



A Report on the Regional Forum for MENA Women Human Rights Defenders

September 2022

Innovation for Change
Network - Middle East and
North Africa
Gulf Centre for Human
Rights



**INNOVATION
FOR CHANGE**
MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA



GCHR
مركز الخليج لحقوق الإنسان

المنتدى الإقليمي
للمدافعات عن
حقوق الإنسان
الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

**Women Human
Rights Defenders
Regional Forum**
Middle East and North Africa



15-17 September 2022 17-15 سبتمبر 2022

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Introduction

Organised by the Innovation for Change Network - Middle East and North Africa and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, the Middle East and North Africa Regional Forum for Women Human Rights Defenders was held on 15, 16 and 17 September 2022.

A group of women human rights defenders from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Algeria, Yemen, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Bahrain participated in the Forum, working on various human rights issues.

The Forum aimed to create a safe space for women human rights defenders from countries in the region in order to share their experiences and stories, to inspire each other, celebrate their successes, and respond to the challenges they face. The Forum also aimed to build sustainable frameworks in order to increase the level of influence and create spaces in which women human rights defenders have ownership of their campaigns and narratives.

The Forum comes as a continuation of a concept that began in 2018 when a group of women human rights defenders met during a meeting to launch the Innovation for Change Middle East and North Africa in the Middle East and North Africa, and developed the initial vision for the Forum project. A series of community of practice (CoP) meetings were organised for the Forum, which contributed to the development of the Forum agenda and its main themes.

Innovation for Change is a global network, working through seven innovation centers around the world inspired by ideas, methods and technologies from various sectors, to find solutions that drive positive social change. As part of the Global Network for Innovation for Change (I4C), the Middle East and North Africa Hub was created in 2017 to be a network of people and institutions who connect, collaborate, share ideas, innovations and resources, and learn together in order to unite the purpose of opening up civic space and overcoming restrictions on civil liberties in Assembly, Association, and Expression in the Middle East and North Africa Region.

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation that provides support and protection to human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighboring countries in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. GCHR is based in Lebanon, and documents the reality of human rights defenders in the Gulf region and neighboring countries, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. GCHR was established in 2011.



A look at the situation of women human rights defenders

Khalid Ibrahim, Executive Director, Gulf Centre for Human Rights

The Women Human Rights Defenders Forum is a space for expression and reflection on issues related to women's rights, especially in light of the challenges that women face in the countries of the region.

Mouna Bengarga, Innovation for Change Manager, CIVICUS

The situation of civic space in the region, and the reality of human rights violations in the region, is what obliges us to continue solidarity and collective action. This Forum is a space for reflection and solidarity.

Reem Al-Salem, United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

There is a weakness in the information that we receive about the status of women's rights in the region, and this is due to many reasons, including the severe restrictions on civil spaces in the countries of the region.

Sarah Sheikh Ali, Chair of the Board of Directors, Innovation for Change Network - Middle East and North Africa-

The essence of women's struggle is solidarity and diversification of work tools. We hope that the Forum will be a space for rethinking the tools for the work of women human rights defenders and reformulating their own narratives.



Greetings to the women human rights defenders, whether present or not, who are fighting daily battles against tyranny and patriarchy.



Forum Objectives

1

Building Alliances



2

**Creating a safe space
to reformulate
narratives, campaigns
and coalitions**

3

**Sharing inspiring
experiences and
celebrating women
human rights
defenders**

Forum Agenda

Day One

A day to celebrate women human rights defenders through a discussion of inspiring experiences, in addition to networking spaces among the posts in the works of the Forum.



Day Two

A day for capacity development through parallel workshops, which revolve around four topics: Methods and tactics for advocacy, Protection mechanisms For women human rights defenders, Well-being, and Practical methods in dealing with gender-based violence online..



Day Three

A day aimed at reconciling challenges and solutions; Innovative and clear action plans for joint advocacy efforts in thematic working groups; as well as group well-being activities. At the end, wrap-up and evaluation.



