

## A Sociological Reading of the Gender Gap in the Digital Economy and the Impact of Cyberbullying on Female Entrepreneurship

قراءة سوسيولوجية في الفجوة الجندرية في الاقتصاد الرقمي وأثر التنمر الإلكتروني على ريادة الأعمال النسوية

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### Abstract:

This article investigates the role of cyberbullying and gender-based digital violence in women entrepreneurs' experiences in the use of digital platforms. Using a descriptive review of the literature and a critical sociological analysis (including content analysis of digital cases, including the Algerian context), was conducted. The findings indicate a paradox of the digitalization process, as we grapple with empowerment and together the reproduction of inequality. Cyberbullying is not to be viewed solely as deviant behavior at the individual level; understanding cyberbullying as a social structure is necessary to understand all socializing, shown by defamation, blackmail, exclusion, and algorithmic bias. These practices lead to psychological consequences (anxiety, isolation, trust erosion), social consequences (delegitimization and weakening of networks), and economic consequences (lost reputational equity, falling sales, difficulty accessing finance). These different consequences can be exacerbated in Global South countries where the digital policy continues to grow without the necessary gender justice perspective

**Keywords:** Women entrepreneurs; Cyberbullying; Gender-based digital violence; Digital sociology; Symbolic exclusion.

### ملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال دراسة أثر التنمر الإلكتروني والعنف الرقمي القائم على النوع في تجربة المرأة المقاتلة عبر المنصات الرقمية. من خلال مراجعة وصفية للأدبيات وتحليل سوسيولوجي نقدي مدعوم بتحليل مضمون لحالات رقمية، منها السياق الجزائري. تكشف النتائج مفارقة الرقمنة بين التمكين وإعادة إنتاج اللامساواة؛ إذ لا يُختزل التنمر في كونه سلوكاً فردياً بل يُعدّ بنية اجتماعية تتجلى في التشهير والابتزاز والإقصاء والتحيزات الخوارزمية. وتخلّف هذه الممارسات آثاراً متعدّدة: نفسية مثل القلق والعزلة وتآكل الثقة، اجتماعية مثل نزاع الشرعية وإضعاف الشبكات، واقتصادية مثل الإضرار بالسمعة وتراجع المبيعات وصعوبة النفاذ إلى التمويل. وتتفاقم هذه التداعيات في بلدان الجنوب حيث تتسع السياسات الرقمية دون مراعاة كافية للعدالة الجندرية. كلمات مفتاحية: المرأة المقاتلة؛ التنمر الإلكتروني؛ العنف الرقمي الجندري؛ السوسيولوجيا الرقمية؛ الإقصاء الرمزي.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, the world is in a critical state of change and upheaval driven by the digital revolution. The virtual space is no longer a place solely for socializing and entertainment. Rather, it has grown into an active economic space offering opportunities for different types of entrepreneurship, especially for women. The development of digital platforms and social media have expanded vast horizons creating exit points for women entrepreneurs to market their services and products, forge client networks, establish their business presence without the need of equivalent capital investment or traditional physical spaces, and an escape of some of the institutional constraints in male-oriented economic structures. Digital entrepreneurship creates a socially and economically empowering entrepreneurial form (McAdam et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, while there has been progress, field experiences have shown that the digital space is not a neutral one; it is a space where gender discrimination is reproduced with different forms of workings. Two of the most common forms of discrimination that arose are cyberbullying and gender-based digital violence (Backe et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2019). Gender-based digital violence includes not only verbal insults and ridicule but also other more serious actions such as defamation, hacking, blackmail, and social isolation, and it negatively affects women's mental health as entrepreneurs and threatens the sustainability of women's economic activities (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024; Shariff, 2009). Empirical evidence shows that women experience these practices more than men and that this materializes the precariousness of women in the digital environment.

The significance of this research is that it responds to a necessary need in Arab societies, including Algeria, where digital policies are expanding remarkably without regard to the principle of digital gender justice. For many women digital entrepreneurs, the internet does not offer a space for liberation and empowerment; it is a space with a social, cultural and political wall of barriers that reproduce marginalization and exclusion (Guo et al., 2025; McAdam et al., 2019). In this way, cyberbullying is considered not just an act of individual deviant behavior, but the outcome of the social structure as a feature of reproducing gender inequalities in a space which was meant to be democratically available.

This paper seeks to answer the central question: How does cyberbullying influence the lived experience of women entrepreneurs in the digital realm or online space and what sociological and security mechanisms can be enacted for prevention and response to ensure sustainable economic participation by women entrepreneurs?

To respond to this question the article will be sectioned into four discussion points: the paper will start with a conceptual basis and theoretical development, then analyze its social and cultural dimensions, depict effects on women entrepreneurs' trajectory, and end with mechanisms of prevention and response.

The significance of this work is derived from the level of fast, furious, and increasing digital policies launched in the Global South - and not the least Algeria, while applying little or none of the principle of digital social justice between genders. This deserves some critical sociological reflection on the social phenomenon of the cyberbullying of women generally

and women entrepreneurs specifically, and deserves to be viewed as a major issue within the digital equity agenda.

This paper adopts a multidimensional methodology. It begins with a descriptive approach aimed at identifying the manifestations of cyberbullying through a review of relevant literature and previous studies. It then employs a critical sociological approach to understand how the phenomenon is linked to social and cultural structures that reproduce male dominance and reinforce the symbolic exclusion of women in the digital space. In addition, the paper relies on content analysis, drawing on studies that have examined digital space content—such as research on influencers in Algeria—in order to uncover the strategies and mechanisms through which forms of cyberbullying are exercised in the virtual sphere.

