

Media Campaigns for social Change and Advocacy

CASE STUDY: “A white dress does not cover rape: #Abolish522” – ABAAD

Summary of the case study written by Fer González Morales

[Link to Case Study](#)

Read this case study and answer the questions in the end of the document

Overview of the campaign

About the organization:

ABAAD– Resource Centre for Gender Equality is a UN ECOSOC accredited organization that aims to achieve gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable social and economic development in the MENA region. The team is comprised of dedicated activists, lawyers, consultants, social workers and researchers, who creatively test new approaches as part of a larger effort to achieve an equitable society, free of hegemonic masculinities and violence against women.

About the Campaign:

In 2016, ABAAD initiated a campaign titled “A White Dress Doesn't Cover the Rape” to address sexual gender-based violence, particularly targeting the abolishment of Article 522 in the Lebanese Penal Code. With support from international organizations like UN Women, Plan International, Save the Children International, Diakonia, and Norwegian Church Aid, the campaign aimed to raise awareness during the “16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women”. Article 522 allowed perpetrators to evade punishment if

they married their victims, perpetuating discrimination and violating human rights.

The campaign gained significant traction globally, leading to increased awareness and support. On December 7, 2016, Lebanon's parliamentary committee for administration and justice recommended the repeal of Article 522, a significant victory for ABAAD's cause. The article stipulated that marriage between the offender and the victim could halt prosecution or suspend the execution of penalties for crimes such as rape, kidnapping, and statutory rape.

The motivation behind ABAAD's effort to abolish Article 522 stemmed from its recognition as a form of blatant discrimination against girls and women, infringing upon their human rights across Lebanon. The Abolish 522 campaign had several key objectives, including advocating for the repeal of Article 522, asserting the right of women survivors to reject marriage to their rapists, combating stigma, and emphasizing that rape is a crime that should be punished without legitimizing it through forced marriages. The campaign sought to challenge societal perceptions and convince parents that marrying the victim to her rapist is not a solution and fails to protect women, reinforcing the message that rape is a crime deserving punishment.

- The campaign addressed the **broad social problem** of gender-based violence and discrimination against girls and women
- The **concrete entry point** for the campaign was the specific legal provision outlined in Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal Code.
- The **main objective and focused action** of the campaign led by ABAAD was to abolish Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal Code.

Specific Strategies of the Campaign

At the beginning of 2016, ABAAD made a strategic decision to advance its organizational mission in countering gender-based violence, specifically sexual violence. They adopted an approach where each campaign targets one specific concrete problem. As part of the preliminary research for the campaign, they collaborated with their legal team to review the Penal Code of the Lebanese Government, exploring all articles related to sexual violence. Despite the presence of multiple articles on sexual violence and recognizing the systematic legal system normalizing such violence against women, ABAAD chose to concentrate its efforts on a single article to fortify the campaign's objectives.

Recognizing the necessity of comprehending the complexity of the topic, ABAAD initiated a survey among the general public in the country. The

survey aimed to gather information about public awareness of the penal code and the sentiments associated with it. The results revealed that a mere 1% of the surveyed population was aware of the existence of the specific article, underscoring the imperative need for initial efforts to raise awareness.

To build a comprehensive understanding of the effects of this article on the affected community and the underlying social norms and beliefs, ABAAD meticulously mapped out various organizations that could contribute to different aspects of the research and implementation phases. They identified existing campaigns attempting to abolish Article 522, analysing their strengths and weaknesses to discern gaps that the new campaign could address.

Simultaneously, ABAAD delved into a profound exploration of the beliefs underpinning Article 522. Rigorous research unveiled a harmful societal belief that marrying the victims of rape would restore the “honour” of themselves and their families. This deep-seated misogynistic belief became pivotal to understand, deciphering its mechanisms and emotions. The goal was to determine the most effective strategy for instigating change across all levels, encompassing policy, individual beliefs, and social norms.

The decision to focus all efforts on changing this article emanated from its role in perpetuating a culture of impunity for perpetrators and further victimizing survivors of sexual assault through trauma and shame. ABAAD emphasized that creating lasting, meaningful change goes beyond altering laws; it necessitates changing people’s hearts and collaborating with communities to practice different social norms. Public involvement and participation emerged as crucial components throughout the campaign. Victims of abuse played a central role, contributing to decisions about the strategy through conversations and feedback sessions.

ABAAD consistently highlighted the pivotal role of women in the campaign, acknowledging them as the driving force behind their strategies. This meant that decisions about the campaign's strategy were either proposed by victims or distilled after conversations with them. Public support became a crucial element; active participation in the campaign’s activities by people in the country demonstrated their endorsement. Allies, family members, and influencers in the community, including celebrities, bloggers, and journalists, were essential in garnering support. Convincing influencers to champion the cause involved more than invitations; it required concrete proposals and meticulous organization of activities. Additionally, extensive lobbying efforts were undertaken to exert pressure and persuade politicians to abolish this law, involving the drafting of formal proposals and continuous discussions.

For the comprehensive public engagement undertaken by ABAAD, it was important to address various risks, including:

1. Privacy and Protection of Victims:

ABAAD prioritized the privacy and protection of victims, recognizing the potential threats they might face. Rigorous measures were implemented – before granting any media professional an interview with a victim, ABAAD ensured explicit consent from the victim. Moreover, a professional psychologist assessed the emotional condition of the victim to determine their readiness to share their experience. Prior to the interview, clear guidelines were established for both the victim and the reporter. The victim retained the unequivocal right to refuse to answer any question or terminate the interview at any point. Importantly, ABAAD strictly prohibited any request for dramatic acting from the victim, such as crying or re-enacting traumatic experiences. Throughout the interview, the identity of the victim was fully protected, employing techniques such as a pseudonym, voice distortion, and image blurring. Post-interview, ABAAD provided comprehensive follow-up care to ensure the well-being of the victim.

