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CHALLENGES AT THE INTERSECTION OF ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND INTERSECTIONAL YOUTH MOVEMENTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE SWANA REGION



ABOUT THIS REPORT

In collaboration with **Democracy Moves** and funded by the **Porticus Learning Partnership**, **Restless Development** selected **Politics4Her** to conduct a research project. This project focuses on **the complex challenges at the intersection of online gender-based violence (OGBV) and youth movements advocating for democratic values**, particularly in the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region. The research delves into the experiences and challenges faced by intersectional youth activists in this context. It sheds light on the specific vulnerabilities and struggles of intersectional youth activists facing OGBV in the SWANA region, thereby informing strategies to support and protect these activists as they advocate for democratic values in environments that are often hostile to their efforts and identities.

The project adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. As part of this approach, **the research has gathered data and insights by conducting five in-depth interviews with intersectional youth activists and experts from various countries within the SWANA region**. Additionally, two focus group discussions have been held, each engaging participants and providing a platform for diverse perspectives from countries. Complementing these qualitative methods, the research also includes a survey component. Responses have been collected from 58 individuals representing a range of intersectional youth movements throughout the SWANA region including: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen. These survey responses were instrumental in providing quantitative data on the impact and effectiveness of initiatives against OGBV and in the promotion of democratic values.

Furthermore, **the research encompasses a thorough literature review and the study of relevant case studies**. This includes examining both published and grey literature, such as policy briefs and reports from various stakeholders, including civil society organizations and UN agencies. The case studies from the literature provide a detailed examination of specific incidents or events related to OGBV and democracy advocacy, offering contextualized examples of the challenges faced by these movements. Overall, this research project is poised to offer valuable insights into the challenges and successes of intersectional youth movements in the SWANA region, contributing significantly to the development of effective strategies and policies for combating OGBV and fostering democratic engagement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the **digital activism landscape within the SWANA region**, highlighting the unique socio-political challenges and opportunities faced by youth movements, particularly those engaged in intersectional activism. Amidst a backdrop of political upheaval and ongoing conflicts, the rise of technology for feminist activism within the Arab states, notably during the Arab Spring, has reshaped civic engagement and political discourse. However, **this digital evolution brings with it significant challenges, including the digital divide and OGBV**, which pose substantial threats to activists, especially women and gender minorities.

Our research, informed by interviews with activists and experts, focus groups, and case studies, underscores the urgent need for robust support systems, legal reforms, and proactive measures from tech companies to ensure a safe and effective online environment for activism. The report identifies key challenges such as online harassment, censorship, and the specific adversities faced by youth, women and LGBTQ+ communities in digital spaces. It also offers actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing digital security, promoting gender equality in tech, and advocating for policy reforms to protect digital activists.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for strengthening digital safety training, establishing clearer legal protections, creating tailored support systems for activists, and urging tech companies to take a more active role in safeguarding digital spaces. These recommendations are designed to foster a more inclusive, safe, and equitable digital landscape for activists, enabling them to continue their vital work in promoting human rights, democracy, and gender equality across the SWANA region.

In essence, this report not only sheds light on the perils and potential of digital activism within the SWANA region but also serves as a call to action for policymakers, tech companies, civil society, and the international community to collaborate in supporting and protecting the digital frontline of activism. By addressing the unique challenges highlighted in this research, **we can empower digital activists to leverage technology as a force for positive change**, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights protected in the digital age.

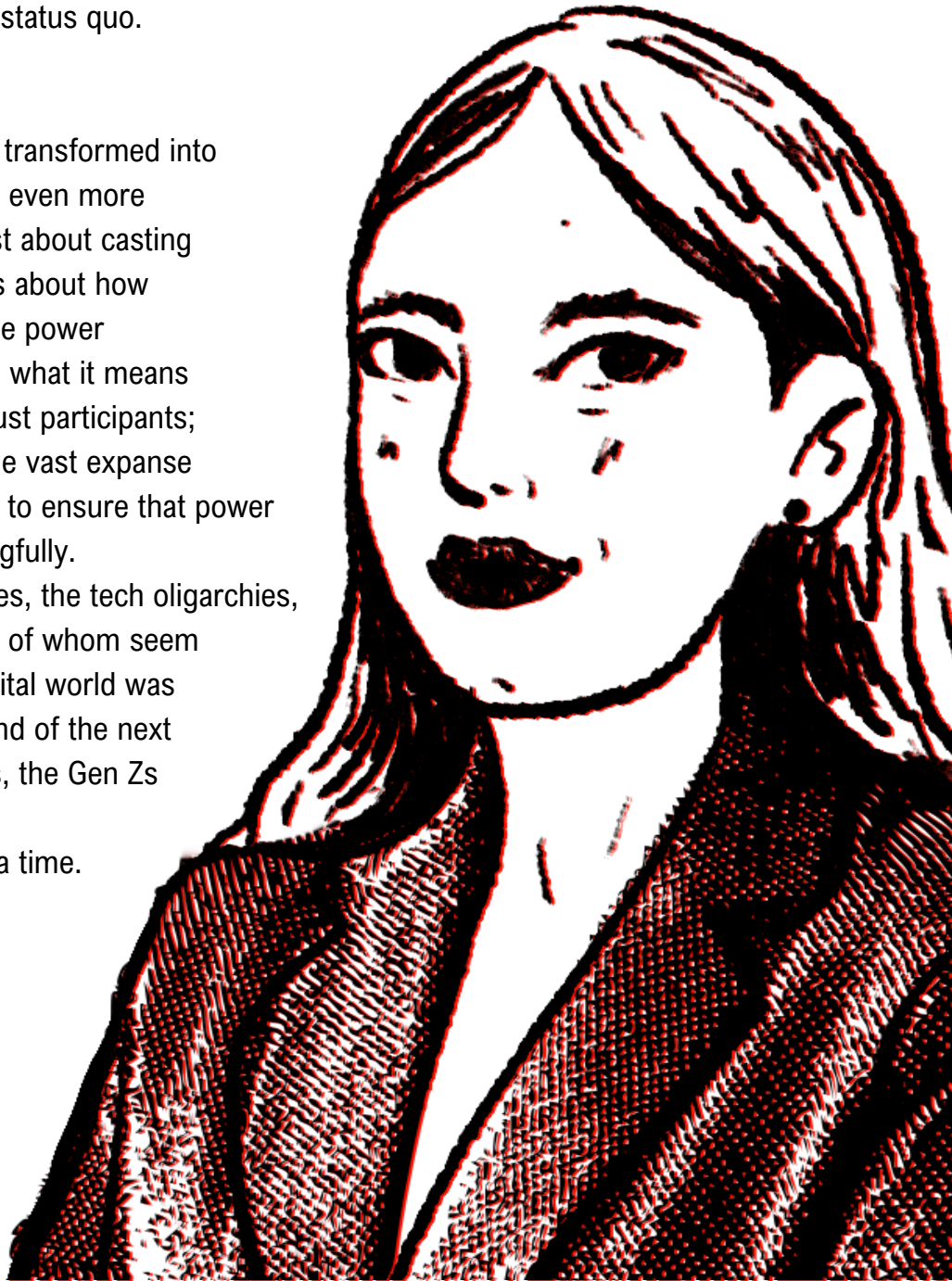
FOREWORD BY

MARWA AZELMAT

DIGITAL RIGHTS EXPERT AT RNW MEDIA

Imagine a world where the streets aren't just the ones we walk on but the ones we scroll through. This is a shout out to the brave hearts of the "Revolution of Dignity," the Arab Spring, where young people didn't just march on the roads; they took to the virtual streets with a fire in their hearts and innovation at their fingertips. They crafted digital pathways of resilience and agency, turning social media into their phones, blogs into their banners, and hashtags into their chants. This wasn't just a revolution; it was a digital uprising, a testament to how the youth can mobilise alternative spaces to bypass censorship and shake the foundations of the status quo.

Since then, "democracy" has transformed into something more dynamic yet even more challenging. It's no longer just about casting a vote or attending a rally; it's about how young leaders, armed with the power of the internet, are redefining what it means to wield power. They're not just participants; they're pioneers, exploring the vast expanse of digital and physical realms to ensure that power is shared equally and meaningfully. They challenge the monopolies, the tech oligarchies, and government censors, all of whom seem to have forgotten that the digital world was supposed to be the playground of the next generation, the digital natives, the Gen Zs who are "tiktoking" the rules of engagement one "reel" at a time.



But here's where the plot twists: as these spaces of innovation and freedom expand, so too do the shadows that loom over them. The darker side of this digital democratisation is the "platformization" of misogyny and surveillance; the deliberate and gendered attacks that target rights and feminist movements striving to carve out a space of equality online. These attacks aren't just trolls under the bridge; they're manifestations of a deeper, systemic issue that seeks to silence voices fighting for liberation.

To the women on the frontlines, facing this dual battle against both the physical and digital manifestations of gender-based oppression, we see you. Your courage to stand against the tide, to speak out even when the algorithms seem to conspire against you, is nothing short of revolutionary. You're not just fighting for a spot at the table; you're challenging the very foundations it stands on, demanding a world where your voice is heard, respected, and valued, both online and offline.

This foreword is more than just an opening to a report; it's a declaration of solidarity with every individual who has dared to dream of a world free from the chains of oppression, whether those chains are forged by governments, tech giants, or societal norms. It's a recognition of the struggle and the resilience of those who navigate these turbulent waters, disrupting the digital and physical spaces to ensure that democracy is not just a concept but a lived reality.

As we move forward, let's carry the torch of the Arab Spring into every corner of our digital streets. Let's dismantle the structures that seek to silence us, whether they're coded into an algorithm or written into law. Together, we stand with the women, the young women, and girls, and the feminist movements, fighting not just for equality but for a world where every voice can rise above the noise, unafraid and unapologetic.

**HERE'S TO THE REVOLUTIONARIES OF DIGNITY, THE
DISRUPTORS OF THE DIGITAL AGE, AND THE WARRIORS
AGAINST GENDERED VIOLENCE. WE SEE YOU, WE HEAR
YOU, AND WE MARCH WITH YOU, IN THE QUEST TO
DISMANTLE PATRIARCHY AND RECLAIM POWER, WHEREVER
IT MAY LIE: OFFLINE AND ONLINE.**

INTRODUCTION

The choice to focus our research on the SWANA region is rooted in its **unique socio-political landscape, marked by conflict and instability, which presents both challenges and opportunities for youth movements**, especially in the realm of intersectional activism. The SWANA region, often in the headlines for its political upheavals and ongoing conflicts, offers a critical context for understanding the intersection of OGBV and the fight for democratic values.

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the use of technology for feminist activism within the Arab states. This trend became particularly evident during the Arab Spring uprisings, where social media and other digital platforms played a pivotal role in mobilizing communities and voicing dissent. These technologies have provided new avenues for activism and reshaped the dynamics of civic engagement and political discourse. However, this increased reliance on technology comes with its own set of challenges. One of the foremost issues is the digital divide, which affects accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for marginalized groups within these movements. Despite the potential of technology to empower and connect, disparities in access and digital literacy can significantly impact the reach and effectiveness of these activist efforts.

Another critical challenge is **Tech-Facilitated Violence or OGBV**. This form of violence has become increasingly prevalent and poses a significant threat to activists, especially women and gender minorities, who often become targets of online harassment and abuse. This issue is compounded by broader systemic challenges such as surveillance and censorship, which can be exercised by both government entities and tech corporations. Such practices not only threaten personal security and freedom of expression but also hinder the ability of activists to organize and advocate effectively. Adding to this, the region's complex socio-political environment, characterized by varying degrees of authoritarianism and societal conservatism, further exacerbates these challenges. Activists often find themselves navigating a precarious landscape where advocating for democratic values and gender equality can attract scrutiny and retaliation, both online and offline.

In light of these factors, **our research aims to delve deep into the experiences of intersectional youth movements within the SWANA region**. By understanding the unique challenges they face, particularly to OGBV and the pursuit of democratic ideals, we seek to contribute to the development of more robust support systems and strategies that empower these vital movements in their relentless pursuit of a just and equitable society.

