

Building Stronger Communities

Community Health Report 2020:
The case for mental health support
for digital rights defenders

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This report involved behind-the-scenes work of many organisations and individuals to whom we are enormously grateful.

Thank you

To the following organisations, who provided us with the financial contribution to make this report a reality.



CENTER
FOR DIGITAL
RESILIENCE



CIVIL
RIGHTS
DEFENDERS



TunnelBear

To our **Lebanese community** for helping us find Selma Zaki, our first Community Health Researcher. It is the beauty in your beaches and snow mountains – both of which you can visit on the same day – that infuses your approach to solidarity.

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To our **glittery community members** who continue to awe us with their intelligence, compassion, and strength. You all deserve the best in the world, and a long vacation. Remember, this too shall pass.

To the **Internet freedom and digital rights communities** fighting to exist and share their truths and realities, you are not alone. We, and countless other groups throughout the world, stand in solidarity with you.

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I

Executive summary

The Community Health Report provides a snapshot of the wellbeing of Internet freedom networks around the world. As the first report of its kind within the digital rights community, it uses a community health lens to offer deeper insight into the psychosocial challenges faced by people who work to secure digital rights for all. The report also helps us understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted digital rights networks in 2020, while helping to design a path forward for the teams, communities, and movements we serve.

The report has three main goals, which are to:

- 1 Provide the community of digital rights defenders with an analysis of their current situation using a psychosocial and community-building perspective. This is designed to validate these experiences and enable the community to better identify when they may need interventions or to seek help.
- 2 Support organisational leaders and decision makers so they can better strategise and design solutions that help the people they serve become more resilient.
- 3 Provide an evidence base and recommendations to donors so they can fund more psychosocial care for the community in 2021 and beyond.



Key findings:

- As a result of Covid-19, people are facing **acute change and uncertainty**, including financial uncertainty, loss of work, the inability to plan, and pressure to adjust to changes resulting from the pandemic. 75.9% of survey respondents reported stress resulting from these factors. All this is contributing to a decline in mental health, the inability to work, and a rise in unhealthy community dynamics.
 - People are experiencing an **increase in local political and social stressors, such as being targeted by governments, protests/revolutions, economic collapse, and racial injustices**. For example, 94.5% reported stress resulting from an increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackouts and/or hate speech. Respondents are also experiencing a wide range of movement and migration issues, such as having to go back home to live with family or having to go into exile.
 - **Individuals report being affected by the suffering of others**. 80.9% of all participants report stress due to witnessing or experiencing human rights abuses such as unlawful detainment, torture, police brutality, while 86.1% reported stress in response to witnessing people they care about being affected by the pandemic.
 - Individuals report toxicity rising from persistent power dynamics resulting in a weakening of healthy relationships within communities. 72.2% of survey participants report experiencing stress in response to toxicity and abuse in professional settings, including being mistreated by those who have power and privilege; being denied opportunities; not being credited for work; and not being paid fairly, all without accountability, conflict resolution, or healing. These **persistent power dynamics result in toxic and abusive behaviours, obstructing genuine diversity and inclusion**.
 - Covid-19 has also resulted in a **decrease in connection and an increase in isolation**. Community members report facing harder challenges with lesser support.
 - **These factors are leading to a marked decline in mental health** including fatigue, insomnia, low self-esteem, a persistent feeling of being in survival mode, depression, loneliness, and isolation.
- The data highlights a deep need for both psychological support and conflict resolution resources for digital rights activists. It also shows how a lack of such support and resources weaken the community. Without

a rapid and sustained shift to provide these resources and support, it is unclear how the individuals and communities working to advance digital rights for all can continue to do their vital work.

Recommendations

While the number of challenges online have increased and become more sophisticated, the resources and investments made available to the digital rights community have not kept pace.

Overwhelmingly, people identified psychological support as a core need. This includes providing access to mental health support, group therapy, and safe spaces where people can talk and connect with the intention of building bonds.

In addition, participants highlighted the need for conflict resolution efforts and resources, and a need for spaces where conflict and community concerns can be addressed.

Stronger efforts are required to integrate people from under-represented communities and to amplify the work and voices of these communities.

We therefore recommend that funders ramp up investment to build resilience and provide mental health support to digital rights activists so they are psychologically secure and healthy.

We also recommend that policy makers prioritise these concerns to help the wider public understand why supporting these communities are central to advancing Internet freedoms and digital rights for all.



The data clearly shows that there is a deep need for both psychological support and conflict resolution resources for digital rights activists. It also highlights how a lack of such support and resources weakens the community.

II

Foreword





The history of the digital rights community

The digital rights community is made up of diverse individuals, communities, and organisations from across the world who are fighting a myriad of problems that impact people's ability to freely express themselves online in a safe and secure way. Members of this community are racially and ethnically diverse, and draw from multiple age groups, different socio-economic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and political leanings. The digital rights community encompasses the Internet freedom community, individuals, and organisations who are utilising technologies and tools to further the [freedom to connect](#).

Members of the digital rights community come from several different movements and disciplines, and work across all professional fields. They include grassroots activists, journalists, human rights defenders, open source technologists, privacy and security advocates, and researchers from over 130 countries. What they share in common is their experience of being subjected to or fighting against the most acute forms of online surveillance, censorship, and digital attacks, all designed to further marginalise and

silence them. Members include Dalit women in India, indigenous environmentalists in Latin America, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex+ (LGBTQI+) activists' networks in Africa, feminist technologists in Middle East and North Africa region, pro-democracy activists in Vietnam, and Taiwanese technology researchers, among others.

Given the importance and central role the Internet plays in our societies as a place to share, mobilise, communicate, and educate, this community believes that **digital rights are human rights**—the idea that all humans deserve to have privacy, access to information, the ability to freely express themselves, and actively engage in public life without fear of discrimination. As such, this community works tirelessly to ensure that the Internet remains a free, open, and secure place for everyone, but especially for those working to improve our societies, such as human rights defenders and journalists. This community also believes that the Internet should be accessible to and representative of all voices, especially those from communities that have been historically marginalised, or have had their rights denied to them, in some cases for centuries. This is

because despite making up more than half of the world's population, these communities are prevented from sharing their stories, identities, and truths. They risk so much more when attempting to exercise these rights, including facing extreme violence. This cycle of violence, surveillance, and censorship, reduces their power, agency, and ability to shape the future of their societies.

It may be surprising for some to learn that this is still an emerging community, and that work in the digital rights space is a nascent field of practice, despite the dramatic impact it has on activism, journalism, and democracy worldwide. Much of this is because it reflects our societies' own relationships with the Internet and the challenge of keeping up with the new and rapidly shifting risks it poses to people.

Despite some disagreement on the timeline, the birth of the digital rights community (which we see as a branch of the broader Internet freedom community) coincides with the rise of online surveillance and censorship. The community has traditionally centred most of its work on circumventing these

issues. However, as the Internet and the challenges it poses have matured, the digital rights community's focus has also widened to address issues like online harassment, disinformation, platform accountability, equity, and decolonisation in technology, among others. For many, these issues are extensions of online surveillance and censorship, which mimic or reflect traditional dynamics of power and control.

While the number of challenges online have increased and become more sophisticated, the resources and investments from donors and policy makers made available to this community have not kept pace. This ranges from traditional funding available to the field to draw from, to policy advocates prioritising their concerns and expertise, to society having difficulty understanding why supporting this work is important. In fact, funding has become increasingly unstable during Covid-19. This has led to the community being stretched thin and barely able to meet new demands, while simultaneously confronting both bad actors and luddite policy makers, resulting in the ballooning of these problems.

Our focus on community health

Team CommUNITY has played a critical role historically within the Internet freedom space for both growing and improving the community health and diversity of digital rights defender networks around the world. We are best known for our flagship event, the Internet Freedom Festival (IFF), which is considered a point-of-reference for digital security and digital rights experts working at the intersection of human rights and technology. This work was borne out of necessity: we recognised that communities who were working on digital rights had experienced trauma in their work.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, most of us in Team CommUNITY only had a faint understanding of digital rights and circumvention technology. However, many of us had already endured state-sponsored censorship and surveillance.

One of our team members, who is from a major US city where over 60% of the population identifies as immigrant, shares how they grew up hearing stories of how families (including their own) had been deeply impacted by the censorship, surveillance, and oppression that they had experienced

in their home countries. They had seen first-hand, the very tangible consequences and multi-generational trauma these challenges produced. The [psychological toll](#) of surveillance and censorship are known to be stark: neighbours and family members become secretive and censor themselves due to a deep fear, they develop deep levels of mistrust of governments, and they frequently experience anxiety and depression. Most importantly, this trauma creates unhealthy cycles of violence in all areas of life since many families lack the mechanisms to process the trauma properly.

Despite the dysfunction and pain, few accessed mental health services for support. Those that did were heavily judged and branded as weak or mentally unstable. Instead, family members' mental illness, anxiety, violence, or histrionic tendencies were assumed to be a reflection of their personalities.

For many of us from this background, it is odd that so many early conversations in the digital rights space focused solely on technology, with little or no discussion of what working on these issues meant to us as human beings.

New community members felt completely overwhelmed by the acronyms, new tools, and modes of speaking, often questioning if they truly belonged.

Part of the issue, as we know now, was that those who were directly affected by state-sponsored surveillance and censorship were rarely represented among technologists, decision makers, or companies creating the solutions. In other words, those directly impacted by the problems were not leading strategies for solutions, [despite having first-hand knowledge of the most acute forms of digital oppression](#). At the same time, many did not have the words to recognise or explain the trauma they were witnessing or experiencing and were unaware of how to address it. [As such, many digital rights activists suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#). PTSD does not discriminate and affects everyone in its path regardless of whether they are directly traumatised or witnesses of trauma.

The same team member recalls that during one of the first digital rights community events they ever attended, they met a young

activist who was so incredibly unwell that you could “almost physically feel their pain”. What stood out was their anxiety, how they rapidly smoked cigarette after cigarette, and their deep exhaustion. No one at the event seemed particularly alarmed by the activist’s appearance, and the advice of the day was to “take a week’s vacation”. However, our team member shares that, in retrospect, this person probably needed long-term therapy or a long sabbatical from their work. [The activist’s PTSD was aggravated by a host of microaggressions](#) that they were experiencing daily because of their background. While the space is by no means perfect now, it was significantly worse for people coming from under-represented communities back then.

Within the last decade, many activists have tried to tackle community health issues within the digital rights space, including bringing more attention to the absence of [psychosocial support](#). However, these initiatives met with limited success because of some key factors. First, chronic under-funding has meant that there is a consistent lack of adequate resources to address the problem. Second, as an emerging field, decision makers have



failed to prioritise psychosocial care as being central to the work. Third, initiatives have typically lacked the expertise of trained mental health care professionals who understand the unique experiences and needs of frontline communities working on digital rights.

Like so many other communities, the Covid-19 pandemic has weakened this already fragile space: people have suffered the death of family members, witnessed increased oppression in their home countries, experienced financial insecurity, and faced restricted movement across borders.

Collectively, we must find ways to strengthen the community, given how emotionally, physically, and mentally taxing our work is even pre-pandemic. In addition, we must leave no one behind, echoing the calls of various movements: “nothing without us”.

Most importantly, moving forward, funders, policy makers and other decision makers in the digital rights and Internet freedom space must find ways to prioritise psychosocial care. Without a rapid and sustained shift in this direction, it is unclear how the communities and individuals working to advance digital rights and Internet freedom can remain resilient.

The Community Health Report is designed to offer evidence and recommendations so that decision makers can level up their commitment to psychosocial support in 2021 and beyond.

We encourage you to look at our [conclusions \(page 52\)](#) where we offer concrete steps that entities and individuals can take. However, we must not forget that this is a problem that requires both innovative thinking and a redirection of resources if we are to overcome this current situation. Luckily, as history has proven, our community has an incredible track record in rising to the challenge.

For members of the digital rights community, we hope this report is a tool you can use to help validate your experiences, particularly those in 2020, as well as help you better advocate for your needs. We celebrate and honour you as human beings and believe in your collective power. Take care of each other and remember we are here to support you in any way we can.

Team CommUNITY

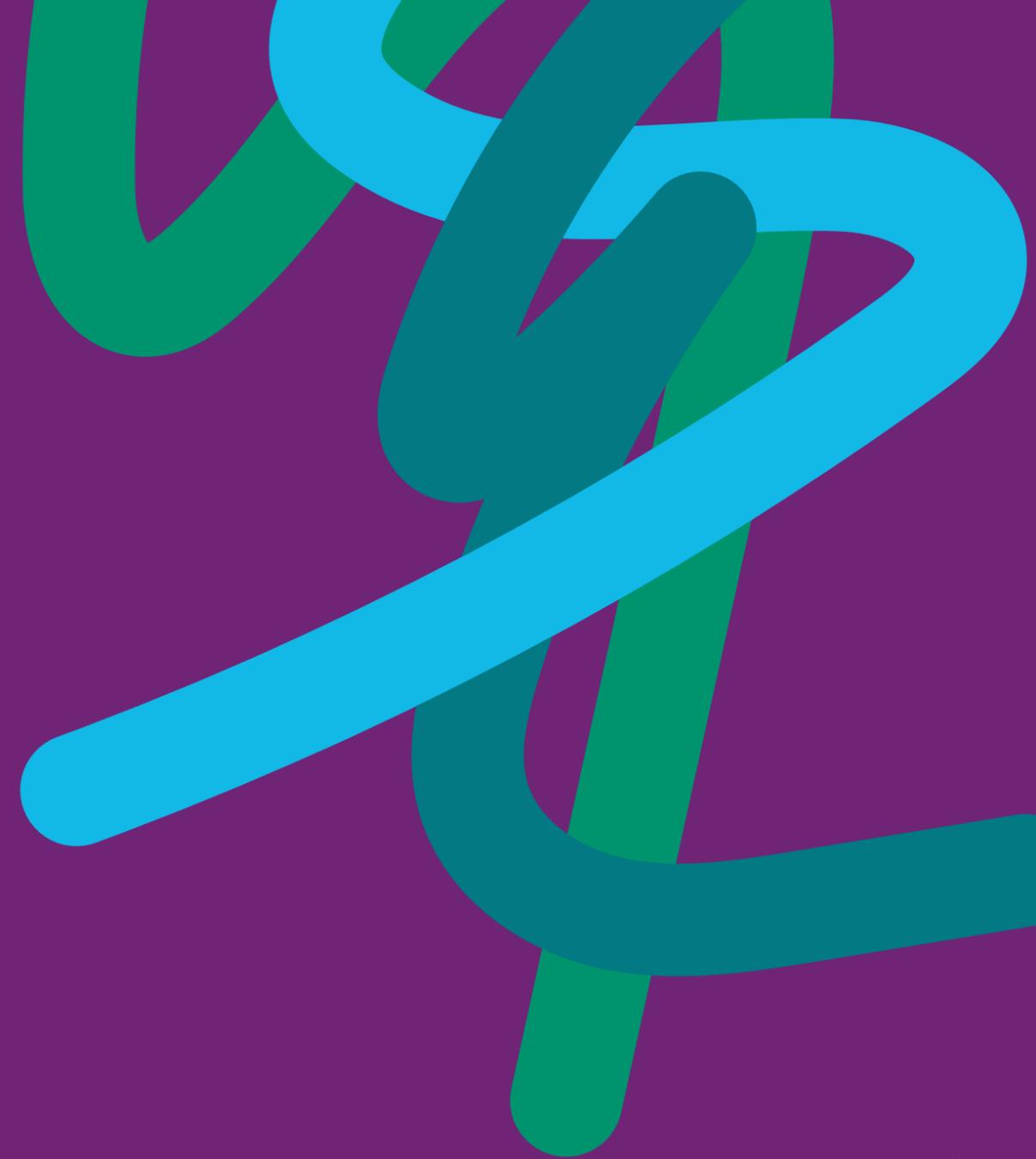
Sandra Ordoñez

Trinh Nguyen



III

Introduction to the research



The researcher

Selma Zaki is Team CommUNITY's first Community Health Researcher, responsible for the fact-finding, psychoanalysis, and writing of this report. A licensed mental health counsellor with experience providing therapy services to a range of communities, Selma's approach to her practice and this research was centred on both individual and the collective's needs. It is this combined approach that makes Selma uniquely positioned to undertake this research.

Selma has been previously published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and is active in the Lebanese civil society space. She has organised projects and events that were aimed at creating space for Lebanese youth to collectively identify community issues and address them through creative projects.

All interviews and analysis were conducted by Selma, who identifies as a cisgender Arab woman.

We feel truly lucky to have Selma as part of our team and congratulate her on the exceptional work she has done.



Selma Zaki

The approach

The research design has been influenced by two models: **Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR)** and **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**.

CQR is a rigorous qualitative research method that involves open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview, several research analysts analysing the data from the interviews and arriving at a consensus about the meaning of the data, and finally an auditor checking the work of the analysts to increase validity and minimise the effects of group mentality.

In analysing the interviews, researchers collectively extract the 'domains' (broad themes that serve at grouping the material into meaningful clusters) and the 'core ideas' (summaries of data that capture nuances of what's being said within the domains) and then look at how many times the core ideas and domains were reflected across participants.

PAR is a research framework built on the idea that those most impacted by the research should take an active part in shaping the questions, design, methods, and analysis, and determine what actions might be most impactful in effecting change. The intention is to level power relations in research through

a bottom-up approach guided by respect and reciprocity. This approach of sharing power asks the researcher to challenge beliefs around who is truly the expert, and what it means to be an expert.

At the core of this approach is the attitude of the researchers. Rather than focusing only on specific methodological tools, the attitude of being committed to full democratisation of both content and method requires a continual practice of respect, openness, and humanity. This allows the researcher to better perceive situations and more readily attune to the needs of those who want to improve their lives. With PAR, the focus is on the process rather than the outcome.

