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Changing the Story

Workplace safeguarding in the MENA context

Every day, as she gets ready for work, Rabab has to be prepared for a lot of disruptive situations: the terrible traffic, the dissatisfied customers, the dysfunctional copy machine – and her manager inappropriately touching her under the meeting table while appropriating her efforts and accomplishments!

Do you find Rabab’s story shocking? Not really!

Abusive practices in the workplace have become so normalised to the point that, more often than not, they are part of our daily lives — from exploitation to assault, harassment, bullying, and discrimination, in all their diverse forms. And if you dare to complain, you should be ready to face blame, victimisation, and/or accusations of how you terribly misunderstood an “innocent” situation.

Too many employees are facing the same realities as Rabab in the workplace today – realities that prevent them from speaking out, from accessing justice, and from feeling safe at work.

In this publication, we want to give you a glimpse into the concept of “safeguarding” and how it can be exercised efficiently. In sharing this information, we hope to pave a path to start rewriting Rabab’s story and the many other examples of normalised abusive practices in the workplace, within the context of the MENA region.
What is Organisational Safeguarding?

There is a vast array of literature about the concept of safeguarding, mostly built around ideas of “protection” and “prevention”. However, we need to look at this complex notion more holistically, in a manner that does not take away the agency of the victim or aspire for a utopian world where bad things would simply cease to happen. After all, prevention of abuse is a “myth”, as we are all capable of and disposed to committing such practices, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

What we can and should – realistically – aspire for is an environment where what qualifies as an abusive practice is clear and known to everyone, the processes for accountability are accessible and effective, and there is a collective and individual will and intent to deal with such issues.

Along these lines, organisational safeguarding can be defined as an umbrella term, which includes:

1. the provision of tangible processes and procedures
2. the nurturing of an intent and sense of individual and collective accountability
3. the presence of dedicated organisational cultures of respect

In order to ensure a “safe environment” where problems of workplace abuse can be properly addressed.
Shaking Things Up:

How to approach organisational safeguarding efficiently in the MENA region?

Just like the plethora of definitions, there are plenty of safeguarding frameworks and toolkits out there. However, when we look deep enough, we will find significant gaps in traditional policies, especially when applied outside their Western contexts.

This is why WILPF and CTDC’s safeguarding toolkit for the MENA region sought an alternative approach – one that is based on:
One main barrier to properly addressing abuse is how traditional policies tend to reproduce flawed binary notions and oppositions — men vs. women, victim vs. aggressor, etc. Such an approach overlooks the intersecting systems of oppression that manifest within an organisation, and in our lives in general — such as race, class, physical appearance and abilities, faith, nationality, citizenship status, and more. This narrow binary lens also overlooks the overlapping and interconnected forms of power within oppressive systems. For instance, it suggests that a woman is always the vulnerable party incapable of perpetrating abusive practices, thus ignoring other forms of power beyond gender binarism. That is why effective “safeguarding” should be intersectional and avoid blind binaries.

Another barrier that stands in the way of appropriate safeguarding practices in the “global south” is the myth of cultural exceptionalism — the claim that harassment is an inherent part of our culture. This is one of many examples of flawed logic that can be explained by another dominating binary approach that portrays “the North as the haven, versus the South” as backward, as well as a legacy of research reinforcing colonial narratives. Such a discourse often leads to justifying the abuse, and/or setting inapplicable standards and solutions. In contrast, a decolonial approach seeks to reclaim our agency for change, each in their own context. A decolonial lens is one of self-reflection, which encourages change from within, by looking into Indigenous knowledge, and contextualised experiences.

A third pillar for an effective safeguarding framework is to follow a multidisciplinary approach; one that does not compartmentalise the complex phenomenon. An interdisciplinary approach to safeguarding would draw on literature from the fields of sociology, organisational and social psychology, anthropology, moral philosophy, feminist philosophy, managerial and organisational sciences, finance, linguistics, sociolinguistics, education sciences, and ecology. This way, it allows for a holistic perspective that again properly considers all the dimensions of the problem.