CYBERSPACE ACTIVISM AND THE SWANA REGION

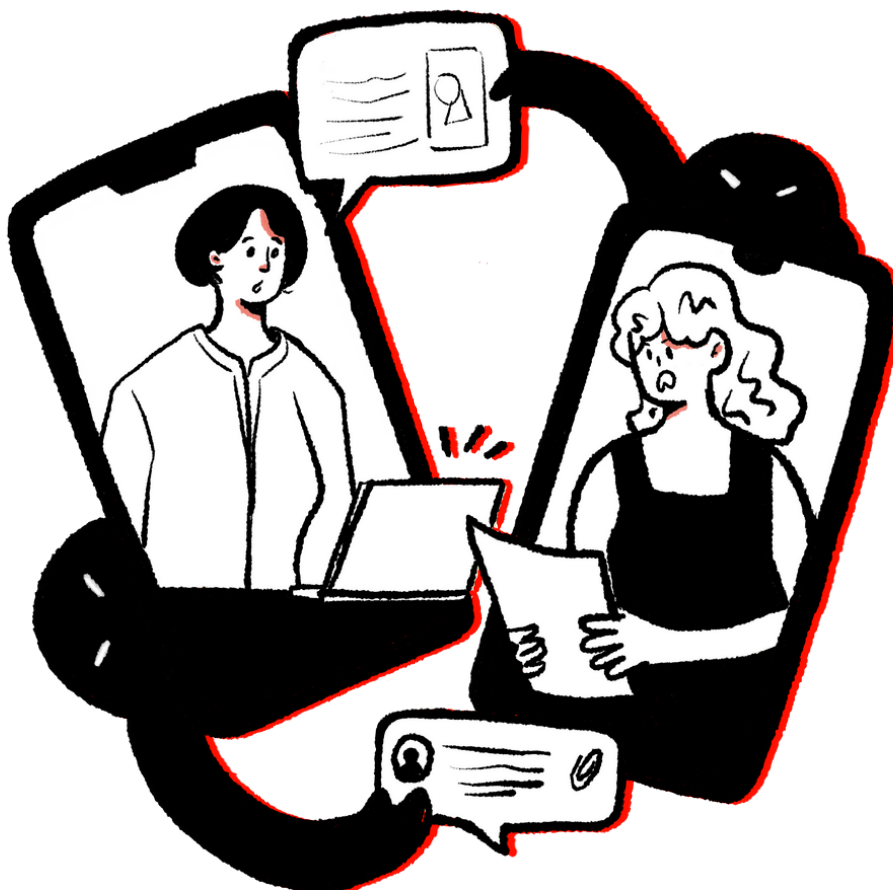
The digital world, originally envisioned as a realm of freedom, equality, and optimism, is exemplified by the idealistic tone of Barlow's (1996) "**Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace**," which promised a world free from prejudice and coercion. However, over two decades later, this vision of a digital utopia stands in stark contrast to the reality. Instead of an egalitarian cyberspace, the Internet has often amplified and spread negative effects such as abuse, discrimination, surveillance, and exploitation, echoing inequalities found in the physical world. The global Digital Divide is a clear manifestation of this, with disparities across gender, race, and class. Data from ITU (2023) and UNDP (2023) reveal that **2.6 billion people remain offline, with men significantly more likely to be online than women**, especially in the least developed countries. This digital gap particularly affects women in these countries, limiting their digital connectivity, literacy, and access to opportunities for social mobility and rights advocacy.

In the SWANA region, with varied political and economic conditions, there has been progress in addressing the Digital Divide. **According to Petrosyan (2023), internet usage rates in North Africa and Southwestern Asia are 66.3% and 76.2% respectively.** Despite these improvements, a persistent digital gender divide remains, as highlighted by Raz (2020), with women 56% less likely to be internet users due to economic inequality and cultural norms. Youth pro-democracy movements in the SWANA region have, however, leveraged technology effectively for organizing and campaign amplification. Post the Arab Spring's unfulfilled promises, a new wave of youth-led activism has emerged, intent on radical change both on the ground and online (Yom et al, 2019; Gengler, 2019). Examples include Jordan's youth movement against Israeli gas and Morocco's "**New February 20**," utilizing social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook for mobilization (Ryan, 2019: 51).

The Free Palestine movement has also gained significant online traction, with youth activists documenting human rights abuses and spreading awareness through social media (CIVICUS, 2022). Feminist movements in the region, such as #Tal3at, #EnaZeda, #guardianship_myright, the Saudi women's right to drive campaign, and Iran's "**Woman. Life. Freedom**" movement, reflect this trend of leveraging digital platforms for activism (Kharroub, 2023; Khalil and Storie, 2021; Lamensch, 2022b; Clough et al, 2021, Al-Sharif, 2018). However, the internet's role in activism is a "**double-edged sword**," as noted by Kamei (2022). While it provides tools and platforms to reach a global audience, it also offers state and non-state actors more direct and intrusive ways to cause harm, unbounded by physical world limitations. The next section will delve into the challenges faced by intersectional youth movements in using the Internet for activism, examining the negative aspects of digital engagement in the context of their efforts for change.

EMERGING AND EVOLVING ONLINE CHALLENGES

GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP, SURVEILLANCE, AND INVASION OF DATA PRIVACY



In the digital landscape, the initial enthusiasm of "techno-optimists" in the early 2010s, who saw the internet as a democratizing force and a means to circumvent state restrictions, has been tempered by evolving realities. Scholars such as Morozov (2012), Monshipouri (2019), and Guesmi (2021) have observed a significant transformation in the role of the Internet, especially following the Arab Spring. Contrary to earlier expectations, the digital realm has become a potent political medium for propaganda and control, rather than solely an enabler of democratic expression.

This shift is particularly acute in SWANA countries, where government censorship and surveillance have intensified. These practices restrict activists' capabilities to communicate and share information freely, challenging the initial techno-optimist view of the Internet as an open and egalitarian platform. The limited freedom of expression in these regions, especially concerning gender, sexuality, and LGBTIQ+ issues, is further compounded by repressive societal norms and conservative religious perspectives (Saeed, 2023; Web Foundation, 2022).

The digital space in the SWANA region, therefore, reflects and reinforces offline restrictions, altering the online social landscape and empowering those who maintain the status quo (Yahaya and Iyer, 2022). Activists advocating for change find themselves increasingly vulnerable to legal systems that are weaponized against them. They face legal threats and challenges, such as defamation lawsuits or charges related to their online activities, effectively stifling dissent and advocacy efforts (Saeed, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023a).

Moreover, the suppression of pro-democracy advocacy in the digital realm is not just a matter of censorship but also poses severe personal risks for activists, including imprisonment and potential death sentences. **The internet, once a tool for mobilizing and spreading awareness, is now being used to gather incriminating "evidence" against activists, often based on misinformation (Human Rights Watch, 2023b).** The case of Ahed Tamimi in occupied Palestine exemplifies this trend, where she was imprisoned by Israeli forces for alleged online incitement, despite claims of impersonation or hacking (McKernan and Taha, 2023).

The vulnerability of activists is further exacerbated when information is not publicly available, leading state and non-state actors to resort to hacking and surveillance techniques. Tools such as the "Pegasus" malware are used to infiltrate personal data, silencing voices of dissent (McKernan, 2022). This development marks a stark deviation from the techno-optimist vision of the internet, revealing a landscape where digital tools, once symbols of freedom and resistance, are now employed for repression and surveillance.

In the digital realm, **the initial techno-optimist view has significantly shifted, especially impacting young intersectional feminists in the SWANA region.** These activists, advocating for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights, face amplified challenges due to intensified government censorship and surveillance, which disproportionately target them based on their gender, sexuality, race, and class. Thus, the early vision of a free and open digital world stands in stark contrast to the current realities where the internet has become another arena where intersectional feminist voices confront and challenge entrenched patriarchal and authoritarian structures, reflecting the complex interplay of societal and digital inequalities.



DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION

In the context of intersectional youth activism, the spread of disinformation, fake news, and propaganda emerges as a challenge. **These tactics, as Calvert (2017), Grimes (2017), Ruiz and Nilsson (2022) note, blur lines and create polarizing "echo chambers", fostering multiple, conflicting realities. Schrifin (2017: 123) traces the evolution of social media from a tool for challenging authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring to a platform now inundated with global disinformation, undermining and sabotaging movements.**

Butcher (2019: 6) underscores the online prioritization of profit over truth, where disinformation is fueled by social media algorithms that promote a **"business model of falsehood."** This model thrives on user attention and clicks, often at the expense of societal well-being. Under this model, disinformation, including text and deep fakes targeting activists, is amplified, intensifying harassment to silence and control them and disrupt their movements (Lamensch, 2022a). The impact of disinformation is underscored by findings from Nemr and Gangware (2019: 3), who show that fake news spreads six times faster than factual stories, due to their emotive and novel content which appeals to users' preferences for sharing falsehoods (Meyer, 2018).

These tactics can create **"rumor cascades,"** where audiences are misled into believing activists have said or done things they haven't (Vosoughi et al, 2018: 1146). This is particularly effective in communities with low digital literacy, where individuals are not equipped to identify false information (Sirlin et al. 2021). The responsibility for addressing disinformation is a subject of debate. Initially, Big Tech companies were reluctant to intervene in content moderation, except in extreme cases, to preserve the online marketplace of ideas. However, events like the US 2020 insurrection have triggered global calls for these companies to demonstrate corporate social responsibility, especially when democracy is threatened by disinformation on their platforms (Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2021: 8). In response, Big Tech has pledged to implement new systems for increased cybersecurity, fact-checking through third parties, and banning political advertisements, though the effectiveness and **adherence to these pledges have been questioned (Twitter, 2019; Yin and Ng, 2021).**

The responsibility is also often placed on activists themselves to combat disinformation and ensure the accuracy of the information they share. However, once trust with their audience is compromised due to targeted disinformation campaigns, regaining momentum and credibility becomes a significant challenge. This issue is particularly pertinent for intersectional youth feminists, who often navigate a complex web of societal and digital challenges in their activism. Their efforts to combat disinformation are crucial not only for the success of their movements but also for maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of their advocacy in the digital age.

SYSTEMIC SOCIAL MEDIA CENSORSHIP AND DEPLATFORMING

In the evolving landscape of digital governance, social media giants, following their proclaimed commitments to combating online disinformation and hate speech, have grown increasingly influential in shaping freedom of speech. This influence, however, raises concerns about the "privatization of governance in cyberspace," as noted by Schaake (2021) and Butcher (2019: 20). These platforms wield immense power, often accused of exploiting their role to enforce political biases, thereby challenging the democratic ethos they claim to uphold.

From an intersectional youth feminist perspective, the actions of these tech giants are particularly impactful. Biased censorship and deplatforming practices on platforms like Meta, Twitter, and YouTube often target content related to human rights advocacy under the guise of violating community guidelines. These actions disproportionately harm activists, especially those from the Global South and those advocating for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights. For instance, Meta's systemic social media censorship during the genocide in Gaza, as documented by Human Rights Watch (2023), illustrates selective censorship and deplatforming of pro-Palestine content. In this research, Brown and Younes (2023), highlight Meta's heavy reliance on US political perspectives in defining "terrorist" organizations and its inconsistent policy applications, often disadvantaging Palestinian liberation activists.

Furthermore, the monetization strategies of Big Tech, including profiting from Israeli wartime advertisements, as reported by Google (2023) and Newsham and Long (2023), starkly contrast with Barlow's (1996) vision of liberating cyberspace. These practices not only limit the reach of activists but also reveal a clear bias that reinforces a "digital apartheid" (Zahzah, 2021). For young intersectional feminists in the SWANA region, this is particularly troubling as it erases their visibility on crucial social media platforms, marginalizing their voices and exacerbating existing oppressions. The digital realm, which could have been a space for amplifying marginalized voices, is instead becoming a landscape where power dynamics are replicated and where the voices of those fighting for equality and justice are often silenced or overshadowed.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Digital Divide, a **complex issue characterized by disparities in availability, affordability, quality of service, and relevance of digital technologies (Aguar and Muller, 2022), significantly impacts youth movements, especially through an intersectional feminist youth lens.** This divide not only reflects but also exacerbates existing socio-economic disparities, posing unique challenges for activists, particularly those advocating for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights in less developed areas within the SWANA region.

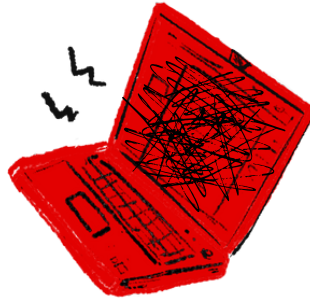
For young intersectional feminists, the divide means more than just limited access to technology. It affects their ability to communicate, collaborate, organize, and disseminate information effectively. Organizations like Restless Development (2022) highlight how these challenges hinder the momentum and efficacy of youth-led movements. In regions with inadequate digital infrastructure, even the most driven activists struggle to establish and maintain effective digital platforms for their advocacy.

The issue of digital literacy further complicates the scenario. Many young activists, eager to build public platforms and amplify their causes, often lack the necessary skills to navigate these digital spaces securely and efficiently. This gap not only limits their ability to leverage technology for activism but also exposes them to various online threats, from misinformation to cyber harassment. Their vulnerability is heightened in a digital landscape where patriarchal norms and gender biases already pose significant barriers.