Despite not being able to fully implement a PAR method or a CQR method, the research for this report has been guided by the PAR philosophy for logistical reasons. Several community members have been involved in the research design process from providing feedback to the methodology, to developing the research questions and gathering the data. The underlying intention behind this approach has been to continuously recentre the community in this process.

Gathering data

The qualitative and quantitative methods occurred in parallel and both have influenced each other. The first step was to build a preliminary idea of what makes a community healthy (the identification of community health indicators) and to understand the risk factors that threaten the community's health.

This initial inquiry began with a review of the existing literature on community health followed by conversations with professionals working on various types of community health research. The outcomes were a refined list of community health indicators and potential risk factors that impact the digital rights community's health. This list then guided the survey development. The development of the research questions for the semi-structured qualitative interviews took place alongside the development of the survey.

The report uses a mixed-method approach to gather and analyse data, using both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (a survey) methods. While the survey data reveal trends and disparities that exist within the larger pool of digital rights activists, the interviews reveal a more zoomed-in, nuanced picture of the lived experiences of the digital rights activists in this community. The larger trends in the survey are compared to the

analysis of the interviews to provide a more accurate and nuanced conceptualisation of the community's health.

Community members were actively consulted across the research and development processes as they are the ones that understand the community best and are most impacted by the research. Sandy Ordonez and Trinh Nguyen also contributed to the research questions due to their leadership roles within Team CommUNITY.

Thirty-nine digital rights activists and Internet freedom community members were interviewed for this research, representing various ages, areas of professional experiences, and genders. Nine participants were from South and Central America, eight from Asia, seven from Africa, six from the Middle East and North Africa, and nine from North America and Europe. The participants were recruited through Team CommUNITY's network. The main criteria for the recruitment were that the participants were part of either a global or regional Internet freedom space and/or community. The interviews and analysis were conducted by Selma Zaki.



The interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted virtually on secure communications platforms. Consent forms were sent out via emails and interviews were not recorded to ensure confidentiality. Instead, they were transcribed at the time, on Standard Notes, an open source and end-to-end encrypted note-taking application. The transcriptions were processed and analysed post-interview. Each participant was assigned a code and all identifying information was removed as the interviews were being transcribed. The transcripts of the interviews will be deleted two years after the release of the report. Regional self-care circles with community members were also regularly organised alongside the interviews. Despite

this not being part of the research method, the self-care circles played a unique role in creating an opportunity to build rapport with community members, which led to stronger engagement during the interviews. The interviews were held either soon after self-care circles or around the same time.

Data and trends from the interviews were then used to develop and refine the survey questions. The survey was shaped and developed using available literature, informal conversations with health researchers and members of the community, and finally, the interviews themselves. The survey went through at least four phases of review and feedback before being published. It was then

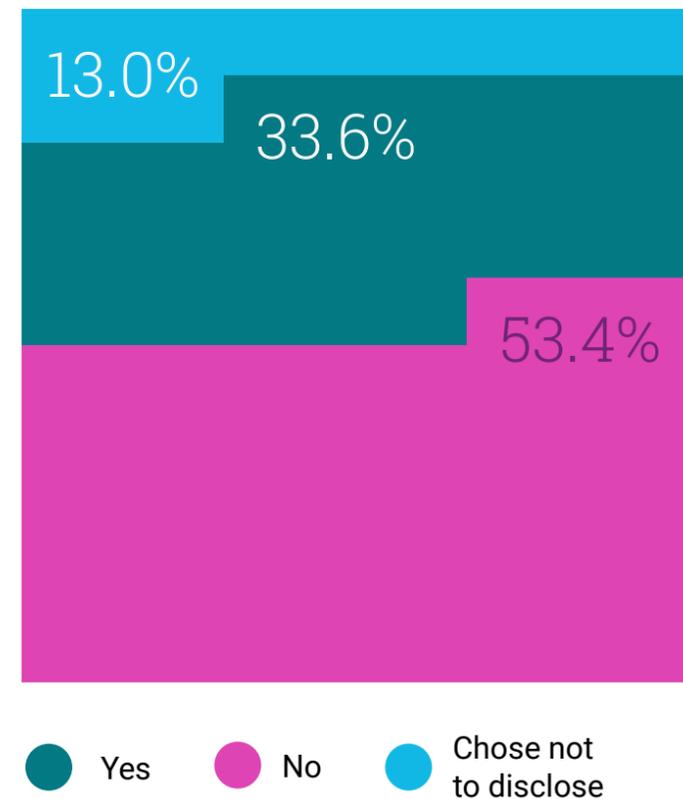
tested by a small network, representative of different regions and fields, before it was made widely available to the broader community.

A total of 238 participants took part in the survey which was created on Typeform.

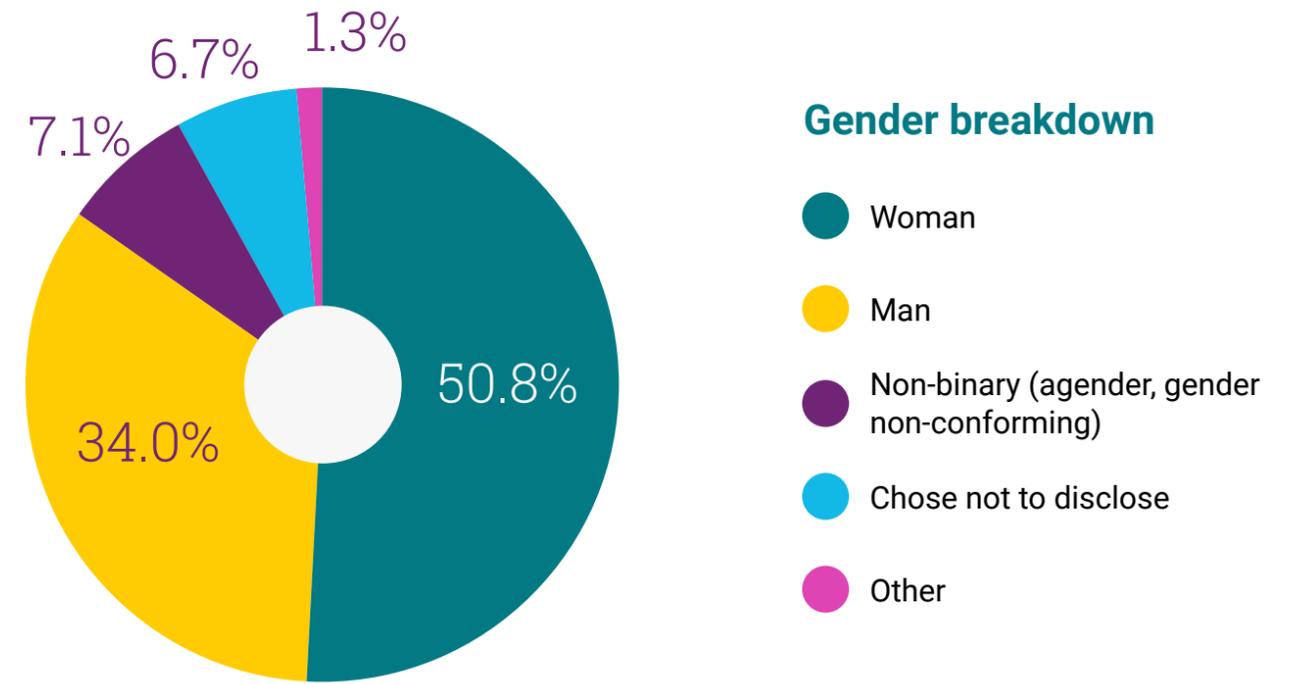
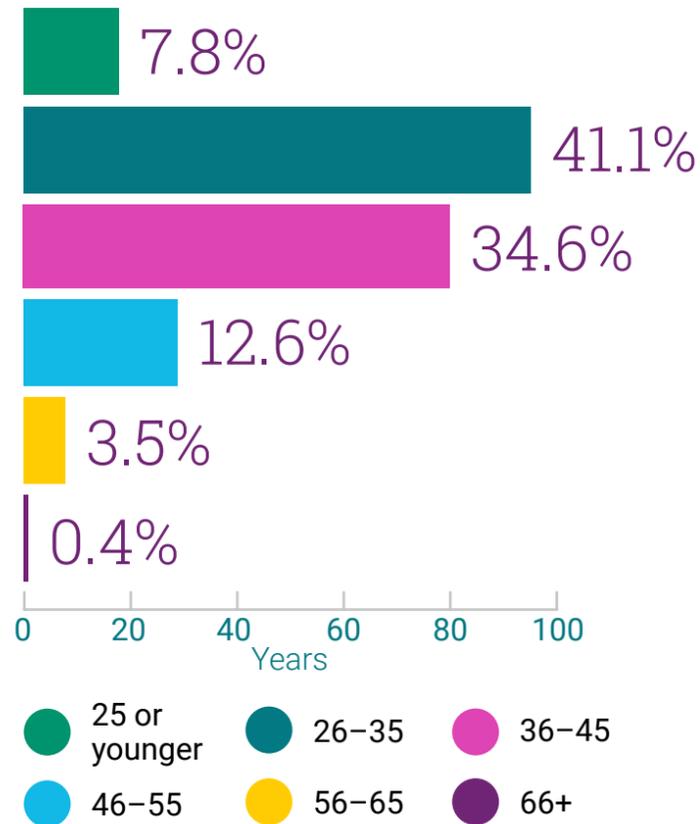
The survey was made available in English and Spanish and shared through mailing lists and one-to-one outreach.

Due to rounding of calculations, not all numbers in the charts and figures add up to 100%.

Do you identify as being part of the LGBTQI+, questioning community?



Age breakdown



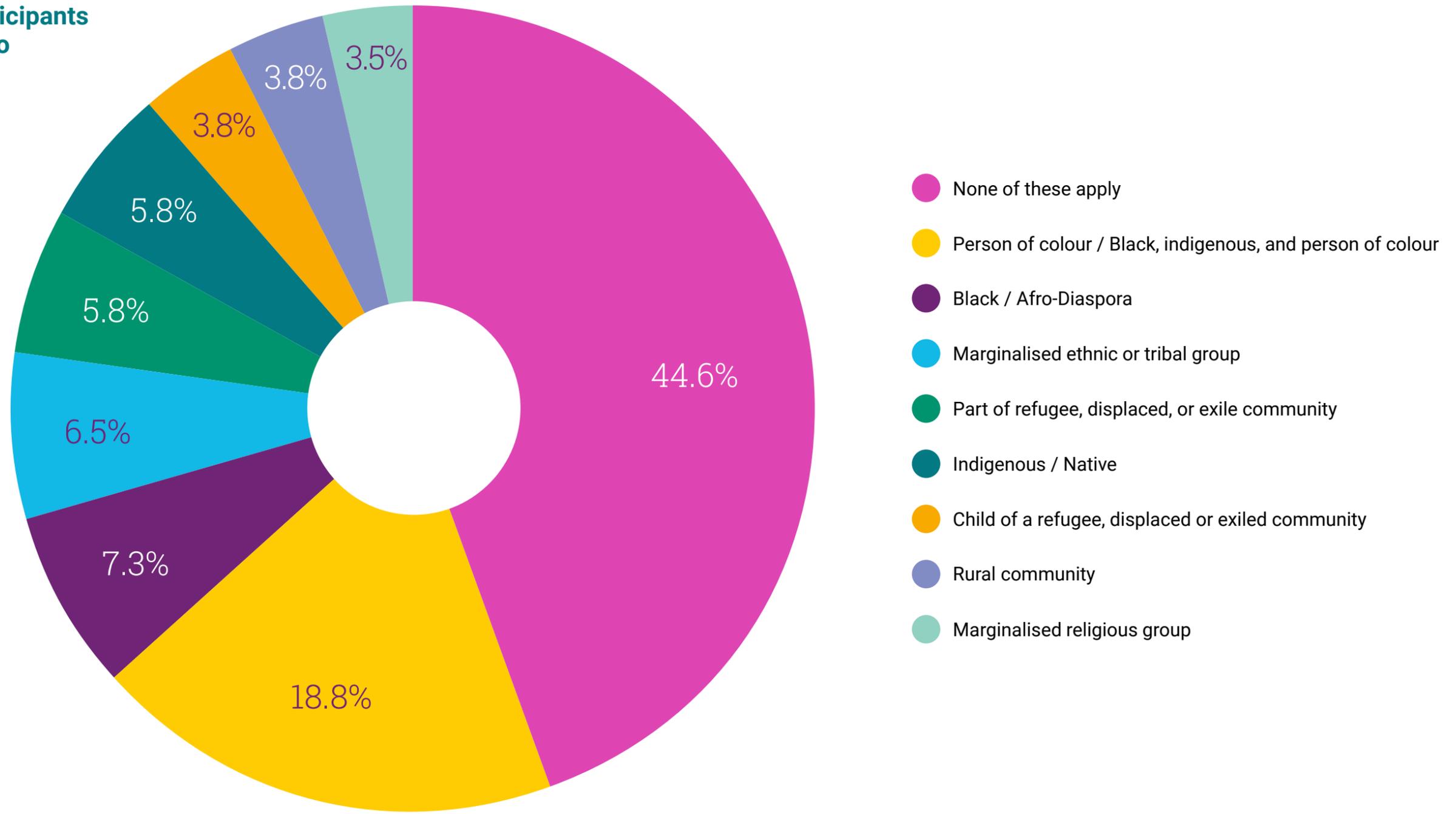
Income level



Participants were asked to identify their income level, based on the living standards in their region or country.

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Breakdown of survey participants identifying as belonging to marginalised groups



Processing and analysing the interviews

The first step in analysing the interviews was to create a shortlist of themes based on the questions the activists were asked. Then, sub-themes were identified from both the transcripts and the survey. This list of themes and sub-themes became the backbone of [the codebook](#). The content from the interviews was then reviewed in detail and categorised into thematic tables. From these tables, content was further refined into clear sub-themes, descriptions, and summaries (with descriptions mirroring the activists' words as closely as possible).



All this information was then transferred into a final codebook consisting of themes, sub-themes, descriptions, and quotes. The last step was to review each interview again and tally the number of times each sub-theme appeared. This allowed us to identify patterns and commonalities which informed the interpretation and analysis of the data. The numbers within the tables across the report represent frequency: the number of times each sub-theme appeared in the interviews and *not* the number of participants that expressed this sub-theme.



Research limitations and challenges

The report should be interpreted in light of its limitations, including the lack of a research team to analyse the qualitative data and the lack of a stability check. [Analysing the data through a team rather than an individual increases the validity of an analysis.](#) A stability check is when two transcripts are withheld until the end before being analysed. This is done to see whether the two interviews fall within the existing categories / sub-themes of the pre-established codebook. If they do, then the codebook is said to be stable. In other words, a stability check increases the validity of the codebook used for analysis.

A third limitation is that the transcripts were counted and coded only once. For better accuracy and consistency, the transcripts would need to be coded and analysed at least twice through the codebook.

Another limitation is that the interviews were not recorded and therefore the transcriptions are not word-for-word as they occurred in the session. Moreover, most interviews were conducted in English, with some in

Arabic, resulting in a language barrier as these languages are not native to many participants. For our survey, we avoided common demographic questions that typically ask individuals to identify themselves based on race or ethnicity. Because of the global spread of respondents and the historic [lack of data on race or ethnicity](#) in many countries, we chose instead to ask people to self-identify based on factors of marginalisation.

Finally, despite asking all participants each interview question consistently, some questions were left unanswered in a few interviews and were thus unexplored due to time constraints. This limitation slightly affects the counting and the coding.

The most challenging aspect of this research was defining and understanding the digital rights and Internet freedom community itself. This community is unique in that it is global, and its members live under different conditions and work on different projects. For example, some participants work at international organisations while others are working as freelancers or at local organisations. Some are living in stable countries while others are living in countries with political and economic turmoil. There are members who live in their own country, while others live in foreign countries. All these differences shape a member's reality. The digital rights community challenges conventional ideas of a community – and in many ways, it is a community of communities.

IV

Reflections from the researcher



As I reflect on this process, I am seeing the internal challenges that I experienced throughout this journey. I'd like to believe that my training as a therapist as well as my experience as an Iraqi, Palestinian, Lebanese woman raised in Beirut has fostered within me the capacity to witness, confront, and hold pain. My experience has taught me that the only way forward is by moving through the pain. Healing occurs when we turn our attention, our most valuable currency, towards pain and not away from it. My mind acknowledges this capacity to witness pain, yet my body is challenging this belief.

I am questioning my capacity because I am noticing a defence in my body, a resistance to the contents in the report. I wonder if it's because my body knows that this is not simply research material or a set of data points. The 'content' is an entire collective suffering; these experiences are so enmeshed with trauma that pain has become a way of being. I recognise this way of being because I've experienced this growing up. I witnessed and still witness what happens when generations experience collective trauma yet are only met with silence and systemic neglect. While conducting these interviews, a few conversations left me feeling heavy. In that moment, my heart was open, as it typically is when I am doing this kind of work. I try to honour one's experience by keeping an open heart because it is only then that I am capable of hearing, seeing, and receiving. In the interviews, I could see suffering embodied in many activists, but one particular

person left feeling deep pain for what they were holding. When talking to this activist, it felt like all the stressors they were experiencing had collapsed onto their body and they were sinking, but the world still needed them to be afloat. I recall them telling me, "In my culture, boys don't cry. In 2020, I cried so many times in places where my family couldn't see me."

Despite having witnessed isolation, pain, and hurt over and over again throughout the interviews, this interview affected me most because in this specific case the person's pain was so invisible to the outside world. There is isolation that comes from Covid-19 and the conditions of the world, but then there's a cold type of isolation that comes from our inner worlds being inaccessible to ourselves and to those around us. Perhaps, if this person allowed themselves to lean on others and if there was a healthy community to lean on, their year would not have been spent breaking down in isolation as the stressors piled onto their body.