## **1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Work in the Digital Age**

The digital revolution has drastically altered ways of working, thus offering women entrepreneurs unprecedented possibilities to surpass the barriers historically conditioned by capital or social limitations, making digital entrepreneurship a medium of economic and social empowerment. Digital entrepreneurship does not exist in a vacuum, and instead is constituted according to existing social and cultural structures that normalize and perpetuate social models where women still experience exclusion. The internet space, as noted by Gupta and Kiran (2025), really does reproduce gendered harm through new manifestations of symbolic and economic exclusion that manifest as discrimination. Cyberbullying as a form of digital violence, particularly against women but also including women entrepreneurs, is perhaps the most visible, in terms of defamatory harm, blackmail, and exclusion aimed at this undermining of one's economic and social visibility.

In this sense, cyberbullying has also emerged as one of the most visible forms of digital violence directed at women, including women entrepreneurs, in terms of defamatory harm, blackmail, and exclusion which undermines one's economic and social presence.

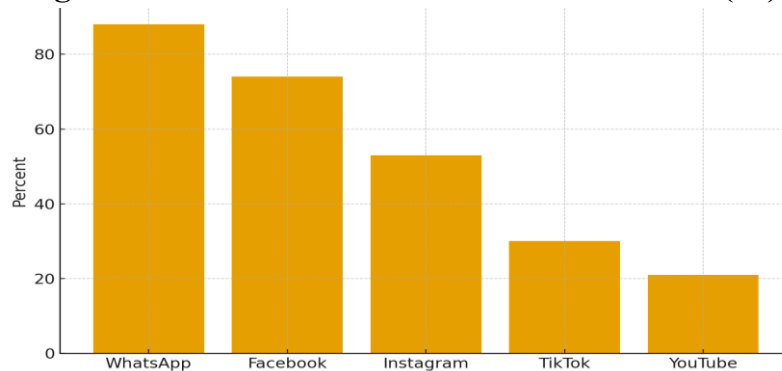
Considering this, in studying the intersection of: women entrepreneurs and their presence in the digital space, one must engage with a dual digital sociological approach, seeing digitization as a tool in which women experience liberation and empowerment, and on the other hand expose digitization as a space for reproduction of domination and difference.

### **1.1 Women's Digital Entrepreneurship:**

In the past four decades, digital entrepreneurship has arguably become the single, most important change triggered by technological revolution. What began as a vast digital opportunity for business began to knock down either physical or predetermined spaces for an entrepreneurial opportunity, and social media and social networks provided alternative economic areas to take advantage of. For women with structural barriers - this has now meant brand new, exciting and unprecedented ways to conduct entrepreneurial work, largely without needing capital investment or complicated, traditional physical networks (Malaquias & Fernandes Malaquias, 2022).

In this context, the following figure illustrates the platforms most commonly used by women entrepreneurs:

**Figure 1. Social Media Platforms Used Busniss (%)**



**Source:** Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2024, p. 45.

Women entrepreneurs have clearly shown that they primarily use the following social media platforms when conducting their business: WhatsApp (88%), Facebook (74%), indicating a preference for simple, fast, digital tools that allow direct, low-cost connections with customers. Instagram (53%) is of moderate importance for women entrepreneurs, albeit more important than it might otherwise be, because they are engaging in sectors where visual identity is crucial (fashion, beauty, handicrafts, etc.). TikTok (30%) is also starting to gain ground among younger women entrepreneurs who are experimenting with marketing via short-form video. YouTube (21%) is used by a small number of women entrepreneurs, in part because it has a much higher threshold popularly for production skills and requires more time.

These data illustrate what can only be described as “the logic of the digital household economy,” in which women feel comfortable using the low-threshold platforms and avoid using more complex channels. Simultaneously, this continues to highlight the digital gender gap that limits women entrepreneurs from extending their practices into professionalized digital spaces.

Accordingly, women’s digital entrepreneurship can be regarded as a mechanism for economic and social empowerment, as it enables women to create individual or collective projects and expand their markets through digital networks, thereby achieving relative independence from the traditional frameworks imposed by patriarchal culture (Guo et al., 2025).

Comparative studies have highlighted that women in patriarchal societies such as China and Saudi Arabia have been able to leverage digital tools to build their businesses and overcome restrictions imposed on them in the physical space (McAdam et al., 2019).

Thus, digital entrepreneurship involving women is referred to as a means of economic and social empowerment as it allows women to develop individual or collective projects, and develop markets through digital networks so that, at least to some extent, they can escape the installed frameworks of patriarchal culture (Guo et al., 2025).

Comparative studies have shown that women in patriarchal setting such as China and Saudi Arabia, have used digital tool to develop their businesses and move beyond their earlier physical restricted environments (McAdam et al., 2019) .

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these emancipatory potentials, critical feminist scholarship has warned that the digital space is not neutral but rather a reproduction of existing unequal social structures. Digital dimensions can reproduce gendered discrimination and unlock, activate, and reassert stereotypes that resist or extend women's agency as entrepreneurs (Daniels, 2013). More importantly, the fact that women will tend to have less access to technological resources and digital literacy than men complicates the gender digital divide and undercuts women's digital entrepreneurship, making it even more fragile and vulnerable to exclusion (Dy et al., 2017).

Women in digital entrepreneurship therefore occupy a precarious space of opportunity at the intersection of empowerment and marginalization. On one hand, it represents a new horizon for women's engagement in the digital economy; on the other hand, it demonstrates the limitations of technology when subsumed under unjust social and cultural formations.

