

# **Navigating Taboos: Exploring social media policies and SRHR content restrictions in WANA**



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**SMEX** is a Beirut-based non-profit advancing digital rights in West Asia and North Africa through reporting, research, and advocacy.

[www.smex.org](http://www.smex.org)



## List of Terms and Definitions

**Hateful speech:** Speech that attacks a person or a group based on their race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender.<sup>1</sup> Hate can invoke prejudicial feelings over intellectual arguments in order to avoid discussion of the topic at hand by attacking a person's character or attributes.<sup>2</sup>

**Online harassment or online abuse:** Stanford University's SHARE (Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Education Title IX Office),<sup>3</sup> describes online harassment "as a wide range of targeted behaviors online perpetuated to scare, intimidate, threaten, or harm. Online harassment can target – or come from – a group or individual, and it might be ongoing and sustained over long periods."

**Online sexual harassment** (also referred to as cybersexual abuse or gender-based harassment): Online sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual conduct on any digital platform and is recognized as a form of sexual violence. This type of harassment can include non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos, exploitation, coercion, and threats, sexualized bullying, and unwanted sexualization.<sup>4</sup> Those who identify as women and/or LGBTQ+ are disproportionately targeted by online sexual harassment.

**Mass reporting (also known as false reporting):** Abusers coordinate to falsely report a target's account as abusive or otherwise harmful to try to get it suspended or shut down.<sup>5</sup>

**Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR):** According to the United Nations Population Fund,<sup>6</sup> SRHR is "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Therefore, a positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by pleasurable sexual relationships, trust, and communication in the promotion of self-esteem and overall well-being."

<sup>1</sup> Scholarly Community Encyclopedia, "Online Hate Speech", Encyclopedia.pub .n.a, <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/31964>

<sup>2</sup> PEN AMEIRCA, "Online Harassment Field Manual", Pen.org. n.a, [https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/?\\_gl=1\\*1qprj4\\*\\_ga\\*ODg2NTI3MTI5LjE2OTk4MjU2NTE.\\*\\_ga\\_0ROGYGDH22\\*MTY5OTgyNTY1MC4xLjAuMTY5OTgyNTY2NS40NS4wLjA.#dog](https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/?_gl=1*1qprj4*_ga*ODg2NTI3MTI5LjE2OTk4MjU2NTE.*_ga_ORQG2NTI3MTI5LjE2OTk4MjU2NTE.*_ga_0ROGYGDH22*MTY5OTgyNTY1MC4xLjAuMTY5OTgyNTY2NS40NS4wLjA.#dog)

<sup>3</sup> Stanford University's Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Education Title IX Office, "Digital Safety", <https://share.stanford.edu>, n.a, <https://share.stanford.edu/education-and-outreach/learn-topics/digital-safety>

<sup>4</sup> Project deSHAME. "Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment". childnet.com. 2017. [https://www.childnet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Project\\_deSHAME\\_Dec\\_2017\\_Report.pdf](https://www.childnet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Project_deSHAME_Dec_2017_Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> PEN AMEIRCA, "Online Harassment Field Manual", Pen.org. n.a, [https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/?\\_gl=1\\*1qprj4\\*\\_ga\\*ODg2NTI3MTI5LjE2OTk4MjU2NTE.\\*\\_ga\\_0ROGYGDH22\\*MTY5OTgyNTY1MC4xLjAuMTY5OTgyNTY2NS40NS4wLjA.#dog](https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/?_gl=1*1qprj4*_ga*ODg2NTI3MTI5LjE2OTk4MjU2NTE.*_ga_0ROGYGDH22*MTY5OTgyNTY1MC4xLjAuMTY5OTgyNTY2NS40NS4wLjA.#dog)

<sup>6</sup> UNFPA, "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: An Essential Element of Universal Health Coverage", unfpa.org, 2019, <https://www.unfpa.org/featured-publication/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-essential-element-universal-health>



**SRHR content:** All types of content, including posts, ads, videos, photos, etc., posted on platforms by anyone, including individuals, artists, activists, NGOs, health practitioners, etc., addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights, including but not limited to access to contraception, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, pleasurable sex, childbirth, and LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>7</sup>

**Takfir:** The pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim. This type of speech is harmful in a conservative society as it can result in discrimination and even violence. Mainstream Muslim scholars and groups reject the concept as a doctrinal deviation. Leaders such as Hasan al-Hudaybi (d. 1977) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi reject takfir as un-Islamic and marked by bigotry and zealotry.<sup>8</sup>

**Troll:** According to Amnesty,<sup>9</sup> “Internet trolls are not fantastical beings living under bridges, but ordinary people who deliberately post abusive comments, sometimes with the express intention of causing alarm, distress or humiliation, and pushing women offline. Sometimes, trolls will launch coordinated and targeted attacks against individuals online, which can include any or all of the forms of violence and abuse above.”

**Two-factor authentication (or multi-factor authentication):** A security method through which users can gain access to an application, account, or system, after presenting two or more unique pieces of information or evidence. The two-factor authentication process can include a personal password as a first factor and a second different factor like a security token or a biometric factor.

