

Whose Digital Space? Ours!

Amplifying Young Women's Voices in an
Increasingly Digital Future



OXFAM

Courtesy of Oxfam



“I was called for interrogation by the de-facto Authority on the basis of my tweets on social media. I was under interrogation for hours, my mobile was confiscated for 45 days, and I was obliged to sign a pledge that prevents

me from posting what is defined as critical tweets.”

Riham, a member of a youth group supported by Oxfam and partners in Gaza

Technology provides a crucial platform with opportunities for women and girls to unite, access information, claim social and economic rights, challenge stereotypes, and realize their potential. The radical growth in the field of technology and digitalization in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) can contribute to more inclusive development. To seize such opportunities, it is vital that no one, especially women and girls, be inhibited in claiming their digital rights.

The unprecedented global growth in connectivity in the digital space has not been enjoyed equally by everyone. Youth, specifically young women, face systematic exclusion when it comes to their digital rights. The policies and practices applied by the government of Israel continue to suppress Palestinian freedom of expression in digital spaces in favor of the occupying country's national security.ⁱ The Palestinian Authority (PA) and the de facto government of Hamas use Cyber-Crime Law and the Penal Code respectively to impede digital activism. Data shows that 42 percent of Palestinian youth have been interrogated for their political participation online either by the Israeli authorities, the PA, or Hamas.ⁱⁱ

The digital gender divide is exacerbated by factors such as access and the capacity to utilize the digital space, social norms, and conservatism. Forty-five percent of the households headed by women in the oPt do not have access to the internet, compared to 17 percent of households headed by men.ⁱⁱⁱ Likewise, 77.5 percent of women (as compared to 65.0 percent of men) believe that they have no understanding of digital security.^{iv} Even more concerning is the fact that the oPt is currently witnessing one of the fastest-growing rates of online

gender-based violence (GBV) in the world.^v In the oPt, one in three women experiences online GBV,^{vi} including online harassment, violent threats, and hate speech which has led to self-censorship, deterring their digital rights.

Youth, specifically young women, are at the heart of leading the change! Oxfam and partners are working closely with young women to claim safer and inclusive digital rights by promoting their capacity on ICT, online GBV mitigation strategies, digital security, activism, laws, and rights. Young women are collectively working to challenge misinformation and disinformation, the restrictive social and legal environment, and GBV in online spaces.

“I have always dreamed of bringing about change! And now, I am confident not only in expressing myself in online spaces but also in taking a leading role in conducting dialogue at local and national levels, addressing online GBV, cybercrime

Can promoting women and girls' digital literacy and skills contribute to closing the digital gender gap and promote the rights of women and girls in the oPt?

A short video about Oxfam's program that empowers youth, and particularly young women, to voice their (socially critical) opinion on social media (in Arabic with English subtitles) is available at <https://fb.watch/3DhsavIK-a/>.

law, and its impact on young women.”
Riham, a member of a youth group supported by Oxfam and partners in Gaza



■ Youth activists and the Palestinian minister of Telecommunication and information technology after a round table discussion that aimed to enhance digital-space security in the oPt. Photo by Ahmed Badarneh, Taghyeer/2020.

Recently, young women lobbied the private sector internet service providers to amend their digital security policies. They were successful in influencing four internet service providers in Gaza and the West Bank to offer security services free of charge!

By using an open-source approach, Oxfam has supported and invested in existing and new digital platforms

to create an infrastructure for safe “alternative” spaces for young women where they can raise their voices safeguarded from online abuse, allowing them to claim their rights. The time has come to ensure that the digital transformation gives equal opportunities for women and girls and creates a more inclusive digital world.



■ Afnan, a youth group member, conducts an awareness-raising session about digital rights and security for school students in Hebron. Photo by Hisham al-Lahham, TAM/2019.



Ghosts of Girlhood by Suhad Khatib.

ⁱ “Hashtag Palestine 2019, an overview of digital rights issues of Palestinians,” 7amle Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, p. 11.

ⁱⁱ “Silenced Networks: The Chilling Effect among Palestinian Youth in Social Media,” 2019, 7amle Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data from the household survey on information and communication technology, 2019, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, available at <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3738>.

^{iv} “Gender-Based Electronic Violence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip,” TAM—Women Media and Development, June 2019, p. 34.

^v 7amle Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, “Online GBV Means Losing Out on Women’s Participation,” GenderIT.org, June 11, 2018, available at <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/online-gbv-palestine-means-losing-out-womens-participation>.

^{vi} “Silenced Networks,” p. 29.