CLAIMING AND RECLAIMING THE DIGITAL WORLD AS A PUBLIC SPACE

Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa

OXFAM

This paper seeks to highlight the experiences and aspirations of young women and feminist activists in the MENA region around digital spaces, safety and rights. It explores individual women's experiences engaging with the digital world, the opportunities and challenges that women's rights and feminist organizations find in these platforms, and the digital world as a space of resistance, despite restrictions on civic space. Drawing on interviews with feminist activists from the region, the paper sheds light on women's online experiences and related offline risks, and illustrates patterns and behaviours that prevailed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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SUMMARY

Since the early 2000s, digital technologies have had continuously and rapidly changing implications for the way the world works. These technologies have transformed how people interact socially, engage in public debates and political discourse, or organize and mobilize for social change. They have also provided space and tools for innovation and new ways of working. Yet, the risks and limitations around these tools remain vast. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital platforms considerably intensified, exacerbating existing risks for women on these platforms. Digital platforms have also become yet another tool used by authoritarian regimes to commit human rights violations.

Drawing on six semi-structured interviews with young feminist activists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as internal consultations with Oxfam colleagues, this paper seeks to highlight the experiences and aspirations of young women and feminist activists in the MENA region around digital spaces, safety and rights. It explores women's individual experiences engaging with the digital world; the opportunities, challenges and risks that women's rights and feminist organizations have found in digital tools and spaces; and finally, it looks at the digital world as a space for resistance, despite restrictions on civic space.

A personal margin of freedom

The MENA region is characterized by deeply embedded patriarchal social norms and oppressive authoritarian regimes, in which women's lives, bodies and minds are systematically controlled, placed under surveillance and instrumentalized by both state and society. Women are confined to roles prescribed by those norms, their personal freedoms are constrained, and their participation in public spaces is restricted. In light of this context, digital platforms have emerged as an alternative space for women to overcome these restrictions, by facilitating their engagement in public debates and their ability to voice their demands and to have a stronger collective voice.

However, despite providing an alternative, the digital space remains yet another public space which mirrors the patriarchal social norms of the offline world that normalize violence and protect perpetrators. The digital space has also intensified existing inequalities and harmful norms and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to what has been dubbed a 'pandemic of online gender-based violence'. Additionally, state-sanctioned surveillance poses important restrictions and sometimes threats on internet users. This space thus allows for renewed manifestations of systemic oppression of individual women and control over the way they represent or express themselves. It is also worth noting that women's access to the digital space is neither free nor without restrictions and the digital gender gap is growing in the MENA region.

An organizational tool for feminist change

Digital platforms have already proven to be a useful, accessible and cost-effective tool for feminist and women's rights organizations (WROs) in their work towards social change. When face-to-face communication and movement are restricted, such as in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) due to occupation and geographical fragmentation, or during the recent uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, or yet again, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of WROs has been significantly facilitated by online tools and platforms. They have been able to sustain their work, reach more people, disseminate critical information and continue responding to the needs of women and their communities.

These platforms nevertheless open the door to individual and mass attacks against those organizations, the women behind the work, and the content itself. Despite different forms of violence and their regular occurrence, WROs and feminist organizations persist in their work and constantly identify and implement protective measures.

Interviewees raised important questions around engaging with both governments' cybercrime units and big tech corporations in responding to online violence. While governments' cybercrime units may be efficient in responding to cases of violence and tracking down perpetrators, they remain institutions of oppressive governments, which commit various forms of violence, whether in using women's data against them, arresting and silencing those who express opposing opinions, or carrying out threats and extortion. Big tech corporations have also failed to protect their users from violence on their platforms, and despite certain efforts to combat online abuse, they are themselves perpetrators of different violations.

A space for resistance and solidarity

Women's rights and feminist movements have been a critical force for social change in MENA, but they face increased restrictions in a region where civic space is closing at a dangerous pace. In light of this reality, they have had to devise new strategies to organize and fight for social justice, resorting in many cases to digital tools and platforms. These platforms have offered an alternative space for discussions, mutual learning and support, as well as solidarity and resistance through garnering collective power. In facilitating communication, outreach and the formation of groups, digital platforms contribute to overcoming isolation and creating spaces for national and transnational solidarity where women can offer each other support.

However, feminist activists regularly face violent attacks, threats and defamation campaigns whenever they are active online. They are often silenced when they express their opinions, engage in political debates, or speak out against violence and harassment. Finally, while the digital space provides room for resistance and solidarity, it is also a tool in the hands of the oppressors; state-sanctioned violence against activists and restrictions on civic space are reflected in online spaces, and those tools are used to reinforce repression offline.

The future of digital spaces for women in MENA

Despite the constant risks associated with the digital space, it remains a public space that is constantly being claimed and reclaimed by women across the region, mirroring the actual world in which women struggle to remain present and safe. Building on their experiences and analyses of digital platforms, interviewees provided insights around the risks posed by those spaces and the work that needs to be done to start making them safer for women and feminist activists in the region, and more transformative for feminist change. These were highlighted as a starting point for addressing issues related to digital safety and for developing more comprehensive action points and targeted recommendations:

• **Facilitate online and offline spaces for solidarity and mutual support**

• **Advocate for protective legal and reporting mechanisms**

• **Raise awareness and provide training around digital safety and protective tools**

• **Expand the definition of violence and address harmful social norms**

• **Hold governments accountable over their obligation to protect**

• **Hold big tech corporations accountable**

• **Support feminist digital rights groups**

As this topic and issues around it are yet to be widely unpacked and explored in the region, further analysis and research are still needed, and some of these issues are listed in the report.

