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FEMINIST ACTIVISM DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC: ZOOMING ON THE MENA REGION



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Established in 2012, the Asfari Institute serves as a regional hub dedicated to fostering a robust, diverse, and inclusive civil society in the Arab region. It seeks to bridge academia and activism through knowledge production and research, as well as advocacy and convenings, aiming to enhance the capacities, skills, and visibility of civil society actors while contributing to the redefinition of inclusive citizenship. Top of FormBottom of Form

Conducted between October 2020 and January 2022, the project aims to highlight the roles played by feminist civil society groups in the Arab region during the COVID-19 pandemic, covering Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. More specifically, it seeks to provide insights into how feminist activists and organizations navigate complexities within patriarchal and conflict-ridden contexts to address injustices amid the pandemic.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted and gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups in the Arab region and places a specific emphasis on feminist perspectives, drawing from findings in five country reports—namely, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. It builds on preliminary documents and findings collected by Nazra for Feminist Studies (Egypt), Takatoat (Jordan), Marsa Sexual Health Center (Lebanon), and Mawjoudin (Tunisia). These reports explored the dynamic responses initiated by actors within the feminist movement in the online and offline spheres. This report aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by vulnerable groups and the proactive measures taken by feminist movements to address them in the context of the pandemic.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated vulnerabilities in the Arab region, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQI+ individuals, refugees, and migrant workers.
- Government actions in response to COVID-19, such as implementing lockdowns and imposing restrictions on civic freedoms and movement, have intensified challenges for marginalized communities. These challenges include heightened gender-based violence (GBV), economic repercussions, and discrimination, which are compounded by societal norms and insufficient legal structures.
- Coalitions and collaborations, such as the Yalla Care Coalition in Lebanon and collaborations between organizations in Tunisia, played a crucial role in coordinating emergency responses and supporting marginalized groups, especially the LGBTQI+ community, and refugees.
- Feminist activists in the Arab region embraced virtual spaces, using online protests, digital campaigns, and webinars to advocate for gender equality, address GBV, and empower women and vulnerable groups. They leveraged social media and online platforms to amplify their voices and foster community and solidarity.
- Challenges in digital activism during the COVID-19 pandemic included issues of survivor anonymity, media reinforcement of patriarchal norms, a rise in online violence targeting women, and the spread of misinformation undermining feminist efforts. Limited digital literacy among vulnerable groups and instances of online censorship by governments further compounded these challenges.
- Feminist movements in the Arab region during the pandemic faced obstacles such as prioritizing short-term issues over long-term ones, limited digital inclusion for vulnerable groups, persistent patriarchal challenges, and underreporting of GBV. Limited resources hindered efforts to address societal and cultural norms while ensuring the well-being of marginalized communities.

INTRODUCTION

Deeply ingrained patriarchal systems have historically hindered progress in human rights and women's rights in the Arab region, perpetuating gender-based violence and discrimination¹. With its complex socio-political dynamics as well as repercussions, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed weaknesses in healthcare systems and overall preparedness². This ultimately posed challenges for effective responses, which led to the further marginalization of vulnerable groups and communities in the region such as women, the LGBTQI+ community, refugees, migrant workers, and persons with disabilities.

The economic impact of the pandemic disproportionately affected women, especially those in vulnerable segments like agriculture and domestic work. Female refugees and migrants, who mostly engage in informal employment, faced precarious conditions due to lockdown measures and restrictions, putting them at heightened risk of poverty, with female-headed households particularly vulnerable³.

Rates of gender-based violence (GBV) exacerbated, limiting survivors' access to support services due to lockdowns, increased household tensions, and changes in social safety nets. Lebanon and Tunisia saw a surge in reported GBV cases through hotlines⁴. The challenges are even more severe in fragile and conflict-ridden areas, where sexual violence and forced marriages are more common, and the services addressing these issues have been disrupted.

The pandemic also worsened access to education, with school closures affecting 110 million students. Alternative methods like online platforms and home-based instruction have been implemented, but disparities in technology access and variations in teaching capacity pose threats to marginalized students, including those in remote areas, facing poverty, refugees, internally displaced persons, and children with disabilities⁵.

To address such challenges, feminist activists and organizations in the Arab region launched different initiatives, campaigns, humanitarian support, as well as relief efforts. Faced with restrictions on civic freedoms and mobility, feminist activists adjusted to the circumstances by transitioning their activism to the digital sphere. Digital activism provided a unique and great opportunity for vulnerable groups and communities to amplify their voices, challenge the existing power structures, and globalize the issues they faced.

However, such efforts were not void of challenges and obstacles. Many feminist activists faced backlash from multiple actors, namely repressive governments

1 Said-Foqahaa, N. (2011). Arab women: Duality of deprivation in decision-making under Patriarchal Authority. (M. Maziad, Trans.). *Hawwa*, 9 (1–2), 234–272.

2 Rosenthal, A., & Waitzberg, R. (2023). The challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to health systems exposed pre-existing gaps. *Health policy OPEN*, 4, 100088.

3 OECD. (2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: Impact on gender equality and policy responses.

4 Belhaj, F., Soliman, A., & Kalle, M. (2021). MENA must take bold action against gender-based violence (GBV). World Bank Blogs.

5 Intini, V., Abdel-Shafi, K., & Poole, S. (2021). Compounding crises: Will COVID-19 and lower oil prices prompt a new development paradigm in the Arab region? UNDP.

and conservative societies. Moreover, they faced multiple issues, including online harassment, censorship, the spread of misinformation, and arrests over posts and online campaigns.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing structural issues through feminist advocacy and activism became twice as hard. This report aims to unravel the nuances of Arab feminist activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the challenges faced, the opportunities seized, and the transformative shifts observed in the pursuit of gender equality. By exploring the experiences in five countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, we seek to provide insights into the complexities and dynamics shaping Arab feminist movements in times of unprecedented global upheaval.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

At the end of January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the Arab region⁶. As COVID-19 came to an end, Egypt had reported over 516,023 cases, Jordan over 1,746,997, Lebanon over 1,243,838, Morocco over 1,278,269, and Tunisia over 1,153,361. Though the spread varied across countries, the region as a whole experienced high rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths especially throughout 2020 and 2021. This placed immense strain on healthcare systems and exacerbated existing social and economic challenges across the region. In particular, women faced amplified economic and social burdens due to lost livelihoods, increased domestic duties, and heightened risks of gender-based violence.

The pre-existing vulnerabilities in the Arab region worsened as a result of the measures enforced by the governments in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Civic freedoms, free speech, and mobility became restricted as part of the confinement measures which had a profound impact on vulnerable groups across the region. These groups, which include but are not limited to women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, healthcare workers, domestic and migrant workers, and persons with disabilities faced unique hardships as a result of the health crisis. Economic consequences such as unemployment also increased existing gender inequalities and gender-based violence.

WOMEN AND GIRLS

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the various forms of violence against women, both in physical and virtual spaces. In the case of Morocco, a study indicated that one in four women suffered from physical violence during the pandemic⁷. Moreover, in a survey conducted by the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, 57 percent of respondents reported experiencing GBV during the pandemic⁸. However, in many cases, victims of violence did not resort to legal action against their abusers. According to the Union of Feminist Action, a feminist organization that runs support centers in Morocco, only 35 percent of the victims of domestic abuse assisted by NGOs filed complaints against their partners⁹. In addition, women were burdened with additional care work during lockdowns due to societal expectations and traditional gender norms¹⁰. Many women reported that household duties prevented them from participating in remote learning and others highlighted the issue of daycare and how it affected their ability to find employment.

6 Younis, N. K., Rahm, M., Bitar, F., & Arabi, M. (2021). COVID-19 in the MENA Region: Facts and findings. *Journal of infection in developing countries*, 15(3), 342–349.

7 Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Maroc. (2021). Rapport d'analyse genre de l'impact de la pandémie COVID-19 sur la situation économique, sociale et psychologique des ménages.

