



Opportunities and Challenges for Women Human Rights Defenders from Middle Eastern Countries

A Report on a Study by
The Gulf Centre for Human Rights GCHR

January 2025





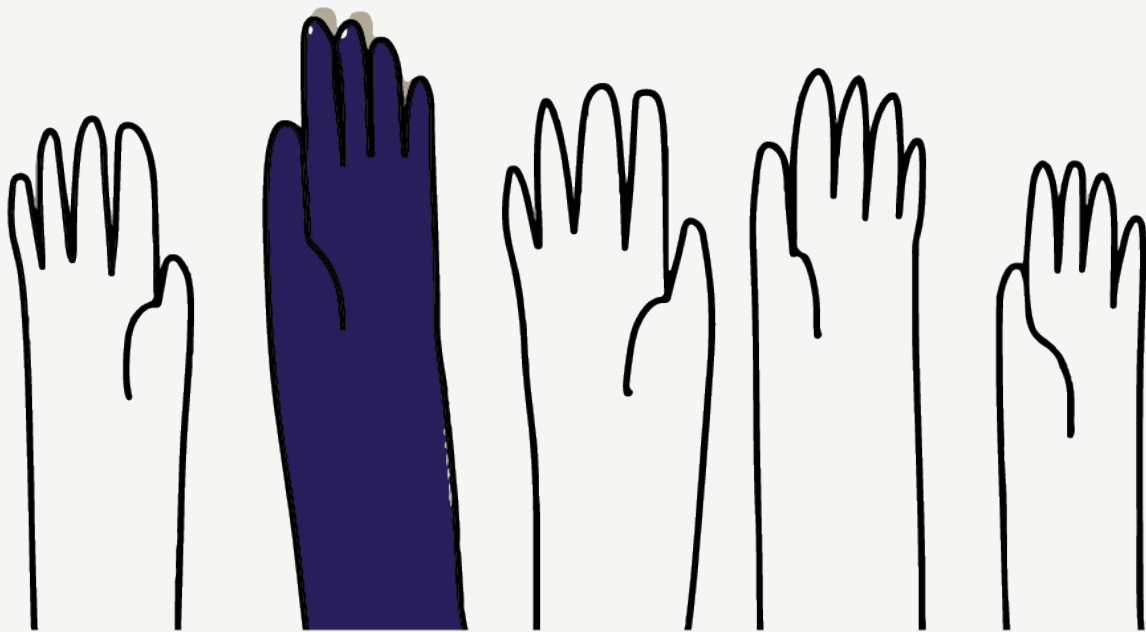
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Report Highlights



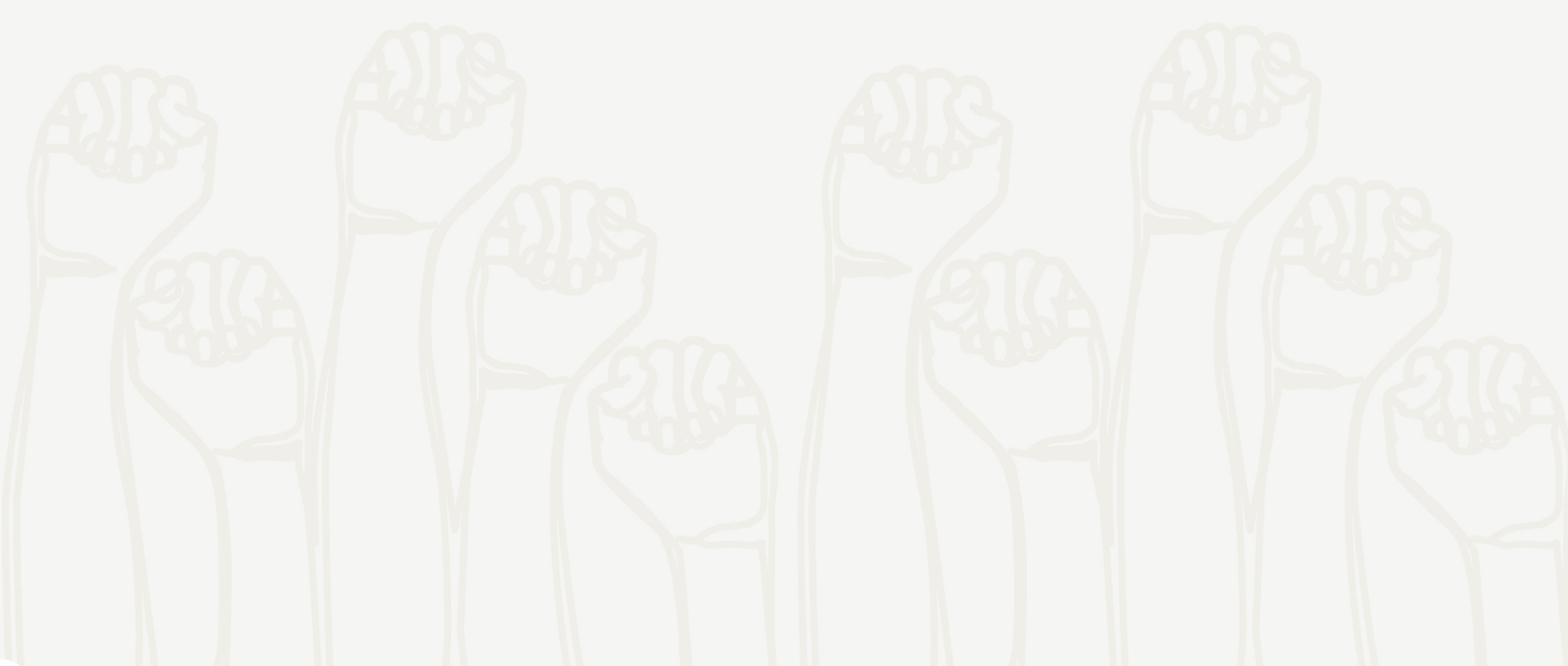
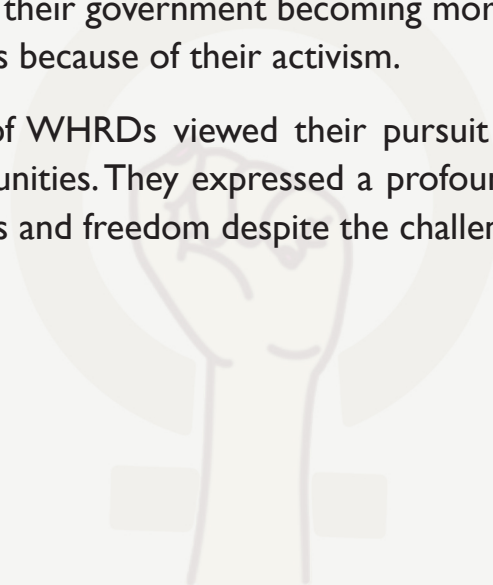
The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) conducted this research to learn of the opportunities and challenges facing women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) while pursuing their activism. We developed a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of four parts, namely, personal characteristics of WHRDs, opportunities and pathways for pursuing activism, challenges and adverse outcomes of pursuing activism, and the lived experiences and lessons learned by WHRDs.