1 INTRODUCTION

'Digital technologies are a double-edged sword. The very opportunity they provide can be turned into a risk, whether it's accessing information, building relationships, or otherwise.' – Suhair Faraj, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

Since the early 2000s, digital technologies have had continuously and rapidly changing implications for the way the world works. These technologies have transformed how people interact socially, engage in public debates and political discourse, or organize and mobilize for social change. They have also provided space and tools for innovation and new ways of working. There is much enthusiasm around such platforms and tools and the opportunities they could provide for transformative change.[1] In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region characterized by patriarchal societies and norms, oppressive regimes, economic crises, occupation, conflict and displacement, the potential that digital tools bring for social change has already been demonstrated in the different waves of uprisings from 2011 until late 2019 and 2020. For example, social media has been highly emphasized as a tool for citizen journalism in the region.[2] During the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially in relation to physical distancing, the digital space has allowed new types of interactions to emerge at the personal and public levels, and has expanded the world of virtual interactions.

Yet despite the interest and hopes in the digital space providing opportunities to build better futures and just societies, the risks and limitations around these tools remain vast. In times of lockdown and quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic – the gendered implications of which have been widely documented – the use of digital platforms considerably intensified, exacerbating existing risks for women on these platforms. The pandemic has also put additional pressures on women offline, increasing their burden of care work, with whole families staying at home, on top of remote working and home-schooling children.

Digital technologies have also become yet another tool used by authoritarian regimes to commit human rights violations, particularly when it comes to freedom of expression, access to information and the right to privacy.[3] During the pandemic, for example, digital tools have been widely used by states to respond to and curb the health crisis. This has resulted in various forms of digital surveillance, the dangers of which human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Access Now and Human Rights Watch have warned against.[4]

This paper seeks to highlight the experiences and aspirations of young women and feminist activists in the MENA region around digital spaces, safety and rights. It focuses on different forms of violence, self-protection mechanisms, and visions of a feminist future for digital spaces. The paper first explores the personal level, looking at women's individual experiences engaging with the digital world and highlighting patriarchal social norms both online and offline. Second, it discusses the opportunities that women's rights and feminist organizations have found in digital tools and spaces, while also addressing challenges and risks. Finally, the analysis looks at the digital world as a space for resistance, focusing on activism and movement-level tools for change, and restrictions on civic space.

METHODOLOGY

This paper relies on a qualitative methodology, complemented by a <u>review of existing literature and media reports</u> on digital rights and safety for young women as well as women's rights and feminist organizations and activists in the MENA region. It also covers the implications of changes in practices and experiences during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative data collection exercises included <u>consultations</u> with Oxfam Gender Justice leads in some of the countries where Oxfam operates in the MENA region – specifically Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, OPT and Syria – as well as with two Oxfam colleagues whose work touches on digital safety and rights globally. Additionally, <u>six semi-structured in-depth interviews</u> were conducted with young women and feminist activists from the region who are active online and work around issues of gender justice and/or digital rights and safety.

The interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of these women's online experiences, practices, challenges and priorities, in addition to related offline risks. Data collection exercises also provided evidence of different cases of cyberbullying and online and offline violence related to women's use of digital platforms, which are highlighted throughout the report to illustrate patterns and behaviours that prevailed during the COVID-19 lockdown. In line with feminist research principles, this paper centres the voices, standpoints and experiences of the women who contributed to the research process.

2   A PERSONAL MARGIN OF FREEDOM

'Whenever women are more visible, they pay the price. When you use the [digital] tool to empower yourself, to use your body whichever way you choose, the society and the state punish you. The more you are visible, the more you are exposed to bullying, and the more you are punished for it.' – Maya Ammar, Lebanon

Women in the MENA region, and young women in particular, have largely been confined to roles prescribed by patriarchal norms and excluded from public spaces, whether through forced isolation or different forms of harassment, violence and silencing. Their personal freedoms are significantly constrained, and their participation in the economy, politics and other public realms remains among the lowest globally. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, MENA scored lowest among all regions in the Global Gender Gap Index, with a 61.1% score; seven of the ten lowest-scoring countries worldwide are in the region.[5] MENA also scored lowest in the Political Empowerment and second lowest in the Economic Participation and Opportunity sub-indices.[6] According to figures by UN Women in the Arab States, nearly 40% of women report having faced some form of violence in their lives, while there is evidence that the actual numbers are much higher.[7]

In a region characterized by deeply embedded patriarchal social norms and oppressive totalitarian regimes, women's lives, bodies and minds are systematically controlled, placed under surveillance and instrumentalized by both state and society. Women's oppression is central to authoritarian regimes, and such regimes reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal social norms to sustain their own control. For example, in discussing sectarian violence in Iraq, Nadje Al Ali (2013) illustrates the links between increased militarization and the rise in gender-based violence, but also describes different ways in which a regime she considers as authoritarian polices women's bodies, dress and participation in public spaces, such as politics or the labour market.[8] Al Ali also recognizes that the struggle for gender justice 'cannot be separated from the wider struggle against authoritarianism, sectarianism, corruption and nepotism' – features that are widespread across regimes in the MENA region.[9]

An alternative space – but not a safe one

Maya Ammar, a feminist activist and journalist from Lebanon, reflected on the power and control that totalitarian regimes in the region hold over people's lives, and over women's lives in particular. She explained that women are not allowed to move their bodies in the way they choose, to sing, dance or protest; if they choose to be visible and practise self-expression, whether through their bodies or thoughts, they face both communal and state-sanctioned violence.[10] In light of this social and political context, digital platforms have presented an alternative space which has facilitated women's engagement in public debates as well as their ability to voice their demands, express their opinions, live out their identities and negotiate power relations. In Ammar's words, *'you cannot stop people's bodies, and women's bodies, or shut them up. These acts of protest will manifest differently. […] The body that is being oppressed by those systems finds ways to move and release its energy, even if it's not the physical body itself.'*

Indeed, interviewees all agree on the potential that digital spaces present for young women in the region. Lilav Ihsan, an Iraqi activist now based in London, echoed Ammar's analysis, characterizing the digital space as one where individual women can have a stronger voice,

analyse socio-political events and engage in public debates. She said, *'the digital space is not a safe space, but it is a brave one'.* In fact, the role of digital platforms in facilitating women's self-expression extends to their emotional and sexual lives. For example, through dating apps and other online platforms, young women are able to live out diverse aspects of their identities more freely and comfortably. Women have found in these spaces a margin of freedom to express themselves and transgress social norms, while navigating – and sometimes circumventing – society's control over their self-representation and personal choices.

