



Navigating a Changing and Shrinking Civic Space

A Toolkit for Local and
Community Women's
Organisations and Initiatives

in Jordan, Palestine,
Lebanon, and Tunisia



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Acknowledgements	10
1. Introduction	14
1.1 Background and Context	16
1.2 Methodology	18
1.2.1 Individual Consultations	18
1.2.2 Questionnaire	19
1.2.3 Secondary Research Sources	19
1.2.4 Toolkit Validation Workshops	19
Dimensions of Shrinking and Changing Civic Space Challenges and Resistance Strategies	20
2. Access to Funding	22
2.1 Challenges in Access to Funding	23
Jordan	26
Palestine	27
Lebanon	28
Tunisia	29
2.2 Resistance Strategies	30
Persistence and Resilience	31
Close Relationships	32
Supportive Partnerships	33
Local Resources	34
Available Expertise	35
Internal Resources	36
Internal Capacity Building	37
Securing Assets and Properties	38
Using Artificial Intelligence and Social Media Platforms	39
Continuous Research	40

3. Banking and Financial Management	40
3.1 Challenges of Financial Management	42
Jordan	44
Palestine	44
Lebanon	45
Tunisia	45
3.2 Resistance Strategies	46
Strictness and Severity	46
Personal Relationships	47
Ensuring Accuracy	48
Alternative Accounts	49
Internal Capacity Building	49
4. Security, Safety and Protection	50
4.1 Security, Safety and Protection Challenges	52
Palestine	54
Jordan	55
Lebanon	56
4.2 Resistance Strategies	57
Relations with Security and Government Agencies	58
Preparedness and Risk Management	59
Good Relations with Local Community	60
Documenting Violence and Violations	61
Adapting Language to Context	62
Using Networks and Alliances	63
Self-Care and Collective Care	64
Providing Services and Referral Pathways to Relevant Authorities	65

5. Freedom of Expression 66

5.1 Challenges to Freedom of Expression 68

Palestine	69
Jordan	70
Lebanon	71

5.2 Resistance Strategies 72

Adapting Language and Terminology	72
Confrontation	74
Media	75
Using Alliances	76
Raising Community Awareness	77

6. Freedom of Assembly and Association 78

6.1 Challenges to Freedom of Assembly and Association 80

Jordan	81
Palestine	81
Lebanon	82
Tunisia	82

6.2 Resistance Strategies 83

Choosing Not to Register	83
Registering as Companies	83
Strict Adherence to Procedures	84
Networking and Partnerships	85
Advocating for the Importance of Civic Work	86
Internal Capacity Building	87

7. The Ability to Influence Public Policy 88

7.1 Challenges to Influencing Public Policy 90

Palestine	91
Jordan	91
Lebanon	91

7.2 Resistance Strategies 92

Patience and Persistence	92
Grassroots Work	93
Cooperation	94
Spreading Awareness and Building Internal Capacities	95
Advocacy	96

8. The Right to Access Information 98

8.1 Challenges to Access to Information 100

Palestine	102
Jordan	102
Lebanon	102
Tunisia	102

8.2 Resistance Strategies 103

Relationships and Networking	103
Consult Multiple Sources	104
Private Research	105

9. General Recommendations 106

Expanding the Concept of Civic Space	108
Recommendations for Donors and Funders	108
Recommendations for Organisations that Provide Technical Support	108
Advocacy Recommendations	109
Recommendations for All Stakeholders	109
Select Organisations that Support the Civic Space	109



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This toolkit was created in response to the needs of participating organisations to develop, document, and share tools and experiences that have been used and tested by partners to navigate the changing civic space in several Arabic-speaking countries. Thus, it was crucial to record the challenges faced by these organisations, the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges, and to present this information in a manner that enhances the exchange of knowledge and experience among partners.

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Women for Sustainable Development Organization

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Aljawhrah Charity Association
Arab Women Association
Basheer Al Noor Charitable Society Working Women Association
Alnahda Association for the Physically challenged

From Lebanon

Sama for Development Association
Donia for Sustainable Development
Committee of Employee Women Union in North
NGOs Platform in Saida
Development for local resources (CREADEL Liban)

Union of Progressive Women
Solidarity Association for Social and Cultural Development (Tadamon)
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Ward Organisation
IM POSSIBLE

From Palestine

The Palestinian Centre for Peace and Democracy (PCPD)
The Association for Women Action and Rehabilitation
Palestinian Women's Development Centre
Not To Forget Association

Al- Harah Theater
The Psycho-Social Counselling Centre for Women
Roles for Social Change Association (ADWAR)
Cooperative for Community Development Association (CFCDA)

From Tunisia

Association Beity

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01

Introduction



This toolkit addresses the evolving challenges in civic space within Arabic-speaking countries, specifically targeting the impacts on women and feminist organisations in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia.

Despite the shrinking and changing civic space at the regional level due to political, economic, legal, social, technological, environmental, and internal factors, women's organisations are developing strategies to adapt and continue their work towards positive societal change. Through the Feminist Program for Women's Economic Rights (FemPawer), key organisations including the Arab Women's Association in Jordan, the Research and Training Group for Development Action in Lebanon, the Palestinian Working Women's Association for Development in Palestine, and the Swedish Women's Foundation Kvinna till Kvinna, have been enhancing women's capabilities to tackle violence and economic discrimination.

In 2023, FemPawer partner institutions issued a call for proposals to develop a toolkit related to the shrinking civic space. In response, the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC) submitted a proposal using a participatory methodology. After reviewing several submissions, the Centre was selected for its suitable approach and commitment to an intersectional feminist methodology in creating this toolkit.



Therefore, this toolkit aims to:

- Document the experiences of women's organisations, initiatives, and activists within the FemPawer project who are advocating for women's economic rights amidst the changing and shrinking civic space.
- Provide resources for these groups to negotiate with and counteract the shrinking civic space.
- Create space for mutual learning and self-reflection among institutions, initiatives, and activists across the targeted countries
- Offer recommendations to stakeholders interested in supporting women's initiatives facing challenges in civic space.
- Serve as a reference for understanding the challenges and strategies of participating organisations and initiatives.

The target audience of this toolkit includes:

- Workers in civil society, women's organisations, and other organisations and initiatives.
- Individuals concerned with addressing the shrinking and changing civic space in Arabic-speaking countries.
- Activists engaged in civic activities within these regions.
- Organisations and initiatives seeking to develop strategies to navigate and negotiate the shrinking and changing civic space.
- Organisations advocating for the expansion and enhancement of civic space.

1.1 Background and Context

Countries in the Arabic-speaking region, known as the Middle East and North Africa, are deeply influenced by global political and economic factors. Since these states emerged less than a century ago, they have experienced ongoing political, economic, and demographic shifts, leading them to be viewed as suffering from persistent conflicts, disputes, settler colonialism, and various forms of occupation.¹ These dynamics, coupled with instability in certain areas, affect all societal sectors, including institutions, initiatives, and activists engaged in civic spaces, particularly women's organisations and initiatives. These groups are often targeted amid political changes and used as scapegoats to divert attention from deeper political, economic, and social issues.² International politics are a main influence that shapes the civic space in the region, affecting its boundaries, accessibility, and priorities.³ For example, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has impacted civic space by redirecting donor priorities and reducing available funding.⁴

In recent years, countries such as Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Algeria have experienced revolutions, uprisings, and protests against oppressive regimes and deteriorating economic conditions.⁵ Women have prominently participated in these movements, advocating for improved living conditions and economic reform, while remaining cognisant of external influences on their region.⁶ Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the suppression of public demonstrations by authoritarian regimes, confining people indoors and minimising public gatherings.⁷ This shift has not only altered the dynamics of civic engagement but also increased reliance on the internet, changing the nature of activities within civic spaces conducted by CSOs, institutions, initiatives, and activists.

The region has undergone events that largely impacted its civic space. For instance, the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake, which claimed over 50,000 lives, heightened awareness among CSOs and initiatives of the need to better prepare for environmental disasters and severe humanitarian crises. Then, the genocidal war unfolding in Gaza and the escalation across Palestine shifted the focus of the international community and donor countries, and consequently affected institutions at the level of the region as a whole. Accordingly, the complexities of addressing the shrinking and changing civic space in the Middle East and North Africa region are related to the region's geopolitical position and its influence on global politics, which may be difficult to address in any radically meaningful way. Therefore, this tool recognises its own limitations; it does not propose solutions to the fundamental and structural issues but rather offers immediate advice, guidance, and strategies to help women's organisations and initiatives navigate the repercussions of these changes.

It is important to note that this toolkit primarily addresses one aspect of effectiveness and activism within the broader scope of civic space, which includes "organisations and institutions in various forms, such as international, national, and local organised and informal organic groups, networks, unions and grassroots social movements (Cooper, 2018) It also includes foundations and non-profit NGOs, emerging online groups, religious, spiritual or faith-based organisations, the private sector serving a social justice mission, grassroots gatherings and cooperatives that may be commercial, youth clubs and platforms, media, including radio, television, print or online publishing, research and academic institutions, and others (WEF, 2013)"^{8,9,10}.

Civic space is understood as "the space available-both practical and legal, available online and in real life-where individuals exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, access to information, and active participation in society. This space enables individuals and institutions to address societal issues, voice concerns publicly, engage in both online and offline gatherings, and participate in public decision-making processes.¹¹ However, cultural factors tied to the traditions and customs of various societies also play a major role in shaping civic space. Even when legal avenues are open, cultural norms can greatly restrict the space available for women and feminist organisations and initiatives. Addressing these cultural limitations often extends beyond the reach of statutory laws, which typically govern aspects like personal status, the registration of institutions, and penal codes.

Describing civic space as shrinking or narrowing highlights the various forms of oppression, including the patterns, sources, and mechanisms that constrain the agency and freedom of actors within this space.¹² To better understand the impact of these dynamics on organisations and initiatives, and to uncover the strategies they employ to navigate and counteract this constriction, we have explored different dimensions of civic space. This exploration has been instrumental in developing this toolkit and conducting the practical research that informs it. The dimensions of civic space, outlined non-hierarchically and without implying an order of importance, include:

- 1. Access to Funding:** This dimension assesses the ability of institutions to secure necessary funds. Challenges may arise from funders, donors, governmental restrictions, or internal institutional barriers.
- 2. Banking and Financial Management:** This dimension focuses on the ability of institutions to navigate bureaucratic hurdles related to banking services and financial systems that are essential for their operations and program execution.
- 3. Security, Safety, and Protection:** This dimension focuses on the general safety and security of institutions and their employees. It includes the availability of mechanisms for protection in cases of abuse, violence, or harassment.
- 4. Freedom of Expression:** This measures the degree to which individuals and institutions can freely and safely express their opinions, and the extent to which they can publicly share their concerns, whether online or in other public forums.
- 5. Freedom of Assembly and Association:** This refers to the ease with which individuals and groups can gather, organise, and carry out activities locally or nationally, including the ability to protest and demonstrate without fear.
- 6. Ability to Influence or Contribute to Public Policy:** This dimension evaluates whether individuals and groups have the capacity to affect and contribute to policymaking processes, and to develop and implement activities and agendas at the national level, and if the government engages its citizens and various stakeholders in these processes.
- 7. Access to Information:** This pertains to how easily individuals and groups can obtain reliable and unbiased information without being misled, through various channels including media, government, and private institutions.

In this toolkit, we examined the experiences and strategies of civil society institutions and grassroots initiatives led by women in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia, particularly those operating outside the capitals of these countries. We observed that the institutions from Jordan and Palestine typically did not identify explicitly as "feminist" despite adopting feminist approaches in their work. Conversely, in Lebanon and Tunisia, the participating institutions readily identified with feminism both as a term and a defining characteristic of their activities.

The use of the term "feminism" varied among these institutions. For some, feminism represents a methodology, perspective, or approach to their operations, while others use it to denote efforts that focus specifically on women. Additionally, perceptions of feminism and its relevance to the local communities these institutions serve also varied. Some view it as a universal humanitarian concept tied to women's rights, while others resist the term due to its associations with Western hegemony and colonialism. Despite these differences in terminology, all the institutions emphasised their commitment to supporting women's economic participation and empowerment within their local communities, whether or not they use the term "feminism."

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1.2 Methodology

In the development of this toolkit, we employed an intersectional feminist methodology, which enriched our understanding of women and feminist organisations and initiatives, their needs, experiences, and the strategies they use to navigate the changing and shrinking civic space. This approach facilitated an exploration of how these groups exercise their agency and resist intersecting systems of oppression. Recognising their agency and resilience, this methodology not only fosters critical thinking and transformative effects among participants but also promotes self-reflection. Through this feminist learning tool, we created a space for active participation and collaborative knowledge-building, encouraging mutual learning and relearning. Participants were engaged not merely as data sources but as co-thinkers in addressing the challenges faced in various civic spaces. It's important to note that while this tool draws from the experiences of participants, and researchers negotiating shrinking civic spaces, it is not representative of all contexts or universally applicable.

We explored several factors impacting civic space, discussing their effects and strategies for negotiation. These factors include:

- **Political factors:** Political coups, armed conflicts, human and women's rights violations, occupation, censorship by political and security entities, militarisation, political repression, issues of asylum, migration, displacement, and settler colonialism.
- **Economic factors:** Inflation, financial crises, volatile currency rates, high unemployment rates, privatisation, and significant poverty levels.
- **Social factors:** Unfavorable social attitudes, traditional gender roles, social stigmas, violence against minorities and vulnerable groups, and cultural limitations tied to customs and traditions.
- **Technological factors:** Online harassment, digital censorship, online smear campaigns, technological malfunctions, issues with internet access, and the skills required to utilise modern technological tools.
- **Legal factors:** Discriminatory legal frameworks, unjust judicial systems, poor enforcement of laws supporting women's rights, emergency and war laws, regulations on virtual spaces and the internet, laws on association and assembly, lack of legal protection mechanisms, and legal constraints affecting migrants and refugees.
- **Environmental factors:** Environmental challenges and climate changes such as droughts, pandemics, pollution, earthquakes, and deprivation of natural resources like land, water, and environmental wealth.
- **Relational factors:** Potential benefits and detriments arising from relationships with various stakeholders, including partnerships with other institutions, international bodies, and donor countries.
- **Internal factors:** Institutional capacities that influence the ability of organisations to execute activities, network, make decisions, and access resources, potentially including governance, internal policies, and operational limitations.

