

CAFCAWNEWSLETTER

No.2 – December 2023

2023 IN RETROSPECT

2023 has proven to be an immersive and dynamic year brimming with fruitful endeavors despite the ongoing war on Gaza, adding another layer of complexity, significance, and urgency to our mission. The Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship (CAFCAW) orchestrated a thought-provoking round table discussion in June, held in Larnaca, Cyprus, focused on the intersection of culture, religion, higher education, and digital transformation in Southwestern Asia and North Africa (SWANA). CAFCAW further extended its impact by publishing the videos of these enlightening round table sessions on its [website](#).

Furthermore, CAFCAW forged strategic partnerships with various institutions and collaboratively organized national youth workshops in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt during September.

These engaging initiatives saw the active participation of over 100 individuals, including speakers, trainers, trainees, and moderators, from diverse backgrounds and fields of expertise across Southwestern Asia, North Africa, and diaspora communities in Europe and North America.

Beyond the physical events, CAFCAW's impact reverberated across digital platforms, reaching thousands of visitors through social media channels and garnering significant coverage in local and regional press outlets.

This year, the CAFCAW steering committee's activities included holding physical and virtual meetings to assess progress, contribute to the 2024 theme development, and strategize for future initiatives.

In addition, CAFCAW published the June 2022 Conference proceedings in [English](#) and [Arabic](#), and disseminated two newsletters (February and December) and a 2023–2023 feedback survey to a network of over 270 previous participants.

CAFCAW also underwent an external evaluation process in the Fall of 2023, contributing to a comprehensive assessment of its impact, performance, and future trajectory.

THE ROUND TABLE

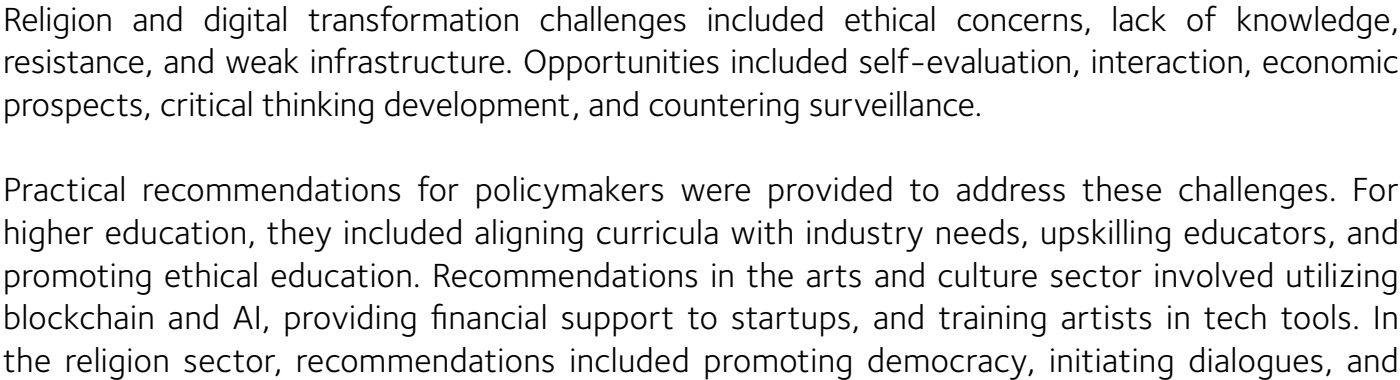


The “Culture, Religion, Higher Education, and Digital Transformation in Southwestern Asia and North Africa: Challenges and Opportunities” round table was held on Friday, June 9, and Saturday, June 10, 2023, at the Radisson Beach Resort in Larnaca-Cyprus, with a total of 36 participants (of whom approx. 45% of women and 20% of youth) – secular, atheist, agnostic, and faith-based (Muslim and Christian) scholars and experts from multi and interdisciplinary fields, representatives from civil society organizations, religious–based institutions, universities, cultural institutions, national human rights/women's rights groups, and SWANA sectoral bodies from Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Oman, Egypt, Morocco, and diaspora communities in Europe and North America. It gathered experts, academics, administrators, practitioners, and artists from diverse fields – visual and performing arts, cultural studies, cultural heritage, social/political studies, education, theology/sciences of religions, archaeology, communication, computer science, and artificial intelligence.

The round table was organized by CAFCAW, a program by [Dar al-Kalima University](#) (Bethlehem – Palestine). It followed the [24th International Conference on Digital Transformation and Culture](#) in June 2022.

It was structured into three main thematic sessions (religion, culture, higher education) with participants’ verbal interventions in English and Arabic, group workshops, formal and informal discussions, and introductory, plenary, and concluding sessions.

