

# *(In) Visible*

**The Digital Threats Muslim Women  
Human Rights Defenders Face in the  
Greater Horn of Africa**



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Safety online lies at the contours of digital rights, and all people should be able to engage on social media and use digital technologies without any threats to their freedoms, privacy, access and lives in general. However, Muslim Women Human Right Defenders (MWHRDs) continue to experience grave forms of violence and threats due to their activism. As such '(In)Visible' was conducted to identify and understand the needs, challenges and opportunities for bolstering the digital safety of MWHRDs in order to recommend long-term actionable strategies for Muslim organizations working on family law reforms, movements and activists in the GHoA region. The report sought to document the landscape of risks from stakeholders and promote the use of sustainable risk-mitigation measures and mobilise the relevant pushback against patriarchal structures and hegemonies.

# Key Findings

## *Understanding the Scope of Threats*

“We are threatened when we speak on gender and religion. The issue is mostly when we attempt to advocate for women’s right in Islam”

While MWHRDs who participated in this project mainly work on family laws, they also work on justice for gendered and sexual violence survivors, teach digital skills to other WHRDs and communities, and engage in peace building and advocacy. MWHRDs inherently challenge patriarchal systems within their countries and communities, thus face threats of violence online from religious leaders, the state authorities and mostly men within their communities. Some of the threats they experience in their daily lives include sexual violence, trolling and misinformation, financial violence, threats of murder, verbal abuse and harassment, to name a few. Their cultural, political and locational contexts also come into play in the type of experiences they face and digital security concerns that exist.

The concerns of MWHRDs include challenges to secure funding for advocacy in their region, the complexities of navigating the intersection of gender, religion and the state and online security and digital inequalities. Each concern poses challenges to their work by limiting advocacy on gender-related issues, due to the fear of harassment, intimidation and existing moral shaming that comes with MWHRDs engaging in feminist work. Similarly, the lack of funding also affects how much security they can access, and effectively online advocacy which requires skills and capacity development. MWHRDs are also unable to promote or publicise their work thus limiting visibility which is integral to human rights advocacy.

“Normally we have communication challenges especially when there is no data. Another challenge we face is when communities expect us to pay them to participate in our work because this the norm politicians have created”

Finally, digital inequalities pose accessibility threats specifically regarding their access to digital spaces, and ensuring online safety given that they struggle with basic digital engagement skills. Collectively demonstrating the scope of risks and threats that MWHRDs face with the GHoA.

### *Personal Strategies Used by MWHRDs*

The key strategies MWHRDs use to ensure personal safety online includes;

- 01 Community:** Relying on their communities for support during periods of intense harassment, threats and violence.
- 02 Self-Censorship:** Other MWHRDs stay away from social media altogether or censor themselves. They highlighted that visibility poses a significant risk, as such limiting it is a protective strategy.
- 03 Digital Security Training:** Some organisations who work with MWHRDs also provide security training, and ensure that they protect the identities of their employees.
- 04 Encrypted Messaging:** Organisations also highlighted the importance of encrypted messaging platforms, as such refraining from Whatsapp. Another important tool some MWHRDs use is their ability to identify ways to engage with different audiences on different platforms.
- 05 Block, Mute, Report:** In addition, many of them who use social media shared that their go-to protective feature is to block, report and mute online abusers, and trolls.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

In addition to the personal strategies that MWHRDs, we came up with a few more recommendations for them to follow to protect themselves online.

- Using secure messaging platforms such as signal is important to avoid any information or data breaches.
- Second, TOR and AnonymX also help in concealing users' digital identities, and may be helpful to engage with other MWHRDs without being targeted by state intelligence agencies.
- On a more holistic level, digital security and safety should be designed with the grassroots communities in mind. It should be replaced in context, embodiment and location, and should not only focus on the technical.
- Finally, "we need practical policies on communication and online/digital protection and rights and strong implementation bodies."

Thus, the report maps out how different African countries and political organisations can improve their digital governance laws and policies protecting WHRDs in general.