## Introduction

Comprehensive sex education improves sexual and reproductive health knowledge and promotes safe sexual practices among young people, including adolescents.<sup>10</sup> A global 2020 study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that of the 4000 youth who participated in the study, two-thirds or 65% of respondents said they had used digital spaces to access information about their bodies, sex, and relationships with 29% stating that the digital space is the main source where they access sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information, primarily on social media.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a

<sup>7</sup> SMEX, “From Sharing to Silence: Assessing Social Media Suppression of SRHR Content in WANA”, smex.org, 2023, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Reference (Oxford University Press). “Overview: Takfir”.oxfordreference.com, n.a.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803101936564>

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty, “What is online violence and abuse against women?”, Amnesty.org, 2017,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/11/what-is-online-violence-and-abuse-against-women/>

<sup>10</sup> Sasha Abdallah Fahme, Beatrice Khater, Myriam Dagher Jocelyn DeJong, Sawsan Abdulrahim, “Developing a sexual and reproductive health educational intervention for adolescent Syrian refugee girls: challenges and lessons”, frontiers.org, 2022, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frph.2022.780157/full>

<sup>11</sup> Franklin Paul, Dr. Kelly Thompson and Naval Kishor Gupta, “How are young people engaging with digital spaces to learn about bodies, sex and relationships?”, unesco.org, 2020,

[https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef\\_0000373884&file=/in/rest/an](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000373884&file=/in/rest/an)



United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) survey of Palestinian youth found that most respondents said their primary sources for SRHR information were from digital platforms and social media. It is not surprising that in a young region<sup>12</sup> like West Asia and North Africa (WANA), where sex education is still largely absent in schools,<sup>13</sup> social media plays a significant role in filling this gap.

Social media tends to be viewed as more private; avoiding having to deal with stigmas some may face if trying to access such information in person, for example through a health clinic or a public library.<sup>14</sup> In the past few years there has been a notable growth in the number of social media pages that tackle SRHR content in Arabic and local dialects. They address these topics in ways that speak to local contexts and cultural and social sensitivities. Despite the popularity of these pages, creators face challenges represented in censorship and restrictions by social media companies and online harassment by followers or platform users more broadly.

The goal of the study is to get a better understanding of the online abuse and harassment faced by social media accounts advocating for SRHR in WANA, exploring the opportunities and limitations SRHR content creators face in the online space. The report also looks at how content creators work through or around and respond to these obstacles and their recommendations to make these platforms free and safe. The report also includes recommendations and safety tips proposed by the interviewees and SMEX's Technical Unit. Although the author observed similar patterns on various social media platforms, the focus of the report is Meta's Facebook and Instagram, especially Instagram, where many creators mentioned are currently focusing their efforts.

## Methodology

The methodology of this research combined desk research, observation, and monitoring of SRHR content and interviews. The first stage was a period of readings, secondary research, and monitoring of content and public engagement (including comments sections) of various SRHR social media pages in Arabic or by creators from the WANA region, including [Sex Talk Arabic](#), [Transat](#), [Love Matters Arabic](#), [Jeem](#), [Dr. Gael Abou Ghannam](#), [Muntada Aljensaney](#), [My Kali Magazine](#), [IraQueer](#), [Moroccan Outlaws](#) and many others. Then, more than ten invitations were sent to interview creators and organizations from across the region, including Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the east to Tunisia and Morocco in the west of the Arabic-speaking region.

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<sup>12</sup> The West Asian North African region (or the Arabic-speaking region) is home to more than 400 million people, 28 percent of whom are people under the age of 30. Around half of the total population is of women and girls, and nearly 107 million of them of childbearing age according to the United Nations Population Fund:

<https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/topics/sexualandproductivehealth>

<sup>13</sup> UNFPA, "Between 3eib and marriage: navigating comprehensive sexuality education in the Arab Region; a situational analysis", arabstates.unfpa.org, 2020,

[https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/situational\\_analysis\\_final\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/situational_analysis_final_for_web.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Masarouna, "It's time to close the gap." Masarouna.org, 2022, <https://www.masarouna.org/womensday2022>



Eventually, four interviews were conducted online in the summer of 2023; two with individual content creators working on reproductive health and two with organizations working on sexual health and rights more broadly. The interviews included over 15 semi-structured questions aiming at understanding the creators' areas of expertise, page objectives, audiences, focus, nature of content, and editorial considerations, in addition to restrictions they face from social media platforms and their experiences of harassment, hate, or online violence. A portion of the interview questions also aimed at understanding the literacy creators have of platform algorithms, community guidelines, reporting process, and sense of safety online. The interviews were conducted in Arabic with the sporadic use of English expressions. They were recorded with the full consent of the interviewees. Ten additional interviews conducted by SMEX's research unit in May and June of 2023 were also analyzed for additional examples of online harassment.

The author of this report also reached out to Meta's Human Rights Policy Manager in MENA for an interview. Despite some back and forth, no response was eventually given from the company agreeing to an interview. Finally, an expert from SMEX's Tech Unit was interviewed to help put together the recommendations and safety tips at the conclusion of this report.

### **The criteria used for the creators and content studied:**

Prior to starting the interview process, criteria were set to guide the selection of creators (individuals and organizations) to be interviewed. These include:

- **Size of followers/influence:** Accounts interviewed and analyzed have a minimum of a thousand followers ([nano influencers](#)) as a way to ensure a minimal level of influence and impact. Most of the interviewees are in the micro-influencers category. These are the majority of the accounts that were reviewed as part of the study. Micro-influencers are accounts with anywhere between 1,000 to 40,000 followers and who tend to be influential in highly specialized topics.
- **Consistency of posts:** This is an important element for ensuring engagement and vitality within the community. During the interviewee selection process, accounts inactive for several weeks prior to the start of this research were excluded.
- **Diversity of topics:** the content observed can be grouped into at least the three following categories:
  - Content specifically focused on the reproductive health of women (or child-bearing bodies): This includes content focused on fertility, women's health, body awareness, prenatal care, etc. It is notable the scarcity of content that addresses abortion or miscarriage in this category.
  - Content that is focused on sexuality and sexual experiences, criticism of social norms and taboos, though can also touch on other areas.
  - Content that explicitly advocates for reproductive justice, gender equality, rights, freedom of choice, sexual freedom, etc. This content usually comes from feminist organizations and tends to be more mindful of LGBTQ+ communities and non-cis individuals.