When I look back at that exact exchange today, I notice a defence within me despite feeling open at that time. There is a part of me right now that wants to deny the full picture, diminish the suffering, and normalise this reality. And so even though I would like to believe that I have this capacity to witness, hold, and confront, my defences are saying otherwise.

The defensiveness reminds me that the ability to witness, hold, and accept other people's pain is a

continuous practice from which our forgetful minds can sometimes stray. Denial is deeply seductive and so my challenge moving forward is to remember not to give into denial. Denial is a defence to suffering. I am also mindful that when we confront all the suffering at once and overwhelm our minds, we fall into helplessness. There is a spot,

between helplessness and denial, where there is room for acceptance. Only there will we find resilience and we can collectively resist oppression and injustices.

I am grateful for everyone who took part in this process and I am especially grateful for Sandy and Trinh.

Healing occurs
when we turn our
attention, our most
valuable currency,
towards pain and
not away from it.



Analysis, discussion, and implications of the interviews



Theme 1 and 2: Defining community for this space

Given how diverse and global the digital rights community is, research participants were asked to define community and whether they even perceive themselves as a community.

The majority of our respondents defined a community as a group of people with shared values, beliefs, and intentions that consistently work together towards a common objective or goal. 3 out of the 39 interview participants (7.6%) indicated that they are not sure how to define a community.

Many respondents perceived the space either as a community or as a community of communities (reporting that there is a global community along with regional / local ones). A smaller number of participants, 7 out of 39 (17.9%), responded with either it is inconclusive (sometimes it is a community and sometimes it is too loose and hard to define) or that it is forming and evolving into a community and has the potential to become one. Those that view the Internet freedom space as a community, or a community of communities, are people who have engaged and interacted with the Internet Freedom Festival.

From those who answered 'inconclusive', a couple of them mentioned that they once saw the space as a community but, with time, this belief has been challenged. 2 participants reported experiencing a shift in the community and when trying to explore and understand the cause for this shift, it appears that both these members have been part of the space for a long time and have witnessed and experienced toxicity and ruptures without any accountability, repair, or healing.

The 'position' (i.e. how 'close' they are to the global community Team CommUNITY cultivates as well as the regional communities), together with 'duration' (or how long they had been members) are the two factors that influence how respondents conceptualise the digital rights space.

Finally, one response viewed the digital rights space as a community of communities that is shaped by its funders. While this exact language may not have been reflected directly by other participants for this particular question, it was clear from the interviews that many participants acknowledge the power and influence of funders in shaping the Internet freedom and digital rights community.

Theme 3: Activists' sense of belonging to this space

Activists might perceive the digital rights space as a community, but that does not mean that they identify with or feel that they belong to the community. Whether one identified or belonged to the community could be telling of the community and its health. A majority of participants, 26 out of 39 (66.7%) interview participants, reported that they identify with and belong to the community.

Many are involved with events or initiatives led by Team CommUNITY and were speaking about the IFF or their own regional groups. 6 out of 39 (15.4%) expressed ambivalence and reported feeling as though they sometimes belong, starting to feel like they belong, or feeling as though they don't belong at all. As with Theme 2, the difference in responses is influenced by the duration and positioning. Those more involved and engaged with Team CommUNITY's spaces and/or their own regional groups are more likely to see the space as a community and identify with it. Members with more ambivalent responses were either new to the space or have been there for a longer period and have experienced different parts

of the digital rights space through larger international or Western organisations and conferences. In comparison to Team CommUNITY's spaces, these spaces were described as less diverse and inclusive and more corporate and competitive.

The initial assumption was that those who perceived the space as a community and identified with it were more likely to indicate that the community is healthy. However, the qualitative data does not necessarily indicate this as many participants reflected on the unhealthy aspects of their communities. Prior to exploring the participants' views on whether their communities were healthy, they were first asked about what makes a community healthy.



Participants report healthy relationships and communication as the foundation of a healthy community. Together, they allow community members to feel more connected and experience a sense of belonging, which increases engagement overall.

Theme 4: Activists' indicators of community health

Participants identified several factors that make a community healthy (see Table 1). The indicator named most often is **healthy relationships** which appeared 26 times in interviews. Healthy relationships are characterised by 'feelings of connection, mutual care, empathy, support, trust, and respect, resulting in collaboration'. Even though there was consensus that a healthy community is made of healthy members and healthy relationships, many participants acknowledged that while a healthy community does not automatically imply that people will be happy all the time, there's an ability to discuss challenges openly and safely, and a shared belief that community members have good intentions.

Other indicators of community health listed by respondents include healthy communication, diversity and inclusion, safety, responsibility and commitment, and conflict resolution.

Healthy communication is the second most common indicator (appeared 17 times in interviews). It was defined as 'an active, consistent and sustainable communication between members' as well as 'the ability to

actively listen and hold open and transparent conversations around community-related issues'. Despite healthy communication being named as a separate indicator to healthy relationships, it is important to note that healthy relationships are only possible when there is healthy communication. The first two indicators are the foundation of a healthy community.

The next three indicators were named around 12 times. **Diversity and inclusion** is defined as 'tolerating, accepting, and embracing of diverse opinions within the community while focusing on shared goals'. A diverse and inclusive community can be cautious to outsiders, but it is not exclusionary or exclusive and it is open to new members. More importantly, in a healthy community, minorities feel included and empowered.

Safety is when 'community members are not worried about being judged and feel safe and empowered in being themselves in community'. It is also when 'no single person or group is holding all the power or dominating' and 'in the case of toxicity, people are held accountable and boundaries are set'.

Many acknowledge that there is no diversity and inclusion without safety.

Responsibility and commitment is when 'members experience a sense of intentional responsibility towards the community and choose to be active and committed towards the community'. Commitment is reflected in actions and not just words. In discussing this category, some participants acknowledged that a healthy community does not expect too much or put too much pressure on its members, while others highlighted the need for members to be active in order to have a healthy community. It seemed that some participants perceived a community as an entity that either gives or takes from them, whereas others saw themselves as the community in itself – as the entity itself. The difference in this perception could be due to cultural differences and differences in individualistic versus collectivistic values.

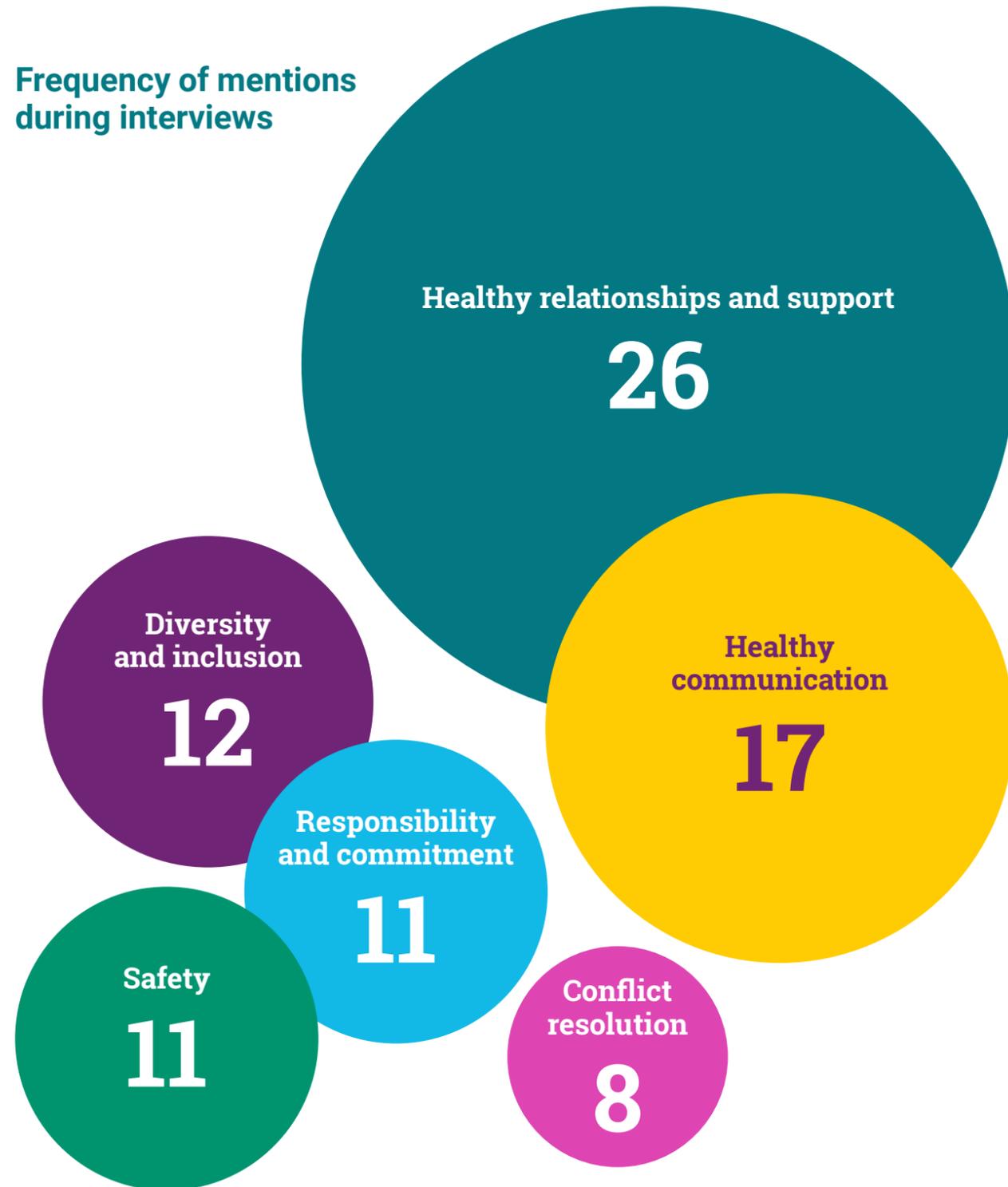
The last indicator, **conflict resolution** (which appeared 8 times in the interviews), addresses members' ability to name and acknowledge conflict and challenges that are occurring within the community, and their ability to collectively address these through positive behaviours (rather than through gossiping, passive aggressive behaviours, or mind games). Healthy conflict resolution

approaches include protocols, codes of conducts, and implementing training that supports managing conflict.

All six indicators were identified and extracted from the interview transcripts and are important indicators of community health. While the numbers reflect frequency (how many times a particular indicator showed up), they do not necessarily reflect saliency. For example, conflict resolution appeared only 8 times compared to healthy relationships (26 times), but when discussing community health needs, a majority of members highlighted a need for conflict mediation resources.

Moreover, the indicators are interconnected—there are no healthy relationships without safety and there is no safety without conflict resolution skills. Similarly, there is no diversity and inclusion without safety. So, while numbers and frequency are one measure in analysing data, they are not the only factor. A healthy community is a community that meets all these indicators.

Frequency of mentions during interviews



| Indicator | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|--|--|---|
| Healthy relationships and support | A healthy community is where the relationship between members is healthy. Healthy relationships are characterised by feeling connected to one another and experiencing mutual care, empathy, support, trust, and respect, resulting in members being able to collaborate and work together. | 26 |
| Healthy communication | Healthy communication is characterised by active, consistent, and sustainable communication between members, as well as the ability to hold open and transparent communication around community-related issues where members are <i>listening</i> to each other. | 17 |
| Diversity and inclusion | There is tolerance and an acceptance of diverse opinions within the community and an effort to embrace diverse ways of thinking while focusing on shared goals. Community can be cautious towards new members but is not exclusionary or exclusive and is open to new members. Minorities feel included. | 12 |
| Responsibility and commitment | Members experience a sense of intentional responsibility towards the community and choose to be active and committed towards the community. Commitment is reflected in actions and not just words. | 11 |
| Safety | Members feel empowered and safe in being themselves in the community. Members are not worried about being judged. No single person or group is holding all the power or dominating. In the case of toxicity, people are held accountable and boundaries are set. | 11 |
| Conflict resolution | Members of this community are able to name and acknowledge conflicts and challenges that are occurring with the community and collectively address them through healthy mechanisms (rather than relying on gossiping and whisper games). There is a clear code of conduct, structure, and expectations in place that support in managing conflict. | 8 |

Table 1: Activists' indicators of community health (interview data)



People are experiencing declines in mental health resulting from abusive power dynamics, attacks on protesters, hate speech, heavy surveillance, police brutality, racial injustices, financial insecurities, increased isolation, and from witnessing the suffering of others.

Theme 5: Participants' perception of the community's health

After participants identified indicators of community health, they were asked whether they perceived and experienced their own digital rights / Internet freedom communities as healthy. Responses were scattered. A handful (6 people) reported 'yes their community is healthy and have improved in health over time'. Nine people reported that their Internet freedom / digital rights communities are 'sometimes healthy and sometimes unhealthy and that these communities struggle to remain healthy'. 6 people reported that the communities are 'evolving towards being healthy', indicating that they are not there yet but they have the potential to be healthy. Finally, only two respondents said that their communities are unhealthy.

None of the participants who reported their communities being healthy responded in a definitive manner as evidenced by pauses, hesitations, and using statements like "I think" in their responses. Moreover, the disparity across the responses highlights the complexity in conceptualising the health of the larger Internet freedom / digital rights community. It is difficult to categorise the

community as healthy or unhealthy given the nature of how dynamic this community is and that its members experience different environments that are part of the larger space.

To further understand the differences in responses, participants were asked what aspects of the community they found healthy or unhealthy.

Respondents who described their own community as healthy pointed to the gathering spaces built by Team CommUNITY. They talked about feeling welcomed as newcomers, finding emotional and professional support, and experiencing friendliness from members of the community. Several participants talked about how they feel supported by Sandy and Trinh, the community managers. Many expressed appreciation for the presence of the Internet Freedom Festival as a method of efforts to build and strengthen community relationships, and recognised the festival as a space where they felt safe and could experience what a healthy space looks like for the first time.

These responses were in direct contrast with others who reported opposite experiences and described the digital rights space as unsupportive and toxic. A few participants discussed the disconnect between words and actions in the community, claiming that people talk but not everyone is willing to show up. One activist gives an example:

"Something that I did find interesting in the last few years is who did or didn't sign the letter of [Google incident in AI](#) – so many people in the space talking about diversity and I was watching the letters and seeing who signed on and White women were the last to sign."

Interview with activist, December 2020

Extending on this, many participants talk about how the digital rights space is not only unsupportive, but harmful. Respondents highlighted that conflict and toxic behaviours are permitted without any accountability, support, or healing, resulting in people feeling unsafe. They also say that conflicts usually lead to gossip, which leads to further conflict and prevents resolution.

One participant reports, "There needs to be accountability for healing. Not only is there no accountability in this community – but all these people are claiming to fight for accountability."

Respondents also said that the space is unhealthy due to being under-resourced and lacking diversity in funding, resulting in competitive behaviour and money-focused efforts. These factors divide people's intentions; with some motivated by the money and others working because it's personal to them. Others stressed how the absence of space for self and community care left them feeling overworked and burnt out, thereby threatening the community's health.

Several respondents also expressed that the space is more Western, perpetuating existing power dynamics. One person said, "I can see how the conversation changes in spaces depending on who is dominating." Three participants reported the experience of "being the only one" at a conference or watching a panel discussion about their country but not having any locals on the panel. One participant reports, "Sometimes you don't feel comfortable in the space. Out of 200 people at a conference, there are only two or three people that look like you and you're put in a box."

When examining these stark differences between responses it seems like those with marginalised identities who frequently encounter Western dominance were more likely to experience the space as unhealthy compared to those who were speaking mostly

about Team CommUNITY spaces or their regional group. The responses also reveal how the participants' positioning, their identities, the spaces they've experienced (and which groups dominate these spaces) all affect their perception of the community's health.

This report will continue to examine how 2020 has affected the community's health, but first, we examine the factors that affect activists' engagement.



“ ”

Sometimes you don't feel comfortable in the space. Out of 200 people at a conference, there are only two or three people that look like you and you're put in a box.



When community and self-care are deprioritised, this can lower expectations for community care overall.

Theme 6: Factors that affect activists' engagement in the Internet freedom / digital rights space

Understanding what encourages or prevents people from engaging in the space can be reflective of the community's health. For example, if activists disengaged from the community, it could be because they experienced the space as unhealthy. When asked about what factors affect people's ability and/or willingness to engage and participate in the community, respondents named several factors, including a sense of belonging, access, language barriers, the ability to commit, level of knowledge / expertise, social factors, and psychological factors.

Participants reported that their engagement levels are affected by their sense of **belonging**. This was reported 13 times in the interviews. Belonging was described as a participant's sense of connectedness to other members of the community. Respondents reported feeling more connected to members after having met or worked with them, including finding it easier to build trust and foster connections once they had bonded. Participants also reported 'access' as a barrier to engagement. This was reported 13 times. Participants recognise that there

are disparities in access due to connectivity issues or lack of access to smartphones.

From these participants, many discussed how **power** is residing in the Global North and Western culture, affecting who makes decisions and who receives an opportunity to engage. One participant elaborates:

"You have to be visible in spaces like [popular international events] to get jobs and if you don't, you don't exist... and it's not always possible to travel."

Interview with activist, November 2020

A second participant also comments on power and access:

"I can also think about some other events in Europe created mostly by White people. They're a bit disconnected from local realities. Many of them have expensive tickets and costs. I've tried to not be part

of those spaces because I don't see the point if these conversations are disconnected from what's happening on the ground."

Interview with activist, December 2020

Other factors affecting engagement include **language barriers**. Participants discuss how English being the dominant language limits access. This was identified 9 times. Respondents also discussed how the **ability to commit** could also be a barrier to engagement. They recognise that engagement depends on one's availability of time as well as making the personal choice to commit. Ability to commit as a barrier was named 5 times in the interviews.

