



Intersectional
Feminist
Collective



" We Exist Despite their Violence "

**Mapping the situation
of WHRDs in MENA
post Covid 19
Challenges they Face
and Well-Being
Measures They Need**

**Regional Meeting Istanbul,
Turkey 16-20
December 2021**

LOUDER

LOUDER- The Lebanese Organization for Unity and Defending Equal Rights is a non-profitable, not-political, and non-governmental organization founded in May 2015. LOUDER is a human rights and peace-building organization that provides a human rights-based approach (HRBA) platform for research, innovation, capacity building, and collaboration in human rights. LOUDER vision, mission, objectives, and work are guided by the Declaration of Human Rights, international conventions, resolutions and values of equality, Rule of Law, democracy, participation, inclusion, protection, partnership, accountability, and transparency.

Rafto Foundation

The Rafto Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the global promotion of human rights. Established in 1987 in memory of Professor Thorolf Rafto at NHH – Norwegian School of Economics, the Foundation awards the Rafto Prize to human rights defenders worldwide and offers long-term support to the laureates through a range of activities. The Rafto Foundation collaborates closely with national and international experts, businesses and academia and links key players in order to reinforce work on human rights. The Rafto Foundation supports different target groups of human rights defenders, such as women human rights defenders. Part of this work is to build, coordinate, and support networks for women human rights defenders from the grassroots standing at the frontline for the struggle to promote women's rights in the MENA and Southeast Asia region.

Intersectional Feminist Collective (IFC)

Intersectional Feminist Collective (IFC) is a network of and for women human rights defenders from the MENA and Southeast Asia region. The network was established in 2013, initiated by Rafto Prize laureates. IFC provides a safe platform and space where women human rights defenders come together for support and solidarity, collaborations, strategizing and sharing ideas on how to promote women's rights in the region. IFC also carries out different projects in the region, tailored to each specific context, where it reaches out to around thousand women human rights defenders directly.

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Introduction

We as “Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) fight for Freedom, Equality, and Justice. We experience violations because of “who we are and because of what we do”. We stand up against inequality, violence and patriarchy, We are peacemakers and peace builders; we fight for women’s rights, democracy and peace, but are limited to; we are concerned with every day human rights struggle, from the access for food and education to the shrinking of the civic space; from combating all the forms of gender based violence to the right to be free from arbitrary arrest. We resist all systems of tyranny and oppression and advocate to amend all the laws, regulations, and practices that endanger our lives and limit our freedom and activism.”

With these beliefs, WHRDs in MENA are facing their challenges.

The struggle to defend human rights has long been alarming. Countries of the Middle East and North Africa are not unique in their persecution of women human rights defenders, but they constitute a rapidly hostile environment that creates a disproportionate burden on women. While the region is diverse in its history and culture, several governments have used “counter-terrorism” and security measures to restrict and shrink the civic space. The prevalence of patriarchal norms, accompanied with regional conflicts, militarism and increasing authoritarian regimes, puts women defenders increasingly at risk.

They face intimidation, harassment, surveillance, threats, assault, arbitrary detention, criminalization, torture, travel bans, enforced disappearance and in some cases murder, without neglecting impunity when it comes to attacks and violations against HRDs. In addition, the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have added to the challenges faced by WHRDs, preventing them from a safe and empowering environment where they can effectively enjoy and promote their rights and freedoms. These gross human rights violations continue to be widespread and have a profound impact, which impedes building a world free of fear and terror. WHRDs increasingly face these challenges and have been among the most prominent targets as a direct result of their human rights-related work, and due to the context in which they do their work. As human rights defenders, they face the same types of risks faced by all HRDs, as women they are also particularly exposed to gender-based violence and gender-specific risks. These obstacles are created by States and non-state actors where a variety of tactics are used to silence women and impact them at personal, psychological, and professional level. Silencing the women’s human rights movement is systematically utilized by authoritarian governments, patriarchal religious structures, and community leaders. In some contexts, social inequality and traditions consider that WHRDs are not fulfilling their “natural roles”, putting them under systematic gender-based violence. In recent years, Women human rights defenders have been threatened to death personally or at their family members, as what happened in Iraq.



Dr. Khoulood AlKhatib
Director of LOUDER and CO
Founder of IFC

Khoulood AlKhatib

Why this regional meeting ?

Twenty-two years have passed since the issuance of the Declaration on the “Protection of Human Rights Defenders”, and eight years since the Resolution 68/181 “Protection of women human rights defenders” was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 18, 2013. There is an urgent need to identify the most prominent challenges and difficulties WHRDs have faced in the MENA, record their experiences, bring recognition for their work, look for the tools and means that enable a safe and empowering environment, and ensure that their struggle to demand and defend human rights is fully valued. Solidarity networks are needed to be created to strengthen their work, provide them with a safe place for dialogue, build capacities and strategies that contribute to finding the tools they need to sustain their defending for human rights.

This report highlights the most prominent trends and contribution of WHRDs in the Middle East and North Africa, not only to the women’s rights and promotion of gender equality but also to the promotion of democracy, peace, and human rights. The report also documents the strategies and tactics used to target women in general and silence WHRDs in particular. It also shows the devastating effects on their lives, families, and organizations. In addition, the report outlines the strategies and sets a series of recommendations that allow WHRDs to sustain their work despite the risks.





