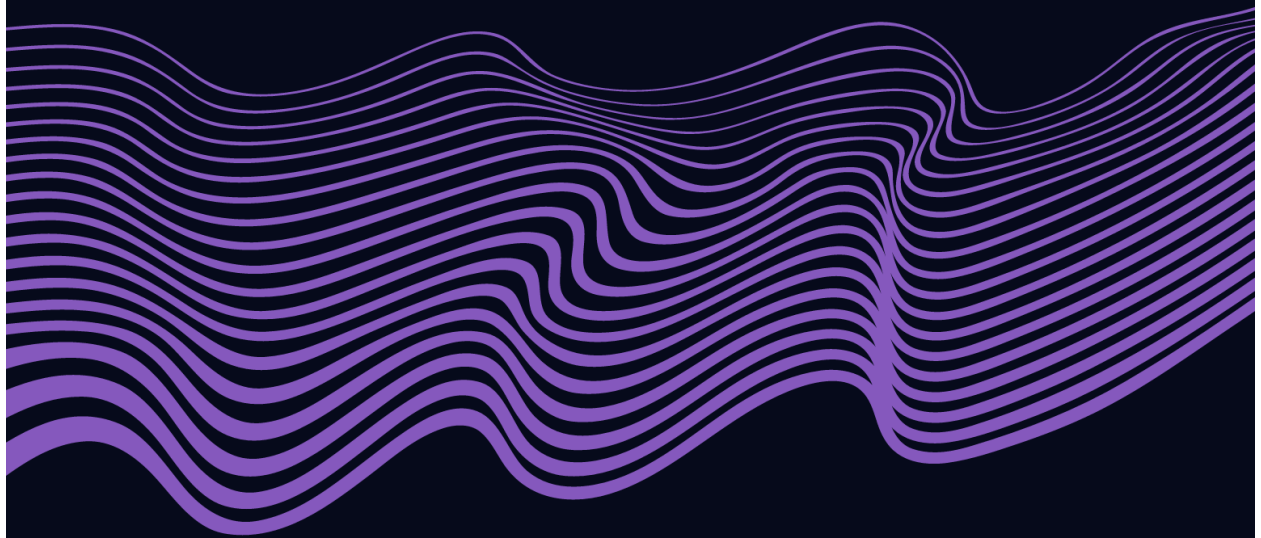


**Revisiting the impact of Cybersecurity, Covid-19,
and Conflict Nexus on Women Human Rights
Defenders, Activists and Peacebuilders:
Case study from Syria and Yemen**



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Executive Summary

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists, and Peacebuilders (WHRDAPs) face numerous challenges and violations, including harassment and gender-based threats, hostility by state and non-state actors and threats against their family members. They also face online and offline violence such as defaming and the use of digital surveillance tools to track their work.

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.

This research aims to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the progress and commitment of WHRDAPs and assess the effectiveness of its coordination and coping mechanisms. The study takes a holistic approach, examining the interplay between Cybersecurity, COVID-19, and Conflict (triple C) Nexus. The goal is to enhance women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both imposed new challenges and presented new opportunities for WHDRAPs. Despite the long-standing policy of oppression and the intensified attacks on internet freedom in the MENA region by regimes and authorities, the pandemic has also provided a chance for WHDRAPs to participate in spaces and conferences online. However, these online spaces also expose them to invisible cyber threats that amplify risks for women, especially WHDRAPs, who are facing the pandemic and shift to remote work without being equipped with the proper tools to protect themselves and their families.

The following points summarized the finding of this research:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional threats and risks to WHRDAPs in the MENA region in general and in conflict and post-conflict zones in particular.
- The COVID-19 increased gender gap inequality and posed new struggles for WHRDAPs.
- WHRDAPs in non-English speaking and/or conflict countries have been overlooked by international stakeholders, and social media networks when it comes to cybersecurity and digital safety.
- The fast growth of the online space, characterized by increased digital literacy, imposes a great risk for WHDRAPs.

- WHDRAPs face similar challenges offline and online: men-dominated spaces, a great risk of exposure to Electronic Gender-Based violence (E-GBV) that imposes a great correlation to physical threats.
- The online threat has a negative and undesirable impact beyond screens and cyber space.
- The lack of cyber security resources (i.e., a cyber special reporter) and initiatives dedicated to protecting WHRDAPs leave them reluctant to report incidents.
- Digital governance and online jurisdiction are key elements to contribute to WHRDAPs safety.

List of Abbreviations

AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HRD	Human Rights Defender
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
KII	Key informant interviews
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Asexual.
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SEA	Syrian Electronic Army
SIM	Subscriber Identity Module
GCHR	The Gulf Center for Human Rights
TOR	The Onion Router
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
US	United State of America
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
WHRDAP	Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists and Peacebuilders
WPS	Women, Peace, and Security

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Introduction

Resistance to democracy and the prevalence of authoritarian regimes remain among the most critical challenges in MENA region. In this context, grassroots movements have emerged concurrently with the political changes that characterized the region in 2011. Youth and women first prompted this social dynamism on social networks before the mass protests and demonstrations took place on the ground, creating slogans that called for political and social reforms, a turning point in national agendas.

These grassroots dynamics strongly relied on social media to mobilize and disseminate their communiqués and document their rich experiences. However, hundreds of human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders have been hacked, their websites shut down, and their personhood persecuted and detained in the last few years. This results from legislative changes targeting dissenting voices under the pretext of fighting hate speech or terrorism. Along with torture, forced disappearances, and condemnations, governments and regimes adopted various measures, including travel bans and detentions, to stifle expression and prevent human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders from carrying out their work.

Human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders, along with journalists and civil society organizations (CSOs), have also been targeted by repressive measures such as the freezing of assets and control or prohibition of foreign funding, an important obstacle for their work due to the limited access to local funding. Foreign support is essential to strengthen their capacity and enable them to achieve their goal, which informs the public and enhances participation and transparency.

Beyond the flurry of banners and repression, controlling communications in cyberspace represents another fight. Governments and regimes in the MENA region challenge the work of human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders through various propaganda mechanisms and the injection of systematic disinformation into the public discourse to thwart transparency and critical reporting. They also attack, spam, and deface their platforms, pages, and groups.

Governments and regimes have realized how human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders threaten the longevity of their authoritarian rule. CSOs, journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders have proven essential in mobilizing opposition to authoritarian regimes in the MENA region. Hence, many platforms have provided new participation models for youth and women, as they are unrepresented in the existing political systems and social structures. They have found an alternative space where their perspectives, opinions, and, most importantly, self-representations, can be expressed, heard, and discussed.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's circumstances have imposed new challenges for the region's human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders. While internet freedom is already under continued and renewed assault in the MENA region, authorities have used the pandemic as an excuse to increase their long-standing policy of repression against journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders.

Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequalities among human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders, neglecting women's role in democratization and peacebuilding. Many measures, such as border closures, curfews, and disruption of services for women, put women at significant risk. Moreover, cybercrime and assaults have increased amid weak responses from the international community. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, therefore, provides a transformative framework for inclusive, sustainable peace. Women's groups in Syria and Yemen continue to be excluded from meaningful representations, and their efforts often remain unrecognized, undocumented, and under-resourced. Consequently, they shifted the status quo by creating virtual alternative spaces for a feminist response in order to build peace and address inequities intensified by the pandemic.

In this context, our research aims to explore how COVID-19 affected WHRDAPs in the MENA region, with a particular focus on Yemen and Syria. In this report, we tackle the situation of women human rights defenders in the MENA region, concentrating on WHRDAPs in conflict and post-conflict countries through three primary lines. First, we will describe what we mean by "human rights defenders," "women human rights defenders," and the existing specific international framework to protect them. Second, we will provide a preliminary mapping of different forms of repression against women rights defenders and peacebuilders, focusing on WHRDAPs in conflict and post-conflict countries, by providing cases and documented testimonies from Yemen and Syria. Third, we will shed light on how WHRDAPs try to mitigate risks and threats. Furthermore, we will present the coping strategies and different forms of resistance/ resilience they use.

Background and Approach

1. Research hypothesis and questions

Our research hypothesis is based on the fact that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately increased the threats to the safety of WHRDAPs in Yemen and Syria, and it negatively impacted their progress and commitment toward conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding.

The second hypothesis is that authoritarian governments have developed new strategies to control the work of WHRDAP, benefiting from the shift towards virtual work established as a result of COVID-19 quarantine measures, making it more traceable and easier to infiltrate.

This research relied on a set of key research questions. The researchers combined original data gathering, synthesis of multiple sources, interpretation, and arguments to answer these questions:

- To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increasing violence and assault (cybercrime and assaults) against WHRDAPs?
- To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic had a gendered impact on human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders in Syria and Yemen?
- To what extent were WHRDAPs' coordination and coping strategies against COVID-19 barriers efficient in enhancing women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding?