Some participants report **knowledge** as a factor affecting engagement. They discuss how one's level of knowledge, expertise, and comfort with certain tools and technologies used in the community affect engagement. Having an understanding and clarity on certain tools, of the purpose and outcome of participation in certain events increases engagement. A few of them mentioned

Mattermost (an open source version of Slack where text conversations occur and are used as a virtual place to build community) as an example of a tool they don't fully understand. Moreover, one activist reports that "conversations in global spaces are high level and high speed, making it hard to keep up and it becomes exclusive in that way. The conversations fail to recognise that some people can't keep up 'cause they're new."

While some participants recognise that differences in knowledge / expertise might affect peoples' engagement, others discuss how the social aspect of the space can serve as a barrier to engagement. A couple of respondents described experiencing the space as 'cliquey' and found it difficult to break into, especially for new members. They also described how experiencing conflict, toxicity, or discrimination in the space can further decrease engagement.

Finally, over half the respondents reported that **psychological factors** affect their engagement levels. This category was identified 25 times in the interviews. Respondents named three

types of internal psychological factors: 1) mental health struggles, 2) personality or temperament, and 3) insecurities.

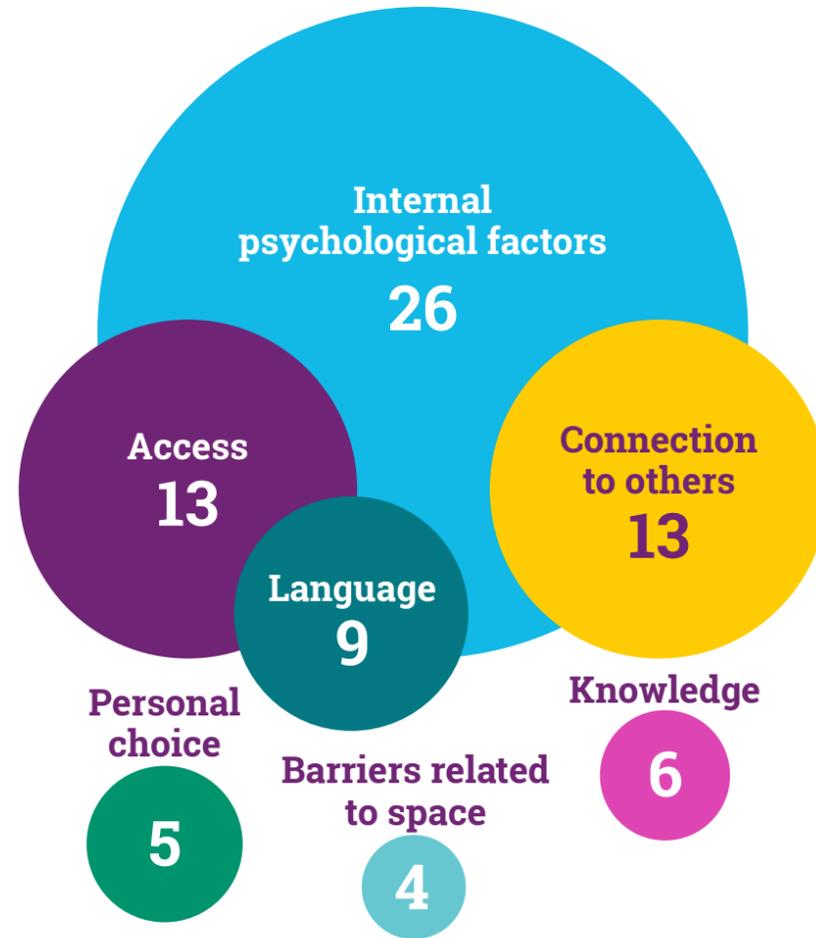
Mental health struggles include: [Zoom fatigue](#), feeling overwhelmed, burnout, being in survival mode, and one’s personal traumas making it difficult to engage. One person reports that: “Internal stuff can stop people from engaging and that people need to be there for themselves first.” Another participant explains: “If you are a woman or queer, you can feel all that trauma in these spaces...all repressed things show up even if you are in a healthy community.”

The second type of internal psychological factor includes personality types and temperament (i.e. people’s level of introversion and extroversion). The space seems to be designed for extroverts. One person talked about how exhausting it is to be in spaces without knowing or trusting people but being expected to work or socialise with them.

The third type is about one’s insecurities related to the work or workspace. These insecurities can present as [Imposter Syndrome](#), self-censorship, not feeling instrumental to the community, and being conflict averse. This is distinct from knowledge as a barrier because despite having the knowledge and expertise, intersecting identities still serve as a barrier.

While several factors impact engagement in the community, it is clear from the numbers that psychological factors affect engagement the most ([Table 2](#)). This brings us to examining the stressors and traumas that affect individual and community health the most.

Frequency of mentions during interviews



| Factor | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Internal psychological factors | Internal psychological factors include: 1) mental health struggles (Zoom fatigue, feeling overwhelmed, burnout, being on survival mode, personal traumas), 2) personality types and temperament, and 3) insecurities related to the work or workspace showing up as Imposter Syndrome and self-censorship. | 25 |
| Connection to others | Feeling connected to members in the community by having met them or worked with them and being involved through collective activities. | 13 |
| Access | Disparities in access due to connectivity issues as well as power residing in the Global North and in White culture. | 13 |
| Language | Dominance of English which perpetuates a power dynamic and excludes many communities. | 9 |
| Knowledge | Level of knowledge, expertise, and understanding of certain tools, technologies, and other community-related mechanisms and projects. | 6 |
| Personal choice | Ability to commit and availability of time as well as willingness to personally commit and put in the extra effort. | 5 |
| Barriers related to space | Experiencing space as ‘cliquey’ and finding it difficult to integrate and/or experiencing conflict, toxicity, and/or discrimination in the space. | 4 |

Table 2: Factors that impact activists’ engagement (interview data)



A safe environment is necessary for members to heal. There can be no safety without addressing both past and current traumas that the community has endured, which are currently being ignored.

Theme 7: Stressors that impacted community members in 2020

So far, participants report that the greatest indicator of community health are healthy relationships. It has also become apparent that psychological factors have the most effect on the activists' engagement in the community. However, can healthy relationships exist without psychologically healthy individuals? To drill down into the factors affecting the activists' psychological health and the impact this has on the health of the community as a whole, participants were asked about the stressors that have impacted them during 2020.

Stressors identified by the majority of participants include loss of work, human right abuses, loss of connection, and adjusting to new work realities.

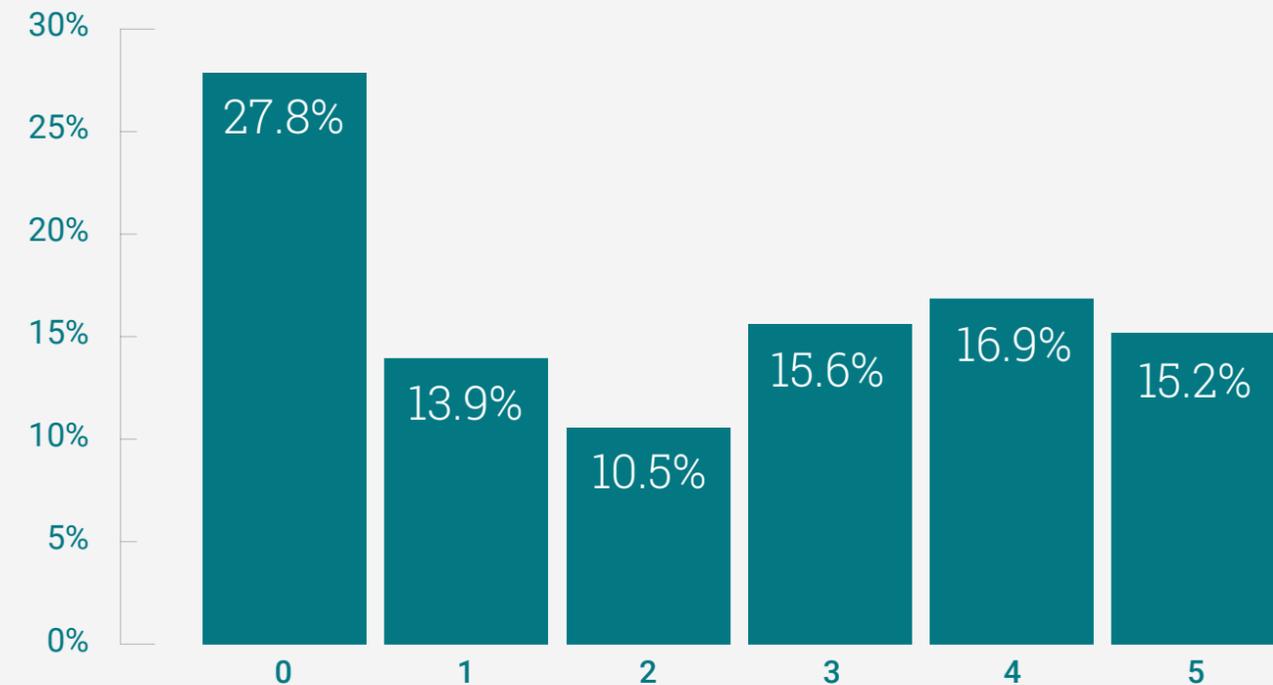
Loss of work includes experiencing loss of work opportunities or funding resulting in financial stressors and/or having to actively look for work. An example named frequently is the loss of [Open Technology Fund](#) funding, which led to a lot of waiting due to uncertainty resulting in tension within the community.

One activist compared losing project funding to losing a child, describing it as feeling "very

traumatic". They also likened the uncertainty of sustaining a project to the uncertainty of holding onto someone in a coma. This imagery depicts how visceral this trauma can be. Many discussed that the stress of uncertainty and permanently looking for funds and trying to support your work takes a lot of mental space and effort.

The survey data reiterates loss of work and loss of funding as a major stressor. On a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 meant the activist did not experience the problem, 1 meant they did experience it but did not find it stressful, 2 being that they experienced a little stress, 3 being moderate stress, 4 very stressful, and 5 being the most stressful, 72.1% of all participants reported experiencing stress related to loss of work / financial insecurity, and 47.7% gave a 3 or higher rating, meaning respondents experienced this stressor as at least moderately stressful. When we factor in gender, 43.8% of women, 50.6% of men, and 76.5% of non-binary members experienced the stressor as at least moderately stressful. When we factor in class, 66.0% of lower-class participants, 43.2% of middle-class participants, and 34.2% of upper-class participants reported experiencing the stressor as at least moderately stressful (a rating of 3 or more).

Loss of work and/or financial security



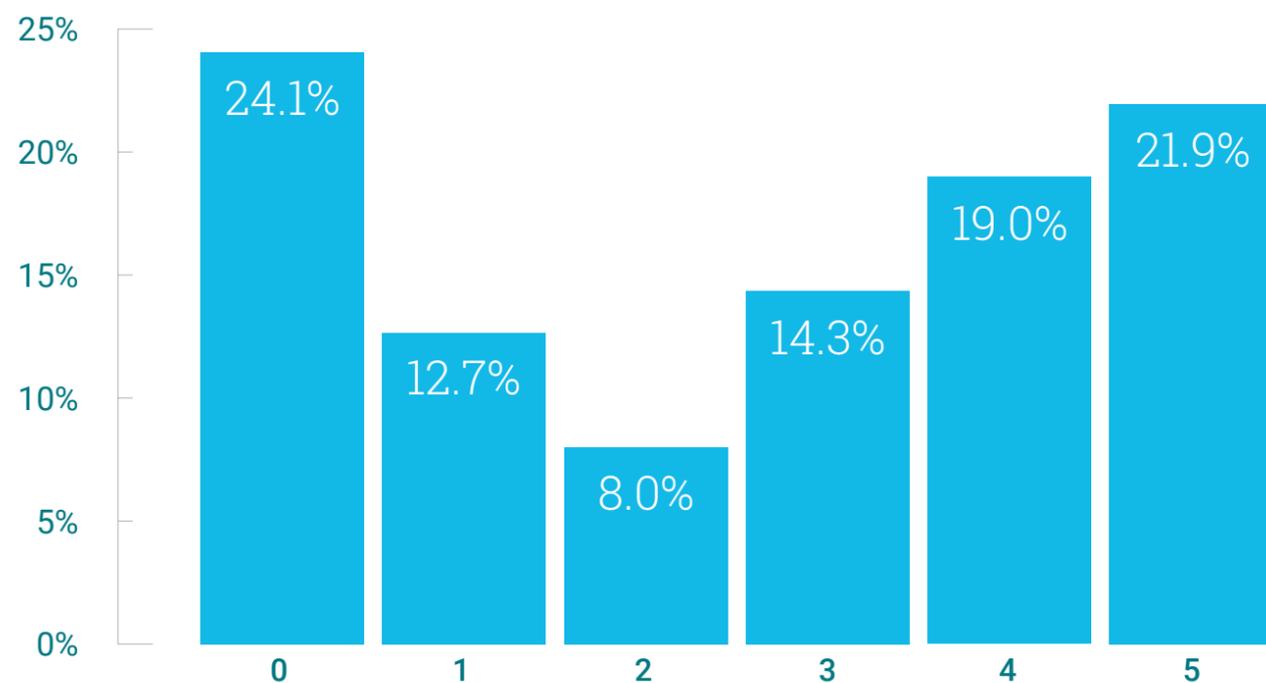
Number of people who filled out this question 237

Average rating 2.25

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

75.9% of all survey participants reported experiencing stress in relation to loss of funding for projects and actively looking for work, and 55.2% of all participants marked 3 or more, indicating experiencing at least moderate stress. For gender, 51.2% of women, 58.2% of men, and 70.6% of non-binary members experienced at least moderate stress. As for class, 66.0% of lower-class members and 53.9% of those who are middle-class reported experiencing at least moderate stress, whereas 39.5% of upper-class members reported 3 or higher.

Loss of funding for projects and/or actively looking for work or funds



Number of people who filled out this question **238**

Average rating **2.58**

0 = Did not experience

1 = Minimal stress

2 = Slightly stressful

3 = Moderately stressful

4 = Very stressful

5 = Extremely stressful

The stressor category of **human right abuses** deals with witnessing or experiencing increase in human rights abuses, discrimination, and/or increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackout, or ‘hate speech’ locally or globally. This includes being targeted by governments, going into hiding, and experiencing severe threat to one’s safety. Many members discuss how backsliding on human rights is a stressor for them. A few activists share their perspective:

“The US administration and the global backsliding on rights has been a stressor. It’s made funding such a cutthroat experience for many people and US politics sets the tone for a lot of the world and a lot of funding comes from the US.”

Interview with activist, December 2020

Government influence on the activists is echoed by another member:

“When you see your own President stigmatising your work and that’s being normalised, there is a certain stress that comes with that.”

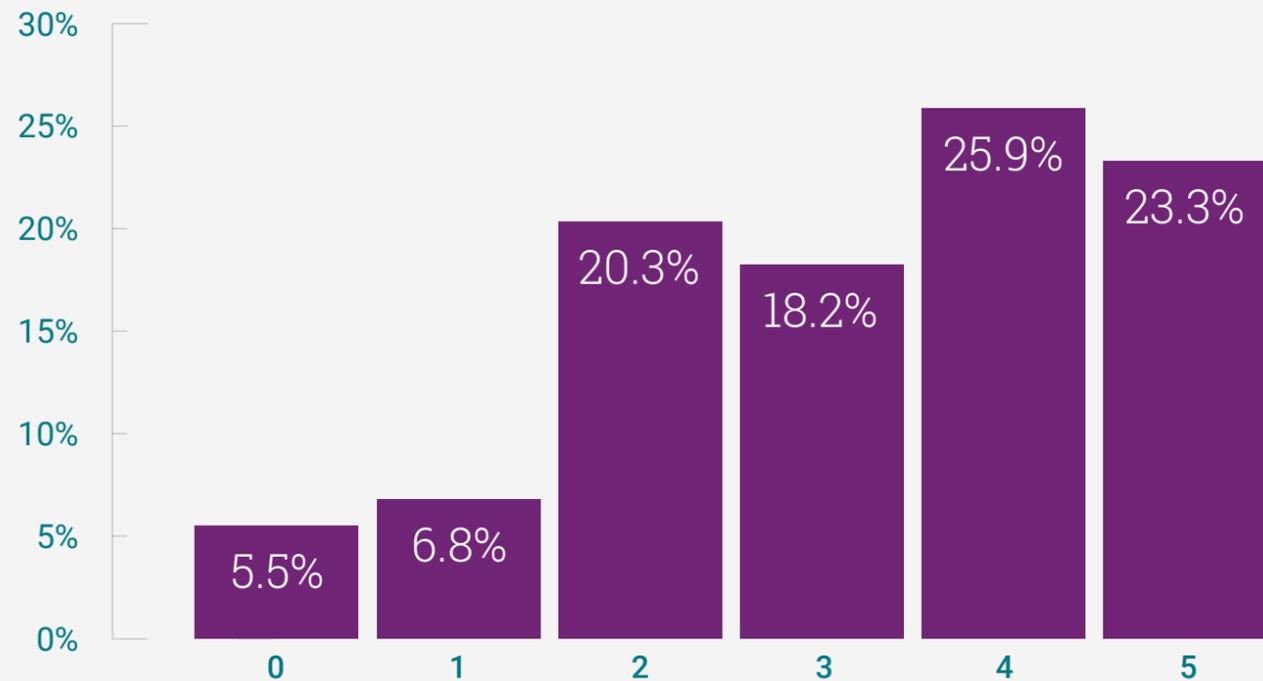
Interview with activist, December 2020

Many talked about how personal this work is for them. One activist illustrates this by recalling a memory from attending a conference where people had to stand in a spectrum line according to how personal this work is for them; so, they stood in a line from ‘least personal’ to ‘most personal’. She recounted how an individual standing at the ‘most personal’ area collapsed to the ground because their body was holding too much suffering. She ended by saying, “People don’t get it, for many of us it’s actually a matter of life or death.”