The Scope of the Report

The ideas and recommendations presented in this report were developed during a regional meeting that was held in Istanbul, Turkey, from December 16 to December 2021, 20. Twenty WHRDs from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia Bahrain, and Iran have shared their experiences and reflected on their challenges and needs. The meeting created an important opportunity to get WHRDS to have a safe space to reflect on their challenges, share their testimonies, and stories. All the women who attended this meeting had first-hand experience in defending human rights, and some of them experienced harassment, detention, interrogation, investigation, or imprisonment because of their efforts to secure peace, justice, and women's rights. As a result, many of them had to leave their countries to work in exile.

In the name of security, governments have resorted to diverse mechanisms to shrink the civic space.



Context in the Middle East and North Africa

Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa have experienced various conflicts such as the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and the presence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Women human rights defenders in conflict-affected contexts are directly affected by violence, displacement, and increased use of force and violence.

Environment of Risk, Violence, and Fear

In Syria, WHRDs have been subjected to rape, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual assault, and hostage-taking. Reem Says, “Violations in Syria are no longer documented and reported because of crimes that have escalated to war crimes and crimes against-humanity, and there is a wide discussion about genocide. The suffering of women has increased with different actors. In reality, there is a multitude of actors such as the Autonomous Administration, the opposition, and the outlaw forces. A group of women human rights defenders have been subjected to enforced disappearance, including lawyer Razan Zaitouneh and Samira Khalil.”

Reem continues, “women human rights defenders in the conflict areas in Syria led liberation movements and faced social challenges represented by the dominance of patriarchal society, patriarchal authority, and the that restricted the freedom of Syrian women, who endured fear, especially as almost every woman became the mother of a martyr, a detainee, sister, wife or daughter of a detainee, not to forget violence against women, the crimes committed against them. Reem adds “Syrian laws such as the Penal Code legalized murder under the pretext of honor crimes, in addition many gaps in Syrian laws legitimize discrimination against women.”



Women suffer from kidnapping for ransom, and the situation of women in Syria has reached the point where women are being arrested, caged, and sold in slave markets by extremist Islamic groups. Reem continues, “These circumstances have made our lives impossible. Our society has been divided into harsh dichotomies between supporters and opponents, pro-government -shabiha and thieves. In return for these dichotomies, citizens are filled with fear as all people are equal in the injustice that befalls them.”

<https://timep.org/syrias-women/violence-against-women/women-a-form-of-currency>

In Palestine, women suffer from a scheme of displacement and ethnic cleansing from the Palestinian lands, and the minority of “original Palestinians” who live within the Green Line (Palestinians of 48) are still obligated to hold the blue identity, meaning the Israeli identity card and the Israeli passport, without being given the right to choose. “According to the law, we are citizens of a state that we do not belong to, nor to its identity, vision, and entity, and this is reflected on us as Palestinians,” says Rafah, who is a Palestinian Citizen of Israel. We are affected by Israeli laws and policies that affect all Palestinians, and we are subjected to all forms of discrimination and systematic persecution, in addition to discrimination in the implemented policies or unwritten policies.”

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Israel announced the designation of six leading Palestinian civil society organizations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as “terrorist organizations. This move is intended to not only criminalize these organizations, but to cut off their funding and other forms of support they receive from international partners and supporters. These organizations are defending human rights and delivering humanitarian aid for thousands of people.

Lamia confirms that women in Palestine suffer from the dispersion of laws. While in the Gaza Strip laws that are applied are of Egyptian origin, the ones in the West Bank are of Jordanian Origin. These laws are very old, such as the Personal Status Law and the Penal Code. The Palestinian territories are divided into three areas A, B, and C. Although Area A is sovereign, it is under full Israeli occupation. Lamia continues, “Some Birzeit University students were arrested in area A and brought to trial by the Israeli occupation who entered their homes during the day and at night, and killed many women and young people. Women in Area C suffer from the lack of access to their basic rights since many of them still live in tribes in rural areas; there is a lack of any development in the lives of these indigenous women, especially in schools, education, clinics, health, and transportation that provide them with access and even electricity.

In addition, Israel announced the designation of six leading Palestinian civil society organizations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as “terrorist organizations”. This move is intended to not only criminalize these organizations, but to cut off their funding and other forms of support they receive from international partners and supporters “These organizations are defending human rights and delivering humanitarian aid for thousands of people.

Kifah from Ghaza-Palestine shows the extent of the suffer of women with disabilities, as they face double discrimination, being women and disabled. Disability takes on gender-related dimensions in terms of multiplying restrictions and depriving women with disabilities of their rights. “In Palestine, girls and women with disabilities are largely marginalized and excluded from decision-making, which is reflected in the limited services available and the difficulty of accessing these services in many sectors.”

This marginalization is also reflected in undermining their efforts to fight violence against girls and women, and in the provision of prevention programs, support services, and access to justice. “We find, for example, that the Palestinian national transfer system, which aims to protect women and girls from violence, did not address the right of girls and women with disabilities to protection neither in its procedures nor in its regulations. “the current family protection law did not address issues of violence against girls and women with disabilities, the available protection centers failed in responding to their needs, which limits their access and benefits from the available protection services”.

In Yemen, there is no way to talk about the law in front of the authority of the militias and the rule of chaos that exposes the lives of HRDs to all kinds of dangers that may lead to murder.



In Iraq, the southern regions are considered one of the most challenging areas for WHRDs, especially those who paid the price of the siege that began in 1990. They were deprived of the right to education and were forced to early marriage and experienced high rates of poverty. In addition, learning to write and read has been a challenge to women affected by wars, especially since it encounters strong opposition from clan elders, as it represents a deviation from traditions and customs and may deprive women of the inevitable destiny drawn by their fathers, husbands, and the clan's sign.



