

Benefits and Barriers
Women's Access to Mobile Tech in Iran and the MENA Region
Insights from a Panel Event Associated with the 2023 United Nations Commission on
the Status of Women (NGO CSW67)

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While digital technology discussions in the media are trending on whether or not AI can read our minds or develop consciousness, other discussions about mobile tech are focused on more immediate and practical concerns. In March 2023, for example, women's rights advocates from throughout the world converged in New York City for the annual two-week session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, where this year's topic focused on digital strategies for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

As an advisory board member of the Women's Freedom Forum (WFF), an organization that researches and informs about women's rights and associated issues in the MENA region and neighboring countries, I joined five of my fellow members on a panel associated with the UN Women event. The WFF is a United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)-accredited NGO that has been providing educational panels for U.S. Congress and the public for 28 years.

Before hearing from our Iranian-born panelists, I reported on the 17% gender gap in mobile internet use in the MENA region (Groupe Speciale Mobile Association, 2023). Closing this gap will mean more women can access education and training and use money apps to take care of their families, pay bills, take payments for their products, save money, access credit, make purchases, and in some countries receive government

benefits for which they are eligible. Mobile money accounts have dramatically improved women's lives in these ways.

While 60% of women in the MENA region do go online via their phones (Shanahan, 2022), the barriers that prevent others typically fall into three categories: lack of access, illiteracy and/or lack of digital skills, and safety concerns.

In terms of access, the cost of phones is a primary barrier, along with family disapproval of women's mobile phone use. In regions with conservative social norms, male relatives are the gatekeepers to the internet. Particularly in rural areas, they prohibit or monitor young women's mobile access, according to one research group, to "control their communication with men outside the immediate family" (Croxson & Wilson, 2018, p. 18). A woman's photo on her social media account can be considered a threat to family privacy, as one woman from rural Jordan stated in a report: "I am not even allowed to put my own picture on WhatsApp as some people can save that image" (Croxson & Wilson, 2018, p. 14). Another finding by the same authors revealed that public disapproval also factors in, such as men behind the counter at kiosks refusing to sell phone cards to women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on these social barriers, however. When schooling went online, families with children were pressured to gain access to the internet, and this was considered a socially acceptable use of mobile tech for mothers to use to help their children (Carboni et al., 2021).

Difficulties with reading and writing are another common obstacle to women's mobile internet use, followed by safety concerns (Shanahan, 2022). Threats to safety, as shown in Table 1, include being threatened and harassed by phone calls from strangers due to their phone numbers being shared, in some cases by male sales agents who retain them when selling women phone credits. Women then receive sexually harassing calls and messages, face social media harassment, and fear they may be exposed to explicit or inappropriate images or videos.

Table 1*Categories of Mobile-Related Safety Concerns of Women in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*

Physical World	Voice and SMS	Online
Physical-world threats resulting from owning or using a mobile phone	Threats experienced via voice calls and SMS	Threats experienced via mobile internet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of phone theft • Harassment when visiting points of sale and subsequent misuse of women’s mobile numbers after they share them to purchase credits • Societal disapproval or harassment as a result of using a mobile phone in public • Domestic violence triggered by using a mobile phone at home (e.g., associated with costs, being seen as not fulfilling household duties, having ‘inappropriate’ contact with men) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwanted calls or messages (e.g., due to their mobile numbers being misused by agents or customers at points of sale after purchasing credits) • Sexually harassing calls or messages • Threatening calls or messages • Scam calls and messages • Unwanted and harassing marketing calls and messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online/social media harassment or bullying • Online stalking or use of spyware • Misuse of personal data or images • Identity theft • Fraud • Online scams/viruses • Exposure to content deemed explicit or inappropriate

Note: Adapted from “Connected Women: A Framework to Understand Women’s Mobile-Related Safety Concerns in Low- and Middle-Income Countries,” by H. Croxson and A. Wilson, 2018, Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA)., p. 16 (https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/A-framework-to-understand-women%E2%80%99s-mobile-report_march.pdf). Copyright 2018 by Groupe Speciale Mobile Association.

Phone carriers and women's advocacy programs tackle some of these safety concerns by promoting the hiring of women in point-of-sale shops and kiosks to keep women's numbers safe and teaching users how to download caller ID and other safety apps (Croxon & Wilson, 2018). Still, the internet can be a dangerous place for women and girls.

