

4 August 2023

Open Letter: Social media companies must take urgent action to protect women human rights defenders

Chairpersons and Staff at Meta, X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram

Front Line Defenders, an international human right organisation which works to provide protection to human rights defenders at risk and the undersigned regional and international civil society organisations urge you to take immediate action to help end the ongoing online defamation campaigns against women human rights defenders in Iraq, Jordan and Syria.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram are still being used effectively to spread hate speech and make serious threats, including death threats, against women human rights defenders in the Middle East . We are concerned that your platforms are not moving quickly enough to counter these aggressive and continuous attacks - sometimes your procedures are too slow to protect these women, and in many cases you have not acted to help them.

In Iraq, where there is a challenging environment for human rights defenders , particularly in the southern city of Basra, there is an ongoing [disinformation campaign](#) regarding the use of the term “gender” which incorrectly links use of the term with homosexuality, perversion and the destruction of society. Taking advantage of the difficulty in accessing information in Iraq, some online content creators and religious and political leaders are using social media platforms to disseminate these ideas through pictures and videos that clearly target the work of civil society organisations in Iraq. These campaigns target civil society organisations in general, but women human rights defenders and those working on feminist issues are particularly affected.

In Syria, an online defamation campaign has recently targeted [Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji](#), a woman human rights defender. We specifically ask you to remove all pictures, hate speech and other defamatory content which is circulating on your platforms and is used to defame Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji. This defamation campaign is having tangible harmful consequences on the lives of the people working with her, as well as the lives of her family members.

As documented by [Front Line Defenders](#) and the [Gulf Centre For Human Rights](#), the campaign against Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji began on 4 July 2023. Anonymous Facebook pages personally targeted her with obscene language because of her call to end discrimination against women, and these defamation campaigns have continued to this day. Between 11 and 18 July 2023, the campaign expanded to include both the Telegram and WhatsApp applications.

On 21 July 2023, the imam of a mosque in the countryside of the Idlib Governorate directly incited action against the woman human rights defender and against her organisation, Equity and Empowerment (E&E), in front of more than 200 worshipers. The sermon was widely published on WhatsApp, putting Hiba Ezzideen Al-Hajji's life and the lives of her team in imminent danger.

Similarly, in Jordan, woman human rights defender [Hala Ahed](#) was [targeted](#) by a large-scale defamation campaign on Twitter following the announcement on 13 June 2023 of a training course that she was facilitating on the concept of feminism. Likewise, the online campaign

against the woman human rights defender manifested in offline harm and threats.

The campaign against Hala Ahed expanded rapidly on Twitter and became organised and systematic with hundreds of accounts involved. While some anonymous Twitter accounts were used solely for the purpose of posting defamatory content about the woman human rights defender, multiple defamatory photos and videos were published by famous content creators and religious and political leaders to discredit her work, and this content was widely circulated. The content included disinformation about the woman human rights defender's work with accusations of blasphemy and incitement to revoke Hala Ahed's nationality. The defamation campaign was a "trending topic" on Twitter in Jordan for days, with a growth that was supported by the use of hashtags which ultimately led to attention across the region.

The heinous tactics used in the above mentioned campaigns against the women human rights defenders aim at inciting further hatred and violence against them, all in an effort to undermine their human rights work. Those behind these campaigns have used measures such as death threats, harassment and incitements against them and their families, along with doxing, deep fakes, threats of rape and sexual slurs.

Despite their scale and severity and the reporting of these cases via the available direct channels by several of the undersigned organisations and by E&E to the different social media platforms, these attacks, which put the lives of the women human rights defenders and their families at risk, are trivialised and not taken seriously by your companies.

To mitigate the impact of such human rights violations, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises require companies to develop human rights and due diligence policies to protect the rights of their customers and other affected individuals. Your platforms must put human rights first and work seriously to eradicate hate speech targeting women human rights defenders and develop an effective mechanism, in cooperation with civil society organisations, to stop these attacks in an immediate and effective manner.

As social media companies, you have a responsibility to ensure that you are not contributing to violent and dangerous campaigns, or allowing users to utilise your platforms to incite targeted violence against women human rights defenders which puts their lives at serious risk. It is of paramount urgency that Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram immediately remove these pictures and messages and take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of your users.

Our organisations stand ready to assist with identifying the pictures and messages in question and the accounts on which they are hosted or shared.

Signatures:

- Front Line Defenders
- SMEX
- Access Now
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
- INSM Foundation for Digital Rights