Intersectionality, decoloniality, and interdisciplinarity — as explained earlier — make up a comprehensive feminist framework, geared towards restorative and societal justice. For a most effective safeguarding approach, a feminist framework also encompasses feminist politics of care to address the wider structural and normative reasons for the problem. And it nurtures the practice of emotional responsibility, to avoid intentional or unintentional biases and prejudices.

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**Take Note:** *It is a common mistake to point out the MENA culture as THE barrier to appropriate responses to abusive practices in the MENA context.*

This myth of “cultural exceptionalism” overshadows the actual structural problems that hinder the creation and/or enforcement of efficient safeguarding mechanisms, namely the political and legal frameworks in the region. (For example, legal bias against certain groups; static colonial penal codes on which a lot of flawed laws are built; power politics and the domination of rule of law by different factions …)
Changing the Story

Where to start?

It is important to acknowledge that violence and abuse are a social phenomenon, and a collective/universal problem. Hence, we are all complicit in reproducing and recreating this “abuse” in one way or another; and we all have a responsibility to nurture a culture of change in our organisations and within ourselves.

But where to start?

Taking into account all of the above gaps in traditional safeguarding frameworks and the specificities of the MENA region, on the next pages there are a few key points to get the ball rolling:
1. When there’s no name for a problem ... you can’t solve it

The very first step to properly address violence and abusive practices is to be able to name them, identify them as they occur, and describe them in case of reporting. Nevertheless, there are various limitations in existing terminologies, and even more when they are exported to Arabic-speaking countries.

*What is exploitation, assault, harassment, or bullying?*
*What are the different forms of abuse that fall under each of these terms?*
*And how do they overlap or stand out?*

Without the answers to these questions, confusion will persist about which practices are acceptable and which are completely unacceptable, and the victim/survivor will never be able to pinpoint the materiality of the abuse they are subject to. This contributes to impunity and reinforces the continuation of these “nameless” practices.

WILPF and CTDC’s toolkit has made progress towards defining and conceptualising different types of workplace abuse by deconstructing existing terminology for the abusive practices prevalent in civil society organisations (CSOs) and grassroots initiatives. The below definitions can be used as a starting point. However, the most efficient definitions can only be identified among and by the members of each organisation, by reflecting on their individual experiences and perspectives.

One example of these terminology problems is when news circulated that the director of an organisation in Lebanon was “a harasser.” After the board of directors took measures and investigated the matter, however, it found that they were not guilty of sexual harassment. According to the common terms and definitions in the field, most of the practices that survivors described as harassment should have been classified as bullying.
Exploitation occurs when a person or group of people uses their power, status, or positionality for personal benefit through the use of force, duress, violence, coercion, deceit, or trickery that causes direct or indirect harm to another person or group of people, or to public interest.

Exploitation

- Sexual exploitation
- Emotional exploitation
- Exploitation of labour and economic resources

Assault is any actual or attempted aggressive act that deliberately violates or threatens the physical space of an individual or group. It is often believed that assault is limited to direct physical violations only, but as a concept it also includes indirect infringement on personal space.

Assault

- Sexual assault
- Physical assault
- Verbal assault

Harassment/Taharrush is a group of unwanted abusive practices that are threatening to the recipient by their very nature. Unlike bullying, harassment need not be targeted. It may take place directly or indirectly, so that it creates an atmosphere of distress, heaviness, and insecurity.

Harassment/Taharrush

- Physical harassment
- Verbal harassment
- Sexual harassment

Bullying is any abusive practice or behaviour directed by an individual or group of individuals towards another individual or group. Bullying can be considered a form of harassment that is more frequent and systematic. It aims not only to violate the receiving party, but also to belittle them. Bullying is characterised by being targeted at a person or group of people, while harassment need not be targeted.

Bullying

- Physical bullying
- Verbal bullying
- Indirect bullying
- Intellectual bullying
- Cyberbullying
- Feminist bullying

Now let’s try to apply this simple conceptualisation of “abusive practices”: **Quiz:** Getting The Terminology Right
2. Power-analysis and self-reflection are essential processes to be able to respond to abusive practices

Let’s first agree that no one in the world does not have power, the forms of which manifest in very different ways and are highly intersectional. Moreover, in order to understand and respond to abusive practices, we need to know that they occur anytime power (or authority, which we do NOT all have) is misused.