2. Methodology

The research adopted a specific set of methodological principles. The mixed methodology helped to crosscheck multiple sources of information and to ensure a complete and more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by WHRDAPs in human rights defense, conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, information about key peacebuilding initiatives was collected through the snowball method, which is used to target hard-to-reach groups.

The methodology included three main approaches:

- a) **Capitalization on existing knowledge and information (desk review):** on the one hand, an assessment of background literature, such as academic research, reports, policy papers, and strategy documents, to learn more about the involvement of WHRDAP in the human rights defense, prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding work, as well as the political framework in Syria and Yemen, was conducted. On the other hand, related documents and available initiatives' documentation were reviewed to identify essential information about peacebuilding efforts in the targeted countries and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work. The researchers looked into long-standing policies repressing WHRDAPs in the region, specifically in Syria and Yemen.
- b) **Standardized interviews:** as the fieldwork was conducted remotely, interviews were relatively short (average of 60 minutes) to avoid fatiguing the interviewee, especially those with whom no previous contact had been made. Thus, the information was collected through open-ended questions using a standardized interview tool. This approach conducts faster interviews and allows for easy responses to be given across respondents, facilitating analysis.

The interviews aimed to collect information from WHRDAPs and experts on their initiatives, approaches, challenges, security concerns (including cybersecurity), networking, gaps, and COVID-19. In addition, interviews were meant to understand COVID-19's impact on peace efforts led by WHRDAPs in the targeted countries. Furthermore, respondents shared their experiences and details about the nature of the offline and online they were subjected to or witnessed during the pandemic, and the good practices they identified.

- c) **Case Study:** this includes the analysis and assessment of selected case studies to identify critical challenges and the main security concerns faced by these groups in the COVID-19 era. It helped identify variables and innovations in successful and gender-inclusive actions in human rights, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding initiatives led by WHRDAPs.

Sampling: Due to the novelty of the topic, the primary aim of the research is to make the unfamiliar familiar and contribute to a comprehensive analysis of this modern oppression tool that has been used to silence women human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders in conflict and post-conflict settings. In this context, the research tried to bring together relevant aspects to give us a complete picture, to the extent possible, of the subject, interviewing human rights defenders, activists and peacebuilders, specialized organizations, CSOs inside and outside Syria and Yemen, diaspora members with active links to their country, peacebuilding organizations (e.g., mediators, negotiators, women in politics) and cybersecurity specialists.

Data Analysis: According to the identified themes (codes), collecting data requires organization and categorization. The collected feedback was cleaned, categorized, and coded accordingly.

The qualitative data generated from the Key informant interviews (KII) was used to identify and analyze the following relationships: (1) gender and engagement, (2) COVID-19 pandemic and progress of commitment, (3) COVID-19 pandemic and increase of repression, (4) COVID-19 pandemic and innovative coping mechanisms.

Gender intersectionality was adopted as a guiding approach for the analysis. The varied experiences of women in conflict depend, among other factors, on social factors and their identity as a woman. Thus, the researchers highlighted how different social identities (e.g., ethnicity, social class, political orientations, disability, sexual orientations, gender expressions, whether they are IDPs, refugees, etc.) impact their experiences as women peacebuilders.

3. Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic and the changes triggered by it pose substantial methodological and health-related risks to conducting research and fieldwork.

- **Safety Risk and Research Ethics:**

Research on peace and human rights has significant ethical implications because of the sensitive nature of these topics. While a critical ethical principle is 'Do no harm,' this principle is difficult to guarantee. The researchers carefully considered the ethical implications of every aspect of the work. Confidentiality, disclosure issues, privacy, and adequate and informed consent procedures were considered and implemented at every step of the research. The safety of the participants and the researchers guided such decisions.

Furthermore, the methodology was sound and built upon recent research experience on how to minimize risk in similar contexts. However, there were challenges in reaching out to people in Yemen and Syria. Even the interviewees outside these countries were concerned about their security, given the transnational character of the targeting they were experiencing.

Safeguarding privacy and appropriate measures for processing, handling, and storing data are thus central at all stages of this research and even beyond the publication of the results. All the information was held on a secure server accessible only to the researchers, and all the information collected followed ethical data protection practices.

- **The novelty of the research and lack of prior research studies on the topic:**

Technology has a positive impact on providing women in the MENA region with more chances to access the online social space and reclaim agency on issues that affect them. However, E-GBV is on the rise, especially among women in the public eye, such as human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and peacebuilders. This situation reflects a clear gap in the literature and an opportunity for the scholars and researchers supporting stakeholders, to invest further in this topic. The limited available data and literature about E-GBV in the MENA region was a significant obstacle to this research.

- **Trust in research impact:**

Building trust is crucial for successful research, especially when addressing sensitive topics in challenging contexts. During the fieldwork (especially when conducting interviews with WHRDAPs living inside Syria and Yemen), the researchers noticed elevated levels of frustration, fear, anger, and anxiety resulting from the difficult living conditions and lack of support. Many of these women are under threat and expect support and more solidarity. Thus, we have noticed a lack of trust in the potential impact of research in creating a change in their lives and providing them with protection. Further, with the lack of meaningful solutions for cyberattacks, survivors assume additional burdens that make them hesitant to participate in a research process; knowing that the exposure to threats is high, while solutions are still weak and scarce against any potential consequences arising from their participation.

- **Access to internet and power regularly:**

Weaponizing the internet is undoubtedly not a new concept in conflict zones. However, during the COVID-19 era, access to the internet and electricity became an urgent need for a multiplicity of reasons, such as facilitating access to essential services and communicating with family members to ensure that they are still alive, online education, etc. During this research, our interviewees increasingly struggled with electricity and internet connection access. Thus, many interviews were canceled, rescheduled, or conducted in different sessions.

“The long road is riddled with obstacles and mines. Only luck determines whether a person crosses it safely. This dark road is lit only by faith and the shattered remains of dreams.” By Razan Zaitouneh, a Syrian Human Rights Defender kidnapped in 2013; is one of the Syrian HRDs victims of forced disappearance; her fate, among the fate of her 3 colleagues (Samira Khalil, Nazem Hamadi, and Wael Hamada), remains unknown.¹

WHRDAP 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 conflict zones, is highly prevalent in online and offline civic spaces.

This statement was confirmed by the United Nations’ (UN) shocking data on the growing number of killings of human rights defenders in the world, which raises the alarm about the global prevalence of targeted killings over other forms of violence against these collectives. According to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, at least 281 were killed in 2019². In total, 1,323 human rights defenders were killed between 2015 and 2019. Frontline Defenders also confirmed that killings among human rights defenders are rising, documenting 304 cases during 2020.³

¹ Razan Zaitouneh’s official [website](#). Last accessed 27/07/2022.

² [Report](#) of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, **Final warning: death threats and killings of human rights defenders**, A/HRC/46/35, 24 December 2020. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

³ Frontline Defenders’ global [analysis report](#) of 2020. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

Today, it is evident that the violent repression on WHRDAPs has escalated, causing repression and the shrinking space for women. The extent of the suffering caused by defending human rights issues complexifies when it is in conflict or post-conflict zones. The challenges also multiply, creating multidimensional consequences when shedding light on the suffering of WHRDAPs in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

1. Contextual overview

Yemen

Yemen has joined seven of the nine core international human rights treaties:

- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

In addition, Yemen has ratified the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Yemen is a party to all four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and Additional Protocols I and II thereto and the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects.

Yemen is considered the poorest country in the MENA region. According to the UN, Yemen has been suffering one of the worst humanitarian crises – including severe food insecurity - since the eruption of the conflict in 2015.

In 2011, people in Yemen joined Tunisians and Egyptians in pro-democracy protests, becoming one of the first countries to experience the protests of the Arab Spring. The uprising forced President Ali Abdallah Saleh to resign, and since then, the Houthis seized parts of the north and west of the country while Saudi-led forces backed the government based in the south. As a result of this conflict, the UN has estimated that 24.3 million people in 2021 were "at-risk" of hunger and disease and roughly 14.4 million were in acute need of assistance.

The conflict in Yemen significantly damaged women's lives, resulting in serious safety risks and increased vulnerability to sexual violence, persecution, and general exploitation. Men and young boys are more likely to be killed during the conflict. Thus, many women and girls take on roles

customarily reserved for men. This situation worsens women's living conditions because of the social challenges and security risks they face, as their access to much needed resources is limited.

In addition to the conflict, Yemen is deeply impacted by patriarchal and discriminatory regulations. In the Yemeni Constitution, women are referred to as "sisters of men"; they "have rights and duties guaranteed and assigned by Sharia and stipulated by law." Yemen's Personal Status Law contains provisions that discriminate against women concerning marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance⁴.

