



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SAFE ABORTION

Right and Access for Women to Safe Abortion in the Middle East & North Africa (RAWSA MENA)

Capacity Building and Regional Advocacy Strategy on Safe Abortion:

A Meeting to Launch the RAWSA MENA Regional Network

Hotel Le Palace, Gammarth-Tunis, Tunisia, 15-16 April 2019

On the 15-16 April 2019, the Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh, Tunisia, with funding from the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion and the Safe Abortion Action Fund, brought together 17 NGO representatives from eight countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to discuss regional advocacy strategy on safe abortion and capacity building.

Opening the meeting, the keynote speaker, Professor Hafidha Chekir, Vice-President of International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), called for the mobilization of the community around the right to abortion, in order to achieve safe, legal abortion in the MENA countries. This meeting, she said, will start the discussion and from the first, it should try to build a network that will not only advocate for safe, legal abortion in the region but also call for States to ensure the law is changed and implemented in women's favour and for healthcare systems to ensure access to safe abortion for every woman in the region who needs it. The regional network can work to create an enabling environment that will help to make all this possible.

The 15 participants from the MENA region came from: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, and Tunisia. In addition, two representatives of the International Campaign from London attended. Apologies with expressions of interest in participating in the future were received from invitees from Egypt and Sudan.

The meeting was held in English when in plenary and in French and Arabic when it broke into two groups for workshops.

Agenda

The agenda over the two days was as follows:

- Opening and welcome. Participants introduce themselves.
- Introduction to the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion and existing regional networks.
- Overall picture of achievements on abortion legislation in the MENA region to date.
- Presentations on key aspects of the legal, health service and advocacy landscape on abortion (safe and unsafe) in each country represented.
- Initiating a regional network in the MENA region – what does it mean, needs assessment, for whom, to accomplish what?
 - What kind of regional network?
 - Who will be the members?
 - What would it require?
- Ensuring that young people and/or youth groups are involved
- Vision, aims and objectives of a MENA regional network

- How strong is the existing national advocacy work and campaigning for safe abortion? Is it effective? What are the gaps? Who needs to be involved at national and regional level?
- In what ways can a regional network support the different national actors in the field?
- Inviting others to join the network – criteria
- Who will host the network? Proposal from Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh to host.
- How will it be funded? Opportunities for funding.
- Strategies and initiatives, key messages, communication between members.
- Roles and responsibilities of members.
- Networking and working with strategic partners – UN agencies, government, policy makers, human rights groups and bodies, health professionals and women's organizations.
- Way forward, road map, next meeting.

Expectations of the participants

Although the specific situation of each country in the region varies, participants expressed similar expectations: the opportunity to benefit from shared strategic information from neighbouring countries; the conduct of joint advocacy activities, including campaigns; and to keep updated on major international and regional events relevant to the cause.

Building capacity was also mentioned as a desired objective for the region, as not all the countries were at the same level with regard to civil society capacity to launch, develop and manage argument and dialogue with women and the public on abortion. Participants therefore had high expectations for the establishment of a regional platform, which would support their advocacy efforts at the country level.

Collectively, the members of the regional network could ensure that the issue of the right to safe abortion becomes a subject of country debate and is placed on the public agenda. Another expectation was the development of a common language and terminology (even a glossary) to use at the country level. Interaction with the media, politicians and law makers were also considered a priority.

Regional overview on abortion law and policy

Existing laws are mostly based on the colonial Napoleonic Criminal Code, incorporated into national laws at independence in the early 1960s and never revised thereafter. Today, 80% of women of childbearing age in the MENA region live in countries with restrictive abortion laws. In 55% of the countries, abortion is not permitted for any reason except risk to the woman's life, and in 28% of the countries abortion is also legal to preserve the woman's physical and/or mental health, but this is not interpreted liberally. Abortion is permitted in only two countries (Tunisia and Turkey) without legal restriction in the first 12 weeks. However, in Tunisia today, and even more so in Turkey, it has become harder to find a safe abortion provider.

Discussion of law reform has taken place in the past several years in Morocco and a group of parliamentarians in Algeria have tried to introduce some limited grounds for legal abortion, but no country in the MENA region has so far modified its restrictive law. Although health professionals, pharmacists and anyone who helps a woman to have an abortion can be prosecuted, prosecutions and imprisonment are rare. Because abortion is a necessity for women, the laws are not respected, and abortion is usually accessible and safe for women who can afford the high costs of (mainly private) medical provision. Unsafe abortion almost exclusively affects poor, young and marginalised women. In addition, taboos and the negative attitudes of providers, politicians and society in general, including the media, create other important barriers to accessing safe services. Finally, in some countries, any form of advocacy and campaigning may be limited because the laws prohibit it.

A more detailed report on abortion law and policy in the region will be prepared and circulated, based on presentations of participants at the meeting.