Hence, it is important to look beyond the materialistic forms of power or those derived from positions and titles, and to understand the complexities, entanglements, and various non-traditional and non-physical manifestations of power.

Analysing power in such a holistic way enables organisations to a) reduce the potential for any form of power to be misused; and b) understand an aggressor’s context and background to better plan actions against them. Moreover, c) by analysing our own source of power, we can overcome our own prejudices and projections.

Shall we try to give a name to some of these diverse forms of “powers”?

Quiz: Types of Power
3. Accountability frameworks have to be holistic, integrated, and mainstreamed at all levels

Let’s agree on one more thing: Collective accountability falls on all of our shoulders. In other words, everyone who would have been able to prevent the incident from happening is part of the accountability chain. Therefore, while noting that accountability is to be seen vis-a-vis the power-structure analysis and positionalities mentioned above, we must not only think about the responsibility that falls on individuals (i.e., punishing the perpetrator), but also about that which falls on us as individuals and on all levels of oppressive systems.

Here, accountability becomes an ongoing process within the organisation, in a way that considers each and every one of us responsible for the incident to varying degrees and considers occurrences as a mere reflection of societies formed by us as individual people.

“...This approach to accountability disrupts the dominant carceral logic that reserves punitive and shaming responses for groups of people designated as the ‘bad people’ while offering everyone else immunity from any responsibility for wrongdoing. Instead, it calls for the recognition that all of us are capable of harm and complicity in systemic oppression, and so we all could practice taking accountability for our involvement in the perpetuation of oppression and violence.”

Ann Russo, Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power

At the level of organisations, movements, and initiatives, this means that we have to institute accountability frameworks at every level, from decision-making to finances, without neglecting any element of organisational development. This also includes the organisation’s culture of behavioural and ethical standards, which are subject to various and disparate practices and understandings.
4. Complaint response mechanisms (CRMs) need to be accessible, secure, predictable, and tailored

There are some basic procedures and principles that organisations should have in place for responding to employee complaints.

Here are some essential standards to keep in mind:

01. Reporting channels should be responsive and accessible. In addition to accepting written complaints, organisations could also encourage the use of audio visual materials, develop materials in Braille or in sign language, and so on.

02. Secure reporting mechanisms should address potential risks and dangers for all parties and include means for protection against harm (i.e., confidentiality).

03. Before taking any steps to respond, it is necessary to make sure that the complainants or victims agree with informed consent on the actions that should be taken and are aware of both the steps that will take place and any ensuing risks.

04. Awareness of and attention to affect and impact on victims is key to centring CRMs on survivors.

05. Investigations of exploitation, abuse, and harassment must respect the privacy of the victims and the perpetrator, and limit the spread of information beyond those authorised to conduct the investigation.

06. Community members should know the reporting mechanism, contribute to its development, and have sufficient information on how to access and use it.

It is also worth noting that complaint response mechanisms should take into account those who are most marginalised, such as refugees, non-normative individuals, and immigrants.
Beware

There is no one-size-fits-all or permanent solution to address abusive practices

It is important to always remember that accountability and safeguarding systems must be adapted to different contexts and workplaces, consider political, economic, and social factors, and take into account the natural, legal, technological, and relational environment for which they are being created. Moreover, we should be aware that the process of developing policies and procedures is a long term commitment, which will never yield a final or complete product.

If we keep this in mind, and start approaching “safeguarding” in a more efficient way following the aforementioned guides and tips, we might eventually be able to rewrite Rabab’s story!

To learn more about safeguarding practices and how to adapt and apply them in different organisational contexts, read ‘Organisational Safeguarding Best Practices and Procedures: A Toolkit Towards Transnational Intersectional Feminist Accountability Frameworks to Respond to Exploitation, Assault, Abuse, Harassment, and Bullying’.
This publication seeks to provide an accessible and functional introduction to the concept of “safeguarding” in the context of the MENA region. It further offers a few key points to start building an adequate safeguarding framework that addresses abusive practices in the workplace.

In sharing this information, we hope to pave a path to start addressing many examples of normalised abusive practices in the workplace, within the MENA context.