The survey asked community members about several stressors that relate to this larger category of human rights abuses. These include 1) witnessing or experiencing an increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackout or hate speech locally or globally, 2) witnessing or experiencing human rights abuses such as unlawful detainment, torture, police brutality, etc, and 3) experiencing discrimination because of an aspect of your identity such as racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, or ableism.

For the first stressor, 94.5% of respondents reported experiencing stress related to an increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackout, and/or hate speech, with 67.4% of all members reporting experiencing at least moderate levels of stress. When factoring in gender, 66.1% of women, 65.4% of men, and 76.4% of non-binary members reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress. When looking at class, 82.0% of lower-class, 66.4% of middle-class, and 52.6% of upper-class respondents reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress.

Witnessed or experienced an increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackout, or hate speech locally or globally

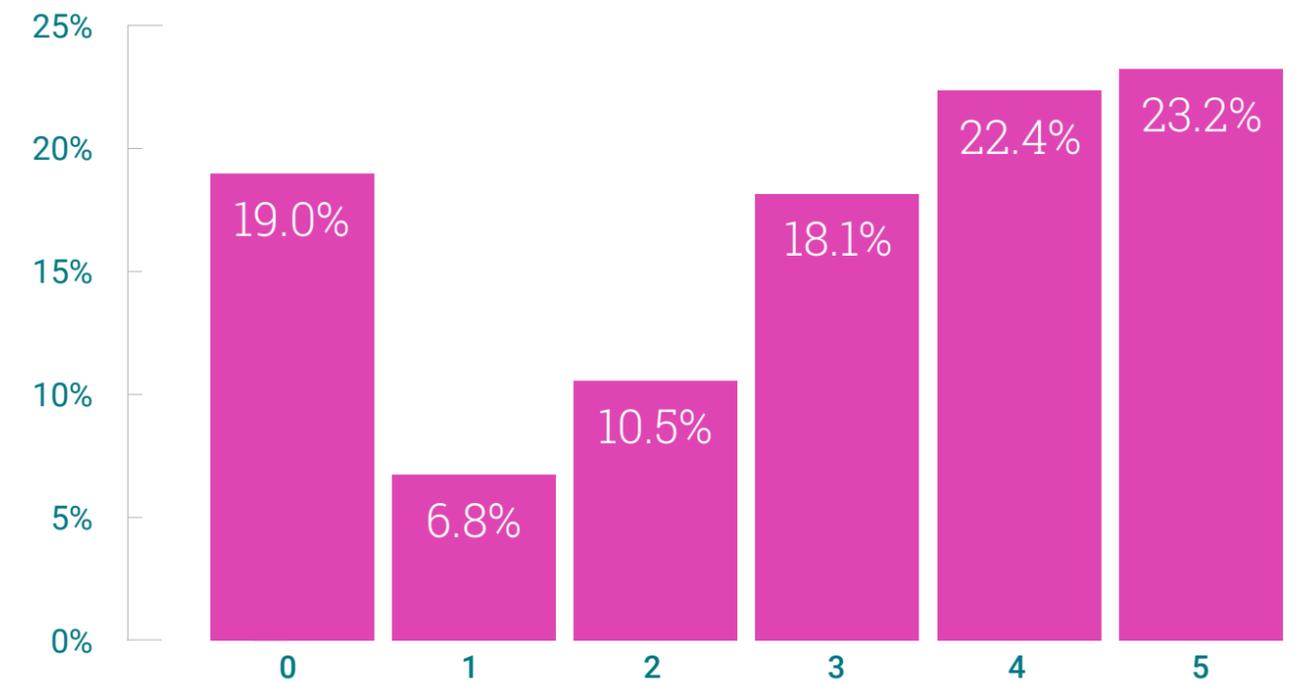


Number of people who filled out this question 238
Average rating 2.92

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

For the second stressor, 81.0% of all participants reported experiencing stress due to witnessing or experiencing human rights abuses such as unlawful detainment, torture, police brutality, and 63.7% of all participants rated 3 or higher on the scale, indicating that they experienced at least moderate levels of stress. For gender, 61.9% of women, 58.0% of men, and 82.4% of non-binary participants reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress in relation to this category. For class, 70.0% of lower-class participants, 64.1% of middle-class participants, and 52.6% of upper-class participants reported experiencing moderate levels of stress.

Witnessed or experienced human rights abuses such as unlawful detainment, torture, police brutality, etc.

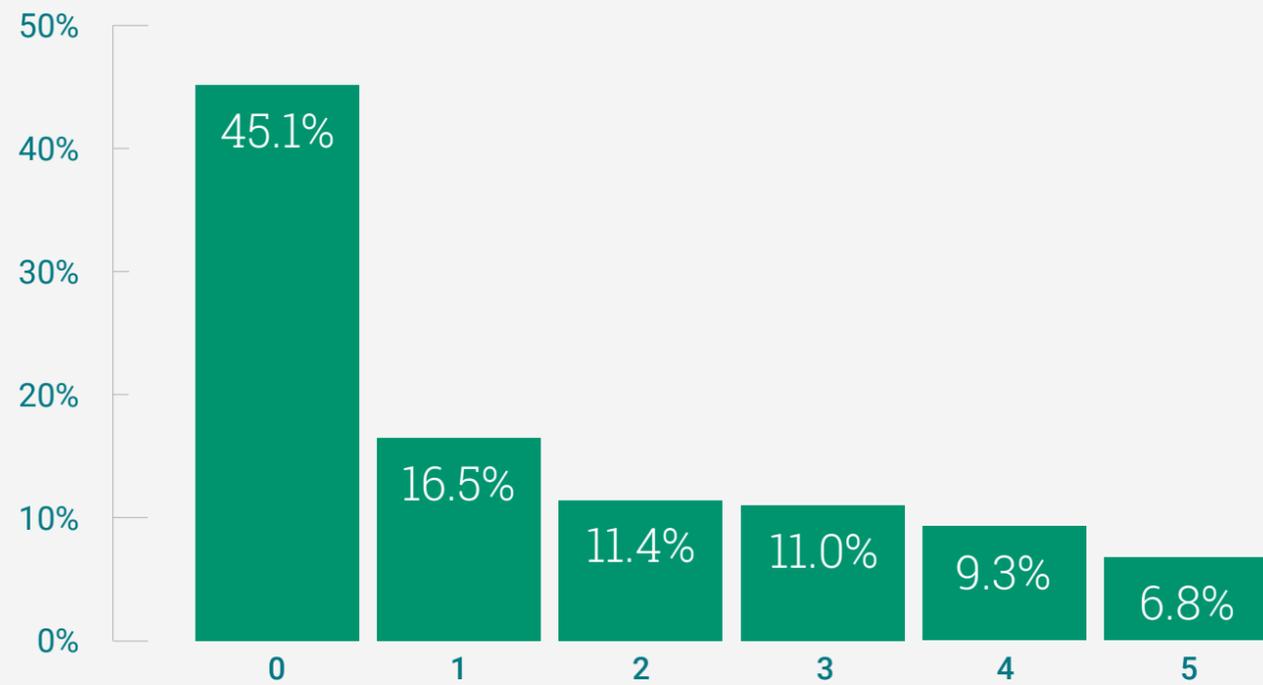


Number of people who filled out this question 237
Average rating 2.88

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

Nearly 55.0% of all participants reported experiencing stress due to discrimination, with 27.1% marking a 3 or higher on the scale, indicating high levels of stress. Interestingly 45.1% of participants did not experience any discrimination and when we look at the demographics, 43.3% of all members do not identify with an identity that is marginalised (i.e. black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), Black / Afro-Diaspora, native, refugee or exiled community, marginalised religious group etc). Therefore, 40.0% of all members come from identities that are not marginalised and nearly 40.0% of all participants reported not experiencing any stress related to marginalisation.

Experienced discrimination because of an aspect of identity (racism, sexism, homophobia, islamophobia, transphobia, or ableism)



Number of people who filled out this question **237**

Average rating **1.43**

0 = Did not experience

1 = Minimal stress

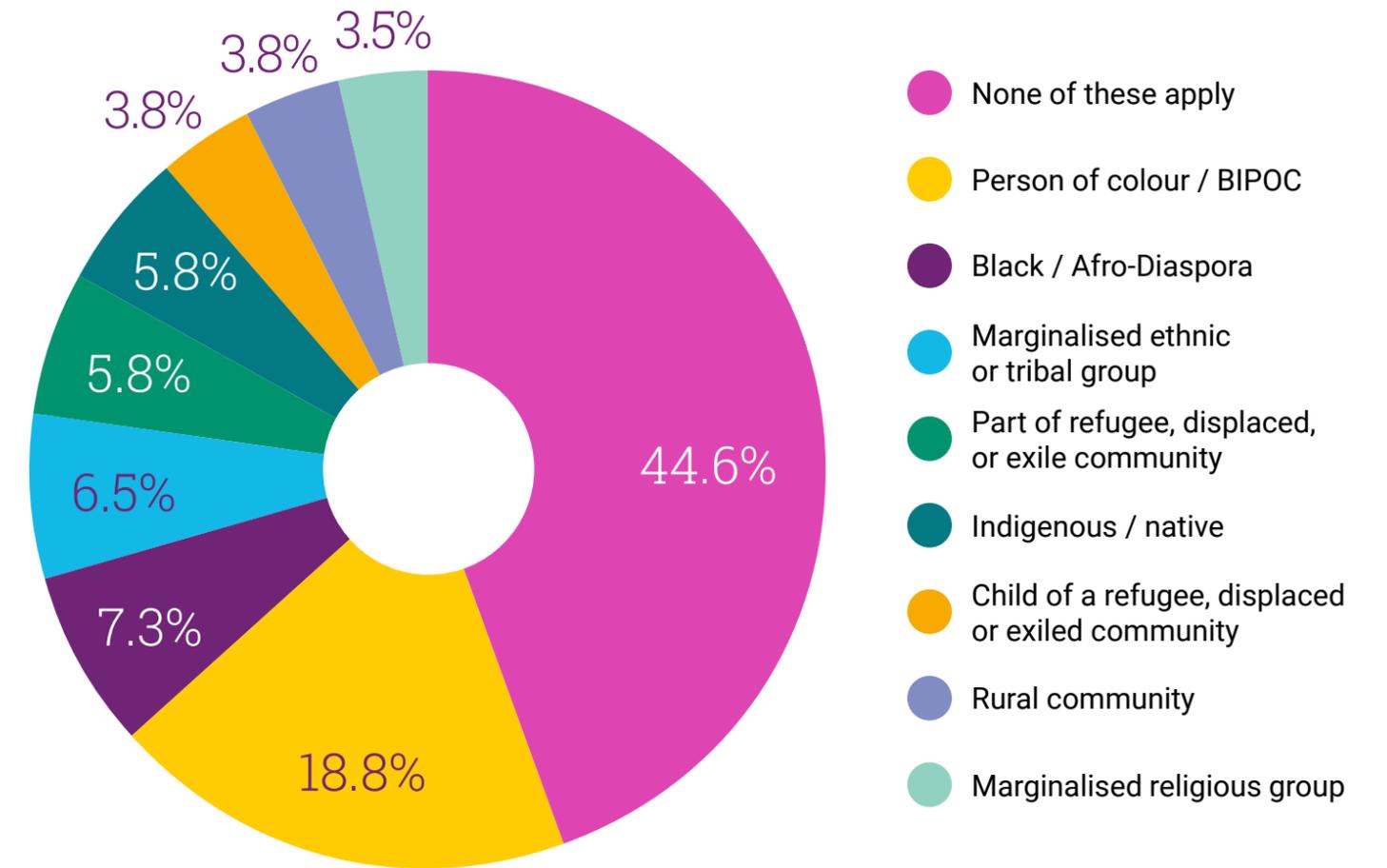
2 = Slightly stressful

3 = Moderately stressful

4 = Very stressful

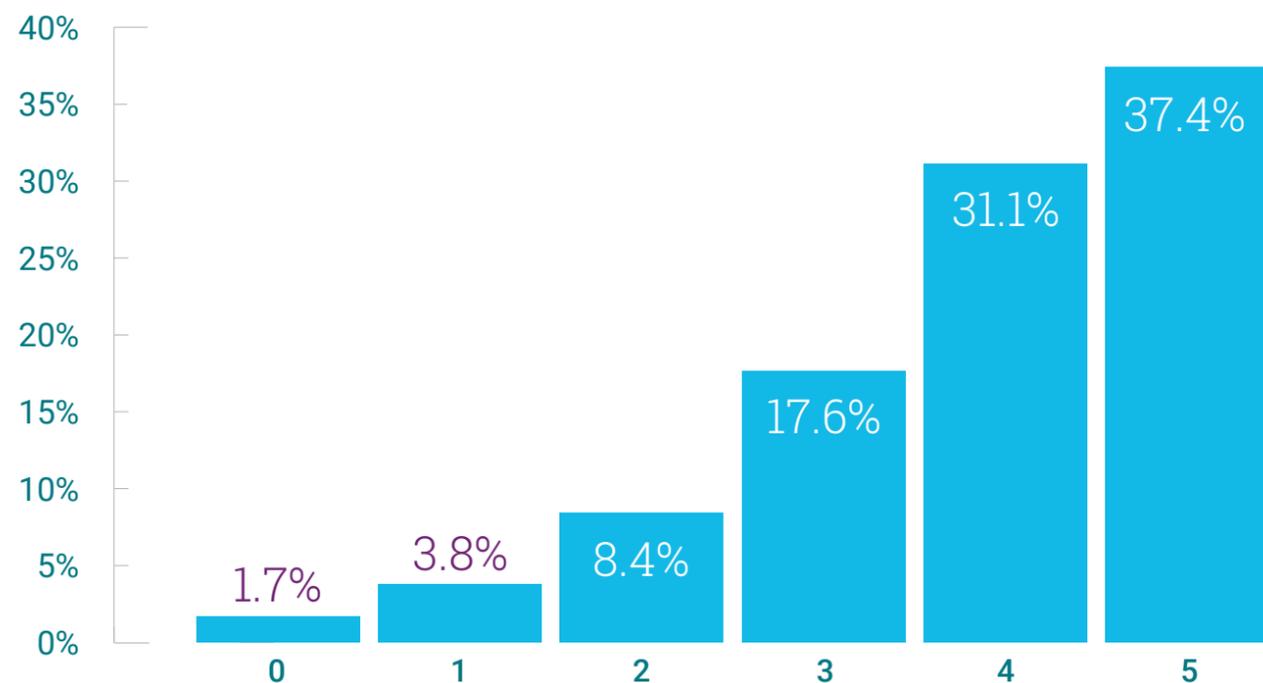
5 = Extremely stressful

Breakdown of those who self-identified as being part of marginalised populations



One stressor that was not explicitly expressed in the interviews but was reflected in the survey is related to witnessing people they care about being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: 86.0% of all participants in the survey reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress (3 or more) in response to witnessing people they care about being affected by the pandemic. This indicates that activists are not only affected directly by these stressors, but they are also affected by the harm caused to those they care about. This could lead to a sense of feeling overwhelmed.

Seeing people and individuals I care about affected and struggling due to pandemic conditions



Number of people who filled out this question 238

Average rating 3.85

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

Loss of connection was another stressor identified by the majority of those interviewed. This included the cancellation of physical conferences, events, and one-to-one or group socialising due to Covid-19, leading to a loss of connection and an inability to share one's work with people in the community and an increased sense of isolation. Four members describe the IFF as a home they return to and they felt this loss quite strongly.

Adjusting to new work realities includes switching to virtual work, managing employees during the pandemic, and experiencing an inability to present or complete work due

to Covid-19. This adjustment also includes an increase in family responsibility and adjusting to working at home with a partner or house mates. Many people reported feeling like they are working much harder. There was a general agreement that what you can finish in a day, face to face, takes much longer virtually and remotely. Moving virtually has increased the demands, with higher levels of expectations for productivity but no increase in support or resources.

Mobility was mentioned 15 times in the interviews. Mobility referred to the pandemic or visa restrictions limiting one's ability to move across borders. This manifested variously either with people being forced to return to countries they may have chosen to leave, being in exile and not able to return home, and/or experiencing acute uncertainty around one's visa status.

Beyond these factors, participants named several other stressors throughout the interviews including the **death** of family or friends (6 times), **uncertainty** (8 times), and insecurity around **basic needs** (6 times). Uncertainty was described as the inability to make plans and not knowing what the future holds, along with experiencing fear. Insecurity around basic needs meant threats to one's health, security of health insurance, and housing and livelihood security. One participant detailed their experience with the failed healthcare system in their country. The participant was diagnosed with a major health disease and reported that their country wanted them to either die or be bankrupt. Another participant talked about their experience of being bankrupt and homeless for a year and having to depend on friends for housing security.