However, despite providing an alternative, the digital space is not 'a safe space'. It remains yet another public space which mirrors the patriarchal social norms of the offline world, and sometimes brings additional dangers due to the anonymity it gives to perpetrators of violence. Women's use of digital platforms and their transgression of social norms often leads to multiple forms of violence and harassment, both online and offline: '*All types of violence practised offline are reflected online as yet another [patriarchal public] space'* said Hayat Mershad, a feminist activist from Lebanon and co-founder of Fe-Male, a feminist collective in the country.

In Iraq, since 2018, a systematic series of murders of outspoken, visible and active women has rocked the country. These include the recent murder of Reham Yaacoub, a doctor and activist known for organizing women's marches in August 2020;[11] Tara Fares, a 22-year-old Instagram model who criticized double standards against Iraqi women; Suad Al Ali, a human rights activist; and Rasha Al Hassan and Rafeef Yassiri, both plastic surgeons.[12] According to Ihsan, what all these women had in common was their visible, often online, transgressions of social expectations and norms.

A 'pandemic of online gender-based violence': the impact of COVID-19

Suhair Faraj, Director of TAM,[13] a Palestinian organization that receives and responds to cases of both offline and online gender-based violence, explained that online violence against women – or offline manifestations of violence as a result of online practices – are on the rise, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every interviewee discussed in one way or another the increasingly horrific and rapidly changing forms of violence that women have faced during this period, with harm caused to women offline now being more intensively replicated in online spaces. In addition to the fact that women are disproportionately affected by crises, the digital space has intensified existing inequalities and harmful norms and practices, leading to what has been dubbed a 'pandemic of online gender-based violence'.[14]

Mershad explained that according to exclusive data from the Internal Security Forces in Lebanon, more than 100 reports of online violence are being received monthly, the great majority related to young women, with a significant increase since the beginning of the pandemic. According to Fe-Male, such cybercrimes vary in nature and include harassment but also 'sextortion',[15] extortion, defamation and identity theft.[16] Faraj gave various examples of husbands extorting their own wives by using their data to pressure them into relinquishing their rights, or ex-boyfriends threatening and blackmailing young women using photos or screenshots from previous chats. Shatha Skeikh Youssef, a Palestinian feminist and digital rights activist, also spoke of these changing and more visible forms of violence, giving examples of men beating women in their families while on live conference calls during the pandemic. Interviewees in Tunisia and Lebanon also mentioned an increase in violent and misogynistic content online during this period, such as calls on social media platforms to harass and rape women during curfews in Tunisia, as the streets are empty and the courts are closed; the multiplication of 'clickbait' links promising rape videos; or the spread of 'tracking apps' that facilitate surveillance and control over women's lives.

Risks from state-sanctioned surveillance

In addition to social norms that normalize violence and protect perpetrators, state-sanctioned surveillance poses important restrictions and sometimes threats on internet users. According to a report published by 7amleh[17] in 2018, Israeli control over Palestinian ICT infrastructure in OPT entails a constant risk of surveillance by Israeli forces, as well as a breach of digital rights and freedom of expression.[18] While digital tools do provide women with a margin of freedom, they are also used by authorities to reassert control; this has also been the case during the pandemic, for example through increased digital surveillance.

Box 1: Women's online activity and public morals in Egypt

In May 2020, Menna Abdel Aziz, an 18-year-old woman who was beaten, raped and filmed, appealed for help through her Instagram account. She was arrested a few days later for inciting debauchery and violating public morals. Abdel Aziz is still under investigation by the Egyptian authorities. In April 2020, Hanin Hossam, a 20-year-old student at the American University of Cairo, who has a large following on social media, was arrested on the same charges. She was also charged with human trafficking in relation to videos encouraging other women to make money through platforms that pay a fee for high viewership.

Since April 2020, at least 10 women considered to be TikTok influencers, including Hanin, have been arrested by Egyptian authorities on similar charges. In July 2020, five of these women were sentenced to at least two years in prison and given exorbitant fines. Egyptian courts have also used women's photos, previously reported as leaked, as evidence against them.

According to Amnesty International, this represents the 'use of new repressive tactics to control cyber space by policing women's bodies and conduct'.

Amnesty International (2020). https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/egypt-survivors-of-sexual-violence-and-online-abuse-among-prosecuted-women-tiktok-influencers/

Both Shatha Sheikh Youssef, who works with 7amleh, and Suhair Faraj highlighted high levels of mistrust among Palestinian women in the Israeli authorities' ability and willingness to protect them from and address cases of violence, making reporting online violence, or indeed any form of violence, a rarely sought option.[19] They also emphasized fears of their data being used against them by these authorities as a tool for blackmail, threats or extortion, or to ensure their cooperation or that of their families in investigations and interrogations. According to Sheikh Youssef, this may in turn translate into further violence against those women for having brought shame on their families. In an article on TikTok and women in Egypt,[20] Ammar reflects on the ways in which young women who choose to express themselves and to live out their 'alter-personas' on social media platforms are attacked, disciplined and silenced by both their communities and the regime (see Box 1). In that sense, the digital space creates its own risks, but also allows for renewed manifestations of systemic oppression of individual women and control over the way they represent or express themselves.