8 Ennaji, M. (2021). Women and gender relations during the pandemic in Morocco. *Gender and Women's Studies*. 4(1):3.

9 Zaireg, R. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic case study: Morocco. Heinrich Böll Foundation.

10 Ibid.

In Jordan, women and girls faced GBV during lockdowns amid mobility restrictions. In a study by UN Women, 49 percent of the women reported to have experienced or knew someone who has experienced various forms of violence during the pandemic¹¹. In 2020, 6965 women were reported to have been subjected to violence, but only 810 were able to receive assistance from the small shelters belonging to the Ministry of Social Development¹². In the same year, 22 cases of femicides were recorded¹³. In addition, verbal abuse and the denial of basic resources were the most common forms of violence in the private sphere. For instance, 82 percent of these aggressions were perpetrated by husbands against wives¹⁴.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Egypt, women experienced an elevated risk of GBV and intimate partner violence due to restrictions on movement, enforced social isolation, as well as economic strain. The heightened vulnerability was due to the necessity for social distancing, particularly affecting women who lacked awareness of available GBV resources and faced increased difficulties in accessing in-person support¹⁵. In 2021, the Observatory of Crimes of Violence Against Women documented 813 instances of violent crimes, a substantial rise from the 415 cases reported the previous year¹⁶. New findings from the National Council for Women in Egypt indicate a staggering 86 percent surge in rates of violence¹⁷.

CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB REGION

Identifying and evaluating various manifestations of gender-based violence within the Arab region is intricate and demanding, particularly due to deeply rooted cultural and societal norms that place a significant emphasis on patriarchal values. These values not only accentuate a power imbalance that marginalizes and subjugates women but also cultivate an atmosphere where acts of violence against women are normalized¹⁸. This normalization poses a significant challenge in recognizing and addressing GBV effectively. Legal frameworks within the Arab region also present substantial obstacles to effectively addressing violence against women, especially because it is deeply rooted in gender-based discrimination. Discriminatory laws or insufficiently enforced regulations may fail to provide adequate protection for victims or appropriate punishment for perpetrators. This legal context contributes to a sense of impunity for those who commit acts of violence, perpetuating a harmful cycle.

The challenge of recognizing and assessing various forms of violence in the Arab region is deeply embedded in the cultural, societal, and legal structures that shape gender relations. Addressing this challenge necessitates not only legislative reforms but also a broader societal shift in attitudes towards gender equality. This involves challenging deeply rooted norms, fostering an environment that rejects all forms of violence, and creating a supportive environment for victims to come forward and seek justice. Efforts should extend beyond legal measures to encompass educational initiatives and awareness campaigns.

11 Emandi, R., Encarnacion, J., Seck, P., & Tabaco, R. J. (2021). Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19. UN Women.

12 The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. (2020). Women in Jordan: Continuing violence and absent protection.

13 Ibid.

14 Roth, K. (2022). World Report 2022: Rights trends in Jordan. Human Rights Watch.

15 Christia, F., Larreguy, H., & Parker-Magyar, E. (2023). *Community Jameel: Connecting Egyptian women to gender-based violence resources via social media during COVID-19*.

16 Rabinowitz, A. (2023). The renewed fight to prevent domestic violence in Egypt. Wilson Center.

17 Amin, S. (2022). Proposed domestic violence bill prompts rare criticism of Al-Azhar sheikh. Al Monitor.

18 UN Women. (2020). Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab region.

REFUGEES

After 2011, the Arab region witnessed a substantial influx of refugees compelled to leave their homes due to war and conflict. Seeking refuge in neighboring countries in pursuit of safety and stability, displaced individuals confronted a myriad of challenges, particularly in the realm of integration into their new communities. In Lebanon, the political rhetoric against refugees led to harmful consequences, such as the burning of refugee tents in the conservative towns of Miniyeh and Bcharre¹⁹. Camps and areas that were already in intolerable conditions developed into further damaged locations that left hundreds of refugee families in further states of vulnerability. Individuals were also left with fewer resources to maintain a basic standard of living. These occurrences have transpired without any consequences for those responsible, further highlighting the absence of legal and governmental intervention, underscoring the systemic discrimination prevalent across the country.

In Tunisia, queer refugees bore a disproportionate burden amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when it comes to emotional and mental well-being. With the onset of the pandemic and the implications it has left, depression, anxiety, and drug abuse significantly increased among the community²⁰. Some interviewed queer refugees noted that associations and organizations showed greater involvement during the initial wave of the virus. However, the assistance provided failed to meet all their needs, which is perhaps because no assessment has been made to identify their needs²¹. During the second and third wave of the pandemic, when queer refugees' needs increased, associations were reported to have been even less involved. Consequently, many felt isolated in their fight against the virus.

It is important to note that the aid provided by UNHCR, its partners, national associations, and NGOs, does not cover all the needs of the queer refugees because the UNHCR does not share its database which facilitates reaching the queer refugee community. The overall execution of the work was done on a humanitarian basis, rather than a feminist approach, which left the burden on a small number of feminist organizations²². Moreover, these feminist organizations' work depends on the funding that they receive. During the second and third waves of the pandemic, they faced a shortage of funds for emergency response, given that donors had allocated emergency funding exclusively during the initial wave. This prompted them to explore alternative methods to mobilize resources and offer assistance.

THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

The LGBTQ+ community in the Arab region, historically marginalized and discriminated against, faced heightened challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Lebanon, the Beirut Port Explosion exacerbated existing difficulties by diminishing public healthcare services²³ and damaging safe spaces for the LGBTQI+ community²⁴, increasing their vulnerability to violence and discrimination²⁵. Trans individuals,

19 Issa, M. (2020). More than 100 tents set on fire in Miniyeh Refugee Camp. Beirut Today.

20 Minority Rights Group. (2022). MRG and partners concerned about the situation of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Tunisia.

21 According to a testimonial of a queer refugee in Tunisia.

22 Ibid.

23 UNFPA, ABAAD, Care International, ESCWA, & UN Women. (2021). A rapid gender analysis of the August 2020 Beirut Port Explosion: An intersectional examination.

24 This includes the following areas: Karantina, Bourj Hammoud, Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael.

25 Khoury, C., & Traboulsi, K. (2021). Yalla Care Coalition – A descriptive report.

facing growing transphobia, lost safe living spaces, and places that offered support during the October Revolution were physically destroyed. This community in Lebanon became susceptible to harassment, with reports of discrimination emerging when seeking aid. Fearful of providing IDs for humanitarian assistance, individuals from the LGBTQI+ community faced increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation, blackmail, and harassment²⁶. Those who relied on sex work for their income, particularly trans women in Beirut – an already vulnerable group – became even more vulnerable to this kind of violence²⁷.

The LGBTQI+ community in Tunisia was subjected to numerous human rights violations based on sexual freedom, sexual orientation, and gender identity. These included being expelled, harassed, and persecuted, to the point that some queer individuals were seeking asylum in other states in search of protection²⁸. Furthermore, discrimination, encompassing homophobia and racism, was prevalent in public hospitals, exacerbating difficulties in accessing essential HIV care²⁹. Many LGBTQI+ individuals experienced loss of access or lacked the means to reach healthcare providers due to confinement measures, further compounding the multifaceted challenges faced by this marginalized community. During confinement, they were the target of hate campaigns and legal proceedings, compounded by extreme socio-economic precariousness resulting from the loss of their jobs and sources of income.

Overall, the queer community in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia relied on social support networks and community spaces which have been disrupted due to lockdown measures. For example, accessing inclusive healthcare has also been limited for the Moroccan queer community because of patriarchal and exclusionary norms in Morocco. In response to the discrimination faced during the pandemic, queer refugees were overly dependent on income from the informal sector while still being vulnerable to harassment and violence³⁰.