In South of Iraq, many women commit suicide due to the customs which force women to marry to settle a tribal feud in what is known as the Fasliya marriage in Iraq. It derives from the Arabic word for «arbitration». Salimas brother Ali had killed a man from another tribe. Fighting between the two tribes ensued and lasted nearly a year. After the intervention of other tribes, they the two sides were persuaded to end the fighting. The verdict was for Ali's tribe to pay five thousand dollars in addition to compensating the other tribe with five «tributes», including Salima and four other women. «I tried to commit suicide before my wedding, but all my attempts failed,

In the southern regions, customs force women to marry via shighaar marriage or Exchange marriage (quid-pro-quo marriage) which is the practice of exchanging brides between two families, where the girl and dowry of one family is exchanged for a girl and dowry from another family. “I’ll give you my daughter or sister and my son or nephew will marry your daughter, sister or niece, and so on.” the shigar marriage forced many women to commit suicide”

In addition, despite protests, Fasliya marriage which derives from the Arabic word “arbitration”, has re-emerged among Iraqi tribes, and is arranged as compensation, through which tribal conflicts are resolved. “Women are forced to marry to settle a tribal feud in what is known as the Fasliya marriage in Iraq.

“We have never imagined that in the twenty-first century a woman would be subjected to sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, and is intimidated to be sold and raped many times as an undesirable group as if she is treated as an object. Yazidi women were forced to pass in front of thirty or forty “ISIS” men so that one of them would choose her and take her for hours or perhaps days and then send her to another friend or trade her at public auction.” More than 6,500 women and children were kidnapped, and the most horrific acts of torture and rape were practiced against them. Moreover, 450,000 people were displaced to the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. They faced the threat of starvation, thirst, hot weather, and ISIS militants who shot or killed women and children after ISIS had determined that these women had passed the childbearing age.

In Lebanon, which is burdened with political and sectarian quotas, women have suffered from the worst economic crisis in its modern history as they have been deprived of the necessities of a decent life. According to the last economic update from the World Bank Lebanon's economic and financial crisis is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century. The social impact of the crisis, which is already dire, could rapidly become catastrophic; more than half the population is likely below the national poverty line. According to Nadine "We are facing multiple crises, including a massive explosion in Beirut's port, an economic collapse, rising political instability, and the Covid-19 global pandemic, all of which endangered our basic rights."

"We found ourselves living in danger of slipping into extreme poverty and forced to turn our lives around and upside down. We suffered from an unprecedented deterioration of our rights at the economic level, the collapse of the national currency exchange rate and high inflation rates for basic commodities, especially in energy, medicine, flour, and poverty, added to the high rates of unemployment and the absence of social protection."

"The massive explosion that occurred in Beirut port due to the corruption, incompetence, and negligence of the authorities killed more than 200 people, injured more than 6,000, and left 300,000 homeless. The blast rocked the city that has always been an essential part of the national economy and caused massive destruction changing the entire neighborhoods to rubble. Moreover, authorities have failed to protect the media from violence or intimidation by members of political, religious, and other influential groups. Both security forces and supporters of political parties have attacked reporters covering protests, and several journalists have experienced harassment and threats of violence online."

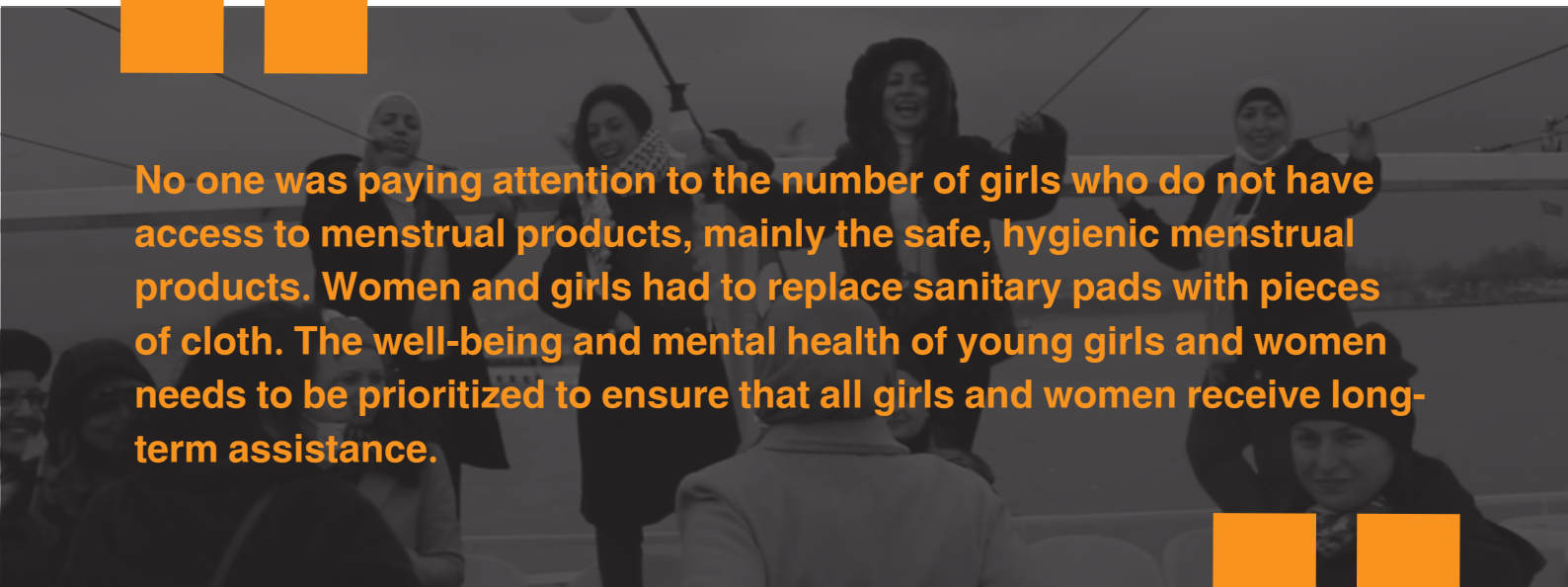
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In Lebanon, we suffered from an unprecedented deterioration of our rights at the economic level, the collapse of the national currency exchange rate and high inflation rates for basic needs, especially in energy, medicine, and flour. This is added to the poverty, the high rates of unemployment and the