## **1.2 Digital Violence and Cyberbullying**

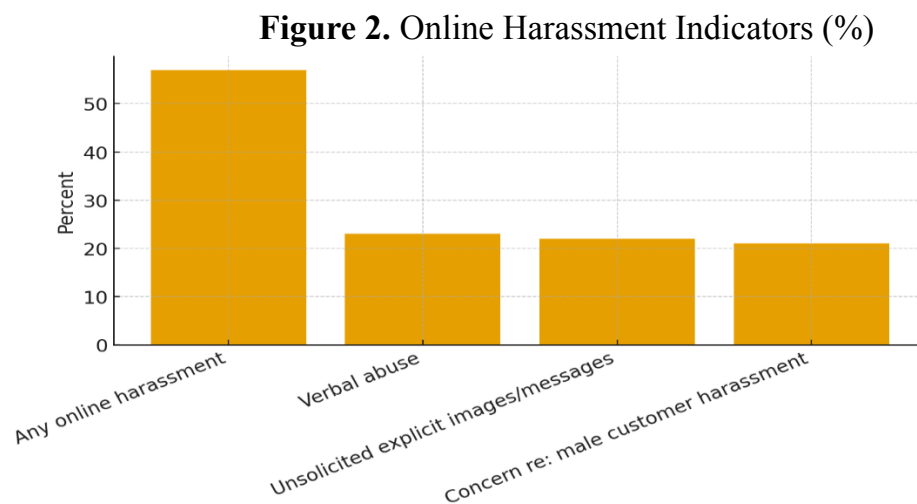
Digital violence is often considered an extension of "traditional" violence, though it takes on different forms due to technological advancement and the ubiquitous development of new communication technologies. Digital violence takes many forms through practices such as defamation, voyeurism, identity theft, blackmail, and an infringement on the right to freedom of expression. Cyberbullying is perhaps the most noticeable and prevalent form of digital violence (Shariff, 2009). From an educational and legal perspective, many studies have defined cyberbullying as the repeated use of digital technology to insult, harass, exclude or otherwise do psychological and social harm to another person or group (Backe et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2019) .

The studies confirm what we know; we cannot view cyberbullying as just an individual deviance but as a digital social structure that exemplifies existing cultural and gender disparities in society. There is a larger degree of targeting of vulnerable groups – predominantly women - within social, professional and entrepreneur space.

Recent studies conducted in academic, and professional contexts have shown that women suffer from more aggressive digital practices than men, from threats, to verbal discrimination, defamation and diminished engagement and impact within the digital public sphere.

Some sociological approaches perceive cyberbullying as a means of perpetuating male domination online, where domination is claimed not only through conversation, but also through technologies and algorithms that favor the dominant's voices and silence less-represented actors (Daniels, 2013). This aligns with the position of (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024), who have promoted moral disengagement as linked to the proliferation of digital violence across social relations, including professional and economic (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024) .

In this context, the following figure illustrates the forms of online harassment and digital violence, along with their prevalence rates, directed against women entrepreneurs:



**Source:** Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2024, p. 58

The figure on online harassment indicators shows that 57% of women entrepreneurs reported experiencing at least one form of digital harassment, reflecting the widespread prevalence of the phenomenon and the breadth of its scope. The forms of targeting are distributed between verbal abuse (23%), which represents the most common practice, inappropriate images or messages (22%), which reveal the explicit sexual dimension of digital violence, and 21% of women who expressed concern about harassment or discrimination originating from male clients.

These signs are evidence that cyberbullying is not just detached lone assaults, but actually reflects deeper structural habits associated with patriarchal culture and gender inequality. Verbal abuse signals a perceived loss of legitimacy for women entrepreneurs in the public domain, and blackmail through trolls' unwanted images or messages designed to shake her confidence ultimately push women off digital platforms. Factors of worries connected to discrimination or harassment—trojan horses—through economic activity demonstrate how “professional” economic relationships are still mediated through a nexus of gendered power relations.

Consequently, an increase in these rates represents how the digital context reproduces forms of symbolic and economic violence, which demands that the question be brought to bear in the context of digital protections and the legislation on gender-based violence and harassment, to provide women entrepreneurs with a safer and more equitable environment for their businesses both online and off. Thus, to take on cyberbullying means to respond to not just individual retaliatory behaviors, but to an overall social and cultural structure that normalizes the reality of persisting gender inequities in physical and virtual space. This renders cyberbullying as a structural barrier to achieving digital justice, and making possible the economic activity of women entrepreneurs to happen in a safe and sustainable environment.

### 1.3 Digital Sociology

Digital sociology has appeared as newly developing area of knowledge. Digital sociology seeks to examine the ways in which digitalization reforms social relationships, public spaces and patterns of interaction between individuals and/or groups. It does not view the digital realm as a decontextualized reflection of reality, it sees the digital realm as being

part of already existing social, cultural and political structures, meaning existing patterns of discrimination and domination move from the material realm to the virtual realm (Orlikowski, 2007).

The digital sphere today has become a parallel domain to the physical world, where individual and collective identities are constructed, public opinion is shaped, and social and political power is exercised. However, while this sphere provides broad opportunities for empowerment and participation—particularly for women entrepreneurs—it simultaneously reinforces new forms of social control through targeted algorithms, hate speech, and systemic discrimination on digital platforms (Backe et al., 2018). Research on women's digital entrepreneurship further shows that platforms, which are ostensibly designed to enhance economic freedom, can turn into mechanisms that reproduce institutional voids and social constraints, especially in patriarchal contexts (McAdam et al., 2019).

