



Digital Courage

How Women in Shabwa Faced Societal
Silence in the Face of Cyber Extortion





She would often close her phone in confusion, hiding the signs of anxiety behind a forced smile, fearing that someone might discover what was happening behind the screen. Caught between the fear of scandal and a heavy silence, thousands of girls in Shabwa chose to suffer in silence. There was no one to listen, or even to want to listen. But what if a woman decided not to be silent? And what if this decision turned into a comprehensive community protection project?

In the city of A'taq, the capital of Shabwa Governorate, where social traditions impose strict boundaries on women and envelop issues of digital violence in secrecy, even though social media has become part of daily life, discussions about cyber extortion remained limited. The victim often found herself in a position of accusation instead of being afforded protection, as she was asked to remain silent for the sake of "reputation".

From here, the **"Women's Development Association"** chose to break this silence and embark on a journey to build a new awareness. The association led a qualitative transformation in understanding and protecting women from cyber extortion, supported by training and capacity-building from Resonate! Yemen as part of the "Governance of Civil Society Organizations Working in the Field of Human Rights" project, with support and funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.



*Beginning

When We Faced Fear with Knowledge

- > In the face of this complex reality, the idea of intervention from the field began. "We noticed through our communication with women in our programs that there are painful stories that keep repeating," says **Dhikra Al-Awlaqi, the Secretary-General of the Women's Development Association**. "We were hearing about threats, stolen images, and conversations used as tools of pressure. However, no one was talking. From here, we realized that we had to take action."

Thus, the association's initiative was launched with the support of **Resonate! Yemen** and funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, where the choice of the Women's Development Association in Shabwa was based on its active presence in the community and the trust women and girls have in it, in addition to its previous experiences in implementing sensitive and courageous community initiatives. Moreover, Shabwa Governorate, with its social specificity and tribal weight, was one of the areas that still lacked targeted initiatives.



* First line of defense

Awareness campaign... and signs of hope

- > The association began its practical intervention by launching a wide community awareness campaign, led by a young team trained by the Women's Development Association, armed with specialized knowledge in issues of cyber extortion, methods of dealing with victims, and safe communication with them.

This change quickly began to surface, as the team overseeing the project noticed that the girls themselves started to show interest in participating in activities. Some mothers who listened to survivors during awareness meetings began to speak more openly and ask about how to protect their daughters. Additionally, some local entities, centers, and schools initiated contact with the association to request the implementation of awareness activities within them. Thus, community change began gradually.



* From personal experience to a community voice

- The association's efforts did not stop at individual intervention; the impact extended to a deeper and more sustainable dimension. Between three to five women were able to become activists in community awareness, which is a significant achievement in a social environment like Shabwa.