A session to listen to the stories of Women Human Rights Defenders



Celebrating the human rights defenders

The first axis that the Forum dealt with was the celebration of five women human rights defenders from countries in the region. The aim was to identify the experiences of women defenders, and to draw the intersections between the challenges faced by women human rights defenders in the countries of the region. This axis constituted an important entry point for the Forum's work, by listening to the experiences of women with the aim of understanding the transformations, documenting what we are experiencing, and thinking about the prospects for what will happen.



The defenders were interviewed by Diana Moukalled, a Lebanese journalist and co-founder of Daraj media website.



Digital Security and Electronic Surveillance of Women Human Rights Defenders

Hala Ahed works on issues related to unions, demonstrators, and prisoners of conscience. Through her work, she has dealt with issues of discrimination against women, including gender-based violence. Her phone was hacked using spyware.



Hala Ahed, a lawyer and human rights defender from Jordan

She still does not know who was responsible for hacking her phone.

According to Hala Ahed, the timing of the surveillance raises the possibility that government agencies are responsible. Because of her support for trade union work, especially since the trade union file is a red line for the Jordanian authorities, and the surveillance took place at a time when the pace of arbitrary arrests increased, the stifling of spaces for expression, and the restriction of civil society. Despite what Ahed was exposed to, she is still working on many issues, including women's issues, and freedom of opinion and expression. Spying and hacking her phone caused Ahed great anxiety in the first place, as she didn't know the goal of those who wanted to spy on her and what they would do with her information, and she felt that whatever she did to protect her privacy and the privacy of those she dealt with would remain impotent.

Some of the challenges Hala Ahed faced due to the violation of privacy and surveillance: family pressure, constant concern about weak protection spaces, and a sense of helplessness

Despite feeling helpless and frustrated at many times, Hala Ahed decided to continue the struggle.

Exploiting the fear of a deterioration of the situation, as in the rest of the region's countries, exacerbated the situation of violations in Jordan

Restrictions imposed on Media and Women Journalists Defending Human Rights

The struggle of women is not a recent occurrence, but rather an old one that has been going on for decades.

Sanaa El Aji, a journalist and editor of “Marayana” (Our Mirrors) website from Morocco

Many, including a significant number of human rights activists and leftists, still consider defending women's rights and individual freedoms (freedom of belief, sexual freedoms, etc.) a mere human rights luxury, and they may sometimes imagine that the woman you are defending is a "permissible woman." Therefore, the defender of individual freedoms and women's rights becomes in confrontation not only with conservative currents, but also with some affiliated with left-wing, progressive modernist currents. This complicates her task and her daily life..

For Sanaa El Aji, the issue is complicated in Morocco because there are human rights developments but also some setbacks. But in general, Al-Aji considers that rights are not classified in a hierarchical manner, in which political rights and freedoms are of priority compared to individual rights and freedoms.

There are no priorities in rights, and each actor works according to his or her interests.

“Today, restrictions on the media are modernized, on top of the conventional restriction methods.”



Sanaa El Aji is a writer and researcher in sociology, and works on critical and intellectual political, religious and social issues.

Arrest, assault, harassment and surveillance against women human rights defenders

The continuation of the work of men and women human rights defenders is the main working tool against authoritarian regimes.



Ebtisam Al-Saegh is a human rights activist with a long experience in defending human rights. She was arrested, assaulted, harassed, and imprisoned several times. Her phone was hacked.

Ebtisam Al-Saegh, a human rights defender from Bahrain

Ebtisam Al-Saegh presented her experience and support for a large number of victims of human rights violations in Bahrain. This caused her to continue her struggle and motivates her to keep reminding others of the victims' sacrifices. For Al-Saegh, the continuation of the work of men and women human rights defenders is the main working tool against authoritarian regimes.

Through her work, Al-Saegh interacted with international human rights mechanisms, especially experts concerned with cases of torture, and provided them with information during several visits to Geneva. As a result of these activities, she was detained at the airport for seven hours, and prevented from communicating with her family. After that, her vehicle was set on fire. Throughout the years, Al-Saegh was summoned to investigations on numerous occasions without ever understanding the actual charges brought against her. During these investigations, she was subjected to threats related to her work and her children, in addition to imposing a travel ban on her.