In gathering data and information for this toolkit, we undertook the following steps:

1.2.1 Individual Consultations

The team from the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration convened an initial general meeting with all partner organisations and initiatives involved in the FemPAWER program. This meeting served to introduce the toolkit's purpose and to establish a consensus on the methodology for the project. Following this, from November to December 2023, the team conducted individual consultations with the partner organisations in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia. These consultations were carried out either face-to-face or via Zoom, depending on logistical and safety considerations. The purpose of these individual sessions was to provide a space for each partner organisation to articulate their specific experiences within the civic space and discuss the various factors impacting their operations. These consultations not only facilitated a deeper understanding of the challenges faced but also allowed participants to think about potential solutions and share the strategies and tools they currently employ. The researchers conducted 31 consultation sessions for the purpose of this research, with their distribution as follows:

Country	Number of sessions
Palestine	8
Jordan	12
Lebanon	9
Tunisia	1

1.2.2 Questionnaire

Following the individual consultations, our researchers developed a questionnaire based on the tools and strategies shared by participants during these sessions. The purpose of the questionnaire was to validate the collected data and information and to identify the areas that partner institutions were particularly interested in exploring further. The questionnaire was distributed among the partner organisations, and we received 40 responses.

1.2.3 Secondary Research Sources

Throughout the development of this toolkit, researchers consulted literature related to civic space, and we relied on previous research to provide an in-depth understanding of the contexts in which the partner organisations operate. Secondary research sources were used at all stages of the study, from preparation through analysis and into writing.

1.2.4 Toolkit Validation Workshops

After drafting the initial version of the toolkit and conducting an internal review, the researchers organised online workshops to validate the toolkit's conclusions and the resistance strategies identified during the initial research and analysis. These sessions involved participants from each country, meeting separately with partner institutions to ensure focused discussions. Notes and feedback gathered during these sessions were thoroughly incorporated into the latest version of the toolkit.

02

Dimensions of Shrinking and Changing Civic Space

Challenges
and Resistance Strategies



2. Access to Funding

Access to funding is a vital aspect of civic space, as organisations and initiatives require financial resources to conduct their activities and sustain their workforce. The ability to secure funding can be constrained by various internal and external factors. Internally, an organisation's capacity to attract funds can be limited, while externally, funders, donors, and national government policies can impose significant restrictions. These policies might include censorship of activities, limitations on official registration, or barriers to receiving foreign funds, all of which can severely impede access to necessary financial support.

2.1 Challenges in Access to Funding

The challenges associated with securing funding in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia include:

● Regional Instability

Political and economic turbulence in the region, including armed conflicts and economic downturns, directly impacts funding availability. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to reduced funding globally. Additionally, institutions in Palestine and those in the diaspora that support the Palestinian cause have experienced funding cuts following the genocide in Gaza and the collective punishment as of October 7, 2023.

● Centralisation

Many grassroots and community organisations and initiatives, particularly those located outside the capitals in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia, face challenges due to the centralisation of funding. Donors often show a preference for civil society organisations based in major cities like Beirut, Amman, Ramallah, and Tunis. This preference for capital-based organisations restricts the funding available to smaller institutions operating in peripheral, remote, or rural areas.

● Funding Monopoly and Competition

Participants involved in developing the toolkit highlighted that intense competition for funding among organisations and initiatives negatively impacts overall work within the civic space. Rather than fostering cooperation, partnership, and coordination, many organisations find themselves competing against one another for financial resources. This competition is particularly pronounced in environments where funders tend to favour well-established, large, or longstanding institutions. Such preferences lead to a concentration of funding among a few large institutions primarily located in capital cities. Consequently, these larger entities often rely on smaller institutions to execute activities in areas outside the capitals. This dynamic was specifically noted by participants from Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.

● Complex Requirements and Limited Skills

Complex requirements on the part of donors and funding bodies are another major barrier to access to funding for grassroots and community organisations and initiatives. Participants explained that they sometimes find themselves struggling with requirements that are unsuited to the context, the nature of their work, or even the age of their organisations. They also expressed concerns about the opacity and difficulty of the criteria used to evaluate project proposals, feeling that some funding calls are merely procedural formalities, with decisions on funding seemingly predetermined in favour of certain organisations. The language requirement for submitting proposals presents another substantial barrier, as documents are often required to be in English. This poses a challenge for organisations where English proficiency is limited, thereby restricting their ability to secure funding. A general lack of clarity and understanding of the application requirements further complicates access to funding.

New and emerging organisations encounter additional hurdles, as some donors impose a minimum operational history requirement, which can prevent newer entities from accessing funding which could be vital to them and restricts the growth and sustainability of new initiatives in the civic space.

● Agendas Inconsistent with Local Contexts

A significant challenge that grassroots organisations and initiatives face with funding is that the agendas of funders often lack flexibility and fail to align with local contexts. This rigidity is also evident in the nature of the available funds, which are typically restricted to specific activities and do not cover the administrative costs and other financial needs essential for organisational sustainability. This limitation affects the ability of these organisations to maintain adequate staffing. Participants from various countries have noted that donors' agendas often overlook contextual risks, and there is a mismatch between funders' perceptions of risks and those recognised by local institutions. For instance, a participant from Lebanon noted, "Since 2022, funding strategies have become ambiguous, and while they claim to prioritise local activity, it is unclear how they design their projects to fit the context appropriately." Additionally, a participant from Jordan highlighted the issue of conditional funding: "Some donors offer conditional funding, which restricts our organisation's autonomy in decision-making and expression."

● Volunteer-based Work

Many organisations and initiatives rely on volunteers due to inadequate funding or limited access to financial resources, which in turn impedes their ability to allocate sufficient time and human resources for fundraising activities. It is crucial to acknowledge that while volunteer work is often used as a strategy to navigate shrinking civic spaces, it also presents challenges to the sustainability and continuity of these organisations. The reliance on volunteers can be particularly problematic given the economic pressures that weigh on both the institutions and their staff, making it difficult to maintain operations and achieve long-term goals.

● Knowledge of Donor Organisations and Calls for Proposal

Many organisations and initiatives face challenges due to a lack of awareness about available donor organisations and the platforms where funding calls are announced. The dissemination of these calls for proposals is often not widespread enough to reach grassroots organisations, which restricts the diversity of associations that receive funding, making it exclusive to those with established relationships with funding agencies and sufficient knowledge of the relevant platforms. A participant from Jordan highlighted that information about funding opportunities "is not equally available to everyone and depends on the relationships of the association members with different organisations. Sometimes we learn about available funding too late, leaving insufficient time to write and submit a project proposal." Another participant confirmed, "Donors tend to provide support to the same associations repeatedly, which limits the opportunities for other organisations to obtain funding. The same organisations always receive funding, resulting in a lack of diversity and few attempts to engage new organisations." Additionally, nepotism and favouritism were cited as significant barriers, with one comment noting, "Relationships and favouritism among some associations play a role in limiting other associations' access to funding,"

JORDAN

In Jordan, one of the barriers to accessing funding for community and grassroots organisations and initiatives is the requirement to obtain official permits for any foreign funding. This authorisation process can involve multiple bureaucratic layers, including obtaining approval from the Prime Minister. Moreover, these procedures are often lengthy, extending up to six months, which not only delays the ability of projects to operationalise, but also reduces available time for implementation, impacting the effectiveness and operational capacity of these organisations.

"Approval from the Prime Minister for all foreign funding takes a long time, sometimes up to 6 months, which affects our association's ability to implement the project within its time period, especially for small projects."

Participant from Jordan

"It is necessary to obtain official authorisation for every instance of funding received by our association, which can delay our receipt of funding for several months. We try to strictly adhere to the requirements of the Ministry of Social Development, and sometimes we have to go to Amman in order to ensure that official documentation is followed up until approval is obtained."

Participant from Jordan



PALESTINE

The situation in Palestine is uniquely complex due to the region's specific challenges compounded by the effects of settler colonialism which is supported by most donor countries. Even before the Genocide in the Gaza Strip, starting in October 2023, Palestinian institutions were already grappling with special funding conditions imposed upon them.

Moreover, Palestinian organisations face aggressive campaigns from settler-colonial advocacy groups like NGO Monitor, which pressures donors to withdraw support by labelling organisations as anti-Semitic, which further complicates the funding landscape.

A significant moment came in 2020 when the Palestinian National Campaign to Reject Conditional Funding issued a statement denouncing the stipulation that funding must not support terrorism-a condition that labels all Palestinian resistance factions as terrorist organisations. The majority of Palestinian community organisations have rejected, and continue to reject, this condition, severely restricting their access to funding sources.

Following the events of October 2023, many donors and international agencies ceased their support for numerous Palestinian institutions, exacerbating the damage to the civic space and further limiting opportunities for Palestinian organisations to secure vital financial support.



"We cannot accept these conditions. The Society after October 7 will not accept complicity."
Participant from Palestine



LEBANON

In Lebanon, the economic collapse that struck the country in 2019 has profoundly altered societal needs, subsequently affecting the requirements of community and grassroots organisations and initiatives. However, there has been a noticeable lag in how donor priorities have adjusted to these new realities. Many organisations from Lebanon highlighted that donor agendas often fail to align with the urgent economic needs and the financial repercussions of the economic collapse, including the unprecedented devaluation of the Lebanese pound. This disconnection has forced a re-evaluation of priorities, with many participants emphasising the critical importance of addressing economic violence as a current and urgent priority, necessitating shifts in their operational focus.

Additionally, Lebanese organisations and initiatives operating in areas perceived as having a "sectarian character" encounter specific challenges in accessing funding. These groups often find themselves excluded from funding opportunities offered by secular or non-politically partisan donors. Despite these funding barriers, the efforts of these organisations play a crucial role in their communities, particularly in combating sectarianism within the regions they serve.



TUNISIA

In Tunisia, recent legal changes introduced by the government pose significant threats to the ability of organisations and initiatives to access foreign funding. The new laws regulating civic associations grant the government increased authority to oversee these groups, potentially allowing it to prevent them from obtaining necessary financial support. This increased oversight complicates the operational landscape for Tunisian organisations, directly impacting their funding streams and, consequently, their ability to effectively serve their communities and pursue their missions.

2.2 Resistance Strategies

Persistence and Resilience

Persistence and resilience are vital traits for organisations, community-based initiatives, and grassroots groups striving to continue their operations despite significant funding challenges. These qualities serve as both a resource and a source of internal strength, helping many institutions survive and maintain continuity in a world marked by injustice and inequity. One manifestation of this determination is the decision by many organisations to persist with volunteer work, even in times of resource scarcity and financial constraints.

To maintain their activities without adequate funding, some organisations and initiatives opt for smaller, less costly events and activities, choosing sustainability over expansion, which could otherwise strain their resources. In particularly tough financial situations, some institutions may scale down the size of their activities as a deliberate strategy to ensure their persistence and resilience.



"We are steadfast because of our belief in the cause for which we work and because of our belief in the change we make in the lives of women and children. Because of this belief, we are not hindered by the lack of funding. Even if we do the work voluntarily, we will be satisfied."

Participant from Palestine

"As a young woman, I faced a lot of injustice from patriarchy, gender discrimination and violence. In the workplace, at home, and during my divorce, I had to endure all kinds of tragedies. But were these circumstances able to stop me? Of course not!"

Participant from Lebanon

"We must communicate with decision-makers to support the issues that concern us, send official documents, and network with the visual, audio, and written media to cover events, activities, and issues that concern us or alarm us, and present various recommendations to decision-makers through various activities. There must be long-term thinking, will, determination, and belief in the cause."

Participant from Jordan

Close Relationships

Building close relationships with donors and funders is vital for organisations and initiatives seeking to secure funding. These relationships, founded on trust and mutual understanding, require organisations to engage in several key behaviours:

Open Communications

- Transparency:** Articulating both internal and external challenges to donors
- Integrity:** Dealing honestly and fairly in all interactions
- Active Listening:** Attentiveness to the concerns and feedback of donors
- Seeking Clarification:** of unclear matters to ensure full understanding
- Considered Decision-Making:** Taking adequate time and space to make informed decisions
- Demonstrating Commitment:** Continually showing dedication in actions, not only words.
- Setting Boundaries:** Clearly defining the limits and expectations of the relationship to prevent misunderstandings.

In this context, it is crucial for organisations to engage in ongoing dialogue with donors to help them understand and adapt their funding agendas to better match local needs and contexts.



"Our association's good reputation with the local community helped us a lot in building trust with donors."

Participant from Jordan

"We have donor allies who trust us, and that's how we persist."

Participant from Lebanon

"We have strengthened our communication with the local community, and by providing various trainings for women and girls, we have become in good contact with different people who have the capabilities to help our association through their volunteering. For example, women volunteers sometimes help in conducting surveys of areas to identify needs, and sometimes experts help in writing project proposals to get funding."

Participant from Jordan

Supportive Partnerships

To enhance their access to funding, small grassroots and community organisations often form partnerships with larger institutions that have established relationships with funders. Such collaborations can significantly benefit smaller groups, as aligning with well-known partners can increase their chances of securing funding.

In these partnerships, it is crucial for all involved parties to clearly define the nature of their relationship and establish firm boundaries. This clarity helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures that each organisation's roles and responsibilities are well understood. Additionally, it is essential that projects be designed transparently to avoid the potential exploitation of smaller organisations by their larger counterparts.



"If it were not for our partnerships with larger organisations in Ramallah, we would not have been able to obtain funding."

Participant from Palestine

"One of the most important ways to confront challenges is cooperation between large and small associations to present joint projects, to cover the lack of capabilities that small organisations have in terms of writing project proposals. Such partnership is beneficial for the larger organisation as well, as it guarantees access to the grassroots level and to remote areas."

Participant from Jordan

"Applying for projects through alliances or building partnerships and applying together to obtain funding."

Participant from Jordan

"It is very important that we develop the spirit of cooperation rather than competition by applying for funding as a network and following transparency and democracy in accessing opportunities."

Participant from Lebanon

Local Resources

To navigate the challenges of accessing official funding, many grassroots and community organisations turn to alternative fundraising methods. These include organising fundraising events, launching charitable initiatives, and sometimes securing support from private and commercial business owners. It's important to recognise that some private sector companies allocate specific amounts each year for donations, community work, and charity under what is often referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR). This commitment can provide a valuable source of support for local organisations, enabling them to continue their work despite obstacles in securing traditional funding.



"We were able to obtain support from businesses and the private sector through charitable initiatives."