Moreover, **the 'Data Divide' presents an additional layer of disparity** . Activists in the SWANA region often have limited access to comprehensive, up-to-date data, a crucial resource for creating new knowledge and developing evidence-based campaigns. This divide stems from a lack of funding and advanced technologies, especially when compared to their Western counterparts. As a result, these young feminists face significant obstacles in substantiating their advocacy with data-driven insights, a critical aspect of modern activism.

In essence, the Digital Divide in the SWANA region is not just a matter of technological access but intersects deeply with gender, economic, and educational inequalities. It disproportionately affects young intersectional feminists, impeding their ability to lead effective movements and advocate for change in an increasingly digital world. **Addressing this divide requires a nuanced understanding of these intersecting issues and targeted efforts to bridge the gaps in digital access, literacy, and data availability.**

ONLINE ACTIVISM BURNOUT



Walther's (2022) **"approval-seeking"** theory suggests that cyberbullies engage in hate speech and collective aggression for social rewards within their group, often under the guise of **"fun."** **This behavior has significant implications for youth activists, particularly through an intersectional feminist lens.** These activists, consistently exposed to hate speech, negative content, and online attacks, bear the brunt of such cyberbullying, leading to serious mental health issues and burnout.

Conner et al. (2023) delve into the mental health impacts on youth activists, acknowledging that while the sense of **"belonging"** in activism can mitigate feelings of burnout, it does not fully shield them from worsening mental and physical health. This "belonging," however, comes with its own set of pressures. As Conner et al. (2021) note, **youth activists often feel compelled to maintain a strong online presence, sometimes to the point of self-sacrifice, which can exacerbate stress and mental health issues.**

The severity of burnout is further **influenced by gender and cultural context.** Women, particularly in the SWANA region, face higher rates of online harassment. **This increased harassment, as reported by UN Women (2022), leads to higher burnout rates among female activists.** The situation is even more dire for intersectional feminist youth activists in the SWANA region, who not only contend with relentless bullying and sexual harassment but also face threats to their families and their "honor." Such attacks often force them to withdraw from online public spaces, effectively silencing them and sabotaging their movements (Erhaim, 2020).

These challenges highlight the unique struggles faced by intersectional feminist youth activists. The combination of cyberbullying, cultural pressures, and gender-based harassment creates a hostile online environment that significantly hampers their ability to advocate effectively. Addressing these issues requires not only combating online harassment but also providing support systems that acknowledge and respond to the specific needs of these activists, fostering resilience and ensuring their voices remain a vital part of the digital discourse.

YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN SWANA

In the SWANA region, women activists, particularly those engaged in pro-democracy youth movements, confront a unique set of challenges. Heightened patriarchal cultural norms, lack of legal protection, and **socio-economic inequality create significant barriers for women and girls in the digital space.** Al-Sharif (2018) highlights these challenges, emphasizing how they hinder the thriving of women in online environments. Despite these obstacles, Sreberny (2015) offers an optimistic perspective, noting that women in the region are persistently fighting against patriarchy, utilizing new media techniques to circumvent state control.

The digital realm is often a battleground for women activists, as described by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2015). They face a dual struggle: advocating for human rights while combating the pervasive online violence directed at them. Luchsinger et al. (2022: 14) found that women activists and human rights defenders in the Arab States often feel particularly unsafe online, with perpetrators targeting movement leaders to deter and punish them for promoting what is perceived as **"Western ideas."** This strategic targeting, fueled by misogynistic intentions, undermines their fight for human rights.



These **women's intersecting identities make them prime targets for OGBV**. The lack of prioritization by the private sector and regional laws further exacerbates this issue, allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability (Web Foundation, 2022). While online anonymity can facilitate engagement in conservative cultures, it also enables OGBV perpetrators to act with impunity (Mama Cash, 2018: 27; Kamei, 2022). Anonymity, however, does not protect women from surveillance states, as seen in cases like Saudi Arabia, where feminist activists, such as Salma al-Shehab, have been arrested for their online activism (Amnesty International, 2022).

SWANA feminists taking public stances and building online platforms often face relentless OGBV attacks, aimed at silencing their political views (UN Women, 2020; Erhaim, 2020). This abuse leads to safety concerns, psychological stress, and discouragement from participation, undermining democracy and violating their human rights. **Pultz and Lorentzen (2023) note that women in regions affected by war or authoritarian regimes are at even greater risk, with online threats frequently escalating into real-world assaults.** UN Women (2022) reports that in 2021, 60% of women in the Arab states experienced online violence, and 44% of these incidents transitioned to offline threats or assaults.

As a result, many women and girls delete their online accounts or are forced to self-isolate due to family restrictions on digital device access, further widening the digital gender divide and limiting their opportunities for career and network development (Luchsinger et al., 2022: 17; EIGE, 2022). **Those who remain active online often adopt self-protective measures due to the lack of legal support, relying on community support, self-censorship, digital security training, and using block/report functions for safety (Yahaya and Iyer, 2022).**



YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND THEIR BATTLE WITH OGBV

Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV), a term encompassing any gender-based violence facilitated through digital technologies like the internet, specifically targeting gender, sex, and sexual orientation. This definition, as outlined by UN Women Asia-Pacific (2022) and the Council of Europe (2023), highlights the broad scope of OGBV, which inflicts not only direct harms such as physical, sexual, psychological, and economic damage but also broader social and political impacts that restrict freedoms (University of Melbourne and United Nations Population Fund, 2023: 5). **The variety of violent acts facilitated online, including hate speech, stalking, doxing, and threats, disproportionately affect women and girls**, particularly young intersectional activists in the SWANA region, reinforcing systemic oppression and causing significant psychological distress and fear (Lamensch, 2022a; UN Women, 2022).

The evolving nature of technology, coupled with lagging government policies, creates an environment where perpetrators easily exploit these platforms to harm their victims.

The intersection of digital technology and gender-based violence, as discussed by Bailey and Burkell, (2021), mirrors and amplifies broader societal issues like sexism, racism, and cisnormativity.

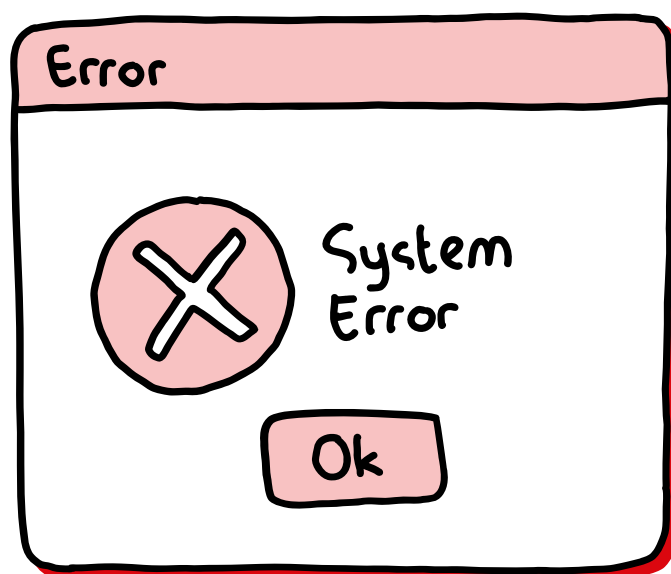
For example, the spread of misogynistic stereotypes and objectification on social media, a phenomenon highlighted by Amnesty International's (2018) **"Toxic Twitter"** research, illustrates how women and girls are often subjected to more intense online abuse compared to their male counterparts.



This situation is particularly acute for young intersectional activists in the SWANA region. **The unique blend of cultural, political, and social factors in this region makes them highly susceptible to OGBV.** Black women, LGBTQI+ individuals, minorities, migrants, and women with disabilities face additional layers of risk, making their online experience fraught with potential abuse (UN Women, 2022). The 'digital gender divide', a critical issue identified by Barter and Koulu (2021) and Gloor and Meier (2020), further complicates this by limiting access to online support and resources, especially for those in rural or impoverished areas.

The private sector's failure to ensure equal safety for all users, especially those in the Global South, exacerbates these risks. **Big Tech's Western-centric policies create an enforcement gap against abusive content, leaving women in the SWANA region vulnerable to unchecked online abuse.** Cultural nuances mean that seemingly benign content, as per Western standards, can have life-threatening implications in the SWANA context, such as inciting honor killings or blackmail (Web Foundation, 2020).

The dual role of the internet in intersectional feminism is evident here. While it has significantly expanded the reach of feminist movements globally, this increased visibility has brought a surge in online abuse, revealing clear biases in the private sector and highlighting the issue of state surveillance (Kamei, 2022). For young intersectional activists in the SWANA region, navigating this digital landscape requires **not only confronting these unique challenges but also working towards creating safer and more inclusive online spaces.**



CASE STUDIES

Through detailed case studies, we explore the challenges and resilience of digital activists facing censorship, cyberattacks, and legal repercussions across various countries and platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

The case studies include a cyberattack against "**Sharika wa Laken**," an influential intersectional feminist platform on Instagram advocating for women's rights in Arabic-speaking regions, which underscores the vulnerabilities of digital activism against systemic oppression. In Iran, the "**Women. Life. Freedom**" movement, sparked by **the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini**, exemplifies the crucial role of social media in mobilizing activists and the severe consequences they face, including surveillance, imprisonment, and online harassment. **The research also highlights the silencing of Palestinian voices online**, showcasing the digital suppression of activists and the challenges of advocating for democratic values and gender equality amidst a backdrop of censorship and violence. In Sudan, the focus is on the spike in OGBV amidst the country's humanitarian crisis, revealing the complex intersection of social, cultural, and economic injustices that exacerbate the threats faced by women online. In Egypt, the resurgence of the **#MeToo** movement, led by initiatives like **Nadeen Ashraf's Assault Police**, spotlights the critical role of social media in challenging sexual violence and amplifying women's voices, despite facing targeted harassment and a lack of comprehensive legal protections for feminist leaders and content creators. Lastly, the study delves into the situation in Saudi Arabia, where despite stringent laws against OGBV, activists like **Loujain Al Hathloul** endure severe repercussions for their advocacy, illustrating the gap between legal frameworks and the reality of digital dystopia faced by women's human rights defenders.



CYBERATTACK AGAINST A REGIONAL INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST PLATFORM

Sharika wa Laken (2023a), an influential intersectional feminist platform on Instagram dedicated to advocating for women's rights in Arabic-speaking regions, experienced a significant **cyberattack** on November 14th, 2023 (Sharika wa Laken 2023b). **The attackers managed to hack into the platform's account, erasing all its posts and content dating back to its inception.** The cyberattack on 'Sharika wa Laken' was not just a mere digital infringement but an attempt to silence a powerful voice in the feminist movement. All historical archives and posts, which represented years of advocacy and community engagement, were wiped out, leaving a void in the digital feminist discourse. Following the attack, a specialized team undertook an intensive investigation and successfully retrieved the account, along with a portion of the feminist archives. Concurrently, strict legal actions were initiated against the perpetrators, marking a significant stance against digital oppression.

Far from being silenced, the platform and its community transformed this incident into a rallying cry for continued activism. **This event highlighted the intensity of the struggle against systemic oppression, particularly within patriarchal frameworks.** It underlined the significance of 'Sharika wa Laken's mission and its perceived threat to authoritarian structures. This case study not only exemplifies the vulnerabilities of digital activism but also illustrates the resilience and determination of intersectional feminist movements in the face of digital suppression. 'Sharika wa Laken's' experience serves as a testament to the unwavering spirit of feminist activists who, despite facing challenges in the digital realm, continue to advocate for equality and justice. The incident reinforces the necessity for robust digital security measures and legal frameworks to protect activist platforms and their invaluable work.

IRAN'S WOMEN LIFE FREEDOM

From Iran's 2009 pro-democracy Green Movement to the 2022 "Women. Life. Freedom" feminist movement sparked by the murder of **Jina Mahsa Amini**, the digital world has been a way to mobilise activists and also oppress them (Lamensch, 2022b; Abadi, 2022). In 2009, Iranian citizens bypassed their governments authoritarian censorship of mobile text messaging through the **"Twitter Revolution"**, spreading awareness domestically and internationally, building momentum through tweets and acting as a catalyst for the Arab Spring (Snow, 2010 and Pickering; 2011 cited in Moghanizadeh, 2013). In 2022, we saw this use of social media resurge through its essential role in raising awareness, gathering and spreading **"documentation for accountability"** (Alterman, 2022). During this time activists in **Iran have faced many obstacles and brutal punishments for their pro-democracy online activism, and this case study explores such struggles with the intersection of OGBV.**

JINA MAHSA AMINI: WOMEN. LIFE. FREEDOM



Following the arrest and murder of **Mahsa Amini** by the “**morality police**” under compulsory hijab law, major anti-government **woman and youth-led** protests spread throughout Iran, with **a total 19,400 arrests and 537 killed** by state security forces (Loft, 2023; Lamensch, 2022b; Iran Human Rights, 2023). **The internet was also shut down** by the state in attempts to stop activists mobilising, restricting internet access, blocking social media and communications platforms, increasing surveillance and imprisoning internet users who took part in online campaigns (Freedom House, 2023). The movement is a prime example of the interconnected nature of pro-democracy and women’s rights movements, as well as the intersectional lens needed to understand the online gender based violence endured by women activists in the region.

WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Iran is **the 4th biggest prison in the world for women journalists**, 31 were arrested during the “Women. Life. Freedom” movement, with many accused of spreading propaganda and experiencing sexual abuse in prison (Reporters Without Borders, 2023a). Those arrested include **Niloofar Hamed** who reported Amini’s death and **Eelaheh Mohammadi** who reported on Amini’s funeral (Reuters; 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2023b).

Government Surveillance and Harassment:

Iranian authorities have persisted in **their technology-facilitated gender-based violence** against women and girls through online harassment, abuse, and disinformation campaigns in order to silence and discredit their activism (FCDO and Clevery, 2022). They are known **to use AI-powered technology (e.g. facial recognition)** to identify and target women activists for their online campaigns and violating the country’s hijab laws (Johnson, 2023).

Social Media

Women have often been arrested for appearing in unveiled photos on social media. Seemingly harmless photos which don’t break western community guidelines can have dire consequences. We see this in **feminist activist Donya Rad’s case**, who was imprisoned after a photo of her having breakfast without a hijab went viral (Levine, 2022).

State-Backed Hacking

In 2022 Human Rights Watch reported **that Iranian government-backed hackers**, identified as APT42 or Charming Kitten, targeted a women’s rights defender in the Gulf region, compromising her email and sensitive data, highlighting the urgency for improved security measures and stronger Gmail account warnings (Far, 2022).

SILENCING PALESTINIAN VOICES ONLINE DURING A GENOCIDE

The age of **digital apartheid** has made it difficult for youth voices to be heard. Social media platforms controlled by self-serving tech companies are the primary avenues to any form of expression, but they are actively blocking the voices of Palestinians and those who are standing up with Palestine (Kamran, 2023). Since the beginning of the genocide in October 2023, there has been a marked increase in the silencing of Palestinian activists, with youth at the forefront experiencing compounded challenges due to their intersectional identities. This case study delves into the intersection of OGBV and the struggles of intersectional youth movements for democracy in Palestine. It examines the multifaceted suppression of Palestinian voices and their allies, especially those of young activists, and its implications on their fight for democratic values and gender equality.

Social Media Censorship

Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have faced accusations of **censoring pro-Palestinian content** (Fatafta, 2023a). This includes incidents like the **suspension of the Quds News Network** and targeted censorship of Palestinian journalists and activists, particularly those reporting from Gaza (Fatafta, 2023b).

Shadowbanning

Allegations of **shadowbanning on platforms like Instagram and TikTok**, along with the removal of pro-Palestinian content, have a disproportionate impact on young women and LGBTQ+ activists (Dixit et al., 2023). This reduces the visibility of their activism, further marginalizing their voices in the digital space.

Black Feminist Solidarity and Meta Censorship

The censorship of **Black feminist groups expressing solidarity with Palestine underscores the intersectional challenges faced by these activists** (Black Women Radicals, 2023). The digital suppression of their voices, particularly those advocating for gender rights and Palestinian freedom, exemplifies the broader issue of digital apartheid.



7AMLEH'S "VIOLENCE INDICATOR" AND OGBV

The "Violence Indicator" by 7amleh has documented a surge in online hate speech and incitement against Palestinians, with a significant portion targeting women and LGBTQ+ individuals. According to 7amleh, 68% of documented instances of hate speech and incitement were based on political bias, 29% on racial bias, and the remaining included gender-based violence and religious violence, among others (Khan, 2023). The research "Gender-Based Violence against Palestinian Women in the Digital Space" by 7amleh (2022a) analyzed the phenomena OGBV for Palestinians and showed **that about half of the participants feel monitored online, with instances of attacks on women's rights defenders and death threats being reported.** These findings highlight a worrying trend of OGBV within the context of the Palestinian struggle. The report also emphasized the need to combat online hate speech and the challenges in creating a safe, free, and fair online space for Palestinian youth (7amleh, 2022b).

The censorship and silencing of pro-Palestinian voices have been a cause for concern, with social media platforms being accused of downplaying organic reach and disproportionately censoring critical Palestinian voices (Espanol, 2023; Fatafta, 2023b). **The censorship and suppression faced by Palestinian youth activists and their allies, particularly those advocating for gender rights and democracy, have profound implications.** Their ongoing battle against digital silencing not only hinders their advocacy efforts but also exacerbates their marginalization in both the digital and physical realms. On top of that, numerous prominent feminist voices have been silent on the struggles of Palestinian women (Aldossari, 2024). While their platforms have the power to bring critical issues to light, they also have the subtle power to relegate others to the sidelines. Despite these challenges, Palestinians continue to innovate in their methods to voice their narratives and resist oppression.

SUDAN'S ONLINE GENDER BASED VIOLENCE: ANOTHER THREAT IN A SEA OF MANY

Sudan's volatile war has become more dire over the past few weeks, **leading it to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises in modern times as announced by the UN (ReliefWeb, 2023),** displacing more people externally and internally than Ukraine and Syria (AA Turkey, 2023) with **ethnic violence** rising in concerning numbers (Reuters, 2024). Gender-based violence, similarly, has spiked producing hundreds of hurdles for its victims, many of whom are unable to report the incidents to begin with (WHO, 2023). Within the same lines, OGBV turned the beneficial use of the internet into a complex intersectional hurdle that expands far beyond the systematic digital divide in Sudan to include factors such as social and economic injustices, as portrayed by the report examining **the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan (GenderIT, 2023a).**

According to the report, women in rural areas in South Kordofan, North Darfur, Khartoum and in Kadugli, the capital city of South Kordofan, are prevented from owning smartphones, and from accessing the internet freely.

Women in those rural areas often face punishments that can end in death especially with the intercommunal conflicts and men's control over women's freedom and safety online. In several cases, this has been justified with the fear of creating behavioural changes that would oppose the communities' cultures. **Data collected from focus group discussions (Firn, 2023)**, highlight the severity of OGBV where women are banned from sharing their opinions online, and often have to create pseudonyms to avoid recognition. In fact, even with mitigation measures women resort to, they all experience bullying, blackmail, threats, and harassment leading them to discontinue their engagement online and to fear for their lives.

As often **highlighted, the rise of social media has enabled OGBV where perpetrators are targeting vulnerable groups (Unwanted Witness, 2024)**. In the case of Sudan, it expands far beyond mere online presence to intersect with more **social, cultural and economic challenges that add complex layers to the threat women face (GenderIT, 2023b)**. If not controlled by men, then most women, namely from rural areas in Khartoum, are forced by their social and family circles to abstain from having any online presence nor identity. In fact, the infrastructure of the information system in Sudan systematically oppresses women and enables a culture of no consequences for online violence. **Sudan's cybersecurity law does not criminalise OGBV** and has no solid guidelines which help identify perpetrators to be justly held accountable and responsible for their cyber attacks (Advox, 2021). Sudan still has a long way to go. It is becoming more dangerous by the day for women to speak against attacks, and to be safely present online. Finding safe spaces is rare these days with more misinformation growing excessively, and the conflict to worsen in many parts of the country.

In July 2020, **Weam Shagi (Advox, 2020)**, a prominent women's rights activist shared on her Facebook account photos documenting torture by security forces, yet several comments used body-shaming language to attack and intimidate her. Within the same vein, **the 2018 Freedom on the Net Sudan Report highlighted how over 15 feminist activists' privacy was violated** by a fake Facebook page named "**Sudanese Women Against Hijab**" that shared private pictures without their consent adding fake quotes against veil and religion (Freedomhouse, 2021; Sharif, 2016). These are examples among hundreds more that portray the direct attack on women's privacy and presence online. **In fact, Article 19 (2023) tackled the decline in freedom of expression** since the events of April 15 unfolded, with women being the most affected especially knowing how this pattern of armed conflicts targets freedom of expression and information as first casualties, eventually creating the space for online harassment and hate to flourish. **A report on cyberbullying of women in Sudan (Kace Sudan, 2020) shared how young women face the threat of honour killing and forced marriage after intimate videos have been leaked online.**

However, as history has shown, Sudanese young women continue to defy hurdles that come with existing within an oppressing system, as they fuel their intersectional identities through their solidarity leading eventually to breaking alienating patterns. A hashtag to call out online harassment emerged online by Sudanese women **#exposeaharasser** to be actively used for women to speak up against their harasser and share personal stories. Eventually, despite the absence of legal frameworks, legislation and social support, young women in Sudan never cease to speak up!

SAUDI ARABIA: DIGITAL DYSTOPIA AND THE PERSECUTION OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In recent years, **Saudi Arabia has witnessed a surge in OGBV (UN Women, 2019)** despite stringent laws criminalizing such acts. This case study delves into the harsh reality faced by women in the digital sphere, exploring the flagrant discrepancies between existing laws and the prevalence of OGBV.

Legal Framework vs. Reality

Saudi Arabia has explicit laws against online violence and harassment through modern technology, but the ground reality tells a different story. **A report by CIGI (Centre for International Governance Innovation) reveals that 70% of Saudi Arabian women have experienced some form of online harm**, with 41% attributing the targeting to their gender identity (Alzahrani, and Alharbi, 2019). The discrepancy between legal provisions and the alarming statistics underscores the need for effective implementation and awareness (Bailey and Steves, 2015; IDRC, 2021).

The impact on Mental Health

According to CIGI's findings, 59% of women respondents reported that their mental health was negatively impacted by incidents of online harm. The toll on mental well-being is a critical aspect of OGBV that often goes unnoticed. A concerning 39% of victims did not reach out to anyone following the incident, exposing a gap in support systems (Alzahrani, and Alharbi, 2019).

Activism Under Threat: Loujain Al Hathloul's Ordeal

Loujain Al Hathloul, a prominent Saudi activist, rose to prominence for her fearless advocacy against gender-based discrimination and her call for the end of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia (Aratani, 2019). In May 2018, Loujain was detained and held incommunicado for weeks without any formal charges. Her arrest was part of a wider crackdown on women activists who were demanding fundamental rights. **During her imprisonment, Loujain Al Hathloul endured not only physical abuse but also psychological torment (Reuters, 2019)**. Reports suggest that she was subjected to torture, including beatings, electric shocks, and waterboarding. Furthermore, she faced sexual harassment and assault. The severity of her treatment was a stark warning to others who dared to challenge the established norms in the Kingdom (Rotundi, 2020; Al-sulami, 2019).

Despite global outcry and demands for her release, **Loujain Al Hathloul was sentenced to nearly six years in prison by a Saudi court in December 2020**. The charges against her included activities such as contacting foreign journalists, attempting to apply for a job at the United Nations, and using social media to criticize the Saudi government. Her imprisonment sent shockwaves through the international community, highlighting the risks women face when advocating for change.

SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION AND UNFAIR SENTENCES: ONGOING CASES

The ongoing cases of **Noura al-Qahtani, Salma al-Shehab, and Israa al-Ghomgham** underscore a **disturbing pattern of systematic repression and unjust sentences faced by women in Saudi Arabia for their engagement in digital spaces (ESOHR, 2021)**. In August 2022, Noura al-Qahtani received a 45-year prison sentence and a 45-year travel ban. Her charges encompassed preparing, publishing, and storing material considered harmful to public order online, including tweets that allegedly insulted state symbols. Similarly, Salma al-Shehab, an activist, confronted a 34-year prison sentence and a 34-year travel ban, later reduced to 27 years. Her charges involved disseminating false information through writing and tweets on her Twitter account, aiming to undermine public order and destabilize public security. Israa al-Ghomgham faced a grave threat of execution before being sentenced to 8 years in prison, later increased to 10 years. Her charges, framed as crimes against the state, included creating a YouTube channel and using social media.

These cases collectively expose the severe sentences and official violence against women in Saudi Arabia engaged in online activities. The government's use of social media accounts, known as "electronic flies," to surveil and intimidate activists further highlights the extreme measures taken to control dissenting voices. The systematic campaigns paint a bleak picture of the challenges women encounter in the Kingdom when asserting their rights in the digital realm. Despite the adversity, there is a glimmer of hope. Fatin Selim, a Saudi woman, notes a qualitative shift in Arab women's cyberactivism, emphasizing solidarity in addressing issues on platforms like Twitter. This resilience signifies a positive evolution in women's awareness and collective action against OGBV.



