

USING VIOLENCE AND MOBILISING ANXIETY

Repressing Feminist Activism Online



INTRODUCTION

About the project

UAF-Africa implemented a 2-year project through which she worked with Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) from Tunisia and Egypt, to explore their experiences with online activism.

Research was conducted through which 15 WHRDs were interviewed to explore their experiences of violence online. How are they using the internet in the promotion of and exercise of their rights, and what are the possible implications of online content regulation measures on this ability? What tactics have they used to avoid surveillance of their activities and to avoid the real risks and dangers that they can face online? How can we develop trust and a greater sense of certainty, when using ephemeral technology to create content, interact with others, grow trusted networks, and create safe spaces for ourselves?



Who are WHRDs?

Self-identified women who defend women's human rights and are subject to gender-specific risks and threats, because of the rights they advocate for and as a direct consequence of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

WHRDs are exposed to the same types of risks that all other human rights defenders face. However, they are also exposed to gender-based violence and gender-specific risks, because they challenge existing gender norms within their communities and societies.





Use of social networking platforms

WHRDs use social networking platforms, as these have been essential to their efforts to campaign, mobilise, report injustice, and find safe spaces to communicate and share experiences.

While it can be very useful, social media also exposes WHRDs to surveillance, harassment and threats. These platforms often also subject WHRDs to sexualised harassment from those who oppose their work.

WHY DO WHRDS FACE VIOLENCE ONLINE?

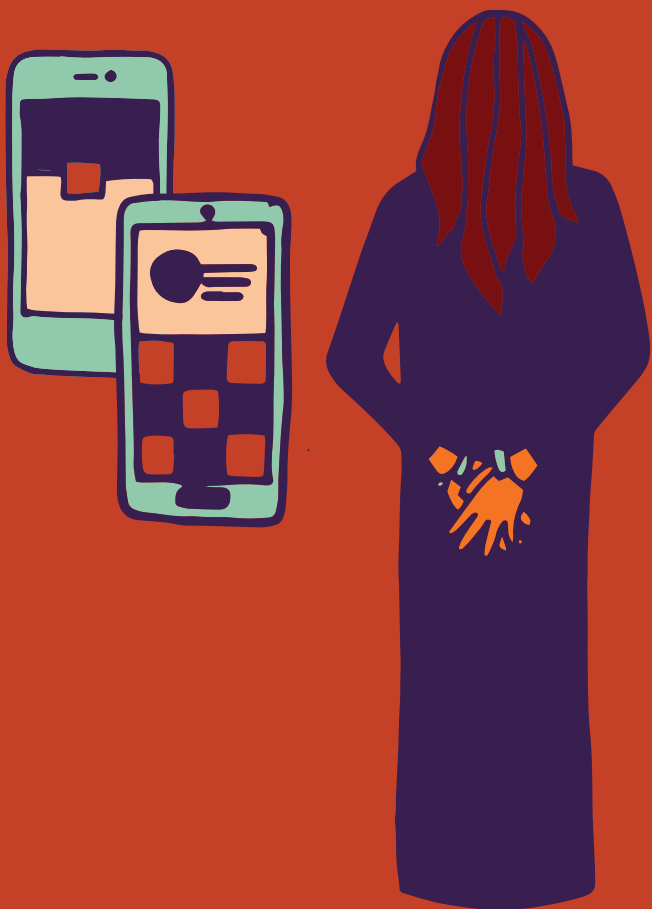
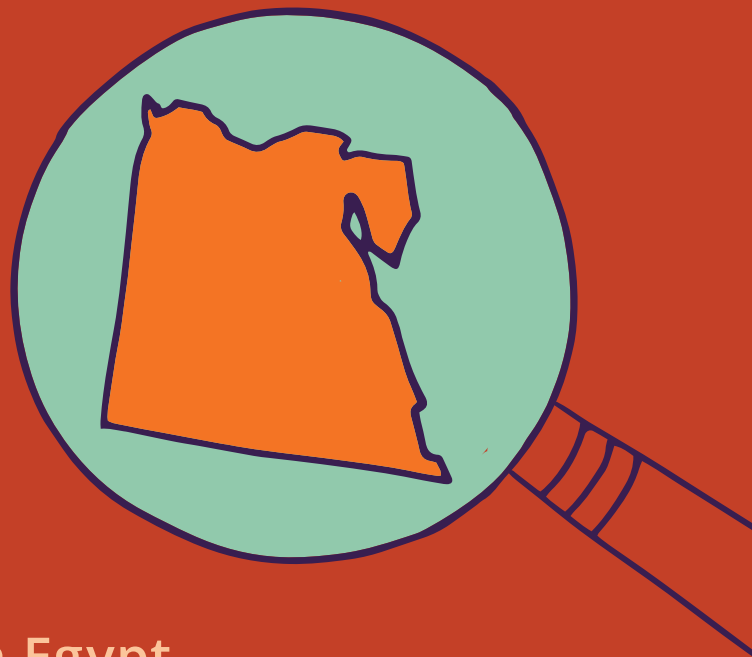
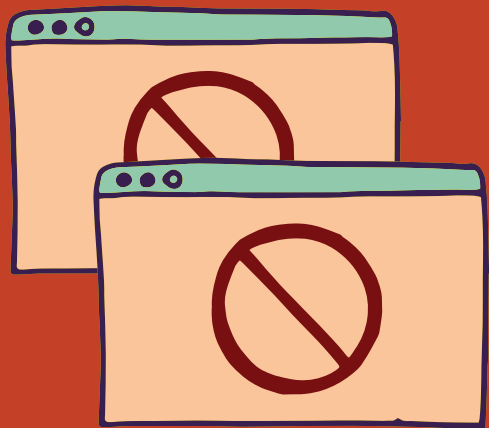
Resisting patriarchal norms