She said, "In 2017, due to the complexities of the political and security situation, I was summoned for interrogation late at night. During this interrogation, I was subjected to physical and verbal abuse, in addition to various forms of torture." The experience was harsh, and Al-Saegh's family was targeted, with the arrest of her son, in addition to the constant harassment of her daughter at the university.

**Detention, travel ban,
preventing contact with her
family, vehicle arson, arrest
and torture...**

Hacking and the formulation of women human rights defenders' narratives

“Hacking can turn into a weapon to assassinate defenders, especially women defenders.”



Marwa Fatafta is a researcher from Palestine concerned with technology and human rights issues.

Marwa Fatafta, policy advisor for the MENA region at Access Now, from Palestine.

After the discourse brought about by the Arab Spring, the Israeli occupation targeted in 2015 each person who used social media on charges of committing terrorism against Israel. For Marwa Fatafta, hacking could turn into a weapon to assassinate defenders, especially women defenders. Fatafta elaborated on the seriousness of hacking, the methods used and their impacts on everyone, in particularly women. She also underlined the use of hacking as a method of political repression, defamation, harassment, and forcing women defenders to withdraw from public life.

She also pointed out that these attacks have markedly increased, especially electronic sexual harassment, against the backdrop of the absence of any international will to provide support to men and women defenders.

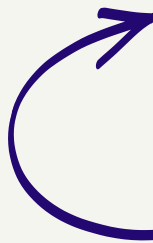
The session concluded by emphasizing the importance of feminist solidarity, and the importance of formulating the women defenders' narratives in order to analyze the intersections between these experiences, and to enhance feminist and human rights solidarity.

Political repression methods, defamation and harassment force women defenders to withdraw from public life.



Well-Being

Serenity Peace of mind
Freedom Contentment Healthy relations
Self love Recovery Enjoyment of rights
Financial independence
Being with like-minded people who are a source of comfort
Departing from the victim approach



Well-being for women defenders



Women defenders often face difficulties in expressing their feelings due to societal restrictions, or the women defenders themselves refusing to talk about their feelings and experiences, or even because women and women human rights defenders fear the consequences.

At the Forum, well-being was a recurrent theme throughout the three days, as well as providing a safe space for women defenders to talk about their feelings.



Well-Being

Sessions

Some of the issues raised by the participants



What is well-being?

THE CONCEPT OF "WELL-BEING" ITSELF AND CONFUSING IT WITH WELFARE OR ENTERTAINMENT (IN ARABIC)

Women defenders

Difficulty expressing what we feel as women defenders due to feelings of guilt because we are physically safe or not subjected to abuse



The influence of societal culture on thinking about well-being

Let's unite



THE RELATIVITY OF WELL-BEING BETWEEN PEOPLE AND BETWEEN ONE CONTEXT AND ANOTHER

Let's discuss



WELL-BEING AS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

A complex combination of feelings because of what we live through and what surrounds us

THE NEED TO DECONSTRUCT CHARACTERIZATION AND FORMULATE OUR OWN DEFINITION



Definitions are often projected on us and we have to deal with them in a flexible manner

Well-Being

Sessions

Some of the issues raised by the participants

- Some participants suggested that we, as women or mothers, consider ourselves responsible for the problems that surround us. That is the reason why we should learn to take care of ourselves without drowning in providing care to others.
- Care is a social construct defined by roles. Therefore, when women take care of themselves, strong accusations are made. The society does not accept care of masculine nature, and women are expected to provide care out of kindness or weakness.
- Given that care is a social construct, women expressing their feelings became synonymous with selfishness.
- Self-care is essential for us as women because of what we are subjected to. Blame is something we face which makes us fall short when it comes to caring for ourselves.
- Care is attention to details, and as women, we are often not cared for.
- Feminist solidarity is part of the care tools for women human rights defenders.
- This concept has different understandings in different environments and societies.
- The difficulty working on community care due to the complexities and difficulties of what we go through each day.
- The boundaries of the relationship between the individual and society are not clear to us most of the time. Distinguishing the individual and the collective is important so that part of our caring for others becomes part of our care system.

It is important to collectively share feelings. Narratives are tools that help women to show solidarity, feel that their experiences are similar, and that their feelings are not an imagined memory.

The violence women face is not an imagined memory.