This body of work suggests that we cannot examine cyberbullying without considering the social and cultural contexts in which it appears. On the one hand, digitalization is an emancipation and empowerment tool for women, and a means for women to express themselves and create separate economic and social network (Suseno & Abbott, 2021). On the other hand, digitalization can be a social structure that reproduces exclusion and discrimination evident in society, which creates a double structure that constantly moves between the promise of emancipation and the possibility of renewed domination.

Thus, engaging with the relationship between women entrepreneurs and cyberbullying from the lens of digital sociology necessitates situating an analysis of the possibilities opened up by technology within a critique of the structural risks related to the enduring nature of gender inequalities within digital contexts.

From this perspective, we can articulate the key issue of this paper: the dialectics of empowerment and marginalization. This tension plays out in the dual possibilities of women's digital entrepreneurship articulated in this case—the emancipatory possibilities of women's digital entrepreneurship are challenged by the structural risks of cyberbullying. On one hand, digitalization enables a form of economic and social empowerment for women, placing them in a virtual space in which they can market their products, develop networks for business, and access (and overcome) other and conventional forms of barriers inherent to the historical development of the material economy and patriarchal culture. On the other hand, this same virtual space is where discrimination is reproduced through new mechanisms of digital violence (at every level of social and cultural structure).

Cyberbullying as one of the most advocated forms of digital violence, is not only an individual act of harassment it presentations a more systemic social structure formally done via communication technologies and digital algorithms, where partially involve women. Several studies show conclusively that women entrepreneurs are facing an increasing level of exposure to defamation, hacking and extortion, all of which threaten their economic projects and sustain the fragility of their exposure in the digital realm.

## **2. The Social and Cultural Dimensions of Cyberbullying**

The second axis of this presentation accentuates the social and cultural dimensions of cyberbullying, as it acts as a device for reproducing discrimination in cyberspace. Cyber

violence does not occur in a technical void; rather, it is sustained by the cultural and symbolic structures that constitute society, and translated as an exclusionary, hostile practice in a virtual space.

From this perspective, cyberbullying is more than an isolated act of aggression, it is showcases an unequal social structure that reinforces and re-establishes patriarchal authority and gender-based discrimination in a mediated space that is supposedly open, and democratic.

## **2.1 The Reproduction of Patriarchal Dominance in the Digital Sphere**

Although the digital space is frequently described as open and free for all actors, critical literature argues that it doesn't operate outside the social and cultural structures and contexts that produced it. On the contrary, it will reproduce forms of gender discrimination (Daniels, 2013).. Women entrepreneurs can expect to receive more symbolic violence, marginalization, and defamation than male entrepreneurs, which demonstrates that gender continues to perform as patriarchal dominance, even in supposedly neutered digital spaces.

Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017) addressed the idea of the “digital double bind” to capture the predicament women experience on digital platforms. On the one hand, women are expected to embody feminine stereotypes that align with dominant depictions in culture and when women push against these representations to position themselves as independent economic actors, they are flagged or punished (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

McAdam et al. (2019) used this idea to contextualize the precariousness of women entrepreneurs’ digital presence among emerging situations, emphasizing how this predicament renders women’s presence in the virtual realm susceptible to pushback and challenges to their economic legitimacy (McAdam et al., 2019).

Research on digital women's entrepreneurship also shows that women entrepreneurs are forced to engage in the conversation around the digital market, imbued with masculine social representations that limit their autonomy, making their engagement in the digital sphere a conditional and limited engagement (McAdam et al., 2019).

Although it is an open environment, the digital space becomes another outlet for the reproduction of gendered dominance, using different tools as part of a process where symbolic violence is enacted through language, stereotypes, and algorithmic policies that privilege visibility for men at the expense of women's visibility.

The reproduction of this dominance in the digital space is not merely an extension of real-world discrimination but a mechanism that intensifies it. It combines symbolic and cultural violence on the one hand with the structural influence of algorithms on the other, making it difficult for women entrepreneurs to fully benefit from the emancipatory potential of digitalization without facing the risks of exclusion or defamation.

## **2.2 Cultural and Symbolic Structures as an Explanatory Factor**

Sociological literature shows that cyberbullying does not emerge independently of social and cultural contexts; rather, it is fueled by symbolic structures and cultural norms that define gender roles in society. In patriarchal contexts, where women are reduced to objects of social and familial guardianship, digital platforms become spaces for reimposing

this social control through mechanisms of symbolic violence and digital exclusion (Guo et al., 2025).

Research carried out in Asia shows that women entrepreneurs must navigate historical barriers as defined by traditional culture, which frequently stigmatizes women's economic activity in terms of legitimacy. The qualitative research case study in China also provides evidence that the ability to maximize other tools and digital tools can have two conflicting effects:

- A expanding force, increasing opportunities for exposure & market entry and access to a potential audience through digital marketing
- An empowering force: giving females the ability to apply their skills and resources (like online education and platform-based marketing) through digital

However, these gains do not fully eliminate structural biases. Traditional cultural values remain a constraining factor that confines women to stereotypical roles and renders their economic presence fragile (Guo et al., 2025).

This issue is also repeated in other contexts, such as Arab countries, where McAdam et al. (2019) highlighted that women do not use the digital space as a way to escape gender or to conceal their identities. On the contrary, they invest in it as a means of reshaping their selves and renegotiating their roles within a society governed by strict patriarchal norms. Thus, the digital space becomes an arena of tension between the reproduction of domination on the one hand and the reconstruction of female identity on the other (McAdam et al., 2019).

Moreover, experiences from countries of the Global South reveal that cyberbullying is sometimes employed as a symbolic mechanism to exclude women entrepreneurs from the digital public sphere, through questioning the legitimacy of their work or labeling them with negative attributes that undermine their morals or social roles (Ramdane et al., 2024). This demonstrates that symbolic violence in the digital space is a direct extension of societal culture and constitutes an obstacle to achieving digital equality.