THE RESURGENCE OF #METOO IN EGYPT: NADEEN ASHRAF AND ASSAULT POLICE

Gender-based violence casts a pervasive shadow over the lives of Egyptian women, infiltrating their daily experiences on the streets and in the vast expanse of the online space. **According to a UN study, online harassment or hate speech is 27 times more likely to be directed at women, despite women being 20% less likely to use the Internet than men (UN News, 2023).**

“Cyber-Terrorism”: Egyptian Feminist Leaders Targeted on Social Media

Feminist content creators and advocates for women's rights in Egypt frequently find themselves subjected to malicious smear campaigns and harassment across various social media platforms. The arsenal of attacks encompasses hacking, hate speech, defamation, and even Non-Consensual Intimate Image (NCII) abuse. **The consequences of such assaults extend far beyond the digital realm, as harassers often go to the extent of circulating personal information, images, and videos on social media platforms.** This not only invades the privacy of these women but also exposes them to tangible threats of physical violence. For instance, the founder of the Superwomen initiative, was immediately attacked after criticizing a post by a Salafi preacher about polygamy (Superwomen, 2024). Samira Abdul Qadir, founder of Polygamy Control, had her Facebook page and personal accounts suspended six times, during a reporting campaign because she criticized Egyptian laws she deemed unfair towards women.

A notorious example of such targeted harassment is observed through the Telegram channel named "Dashmel", with more than 7,000 members (Kamal, 2023). This channel specifically focuses on targeting girls and young women engaged in feminist advocacy on social media. Through orchestrated campaigns, "Dashmel" seeks to discourage girls from associating with women's rights causes, thereby creating an environment of intimidation and fear for those daring to voice their support for gender equality.

LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Before 2014, sexual harassment was not recognized as a crime under Egyptian law (Marzouk and Vanderveen, 2021). **Youth-led feminist movements have denounced the ineffective cyber-security and sexual harassment law.** Following a case of sexual assault that happened in the Tahrir square during celebration of President Sisi's victory, the law was amended, and the sentence was longer and harsher for perpetrators (Al Jazeera, 2014). Despite this progress, women's rights advocates still persistently call for the thorough and effective implementation of this amended law.

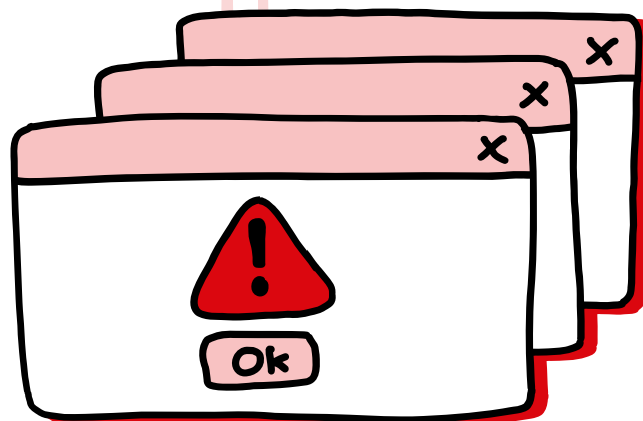
HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA: THE IMPACT OF ASSAULT POLICE

In response to the prevalence of sexual harassment at the American University in Cairo, **Nadeen Ashraf**, a student at the time created an Instagram account to expose one of **the most notorious harassers on campus, Ahmed Bassam Zaki (Walsh, 2020)**. The impact of this initiative was swift and significant, with the page garnering over 70,000 followers within a mere week. **Nadeen Ashraf's efforts not only led to the arrest of Zaki but also reignited the #MeToo movement in 2021**, inspiring Egyptian women to break their silence and share their own stories of harassment.

The Assault Police initiative evolved beyond a platform for naming and shaming a single individual to address broader issues of discrimination and sexism. **It demonstrated the adaptability required for success on visual-based platforms like Instagram, using memes, screenshots, and artwork to engage more than 300,000 followers and build awareness around sexual violence against women.** The targeted harassment experienced by feminist leaders emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive legal measures to safeguard women's rights in Egypt. Initiatives such as Assault Police, demonstrate the potential for online platforms to empower and unite against sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

The case studies across the SWANA region illustrate a shared struggle faced by digital activists combating censorship, cyberattacks, and online gender-based violence while advocating for gender equality, democratic freedoms, and human rights. Despite facing these challenges, including state-sponsored surveillance, cyberbullying, and legal repercussions, these activists demonstrate remarkable resilience. They employ digital tools to mobilize support, foster solidarity, and amplify their advocacy efforts, showcasing the power of digital platforms in enabling social change. These narratives underline the urgent need for a collaborative approach to enhance digital safety, advocate for legal protections, and ensure that online spaces support free expression and activism.



RESULTS

Drawing from the insights of activists and experts across the SWANA region, **this comprehensive analysis delves into the nuanced landscape of digital activism.** It reveals the widespread challenges faced by advocates, including online violence, cyberbullying, censorship, and specific hurdles encountered by women and LGBTQ+ communities as in OGBV. **The compilation of diverse narratives, alongside contributions from focus groups, illuminates the intricate relationship between digital activism and issues of security, gender equality, and freedom of expression.**

The findings of this research underscore not just the adversities but also the resilience and innovative strategies activists deploy to navigate the digital space securely and effectively. Advocating for a suite of actionable recommendations, the report calls for enhanced digital security measures, the promotion of gender equality within the tech sector, and comprehensive policy reforms to protect digital activists. These strategies are integral to supporting the crucial efforts of activists advocating for human rights, democracy, and gender equality throughout the SWANA region.

The collective insights from experts and activists interviewed for this study illuminate a broad spectrum of research, activism, and goals dedicated to bolstering digital rights and empowering youth-led movements across the SWANA region. These contributors, with their wealth of knowledge and experience, underscore the vital intersection of technology, social justice, and youth empowerment in their work. They strive to navigate and mitigate the digital landscape's challenges, such as censorship, online harassment, and the digital divide.

OGBV and cyberbullying stand out as significant challenges, profoundly impacting women and LGBTQ+ communities and hindering their participation in digital activism. **Censorship, intensified by government surveillance and internet shutdowns, further complicates free expression online.** Activists' innovative strategies for safe navigation of online spaces, including encrypted communication and digital security tools, highlight the importance of community support and solidarity in combating OGBV and censorship.

Expert advocacy for stronger digital security measures and legal protections aims to safeguard activists online, emphasizing the need for gender equality within the tech sector and policies addressing the unique challenges faced by women and minority groups. **The report stresses the importance of equipping youth with the necessary tools to effectively leverage digital platforms and engage with policymakers to advocate for digital rights, reflecting the dynamic and complex political landscape of the SWANA region.**

Overall, the report's synthesis of challenges, resilience, and advocacy efforts paints a detailed picture of the current state of digital activism in the SWANA region. It calls for a multifaceted approach to support digital activism, including improving digital safety, promoting legal and policy reforms, and fostering supportive communities for activists. By addressing these needs, stakeholders can create a more inclusive, safe, and empowering digital landscape for activists committed to advancing human rights, democracy, and gender equality in the digital era.

EXPERTISE IN DIGITAL RIGHTS AND ACTIVISM

Experts in digital rights offer an in-depth understanding of the legal and technological frameworks that govern online spaces. Their research often explores the nuances of internet governance, data privacy, and freedom of expression online. **Activists, on the other hand, bring practical experience from the forefront of digital campaigns, highlighting the transformative power of social media and digital platforms to mobilize support, raise awareness, and enact social change.** Together, their expertise illuminates the potential of digital tools to advance human rights and democracy, as well as the risks these spaces pose to activists and diverse communities.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF ACTIVISTS AND EXPERTS

The primary objectives of those interviewed are multifaceted, reflecting the complexity of the digital activism landscape. One major goal is to advocate for and implement stronger protections for digital rights, ensuring that all individuals—regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status—have equal access to online platforms without fear of censorship or reprisal. This includes pushing for policies that protect against online harassment and violence, which disproportionately affects women and minority groups. Another key objective is to enhance the capacity of youth-led movements to leverage digital tools effectively. Recognizing the pivotal role of young activists in driving social change, experts and activists emphasize the need for training and resources that equip these leaders with the skills to navigate digital risks, engage with policymakers, and harness the power of online platforms to amplify their messages.

EMPHASIZING THE INTERSECTION OF DIGITAL RIGHTS AND YOUTH MOVEMENTS

A recurring theme across interviews is the critical intersection of digital rights and youth-led movements in the SWANA region.

Experts and activists underscore the unique position of young people as “digital natives”, who are both highly adept at using technology and disproportionately affected by its downsides. **The dynamic and often volatile political landscape of the SWANA region adds another layer of complexity, as youth movements navigate government surveillance, internet shutdowns, and targeted digital campaigns against activists.**

The insights gathered highlight a collective call to action: to support and protect digital spaces as open forums for expression, innovation, and activism.

By focusing on the intersection of digital rights and youth-led movements, stakeholders—including policymakers, tech companies, and civil society—can collaborate to create a more inclusive, safe, and empowering digital landscape for all, particularly for those who are bravely pushing the boundaries of social change in the SWANA region.



Section 1:
Digital Activism Landscape



CHALLENGES IN ONLINE ACTIVISM

The online space, while a potent platform for activism and social change, presents significant challenges for intersectional youth movements. These challenges, as highlighted by experts and activists interviewed, underscore the complex digital landscape that activists navigate. Their experiences shed light on the pressing issues of online harassment, censorship, and tech-facilitated violence, which not only hinder their ability to advocate for change but also pose serious risks to their safety and well-being.

Online Harassment

Online harassment emerges as a pervasive issue, with activists frequently targeted for their advocacy work. For example, one activist from Yemen shared an experience where they were subjected to a coordinated harassment campaign after launching an online initiative for peace-building. The campaign included threats, doxxing (publishing private or identifying information), and the spread of misinformation, aiming to intimidate and silence their efforts. This incident illustrates the vulnerability of activists in the digital realm, where anonymity and the borderless nature of the internet can embolden harassers.

Tech-Facilitated Violence

Tech-facilitated violence encompasses a range of malicious activities, from cyberstalking and blackmail to the use of digital tools to coordinate physical attacks. A notable example shared by an activist involved the hacking of a feminist group's social media account in Morocco. The hackers posted false statements and offensive content to discredit the group. Additionally, the activists received anonymous messages threatening physical violence, demonstrating the intersection of online threats with real-world dangers.



Intersectional Challenges

Intersectional youth movements, which advocate on behalf of multiple marginalized identities, face compounded challenges online. LGBTQ+ activists in Tunisia shared their experiences of being targeted by hate speech and digital campaigns aimed at discrediting their advocacy for gender and sexual rights. These campaigns often leverage societal prejudices to isolate and attack activists, exacerbating the challenges faced by those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

The key challenges identified in the online space underscore the need for a multi-faceted approach to protect and support activists. Solutions must address the immediate safety concerns associated with online harassment and tech-facilitated violence, combat censorship to ensure the free flow of information, and recognize the additional burdens faced by intersectional movements. Strengthening digital literacy, advocating for clearer and more equitable policies on social media platforms, and enhancing legal protections against online harassment are crucial steps toward creating a safer online environment for all activists, particularly those representing youth-led and intersectional movements.

Sara Alwan's Experience

Sara Alwan's case is an example of the severe impact that online harassment can have on activists. She found herself the target of a relentless cyberbullying campaign that escalated to life-threatening proportions. This attack wasn't just an isolated incident of digital abuse; it was a focused effort to intimidate and silence her activism. Despite the extreme distress caused by this ordeal, Sara's situation also highlights the critical importance of timely support and intervention. With assistance from fellow activists and a supportive network, she was able to navigate through this crisis, underscoring the necessity of robust support systems for individuals facing similar threats. Sara's story, while distressing, serves as a testament to the resilience of activists and the essential role of community solidarity in overcoming the challenges posed by online harassment.

Nasim Al-Musllmi's Advocacy

Nasim Al-Musllmi's activism sheds light on the broader landscape of digital challenges faced by activists, especially in conflict-affected areas like Yemen. His dedication to human rights and peace-building in such a volatile environment is filled with obstacles, from combating misinformation to ensuring the digital security of his and his colleagues' online presence. Nasim's experiences emphasize the complexity of navigating online platforms as tools for activism, where the threats extend beyond mere cyberbullying to include targeted misinformation campaigns and digital surveillance. Despite these challenges, Nasim remains committed to leveraging digital platforms for advocacy, driven by a belief in the transformative power of informed and secure online activism. His work exemplifies the persistent effort required to maintain the integrity and efficacy of digital campaigns in the face of adversity.

These narratives underscore the urgent need for comprehensive digital literacy, security training, and a supportive community that can rally around those targeted by online harassment. Together, their stories not only highlight the perils of online activism but also celebrate the resilience, solidarity, and unwavering commitment of individuals fighting for justice and peace in the digital age.