Participant from Jordan

Available Expertise

Navigating the complexities of funding applications often compels organisations and initiatives to seek assistance from experienced individuals skilled in writing grant proposals. Sometimes, experienced members from within the organisations volunteer to write proposals, while at other times, help is sought from external experts who may offer their services pro bono. Additionally, there are community groups comprising professionals with diverse specialisations who provide free services to support these organisations. These groups can include lawyers, accountants, and writers, among others. However, organisations and initiatives frequently encounter challenges when external specialists require high fees for their services, which can impose further financial strains on already resource-limited groups.



"We have strengthened our communication with the local community, and by providing various trainings for women and girls, we have become in good contact with different people who have the capabilities to help our association through their volunteering. For example, women volunteers sometimes help in conducting surveys of areas to identify needs, and sometimes experts help in writing project proposals to get funding."

Participant from Jordan

Internal Resources

To address the challenges of securing external funding, many community and grassroots organisations turn to their internal resources to generate income and ensure sustainability. For instance, some organisations launch income-generating projects, such as providing consulting services to other organisations. This strategy not only helps maintain their operations but also builds a degree of financial independence.

Additionally, many local organisations manage their expenses through contributions from their own members or from internal funds accumulated over time.

Some institutions find creative ways to utilise their assets, such as renting out their halls or office spaces to other entities, which provides a steady stream of income.

Another innovative approach involves the implementation of cooperative projects. These initiatives often lead to the establishment of small, income-generating cooperatives that provide financial support to the parent organisations and initiatives.

"The issue of securing financial resources is a real concern of most people who work in (civil society) organisations, because we want independence from donors. We try to carry out small projects that generate income, such as sewing, preserved foods, cheese, dairy, and others."

Participant from Lebanon

"We are concerned about funding, and we often try to sell some products to meet our financial needs."

Participant from Palestine

"We are trying to obtain revenue for the association from other sources that make us more independent. For example, we purchased a vegetable and fruit dehydrator that runs on solar energy, sold dried fruit to increase the association's production and obtain a better revenue, and even opened a children's nursery."

Participant from Jordan



Internal Capacity Building

To navigate the challenges of accessing financing, particularly when confronted with stringent funding criteria and complex application processes, some organisations invest in strengthening their internal capabilities. This internal capacity building focuses on enhancing the skills of staff members in key areas such as fundraising, writing project proposals, and documenting and evaluating impact. Furthermore, internal capacity building involves developing essential internal policies that not only appeal to potential funders but also help streamline organisational operations, advance the institution's goals, increase the likelihood of securing funding, and align with donor expectations.

These policies cover a range of operational and ethical areas, including:

- Financial Policy
- Code of Conduct and Internal Regulations
- Safeguarding Policies
- Anti-corruption Policies
- Human Resources Policies
- Procurement Policies



"The presence of a good work team, in addition to the association's experience and the training that the work team obtained from various projects, and the reliance in building projects on the needs of the local community and offering projects that serve the local context and its environment."

Participant from Jordan

Securing Assets and Properties

One of the strategies used by organisations and initiatives to ensure their financial continuity and overcome the obstacles of scarcity of funding is securing their assets and properties, such as buildings or equipment, devices and supplies. Some organisations seek to obtain and maintain these assets and properties, sometimes from the same funding and other times through donations and local resources.



"If we had not had the building in which we work, which is owned by the association, we would not have been able to continue."

Participant from Palestine

"Frankly, when we purchase equipment and devices for the association, all of these are considered assets that are a financial resource and can be used when needed."

Participant from Palestine

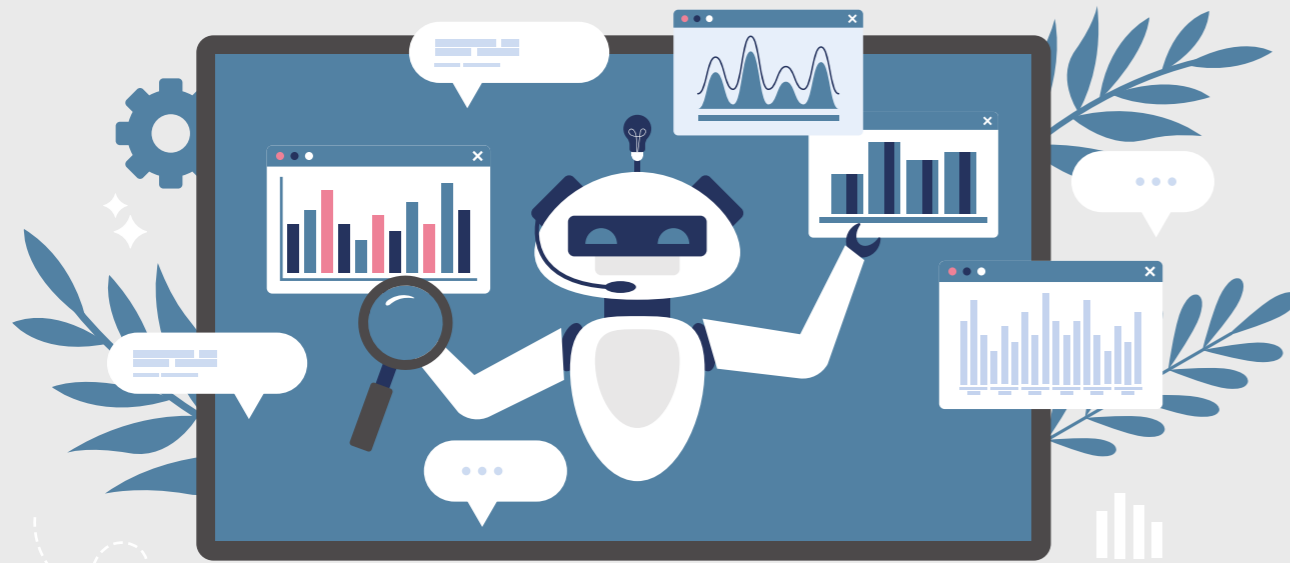
"We developed the association's spaces and infrastructure, such as training halls, and prepared materials and furniture, including tables, chairs, and projectors, to prepare the training halls and rent them to various institutions."

Participant from Jordan

Using Artificial Intelligence and Social Media Platforms

In today's technological landscape, organisations and initiatives have the opportunity to leverage artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT for the development, review, and refinement of project proposals. This can be particularly beneficial for those facing challenges due to language barriers, as AI applications can assist in overcoming linguistic limitations. Additionally, the widespread use of social media platforms facilitates the dissemination of funding information and the promotion of organisational activities to a broader audience.

However, it's important to recognise that some donors may scrutinise the use of artificial intelligence in the proposal-writing process. Therefore, it's imperative to use tools like ChatGPT judiciously, primarily for tasks such as linguistic proofreading or structural organisation of content. Human oversight should remain integral to ensure the accuracy, coherence, and appropriateness of the proposals generated with AI assistance.



"Having ChatGPT has helped us a lot in formulating projects and reducing their writing time."

Participant from Jordan

"Using social media and checking local newspapers helps the association know when there are opportunities to apply for funding."

Participant from Jordan

Securing Assets and Properties

Organisations and initiatives are relentless in their pursuit of funding opportunities. They employ various tools to identify potential sources, including:



Monitoring social media platforms

Scanning local newspapers

Regularly checking donors' websites and online platforms

Subscribing to relevant email lists

03

Banking and Financial Management



Banking and financial management plays a crucial role in the operation of community and grassroots initiatives, representing a significant dimension of civic space. Restrictions on these activities can, therefore, constrict civic space. This covers various aspects including the capability of institutions to navigate banking services, bureaucratic challenges, and banking restrictions. It also involves the ability of organisations and initiatives to establish and maintain internal financial processes and procedures for their operations and programs.

Our consultations revealed that most obstacles in banking and financial management are common across all targeted countries, with specific contextual differences noted particularly in Lebanon and Tunisia. Institutions employ similar strategies to overcome these challenges, adapting to the restrictive environments in which they operate.

3.1 Challenges of Financial Management

The challenges associated with joint banking management across Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia are multifaceted and significantly impact the operations of community and grassroots initiatives:

● Excessive Documentation

Institutions frequently encounter substantial bureaucratic hurdles with banks requiring an extensive array of documents for basic transactions. This includes grant contracts, employment contracts, activity details, government approvals, and budgets. The heavy reliance on paperwork and the slow pace of digitisation in financial services create major operational delays and increase administrative burdens.

● Opening and Closing Accounts

Many grassroots and community organisations and initiatives, particularly those located outside the capitals in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia, face challenges due to the centralisation of funding. Donors often show a preference for civil society organisations based in major cities like Beirut, Amman, Ramallah, and Tunis. This preference for capital-based organisations restricts the funding available to smaller institutions operating in peripheral, remote, or rural areas.

● Limited Banking Services

Across the region, organisations and initiatives face limited banking services. Restrictions on issuing cheque books, credit cards, and accessing electronic banking services necessitate cumbersome paperwork and in-person transactions, which complicates financial management at the organisation level.

● Inconsistency and Lack of Clarity

Banks frequently change their requirements and procedures without clear communication, leading to confusion and inefficiencies. The level of service can vary significantly not only between different banks but also between branches of the same bank and even among staff within a single branch.

● Currency Fluctuations

The handling of foreign currency transactions by banks poses a major challenge. Organisations receiving funds in foreign currencies often lose a portion of their value due to unfavourable exchange rates imposed by banks, a problem particularly acute in Lebanon since 2020.

● Access to Banking Infrastructure

The lack of bank branches and banking services in remote or marginalised areas forces organisations based in such areas to travel significant distances for banking needs, adding logistical challenges and costs.

● Anti-Terrorism and Money Laundering Regulations

Global regulations designed to combat terrorism and money laundering disproportionately affect organisations in the Middle East and North Africa. Banks may reject or heavily scrutinise incoming and outgoing transfers, creating delays and financial losses for initiatives engaged in legitimate activities.

● Jordan

In Jordan, the Central Bank annually issues directives to regulate the interactions between banks and non-profit associations and institutions. These guidelines stipulate that for associations to receive transfers from financiers, they must submit a comprehensive set of documents. It is insufficient to present just a copy of the Prime Minister's approval for the financing; official documentation from the ministry that registered the association or institution is also required to facilitate the transfer of funds to their bank accounts. Moreover, banks mandate that institutions annually update their data in the presence of their administrative body. This process is not only time-consuming but also requires a significant effort from the organisations.

"Our association faces difficulties and delays in receiving money transfer to our bank account, as many official documents must be submitted to allow the transfer to go forward, such as official approvals from the Ministry of Social Development and the Prime Minister's office for the project, the project contract, among other documents."

Participant from Jordan

"Banks require many documents for every banking transaction, such as the agreement, the budget, official approval from the Prime Minister, and the signature of all authorized persons; there are many procedures and much inflexibility."

Participant from Jordan

● Palestine

The banking and financial landscape for organisations and initiatives in Palestine has been particularly challenging, especially following the Israeli escalation on October 7, 2023. In the aftermath of these events, which can be described as collective punishment, a number of European banks started refusing to process transfers to Palestinian banks in the West Bank. Some Palestinian banks have also decided against sending transfers to the Gaza Strip.

While Palestinian organisations face similar challenges to those in Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia, such as excessive documentation requirements and limited banking services, the situation after October 2023 introduced an additional layer of difficulty.

● Lebanon

The economic collapse that Lebanon experienced in 2019 placed significant strain on local organisations and initiatives. As the Lebanese pound plummeted to unprecedented levels, banks ceased disbursing funds and froze numerous accounts. This action severely impacted local civil society, as many organisations saw the purchasing power of their pre-2020 funding evaporate. Additionally, banks restricted currency exchanges to the Lebanese lira, preventing many from accessing funds in foreign currencies in their accounts. This not only affected the organisations but also the personal bank accounts of individuals working in the sector. Organisations were compelled to start over with new financing contracts due to these banking restrictions.

Another distinct challenge faced in Lebanon is the high banking fees imposed on the accounts of institutions and associations, further exacerbating their financial and banking difficulties.

● Tunisia

In Tunisia, banking and financial regulations impose unique challenges on organisations and initiatives. One notable requirement is that, upon receiving funding from abroad, institutions must not only inform the relevant authorities but also publicly announce their receipt of funds in a local newspaper. This requirement adds an extra layer of administrative burden and public scrutiny that is not typically seen in other countries. Moreover, Tunisian institutions face restrictions regarding foreign currency accounts; they are not permitted to open accounts in currencies other than the Tunisian dinar. All incoming funds are subject to conversion at the exchange rate determined by the Central Bank of Tunisia.

3.2 Resistance Strategies

Strictness and Severity

Some organisations and initiatives, facing unclear and non-transparent banking procedures, sometimes adopt a stern and harsh approach with bank employees to secure necessary services. This method is driven by the need to navigate opaque financial operations that lead to conflicts with bank staff. Despite the potential for negative long-term effects on relationships with financial institutions, some instances suggest that this assertive approach can occasionally expedite services.



"I had to get loud and intense with them, and then they started facilitating my transactions."

Participant from Palestine

Personal Relationships

Personal relationships and networks play a crucial role in smoothing the operations of organisations and initiatives, particularly in facilitating financial and banking transactions. These connections are not necessarily with influential figures; often, they involve relationships with bank personnel at various levels, including bank tellers.



"Personal relationships with the bank branch helped us understand what the procedures are, and what is required."

Participant from Jordan

"We had to use our knowledge and networking with more than one bank branch in order to obtain an account and a cheque book."

Participant from Jordan

"The truth is that the transaction is much easier when you know someone at the bank."

Participant from Palestine

"Using personal relationships to facilitate transactions is a method we use to negotiate the collapse of the country."

Participant from Lebanon

Ensuring Accuracy

To mitigate obstacles in accessing banking services, many organisations and initiatives prioritise accuracy and thoroughness in managing their financial documents and adhering to banking procedures. This includes ensuring that all required official papers, such as those mandated by government agencies, as well as documents related to grants, projects, disbursement plans, and budgets, are readily available and properly organised. By meticulously preparing and verifying these documents, organisations can avoid pitfalls, complications, and delays that often arise from missing or incomplete paperwork.



"We prepare all the paperwork for them, so that they do not come back to us every now and then with a new request."

Participant from Palestine

"Getting used to and following the procedures one by one is something we do to deal with difficulties, as well as prior coordination with the members charged with signing. With years of experience, we have come to expect what is required by the bank and when it must be submitted."