MIGRANT WOMEN AND DOMESTIC WORKERS

Amidst the complex socioeconomic landscape in various countries in the Arab region, domestic migrant workers faced escalating challenges that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In Tunisia, the situation of domestic migrant workers took a distressing turn as reports indicate a surge in layoffs by their employers, rendering many stranded without the means to return to their home countries³¹. The situation was exacerbated by widespread lockdown restrictions and job layoffs imposed by employers, significantly amplifying the workload and working hours of migrant workers. The heightened economic uncertainties, coupled with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have created a precarious environment, leaving these workers facing unprecedented difficulties in securing their livelihoods and navigating the complexities of their employment situations.

In Lebanon, the economic situation impacted the value of wages received by the

26 UNFPA, ABAAD, Care International, ESCWA, & UN Women. (2021). A rapid gender analysis of the August 2020 Beirut Port Explosion: An intersectional examination.

27 Ibid.

28 Queer is an umbrella term used to label the whole of sexual and gender minorities: people with a sexual orientation, gender identities and sex characteristics that are non-normative and differ from heterosexuality and cis identity.

29 Ben Jouira, A., Channa, J., & Hammami, O. (2021). Impact de la Covid-19 sur les droits des minorités et des populations minorées : consultation avec la société civile. Minority Rights Group International.

30 Minority Rights Group. (2022). MRG and partners concerned about the situation of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Tunisia.

31 UN Women. (2020). Gender alert on COVID-19 Lebanon: In focus: Women, gender, and the economy.

migrant workers, receiving little to no salary. In the aftermath of the Beirut Port Explosion in September 2020, there was a notable rise in cases where domestic workers were abandoned by their employers and left in dire conditions and forced to fend for themselves. For instance, around 70 domestic workers were stranded in front of the Kenyan Consulate in Lebanon with many not even having their basic belongings³². This ignited many campaigns and protests in front of embassies and consulates to pressure officials to take action³³. Unlike the Lebanese government and officials not playing a crucial role in the evacuations of migrant workers, much of the assistance was conducted by the International Organization for Migration, Egna Legna³⁴, Anti-Racism Movement (ARM Lebanon)³⁵, and other local organizations.

In April 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Morocco denounced Moroccan authorities for using sexual violence to intimidate Sahrawi women human rights defenders³⁶. Vulnerable groups faced displacement which has exposed them to higher risks of GBV. While the Moroccan government has put in place legislation to regulate the relationship between domestic workers and their employers, the implementation and enforcement of these frameworks remain challenging. During the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic workers became overwhelmed with the increasing amount of housework and restrictions on leaving the house. They were requested to work around the clock and take on additional workload, including caring for infected people and accepting additional cleaning tasks. Even worse, they were more exposed to sexual abuse and GBV³⁷.

THE KAFALA SYSTEM: MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

The kafala sponsorship system, prevalent across the Gulf and wider Arab region, has garnered exploitation and abuse of migrant domestic workers for generations³⁸. Under the kafala system, a migrant's legal status and right to remain in the country depends directly and entirely on their employer/sponsor. The employer/sponsor exerts complete control over the worker, and that is the main reason the kafala system is compared to as the modern-day slavery. Workers are unable to change jobs or even leave without the sponsor's consent, trapping them in potentially abusive situations with no escape. Furthermore, workers cannot even unionize³⁹, and thus have zero pathways to justice. If they leave employers, they lose legal status and confront likely arrest and abuse at the hands of authorities. With the advent of COVID-19, the pandemic illuminated, as well as exacerbated, these dangers as their plight became more and more visible to the public.

Some Gulf states have claimed progress in dismantling the kafala system, but human rights groups find these moves as lacking substantive change on the ground. For example, Qatar and Bahrain have proclaimed reforming or abolishing components of kafala⁴⁰. However, the core power imbalance remains untouched—workers still depend on employer sponsors. Other states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have passed smaller, piecemeal reforms⁴¹ that also fail to alter the exploitative system of kafala. Without profound structural change severing workers from employer sponsors, the Gulf's legacy of migrant labor exploitation cannot be remedied and migrant domestic workers in the Arab region remain unprotected.

32 International Medical Corps. (2020). Beirut Explosion, situation report #6.

33 Ibid.

34 Anti-Racism Movement. (2020). Weekly news report: November 2-8, 2020.

35 Ibid.

36 Amnesty International. (2023). Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The state of the world's human rights.

37 OECD. (2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: Impact on gender equality and policy responses.

38 The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2023). The time for change is now: Abolishing the Kafala System in Lebanon.

39 Ibid.

40 Migrant Rights. (2019). Reform the Kafala System.

41 Ibid.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The pandemic's ripple effect extends to gender-based violence (GBV). This means that the situation is not just economic or social as many contend, but is also *gendered*⁴². This is seen in lockdown measures which have inadvertently heightened tensions within households, creating an alarming environment for domestic violence. Recent research tracing activism over the last 30 years against sexual and gender-based violence, with a focus on survivors' and advocates' narratives in Egypt, reveals how Egyptian feminist mobilization during the pandemic has brought to the public sphere the untold stories of the various forms of violence occurring through online and social media platforms⁴³. This underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions addressing the complex interplay between economic vulnerability and GBV in the context of the pandemic.

The erasure of disabled individuals is also a profound societal concern that begets urgent attention. It reflects not only a failure in public health measures but also underscores the need for a broader reevaluation of intersectional erasure. From a sociological standpoint, within a capitalist and consumerist modern world, value is predominantly ascribed to entities that generate profit and capital. Consequently, disabled individuals are marginalized and erased in a societal framework where their contributions are deemed "unproductive" and do not generate profit (such as labor)⁴⁴. The implications of this erasure extend beyond the pandemic. Hence, disabled people are dispensed and erased. In practical terms, the erasure of disabled individuals during the pandemic becomes evident through a stark 30% reduction in their access to indispensable healthcare services⁴⁵. In other words, disabled people experienced "invisibility." This statistical point serves as a poignant indicator of systemic shortcomings perpetuated by the ongoing global health crisis. Moreover, the economic repercussions of COVID-19 have differentially impacted sectors traditionally employing persons with disabilities, resulting in a discernible 20% reduction in viable employment prospects for this already marginalized group.

42 European Institute for Gender Inequality. (2021). Gender-based violence amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

43 Hassan, M., & Rizzo, H. (2022). The sexual and gender-based violence epidemic meets the COVID-19 pandemic: Survivors' and advocates' narratives in Egypt. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 47(2), 147–165.

44 Brown, L.X.Z. (2017). Ableist Shame and Disruptive Bodies: Survivorship at the Intersection of Queer, Trans, and Disabled Existence. In: Johnson, A., Nelson, J., Lund, E. (eds) *Religion, Disability, and Interpersonal Violence*. Springer, Cham. 0

45 McBride-Henry, K., Nazari Orakani, S., Good, G., Roguski, M., & Officer, T. N. (2023). Disabled people's experiences accessing healthcare services during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review. *BMC Health Services Research*, 23(1).

FEMINIST SOCIAL RESPONSE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The feminist movement in the Arab region has a rich history marked by the dynamic struggle of women for equality in the face of entrenched patriarchal norms, religious interpretations, colonial legacies, and economic priorities. Leslie Lewis, highlighting the trends and challenges of feminist movements over the past hundred years, claims that the last decade has seen some relaxation of the enforcement of laws against women in general and that there is a broad coalition of group formations (such as Kifaya, Egyptian Movement for Change) across the Arab region calling for radical change⁴⁶. Post-Arab Spring, feminist movements are navigating a complex landscape, from failed states engulfed in civil wars to others promoting state-feminist agendas. Yet, there has been resilience and continued activism⁴⁷, especially in countries such as Egypt, where the MENA region has been deemed as the place where “fourth-wave feminism” emerged⁴⁸.

EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS: POSSIBLE FACTORS

According to Moghadam, the expansion of women's rights – and feminist – organizations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region can be related to four factors, including demographic, economic, political, and international factors⁴⁹. The demographic factors encompass the expansion of educated women residing in urban centers and their active participation in the paid labor market. The growing concentration of populations in urban areas presents both challenges in terms of the demand for social services and opportunities for proactive measures.

Economic factors involve cutbacks in government expenditure on critical areas like healthcare, education, and social welfare, coupled with governmental shortcomings in addressing issues such as female illiteracy, reproductive health, and legal reforms. These circumstances have galvanized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into action and sharpened women's awareness of the interconnectedness between the development agenda and the well-being and standing of women. Political factors, on the other hand, are characterized by two concurrent trends: the emergence and expansion of Islamic fundamentalism and the surging demand for democratization. These dynamics have given rise to a proliferation of NGOs, particularly those dedicated to human rights and the advancement of women. The significance of women's NGOs lies in the historical marginalization of women from public participation and power.

These conferences include the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, the International Conference on Human Rights, particularly the Women's Tribunal convened in Vienna in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

46 Arenfeldt, P., & Golley, N. A.-H. (2012). Arab Women's Movements: Developments, Priorities, and Challenges. In P. Arenfeldt & N. A.-H. Golley, *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations from Within*.

47 Al Atiyat, I. (2020). The current faces of Arab feminism: Micro-rebels, art activists and virtual heroines. Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung.

48 Tazi, M., & Oumlil, K. (2020). The rise of fourth-wave feminism in the Arab region? Cyberfeminism and women's activism at the crossroads of the Arab Spring.

49 Moghadam, V. M. (1998). The women's movement in the Middle East and North Africa: Responding to restructuring and fundamentalism. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 26(3/4), 57–67.

Collectively, these global initiatives have fostered what can be termed “global feminism,” creating a vital space for the growth and development of women’s organizations⁵⁰. In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security⁵¹ to redefine and reaffirm commitment to the prevention of violations of women’s rights during conflict.

It is important to note that the growth of feminist civil society and feminist activism in the Arab region was driven by many other factors, including challenging patriarchal norms and values, engaging in political spheres, protesting personal status laws, addressing unpaid care work, navigating informal networks, combating homophobia and transphobia, and advocating against discrimination faced by refugees, migrant workers, and individuals with disabilities. These various aspects are not just peripheral but form the core of the feminist movement in the region, underscoring the breadth and depth of the challenges and issues that feminists are addressing.

The feminist movement was directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which left direct and indirect threats to the lives of many vulnerable groups in the Arab region. With the onset of the pandemic, significant progress was made by feminists, activists, and organizations to address the taboos of silence and societal stigma, especially those related to violence against women. Efforts were also invested in ensuring relief and aid to communities that fell through the cracks of government interventions. Through their efforts, feminist activists were able to shed light on human rights violations and shift the conversation from the private sphere to the public and political sphere. The movement worked diligently on exposing these violations, raising awareness, as well as advocating for measures to ensure the protection and freedom of marginalized groups across the region.

FEMINIST COLLABORATIONS AND COALITIONS

Feminist activism seeks to build inclusive coalitions across borders as well as collaborative movements within countries to challenge interconnected systems of oppression. This requires dialogue between women across regions and nations to move beyond cultural divides, enforced borders, and identities to collectively envision liberatory futures. Feminist collaborations and coalitions, epitomized through solidarity, recognize that gender-based oppression intersects with other systems of domination like racism, capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Accordingly, this section explores feminist collaborations during COVID-19 and their acts of solidarity, focusing on Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia.

EGYPT

One exemplary collaboration unfolded in Damanhour, where Bent el Nile, established in 2012, played a pivotal role⁵². In addition to providing legal, psychological, and medical services, they launched new initiatives after the pandemic’s onset. The campaign “My Rights are Mine” was a notable endeavor, driven by a survey of approximately 300 women workers assessing the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. Radio Banat, conducting online surveys on the lockdown’s effects on women, produced impactful reports on the pandemic’s impact on women in an unstable economic market. Under

50 Ibid.

51 United Nations. (2000). *S/RES/1325. Security Council resolution on women and peace and security.*

52 Hassan, M., & Rizzo, H. (2022). The sexual and gender-based violence epidemic meets the COVID-19 pandemic: Survivors’ and advocates’ narratives in Egypt. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 47(2), 147–165.

the banner “She Can,” they created videos based on their studies and collected stories, contributing to a broader understanding of women’s experiences during the pandemic. Further, the Superwomen Initiative, originating in 2016 outside of Cairo, shifted its focus during the pandemic. They adapted to the new reality by developing online initiatives providing safe spaces on social media for women to discuss their issues, organizing online events to raise awareness, and initiating economic empowerment programs. Numerous formal organizations also took feminist initiatives during this period⁵³. Nazra for Feminist Studies conducted research focusing on women in prison, their health vulnerability, mental health, and self-care in crisis situations. The Arab Women’s Organization launched a media campaign highlighting the pandemic’s effects on women, while the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance reposted their hotline for legal and psychosocial services.

JORDAN

Tadamun (established in 1998), SADAQA (founded in 2011), and Takatoat (emerging in 2020 where Covid played a role in its emergence) have played instrumental roles in the women’s rights movement. Tadamun, initiated by Asma Khader, focuses on legal services, education, and activism. They have carried out 167 total projects, and their ongoing collaborations included working with Vital Voices Global Partnership, JNCW, Women Learning Partnership, Global Fund for Women, Kvinna Till Kvinna, the SURGIR Foundation, Nujūd Alliance (which aims to eliminate child marriage), the Jordanian Civil Coalition to Repeal Article 308, JNCW’s Network for Combating Violence Against Women (“Sha’ma”), and the Salma Network and others.⁵⁴ SADAQA played a vital role during COVID-19, introducing a mitigation plan for the care sector, and supporting daycares and families when state assistance was limited. By the end of the pandemic’s first year, they assisted 50 daycares. Takatoat has organized, since its inception, a Regional Feminist School and several iterations of online and in-person feminist workshops and feminist book clubs. The Regional Feminist School, done completely online and in conjunction with Nazra for Feminist Studies (Egypt), was held in late 2021 and focused on introducing its participants to laws and legislation related to gender-based violence. In July 2022, Takatoat partnered over social media with Al-Haraka Al-Niswiyya Fi Al-Urdun (“The Feminist Movement in Jordan”) to organize an in-person protest in response to the killing of Iman Rashid in Amman.⁵⁵

LEBANON

The Yalla Care Coalition was established in 2020 preceding the Beirut Port Explosion in Lebanon to coordinate emergency responses⁵⁶. It initially started in May 2020 to fundraise and respond to the needs of the LGBTQI+ community. Following the Beirut Port Explosion, the organizations of the original fundraiser and new initiatives came together to form a coalition that includes Haven for Artists, Marsa, Queer Relief Fund, LebMash, Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, Skoun, SIDC, and MOSAIC, all of which are inclusive of marginalized communities and work toward compiling data and providing support and aid⁵⁷. The coalition played a crucial role in specifying not only the needs of the community but also documenting the impacts and certain steps that should be taken. Haven for Artists – a cultural feminist organization in

53 Ibid.

54 Poust, M. R. (2023). Making a space: Negotiating discourses within the Jordanian women’s movements.

55 Ibid.

56 Khoury, C., & Traboulsi, K. (2021). Yalla Care Coalition – A descriptive report.

57 UNFPA, ABAAD, Care International, ESCWA, & UN Women. (2021). A rapid gender analysis of the August 2020 Beirut Port Explosion: An intersectional examination.

Beirut that intersects art and activism – turned their space into a shelter for vulnerable individuals who had lost their homes after the Beirut Port Explosion. Through money donations, Haven for Artists was able to assist 35 artists, 195 LGBTQIA+ individuals, 201 single mothers/families, and 22 migrant women⁵⁸.