Limitations on women's access to digital spaces

Finally, it is worth noting that women's access to the digital space is neither free nor without restrictions. In fact, not all women have access – or quality and uncompromised access[21] – to the internet. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the digital gender gap is growing in the MENA region; with a mere 44.2% of women using the internet compared with 58.5% of men; in 2019 the gender gap was estimated at 24.4%, up from 19.2% in 2013.[22] The same ITU report also explains that there is a direct link between the percentage of internet

access and the level of development in a country or region.[23] For example, in Lebanon, where public services and infrastructure are severely lacking, access to quality and affordable internet, but also to electricity, mobile phones and computers, are significant constraints on many women's ability to use digital platforms. Similarly, in Syria, fluctuating exchange rates and inflation that came with the COVID-19 lockdowns have made mobile phones increasingly inaccessible. In Egypt, the digital infrastructure still needs to be developed, and access to digital space is clearly defined along gender lines, with only 41.3% of women using the internet compared with 52.4% of men, according to data from 2018.[24] It is important to note that the region's digital divide also concerns age and education, with younger and more highly educated individuals using the internet at higher rates than older and less-educated respondents; however, over the past seven years these gaps have been closing.[25]

3 AN ORGANIZATIONAL TOOL FOR FEMINIST CHANGE

The COVID-19 pandemic, believed to be one of the worst public health emergencies in history, has had significant repercussions in the MENA region, which have been only worsened by already existing inequalities, austerity and poor governance as well as protracted conflict, occupation and displacement. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by this reality, as patriarchal social norms and inequalities are exacerbated during such crises. The gendered implications of the pandemic have been widely documented; women have lost livelihoods and income-generating opportunities in light of lockdowns and economic crises in many countries in the region, and their access to sexual and reproductive health services has been severely restricted. A recent Oxfam publication states that 41% of those expecting to lose their jobs in the region are women, whose economic participation already stands at just 21%, the lowest in the world.[26] Additionally, the spikes in gender-based violence and domestic violence during the pandemic, both offline and online, are alarming, and access to services and support has been limited due to social distancing measures and lockdowns.

Long before the lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms had already proven to be a useful, accessible and cost-effective tool for feminist and women's rights organizations (WROs) in their work towards social change. Since the beginning of the pandemic, despite the restrictions, WROs have been able to sustain their work providing essential and life-saving forms of support and services in response to the needs of women and their communities,[27] and their hard work and dedication has been significantly facilitated by online tools and platforms. For instance, TAM in OPT uses social media to share information, raise awareness and answer questions from women online. Similarly, Fe-Male in Lebanon and Asswat Nissa, a young feminist organization in Tunisia, rely on social media to produce and share daily content targeting young people and to raise awareness around women's rights and feminism.

Reaching more people through digital platforms

Sarra Ben Said, Executive Director of Asswat Nissa, explained: *'We create content to reach young people, to popularize information around public policies and to share accessible messages with young people on feminism, on the importance of gendered approaches, etc.'* She added that through digital platforms, young women are able to gain greater access to information about socio-political events, economics and culture. Reflecting on her experience with TAM, Suhair Faraj stated that youth can now access information, wherever they are and at any time, around topics considered taboo, such as sexuality, love and relationships. However, she also warns about the risk of misinformation on such an open platform.

Despite the limitations in access to digital spaces outlined in the section above, these platforms also provide a cheaper alternative to traditional campaigning methods, with greater potential for outreach, visibility and engagement. The digital space, and social media platforms in particular, specifically allow for wider outreach to youth and young women. Sarra Ben Said explained that Asswat Nissa primarily reaches young people on social media: *'We created an Instagram campaign because this is where the youth are. […] These platforms give us more access to the population with whom we work, especially women and young women.'*

In fact, WROs and feminist organizations in the region have also found digital technology a useful tool for campaigning and raising awareness around gender justice and digital safety – the

latter being an area in which, according to these organizations, women in the region lack awareness. For example, in response to reported spikes in gender-based violence, blackmail and extortion online in Lebanon during the pandemic, Fe-Male launched an online campaign on cybersecurity called 'The screen does not protect'. This aimed to inform the debate around online gender-based violence and raise awareness among women and girls across the country on digital safety and tools to protect themselves online. According to Hayat Mershad, the campaign achieved significant impact; she credits its effectiveness to the fact that it was completely digital: *'Our online gender-based violence campaign is an example of how amazing the reach we have online is. To achieve similar results and reach offline, we would have needed four, five or even ten years. We consider social media to be a very effective tool.'*

When movement and face-to-face communication are restricted, the digital space has filled gaps and provided tools for organizations to sustain their work; this is seen, for example, in the everyday reality in OPT, which is marked by occupation, checkpoints and geographical fragmentation. Restrictions on movement have also characterized uprisings in the Arab region, such as those in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019, and have most recently resulted from the COVID-19 crisis and national lockdowns. Mershad explained that through their campaign and engagement online during lockdown, Fe-Male received a large number of cases and reports of violence, and were able to respond quickly. Ben Said and Faraj mentioned similar experiences, whereby women reached out through their social media pages or through virtual communication tools such as WhatsApp to report cases of violence.