- **Geographic diversity:** The accounts interviewed and analyzed have a presence from across the Arab-speaking region with the objective of presenting a more comprehensive and representative image of this genre of content.
- **Language:** The content reviewed is predominantly in Arabic with occasional use of English language.

## Harassment, Violent Threats, and False Reporting: How SRHR Creators Get Silenced

Creators experience all sorts of harassment, from belittling and harsh criticism to threats of rape and physical harm. During the interviews conducted by the author of this report and those by SMEX's research unit, creators reported they were subject to the following abusive behaviors: negative comments, including trolling or insults and belittling of people's knowledge and expertise; sexual and sexualized comments; female users receiving multiple add requests from men they do not know anytime they comment or engage with these pages, hateful speech as in the case of a gender non-binary creator appearing in a video by the page "Sex Talk Arabic," rape threats, unsolicited sexual images in private messages as in the case of the page "Love Matters," an online project based in Egypt focused on SRHR content for youth, which recounts receiving images of male genitals by users in their direct messaging inbox.

Harassment also happens when the page hosts experts in their posts or on live videos, making it hard for people to take the space they need to express themselves. Also, commonly observed is the use of content and page reporting, takfir, and accusations of serving Western political and cultural agendas through the spread of sexual education and awareness around sexuality and sexual rights (see examples in the screenshots below). Another less evident form of harassment is false reporting, which results in content removal by platforms.

Through this study, it has become clear that platform censorship and users reporting (often false reporting) of content go hand in hand. However, it is not clear how many user-reports it takes for content to be removed or reviewed by human moderators or if mass reporting is always a coordinated effort. SMEX's research and interviews demonstrate that SRHR content faces clear restrictions not just by platforms but also by users reporting content, which leads to content restrictions or removal, at times indefinitely. Although Meta says that it takes down networks of false reporting,<sup>15</sup> in the interviews conducted, it was evident that creators face what they describe as false reporting regularly, whether coordinated or not, often resulting in content being removed or restricted in various forms.

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<sup>15</sup> Meta, "Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report",



Social platforms use automation and human moderation,<sup>16</sup> in addition to user reporting, to detect content that violates its guidelines. User reporting is still a large part of their content moderation, not just for the mere purpose of moderation but also to train their algorithms.<sup>17</sup> Previous research has noted that reporting mechanisms do not always work correctly, undermining the entire content moderation process and impeding these platforms from protecting creators and users. As long as Meta's algorithms cannot distinguish between false from just reporting, this can have severe consequences for the free exchange of ideas, especially regarding much-needed SRHR awareness in WANA societies. As a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2022 report noted, access to health information, and SRHR content in particular, remains a challenge in the region, particularly impacting youth.<sup>18</sup>

Almost all interviewed creators are aware that they need to navigate not only restrictions by social platforms but also possible reports by users. One creator mentioned that they have three different accounts on Instagram because of the volume of reporting they experience, which results in content removal. To avoid reporting, users change their account settings to private when adding a new post and then change it back to public after a few days.

Given that there is no way to understand platform algorithms and how or when they change, creators cannot always interpret engagement, positive or negative, or even predict followers' reactions to content. The A Project, a non-profit based in Lebanon working on mental health and sexuality, said that it is not always easy to guess what causes uproar from users. One of their members said: "As an organization, we do not aspire to be controversial on social media, or have spikes of engagement and attention." They attempt to be cumulative with how they grow their audience and followers, but they are surprised, at times, by what provokes negative engagement. They gave the example of a comic about domestic violence or violence against women by their intimate partner as a post that unexpectedly created a backlash among users. "We typically expect topics like abortion, unplanned pregnancy, sex outside of marriage to cause controversy, but it really can be anything."

Creators told SMEX that they face restrictions on all social media platforms with some degree of variation that they interpret as having to do with a platform's target audience. Facebook, viewed as a platform for an older and more conservative audience, is the platform most criticized by interviewees for its strict content moderation, especially when creators apply to boost the reachability of their posts. Creators interviewed noted cases of negative engagements

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<sup>16</sup> In order for it to be able to handle large amounts of content, most social media platforms use a combination of automated and human content moderation. The automated moderation employs algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI), based on a set of parameters, algorithms can identify and remove violating content. Whereas human moderators are typically able to employ nuance and cultural sensitivities to manually review flagged content. Source: Floating Numbers Digital Solutions

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-does-content-moderation-work-social-media-sites-floatingnumbers>

<sup>17</sup> Pen America, "Shouting into the Void", Pen.org, 2023. <https://pen.org/report/shouting-into-the-void/>

<sup>18</sup> UNFPA, "Youth sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in the Arab region overview", arabstates.unfpa.org, 2022.

<https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/youth-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-reproductive-rights-arab-region-overview>





like Takfir attacks and false reporting (and subsequent platform removals) even on platforms like LinkedIn or TikTok, perceived as the platforms with the youngest audience.

Sex Talk Arabic, one of the largest WANA SRHR social pages and a registered NGO, reports that the team decided to move from Facebook to Instagram a few years back as peers said Instagram is less strict. The founder, Fatima Ibrahim, said: "Our Facebook page was taken down several times, admins were locked out of the page, the public page of Sex Talk Arabic used to get reported, and bots would close the page." Ibrahim added that they would get locked out of the private Facebook group as well, though they believe they accurately followed community standards and made it clear that the page was for women over 18. They did so despite disagreeing that sex education should only be for people aged 18 or older. Although the team complied with the platform's community guidelines, Facebook still restricted their actions.

### **Online violence can easily turn into real-life violence**

2023 witnessed a notable rise in homophobic attacks and restrictions on organizations and activists, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia. Many of the attacks were incited by government bodies or figures who exploited digital spaces to further amplify such homophobic messaging. One creator interviewed by SMEX's research unit was called in for an interview by the intelligence services in Jordan. The activist was questioned about the content they were publishing regarding sexuality-related topics.

