



AN OPEN LETTER TO FACEBOOK: ON THE HATE SPEECH AGAINST THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

We the signers below are concerned about the increase of hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community on Facebook. And we pledge the Facebook administration in the MENA region to halt the use of its platform for spreading bigotry and hate, especially among the Arabic speaking users.

Background:

The systematic campaigns spreading hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community in Egypt have increased once again in the past few days, following the death of the queer, feminist, human right activist Sarah Hegazy.

Three years ago, while attending a Mashro' Leila concert in Cairo, Sarah waved the rainbow flag, which led to her arrest by the Egyptian authorities. Sarah was accused of "joining an illegal group founded to obstruct the constitutional laws in the country." During her arrest, Sarah was subject to various forms of abuse, discrimination and torture. Eventually, the young activist fled the country to seek asylum in Canada, but that didn't stop the messages of hate she received every day on social media accounts, which made her decide to take her own life on Saturday, June 13th, 2020.

Social Media as an Incitement Tool:

The recent development of social media platforms and digital communications has led to a gruesome spread of hate speech on the internet, which requires a tremendous effort towards organizing and finding ways to tackle all forms of digital incitement and bigotry.

Social media is being used as a tool to share hatred, bullying, discrimination and violence, particularly by those with homophobia launching intense campaigns of intimidation, threat and blackmailing.

People pertaining to more than on minority groups are also more often targeted by hate speech campaigns.

Reporting Hate Speech:

In its community standards, Facebook assures that "it does not allow hate speech because it creates an environment of intimidation and exclusion and in some cases may promote real-world violence."

Item 12 defines hate speech as "a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability."

And although the MENA LGBTQI+ community has been reporting thousands of Arabic hate speech posts targeting women in general, and people of different sexual orientations in particular--most of these reports were declined because the content "did not contradict the Facebook community standards."

This is due to the lax implementation of effective anti-hate speech policies to manage the platform in our region, which makes the platform unsafe for sexual minorities. While the right to equal treatment and non-discrimination is a fundamental right enshrined in international treaties and covenants, it should be ensured that a mechanism exists to ensure that complaints from victims of hate speech in the region are examined without violating freedom of expression.

The Freedom of Speech and Hate Speech:

Hate speech does not have a specific definition within the international human rights laws, yet it is a term used to describe any discourse considered negative and threatening to social stability and peace. The term includes all forms of expression that incite discrimination, hostility and violence.

Usually, inciters tend to claim hate speech to be freedom of expression, but they shouldn't be given the right to disrespect and discriminate against others. Freedom of speech comes with a great responsibility and respect to people's fundamental rights. Every person is entitled to be protected from bigotry and violence. Thus, the use of abusive language and the incitement of discrimination and hostility cannot be counted as freedom of speech.

Hate Speech and International Laws:

The universal declaration of human rights, article 2 ensures that everyone is "**entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or another status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.**"

And in the international covenant on civil and political rights, paragraph 2 of article 18 reassures that "**No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.**" and in paragraph 3 that "**Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.**"

Based on what the recent campaigns of hatred experienced by the LGBT community in the Middle East and North Africa; campaigns that continue to this day despite the new policies announced by Mr. Zuckerberg on Friday, June 26th, regarding "dealing with any publication that aims to threaten the physical and health safety of building people based on origin, race, nationality, social class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrants, or anyone else, and the assurance that they will be banned";

We therefore ask the Facebook administration to:

- Keep holding meetings with members and activists of the LGBTQI+ community in the MENA region to discuss the issue at hand, convoke an emergency meeting, and assure an active and regular follow up on the strategies and outcomes of those meeting,
- Activate a mechanism to individually investigate all cases of hate speech, specifically targeting sexual orientation / Gender identity, in accordance with specific criteria that respect privacy and without prejudice to the right to expression;
- Apply the same policies applied by the administration for the safety of the LGBTQI+ worldwide, and that hate speech is being monitored, addressed and taken strict measures against;
- Train staff and raise awareness on issues related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and minorities' right (specifically the LGBTQI+ community);
- Appointment of an expert concerned with combating hate speech within the Facebook Wise Council Committee, as well as a representative of LGBTQI+ people from our region; these people should obviously be convinced of the universality of human and minority rights.

If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your

consideration,

Signatories:

- **ANKH association (Arab Network for Knowledge about Human rights) -Euro-Mediterranean region**
- **ATYAF Collective for sexual and gender diversity -Morocco**
- **Barra El Sour Initiative - Egypt**
- **Bedayaa Organization - Egypt and Sudan**
- **Collective SAQFE - Morocco**
- **Committee For Justice - Geneva**
- **HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement - MENA region**
- **Il Grande Colibrì - Intercultural LGBTQIA Association - Italia**
- **Initiative franco-égyptienne pour les droits les libertés - France**
- **Mawjoudin Initiative for Equality - Tunisia**
- **Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity - Egypt and Sudan**
- **Missing letter T - Egypt**
- **Nassawiyat - Morocco**
- **LGBT Arabic - Syria**
- **Philomela - Russia**
- **Planet Ally - Australia**
- **Rainbow-street- USA**
- **Solidarity with Egypt LGBTQ+ - Egypt**
- **The Egyptian Human Rights Forum - Egypt**
- **The medical and psychosociale village - Morocco**
- **Tunisian association defending individual liberties - Tunisia**
- **Women's center for guidance and legal awareness -Egypt**