Gender equality does not exist online, and gender-based violence is pervasive on the internet, where WHRDs encounter the same patriarchal values and practices they encounter in “real” life.

The WHRDs interviewed consider the internet as a space that reproduces discrimination, violence and inequalities based on gender, class, race.

States have an important role to play in perpetuating online violence against WHRDs.





In Egypt

In 2018, the Supreme Media Regulatory Council set up a committee to follow social media platforms. The committee has powers that allow the state to block websites and social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers, if they are deemed a threat to “national security”.

14

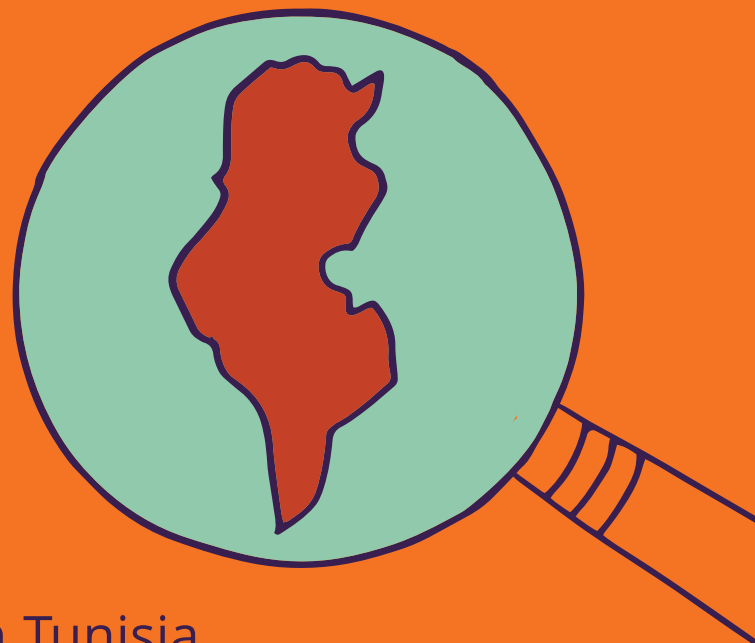
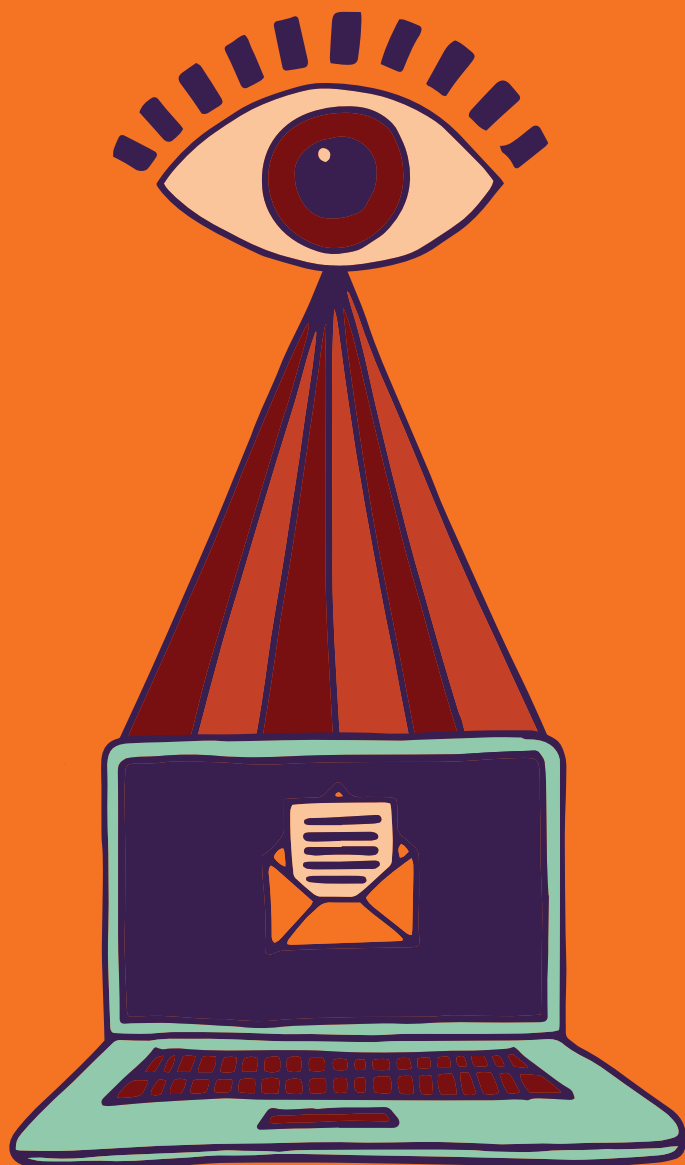
Individuals arrested