Thus, understanding the phenomenon of cyberbullying remains incomplete without analyzing the cultural and symbolic factors that fuel it. These factors explain why women are targeted to a greater extent and why they face greater difficulty in sustaining their digital enterprises compared to men.

### **2.3 The Social Dimension of Digital Vulnerability and Structural Inequalities**

Sociological literature reveals that the digital sphere, despite its emancipatory potential, also mirrors the social inequalities existing in real societies. This makes women—especially in the Global South—face double vulnerability compared to men. This vulnerability stems from three interrelated levels:

- Limited access to digital resources: The gender digital divide persists in terms of access to equipment (computers, smartphones) and the technical knowledge required to fully benefit from digital opportunities (Suseno & Abbott, 2021).
- Weak digital and social support networks: Women entrepreneurs tend to possess weaker social and economic networks than their male counterparts, which reduces their

ability to cope with digital attacks or to build supportive professional solidarity (Ramdane et al., 2024)

- Cultural constraints: Women’s digital participation in the public sphere remains conditioned by traditional social perceptions that often undermine their legitimacy as independent entrepreneurs and expose them to discourse of doubt or defamation.

These factors have contributed to women entrepreneurs increasingly facing the pressure of cyberbullying. Comparative studies show that women are more susceptible than men to defamation campaigns and digital extortion. Recent studies have also shown that both researchers and women in professional environments can be subjected to gender-based digital violence, which can include anything from verbal violence to direct threats, and this is an entrenched exclusion undermining their chances of sustainable participation (Kavanagh & Brown, 2020).

It can therefore be seen that digital vulnerability is not only technical but indicative of much greater social inequalities which are related to class, gender, and culture. Accordingly, cyberbullying is one of the most significant vehicles through which these inequalities are reproduced in the digital space.

## **2.4 Cyberbullying as a Social Structure**

In superficial literature, cyberbullying is often viewed as a deviant individual act or the result of a lack of digital ethics. However, sociological and critical approaches emphasize that the danger of this phenomenon lies in its structural dimension. It goes beyond individual practices to become a mechanism for reproducing social and gender inequalities within the digital sphere (Backe et al., 2018) .

The digital sphere does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it reflects and extends the deep social structures of real society. Practices such as mockery, defamation, exclusion, and symbolic marginalization thus emerge as digital manifestations of the social and cultural control mechanisms that have long reinforced male dominance in the public sphere. This makes cyberbullying more than just “hostile individual behavior”; it becomes a deeply rooted social structure that relies on existing disparities and continually reproduces them.

In addition, digital violence intersects with other social factors such as social class, ethnic affiliation, and economic status, which heightens the vulnerability of certain groups of women more than others. Women who belong to economically marginalized groups or ethnic and cultural minorities are subjected to more severe levels of digital violence compared to others (Dy et al., 2017).

Recent studies on digital violence in social relationships show that mechanisms of moral disengagement are employed to justify hostile behaviors across platforms. This grants implicit legitimacy to cyberbullying and integrates it into the dominant digital cultural structure (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024) .

From this perspective, cyberbullying represents a new arena for reshaping class and gender inequalities in the virtual world, where technology functions as a mediator that redistributes social power, yet at the same time entrenches structural disparities instead of overcoming them. Consequently, the digital sphere becomes a contradictory space, combining emancipatory potential with the risks of reproducing marginalization.

### 3. The Implications of Cyberbullying on the Experience of Women Entrepreneurs

This axis highlights the direct implications of this phenomenon on the experience of women entrepreneurs. Cyberbullying is not limited to being a hostile behavior in the digital sphere; it transforms into a structural factor that produces multidimensional effects—psychological, social, and economic. These implications go beyond the individual, affecting the sustainability of entrepreneurial projects and weakening women's presence in the digital public sphere.

From this perspective, cyberbullying can be seen as a central obstacle to women's empowerment in entrepreneurship. It reproduces the marginalization they already face in real life and intensifies their vulnerability in the digital realm through what can be described as double discrimination: as women subjected to cultural domination, and as economic actors facing structural barriers in the market.

#### 3.1 Psychological Implications

Studies show that cyberbullying leaves profound psychological scars on women entrepreneurs. Its impact goes far beyond temporary discomfort, often leading to chronic anxiety and fear of engaging in the digital public sphere. This anxiety appears in the form of persistent tension when interacting on platforms and a decline in trust toward others, which drives some women to restrict their online presence or even withdraw from it completely (Shariff, 2009).

The erosion of self-confidence is another serious consequence, as it undermines women's ability to make strategic decisions related to their entrepreneurial ventures. Hesitation to engage with clients, fear of negative feedback, and concern about potential defamation campaigns all act as barriers that limit the professional and economic dynamism of women entrepreneurs (Kavanagh & Brown, 2020).

In addition, studies have shown that women often resort to unproductive defensive strategies, such as:

- **Self-censorship:** Constantly monitoring what they post in order to avoid being targeted.
- **Partial or complete withdrawal:** Reducing their digital presence, which results in losing opportunities for marketing and expansion.

Rather than protecting them, these strategies reinforce symbolic exclusion by weakening their digital presence and further entrenching their economic marginalization (Backe et al., 2018)

Based on the above, it can be argued that the psychological repercussions of cyberbullying goes considerably beyond the individual to become a structural barrier to sustainability for entrepreneurial projects. It degrades self-efficacy, weakens social risk-taking and innovative capability, and augmented the probability of failure or exiting the digital space.