The above-mentioned interviewees from OPT, Lebanon and Tunisia also explained how digital tools allowed them to sustain communication with women in difficult-to-reach areas or who were stuck inside their homes, and to provide case management and other forms of support. In Morocco, 'Manchoufouch', an app created by a young feminist organization called Union Feministe Libre, is providing an open platform where sexual harassment and all forms of violence based on gender and sexuality can be safely mapped and reported, in yet another example of how organizations are using digital tools to provide services and create social change.[28]

Mass attacks, harassment and victim-blaming online

As an organizational tool for feminist change, digital platforms nevertheless open the door to individual and mass attacks against those organizations, the women behind the work, and the content itself. In the words of Hayat Mershad: *'There isn't a single time that feminist content is posted [online], without [those who posted it] facing bullying afterwards.'* Interviewees commented on the ways in which rape culture[29] and gender-based violence more broadly are systemic issues in the virtual world in the same way as they are in the actual world. Organizations that share information about cases of abuse online or provide services through digital tools are subject to mass attacks, harassment and victim-blaming comments and messages, in the same way that women are blamed or shamed by both the police and their communities when they speak out offline. Additionally, the women working in these organizations, the case workers who provide support to those reporting abuse, and the journalists who cover their cases are themselves also targets of violence.

All the women who took part in this research have faced these types of attacks. For example, Sarra Ben Said was subjected to an online smear campaign which used photos of her taken from her organization's Facebook page; Lilav Ihsan received personal threats, made both to her father and directly on her social media platforms, in response to her work supporting women affected by conflict. Hayat Mershad and other members of Fe-Male have received personal threats and threats to their loved ones, both online and offline; and Suhair Faraj explained that case workers at TAM regularly receive threats and face online harassment from the abusers of the women they are

trying to support. She also gave examples of fake phone calls to the organization's hotline by men impersonating women reporting violence in order to either collect information and launch defamation campaigns, or to sexually harass the women answering the calls.

Despite these forms of violence and their regular occurrence, WROs and feminist organizations persist in their work responding to all cases of violence whether online or offline, and are constantly identifying and implementing protective measures. These include separating as much as possible their private lives and social media profiles from the organizations' social media platforms and public campaigns, to make it harder for them to be personally targeted or associated with the work.

The interviewees also raised important questions around engaging with both governments' cybercrime units and big tech corporations in responding to online violence. On the one hand, in some countries in the region, such as OPT or Lebanon, cybercrime units can reportedly be efficient in responding to cases of violence and tracking down perpetrators. On the other, however, these same countries can remain institutions of oppressive government and security forces which commit various forms of violence, whether in using women's data against them, arresting and silencing those who express opposing opinions, or carrying out threats and extortion, as previously explained in the case of OPT.

Big tech – crime fighter or perpetrator?

In relation to the big tech corporations, such as Facebook, interviewees identified them as perpetrators of violence. In the words of Shatha Sheikh Youssef: *'The big tech corporations like Facebook and Google commit a lot of violations against us and our rights: surveillance, selling our information, tracking, collaborating with the Israeli government, etc. They exploit us, and our presence and need for these spaces. They give us seemingly free services in exchange for a lot of things that are actually of a lot of value.'* In 2016, Facebook and the Israeli authorities agreed to work together to combat 'incitement against Israel'.[30] This has translated into significant restrictions on Palestinians' freedom of expression, as well as arrests and disciplinary measures against women's rights activists and journalists for 'incitement' in relation to their posts on social media platforms, including Facebook.[31] In discussing silencing and violations of freedom of expression at the hands of both governments and tech corporations, Sheikh Youssef continued, *'[Tech corporations] target Palestinian content and accounts to limit available content on digital spaces and our ability to express ourselves.'*

It is important to mention that some of these companies have set up informal 'partnerships' with WROs in the region, including with some of the interviewees' organizations, through which they consult them on the platforms' policies and community standards, and create channels for direct reports of violent and threatening content or accounts. While interviewees did talk about these efforts as somewhat positive, they explained that these processes require a lot of time, work and justifications, and that responses on the side of these companies are often slow and highly unsatisfactory. In fact, Facebook was mentioned by interviewees as the platform where most of the online violence occurs, given its wide use and accessibility in the region. Organizations that are 'partners' with Facebook highlighted the company's speed and efficiency in taking down content that violates community standards in relation to 'terrorism' or to issues concerning politics or religion, in contrast to their inefficiency and lack of responsiveness in taking down content related to gender-based violence, bullying or harassment, despite the existence of community standards and policies against such forms of violence.[32] According to interviewees who work with such organizations, this was exacerbated at the beginning of the pandemic, as the corporation claimed that it was understaffed and took even longer to respond to reports, at a time when cases of online violence were spiking.

4   A SPACE FOR RESISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY

Despite the harsh realities of the region, women's rights and feminist movements have been a critical force for social change in MENA – leading the fight against gender-based violence, advocating against discriminatory laws and patriarchal social norms, creating alternative and safe spaces for women and marginalized groups to organize and build solidarity, and imagining feminist futures built on the foundations of social justice. However, the struggle for gender justice is constantly hindered by increased restrictions on civil society and freedom of assembly and expression in the region, where civic space is closing at a dangerous pace.

According to a 2018 report by the women's rights organization Kvinna Till Kvinna,[33] shrinking civic space has severe implications for the work of all civil society organizations and movements, but those working on women's rights and feminist issues often face the heaviest repercussions. Many Bahraini women human rights defenders, for example, currently live in exile due to recurring threats to their safety. In Egypt, civic space is severely restrictive, especially to rights-based groups and activists, with bans and severe sanctions against organizations receiving foreign funding; activists face defamation campaigns and arrests. In Iraq, Jordan and Palestine, women human rights defenders are threatened by political parties and state and non-state actors that perpetuate harmful social norms, limiting these women's ability to express themselves and putting their lives at risk.[34] In light of this reality, feminist movements have had to devise new and adapted strategies to organize and fight for social justice, resorting in many cases to digital tools and platforms.