Section 2:
Key Themes from Surveys and
Interviews



The survey responses from individuals in SWANA countries reveal a multifaceted array of challenges in the online space, shedding light on the significant barriers to free expression and engagement on digital platforms. The prevalence of online harassment, government censorship, data privacy concerns, and the spread of misinformation are identified as critical issues that impede digital freedoms and highlight the urgency for comprehensive strategies to safeguard online rights.

CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGES:

- **Online Harassment:** This category, encompassing hate speech, online stalking, doxxing, and gender-based violence, emerges as the most cited challenge. It underscores a pervasive culture of online abuse and targeted harassment that threatens individual safety and well-being.
- **Government Censorship and Surveillance:** Reflecting the political dynamics in SWANA countries, government monitoring and control over online expression pose significant challenges to freedom of speech and privacy.
- **Social Media Censorship and Deplatforming:** Arbitrary content removal and account suspensions by social media platforms without clear justification further restrict the freedom of expression, demonstrating the need for more transparent and accountable platform governance.
- **Disinformation / Misinformation:** The rampant spread of false information complicates the dissemination of accurate content, impacting public perception and understanding of critical issues.
- **Data Privacy Concerns:** Anxiety over personal data being collected, shared, or exploited without consent highlights the growing need for robust data protection measures.
- **Mental Health Impacts and Burnout:** The psychological toll of continuous online engagement, exacerbated by harassment and surveillance, indicates the need for support systems to address mental health concerns in digital spaces.

Examples of Experiences:

- Incidents of gender-based violence and discrimination leading to individuals deleting their online accounts.
- Cases of government oppression against activists prompting self-censorship to avoid surveillance and repercussions.
- Experiences of harassment and disinformation campaigns targeting individuals, undermining their safety and the credibility of their messages.
- The significant negative impacts on mental health due to sustained online harassment and the pressure of constant vigilance.

IMPACT ON ONLINE ACTIVITY:

- The cumulative effect of these challenges has led many to significantly alter their online behavior, including deleting accounts, switching platforms, and limiting their digital footprint to avoid exposure to harassment and surveillance.
- A cautious approach to online posting, aiming to minimize risks of triggering further harassment or censorship, reflects a broader trend of self-censorship among individuals from SWANA countries.

The survey elucidates the multifaceted digital challenges encountered by intersectional youth movements within SWANA countries, drawing attention to the critical intersection of digital rights with overarching issues of freedom, security, and governance through an intersectional lens. It underscores the imperative for a tailored, multi-dimensional response that incorporates legal reforms, ensures platform accountability, and enhances support for young activists in the region navigating these intricate challenges.

Given the pivotal role of digital platforms in facilitating intersectional youth-led initiatives for social, political, and personal advocacy in SWANA countries, safeguarding their openness and safety is essential for promoting digital freedoms and empowering the diverse voices of youth. This approach not only aims to advance digital liberties within the region but also seeks to elevate the visibility and impact of intersectional youth movements in SWANA, empowering them to enact inclusive and transformative changes that resonate across global and local spectrums.

ONLINE CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS

- **Primary Thematic Areas:** The surveyed organizations are actively engaged in a broad spectrum of social justice issues, including Intersectional Feminism, Digital Rights, Democracy/Civic Engagement, LGBTQIA+, Digital Safety, Cyberviolence, and Sexual and Reproductive Health. Their work encompasses advocacy, online activism, education, policy development, and capacity building, highlighting a multifaceted approach to addressing systemic inequalities and promoting social change.
- **Platforms for Engagement:** To reach their audience and conduct their activities, organizations utilize a mix of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (referred to as X), Facebook, and TikTok, alongside specialized non-corporate, open-source alternatives for more secure and value-aligned communication and collaboration. This choice of platforms underscores the importance of digital spaces in contemporary activism and the need for a diverse toolset to navigate the online ecosystem effectively.

- **Encountered Difficulties:** Organizations face several challenges that hinder their efforts, including Eurocentric biases, digital literacy gaps among target populations, the complexities of legal jurisdiction in online spaces, and significant resource limitations. These obstacles are compounded by the need to maintain the privacy and security of their communities while ensuring that technical and advocacy information is both accessible and engaging.
- **Challenges in the Online Space:** The digital domain presents its own set of challenges, notably Online Harassment, Social Media Censorship, Mental Health Impacts, Government Censorship and Surveillance, Disinformation/Misinformation, Data Privacy Concerns, and Online Gender-Based Violence. Specific incidents reported include backlash from political figures, shadow banning, and difficulties in content visibility due to platform algorithms and policies. These challenges not only disrupt the organizations' ability to communicate and engage but also pose significant risks to their members' well-being and safety.
- **Adaptive Strategies and Impact:** In response to these online challenges, organizations have adopted various adaptive strategies to maintain their presence and effectiveness. These include removing followers, employing self-censorship, creating backup accounts, and migrating activities to independent websites to circumvent censorship. While these measures have allowed organizations to continue their advocacy, they also signify the compromises and additional burdens shouldered by activists in the digital age.

The survey responses illuminate the resilience and creativity of social justice organizations in the face of online adversity. However, **they also highlight the pressing need for safer, more inclusive digital platforms that support the essential work of advocacy and activism.** As these organizations navigate the complex interplay of digital challenges and opportunities, their experiences underscore the critical role of solidarity, digital literacy, and strategic adaptation in sustaining the momentum of social justice movements in the digital era.

This section highlights the pervasive challenges and dynamic responses in the realms of gender equality in tech and the legal frameworks governing digital safety.

GENDER EQUALITY AND TECH INDUSTRY CHALLENGES

Marwa Azelmat's transition from an IT engineer to a human rights lawyer symbolizes a deep dive into the intersection of technology, gender rights, and social justice. Marwa's narrative sheds light on the stark gender disparities prevalent in the tech industry—a sector renowned for innovation yet marred by traditional gender biases. She emphasizes the critical need for "technology design with a Moroccan perspective," arguing that such an approach is essential for creating tech products that are not only inclusive but also reflective of the unique cultural and social context of North African users.

Marwa's advocacy goes beyond calling for gender diversity in tech; it's about reshaping the tech landscape to be more equitable and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. She points out the double bind women face: navigating a male-dominated industry while also dealing with societal expectations that limit their participation in tech and digital activism. Her insights highlight a crucial gap in the tech industry's approach to diversity and inclusion, underscoring the importance of creating family-friendly policies and supportive environments that encourage women to remain and thrive in the tech field.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR DIGITAL SAFETY

Zaid Amali, a Palestinian activist, highlights the challenges posed by online censorship and the need for robust legal and policy frameworks to safeguard digital activists. Living under Israeli occupation is the root cause behind the challenges that Palestinian activists face online. Zaid also emphasizes the misuse of the cybersecurity law by the Palestinian Authority, which, instead of safeguarding Palestinian users from online smearing and sexual harassment, is used to target and profile activists and those who express dissent. Zaid's narrative is a testament to the resilience of activists working under the constant threat of digital surveillance, censorship, and tech-facilitated violence, which translates on the ground offline. He describes how Palestinian voices are systematically silenced online, with social media platforms often becoming arenas of geopolitical control rather than spaces for free expression.

The challenges highlighted by Zaid underscore **the urgency for comprehensive legal and policy reforms aimed at protecting digital activists, especially in regions fraught with conflict and political instability**. He advocates for the implementation of international digital standards and the support systems provided by organizations like 7amleh, which focus on the digital rights of Palestinians. Zaid's call to action is clear: there is a dire need for policies that not only prevent tech-facilitated violence but also ensure that digital platforms serve as safe spaces for activism rather than tools of oppression.

Zaid's and Marwa's stories, while distinct, converge on a common theme: the critical need for systemic change in both the tech industry and legal frameworks to create a more inclusive, safe, and equitable digital landscape for activists. Their insights provide a roadmap for addressing the complex challenges faced by digital activists in the SWANA region, highlighting the intersectionality of technological, legal, and societal factors in shaping the future of digital activism.



Section 3:
Insights from Focus Groups



This section delves deeper into the lived experiences and collective wisdom gathered from focus groups, providing a granular view of the specific challenges and resilience of women activists and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in the SWANA region. The insights underscore the intersectional struggles and the imperative for nuanced, context-sensitive solutions.

EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN ONLINE SPACES

In Focus Group 1, women activists from Morocco and Tunisia shared their firsthand experiences with gender-based discrimination and cyberbullying, painting a vivid picture of the digital adversities they face. A participant from Tunisia shared a chilling incident involving her colleague. Following their participation in a workshop advocating for sex education, the activist experienced a harrowing situation where her personal information and workplace details were leaked. Given her role as a teacher, parents voiced their frustration regarding her advocacy, illustrating the direct impact of cyberbullying and doxing on the activists' personal safety, mental well-being, and professional livelihood. Another activist highlighted how gender-based discrimination isn't just about the content of online attacks but also about the systemic silencing of women's voices in digital forums, where their contributions are often dismissed or met with hostility.

The group collectively emphasized the need for robust support systems that go beyond reactive measures against harassment. They called for proactive strategies that empower women activists with digital literacy and security skills, alongside advocating for legal reforms that recognize and punish cyberbullying as a serious offense. Participants also discussed the importance of solidarity networks that provide psychological support and advocacy, illustrating the power of community in combating online violence.

ADVOCACY FOR LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN CONSERVATIVE SOCIETIES

Focus Group 2 provided critical insights into the challenges of advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in conservative societies, where cultural norms and laws often significantly restrict the freedom of expression and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. Participants shared how the online space, while offering a platform for advocacy, also exposes activists to heightened risks, including hate speech, doxing, and targeted harassment campaigns.

One poignant story involved a campaign that used social media to inform about an HIV awareness event for LGBTQ+ individuals. In anticipation of a dangerous escalation of threats against participants and organizers, it was necessary to adapt the organization's communication accordingly. This incident underscored the precarious balance LGBTQ+ activists and advocates for LGBTQ+ individuals must navigate between utilizing digital platforms for visibility and advocacy and protecting themselves and their communities from backlash and violence.

The discussion underscored the critical need for safe online spaces where LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities' voices, including sex workers, can be heard without fear of retribution. Participants called for social media platforms to enforce their anti-harassment policies more stringently and for the creation of digital tools that cater specifically to the safety needs of these users. Moreover, there was a consensus on the necessity of legal and societal changes that foster a more inclusive and accepting environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, both online and offline.

The focus groups highlighted not only the challenges faced by women and LGBTQ+ activists in the digital realm but also their resilience, innovation, and the critical role of collective action and international solidarity in advancing their rights. **These discussions point towards the need for a multi-layered approach to digital activism, one that incorporates strong legal protections, supportive policies from tech companies, and an empowered community of activists equipped with the knowledge and tools to navigate and transform the digital landscape.**



Section 4:
Intersectionality and Online Activism



In exploring the nuanced landscape of digital activism, it's crucial to understand the concept of intersectionality—how overlapping identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and class, contribute to unique experiences of oppression and discrimination. This section examines the complex challenges faced by activists at these intersections, particularly in online spaces, and sheds light on the innovative strategies they employ to navigate and counteract these challenges.

COMPOUNDED CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL SPACES

Activists with intersecting marginalized identities often encounter intensified forms of harassment and censorship online. For instance, a Black feminist activist from Tunisia shared her experience of being targeted not only for her advocacy for women's rights but also for her racial identity, resulting in a barrage of racist and sexist abuse on social media platforms. Similarly, an LGBTQ+ activist with a disability from Morocco recounted how ableism compounded the harassment faced, with attackers using their disability as another vector for abuse.

These incidents underscore a troubling reality: online spaces, while democratizing in theory, can also replicate and amplify societal prejudices, making activism a potentially perilous endeavor for those at the intersection of marginalized identities. The lack of nuanced content moderation policies that recognize and address intersectional harassment further exacerbates the problem, leaving many activists feeling unprotected and silenced.