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“Lebanon is witnessing a worsening perception of democracy and rising support for military rule. The country is moving towards an “authoritarian regime” escalating its use of judicial and non-judicial tactics to silence journalists and human rights defenders”. Concerning the social and economic level, Nadine says that the economic stagnation and the high rate of unemployment, especially among young people, as well as the rates of poverty are constantly increasing. Poverty rate increased rapidly especially after the economic crisis and Beirut blast; the poor and middle classes will be the most affected in such economic crises as they will be unable to buy medicine, fuel, and flour.

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No one was paying attention to the number of girls who do not have access to menstrual products, mainly the safe, hygienic menstrual products. Women and girls had to replace sanitary pads with pieces of cloth. The well-being and mental health of young girls and women needs to be prioritized to ensure that all girls and women receive long-term assistance.

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“In Iran, governments monitor and control all activities that are related to human rights. Even if you work for the environment, for raising children, or raising awareness of human rights, the government feels insecure and closes civic space. A number of defenders have been arrested, and women have been targeted; all protest movements have been confronted with arbitrary measures by the government.

In Tunisia, Human Rights achievements are the result of the Tunisian women's rights movement, who were voicing demands for greater rights not because of the states' policies which are not supportive for gender equality.

Tunisia is viewed as a relatively advanced country in terms of women's rights, compared to other countries in region. Tunisian women have long had more rights than their counterparts in neighboring countries, mainly civil, political, economic, and social rights; however, the right to equality is still not fully realized. There is inadequate implementation of laws and measures to protect women from all forms of violence; moreover, discriminatory laws and policies infringe on women's rights, access to justice and economic prosperity which leads to limited participation of women in politics, leadership and public life.

According to the Global Gender Gap report 2020, the World Economic Forum's publication on gender inequality, out of a total of 153 countries Tunisia's ranking in terms of gender equality dropped from 90th to 124th between 2006 and 2020

Salwa says that "Human Rights achievements are not only due to states' policies but to the Tunisian women's rights movement, who were voicing demands for greater rights"; She added, "Today in Tunisia, the state policy is not supportive of gender equality. The Equality of Inheritance Law that was defended by the feminist movement did not find a way to be ratified, and most of the proposals and amendments to update the laws were rejected by the current president. The situation of women in Tunisia differs from one society to another, and between rich and poor environments or among conservative environments. "This gender gap can be explained through a lack of awareness about women's rights and the regression within the education sector of the country."



In Bahrain, the human rights situation did not improve. According to the report of Human rights Watch, there are 27 individuals currently on death row, of whom 25 are at imminent risk of execution. The government has put six people to death since it ended a moratorium on executions in 2017. Authorities arrested, prosecuted, and harassed HRDs, journalists, opposition leaders, bloggers. All independent Bahraini media have been banned since 2017 from operating in the country and all opposition groups dissolved. Nedal says “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”.

Authorities have increased their repression for freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and associations. They have also restricted the freedom of expression on the Internet, particularly in the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the authorities have arbitrarily detained HRDs and their families and imprisoned them for their human rights work under the Anti-Terrorism Crimes Law and the Anti-Cybercrime Law. Zainab says, “There are no independent media, and we cannot organize even small gatherings because even those gatherings need the government’s permission.”

In Jordan, women human rights defenders suffer from several societal and economic challenges “if the woman human rights defender demands economic rights for herself or for others, she will face obstruction of career progression , which will eventually lead to her dismissal from her job”. Abeer says that the most prominent of these challenges revolve around three levels:

1. Government has attempted to recruit women activists to preside over political positions and affect their credibility.
2. Some political movements and forces have attempted to involve women as activists as a political image for the political, religious, or sectarian parties.
3. Impersonating the role of HRDs is what some governments and oppositions seek to form structures of women rights groups. Such structures aim to disseminate the governmental ideas and their political propaganda and promote them, which sometimes leads to the

Also, in Egypt after the 2011 revolution and the events that followed it, “we believed that there would be freedom of opinion and expression and practice of civil work in Egypt; nevertheless, the regime attributed its failure to civil society organizations, which remained in conflict with the state on one hand and with the society on the other hand.” At the end of 2021 and despite the political will, some of the associations emerged and reconciled their conditions according to the new law. On the other hand, others closed their doors as a result of the refusal of grants to associations and the prevention of civil society institutions from resuming their work. Despite the declaration of a new law, “the survival of associations was a distinguished act of bravery,” because of obstructing the implementation of projects and rejecting them without valid reasons. Added to this are the challenges of national security and the bureaucratic administrative procedures.