Key findings from those surveyed include:

- WHRDs were of older age groups, well-educated, and well-engaged in their own communities. They represented diverse professions, all closely tied to advancing human rights.
- WHRDs cited several motivations for their activism, including experiencing discrimination in their lives or supporting cases of discrimination and oppression, inspirations from members of families, work, or community activists, and seeking justice as a social responsibility.
- WHRDs pursued diverse rights, at times simultaneously, including advocacy for women's rights, rights of children, climate change, support for prisoners of conscience, support for victims of torture, right to health, right to education, right to humanitarian assistance, right to freedom of expression and association.
- WHRDs identified various sources of support in pursuing activism, including from civil society organisations or from other feminists and activists, in building capacity and networking, as well as in training as lawyers, journalists, and others.
- Many used social media and public advocacy for outreach and raising awareness and support, while others preferred personal communication and low-profile advocacy due to fears of surveillance and potential risks of blackmail or persecution. Many worked without a license.

- There were different approaches and strategies that WHRDs used in pursuing activism, including media, coalition-building, networking, holding events, and meeting members of the government and stakeholders in businesses and other sectors.
- The majority of WHRDs identified support from family and friends as most helpful to overcome challenges, while a few reported receiving support from civil society and human rights organisations, indicating the limited support and outreach resources for WHRDs.
- WHRDs revealed distressing accounts of challenges and adverse outcomes of pursuing activism under repressive political systems, without measures of protection or access to justice, particularly for those advocating for gender equality, political and civil rights, and religious freedoms.
- Physical harm and abuses, including being beaten and raped, or threats of such acts of physical abuse or death, either to the women or their family members, were reported by WHRDs. Some WHRDs had family members imprisoned or legally harassed in relation to their activism.
- Several women suffered legal harassment or restrictions on mobility and travel. Some managed to leave their countries to avoid persecution. One woman received support to relocate by a human rights organisation. Financial constraints and limited support were reported by those who left their countries.
- Financial constraints were reported by the majority of WHRDs, either caused by employers or by state officials. Some women managed to receive financial support from civil society organisations, others had to look for other jobs to make ends meet.
- An overwhelming majority of WHRDs reported adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depression, but few received any medical attention.

- Many WHRDs faced social isolation by family and friends, who feared being guilty by association. Many have reported defamation, online bullying, and other discrediting tactics by society and state officials.
- WHRDs identified several learned lessons of their journey of activism, including the abuse of human rights advocacy for political expediency. Women's rights activism reflected on their positive transformation because of activism, and the newly-found appreciation for their roles in their families and communities as safeguards for justice. Many reported their government becoming more oppressive against women activists because of their activism.
- The majority of WHRDs viewed their pursuit of activism as vital to their communities. They expressed a profound conviction in the pursuit of rights and freedom despite the challenges.



Overview

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) face several and unique risks while advocating for human rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Particularly in the context of traditional, patriarchal societies where women's code of conduct is monitored and controlled by their families and societies to maintain expectations. In addition, authoritarian governments, despite initiating limited reforms in women's rights, continue to restrict women's autonomy and mobility.

Human rights reports have long documented such practices, to varying degrees, in most of the Arab countries. Such practices are manifested mostly in discriminatory personal status codes, criminal and penal codes, legal and social measures of combating gender-based violence, low representations of women in key decision-making positions, and less economic opportunities and property rights for women compared to men. In addition, the increasingly authoritarian governments in the region have relentlessly worked to limit the civic space by targeting WHRDs, limit access to information, creating a façade of state-sponsored propaganda on women's rights reforms, and criminalised any forms of peaceful protest or organisation of women's rights groups. It is not surprising that the Arab countries have the worst gender gap, according to the World Economic Forum, in key areas of political and economic participation, education, and health, with an estimated 172 years needed to bridge this gap.

WHRDs play a key role in identifying key aspects of domination and subjugation of women in their own communities. While they face familial, societal, and state threats for their advocacy, they mobilise their communities to acknowledge and recognise the inherent risks facing women under such discriminatory policies and practices. In this report, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) presents the findings of preliminary research to identify the unique opportunities and risks facing WHRDs while pursuing their activism.

The research will help GCHR in identifying useful resources to be added to its Emergency Resource Hub ⁽¹⁾ and strategies for WHRDs, as well as understanding the gaps in services and support systems.