MOROCCO

Collaborations such as the “Moroccan Feminist Network” and the “Feminist Collective for Solidarity” amplified efforts to support women’s voices and rights challenged by the pandemic. They have also proved effective in providing opportunities for women to share their experiences and work together towards a more inclusive and equal society. The “Touche Pas à Ma Constitution” (Don’t Touch My Constitution) organization has collaborated with other organizations to create safe shelters and spaces for GBV survivors⁵⁹. Noteworthy organizations such as the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité and LGBTQIA+ feminist collectives like Nassawiyat demonstrated the effectiveness of transnational cooperation. The Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité, as a coalition, successfully overcame social divisions in feminist struggles by considering obstacles to lobbying as transnational issues⁶⁰. In a parallel narrative, Nassawiyat, operating in a country criminalizing both male and female homosexuality, showcased innovation during the pandemic. Collaborating with counterparts such as the Shams association in Tunisia and the HELEM association in Lebanon, Nassawiyat leaders created emergency funds and activities, addressing critical needs in a challenging socio-political environment⁶¹.

TUNISIA

During the first COVID-19 wave, LGBTQI+ organizations in Tunisia faced resource limitations, preventing them from addressing the needs of the queer community. As such, they reached out to diverse organizations across regions in Tunisia to collaborate and expand relief efforts. Organizations, such as Mawjoudin, Damej, Baya Association, Ghosen Al Zaytoun, and Sfax Al Mezyena, alongside UNHCR and its partners, actively supported refugees during the pandemic⁶². The collaboration between UNHCR partners and national associations, like the Conseil Tunisien des Réfugiés, focused on ensuring a comprehensive response to the diverse needs of vulnerable groups, particularly queer refugees. Mawjoudin, for instance, worked with pharmacies to secure essential medications for the queer community, enhancing distribution safety. This joint effort aimed to overcome medication challenges amid shortages, emphasizing reliable procurement and distribution. LGBTQI+ organizations also offered legal support, food stipends, rent coverage, and online counseling.

FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Digital activism emerged as a powerful force of change within feminist movements during the COVID-19 outbreak, especially in the Arab region. Through social media and online platforms, feminist activists highlighted gender inequalities, challenged patriarchal norms, and provided a vital space for marginalized groups. Facing restrictions, they turned to virtual platforms for advocacy, employing online protests,

58 Bertolino, H. (2021, August 4). Speaking to Lebanese creatives one year after the Beirut Blast. Dazed Digital.

59 UN Women. (2020). Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab region.

60 Bensouda, H. (2022). Lessons from Morocco’s women’s rights movement: Overcoming divisions to push for reforms. Arab Reform Initiative.

61 Ibid.

62 UNHCR. (n.d.). LGBTQI+ refugees.

campaigns, and webinars. The online sphere provided feminist groups with a space to connect, share experiences, and mobilize.

In the absence of sufficient governmental measures, feminist actors and feminist civil society organizations took on that responsibility, advocating for legal reforms and implementing anti-GBV measures, such as financial assistance programs and helplines. According to Leila Rhiwi, Representative of UN Women in Morocco: **“While the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated inequalities and vulnerabilities, it also showed that women were agents of change who could respond to this disastrous health crisis”**⁶³

EGYPT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, feminist activists in Egypt established new initiatives that address feminist and gender issues in virtual realms. For instance, the **“Speak Up”** initiative was created to address sexual harassment of women. It gained significant attention in July 2020 after the case of Ahmed Bassam Zakim, an Egyptian student accused of sexually assaulting women in Egypt. This initiative started by publishing testimonies of survivors on Instagram. In addition, the campaign and hashtag **“الولاية حقي”** or **“Guardianship is My Right”** gained significant traction across various social media platforms in March 2021. The campaign served as a powerful platform for women to voice their concerns and highlight instances where they faced significant obstacles in exercising their legal rights as guardians. For instance, some women addressed their inability to enroll their children in school although Egyptian law grants this right to first-degree relatives, including uncles⁶⁴. The widespread participation in the campaign demonstrated a collective call for change and greater gender equality within the legal and social framework of Egypt⁶⁵. The campaign allowed Mada Masr and other activists to address various issues that women are unable to control in Egypt, such as living independently in an apartment or having the right to educational guidance.

JORDAN

Feminist activists in Jordan also shifted their activities and services to remote delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Feminist Movement In Jordan did not shift its services to remote delivery but is rather an example of a cyber movement that emerged amid COVID-19 (around the end of 2020) where all their activities are based on remote delivery. It has been reported that *“remote delivery was only an alternative provided to those women whose living circumstances restrict their mobility. The alternative becomes the regular; the norm; the usual. A new reality our services needed to adapt to”*⁶⁶. The need to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic was crucial to ensure the continuity of the feminist efforts in Jordan.

Many feminist activists actively engaged in digital platforms, such as Twitter, to advance their causes through advocacy and mobilization efforts in Jordan⁶⁷. Moreover, new online initiatives were developed to promote gender equality, such as **“The Woman Voice”**. Feminist activists in Jordan also organized various online campaigns to raise awareness online and amplify their voices⁶⁸. One example is the campaign titled **“16 Days of Activism Against**

63 Ennaji, M. (2021). Women and gender relations during the pandemic in Morocco. *Gender and Women's Studies*. 4(1):3.

64 أبو ضيف، ع. (2021). (الولاية حقي.. ما قصة الحملة التي اجتاحت مصر؟. سكاى نيوز عربية.

65 Ibid.

66 Interview with Maisa Farraj, the programs manager at JWU on November 9, 2021.

67 Cuthbert, O. (2017). A new chapter for feminism in Jordan. openDemocracy.

68 Interview with Sahar Aloul, an executive team member at SADAQA on November 7, 2021.

Gender-Based Violence” under the slogan “Together Against Violence.”⁶⁹ This campaign was done in November 2020 where they invited everyone to join their online campaign under the hashtags #16DaysJo, #TogetherAgainstViolence, and نحن_معكم_ضد_العنف#. These online spaces offered activists safer avenues for organizing because they provide some level of protection against state authorities and other entities like conservative nationalist Jordanians who either lack full access or have limited control over these spaces⁷⁰.

LEBANON

In 2019, there were nationwide protests in Beirut primarily driven by the deteriorating economic crisis. Accordingly, these protests grew in intensity and became more violent during COVID-19, especially following the Beirut Blast⁷¹. The uprising took on a digital and remote form, with many actors utilizing social media as an alternative public space to organize protests. Social media platforms were used to spread resources and educate individuals about the importance of change, whether targeting the revolution or the pandemic⁷². Despite COVID-19 restrictions, feminist activists in Lebanon sustained momentum for change by leveraging online platforms. The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering created digital campaigns against domestic violence under lockdowns. ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality also developed online campaigns with a hotline number dedicated to women enduring violence at home, with the hashtag [#LockdownNotLockup](#). The remote delivery was also seen in Lebanon during the Beirut port explosion, where feminists organized through social media platforms. One example is YallaFeminists, where they prioritized women-headed households and mothers affected by the Beirut port explosion.

Despite operation restrictions, feminist organizations across the region developed or adapted methods to continue their work remotely. One example is [Marsa – Sexual Health Center](#), a Lebanese local center that provides confidential and anonymous services related to sexual and reproductive health in a friendly environment free of stigma and discrimination. Marsa exerted extra efforts to transition services to the online realm, specifically focusing on mental health services and ensuring they are provided in secure and inclusive environments. ABAAD, a local organization in Lebanon dedicated to combatting gender-based violence, introduced a case management system for GBV cases, prioritizing the safety of both survivors and caseworkers. The shift to remote operations necessitated the establishment of guidelines, which were collaboratively developed in partnership with the UNF⁷³.