Indeed, in times of health and economic crises, of fragmentation, occupation and armed conflicts, and of shrinking civic space, digital platforms have played a significant role in responding to these challenges, offering an alternative space for discussions, mutual learning and support, as well as solidarity and resistance through garnering collective power.[35] Interviewees across the MENA region reflected on their experiences using digital tools and platforms for their personal work and activism, and unanimously agreed that digital platforms have presented a space for them to resist and fight oppression and to shape and disseminate counter-narratives. They all described online platforms as outlets for them to address critical issues they care about, to influence the discourse of the people and communities around them, and to make information available about public policies and feminist change.

Building solidarity beyond borders

For example, both Sarra Ben Said and Maya Ammar described using digital tools as a way to democratize or popularize feminist knowledge and gender justice issues. Shatha Sheikh Youssef explained the benefits of digital spaces in relation to communication and solidarity in times of social distancing. She particularly emphasized the possibility they present for open discussions around the negative implications of lockdowns – which are portrayed as a measure to protect people – on women and other vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, refugees and migrant workers. Lilav Ihsan reported that when movement became restricted in Iraq during the uprisings, and later during the pandemic-related lockdowns, feminist and other political reading groups, which took place in tents on the streets and city squares during the uprisings, sustained their work through online meetings. She reflected that these reading and discussion groups *'allow us to learn collectively, to learn from each other's experiences and realities, and to imagine a radical tomorrow'.*

In facilitating communication, outreach and the formation of groups, digital platforms contribute to overcoming isolation and creating spaces for national and transnational solidarity. The Palestinian context is a good example to illustrate the ways in which digital tools are facilitating communication and organizing between communities separated by checkpoints, borders and occupation. Sheikh Youssef discussed her own experience as a feminist activist, and explained that within the context of OPT and its geographical fragmentation, digital tools present one of the few ways, if not the only way, for people to communicate, shape their own narrative and reduce the effects of this forced fragmentation: *'It gives us the opportunity to meet, to build solidarity, to be part of one discourse, one of solidarity with all, not only women but with the entire Palestinian people… Despite the risks and everything we face on these platforms and as Palestinian women, we choose to be on these platforms to overcome fragmentation and build solidarity with Palestinian women everywhere.'*

Ben Said discussed the case of Tunisia, where digital tools have allowed women who are feminists, but don't know about or don't have access to the main spaces or organizations, to meet and start working with others who share their values. These women have had the chance to share experiences, organize meet-ups, have access to information and build collective power: *'Through [one of our online groups], for example, we've organized two or three meetings and met with other young women in cafés, at events or online. During a protest organized in front of [the Tunisian] Parliament, most of the participants were members of the group. These technologies present opportunities and access for young women, primarily.'* Through these online spaces, women who have access to the internet and to digital tools are not only able to communicate with and meet each other, but also to build solidarity and offer each other support.

Box 2: 'Name your harassers' online campaigns and movements

A clear manifestation of women's solidarity in the digital world, which can be witnessed worldwide and quite strongly across the MENA region, are the recent 'name your harassers' online campaigns and movements against sexual harassment. Through these campaigns, women who have experienced sexual harassment or violence have been able to speak out against their harassers, seek support from relevant organizations, and critically, receive support from other women around them who have had similar experiences.

In Tunisia, following the case of a politician sexually harassing a teenage girl outside her school, an online #MeToo movement called #EnaZeda (Me Too in Tunisian) erupted, whereby hundreds of women started speaking out against their abusers. The teenager posted evidence of the harassment online and received an outpouring of support from other women. According to Sarra Ben Said, Asswat Nissa then created a closed #EnaZeda Facebook group, bringing together women who report cases of violence, share their experiences and extend support to each other.

Other interviewees shared how similar online movements and campaigns can also be found across different countries in the region, including in Egypt, where recent cases of violence against women have sparked waves of online outrage, leading to investigations by the authorities. In Lebanon, during the uprisings, a man was exposed as having harassed and raped women over several years; he was named and shamed online, leading to an entire campaign against him on offline media and a legal case.

These are just examples of the ways in which digital spaces can help build solidarity and a collective force, and in turn lead to results for women's rights and gender justice. However, these individual cases have not yet yielded justice, with some currently under investigation and others put on hold or dismissed due to political interference. Maya Ammar provided a pertinent critique of the 'Name your harassers' online movements and campaigns. She explained that while resorting to naming and shaming online gives women a sense of freedom and allows the voices of survivors to be heard and quick action to be taken, it also limits further thinking around justice and accountability:

> *'Something really bad has happened, and you need to speak and let it out. But this doesn't solve the problem and doesn't allow us to think about what we need to do. It allows us to channel our anger in that very second, and the process is online and fast, but without giving enough thought to our communities and the type of justice and accountability mechanisms and processes we need to put in place.'*
>
> According to Ben Said, who is one of the administrators of the #EnaZeda Facebook group, the group has become something of a transformative space for women to speak up and support each other, but there are always harassers and trolls who infiltrate the group, who post victim-blaming comments and pose a risk to survivors' anonymity, privacy and safety. For this reason, within a few months of launching the group, the administrators had to put it on hold to reorganize themselves and develop a strategy to ensure group members' security. They now have monitors who try to ensure that the group is as safe as possible and are considering hiring a full-time staff member to manage it.

Paradoxically, digital platforms themselves have also proved useful in disseminating knowledge around digital safety and how people can protect themselves online. In discussing her use of digital platforms, Shatha Sheikh Youssef explained: *'I try to do some awareness raising on my platforms, especially on digital security. I feel like in Palestine there is less awareness around these issues. People are not aware of the violations that can be caused by governments or corporations.'* However, according to a study conducted by TAM in 2019, 77.5% of women who participated in the study reported a lack of information around digital safety.[36] Indeed, interviewees in this research, such as Hayat Mershad, Lilav Ihsan and Suhair Farraj in particular, also identified a critical issue around lack of awareness and de-prioritization of digital safety and security and tools to protect oneself, both in the region more generally and among activists particularly.