Growing authoritarianism

Even though the Middle East and North Africa region is diverse in its history and culture, yet the governments are enabling a rapidly hostile environment that creates a disproportionate burden on HRDs. The Middle East and North Africa region remains the lowest ranked of all the regions covered in the Democracy Index 2021 with five countries of the 20 in the region featuring in the bottom 20 in global ranking. The region’s low average score (3.41 for 2021) continues to be weighed down by conflict in several countries such as Syria and Yemen. Even from such a low base, the average regional score declined further in 2021 (from 3.44 in 2020). The regression in 2021 came mostly as a result of sharp deterioration for Tunisia and Lebanon—two of the higher scorers in the region—with both countries’ political systems in turmoil. Tunisia’s resulting downgrade in category from “flawed democracy” to “hybrid regime” leaves the region with only one “flawed democracy”. Meanwhile, Lebanon’s downgrade from “hybrid regime” to “authoritarian regime” means that 17 of the region’s 20 countries are now classified as “authoritarian”.

Shrinking the civic space for women human rights defenders

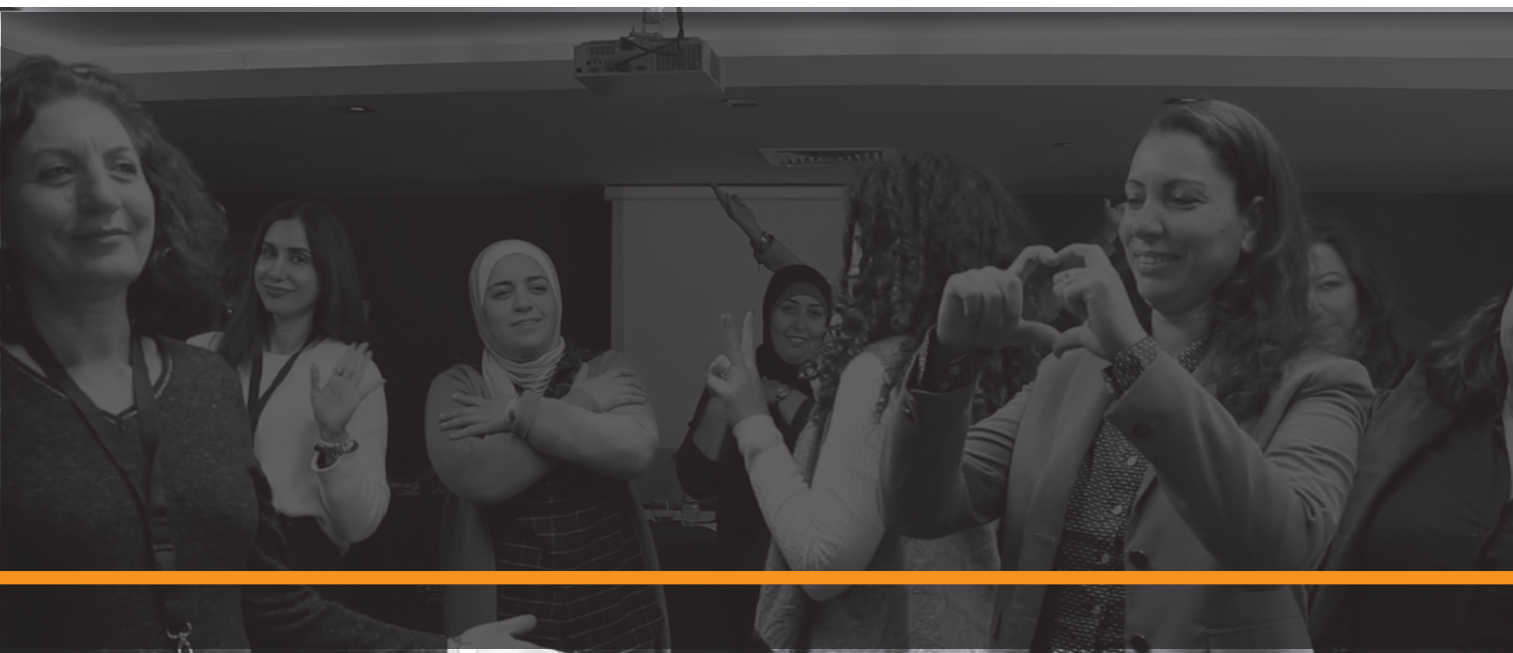
Governments have adopted a common approach in dealing with defenders. There is a systematic attempt of shifting the pattern of violations from targeting organizations to individuals. Variety of surveillance tools, online disinformation campaigns, blocking of accounts and websites, even shutdown of the internet are common. Customs and traditions have also become superior to the law and even to the religion itself.

Although WHRDs are at the forefront of pro-democracy and gender equality movements and are exposed to the same challenges as any HRDs, they, as women, are subject to additional challenges as a result of patriarchal norms and traditions. Their families, communities, and religious groups consider their work as a challenge to the traditional familial roles in society and as a threat to religion, honor, or culture which exposes them to stigmatization in their society. WHRDs also face increasing risks arising from regional and local conflicts and the spread of extrajudicial forces, such as in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

With the continuation of conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, and the suppression of peaceful protests in Sudan, “counter-terrorism” measures have increased as a means of restricting the work of defenders who are facing intimidation, harassment, surveillance, threats, assault, arbitrary detention, unfair trials, criminalization, torture, travel bans, enforced disappearance and in some cases murder. In addition, live ammunition, tear gas, and water cannons have been used against the peaceful protestors, as in Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. The prosecution of HRDs has spread throughout the region, and there have been many constraints on civil society organizations, freedom of association and peaceful assembly is restricted and foreseen as threatening “the political, economic, social or security principles of the state.” Leila says that “What is new is that attacks on WHRDs are being normalized across the region. Governments are using escalating terror laws to suppress HRDs. These laws are now being used against WHRDs.”