Although women in Yemen have equal rights to access education, work and political life, Yemeni women are living, according to UNICEF, in one of the world's most atrocious instances of despotism.⁵

In Yemen, significant human rights violations are documented by human rights advocates from different parts of the country, including, but not limited to, arbitrary killings, forced disappearances, torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, life-threatening prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and detention, unlawful recruitment or use of child soldiers, severe restrictions on the freedom of expression, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified arrests or prosecutions against journalists, activists, human rights defenders and peacebuilders, especially women.

In the face of extreme hardship and oppression, women play a vital role in peacebuilding. According to the UN Security Council's briefs on Yemeni women's rights, Muna Luqman, a Yemeni activist and peacebuilder, stated "*Women are not passive victims of this war. They have been leading efforts to bring peace to Yemen and hold communities together with limited resources.*" There are many inspiring stories of the work being done by Yemeni human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders despite the many factors hindering their work. The UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen has documented cases in which journalists and human rights defenders were prevented from working freely, threatened, arbitrarily detained, and even tortured by sexual violence. In February 2020, a woman journalist was harassed in Sana'a; she was followed in the streets and verbally threatened by armed men in civilian clothing. They ordered her to stop writing against the Houthis and the Zainabiyat forces if she did not want to be detained. Since then, she has decided to stop journalistic work, including posting on social media.⁶

Consequently, the UN Group has expressed its deep concerns about the continuous human rights violations and targeting of journalists and human rights defenders, including lawyers and activists, by different actors involved in the conflict in Yemen.

⁴ Article 31 of the [Constitution](#) of the Republic of Yemen.

⁵ UNICEF, 2020. [Helping Girls Escape Early Marriage in Yemen](#). Last accessed 27/07/2022.

⁶ UN Security Council Report, 2014. [A/HRC/45/CRP.7](#). Last accessed: 26/07/2022.

Syria

Syria has joined the core international human rights treaties:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The current Syrian Regime came to power after a military coup led by Hafez Al-Assad, father of Syria's incumbent president, Bashar Al- Assad. Since Syria's independence in 1946, the Assad family has remained in power as Syria's most prolonged Regime.

As part of the Arab Spring, multiple popular revolutions erupted in the MENA region against authoritarian regimes. Syria's revolution has been the bloodiest in the area since its first day in March 2011. Hundreds of thousands of grave human rights violations have been committed by the Syrian Regime and its allies. There has been overwhelming evidence that the Assad regime has engaged in repeated violations, e.g., disproportionate attacks on civilians, siege, use of prohibited weapons such as chemical weapons, sexual violence, torture, and attacks on humanitarian aid and medical facilities. According to the former war crimes prosecutor, Stephen Rapp, *"the collected evidence against the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad in Syria is stronger than what was used against Nazis at the Nuremberg trial"* (Rapp, 2021). For years, these violations have been met with political blockage and indifference from the international community. The role of the Syrian civil society was and remains prominent, driven by human rights values and principles, supporting the revolution in its demands for political reforms and regime change.

Over the years, many attempts have been made by the international community to hold the perpetrators accountable in Syria, exploring multiple avenues for justice. Unfortunately, these attempts have failed due to many reasons. First, the geopolitical interests of foreign countries in

Syria contribute to the complexity and the prolonged duration of the conflict by supporting the Regime logistically with air and land military forces from countries such as Russia and Iran. The second reason is that Syria has not signed the international conventions related to accountability and justice to protect itself from any international investigation. Thus, Syria is not a signatory state among the 139 members of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC); the adherence of states to this Statute allows a referral from the Security Council to attribute jurisdiction to the ICC in order to be able to investigate war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity committed from all conflicting parties of the Syrian conflict (UN, 1998). The third reason is the double veto by Russia and China, blocking international efforts to end the atrocities in Syria. The international mobilization against the Regime has failed, in great part, because of the veto mechanism at the United Nations Security Council ⁷.

In response to the inability of the international community to stop the mass atrocities and crimes committed by the Syrian Regime, the Syrian civil society still plays an exceptional role as 'Advocacy Coalition groups' to change the status quo and shape policies from the perspective of local actors.

2. The international normative framework to protect WHRDAPs

Based on international human rights law and international humanitarian law⁸, every state is responsible for protecting human rights defenders and providing an enabling civic space both online and offline. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the term **“Human Rights Defender”** has been used increasingly since the adoption of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in 1998. Up to that point, terms such as human rights "activist", "professional", "worker", and "advocate" were more common. Given the current context, the term "human rights defender" is seen as a more relevant and helpful term and has become widely used by the human rights movement and by different stakeholders related to human rights work. Thus, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders affirms, *"there is no specific definition of who is or can be a human rights defender. Thus, it refers to "individuals, groups and associations ... contributing to ... the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals" ⁹.*

Given that Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) are more affected by intersecting forms of discrimination, oppression and threats, they experience additional risks due to their gender identity and representation in patriarchal societies. For this reason, the term **Women Human Rights Defenders** has been widely used since the adoption of the UN's first resolution on protecting women human rights defenders in 2013; the OHCHR defines WHRDs¹⁰ as follows:

⁷ The mechanism allows the five permanent member states (Russia and China are one of them) to use the veto to block an international intervention led by the United Nations. Moreover, "The double vetoes" by Russia and China at the Security Council present one of the major obstacles, if not the only, to bring the Syrian Regime to the International Criminal Court ICC or to allow the international community to military intervenes.

⁸ Treaty-based bodies' obligations, charter-based bodies' recommendations and the international humanitarian law's obligations.

⁹ The Declaration of human rights defenders, [A/RES/53/144](#). Last accessed 27/07/2022.

¹⁰ OHCHR [website](#) "Women human rights defenders". Last accessed 27/07/2022.

“Women human rights defenders are all women and girls working on any human rights issue (“women defenders” and “girl defenders”), and people of all genders who work to promote women’s rights and rights related to gender equality”. The term also refers to “any civil society actors who may not self-identify as human rights defenders or those who work on non-traditional human rights fields (journalists, health workers, environmental activists, peacebuilders, private actors, development and humanitarian actors, etc.). WHRDs include LGBTQ+ activists, as sexual orientation and gender identity are part of gender equality issues. The term WHRDs is different from HRDs as “it represents the struggle for recognition of the specific challenges faced by women who engage in the defending any human right issue and people of all genders who defend women's rights or work on a range of gender-related issues and sexuality.”¹¹

In this regard, the evolution of human rights and the efforts of the human rights movement to ensure a safe environment for defenders have pushed UN state members to recognize the status of human rights defenders and give attention to the specific threats faced by WHRDAPs. They also recognize that those who defend human rights are harassed, attacked, imprisoned, made to disappear, tortured, killed, or suffer reprisals for their peaceful work; thus, they must be protected and promoted.

This process of protecting HRD has resulted in the creation of a solid normative framework stipulating obligations (at least theoretically) through special declarations, resolutions and principles related to the situation of human rights defenders, such as:

- The Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; is referred to as the “Declaration on Human Rights Defenders”.
- The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders.
- The Commentary to the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders: an essential guide to the right to defend human rights.
- The resolution on protecting women's human rights defenders.
- The European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

Nevertheless, some positive developments have been made at the international normative framework level, but defenders' *de facto* protection remains elusive. Many countries worldwide are still implementing laws and regulations restricting civic space activities. Namely, in the MENA region, most national laws still lack harmonization with international standards and with the Declaration of human rights defenders. Even though different national institutions guarantee—unevenly—human rights, domestic laws restrict defenders' rights. In some cases, domestic laws legitimize human rights violations and seriously hinder human rights defenders' work. In some

¹¹ Amnesty International [report](#): Challenging Power, Fighting Discrimination: A Call to action to recognize and protect Women's Human Rights Defenders, October 2019. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

other cases, countries have made efforts to harmonize domestic laws with international standards; however, there is a large gap between laws and implementation in practice.

The civic space in the MENA region is shrinking and the situation for human rights defenders, including WHRDAP, is very challenging. The *CIVICUS Monitor* rated civic space as closed in nine countries of the MENA region, with five countries rated as "repressed" and five as "obstructed"¹². The MENA region has no country rated as a "narrowed" or "open" civic space.

3. WHRDs in the MENA region: main instruments of online and offline repression

Although valuable efforts have been made to recognize the status of human rights defenders, including women rights defenders, multiple forms of discrimination, threats and attacks hinder their work. Human rights defenders, including WHRDs, activists and peacebuilders, are still facing numerous threats in the MENA region due to the emerging protests, revolutions and context of conflict and post-conflict that marked the last decade. WHRDs have been considered as "the enemies" to states' sovereignty, rather than the drivers of change and peace.