It is crucial to highlight a few examples of repression where social media played a critical role. In Jordan, for example, an online campaign under the hashtag "فطرة" (which means human instinct) was used to incite violence against feminists and LGBTQ+ communities under the pretext of defending "morality and the natural (i.e. heteronormative) family order."<sup>19</sup> The campaign was initially launched in the summer of 2022 by Egyptian marketing professionals on Facebook to show "categorical rejection" against all campaigns and "malicious ideas that are promoted and that are contrary to human instinct."<sup>20</sup> Although Facebook shut down the initial campaign page within about a month of its launch, local pages with the same name, hashtag, and logo (blue and pink rectangle) have spread on different social media platforms. Activists say the campaign is "a hate campaign that has gained traction due to a backlash against the increased visibility of queer Arabs."<sup>21</sup>

MyKali Magazine said the former Jordanian Member of Parliament (MP) Dima Tahboub was the one who ignited this campaign in Jordan, although the hashtag was used in the past to incite

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<sup>19</sup> MyKali, "Report: Escalating Attacks on Queer Initiatives and Individuals", mykalimag.com, 2023, <https://www.mykalimag.com/en/2023/07/29/report-escalating-attacks-on-queer-initiatives-and-individuals-in-jordan-2023/>

<sup>20</sup> Safaa Kasraoui, "#Fetrah: Online Campaign Against LGBTQ+ Community Goes Viral in Morocco", Morocco World News, 2022. <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/07/350216/fetrah-online-campaign-against-lgbtq-community-goes-viral-in-morocco>

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Deck, "An Arabic anti-LGBTQ+ campaign is going viral on Twitter", Rest of World, 2022, <https://restofworld.org/2022/an-arabic-anti-lgbtq-campaign-is-going-viral-on-twitter/>



violence against queer individuals in several WANA countries. The Magazine reported that since this campaign was launched in 2022, more than twelve individuals reached out to them to report being physically assaulted by family members or on the streets.

Meanwhile, a new amendment in the cybercrime law in Jordan was criticized by rights groups, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), as it further encroaches on freedom of expression online and on social media in particular. Jordanian MPs claimed that the new law could be used to criminalize homosexuality online. Although the Speaker of the House denied this, HRW maintained that the new provisions could be used to target "digital content around gender and sexuality," as well as those that advocate for LGBTQ+ rights online.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, in August 2023, the Iraqi government banned the use of the term homosexuality in all forms of media. A few weeks later, a bill was proposed to punish same-sex relations and transgender expression by death or life in prison.<sup>23</sup> Amidst this heightened climate of repression, an Iraqi creator, Noor Alsaffar, with hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram and TikTok, was shot dead in Baghdad in September 2023. The perpetrators remain unknown. The influencer who faced criticism and questions about his gender identity did not identify openly as queer. His content included videos of dresses, makeup, and hairstyles, and he considered himself a model.<sup>24</sup>

In Tunisia, activists blamed President Kais Saied's homophobic rhetoric for the rise in hate against the community. LGBTQ+ organizations and individuals have faced numerous attacks over the past year. One of the most notorious of these was the campaign by influencer Malek Khedhri, who claimed that foreign agendas are working to normalize homosexuality in Tunisia. The influencer used his social media channels, including Facebook, to incite the killing and physical violence against LGBTQ+ people. He claimed to have support from inside the government and called for anti-LGBTQ+ protests, which were not given a permit by authorities. The organization Damj (the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality) sued Khedhri, and social media platforms took down his accounts. He also was reportedly fired from his job.<sup>25</sup> At the time of writing this report, the influencer appears to have new accounts on Instagram and other platforms.

In Lebanon, HRW reported a rise in online threats following attacks by prominent politicians and the armed vigilante group Jnud Al Rab or Soldiers of God.<sup>26</sup> At least two of the creators interviewed cited incidents of people in their networks having faced attacks in Lebanon and

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<sup>22</sup> William Christou, "Jordan Cybercrime law 'disaster' for LGBT community: HRW", The New Arab, 2023, <https://newarab.com/news/jordan-cybercrime-law-disaster-lgbt-community-hrw>

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Scrap Anti-LGBT Bill", Hrw.org, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/23/iraq-scrap-anti-lgbt-bill>

<sup>24</sup> Nadeen Ebrahim and Nechirvan Mando, "Prominent Iraqi TikToker fatally shot in Baghdad amid crackdown on LGBTQ community", CNN, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/27/middleeast/iraq-lgbtq-shot-intl/index.html>

<sup>25</sup> Chahd Lina Belhadj, "Tunisia's LGBTQ Activists Fight Back After Hate Campaign", Meshkal.org, 2023, <https://meshkal.org/tunisia-lgbtq-activists-fight-back-after-hate-campaign/>

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Michaelson, "Lebanon LGBTQ+ activists say attacks are distraction from country's problems", The Guardian, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/30/lebanon-lgbtq-activists-attacks-distraction-scapegoated>



Tunisia. The A project mentioned examples of members of their community receiving online threats. According to the organization, “Fear of real-life threats is always there and in the back of our heads even if we have not faced it in real life yet. Vigilante groups like Jnud Al Rab or politicians can make attacks all the more real.”

It is important to note that while social media has been an exceptionally important tool for sex education and SRHR conversations both from medical, social and even political angles, it has also led to the extension of violence and harassment to online spaces. Platforms must work to patch any vulnerabilities that could jeopardize organizations' and individuals' work and livelihood. Some recommendations that help support this goal are included at the end of the report.

## Self-censorship among SRHR Creators in the Region

Creators are forced to practice varied degrees of self-censorship and to “tone down” their content to avoid platform censorship as well as possible abuse and reporting from users. Many creators practice self-censorship. Those who do not self-censor remain highly vigilant or weary of backlash and negative feedback from users, leading to content removal by platforms. Creators have to navigate platform censorship as well as unexpected negative sentiments they may trigger in platform users (whether they are their followers or not).