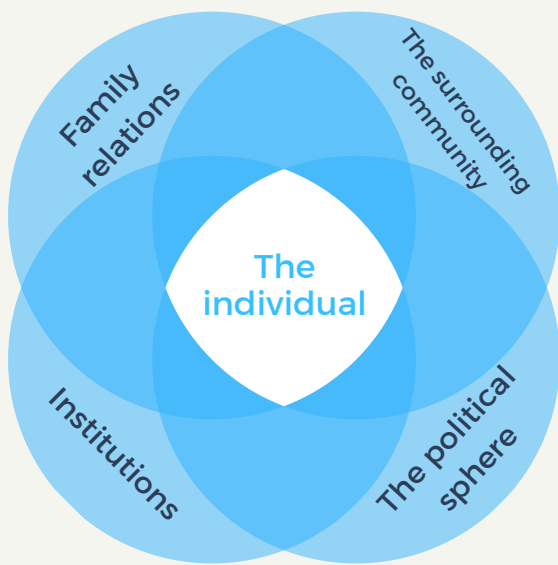
Solidarity is a collective survival mechanism for individuals and societies.

“Social Psychology” is an influential field of knowledge in examining a society's coping mechanisms. It is a discipline in which the public and private spheres interact, and the relationships between the various components intersect.

Well-Being

Sessions

Some of the issues raised by the participants



During the sessions dedicated to well-being, the women defenders discussed their various experiences of threats that impacted them as women or as actors within human rights or feminist institutions. By presenting their experiences, they concluded that a number of individual and collective work tools are required to ensure the well-being of women human rights defenders.

The well-being system is a path that works to protect the individual by taking preventive measures against the violations taking place, in addition to the application of protection measures in the post-occurrence phase. It is a fundamental aspect in our lives as women defenders, because it is connected to social justice and our right to protection as women defenders, and is essential for ensuring our mental health.



The importance of breaking barriers to build trust: As women defenders, we must deal with expression and speech as a tool to break the barriers within the group.

Well-Being

Sessions

Some of the issues raised by the participants



In life, we are faced by many obstacles that require us to overcome them by various means and work to rectify wrongdoings, which may result in something better than the presumed ordinary course of things.



Advocacy

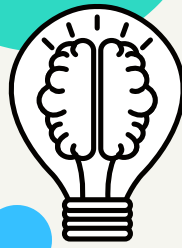
Advocacy-related definitions

The importance of involving men in advocating for women's rights

A process for the inclusion of individuals and groups in decision-making

The importance of advocacy according to a human rights-based approach

Lessons learned from different advocacy experiences



CHALLENGES WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACE IN ADVOCACY EFFORTS