Participant from Jordan



Alternative Accounts



Due to the challenges associated with opening and managing official bank accounts, some organisations and initiatives opt for alternative approaches to receive funding. For instance, organisations may negotiate with financiers to route funds through personal or joint accounts, which can be simpler to manage. Additionally, institutions sometimes form partnerships with other entities that have established capabilities in financial management and banking relations to receive their funding.

Internal Capacity Building

Community and grassroots organisations and initiatives are actively enhancing their internal capabilities to better access financial and banking services and streamline their transactions. To this end, they invest in training programs for staff, focusing on financial management skills. Additionally, some institutions are implementing computerised financial systems to expedite and facilitate financial and banking management in general.



"We have developed our capacities through practice in writing and following up on budgets. We have opened a bank account and are working on developing a computerised financial system for the association. We are currently dealing with receivable vouchers and financial reports."

Participant from Jordan

"There is a need to support associations in building their financial and accounting capabilities, support them in developing their internal policies, finance computerised financial programs for them, and train them to use them."

Participant from Jordan

"With time it becomes easier, and we get used to the requirements."

Participant from Palestine

04

Security, Safety and Protection

The sense of security, safety, and protection is crucial for the effective functioning of civic space, influencing the ability of activists, to negotiate and engage effectively. It is therefore essential to have robust protection mechanisms especially in cases of violence, mistreatment, or harassment and abuse, to protect from factors that may undermine civic space such as community backlash, repression by state institutions, or abuses that may occur in the workplace.

4.1 Security, Safety and Protection Challenges

We found that challenges to security, safety, and protection vary depending on context, but share some common elements across Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia, which can be summarized as follows:

● Community Backlash

Some community and grassroots initiatives often face societal backlash that can escalate to violence. This negative response is frequently triggered by various controversial issues such as accusations of corruption, perceived collusion with Western entities, or the promotion of ideas that are seen as foreign to traditional societal values. Such backlash is typically consistent and can be exacerbated by patriarchal authorities who view these initiatives, especially feminist movements, and efforts to advance women's rights.

● Misunderstanding of feminist and feminist work

Misconceptions about the nature and objectives of feminist organisations and initiatives contribute significantly to societal backlash. These groups, particularly those engaged in grassroots feminist and women-focused work, often face criticism based on a fundamental misunderstanding of their activities. They are sometimes wrongfully accused of promoting ideas that are viewed as foreign to the cultural norms of their societies, such as allegations of promoting homosexuality or undermining traditional family structures. Such accusations can also include claims that they encourage young women to act against their families or pursue divorce.

These societal reactions are not only based on cultural misunderstandings but are also influenced by political dynamics. Political factors can lead to sharp polarisation within society, and feminist groups and their agendas are used as scapegoats to divert public attention from pressing political, economic, and social issues.

● Cyber-Security

As the world increasingly relies on technology and digital platforms, cyber security has emerged as a critical concern for organisations and initiatives. Many of these groups report a significant gap in their knowledge and capabilities regarding cyber-security. This lack of expertise exposes them to various risks, including online harassment and bullying. Furthermore, their vulnerability extends to the protection of sensitive data and information, which can be targets for cyber attacks or hacking.

● State Violence

Organisations and their staff may face various forms of state violence, including harassment, legal accountability, and sometimes imprisonment. This type of violence intensifies during crises, particularly political and economic ones, as state entities may use organisations and initiatives as scapegoats to divert attention from the fundamental and structural issues affecting citizens.

● Lack of Protection Mechanisms

Another challenge confronting organisations and initiatives is the absence of clear, systematic, and mainstreamed applied protection mechanisms. This deficiency is particularly acute in ensuring the safety and security of civic workers, both women and men. The lack of comprehensive legal frameworks, which should ideally guarantee justice for victims of all forms of abuse, exacerbates this issue. Most countries lack these protective structures, especially concerning the violence targeted at women and specifically women who are human rights defenders.

PALESTINE

Organisations and initiatives in Palestine are grappling with severe challenges due to the violence associated with settler colonialism, which includes displacement, killings, abuse, and administrative imprisonment. Palestinian men and women have endured this violence for decades, yet it remains challenging for organisations to develop effective mechanisms to counteract the impact of settler colonialism.

The situation intensified after October 7, 2023, when settler colonial violence escalated in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, placing additional strains on local institutions and their workers. Beyond the ongoing violence, the occupation forces have taken measures to fragment Palestinian regions further, such as closing checkpoints and conducting invasions, severely restricting the freedom of movement for all organisational staff. This restriction greatly hampers daily operations and exacerbates the difficulties of working under such oppressive conditions.

Moreover, the ability of organisations to freely express themselves or even vocalise opposition to settler colonialism is critically undermined. Authorities actively pursue and target vocal advocates, subjecting them to imprisonment, beatings, and various other forms of violation and abuse.

"Today on my way to work, I was almost hit by a bullet"

Participant from Palestine

"Our area is surrounded by settlements, and settlers often violate and assault us."

Participant from Palestine

"The occupation authorities invade the offices and headquarters of organisations."

Participant from Palestine



JORDAN

In Jordan, organisations and initiatives, particularly those focused on women's and feminist issues, face unique challenges stemming from societal and state-level violence. These challenges are influenced by the tribal nature of the state's structure, which can lead the state to infringe on the activities of these organisations. This infringement often occurs either to appease certain societal elements or to divert public attention from underlying societal problems. Furthermore, some government entities may view civil society organisations as competitors, adding another layer of complexity to their operations.



In 2023, women's organisations and initiatives in Jordan were particularly targeted by violent societal attacks. These included defamation campaigns, threats, and, in extreme cases, calls for the killing and execution of women activists. Such hostility poses severe risks to the security, safety, and protection of women activists engaged in civil society work. Additionally, many individuals, both men and women, who demonstrated in solidarity with Palestinians, faced legal repercussions, including imprisonment, investigations, and persecution due to their activism.

"We gave a lecture about raising awareness for women workers in kindergartens and factories. Some parents refused to have their daughters attend, and we explained to them that we were giving the lecture about the rights of women workers according to the labour law, but the parents thought that we wanted to sabotage the girls' work."

Participant from Jordan

LEBANON

On Lebanon, grassroots and community organisations encounter a complex array of security, safety, and protection challenges. These issues are exacerbated by the widespread availability of weapons among certain factions and the lack of effective mechanisms to enforce the rule of law. The ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon compounds these challenges, as it not only intensifies financial and banking supervision but also increases the vulnerability of organisations to interference and harassment by security services.

Many organisations report increased harassment from security forces, where women and men in their staff are frequently summoned for security investigations and subjected to harassment.



"I was stopped at the airport and subjected to insults, and I am sure it was because of my work."

Participant from Lebanon

4.2 Resistance Strategies

Relations with Security and Government Agencies

Organisations and initiatives often manage their security, safety, and protection needs by cultivating and maintaining positive relationships with personnel within security and government agencies. This approach is regarded as a fundamental and crucial strategy for many institutions. By establishing friendly connections with these figures, organisations can enhance their security and safety measures. This helps to mitigate risks associated with state or societal violence that they might otherwise face.



"When we were attacked on the basis of being a woman's organisation, the support of the local authorities was very important."

Participant from Palestine

"We build good relationships with the security forces and officials because if they know you, they will trust your work, and this helps in many cases."

Participant from Palestine

"We build friendly and open relations with the local community. We have a good relationship with the security authorities, and there is a police station across the street from our association."

Participant from Jordan

Preparedness and Risk Management

One of the most important tools to maintain the security, safety, and protection of workers in organisations and initiatives, and to protect the organisations and initiatives themselves, is preparing and equipping plans and procedures for readiness and evacuation in emergency situations. While organisations and initiatives are aware of the importance of these measures, they face difficulties in preparing them because they are considered expensive and complex. The readiness frameworks cover topics such as physical safety, from fire extinguishers in the workplace to awareness-raising exercises in dealing with hostile environments, known as HEAT training. They also include response plans for emergency situations, such as cases of imprisonment, death threats, or other forms of violence. Although readiness frameworks require significant resources to cover all dimensions of an organisation's work, some resources may be available online.

Those wishing to attend HEAT training can join the reasonably priced Arabic classes provided by the organisation Safer Edge, which aims to increase awareness regarding dealing with hostile environments, available [here](#).

It is crucial for preparedness to include procedures or instructions for the staff on how to handle difficult situations. Having protection policies in place, or instructions for dealing with state violence such as arrests, abuse, or societal violence, is essential for enhancing the security of workers, both women and men. In addition to policies that guard against external threats, it is also important to establish policies that manage internal risks within the organisation, such as exploitation, harassment, and abuse.

Risk management is a vital component of these preparedness frameworks, requiring flexibility in the implementation of activities and business strategies to effectively avoid and respond to risks.

"It is very difficult for us to achieve preparedness, as it requires a lot of resources. We even need training in risk management and response, because the risk matrices requested by donors are not sufficient to protect us."

Participant from Palestine

"In Jordan, emphasis was placed on preparing our surroundings and our building for emergency situations, such as the availability of fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and specific medications. The importance of protecting the confidentiality and privacy of information for beneficiaries by safeguarding their documents was also stressed."

Participant from Jordan

"We were not aware of the importance of developing a plan for physical, psychological and digital safety before we faced these challenges. So we sought the help of trainers and experts within our networks to lay the foundations of prevention and safety in all our projects."

Participant from Lebanon



Good Relations with Local Community

Good relations with the local community are fundamental for community and grassroots initiatives and institutions to ensure their security, protection, and safety. These relationships can be strengthened by raising community awareness and involving local members in various sessions, dialogues, trainings, and field visits. Transparency in operations significantly enhances trust and solidifies these relationships. Additionally, forging connections with key community figures, including women leaders and stakeholders such as mukhtars and other community leaders, plays a critical role in enhancing the overall security, safety, and protection for these organisations.



"When some conservative groups attacked us for our feminist work, we put pressure on some political factions, and they supported us."

Participant from Lebanon

"When religious groups in our region attacked us, we turned to a local leader to confront their accusations and to have the support of a respectable figure who believes in the importance of our work... Our religious groups are stronger than the law."

Participant from Lebanon

"Building trust with the community is very important. It helps us succeed and protect ourselves."

Participant from Palestine

"Solutions were mostly based on relationships and collaborative work between the members. We would speak to the girls' families over the phone or conduct field visits to talk about the objectives of our activity. It is raising awareness about labor rights to preserve the rights. Over time, the parents' point of view changed when they learned what the project was and its goal in the interest of the girls. About 150 women workers have benefited from the awareness sessions so far."

Participant from Jordan

"We work on networking with other organisations in order to refer specialised cases to them."

Participant from Jordan

Relations with Security and Government Agencies

Documenting violence and violations is a critical tool used by grassroots and community organisations to address the challenges they face. In environments where there is a lack of robust complaints and accountability mechanisms, thorough documentation becomes essential. While this approach does not offer immediate resolutions to issues of violence and violations, it plays a crucial role in identifying and analysing patterns of violence. This data can then be used to seek justice and create more effective strategies to combat these issues in the future.

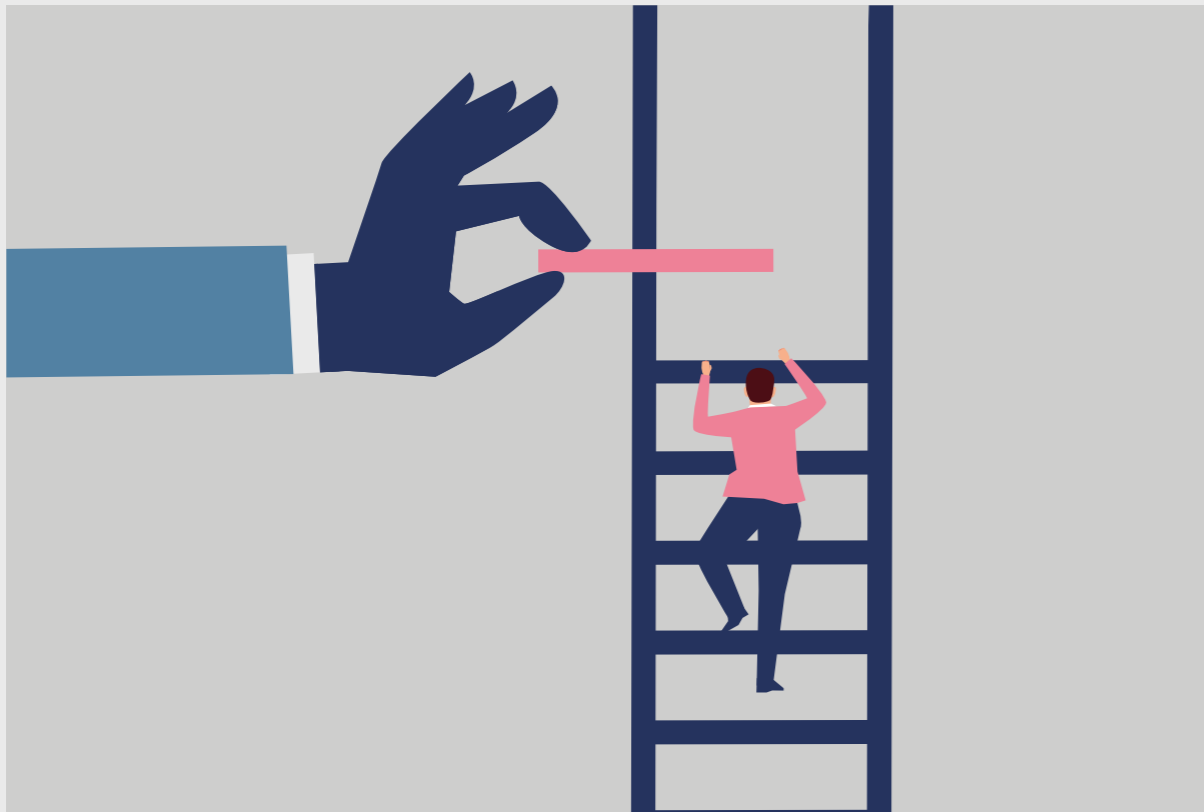


"We have no agency to which we can complain, but an essential part of our response is documenting violence and violations, which is useful for posterity."

Participant from Palestine

Self-Care and Collective Care

Self-care and collective care are pivotal in navigating and negotiating within narrow civic spaces. By dedicating time for leisure and self-expression, and creating supportive environments within organisations and initiatives, these practices foster a sense of well-being among staff. Allocating resources for psychological support and actively encouraging self-care across all levels of the organisation enhances the security, safety, and overall protection of workers, women, men, and others.