Creators maintain that their content does not violate community guidelines, but the vagueness of these guidelines lends itself to a broad interpretation by users. Existing research about the subject also pointed to the lack of transparency regarding the role of user reporting in content moderation.<sup>27</sup> Even if not incentivized by the community guidelines, users in the region continue to view many SRHR topics as taboos or topics for private conversations.

According to Dr. Gael Abou Ghannam, an OBGYN who uses her Instagram page to talk about reproductive health and a range of medical issues, the two main topics that receive the highest negative engagement are vaccines and trans health or LGBTQ+ issues. Dr. Abou Ghannam resorted to self-censorship after several attacks that she described as systemic. Every time she posted about vaccination (regardless of type), she would receive aggressive accusations about her receiving money from pharmaceutical companies, provoking heated debates in her comments. Due to her limited capacity, she decided to avoid discussing vaccines on her page altogether but vowed not to stop publishing LGBTQ+ content. Dr. Abou Ghannam stated that she does not intend to let people down, insisting that this is a fight she is willing to take on.

Creators or organizations choosing not to self-censor their content still put significant time and consideration into their content from language to word choice and visual material. For example,

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<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Petty, “The Naked Truth: Meta’s Censorship of Sexual Health Information and Advocating to Big Tech for Change”, <https://www.ohchr.org/>, 2022.  
<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/digitalage/cfis/tech-standards/subm-standard-setting-digital-space-new-technologies-csos-choice-rnw-media-3-input-part-2.pdf>



they make the choice between using formal Arabic terminology versus colloquial, or whether they use images of actual body parts versus illustrations or symbolic representations that do not depict organs. They even have to carefully consider whether to show the faces of their team members in social media posts. Love Matters often uses formal Arabic (viewed as more medical or scientific) to describe genitals or body parts while avoiding colloquial terms that may be socially loaded. They also use fruits to symbolize body parts. Many creators manipulate words or hashtags or insert non-Arabic letters to bypass censorship.

Additionally, creators recognize that some posts may require disputing platform removal or restriction decisions. This is often the case when they decide not to water down their content. Disputing removals is another time-consuming and disruptive process. Different creators have noted that if Meta often restores content after disputing their decision, then why remove it in the first place? Some creators interviewed also noted that using boosting or paid advertising tools, especially when used with a default target audience, can result in significant negative responses, including hate speech and more false reporting, according to one creator interviewed. The Tunisian non-profit Mawjoudin, which advocates for equality and respect for bodily and sexual rights, mentioned that they do not resort to ads unless they have a major event or promotion, and instead, they focus on organic views. Although a smaller audience, they are more keen on reaching people genuinely interested in following their content, reducing the risk of attracting hostile audiences. Other creators like Love Matters mentioned that they choose “safe content” focused on family issues or medical knowledge, and avoid topics under the term “sexual health,” such as masturbation or sexual pleasure. “It’s a game of push and pull,” Love Matters stated, adding that it is not always easy to guess what will be removed due to user reports or auto-labeling as adult content.

## How Meta’s Policies Fail SRHR Creators

Meta lacks mechanisms for protecting SRHR creators. In the interviews, creators expressed confusion or disappointment in the lack of mechanisms to deal with abusive users. Several creators mentioned that the platforms lack safety mechanisms to keep them safe online. They often resort to either deleting or ignoring abusive messages or comments. Reporting users' abuse is ultimately the only method creators have at their disposal to respond to the hate or harassment they receive. The reporting process, however, can be long and confusing, and many creators end up not even bothering to report similar incidents. Creators often find it confusing to know where their report stands, what to expect next, and whether a decision has been reached. The lack of confidence in Meta’s willingness to protect activists and vulnerable communities means a lot of abuse goes unreported.

Sex Talk Arabic said that on their public Facebook page they received threats and harassment but that the platform would not remove those but would remove their posts. They complained to Facebook but nothing changed.<sup>28</sup> The team at Sex Talk Arabic believes platforms are more

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<sup>28</sup> A details report by Meedan and Pen America discussed the issue of reporting online abuse in great detail including recommendations to fix the feature: <https://pen.org/report/shouting-into-the-void/>



responsive to content flagged for removal by users than they are to creators about abuse they face. This claim cannot be verified as Meta would not accept an invitation to speak on record with the author of the report, but one explanation offered by SMEX's Technical Unit is that mass reporting from users on posts creates more pressure, so to speak, which explains why platforms may be more swift with reports from users whereas a creator's complaint to them, is just one report. Regardless of the explanation, the consequences on creators are real. In Egypt for example, feminist content creators face attempts to hack their accounts and phones, they face hate speech, threats, defamation and even attempts to film them without their knowledge and consent or trying to hack into their private photos. Activists also share that the local cybersecurity laws have been used to weaponized to suppress and prosecute women content creators under the pretext of protecting family values<sup>29</sup>. Inciting hate or violence, threats of outing LGBTQ+ people or targeting feminists online<sup>30</sup> cannot be taken lightly and could have serious implications on people's lives and safety.

Creators expressed frustration at Meta's slow responses or taking of action in the face of sexual harassment, threats, and aggressive comments or messages. The Tunisian organization Mawjoudin who spoke to SMEX's research unit reported that it took Facebook four months to shut down the account of a homophobic influencer "Lapa". They also filed similar complaints against another content creator, "Lady Samara," who had actively encouraged her hundreds of thousands of followers to express their homophobia. Mawjoudin and Damj said Lady Samara used her platform to insult and mock the queer community, going as far as naming some queer activists, which resulted in her followers sending threatening and offending messages to those activists<sup>31</sup>. A member of Mawjoudin stated that after the harm queer activists went through, Meta still did not shut off the influencer's page and instead removed one post. In the end, they decided to stop complaining as they did not believe Meta is there to serve rights defenders. Activists from Mawjoudin and Damj warned in their response to these attacks that the impact of this speech normalizes stigmatization and dehumanization of the queer community; impacting people's mental, physical and psychological safety, in addition to the legal consequences people can face in the absence of protecting legal frameworks.<sup>32</sup> A 2023 report from HRW also details how the online space is used to target LGBTQ people in the region.<sup>33</sup>

The organization "the A Project" stated that though they have not themselves received threats as an organization, some of their members have in the past received social media messages such as "we know about you or about your affiliations." The member added "Obviously that

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<sup>29</sup> Enas Kamal, "Feminist Content Creators in Egypt: Digital Violence Unbound by Law or Customs", smex.org, 2023, <https://smex.org/feminist-content-creators-in-egypt-digital-violence-unbound-by-law-or-customs/>

<sup>30</sup> Shoa Al Malki, "The Culture of Online Shaming Targeting Women from the Middle East and North African (MENA) Region", [African Media Space and Globalization](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-35060-3_10), Springer Link, 2023. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-35060-3\\_10](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-35060-3_10)

<sup>31</sup> Colin Stewart, "Tunisian activists to Instagram: Stifle homophobic Lady Samara", 76 Crimes, 2020, <https://76crimes.com/2020/09/23/tunisian-activists-to-instagram-stifle-homophobic-lady-samara/>

<sup>32</sup> Colin Stewart, "Tunisian activists to Instagram: Stifle homophobic Lady Samara", 76 Crimes, 2020, <https://76crimes.com/2020/09/23/tunisian-activists-to-instagram-stifle-homophobic-lady-samara/>

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Middle East, North Africa: Digital Targeting of LGBT People", hrw.org, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/21/middle-east-north-africa-digital-targeting-lgbt-people>



scares people so we are always trying to think of ways to protect ourselves and protect identities". The A project does not use the faces of its team members in its posts, and even with their podcast, [Fasleh](#), the team decided to keep the names of those who appear on the show anonymous and at times alter the voices of some speakers.

A member of the A Project also raised Facebook's policy requiring users to use their real names and the implications that could have: "We're a registered organization and that helps protect us but we know individuals who we work with who want to do this work on an individual level and they have to submit their real identity. Sometimes people decide to take the risk of using their face or real name and just deal with the consequences."

Digital rights activists have long contested this Facebook policy especially because of the harm it can cause to vulnerable groups like political dissidents and members of the LGBTQ+ community who face online and offline harassment. According to previous analysis by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a global digital rights organization based in the United States: "Being able to connect a legal name with an online LGBTQ identity makes it much easier for not just stalkers and harassers, but dangerous abusers, to find people offline. And the loss of ability to identify using one's chosen identity makes it more likely that an individual will simply leave social media, thereby losing an essential source of community and information."<sup>34</sup>

Community Guidelines is an ambiguous point of reference for users reports. Although some of the creators interviewed said Meta community standards do not dictate or influence their content and are not something they even look at on regular basis, other creators namely those who deal with regular censorship and false reporting criticized the vagueness and broadness of the community guidelines. Love Matters said the standards that differentiate adult content from educational SRHR content are virtually nonexistent, feeling like there's no common language between them as an SRHR educational platform and Meta and that based on the current guidelines anything can be justified as a violation.

This lack of clarity can allow for misinterpretations by users and possible further censorship by platforms. The creators interviewed maintain that the SRHR content they share is educational and is not in violation of community guidelines which are supposed to be universal but the actual application differs from one country or region to another. A few of the creators interviewed noted that they believe Meta helps maintain a very conservative status quo in our societies that censors female bodies and important information pertinent to people's rights to make decisions about their lives and futures.

Multiple creators interviewed, like activist Mousa Al Shadid argued that the community guidelines are applied more strictly to content in Arabic and in our region, which casts a doubt on impartiality of social media platforms. Al Shadid also said that accounts that are

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<sup>34</sup> Jillian York and Dia Kayyali, "Facebook's 'Real Name' Policy Can Cause Real-World Harm for the LGBTQ Community", EFF, 2014, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/09/facebooks-real-name-policy-can-cause-real-world-harm-lgbtq-community>



pro-Palestine, anti-imperialist and opposing of regional governments tend to be hit harder by reports and censorship as if Meta forms an opinion or a history around such accounts. When it comes to SRHR content some posts may remain available while other content is removed. He believes there's a lack of consistency or logic in applying the guidelines.

Several creators stated that they believe social media companies are driven by profit and they therefore cannot be trusted to uphold human rights or usher social and political change in the region. A natural result of SRHR content censorship and the vagueness of community guidelines is misinterpretation of those guidelines by users who will view the reporting of SRHR content as justified. Despite censorship by platforms and constant reporting by users, activist Mousa Al Shadid said he “refuses to self-censor because he does not want to reiterate the shame associated with the conversations around sexuality and give power to authorities, whether governmental or companies, to dictate what’s permissible and what’s not.”

## Creators’ Self-Protection Strategies and Tools

In the absence of safety tools SRHR creators are coming up with strategies to protect themselves.

Mental health and safety are major themes that came up in the interviews conducted with creators. Though the degrees of negative engagement received can greatly vary, most creators discussed the ways in which negative engagement such as negative comments on content, arguments between followers, and even direct messages that are sexual in nature, impact their mental health. Self-care practices to support the mental health of those running the social media accounts came up with organizations with larger social media teams. Some said they instated a system for their members to take breaks, choosing not to engage, turning off comments at times or keeping them open for venting at other times and even deleting messages without engaging.