This report follows a previous study by GCHR on tangible protection mechanisms for WHRDs in the MENA region and beyond, published in 2016. ⁽²⁾

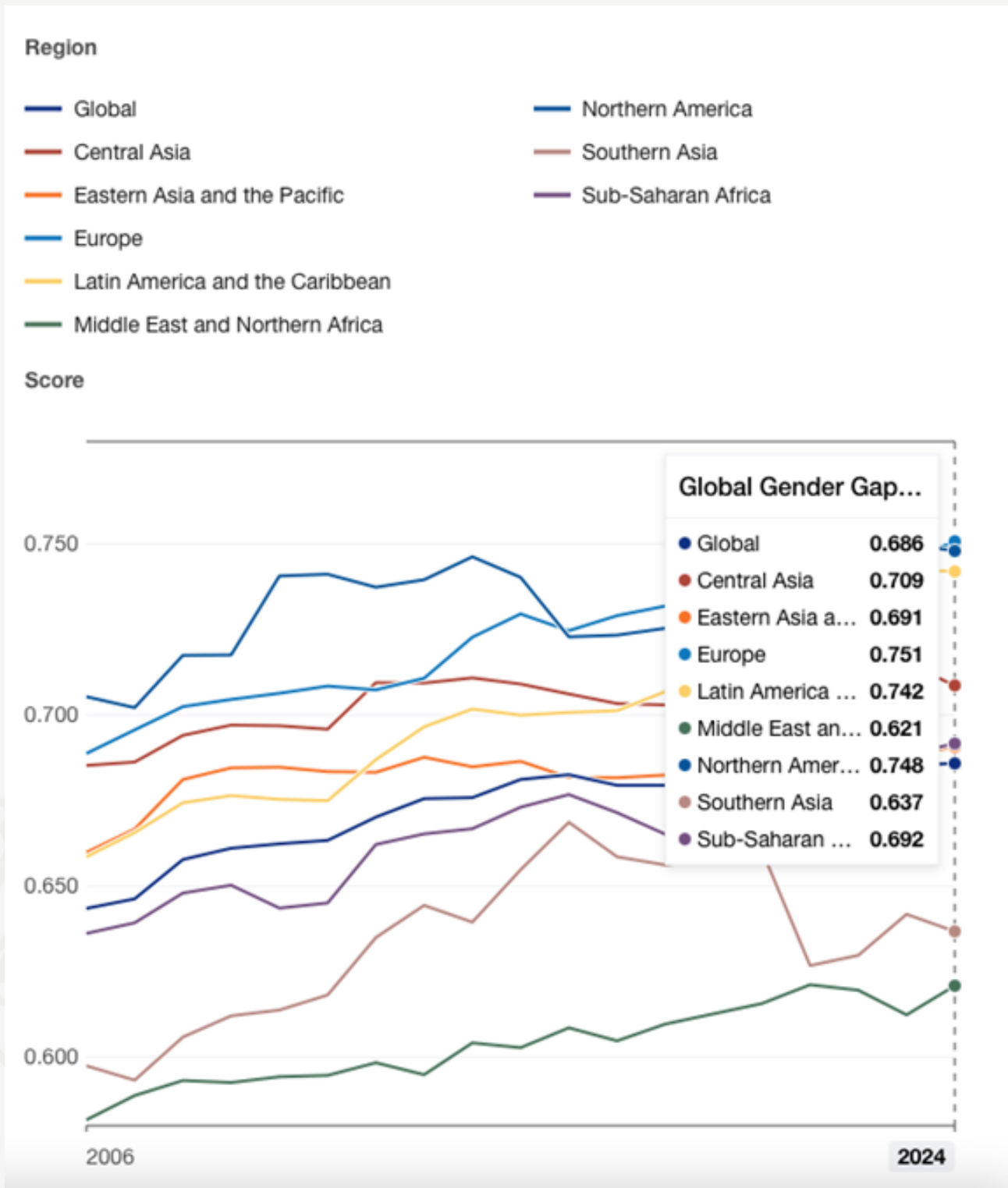
The tentative objectives of this research are to:

- A) Identify motivation and pathways which motivated WHRDs to pursue activism despite the risks involved.
- B) Understand which opportunities, familial privileges, or influential positions within their communities enabled them to pursue activism.
- C) Identify what methods of activism are mostly practiced by WHRDs in different contexts and based on their unique demographics.
- D) Recognise the risks, existing or potential, that WHRDs face for activism, including health-related adverse effects, familial, societal, or state-linked threats.
- E) Document the experience of the WHRDs in this study in pursuing activism to inform and inspire the next generations of WHRDs in these countries.

(1) Gulf Centre for Human Rights. Emergency Resource Hub. <https://www.gc4hr.org/resource/>

(2) Gulf Centre for Human Rights. [BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE: A Preliminary Inquiry: Tangible Protection Mechanisms for Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA Region and Beyond](#). 26 October 2016.

Figure I
Gender Gap in the Middle East 2024



Methodology

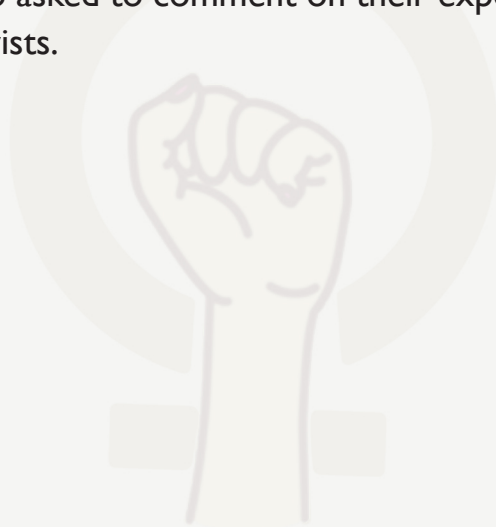
This study utilised a self-administered questionnaire, in Arabic and English (Appendix A), sent to MENA WHRDs via emails in 2024 and January 2025. Women were selected using a snowball method approach, and from a large database of WHRDs from the network of GCHR. Two of the WHRDs were interviewed in mid-2024 at first on a one-to-one basis for a pilot study, using secured platforms, one each from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. A total of four well-established WHRDs from Yemen and Saudi Arabia participated using the English Questionnaire, and thirteen participated using the Arabic questionnaire from the United Arab of Emirates (UAE), Sudan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. It is believed that some of the invited WHRDs were hesitant to participate due to safety concerns and the conditions of political unrest or repression in their own countries. It is notable that a good proportion of participating WHRDs were working in exile because of their advocacy, mainly in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, United States, Canada, Belgium and Italy.