"We have a very supportive leadership. They encourage us to speak out and express ourselves, and they encourage us to protect ourselves. Their priority is our safety and security."

Participant from Palestine

"We work to provide annual recreational trips for employees and volunteers."

Participant from Jordan

"There are good spaces in the association. We hold non-traditional activities for volunteers, as well as recreational activities every now and then."

Participant from Jordan

Providing Services and Referral Pathways to Relevant Authorities

Some institutions enhance their support structures by offering a range of services through their programs and projects, benefiting staff, workers, beneficiaries, and others. These services include legal, psychological, or health counselling, facilitated by specialists. Additionally, they focus on providing comprehensive case management, creating safe spaces, and establishing referral services to competent authorities, particularly in response to various forms of violence.



"In the association, there is a woman lawyer to provide advisory services, a case manager for referrals, a safe space in the association for women to share their stories and cases, and a center for awareness and guidance. There is also an internal referral process between projects and external cooperation with other institutions such as Family Protection, the Noor Al Hussein Foundation "NHF", and the Justice Center for Legal Aid "JCLA" in order to refer cases to them."

Participant from Jordan

05

Freedom of Expression



Freedom of expression is a critical dimension of civic space, enabling community and grassroots organisations to voice their concerns and advocate for change. This freedom allows organisations and initiatives to publish data, express demands, and engage in public discourse both offline and online.

5.1 Challenges to Freedom of Expression

The process of developing this toolkit has shown that the space for freedom of expression in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is narrowing and is significantly influenced by political and economic stability. Key challenges affecting all countries in the region include:

● Social Taboos

Social taboos pose substantial barriers to the expression of certain topics that organisations aim to address at a societal level. Restricted topics often include feminism, gender issues, sexual harassment, abuse, homosexuality, reproductive rights, and even the economic rights of women. Discussing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) can also be viewed as incitement against men and society. Additionally, religious and sectarian laws regarding personal matters such as marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance create further topics considered taboo. Educational institutions may also shy away from collaboration with women's and feminist organisations due to these social taboos.

● State Repression

Organisations face substantial risks when addressing political topics, particularly those that critique state practices. Criticism of the state can lead to imprisonment and security harassment, with state repression manifesting in various forms. These include enhanced censorship measures, the activity of security and intelligence services, criminalising discussions on certain topics, and targeting outspoken individuals.

● Censorship and Silencing on Social Media Platforms

The application of laws regulating freedom of assembly and association is also deeply influenced by the prevailing political climate. Feminist and women-focused grassroots organisations are particularly vulnerable, often targeted to distract from larger political issues. Laws related to assembly are sometimes leveraged to suppress demonstrations, especially those with political demands.

● Continuity and Sustainability

Many participants have highlighted severe challenges related to freedom of expression, particularly the censorship and silencing experienced on social media platforms. This censorship manifests in various forms, some of which are directly implemented by the social media platforms themselves through actions such as blocking and banning content. Additionally, authorities, security services, and societal groups also engage in censorship, often targeting and attacking content published online and through social media.

PALESTINE

In Palestine, community and grassroots organisations and initiatives face significant constraints on their freedom of expression due to settler colonialism. This force actively works to suppress and obscure its violations in Palestinian territories by silencing Palestinians.



Notably, it has attempted to discredit local Palestinian institutions by labelling them as terrorist organisations without providing substantiating evidence. Since October 7, the situation has intensified, with increased harassment and prosecution measures targeting individuals who voice opposition to Israeli violations via social media and public statements. Furthermore, occupation forces have escalated their efforts to monitor and control expressions of solidarity with Gaza.

JORDAN

In Jordan, the space for freedom of expression, particularly concerning certain sensitive topics, is constrained both by state policies and societal norms, similar to other countries in the region. The recent enactment of the Cybercrime Law, which has been criticised for its ambiguity and lack of clarity, has heightened these concerns. Organisations and initiatives are wary of the law's potential misuse and its implications, leading to a cautious approach in their online activities. This has resulted in restricted contributions to social media platforms and, in some cases, the deletion of posts and accounts.

Additionally, fear of reprisals has deterred organisations and individuals from publicly showing solidarity with Gaza, particularly in demonstrations, due to concerns about security repercussions. The political climate in Jordan is such that many issues are perceived by the state as threats to its security and stability, further limiting the ability of organisations and initiatives to operate freely without crossing perceived red lines.

«Legislation and laws limit the freedom of expression of opinion, and there is a policy of silencing voices, making it difficult to get our message across. The Cybercrime Law imposes large fines, such that a Facebook post could cost you five thousand dinars, and this new law even penalises constructive criticism.»

(Participant from Jordan)



«Because of the Cybercrime Law, which is vague and loose, there is a fear that our association will pay the price for any comments made on its Facebook page, so we now delete comments from our page. The law is ambiguous and unclear, and anyone could use it against the association and file a complaint, so we are very careful with our social media pages. We cannot allow people to add comments so that the association does not pay the cost if the comments are found offensive.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«Despite the right to demonstrate and show solidarity with Gaza, there were young women who wanted to participate in demonstrations and sit-ins but feared security repression.»

(Participant from Jordan)

LEBANON

In Lebanon, while the space for political expression is relatively broader compared to places like Jordan and Palestine, there are still particular topics that provoke strong societal reactions and backlash, which can impact community and grassroots organisations, especially those operating outside major cities. Issues such as perceived collusion with Western entities, promoting foreign agendas, or support for homosexuality are especially sensitive. After the economic collapse in 2020, the intensity of negative reactions to these topics significantly increased. These reactions are deeply intertwined with a complex interplay of culture, customs, traditions, laws, and the political and party systems within Lebanon.



Lebanon demonstrations, 1951

5.2 Resistance Strategies

A D A P

T I N G

Language & Terminology



Grassroots and community organisations and initiatives often adapt their language and terminology as a strategic tool to navigate the restricted space for freedom of expression. To ensure safety and security, and to avoid potential repression, some organisations engage in self-censorship. This can include modifying or even deleting social media posts that could provoke controversy. Additionally, these groups strive to employ a balanced discourse when addressing society to minimise unnecessary confrontations.

Constructive dialogue with various stakeholders, including local community members and decision-makers, is crucial for securing and expanding spaces for free expression. Through these engagements, organisations can build trust and evolve ideas, which is essential for fostering a supportive environment. To further ensure the safety of their workers and enhance their effectiveness in these dialogues, some organisations invest in developing their teams' skills in communication and networking within the community.

«We use effective dialogue with the families and beneficiaries. Over time, the families themselves have also become beneficiaries. Their perception of our association's work has transformed as they saw the benefits and empowerment of the young women involved. This empowerment extends to the families too, enhancing our volunteers' ability to communicate effectively and to assess the local community's needs accurately and design programs that cater specifically to these needs.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«We try to avoid activities that could cause harm or problems. As long as we are achieving our goals, there is no need to mention CEDAW, gender, or feminism.»

(Participant from Palestine)

«There is no shame in withdrawing a little in order to re-evaluate our work and strategies.»

(Participant from Lebanon)

«Most attacks come when we talk about women's bodies and sexual health, such as the campaign to end period poverty. We're considering discussing these topics less, as we feel exposed in our societies and need to tread more lightly.»

(Participant from Lebanon)

CONFRONTATION

While some organisations and initiatives adopt a more moderate tone in their communications with society to avoid conflict, others embrace confrontation as a strategic approach. This confrontation varies in its intensity and purpose: some opt for sharp and direct challenges, while others focus on confrontation as a means to counteract false allegations and accusations. While the latter group may aim to avoid provoking societal backlash, the former sees stirring controversy as a constructive step towards progress.



«No matter what we do, they target us all with false and misleading allegations. This is part of our battle against patriarchy, and we will continue our work without fear because we believe in our cause and have nothing to hide.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

MEDIA

Engaging with both national and local media is another strategy used by organisations and initiatives to expand their space for exercising freedom of expression. Media outlets, including social media and other online platforms, provide essential channels for expressing opinions and disseminating information. Utilising the media effectively allows these organisations to reach broader communities, raising awareness and mobilising support around specific issues.



«Our association has a website and a Facebook page to voice our perspective and publicise our activities.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«We use social media to express our opinions, share information about the association's activities, and advocate.»
(Participant from Jordan)

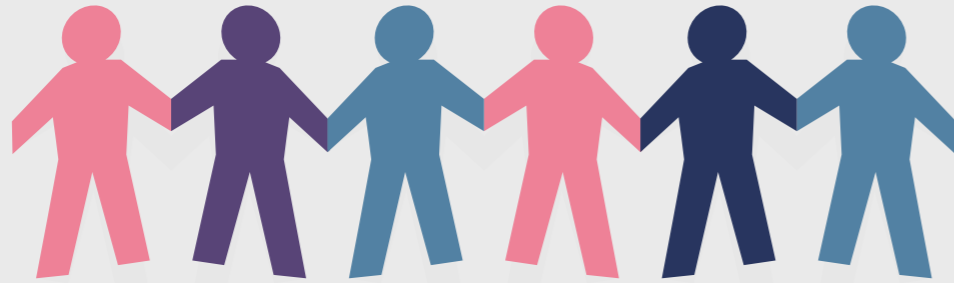
«When an issue becomes the subject of public opinion and is present in the media and in our allied networks, then we are not as vulnerable.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

«Through the media, we can rally the support and solidarity we need to keep going. I write the positive comments we receive on pieces of paper and hang them on the wall, to remind myself every day of the appreciation I receive from people.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

USING ALLIANCES

Using alliances is a strategic approach for organisations and initiatives to enhance their capacity for advocacy and lobbying, particularly in negotiating the space for free expression. Collaborating on sensitive topics through partnerships, rather than competing for dominance, provides protection for these organisations. These alliances can be formed with a variety of stakeholders, including partner institutions, coalitions, decision-makers, and even local figures like mukhtars or tribal elders.

These alliances not only broaden the space for exercising freedom of expression but also enhance organisational support and the sense of security among members. Additionally, fostering circles of solidarity and collective care creates safer spaces where freedom of expression can be practiced without fear of societal or state repression.



«We do campaigns to rally support and build coalitions. For example, we were part of a coalition against the Cybercrime Law, and we protested it through appearances in audio-visual media outlets.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«We use effective dialogue with the families and beneficiaries. Over time, the families themselves have also become beneficiaries. Their perception of our association's work has transformed as they saw the benefits and empowerment of the young women involved which extends to the families as well.»
(Participant from Jordan)

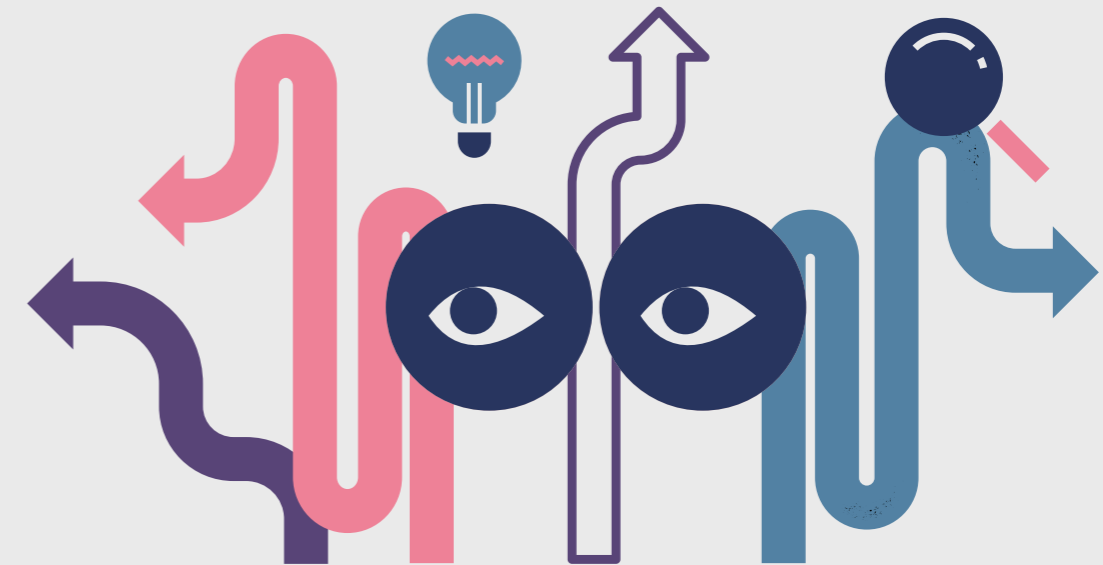
«In the context of our work, we fully recognise the importance of networks and alliances. When we face attacks, we face them collectively. During periods of intense criticism against gender and feminist topics, the solidarity we experienced greatly fortified our stance. This support reaffirmed our confidence that our actions were justified and that our objectives and efforts were sound. Although our work does not specifically address LGBT issues, we are unequivocal in our support for individual freedoms.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

«There are a number of alliances and coalitions that we are part of, which help us raise our voices and stand firm with each other, because these alliances protect us.»
(Participant from Palestine)

RAISING COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Building strong relationships with the local community is an important tool for expanding the narrow space of freedom of expression, especially at the social level. Educating and raising awareness among local community members is a strategy used to drive social change and garner grassroots support for organisations and initiatives. Effective methods for engaging the community include hosting dialogue sessions, workshops, training, media campaigns, and utilising social media platforms.

Furthermore, leveraging the reputation of the organisation, its historical background, and its ongoing interactions with the community are instrumental in transparently showcasing the positive impacts of its work. By presenting diverse perspectives and successes, organisations can challenge and gradually change local beliefs and opinions. For instance, activities might focus on promoting women's participation in the public sphere, and emphasise the benefits of their economic involvement and financial independence.



«We hold dialogue and educational sessions with the local community at our knowledge center, and because we have a conference hall in the association's building, we hold dialogues with young men and women there.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«Using social media in a way that focuses on the grassroots level is very important in regards to freedom of expression.»
(Participant from Palestine)

«We need the community's support so we can continue.»
(Participant from Palestine)

«We support constructive dialogue and positive engagement with society.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

06

Freedom of Assembly and Association



Activism within civic space critically depends on the freedom of assembly, which is essential for mobilisation, pressure, advocacy, influence, and fostering positive societal change. Often, grassroots groups and initiatives find themselves needing to register as associations to legally exercise this freedom in the civic arena. The process of forming associations, whether easy or challenging, significantly impacts the civic space as it provides a legal and legitimate framework for activities aimed at societal change.