MOROCCO

In Morocco, digital and online spaces offered unprecedented opportunities for individuals to express themselves and engage in protests virtually in light of government-imposed mobility restrictions and the lockdown. Online forums and discussion boards allowed people to express their demands and make their voices heard by local authorities as well as engage in political mobilization and protests. These digital spaces also provided a platform for marginalized voices to express themselves and advocate for their rights⁷⁴. During the pandemic, platforms like

69 UN Women (2020). The Jordanian National Commission for Women launches the international advocacy campaign ‘16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence’ under the slogan “Together Against Violence”.

70 Murad Garlick, N., & Jaber, B. (2020). Impact of shrinking space on women organising in Jordan. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation.

71 Arab News (2021). Two years after protests, Lebanon activists set sights on vote.

72 Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. (2021). In what ways has the pandemic affected the revolution?

73 ABAAD. (2021). Remote GBV case management during emergencies.

74 ERIM. (2021). Libert  d’expression sur Internet au Maroc [Freedom of expression on the Internet in Morocco].

Facebook and Twitter were vital tools for activists to share information, share news articles, organize events, and connect with like-minded individuals. Through social media platforms, activists, and organizations were able to reach a wider audience, connect survivors with resources, and advocate for change. For example, Union Feministe Libre developed an application called 'Manchoufouch' to serve as an open platform where sexual harassment and all forms of sexual and gender-based violence can be safely mapped and reported⁷⁵. In this context, the feminist response was more effective in assisting vulnerable groups, especially women when public spaces were deemed inaccessible. These initiatives also put pressure on policymakers to address the issue of gender-based violence in the country amid the pandemic.

TUNISIA

Digital activism played a critical role in feminist organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tunisia. Initiatives like [#EnaZeda](#) emerged, providing an online platform for women to anonymously share testimonies of sexual assault and break the silence around sexual violence. In less than two months, over five hundred stories of abuse were posted. #EnaZeda gained traction and is considered a successful online feminist movement. The movement initially started in the social media sphere, in October 2019, as a local appropriation of the international #MeToo movement. Additionally, the Fe-Male organization partnered with UN Women to launch an online campaign emphasizing that women and girl survivors are not statistics but humans with stories and rights⁷⁶. Another example is The Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development (AFTURD) where they opened an emergency shelter with UNFPA for women victims of violence, ensuring protections continued despite court closures and lockdowns⁷⁷. Part of their campaign was to create social media graphics raising awareness about heightened gender inequality during lockdowns.

75 El Asmar, F. (2020). Claiming and reclaiming the digital world as a public space: Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa. Oxfam.

76 FeMale (2021). Fe-Male campaigns against the rise of domestic violence during COVID19.

77 MedTOWN (2020). AFTURD's involvement in the care of women victims of violence during the lockdown period in Tunisia.

MAIN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges for feminist activists in the Arab region. Gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment surged during lockdowns, with a notable increase in online violence targeting women. Societal norms and cultural barriers contributed to the underreporting of GBV, as victims feared stigma and lacked trust in the justice system. Media bias and misinformation hindered feminist efforts, perpetuating biases against women. Limited access to the digital sphere, prioritization of short-term needs, and scarce resources created obstacles to women's participation in online platforms and protests. Economic downturns strained funding for feminist organizations, leading to poor collaboration and uneven resource distribution, exacerbating disparities between urban and rural communities.

Despite these challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, feminist activists in the Arab region seized the opportunities provided by the digital realm to amplify their voices and advance their cause. Online platforms have become vital arenas for advocacy, offering a space where digital tools can be harnessed to reshape narratives and raise awareness on issues such as gender-based violence. The adaptability of the feminist movement to the digital sphere has been particularly evident, with the emergence of powerful hashtags like “#BreakTheSilence” that serve as rallying points for solidarity, enabling activists to address and combat pervasive societal issues.

CHALLENGES

1. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Many feminist activists encountered gender discrimination and multiple forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment⁷⁸. During the lockdown, a rise in online harassment, online violence, and cyberbullying targeting women and women activists. They would receive threats, blackmail, and unsolicited sharing of explicit content without consent⁷⁹. In 2021, around 58.1 percent of women in Morocco have reported having been exposed to online violence⁸⁰. Online violence posed threats to both the physical safety and mental well-being of women. What's more, these digital incidents frequently escalated into offline situations and real-world events. In 2020, it was reported that 44 percent of cases involving women experiencing online violence also spilled over into offline occurrences. This marked a significant increase from the previous rate of 5 percent before the COVID-19 pandemic⁸¹. As a result, women's activists and human rights defenders were concerned about the attacks they faced online after the pandemic, which often involve explicit sexual content and threats of

78 Luchsinger, G. Benkirane, M., & Zeid, Y. (2022). Violence against women in the online space: Insights from multi-country research in the Arab States. UN Women.

79 El Asmar, F. (2020). Claiming and reclaiming the digital world as a public space: Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa. Oxfam.

80 Luchsinger, G. Benkirane, M., & Zeid, Y. (2022). Violence against women in the online space: Insights from multi-country research in the Arab States. UN Women.

81 Ibid.

rape and murder. Activists attributed these attacks as a result of conservative and patriarchal social norms. This perception often triggers outrage and efforts to silence them or even remove these women from online platforms⁸². Furthermore, no Arab country has yet implemented a law criminalizing online violence which is deeply intertwined with gender-based discrimination and misogyny⁸³.

There was a significant underreporting of GBV due to societal and cultural barriers. In many instances, victims hesitated to come forward and report incidents due to pervasive societal norms that stigmatized survivors, often placing the burden of shame on those who spoke out. Cultural expectations regarding gender roles and familial honor contributed to a culture of silence, where victims feared judgment, ostracization, or retaliation for disclosing their experiences. This reluctance to report not only perpetuated the cycle of violence but also created a significant impediment to understanding the true extent of the issue. One notable example was the circulation of misogynist jokes and memes that targeted women during Covid⁸⁴. Memes portrayed women as happier staying at home, being in the kitchen, or taking care of children rather than working or being in public spaces. These problematic jokes and memes work to normalize the harassment and subjugation of women while trivializing their roles and capabilities. Their wide distribution through social media platforms gave them an aura of social acceptability that perpetually reinforced gender biases. This creates a distressing environment where speaking out against gender biases becomes even more and more challenging.

Moreover, a lack of trust in the justice system further compounded the underreporting of GBV. Victims perceived the legal processes as inadequate or biased, deterring them from seeking justice or protection. The absence of faith in the system contributed to a pervasive sense of impunity for perpetrators, allowing the cycle of violence to persist. The limited reporting of GBV posed significant challenges for feminist organizations seeking to address the issue. Without accurate data, it became challenging to allocate resources effectively, design targeted interventions, and advocate for policy changes. The result was a gap in the provision of support and services for survivors, leaving many without the necessary assistance to cope with the aftermath of violence.

2. MEDIA BIAS AND MISINFORMATION

Efforts to undermine the feminist cause have been well observed during the confinement period as misogyny and patriarchal norms from the offline world transferred readily online. The COVID-19 pandemic was a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, as individuals constantly looked out for answers to uncertainties and resources for challenges they faced⁸⁵. Misinformation negatively impacted online feminist activism since it undermined the efforts and credibility of many feminist activists. Indeed, it reinforced existing prejudices and biases against women, further marginalizing and silencing their voices in society. For instance, vulnerable groups in Morocco, particularly disadvantaged women lack knowledge in using new communication technologies, obstructing their ability to report cases of GBV encountered during the pandemic and access basic assistance and help units⁸⁶. More importantly, marginalized, and

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Nasreen, Z. (2021). 'Have You Not Got a Sense of Humour?': Unpacking masculinity through online sexist jokes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 7(1), 148-154.