The questionnaire included questions exploring five main themes: Personal characteristics of WHRDs, opportunities and pathways to pursue activism, existing or potential risks facing WHRDs, and lived experience of WHRDs after pursuing activism. Under the personal characteristics section, participants were asked about their country of activism, country of residency, gender, age group, educational attainment, source of income, whether they were formally employed in a human rights-related job, and their marital status.

Under the opportunities and pathways to pursue activism section, participants were asked about the motivational role of family, work, activists, human rights organisations, or community members in activism, the enabling role of media, the factors that helped them avoid risks and problems, and the choice of different platforms to pursue activism.

Under the existing or potential risks for WHRDs from pursuing activism, participants were asked about the perceived threats and the actual threats facing them for pursuing activism, adverse health outcomes, reduction or loss of income or economic opportunities, social isolation or negativity from family and community, and whether their activism caused them to leave their country of origin.

The lived experience section of the questionnaire inquired about how WHRDs perceived the changes in values and practices toward women activists, both from the activists' families, community, or state officials. WHRDs were also asked to comment on their experience for the next generation of activists.



Personal Characteristics of WHRDs

Participating WHRDs in this study represented a group of diverse women in background, educational attainment, and profession. Most are between 30-39 years of age, with a good proportion of women in the older age group (50 years or more). The majority are well educated (50% or more) to a graduate level. Only 16% of women have some college education. More than half of the women are married with children, a few are single, divorced, or widowed. All the women identified their gender as women, with one activist identifying herself as a transgender woman.

Women who responded to the study said they are mostly able to earn income through a full-time job in more than 50% of cases, while 16.7% hold part-time jobs, and an equal few are relying on social security allowance from the state or are unemployed and relying on family support. The WHRDs work in a variety of professions, taking roles in the civil society sector as researchers and consultants. The respondents also include retired women, social media influencers, lawyers, one journalist, and one surgeon.

The respondent WHRDs are mostly active in advocacy for women's rights, protection of women from violence and extortion, civil and political rights, or are human rights lawyers. A few women who are professionally working in civil society organisations are working in licensed organisations, the rest are working in an unlicensed CSO in their countries of origin. It is not surprising that most of the WHRDs who participated are older, well-educated, and more involved in community work, as it takes time for women to build their networks, access adequate information and education, and develop strategies to pursue activism in traditional societies, where state and community surveillance of women activists, as well as traditional norms are difficult to manoeuvre.

The responses from women showed that the majority are pursuing activism from outside their countries of origin. This phenomenon was repeatedly observed as a growing number of WHRDs, from Arab countries and Iran, have to flee their countries because of their engagement in advocacy for women and human rights.

A survey conducted by ALQST for Human Rights last year, to explore the main factors causing many Saudi citizens, including women activists, to choose to be in exile while pursuing their activism indicates a myriad of factors related to safety and threats of legal harassment.⁽³⁾ Of those who participated in that research, 64% cited lack of political freedom, 49% cited lack of religious freedom, and about 17% cited their activism or the activism of their relatives as reasons to leave the country and seek asylum elsewhere. Most participants (93.5%) also reported that they do not feel safe to return to Saudi Arabia, even if the authorities granted them safety.

The situation is similar or worse in neighbouring countries, especially in countries torn by wars and civil unrest, which highlights both the importance of women's advocacy for political and civil rights, as well the fact that many participants in our survey were living in exile.

(3) ALQST for Human Rights. [The Saudi Diaspora: A growing community of emigrés and refugees](#). August 2024.

Opportunities and Pathways to Pursue Activism

This part of the questionnaire explored the motivation for WHRDs to pursue activism, and which enabling factors were significant. Participants identified several educational or work-related factors which motivated their pursuits of activism, including working in a humanitarian job as lawyers and civil society workers, engaging with the plight of disadvantaged women and other groups, experiencing discrimination in their families and countries, and seeking justice and fighting oppression out of social responsibility.

“Several factors affected my pursuit of activism, the sectarian divide in my country, an explosion that largely destroyed my health, social pressures which demean a woman’s position, and helping in a case of a little girl who committed suicide after her uncle and guardian refused to allow her an urgent vaginal surgery - dilation & curettage (D&C), it was how I felt I have to become active.”

— An Iraqi woman activist working in the media and civil society. —

WHRDs have also cited **inspiration** by other activists as their **motivation** to become activists. Some cited inspiration by family members and friends who were activists themselves. Others cited the arrest of a family member as the start of their own activism.

WHRDs also have had diverse experiences in getting **support** from families or communities. Some expressed that they received full or partial support from their family members, others stated that they have

had no support at all, especially when the pursuit of activism causes legal harassment or persecution.

“Support and praise is received [from family and community] when everything is going well, but when facing challenges or being persecuted, less support is given.”

————— *A Saudi surgeon and activist.* —————

Others also expressed a positive change of their family support, after they were resentful at the beginning, because of how society perceives women activists or feminists negatively:

“My family was my first challenge, with time they became supportive, the society perceives any woman activist or a feminist as a woman of bad reputation worthy of being killed.”

——— *An Iraqi woman activist working in the media and civil society.* ———

Most women were **engaged with networks of activists** and civil society organisations, including GCHR, and they perceive them positively. Only three activists reported no support from activists or civil society while pursuing activism. WHRDs mentioned various forms of support that they received from the civil society and activists, **such as training and building capacity, networking and protection** when they were in danger. Others also mentioned legal representation when needed, and ability to work on projects and as freelancers.

Many participants expressed the contradicting **effects of the social media platforms** in pursuing **advocacy** and activism. Most women thought social media was helpful for **mobilisation** and garnering support for certain cases which were neglected by the state. Others thought social media was valuable in accessing information and promoting content that is supportive of human rights. Some thought that social media and online platforms helped keep their work continuous during the COVID-19 lockdown.