It's important to distinguish between the concepts of freedom of assembly and association, despite their similarities. While both are crucial for civic engagement, the formation of associations requires official registration with government authorities, conferring a formal status to the group. In contrast, the freedom of assembly refers to the ability of individuals, institutions, initiatives, and associations to engage in public activities such as protests, demonstrations, vigils, and other public events and meetings without necessarily having formal legal status.

6.1 Challenges to Freedom of Assembly and Association

Despite some legal variances across Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia regarding the freedom of assembly and association, these countries face common challenges that complicate the practice of these freedoms:

● Strict Laws and Complex Procedures

Organisations and initiatives encounter stringent laws and convoluted, often unclear, procedures that demand considerable effort and time to navigate. This bureaucracy significantly narrows the space for exercising freedom of assembly and association, particularly impacting emerging associations. For instance, in Jordan, public activities cannot proceed without security clearances, even if other official approvals have been granted for the project as a whole.

● Community Backlash

Negative reactions from the community, and media attacks, pose a threat to freedom of assembly. Accusations of promoting foreign agendas or demonising institutions, especially those focused on feminist issues or women's rights, can undermine the legitimacy and efforts of these organisations. Additionally, the presence of many inactive associations may lead to a public perception that these groups prioritise personal interests over community goals.

● Political Situation

The application of laws regulating freedom of assembly and association is also deeply influenced by the prevailing political climate. Feminist and women-focused grassroots organisations are particularly vulnerable, often targeted to distract from larger political issues. Laws related to assembly are sometimes leveraged to suppress demonstrations, especially those with political demands.

● Continuity and Sustainability

The sustainability of community initiatives and institutions is a constant concern, largely due to their dependence on external funding. With funding sources becoming increasingly scarce, there is an ongoing anxiety about the ability of these organisations to maintain and continue their activities.

JORDAN

In Jordan, the framework governing freedom of assembly is outlined by the Act on Public Assemblies of 2011. This law mandates that Jordanians must provide notification of any public gathering, including detailed information about the event, at least 48 hours in advance. Any demonstration lacking such notification is deemed illegal. Furthermore, Article 2 of the law restricts the use of slogans, cartoons, pictures, or symbols that could potentially undermine the state's sovereignty, national unity, or the rule of law. It also prohibits gatherings in locations that could obstruct vehicular or pedestrian traffic. Spontaneous demonstrations are explicitly categorised as criminal offenses under the Penal Code, significantly limiting the scope for spontaneous public expression.

Regarding the formation of associations, Article 16 allows Jordanian men and women to establish associations and political parties, under the condition that their objectives are lawful, their methods are peaceful, and their internal systems do not contravene the constitution.

One of the primary challenges in Jordan relates to the ambiguity and frequent changes in the laws concerning assembly and association. This lack of clarity, coupled with contradictory instructions and periodic changes in procedures, complicates the operational environment for organisations and initiatives and impacts their ability to effectively mobilise and advocate for their causes.

PALESTINE

In Palestine, grassroots and community organisations face significant legal hurdles that affect their ability to operate freely within the civic space. These challenges stem from the implementation of Law No. 1 Of 2000 Concerning Charitable Associations And Civil Society Organisations. The law, along with additional legislative measures, imposes restrictive procedures that complicate the registration and operation of these entities. These include cumbersome financial procedures and administrative barriers such as difficulties in opening bank accounts and managing fund transfers.

The Palestinian Basic Law, amended in 2003, in its Article 26 (5), guarantees the right for Palestinian men and women to hold private meetings without police presence and to organise public meetings, gatherings, and processions within the legal boundaries. However, the Law on Public Assemblies No. 12 of 1998 mandates that organisers of public meetings or gatherings must notify the authorities 48 hours in advance of the event, adding another layer of bureaucracy to the process of organising public gatherings.

Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the presence of settler colonialism, particularly through Military Order No. 101. This order severely restricts freedom of assembly by prohibiting the gathering of more than ten people for discussions that involve political topics.

LEBANON

Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution of 1962 affirms the rights of Lebanese men and women to express their opinions verbally or in writing, and to assemble and form associations. However, Article 3 of the Public Assemblies Law stipulates that any gatherings that might threaten security, public morals, or the rule of law are prohibited. Additionally, this law mandates that authorities must be notified of any public gatherings 48 hours prior to their scheduled time.

TUNISIA

In Tunisia, there is significant concern among civic organisations regarding proposed Law 27/2023, which is currently under consideration by the government. If enacted, this legislation could substantially impede the operations of Tunisian institutions. The law proposes to restrict the freedom to form associations by requiring government approval for their establishment and their receipt of foreign funding. Additionally, it would expand the state's authority to intervene in the activities of these organisations.

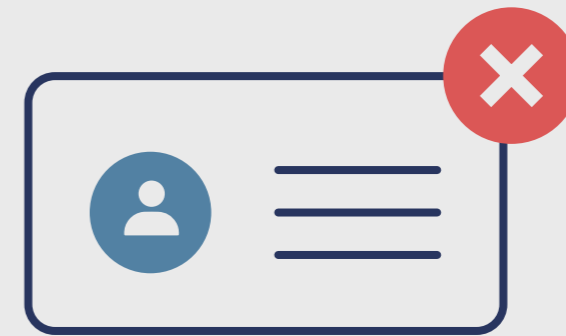


6.2 Resistance Strategies

CHOOSING NOT TO REGISTER

Some initiatives and groups opt out of registering as institutions or associations to circumvent the bureaucratic, demanding, and often ambiguous official registration procedures. This decision can also stem from a belief that the existing laws governing civil society organisations are unfair or restrictive.

To navigate these challenges, these unregistered groups often forge partnerships with larger, registered institutions. Through these collaborations, they can access funding indirectly by integrating their projects or programs within the frameworks of the larger institution's existing programs. Additionally, these initiatives frequently seek grants through partnerships with other organisations, effectively bypassing the barriers to funding that non-registration might pose.



"Registration as an association may be easy and available, but the subsequent procedures and follow-up with the relevant ministerial authorities are tedious and complex, such as financial and administrative reports"
(Participant from Palestine)

REGISTERING AS COMPANIES

In response to the legal challenges associated with the freedom of association, some grassroots initiatives and groups choose to register as companies, whether for-profit or non-profit. This approach is often taken because registration as a private sector company can be perceived as easier, simpler, and less time-consuming compared to formal non-profit status under civil society regulations. However, this method may involve higher tax liabilities, which can impact the financial sustainability of the initiatives.

These groups typically structure their operations to focus on community service, aligning their business models with social goals. By registering as companies, they are able to navigate around restrictive laws governing non-profits and civil society organisations, while still working towards their mission of serving their communities.

NETWORKING AND PARTNERSHIPS

Networking and building partnerships are critical strategies for navigating and expanding the space for freedom of assembly and association. These connections can significantly benefit community and grassroots organisations by leveraging the influence and resources of a diverse range of stakeholders. Key players in this process often include large, established institutions, civil society organisations, and various governmental and official bodies such as municipalities, local decision-makers, security agencies, ministries, and other governmental departments.

Engaging with and integrating the local community into the activities of these organisations is a vital strategy to broaden the space for exercising freedom of assembly. The local community can offer protective support for organisations during demonstrations, which is especially valuable in volatile or contentious situations. Additionally, in scenarios where there might be societal pushback, especially against feminist and women's groups, security agencies can sometimes provide necessary protection to ensure that these demonstrations proceed without interference.

«We establish relationships, build partnerships, are represented in various forums, and participate in various events.»

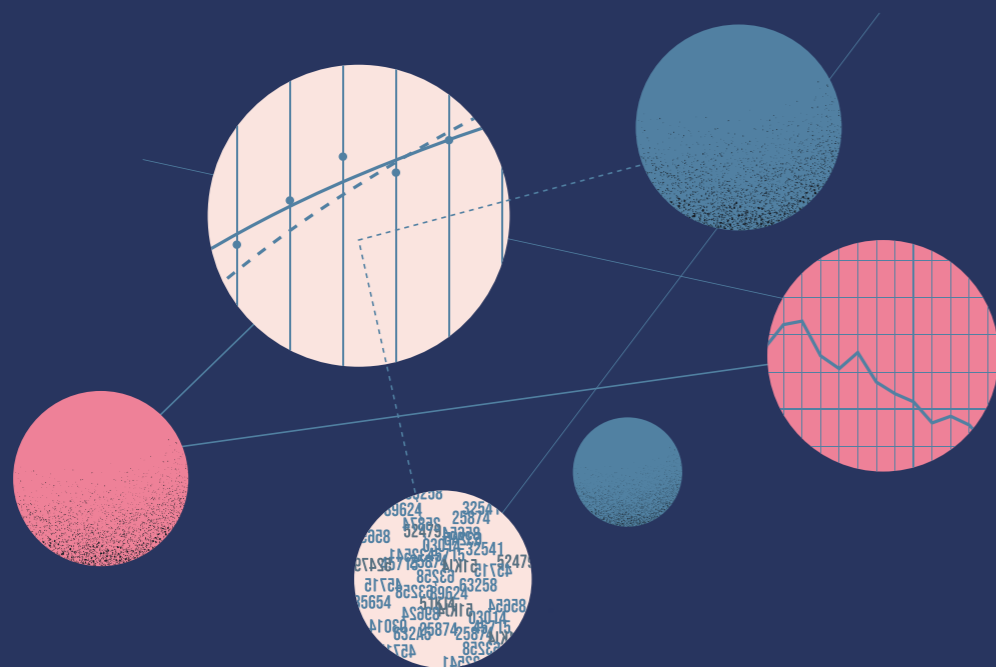
(Participant from Jordan)

«Individual organisations and emerging initiatives gain strength from other institutions.»

(Participant from Palestine)

«Our networks are very important because we are all interconnected, and they are important for our continuity in different ways.»

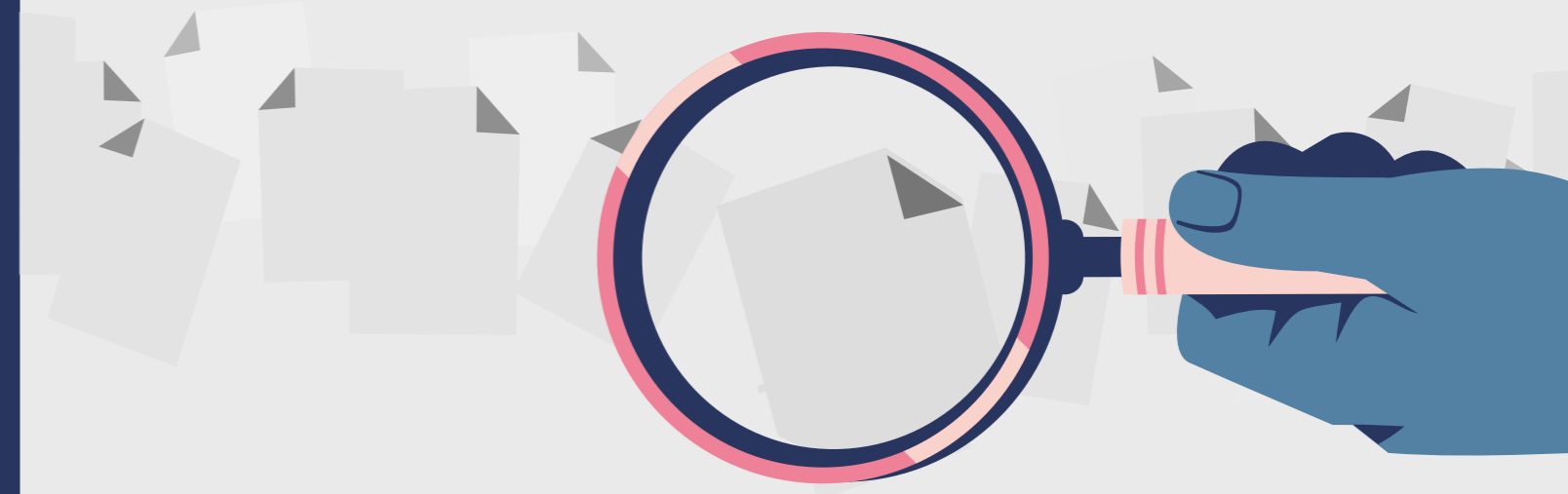
(Participant from Lebanon)



STRICT ADHERENCE TO PROCEDURES

To navigate the challenges posed by association laws, many organisations and initiatives adopt a methodical approach to document and learn from their interactions with government departments. This meticulous documentation of processes helps them understand governmental procedures and guidelines accurately, allowing them to maintain a certain level of operation and interaction with various government agencies and departments.

Moreover, some institutions strictly adhere to government and security procedures as a strategy to negotiate the space for freedom of assembly. By complying with official instructions, they ensure their safety and reduce the risk of confrontations. However, it's important to note that some institutions choose to uphold the principles of freedom of assembly by deliberately not following restrictive regulatory procedures. They leverage these positions in their advocacy for a freer civic space—for instance, by publicly announcing a sit-in or other activities without waiting for security permission.



«In recent years, the state has imposed several challenges that limit and control our work. The solution, after repeated closure of our association for long periods of time, was to strictly adhere to the procedures and instructions.»

(Participant from Lebanon)

«Informing the authorities of our sit-ins and adhering to the procedures protects us from society's reactions to feminist and women's work.»

(Participant from Palestine)

«There was continuous follow-up to obtain official papers and complete procedures. We followed the existing instructions and systems.»

(Participant from Jordan)

ADVOCATING FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC WORK

Another long-term advocacy strategy is to raise awareness about the importance of community and grassroots organisations and initiatives, which can expand the space for exercising freedom of assembly and association. This advocacy can take several forms, including awareness programs targeted at decision-makers and the local community, pressure campaigns to gain support for amending laws that regulate these freedoms, and continuous communication with officials. Additionally, it is important to leverage relationships and networking with national and local bodies such as ministries and municipalities.