85 ERIM. (2021). *Liberté d'expression sur Internet au Maroc* [Freedom of expression on the Internet in Morocco].

86 Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc. (2022). Report of Women's Rights NGOs in Morocco under the 4th Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Rabat, Morocco.

low-income women lacked access to digital devices, and internet connectivity to participate in digital protests, access information, and participate in virtual meetings surrounding their issues. Reports of online censorship and suppression of feminists in the Arab region, and especially in Morocco, have also surged during the pandemic as a result of conservative values and societal norms. It is not uncommon as previous attempts to silence activists and restrict traditional media outlets existed before the pandemic. This violation of freedom of expression manifested through content removal, online surveillance, account suspension, and internet shutdown by the governments, especially during times of social unrest and protests⁸⁷.

Moreover, the media employed traditional patriarchal tactics, emphasizing values like honor and marginalizing women's issues as less important, to attract viewership and diminish the importance of women's issues. For instance, the media accused the "TikTok girls" of "violating the values of the Egyptian family." Egypt has seen eight cases where legal judgments were issued regarding the publication of digital content on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The headlines of newspapers, often criticized by the public for their coverage of violence-related issues, tend to focus on one side of the story which can turn victims into suspects. The incident involving "The Girl of Mit Ghamor in Egypt," who faced harassment from a group of young men while walking home is an example. News organizations obtained images of her from her social media profiles and released them, seemingly disregarding the Personal Data Protection Law. They emphasized specifics about her attire and insinuated her responsibility for the incident. However, these same outlets withheld information and images of the individuals accused of harassment^{88,89}.

3. LIMITED ACCESS TO THE DIGITAL SPHERE

In the context of the global shift towards digital activism and increased online engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerable groups in the Arab region, especially women, faced obstacles hindering their access to and participation in digital platforms and protests. Women encountered challenges such as limited access to technology, inadequate internet infrastructure, societal norms, and gender-based discrimination. This digital divide went beyond physical access, extending to restricted digital literacy and awareness, isolating women from support systems and services. This stems from the fact that digital spaces mirror existing gender inequalities that women face in the real world⁹⁰. Patriarchal norms that restrict women's voices and participation in the public sphere transfer seamlessly online. And since women are most often restricted to the private sphere, as many feminists contend, they become subsequently erased and silenced in the public online sphere. Accordingly, the cyber world unleashes a wave of backlash through trolling, bullying, and efforts to silence outspoken women, as previously stated with the circulation of jokes and memes⁹¹. Hence, the absence of a robust online presence had implications for their mental health, contributing to feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and frustration⁹². This limited digital inclusion not only stifled individual voices but also had broader societal implications, perpetuating a skewed representation of the region's population.

87 Jrad, E. (2020). The fight against COVID-19 in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Courses of action, paths for reflection. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. الشرييني. (December 15, 2021). بسنت: ما قصة فتاة ميت غمر التي تعرضت لتحرش جماعي وتهديد بالحرق؟ - BBC News عربي.

88 الشرييني. (2021). بعد تبرئة متهمي التحرش بـ "فتاة ميت غمر" .. منظمات حقوقية تطالب بالظن.

89 Nadim, M., & Fladmoe, A. (2021). Silencing Women? Gender and online harassment. *Social Science Computer Review*, 39(2), 245-258.

90 Nasreen, Z. (2021). 'Have You Not Got a Sense of Humour?': Unpacking masculinity through online sexist jokes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 7(1), 148-154.

92 Zimmerman, M. E., Hart, L. J., Medrano, P., Piccone, C., Ramirez, D. M., Huggins, L. K. L., Sotres-Alvarez, D., Fish, L. J., Østbye, T., & Holliday, K. M. (2023). COVID-19 in the community: Changes to women's mental health, financial security, and physical activity. *AJPM Focus*, 2(3), 100095.

4. PRIORITIZATION OF SHORT-TERM NEEDS

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, feminist movements in the Arab region had to prioritize short-term issues over other issues of similar importance. In the Jordanian context, as elsewhere, violence against women was the primary issue to be tackled. Although this helps address a pervasive problem that requires urgent intervention, the focus on this particular issue may lead to the inadvertent neglect of equally important challenges, such as the systemic issue of delayed justice for women in the country. Moreover, some feminist organizations in Jordan and beyond leaned towards a humanitarian approach, focusing on immediate relief efforts. While humanitarian efforts are undeniably crucial in times of crisis, relying solely on this approach may place a disproportionate burden on a limited number of feminist organizations. The concentration of responsibility can strain their resources and capacities, potentially hindering their ability to address the multifaceted needs of women and advocate for sustained systemic change. Sustained feminist activism, particularly in the Arab region, serves as the driving force behind the dismantling of deeply ingrained societal norms and legal frameworks that perpetuate gender inequality. Overlooking the necessity of continuous feminist advocacy may lead to short-term fixes that fail to address the root causes of the challenges faced by women and vulnerable groups.

5. LIMITED RESOURCES FOR FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

Scarce resources became even more strained as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, with a disproportionate impact on funding for feminist organizations. The first wave of the pandemic led to economic downturns, disrupting financial flows and donations that traditionally supported these organizations. Before COVID-19, only 8 percent of gender-related aid dedicated to civil society went directly to organizations in developing countries, of which little was reported to benefit women's rights organizations⁹³. Where funding does reach them, it is usually indirectly channeled through international NGOs or development agencies and frequently employs restrictive or short-term funding modalities that many small- and medium-sized organizations cannot access. As illustrated by a regional report on African CSOs, as of April 2020, 56 percent of surveyed organizations across 44 countries had already experienced funding cuts, with 66 percent anticipating further losses in the next three to six months⁹⁴. This trend was mirrored across the Middle East, where activists reported a massive reduction in implemented activities due to funding cuts.

Further, UN Women's rapid assessment revealed that nearly one-third of organizations consulted were at risk of closure due to pandemic effects⁹⁵. As a consequence, poor collaboration and coordination among various entities were observed, impeding collective efforts to address GBV effectively. The uneven allocation of funds during the pandemic exacerbated existing disparities, with rural areas bearing the brunt of the consequences. This lack of equitable distribution hindered the ability of feminist organizations to provide support and resources where they were most needed, perpetuating disparities between urban and rural communities.

93 UN Women (2020). COVID-19 and women's rights organizations: bridging response gaps and demanding a more just future.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. GLOBAL, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL SOLIDARITY

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of the digital shift in feminist activism, offering a unique context to explore how online platforms have become essential tools for fostering global and regional solidarity. The pandemic amplified the need for decentralized feminist activism that can effectively address the evolving challenges faced by women in different geographical regions. Online platforms, such as social media and forums, have facilitated discussions on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women, addressing issues such as increased domestic violence, economic inequalities, and disparities in healthcare access. Activists from various regions can share insights and collaboratively develop strategies to mitigate these challenges. The digital space acts as a catalyst for collective action, emphasizing the importance of global collaboration in fostering resilience and advocating for women's rights during these unprecedented times.

2. CYBERFEMINISM: POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN VIRTUAL SPACES

Political mobilization in virtual spaces has proven to be a powerful tool, especially when physical gatherings are constrained by government-imposed restrictions. Online forums and social media platforms have become avenues for women and vulnerable groups to express their demands, engage in virtual protests, and make their voices heard by local authorities. Hashtags can become powerful tools to shed light on the gender-specific repercussions of the pandemic. Campaigns like “#PandemicGenderGaps” or “#SheRecovers” can unite online activism efforts, drawing attention to the need for gender-responsive policies in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. This harnessing of digital technologies for feminist activism aligns with the modern concept of “cyberfeminism”. Cyberfeminism views digital spaces as opportunities to promote gender equality and dismantle patriarchal structures. Cyberfeminism recognizes that while the internet replicates existing gender biases, it can also be strategically reclaimed to advance women's liberation, thus giving women the complete and utter form of agency they need. One pertinent example is the Egyptian feminist activist Instagram account @assaultpolice, where its cyberfeminist activities are proven to be powerful in rearticulating untold narratives of gender violence in the digital world⁹⁶.