1

THE PATRIARCHAL MASCULINITY MENTALITY

2

THE COMPLEX POLITICAL CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH WOMEN DEFENDERS OPERATE IN THE REGION

3

WOMEN'S WEAK POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

4

DISCRIMINATORY LAWS AGAINST WOMEN AND WEAK PROTECTIVE LAWS

5

FRAGMENTATION OF THE FEMINIST FRONT

6

WEAK AND OUTDATED TOOLS OF COMMUNICATION, PERSUASION AND MOBILIZATION OF SUPPORT

7

WORKING ACCORDING TO DONORS' AGENDA

8

WEAKNESS OF JOINT WORKING TOOLS

9

DIFFERENT DISCOURSE AND APPROACH WITHIN FEMINIST GENERATIONS

Advocacy

The “Dream” Exercise

Laws protecting women from violence

Greater representation of women in decision-making positions



Freedom as a space available for all without any restrictions

Justice for victims

Solidarity from the family and the society with women human rights defenders



Freedom from society's constraints and the restrictions of the authorities

Ending all forms of violence against women

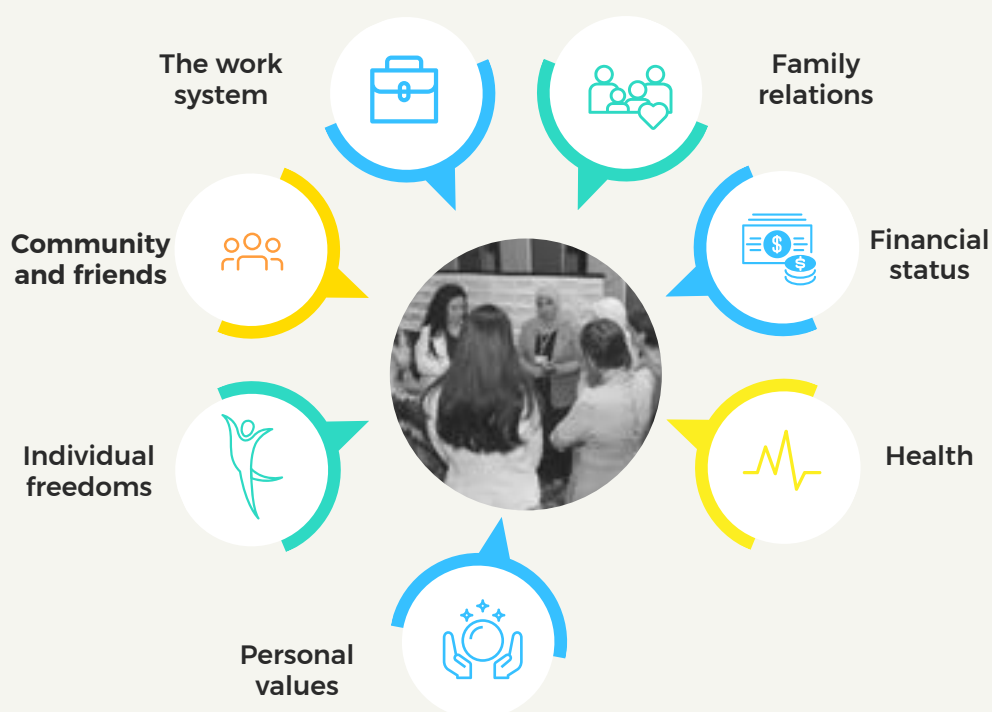
The rise of women and society in the Arab world

Restorative justice among individuals

Mainstreaming and disseminating the culture of human rights

Protection

Women defenders' perceptions of a comprehensive vision of protection



Common protection tools identified by women defenders

- Proactive protection mechanisms.
- Self-protection and group protection mechanisms.
- Security in communication (participation and flexible interventions that do not endanger the group), organization, distribution of tasks, the process of developing ideas, preparation.
- Understanding what is happening, organizing appearances on social media, digital security training, personal assessment of risk, analyzing the context, using different means to communicate with the public.
- Safety within the family: not disclosing what we face, speaking after the incident has taken place, choosing a way to inform the family of what are facing, blame by the family.
- Adopting a protective system for the family, such as not publishing their photos, taking precautions not to expose them to bullying or danger.
- Security at work: a safe work environment, support by work institutions.
- Security in society: laws, constitutions, language, policies.

The Challenges

- Weak protection mechanisms
- Weak legal mechanisms
- Digital security
- Weak societal protection for women human rights defenders
- Protection for the most vulnerable women
- The patriarchal system

Factors impacting protection spaces for women human rights defenders

The form of work that is supposed to support us:

- Supportive institutions
- The political context
- Well-being



Protection

A very human need

Digital Security

Reconsidering our relationship with technology

FACTORS THAT MAKE WOMEN DEFENDERS FEEL SAFE AND SECURE

A SECURE ENVIRONMENT

A DEMOCRATIC STATE THAT RESPECTS HUMANS IS CAPABLE OF GRANTING SAFETY

SAFETY IS ABOUT NOT HARMING ONE'S BODY OR SOUL

WHAT MAKES US FEEL SAFE AND SECURE IS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STABILITY

SAFETY IS ABOUT FREELY EXPRESSING OUR IDEAS AND VALUES AND THEM BEING RESPECTED

A SOCIETY THAT RESPECTS HUMAN DIGNITY

SAFETY CAN BE SOMETHING WHICH WE CAN CONTROL IF WE MAKE THE DECISION TO DO SO

SAFETY STANDS FOR THE INTEGRITY OF BODY AND SOUL BEING GUARANTEED

SECURITY IS IMPORTANT TO OUR CONTINUATION AS WOMEN DEFENDERS

THE PRESENCE OF PROTECTION MECHANISMS MAKES US FEEL SAFE

FREELY EXPRESSING OURSELVES MAKES US FEEL SAFE

SECURITY IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED THAT WE CANNOT CONTROL, WHICH WE DESERVE, EVEN THOUGH IT IS INTANGIBLE

SECURITY SHOULD BE FELT IN ALL AREAS

SAFETY IS COMFORT

SECURITY IS THE ABSENCE OF FEAR AND ANXIETY

SAFETY IS PREVENTION AND SECURITY IS SAFETY.