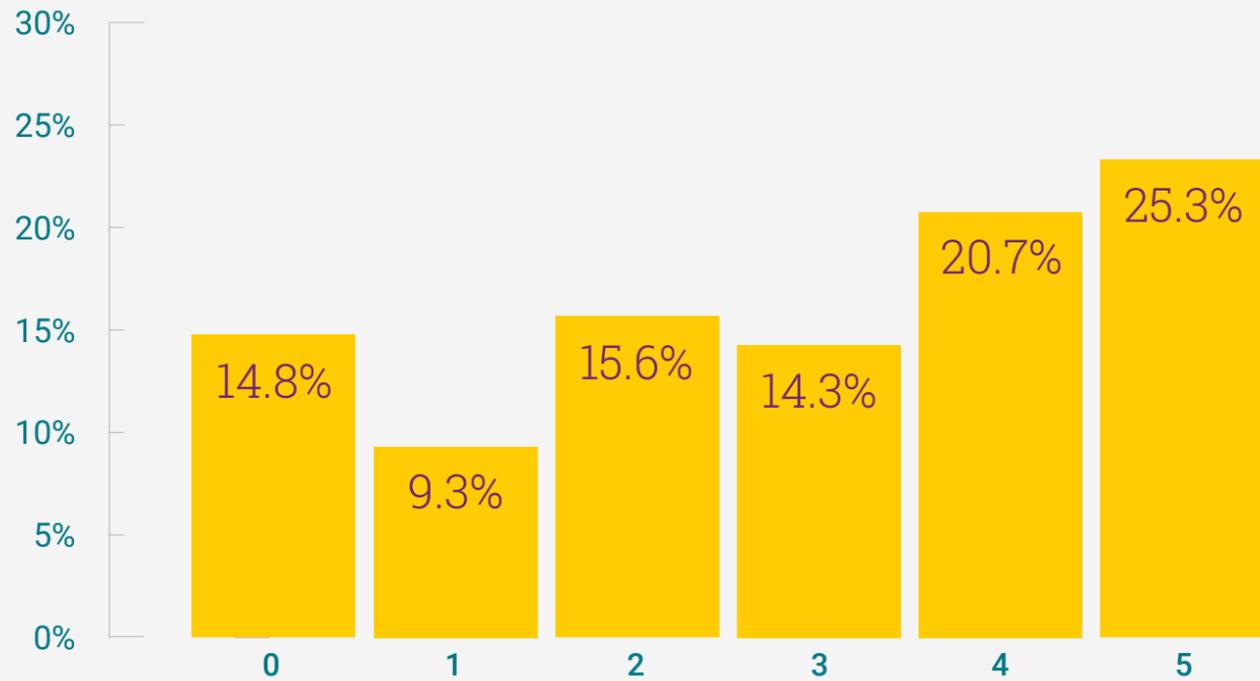
While many of these stressors were not reported by the majority of respondents, they still have serious and noticeable psychological consequences on community members. The two final stressors, **regional stability** and **toxicity**, were named nearly 13 times in the interviews and appeared to have severe consequences.

Regional or local political and/or economic instability includes protests, attacks on protesters, economic collapse, ecological threats (such as fires), and large-scale dangers such as explosions and bombs. One activist described her country as a war zone: "It's been a lot; we live in a war zone and it's not an exaggeration." Another named all the possible forms of instability that they have experienced in their country: "I am

not going to deny the revolution was a stressor for me, the pandemic still is a stressor for me, and oh, the explosion? Definitely – it still impacts me. Yesterday there was thunder and I felt like it was an explosion – oh yeah and the economic collapse.”

Despite this category not being named by the majority of interview participants, the survey data challenges this reality because 85.2% of all participants reported experiencing stress due to local or regional instability, with 61.3% reporting experiencing at least moderate levels of stress (3 or more). When looking at gender, 65.3% of women, 49.3% of men, and 67.7% of non-binary members reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress. As for class, 72.0% of lower-class, 60.4% of middle-class, and 42.1% of upper-class participants reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress.

Local or regional political instability e.g. protests, attacks on protesters, etc



Number of people who filled out this question 238
Average rating 2.92

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

Another category that heavily impacted activists is **toxicity and abuse**. This means being mistreated by those who have power and privilege, being gaslighted, being denied opportunities, not being credited for work, not being paid fairly, and experiencing discrimination because of an aspect of one’s identity; all without accountability, conflict resolution, or healing. In the survey, 72.1% of all participants reported experiencing stress in response to toxicity and abuse in professional settings, 46.4% of all participants reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress. For gender, 47.9% of women, 38.2% of men, and 64.7% of non-binary members reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress (3 or more). When factoring in class, 47.0% of participants that identified as middle-class, 23.7% of participants that identified as upper-class, and 52.0% of participants that identified as lower-class reported experiencing at least moderate levels of stress.

Experienced toxicity or abuse in professional settings



Number of people who filled out this question 237
Average rating 2.28

- 0 = Did not experience
- 1 = Minimal stress
- 2 = Slightly stressful
- 3 = Moderately stressful
- 4 = Very stressful
- 5 = Extremely stressful

In the interviews, one activist talked about their experience of toxicity in the workplace. Despite having a work contract with a leading individual in the digital rights space, they were not paid at the end of the contract:

“We had a contract and at the end of the contract they said I am not going to pay you. They were in a position of power. And when I went and told other leaders about it, they told me to go solve my problem myself. People who were being abused were not full-time employees and are not protected by the same laws. For example, you couldn’t file for sexual misconduct, so you can bypass accountability. I left my country knowing I can’t go back, you come here and seek refuge, what’s devastating is that you are most vulnerable, and you got backstabbed.”

Interview with activist, December 2020

It seemed what was the most painful for this activist was not the loss of money but the betrayal. Another revealing experience that reflects harm in the community was the story of an activist who was living in exile and felt betrayed and regret for trusting the community. They reported experiencing conflict and toxicity at work without accountability or fair treatment. When delving into their experience, the activist reported:

“[The workplace] did not know how to handle this situation because they didn’t know how to work with queer people of colour. If you’re a White man and you didn’t know how to address this issue, why didn’t you get someone to look into it. The way they treated me and addressed me throughout this conflict felt like a character assassination.”

Interview with activist, November 2020

In both experiences, the respondents described a conflict or abuse that was mishandled and resulted in suffering. This highlights the lack of training, codes of conduct, and conflict resolution resources. Consequently, both participants reported feeling disposable, and ‘easy to get rid of’.

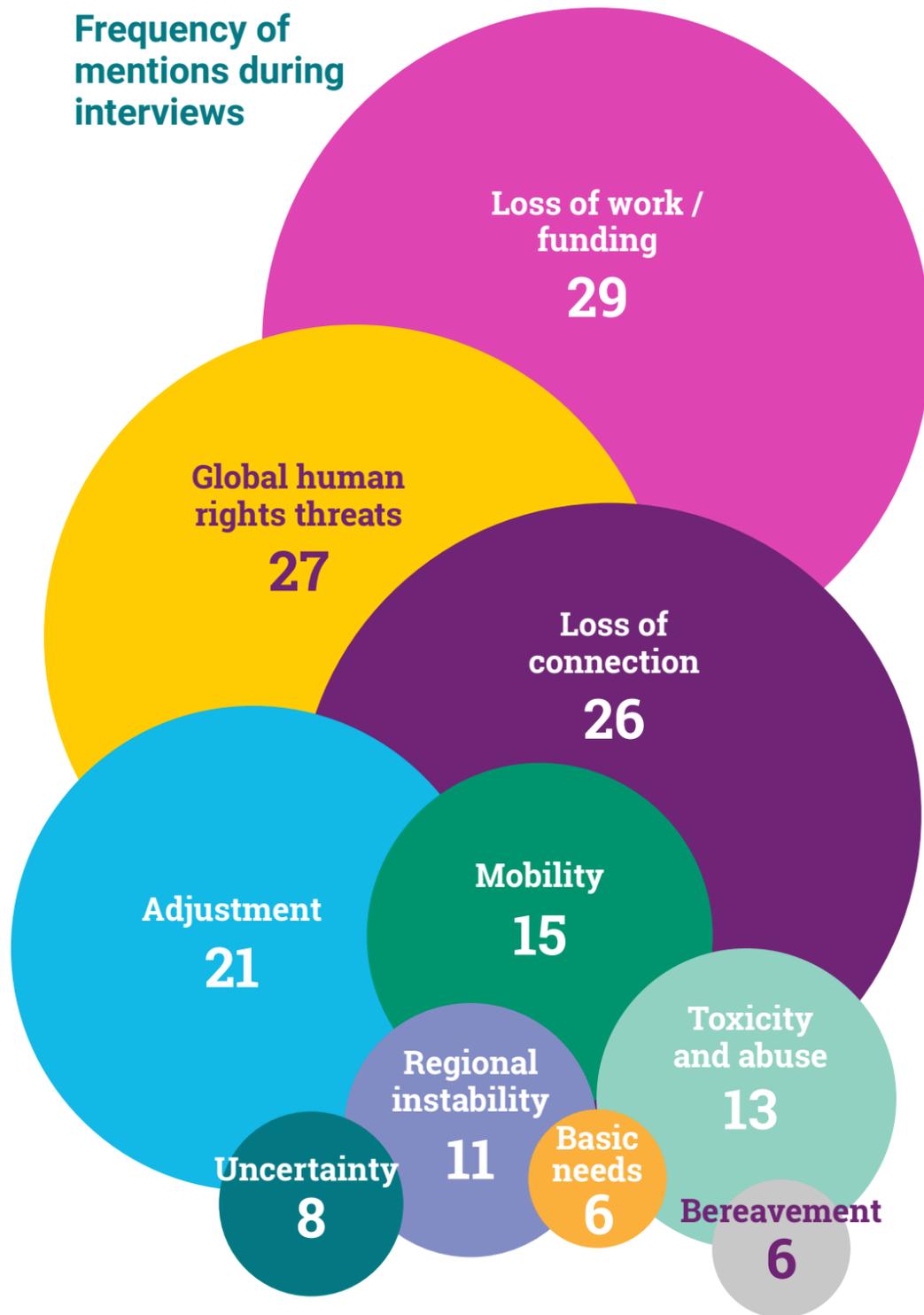
The psychological impact of these experiences can be wide-ranging. Trauma is defined as an exposure to a distressing event as well as experiencing a trauma response to the event. The trauma response is reflected in the content but also in the voice, body language, and speech (where a person pauses and speeds up). The impact of this type of trauma also affects self-esteem. Other activists who experienced a similar type of abuse of their work being taken advantage of without crediting them reported self-doubt and a rupture in self-esteem. Another thread across the narratives was that they are occurring in Western organisations where there is an unequal power dynamic between community members and those causing the harm. One activist explains this abuse by shedding light on how funding affects the work culture:

“If your behaviour is the most cutthroat way, it puts the name of the organisation out there and it’s the best way to get funding. The idea that funders tell people this is what you do and how you should do it, isn’t the basis of community, it’s a relationship of power...”

Interview with activist, November 2020

Overall, there are several stressors that are impacting community members. Some of the stressors lie outside the control of the community, such as regional instability or Covid-19-related stressors. However, some of the stressors are within the control of the community and are inflicted by other people in the space. In the next [section on impact \(page 41\)](#), we explore whether these stressors affect community members in similar ways.

Frequency of mentions during interviews



| Stressor | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Loss of work / funding | Experiencing loss of work opportunities or funding resulting in financial stressors and/or having to actively look for work. | 29 |
| Global human rights threats | Witnessing or experiencing an increase in human rights abuses, discrimination, and/or increase in surveillance, censorship, media blackouts, or hate speech locally or globally. This includes being targeted by governments and experiencing severe threats to one's safety as well as observing a general global backsliding on human rights and an increase in polarisation and oppression. | 27 |
| Loss of connection | Covid-19 restriction resulting in cancellation of physical conferences and festivals and one-to-one or group socialising, resulting in the inability to bond, connect, and share one's work with members of the community doing similar work. This results in an increased sense of isolation. | 26 |
| Adjustment | Adjusting and adapting to new work realities, such as switching to virtual work or managing employees during a pandemic, being expected to have the same levels of productivity at work during a pandemic, and experiencing an inability to present or complete your work due to Covid-19. | 21 |
| Mobility | Movement across borders being affected due to the pandemic or visa restrictions. Examples include the inability to travel, being forced to return to a country, being in exile, not being able to return to one's home country, being rooted in the same place for a long time, and experiencing uncertainty attached to one's visa status. | 15 |
| Toxicity and abuse | Experiencing toxicity or abuse in professional settings and in Internet freedom spaces. | 13 |
| Regional instability | Local or regional political and/or economic instability. Examples include protests, attacks on protesters, economic collapse, ecological threats (such as fires), and large-scale dangers such as explosions and bombs. | 11 |
| Uncertainty | Experiencing uncertainty and fear around the uncertainty. Examples include the inability to make plans or act, not knowing what the future holds, and/or financial uncertainty. | 8 |
| Basic needs | Experiencing stressors and threats in response to one's basic needs. This includes threats to one's health, security of health insurance, and housing and livelihood security. | 6 |
| Bereavement | Death of family or friends due to Covid-19 or other conditions. | 6 |

Table 3: Stressors that impacted community members in 2020 (interview data)



The majority of respondents cited human rights abuses, the loss of connection, and the loss of employment as major causes of stress.

Theme 8: Impact of stressors on activists

Participants were asked about how the stressors (page 32) impacted them individually and then collectively as a community (page 44). Regarding individual impact, three subcategories were identified, namely: impact on functioning, adaptations, and psychological and emotional impact.

Impact on **functioning** means experiencing changes in functioning. This includes changes in concentration, motivation, decision making, work productivity as well as changes in daily habits. This category was mentioned nearly 22 times during interviews.

Adaptations captures the positive aspects of adapting to the stressors including an increase in appreciation and gratitude for life, slowing down, and creating more space for self-care. This category was named 8 times.

Finally, **psychological and emotional** impact was named and appeared 36 times in the interviews. This includes experiencing psychological symptoms such as severe stress, sadness, frustration, low self-esteem, symptoms of depression and anxiety, isolation and loneliness, trauma symptoms, and

helplessness. In the codebook, this category had the highest frequency, which is telling of the severe psychological consequences the community is enduring. One activist made a note that the interview would have been very different a few years ago but right now they are completely burnt out. This data is emphasised in the survey as 66.0% of all survey participants reported that their mental health had regressed in the past year.

Based on the results, it is clear that the psychological impact on community members is severe. This is the result of experiencing several stressors at once with little support. This data is significant because if community members are not psychologically secure and healthy, then it is difficult to foster and nourish healthy relationships within a community. As indicated earlier, participants report healthy relationships and communication as the foundation of a healthy community.

The stressors were experienced as less severe when members reported that they knew they were not alone in their experience and when they were able to witness their experience mirrored in others. Perhaps it was

easier for participants to discuss stressors experienced by the collective with others, such as stressors related to Covid-19. However, the stressors and traumas that were not experienced by the collective but were caused by others, such as abuse and toxicity, had a

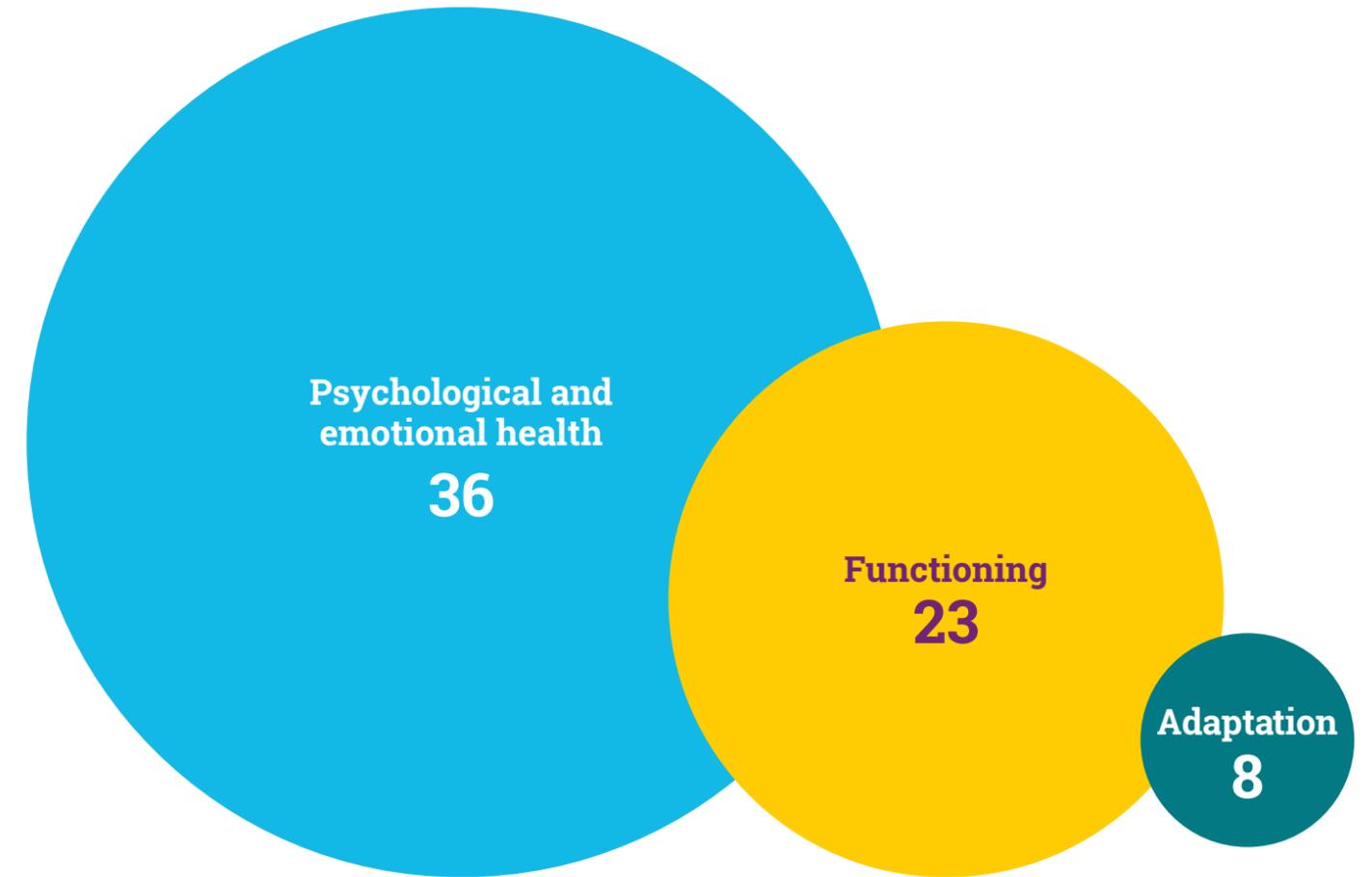
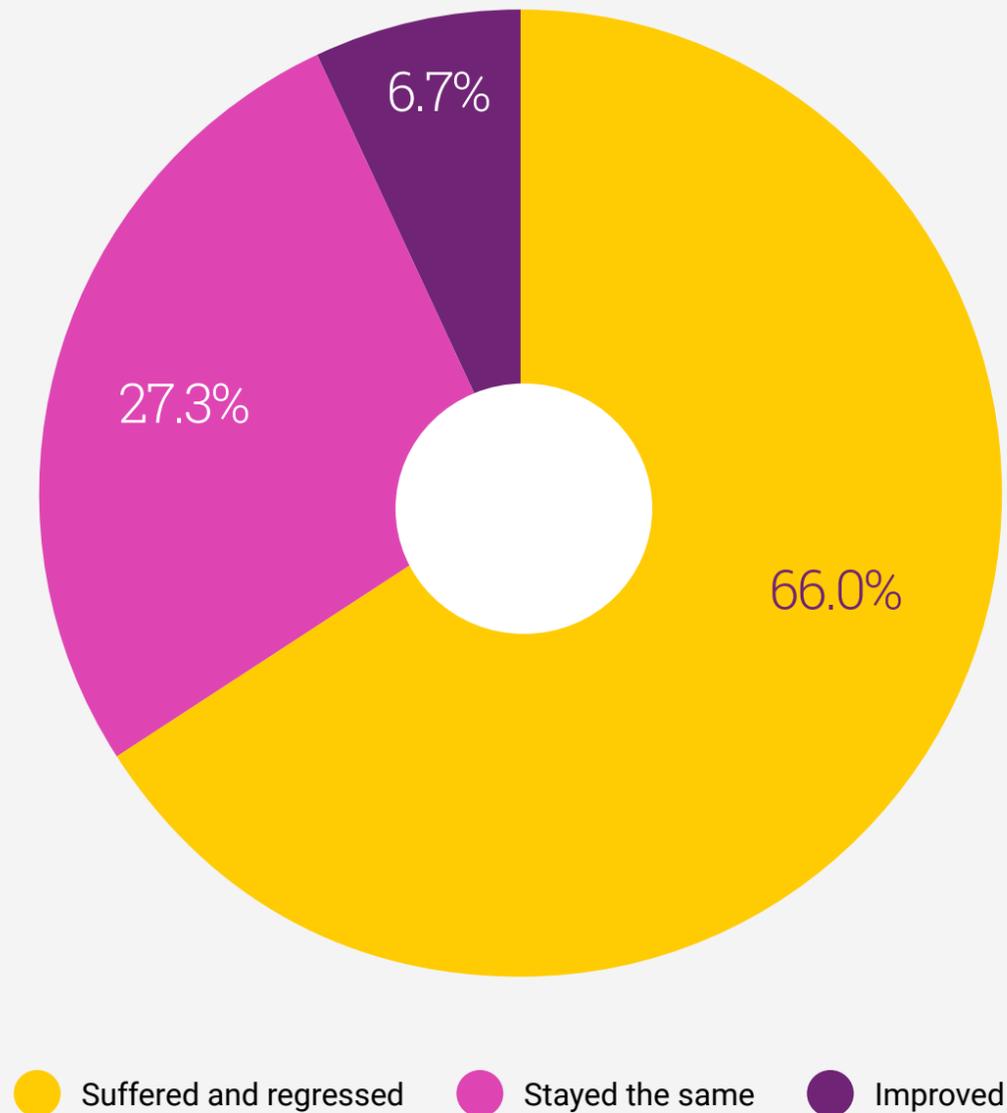
sharper impact on members' self-esteem, sense of safety, and trust. The broken trust results in fragmentation and isolation in the community, weakening relationships and affecting community health overall.