«When society understands the importance of our work, this helps us freely express our goals.»
(Participant from Palestine)

«We work to change society's perspective about women's work, especially in the hotel industry. We sat with women and men and talked about the opportunities in hospitality work in our region, and that it is safe work with the presence of surveillance cameras, social security, and secure transportation, and now there are 17 women employees from the region working in Wadi Musa hotels. We have changed the misconception of women's work in hotels.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«The association must be constantly developed to keep pace with the changing needs of the local community. Our programs are based on the needs of the people and on the local reality and seeks to change the thinking of official bodies and people.»
(Participant from Jordan)

INTERNAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Enhancing the internal capabilities of associations and organisations is an important strategy for overcoming obstacles and challenges related to organisational management. Having a qualified and experienced staff enables organisations to understand laws and regulations, adhere to various procedures to ensure ongoing operations, and build trust within the local community. Furthermore, a competent team is essential for establishing partnerships and alliances, and for effective networking. These skills are vital for raising awareness, advocating for change, and performing other activities that are necessary to secure the organisation's structure and ensure its sustainability.



«It is necessary to provide various trainings on modern management and various tools, such as conflict resolution and identifying stakeholders, to help us implement our projects and to learn how to deal with different parties. Some trainings focus on public administration tools, crisis management, and modern management.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«Building the capabilities of the working team is beneficial and a strength for the organisation, and an element of success for the local community.»
(Participant from Jordan)

07

The Ability to Influence Public Policy



The ability of community and grassroots organisations to influence public policy is a key measure of the space they occupy within the civic sphere. It reflects their ability to develop and implement activities and plans at the national level and whether the government engages its citizens, and various stakeholders, including institutions and associations, in decision-making and policy formulation.

7.1 Challenges to Influencing Public Policy

Organisations and initiatives in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia encounter several common challenges in influencing public policy:

● Political Priorities

Women's and feminist issues often are not prioritised within national political agendas, frequently clashing with the authoritarian, patriarchal, and capitalist tendencies of ruling regimes. Too often, women's work is marginalised and demonised, significantly limiting its impact on public policy and societal attitudes.

● Marginalisation of Women in Public Policy

Women's grassroots community organisations and initiatives particularly face the challenge of being marginalised within the public policy arena. In many countries, women's political participation is extremely limited, even at municipal and local council levels. When women are included, their participation often remains merely tokenistic, with their perspectives and contributions frequently overlooked.

● Limited Approach to Influencing Public Policy

Grassroots and community organisations and initiatives understand that influencing public policy is a demanding process that requires substantial time and effort, particularly in contexts where effective and formal democratic systems are lacking. However, this awareness often does not translate into their operational strategies for shaping public policy. For instance, these organisations frequently struggle to secure long-term funding necessary for projects aimed at policy influence. Moreover, international institutions that provide funding tend to favour approaches that diverge from grassroots methods, such as direct collaborations with governments, state institutions, and security services.

● Inadequate Skills in Influencing Public Policy

Among the challenges facing organisations and initiatives in influencing public policy is a notable lack of experience and underdeveloped skills in the fields of legal and political change, as well as in organising advocacy campaigns targeted at decision-makers of all genders. This skill gap extends to essential tools for influencing public policy, including report writing, research, and the development of policy briefs. Additionally, competitive dynamics between organisations often hinder their ability to effectively influence public policies and laws. This competition can obstruct the formation of productive alliances and partnerships that are crucial for collective action and in bringing about change.

PALESTINE

In Palestine, one of the biggest challenges facing organisations and initiatives in their efforts to influence public policy and legal amendments is the absence of a functioning legislative council capable of amending and enacting laws. This gap severely limits the scope for legal advocacy and reform. Further complicating this issue, the decision-making capacity at the executive level is constrained by settler colonialism, which dictates and restricts the political capabilities of Palestinian authorities. Moreover, Palestinian organisations and initiatives operate under a constrained ceiling set by settler colonialism when it comes to political action.^d

JORDAN

In Jordan, grassroots and community organisations and initiatives often feel that their capacity to influence public policy is minimal and restricted. Legal changes, particularly those related to women's issues, are slow-moving and typically occur only through government initiatives to present draft laws or formulate national plans and policies. This process is deeply intertwined with societal changes and is influenced by the tribal nature of the state. The government frequently hesitates to modify or amend certain policies or laws due to concerns about potential negative societal reactions.

Furthermore, the discussion and development of national plans and policies tend to involve only a limited number of individuals, often excluding wider participation. Even when organisations and associations are invited to share their visions and proposals, their contributions are frequently overlooked and not taken into account.

LEBANON

The successive crises in Lebanon have significantly undermined the capabilities of civil society organisations to influence public policies, particularly in terms of amending them to address evolving needs or implementing effective mechanisms. This challenge is exacerbated by the frequent unavailability of officials or relevant departments and a marked decline in the capacity of public sector workers due to a pervasive salary crisis. Additionally, the general population has been preoccupied with urgent living needs, which have not been adequately addressed by ministerial or parliamentary bodies. Legislative work has also been consistently disrupted due to a combination of factors, including political vacuums at the presidential and governmental levels and disruptions caused by Israeli bombings in late 2023.

In response to these challenges, some associations have shifted their focus towards advocacy efforts with local authorities and municipal councils where possible. These groups continue to work on building awareness and enhancing understanding of the national policies that are crucial for addressing the specific challenges faced by women during this turbulent period.

7.2 Resistance Strategies

PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE

Patience and persistence are important tools for negotiating the space of influence in public policy, as awareness that this influence takes a long time is important for initiatives and institutions to continue their work.

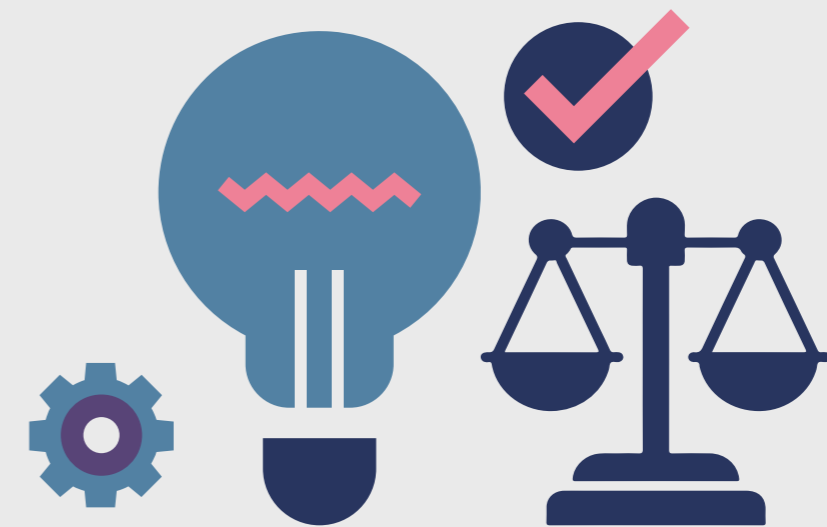


"Associations cannot change laws easily... For example, amending Law 308 of the Penal Code took more than 10 years."
(Participant from Jordan)

«People think short-term... We used all means and worked on popular support. Now all projects require a public hearing. We achieved this despite all the challenges.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

GRASSROOTS WORK

One effective strategy employed by organisations and initiatives to counter the challenges of influencing public policy is to concentrate their efforts at the grassroots and local levels. This approach is seen as a vital means of enhancing their overall capacity to impact broader public policies. Working directly with communities at the grassroots level is essential for fostering positive societal change and facilitating access to justice.



«We worked with women in popular committees, and much of this work required effort, pressure, and persuasion. But in the long run, this work will help us.»
(Participant from Lebanon)

«We focus on influencing the community so we can influence public policy. At times, the support of the local community protects us.»
(Participant from Palestine)

«In the governorates, the work of associations is an outlet for women and a gateway into their political work, as it enables them to reach higher positions than through tribes. Associations are important for organising women's work and women's access to decision-making, especially since equal education in Jordan has not led to more women in the workforce or in politics.»
(Participant from Jordan)

«We must press to hold actual consultative sessions with associations from all regions when drafting laws and legislation, and to take their opinion into account in practice and not only in words.»
(Participant from Jordan)

COOPERATION

Effective collaboration and alliance-building are vital strategies for influencing public policy and advocating for legal changes. By forming networks and alliances, unifying efforts on common issues, and partnering with specialised institutions and entities, organisations can amplify their impact and enhance their influence over policy and legislative changes. Engaging with the local community with the aim of societal change is also a powerful method for driving policy transformations.

The effectiveness of such cooperative efforts is demonstrated by successful regional campaigns, such as the joint Tunisian-Jordanian initiative that led to the amendment of a law. Previously, this law reduced the punishment for a rapist if he married his victim. The campaign's success highlights how regional and transnational cooperation can be instrumental in achieving significant legal reforms. This example demonstrates that regional and transnational collaborative efforts are effective in achieving meaningful change in public policy.



«If associations cooperate with each other, they can have a greater voice and influence through alliances, lobbying, advocacy, and pressure.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«The association engages in the local community and works to network with women municipal council members, women members of parliament, and other influential women. It also networks with other associations and carries out advocacy work.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«We have a lot of faith in alliances, because they help us amplify our voices, and they protect us at the same time, because when we are part of a group, it is different.»

(Participant from Palestine)

SPREADING AWARENESS AND BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITIES

Working from the grassroots level is essential to influence laws and legislation effectively. The process begins by raising awareness among the community about existing laws and public policies. This can be achieved through various methods, including distributing publications, launching electronic campaigns, holding dialogue sessions, utilising social media, and conducting studies to assess community needs. These activities serve as foundational steps in discussing public policies and gathering suggestions and claims from the public. This approach also involves writing policy papers and organising public advocacy campaigns that are informed by insights directly sourced from the communities themselves.



«We can distribute leaflets to raise awareness and knowledge in the local community... And work to raise general awareness, especially among young women.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«We must build in-house capacities to write policy papers based on local needs.»

(Participant from Jordan)

ADVOCACY



Advocacy is an important strategy for influencing public policy and can be executed at multiple levels and in various forms. It may target public opinion, decision-makers, the international community, local officials, local councils, municipalities, or even civil society institutions. Advocacy efforts can utilise the media, organise round tables, conduct research and studies, write policy papers, collect signatures for petitions and appeals, produce periodic shadow reports, or build relationships with influential decision-makers, both men and women.

«We are currently advocating for modifications to maternity leave policies. To achieve this, we have undertaken training in community-based organising, written policy papers, submitted a petition to decision-makers, and networked with other associations.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«We conducted a study on the economic violence facing young women with disabilities because influencing laws and legislation must be based on well-researched findings with clear outputs, results, and recommendations. The outcomes of this study have informed the development of our lobbying and advocacy programs, particularly concerning the employment of people with disabilities as stipulated by law. It is crucial to base our project on existing legal rights and to advocate for the enforcement of these laws by engaging with the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.»

(Participant from Jordan)

08

The Right to Access Information



The ability to access accurate and reliable information is crucial for the effectiveness of organisations and initiatives. Without reliable information, these groups face significant challenges in their operations. The right to access information in civil spaces includes the ability to obtain reliable, fair, and non-misleading data from various sources including media, social media, government departments, and both private and public institutions.

8.1 Challenges to Access to Information

Organisations in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Tunisia encounter several common challenges in accessing information, despite slight variations in the laws regulating this freedom:

● Lack of Legal Transparency

A major hurdle is the difficulty in accessing information about current laws, which complicates efforts to comply with registration and other governmental procedures. Furthermore, there is a general opacity in how legal drafts are formulated and processed.

● Inadequate Legal Frameworks

While laws exist in Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia that theoretically guarantee the right to information, they often lack detailed procedures, frameworks, or mechanisms for accountability, follow-up, or oversight to ensure their implementation.

● Government Inefficiency

There is a widespread issue with the availability and reliability of information from government departments. This is often due to inefficiencies and a lack of competencies within government bodies, resulting in inaccurate or incomplete statistics, especially concerning marginalised groups such as individuals with disabilities or racial and ethnic minorities.

● Deliberate Misinformation

Governments sometimes intentionally disseminate misleading information through various media, particularly regarding sensitive topics like corruption, budget allocations, financial disbursements, and political orientations.

● Weak Media Integrity

In the countries studied, media integrity is often compromised by political pressure, censorship, and private sector influences aimed at profit maximisation. This affects the reliability and fairness of the information provided.

● Centralisation of Information

In addition to deliberate misinformation and government inefficiency, information centralisation was cited by participants as a significant issue, particularly for organisations and initiatives located outside capital cities, which struggle to access information from centrally located government departments.

● Lack of Research Skills

Research plays a crucial role as a source of information, especially in countries where access to information is not guaranteed. It enables organisations and initiatives to understand the specific needs and circumstances of local communities, which in turn helps them tailor their strategies and activities effectively. Despite its importance, many initiatives and institutions recognise a gap in the scientific research skills of their staff, and the need to develop their research methodologies.

● Scarcity of Research Funding

In environments where there are no organisations or entities specifically designed to facilitate access to information, independent research by organisations is especially important. However, the limited availability of funding for research poses a significant hurdle for organisations and initiatives seeking to conduct their own research and compensation for gaps in available information.

PALESTINE

In Palestine, no law currently guarantees the right to access information, though a proposed draft exists. The absence of a legitimate legislative council capable of enacting and approving laws has hindered progress on this front. Nevertheless, civil society organisations are actively advocating for the expedited passage of this law, emphasising its critical role in enhancing civic space.

JORDAN

The Jordanian National Charter of 1991 and Law No. 47 of 2007 guarantee citizens the right to access information. However, gaps in implementation and a lack of legal clarity continue to pose significant obstacles to effectively ensuring this right in Jordan.

LEBANON

Law No. 28 of 2017 on Access to Information guarantees the right of citizens to obtain information. However, similar to the situation in Jordan, there are still significant gaps in its implementation.

