be addressed: the one that, thanks to many resources, can be visible; and the other, the hidden gender-based violence, which is so difficult to keep track of, especially in some countries, due to the lack of resources, either because women have no access to the internet and special helplines, and lack of information, or because they find themselves in very vulnerable situations such as being a refugee or asylum seeker.

We do not need to provide examples to see that not all women have access to specific tools to be able to speak up, and to find the way to escape violence. Social media and digital platforms have become useful tools within the feminist activism framework, not only for individuals but also for a large number of women's rights organisations. However, there is limited data because most of the cases were never reported, which means we must accept what we have. Therefore, we analyse it, knowing that there is a large hidden part of society suffering violence in silence. After Turkey's decision, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), stated that "the adoption of this decision in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to deepen the protection gap for women and girls during a time when gender-based violence against women is on the rise and thereby undermines the international human rights system seeking to prevent, and protect women and girls from such violence. Such an unprecedented act cannot, and does not, have a valid ground and justification."<sup>5</sup>

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The Istanbul Convention represents a key tool in the fight for women's rights. The fact that Turkey withdrew the convention from its political system allows men to beat and hit and use any type of violence against women with impunity. Therefore, this represents a backwards step in the history of the women's struggle in the country. The decision was the

straw that broke the camel's back, and it created a strong movement of women taking to the streets of Turkey, claiming what is theirs. They filled the streets with the colour of the flag of the convention aiming to show a powerful, strong, united and well-organised movement. Beyond those colours, those flags, those shouts, there was a very profound reason to be there: "you are not alone", which may seem obvious but the power of these words has gone beyond analysis, papers, statistics or data. It is just a human feeling of belonging, a feeling that you can be understood, that you can be freed, and that someone is there next to you. Women gathered in the streets thanks, in part, to the previous campaign on social media.

## Digital Activism as a New Paradigm for Change?

Digital activism has contributed towards a development of a new vocabulary and new frameworks gathering daily experiences of individuals from around the world. Digital activism is a way to create awareness on both collective and individual levels.<sup>6</sup> Most of the time, reported cases of violence on the social media landscape start with an individual case, and the sequence goes from the individual to the general. Similarly, individual cases reported on social media are growing faster and stronger, and, from one case, millions of people/users create a movement. This serves as a space to add extra non-official information that confronts governments and national authorities that, in most cases, seek to hide or avoid. There are examples of bloggers and activists in countries such as Nigeria that create platforms to help

5. [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/Statement\\_Turkey\\_30.06.2021.doc](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/Statement_Turkey_30.06.2021.doc)

6. Rachel Loney-Howes, Kaitlynn Mendes, Diana Fernández Romero, Bianca Fileborn and Sonia Núñez Puente, "Digital footprints of #MeToo", *Feminist Media Studies*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1886142

verify information about gender-based violence cases through social media hashtags. A huge community of bloggers and activists boost the visibility of each case turning them into a general problem in society. #FindHinyUmoren was a campaign created by activists in Nigeria when a young woman disappeared on her way to work. This campaign had three stages: in the first one the hashtag was used to create a movement sharing pictures to help find her; in the second, when she was found dead, the hashtag was used to find more information about the aggressor; and in the third and last, the hashtag twisted and turned into a movement to protest against government management and to seek justice for the victim.

Women and women's rights organisations that can be very active on social media in using it as a tool to organise campaigns to protest is the beginning of a change. But their power comes not only from there but also from taking to the streets. This leads me back to the difference between the "inside" and the "outside". There are a lot of women who have access to the internet but a high percentage still do not. Young generations are the perfect example. They are much more active on the internet, especially younger women who have had the opportunity to go to college, because they can raise their voices and create a community, giving the chance to others to join them.

This new scenario is the result of many years of struggling in silence and feeling powerless. The use of these not so new technologies has shown a clear way out for women and victims of gender-based violence and human rights abuses to seek justice or, at least, support. Each campaign has a different impact, which depends on the objective and the target to reach but also the case. However, most of them develop the same pattern – from the individual

to the general –, which means starting with the specific case and ending up as something mediatic, something people can relate to and identify with. Therefore, when the campaign reaches this point, it means that an entire community from different places is behind it. In an interview in 2021, the Turkish journalist Burcu Karakas stated that "social media is something you cannot control. Either you shut down the entire thing or you accept that it is happening. In the case of Turkey, as in many other countries, when there is an ongoing investigation that does not seem transparent, you will immediately see that there is a huge community of women organising social media campaigns, just to bring attention to the case. Murder, rape and psychological violence happen every day, and this community [women] never gets tired of seeking justice."

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However, digital activism has a dark side. It is obvious that it has empowered women worldwide, and it is a tool for positive change because it has created a community of solidarity and understanding. But, although the old concept of the fourth estate has been reformulated and has replaced the traditional media outlets to "confront" power and governments, it has also provided a serious negative effect. It has become "a vehicle for global voyeurism and spectatorship, where digital citizens observe, comment and make judgements inciting prejudice, hatred and violence."<sup>7</sup> Digital activism has grown hand in hand with trolling, cyberhate and cyberbully-

7. Sunita Toor, "Digital activism: empowering women, creating change and demanding human rights", *OpenGlobalRights*, 2020, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/digital-activism-empowering-women-creating-change-and-demanding-human-rights/>

ing, and the fight for women's rights has encountered several obstacles, including threats, hate, insults and discrimination, among many others. These online campaigns and movements have had to face anti-feminist hatred and persistent intimidation. And although governments have created laws and policies to regulate cyberbullying, social media cannot be controlled.

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The old concept of activism and hate have now mutated to the online sphere. Recognising the importance of the role of these new actors as an online tool to fight for human rights should be considered a priority, especially when these tools are a weapon to seek justice, confront power and create and build a community of

solidarity and understanding, as well as to fight against cybercrime.

Social media plays an important role in promoting a movement and spreading the message worldwide and reaching a wider audience, and it should continue to do so. It should keep building communities to support movements, to protest and raise one's voice, and to show solidarity between societies. Social media should be seen as a tool to confront power and to connect people beyond the borders with a common interest and a common objective, and not a tool for disinformation and a pool of discrimination and hate.

"Violence has always been there. It's not going to be over, and we know that the Turkish government doesn't care about it, neither the ministries nor the police. But it doesn't mean that we are going to stay and do nothing, so we just keep fighting," Burcu Karakas told me. And yes, we are just going to keep fighting.