163

Facebook accounts shut down

513


Websites blocked for incitement against state institutions and citizens



In Tunisia

Parliament ratified the Anti-Terrorism Law on July 25, 2015. This raised concerns about human rights and freedom of expression in Tunisia, as the law had many drawbacks. These included detention without trial for several days, in addition to giving the government the right to monitor the internet and correspondence.

The law contains some articles that allow journalists to not disclose their sources and criminalises the use of exceptional investigative methods by the authorities, such as wiretapping without warrant. However, it also contains some loose definitions that open the door to exploitation of its provisions on freedom of opinion and expression on the internet and in situations that might not involve violence or terrorism.

An illustration on the left side of the page shows several hands of different shades of orange and red reaching towards a central smartphone. The phone is light green and displays a video player interface with a dark background, a white play button in a red circle, and three large red 'X' marks on a light orange rectangular area below the play button. The background of the entire page is a solid dark purple.

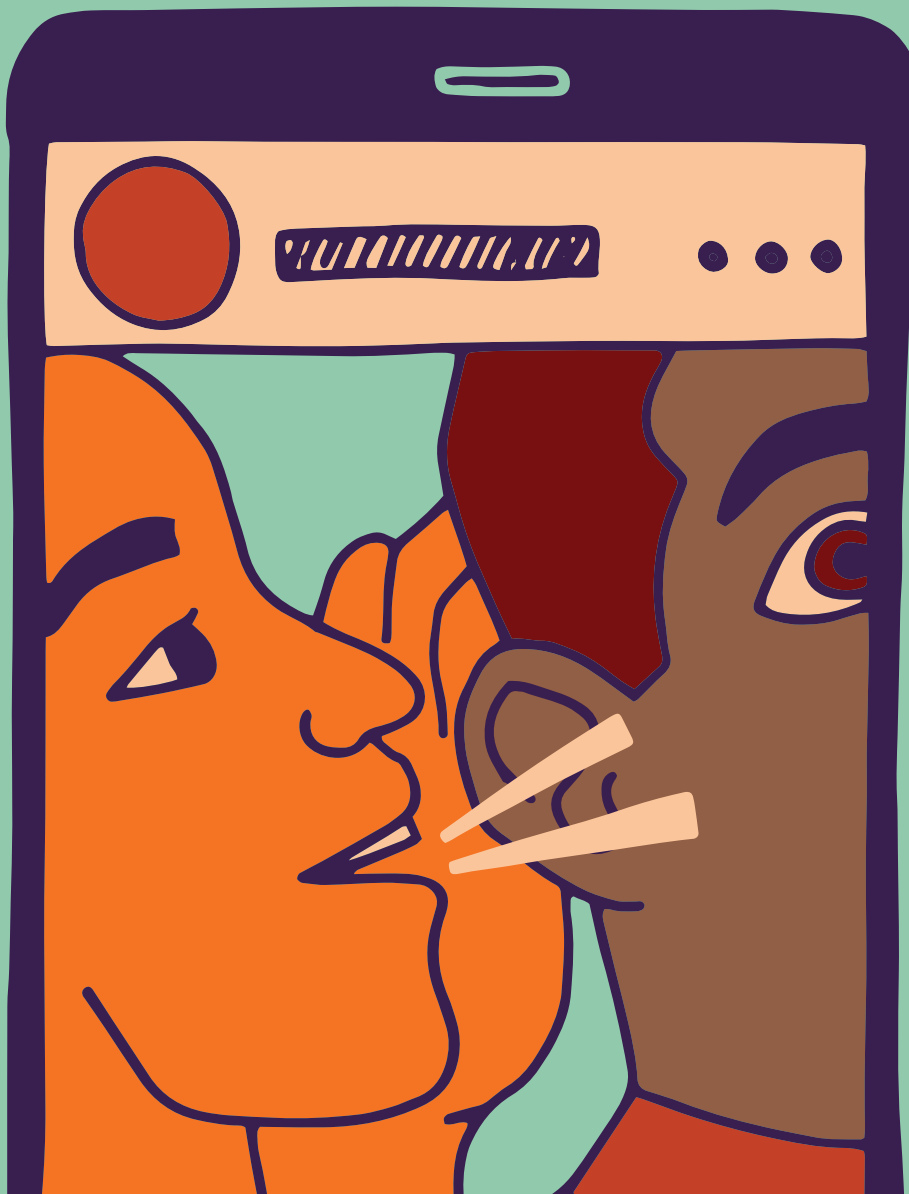
WHAT TYPES OF VIOLENCE DO WHRDs FACE ONLINE?

Manipulating images or intimate videos and using them to blackmail WHRDs

The partner of one WHRD published an intimate video of her on YouTube. The video went viral and spread on Facebook. Men in the WHRD's neighborhood gathered under her house to sing the song that was in the video.

Spreading rumors

One WHRD advocated for the rights of a woman who was raped by a male activist. Rumors that she was a spy spread on Facebook and she had to close her account.



Harassment and cyberstalking

One WHRD received pictures of penises after advocating for civil marriages.

Another WHRD, who spoke about the myth of virginity, found that stalkers had managed to find her mobile number and had shared it on social media platforms.





Threats of rape and murder

One openly lesbian WHRD often receives threats of rape. Men send her messages that if they rape her, she will see that sex with men is the way to go.

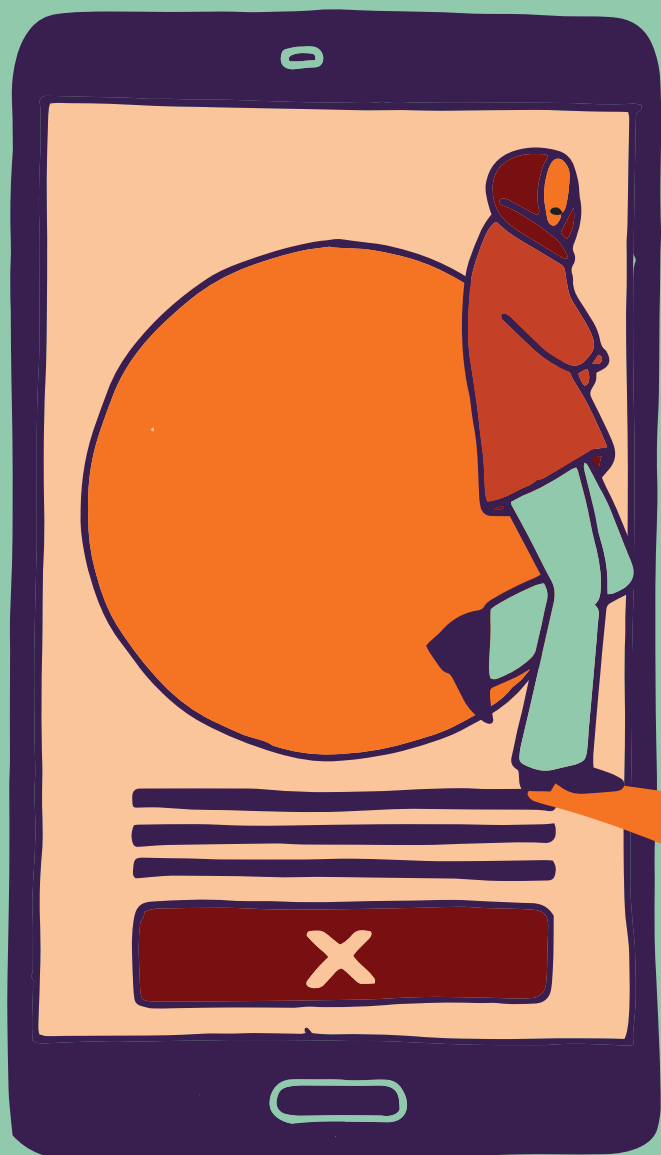
The role of the state in mobilising anxieties that justify persecution and violations of human rights