Love Matters said the team running their accounts receives sexual harassment or images of private parts sent by men on a daily basis. This causes a lot of discomfort and has a mental toll on the team. Love Matters added that they have the impression that some internet users believe those behind the screens publishing this content are women and just because they put out content that has to do with sexuality then they are available to chat.

Sex Talk Arabic has a care program that centers the individual needs and choices of the team members who run its accounts, especially those who regularly appear in video posts. The care program includes taking longer breaks, keeping comments and DMs on or turning them off when needed. For safety reasons the team also decided to only feature members based outside of WANA or who are in less vulnerable positions in their videos.

Fatima Ibrahim, the founder of Sex Talk Arabic, said that her team recently received threats from a group organized on Telegram. A cybersecurity expert they consulted with warned them that the group is targeting feminists in Egypt not only online, but also offline. The group has



been sharing screenshots from Sex Talk Arabic page and it appears that now they're focused on their page, so they made a decision to have the team members in Egypt take a break from the page for a little while for their safety. They also stopped giving credit (or naming) the creators on posts. They went through all 300 posts they have online to delete the names of their team members. As an activist organization with limited resources, Sex Talk Arabic stated that the mental health toll and the safety and security precautions can add a burden to a small volunteer-run organization like theirs.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Although this report focuses on online harassment and abuse, it is important to understand that these interactions do not represent the only type of response SRHR content receives on social media. This content remains quite popular, well-followed, and engaged with by internet users. The goal behind highlighting the negative engagement and the breadth of online violence is to demonstrate the ways in which platform policies disregards and intentionally or unintentionally facilitate this abuse through its features design, vague community guidelines and according to a few interviewees the prioritizing of profit over the well-being of creators and activists behind this work, an argument advanced by activists in other parts of the world as well, and which has been the subject of a few recent lawsuits.<sup>35</sup> The hope is to overcome this technology-mediated violence and build safer, freer and more transparent spaces.

Having said that, it is also important to note that as in other societies, more open and free conversations about SRHR topics require societal and cultural shifts, which take a long time. This is something that was noted by a few different interviewees who believe in the importance of not just providing education and awareness online but also creating long-term societal change, which in the WANA region is part and parcel of a larger political, economic process of change. Building on that here are a number of [recommendations put forth by the creators interviewed in this report to social media platforms, particularly Meta. The recommendations were also supplemented by context from SMEX's Technical Unit:](#)

- 1- **Act more swiftly and firmly in response to abusive users especially serial abusers.** Creators complain of the delay they face in getting social media platforms to respond to their reports of abusive behavior like attacks and doxing, taking weeks and even months to remove abusive users. As demonstrated earlier, even when abusers are removed there is nothing stopping them from creating one or more new accounts. According to the Unit, Meta can detect the devices abusers log in from and has the

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<sup>35</sup> Examples of lawsuits including one by a shareholder against the Meta board stating the company prioritizes profit over public safety: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-04/meta-directors-sued-for-outdated-focus-on-profit-over-all-else?embedded-checkout=true> Also a US federal lawsuit by 33 attorneys general alleged that Meta is profiting from harming youth through the addictive features of its products and with that contributing to a mental health crisis in the country <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/tech/states-sue-instagram-parent-meta/index.html#:~:text=Dozens%20of%20states%20sued%20Instagram,that%20demand%20users'%20constant%20attention.>





ability to permanently ban abusive users, yet this practice has not been observed when it comes to actual abusive users. A ban should also mean a suspension of their ability to create new accounts. If creators are receiving threats or hate messages, these need to be taken very seriously as people's lives could be in danger.

2- **Provide more tools for the protection of SRHR creators and vulnerable users.**

Platforms should make it easier and more accessible for creators and activists to get verified and get in touch with content moderators or support teams. They should also make additional features available for safety like protecting accounts from hacking and unauthorized login attempts, as well as, detecting of abusive or false user reporting intended to take down content. Designing features with women or vulnerable communities in mind, even if the features are used by any user. Activists have long demanded to be involved in the development of platform features and policies, from design to implementation and enforcement, including content moderation and trust and safety strategies<sup>36</sup>.

3- **Be transparent about the reporting process.** Creators note that when they report abuse they are typically unaware of where the process is at, or when the decision will be made or if it was already made. Similarly when appealing a faulty removal of content due to unjust flagging by users, there's no easy way to dispute the decision and follow through with Meta's process. Some creators state that they don't have the time and resources to patiently follow up and wait for Meta's reversal of the initial decisions or to keep reworking posts to bypass such restrictions. When posts are reinstated this indicates to creators that there was no reason for a post to have been removed in the first place. Providing more details, timely updates and the outcome of appeals on content moderation decisions and reporting of abuse can help the confidence content creators and activists have in the platform and encourage them to report abuse of hateful behavior which in term will make these platforms safer.

4- **Ensure that more nuance and human rights inform content moderation policies and practices.** A few of the creators interviewed noted that they believe that Meta helps maintain a very conservative status quo in our societies that censors female bodies and important information pertinent to people's rights to make decisions about their lives and futures. It is critical that community guidelines and moderation policies ensure educational content, content that advocates for human rights, medical needs and other information pertinent to SRHR content is protected from wrongful moderation decisions and unjustified reporting. Community guidelines need to make a clear distinction between pornographic or "adult" content and SRHR content.

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<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch, "All This Terror Because of a Photo: Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa", hrw.org, 2023, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2023/03/lgbt\\_mena0223web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/03/lgbt_mena0223web.pdf)



- 5- **Ensure content moderators understand the local contexts of the region.** There's a wide-held belief among interviewees that social media platforms discriminate against Arabic language and content from WANA. This was also proven by previous research.<sup>37</sup> Weighing content moderation decisions in ways that understand local context is key for under-resourced activist organizations who highly depend on social media to educate, spread awareness, and support vulnerable communities. Furthermore, human moderators need to have the linguistic and cultural competency which includes awareness of the importance of this type of content in filling an important educational gap. Additionally, ensuring human moderators are not applying their own views or values in SRHR content moderation is crucial to ensure freedom of expression, comprehensive human rights, and supporting not suppressing advocacy work for social change.
  