However, a few women expressed suspicion of using online advocacy because of hacking and surveillance:

“Because of my activism, I suffered from hacking of my account and was blackmailed, which traumatised me despite resorting to the legal system, and even after the blackmailing ended. I no longer use online social media most of the time, or I use fake identities [if I must].”

_____ *A Syrian woman activist living in Turkey.* _____

When asked about the supportive factors which helped them through challenges they faced, WHRDs reported several factors including, family and friends’ support, women’s organisations, digital protection organisations, getting grants to leave when there are risks, not being public, and media support.

A woman also mentioned **personal conviction and resiliency** as a source of motivation to keep pursuing activism:

“As an employee in a public sector, who was summoned to interrogation and was threatened, I used to face challenges in obtaining travel documents to attend workshops in Lebanon, but with my determination, will and love for my human rights, and my absolute belief in the nobility of this pursuit, and despite all fears, I managed to travel.”

_____ *A Syrian woman activist.* _____

The universality of human rights was reflected in the WHRDs’ pursuit of several rights, in addition to women’s rights. WHRDs reported that they defended prisoners of conscience, victims of torture, rights to free speech and expression, rights of children, right to assembly, right to health, right to education, humanitarian assistance, and worked on climate change. Most, if not all, countries in the Middle East have a persistent gender gap mainly because of women’s largely lower political representation and economic participation.

The Middle East is the worst performing region across the world when it comes to gender parity (Figure 1 above).⁽⁴⁾

However, it is comprehensible that women's advocacy for every right is related to the conditions in which women live within and their own personal experiences. Women reported different approaches and strategies for advocacy and capacity building, based on their experience. Most believed in using the media, in all forms, but particularly social media to lobby for support. Some believed that mobilisation and coalition building is the best strategy to support access to justice and community rejection of abuses. Others believed in building personal connections rather than online engagement as a better way to connect and build collaborations. Some believed in lobbying the public through holding conferences, meeting politicians in parliaments, and stakeholders in businesses.

One woman suggested using comedy:

“Dark comedy is one of the most complex phenomena, where irony and humour are used to shed light on a miserable reality filled with tragedies and major challenges. In the field of human rights, comedy could be a tool to express frustration, mitigate difficult situations, or even to point sharp critique to political systems and policies.”

An Iraqi woman activist.

(4) World Economic Forum. [Global Gender Gap Report 2024](#). Accessed on January 2025.

Challenges, Perceived or Real, Reported by WHRDs

on. Although the findings of this study were not unexpected, it clearly shows how devastating the pursuit of human rights for women can be in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa as the women work in communities where political and societal repressions are frequently used to control the narrative and maintain adherence to the status quo, particularly regarding political and civil rights, women's rights, and religious freedom.

“I currently live in a country in which speaking out for human rights is regarded as a mine that can explode anytime. Especially that I'm speaking about the rights to expression, opinions, and religious freedom, which is considered the most dangerous thing to advocate for without exception. Also, that the linked interested on the Middle Eastern countries with each other jeopardise the lives of many human rights defenders for those activists living in a different Middle Eastern country, in addition to the complicated security measures needed to attend any training workshop or seminar involving human rights, the matter [traveling] becomes impossible, and it continuously subjects me to constant danger for being a human rights activist in a society that does not want to recognise rights.”

A Yemeni WHRD.

In fact, GCHR has reported repeatedly over the years on the cases of WHRDs being **detained** and accused of charges related to their activism, particularly, their online content. **Charges** often include common accusations of treason, receiving foreign financial aid to destabilise the state, and using digital platforms to undermine national unity. In response, GCHR regularly collaborates with partners and coalitions to organise actions and appeals in support of WHRDs detained for their online advocacy for women's rights. ⁽⁵⁾

(5) Gulf Centre for Human Rights. [Spreading the echo campaign](#). December 2024.

Physical threats are also frequently reported by activists. Alarming several women participating in our 2024-2025 study reported being physically abused because of activism, and one activist troublingly said that she was **raped**. Death threats is one of the most serious threats reported by women:

“I live in Suwayda’a, it is now a city ruled by armed militia, and the danger for us women activists is huge, because bullets are the only language to resolve conflicts, the cost of a woman [activist] in the concept of those militias is one bullet. Moving around the city, especially at night is a huge danger to us, and the state prevents us from conducting any human rights work because it’s considered prohibited and unlicensed.”

An Iraqi woman activist.

Facing financial constraints and economic burden because of activism was also a common refrain, both caused by employers and punitive restrictions imposed by state officials. This is also an expected outcome for human rights activism in repressive countries, where access to rights is considered a privilege. As access to work and economic opportunities is treated by Middle Eastern authorities as a reward and punishment to ensure political obedience.

We specifically asked the activists about the economic, health, and social impacts of their activism, knowing that many have suffered financially, socially, and sustained adverse health outcomes in retaliation for their activism.

Others reported facing punitive actions for attending human rights events, such as prolonged salary cuts, reassignment to inferior positions, or being forced out of their jobs after decades of service. For instance, several reported that they were rejected when their activism became known during their job interviews, while one reported that she keeps her activism low profile so she can keep her job. Additionally, many activists described struggling to find employment altogether, particularly those forced into living as refugees, which compounds the barriers to rebuilding their professional lives.

“Yes, we [the activist and her husband] had to spend a couple of years to learn a foreign language and do medical board exams to obtain a license to practice. Those couple of years I was incomeless, living in an overcrowded refugee camp/prison. How did I manage, I just got on with life and kept on studying [until I] cleared language exams and medical board exams.”

A Saudi WHRD.

On sustaining adverse physical or mental health outcomes, the WHRDs universally, except for two activists, reported several mental health outcomes. WHRDs reported suffering from stress, anxiety, trust issues, depression. Not all the women have received adequate care because of these issues, and some did not even get a diagnosis, and relied mainly on the support of friends or families. Those who were able to access care, with or without the support of their families, have benefited from medical care or care sessions by some human rights organisations, including GCHR. In the case of the woman activist who was raped, she was also fortunately able to obtain medical care.