Bullying, defamation, intimidation and silencing of women online

However, even in cases where digital safety *is* prioritized and activists are aware of and adopt tools and measures to protect themselves, they still face violent attacks and threats. Ben Said explained that Asswat Nissa created a specific account for its #EnaZeda Facebook group (see Box 2) to avoid it being associated with a single individual. Suhair Faraj spoke of 'online armies' that are well-organized and ready to attack, defame and threaten women, and feminist activists specifically, whenever they are active online. Those attacks can also take the form of defamation campaigns, identity theft and fake accounts using women's personal information, or falsifying data and associating it with their names.[37] The Gulf Centre for Human Rights, for example, issued a statement in October 2019 expressing concern over women human rights defenders being targeted through 'deepfake' technology to manipulate their photos, videos, voices or text, exposing them to significant risks.[38]

Attacks can also take the form of silencing women who are trying to speak out against abusers – whether through direct and visible attacks and defamation campaigns, or by mass reporting of online posts and calls for them to be taken down. This is especially the case if perpetrators of violence are powerful figures. As one of the interviewees put it: *'Online harassment is not only in words, it is also limiting your ability to say something that is against [your abusers].'* According to Shatha Sheikh Youssef, feminist activists in OPT are also silenced when they try to express their opinions and engage in debates around the occupation and the politics and future of OPT. Many receive direct messages and comments that ask them to 'stick to women's issues'. Maya Ammar explained that despite being visible online, to ensure her safety she always posts on the pages of organizations or media platforms she collaborates with, rather than posting publicly through her personal account. Similarly to other interviewees, she still faces cyberbullying and violence online despite these precautions. Such attacks are often of an *ad hominem* nature, i.e. referring to women's appearance and personal life rather than

addressing the content of their online post.

Finally, while the digital space provides room for resistance and solidarity, it is also a tool in the hands of the oppressors. State-sanctioned violence against activists and restrictions on civic space and activism characterize the region, and are either reflected in online spaces or used as a tool to reinforce repression offline. This often takes the form of censorship as well as interrogations, arrests and detention on charges related to content posted online. In fact, in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, cybercrime laws are used by authorities to restrict and criminalize free speech.[39] According to Hayat Mershad, such violations of freedom of expression have long existed in Lebanon, and have only intensified since the beginning of the uprisings in October 2019. She stated: *'Even online, where we felt like we could escape [oppression] and express ourselves more freely […] it became a space where authorities try to dominate and oppress opinions and freedom of expression.'*

5   WAYS FORWARD: A FEMINIST VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE DIGITAL SPACE

'[Digital spaces] are the spaces that we fight and struggle to be in, in the same way that we fight to be in the streets, in the cities and even in our own homes… We want to be part of those spaces, to express ourselves and to make our voices heard in them.' – Shatha Sheikh Youssef, OPT

As this paper has shown, the digital space has proved a useful and efficient tool for women in the region, allowing them a personal margin of freedom in which they can freely and comfortably express themselves and live out their identities. Women's rights and feminist organizations have also used digital tools and platforms to sustain their work in times of crises, to provide services and respond to online and offline gender-based violence, and to campaign and expand their reach. Moreover, feminist movements in the region have found in digital platforms a space to resist oppression, to fight for social justice and to build solidarity. Digital platforms present opportunities for the development of joint discourse and collective action, increased global communication and networking, and improved access to information and resources. They also allow the building of spaces and communities with more balanced power distributions, where social norms can be disrupted and the voices and demands of the most marginalized people can be centred.

Digital platforms have impacted the strategies and approaches of feminist movements worldwide. They have opened the door to stronger transnational solidarity and movement-building and have created greater opportunities for cross-border knowledge creation, learning, strategizing and information sharing, by diminishing limitations imposed by borders. This has been illustrated most recently during the global COVID-19 pandemic, when the use of digital tools intensified as a way to bypass restrictions on movement, overcome isolation, sustain service provision and build collective power.

Nevertheless, the digital space remains yet another patriarchal arena in which harmful social norms are reflected, multiple and rapidly changing forms of violence emerge, and in which governments' oppression manifests. For example, digital surveillance by governments has increased during the pandemic as part of their strategy to respond to the health crisis. In the words of Rasha Abdul Rahim, Deputy Director of Amnesty Tech, '[while] technology can play an important role in the global effort to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, […] the recent past has shown governments are reluctant to relinquish temporary surveillance powers'.[40]

The future of digital spaces for women in MENA

So, what does the future of digital spaces hold for young women and feminist activists in the MENA region? When asked this question, interviewees' responses were overwhelmingly positive, though cautious and conditional on solid and continuous work. Despite the constant risks associated with digital platforms, interviewees unanimously agreed on the potential they provide, and that they create a public space that women and feminist activists need to hold on to and struggle to be in. Lilav Ihsan defined this as a 'beautiful utopic space' offering alternatives to the multiple restrictions that women in MENA have to navigate throughout their lives. Maya Ammar said she believes that online spaces for women in MENA will remain and grow, and 'we will take over those spaces'. In the words of Sarra Ben Said: *'We cannot leave the digital space for the harassers and the rapists. […] The virtual space holds many risks, but*

rather than leaving these spaces, we need to remain active and keep on working so they become safer. […] We need to hold on to the digital space because it is a space of freedom.' The digital space is therefore seen as a public space that is constantly being claimed and reclaimed by women across the region, mirroring the actual world in which women struggle to remain present and safe.

Building on their experiences and analyses of digital platforms, the interviewees provided insights around the risks posed by those spaces and the work that needs to be done to start making digital spaces safer for women and feminist activists in the region, and more transformative for feminist change. Some of these insights, which have the potential to inform future work and research at the intersection of digital safety and gender justice, are categorized under key themes below. These were highlighted by interviewees as a starting point for addressing issues related to digital safety and for developing more comprehensive action points and targeted recommendations.