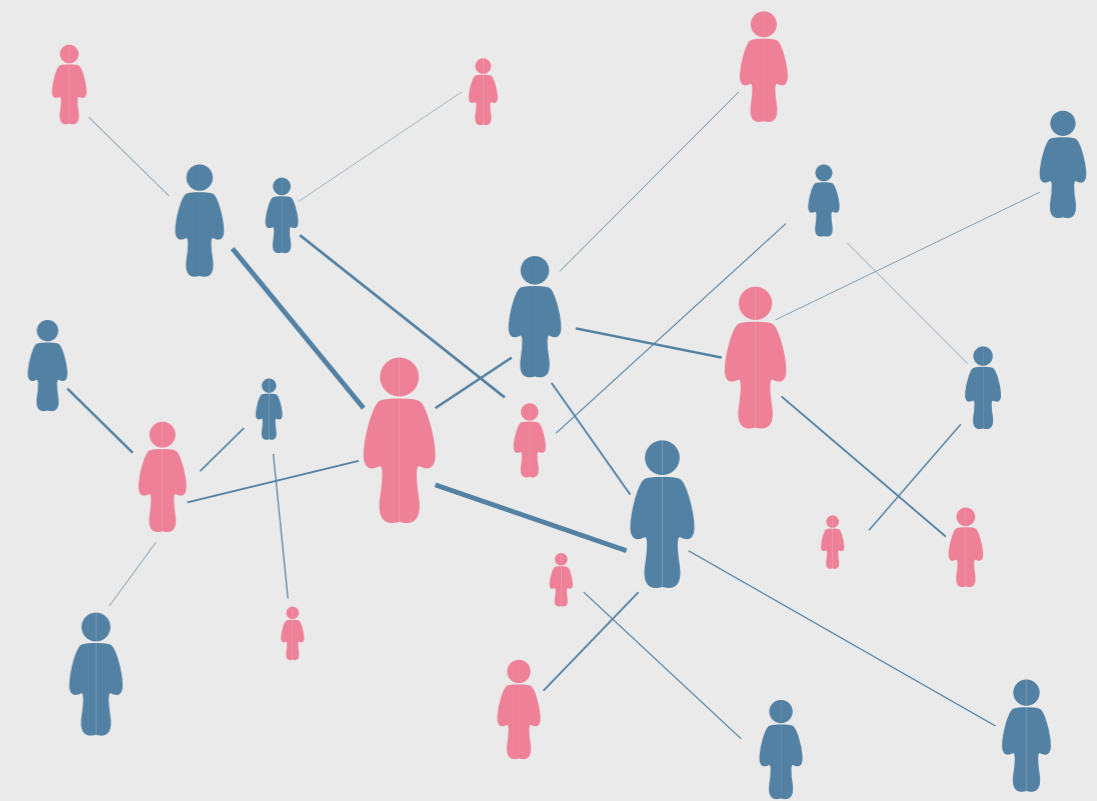
TUNISIA

Article 32 of the Tunisian Constitution guarantees the right of citizens to access information, but there are still gaps in its implementation.

8.2 Resistance Strategies

RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKING

Personal and institutional relationships, along with effective networking, are crucial tools for initiatives and institutions striving to access fair and reliable information. These relationships span a diverse array of connections, including various media outlets, government departments, other civil society institutions, universities, libraries, research centers, and information-providing institutions.



"We have a good relationship with newspapers, and the president of the association has good relationships with local news agencies. This facilitates our access to information, through official and local channels.."

(Participant from Jordan)

«Our relationship with the municipality, which is elected locally, helps us access data from ministries that is important for our work.»

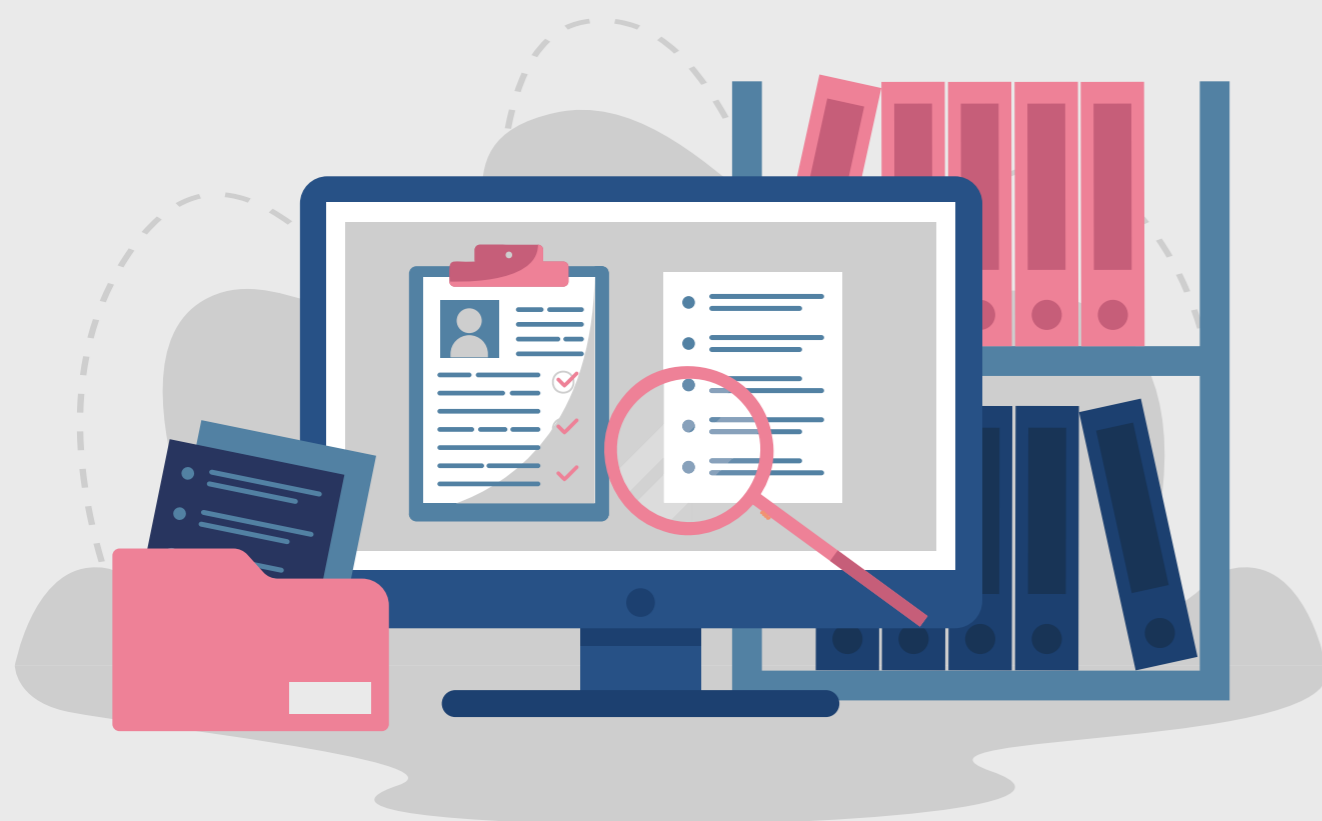
(Participant from Lebanon)

«It is not difficult to access information if you have relationships with those in government departments.»

(Participant from Palestine)

CONSULT MULTIPLE SOURCES

To combat misinformation and the scarcity of information, community and grassroots organisations adopt the strategy of consulting multiple sources to verify the accuracy of the data they receive. This approach is integral to their operations and effectiveness. For instance, to ensure the reliability of information, organisations and initiatives may cross-reference data from various sources, including state-provided statistics, official research centres, information centres, other civil society organisations, the media, social media platforms, and direct reports from individuals. This rigorous verification process helps organisations access fair and reliable information..



«A platform like 'Know Your Right' on social media helps with access to reliable information.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«Even if we obtain important information, we verify it from other sources, because we cannot trust one source.»

(Participant from Palestine)

PRIVATE RESEARCH

To navigate the challenges of accessing information, many community and grassroots organisations and initiatives undertake their own research. This proactive approach aims not only to gather information but also to disseminate it effectively. Various methods are employed depending on the resources and networks available. Some organisations utilise digital platforms like social media, WhatsApp, and Telegram to conduct their research, tapping into wide and diverse audiences. Other organisations generate information through interviews, questionnaires, and such conventional mediums, while others build long-term databases that compile and structure information over time.



«Technological development has improved access to information, but organisations must work hard and have a specialised technologically competent team that can follow up.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«While conducting our research study, we engaged with girls from multiple areas within the Balqa Governorate. The researcher held meetings and developed a questionnaire, which was distributed to women workers. This questionnaire included general questions designed to gather comprehensive information. Based on the data collected, we conducted the research and derived outcomes. Over time, we have built a substantial database about the region and target groups, which has been continuously enriched through ongoing communication with the local community.»

(Participant from Jordan)

«We rely a lot on our in-house capacities, and we do our own research to verify the information we encounter.»

(Participant from Palestine)

09

General Recommendations



Through research to develop this tool, we derived a number of recommendations based on the support that initiatives and institutions need to expand the area of civic space in which they operate and to be able to confront some of the challenges they face. These recommendations can be summarised as follows:

EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF CIVIC SPACE

Our development of this tool has revealed that the understanding of civic space and its dimensions is often confined within the framework of citizenship and the rights of the country's nationals. This perspective overlooks important societal groups that are not classified as citizens, such as immigrants, refugees, foreign workers, and others who form a significant part of the social fabric and play a crucial role in civil society. Limiting the concept of civic space to citizenship effectively erases and marginalises the vital contributions of non-citizens in states. Therefore, one of our key recommendations is the importance of broadening the definition of civic space to be inclusive of all people, and to recognise and value their contributions regardless of citizenship status.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS AND FUNDERS

Donors and funders wishing to help organisations and initiatives overcome funding obstacles have a number of recommendations, including:

- **Provide flexible and core funding** that covers not only specific activities but also the core operational costs of the organisation.
- **Simplify requirements for small organisations**, as complex and difficult requirements often pose barriers to smaller organisations and initiatives.
- **Ensure clear and transparent communication** about the criteria used for evaluating and selecting project proposals for funding.
- **Provide language accessibility**, by allowing for the submission of project proposals in languages other than English.
- **Broader dissemination of calls for funding**, using a wider selection of platforms, including local platforms and social media.
- **Diversify financing mechanisms** in order to cater to the needs of emerging organisations and those located in remote areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS THAT PROVIDE TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Organisations dedicated to providing technical support to grassroots and community initiatives can enhance their impact through various targeted training programs:

- **Training on fake news and misinformation**, to equip individuals with skills to identify and counter misinformation;
- **News writing and coverage training**, focusing on gender-sensitive reporting for journalists of all genders;
- Leadership skills training;
- Digital security training;
- Training on documenting violations;
- Training and support to develop preparedness frameworks for institutions;
- Security, safety and protection training, such as **Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)**

- Project proposal development training;
- Fundraising training;
- **Advocacy and lobbying training** to enhance capabilities in advocacy, lobbying, political paper writing, and law and policy analysis.
- **Financial management training** focusing on the use of computerised financial systems.
- **Management training** that covers internal documentation, structuring work, and improving administrative processes.

ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

For those engaged in advocacy work aimed at supporting community and grassroots organisations and initiatives, the following areas are recommended for focus:

- Advocate for the establishment and strengthening of protection mechanisms at international, regional, national, local, and institutional levels for activists, human rights defenders in general, and particularly for women and those seeking societal justice.
- Apply pressure to ensure the implementation and enforcement of laws that regulate the right to access information, to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Lobby for the reduction of the bureaucratic burden and oversight that stem from assembly and association laws.
- Advocate for greater and more effective participation of civil society organisations in the formulation and development of national policies, legislation, and laws.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

Through the development of this toolkit, we have identified networking, forming alliances, and building collaborations and relationships as crucial tools that grassroots organisations and initiatives use to navigate the shrinking civic space. These strategies have proven effective not only at the national level but also regionally and globally. Thus, we recommend:

- **Focus on Transnational Activities:** Encourage stakeholders to design transnational activities and projects. These initiatives provide vital tools for negotiating the constraints of the changing civic space and allow for broader, more impactful engagement.
- **Increase Funding for Alliances:** Expand funding for alliances, particularly at the national level, to enhance the capacity of small and emerging associations. This will enable these newer entities to collaborate and exchange expertise with more established associations, thereby strengthening the overall civil society framework.
- **Inclusive Definition of Civic Space:** Much of the existing literature and policy on civic space is framed around the concept of citizenship, often overlooking non-citizens such as immigrants and refugees. It is crucial for stakeholders to broaden the definition of civic space to be more inclusive, recognising the roles and contributions of all societal groups, regardless of their citizenship status. This more comprehensive approach will ensure that civic space truly reflects the diversity of the communities it serves and protects the rights and interests of all participants, not just those who are citizens.

CONSULT MULTIPLE SOURCES



CIVICUS

An international membership-based non-profit that describes itself as "a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world" The network currently includes nearly 15,000 members in approximately 175 countries around the world.



Front Line Defenders

Front Line Defenders aims to protect human rights defenders at risk by providing rapid and practical support to human rights defenders. The FLD provides support for the human rights organisations around the world, and offers grants to cover practical security needs, training and knowledge resources, and opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange. The organisation also has an emergency hotline available in Arabic, you can call 00-353-1-210-0489.



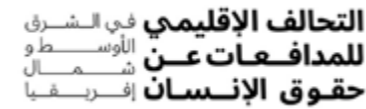
SMEX

SMEX works to promote digital rights, and its mission is to promote digital rights and freedoms in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region through research, campaigns and advocacy that encourage users to engage in the world of digital technology, media and networking. The Digital Safety Helpdesk enables activists, journalists, marginalised groups, and human rights defenders facing cybersecurity incidents and online threats in West Asia and North Africa.



Bank Information Center (BIC)

Bank Information Center (BIC) Middle East and North Africa collaborates with regional civil society organisations to ensure international financial institutions fulfill their commitments. The Center focuses on areas where entities like international development banks operate. BIC supports its partners by providing insights into the projects and policies of these institutions, offering tools and strategies for project monitoring, and delivering advice and technical assistance on issues related to their activities. This support includes leveraging independent accountability mechanisms.



Regional Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa

The Regional Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa comprises individual activists and groups dedicated to advancing the protection of women human rights defenders in public spaces. Established to address and publicise violations against these defenders, the alliance fosters support through advocacy, knowledge sharing, educational initiatives, and various activities. It aims to produce knowledge and implement positive actions to challenge patriarchal norms, male dominance, and discrimination against women in diverse communities. Additionally, the alliance strives to provide a safe environment for its members.



Funds for NGOs

Funds for NGOs is a global platform that equips NGOs and individuals with knowledge and financial resources to enhance their capacity for self-sufficiency and sustainability.



Daleel Madani

Daleel Madani is dedicated to enhancing cooperation among civil society components and minimising the redundancy of initiatives and projects to strengthen the sector. The platform aims to widely disseminate information about civil society and improve accessibility, guided by the principle of the right to access information and a commitment to transparency in civil society operations.



Bank Information Center (BIC)

The Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) is a leading civil society network committed to fostering a free, democratic, and occupation-free society based on social justice, human rights, and the rule of law. PNGO strives to safeguard the autonomy of civil society activities, empower these groups, and amplify their role in the national struggle and democratic development.



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