2. Public Backlash:

Recognizing that change often encounters resistance, ABAAD was proactive in preparing for potential public backlash. The organization carefully considered various arguments that could be employed to counter the campaign and formulated strategies to address different scenarios. Even when faced with seemingly absurd counterarguments, ABAAD took them seriously as potential threats to the success of their campaign. This approach, of not underestimating opposition, proved to be a significant strength in navigating challenges and maintaining the campaign's effectiveness.

Key Objectives of the campaign:

1. Raise awareness of the existence of Article 522 to general public in Lebanon
2. Get public support for the cause
3. Repeal Article 522 from the Penal Code

Tactics employed

The strategic foundation for these tactics began with a fundamental question: *How can the audience actively participate in the campaign?* Every campaign needs a supporter's journey within its design. Audiences should establish an emotional connection to the cause and discover clear actions to

take as modes of participation. This involvement can take various forms, such as sharing and commenting on social media, signing petitions, participating in public manifestations, and contributing to the campaign in diverse ways. Following the cycle of public engagement—Observe, Follow, Support, Promote, Act & Contribute, and Organize & Lead—these constituted some of the pivotal tactics employed:

Engaging with influencers

Recognizing the major influence that social influencers have in the general public was vital for this campaign. Prior to the campaign's official launch, the team contacted the Lebanese Women's Soccer Champion Team "SAS" and requested their participation by wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan #Abolish522. The resulting image quickly went viral, garnering huge media attention, including coverage by international outlets like the BBC. This strategic move ensured a broad audience reach even before the formal initiation of the campaign.



Figure 1: "SAS" team wearing the T-shirts of the campaign

Public Mobilization

In a parallel approach, the campaign used the Beirut International Marathon by mobilizing 300 participants to use T-shirts featuring the campaign slogan. The initiative incorporated additional symbolic elements such as red balloons, posters, and participants wearing boxes on their heads to symbolize the anonymity of the victims.



Figure 2 Picture taken during the Beirut Marathon

As a component of their public mobilization strategy, they orchestrated weekly sit-ins every Wednesday in front of the Lebanese Parliament. This strategic choice was aligned with the schedule of the administrative and justice committee, responsible for reviewing and making decisions related to changes in the penal code on that particular day. This approach served a dual purpose, fostering public awareness of legal processes and exerting public pressure on politicians engaged in these crucial decisions.



Figure 3 Sit-in in front of the Lebanese Parliament

Public Space Installation

Another notable public intervention involved a collaboration with a Lebanese fashion designer based in France. This partnership resulted in the creation of white paper dresses, showcased through a powerful installation in a public square.



Figure 4 Picture of the installation in the public square

Finally, billboards were strategically placed across the country to publicize the campaign. The primary objective of these widespread public interventions was straightforward yet impactful: to ensure that everyone had #Abolish522 and an awareness of the effects of this Article in their minds.



Figure 5 Picture of a billboard in a main street in Lebanon

Audiences may find various reasons to be interested and involved in your campaign. These motivations include:

- Contributing to positive change for themselves and the community.
- Believing in the underlying cause.
- Correcting perceived injustices.
- Finding inspiration through participation.
- Feeling a connection to something greater than themselves.

Relevance of monitoring the campaign and the impact on the audiences:

Monitoring the campaign and its impact on audiences holds immense relevance for ABAAD. The organization consistently employs a data-supported strategy, understanding that social issues are dynamic and require ongoing research. This active research approach is vital throughout the campaign, serving not only to gauge performance through clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) but also to unearth layers of the problem that the campaign may bring to the surface. ABAAD places great importance on listening to the impact and stories of diverse individuals, acknowledging that, while not always quantifiable, these narratives serve as valuable guides.

The monitoring efforts extend to social media conversations. ABAAD diligently tracks engagement on social platforms and compiles systematic reports on conversations. This allows them to discern sentiment, identify questions, and understand the discussions the campaign stimulates in the digital sphere.

Additionally, ABAAD recognizes the significance of monitoring the political and media landscape. Observing how dominant discourses respond to the campaign provides valuable insights. The organization notes that politicians may alter their stance under pressure, and media organizations may approach the issue in varied ways, whether for mutual benefit or potential backlash. This comprehensive monitoring across different spaces equips the campaigners with the necessary information to adapt or alter the campaign as needed.

After reading the case study answer the following questions:

1. How did ABAAD strategically identify and decide to target Article 522 as the focal point of the campaign, and what considerations influenced this decision?
2. Choose one of the tactics used and describe how did it contribute to the key objectives of the campaign?
3. While we discussed some of the campaign's challenges, can you identify additional forms of backlash it might have encountered, and what strategies could be employed to address and mitigate them?

It is worth noticing that while the overarching social issue addressed in this case study is gender-based violence, the campaign strategically concentrated its endeavours on a pivotal point of change: the abolition of Article 522. This specific entry point not only provided a focal area for the campaign but also served as a catalyst for raising awareness and fostering community engagement in the battle against gender-based violence.

Start thinking about the overarching social the issue you aim to tackle with your campaign and consider potential concrete entry points for strategically instigating change. Tomorrow, we will start the process of defining this problem and establishing a good base with a research context.