In order to sustain our movements, we must instil psychosocial practices that will allow for regeneration and resiliency.

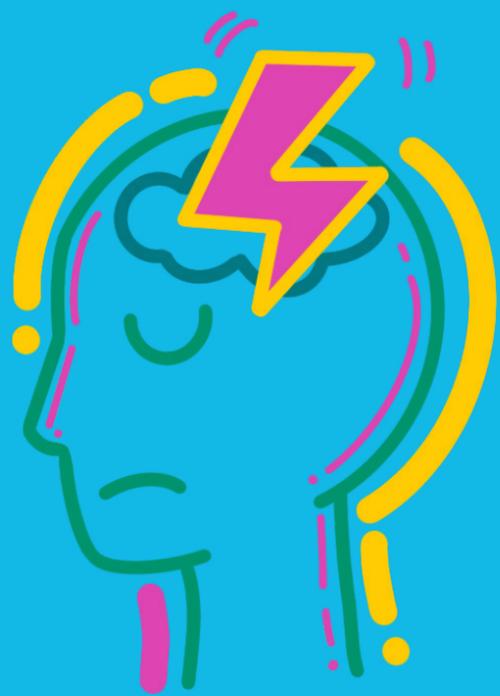


Survey question: As a consequence of Covid-19, my mental health and wellbeing has:



| Stressor impact | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|---|--|---|
| Psychological and emotional health | Experiencing psychological symptoms such as severe stress, sadness, frustration, low self-esteem, symptoms of depression and anxiety, isolation and loneliness, trauma responses, and helplessness. | 36 |
| Functioning | Experiencing changes in concentration, motivation, decision making, work productivity, as well as changes in functioning and daily habits. | 23 |
| Adaptation | Experiencing an increase in appreciation and gratitude for the positive aspects of life. Slowing down and creating space to recognise and address mental health struggles and attempting to help others. | 8 |

Table 4: Impact of stressors on activists (interview data)



66%

of all participants in the survey
report that their mental health has
regressed in the past year.

Theme 9: Impact of stressors on community health

When looking at the impact the stressors had on the community, four categories were identified from the interviews: impact on community engagement and motivation; material and logistical; relationships; and collective functioning.

The first category is the impact on **community engagement** and motivation. This category was mentioned 11 times. They reported an increase in virtual engagement at the beginning of the pandemic but, over time, a decrease in motivation, engagement, and communication.

The second category identified is **material and logistical impact** (named 8 times). A minority (8 participants) discussed this category, with 5 talking about the logistical benefits of not spending on conferences and travelling, and having them accessible instead. 3 participants discussed the negative consequences of being forced to move out of their homes due to the pandemic and/or experiencing financial insecurity and debt.

The two categories reported by the majority of respondents were impact on relationships (named 21 times) and collective functioning (named 22 times). The impact on **relationships** includes:

- A decrease in intimacy and difficulty in maintaining relationships due to the loss of bonding and connecting.
- A fear of losing connections previously formed.
- Experiencing mistrust and fear of being open to community members to the extent of avoiding social spaces within the community or leaving the community all together. For example, more than one participant reported feeling hesitant to join the self-care healing circles. This is the consequence of conflict within the space going unaddressed.
- A feeling that conflict and/or toxicity ruptures relationships, resulting in an increase in gossip, shaming, cancelling out, and more conflict.



The impact of the stressors on a community is never fully black and white, good or bad. Participants named a positive or neutral impact on relationships 8 times. They reported an increase in cohesion, intimacy, and collaboration within the community due to efforts to adapt and adjust.

The fourth category, **collective functioning**, reflects the collective experience of fear, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed, to the extent that it results in members existing in survival mode and disengaging from the community. Common patterns include feeling unable to ask or seek for support, feeling unable to set boundaries or practice self-care given multiple demands, and feeling obligated to others (leading to burnout). This category does not overlap with 'individual psychological impact' because it looks at how this affects the functioning of the community as a collective.

So, when members of a community are collectively burdened by stressors, this affects how activists show up in the community. Many shared this sentiment of not knowing how to seek or provide support because they know everyone is struggling. A few also discussed the difficulty in setting boundaries with others as they worry about how this would affect them and the collective. One activist elaborates on this:

“We preach self-care but don’t practice it ourselves. How do you actually practice it especially when you are the foundation for helping thousands of people to stay alive? You need to be sane, but how do you maintain sanity without disrupting the whole network? You can’t say no because there is no one else who can assist them.”

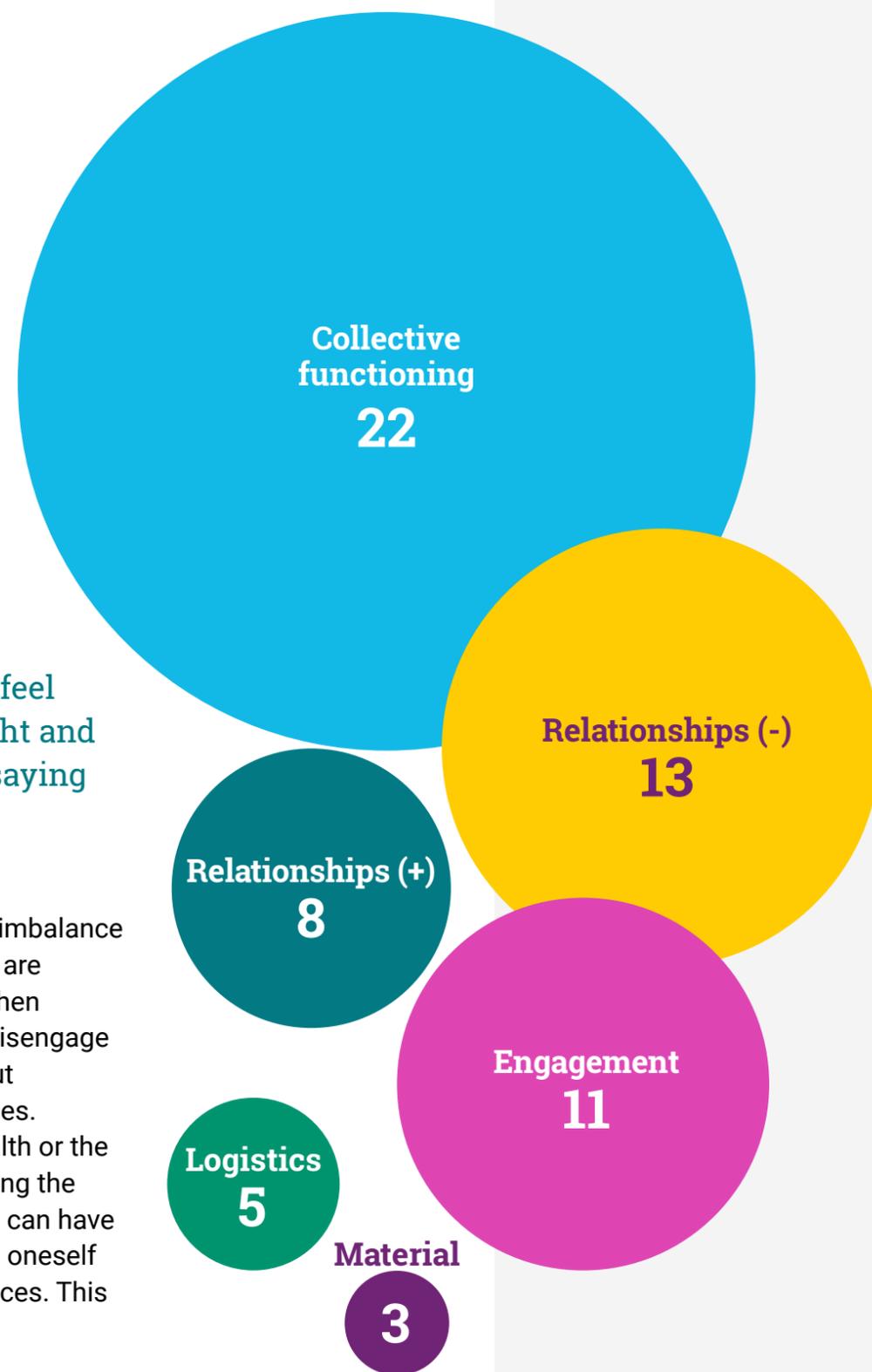
Interview with activist, December 2020

The difficulty in seeking or giving support is also affected by experiences of toxicity and abuse. One activist explained that these harmful experiences stop them from asking for help from others, making it more difficult to set boundaries, and thus taking on more work. Another shared an incident about a group of people calling out abuse in the community:

“All these people who called out bullshit were destroyed and till now they haven’t recovered... and so, when you see the damage that can be done, you can’t ask others to be involved. It was really hard for me because I felt like I couldn’t put more pain and suffering on people. Asking them to get involved would make me feel guilty so I would just do things myself. So, I gained weight and struggled to say ‘no’ to things. I have a really hard time saying no, but I realise if I don’t, I’m going to die young.”

Interview with activist, December 2020

Through this category, we witness a domino effect in response to the imbalance between stressors / demands and support / resources. The stressors are impacting activists’ psychological health, and with little support, this then impacts their engagement in the community (we see activists either disengage or take on excessive responsibilities). As a result, this deepens burnout for some and increases the imbalance between demands and resources. Activists are eventually cornered into choosing between their own health or the community’s health; and either choice comes with a high cost. Choosing the community’s health over oneself results in psychological burdens that can have severe consequences on one’s physical health. Alternatively, choosing oneself over the community could mean that others suffer serious consequences. This is unhealthy and indicates a problem.



| Category | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Collective functioning | Experiencing and noticing a collective fear, exhaustion, feeling overwhelmed, and sense of paralysis, resulting in the inability to ask for help, inability to provide support, existing in survival mode, or the inability to set boundaries and practice self-care due to feeling obligated to others. | 22 |
| Relationships (negative) | Impact on relationships such as experiencing a decrease in intimacy and connection as well as experiencing ruptures in relationships. | 13 |
| Relationships (positive) | Impact on relationships such as experiencing an increase in intimacy, cohesion, and collaboration due to efforts to adapt and adjust as well as a solidarity through sharing experiences of trauma. | 8 |
| Engagement | Impact on levels of community engagement and motivation. | 11 |
| Logistics | Logistical benefits such as not spending on conferences or travelling and having the conference free and accessible. | 5 |
| Material | Impact on material life including experiencing financial insecurity such as being in debt. | 3 |

Table 5: Impact of stressors on community health (interview data)



We can no longer deny the full picture, diminish the suffering, or treat this reality as ‘normal’. The space between helplessness and denial is where we can begin to resist oppression and injustice.



Theme 10: Resources and tools for support

As participants discussed the stressors and their impacts, we were curious to see whether they felt like there were resources available to address the stressors. When asked about this, there was a broad consensus that there is a need for more tools and resources.

A handful of participants said that they were either unaware what the available resources are or that, although there are some resources, they are not enough (mentioned 7 times). A large number of participants acknowledged the resources and efforts initiated by Team CommUNITY as helpful tools, and discussed initiatives like the codes of conduct, glitter meet-ups, community knowledge sharing sessions, newsletters, and most importantly, the global gathering itself (mentioned 30 times). It seems like activists conceptualised Team CommUNITY as a resource in itself, for its efforts and for connecting the regional communities to the larger global one. Respondents naturally and organically expressed appreciation for Team CommUNITY's efforts, with many reporting that these efforts exceeded their expectations. This

demonstrates how this community might have low expectations regarding community care due to the lack of community and self-care being normalised. It could also highlight that not many organisations in this space pay attention to community care.

7 activists specifically named two members of Team CommUNITY, (Sandy and Trinh) when expressing gratitude for the efforts being done. On one hand, it was powerful to see that the most useful resource was not a tool, a manual, or training, but instead, it was human relationships and connections. This reflects the initial data reported by the activists: that a healthy community is made of healthy and supportive relationships. On the other hand, it highlights the imbalance between the demands of community members and available resources, and the unsustainable reliance on just two people.



We preach self-care but don't practice it ourselves. How do you actually practice it especially when you are the foundation for helping thousands of people to stay alive? You need to be sane, but how do you maintain sanity without disrupting the whole network? You can't say no because there is no one else who can assist them.



When funders, policy makers, and decision makers consistently deprioritise community needs and do not invest in building resiliency, this lowers expectations and standards for community care overall.

Theme 11: Needs of the Internet freedom community

So far, we can see that stressors have a significant impact on the psychological health of community members as well as the relationships between community members. They affect how activists engage in the community and consequently affect the community's health as a whole. Given these conditions, we asked activists what their needs are.

Almost all participants interviewed identified psychological support as a core need (mentioned 30 times). This includes **mental health support**, group therapy, and safe spaces where people can talk and connect with the intention of building bonds. The need for psychological support is evidenced by the activists' reactions to the self-care circles. Three different participants from different self-care sessions had a similar reaction to the circles, where all of them felt surprised but also validated by witnessing and hearing other people's experiences, leading them to feel more connected to the community and less alone.

Self and community care is often seen as a flowery luxury, a buzzword, or a trend to follow (or rebel against), but in a world that's harming the individual and the collective in so many

ways, self and community care is resistance. The importance of having a healthy collective to lean on is reflected in another participant's words:

"If one person asked me, I would feel bad to answer honestly because I wouldn't want to give my burden to one person but if we share it in a collective we know it's okay to share, to be sad. Then I don't feel like I am giving my burden to one person..."

Interview with activist, November 2020

Over half of the participants highlighted the need for **conflict resolution efforts and resources**, and a need for spaces where conflict and community concerns can be addressed (mentioned 21 times). More importantly, they emphasised the need for accountability. Psychological support and conflict resolution are both necessary for individual and collective healing. Psychological healing is insufficient if the environment continues to remain toxic. As such, resources for individuals must be matched with efforts to strengthen community culture.

In order to provide the right resources and spaces for community members, be they spaces for mental health support or spaces for conflict resolution, there needs to be sustainable **infrastructure** to connect community members together. The need for sustainable infrastructure was mentioned 11 times in the interviews. Activists believe that infrastructure will allow for collaborations between networks and members across regions and disciplines, resulting in deeper connections between community members.

Diversity and inclusivity was mentioned 15 times during the interviews. This category focuses on the need to better integrate people from under-represented communities as well as providing opportunities to lead and amplify the work and voices of these communities on a large platform. Many members talk about how the decision makers and funders have power over who is given an opportunity and who isn't, which impacts how diverse and inclusive the community can be.