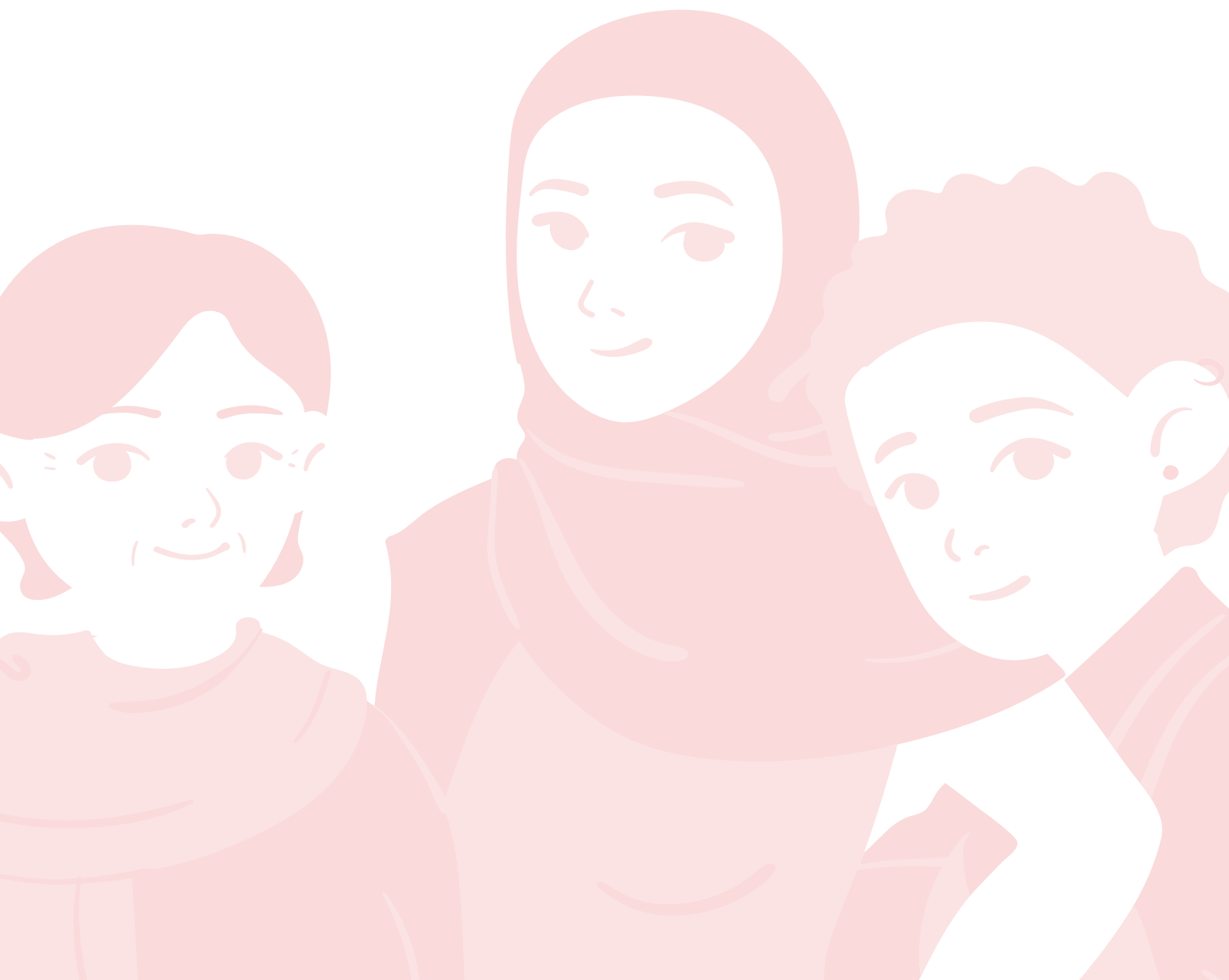
STRATEGIES FOR NAVIGATING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Despite these daunting challenges, activists have developed a range of strategies to protect themselves and their communities online. One common approach is the creation of closed, moderated online spaces where activists can share experiences, strategies, and support in a safer environment. These spaces not only serve as a refuge from the hostility of broader online platforms but also as incubators for collaborative activism and solidarity across borders.

Digital literacy and security training tailored to the specific needs of intersectional activists have also emerged as crucial tools. By understanding the mechanics of online harassment and the available digital protections, activists can better safeguard their privacy and security online. Workshops on secure communication, data protection, and anonymity tools are increasingly offered by advocacy groups, highlighting the importance of technical empowerment in the fight against digital harassment.

Furthermore, intersectional activists are pushing for systemic changes within social media companies and legal systems. **Campaigns aimed at highlighting the inadequacies of current content moderation policies and advocating for more inclusive and intersectional guidelines are gaining traction.** Activists are also lobbying for legal reforms that recognize the specific threats faced by marginalized communities online, advocating for laws that address online harassment with the seriousness and nuance it demands.

The intersection of various marginalized identities brings with it compounded challenges in online activism but also fosters a rich ground for innovative resistance strategies. **By drawing on the strength of their diverse identities and experiences, intersectional activists are not only navigating the treacherous waters of digital spaces but are also actively working to transform them into safer, more inclusive environments.** This section highlights the resilience and ingenuity of these activists, underscoring the critical need for supportive policies, legal protections, and community solidarity to ensure their voices are heard and their rights are protected online.



Section 5:
**Impact on Activities
and Mental Health**



The digital realm, while a platform for advocacy and change, has also introduced significant challenges affecting the activities and mental health of activists. The pervasive nature of online harassment, censorship, and tech-facilitated violence has led to notable shifts in how activists engage online and has had profound effects on their mental well-being.

ADAPTING ONLINE STRATEGIES

Activists have found themselves compelled to adapt their online strategies to navigate the hostile digital environment. For instance, some have resorted to changing platforms, seeking spaces that offer better protection against harassment or more favorable policies towards free speech. Others have modified their digital engagement tactics, such as using pseudonyms to protect their identities or leveraging encrypted communication tools to maintain privacy. A feminist group in Tunisia shared how they had to segment their online presence, creating private groups to discuss sensitive topics away from the public eye, thus safeguarding their members from potential backlash.

These adaptations, while necessary, come with their own set of challenges, including reduced visibility for important causes and the constant threat of being silenced. The mental toll of remaining vigilant and the fear of attack can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout among activists, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR YOUTH MOVEMENTS

The importance of robust support systems in supporting youth movements to overcome online challenges cannot be overstated. Organizations like Access Now and the Electronic Frontier Foundation provide digital security training, legal advice, and advocacy for policy change, offering crucial support to activists facing digital threats. However, there's a pressing need for more localized support systems that understand the unique cultural and political contexts of the SWANA region.

LEGAL AND POLICY CHANGES

Legal and policy reforms are essential to create a safer environment for digital activism. Recommendations from experts and activists include the enactment of laws that specifically address online harassment and tech-facilitated violence, with clear definitions and penalties that deter perpetrators. Additionally, policies that promote digital literacy and safe online practices among the youth can empower them to navigate digital spaces more securely.

Section 6:
Brief Synthesis of
Cross-Cutting Themes



In synthesizing the rich and comprehensive findings of this report, we distill the essence of the challenges, strategies, and aspirations of digital activists in the SWANA region into key cross-cutting themes. These themes illuminate the complex interplay of factors that shape the digital activism landscape, offering insights into the lived experiences of those at the forefront of advocating for social justice online.

1. Pervasiveness of Online Harassment and Censorship: A recurring theme across all methods of data collection is the widespread incidence of online harassment and censorship. Activists, particularly those representing marginalized communities such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals, face relentless harassment. This harassment ranges from targeted attacks, such as doxxing and cyberbullying, to more systemic forms of silencing, including censorship by state authorities and social media platforms. These experiences not only underscore the hostile environment in which digital activists operate but also highlight the resilience and determination of these individuals and groups to continue their advocacy despite these challenges.

2. Intersectional Challenges and Resilience: The concept of intersectionality emerges prominently, revealing how overlapping identities exacerbate vulnerabilities and challenges in digital spaces. Activists with intersecting marginalized identities face intensified forms of harassment and discrimination. Despite this, they employ innovative strategies for resilience, creating safe spaces, leveraging encrypted communication, and fostering solidarity networks. These strategies not only allow them to navigate the digital realm more safely but also enable them to push back against the forces seeking to silence their voices.

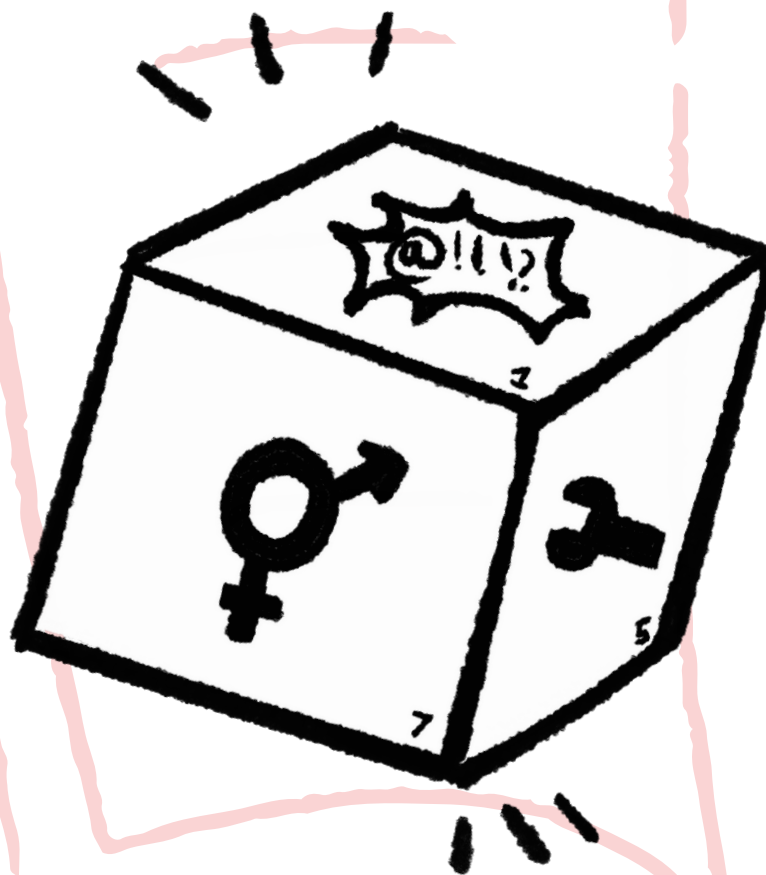
3. Adaptations to Digital Threats: The adaptation of digital strategies in response to harassment, censorship, and surveillance is a testament to the agility and creativity of activists. Changing platforms, using pseudonyms, and segmenting online presence are among the tactics employed to mitigate risks. However, these adaptations often come at the cost of visibility and impact, underscoring the need for a balanced approach that ensures safety without compromising the efficacy of digital activism.

4. The Critical Role of Support Systems: Support systems, including digital security training, legal advice, and advocacy networks, play a pivotal role in empowering activists to confront digital challenges. The call for localized support that understands the unique contexts of the SWANA region is clear, highlighting the importance of culturally and politically sensitive approaches to supporting digital activism.

5. Urgency for Legal and Policy Reforms: Across surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the demand for comprehensive legal and policy reforms to protect digital activists and ensure a safer online environment is evident. Activists advocate for laws that specifically address online harassment and tech-facilitated violence, alongside policies that promote digital literacy and safe online practices. These reforms are seen as crucial steps toward creating a digital landscape that supports free expression and activism without fear of retribution.

6. Mental Health Impacts: The mental health impacts of sustained online engagement, harassment, and the pressure of digital activism are profound. Anxiety, depression, and burnout are common among activists, underscoring the need for mental health support alongside digital security and legal protections.

7. Gender Equality in Tech: The struggle for gender equality in the tech industry is highlighted, with activists calling for the industry to address gender disparities and create inclusive environments. This includes designing technology and digital policies that consider the needs and perspectives of diverse users, particularly those from marginalized communities.



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**Section 7:
Refining Recommendations
for Enhancing Digital Activism**



This section elaborates on strategic recommendations derived from the collective insights of activists who navigate the complexities of online advocacy. These recommendations are crafted to cultivate a more secure, inclusive, and empowering online environment, essential for the flourishing of digital activism. They address the need for fortified support systems, enhanced legal frameworks, and a proactive stance from tech companies in protecting digital spaces.

STRENGTHENING DIGITAL SAFETY TRAINING

To mitigate the risks faced by activists, especially those from underrepresented communities, it's imperative to offer specialized digital safety training. Collaborations between advocacy organizations and cybersecurity experts should focus on creating comprehensive training modules that cover secure communication practices, data protection, and effective response strategies to online harassment. Accessibility is key; therefore, these resources must be available in various languages and formats to cater to a global audience.

ESTABLISHING CLEARER LEGAL PROTECTIONS

The absence of specific legal protections for online harassment and cyberbullying creates a precarious situation for digital activists. Crafting legislation in close consultation with those at the frontline of digital activism ensures the laws are grounded in the lived experiences of those affected. These legal frameworks must balance the protection of individuals from digital harm with the upholding of free expression, avoiding any potential for misuse that could curb legitimate dissent.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS TAILORED FOR ACTIVISTS

Creating dedicated support infrastructures for activists under digital duress is crucial. This includes providing legal counsel, psychological support, and emergency assistance to those facing imminent threats. Establishing networks where activists can exchange knowledge, strategies, and moral support plays a vital role in building resilience within the activist community. Such networks not only offer practical aids in times of crisis but also foster a sense of solidarity and collective strength, crucial for sustaining the momentum of digital activism.