"Women in Yemen are subject to many constraints [...]; consequently, any woman who speaks up or advocates for an issue finds herself a subject to moral accusations through tweets and comments, not only by state parties [...]. I was detained under the suspicion of threatening national security using my posts on Facebook. During that experience, my digital rights were completely violated; the authorities had access to all my written material and seized all my devices, including my work laptop". Fatma, a young woman human rights activist and peacebuilder from Yemen based in Sana'a.

In this context, and based on our fieldwork findings, literature review, and data sources provided by the UN charter-based bodies, treaty-based bodies and UN resolutions, WHRDs and HRDs international and regional coalitions, local NGOs reports, and media articles, we can document different forms of repression and massive attacks against WHRDAPs across the MENA region, through classifying the main categories of online and offline attacks and threats, along with providing examples from across the MENA region, with particular focus on Yemen and Syria.

The main threats and restrictions are as follows:

- **Restrictive/oppressive legal environment**

Despite the continuous calls of the Special Rapporteur about human rights defenders and the international human rights movement for states to adopt a special law to protect human rights defenders, the legal environment framing the work of human rights defenders, including WHRDs, activists and women peacebuilders in the MENA region remains characterized by restrictions and repression. Countries in this region have not moved towards protecting and promoting women

¹² *CIVICUS people power under attack 2020*, a [report](#) based on data from CIVICUS Monitor. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

defenders and human rights defenders. No country has adopted a special law to protect their work, as recommended by Declaration on human rights defenders

Almost all the MENA countries recognize fundamental freedoms in their Constitutions, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Most of them have ratified conventions and treaties to protect human rights. However, these commitments have not guaranteed the respect and promotion of rights in practice, as regulations and laws usually hinder the civic space and threaten the work of HRDs.

Law No. 93 of 1958 regarding associations in Syria is considered a law restricting WHRDs from exercising their fundamental rights. For instance, in the case of Syria, although its Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of assembly and expression, the Regime has consistently and historically adopted a state of emergency law and restrictive legislation to silence voices of criticism and prevent them from operating as legally recognized associations. Thus, the Syrian Regime has relied on these laws to bypass constitutional guarantees to become the only body determining the right of assembly and association.¹³

In Yemen, the law of freedom of association (Law 1 of 2001) is considered one of the most enabling laws governing CSOs in the region. It guarantees the right to form associations and be able to join them with minimal interference from the government. However, the context of conflict and war has led to an increasing number of associations and HRDs being banned and restricted in their activities by authorities without proper due processes, citing treason or conspiring with foreign powers as a reason to repress them¹⁴.

War, conflict, and post-conflict contexts are an additional pressure factor on human rights defenders, activists, and peacebuilders in Syria and Yemen as they are operating in fragile contexts and are exposed to threats not only from the state, but also from non-state actors, such as extremist groups hostile to human rights defense and peacebuilding.

Besides this, conflict, particularly in Syria and Yemen, causes the forced displacement of hundreds of HRDs outside Syria and Yemen, exposing them to host countries' legislation that often limits their rights as refugees to establish their associations.

“The difficulties for several WHRDAP who leave the country, is that their first step is to go to neighboring countries, like Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Oman or Egypt, known for their questionable human rights record. The challenges of digital transnational repression are how WHRDAPs may face prosecution in these countries where they seek refuge. The challenges persist even when WHRDAPs move to European countries or the so-called “semi-democratic” countries”. Hasna, a young peacebuilder woman from Syria based in the diaspora.

¹³ International Center for Non-For-Profit Country update, [Legal analysis](#). Last accessed 27/07/2022.

¹⁴ US department 2021 country [report](#) on human rights practices: Yemen. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

- **Torture, killings, and forced disappearances**

Torture, killing, and forced disappearance are some of the horrible threats faced by WHRDs in Syria and Yemen. According to the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts in their Yemen report, women human rights defenders face torture and ill treatment in detention places. They are victims of a wide range of physical and psychological ill treatment, torture methods, including suspension for prolonged periods, electrocution, burning, severe beating with sticks and batons, kicking, forced nudity, and rape, the latter being a widespread practice in the secret detention facilities where women and girls were kept. Thus, the UN group has documented the case of a woman human rights defender rendered blind in her right eye and partially deaf because of severe beatings under torture.¹⁵

The situation of human rights defenders in Syria is even worse and has rapidly deteriorated since 2011. According to the Human Rights Council Report and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the *"whereabouts of tens of thousands of detainees remain unknown and unacknowledged by the state"*. For instance, forced disappearances, which put human rights defenders at risk of extrajudicial killing, torture, and ill-treatment, are widespread in Syria and are committed with impunity by state security forces, to obtain information or extract confessions under duress, a practice also emulated by non-state actors. These threats have obliged many WHRDs to flee and seek refuge in other countries that may protect them.¹⁶

The following case is an example documented during our fieldwork: ***"I was detained for 30 days by the Political Security forces under the suspicion of threatening the national security by using posts on Facebook [...] before my detention I have received several threats on Facebook and other communications tools. In addition, I was shot three times in 2017, 2018 and 2019"***. Maram, a young women activist from Yemen (based in Yemen).

- **Attacks against family and loved ones**

Threats against WHRDs have a substantial impact on their families and beloved ones. For example, lawyer Huda Al-Safari lost her son in 2019 in Yemen due to her investigation on secret prisons run by foreign governments, particularly those run by UAE in Yemen since 2015, where thousands of civilians have suffered torture and arbitrary detention. She documented evidence on more than 250 cases of abuse within the prisons and convinced international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to take up the cause.¹⁷

The family's targeting is considered a means of applying pressure on the defender. During the fieldwork, we interviewed Hala from Syria. She reported how the Regime attempted to hack her

¹⁵ Human Rights Council, October 2020. [A/HRC/42/CRP.1](#). Last accessed 27/07/2022.

¹⁶ [Amnesty International](#): End the Horror in Syria's Torture Prisons, 2019. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

¹⁷ [Yemeni Press Agency](#), April 2019. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

personal online accounts and inflict harm on her and her family, imprisoning her father for two weeks and her sister on three occasions.

- **Online harassment, violence, moral accusations, and smear campaigns**

WHRDAPs face large online attacks such as online defamation, spread of false information, harassment campaigns against them, as well as the use of digital surveillance tools to track and target them. The Syrian Regime used (and continues to use) state-sponsored hackers in Syria to *"limit the Syrian peoples' ability to employ tools that facilitate anonymous communication while deploying hacking and tracking techniques to identify and monitor critics and human rights defenders"*¹⁸. This puts HRDs, particularly women, at high risk, as in the case of Samia, a young woman activist and peacebuilder from Syria, who faces smear campaigns, rape, and death threats, and as threats against her family. She stated, ***"the Syrian Regime acquired spyware from European countries through Syrian intermediaries with dual citizenship or the UAE. Prior to my detention, the Regime traced my exact location through my SIM card, thanks to advanced technology."***

In Yemen recently, the peacebuilder Tawakkol Karman, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, has faced hostility from Arab state media and social media users accusing her of being an Islamist. *"I am subjected to widespread bullying and smear campaigns by Saudi media and its allies. More important now is to be safe from the saw used to cut #jamalkhashoggi's body into pieces. I am on my way to #Turkey, and I consider this a report to the international public opinion"*¹⁹.

Our expert interviewee, Helmi Noman, focuses his research on the targeting messages against Karman, and he concluded that this content shows an overview of the GBV scene and how the digital space is used for political polarization, misinformation and GBV²⁰.

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". Shada from Yemen suffered from the online "morality" vigilantes. She stated, ***"[...] any woman who speaks up or advocates for an issue, find herself a subject to moral accusations through tweets and comments, not necessarily by legal institutions"***.

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. Manar from Yemen confirmed that ***"[...] one of the conditions after my release by the authorities was that I would stop writing or that they would arrest me"***

¹⁸ [Digital Dominion](#): How the Syrian Regime's mass digital surveillance violates human rights. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

¹⁹ [Official Twitter Account](#) of Tawakkol Karman. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

²⁰ Interview conducted with the expert Helmi Noman, a researcher at the Middle East and North Africa lead researcher and coordinator at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society (conducted - 02/12/2021).

again as soon as I write. Therefore, I still feel imprisoned, unable to publish anything or defend myself".

WHRDAPs in Syria and Yemen face numerous forms of repression and endure efforts aiming to stop their work. The magnitude and systematic nature of the targeting by state and non-state actors, who combine offline and online instruments, cause serious physical, psychological and social consequences to WHRDAPs, pushing them to distance themselves from their regular work or reduce their public exposure.

In the next chapter, we will focus specifically on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis on WHRDAP across the MENA region, focusing on Yemen and Syria.

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

1. COVID-19 and new participation modalities

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing burdens on WHRDAPs in the MENA region, specifically in Yemen and Syria. Governments and regimes across the region used the COVID-19 crisis to justify additional restrictions on freedom of expression. Arrests, harassment, and criminal investigations are some of the measures taken to silence the voices of criticism.