- **Facilitate online and offline spaces for solidarity and mutual support**

Interviewees highlighted the opportunities for solidarity presented by digital platforms, and the importance of facilitating spaces online and offline where women can come together, raise their voices, share their stories, and feel supported and comfortable speaking up – whether through providing funding for feminist groups or through technical or other forms of support. This should be complemented by opportunities for women to build their own digital platforms, where they devise their own policies against online violence and sexual harassment and develop accountability mechanisms. In line with Maya Ammar's critique of the 'Name your harassers' online campaigns, this would allow digital spaces to play a role that goes beyond just naming and shaming. Finally, safety on those platforms should not only entail safety from violence and control over one's privacy, but also processes and communication channels that ensure women feel safe and comfortable engaging in activism. This would include uncompromised access to digital devices, platforms and connectivity, as well as freedom from surveillance or retaliation.

- **Advocate for protective legal and reporting mechanisms**

As legal and reporting mechanisms in the region consistently fail to protect women from both online and offline violence, interviewees highlighted the need for further research and discussions on how to facilitate the process of reporting abuse and devising effective mechanisms and legal frameworks to respond to online and offline violence. This process must involve women themselves and centre their experiences and priorities, and any mechanisms or frameworks must also reflect the rapidly changing nature and forms of violence in the virtual and actual worlds. Additionally, protective measures specific to service-providers and case managers need to be developed, as they face both online and offline violence in their work.

- **Raise awareness and provide training around digital safety and protective tools**

Interviewees all identified the need to address de-prioritization and lack of awareness among women in the region on digital safety and the measures they can take to protect themselves and their privacy online. They expressed a need for awareness raising and capacity building around these issues, which should include where to find support in cases of abuse. Awareness-raising efforts should also extend to informing communities about their legal rights in countries where online violence is recognized as a crime – such as Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt – but also about the ways in which these laws may be used by oppressive regimes to restrict freedoms. Suhair Faraj emphasized a need to integrate this kind of education in schools, so that children can be aware of the risks and protective measures from an early age. Shatha Sheikh Youssef proposed developing an online, open and accessible course where women in the region can learn about

online safety. This was corroborated by Lilav Ihsan, who pointed out that in Iraq, capacity-building programmes are offered in English, and are therefore not widely accessible.

- **Expand the definition of violence and address social norms**

From discriminatory laws and patriarchal social norms that shape the justice system and limit communal and social support, to women's limited knowledge about those laws and their rights, to the lack of financial means required to claim those rights, access to justice for women in the region remains heavily restricted, despite limited advancements in some countries.[41] A key aspect highlighted by interviewees in relation to the challenges of preventing and responding to cases of violence online concerns the very definition of violence in legal and justice systems in the region and among communities. Accordingly, interviewees all agreed that the definition of violence needs to be expanded to the virtual world and integrated in legal systems across the region. Narrow and unsuitable definitions of violence in the legal systems only reflect harmful social norms across the region that normalize violence and perpetuate rape culture both online and offline. Interviewees thus highlighted the urgent need to work on social norms and to campaign against rape culture and victim-blaming. This encompasses the wider society in which survivors of violence are blamed and shamed, but also the security and justice systems through which women should be able to report violence and seek justice.

- **Hold governments accountable over their obligation to protect**

Governments across the region were themselves identified as perpetrators of violence. Interviewees therefore reaffirmed the need for governments to uphold their obligations as duty bearers. This should translate into more actions and regulation to ensure the protection of people from violence, both online and offline. Governments should also respect these rights and refrain from practices that violate people's freedoms, rights and protection. Interviewees also reflected on the importance of governments fulfilling these obligations as duty bearers, particularly by encouraging interventions that aim to support people at risk and prevent the occurrence of violence in all spaces.

- **Hold big tech corporations accountable – support feminist digital rights groups**

Big tech corporations were identified as critical actors with power to respond to and prevent violence online, but also as perpetrators of violence. While different corporations have made varying levels of investment to improve their ethics, and some have set up informal partnerships with feminist groups and activists, they were nevertheless identified by interviewees as one group of stakeholders that is complicit in perpetuating harmful social norms. Interviewees called for greater accountability by all those corporations, and highlighted the need to pressure them to develop suitable and accessible safety tools and mechanisms on their platforms.

The existing policies and standards of those platforms were also criticized by interviewees, some of whom are partners of the tech corporations behind them. Platforms must therefore revise their policies while centring the priorities of women themselves, and should be pressured to increase their efficiency in responding to reports by feminist activists and organizations, permanently blocking abusive accounts and potentially taking legal action against perpetrators. The corporations behind these platforms should make proactive and continuous efforts to respond to feminist groups and to monitor the content on their own platforms. Maya Ammar explained the need to support, strengthen and facilitate the formation of feminist digital rights groups, who can act as intermediaries and put pressure on those corporations.

Areas for further research

This paper focused on some experiences and insights from feminist activists and young women in MENA, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the gendered realities and dynamics in those spaces, and to lay the ground for further work around the subject. As this topic and issues around it are yet to be widely unpacked and explored in the region, further analysis and research are still needed. This could include research on:

• Restrictions on access to the internet and to digital tools and devices, with an intersectional lens;

• Gaps in digital safety tools and self-protection or coping mechanisms that need to be addressed;

• How best to integrate digital safety into development programmes;

• How best to build on the opportunities created by the digital space to support transnational movement-building;

• The role and accountability of key stakeholders – such as governments and tech corporations – in relation to gender-based violence online;

• Gendered dynamics within the online gaming community in the Arab world;

• The relationship between online and offline harmful social norms and practices, and pornography in the region, among others.

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