Zainab adds “In Bahrain, anyone who joins a public gathering of more than five people in defiance of public order may be imprisoned or subject to a travel ban or citizenship revocation.”

The government has closed civic space for Bahrainis to express their political opinions and withdraw their nationalities. “If we tweet against the war on Yemen or retweet it, the crime would be 3 years in prison.”



Governments, as in Egypt, impose restrictions on receiving and accessing funding, particularly from international sources; some governments used anti-terror laws and mass assembly laws to impede the organization of peaceful protests; Unnecessary and excessive force was also used by the security forces to suppress the gatherings.

Norms, customs, and traditions

“As a human rights defender, I do not allow anyone to accuse me of destroying a value system, and this is a slogan that must be raised,”

All over the world, WHRDs have experienced risks and challenges similar to those faced by HRDs, yet gender inequalities remain among the most serious inequalities reinforced by a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture. In addition to attacks, criminalization, arbitrary detention, and sometimes even murder, women defenders have undergone special forms of verbal, physical, and moral violence, including sexual violence. “As a human rights defender, I do not allow anyone to accuse me of destroying a value system, and this is a slogan that must be raised,” said Lamia from Palestine.

WHRDs are subjected to various forms of violence due to their defiance of patriarchal authority, and social norms. Women defenders who work specifically on gender equality issues face a severe attack simply because they have broken the barrier of “taboos” and rejected the socially approved roles originating in patriarchal norms that are embedded in social relations and legal frameworks.

As a result of the patriarchy prevailing in most countries, women activists are seen as “deviants.” In addition gender and sexual stereotypical images are used to damage their reputation. WHRDs who participated in the Istanbul meeting highlighted the impact of family and community violence on them and their work disproportionately. “When I defend human rights, they consider that I am defying norms, and I am an oppositioner serving the West.”

In Iraq, when women defenders challenge the traditional notions of family and the gender roles in society, they are labeled as “family destroyers,” and through their work, they are considered as a threat to religion, honor, or culture.

Fatima from Iraq has faced many challenges because “working on human rights is considered to be against the traditions, doctrine, and religion. Moreover, many individuals in society consider that those who talk about international conventions are against religion and that the word (gender) constitutes a Western culture. That is, they understand gender equality in a negative way.” Salwa says, “In Tunisia, moral provisions prevail in targeting women human rights defenders in their persons, families, and morals; persistent social norms and cultural beliefs that increases violence against women and infringe on their right to free and dignified lives;

However, these women are targeted in their marital status and in their personal freedom. Such as, is she married or divorced? Does she have children? Who is her family? What does she wear? What does she drink, and what does she eat? Many women human rights defenders have been exposed to systematic campaigns that have affected their private lives, such as the late head of the National Union of Tunisian Press, Najiba Hamrouni. Her pictures were distorted in a way that her features were changed and then shared via social media channels.” Wissam from Tunisia continues, “WHRDs are subjected to smear campaigns based on ethics, and these affect the women’s personal freedom and private relations.”

In Lebanon, the decision-making at the personal, family, and community level is hindered by social, cultural, and legal obstacles. Women are less fortunate than men in the decision-making process. In addition to the patriarchal norms, there is a lack of financial resources, glass ceiling policies that hinder women’s access to upper-level positions in various fields. Furthermore, the stereotypical image of women in the media and on television has lowered people’s confidence in the potential of women in leadership. All of these factors have reduced the chances of women’s participation in decision-making, Josephine, says, “Women are almost under-represented in decision-making positions, which weakens women’s access to fundamental rights and freedoms. Other great challenges start with the family and the prevailing environment.” She continues, “The Lebanese woman not only participated in “October 17 Revolution”, but also became one of its symbols and led many of its movements and activities. Women revolted against the “low” rank of Lebanese women in terms of their rights.

Their role was prominent in joining demonstrations, standing in the front lines, writing Banners and proclamations, confronting rioters, and protecting and defending revolutionaries. Waiting for the legislation to criminalize sexual harassment, women in the revolution did not stop identifying their harassers and prosecuting them.”

Manal adds that in Lebanese laws there is no specific age that determines a girl's "eligibility" for marriage. Especially that there is no unified concept between the legal age applied according to civil laws, and the marriage age applied according to personal status laws since this age changes from one sect to another. "Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence, and constitutes a flagrant violation against the right of children and girls to safety, protection, health, development, decision-making, and education. The girl is placed at risk due to early pregnancy, social isolation, discontinued education, limited chances of career and professional advancement, and increased exposure to domestic violence."

In Jordan, Abeer describes the Jordanian women's participation in politics as limited and weak compared to their educational, health, cultural and social reality. "Women defenders are at greater risk of experiencing additional forms of violence and exclusion. They are often seen as challenging the accepted socio-cultural norms, traditions, perceptions and stereotypes about femininity, sexual orientation, and women status in society."