A cyber security expert uncovered a weakness in the system of a Middle Eastern hotel, using HSMX Gateway, that exposed the personal information of millions of guests worldwide. This is common practice; to use the Internet at most hotels, shopping malls, restaurants, and cafés, users must first connect to the network, create an account, and then fill out their personal information. It does, however, have certain drawbacks.

As per a column for Aljazeera written by Kareem Chehayeb,²¹ HSMX Gateway²² is similar to a hotel router vulnerability discovered seven years ago that affected 277 devices in hotels and convention centers across 25 countries, including the UAE, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. More than 100 hotels, including those in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon, Egypt, and other MENA countries, are among the 378 that have not opted for AirAngel's new service, out of the 629 hotels. According to the Article, the cyber security specialist discovered to have subpar Internet protection. He was able to access the network setups of 629 significant hotels in 40 different countries from his hotel room, as well as the personal data of millions of visitors, including their room numbers, emails, and the dates that they checked in and out of the establishment. The hotels all make use of a British business named AirAngel's HSMX Gateway Internet technology. Some of the biggest hotel brands in the world are among its clientele. The article urged public WIFI users to always use a VPN to encrypt all data as it passes over the network through a secure tunnel. Instead of WIFI, you might employ mobile data to reduce these risks entirely.

²¹ Article on [Al-Jazeera](#) by Kareem Chehayeb, *Hotel WiFi across MENA compromised and exposing private data*, Last accessed 22/03/2022.

²² The HSMX Gateway is a platform for managing network authentication and payment. It provides a role-based platform for managing network and users.

Recent allegations revealed that two well-known female activists were repeatedly hacked by the NSO Group malware²³, a plight suffered by women's rights advocates in Bahrain and Jordan. The mobile phones of Hala Ahed Deeb, who works with human rights and feminist organizations in Jordan, and Ebtisam al-Saegh, a Bahraini human rights defender, were compromised using NSO Pegasus spyware, according to an investigation by the human rights organization, Front Line Defenders (FLD) and the digital rights non-profit group, Access Now²⁴.

In Syria, targeting civilian facilities, arbitrary detention, and the use of exceptional courts, such as military and security courts, are part of the methods employed extensively against journalists and human rights activists. In Yemen, all parties of the conflict continue to suppress freedom of expression and association through enforced disappearance, torture, ill-treatment, and unfair trials²⁵.

In Yemen and Syria, the authoritarian Regimes cut off Internet services to silence civilians and WHRDAPs. The lack of protection in virtual spaces will increase the danger of WHRDAPs, through exposure to E-GBV. ***“During COVID, the situation was aggravated in real life. In fact, all events were forbidden under COVID-related restrictions and required the supervision of local authorities. The COVID-19 situation was exploited as an excuse to target the activities of my organization”***. Lama, a young woman human rights activist from Yemen, based in Taiz.

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. Rasha, from Syria, thinks ***“COVID-19 has advantages and disadvantages for us as we struck initiative, that virtual space has always been our space, because we were excluded systematically, and so we reclaimed the space through the virtual space”***.

In the Syrian context, the Brussels international humanitarian conference is considered one of the most important annual conferences for Syria, where the international community announces its commitments and humanitarian pledges for the country. For the first time, the conference was held online in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, allowing hundreds of civil society actors to attend and vocalize their demands collectively and individually. Consequently, WhatsApp groups have been created to facilitate discussions and collective work through Zoom and other virtual working platforms.²⁶ Furthermore, the EU developed an interactive tool to consult with Syrians

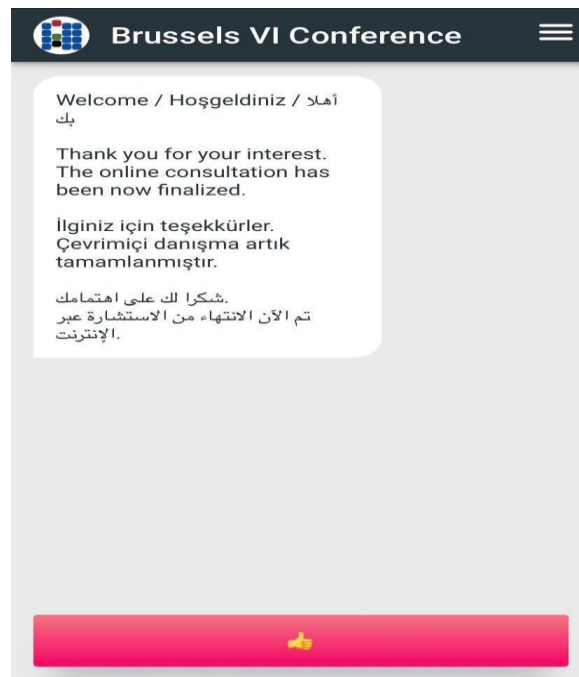
²³ The NSO Group malware Israeli software company NSO Group Technologies is well known for its proprietary spyware Pegasus, which enables zero-click remote monitoring.

²⁴ Article on [The Guardian](#) by Stephanie Kirchgaessner, *Two female activists in Bahrain and Jordan hacked with NSO spyware*, Last accessed 17/02/2022

²⁵ Amnesty International [Report](#) 2020/21: The state of the world's human rights. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

²⁶ Brussels IV Conference on *'Supporting the future of Syria and the region-* EU, 2020

in the diaspora and inside Syria about their opinions on certain issues related to the agenda of the Brussels conference. The survey was available in Arabic, English and Turkish and accessible online.²⁷ This tool has enlarged the space for Syrians to share their thoughts and opinions on issues that greatly impact their reality.



Source: EU online consultation platform for Brussels conference during Covid-19. The screenshot has been taken by Muzna Dureid

However, this shift does not come without risks in terms of regulations and spyware, including more recently, disinformation and digital battles. In some cases, even the private sector is implicated in leaking information and extracting personal data. Some companies do not react to reports linking that to their lack of resources or internal policies, or they allow disinformation because it increases user interaction, beneficial for their business models.

After most regional events went online, a significant gap was uncovered in cyber safety and cyber hygiene amongst WHRDAPs worldwide, particularly in the MENA region and conflict zones. Consequently, this has led to digital violence from state and non-state actors, as well as patriarchal actions coming from individuals who oppose women's empowerment.

That being said, WHRDAPs do not always have access to digital tools, due to the lack of Internet infrastructure in their contexts and limited online knowledge to deal with virtual spaces that need different empowering tools, adapted to their knowledge levels.

²⁷ EU Brussels consultations [Arabic](#), and in [English](#)

2. WHRDAPs in Syria and Yemen: easy online and offline targets

Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, the digital space became the hub for activists, journalists, politicians, and public actors to organize themselves and work on sectorial issues in order to meet the needs and design the activities related to the uprising.

After the displacement and migration flux, the virtual spaces became a central platform, especially with limited mobility options inside and outside countries. Then, COVID-19 shifted the few physical meeting opportunities to virtual spaces. In Yemen and Syria, as in the rest of the world, the virtual working style became a reality, but cyber security and engendered virtual spaces remain scarce. The virtual world generally applied similar patriarchal forms of violence against women, as offline and physical spaces did.

Social movements in the Arab region have faced dramatic consequences due to myriad repression. In Syria, with almost half a million people killed, six million forcibly displaced outside the country and another six million internally displaced, countless punishments have been imposed on activists, including travel bans, imprisonment, forced disappearances, killings under torture, sieges in residential areas, and systematic bombardments by air and land against areas considered to be controlled by rebels by the Regime. This situation obliged activists and the members of the opposition to flee to neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, where they created a diaspora of Syrian civil society and an opposition shadow government, to meet the needs of the civilians in opposition areas who are still deprived of their rights and essential services, such as medical services, education, and food.

The situation has shifted towards severe poverty, famine, and mass killings, especially after the militarization of the conflict and Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, backing the Regime with air and land soldiers with military aid to disrupt the Syrian uprising. Russia is not the only intervening Regime-supporter country in Syria; Iran has also intervened with its militias backed by Hezbollah from Lebanon and end the social struggles. The militarization of the conflict attracted extremist armed groups, old and new, composed of foreign and local fighters. This situation jeopardizes women's role in Syria.