#### 3.2 Social Implications

Cyberbullying takes a toll on more than just psychological effects, there are also significant social outcomes, especially in relation to the symbolic banning of women entrepreneurs. Systematic digital violence, such as defamation or stigma, ultimately

removes an individual's social currency from their entrepreneurial activity, which further compromises their professional networks and reduces the same opportunity to create stable relationships with clients or partners.

The literature makes it very clear that these practices are not individual behaviors, but a collection of coordinated strategies within the digital ecology that utilizes hate speech and exclusion to enforce existing social norms and re-establish male dominance (Guo et al., 2025).

Field research on the experiences of women entrepreneurs and influencers from Algeria has revealed, in local contexts, that defamation and other campaigns of online harm result in women's gradual withdrawal from the digital realm, compromising their ability to maintain digital work and reverting their status back to traditional roles (Ramdane et al., 2024). This movement from digital to traditional roles indicates that the digital domain is not an entirely different realm than social reality, but rather reproduces social realities through modernized mechanisms that reinforce masculine value systems.

In this sense, cyberbullying acts as a mechanism for under-explored forms of symbolic exclusion: weakening women's social and economic visibility on one side of the spectrum, and enforcing the power of patriarchal structures on the other, by reiterating patriarchal values within the digital domain. In this way, the virtual space is itself an extension of real social systems, not only reproducing their constraints, but transforming them to be more flexible and widespread.

### **3.3 Economic Considerations**

Cyber bullying has implications beyond psychological and social implications; they also have economic implications that influence the heart of the entrepreneurial experience. Digital attacks, from defamation to blackmail, impact entrepreneurs and her clients, harm the project's reputation, and shake confidence in the quality of products and the economic actor's credibility (Rahayu & Ellyanawati, 2023). The loss of trust equates to loss in sales and loss of clients, ultimately decreasing economic productivity.

Further, taking oneself off digital channels (considered the most important method for marketing and expansion) is one of the most serious economic implications. This withdrawal removed access to new markets and new opportunities to expand geographically and professionally. McAdam et al. (2019) highlight the lack of institutional structure that supports women starting out in transitional economies (McAdam et al., 2019).

Cyberbullying also causes additional barriers to access funding, as defamation and stigma sap the confidence of proponents in women entrepreneurs. Notably, new data shows that women face an even bigger financing disadvantage, and women who experience digital violence face an even bigger disadvantage due to stereotypes of women's ability to carry and manage successful and stable projects (Suseno & Abbott, 2021).

Given the forms above, it is not only evident that cyberbullying constitutes a risk for women's safety in the digital sphere, but also that this is a structural and economic barrier that threatens the sustainability of women's projects and restricts their opportunities for growth and inclusion into the global digital economy.

### 3.4 Double Discrimination

Women entrepreneurs in the digital sphere face what can be described as double discrimination, where traditional forms of marginalization present in real society are replicated and then reshaped in the virtual world through new mechanisms. While digitization is assumed to break barriers of time and space, it instead becomes a dual arena of exclusion (McAdam et al., 2019):

The first exclusion stems from being a woman, as patriarchal culture subjects her to narratives of doubt and delegitimization.

The second exclusion stems from being an economic actor attempting to compete with men in a digital space also controlled by unequal mechanisms, such as algorithms and market biases.

This double discrimination exposes women entrepreneurs to repeated targeting through digital violence ranging from mockery and defamation to extortion, weakening their presence in the digital economic sphere. It also entrenches a dual vulnerability: on one hand, the lack of social recognition for the legitimacy of women-led enterprises, and on the other, weak institutional protection, which makes women's projects less stable compared to those of their male counterparts (Orser & Elliott, 2015).

In addition, the literature indicates that this situation deepens women's self-confidence gap, as double discrimination translates into constrained expansion strategies and increased reliance on narrow markets or informal support networks. Thus, instead of serving as a space of emancipation, the digital economy becomes a space that reproduces the boundaries of gendered dominance in a compounded way.

The following table summarizes the main manifestations of cyberbullying faced by women entrepreneurs in the digital sphere, along with their multidimensional impacts (psychological, social, and economic).

**Table 1. Manifestations of Cyberbullying and Their Corresponding Impacts**

| Manifestation/Mechanism          | Brief Definition (According to the Article)                                      | Suggested Qualitative/Quantitative Indicators                                                                           | Psychological Impact                                       | Social Impact                                                          | Economic Impact                                          | Brief Methodological Notes                                                             |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Systematic Defamation</b>     | Repeated campaigns on platforms targeting reputation and professional legitimacy | Descriptive/estimated change in engagement rate (↓ noticeable over a week–month), increase in negative comments/reports | Anxiety, erosion of self-efficacy, fear of public exposure | Delegitimization, weakening of professional networks and relationships | Loss of partnerships/clients, decline in sales           | Track series of posts/comments as the unit of analysis; compare before/after the event |
| <b>Extortion/Privacy Threats</b> | Threats to reveal data/images or hacking accounts to enforce behavior or silence | Document messages/attempted logins, change in posting patterns (interruption/reduction)                                 | Chronic tension, feeling of digital insecurity             | Withdrawal from groups/platforms, weakened trust in connections        | Temporary suspension of activity, loss of pending orders | Archive messages/evidence; record withdrawal decisions and duration as a variable      |

|                                         |                                                                                    |                                                                                    |                                    |                                                                               |                                                        |                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Exclusion or Coordinated Reports</b> | Organized group reports to remove content/account or limit its reach               | Sudden increase in reports, hidden posts, platform messages restricting access     | Frustration, sense of helplessness | Reduced presence in the digital community, decreased interaction with clients | Shrinking client base, cost of rebuilding channels     | Use screenshots/platform logs; monitor weekly reach impact                                 |
| <b>Algorithmic Bias (Suspected)</b>     | Patterns of ranking/recommendation that may marginalize women-led accounts/content | Drop in organic reach despite consistent content/budget, change in display ranking | Confusion, loss of trust in tools  | Reduced visibility within networks                                            | Decreased sales/conversions without clear market cause | Compare time series before/after events; control for variables (content type/time/hashtag) |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher based on the discussion in Axis Three.