- 6- **Direct communication between creators and platforms.** Several creators called for direct lines of communication between Meta and activists, civic actors, and content creators if Meta is really invested in advancing social issues. Meta's [Business Manager tool](#) which a central platform where users can manage all their Meta accounts on the various platforms is one of the only ways users can establish a more direct communication with Meta, but it remains a tool better suited for businesses and advertisement purposes. Having a similar social manager would offer great help for rights groups and content creators working on social issues.
  
- 7- **Do more to combat Misinformation:** As of now verifying the accuracy of information in medical and SRHR topics remains largely an individual responsibility as there are no tools for fact-checking or the verification of the accuracy of information available on social media. Users need to be aware that not all content in this domain is offered by trained educators or medical professionals, this seems especially prominent in reproductive and obstetric health social media content in English.

## Safety & wellness tips for content creators:

1. **Limit the sharing of personal information.** One of the main things hackers and bullies try to do when preying on a victim online is to gather information about a creator or someone they want to target. This is especially pertinent to creators (more than organizations) who may use their personal page to advocate for SRHR issues. It is important especially for women and LGBTQ+ individuals to try to separate their personal and public accounts that are used for advocacy. If you are using personal accounts for your advocacy and activism consider keeping personal information at minimal. And if you are trying to keep your identity, name, and other personal information private avoid posting anything personal on the advocacy account.

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<sup>37</sup> Mahsa Alimardani and Mona Elswah, "Digital Orientalism: #SaveSheikhJarrah and Arabic Content," Moderation, POMEPS Studies, August 2021, <https://pomeps.org/digital-orientalism-savesheikhjarrah-and-arabic-content-moderation>.



2. **Use strong passwords.** Choose more secure passwords for your social media accounts and your email addresses tied to the account. Avoid birthday dates or numbers in sequence. Make your password long and consider a password manager to keep your logins secure.
3. **Use an additional method of authentication.** Two factor authentication can help add another layer of security by requiring another method of identification, apart from a username and password. It makes it harder for possible intruders to gain access to your account.
4. **Limit those with access to your accounts.** The more admins run an account, the more vulnerable it will be. Consider minimizing the number of people with admin access to the account.
5. **Be wary of phishing links.** If you receive an unusual request that contains links, for example, links asking you to vote (usually via direct messages or DMs) be careful with clicking on such links even if the DM is from someone you know. Be aware that Meta and other tech companies typically reach out to users via email and not DMs.
6. **Consider using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).** VPNs conceal a user's online activities to their Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and the authorities. This is especially important if you are based and publish your content from a country where your activism may be criminalized or can get you in trouble, especially with authorities.
7. **Get your accounts verified.** If possible, apply for the blue badge for an additional layer of security. There is currently two ways for users to get verified on Meta, one is through applying for the blue badge which is free. Or the paid version called "Meta verified" available for Instagram and Facebook users who are 18 years or older, in select regions including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in WANA. Creators get verification with a government ID, they get account support and protection. The service, however, is not free and the fee varies depending on country .<sup>38</sup>

For additional resources and tips, consult the following report by Internews: "[Global Trends in Digital Security: Civil Society and Media](#)".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Meta, "Become Meta Verified", meta.com, n.a, <https://about.meta.com/uk/technologies/meta-verified/>

<sup>39</sup> Additional resources available for activists online include "Some Steps to Defend Against Online Doxxing and Harassment by the American Civil Liberties Union or the ACLU and "Cyber harassment: Concepts and prevention" course by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting: <https://advocacyassembly.org/en/courses/43> available in Arabic and English. Make sure to check other valuable training courses on the platform Advocacy Assembly. The Palestinian digital rights organization "7amleh" also has a 2023 guide to combating digital gender-based violence also available in Arabic and English: <https://7amleh.org/2023/12/24/a-guide-to-combating-digital-gender-based-violence-ar>



## Recommendations for Digital Rights Organizations in the Region:

1. **More awareness raising campaigns:** Several of the creators interviewed had very little awareness of SMEX or its and similar organizations' work in the field of human rights and technology. More awareness raising campaigns are needed to educate the public and content creators about the work of digital rights organizations in the region and the resources they offer. Additionally, lack of knowledge about the rights and responsibilities of content creators has also been noticed throughout the course of conducting this research. That includes but is not limited to; copyrights, how to protect their own creative works, and seek support from local or regional rights groups when needed. Equally important is raising more awareness about the available help lines dedicated to content creators and activists to seek support in cases of online abuse or attacks from other users (whether known to them or not) and censorship by platforms. Reporting not only helps with gaining better knowledge of the type of issues and magnitude of the problem but also helps develop the necessary resources to respond. To report online attacks, visit SMEX's [Helpdesk](#).
2. **Training and capacity building:** Several creators interviewed expressed interest in learning more about digital security. It was notable that SRHR organizations are working individually to provide digital security to their members and protect their privacy, mental health and the tools and accounts they use to disseminate information. Some also expressed interest in having trainings and meetups dedicated to organizations and individuals working on SRHR so the trainings are informed by the particular challenges they face in the region. Other trainings like anti-doxxing or know your rights would be valuable.
3. **Research and documentation:** Though there's a growing body of research on the issue of online violence in WANA, reports and research focused on SRHR creators, especially in Arabic, remains limited, despite the importance of social media for SRHR advocacy and education. Civil society organizations working on SRHR and digital rights groups are encouraged to document, research, and publish more about the issues they face.