One woman was particularly traumatised because she couldn't respond to an abuse by a prosecutor:

“I was subjected to ridicule and threat by an interrogator, he made me feel worthless and [said] the only place that I belong is [serving in] the kitchen... At the time, I couldn't respond, and this incident continues to cause me distress... and I didn't get any care for that.”

An Iraqi woman activist.

It is notable that women who were brought for interrogation were maltreated and - in many cases - tortured, emotionally, psychologically or physically, and this was documented in many cases across the MENA countries, making access to adequate healthcare services and obtaining medical attention necessary.

GCHR has documented many such incidents of this kind, as in the case of the prominent Saudi WHRDs who were detained and tortured using the ultra-investigative techniques of waterboarding, electrocution, beating, sexual harassment, threats of abusing family members, among other forms of torture for demanding the right to autonomy and mobility for women. ⁽⁶⁾ In many cases, the aftercare and rehabilitation are denied as the activists remain under surveillance while under constraints of travel bans or house arrest.

Living under repressive authorities, many realise that communicating or publicly supporting the calls of WHRDs for women's rights is precarious. Authorities often perceive such support as "guilt by association," leading to several documented cases of arrest for acts like voicing agreement with WHRDs. GCHR and others have documented incidents of people being arrested for supporting the calls of WHRDs, being related to activists, maintaining friendships with them, or even legally representing them during trials.

In GCHR's latest study, most WHRDs reported social implications because of their activism. Some reported societal implications such as stigma for promoting human rights, or defying norms and traditions such as traveling alone. Others reported family implications, such as being removed from family online groups, being shunned by family and friends, or facing outright refusal from loved ones to be publicly associated with them. One WHRD shared that she deliberately refrains from involving her family in her advocacy work, aiming to shield them from potential harm or negative consequences.

Another mentioned that her family support was wavering after being faced with trouble:

"I always had my family's support, but when I was faced with a problem, they started pressuring me not to pursue my work or human rights activities by preventing me from travelling or leaving home."

A Yemeni civil society activist.

(6) Gulf Centre for [Human Rights. Human Rights Side Event calls for accountability for rights abuses including torture and incommunicado detention of women's rights defenders.](#) March 2019.

We also asked the women activists if they had to leave their country because of the risks they faced for activism. Several women had to leave their countries to other countries, and some had to relocate to a different place within their own countries. One woman who left her country to another country reported that she is having poor connection to other Arabs. Her reluctance stems from a pervasive fear that they might be informants for her government. For some activists, the journey out of their countries involved being smuggled across borders, an undertaking fraught with immense danger and uncertainty. They cited several reasons such as receiving threats, concerns from family, being arrested or actively being prosecuted:

“I was detained before for raising the flag of the revolution in university and so was my husband by the de facto authorities of the North [Syria], so it was our decision to flee to Turkey by smuggling.”

A Syrian woman activist.

Those who left their countries reported financial difficulties and loss of work opportunities and profound loneliness. One woman shared that, despite the risks she faced, she was unable to leave her country due to financial constraints. However, several activists said they choose to stay in their own countries amid all the challenges.

Women have also reported the negative impact on their advocacy for women’s rights. Many reported facing ridicule and dismissive attitudes, with critics portraying their efforts as politically insignificant or unnecessary. They also reported being accused of abandoning Islam, encouraging women to divorce, enduring bullying and verbal assaults both in online spaces and through local media outlets. One frequent comment was the report of having to be constantly on the move and a loss of stability:

“[I faced] Instability and constant moving, and [had to] work with utmost caution and secrecy.”

A Yemeni woman activist who is now residing in Egypt.



Table 1

List of threats reported by women activists



Perceived threats to WHRDs
Threats of physical safety
Reputational risks
Blackmail
Collective punishment of the activists' families
Facing legal harassment and lawsuits, especially if working without licenses
Emotional and mental distress from dealing with cases of severe human rights violations
Criticism from the community, particularly when living in a traditional and repressive community
Constraints on mobility because of activism
Economic constraints and financial instability
Surveillance by state and non-state actors
Digital hacking and leaking personal and confidential information to the public
Loss of support of certain entities because of controversial opinions or positions
Limited access to the internet or sources of help and support
Risk of supporting right to religious freedom
Actual threats and risks faced by WHRDs
Threats of kidnapping the activist or her family members
Surveillance, hacking, and posting personal information to the public
Embassies refusing to renew documents or passports of activists in exile to force them to return to their countries
Being forced out of the country and having to live in a vulnerable position as a refugee
Defamation, blackmailing, online bullying, and harassment
Kidnapping of a child of one activist by an armed militia
Receiving death threats because of advocating for women's rights
Threats of expulsion from work
Repression, legal harassments, and detention
Rape

Lived Experiences of WHRDs and Lessons Learned

We asked WHRDs to reflect on their activism and whether it changed their own values and beliefs. Women expressed a variety of responses reflecting on their unusual pursuits in life that brought them difficult challenges and sometimes achievements. A few women reported on discovering the hypocrisy of using human rights for political expediency, rather than for changing people's lives.

Many WHRDs expressed an unwavering commitment to justice and supporting victims of violations. Their experiences of facing risks and challenges have deepened their empathy for human suffering and heightened their awareness of discrimination. These trials have also strengthened their resolve and sharpened their understanding of how to drive meaningful change within their communities. Through capacity-building, education, and raising awareness, they have become powerful agents of transformation. Some women expressed a change in how cautious they have become in their pursuits of activism while facing multiple challenges; however, these challenges have prompted them to adopt a more cautious approach to their activism. Witnessing the consequences of their efforts has influenced how they navigate their pursuits, balancing their dedication to advocacy with the need to protect themselves and others. This is understandable considering the magnitude of sacrifices and burden some of the activists had to endure. In fact, one activist questioned the validity of her pursuit:

“Sometimes I think it wasn't worth it.”