Despite all the odds, Syrian women have organized themselves across multiple sectors, both collectively and individually, from peace talks with minimal access to the negotiation table to humanitarian work on the frontlines, and sometimes fighting alongside male fighters. This participation is costly for women and makes them a target of all kinds of physical, mental, and online attacks aimed at silencing them and blocking their work. Rania from Syria describes the obstacles faced by HRDAPs as follows: ***“The Syrian electronic army, which has advanced techniques and programs, used malicious applications that were on the Apple store during COVID-19 that seemed like applications for COVID tests but were malicious. Also, campaigns spread dangerous links or contain offensive content on social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, and Email) in Syrian society. Hezbollah and Daesh, as well as Al Qaeda in Syria, developed their technical capacities and systemic espionage tools, allowing them to locate the people they're spying on and arrest them. Moreover, these actors spy on social media posts to uncover people***

who criticize them and conduct smear campaigns, spreading rumors about individuals. These campaigns targeted men as well as women”.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe funding cuts to humanitarian work, protection, and gender-related programs, where women ended up in unsafe homes and tents. The pandemic coupled with conflict was the worst scenario for women worldwide living in conflict areas. The notion of proper protection does not even exist. This certainly includes cyber-attacks that are invisible and beyond borders. Before the uprising, Facebook was banned in Syria and activists have used TOR²⁸ and other programs to change their VPN to access social media safely. Further, the Syrian Regime has imposed a new regulation for cyberspace in Syria to control the content and information flux. The new regulation entered into force in December 2021, aiming to impose seven years of prison and a 2,872 USD fine on those who share information against the government online. Additionally, in January 2022, the Syrian parliament passed an article under the cybercrime law tightening online punishments. The new article fails to offer protection for cybercrime survivors; instead, it obliges YouTubers and online creators, including artists, to get permission beforehand from the government to publish their content.²⁹

Therefore, the surveillance of virtual spaces became highly framed and legalized to cover the oppression of Syrians trying to organize and mobilize themselves through cyberspace. This indeed increased the odds against WHRDAP, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the total shift towards virtual work, turning their work much more accessible and traceable by the Syrian Regime under a legal umbrella.

In 2021, the META platform that owns Facebook and Instagram, published an article citing that they had removed three identified hacker groups related to the Syrian cyber government army, known as the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), that committed cyber-attacks against human rights activists, journalists, and the opposition. The META platform, in its communiqué, mentioned that the blocked accounts had launched cyber-attacks against Kurdish journalists, minority activists, members of the People's Protection Units, and the White Helmets.³⁰

According to the communiqué, the attacks have been conducted through links or malicious software. The malicious software sent by SEA aimed to collect sensitive information, once the devices are compromised, to record audio, videos and gain access to calls and text messages. META platform has confirmed the tactics used by these groups, mentioning the following, "*A new Android malware built with the open-source mobile app development tool, Xamarin has been detected by one anti-virus engine in public virus repositories. We found this malware in trojanized*

²⁸ The Onion Router (Tor) is an open-source software program that allows users to protect their privacy and security against a common form of Internet surveillance known as traffic analysis.

²⁹ Al Etihad media, [The syrian regime adopted a new bill of cyber crimes](#), Last accessed 06/01/2022.

³⁰ The White Helmets is a Syrian humanitarian organization that works in accordance with international laws and the Bill of Human Rights, especially international humanitarian law and what is specified in Article 61 of Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Its philosophy is based on saving lives, securing areas that were exposed to bombing or disaster and providing basic services to civilians. It is committed to serving all civilians in all communities with a commitment to neutrality, impartiality and humanitarian principles, far from any loyalty to any party or group, and with no affiliation to any military units or political parties. Over years, the White Helmets team has been targeted by Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns led by Syrian regime and Russia

versions of Telegram and a Syrian news app that are being distributed exclusively through phishing websites hosted on the Vercel cloud platform".³¹

The Syria Campaign, a human rights organization, collaborated with Graphika, a social media intelligence agency located in the United States, to investigate who is talking about the White Helmets on Twitter and how their tweets are disseminated. Graphika, which has investigated past misinformation tactics, examined over 12.6 million tweets from about 2.65 million accounts. It revealed that during ten significant news periods between 2016 and 2017, bots and trolls linked to Russian disinformation campaigns reached around 56 million people on Twitter, with tweets about the White Helmets. Analyses done by Graphika between June 2016 and October 2017, show the White Helmets debate was particularly strong on the Internet, including the period of the White Helmets' Nobel Peace Prize candidacy in 2016, as well as the fall of Aleppo.³²

Bashar Al-Assad, the current president of Syria, signed Cybercrime Legislation No. 20 on April 18, 2022. The law defines several actions as cybercrimes and imposes fines and jail terms ranging from 200,000 Syrian pounds to 15 million Syrian pounds (about 26,700 EUR) to anyone who violates it. The new legislation breaches the right to freedom of speech, jeopardizing digital rights and online privacy because it contains multiple provisions with ambiguous definitions.³³

According to the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR), it is a flagrant violation of citizens' digital privacy that Article (3) (a) Paragraph (1) implies that Internet service providers must save the data of all subscribers for a time determined by the competent authorities. Article 27, contains constitutional violations and states that cyber attackers "must be punished by temporary incarceration for seven to fifteen years and a fine ranging from (10,000,000) ten million Syrian pounds to (15,000,000) fifteen million Syrian pounds."

The law clearly mentioned whoever creates or maintains a website, web page, or publishes digital content on the network with the intention of inciting illegal action to change the Constitution, excludes a portion of Syrian territory from the state's sovereignty, incites armed rebellion against the current authorities recognized by the Constitution, hinders those authorities from carrying out their constitutionally mandated duties, overthrow or change the government.³⁴

In Yemen, a decade has passed since the Yemeni people sought political reform and greater freedom as part of the Arab Spring movement against corruption and authoritarianism to undermine Ali Abdullah Saleh's presidency. The uprising has quickly evolved into an international proxy war, primarily between Saudi Arabia and the Iranian militia, Al Houthi. Conflicting groups have committed numerous human rights crimes, putting the country on the verge of hunger, forced disappearance, murder, and mass diversion. Yemen's war has been labeled by the UN, as the world's worst humanitarian disaster after 10 years of fighting. In 2012, Saleh stood down as part of a Gulf-backed political transition plan. Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi is appointed temporary

³¹ META by Mike Dvilyanski, [Taking action against hackers in Pakistan and Syria](#), Last accessed 16/11/2021.

³² The Syria Campaign, [Killing the Truth: How Russia is fueling a disinformation campaign to cover up war crimes](#), Last accessed June, 2022

³³ Sana the Syrian governmental news agency, [The president Aassad issued a new bill regarding cyber-crimes.](#), Last accessed 18/04/2022

³⁴ GCHR, [New cybercrime law is another attempt to repress freedom of expression online](#), Last accessed 18/04/2022

president and oversees a national debate to develop a more inclusive federal Constitution. On September 21, 2014, with Saleh's assistance, the Houthis quickly pushed south from Saadeh and conquered Sana'a. In 2018, Gulf Coalition-backed forces, including some flying the southern separatist flag, pushed up the Red Sea coast against the Houthis with the goal of capturing the port of Hodeidah. This port handles most Yemen's commercial and assistance imports, which is crucial for feeding the country's 30 million people. The Houthis controlled the port of Hodeidah, leaving millions of Yemeni people in limbo. Later, the conflicting parties agreed on a ceasefire, an army withdrawal from Hodeidah, and prisoner swaps as a result of December 2018 negotiations in Sweden, the first in two years. The pandemic imposed a short UN-backed truce ceasefire, but no progress was achieved towards a permanent ceasefire and bloodshed persists, despite prisoner swaps between the conflicting parties. According to the UN, Yemen remains on the verge of starvation. Under Trump's administration, the Houthis militia was designated as a terrorist organization, along with the already listed terrorist organization of Al Qaida in Yemen (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula AQAP).³⁵

Amid this situation, Yemeni WHRDAPs have been at the forefront of the uprisings, negotiations, and mediation efforts, whether it be for the release of those who have been forced to disappear or demanding humanitarian corridors to secure the delivery of civilians' basic needs. Despite the important role of Yemeni women-led initiatives, WHRDAPs and women peacebuilders face being arbitrarily detained, hacked, tortured, sexually abused, and raped. They are also frequently imprisoned with their children, adding to the trauma experienced by both the mother and the child. The use of torture and sexual assault as weapons of war against women and girls has increased, and abuse of women's rights has never been as serious as it is now in Yemen's history. The lack of proper protection for women peacebuilders jeopardized their work and unfortunately silenced them.³⁶

In both Syrian and Yemeni contexts, WHRDAPs are considered "easy targets" for hacking attacks as they share their devices with their children, spouses, and family members. According to the interviews and literature review, the pandemic has not imposed new tactics or patterns in cyber-attacks, yet, it imposed fully online working spaces where women are barely aware and equipped with devices, software, and the technical knowledge to protect themselves. Mariam from Syria stated, ***"Something we thought about a lot: can women access this through their husband's phone? they don't have a phone, can she be using her husband's phone to be part of the group? that means he can see the group. Also, there are all these different issues that it's an open space that we don't know much about, completely free for everyone. Specifically, for Syrian women, we don't have enough protection ways or methods to create a safer space for them"***

Smear campaigns are common, against WHRDAP who participate in political issues at the international and local level, such as briefing the Security Council, visiting IDPs camps, and

³⁵ Reuters, Timeline: [Ten years from uprising, Yemen lies fractured and hungry](#), Last accessed 28/01/2021

³⁶ LSE by Nadia Ebrahim, Aicha Madi, and Nesmah Mansoor, [Peacebuilding without protection: Yemeni women's barriers to peace](#), Last accessed 10/12/2021

participating in peace talks. Formal and informal campaigns have often exposed WHRDAPs to online harassment, hate speech, threats, and smear campaigns.