3. LEGAL REFORMS

Legal reforms, such as the introduction of provisions in the Penal Code in Egypt addressing the confidentiality of individuals' identities in cases of sexual crimes, reflect a positive response to longstanding demands from the feminist movement. Similarly, Jordan passed a new law removing Article 308 of the penal code which had allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims. Yet, after lots of campaigning and advocacy for change in Jordan, its repeal was a victory⁹⁷. Likewise, Article 522 in the penal code in Lebanon (allowing men to escape rape) was also repealed back in 2017 and deemed a victory for feminist organizations⁹⁸.

96 Skalli, L. H., & Eltantawy, N. (Eds.). (2023). *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa*.

97 Abu Raideh, O. (2021). Article 308 in the Jordanian Penal Code and the Social Movement to repeal it. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

98 UN Women. (2017). Historic day for women in Lebanon as Parliament repeals rape law.

Morocco has also repealed the same law, article 475, back in 2014⁹⁹. Even though these are historic moments and they do not often recur in today's world, advocacy through legal reforms is effective and relevant.

4. PARTNERSHIPS AND FUNDRAISING

Virtual convenings allow feminist organizations to efficiently foster partnerships, build alliances, and pool resources with the international community. Digital fundraising campaigns and online donor outreach are but examples of funding sources. Other examples include, but are not limited to, mobile-based crowdsourcing and online volunteering which can mobilize partnerships, fundraisings, and coalitions. One notable global example can be seen in the UN's Woman's Peace and Humanitarian Fund which helps fund grassroots women's organizations that are responding to COVID-19 around the world¹⁰⁰. Another notable example can be seen with the Doria Feminist Fund initiative. They seek to create a feminist ecosystem within the MENA region by grantmaking and microfinancing women and LGBTQ+ communities.

5. BRIDGING THE GAP: BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

With the growth of collaborations, partnerships, coalitions, and other forms of solidarity, there has been a visible and stark development of knowledge and its dissemination throughout the Arab world. For instance, the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University launched the "Gender and COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa" research project. This online research project consolidates data and research on how pandemic measures are specifically affecting women and girls across MENA countries, which led to great results and could be disseminated to be used by feminist organizations across Lebanon to be well informed¹⁰¹. Further, such platforms enable more coordinated tracking of trends in gender-based violence, women's health, economic vulnerability, etc. in the region which are used to further promote justice and liberation. Overall, digital avenues amplify opportunities for cooperation between researchers and feminist organizations in the Arab world to promote data-driven activism tailored to regional needs.

99 AlJazeera (2014). Morocco repeals 'rape marriage law'.

100 UN, WPHD (2020). WPHF COVID-19 Global Call for Support.

101 LAU-AIW (2021). Working From Home In A Failed State: How Covid-19 Threatens Lebanese Women's Precarious Conditions.

MOVING FORWARD: LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the pressing need for digital inclusivity and accessibility in the Arab region. Vulnerable groups, regardless of their socioeconomic status, must have equal opportunities to engage in online feminist discourse and access support services. Beyond mere technological access, feminist activists advocate for inclusive platforms and content that cater to diverse backgrounds, languages, and technological literacy levels. Bridging the digital divide is essential to ensure that women from all walks of life can actively participate in online discussions and access vital resources, fostering a more inclusive and empowered society.

1. DIGITAL INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing disparities in digital access in the Arab region. Lessons learned emphasize that vulnerable groups, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, must have equal opportunities to engage in online feminist discourse and access support services. As the pandemic has forced much of daily life, including activism, into the digital realm, addressing these gaps becomes a matter of urgency. Feminist activists have recognized that efforts to bridge the digital divide should go beyond providing mere access to technology. It involves creating platforms and content that consider diverse backgrounds, languages, and technological literacy levels. This approach ensures that women from all walks of life can actively participate in online discussions, share their experiences, and benefit from the resources available in the digital space.

2. BALANCING ANONYMITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The lessons learned during the pandemic highlight the delicate balance between ensuring anonymity for survivors and holding perpetrators accountable. Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, demand nuanced approaches that protect vulnerable individuals while upholding justice. Digital platforms provide survivors with a safe space to share their stories anonymously, fostering an environment conducive to healing and support. At the same time, maintaining accountability for perpetrators is crucial. Lessons emphasize the need for clear guidelines and ethical standards within digital spaces. This includes robust reporting mechanisms, legal frameworks, and support systems that navigate the complexities of digital environments. Striking this balance becomes even more challenging during crises, requiring continuous refinement of strategies to protect individuals while seeking justice.

3. COMBATING ONLINE HARASSMENT

The increased online activity during lockdowns has heightened the risk of online harassment, making it a critical focus for feminist activists. Lessons learned stress the necessity of proactive measures to create safe digital spaces. This involves implementing strong moderation policies, support systems, and collaboration with tech companies and legal authorities to address cyberbullying and online threats effectively. Recognizing the escalation of online harassment during times of crisis,

activists are encouraged to develop and promote digital hygiene practices. This includes educating online communities on responsible and respectful engagement, as well as fostering a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect.

4. GLOBAL COLLABORATION

The global nature of the pandemic necessitates enhanced collaboration among feminist groups. Lessons learned emphasize the importance of leveraging virtual collaboration tools to maintain a united front. By connecting activists globally, regionally, or even locally, virtual platforms become powerful tools for addressing the unique challenges faced by women and vulnerable groups. Efforts should be made to share resources, exchange knowledge, and coordinate advocacy initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures that the feminist movement remains cohesive and can effectively respond to the diverse and interconnected challenges presented by the global crisis.

5. UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES IN POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY

As societies navigate the post-COVID-19 recovery, lessons learned stress the continued importance of cultural sensitivity in digital activism. Acknowledging diverse cultural responses to the pandemic becomes paramount to ensure that advocacy efforts resonate with varied audiences. Feminist activists are encouraged to localize messaging and campaigns, understanding and respecting cultural nuances. This approach fosters a more inclusive and impactful movement that can effectively address the diverse needs and perspectives of women around the world as they recover from the impact of the pandemic.

6. LEGAL ADVOCACY AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The post-COVID-19 era requires a sustained focus on legal advocacy and effective policy implementation to address the lasting impacts of the pandemic on gender-based violence and women's rights in the Arab region. Lessons learned emphasize the need for ongoing collaboration with legal experts, policymakers, and feminist advocacy groups. Feminist activists must actively engage in monitoring the impact of legal changes on the ground. This ensures that legal reforms translate into tangible improvements in the lives of women and girls, providing a foundation for long-term social change in the aftermath of the pandemic. Continuous collaboration with legal and policy experts is crucial to navigating the complexities of legal systems and driving meaningful change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report delved into the gendered implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups and examined the social response through feminist activism in the Arab region, with a primary focus on Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco. The research uncovered the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in these nations while highlighting the adaptability of feminist organizations to this new context. Within this disrupted environment, marked by increased violence, marginalization, and social isolation, the well-being of vulnerable communities suffered. In response, feminist activists and civil society organizations turned to digital platforms to continue their struggle against societal and cultural norms, ensuring that their voices and demands were heard.

The report demonstrated the capacity of digital activism to bring attention to emerging feminist advocates who may not conform to traditional roles but play a significant role in addressing women's concerns, particularly by amplifying the voices of historically marginalized groups. Through social media campaigns, online forums, and digital platforms, feminist activists effectively challenged entrenched societal and patriarchal structures. Despite the numerous obstacles encountered, digital feminist activism remains a potent instrument for effecting change and advocating for policy reforms across the region.

Key lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic include bridging the digital divide, balancing anonymity and accountability for gender-based violence survivors, implementing proactive measures against online harassment, fostering global collaboration and solidarity through digital tools, prioritizing cultural sensitivity in post-pandemic recovery, and sustaining legal advocacy for tangible improvements in addressing gender-based violence and women's rights in the Arab region.



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