In Palestine, "the attacks and intimidation against WHRDs get intensified when they challenge traditional notions of family, gender roles, and gender identities, so they are subjected to physical and verbal violence, stigma, and exclusion." Lamia adds that traditional culture prevents women from being active in the social and economic fields and limits their participation in public life. Many women are not decision-makers in their families, especially regarding educational and career choices.

Society cannot be strong if women are weak or do not have equal opportunities for development and self-determination."

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Rafah from Palestine says, “When we fight the patriarchal system, we are accused of treason, and we are often asked to adjust priorities... That is, instead of criticizing leaders who violate our rights, we are expected to focus on Israeli violations... We believe that if we want to resist occupation and discrimination, we must be a strong society; however, this society cannot be strong if women are weak or do not have equal opportunities for development and self-determination.

Leila from Iran sees the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture as a major challenge across the region, and it is rooted in religious traditions. “The challenge in most of the Middle East is the same,” and in many cases, the family’s reaction is to intimidate and pressure women advocates to quit their jobs.



Risks



Salwa from Tunisia believes that “with the lapse of time, women human rights defenders have gained some immunity and have continued their struggle despite all the attacks. However, not all defenders had the same courage to face these campaigns. Some of them surrendered when their image was distorted as they could not bear that view of inferiority or stigma. This is why it is important that we support each other as defenders.”

Leila from Iran considers that “the increase of the powerful actors that oppose our work in society will increase our vulnerabilities.” Women defenders who work with victims of domestic violence or sexual assault and women defenders who do not feel safe face threats and attacks. The use of intimidation d forces WHRDs to stop their work.”

Nedal from Bahrain says, “My father was an immigrant and my entire family was in exile. In addition, their citizenship was revoked because of their human rights work. During my childhood, I heard a lot about torture. I was targeted and prevented from traveling for several years. The activists and defenders as well as their livelihood, families, and businesses were targeted. Also, the companies in which they work were targeted and closed.”

In Palestine, Palestinian women suffer from many forms of discrimination :

1. The state's discriminatory policies
2. The economic situation: 50% of families live below the poverty line, and this mainly affects women and children. The percentage of working women does not exceed 30%.
3. The high rate of violence, at least one in three women are exposed to violence.
4. An Israeli public policy that consolidates violence and promotes impunity where 60% of Palestinian women who were killed had submitted complaints of violence to the police who didn't take any action.

Rafah says, "Those who work in law enforcement and policy implementation are men with a patriarchal mindset; they deal with women from a patriarchal view that disempowers them." Kifah from Palestine says, "Violence against women with disabilities occurs primarily as a result of the attitudes towards women in society, which are dominated by a "patriarchal" character, in addition to the conditions resulting from the disability itself.

Therefore, women with disabilities are less physically capable of defending themselves and reporting abuse due to the lack of accessible channels, or the inability to access information and advisory services. Added to this are the barriers in the physical environment and the lack of communication channels that allow the woman who survived violence to report or benefit from counseling and protection services.

There are other personal reasons that belong to the survivor herself and are closely related to the societal stigma and the view of her as a person with a disability, who has no opportunity to fulfill traditional roles normally (such as motherhood). Additionally, the greater reliance on other people for care and support may present other barriers. It creates a fear of reporting abuse, as it may ultimately lead to the loss of the care that they may need.

In Yemen, Radhiya cites that “Human rights defenders working in conflict zones in the region have faced threats and assassination by both state and non-state armed forces. The domination of militias over social and political contexts greatly reduces the space for accountability. Women defenders often face prejudice from various authorities that are required to investigate and handle complaints. WHRDs are treated with hostility and indifference, which constitutes an additional obstacle preventing women defenders from reaching justice”. For women human rights defenders in conflict-affected contexts, 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”.

In Iraq, Fatima was kidnapped in 2012 by armed parties and released later. She was also subjected to “disgrace” campaigns through electronic platforms accusing her of working for the US Consulate in Basra. These were the same charges that targeted many activists by political parties and armed groups during the Tishreen movement.



«We are vulnerable because of our culture and targeted because of our human rights work. My family accuses me for the lack of safety for my children.»

In Lebanon, WHRDs, especially female lawyers, have faced legal, social, economic, and political challenges. Legally, the authorities have not fulfilled their international legal obligations to protect women and girls from violence and to stop discrimination against them.

Manal says that despite the enactment of the Domestic Violence Law and the promulgation of the Sexual Harassment Law in late 2020, no unified personal status law that secures equal treatment for all citizens has been issued. The discriminatory nationality law has not been amended to allow Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese men to pass nationality to their children. This affects nearly all aspects of the children's and partners' lives, including residency, ability to work, education, social services, and health care. It also puts some children at risk of statelessness." Lebanon has also not taken any steps to pass an optional civil code or to reform the existing 18-sectarian personal status laws and the religious courts that apply them. These courts discriminate against women of all sects and do not guarantee them their basic rights, especially in matters such as divorce, property rights, and custody of children after divorce.

Manal adds that the economic crisis in Lebanon, the outbreak of the "Coronavirus, and the explosion at Beirut port on August 4, 2020, increased cases of violence and worsened the life of marginalized groups, especially migrant domestic workers. «As a lawyer, I faced difficulty in defending survivors of violence because of the father's exploitation of alimony between the lira and the dollar rate, in addition to the disturbances in the courts due to the strike of the employees, which has constituted an obstacle to our work as lawyers in defending survivors of violence.»