TECH COMPANIES' ROLE IN SAFEGUARDING DIGITAL SPACES

Tech companies bear a significant responsibility in shaping the safety and inclusivity of online platforms. Their policies and practices have a direct impact on the ability of activists to engage in meaningful advocacy without fear of harassment or censorship.

- **Improving Content Moderation:** Companies should adopt nuanced content moderation policies that are sensitive to the context and intention behind user-generated content. This is particularly vital in regions with high political sensitivity, where the line between censorship and safety is thin. Moderation practices should be transparent and involve input from a diverse set of voices, including those from marginalized and activist communities.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Transparency in the decision-making process related to content removal and account suspensions is essential for trust-building. Tech companies should not only provide clear rationales for their actions but also establish a transparent and accessible appeals process for users. Publishing detailed transparency reports can further enhance accountability and public trust.
- **Engagement with Civil Society:** Active and ongoing dialogue with civil society organizations and activists can equip tech companies with deeper insights into the challenges and needs of digital activists. Such engagement can inform the development of platform policies, content moderation practices, and safety features that are more aligned with the needs of activists.
- **Enhancing Privacy and Security Features:** Developing and promoting privacy and security features that cater specifically to the needs of activists is paramount. Tools for anonymity, encrypted communication, and rapid response mechanisms for reporting harassment can significantly improve the safety of activists online. Additionally, platforms should explore ways to elevate the voices of activists and marginalized communities, ensuring their messages reach broader audiences.

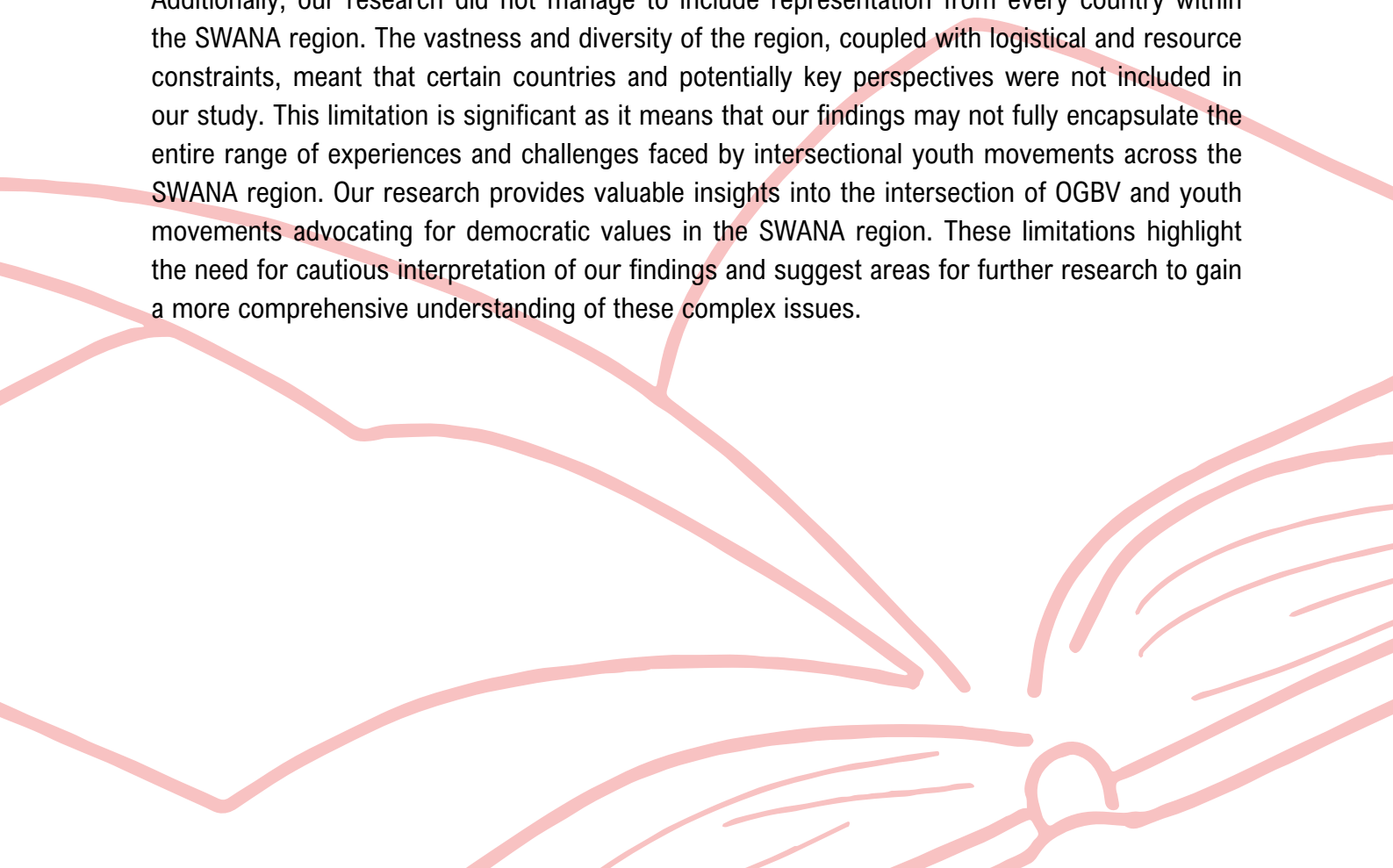
By implementing these recommendations, governments, civil society, activists, and tech companies can collaboratively forge a digital environment that is both safe and conducive to activism. This collective effort is not only vital for enhancing the effectiveness of digital activism but also for safeguarding the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and participation in the digital age. Strengthening legal protections, enhancing support systems, and ensuring that online platforms serve as safe spaces for activism are essential steps toward empowering digital activists in the SWANA region and beyond to continue their invaluable work without fear of reprisal or violence.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

In conducting this research, we encountered several limitations that are important to acknowledge for a comprehensive understanding of our findings. One of the primary challenges was verifying the reliability of the information presented to us via surveys. A significant number of participants chose to remain anonymous, which, while understandable given the sensitive nature of the subject and potential personal risks, made it difficult to fully ascertain the authenticity and context of their responses. This anonymity could have been motivated by fear of reprisal or censorship, but in some cases, it was unclear whether the motivation was fear or the financial stipends we provided for participation, which could influence the responses.

Another notable limitation is the persisting digital divide within the SWANA region. Despite the increasing use of technology for activism, disparities in access to digital resources and varying levels of digital literacy significantly impacted our ability to reach a broader and more diverse set of respondents. This divide not only limits the inclusivity and representativeness of our study but also reflects the broader challenges that activists face in leveraging technology for democratic engagement and combating gender-based violence (GBV).

Additionally, our research did not manage to include representation from every country within the SWANA region. The vastness and diversity of the region, coupled with logistical and resource constraints, meant that certain countries and potentially key perspectives were not included in our study. This limitation is significant as it means that our findings may not fully encapsulate the entire range of experiences and challenges faced by intersectional youth movements across the SWANA region. Our research provides valuable insights into the intersection of OGBV and youth movements advocating for democratic values in the SWANA region. These limitations highlight the need for cautious interpretation of our findings and suggest areas for further research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these complex issues.



CONCLUSION

The exploration of intersectional youth movements in the SWANA region illuminates the resilience of youth activists who navigate a complex socio-political terrain, leveraging technology to champion democratic values and gender equality. This research underscores the pivotal role of digital platforms in amplifying voices that are often marginalized, yet it also brings to light the significant obstacles these movements encounter, from the digital divide to Tech-Facilitated Violence. The challenges of OGBV and systemic issues like surveillance and censorship pose real threats to the safety and efficacy of activists, revealing a critical need for comprehensive strategies that address both access and security.

Our findings highlight the importance of fostering an inclusive digital environment that supports the diverse needs of activists across the SWANA region. Enhancing digital literacy, ensuring equitable access to technology, and developing mechanisms to combat OGBV are essential steps toward empowering these movements. Additionally, advocating for legal reforms and policy changes to protect activists from tech-facilitated violence and government surveillance is imperative.

As we conclude our research, it's evident that the path forward requires a collaborative effort among activists, tech companies, policymakers, and the international community. Together, we can work towards dismantling the barriers to digital activism and ensuring that the digital realm serves as a safe, inclusive space for advocating democratic values and gender equality. The courage and determination of intersectional youth movements in the SWANA region offer inspiring examples of how technology can be harnessed as a force for positive change, even in the face of adversity. Our research not only contributes to understanding these dynamics but also calls for action to support and protect the vital work of these activists in their pursuit of a just and equitable society.

GLOSSARY:

Digital Activism	involve the use of the internet and any other digital means for mass mobilization, raising awareness, and political action. It is one of the most common forms of activism today
Censorship	the suppression of information or ideas circulated among people to conceal facts, often used by external powers to silence online digital activists.
Civic Engagement	communities and individuals who unite together to promote and improve the quality of life in their community through both political and non-political means
Cyber Bullying	the use of electronic communications to bully and spread hate directed towards one person of a group often intimidating and threatening in nature
Cyber-Terrorism	the intention to cause digital chaos through disruptive attacks against digital systems and devices, often repressing activists and online movements
Cybersecurity	the system of protecting devices, systems and networks from digital attacks through softwares and other programs
Digital Apartheid	a multidimensional term referring to the systematic exclusion of certain communities online, often used as a repressional method for silencing these communities, minorities and groups
Digital Divide	refers to the gap between regions, groups, demographics, and communities in having access to technology and communications with this gap being widest in the global south
Digital Rights	they are linked to the freedom and rights of expression allowing individuals to access and use digital media and communications safely
Gender Based Violence (GBV)	Understood as a violation of human rights embedded in a form of discrimination and violence against women because of their gender identity

GLOSSARY:

Intersectional Activism	A new form of activism that aims to dissociate itself from “white feminism” by acknowledging women’s different experiences and backgrounds that contribute in creating different identities
Intersectionality	the ways in which systems of inequality related to identity such as gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity intersect to create dynamics and effect making it harder for individuals to exist
Online Gender Based Violence (OGBV)	any gender-based violence facilitated through digital technologies like the internet. It is violence that can target one’s gender, sex, or sexual orientation. It can manifest in a number of ways such as identity theft, online threats, cyber-flashing, digital voyeurism, gender-based hate speech and many more.
Social Change	It refers to changes in local systems and human’s behaviours, interactions and relationships that transform social and cultural dimensions
Surveillance	Often used by governments or bigger intelligence groups in an invasive way to monitor a group of community’s engagements
SWANA	SWANA is a decolonial and geographical term that represents the various communities located in Southwest Asia and North Africa. Another term used to describe the region is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)
Tech-Facilitated Violence	any kind of violence (harassment, cyber attacks, hate speech) that is used through and amplified by technologies and digital space
Tech Optimists	A broad term used to describe individuals who believe that technology has the power to solve most of humanity’s pressing modern day issues



RESEARCH TEAM:



Yasmina Benslimane is an intersectional feminist activist and consultant who grew up between North Africa and the Middle East. She experienced first hand the “Revolution of Dignity” which led her to launch Politics4Her, as she strongly believes in the power of digital technologies in bringing meaningful change. Known for her digital activism and videos starting with “Hi everyone and welcome to another in this patriarchal world”, Yasmina has created a community with tens of thousands of similar minds alongside recognition for her work as a UN Women Peacebuilder in the Arab States, Forbes 30 Under 30, BBC 100 Most Influential and Inspiring Women in 2023, among others.

Chaimae Haddoumi, a master's grad in International Relations, Geopolitics, and Sociology from Morocco, is a passionate gender advocate. As Co-Director of Politics4Her Europe, she blends advocacy, research, and digital savvy. A migrant indigenous woman in France, she champions youth inclusion, climate justice, and minority rights. A Gen-Zer, she believes in tech's transformative power and fiercely defends voices against injustice. With policy briefs on Amazigh women and child marriage eradication, Chaimae's work is as impactful as it is fun.



Jessica Marvata is a feminist activist and LSE master's graduate in International Political Economy. As Advocacy Officer in Digital Rights at Politics4her, she tackles significant issues such as the digital gender divide, freedom of expression, online gender-based violence, internet governance and Big Tech corporate social responsibility. Her recent work at UNDP explored data and digitalization for development, and her dedication to freedom of expression extends to her work as a country researcher at Humanists International. Passionate about environmental and animal welfare, she campaigns for the Humane League and the Vegan Society.



Asmae Nakib is a Moroccan journalist currently based in Qatar. Passionate about writing, research, strategic communication, and audience development, she has participated in projects with different news outlets and agencies including CNN Arabic, Morocco World News and Al Jazeera Media Network. Dedicated to amplifying voices and advocating for women's rights and education in the SWANA region, her work from Rabat to Doha reflects a profound commitment to addressing crucial Global South issues and inspiring positive change. She joined Politics4Her in June 2023 as a communications officer and has since been in charge of a weekly newsletter "Femi-News", highlighting stories that affect women across the globe.

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

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