

Policy Brief

Revisiting the impact of Cybersecurity, Covid-19, and Conflict Nexus on Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists and Peacebuilders: Case study from Syria and Yemen

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Introduction

Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists, and Peacebuilders (WHRDAPs) are systematically targeted in the MENA region. They face significant violations such as gender-based threats, targeting of family members, harmful anti-gender narratives, state and non-state actors' hostility, stigmatization and ostracism, harassment, and great exposure to offline and online violence.

In Yemen and Syria, women play a vital role in peacebuilding despite facing extreme oppression. They face intersecting oppression by patriarchal society and gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of conflict. Additionally, WHRDAPs are now facing a new threat: they are exposed to online threats that aim to silence them, jeopardize their existence, and hinder their transnational work beyond borders, even in the diaspora and during the time of forced displacement.

While internet freedom is already undergoing severe restrictions and censorship in the MENA region, states and de facto authorities have used the pandemic as an excuse to continue their long-standing policy of repression. The pandemic, on the one hand, imposed new challenges on WHDRAPs. On the other hand, online spaces also offered WHDRAPs new opportunities and sometimes provided them with equal footing standing positions despite borders, limited mobility, and restrictions. Nevertheless, invisible cyber threats exacerbate risks for women, specifically WHRDAPs, who face uncertainty related to the shift towards digital spaces and online work without being prepared with the necessary tools, knowledge, and equipment to protect themselves and their families from these new risks.

WHRDAPs across the MENA region: threats, attacks, and other forms of harassment

In the last decade, the work of human rights defenders (HRD) in the world has been increasingly constrained and massively attacked. Several factors have been driving this, primarily the rise of populism, ascendancy, and violent extremism, which are then reinforced by the rhetoric of some prominent political leaders threatened by human rights values and women in particular. Increased repression of HRD, including WHRDAPs in Yemen and Syria, is highly prevalent in online and offline civic spaces under different forms. This repression includes attacks against family and relatives, restrictive or oppressive legal environments, torture, killings, forced disappearance, online harassment, moral accusations, and smear campaigns.

In the online space, women in the MENA region, in general, and in Yemen and Syria particularly, also remain vulnerable and threatened by misleading comments and propaganda driven by state and non-state actors and individuals on the grounds of "morality". These

different forms of violence led many WHRDAPs to opt out from the public space and the work of peacebuilding as an auto-coping mechanism in the face of significant threats and a lack of meaningful protection.

COVID-19's gendered impact on WHRDAP in Yemen and Syria

Countries affected by conflict suffer from a lack of reliable network infrastructure due to years of war and a lack of political will to provide accessible and reliable networks. In Yemen and Syria, despite the destroyed network infrastructure, limited options to the existing weak online network facilities, and the high cost of online access, online spaces and digital tools were essential to connecting civilians, internally displaced people, activists, WHRDAPs and humanitarian workers. The online shift propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic provided WHRDAPs with a new opportunity for a relatively more inclusive work modality. The online civic space allowed access to information that can be denied in person and allowed women in Syria and Yemen to have access to high-level meetings and convenings that were inaccessible in the pre-Covid-19 era due to the issue of entry visa requirements and mobility permissions.

However, the rapid and entire shift towards online spaces also laid significant risks to WHRDAPs, humanitarian and health workers. Access to online spaces was significantly unprotected and posed various negative consequences on WHRDAPs (unprotected access to their personal information, confidential data related to human rights violations, etc.). Indeed, the increased use of online civic space has led to a new form of violence coined “Electronic Gender-Based Violence” (E-GBV) from states, non-state actors and individuals with patriarchal behavior who oppose gender equality and women’s involvement in activism and peacebuilding.

These risks are amplified because WHRDAPs are not always equipped with the necessary digital tools due to the lack of transformable technological knowledge in their contexts and the narrow scope of funding aligned with foreign aid policies, which are most often gender-neutral. To that end, policy seeking to interrupt the onset of E-GBV should ensure that WHRDAPs have access to tools to mitigate the potential risk of E-GBV.

Conclusions

In online spaces, WHDRAPs face similar challenges to offline spaces in the sense that both spaces are male-dominated. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this gender gap and posed new struggles for WHDRAPs to continue their activities both online and offline.

It is essential to shed light on the lack of justice in dealing with protection for all WHRDAPs in the same way and size. WHRDAPs in non-English speaking conflict countries face additional challenges since the international stakeholders have developed early warning tools for linguistic threats based on the English language. Therefore, these systems designed to help protect WHRDAPs in online spaces are not working in areas where English is not the operating language and where there is a lack of interpretation of threatening vocabulary due to dialects’ diversity.

Furthermore, the lack of clarity on cyber security sources has mystified some WHRDAPs and has left them reluctant to report incidents. In some cases, this has led WHRDAPs to cease their roles in activism and peacebuilding.

Recommendations

Since cyber violence is not gender blind, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda needs to revisit the existing notion of violations against women to include a comprehensive interpretation adapted to the definition of modern human rights violations' which includes the violations occurring in the online civic spaces, specifically against WHRDAPs. Including these new risks and challenges to WHRDAPs will contribute to building meaningful and long-last peace by supporting women in peacebuilding and activist roles. The modernization of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda should be reflected in other existing agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Geneva Convention for Refugees, and other related international mechanisms.

Cyber-attacks and E-GBV pose significant threats that represent one of the factors behind the forcible displacement of WHRDAPs internally and internationally. Therefore, governments should consider a broader notion of protection applicable in cases of individual WHRDAPs and their family members if WHRDAPs require urgent relocation due to E-GBV and cyber-attacks.

International donors are invited to ensure cyber security measures are mandatory in their funding to cover the cost of cyber security software, VPN providers, anti-virus software, encrypted and secure data storage, and secured data collection tools. Flexible and core funding around these areas would be critical to enhance the cyber security of women-led feminist groups and women-led organizations.

From their side, NGOs, while designing their programs, should consider developing a rapid response mechanism for victims of E-GBV, which could include relevant mental health services and relocation support to survivors of E-GBV. Further, precaution and safeguard clauses must be localized and customized through cyber security training for WHRDAPs to meet their needs in their languages and dialects.

Finally, social platforms like META, Twitter, Instagram and others should review their digital violence policies and include rapid response mechanisms for women in the Global South. This would be possible through different measures like developing appropriate language indicators based on local dialects and hiring female native speakers to receive complaints and process requests from women at risk. Furthermore, these platforms must include local activists and grassroots representatives to understand better the risks they are facing and the best measures to address them.

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