On the other side, the pandemic offered an opportunity to advance peace talks. In Syria, COVID-19 led to a ceasefire-like context which alleviated somehow the situation for IDPs and local communities. Yemen also had a ceasefire-like period, to provide health services and control the spread of the virus.³⁷ However, these ceasefires did not last long and did not achieve sustainable peace for both countries. Yet, the pandemic offers new opportunities and challenges to revisiting our theories and reflections on peacebuilding during global challenges.

The COVID-19 era has also empowered new social platforms often used for entertainment, such as Instagram. Activists have shifted the application as a space for advocacy using hashtags to spread the word through footage sent by activists on the ground. However, Instagram has eliminated hashtags and censored activists. For example, the hashtag #SaveShiekhJarrah, created to raise awareness on the violence committed by the Israeli apartheid regime, has been forcibly deleted from the platform.

According to our interviewees, these violations have significantly impacted WHRDAPs imposing self-censorship due to the lack of meaningful solutions offering them protection. Self-censorship sometimes led WHRDAPs to cease their work or change their language due to the fear for their lives, their relatives and their loved ones.

Our research findings have shown that WHRDAPs, including feminist organizations in Yemen and Syria, have seen that digital spaces offered an opportunity for some of them to be equal with other western participants who have mobility privileges and the accessibility to leverage their voices and their demands. Interviewees have agreed that the COVID-19 era advanced access to the seat at the table of peacebuilding meetings and international and national fora. **"After COVID-19, we felt everyone is equal, with a name and a link to access the meetings."** Mariam Jalabi, co-founder of the Syrian Women's Political Movement.

Shaza from Yemen also highlighted how censorship is affecting the online international spaces when it comes to criticism. ***"[...] while in a panel with UN Yemeni special envoy, I criticized the corruption of the UN mission in Yemen deeply. I have been muted in the meeting. Therefore, virtual spaces, as physical ones, are also dominated in a colonial way"***.

In contrast, in-person participation has never been seen as "a possible option" for our WHRDAPs interviewees, because they suffer from limited mobility options and almost no opportunities to get visas and chances to cross the borders for travel. The western countries and neighboring countries have seen them as asylum seeker-to-be, rejecting their visa applications.

³⁷ P. Weller, S. F. (2020). Rethinking Dialogue in the Age of New Challenges and. *Journal of Dialogue studies*, 8 (Special issue), 266.



Muarrat Al Nomaan in Nort West Syria – © Abdulaziz Qitaz

In northwest (NW) Syria, we met Fatima. She lives in a region controlled by opposition's de facto armed groups and the Turkish government in certain areas. Fatima is a researcher who focuses on the social status of women in Syria, particularly in the northwest. She worked on a number of papers last year, one of which examined Daesh's recruitment of minors in Northern Syria, and another paper on the statelessness of children born out of the union of Syrian women who were married to Daesh combatants. Her story began when she got threats following the publication of her research papers on social media. She received live threats via calls, text messages, and graffiti written on the wall of her house. The attack was carried out through one of her interviewees, who was an ISIS survivor, married to an ISIS fighter, and the mother of two children. She was very embarrassed and regretful. During the research interview, she inserted a USB charger into Fatima's laptop to charge it, which was subsequently hacked, and all files were stolen. Later, Fatima left her home with her family to seek safety for herself and for them, as they were systematically threatened by ISIS. She was forcibly displaced to another region in NW Syria. To date, she is still in limbo since she has not found a way to secure protection to avoid relocation. Fatima asserted that without knowing where to go or how to handle this frightening circumstance, her life has been put on hold. Fatima's story illustrates how the global refugee system lacks comprehensive policies and effective protection for women who require immediate assistance. WHRDAPs in active conflict areas have pinned their hopes on feminist international frameworks, e.g., Resolution 1325 and its complementary agendas, which are intended to strengthen their work and their role in conflict zones, yet their actual implementation is very weak in practice.



The Dar al-Hajar area (Yemen) – © Hafsa Afailal

In Yemen, we met Hasna, who shared with us her experience and the challenges she faces to work through her traumas. The case of Hasna highlights to what extent women's human rights defenders' situation in the conflict zone is alarming, as violence and violations against them are intersectional and influenced by multiple forms of discrimination. Her case has brought attention to the worrying situation of WHRDAPs by shedding light on multi aspects. Firstly, the case has stated the challenges related to gender engagement in an unstable conservative context. Women could not express themselves and are criminalized by patriarchal society and authorities online and offline. Thus, Hasna was one of the few women defending human rights since the beginning of the war in her town in Yemen. Once she was released, she had no other choice that remaining silent, halting her presence in social media to protect her life after being shot three times. Secondly, the case has clarified to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the work of women human rights defenders as the authorities have used the pandemic measures to increase repression against her organization's activities. Thirdly, the case of Hasna highlighted the importance of solidarity in challenging moments, as she received support from her peers, who used their pressure to get her released with legal help from a local NGO.

3. WHRDAPs' coping mechanisms and possible forms of resilience

While facing risks and threats related to their work, WHRDAPs in MENA, especially in conflict areas, always insist on devising new mechanisms to maintain their resilience and make their voices heard. One may wonder what mechanisms of resistance and resilience they adopt. What initiatives would provide a space for their protection in conflict and armed conflict? Moreover, how do they continue breaking new ground to defend human rights and participate in peacebuilding?

Given the fact that the violent threats and the high risks hinder the work of WHRDAPs and their structured and unstructured organizations in areas of conflict and post-conflict, as is the case in Syria and Yemen, WHRDAPs respond in a variety of ways:

- **Solidarity and increased cross-movement building**

Belonging to structured and unstructured alliances and networks at the regional and international level is an essential form of solidarity between WHRDAPs, as it provides safe spaces for information sharing and knowledge building. As Amal, one of the interviewees, says, ***“a program by “Peace tracking,” which is highly underfunded, aims at rescuing activists by providing relocation, for example. In the case of an attack, the person must prove that they are under threat. The organization then collaborates with international organizations to bring the person to safety. This institutional mechanism remains very limited due to the required cost.”***

Thus, creating alliances supports making WHRDAPs' voices heard and allows them to launch shared advocacy campaigns and initiatives, capacity building, awareness-raising, and movement building. Dalal, a Yemeni interviewee, says, ***“I don't work alone; the importance of collaboration is great. We invest in opportunities for collaboration and interaction with different stakeholders.”*** As well as in some cases, solidarity actions may have an important role in protecting from online attacks. As the Yemeni peacebuilder confirmed, ***“When attacks are directed at women living in Yemen, the women living abroad, and the network retaliated for them thanks to alliance building. In the case of an attack, the women would reach out and take a screenshot (as evidence). The other women would offer a crash course and help identify the identity of the person behind the attack, assess whether the woman is in danger, and explore the possibility to block the attacker online”***

In this regard, the critical role of the first regional network of WHRDs in the MENA region, WHRDs MENA Coalition, needs to be highlighted. The network was created in 2014, aiming to advocate for the protection and empowerment of human rights defenders, spread the concepts of human rights defenders and define their role. This coalition has successfully defended and supported WHRDAPs in the MENA region by documenting violations, launching campaigns, and lobbying to release WHRDAPs in many countries. It has also played an essential role in bringing cases of

violations to the agenda of the UN human rights council and publishing reports on alarming countries, such as the status report on women human rights defenders in Syria³⁸.

