

Summary of the submission by APC and SMEX to the  
51st session of the Universal Periodic Review at the  
UN Human Rights Council

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# Human rights in the digital context in Lebanon

The joint stakeholder report<sup>1</sup> by APC and SMEX focuses on key issues relating to human rights in the digital context in Lebanon, including digital inclusion and connectivity, freedom of expression online and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), particularly its impact on human and women's rights defenders and marginalised groups. Of the 297 recommendations it received during its previous Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Lebanon supported 179. However, disappointingly, the country has failed to implement many of the recommendations it accepted. The period since the last review has seen ongoing challenges to secure and stable internet access, the continued and increasing use of criminal defamation laws to stifle freedom of expression online and lack of accountability for human rights abuses against human and women's rights defenders.

1. <https://www.apc.org/en/node/40854/>



## **I. Context of the human rights situation online in Lebanon**

Since its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) during the third cycle, key political changes occurred with the election in 2025 of President Joseph Aoun and the formation of a new government under Nawaf Salam. Despite this, the country remains in a deep economic crisis, exacerbated by the 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon. The war also affected digital rights as a result of the use of disinformation campaigns by Israel and the impact on internet access of airstrikes against telecommunications infrastructure and fuel shortages.

## **II. Digital inclusion and connectivity**

As of 2025, Lebanon has a high internet penetration rate of 90.1%, but access is unreliable due to monopolisation, corruption and poor investment in the telecoms sector, as well as high prices that disproportionately impact marginalised groups. A report by the Lebanese Court of Audit (No. 2/2022, based on report No. 114/2021) revealed misuse of public funds in the telecoms sector, but the government has yet to take steps to implement the report's recommendations.

The ongoing economic crisis has worsened service quality, with frequent outages and slow speeds. Israeli airstrikes in 2024 severely damaged telecommunications in southern Lebanon, causing long-term disruptions. Fuel shortages and digital warfare tactics such as disinformation campaigns and recruitment ads on social media further undermined access to a secure and reliable internet. Civil society organisations such as SMEX conducted campaigns to address disinformation and keep citizens safe.

Plans to introduce Starlink services raise concerns over affordability and a lack of necessary regulation to protect people's data. The digital divide, especially in education, has widened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **III. Freedom of expression online**

While Lebanon's Constitution protects freedom of expression, online speech remains criminalised under various outdated and overly broad articles in the Penal Code, which stipulate penalties for defamation, slander and libel, and similar articles in the Publications Law and the Military Code of Justice that do not meet international standards. The proposed New Media Law would maintain and even aggravate these restrictions, as it contains numerous provisions that pose a threat to freedom of expression and the press. Access to public information is limited, as the 2017 Right to Access Information Law has not been properly implemented.

Although Lebanon supported recommendations made during its third UPR to protect journalists and uphold civilian trials, violations of freedom of expression have persisted. Political authorities and figures and religious entities continue to harass and prosecute journalists, bloggers, activists and LGBTQ+ individuals under outdated slander and

defamation provisions in laws. Summons and arrests over online speech are frequent and individuals are often illegally pressured to sign pledges undertaking not to publish similar content, bypassing their rights to a fair trial and defence.

In the 2017-2023 period, there were more than 800 violations against journalists in Lebanon, including physical assaults by security forces and harassment. Notable cases include legal actions against feminist news platform Sharika Wa Laken, media outlets The Public Source and Megaphone News and journalist Dima Sadek, who received a prison sentence for social media posts. Journalists and activists were the most prominent groups targeted over the years 2021-2025, as censorship and content restrictions intensified. SMEX's Digital Safety Helpdesk has documented a concerning rise in cases of sexual blackmail, particularly targeting members of the LGBTQ+ community.

#### **IV. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence faced by women human rights defenders**

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Lebanon face systemic digital threats, including online harassment, surveillance, censorship driven by restrictive laws and institutional gaps in digital protections. Women make up 80% of victims of digital violence, which comprises doxxing, cyberstalking, smear campaigns and account hacking. Impunity, fear of judicial harassment and lack of remedies drive widespread self-censorship among women journalists and activists.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) also rose during the period since Lebanon's last review. In 2023, 650 digital violence cases were reported to SMEX's Digital Safety Helpdesk, 135 of which targeted women. These mainly included cases of online harassment, blackmail, misinformation and account hacking. In the same year, SMEX responded to 71 instances of online violence against women, with 40% of cases involving hacked social media accounts, indicating a trend in the hacking of women's social media accounts. In 2024, cases included sextortion, impersonation, blackmail and doxxing. Much of this violence is carried out by coordinated troll farms with political or financial backing.

#### **V. Marginalised groups**

Marginalised groups in Lebanon – including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, migrant workers, refugees and sexual and reproductive health rights advocates – face significant online and offline hostility. Over recent years, government crackdowns on LGBTQ+ advocacy have worsened this environment, with targeted online harassment resulting in blackmail, forced outings, violence against family members, arbitrary arrests and physical abuse by security forces.

Despite accepting recommendations in Lebanon's last UPR to investigate excessive force during protests, authorities have failed to protect protestors, as was evident during the 2023 Freedom March. Lack of institutional safeguards and impunity leave activists vulnerable to

digital violence and undermine their freedom of expression. Social media platforms inadequately address hate speech and cyberbullying while disproportionately censoring activists, especially in Arabic content – such as that related to sexual and reproductive health rights. This is due to over-reliance on automated moderation and insufficient human oversight. There is therefore a need to adopt a balance of regulatory measures and policy incentives developed in consultation with civil society, affected communities and technology companies to mitigate digital harms and protect human rights online.

## **VI. Key recommendations to the government of Lebanon**

- Develop a five-year plan to advance the telecommunications sector, including network upgrades to ensure consistent quality across all of Lebanon. Implement transparent and inclusive mechanisms for public consultations with civil society organisations on plans to increase internet access and enable the more effective involvement of civil society in the preparation of policies.
- Ensure gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the Digital Transformation Strategy. Work with all implementing agencies and stakeholders of the strategy towards closing the gender digital divide by recognising the differentiated impact that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have on the lives of women and girls, in all their diversity.
- End judicial harassment and criminal prosecution of journalists and activists through the use of repressive defamation laws, undue process and military tribunals aimed at restricting freedom of expression and press freedom.
- Ensure that any new media regulation, including the New Media Law, is in compliance with article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and carry out gender impact and human rights impact assessments as part of the development of any new media regulation.
- Adopt explicit laws and policies aimed at strengthening protection from TFGBV for women and girls, in all their diversity.
- In collaboration with civil society organisations and academia, conduct regular public campaigns to raise awareness on TFGBV by ensuring broader understanding of TFGBV and its impact, while highlighting key issues around digital security and safety. Support the National Commission for Lebanese Women to integrate these awareness-raising activities into the forthcoming National Action Plan for Women (2027-2030).
- Take necessary steps to ensure the safety of marginalised groups, online and offline, and ensure adequate investigations into all attacks against activists, protestors, journalists, media professionals and marginalised groups.