Linked to inclusivity, participants discussed the need for more **sustainable funding** (named 14 times). The two categories seemed to be linked as funders decide who receives money. Some discussed how decision-making processes need to be decolonised as it doesn't make sense for the decision makers coming from privileged

communities to make decisions for those most affected by digital repression. Activists discussed the need for sustainable funding that is in tune with community needs, is resilient to government change, and provides continuity and benefits (insurance, mental health support) for community members. Greater diversity across the funder landscape would enable this. Many participants drew attention to the insecurities that come with not being insured and the pressure of having to do everything on their own.

The last three categories were identified by the minority and include the need for knowledge (named 6 times), the need for community leaders (named 4 times), and the need for support for emergency areas (named 6 times).

The need for **knowledge** deals with the need for informational resources that can meet the demand of people in their current situation, especially for new members. One activist elaborates:

"One thing I noticed is that there isn't really an outline of the projects that have been done. Newcomers can't understand the scope of community unless they know someone first-hand. It is overwhelming."

Interview with activist, November 2020

A number of responses indicated the importance of **community leadership**. Community leaders organise, strategise, and play an instrumental role in shaping the community. Several participants discussed how their experience with two specific community leaders have allowed them to develop a sense of belonging to the digital rights space. This demonstrates how strong leadership can engender feelings of safety and connection. Evidence from the interviews emphasises the need for community leaders who can increase belonging, engagement, and overall community health.

Finally, the need for resources for members in **emergency areas** was identified by 6 participants. This category entails providing resources for members experiencing extreme distress due to emergency situations or living under repressive regimes. Resources include legal support, advocacy, the provision of physical security, financial support, and real-time response.

One activist describes their experience:

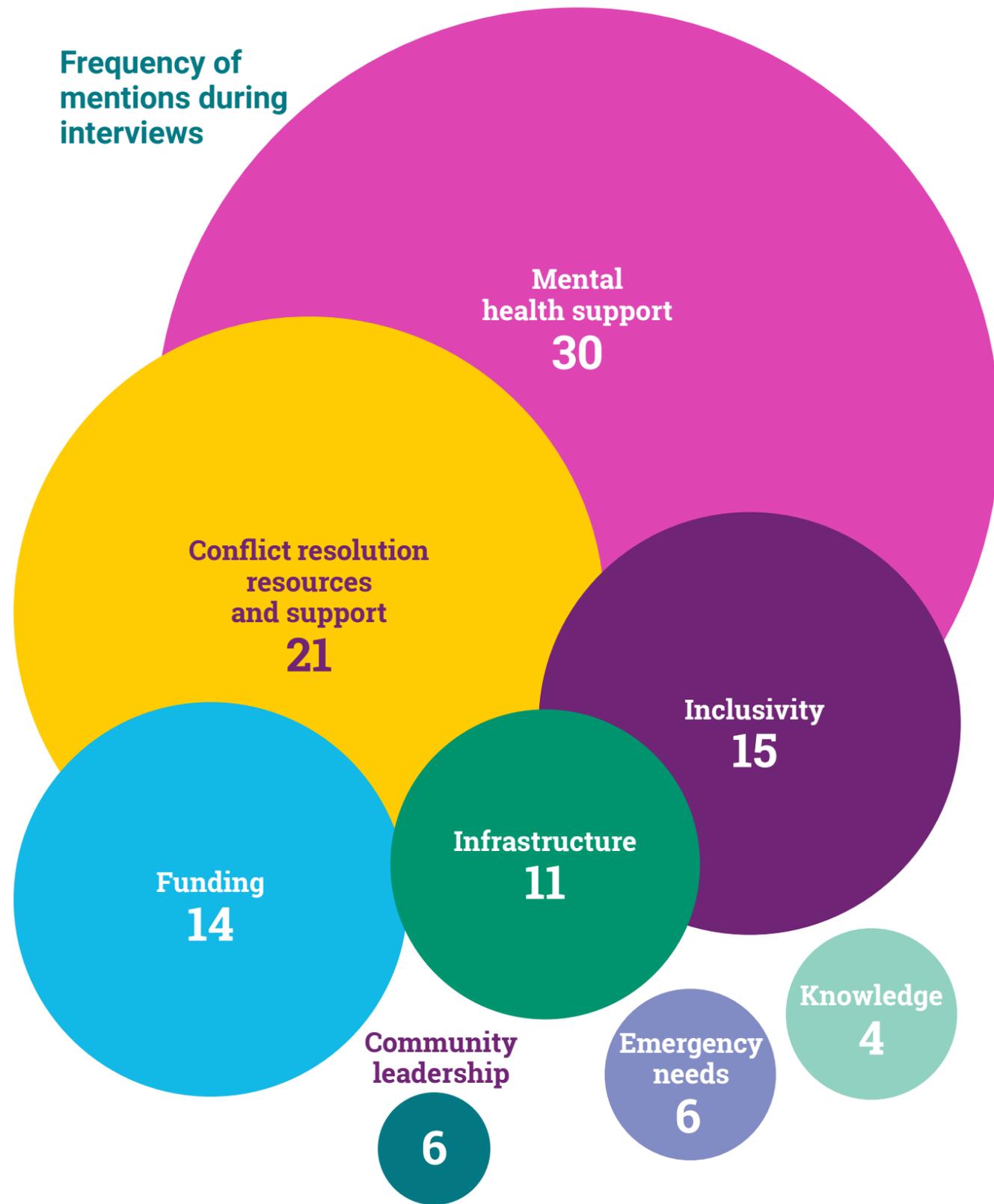
“I had to make a self-care decision and I had to step away from my work for safety. As the head of the organisation I had to go into hiding. It was absolutely stressful, and I realised even though I can have a global community, there’s not much they’re prepared to do to help me...”

Interview with activist, December 2020



Greater diversity across the funder landscape would enable funding that is sustainable, resilient to government change, and provides benefits such as insurance and mental health support for community members. Ultimately, such funding would be in tune with the needs of the community.

Frequency of mentions during interviews



| Need | Definition | Frequency of mentions during interviews |
|--|--|---|
| Mental health support | Psychological support as well as spaces for the community to connect. | 30 |
| Conflict resolution resources and support | Tools, resources, and spaces to address conflict, toxicity, and community issues and to hold challenging yet constructive conversations. | 21 |
| Inclusivity | Better inclusivity including increased representation from under-represented communities as well as empowering repressed communities. | 15 |
| Funding | Secure sustainable and resilient funding that is in tune with and based on community needs. | 14 |
| Infrastructure | Sustainable infrastructure and network allowing for collaborations and connection between members across regions and disciplines. | 11 |
| Knowledge | Knowledge and information resources to meet people's requirements in their current situation, especially for newcomers. | 6 |
| Emergency needs | Specific resources for members in emergency areas and under repressive regimes. Examples include legal support, advocacy, physical security, and real-time response. | 6 |
| Community leadership | Need for more community leaders as well as support for community leaders. | 4 |

Table 6: Needs of the Internet freedom community

VI

Conclusion

VI Conclusion

Bringing it all together, we can see that healthy relationships are the foundation of a healthy community. When there are healthy relationships, community members feel more connected and experience a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging increases engagement in the community.

We've also observed different threats to healthy relationships. The two biggest are psychological health and toxicity and abuse. Psychological health is a factor that affects engagement in the community. We have seen that several activists needed to disengage from the community and the relationships in the community because they were existing in survival mode. When people are in survival mode and are psychologically burdened, it becomes difficult to maintain a healthy relationship.

We also see that toxicity and abuse causes ruptures in relationships. When one's sense of safety is broken and trust is lost, without recognition, accountability, or healing, retreat becomes the only course of action, preventing healthy and secure relationships. Much of the abuse and the stressors that activists face are rooted in the unequal power dynamics that persist between the cultures of over-represented and under-represented communities. This power differential is clearly a threat to the community's health as this issue was discussed across different themes throughout the interviews (from funding, to diversity and inclusion, to access, to toxicity and abuse).

The data reveals a clear need for psychological support as the categories related to psychological health are consistently emphasised by almost all participants. However, psychological support alone is not enough as there is also a clear need for conflict resolution resources. In order for members to heal, the community requires a safe environment and there can be no safety without addressing past and current traumas that the community has endured. Conflict resolution is also necessary to improve the power dynamics within the community. The community needs to be equipped to acknowledge, examine, and collectively address how existing power imbalances result in abuse and therefore an increase in psychological damage and a weakening of the community as a whole.

When a community does not have the space to address and heal from past traumas, its ability to confront current challenges and stressors is reduced. Conversely, when community needs are addressed and activists' psychological health is made more robust, the community will be less fragmented, divided, and polarised, and instead become stronger and more connected. It will function as a whole that is capable of resisting and coping with the stressors that are clearly increasing over time, as reflected in the data.

In order to sustain our movements, we must instil psychosocial practices that will allow for regeneration and resiliency. With the findings of this report serving as the initial mapping of the community's needs, our next steps will be to design and implement programming that centres psychosocial care, support, and education for members of the digital rights community. These initiatives include:

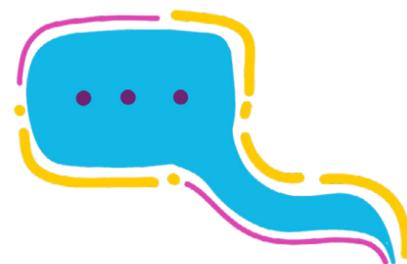
Psychosocial support services

We are creating a community of practice of mental health professionals that are representative of the different regions, languages, and backgrounds we serve. This network will include psychotherapists, psychologists, mental health counsellors, and social workers with clinical experience and will provide both individual and group psychosocial care. They will be trained on holistic security to better communicate and handle cases for activists who require greater security and privacy protections.



Consultation for digital rights / Internet freedom organisations

We will work to inform grassroots networks, civil society organisations, and their leadership on the challenges to community health. We will also provide recommendations for interventions and improvements. These intimate and private sessions will allow for more openness in conversations around community health; help inform our next Community Health Report; and allow us to better customise and evolve our psychosocial services.



Psychoeducation for the most vulnerable

To address the lack of access and stigmatisation of mental health care, we will design and localise psychoeducational articles and toolkits for vulnerable communities. These will include 'briefs' for mental health care professionals who are engaging with communities that have acute security or privacy needs and require advanced digital security considerations when it comes to receiving psychosocial care.

These activities and programmes have the overarching goal of shifting the culture to instigate greater institutional change and normalise psychosocial care within our spaces—thereby strengthening resiliency among our networks and communities.

Appendix



Community management and operational conditions

2020 might possibly be the worst year the digital rights community has experienced collectively. It has been characterised by a worsening of challenges both on an individual and a group level, and more intense attacks on different sectors of the community.

In March 2020, Team CommUNITY began hosting daily check-ins for community members because we were so worried for community members who were either alone or had no resources to rely on. Many individuals in our community are either freelancers or lack stable support systems, and we were worried about people being alone or falling sick without anyone knowing. Like the rest of the world, we were also worried about community members facing food shortages and/or a lack of access to basic resources. The daily check-ins had members from all over the world, and were incredibly powerful, with many connecting for the first time and immediately leaning on each other outside of the gatherings.

During this time, community members who were actively participating during the daily

check-ins began to collectively gather data around tracing apps, prompted by the work of [Doublethink Lab](#) from Taiwan and the [Citizen Lab](#) from Canada. These two entities had conducted research showing that prior to March 2020, surveillance, censorship, and disinformation impacted the spread of Covid-19. In response, we created a Mattermost channel specifically for this research, and invited contact tracing experts to speak to our community directly. The impetus for this research came from members' predictions that it would increase excuses worldwide for the use of additional surveillance and censorship. Our Taiwan community was incredibly instructive in the early part of the pandemic as they had been dealing with Covid-19 disinformation since December 2019.

In late March 2020, we began to do intensive community research to see how Covid-19 was impacting our community, given how overwhelming the challenges seemed. Our community in Italy were some of the first to experience intensive lockdowns; some had already experienced either sickness or even death

in their families while others were starting to have emotional struggles from being so rapidly cut off from their social structures. Our community research showed that Covid-19 was impacting community cultivation. The challenges people were facing, many of which are still relevant over a year later, included a lack of good Internet connectivity or expensive Internet; increased loneliness, depression, anxiety; an increase in existing mental health issues; breakdowns in communication; and many others. Based on these findings, we began offering more one-to-one assistance, and designed programmes bearing these issues in mind.

Between May and September 2020, the situation intensified as we began to see the rise of direct attacks against our community members. Community members have personally dealt with or are working on a shortlist of issues listed below:

- [Increased oppression and targeting of activists in Hong Kong, including the passage of national laws.](#)
- [The attack against the Open Technology Fund, one of the largest donors to the Internet freedom space.](#)
- [The suicide of Egyptian LGBTQI+ activist Sarah Hegazi who took her own life while in exile in Canada after suffering from depression and PTSD.](#)

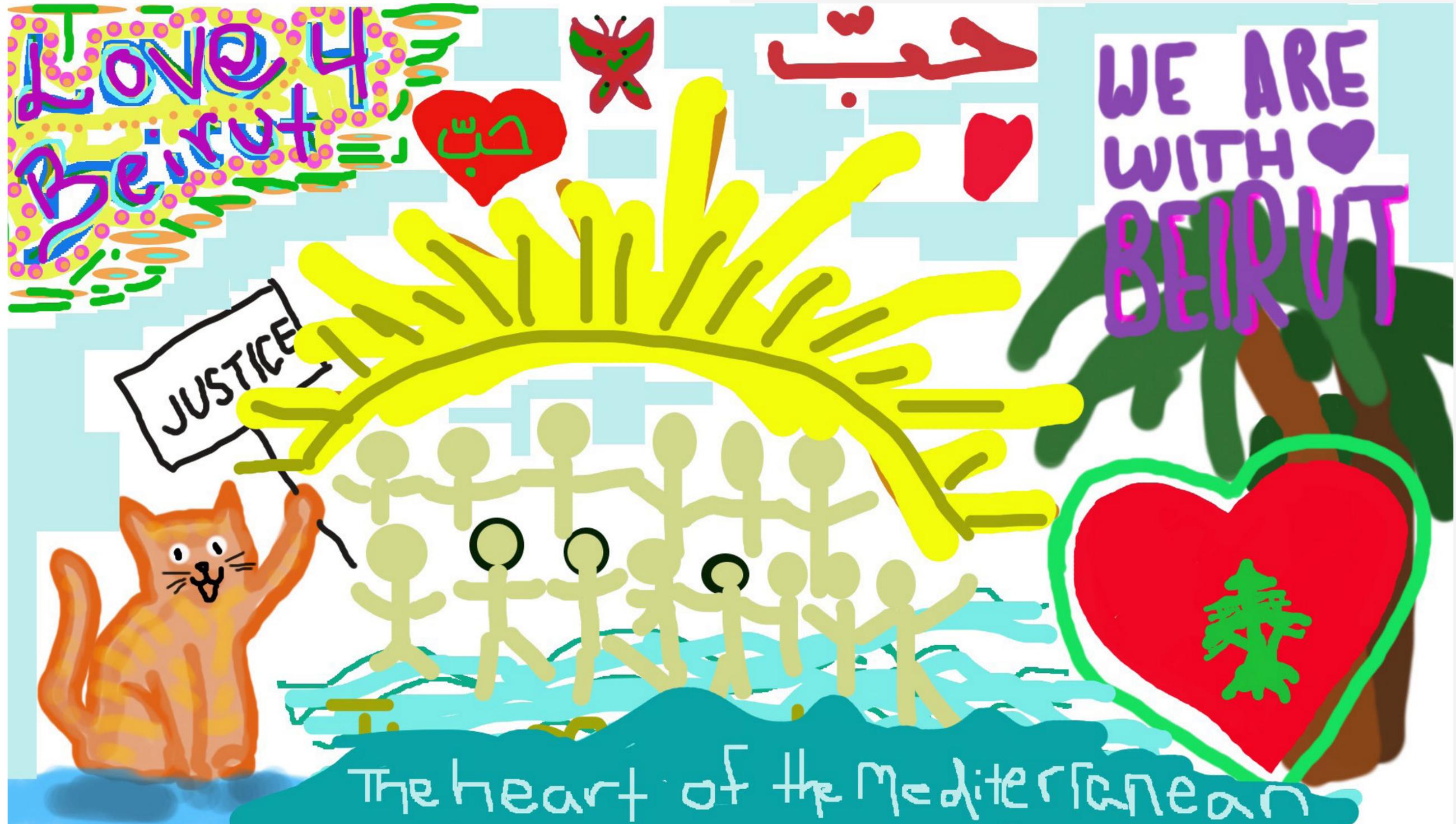
- [Digital attacks](#) against Black Lives Matters protesters across the globe.
- Ongoing [Internet shutdown in Myanmar](#), especially in Rakhine, against the Rohingya community where numerous human rights violations were occurring.
- Rise in [violent discrimination in India](#), specifically against Muslims and Dalits.
- The [explosion in Beirut](#), which affected one of the most vibrant digital rights community networks in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Throughout this entire period, more and more community members were dealing with deaths and sickness due to the pandemic. By October 2020, many countries were entering their second or third waves of pandemic cases, with increased and restrictive lockdowns put into place. We must not underestimate the pain, suffering, and trauma people went through and are still going through to this day.

Recognising the need for a safe space for community members to properly process these ongoing traumas and crises, several self-care, healing circles, and community check-ins were initiated. During these sessions, we used collaborative art exercises to help community members process their feelings (see pages [57](#), [58](#), and [59](#)).

Collaborative painting by the community reflecting their utopia





Collaborative painting for community in Italy





It's time to invest into the mental health of digital rights activists so that they are psychologically secure and healthy, and can continue to advance Internet freedoms for all.