The table above highlights that cyberbullying is not merely a transient individual behavior, but a structural mechanism that reproduces digital vulnerability and gender discrimination across interconnected levels. In this way, the table serves as an entry point for understanding the dialectic between empowerment and exclusion in the experience of women entrepreneurs: while digitization promises broad opportunities, the manifestations of digital violence listed in the table set realistic limits to these promises, making the need for protective mechanisms and fair policies even more urgent.

#### **4. Strategies to combat and prevent Cyberspace Bullism Against women entrepreneurs**

Having established the structural character of cyberbullying and its psychological, social, and economic implications for women entrepreneurs in previous axes, the fourth axis presents a pragmatic question, how can this reality be confronted and prevented? The seriousness of the understanding of cyberbullying means it is not simply individual behaviour, but rather a social mechanism that reproduced reproduction of discrimination and inequality within the framework of cyberspace.

Addressing it, then requires an intersectional, multidimensional approach to combine digital literacy, legal reform, public policy, and cultural shift. An intersectional, multidimensional approach allows for technology to be challenged, for digital harm to be reduced, and for women entrepreneurs to pursue their developmental and growth work free from the burden of digital violence in the realm of cyberspace.

##### **4.1 The Educational Function**

Digital literacy is seen as a primary preventive strategy for cyberbullying because awareness of the dangers of digital spaces, in addition to education on cybersecurity, is in a woman entrepreneur's first line of defence against aggressive attacks across virtual platforms (Shariff, 2009). Technical know-how and practical capabilities—navigating digital accounts, protecting personal data and authentication security tools—help lessen women's weaknesses to the threats of digital life.

The literature shows that the absence of digital literacy deepens the gender gap in dealing with technology, as men tend to possess greater technical knowledge, while

women—especially in developing societies—remain more exposed to digital exploitation (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2024). Comparative studies further confirm that women who have received training in safe online interaction and digital crisis management are better able to sustain their entrepreneurial projects without being negatively affected by defamation or extortion campaigns.

Also, integrating digital education into education and training policies is essential. Women entrepreneurship training courses could include practical modules:

- How to protect their online identity
- How to monitor and report incidents of cyber-bullying
- How to manage a virtual crisis with as little damage to the reputation of their work as possible

From this perspective, education is not merely a choice - it is a strategic choice that enhances the resilience of women entrepreneurs on a digital landscape and retains their economic and social impact.

#### **4.2 Legal Aspects**

One of the principal facilitators for the rise in cyberbullying is the lack of sufficient deterrent legal frameworks. The lack of any clear statutory definition of acts of gender-based violence online allows for impunity, and exposes women entrepreneurs directly or indirectly to exposure to defamation and extortion campaigns (Shariff, 2009).

Literature also identified limited legal frameworks, particularly in developing countries, leads to a greater sense of vulnerability with digital targeting against women and lowers their chances of having confidence to seek redress with their experience (Backe et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2019).

Some developed countries have made substantial legislative advancements on this issue at an international level. In 2014 Canada passed the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act, which criminalizes non-consensual distribution of intimate images and digital threats in general, while the UK expanded its Malicious Communications Act to include cyberbullying through a digital platform (Kavanagh & Brown, 2020). These changes show a new emphasis on the importance of having a gendered lens for legislation relating to cybercrime, as well as combating the online targeting of women.

In contrast, the legal realities in Arab contexts, such as Algeria, are clearly not without significant faults. The laws still classify digital violence in the wider form of general cybercrimes which do not make explicit mention of gender-based violence or to the specific types of extortion and defamation towards women (Women, 2020). These legal and policy deficiencies effectively hinder the law as a deterrent and protecting mechanism and reiterates the imminent necessity for the legal protections, legislation, and other regulations that specifically address cases of digital violence perpetrated against women entrepreneurs.

Internationally, data by the Women (2020) highlights a significant gap in legal policies addressing "gender-based violence" in the context of digital violence as shown in Table (2):

**Table 2. Legal Status of Women's Protection from Digital Violence Worldwide**

| <b>Indicator</b>                                                   | <b>Percentage / Number</b>                                           | <b>Notes</b>                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Economies with laws against online harassment                      | 30% (58 out of 190)                                                  | Most lack specific legislation; laws are more common in high-income economies.                                                              |
| High-income economies with such laws                               | 33%                                                                  | Even among wealthy countries, only one-third have such regulations.                                                                         |
| Middle East and North Africa region                                | 20%                                                                  | Fewer than one-quarter of economies have laws.                                                                                              |
| Sub-Saharan Africa                                                 | 25%                                                                  | Noticeable weakness in legal protections.                                                                                                   |
| Economies with laws on online sexual harassment                    | 12% (22 countries only)                                              | None in South Asia; only one in East Asia/Pacific (Philippines); 8 in Latin America & the Caribbean.                                        |
| Economies with redress mechanisms (penalties + civil compensation) | 27% (53 with criminal sanctions, only 7 with financial compensation) | Sanctions include imprisonment or fines, while civil compensation is almost absent.                                                         |
| Economies with special procedures                                  | 19 economies                                                         | Through cybercrime or IT legislation.                                                                                                       |
| Economies protecting women with disabilities                       | 9 out of 58                                                          | Protection is nearly absent.                                                                                                                |
| Economies protecting children                                      | 21 out of 58                                                         | Less than half of the countries with laws provide child-specific protection.                                                                |
| Number of women legally protected worldwide                        | 2.473 billion (47% of women in 183 countries)                        | But only 12% are protected from online sexual harassment, 3% have the right to civil compensation, and 11% benefit from special procedures. |