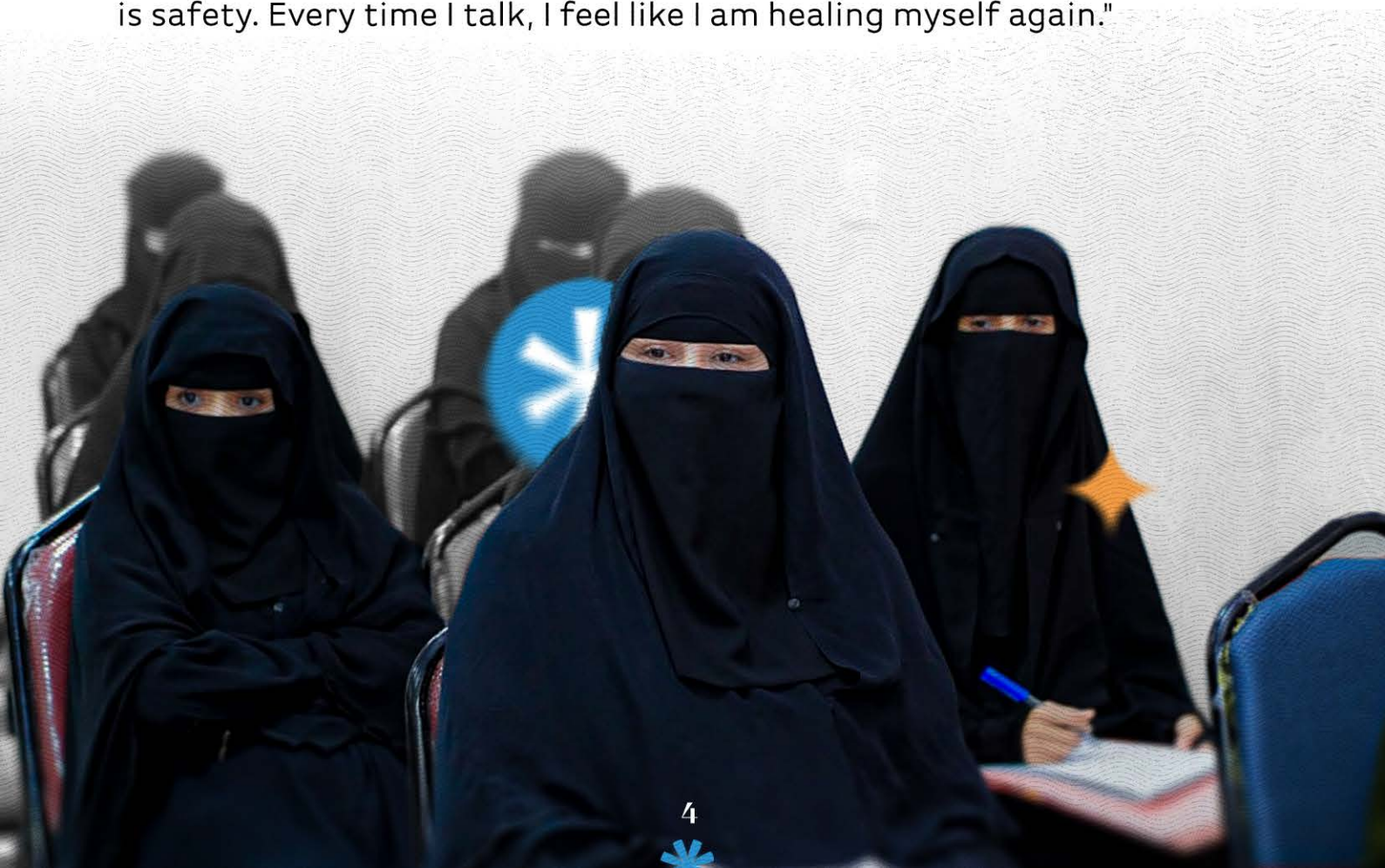
The stories of these women have become real tools for raising awareness, as they used their personal experiences as starting points for discussions in community meetings, schools, and closed women's circles.

One of the activists said:

"When I told my story for the first time, I was shaking, but I felt a strange strength inside me. I felt that every word I said could protect another girl from breaking. Now, every time I speak, I plant hope somewhere."

Another added:

"I never imagined that what I lived through would help others. I thought that silence was survival, but the organization taught me that speaking is safety. Every time I talk, I feel like I am healing myself again."



* Integrated Protection Networks

> The organization realized early on that working in the field of protection could not be a solo effort, but rather required building a strong and interconnected network of community and institutional actors. To this end, a workshop was organized with 20 participants from stakeholders and supporters of protection, including representatives from the Criminal Investigation Department, police, lawyers, media personnel, religious endowments and counseling, owners of phone sales and maintenance centers, and representatives from groups that have faced cases of online extortion.

During the workshop, participants came up with practical recommendations and clear coordination mechanisms among themselves, aimed at enhancing rapid and effective responses to each case of extortion.

This experience was evidence that collaborative work makes a real

Dhikra Al-Awlaqi says:

"Working in the field of protection cannot be individual. Resonate! Yemen taught us to create a strong support network and relationships."



* Sustainable impact and expanding hope

- > The project's impact was not limited to saving individual cases or addressing emergency problems, but went beyond that towards building a solid institutional and community groundwork.

At the institutional level, equipping and furnishing the Cyber Crime Department within the Criminal Investigation Department in A'taq marked a qualitative leap in the course of work. The department was provided with furniture and essential equipment, preparing it to be a safe and effective working environment for receiving and handling reports.

One of the beneficiaries says:

"I was afraid of people's perceptions, but when they saw me speaking boldly, everyone started saying that I did the right thing. This made me feel that I am not a victim; I am a survivor and an influencer in the community."

Today, the association continues to raise awareness, receive cases, and expand its scope of work, benefiting from the strong foundations established by the training of Resonate! Yemen and the lessons learned from every story it has encountered.



* Final Word:

From Silence to Change

- The experience of the "Women's Development Association" in Shabwa confirms that a well-thought-out intervention, based on knowledge and community partnerships, can bring about real and sustainable change.

However, the story did not stop at protecting women from blackmail; it went beyond that to redefine the role of women in their community: from recipients of support to creators of it, from victims to activists, from silence to leadership.

 Dhikra Al-Awlaqi concludes her remarks:

"We only wanted to protect women, but we discovered that we were also giving them voices, spaces to speak, and rights to safety and dignity, and we made their voices a stronger weapon for change, influence, and support. And this is the true meaning of success."



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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