As the space for active participation is narrowed or closed in Yemen and Syria, WHRDAPs rely on regional and international coalitions, as they consider them a safe alternative for WHRDAPs in conflict zones, to conduct advocacy activities and litigation procedures. As well, building coalitions and alliances is a form of resilience that supports defenders, and sometimes it even succeeds in rescuing their lives. Manar from Yemen says, ***“I did receive solidarity. After my release, I didn’t take my case to higher authorities. Some of my peers, mainly journalists that I worked with before, and whose pressure helped get my release, tried to seek justice.”*** As for the case of Hiyam from Syria, she says that ***“The network helped me to clean my laptop, but I didn’t receive any financial support to afford my relocation and change my address to hide my family and myself from the threat of ISIS.”*** Whereas Dalal from Yemen has confirmed that ***“There was no international solidarity, we organized a meeting last month to add light on this topic and the lack of protection from the international organizations. We also raised cases of violations against women by some international organizations.”***

It is important to shed light on the lack of justice in dealing with protection campaigns for all defenders in the same way and size, as Laila from Syria has explained: ***“Activists who have more media exposure, can get protection more easily than lesser-known activists. The effect of social media and the campaigns conducted to display the situation is different. Civil society has the responsibility not to leave anyone behind. Activism creates elites and classes. Some women who are victims of violations from state and non-state actors, can’t write in a foreign language to expose the wrongdoings that they suffered, and therefore their campaigns don’t get the same compassion compared to campaigns in English or French.”***

As the role of structured and unstructured alliances and coalitions in conflict and post-conflict countries in the MENA region is still limited at the level of providing immediate and sustainable assistance and support to WHRDAPs, it is necessary to reinforce the role of exciting forms of solidarity and encouraging WHRDAPs, especially at the regional and international level, to increase cross movement building and provide safe and multiple protection spaces for victims.

- **Cyber safety and security measures**

WHRDAPs tried to mitigate risks and threats by taking into account, in their internal strategies, different measures of online and offline security through developing individual and community security³⁹ plans, such as using robust security software; organizing training on digital security; installing security cameras and sirens to secure office premises; creating rapid response databases; emergency hotline and medical and psychosocial support.

³⁸ [The Status of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria](#). The WHRD coalition in the MENA. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

³⁹ [Urgent Action Fund](#), Feminist Resistance & Resilience, Reflections on Closing Civic Space. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

This awareness of cyber safety and security has increased demands for more support on this among WHRDAPs, as explained by Amal, one of the interviewees: ***“The balance (leverage) is no longer on the side of the authorities only because women are getting smarter and are using new software and techniques”***. However, WHRDAPs still have limited access to funding for high-quality digital safety and security training. As Dalal explained, ***“a training regarding digital security... However, the facilitator, when looking at my case, was unsettled and informed me that I was in danger and that the situation was normal afterward. Also, the training contained many theoretical details and lacked practical knowledge, which wasn’t my liking. Consequently, I didn’t learn much from experience, and the situation stayed the same”***. For these reasons, the aspect of cyber safety and security measures still needs to be improved. Thus, WHRDAPs are demanding core funding mechanisms and flexible support methods that allow them to protect themselves and continue their work with less risks.

- **Self-care, collective care, and wellness**

Due to the gravity of the risks faced daily by frontline WHRDAPs and the trauma that comes with their work, self-care and collective care become essential elements to be integrated into the strategic plan of WHRDAPs’ organizations and coalitions. For this reason, WHRDAPs’ organizations and alliances in the MENA region need to focus on their well-being and try to collectively heal from the trauma caused by war, conflict, patriarchal societies, and authoritarian regimes.

In this context, creating a healing space for WHRDAPs in the MENA region is still very limited, compared to WHRDAPs in Africa or Latin America, where they have developed a strong experience in self-care and wellness, integrating self and collective care in their strategic plans, organizing artistic expressions for self and collective healing, working on trauma, adopting a holistic, integrated approach, and preventing burnout.

These healing spaces and strategies should be created and developed through the joint work of WHRDAPs, local and international NGOs, donors, UN agencies and different interested stakeholders, as these spaces, could create a supportive environment for WHRDAPs, especially in the context of war, conflict, and post-conflict. In this regard, Hasna from Yemen says, ***“I am currently doing therapy sessions with an organization. I didn’t seek support from other parties because I am afraid and, therefore, can’t get in contact with any entity. I would be willing to contact an international organization if they can offer me safety.”***

It is worth mentioning that the Barcelona guidelines on well-being and temporary international relocation of human rights defenders at risk are considered a referential document that WHRDAPs could use to develop their self-care plans and strategies⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ The Barcelona [Guidelines](#) on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk. Last accessed 27/07/2022.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 1325 in 2000. This resolution paved the way for Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. This resolution underscores that conflicts disproportionately affect women and girls. The resolution emphasizes that women have a significant role in peacebuilding through meaningful participation in negotiation and peace talks. The resolution urged UN state members to increase women's participation in peacebuilding efforts through four pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery.

More than twenty years have passed since the adoption of WPS, and yet, the modern crises (e.g., digital authoritarianism, E-GBV, climate change, and displacement) continue to demonstrate that the common thread between these modern challenges is that gender does play a role. These crises have greater impact on Women Peacebuilders and Women rights defenders in global south and countries of conflict, where justice and law enforcement are absent with dominant patriarchal societies.

The year of 2020, brought together several milestone anniversaries on gender equality, including the 20th anniversary of the UNSC Resolution 1325, the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 64. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the celebration of these significant events was held online, offering access for women worldwide to join and participate meaningfully in these conferences.⁴¹

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also posed additional threats and risks to HRD, especially WHRDAP in the MENA region in general and in conflict and post-conflict zones particularly to continue their role and participate actively online and offline.

COVID-19 provided the opportunity for decision-makers in Syria and Yemen to enforce additional repressive and restrictive measures masquerading as a pandemic response. All our interviewees had been subjected to cyber-attacks since the start of their activism and work on human rights and peacebuilding. They not only face the intersection of the oppression of patriarchal society and gender-based violence linked to the conflict, committed by different parties, but they are also exposed to the online threats that hinder their activism even in the diaspora. They face increased targeting during the pandemic from both state and non-state actors, and thus reviewed their security measures to brace themselves for unknown threats and significant risks. However, they highlighted the very limited support to ensure protection and orientation from local and international bodies. 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

⁴¹ UN Women, [CSW64 / Beijing+25 \(2020\)](#), Last accessed March 2020

the operating language and where there is a lack of interpretation of threatening vocabulary due to dialects' diversity.

To this moment, many of our interviewees are still under threat and waiting for support and more solidarity.

The following list of recommendations aims to contribute to laying the ground for local, national, regional, and international stakeholders about effective ways to support women peacebuilders in Syria and Yemen.

Recommendations to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda:

- Revisit the existing notion of violation against women to make 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.
- Explore the new ways in which women participate in peacebuilding, including digital forms and cyber diplomacy. Women in active conflict countries need to be more secure in order to be included in modern peacebuilding tactics.
- Cyber violence is not gender blind; thus, specific measures should be considered to overcome the challenges that women peacebuilders and WHRDAPs face. Our interviewees suggested designating a UN special reporter on digital violence to advance meaningful protection for women and other affected groups.
- Localize WPS agenda; local women-centered agenda and bottom-up approach should be the center of the WPS agenda, with a more comprehensive framework and leadership position for local women at international levels, moving rhetoric into action.
- 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.
- Counter terrorism frameworks should not prevent the WPS agenda from providing proper protection to WHRDAPs who work in areas where extremist groups are present. On the contrary, precisely because of the extremists' presence, WHRDAPs need more protection and resources to find safety.
- Ensure that sanctions imposed in some conflict-involved countries do not affect the work of WHRDAPs, especially when they need rapid funding during emergencies, e.g., pandemics, war, and other natural disasters.

Recommendations to Governments (apathy is not an option and WHRDAPs' protection is their obligation):

- Broader notion of protection to be extended for family members should be in place whenever WHRDAPs receive urgent relocation.
- Banning spyware products, e.g., Israeli spyware Pegasus is life-threatening to WHRDAPs.
- Cyber-attacks and E-GBV pose significant threats that represent one of the factors behind the forcible displacement of WHRDAPs internally and internationally. Many interviewees have stressed that WHRDAPs do not want to leave their countries to advance peace. Still, they wish to have relocation plans as an alternative and to consider digital violence as an element causing forced displacement

Recommendations to donors:

- 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 are considered the main factors by interviewees to enhance the cyber security of women-led feminist groups and women-led organizations (establish healing spaces, create a supportive environment for WHRDAPs, etc.).
- Support fact-checking initiatives to combat smear campaigns against WHRDAPs.

Recommendations to NGOs:

- Provide localized cyber security training customized for WHRDAPs to meet their needs, in their languages and dialects.
- Offer rapid response mechanisms to victims of cyber violence and E-GBV through dedicated hotlines working 24h, operated by female cyber security specialists who speak local languages.
- Offer complementary protective services that are not limited to technical and cyber security support, but also extended to other services, e.g., mental health, relocation support, providing new devices for survivors of E-GBV to continue their work, etc.
- Encourage peer-to-peer learning by creating spaces for knowledge sharing.

Recommendations to META, Twitter, and social media platforms:

- The management of social media platforms legislative committees at government levels should make room for local activists and grassroots representatives to elaborate on specific hate speech based on different dialects in the Middle East.

- Social media companies should hire female Arabic native speakers to receive complaints and process requests to close women's accounts at risk.
- Review digital violence policies and include rapid response mechanisms for women in the Global South.

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