WHAT MAKES US FEEL SAFE IS FREEDOM

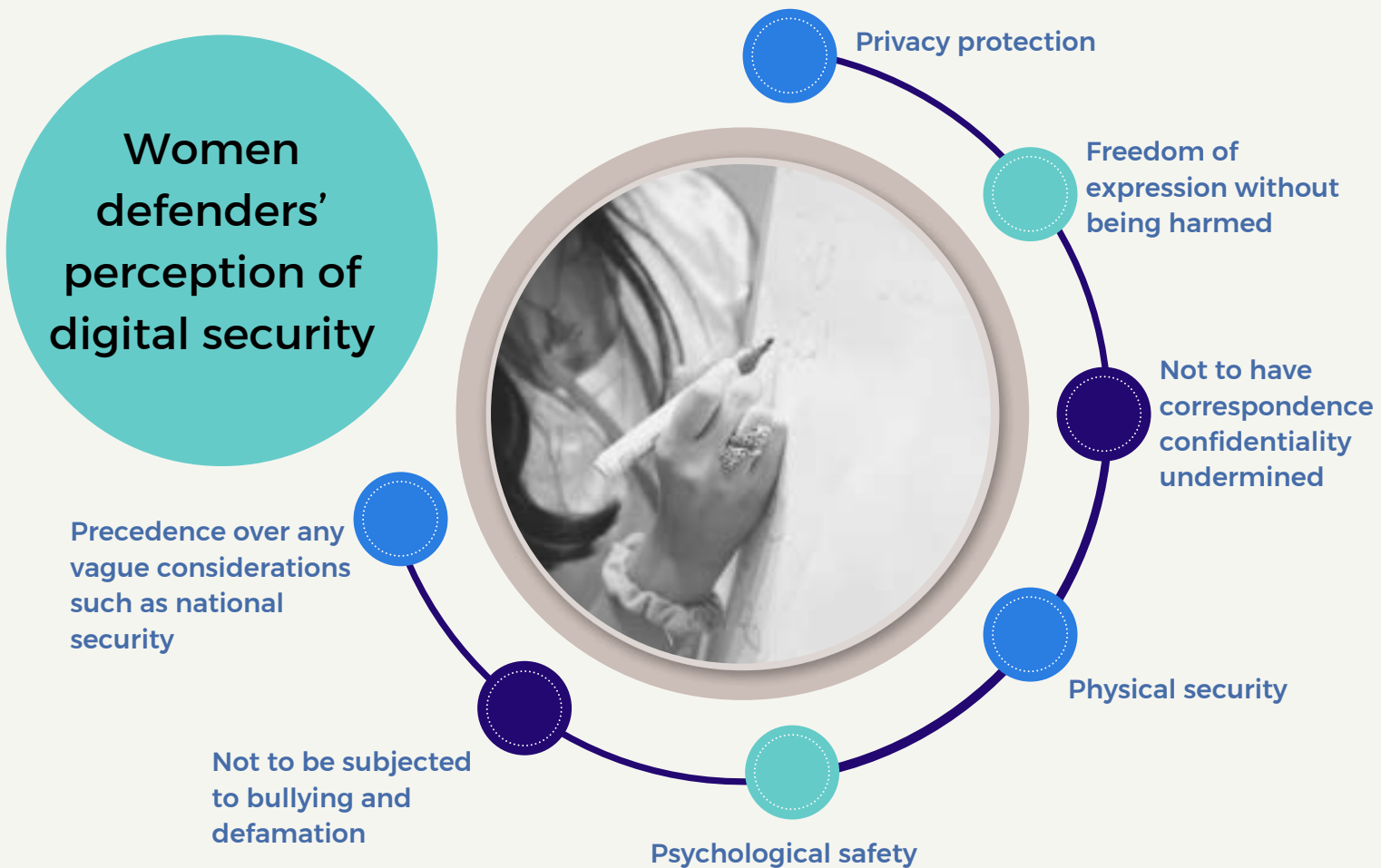
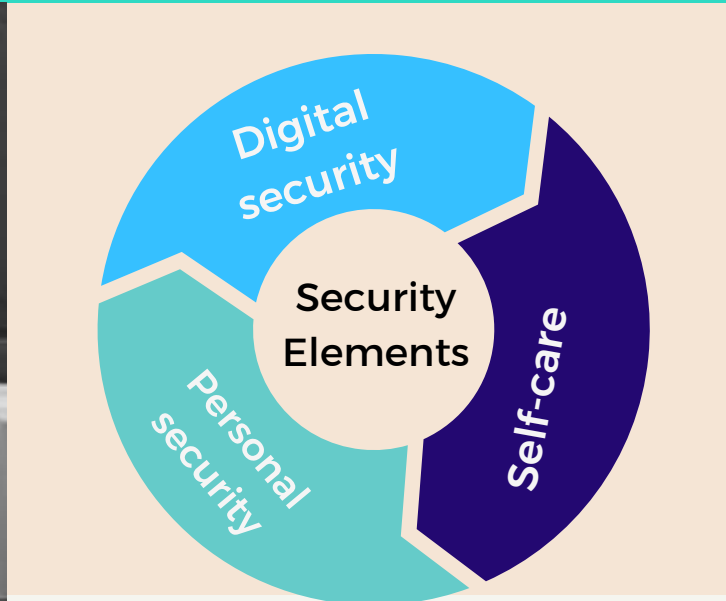
SECURITY IS TAKING PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES EVERYWHERE