The RAWSA MENA Network

Hosting the Network

Following a discussion of which NGO at the meeting was willing and able to host the network, it was agreed that Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh (GTBC), would host the network. They have the advantage of being in Tunisia, where abortion is permitted, and also the infrastructure and experience of organizing international meetings as well as giving trainings on safe abortion provision.

The Network Charter

Vision

Every woman in the region who seeks an abortion has the right to a safe, legal, accessible, free abortion at the point of care. Unsafe abortions should become history. There should be universal access to safe, legal abortion for every woman who requests it without discrimination or stigma. Access must be ensured through a fully functioning and resourced health care system with well-trained health care providers. All barriers – whether cultural or financial – should be removed.

Aim

To support members' activities and advocacy for the right to safe abortion in their countries and across the MENA region.

Objectives

- Promote the right to safe abortion in the context of sexual rights.
- Increase public awareness of the need for safe abortion and the extent of unsafe abortion in the region.
- Challenge restrictive laws and expose their consequences.
- Share information and knowledge about good quality abortion services and promote training for providers.
- Act as a solidarity network: make joint statements in cases of crisis, ensuring support and writing and circulating petitions when needed.
- Build capacity in advocacy work.
- Identify, create and share opportunities for training, research and funding.
- Harmonize and unify lobbying activities among the countries in the region, e.g. to include indicators of safe abortion in national plans and national reporting, and monitor existing data.
- Participate in work on these issues at the United Nations and at strategic international meetings.

Membership

Members can include national and local NGOs and organizations, women's groups and collectives (formal and informal), and individuals. Members must be willing to commit themselves to the vision, aims, objectives and values of the Network and to take action in support of the right to safe abortion. They must be determined to remain independent from any pressure group (whether religious, political or other). Anyone wishing to join the Network must be proposed by an existing member and confirm that they agree with the terms of the Network's Charter.

Activities

Immediate activities

- GBTC as the coordinator of the Network to form a steering committee, which will consist of focal points nominated by members.
- Members to appoint a focal point for their group to liaise with GBTC.
- GBTC to make a mailing list of members and focal points and create a secure Internet space to post and share information and documents.
- GBTC to develop and circulate a six-month workplan to the end of September 2019.
- Stable funding should be sought to support the work of GBTC, which is critical to success.

- Announce the Network nationally, regionally and through the newsletter of the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion.

Activities in the coming 1-2 years

Communications and presence

- Create a logo.
- Create a social media presence/platform (Facebook/Twitter) to promote the network.
- Develop a website to share information.

Membership and partnership

- Agree criteria for membership of the network with the meeting participants.
- Do a mapping of members and of potential members in the region, in consultation with members and other key stakeholders.
- Contact groups identified in the mapping who might be interested in joining; invite them to join.
- Issue information in French and Arabic (as well as English) for broad dissemination.
- Identify in each country potential allies and key stakeholders and find ways to work together with them.
- Become a regional affiliate of the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion (ICWRSA).
- Pay attention to the security of members.

Fundraising

- Create a budget and fundraise for the regional network – for staff, meetings, publications and research – with the support of the International Campaign and other donors who have expressed interest.

Advocacy and other activities

- Give solidarity to members when requested, e.g. circulate petitions, send out press releases, ensure support by writing statements.
- Explore ways to build members' capacity to advocate for safe, legal abortion at their request.
- Learn from and share information about success stories: collect activist history from each country in the region and from other regions.
- Identify, create and share opportunities for training, research and funding.
- Harmonize and unify lobbying activities among members regionally. Create support groups for pressure and lobbying at strategic international meetings.
- Strategize on and prepare a collective position for international meetings, fora, events.
- Ask ICWRSA to prepare a history of its regional network affiliates to serve as an informational and capacity-building tool.
- Call a second regional meeting (within a year of the first).

Close of the meeting

Certificates of attendance were given out and the Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh gave thanks to the participants. They recognized the tremendous work that had been done and the consensus that had been built over the two days, and said how rewarding it was for them to host the meeting and to see its results. The participants all agreed!!

12 July 2019

This report will be translated into French and Arabic.

Participants



Name	Group	Country
Zineb Allouache	Activist	Algeria
Ounnoughene Ouerdia	Association de Développement	Algeria
Shaimaa Aly	NGO Kenana	Egypt
Zhiman Rasheed Hussein	Nujeen NFDO	Iraq
Ibtissem Lachgar	Mouvement alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles (MALI)	Morocco
Majda Akazouz	Individual	Morocco
Rola Yasmine	The A Project	Lebanon
Halima Balushi	Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Development Hub	Oman
Sahar Hassan	Individual	Palestine
Ammal Awadallah	Palestinian Family Planning & Protection Association (PFPPA)	Palestine
Hafidha Chekir	International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)	Tunisia
Amira Yaakoubi	Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh (GTBC)	Tunisia
Selma Hajri	Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh	Tunisia
Hedia Belhadj	Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh	Tunisia
Emma Hassairi	Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD)	Tunisia
Marge Berer	International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion	United Kingdom
Elise Denis-Ramirez	International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion	United Kingdom