The round table goals were to: 1) expand and deepen the critical and interdisciplinary dialogue that was started at the 24th International Conference of Dar al-Kalima University and Cafcaw, held in Limassol in June 2022; 2) publish the participants’ recommendations and the round table audio-visual material [[Video Session 1](#), [Video Session 2](#), [Video Session 3](#)], and 3) expand networks and establish partnerships for future collaborations.



The participants discussed the challenges and opportunities in addressing issues related to culture, religion, higher education, and digital transformation in SWANA, and they identified contextualized recommendations and possible steps to move forward.

Challenges in higher education and digital transformation included ethical issues, the digital divide, lack of innovation, and information overload. Opportunities lie in enhancing social skills, reducing costs, and leveraging technologies like augmented reality and blockchain.

The arts and culture sector challenges involved cultural dominance, exclusion, resistance, and lack of regulations. Inclusivity, economic inclusion, cultural openness, and heritage preservation through tech solutions included opportunities.

Religion and digital transformation challenges included ethical concerns, lack of knowledge, resistance, and weak infrastructure. Opportunities included self-evaluation, interaction, economic prospects, critical thinking development, and countering surveillance.

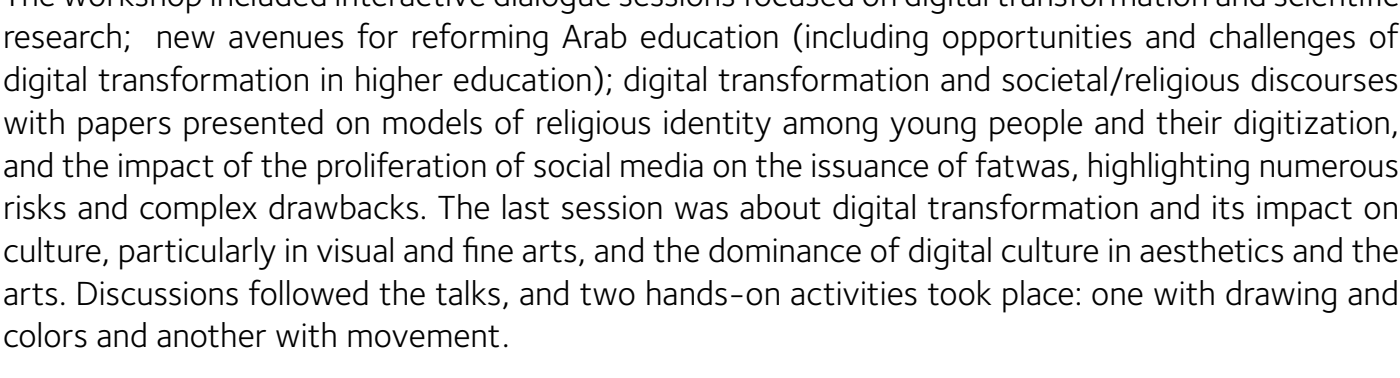
Practical recommendations for policymakers were provided to address these challenges. For higher education, they included aligning curricula with industry needs, upskilling educators, and promoting ethical education. Recommendations in the arts and culture sector involved utilizing blockchain and AI, providing financial support to startups, and training artists in tech tools. In the religion sector, recommendations included promoting democracy, initiating dialogues, and establishing partnerships with digital transformation companies.

THE BEIRUT WORKSHOP

Four national youth workshops followed the June 2023 round table in September in Beirut, Amman, Bethlehem, and Cairo. The Beirut Workshop on Culture and Digital Transformation was held on September 30, 2023, at the Kulturst Cultural Space in Sin-el-Fil (Lebanon) with 24 attendees – including 14 participants. The workshop was organized by Dar al-Kalima NGO for Arts and Culture in Lebanon and funded by Dar al-Kalima University/CAFCAW program.

Several issues were addressed by trainers and speakers and discussed with the youth: What are the main challenges and opportunities of digital transformation in the realm of arts and culture in Lebanon? How does digital transformation impact activism, and what are the challenges and opportunities it presents for activists? What tools and platforms have redefined activist engagement in the digital era, and what complexities does digital activism face? What is the significance of art in societal development and individual self-expression, especially during challenging times? How can digital transformation amplify the reach of artistic ideas, and what role does social media play in this context? What practical guidance is provided for utilizing Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) for home recording and digital art creation? How has storytelling evolved and remained relevant in the digital age? What impact can compelling storytelling have on one's online presence, and how can it make your work stand out? What are the various applications of AI-generated art, and how does it intersect with traditional artistic creation? What ethical considerations are associated with AI in art, including copyright concerns and biases within AI algorithms? How will participants actively create AI-generated artwork and explore the ethical challenges of this art form?

The workshop was divided into three main training sessions, followed by an introductory session with three talks. Participants had the opportunity to experience hands-on and experiential activities and worked individually and in groups during the sessions. Dialogue segments were included throughout the workshop, formal or informal, during meals and coffee breaks. After the workshop, a WhatsApp group was created for follow-up, networking, and future collaborations.



THE AMMAN WORKSHOP

The Amman-Jordan workshop was organized by the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies in Amman, in partnership with CAFCAW and Dar al-Kalima University, on September 11, 2023. During the workshop, 9 participants from different backgrounds were trained.

The workshop included interactive dialogue sessions focused on digital transformation and scientific research; new avenues for reforming Arab education (including opportunities and challenges of digital transformation in higher education); digital transformation and societal/religious discourses with papers presented on models of religious identity among young people and their digitization, and the impact of the proliferation of social media on the issuance of fatwas, highlighting numerous risks and complex drawbacks. The last session was about digital transformation and its impact on culture, particularly in visual and fine arts, and the dominance of digital culture in aesthetics and the arts. Discussions followed the talks, and two hands-on activities took place: one with drawing and colors and another with movement.



THE CAIRO WORKSHOP

The Cairo-Egypt workshop was held on September 28, 2023. 5DVR organized it in partnership with CAFCAW and Dar al-Kalima University at the Holiday Inn-Maadi. The workshop commenced with opening remarks followed by a keynote address that discussed the impact of digital transformation on culture preservation and higher education. After a networking break, a panel discussion explored the challenges and opportunities of preserving cultural heritage in a digital age, along with innovative approaches to cultural adaptation and preservation through technology. The panel also considered digital technology's role in democratizing culture, outreach, cultural access, and online discoverability.

The afternoon session included a panel that focused on the digital transformation of cultural heritage and practical collaboration. A subsequent panel discussion addressed the challenges and opportunities of incorporating digital transformation into higher education, sharing best practices and success stories. This was followed by another workshop to nurture creativity and innovation in higher education through digital innovation, collaborative thinking, and strategic planning. The event concluded with closing remarks, summarizing the day's discussions and collaborations.



THE RAMALLAH WORKSHOP

Dar al-Kalima University/ CAFCAW organized a two-day national workshop as a follow-up to the Cyprus roundtable, which took place in June 2023. The workshop was held on September 1–2 in Ramallah, Palestine, with 37 participants, comprising 15 women and 22 men, and 6 facilitators, 4 women and 2 men. The participants comprised 40.54% of young people aged 23 to 29. They were academics, practitioners, and artists considered opinion leaders who could influence others, particularly the youth and women populations.

The purpose of the workshop was multifold: It was necessary to introduce educators and opinion leaders/makers to the potential and capabilities of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence and the emergence of ChatGPT, as part of the digital transformation that is profoundly impacting not only higher education but also culture and arts sector in Palestine. It was also critical to examine the challenges the participants faced in the digital transformation process, including ethical/religious considerations and academic integrity. A third goal was to launch a space where stakeholders could explore together collaborative efforts, including classes and interdisciplinary cognates, as well as community outreach programs and artistic endeavors where these technologies could be integrated and employed to support innovation in teaching delivery for teachers further, learning for students and expressions for artists. Finally, aside from providing a nurturing space for exchange and collaboration, connecting these participants and planting seeds for a shared group identity whose work highly influences youth and women was essential.

The goals and overall purpose were translated into four main themes: strategic, organizational, cultural, and people-related. These workshop themes were effectively communicated by employing different formats and techniques in their design. Plenary lectures, small group discussions, team building exercises, reflections/recommendations, and a field visit. Informal discussions were also a critical feature that contributed significantly to the workshop's success.

Two significant outcomes materialized as a result of this workshop. The first was a collaboration between the Dar al-Kalima University and the HCIE, providing critical access to know-how, resources, and networks. The second outcome is a series of workshops involving Techno Park, to upgrade the capacities of DAK University faculty, students, and artists.



LOOKING FORWARD TO 2024!

International Conference on Culture, Religion, and the Body in Larnaca, Cyprus.	National Youth Workshops in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan
June 2024	

ABOUT CAFCAW

The Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World (CAFCAW) is an initiative of Dar al-Kalima University that was launched in 2014. It brings together scholars, young graduates, and activists in civil society to share research, experiences, and insights. The Forum seeks to educate for a culture of full citizenship and promote it for all among the SWANA people and its diaspora to create more peaceful, democratic, and prosperous societies.

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