**Source:** Adapted from (Recavarren & Elefante, 2023)

The chart indicates that less than a third of countries in the world have any kind of explicit law against online harassment and legislation that specifically covers digital sexual harassment is present in only 12%. Mechanisms providing for civil compensation or special procedures are available for only a very small number of women globally, demonstrating a significant gap in legally addressing this form of phenomena.

- As such, national legislation should be built upon such principles as:
- The explicit criminalization of cyber bullying and gender based digital violence.
- Implementation of mechanisms for reporting and protection mechanisms ensuring safety for victims and confidentiality.
- Inclusion of legal and psychological support to be provided for public policy addressing digital transformation.

In such sense, the law is not simply a punitive measure but provides the basis for a protective mechanism allowing women to build trust in the judiciary and enabling them to continue building their enterprise in a safer digital environment.

### **4.3 The Political and Security Dimension**

The political and security dimension is one of the most crucial areas in addressing cyberbullying, as it defines the strategic and institutional framework for dealing with the phenomenon. Sociological literature stresses that digital violence cannot be separated from structures of power and public policies, which makes it necessary to integrate a gender-sensitive approach into digital governance strategies (Suseno & Abbott, 2021).

Integrating this approach requires that cybersecurity strategies should not be designed in a gender-neutral way, but rather take into account the specific vulnerabilities of women entrepreneurs, who face double targeting due to their social and economic position. In this regard, several practical measures are essential, such as:

- Establishing official platforms for reporting cases of digital violence, similar to the eSafety Commissioner in Australia or the PHAROS platform in France, enabling rapid and effective follow-up of reports.
- Allocating technical and human resources to monitor hostile discourse on digital platforms, thereby supporting early intervention before harm escalates.
- Embedding specialized units within ministries and security agencies dedicated to addressing digital violence against women, to ensure comprehensive institutional coordination.
- Promoting regional and international cooperation to exchange expertise in combating gender-based cybercrimes.

Such measures are limited and fragmented in the Algerian and Arab context in a broader sense, so it is incumbent to create integrated public policies that recognize cyberbullying as a socio-security use case and prioritize it as part of national cybersecurity strategies (Guo et al., 2025).

### **4.4 The Sociological and Cultural Dimension**

The sociological and cultural aspect is the deepest aspect to address cyberbullying, focusing on the symbolic (rather than legal or technical) roots of violence. Digital violence against women entrepreneurs does not happen in a vacuum, but is a reflection of cultural structures and social norms that re-cast the unequal treatment of women. Hence, any response that is truly meaningful must entail a change in mentality and social perceptions that continue to normalize exclusion and hate speech against women (Daniels, 2013).

This change can occur through many institutional starting points: Education: via curricula that promote the principles of digital equality and include issues of cyberbullying in digital citizenship education. Media: through awareness campaigns that illustrate examples of digital violence as well as how they affect economic and social development. Religious and cultural institutions: who have a responsibility to provide a discourse that supports digital justice and to advocate for women as full-rights citizens. In this perspective, recent studies highlight that developing feminist digital justice must involve re-positioning digital violence to the top of the agenda of sustainable development and economic empowerment in which cybersecurity is considered a basic right as equal to the right to participate in the economy (Rahayu & Ellyanawati, 2023) . In this way, digital justice must not just be considered a rights-based demand but a developing condition for women's inclusion in the global digital economy.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals that, despite the vast opportunities the digital space offers for the economic and social empowerment of women entrepreneurs, it remains a contradictory arena that embeds new mechanisms for reproducing gender-based discrimination. Cyberbullying, with its manifestations of mockery, defamation, blackmail, and exclusion, is not merely an isolated individual behavior but rather a digital social structure that reflects a culture of entrenched patriarchal dominance and perpetuates the fragility of women entrepreneurs' presence in the public sphere.

In conclusion, this paper finds that it will not be possible for women entrepreneurs to attain true empowerment during the digital age without an environment that is safe and equitable, offering women security in the very thing that can be considered a fundamental right - to cybersecurity, equal to their right to economic and social participation. In this sense, including cyberbullying within a digital justice agenda as a focal point is an initial step toward creating a more equitable digital space for women entrepreneurs to create and thrive and provide beneficial contributions of their own to the economic and social development of their communities.

This analysis indicates that the effects of cyberbullying are multifaceted: it creates psychological effects with anxiety, isolation, and loss in self-esteem; social effects with loss of legitimacy of women in the digital public sphere; and economic effects which impacts their project sustainability and inhibits scale-up to the market. Therefore, cyberbullying creates a real barrier to the pursuit of digital justice and sustainable development.

Amidst the many challenges, there is an urgent need for a holistic approach against cyberbullying that incorporates four interrelated pillars: digital education through training and awareness programs aimed at women entrepreneurs specializing in cybersecurity; deterrent laws based on a developed legislation aimed at tackling cybercrime with consideration to gender; public policies that incorporate a gender perspective into cybersecurity strategies at the national level; and, lastly, a cultural shift focused on reinforcing the values of equality and digital justice within education institutions and media spaces.

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