For example: in September 2017, Egyptian authorities carried out a large-scale campaign to arrest LGBT individuals and activists, after news circulated through a Facebook page about a Mashrou' Leila concert attendees raising the rainbow flag. This built an atmosphere of moral outrage, mobilising support for persecution that aimed to protect the country's moral and religious values.

Authorities targeted individuals who published online content that tied them to the concert, while other arrests took place through dating apps like Grindr – of gay men who were not aware of the concert at all. In the span of one month, 75 LGBTQI individuals and activists were arrested.

Anxiety is also used to build support for calls to filter or block content online.





WHAT DO DEFENDERS DO TO RESIST AND PROTECT THEMSELVES?

Delete their accounts

Even though they realise this is a tactic that prevents them from engaging in political discourse, a lot of which is increasingly happening online.

Ignore stalkers
and bullies





Engage with bullies and
defend herself against
their claims

Realising that ignoring bullies only emboldens
them further.

Secure their devices

Including using strong passwords; not sharing personal information on Facebook accounts; deleting social media accounts when traveling.



Alert Social Media Platforms



WHRDs interviewed have reported hateful comments, content and pictures of them shared without consent to Facebook and Twitter.

The issue the majority of WHRDs face with Facebook is that it takes a very long time to get a response (around 3 weeks).

The response is often that the content reported does not violate Facebook's Community Standards. WHRDs are not clear what these standards are. Facebook takes copyright violations much more seriously than violations against women.

WHRDs wonder who reviews Arabic content on Facebook. Is it native Arabic speakers? Is Facebook aware of the need to hire reviewers who are aware of gender-based violence?

Twitter is much more responsive to reports of abusive content. They give quick responses and often take the side of the WHRDs.

Report online violence to states

A minority of WHRDs resort to legal avenues:

- Because they don't want to attract attention to the work they do, which can be illegal;
- They are aware of the patriarchal attitudes they will face from state agents;
- They have experience with state agents who deemed internet violence as "not serious."



RECOMMENDATIONS

Work towards strengthening Feminist Principles of the Internet

Specifically: we believe in challenging the patriarchal spaces and processes that control internet governance, as well as putting more

feminists and queers at decision-making tables. We want to democratise policy-making regarding the internet, as well as diffuse ownership of and power in global and local networks.

This needs capacity-building of feminist activists, to be able to engage in internet governance spaces.



Governments need to put laws in place

Laws that recognise online violence against women as a larger barrier for women and girls in exercising the full range of their human rights. Governments need to include online violence against women as part of their plans to end violence against women as a whole.

Governments need to ensure policies and laws are enforced

Governments need to ensure that policies and laws that are in place to counter online violence are practiced and that law enforcement agents understand the patriarchal dynamics that play out online as they do offline.



Availability of Arabic content on staying safe online

It is important to have content on staying safe online, that is in a language accessible to WHRDs.

WHRDs noted that, even when Arabic content is available, it is translated, usually from English, and reads like a “foreign language.”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Documenting a subject of this nature is a deeply emotional endeavor; we greatly value the time, energy and dedication of all the WHRDs who shared their experiences of resisting online violence with us.

They continue to advocate for women's human rights in hostile contexts and using platforms where they often face threats, smear campaigns and intimidation. Worse, this violence is often not acknowledged as serious enough to merit redress.

UAF-Africa continues to learn from WHRDs on how she can improve the work she does to support the important work of WHRDs advocating for a feminist internet.

This project was conducted through support of the Leading from the South (LFS) fund and AWDF as one of four Women's Funds from the Global South managing LFS

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FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS