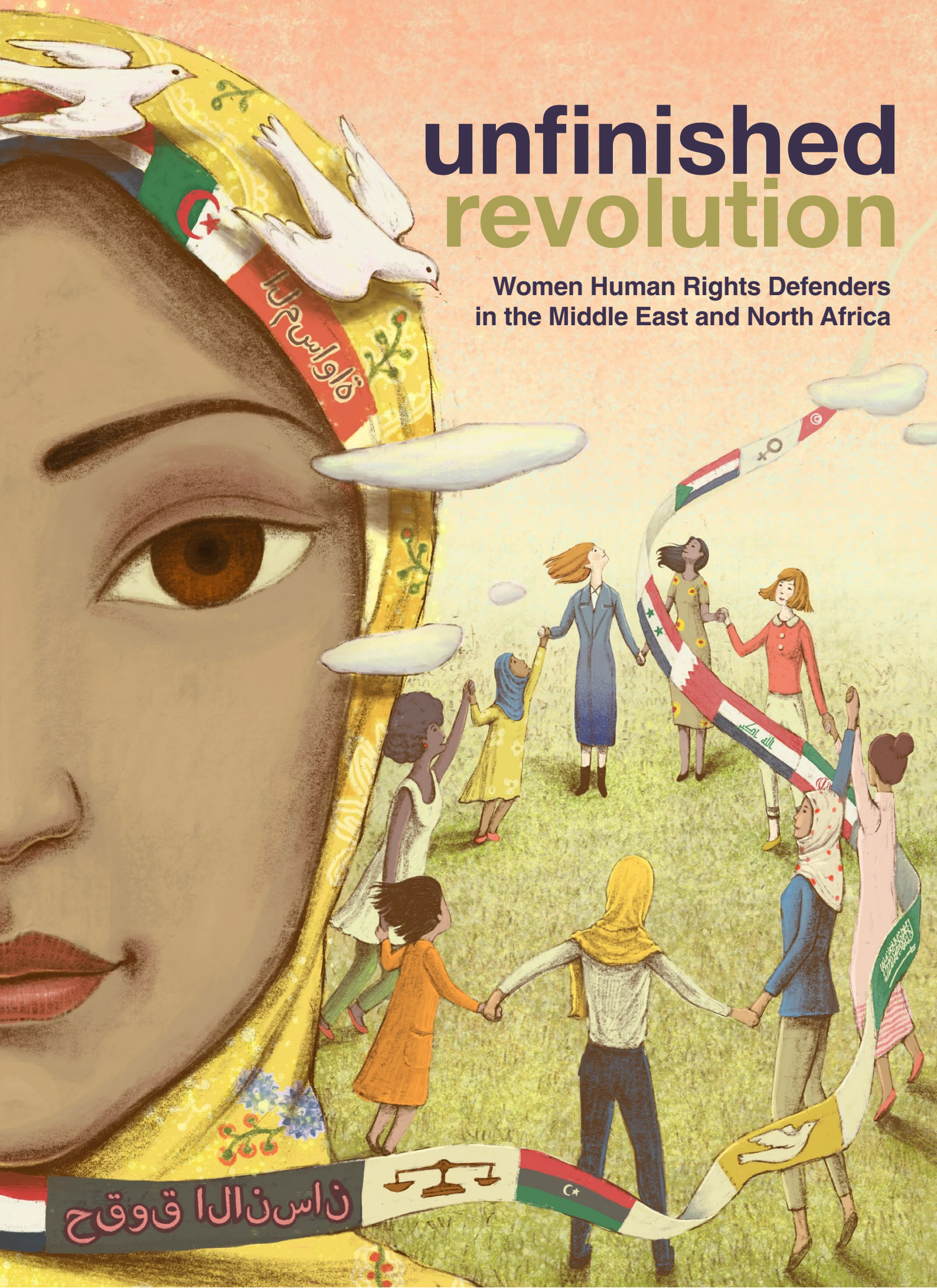


# unfinished revolution

Women Human Rights Defenders  
in the Middle East and North Africa



ناس نال قوقح





## Unfinished Revolution: Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa

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Street Artist Bahia Shehab stencilled a line from a poem by Pablo Neruda and painted it on walls during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011 in Cairo. It reads: "You can cut the flowers but you cannot delay the spring." The big shape in the middle is the symbol for the word "NO!" taken from the Mausoleum of Sultan Barquq, 1384 CE, Cairo, Egypt. Used with permission.

# FOREWORD

This past year Nobel Women's Initiative reached out to courageous feminist leaders in the Middle East and North Africa, inviting them to share their insights and analyses on the state of human rights defence, especially by women.

2021 marked the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring, a grassroots revolution joined and lead by feminist activists in many countries, a time full of promise for fundamental shifts and reforms in politics and culture in the region.

Had the promise been fulfilled?

A rise in authoritarian governance, growing militarization, the erasure of civil society and the growing brutality against women activists, suggest it has not.

Many of the defenders interviewed are now in exile for their human rights work. Many others have been imprisoned.

Advances continue but are achieved under great duress, with a growing cost. With collective co-operation and assembly banned outright, or highly controlled, the burden of protest falls more and more upon the shoulders of individuals to bear, including young women.

Our sister Azza Soliman, Co-founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, speaks for all when she says: "We don't have the luxury to stop or lose hope. The more resistant and resilient we are, the more we push the state and people to change their mindsets toward respecting women and human rights."

The Nobel Women's Initiative uses the combined voices of the five women peace laureates and the visibility and access that comes with the Nobel Peace Prize to magnify the power and visibility of the work of women's movements around the world. This paper provides the foundation for a collaborative program of advocacy, campaigning and resource development to help sustain and amplify the resistance, and to bolster resilience – led and guided by women's movements, organizations, and individuals from the Middle East and North Africa region.

Nobel Women's Initiative shares their vision for a world where vulnerable people, including refugees, migrants and members of the LGBTQ community enjoy peace and dignity. Women human rights defenders need security, resources, protection and acknowledgement, now more than ever, to prevail in the effort necessary to make that happen.

In solidarity,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Shirin Ebadi' and the signature on the right is 'Tawakkol Karman'. Both signatures are fluid and stylized.

*Shirin Ebadi & Tawakkol Karman*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women have been central to the struggle for human rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—before, during, and since the series of popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring. They were key actors in that peaceful, hopeful, and tragically incomplete revolution, from their presence in occupying Egypt's Tahrir Square, to the role of Nobel Prize Laureate [Tawakkol Karman](#) as the public face of Yemen's 2011 uprising.

Despite the backlash against them, the power and success of women's movements in the region are undeniable. Feminist demands are now integral to resistance efforts, with more recent protests focusing on the rights and needs of women, LGBTQ+, refugees and migrants, and other excluded groups. Throughout, the struggle for women's rights and gender equality has been deeply entwined with the broader struggle for basic human rights and freedoms, democratic governance, and peace in the region.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was initially planned as background to a conference of women human rights defenders from the MENA region which Nobel Women's Initiative planned to host in April 2020. Due to COVID-19, this gathering was cancelled. In its place, this report aims to capture the experiences, concerns, and recommendations of these extraordinary women.

Drawing on interviews with 14 individual activists and 1 coalition from nine countries, and informed by recent reports on human rights and gender equality, it shines a light on the unique situation of women human rights defenders in the region. Beginning with an overview of recent trends that are constricting civic space, it highlights women's contributions to women's rights and gender equality, and to democracy, peace, and human rights. The report documents the wide range of tactics used to silence women; the devastating impacts these are having on their lives, organizations, and families; as well as strategies that enable women to continue their work, despite the risks. A final section presents the thoughts of WHRDs in the region on measures that are most essential to protect them and support their struggles.

The MENA region is defined in different ways by different organizations. In this report, we include Sudan, but not Turkey. The women interviewed for this report are from Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, while external sources referenced cover other countries in the region.

## Defining women defenders

"Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are "both female human rights defenders and those human rights defenders who work on women's rights or gender related issues."

— UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (A/HRC/16/44).

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders outlines the relevant rights of all human rights defenders and the obligations of States to protect and support them.

## THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

In recent years, observers have raised the alarm about a growing crackdown on human rights defenders, with women activists among the most notable targets. Countries in the MENA region are not unique in their persecution of women activists, but the combination of authoritarian regimes, patriarchal norms, conflict, militarization and political Islam puts them at heightened risk. Since 2020, the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have added to the burden on women and the challenges facing human rights defenders.

### Authoritarian governance

MENA is the lowest-ranked of all the regions covered in The Economist Intelligence Unit's [Democracy Index](#), with the majority of its countries classified as "authoritarian". The repression of dissent takes many forms, from direct physical attacks and extrajudicial killings, to widespread surveillance and the entrenchment of laws that limit freedoms of speech, mobility, and collective action. Media and the Internet are also widely regulated and monitored to suppress dissent, and cybercrime laws have been used to charge and detain human rights activists in several countries. The Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition has seen a shift underway in the region since 2018, with a total crackdown on women defenders.

“The only protests that take place are illegal protests because all protests are illegal now.”

– Nedal Al Salman

### Patriarchy

Authoritarian forms of governance across the region intersect with social norms that limit a woman's voice and agency and set rigid expectations about how women and men should act. The structure of households and institutions reinforces the supremacy of men as household heads, income earners, and decision-makers. As a result, women's political and economic participation rates are among the lowest in the world. Of the 20 lowest ranking countries on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, 12 are in the MENA region, with Iraq and Yemen in last place.

“Fathers and older brothers decide everything—starting with your name, how you dress, who your friends are, if you go to school, where you work.”

– Hana Saleh

In many countries, restrictions on women's choices and movements are encoded in legal frameworks, including family or "personal status" laws, laws governing property ownership and inheritance, citizenship laws, and guardianship laws which subject women's mobility and personal choices to the approval of a male relative.

### Political Islam

Control of women's sexuality remains the most powerful tool of patriarchy in most societies built on fundamental religious beliefs. This is achieved through intricate mechanisms of political, economic, social, and cultural manipulation, including coercion and violence. Within this context religion often is misused as a powerful instrument of control, legitimizing violations of women's human rights defenders.



## Militarization and conflict

The region has known little respite from conflict in the 21st century. For WHRDs, the consequences are felt both directly and indirectly. Even as they experience the violence and displacement of war first-hand, their work is undermined by repressive measures justified in the name of "security". Militarization normalizes the use of force and violence and entrenches violent masculinities. Sexual and gender-based violence has been documented as a weapon of war in several countries in the region. Human rights defenders working in conflict zones in the region have faced threats and assassination by state and non-state armed forces. In 2019, for example, Libyan women's rights advocate Hanan al-Barassi was shot dead in broad daylight after criticizing the actions of the Libyan National Army.

Conflict further complicates the struggle for human rights by weakening civil society and draining the public space available to address these issues. Women, meanwhile, are also confronted with the effects of displacement in conflict zones, with the Middle East and North Africa harboring more than one-quarter of the world's conflict-displaced population.

## COVID-19

The pandemic has exposed and deepened the inequalities that feminists in the region have decried for decades. It is deepening the confinement and abuse experienced by women domestically, while pushing human rights and equity issues off the table. For those carrying out or imprisoned for their work, it poses new dangers. In some countries, it has also provided a pretext to further curtail rights and freedoms.

“ It used to be that women were excluded from the peace process because they [...] didn't have enough chairs to accommodate us [...] Now we are being told that they don't have the bandwidth to include women.”

Rasha Jarhum

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Despite the difficult terrain, women's organizations are working to advance peace, democracy, and human rights in the region, and making important gains for women's rights and gender equity.

### Democracy, human rights, and women's rights

Risking attacks and harassment for claiming public space, women have been at the forefront of pro-democracy protests and movements that have swept the region. In Sudan, for example, the 2018 protests that led to the end of dictatorship have been dubbed "the women's revolution", with women making up 70% of those facing down the military on the streets.

Despite many setbacks, one of the main breakthroughs in recent decades has been in breaking the taboo on questions of gender equality. These are now considered political issues, debated in public and in the institutions of government.

Gains in women's rights can be seen in legal reforms in countries across the region, such as changes in family codes in Algeria, Egypt and Morocco and the introduction of laws to protect



women from violence in Lebanon and Morocco, among others. Women have also seen some gains in political representation, with minimum quotas introduced in countries across North Africa. But progress remains fragile, and authoritarian male elites continue to dominate the region. The work of advancing women's rights is thus tied to efforts to promote democracy, counter corruption and tyranny, and advance respect for human rights overall.

## A place at the peace table

Women remain on the margins of peace processes, despite international commitments to increase their role in negotiations, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. They are, nonetheless, actively seeking justice and peace in their homelands while demanding their seat at the table.

In Yemen, women have been largely excluded from the UN-led peace process since war broke out in 2014. Yet they play a major role outside formal peace processes—working to end child recruitment, open humanitarian corridors, evacuate families from the frontlines, and secure the release of prisoners.

Syrian women are likewise underrepresented in formal peace processes, despite their increasing role in holding society together: their energies and concerns are largely channeled into advisory bodies. Through organizations such as the Syrian Women's Political Movement, women are demanding at least 30% representation in all tracks of negotiation, including in current talks towards a new constitution.

## REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

Rights defenders in MENA face a daunting array of tactics designed to intimidate and silence them. They are criminalized for their work, and subjected to imprisonment and torture, kidnappings, and disappearances. Media restrictions limit their use of the Internet and other avenues of communication, while travel bans restrict their movements. The crackdown on civil society organizing has forced many groups to work "underground"—unregistered, underfunded, and facing potential arrest under the pretext of security, cybercrime, unlawful assembly or other charges.

Women defenders also face gender-specific threats and violations, such as public smear campaigns and the use of sexual violence and harassment to "put women in their place."

The women interviewed for this report describe their experience of these tactics, and the devastating impacts on their lives and their work. These include exile and displacement, trauma and burnout, and having few alternatives but to shut down or work underground. They also identify strategies that help women's rights defenders persist in the face of relentless oppression. Regional solidarity and coalition building have been essential to their survival. And international visibility is vital to pursuing accountability for human rights abuses and sheltering those fighting for justice.

“ We are trying to build an alternative civil society. One that doesn't have to be registered or structural.”

Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition

“ Our only platform to influence the Saudi government is through international channels.”

Omaima Al Najjar

## STEPPING UP: WHAT WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ASK OF US

The obligations of state and non-state actors to protect and support the work of WHRDs are spelled out in UN Resolution 68/181 and are grounded in a wide body of international human rights law.

The women interviewed for this white paper highlight four key areas of support that are vital to the well-being and protection of WHRDs in the region:

### » Protection and Psychological support

They ask that international allies support a wide range of measures to ensure the safety and well-being of women defenders—including emergency funding and safe houses for those on the move; pushing for the release of prisoners; and providing for psychological support to address the trauma of both defenders and survivors.

### » Funding

WHRDs in the region need rapid, flexible, and long-term funding that can be tailored to the needs of small organizations that don't easily fit the usual donor requirements.

### » Inclusion in peace talks

Women ask that international commitments to increase their participation in peace processes be upheld in the region.

### » International recognition and solidarity

They ask that we keep the work and plight of WHRDs visible and hold regimes and non-state actors accountable for violations against them.

“Speak out for women who are facing travel bans, imprisonment, and harassment. Do what you can to keep [their] names in the public so that they are not forgotten.”

Mozn Hassan

# THE WOMEN INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

*This report draws on interviews with 14 extraordinary women activists and one coalition from nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Several now live in exile, continuing their struggle through international networks while staying connected with grassroots movements in their homelands. Some have asked not to be quoted directly or personally identified.*



**Dr Leila Alikarami** is a well-known Iranian lawyer, human rights advocate, and women's rights expert. In 2006, Ms Alikarami worked with fellow activists to launch the One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality to end legal discrimination against Iranian women. She has been honoured by the European Union as a 2016 Sakharov Fellow in human rights and received the Anna Politkovskaya Award in 2009 from Reach All Women in War. She is a frequent speaker and has published media articles worldwide. Her book [Women and Equality in Iran: Law, Society and Activism](#) was published in 2019.



Writer, poet, and journalist **Intisar Al-Mayali** is a member of the Secretariat of the Iraqi Women's Association and a representative of Alliance 1325 for Women, Peace and Security. She is a trainer and capacity-builder in non-violence, negotiations and peace building, in particular, supporting the participation of women and youth in peace processes. She is also a member of the editorial board of the Nedhal al-Maraa newspaper.



Saudi blogger and activist **Omaima Al Najjar** is also a nurse and physician. In 2011, Omaima moved to China, obtained refugee status and studied medicine and surgery in Jilin University. She is currently getting her postgraduate diploma in surgery from The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Omaima worked as cultural mediator and translator at Trama Di Terra refugee centre in Italy.



**Nedal Al Salman** is Acting President of the [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#), which documents and reports on human rights violations in Bahrain. Despite a November 2004 government order to shut down, the Center continues to operate, recently publishing [Bahrain: Women, the Powerful Actors in Building Peace](#). Ms Al Salman has been targeted for her work, including living under a travel ban from 2016 to 2019.



**Fahima Hashim** was the Director of the Salmamah Women's Resource Centre in Khartoum, Sudan, which was forcibly closed in 2014 by government authorities. The Centre focused on documenting violence against women and demanding reforms to Sudan's legal system, in particular the country's rape laws and public order laws that regulate how women dress and act in public. Fearing for her safety and that of her small child, Ms Hashim was forced to leave Sudan and now lives in Canada. She is currently a board member of [Nazra for Feminist Studies](#) and an advisory board member for [Doria Feminist Fund](#), the first feminist fund targeting the entire MENA region.





**Mozn Hassan** is the Executive Director of Egypt's [Nazra for Feminist Studies](#), which campaigns for women's rights, provides support for survivors of sexual violence, and uses a feminist approach to peace building and to counter violence and extremism. Targeted for her work as a woman human rights defender, Ms Hassan is currently under a four-year travel ban, her assets have been frozen, and she faces charges of "supporting irresponsible liberty for women" which carry a penalty of up to 25 years in jail.



As the Representative of the Syrian Opposition Coalition to the United Nations in New York, **Mariam Jalabi** leads diplomatic engagement with member states' permanent missions to the United Nations, the UN Department of Political Affairs, and the Office of the UN Secretary-General. Her work focuses on women's inclusion in politics and decision-making. Her advocacy and leadership have proven instrumental in reframing the narrative on Syria within the UN community. Ms Jalabi has served as a member of the Women's Advisory Committee to the High Negotiations Committee. She was a founding member of the [Syrian Non-violence Movement](#) and the [Syrian Women's Political Movement](#).



Gender, peace and security expert **Rasha Jarhum** is Director of the [Peace Track Initiative](#) hosted at the [Human Rights Research and Educational Centre](#) at the [University of Ottawa](#). The Peace Track Initiative was established to create a space for the contributions of women, youth and civil society organizations to peace processes. Ms Jarhum is also a founding member of the [Women Solidarity Network](#). She advocates for women's, children's and refugee rights.



**Muna Luqman** is a co-founder of the Women Solidarity Network, the largest women's network in Yemen, and Chairperson of the Yemeni foundation [Food4Humanity](#). She is also a member of the [Women's Alliance for Security Leadership](#). Ms Luqman has briefed the UN Security Council, members of US Congress, and many other organizations, advocating for an end to war and for women's participation in the Yemeni peace process. In 2019, she received the Democracy Today [International Young Women's Peace and Human Rights Award](#). She is a nonresident research fellow at the University of San Diego's [Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice](#).



Iraqi feminist and journalist **Yanar Mohammed** is a co-founder and Director of the [Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq](#), which is working to promote the rights of women in a context where Islamic opposition groups, governing institutions, and militias are targeting women and committing widespread violence against them. In her work to end violence against women, Ms Mohammed spearheaded the opening of the first shelters for women in Iraq. In 2008, she received the Gruber Prize for Women's Rights, and in 2016, she was awarded Norway's Rafto Prize for her efforts on behalf of women and refugees in Iraq. She now lives in Canada.



**Hana Saleh** is the Executive Manager of Belqees Media and TV, an independent broadcaster reporting exclusively on Yemeni news. Ms Saleh is also a member of [Women4Yemen](#), a network demanding seats at the peace table for Yemeni women. A nurse by training, she took part in Yemen's peaceful revolution in 2011, spending months with other youth leaders and protesters calling for an end to the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. She left Yemen and now lives in Turkey.



Syrian activist and lawyer **Joumana Seif** is Chairperson of [The Day After](#), working to support a democratic transition in Syria. She is also a co-founder of the Syrian Women's Network and the [Syrian Women's Political Movement](#). Her father, a dissident Member of Parliament, went to prison multiple times for criticizing the Assad regime, and the family's textile factory was taxed into bankruptcy. In 2012, Ms Seif fled to Berlin, Germany, where she works tirelessly to bring women's voices into peace negotiations to end the devastating war in Syria. Since 2017, she has worked with the International Crimes and Accountability program of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, focusing on sexual and gender-based violence committed in Syrian detention facilities. She recently co-authored (with Wejdan Nassif) [Words against Silence](#), a report on the imprisonment of activists in Syria.



Iranian human rights activist **Maryam Shafipour** was sentenced in March 2014 to seven years in prison for her political views and activism. She was released in July 2015 following lobbying by human rights organizations. She advocates for the rights of university students barred from higher education because of their activism, and for the release of political prisoners. Upon her release, Ms Shafipour launched a campaign in support of imprisoned mothers. In 2016, she launched the [#FreeNarges](#) campaign following the sentencing of feminist and human rights activist Narges Mohammadi to 16 years in prison. Ms Shafipour is now based in Toronto, Canada.



Egyptian lawyer, human rights defender, and feminist **Azza Soliman** is a co-founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and has special consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. She has worked on women's rights issues for more than 25 years.

Founded in 2015, the [Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition](#) works to protect WHRDs in the public sphere, shed light on violations committed against them, and offer support through advocacy and knowledge sharing, and by challenging the culture of patriarchy that discriminates against women. The Coalition provided input to this report through a coordinating representative.







# THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: A RAPIDLY CLOSING SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

“Civil society participation is the lifeblood of any healthy democracy and society [...] When civil society channels flow freely, it means vibrant debate, freedom of thought and opinion, and public engagement in policy.”

—Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>1</sup>

The struggle to establish and defend human rights in the Middle East and North Africa has long been formidable. While the region is diverse in its history and culture, it is today factionalized, and dominated by authoritarian regimes that severely restrict civil society organizing. Gender inequities are among the world's deepest, reinforced by an entrenched patriarchal culture. Since 2011, the backlash against waves of pro-democracy rebellion has touched almost every country in the region. In most, civic space has all but disappeared.

Historically, since the 1920s, women's initial success in organizing emerged from the anti-colonial and nationalist movement, in which independence and the sovereignty of the country were the main goal, not gender and women's rights. The interdependence of nationalism and feminism in the Middle East and North Africa confirmed the gains women could achieve by participating in the nationalist movement. The national project allowed women to gain some space of resistance and strengthened both their capacity and self-confidence by granting them access to education and work.<sup>2</sup>

The civil society alliance CIVICUS has singled out the Middle East and North Africa as having the world's worst record of civic freedoms.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, it estimated that eight out of ten people in the region are living in countries where governments violate the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression.<sup>4</sup>

For women human rights defenders, who have been at the forefront of pro-democracy protests and the struggle for gender equality, space to dissent is further constrained by patriarchal norms that are deeply engrained in social relations, political structures, and legal frameworks, in some cases reinforced by fundamentalist religious doctrine. In 2018 alone, Amnesty International found dozens of women human rights defenders had been targeted for advocating for women's rights or freedom from sexual violence and harassment, particularly in Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup>

Mozn Hassan, Executive Director of [Nazra for Feminist Studies](#), has directly experienced this crackdown. She describes the persecution she faces, and the toxic dynamics behind the targeting of women activists in Egypt:

1 October 2, 2019. Address to the Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25092>

2 Hashim, Fahima “The Prism of Marginalization, in [The Political Economy of Conflict and Violence Against Women](#), 2019, Zes Books

3 CIVICUS (2019). *People Power Under Attack*

4 Ibid.

5 Amnesty International (2019). Op.cit.

“One of my charges is ‘supporting women to have irresponsible liberty’. This is how they see women human rights defenders and feminists. They are seeing me as a ‘pimp’ and I want to ‘prostitute’ women. They are seeing my work [...] as encouraging ‘irresponsible liberty’ for women. Women, in authoritarian states, are only allowed to have certain liberties. This is the definition of patriarchy and securitization. In an authoritarian state, women have to behave a certain way and if we don’t, then we are the enemy.”

Countries of the Middle East and North Africa are not unique in their persecution of women human rights defenders, but the prevalence of patriarchal norms, coupled with regional conflicts, militarism and increasing authoritarianism puts women defenders increasingly at risk. In 2020, the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have added to the disproportionate burden on women and the challenges facing human rights defenders in this already hostile environment.

Here, we explore how these trends are constricting civic space in the region, and undermining efforts to defend women's human rights and promote gender equality.

## GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM

The Middle East and North Africa is the lowest-ranked of all the regions covered in The Economist Intelligence Unit's [Democracy Index](#). Based on its assessment of five categories—electoral process and pluralism; the functioning of government; political participation; political culture; and civil liberties—six countries in the region ranked in the world's bottom 20. None are ranked as a “full democracy”, and only Israel and Tunisia are designated “flawed democracies”. The remainder occupy the bottom half of the rankings, with the majority classified as “authoritarian”—including all of the Gulf Arab states.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the Index finds the region in a precarious state, with widespread public protests calling for a fundamental overhaul of political systems, and in some cases regime change. In Algeria and Sudan, longstanding authoritarian leaders have recently been forced out, but in most countries, prospects for political change are remote.

Hopes for democratic reform had risen with what was dubbed in the West as “the Arab Spring”, which began in Tunisia in December 2010. But as protest movements spread throughout the region, states have been emboldened in their use of repressive measures to crush dissent. Tunisia remains the only Arab Spring state to have transitioned from dictatorship to meaningful democratic freedoms, holding its second round of free elections in 2019, with the participation of new political groups and actors. Elsewhere, a decline in government functioning due to corruption and mismanagement has been matched by increasing political participation, reflecting the will of disenfranchised peoples to turn to other forms of mobilization beyond electoral participation. Ironically, the Index found this mobilization—born of popular exclusion—to be one of the few signs of democratic progress in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>7</sup>

6 Democracy Index 2019: A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest (2020). The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited. [http://www.eiu.com/public/thankyou\\_download.aspx?activity=download&campaignid=democracyindex2019](http://www.eiu.com/public/thankyou_download.aspx?activity=download&campaignid=democracyindex2019)

7 Ibid. Pp 36-37.

The authoritarian environment challenges all rights defenders, but the Women Human Rights Defenders MENA (WHRD-MENA) Coalition has seen a shift underway in the region since 2018, with a total crackdown on women defenders in particular. Saudi Arabia's arrest of at least 12 women activists that year emboldened other countries in the region to suppress women's groups. Before then, according to a Coalition representative, "the violations were restricted to certain countries—Egypt and Saudi Arabia. What is different now, is that every single country in the region has, not only one, but at least a dozen violations against [women defenders]. We had violations in Morocco. We had violations in Tunisia. We had violations in Kuwait. We had Bahrain. We had Yemen...It was mainstreamed."

The Coalition has [documented](#) dozens of cases of the arrests and imprisonments of women activists across the region, calling 2019 the worst year on record for women defenders.<sup>8</sup> It notes that while the human rights movement in general faced backlash, women defenders were targeted in particular. "What is new is that attacks on WHRDs are being normalized across the region. Governments are using escalating insurgency and terror laws to suppress WHRDs. These laws have been in constitutions across the region, but specifically in 2019 these laws are now being used against WHRDs."

The repression of dissent takes many forms, from direct physical attacks and extrajudicial killings, to widespread surveillance and the entrenchment of laws that limit freedoms of speech, mobility, and collective action. Governments in Egypt and Morocco have used politically motivated charges of violence or terrorism to punish rights defenders for their work. Advocates have been subjected to prolonged detention in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan, often held incommunicado, and with torture and abuse used to extract forced confessions and details that might be used against others. Cases of enforced disappearance of rights defenders were also witnessed in Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup>

Prosecution of rights advocates is prevalent throughout the region and there are many restrictions on civil society organizations. Vague provisions of a new penal code in Oman, for example, restrict freedom of association and expression, and outlaw the establishment of, or membership in, any organization seen as attacking "the political, economic, social or security principles of the State." Violators face prison terms of up to ten years, while anyone joining a public assembly of more than ten people in defiance of a public order may also be imprisoned.<sup>10</sup> Qatar, which has signed neither the International Convention on Political and Civil Rights nor the International Convention on Social, Cultural and Economic Rights does not permit independent human rights NGOs.<sup>11</sup> Jordan also continues to restrict freedom of association and expression and peaceful assembly under the guise of national security and the fight against terrorism, despite constitutional reforms in 2011. Legal changes in 2009 made it easier for groups to register as NGOs, but a new clause requires cabinet-level approval for foreign funding. Government authorities routinely monitor meetings convened by NGOs. As a result of these restrictions and the interference of security agencies in NGOs' activities, many human rights organizations practice self-censorship and avoid sensitive issues.<sup>12</sup>

Media and the Internet are also regulated and monitored so as to suppress dissent. According to Amnesty International, over 2018, authorities in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia and Sudan all used penal code provisions to detain, prosecute, and, in some cases, imprison journalists, while Egypt ratified two laws muzzling independent media by giving the state almost total control over

8 Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition (December 11, 2019). The Worst Year Yet for WHRDs in MENA: <https://whrdmena.org/2019/12/11/the-worst-year-yet-for-whrds-in-mena/?lang=en>

9 Front Line Defenders (2019). Global Analysis 2018, with additions from interviewees.

10 Ibid.

11 #Qatar. Front Line Defenders: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/qatar>

12 #Jordan. Front Line Defenders: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/jordan>



print, online and broadcast media.<sup>13</sup> The new media regulations in Egypt allow for government supervision of any social media account with more than 5000 followers. Such accounts may be blocked by the state's Regulatory Council if they are deemed to be broadcasting false news or inciting any violation of state law. Cybercrime laws have been used to charge and detain HRDs in Lebanon, Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> In late 2018, Weam Shawgi, a young feminist activist and a women's rights defender, received death threats and the possibility of imprisonment after appearing on a TV show discussing the situation of women in Sudan. She spoke about sexual harassment and equality of women and confronted another guest of the show who was the Chairperson of the Sudanese Islamic Scholars.<sup>15</sup>

A number of women defenders interviewed for this report described how the crackdown is felt in their country. In Iran, according to lawyer and human rights advocate Leila Alikarami, the reach of the government cuts across a wide swath of civil society: "Governments monitor and control all activities. They do this because they are afraid. They monitor and control everything. Even if you are working for the environment. Even if you are working to educate children. Even if you are working to raise human rights awareness. The government feels insecure and shuts down civic space."

Azza Soliman, co-founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, describes how authoritarian states like Egypt use families to pressure women defenders. "Many direct family members can be subjected to arbitrary arrest or torture if they support the WHRD. In other situations, young defenders are being 'handed over' to their families to force the family to silence the WHRD. Families in such cases can use multiple violent strategies to 'discipline' them including isolation, torture, or killing in the name of honour."

Even in Bahrain, which is seen internationally as a more progressive environment for women, Nedal Al Salman, Acting President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, cites a crackdown dating back

## HANIA MOHEEB

### Highlighting sexual violence in Egypt's revolution



The popular revolution that unfolded in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 sent shockwaves throughout the region. If only for a short while, this space seemed a perfect reflection of its name, which in English means "liberation". But many women were brutally assaulted as they took part in street protests calling for their country's liberation..

In January 2013, on the second anniversary of Egypt's revolution, Journalist Hania Moheeb joined thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square. She was there to call out rising gender-based discrimination under the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood. Hania was surrounded and violently assaulted for more than half an hour by a large group of men in what appeared to be a coordinated effort that prevented others from intervening. She was just one of 20 women who were attacked that night.

"Men surrounded women in very tight circles and violated every inch of them," she said in an interview with Nobel Women's Initiative. "There is no doubt that such packs are organized to serve a political purpose."

Sexual violence has long been pervasive in Egypt. According to a 2013 UN survey, 99.3% of Egyptian women reported being sexually harassed, with 91% saying they felt insecure in the street as a result.

As a journalist, Hania was one of the first to break the silence on her assault. "At the time, I almost could not believe what happened [...] But from the moment they put me in an ambulance I decided I would fight back."

Sources: *Nobel Women's Initiative, Evening Standard*

13 Amnesty International (2019). Op.cit.

14 Front Line Defenders (2019). Op. cit.

15 The African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, 2018 , Kampala, Uganda

to 2015. "We have no civic space. No independent media. No political society. We don't even have a physical, private space to work. We can't organize events or host other women. Not even small gatherings are allowed because even those need to have the government's permission. The only protests that take place are illegal protests because all protests are illegal now." She acknowledges that the presence of women in Parliament and as diplomats may give the appearance of greater openness. "But it is just cosmetic," she says. "They are not real decision-makers. They have to be loyalists and they have to follow the orders of the King."

## PATRIARCHY AND RIGID GENDER ROLES

In his 2019 report on the situation of women human rights defenders, UN Special Rapporteur Michel Forst explored the complex social dynamics that result in the targeting of women defenders. Among these are patriarchy—the social privileging of men—and heteronormative gender expectations that impose rigid rules around how men and women should behave. Patriarchy excludes and disempowers women, while heteronormativity marginalizes LGBTQ+ individuals and others who do not conform to prevailing gender norms. Rights defenders who are seen as questioning traditional gender roles or as disrupting gendered power relations may be attacked or ostracized as "abnormal", "wicked", or "deviant". Women defenders may also stoke nationalist fears and face accusations of being foreign agents or at least anti-national.<sup>16</sup>

In many countries in the MENA region, according to Lina Abou-Habib, Senior Gender Advisor with the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the University of Beirut, patriarchal and heteronormative norms interact with, and are reinforced by, fundamentalist religious doctrine and the prevalence of authoritarian forms of government. These patriarchal ideas limit how and when women can exercise their voice and agency, while traditional gender norms dictate how women and men should express their sexuality and gender.<sup>17</sup>

Laws against same-sex relationships or transgender expression derive from a particular state-sanctioned interpretation of Sharia (Islamic Law) which is considered a principle source of laws in most of the Middle East countries. Several countries in the region use gender-neutral-morality laws. In Egypt, the 1961 law on prostitution was used in September 2017 against young people suspected of raising a rainbow flag at a music concert in Cairo. One of them was Sarah Higazi, an Egyptian socialist, writer, and a lesbian activist.<sup>18</sup> During her three months detention she was tortured and sexually assaulted. This left her battling PTSD, and drove her to end her life in June 2020, leaving behind the following note:

"To my siblings – I tried to survive and I failed, forgive me. To my friends – the experience was harsh and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me. To the world – you were cruel to a great extent, but I forgive."<sup>19</sup>

The structure of households and institutions reflects entrenched patriarchal hierarchies. Religious family laws reinforce the supremacy of men as household heads, income earners, and decision-makers. As such, all aspects of women's lives are strictly regulated and controlled by the male members of their families. As a result, women's political and economic participation rates

16 Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). UN General Assembly: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/004/97/PDF/G1900497.pdf?OpenElement>

17 Abou-Habib, Lina (2020). Unequal Gender Relations and the Subordination of Women in the MENA Region: What the Covid-19 Pandemic Has Taught Us.

18 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/16/audacity-adversity/lgbt-activism-middle-east-and-north-africa>

19 "Egyptian LGBTQI+ Activist Sara Hegazy Dies Aged 30 in Canada". *Egyptian Streets*. 14 June 2020.

in MENA countries are among the lowest in the world.<sup>20</sup> The sustained gender gap in the Middle East and North Africa is one of the world's widest according to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. It examines countries' progress in closing gender inequities in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Of the 20 lowest ranking countries, 12 are in the region, with Iraq and Yemen competing for last place. Despite achieving near gender parity in education and health, the region has closed only 10.2% of the gap in women's political participation and 42.5% of the gap in economic participation.<sup>21</sup> Women are almost completely absent from political life in Oman and Yemen, and there has been no female head of state in the last 50 years in 17 of the 19 MENA countries included in the Index.<sup>22</sup>

In some countries, patriarchal structures and assumptions that restrict women's choices and movements are encoded in legal frameworks. These include Saudi Arabia's male guardianship laws, which require women to seek the permission of a male relative in order to travel, marry, study abroad, or seek health care. The country relaxed aspects of its guardianship laws in 2019, while at the same time imprisoning women activists who had pushed for the reforms. Among them was Loujain Al-Hathloul, now released due to international pressure. She was instrumental in the campaign for the right of women to drive.<sup>23</sup> This was one of the most visible changes, which many defenders have decried as mere window dressing to encourage foreign investment.

According to women's advocate Omaima Al Najjar, even this modest change has spurred a backlash: "Now that women can drive, there have been many instances where men randomly try to spot women driving. They then go back at night to burn the cars driven by women [...] And there is still the male guardianship system. It is not entirely abolished. Women must still obey their husbands and fathers, regardless of what the law is now." Several other countries in the region, including Yemen, feature aspects of male guardianship in their legal systems. "Women can't make any decision for themselves," says Hana Saleh, Executive Manager of Belqees Media and Belqees TV. "Fathers and older brothers decide everything—starting with your name, how you dress, who your friends are, if you go to school, where you work [...] And a woman has no right to say no."

Women's rights are also subordinated to men's in family or "personal status" laws. In Bahrain, for example, only marriage conducted under Sharia law is legally recognized, which traditionally allows only men to seek a divorce. Women can only divorce if the right is stipulated in a contract signed before marriage, and a Sharia judge accepts the divorce—usually only in extreme circumstances. In Bahrain, Shia and Sunni women have different legal rights to child custody, but both are denied legal custody of their children.<sup>24</sup>

In Sudan, child marriage (at 10 years of age - confirmed in the 1991 Personal Law) and female genital mutilation (FGM) are widespread, and until very recently, were permitted under law.<sup>25</sup> "Public order" laws, meanwhile, regulate how women dress, cover their hair, and travel outside their homes, with offenders flogged for violating the rules. "If you are not wearing what they call 'Islamic' attire, then you could be taken to court and lashed 40 times in public," says Fahima Hashim, former director of the Salmamah Women's Resource Centre in Khartoum. However, after the revolution, the Public Order Law was abolished in 2019 when the transitional government was formed. The first national law to end Female Genital Mutilation was implemented in April 2020. The personal law of 1991 is still awaiting to be reformed or changed.

20 Ibid.

21 World Economic Forum (2020). Global Gender Gap Report

22 Ibid. p. 24

23 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56023796>

24 Bahrain Center for Human Rights (2020). Bahrain: Women, the powerful actors in building peace: <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Ausc%3AUS%3A978c951f-f294-4c5b-a567-36d2b4589787#pageNum=2>

25 Akinwotu, Emmanuel (November 27, 2020). Sudan says it will stamp out child marriage and enforce ban on FGM. *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/27/sudan-says-it-will-stamp-out-child-marriage-and-enforce-ban-on-fgm>



Iranian lawyer, human rights advocate and academic Leila Alikarami sees patriarchy as a key challenge across the region, justified in part under cover of religion: "The challenge in most of the Middle East is the same," she says. "Patriarchy exists despite the fact that legislation has changed. For example, [even] in Morocco and Tunisia where the situation is of relative advantage for women compared to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Bahrain, patriarchy is rooted in religious tradition [...] And it is important to say "interpretation" of the religious text. In countries like Iran, legislation is based on Sharia, but it is a rigid interpretation."

These roots, she believes, complicate reform efforts by women defenders: "It is difficult for women to challenge the legislation since it is based on governmental interpretation of Islam. If the women criticize Islamic rules, it means they are criticizing the system itself." As a result, the work of WHRDs, which challenges gender stereotypes, is met with state-enforced resistance and hostility. Women working to change laws and discriminatory practices, provide services for women survivors of violence, or call for an end to conflict and war are accused of acting against the state, social norms, and family honour.

"We want men and women to have equal status and equal rights," says Ms Alikarami. "But everything is linked together: patriarchy, religion, dogmatic interpretation. It is the complexity of the political and legal structures that makes it difficult for WHRDs to demand their rights."

## MILITARIZATION AND CONFLICT

The Middle East and North Africa have known little respite from conflict in the 21st century, ranging from the civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, the Gulf wars, the Iraq-Iran war, the ISIL insurgency, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, and the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has fostered proxy wars across the region.

With the enduring presence of conflict, several governments have embraced "counter-terrorism" measures as a means of crushing civic dissent. Amnesty International's [2019 report](#) on human rights in the Middle East and North Africa<sup>26</sup> found that in the name of security, governments had resorted to arbitrary detention and unfair trials, torture and ill-treatment, the revoking of citizenship, border controls, and, in Egypt, the use of banned weapons and extrajudicial executions against dissenters. In Iran, meanwhile, unarmed protesters faced live ammunition, tear gas and water cannons.

Women human rights defenders in conflict-affected contexts feel the consequences both directly and indirectly. Even as they experience the violence and displacement of war first-hand, their work is undermined by repressive "security" measures. The UN Special Rapporteur has noted how such measures have been used to label women defenders as potential terrorists, and how militarization can normalize the use of force and violence and entrench violent masculinities.<sup>27</sup>

In Yemen, according to Rasha Jarhum of the Peace Track Initiative, "the Houthis have targeted women human rights defenders, political activists and peacebuilders, and arbitrarily detained them. The women were subject to grave violations including repeated rape by armed militia—assisted unfortunately by women militia members who claimed that the rape was purifying the women."

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International (2019). Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018

<sup>27</sup> Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

The use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war was highlighted in 2020 by the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen.<sup>28</sup> It noted that several sides to the conflict have also used false allegations to smear the reputation of women human rights defenders, including questioning their morality through sexual innuendo. Given the resulting stigma, these efforts undermine the important contributions of WHRDs, "rendering them and their families vulnerable to social exclusion, community violence and long-term harm."<sup>29</sup>

In Syria, the protracted conflict and the militarization of society have entrenched gender-based violence in the public and private spheres. Women defenders have been subjected to sexual assault, arbitrary detention, torture, and hostage taking. Sexual violence has been used by all sides in the conflict to traumatize women, families, and communities. Many survivors are reluctant to discuss their experiences due to the heavy social stigma attached to these violations.<sup>30</sup>

Exiled Syrian activist Joumana Seif describes the stigmatization of women survivors of the conflict. "Men and women are treated differently in Syria. The men, when they are released from prison, are treated as heroes. [...] Families, when a woman is released from prison, ask one question: *Did they do something to you?* It is the only thing they ask about because rape will bring shame to the family." The consequences for women endure long after their release, says Ms Seif. "For young women, it is very difficult to have a partner, to get engaged or married, because men don't want to be involved with a former prisoner [...] Unfortunately, this is a part of the Syrian mentality and Syrian society."

Mariam Jalabi, UN Representative of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, observes how nearly a decade of conflict and militarization in Syria has upended society, leaving women to hold families together with none of the decision-making power: "With the men fighting, or disappeared or killed, women are becoming the heads of households, are taking jobs, they are opening businesses, they are the sole caregivers for the elderly, their children. And they are dealing with the devastation of the war." And yet, "they are completely sidelined. They have no say. They have no influence. They have no agency in creating change."

Human rights defenders working in conflict zones in the region have faced threats and assassination by both state and non-state armed forces. Over 2018 alone, Front Line Defenders documented the killing of journalists, lawyers, and other defenders, including women's rights activists, in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Documenting these abuses in war zones is extremely risky for those who attempt it. In Yemen, for example, field observers and leaders of the Mwatana organisation for Human Rights were repeatedly detained and threatened by both the government and Houthi rebels. In Libya, bloggers and women defenders attempting to monitor human rights violations faced threats and detention from both the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA) and other armed militias.<sup>31</sup> In November 2020, women's rights advocate Hanan al-Barassi, an outspoken critic of abuses in the eastern areas controlled by the LNA, was shot dead in her car in broad daylight in Benghazi's city centre. Her murder follows the July 2019 disappearance of Siham Sergiwa, another prominent women's rights activist who had criticized an LNA offensive.<sup>32</sup>

28 Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014: Detailed findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen (September 29, 2020). United Nations Human Rights Council. A/HRC/45/CRP.7

29 Ibid. Paragraph 331.

30 The WHRD Coalition in the Middle East and North Africa (2016). The Status of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria. <https://whrdmena.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Syria-Eng.pdf>

31 Front Line Defenders (2019). Op. cit.

32 Burke, Jason (November 10, 2020). "Gunmen shoot dead female Libyan dissident in busy Benghazi street". *The Guardian*

Conflict, or even the threat of it, further complicates the struggle for human rights by imposing hardships on people, thereby weakening civil society and draining the public space available to address these issues. In Iran, says Leila Alikarami, “women and civil society have consistently advocated for normalized relations between Iran and the United States. But as the lives of ordinary Iranians become more difficult and just about every bit of time and energy is spent on making ends meet, the space for activism shrinks and participation in political life becomes [...] a luxury that few can afford. Therefore, civil society has become weaker and weaker. The government links every activist to a foreign government or to the US, or to receiving money from the opposition. When there is this insecurity, civic space closes.”

Yanar Mohammed, director of Iraq's Organization of Women's Freedom, also attests to the retreat from women's rights that accompanied the U.S.-led military occupation of her country. “Iraq has become a place where polygamy is encouraged, where honour killings are allowed, and child marriage is an everyday occurrence. All of these practices were almost forgotten in the modern history of Iraq. The occupation in 2003 turned all this around and allowed the most extremist groups in Iraq to rule and decide how women's rights would be violated.”

Women defenders are also confronted with the effects of displacement in conflict zones, with the Middle East and North Africa harboring more than one-quarter of the world's conflict-displaced population.<sup>33</sup>

According to the WHRD-MENA Coalition, this is currently the most pressing issue facing the region. “We have refugees from Yemen, Iraq, Syria—it goes on.” These waves of displacement have been accompanied by overtly racist campaigns, according to a Coalition representative. “We have always had right wing governments, so we can't say that there is a rise of the right. But there is a rise of discourse that is very racist and discriminatory. It is being used to justify brutal actions. To target human rights work.” In 2019, she points out, Lebanon stripped refugees of the right to work, while forcing a range of rights organizations to shut down. In Egypt, meanwhile, Sudanese and Yemeni refugees were under constant surveillance. And Sudanese women defenders who were doing vital work documenting sexual violence were forced out of the country. “These refugees had to pack their bags and go.”

## THE COMPOUNDING INFLUENCE OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has exposed and deepened the inequalities that feminists in the region have decried for decades, in particular the social boundaries that limit women to the private sphere, where their subordination to men is maintained.<sup>34</sup>

Yanar Mohammed, an Iraqi feminist who spearheaded the opening of the first women's shelters in Iraq, has witnessed the pandemic's impact on the daily violence women are experiencing. “We are under so much pressure now. We are getting requests every day from women who cannot bear their situation of abuse at home anymore. They are saying that they will kill themselves if they cannot get help.”

Even as her organization struggles to help women victimized by the pandemic, the state's response has been to double down on its repressive security measures: “We have a court case accusing us of accepting women into our shelters and saying that it is illegal for us to provide that protection. We have had to make a difficult decision to not accept any more women because we, the staff, and the women at the shelter were under surveillance and [they were] watching every move that we [make].”

33 According to the Internal Displacement Center of the Norwegian Refugee Council (2019), the region's 11 million conflict-displaced people represented 27% of the 41.3 million displaced by conflict in 55 countries.

34 Abou-Habib, Lina (2020). Op. cit.

COVID-19 has been linked to an increase in domestic violence in several countries.<sup>35 36</sup> Women have also borne the brunt of its health and economic impacts due to their roles as frontline health and education workers, and as primary caregivers at a time when schools and daycares in many jurisdictions have closed or gone online. This burden is compounded in conflict zones, where health care systems are already strained and where families struggle for daily survival. In Yemen, conflict, economic crisis, and the coronavirus pandemic are fueling the highest levels of malnutrition ever recorded in parts of the country. UN agencies estimate nearly 100,000 children under the age of five are at risk of dying of hunger.<sup>37</sup>

"The conditions in all of Yemen are bad," says Hana Saleh of Women4Yemen. "You advise us to wash our hands, but there is no water. Give us water first, then give us advice. The people are angry that they are getting advice for things that are not available. There is no sanitizer, no soap, no water."

According to Rasha Jarhum, two organizations affiliated with the Women Solidarity Network are providing equipment, supplies, and training to support local clinics in preparing for COVID-19. "They were quick to respond. Even before the government.

35 UN Women (2020). COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

36 World Health Organization Human Reproduction Programme (April 7, 2020). COVID-19 and violence against women: What the health sector/system can do. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/covid-19-and-violence-against-women>

37 Ahmed, Kaamil (Oct 28, 2020) Yemen on brink of losing entire generation of children to hunger, UN warns. The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/28/yemen-on-brink-of-losing-entire-generation-of-children-to-hunger-un-warns>

## NASRIN SOTOUDEH

### Enduring COVID-19 and a revolving prison door



Iran has been hard hit by COVID-19. Given the strain on the country's health system, all Iranians are at risk. But those in prison face grave danger due to crowded and unsanitary conditions.

Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh has been in and out of Iranian prisons since 2010 for defending the rights of women and children. The pandemic is just the latest test of her determination.

After charges of "conspiring against state security" put her in prison for three years, she mounted two life-threatening hunger strikes in protest. In June 2018, she was jailed once again, after defending a woman arrested for protesting the mandatory wearing of the *hijab*. In 2019, Ms Sotoudeh was convicted in absentia of a range of national security offences and "for encouraging corruption and debauchery." According to Amnesty International, she was sentenced in total to 148 lashes along with 38 years and six months in prison.

Following a hunger strike in August 2020 to demand the release of prisoners in light of the pandemic, Ms Sotoudeh's health deteriorated badly. Temporarily released from Qarchak Prison in November 2020, she tested positive for COVID-19 within days. In December, she was returned to prison, only to once again require medical treatment the following month.

Over the years, Ms Sotoudeh has defended many other human rights defenders, including Nobel peace laureate [Shirin Ebadi](#). She has won worldwide acclaim for her work, receiving the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award and the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. In 2020, while in prison, she was awarded the Right Livelihood Award—also known as the 'alternative Nobel prize'—in recognition of her unrelenting commitment to justice.

Sources: [World Health Organization](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Nobel Women's Initiative](#), [Al Arabiya](#), [The Law Society Gazette](#)



Even before the [international] NGOs." But, she adds, "women on the frontlines—the health care providers, the nurses—don't have the supplies and don't have any personal protection equipment. Hospitals aren't ready to deal with patients with COVID-19." As a result, she says, hospitals are turning people away, and there are unconfirmed reports that in Houthi areas, people with COVID-19 symptoms are being killed instead of being helped.

The pandemic is also reducing funding and space for advocacy and changing the nature of exclusion of women from the Yemeni peace process. "With COVID-19," says Ms Jarhum, "all the face-to-face meetings with the UN have been cancelled. Now, they are moving to on-line meetings. It used to be that women were excluded from the peace process because they said that they, literally, didn't have enough chairs to accommodate us in the meeting room. Now we are being told that they don't have the bandwidth to include women." At the same time, she says, organizations are struggling to pay salaries and make financial transfers, as the pandemic causes delays with intermediary banks.

Saudi activist Omaima Al Najjar worries that the shift in international focus away from human rights will embolden the government. With UN and European Parliament meetings cancelled, she says, "we don't have a presence anymore. We can't meet and advocate for women's rights. The Saudi government will take advantage of this situation to further violate rights in Saudi Arabia because the world is busy with COVID-19."

Authoritarian states in the MENA region, meanwhile, have responded to the pandemic with militarization, and tightened restrictions on people's mobility and freedoms, without providing any significant form of social protection or support to those hit hardest by the pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states that already suppress the right of expression, have issued statements since the outbreak of the pandemic warning of criminal prosecution for those publishing "false news" or "spreading misinformation"—charges that have been used against those criticizing the pandemic response on social media.<sup>39</sup>

As in other countries around the world, those imprisoned are among the most at risk of contracting COVID-19, and in autocratic regimes that maintain a cloak of secrecy over the condition of prisoners, the threat is dire. Maryam Shafipour is an Iranian human rights activist who, herself, was imprisoned for her political views and activism. Since her release in 2015, she has campaigned for the release of other political prisoners, among other causes. She fears for those inside, who have no means of defense against the disease. "[In the spring of 2020], a guard at a prison in Iran was diagnosed with COVID-19 and asked not to come to work. But nothing is being done for the prisoners. They aren't testing or treating the prisoners. Many women political prisoners are in bad condition. [...] The prison conditions are terrible and some prisoners are seriously sick." She fears the virus may serve as a convenient means for the Iranian authorities to further harm or even kill political prisoners.

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights has monitored its government's treatment of prisoners during the pandemic and found cells for eight people holding more than fifteen. Prison guards ignore precautionary measures such as mask-wearing, and prisoners exhibiting symptoms have been denied access to medical attention.<sup>40</sup>

With Saudi prisons likewise overcrowded and unhygienic, Omaima Al Najjar fears a humanitarian crisis. "We are calling for the release of political activists and human rights activists. They need to be released to lessen the overcrowded conditions. And there needs to be transparency."

39 Amnesty International (October 15, 2020). COVID-19 is new pretext for old tactics of repression in GCC. Public statement MDE 04/3136/2020:

40 Bahrain Center for Human Rights (October 23, 2020). Bahrain: Covid-19 heralds a humanitarian catastrophe in prisons: <http://bahrainrights.net/?p=13073>





## CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Despite the difficult terrain, women's organizations are working to advance peace, democracy and human rights in the region, and making some important inroads in promoting women's rights and gender equality. In defiance of social norms that subject them to attacks and harassment for claiming public space, women have been at the forefront of pro-democracy protests and movements that have swept the region. And while some recent legal reforms to address sexual violence and remove restrictions on women's rights may be tentative, socially-resisted, and subject to reversal at the whim of autocratic or religious authorities, one of the main breakthroughs in recent decades has been in breaking the taboo on questions of gender equality. These are now considered political issues, debated in public and in the institutions of government.<sup>41</sup>

Women were active on the streets and in leadership roles in the broad struggle against corruption and authoritarianism before and during the wave of revolutions nearly a decade ago. Some, such as Libyan human rights lawyer and activist Salwa Bugaighis (see box on page 28) have given their lives in the struggle for democracy, justice and equality.

Building on women's participation in the Arab Spring uprisings, feminist demands have become more central to a "second wave" of revolution more recently seen in Syria, Iraq, Sudan and Lebanon. In some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist parties were elected in the aftermath of first wave uprisings, giving rise to even greater suppression of women's rights and individual freedoms.<sup>42</sup> In this second wave, protests include demands for greater equality and inclusion, including freedom for women, gender non-conforming people, migrants, and refugees, along with other vulnerable and excluded groups.<sup>43</sup>

Some modest gains in women's rights can be seen in legal reforms in countries across the region, but the democratic opening that women and other rights defenders in the region have struggled towards remains elusive. And, in a region where so many countries have been marked by recent and ongoing conflicts, women remain on the margins of peace processes, despite international commitments to increase their role in negotiations, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Women are nonetheless making important contributions to seek justice and peace in their war-torn homelands.

### LINKING DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

While many observers attribute women's inequality in the region with the fundamentals of Islamic belief, religion alone does not explain the lag in expanding women's rights. In looking at women's property rights in 41 Muslim-majority countries, one study found that women enjoyed more secure rights in countries where women had greater access to education and employment, and where dense networks of women's rights activists exist. Their analysis suggests

41 Abou-Habib, Lina (2020). Op. cit.

42 Langohr, Vickie, Lynch, Marc, Baker, Lauren (2016). Introduction to *Women and Gender in Middle East Politics*. POMEPS 19. Project on Middle East Political Science. Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University. Marc Lynch, George Washington University, POMES Director Lauren Baker,

43 Abou-Habib, Lina (2020). Op. cit.



that improvements in women's and girls' education—and women's activism—are key drivers of women's rights reforms, as they better position women to challenge male relations and authorities.<sup>44</sup>

Over the last two decades, women's groups have spearheaded a number of important legal reforms that increase rights and protections for women in the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi Arabia's lifting of its ban on women driving in 2018 followed decades of courageous work by women human rights defenders who drew international media attention to the prohibition and now are suffering state persecution.<sup>45</sup>

Other reforms include changes in family codes in Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco and the introduction of laws to protect women from violence in the home and in the public sphere in Lebanon and Morocco.<sup>46</sup> Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia have also recently abolished penal code clauses that allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims.<sup>47 48</sup> Women in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen and Morocco can now pass on citizenship to their children—which formerly could only be done by fathers.<sup>49</sup> And a recent law mandating equal pay for men and women in the United Arab Emirates constitutes an important step toward gender equality in the workplace.<sup>50</sup>

44 Ibid.

45 Amnesty International (2019). Op. cit.

46 Bishin, Benjamin G. and Cherif, Feryal M. (July 23, 2018). Op. cit.

47 Su, Alice (August 1, 2017). Jordan repeals 'marry the rapist' clause, but it still exists in many countries. The Associated Press. <https://globalnews.ca/news/3638970/jordan-repeals-marry-the-rapist-law/>

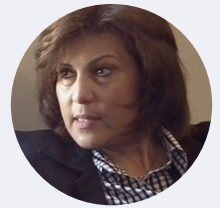
48 Wandzel, Marissa (n.d.). Women's rights in the Middle East: Women creating their own progress. The Borgen Project: <https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-the-middle-east-women-creating-their-own-progress/>

49 Bishin, Benjamin G. and Cherif, Feryal M. (July 23, 2018). Op. cit.

50 Bader, Nairouz (October 8, 2020). The UAE is leading the way on gender equality, but there is more to do. Al-Arabiya: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2020/10/08/The-UAE-is-leading-the-way-on-gender-equality-but-there-is-more-to-do>

## SALWA BUGAIGHIS

### A fallen champion of democracy in Libya



Casting a vote in Libya's last general election—an election she had fought hard to see realized in her country—was one of Salwa Bugaighis' final acts. On June 25, 2014, she was assassinated by hooded gunmen who broke into her house.

The human rights lawyer and activist had been a leading figure in the struggle against extremism and dictatorship in Libya, before and during the popular revolt that began on February 17, 2011. In 2012, she told Human Rights Watch:

"We had never participated before in protests. They were taboo. The revolution made us proud to be there on the front line and men were forced to accept us."

Following the overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi, she served in the first rebel administration—the National Transitional Council—and was vice-president of a preparatory committee that attempted to bridge factions for national dialogue on the country's future. Even under Gaddafi's rule, she had defiantly fought for human rights and became an internationally recognised advocate, helping to launch the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace. Having successfully campaigned for minimum quotas for women's political representation, she later resigned from the National Transitional Council, accusing it of excluding female members.

On the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring, she was remembered by her friend and fellow activist Hibaaq Osman:

"Salwa was the embodiment of so much of what we had spent years campaigning for and showed undeniably that there were women who had the skills, determination and the courage to build equal and just societies in our troubled lands. Her murder proved that there were forces who would stop at nothing to crush them."

Sources: *Human Rights Watch*, *Hibaaq Osman*, *The Guardian*



In terms of political representation, since 2011, nearly every country in North Africa has adopted a gender quota, in which parties are required to nominate a minimum percentage of women as candidates for office.<sup>51</sup> What progress there is, however, has been uneven, and remains fragile. Some observers contend that such reforms must be seen, at least partly, as concessions made by authoritarian male elites to legitimate their ongoing rule. State-orchestrated efforts to increase women's representation in elected office, such as those seen in Morocco, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example, can be understood as responses to crises of legitimacy and international pressure, rather than reflecting genuine interest in increasing women's power in society.<sup>52</sup>

This is not to underestimate the important role that women have played in creating the conditions for this progress—but to highlight the ongoing struggle to entrench these gains and make lasting change within society. Beyond legal reform, these demands challenge authoritarian rule and widely held social and cultural beliefs about women's role and gender norms. In many countries, this has meant that the work of advancing women's rights has gone hand in hand with efforts to promote democracy, counter corruption, and advance respect for human rights overall.

In Sudan, the struggle for women's rights is deeply entwined with the current struggle against authoritarianism. The protests demanding an end to autocratic rule, which started in 2018 and led to the ouster of dictator Omar al-Bashir, have been dubbed "the women's revolution". Along with civilian rule, protesters are now calling for women's rights and an end to the nation's civil wars. By some estimates, women have accounted for 70% of those on the streets, facing a brutal crackdown by military forces. Dozens have been beaten and killed, and rape and sexual violence have been used as an explicit government tactic against women protesters.<sup>53 54</sup> Within the first few months of demonstrations, more than 100 women's rights defenders had been arbitrarily detained.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to restoring civilian rule, women are protesting Sudan's public order laws, which govern every area of their daily lives and subject them to harsh punishments for minor infractions of dress and behaviour.

Fahima Hashim is the former Director of the Salmamah Women's Resource Centre in Khartoum, which focused on documenting violence against women. "During the war, the weapon of choice was rape," she says. "We used that to look at laws that related to sexual violence, [which] was called a private issue. At first, we did not know how to talk about this. But with the shock of what happened in Darfur, we began to work on these issues."

The Centre successfully pushed to change the laws governing rape, under which women victims could be charged with adultery. But these gains came at a cost. Just months after rape laws were reformed, the Centre was forcibly closed by the government. Fearing for her life and the safety of her small child, Ms Hashim fled the country, and now lives in Canada.

"We had to navigate in a context where it was very difficult to work on these issues," she says. "The political situation was not conducive to do any kind of work on issues of violence against women or issues of peace."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Shalaby, Marwa (2016). *Women's Political Representation and Authoritarianism in the Arab World in Women and Gender in Middle East Politics*. Op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Global Fund for Women (2020). *The Women's Revolution in Sudan: We stand in solidarity with feminist activists fighting for their freedom*: <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/sudan-womens-revolution-fighting-for-freedom/>

<sup>54</sup> Eaker, Olivia (October 3, 2020). *The Fight for Women's Rights in Sudan*. The Borgen Project: <https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-sudan/>

<sup>55</sup> WHRD-MENA Coalition (2020). *Petition: Free ALL women human rights defenders detained in Sudan*: <https://whrdmena.org/2019/02/26/petition-free-all-women-human-rights-defenders-detained-in-sudan/?lang=en>

In Egypt, those who played a prominent role in the pro-democracy demonstrations of 2011 risked their lives and reputations to be on the front lines. In their subsequent resistance to the military takeover of government and marginalization of civil society, women defenders have faced rape, smear campaigns, and been charged with prostitution. Their work to defend women's rights has dovetailed with their work to tackle corruption and advance a broader reform agenda in Egypt.

Since its origins in 2005, Nazra for Feminist Studies has provided a means for a new generation of activists to forge an independent feminist movement in Egypt. It campaigns for women's rights and supports survivors of sexual violence, while also promoting a feminist approach to peace building and to countering violence and extremism. In addition to providing legal, medical, and psychological assistance, Nazra documents violations perpetrated against women defenders.

For her work as a rights defender, Nazra's Executive Director Mozn Hassan has been targeted by authorities: she is currently under a four-year travel ban, has had her assets frozen, and been charged with "supporting irresponsible liberty for women".

"We come from a country that has a history of feminist movement," says Ms Hassan. "But at the same time, this has been co-opted by the state. We are having to counteract the notion that feminism isn't inherent to the region and that it is coming from the West [...] Our definition of WHRDs is not just about women working on women's issues, but also about women challenging the stereotype of how women are supposed to act and what they are supposed to do."

Lawyer and activist Azza Soliman is a co-founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA). Founded in 1995, CEWLA promotes access to justice, counters violence against women, and combats corruption by engaging women in decision-making processes in different fields. CEWLA also enjoys a special consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Ms Soliman's work with CEWLA illustrates the close link between the struggle for women's rights and the struggle for democracy and broader human rights in Egypt. In 2010, she spearheaded a campaign that highlighted nationwide corruption and its effects on women, while calling for the Egyptian President to be held accountable. As a result of these actions, CEWLA was closed that year, reopening with the popular revolution of January 25 in 2011.

Ms Soliman pushed for the design of personal status laws for all Egyptians, for adoption of a nationality law that permits Egyptian women to marry non-Egyptians, and for reforms to grant Christians a previously-denied right to divorce. "Over the decades," she says, "I have worked on many issues considered taboo by both the state and society—which others have remained silent about—such as honour crimes, incest, and rape." After being enlisted as a defendant in a case where she was a witness against a policeman, she started a nationwide campaign on a law to protect witnesses and whistleblowers.

## ADVANCING PEACE WHILE DEMANDING SEATS AT THE TABLE

United Nations Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, aims to involve women more closely in crisis prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict peacebuilding, and to protect them from sexual violence in armed conflicts.<sup>56</sup> Research has shown that this is more than a question of women's rights: inclusive peace processes are more likely to lead to enduring peace. An International Peace Institute study of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 found a 35% increase in the chances that a peace agreement would last 15 years or more when women took part in the peace process.<sup>57</sup> But implementation of Resolution 1325 remains elusive. Between 1992 and 2018, women made up only 13% of negotiators, 3% of mediators and 4% of signatories in major peace processes.<sup>58</sup>

This has not, however, stopped women from trying.

Muna Luqman is a Yemeni peace activist and co-founder of the Women Solidarity Network, a coalition of women-led organizations working on peacebuilding and the protection of women. She is also the Chairperson of the Yemeni foundation Food4Humanity. In a country that struggles with both development and gender equality, she works with grassroots organizations to demand that women have a seat at the peace negotiations table.

And yet, she says, "we are still being excluded. We are being ignored because we are not approaching the peace process the way that men are. We are looking at issues of justice and transitional justice. We are looking at human rights. What disappoints me is that what we are calling for isn't viewed as peace. If this isn't peacebuilding, then what is?"

In 2016, Rasha Jarham was part of a small delegation of women invited by the UN special envoy to Yemen to support peace talks held in Kuwait. In 2018, she [briefed the UN security council](#) on the impact of the war in Yemen on women, their vital role in peacebuilding, and their exclusion from peace negotiations. Ms Jarham also directs the Peace Track Initiative, hosted at the Human Rights Research and Educational Centre at Ottawa University, which promotes peacebuilding through women's, youth and civil society groups in Yemen and the Middle East.<sup>59</sup> She believes that the inclusion of women in a 2013 national dialogue, which brought together civil society and political representatives to lay the foundations for a post-revolutionary "new Yemen", was a turning point for gender rights in her country. A quota reserved one-third of places in the dialogue for women. But they have been largely excluded from the UN-led peace process since war broke out in 2014, with only one woman included in a delegation to the Stockholm peace consultations held in 2018, and only three women out of 28 delegates in talks held in Kuwait in 2016.<sup>60</sup>

Outside formal peace processes, Ms Jarham describes how women contribute to peace in many practical ways: "We have women working to end child recruitment, open humanitarian corridors, and evacuate families from the frontlines."

<sup>56</sup> GIZ (October 2020). Including women in peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/90562.html>

<sup>57</sup> Lindbo, Nancy (November 20, 2017). The Essential Role of Women in Peacebuilding: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/essential-role-women-peacebuilding>

<sup>58</sup> UN Women (October 28, 2019). The power of women peacebuilders: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/10/compilation-the-power-of-women-peacebuilders>

<sup>59</sup> Fonbuena, Carmela, Parkin Daniels, Joe, Ford, Liz, and Hodal, Kate (October 29, 2020). 'We have a right to be at the table': four pioneering female peacekeepers. The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/29/we-have-a-right-to-be-at-the-table-four-pioneering-female-peacekeepers>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



Their involvement as peacebuilders in Yemen exposes women to many forms of abuse—including kidnapping, death threats, and smear campaigns—for challenging those who wield power on all sides of the conflict.<sup>61</sup> A lack of international funding and priority means few protections are available to support these women—a crucial gap which the Peace Track Initiative works to address. “We provide both technical and financial support,” says Ms Jurham. “We also have a protection program [for women human rights defenders]. We get them grants to relocate within or outside Yemen. We help with legal aid if they are detained. We also do documentation and connect women with UN agencies. We mobilize women’s organizations to write human rights reports. We work on issuing shadow reports for Yemen. And we work to make women more visible, through op-eds, profiles, policy briefs.”

Syria has experienced overlapping humanitarian crises since the start of conflict in 2011. Beyond the direct effects of bombardment, kidnappings, torture, and disappearances, people have endured massive displacement, food insecurity, and disruption of health and education, and water and sanitation services. Sexual violence has been normalized over the course of the conflict, and rape has been documented as a weapon of war in thousands of cases.<sup>62</sup> As just one sign of the breakdown of households directly affecting young women, the

61 Nadia Ebrahim, Aïcha Madi, & Nesmah Mansoor (December 10, 2020). Peacebuilding without protection: Yemeni women’s barriers to peace. LSE blog: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/12/10/peacebuilding-without-protection-yemeni-womens-barriers-to-peace/>

62 The WHRD Coalition in the Middle East and North Africa (2016). The Status of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria. Op. cit.

## In Yemen: Mothers speak out for prisoners

In October 2020, Yemen took one small step to defuse the conflict that has torn the country apart. Overseen by the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen and the International Red Cross, more than one thousand prisoners of war held by Houthi rebels and the Yemeni government were released.

Their return to their communities was a triumph for the Abductees’ Mothers Association, a dogged group of women who have, since 2016, campaigned on behalf of family members detained and disappeared by both sides in the Yemeni civil war. They have so far secured the release of 940 arbitrarily detained civilians, including many activists and journalists.

Formed by the female relatives of those seized during the conflict, branches of the Association across the country are working to release prisoners of all warring factions. Through sit-in protests, media outreach, and engagement with international organizations, they have drawn global attention to the plight of the disappeared, many of whom have been tortured and held in brutal conditions. They also organize home visits to the families of those taken, extending a hand to show they are not alone.

Until recently, there had been little progress on prisoner exchanges, one of the three key areas that the warring sides committed to in the 2018 Stockholm Agreement. In recognition of the women’s contributions, Association President Dr. Amat Al Salam was invited to join a delegation welcoming the returned prisoners on October 16—she was the only women on hand at the event.

While the Association celebrated this historic release, it has since issued a joint statement with the Women Solidarity Network that underscores women’s ongoing exclusion from peace negotiations. It notes that not a single woman has been included in peace delegations to either the Stockholm Agreement or the Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement. It also calls for the unconditional release of thousands of abducted civilians still in detention, and for the criminalization of rape, which has been widely used as a weapon of war.

Sources: ICAN for Women’s Rights, Peace and Security; Abductees’ Mothers Association; National Public Radio

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that early or forced marriage was a concern in 69% of Syrian communities assessed.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the brutal consequences of war on their lives, Syrian women, like their Yemeni counterparts, have remained largely marginalized from formal peace processes, with their energies and concerns channeled into advisory bodies. The main vehicle, the Women's Advisory Board, was established by the UN Special Envoy for Syria in late 2015 after lobbying by Syrian women's groups. The Board has been criticized by women's groups — including the Syrian Women's Network who ultimately withdrew — as being unrepresentative and non-transparent. It also drew fire for criticizing international sanctions against the Syrian regime.<sup>64</sup> The Syrian opposition, meanwhile, created the Women's Advisory Committee.

According to Mariam Jalabi, who has served as a member of the Committee, the inclusion of women in formal channels has been strongly resisted.

"After the creation of the Board and Committee, there were formal negotiations in 2016 where three women from the opposition side participated. It was clear that as an advisory committee we were being excluded [...] We had to fight to be allowed to stay at the same hotel where the negotiations were taking place. We were denied the badges needed to get access to the space in the hotel where the negotiations were being held...[W]e did not receive any files. There was no official way to be included in what was taking place at the negotiations table."

She notes some recent hard-fought progress on women's participation. In the first round of the Riyadh talks, only seven percent of negotiators were women, and not a single woman was involved in preparatory meetings for the 2017 Riyadh 2 conference. "We realized that we needed to be seen as political actors in order to participate [...] We created the Syrian Women's Political Movement." Women lobbied government officials and international envoys, demanding greater participation in the peace process. As a result, women's representation increased [...] to 15% in the Riyadh 2 conference.

The current track of negotiations focuses on the drafting of a new constitution for the country, with government, opposition, and civil society groups equally represented. Syrian women have since called for at least 30% representation of women in the UN-facilitated Syrian Constitutional Commission, which aims to reconcile government and opposition forces in laying the groundwork for a peaceful end to the civil war.<sup>65</sup> As of December 2020, women made up 28% of Constitutional Committee members, where, according to Mariam Jalabi, their input on the issues of human rights and detainees is crucial. In the face of widespread conflict, detainment, and disappearances, more women than ever are now heads of households, holding together the threads of Syrian society. As well, women's presence on the Committee ensures that their rights under family and inheritance law, and their right to pass on citizenship to their children, cannot be ignored in drafting a new constitution.

63 UNOCHA (April 15, 2018). Syrian Arab Republic: The Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: <https://www.unocha.org/syria>

64 Mansour, Kholoud (2020). Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process. The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University of Beirut: <https://www.cmes.lu.se/article/syrian-women-and-their-participation-peace-process>

65 UN Women (February 19, 2019). In the words of Rajaa Altalli: "Women are leading efforts to push forward in Syria": <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/2/in-the-words-of-rajaa-altalli>

As the Assad regime consolidates its repressive grip after more than a decade of conflict, women's rights organizations are pursuing accountability for war crimes and other human rights abuses and protection for women defenders, while still pushing for a seat at the table. Joumana Seif, a co-founder of the Syrian Women's Network and the Syrian Women's Political Movement co-authored [Words against Silence](#), a report documenting violence against Syrian women detained in state security centers from the 1980s till 2017. Many experienced years of torture and abuse, only to be ostracized by families and society as likely victims of sexual assault, which is widespread in Syrian prisons.

Ms Seif highlights how international allies can support women in Syria by demanding their representation:

"An important role for Canada to play is to push for women's participation in the peace process [...] bringing the perspectives, needs and demands of women and children. Even in the last round of peace negotiations, we saw the role women can play [...] We want equality, but we will not accept anything less than 30% at the peace table."





# REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

## HOW WOMEN DEFENDERS DEFY SILENCING EFFORTS

**W**omen human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa face a daunting array of tactics designed to intimidate and silence them. They are criminalized for their work, and subjected to imprisonment and torture, kidnappings, and disappearances. Media restrictions limit their use of the Internet and other communication tools, while travel bans restrict their movements. A crackdown on civil society organizing, meanwhile, hampers their ability to meet, register, network, or raise funds to sustain their work.

Globally, women defenders also face gender-specific threats and violations. Public smear campaigns are used to delegitimize them, depicting them as agents of foreign enemies or as threatening moral standards.<sup>66</sup> Witnesses interviewed by the Canadian Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs stated that sexual violence and harassment were “often the weapon of choice” used against women human rights defenders, in order to “put women in their place.”<sup>68</sup>

A toxic mix of these tactics can be seen in Saudi Arabia's persecution of rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul, a former student at Canada's University of British Columbia. Ms al-Hathloul was one of several activists detained by the Saudi government in 2018—the same year the country lifted its notorious ban on women driving and eased some aspects of its oppressive guardianship rules. In November 2020, just three days after hosting a virtual meeting of the G20 group of nations, Saudi authorities referred Ms al-Hathloul's case to a terrorism court for trial.<sup>69</sup> The following month, she was found guilty of “agitating for change, pursuing a foreign agenda, using the Internet to harm public order and co-operating with individuals and entities that have committed crimes under anti-terror laws” and sentenced to six years in prison.<sup>70</sup> In her years of detention, rights groups believe she was held in solitary confinement for months and subjected to electric shocks, flogging, and sexual assault.<sup>71</sup> She was released in February 2021, but remains under probation and a travel ban.

The women interviewed for this report nearly all have painful first-hand experience of such tactics, suffering harassment, detention, interrogation, investigation, or imprisonment for their efforts to secure peace, justice and women's rights. Several have had to leave their homelands to work in exile. Those who remain do so under constant risk to their lives and livelihoods, their families, and their

66 Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

67 Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Subcommittee on International Human Rights (June 2019). Raising her voice: Confronting the unique challenges facing women human rights defenders. Canada, House of Commons.

68 Ibid. Page 7.

69 Chase, Steven (November 25, 2020). Trial of Saudi women's rights activist moved to terrorism court. The Globe and Mail: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trial-of-saudi-womens-rights-activist-moved-to-terrorism-court/>

70 Associated Press (December 28, 2020). Saudi women's rights activist Loujain Alhathloul sentenced to nearly 6 years in prison: state-linked media: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/loujain-alhathloul-saudi-arabia-womens-rights-activist-sentenced-1.5855769>

71 Reuters (August 13, 2019). Jailed Saudi feminist refuses to deny torture to secure release. Published in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/13/jailed-saudi-feminist-refuses-release-in-exchange-for-denying-torture>



reputations. In this section, they describe the brutal impact of these tactics on their work, strategies that help women's rights defenders persist, and the passion that motivates them to persevere.

## IMPACTS OF SILENCING EFFORTS

The tactics used against women defenders have severe consequences for them, their families, and their organizations, ranging from exile and displacement, trauma and burnout, to the complete shutdown of their activities.

### Displacement and exile

For women defenders working in the most oppressive contexts, leaving can be the only option to escape with their lives and continue their work. Of the 15 women interviewed for this report, 11 are now living outside their homeland as a result of conflict or the direct persecution they experienced.

Most of those displaced within the MENA region, including women in exile, flee to nearby countries and regions which, themselves, are facing major economic and political challenges.<sup>72</sup> Their employment and housing opportunities are limited, and in countries which have been overwhelmed by waves of refugees from Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones, they can face discrimination and threats of assault and persecution along with language and cultural barriers.

Despite the pressures, some of those in exile are able to continue their vital work, connecting with other rights defenders and resources from afar.

Muna Luqman fled Yemen in 2016, and now works outside the country where she leads Food for Humanity, which provides humanitarian relief to hundreds of families, partnering with other grassroots organizations in her homeland and with members of the Yemeni diaspora. She also works internationally, demanding space for Yemeni women in peace negotiations.

"I have been through the airstrikes [and] street fights," she says. "I was caught in crossfire and part of my house was demolished in the airstrikes. I lived through the siege of Taiz. I saw violations of human rights, so was obliged to do something." A critic of both sides in the conflict, Ms Luqman faced threats and was eventually forced to leave.

Fellow activist Hana Saleh now lives in Turkey after taking part in the 2011 peaceful revolution in Yemen. She spent months with other youth leaders and protesters in what came to be known as Change Square, calling for an end to the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. As an independent broadcaster and a member of the Women4Yemen network, she continues her work for peace and inclusion of women from afar.

"If you are a woman inside Yemen," she says, "you are already dead or in prison. You have no chance. Absolutely. Anyone working for human rights in Yemen is in danger. But if you are outside, you can keep working for Yemen."

Syrian activist Joumana Seif is now based in Europe. The daughter of a dissident Member of Parliament, Ms Seif has a family history of persecution under the Assad regime. In 2012, she fled to Berlin, from where she works tirelessly to bring women's voices into peace negotiations, to end the devastating war in her homeland, and to hold those responsible for international crimes to account.

<sup>72</sup> According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre of the Norwegian Refugee Council (2019, op.cit.), the region hosted more than one-quarter of the world's 41.3 million conflict-displaced people in 2018.

Displacement also affects the lives of those left behind, however, including the families and communities of women human rights defenders. With the loss of their most outspoken members, communities experience an organizing vacuum, increasing their sense of vulnerability and insecurity, and weakening their collective capacity to realize their rights. And as Iranian lawyer and human rights advocate Leila Alikarami explains, family members may also be persecuted and attacked, and used as leverage to silence those in exile:

"Women human rights defenders in exile cannot contact their families because family members still in the country are threatened. Brothers and fathers and sisters are jailed." The pressure and guilt that exiles feel as a result of this persecution can lead to self-censorship, she says. "Some don't give interviews, or use their real names, all because of fear for the safety of their families."

## Being shut down or forced underground

Operating in countries with longstanding restrictions on freedom of assembly, in a context where patriarchal rules limit their access to public space, and where their work has been criminalized as a threat to national security, women human rights defenders are severely restricted in their ability to organize. Many have no choice but to operate in legal limbo—unregistered, underfunded, and facing imprisonment and assault. Even in countries such as Jordan, which accord relative freedom to civil society organizations, they may face limits on "political" activities, require government permission to raise funds, and endure heavy state monitoring and intrusion.<sup>73</sup>

In 2018, the crackdown on civil society organizing increased significantly in Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, three of the most powerful states in the region. The arbitrary detention of activists and government critics had a chilling effect on freedom of expression across the region.<sup>74</sup>

According to the WHRD-MENA Coalition, this closure of civic space has had a devastating impact on women's rights advocates across the region:

"We are losing women human rights defenders. We are losing their voices. It is not just about losing space—it is stopping WHRDs from speaking. It is closing organizations [...] Some are trying to work without being registered, but then they cannot get funding, so their work is not sustainable. So, then they try to only do work that is not public, which is difficult because a lot of funding [depends] on public-facing work."

Nedal Al Salman of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights describes the challenges of continuing her work on women's rights after the country cracked down on civil society organizing, under Saudi influence.

"My organization is banned. Not a single human rights organization is registered in Bahrain." By registering in Denmark, her organization was able to continue functioning. But, she says, "because we are banned, we don't have a physical office. We meet in private places." The ban has also affected their resource base. "We can't get any funding in Bahrain. Travel is difficult, even within the country, for work. So, we travel as individuals. We pay our own way."

The pandemic is also compounding the longstanding challenge women defenders face in securing funding and recognition to sustain their work. According to Iranian human rights lawyer Leila Alikarami, COVID-19 threatens the already meagre resources and attention focused on women defenders: "Firstly, work is impacted because of limited funding. COVID-19 will make the economy worse. So, who will be getting less in the aftermath of this crisis? WHRDs won't

73 #Jordan. Front Line Defenders: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/jordan>

74 Amnesty International (2019). Op. cit.



be the priority. And secondly, in terms of security, now everyone is focused on COVID and no one is talking about attacks on WHRDs or even the violence that is happening in communities and in homes."

Women's rights groups also find themselves shut out of international processes. The UN General Assembly's no-objection procedure, for example, allows Member States to veto the participation of any NGO without providing a reason.<sup>75</sup> Would-be delegates must also obtain visas from government authorities to travel.

Iran today is one of the most oppressive environments in which to organize, as Maryam Shafipour explains. "Most women human rights defenders are already in jail," she says, "or awaiting trial and sentences. I was 25 years old when I was arrested for a second time. At that time, we were campaigning for the "One Million Signatures" campaign to change the discriminatory laws in Iran. But now, we don't hear any voices from Iran. It is impossible for WHRDs to work."

In the absence of organized action, younger Iranian women are resorting to acting alone, she says. "Before, you could gather, meet, organize. Now, that is not allowed. Because there can be no organized action, the young generation are doing individual acts like not wearing a hijab and driving. The new generation is so brave."

Syria has also succeeded in effectively closing down any independent human rights organizing, says Joumana Seif: "The civil society that does exist is totally monopolized by the Assad regime and acts on his behalf. The Syrian regime, after all the crimes it committed, has managed to close down civil society and women human rights defenders."

## Trauma and burnout

The constant threats, surveillance, and abuse—on top of the official sanctions that limit civil society organizing—can be overwhelming, leaving women defenders with few options to continue their advocacy and few resources to care for themselves and their families. Several women interviewed highlighted the urgent need for psychological support and resources to help them cope with the trauma and exhaustion they endure.

According to Nedal Al Salman, women's rights defenders in Bahrain live under constant surveillance. "You are always followed. When under interrogation, they even show you photographs they have taken of you in cafes, or at meetings, or with family." As a result of this pressure, she says, "a few of my colleagues have stopped working. They couldn't take it anymore. It was too difficult personally and on their families."

Sudanese defender Fahima Hashim experienced the shutdown of the Salmamah Women's Resource Centre in Khartoum, just months before the government reformed the country's rape laws, which the Centre had been lobbying for. The burden of that struggle, and the tensions over how to achieve progress while protecting herself and others in her organization, still weigh heavily on her.

"Sometimes you feel burnt out. It's tiring to always think about if and how you can do something because everything that you think you can do might actually jeopardize the women you work with or your organization. How do you sustain and maintain your very existence while at the same time change the patriarchal views?" She underscores the need for mental health supports for women human rights defenders: "We have a lot of stress and we have fear that needs to be washed out [...] Women need support to continue their work and to sustain their inner lives."

<sup>75</sup> Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

For Azza Soliman, living under a travel ban for several years took a heavy emotional toll, and as a consultant to international agencies, it undermined her ability to finance her work. "It affected my mental health because I could no longer travel abroad [...] My financial resources became very limited. At the same time, my need for health care is crucial due to my age and health condition."

Ms Soliman has learned to prioritize her own well-being as part of the struggle for women's human rights:

"Taking care of our mental health and well-being is an essential part to me. I'm not ashamed to feel sad or frustrated. I came to understand that I can lose sometimes and that is okay: tomorrow we can win another case and another struggle. It's important to wait, look, and reflect about our work and respect people's different approaches and coping mechanisms."

## RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

Despite the increasingly hostile environment, women human rights defenders continue with tremendous courage to raise their voices in the Middle East and North Africa. As Azza Soliman says, "We don't have the luxury to stop or lose hope. The more resistant and resilient we are, the more we push the state and people to change their mindset towards respecting women and human rights."

Solidarity with other women's and human rights organizations, and maintaining international visibility and recognition are two key strategies highlighted by the women interviewed for this report.

### Regional solidarity and coalition building

Across the region, women are working in solidarity with like-minded groups through joint networks and campaigns.

For example, in 2015, the [Women Human Rights Defenders MENA Coalition](#) was created to protect women defenders in a range of practical ways, from providing safe houses, to shedding light on violations committed against them. It supports advocacy and knowledge sharing among activist groups, and challenges the culture of patriarchy that discriminates against women.

The Coalition is led by WHRDs and works in nearly every country in the region to help build national networks from the grassroots to international levels. It highlights and amplifies the voices of women rights advocates in the region. It also works through international mechanisms, including the UN special rapporteurs on human rights defenders and violence against women.

Working collectively is one viable response to the closure of civic space in the region, says a Coalition representative. "We are trying to build an alternative civil society. One that doesn't have to be registered or structural. We have been focusing on building local networks, bringing women from different regions together to provide protection, housing, and security networks." Working together, she says, also helps individual organizations deal with the impacts of closing borders and funding constraints. "Funding is stalled and a lot of projects are on pause right now. No one knows what the situation will be like a month from now, or two months. WHRDs have the vision, but they can't strategize because there is a lack of funds and no space for them to do their work." And so they look to each other for support and advice: "Syrian women are asking to speak to WHRDs from Yemen to talk about how to work in conflict areas. WHRDs are feeling closer to one another despite that fact of closing borders."

## SYRIAN WOMEN'S POLITICAL MOVEMENT:

### ENSURING WOMEN HAVE A POLITICAL VOICE IN SHAPING SYRIA'S FUTURE

Syria's decade-long civil war has caused mass civilian casualties and one of the worst displacement crises of modern history.

Peace negotiations have been sporadic, brokered at times by the UN and various regional powers. Women have demanded they be represented from the outset. But international recognition of women's right to participation, embodied in UN resolution 1325, did not translate into seats in formal negotiations. Instead, WHRDs were relegated to advisory roles and encouraged to focus on humanitarian responses to the conflict.

In 2017, a small group of activists came together to be a feminist voice in discussions on peace and rebuilding an inclusive and democratic society. The [Syrian Women's Political Movement](#) united Syrians inside and out of the country to advance women's rights and gender equality and promote the empowerment and participation of women in all aspects of decision-making on Syria's future.

According to co-founder Mariam Jalabi, the Movement in part responds to ways in which women's input has been straightjacketed: "We were always pigeonholed into civil society. We had to be neutral peacemakers, without political opinions. But our issue is a political one."

The Movement has criticized the Syrian Constitutional Committee process—which is intended to involve all parties in drafting a new constitutional framework for the country—as exclusionary and closed-door. Over 2018 and 2019, the Movement partnered with the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) to consult with women's groups in both government- and opposition-controlled territories, seeking input on their priorities and the challenges they face, and their aspirations for a gender-responsive post-conflict Constitution for Syria.

A recent [policy paper](#) outlines a series of recommendations for how the Constitutional process can move forward—with greater representation of the voices of women and other marginalized groups.

Sources: Nobel Women's Initiative [interview with Mariam Jalabi](#); [Syrian Women's Political Movement](#)

Yemeni peace activist Muna Luqman co-founded the Women Solidarity Network out of a similar recognition of the power and security offered by collective action. The Network promotes women's rights and their involvement in peacebuilding in Yemen, while coordinating efforts to improve women's protection. It profiles Yemeni women leaders from inside the country and across the diaspora, and issues statements on latest developments.

"It is only when we organized, worked with other networks, and mobilized, that it became difficult for them to ignore us [...] We have to protect each other by working together. And that is why we founded the Women Solidarity Network. [...] In our group, we have all political affiliations, but regardless, we are there for each other. At the end of the day, if one of us is attacked, we are there to protect her."

Fellow co-founder Rasha Jarhum expands on the many ways in which women work together—within and across borders—through the Network: "If women can't speak out in their country, they speak to us and we amplify their voices. We pass on their messages and information. We connect them, securely, to UN agencies." The Network also enables women to share and access different kinds of expertise: "We have women lawyers defending Yemeni women who are being detained. We have women working in the humanitarian field. We have women lawyers working on legal aid. We have women working to end violence. We have women working for peace. Each organization has its own mandate and they will step in and help with cases that fall into their expertise. We co-ordinate contacts and help each other as much as possible."

## Putting women's rights in the international spotlight

The women interviewed for this report emphasized the importance of gaining international visibility for their work. International attention, in some cases, keeps women alive.

The Saudi government, for example, is deeply concerned with its international reputation as it seeks foreign investment and Western military support. While its treatment of women and human rights campaigners has been among the most brutal, it has made some notable concessions to appeal to foreign investors

International allies are another source of strength, increasing the visibility of women defenders, channeling funding and other resources to grassroots organizations and campaigns, and generating pressure on regional governments to recognize and protect the invaluable contributions of these brave women. According to Omaima Al Najjar, international solidarity is in fact, "the only strategy that has been successful and had a positive impact." She attributes the recent release of some Saudi women prisoners to widespread media coverage and pressure from the European Union and other western nations. "This pressure needs to continue," she says. "There are cases that are long-forgotten—women who have been in prison for eight or 10 years, who have been tortured [and] denied medical interventions. For WHRDs, our only platform to influence the Saudi government is through international channels."

Syrian activist Joumana Seif also underscores the vital importance of international allies, calling on outside NGOs and governments to "support women inside Syria, to keep this link, to be connected, to let them know that they are supported." Ms Seif has worked with the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights to litigate under universal jurisdiction against crimes committed in Syria. One recent success is the warrant for the arrest of the head of the Syrian air force. "He is responsible for torture, sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, and arrests." In June 2020, with support from the Syrian Women's Network and the NGO [Urnammu](#), the Centre filed a criminal complaint against nine high-ranking officials of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence



Service and National Security Bureau in German court on behalf of seven Syrian torture survivors who witnessed or experienced sexual or gender-based violence. The witnesses are asking the German judiciary to investigate and criminally prosecute sexual and gender-based violence in Syria as a crime against humanity.<sup>76</sup>

Knowing that the world is watching provides moral support to activists as well. Egyptian activist Mozn Hassan points to the strength that comes from knowing you have allies. "Resilience is the main thing. We have been seeing the need for psychological support for women [...] Sending the message that 'you are not alone in your struggle' is critical." When such support is not evident from the international community, she says, "we can think that we are the only ones working for human rights."

"Foreign policies need to put WHRDs on the agenda to ensure that there is international pressure," says Ms Hassan. "Authoritarian states need to know that it is not okay to not punish husbands, or fathers, or other members of society who have targeted women in the private and public spheres."

For Fahima Hashim, international allies have been essential both for the knowledge they share and the pressure they can bring to bear on government. In its work on legal reforms in Sudan, Salmamah Resource Centre reached out to women's rights defenders in Pakistan: "We needed to change the law in Sudan that saw women who experienced rape being charged with adultery," says Ms Hashim. "We went to Pakistan and heard from women [there] how they went on to change a similar law."

The Centre also used the international focus on development goals to bring the issue of sexual violence to the forefront: "We had a conference in Sudan and brought Sudanese women and [others] from the region to talk about violence against women. At the time the government was interested in the Millennium Development Goals, so they didn't have any problem issuing visas to the women we wanted to bring. But what we had in mind was that the conference agenda was not going to be [about] the Millennium Development Goals: what we were going to be talking about was sexual violence against women."

Ms Hashim describes the delicate dance of trying to work constructively with government and needing outside pressure to do so. "Sometimes when you are in a very manipulated, controlled situation you need to know how to work differently. [But] if you want to change the law or policy, you need to engage with the government. We can advocate, but at the end of it all, the government needs to change the laws [...] Without international pressure and support we couldn't do our work. We [would] have to keep quiet. Our own office was closed. But we continued working with other organizations and, a few months after our office was closed, the laws were changed."

For Yanar Mohammed of Iraq, the most important international alliances are those with other women's organizations. "We need our work to be seen and recognized," she says. But for feminists, "the international community doesn't mean the UN, or other countries, or other international bodies. The international community means the alliance of feminist women's organizations from around the world. Women's organizations always have our backs in time of need."

<sup>76</sup> European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (n.d.). Survivors: Sexual violence by Syrian intelligence services are crimes against humanity: <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/survivors-sexual-violence-by-syrian-intelligence-services-are-crimes-against-humanity/>







# STEPPING UP: SUSTAINING AND PROTECTING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN MENA

There is universal recognition of the vital role played by women human rights defenders, and both state and non-state actors are obliged to protect them and support their work. These obligations were articulated in [UN Resolution 68/181](#), adopted by the General Assembly on December 18, 2013.<sup>77</sup> The Resolution calls on states to, among other things: protect women human rights defenders; respect and support their activities; condemn and prevent human rights violations, violence, and discrimination against them; and create a safe and enabling environment for defending human rights with a gender perspective—without fear of criminalization, intimidation, or reprisal.

The rights of women defenders are also grounded in a wider body of international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; Article 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

In his [2019 report on women human rights defenders](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders outlined a series of priorities and detailed recommendations for protecting and supporting women defenders around the world.<sup>78</sup>

As a country that promotes women's rights and gender equality locally and internationally, Canada can play a significant role in protecting and providing strategic support to women human rights defenders in the Middle East. In [its guidelines on supporting human rights defenders](#) internationally, Canada acknowledges the vital contributions of women defenders. It recognizes the specific risks and challenges they face, and outlines best practices that its overseas missions can follow to protect and support women defenders, and encourage women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance.<sup>79</sup> Canada has also signalled its commitment to supporting women's movements in low- and middle-income countries by investing in the [Equality Fund](#).<sup>80</sup> Women defenders interviewed for this report have noted Canada's signalled support for women's human rights, and look to the country to follow through on its stated feminist goals for international aid and foreign policy, matching its words with action.

77 UN Resolution 68/181. Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181)

78 Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

79 Global Affairs Canada (2019). Voices at Risk: Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders: [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/rights\\_defenders-guide-defenseurs-droits\\_en.pdf](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/rights_defenders-guide-defenseurs-droits_en.pdf)

80 Global Affairs Canada (June 21, 2019) The Equality Fund: Transforming the way we support women's organizations and movements working to advance women's rights and gender equality (backgrounder): <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2019/06/global-affairs-canada---the-equality-fund-transforming-the-way-we-support-womens-organizations-and-movements-working-to-advance-womens-rights-and-g.html>

The measures outlined below reflect the specific challenges and needs of those working in the Middle East and North Africa, as voiced by women human rights defenders interviewed for this report. These needs are broadly consistent with existing national and global commitments to defending human rights defenders.

## TAILORING PROTECTION TO THE RISKS AND VIOLATIONS FACING WOMEN IN THE REGION

Given the broad spectrum of threats and violations they face in trying to advance peace and human rights in their respective countries, women defenders voiced an urgent need for protection. Authoritarian governments are intent on suppressing dissent of any kind and, as women, they face gender-specific forms of abuse and violence for challenging the dominant power relations in their societies.

According to the WHRD-MENA Coalition, existing international mechanisms for protecting human rights defenders are too generic to address the varied needs of women defenders in the region. These women differ in many ways, including in terms of their race, national and citizenship status, gender identity, and the context they work in. The Coalition emphasizes the need for a holistic and coordinated approach to protection, involving a wider pool of stakeholders, including international NGOs and missions. At the same time, rapid action is needed given the volatility in the region:

"There needs to be quicker, more flexible financial support [for those fleeing] the country or for WHRDs to support themselves while they are on the move. Now there are more and more cases of people who need protection and are on the move." Such protection should, where possible, avoid removing women from their country to avoid interruption of their activities. "There needs to be a sort of safe house for WHRDs where they can be hosted and continue their work."

Providing outside support to WHRDs and monitoring adherence to international commitments to protect them is tricky, the Coalition says, because some organizations cannot accept foreign funding, and may be put at further risk by international interventions on their behalf.

Women also spoke to the urgent need for psychological and moral support. In Syria, the plight of survivors of imprisonment and torture is urgent. According to Joumana Seif, meeting the psychological needs of these women will require an extensive long-term commitment. At the same time, more must be done for those currently in detention: "There are over 128,000 people arrested and detained by the regime. They need to be freed. And Canada needs to, politically, push for their release—especially now with the coronavirus."

The turmoil in Yemen has fueled an exodus from the country. Many, including women human rights defenders, are now refugees and asylum seekers. Rasha Jurham points to the need for long-term support to these exiles in host countries, including by providing education, livelihood support, and health and psychosocial supports.



## ENSURING FUNDING REACHES THE GRASSROOTS IN WAYS WOMEN CAN USE

Globally, the limited access of women's rights groups to adequate financing for their human rights work impedes their efforts and forces them to shift their priorities. Chronic underfunding also decreases their access to justice, defence, and protection. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders has drawn attention to this underfunding, and calls on governments and other funders to direct funding in ways that can strengthen women's grassroots organizations, community-based organizations, and small NGOs.<sup>81</sup>

Funding likewise must be tailored to meet the specific needs and circumstances of women defenders in the MENA region. This entails recognizing that many of their organizations are small and cannot formally register in their homelands. Many face prosecution for receiving funds or collaborating with foreign governments or NGOs. Some are also forced, for their own protection, to work quietly outside the public sphere. As Mariam Jalabi notes, "in Syria, it is against the law for more than three people to gather together at one time. In regime-held areas, where will women register if being public about your work gets you labeled as a terrorist?"

Donors also need to think about the terms and duration of their funding, and the degree to which it supports organizations' real needs. Short-term, project-oriented funding can be damaging to smaller NGOs.<sup>82</sup> Small women's organizations also struggle to meet bureaucratic reporting requirements: they do not easily fit donor requirements for organizational capacity and can't provide public acknowledgements of support, for example. And working under government surveillance, they may not be able to directly claim their "results" for fear of reprisals.

Despite global commitments to women's rights and gender equality, and a notable shift in overseas development funding towards programming for "women and girls" to support progress on Sustainable Development Goal 5, grassroots women's organizations receive only a tiny fraction of available funding. While a record 42% of all bilateral Official Development Assistance—

## WHAT WOMEN DEFENDERS IN MENA ARE ASKING OF US

The women interviewed for this report highlight four key areas of support that are vital to assist and protect WHRDs in the region:

**Protection:** Reinforce a wide range of measures to ensure the safety and well-being of women defenders—including emergency funding and safe houses for those on the move; pushing for the release of prisoners; and providing for psychological help to address the trauma of survivors.

**Funding:** Provide rapid, flexible, and long-term funding that can be tailored to the needs of small organizations that don't easily fit the usual donor requirements.

**Inclusion in peace talks:** Back women's increased participation in regional peace processes.

**International recognition and solidarity:** Keep the work and plight of WHRDs visible and hold regimes and non-state actors accountable for violations against them.

<sup>81</sup> See Priority 8 in Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (January 10, 2019). Op. cit.

USD48.7 billion—was committed for gender equality and women's empowerment in 2018, new resources have not necessarily reached feminist movements, especially in the Global South.<sup>83</sup> Direct funding to women's rights organizations made up less than 1% of bilateral aid in 2018. Three-quarters was directed to bilateral agencies, with the bulk of the remainder allocated to large international NGOs, mainly in the Global North.<sup>84</sup>

Women defenders in the MENA region need discrete, flexible and rapidly accessible funding that can be used in a variety of ways: to strengthen their organizations through training and infrastructure; promote networking and coalition building; provide safe housing and other forms of security; and for psychological support to women and families traumatized by their experiences.

Rasha Jarhum points out that for Yemeni women working in the context of war and famine, direct funding is essential, rather than being relayed through UN agencies. "Women peace builders, humanitarian workers, and human rights defenders need direct support. We need [...] direct core funding so that we can sustain our organizations. And it needs to be long-term funding, not just for a few months."

A number of women noted the need for flexible emergency funds for women defenders in the region, including those working out of the spotlight. "Some WHRDs, especially young and recently released WHRDs," says Azza Soliman, "have great difficulty in meeting their financial obligations. Emergency funds need to be allocated especially for the non-famous WHRDs who are usually in greater need."

## TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE PEACE PROCESSES

Twenty years after the adoption of UN Resolution 1325, women remain on the margins of peace negotiations in Syria and Yemen, despite suffering the direct consequences of the displacement and violence of ongoing conflicts, and despite their important role in rebuilding their societies.

In Yemen, Muna Luqman—who helped open humanitarian aid corridors and negotiated with armed groups over child hostages—looks beyond token participation of women. She wants genuine equality and a more inclusive peace process: "We don't want just participation. We want equal participation and representation [...] We are calling for an inclusive peace. Not just for women, but for all parties, for youth, for people with disabilities. Why? Because Yemen is a diverse country [...] We need inclusive peace in Yemen in order to have a sustainable peace."

As Mariam Jalabi notes, it takes much more than simply quotas to ensure meaningful participation and respect for women's views at the peace table: "We need to support women as political agents. We need to give funding to women as political groups. In order to create a more influential space for women in peace negotiations, women need to be seen as political actors [...] When women are in positions of political power, [they] will take care of all. They will ensure the rights of marginalized groups, the disabled, the LGBT community, and children are respected."

<sup>83</sup> Lever, E., Miller, K. and Staszewska, K. (2020). Moving More Money to the Drivers of Change: How Bilateral and Multilateral Funders Can Resource Feminist Movements. Association of Women in Development and Mama Cash. Pp.8-9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION AND SOLIDARITY

Women's organizations in the MENA region must operate with great caution. Many feel that international visibility and pressure are great sources of protection, and provide leverage to free those detained for their activism. Likewise, the international community must be forthright in recognizing and condemning human rights abuses perpetrated against women defenders, and holding perpetrators to account.

Mozn Hassan explains how and why the contributions of women defenders need to be internationally recognized:

"[Women defenders] who are not visible and not recognized are at even greater risk. Recognition and visibility, internationally, can help keep people safe." Showing public solidarity, she feels, entails documenting and sharing the cases of individual women suffering for their activism. "Use specific names. Speak out for women who are facing travel bans, imprisonment, and harassment. Do what you can to keep [their] names in the public so that they are not forgotten. Give awards. Make visits and [undertake] fact-finding missions."

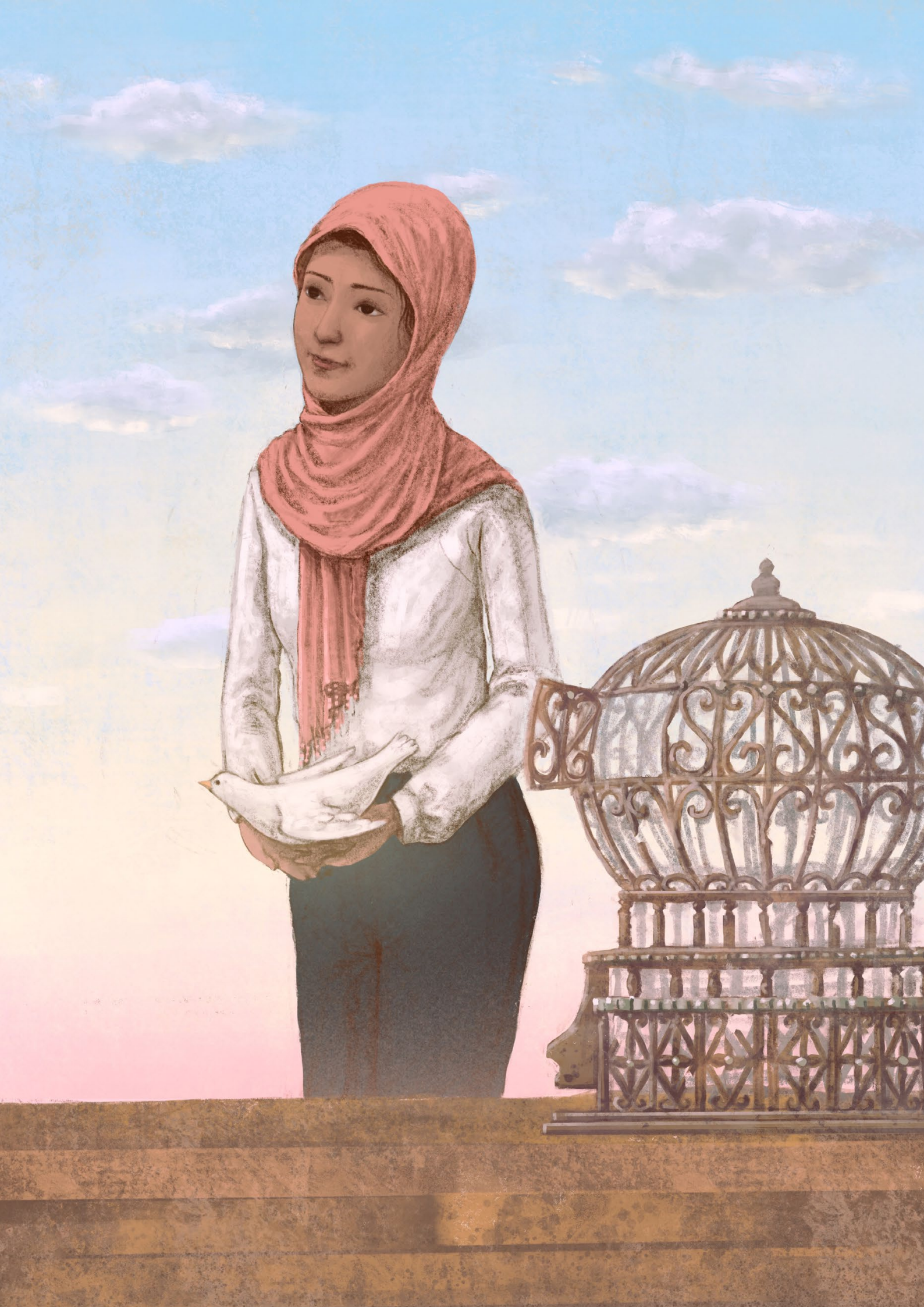
Egyptian lawyer Azza Soliman underscores the need to use existing international mechanisms and conventions to hold countries accountable for the safety of women defenders. "The women human rights defender agenda should be a priority in international events," she says. She would also like to see the international community exert pressure through the Universal Periodic Review process, through which the human rights records of all UN Member States are assessed.

In Saudi Arabi, where a number of activists remain in prison for challenging the country's guardianship laws, Omaima Al Najjar calls for Canada to maintain a bold stand: "What I would like to see Canada do is call for the immediate release of WHRDs, for a lift on the travel ban, and for all charges against [women defenders] based on terrorism laws to be dropped. Canada needs to understand that it is more powerful than it thinks. International pressure helps."

Maryam Shafipour notes the adoption of the Magnitsky Act to pursue foreign officials for corruption, and suggests it could be used to pressure Iranian officials on their violations against women human rights defenders. "We need to let government know that they can't get away with human rights violations."

On a personal note, she also recalls the difference it made when a Canadian senator spoke out on her behalf when she was imprisoned. "It pressured the government of Iran. And I felt that someone cared."







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