— A Saudi woman rights activist. —

When asked if their pursuit of activism has changed the way their families and communities perceive the role of women activists, many women reported a positive change of perspectives. A woman mentioned that

her family started seeking her opinion in all matters because of her pursuits of rights and activism. Other activists reported more respects for WHRDs by their families and communities because of realisation that their activism protects their own communities from violations and discrimination:

“My family has changed for the better because of witnessing how my advocacy resulted in saving many people and restoring their rights.”

————— *An Iraqi woman activist* —————

Some women reported that their work has saved lives and changed drastically the way their community perceive women’ roles as equally capable agents of positive change:

“For sure the society is now viewing a woman’s activist as a lifebuoy taking people to safety shores, I became respected and appreciated by decision makers, and I became part of a team drawing up public policies and [a member of] the council for planning and development, and all this didn’t come out of nowhere.”

————— *An Iraqi woman activist.* —————

We also asked WHRDs if there was a change of perspectives by officials in their countries about the important roles of WHRDs. Most reported that officials treated women activists in very negative manners using a variety of means. They reported that officials have used constant criticism of WHRDs’ opinions and roles, threats of use of repressive means, accusations of having bad moral standards, prohibiting women’s license to work in human rights, defamation, and discrediting of the activists. A few women stated that officials used to welcome the advocacy for human rights but started eyeing it as suspicious activities with ulterior motives. A few also reported that officials encouraged them and respected their work:

“There is a lot of support by many people now, and I became a respected personality, and I was described a lot as an iron woman.”

————— *A Yemeni woman activist.* —————

Many WHRDs reported that they would do things differently, after pursuing advocacy for a while. Some reported that they would not show conflict with the mainstream beliefs to avoid complicating the situation. Others reported that they would learn how to use technology more efficiently in building awareness and engaging disadvantaged groups. Some reported the importance of engaging men in their advocacy. Others reported the importance of not revealing personal identities in social media to avoid retaliation.

As expected, some reported fatigue from facing the burden of being an activist, and thinking they should approach advocacy on a smaller or limited scale with their immediate family and friends, or in a more targeted way:

“Try not to lose too much energy convincing people who won’t change but rather playing on our stronger cards.”

A Saudi activist in Belgium.

Finally, GCHR asked WHRDs if they could share a lesson with the future generations of women activists. The responses revealed a wealth of wisdom and experience, grounded in their tireless advocacy efforts.

Many emphasised the importance of resilience, persistence, and maintaining an unshakable commitment to understanding the causes one chooses to champion. They underscored that a deep and genuine connection to one’s advocacy work not only fuels long-term dedication but also builds credibility and trust within communities.

The WHRDs highlighted a crucial shift in perspective regarding success: they urged future activists to value the act of trying as a success in itself, rather than being solely fixated on achieving specific outcomes. To them, the courage to speak out, raise awareness, and challenge oppressive governments holds inherent significance, regardless of immediate results.

They also spoke passionately about the transformative power of collective action. Building partnerships, forging coalitions, and collaborating with like-minded individuals and organisations were emphasised as essential strategies. Such alliances not only amplify impact but also provide

protection and support in environments that can often feel isolating or hostile. Solidarity, they noted, is not just a strategy but a lifeline for women navigating the many challenges of activism.

Their advice serves as a powerful reminder that the journey of advocacy is not only about the outcomes but also about the process of fostering community, challenging injustices, and inspiring future generations to continue the fight for equality and human rights.

All the women said they believed the pursuit of rights is an honourable one:

“It is worth it, always, whatever the price.”

A Saudi activist in Belgium.



Conclusion

WHRDs in the Middle Eastern and North African countries face enormous challenges and threats, mostly because of their repressive political systems and the limited resources for support. Many show an enormous determination and resilience to pursue activism despite facing risks or displacement from their countries. They continue to support changes in their own countries from abroad and to provide much needed help for those whose rights have been violated. Some have succeeded in bringing positive changes for certain cases, while others have changed policies and influenced their communities to abandon harmful practices towards women. Their work and advocacy is valuable in securing safety and protection for their own countries.

However, the limited resources available to support their causes, particularly institutional and financial resources, are evident from this research. Most women work without licenses or support from families or communities. Those who faced legal harassments, torture or physical and mental harm can hardly find significant support from CSOs, networks of activists, or political leaderships in countries claiming to protect freedoms and rights.

On the other hand, many have reported positive outcomes of receiving support from CSOs or other networks, particularly relocation support, financial support, and to a lesser degree mental and physical health support. Media support was reported to help WHRDs in their pursuit of activism by amplifying their voices and protecting them from persecution or legal harassment. However, some mentioned how social media is being manipulated, by state and non-state actors, or used as a tool of repression against WHRDs to discredit their causes.

The bravery and deep conviction of WHRDs, despite the severe repression, is commendable. It calls for a wider recognition of the significance of their work and influence in changing their own countries to the better. It also calls for establishing more support to accommodate the needs expressed by the activists in this study, most of which remain limited and insufficient.

We, at GCHR, would like to thank the women activists who graciously lent us their time and expertise to participate in this report. We value their contribution to their people and will continue to support their mission with all possible means.



Recommendations

Based on the opportunities and challenges shared by the women participants in this study, GCHR recommends:

- 1. Strengthening Security Measures:** Provide comprehensive digital and physical security training for WHRDs, with clear and measurable assessments to ensure the effectiveness of this training in safeguarding participants.
- 2. Enhancing Regional Connectivity:** Facilitate stronger outreach and communication channels with regional networks to offer WHRDs vital support, solidarity, and resources.
- 3. Prioritising Mental Health Support:** Establish partnerships to provide accessible counselling and mental health services for WHRDs, engaging communities to normalise and prioritise mental well-being.
- 4. Developing Proactive Support Protocols:** Develop a pre-emptive support framework tailored to WHRDs' needs, equipping them with resources and assistance before threats or risks arise.
- 5. Amplifying Voices and Mitigating Risks:** Collaborate with WHRDs, regional networks, and international partners to identify effective strategies for amplifying their voices while minimising the negative impacts of activism on themselves and their families.

Appendix A

Questionnaire:

Opportunities and Challenges for WHRDs in Middle Eastern Countries

Part I: Demographics of Participant

This section will attempt to profile different WHRDs in terms of socioeconomic status to understand their background and how that relates to their activism.