THE "SECURITY APPARATUS" AND THE PHRASE "SAFETY AND SECURITY" HAVE BOTH BECOME POLITICAL TERMS. TODAY, FREEDOMS ARE SUPPRESSED IN THE NAME OF ACHIEVING SECURITY



Digital Security

Reconsidering our relationship with technology



Women defenders' perception of digital security

Precedence over any vague considerations such as national security

Not to be subjected to bullying and defamation

Psychological safety

Physical security

Not to have correspondence confidentiality undermined

Freedom of expression without being harmed

Privacy protection

Digital Security

Reconsidering our relationship with technology



Digital Security

Its absence could destroy a person's life

Lack of it can kill

Not a luxury

A difficult and complex issue

Possession of images with sexual or sensitive content

Cyber bullying

Digital harassment

Gender-based cyber violence



Some available resources on digital security



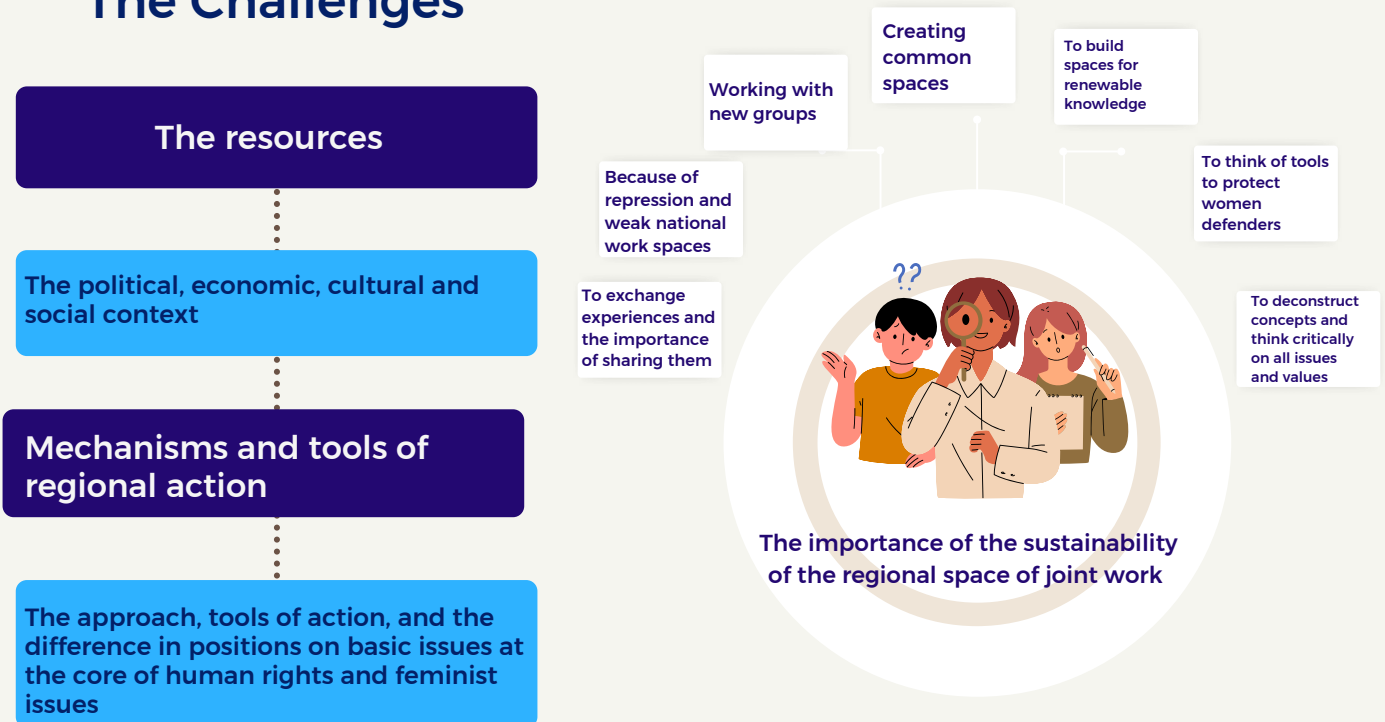
Action Plans



The women defenders developed a few plans that constitute a roadmap for the sustainability of the cooperation and work space after the end of the forum, as well as for the issue of working on digital security, and the issues that were raised during the discussion of advocacy issues

Action Plan to Sustain Co-Working Spaces for Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA Region

The Challenges



A Community of Practice

Which works on

Sessions to reflect on values, issues and priorities

Determining priorities and needs



Building capacities around the paths of building a community of practice

Formulating a code of conduct to operate within the space

Experience sharing sessions

Digital Security Action Plan

The women defenders formulated a plan or a road map for working on the issue of digital security



Intensive technical hands-on training in digital security

Digital Security Clinic

Raising awareness of the importance of protection from gender-based cyber violence and digital security

A secure helpline for women defenders who face gender-based cyber violence and digital security

Sharing resources through a website that includes relevant resources, that are available in Arabic