In Egypt, young women have been arrested for posting videos of themselves on TikTok (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Even though they are fully clothed, they are accused of "breaching public morals" and given prison sentences. In 2022, a 17-year-old Egyptian girl committed suicide after she was "blackmailed with digitally altered photos" by two young men after she rejected their sexual advances (Aljazeera, 2022, para. 21). Tragically, online attacks also go with the job for women journalists in the MENA region. Faranak Amidi, who grew up in Iran and works for BBC Persian, said that "bullying in forms of belittling, sexually degrading comments, rape threats and such are an almost daily experience" (Mierzejewska, 2020, para. 24).

Turning to our panelists' unique insights about social media's impact on women in the MENA region, our presentations discussed the power of images, real-time video, digital business support, and virtual medical services.

Hannah Toutouchi

An Iranian American living in Chicago who works in product innovation and marketing, Hannah Toutouchi described the power of images via social media in awakening the world to the plight of women in Iran. In September 2022, the arrest of Mahsa Amini for violating Iran's headscarf law and subsequent death in police custody set off protests across the country. Amini's photograph became the symbol of the government's brutal repression.

"I know the power of a symbol—an image or concept that badges meaning and value to something big and connects you to it," Toutouchi said. "Mahsa Amini and the mandatory headscarf symbolized decades of oppression and catapulted an uprising that, through technology and social media, was broadcast on the global stage." Images ignite action. Amini's picture launched protests throughout Iran as well as 28 other countries

and compelled the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to remove Iran for the remainder of its four-year term ending in 2026.

Mitra Samani

Human Rights activist Mitra Samani offered a survivor's perspective on the impact of social media. When she was arrested by Iranian security forces as a teenager in 1981 for being outspoken about the government's women's rights violations, there was no Instagram to shout her story to the world. She spent four hellish years in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, where she was repeatedly tortured and raped. Now, she explained, digital technology can report events and change outcomes, as happened during an incident in Tehran last October.

Videos posted by people who live near Evin Prison took videos of fire, multiple explosions, and continuous gunfire raging inside the prison. "Those videos quickly went viral on social media," Samani said. "Many concerned families and protesters gathered near the prison chanting slogans and clashing with the security forces. Forty prisoners were killed during that attack and more than sixty were injured. Had the people of Tehran not rushed towards Evin prison on that Saturday night, many more prisoners would have been killed by the IRGC forces." When media outlets announced the news they were picking up on social media, the government put out the fire. "That was the power of social media that saved so many lives that night," she said.

Zahra Amanpour

Zahra Amanpour, a business advisor and activist who was born in Iran, explained how digital technology has created online networking groups and funding platforms for women entrepreneurs who are typically left out of traditional routes to capital and networking. Referring to the threat this financial empowerment poses to the leadership of Iran, she said, "After all, what is more scary to a system built on the destruction of creativity and the consolidation of wealth and power than an emboldened woman entrepreneur?"

Mandy Sanghera

While collaborating with organizations around the world to evacuate Afghans for the past 18 months, London-based activist and philanthropist Mandy Sanghera learned

about events by way of text messages. “One of the shocking things I was hearing on text messages every single day,” she said, “was that many women slipped over the border to Iran to seek safety, and it’s become even worse for them. Many have been forced into prostitution and they can’t get out.” Sanghera was adamant that we share what we know through our social media channels to raise awareness and keep up the momentum of exposing violations against women.

Ashraf Zadshir

Ashraf Zadshir, MD, an FM-HIV specialist and associate professor in California who fled Iran as a teenager to avoid prosecution for taking part in university protests, shared stories of virtual medical assistance that helped women in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. “The pandemic was even more of a tragedy in Iran due to mismanagement, and considering the gender discrimination institutionalized by the government, women who were heads of household and/or worked in healthcare were most severely affected,” she said.

Advanced technology and digitalization allowed Dr. Zadshir and other doctors to form a network of specialists who were always on call for international help. “I made educational video clips and shared them with people and also created protocols for physicians in Iran to use,” she said. “We offered free remote medical consultations, and I received calls and text messages on a daily basis. We were able to help hundreds of people.”

Serving on the panel with these women was enlightening, inspiring, and a reminder that as we rush headlong into the age of AI we must not forget the irreplaceable wisdom that comes from experience and the efforts of those who use digital tech as a force for good—particularly in regions where the oppression of women is pervasive and paramount.

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