1. Name (Optional)

2. Country of origin/ Country of activism

3. Country of Residence

4. Age Category

- a. 18 - 29
- b. 30 – 39
- c. 40 – 49
- d. 50 or more
- e. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

5. Educational attainment

- a. 12 years or less (High school)
- b. Higher diploma
- c. College graduate
- d. Graduate level
- e. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

6. Occupation

- a. I do not work
- b. Part time worker
- c. I work full time (Please mention your work)
- d. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

7. Are you working in human rights or civil society organisation?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

8. If you work in a human rights or civil society organisation:

- a. What is your role (Please specify)
- b. Is it licensed by your country (Yes, no)
- c. Is it an international organisation (Yes, No)
- d. Do you declare your affiliation with your organisation in your country (Yes, No)
- e. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

9. Marital status

- a. Single
- b. Married
- c. Divorced
- d. In a relationship
- e. Widowed
- f. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

10. If you were ever married, do you have children:

- a. Yes (How many?)
- b. No
- c. Other (I do not wish to respond/ I don't know)

Part II: Opportunities and pathways to pursue activism.

This section explores motivations to pursue activism and what were the enabling factors that helped in such pursuit.

1. How did you start your activism?
2. Were you supported by your family in such pursuit?
3. Were you supported by your immediate acquaintances at your community, such as your work, friends, and extended family?
4. Which factor helped you the most to pursue your activism?
5. Did you receive support from the international community, such as international human rights organisations, UN agencies, or regional women's networks and organisations? If so, how do you think such support helped you in your activism?
6. What role did access to the media, local and international, helped you in your pursuit?
7. What role did the social media platforms, and the relevant online communities helped you in your pursuit?
8. When you faced troubles or obstacles in pursuing your activism, what were some of the most helpful resources that helped you mitigate such obstacles?
9. Do you have any additional information or suggestions you need to add to share with the greater community of WHRDs in the region on the enabling factors from your perspective?

Part III: Practices used by WHRDs to pursue activism.

This section explores the unique practices pursued by each WHRD in her own country to promote her advocacy. It helps us in sharing the knowledge and identifying which positions and privileges are enabling WHRDs to engage in advocacy.

1. Though we understand that human rights are universal and intersectional, we would like to know more about the specific type or types of activism that you mostly pursue.
2. What would you say the factors that triggered you to pursue your activism, for example, was it your academic background, position at work or in your community, a continued family pursuit of the same goal, or a combination of factors?
3. What are the methods that you often use to pursue activism, for example, use of social media, writing for the media, campaigning in the local or international community, etc.
4. If you work for a human rights or civic society organisation, such as independent media or international organisations, do you feel that your position in such an organisation has influenced your pursuit of activism? If so, in which way?
5. Would you have other remarks to add in this section?

Part IV: Existing or potential risks which WHRDs face due to their activism.

This section attempts to assess the existing or potential threats or risks as experienced by individual WHRD in their own countries due to their activism. It does not provide a comprehensive list of the risks faced, but to identify the most significant ones from the perspective and experience of each woman. Particularly, the risks from family, society, and state sources, including the transnational repression.

1. During your activism, have you experienced actual risks or threats of such risks from your family members? If so, can you elaborate on such risks and how did you deal with them?
2. During your activism, have you experienced actual risks or threats of such risks from your immediate community? Such as your colleagues, acquaintances, or people in your local community. If so, can you elaborate on such risks and how did you deal with them?
3. During your activism, and if you are using social media, have you experienced actual risks or threats of such risks from your online followers or readers? If so, can you elaborate on the type of these threats and how did you deal with them?
4. During your activism, have you experienced actual risks or threats of such risks from the state, whether directly or indirectly? For example, people inciting the state to target you with arrests or harms, or people trying to hack your phone or devices? If so, can you elaborate on such risks and how did you deal with them?
5. If you experienced travel bans, interrogations, detention or sentencing by the state for your activism, can you elaborate on how you were treated, and which aspects of your activism caused your targeting by the state?
6. Due to your activism, have you experienced any mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disease (PTSD), or others? If so, have you sought medical attention or attempted to manage this mental burden in other ways?
7. Due to your activism, have you experienced any loss of income or opportunities at work? If so, how did you navigate such a burden?
8. Due to your activism, have you experienced any social impact, such as family, friends, or members of your community, attempting to avoid you or distance themselves from you? If so, how did you manage such a challenge?
9. Due to your activism, have you experienced any physical health conditions, such as because of physical aggression by state officials or

community members? If so, can you elaborate on this and how did you manage to deal with it?

10. Due to your activism, did you experience any online or public defamation campaigns against you, whether from the state or other sources? If so, how did you deal with such attempts?

11. Due to your activism, did you have to leave your country? If so, can you elaborate on the most difficult challenges you faced in leaving your country?

12. If you live in exile and continue your pursuit of activism, what kind of threats, real or potential threats, are you facing personally or from your family and your country?

13. Would you like to add any other remarks in this section?

Part V: Documenting the lived experience of WHRDs in pursuing activism

This section explores the various aspects of WHRDs in Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, from the perspective of the women activists themselves. It explores how championing activism has transformed their lives and the lives of their family, society, and the state reactions to women's pursuit of activism. It will provide valuable information to inform and inspire future generations of women activists in their own countries.

1. Looking back at your activism, what were the most important personal aspects that have changed in your life? For example, your values, your priorities, and your own beliefs about yourself and your abilities?

2. Would you say that your pursuit of activism has changed your family and friends' perspectives on women's activism? If so, in what way?

3. In your own country, do you feel that the public perception of women activists and their advocacy have changed because of your activism? If so, in which ways?

4. How would you evaluate the change in the state policies and officials' reactions to women activists because of your activism?
5. What would you do differently, considering the learned experience you gained so far, in pursuit of your activism?
6. If you would share special insights or messages for the next generations of women activists in your country, what would they be?

End of Survey





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