Mechanisms to interact with relevant organizations such as Access Now

A draft model legislation for protection from gender-based cyber violence and digital security

Advocacy and Protection Action Plan

Group I

The group considered diversification of funding sources essential to overcome dependence on donors, and to promote the work of women human rights defenders

The message is clear and there is public endorsement

The key elements of the plan for enhancing economic resources

- Campaign to attract members
- Fundraising
- Providing services to members
- Using social media

Fragility of economic resources



Group II

This group worked on the challenge of weak solidarity with women human rights defenders. The plan is to integrate the work of women human rights defenders into educational curricula.

Education is the building block of the society's women

The key elements of the plan for strengthening solidarity

- Incorporating the stories of women human rights defenders in school curricula
- Introducing human rights into the curricula
- Modifying school curricula to ensure gender equality
- Revision of training to teachers
- Creating human rights spaces outside schools

“It all begins at school”

The challenges

Fragility of economic resources

Weak solidarity with women defenders due to the male-dominated society

Weak tools to protect women human rights defenders

Group III

One of the challenges discussed is the weakness of protection tools for women human rights defenders, hence the group developed a plan for awareness-raising, networking and protection tools.

Networking leads to the availability and diversification of protection mechanisms and tools

The key elements of the protection promotion plan

- The role of civil society and government in protection and awareness
- Providing mechanisms and tools for protection
- Availability of appropriate technologies and competencies to carry out research and analysis, and the provision of protection tools
- Availability of sources and resources

Our struggle is righteous



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