Politically, there are still many areas under the control of political parties, especially the police stations that the survivors of violence contact but get disappointed due to political mediation by the husband and the lack of independence of the judiciary. "I was subjected to constant threats from the survivor's husband and her father by phone and then by gun."



WHRDs consider that many programs and protection measures do not take into account the needs of the family members of WHRDs



Reprisals and fear for families

The biggest challenge is the targeting of WHRDs' families and the perpetration of reprisals against them. In Bahrain, WHRDs play an essential role in defending human rights and combating injustice, among whom are doctors, nurses, teachers, and mothers. But the more active the women were, the more ruthless the state was in keeping them out of their activism. "We suffered and were oppressed in prisons and were exposed to the most severe punishments. There were many forms of targeting, including from the society and the family.,There is also the financial and economical situation.

"If we could actually protect our families and children, it would give us our inner peace." Zainab from Bahrain explained the forms of targeting she was subjected to as a result of her human rights work. "Inside one family in Bahrain there might be five persons in prison, some are in exile, and others died as martyrs and detainees, or were victims of torture."

Zainab asks, "How do we protect our communities and families as human rights defenders, especially since the regimes may not target women defenders personally, but rather their children and their families, and this is what prompts many women human rights defenders to surrender in their legal struggle to protect their families."

"If there is a defender in the family, all of its members become enemies of the government. My father, my husband, my sister's husband, my uncle, and my cousin were all arrested, and my ex-husband was tortured in prison. This was the first type of physical targeting. Later, we were targeted financially. My mother was fired from her job as a school principal despite her ten-year contract."

Zainab adds that psychological targeting exposes WHRDs to societal isolation, as their relatives are filled with fear, and they avoid even contacting them fearing detention and harassment. "They are even afraid to ask about me, and when they see me on the street, they ignore me to avoid being targeted."

Also, acts of arrest and imprisonment have increased the challenges of WHRDs. "They arrested me seven times, and the period of detention ranged from one week to two months up to a year." Zainab was arrested in 2016 with her 16-month-old son, in implementation of a judicial decision against her for 3 years and 3 months in prison and a fine of 3,000 dinars. The court convicted her for tearing up a picture of the King of Bahrain inside the court. Today, Zainab faces 12 court cases for hatred to the king, and she is sentenced to one year in prison for her human rights work.

In Iraq, Fatima al-Bahadli, with a broken heart, welling tears, and stifled feelings, remembers the coffin of her son, “Ali”, who was transported by a funeral car to his final resting place in the city of Najaf after he was kidnapped and killed by militias. “Where is the justice, Lord?” My son, activist Ali Karim, was killed by two bullets to the head and one to the chest after he was kidnapped. He was killed at the age of 26. He joined his other brother, Ahmed, who was found hanged in 2019.

Fatima is still been subjected to constant threats and prosecution from the militias that are working to exterminate activists and demonstrators. Therefore, the loss of her sons has been a very high price to pay. . Al-Bahadli has preserved traditions in Basra by wearing the black Abaya like thousands of southern women. This societal tradition does not prevent her from achieving continuous successes in her work and continuing her cooperation with international organizations to specifically support southern women.

In Syria, Reem draws inspiration from human rights defenders who have adhered to their basic principles in defending human rights despite all the attempts of violations and torture they have been subjected to. Her work with the female detainees has been a key factor in her stability and strength. Reem left for Vienna, and she is no longer afraid that her house will be invaded, or of being arrested because of writing an article or tweeting. however, she faces other challenges such as the language and the culture, “I live in constant fear for my family in Syria.”



**Where is the justice, Lord?
My son, activist Ali Karim, 26 years old, was killed by two bullets to the head and one to the chest after he was kidnapped.**

One of the WHRDs who attended the meeting says that she was intimidated and summoned by State Security and was subjected to psychological pressure to quit her human rights work. «I was intimidated and summoned to State Security several times. They were trying to traumatize me, especially since I belong to a rural community. They knew that I had a phobia of high and closed places, so they kept me in a closed place for a number of hours without talking to me, and then they started asking me questions considering me as accused." She added, «The funds that were raised to the Foundation from abroad were rejected, and the Foundation's headquarters were exposed to the theft of all electronic devices, and when it was reported as a criminal incident, the case was closed without reason. My colleagues were intimidated and summoned by the security, especially the girls, which prompted their families to prevent them from working with me. I sold all my possessions to maintain the existence of the institution.»

Cyber-attacks

A major challenge for WHRDs is the use of targeted digital surveillance which violates the right to privacy, and the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. WHRDs face new forms of digital gender based violence where they are subjected to censorship and hacking of email accounts and websites. In addition, they are subjected to defamation by social media, official media, or media close to the regimes if they express their opinions publicly, publish articles, write blogs, or post tweets. They have been subjected to cyber threats via mobile phones, text messages, or emails, in addition to online harassment, image manipulation, privacy breach, and social media campaigns to close their pages and accounts. WHRDs.

Reem from Syria says, «We should take into account that the safety and security of the WHRDs are at risk because sensitive protection information such as testimonies of victims of human rights violations or information about sexual assault on computers and mobile devices are not secured.»



According to Nedal, WHRDs in Bahrain are under constant surveillance. “You are always followed. During interrogation, they show you pictures of you in cafes, in meetings, or with family.” As a result of this pressure, she says, “a few of my colleagues stopped their activism because they could no longer carry on as it was very difficult for them and for their families.”

COVID-19

COVID-19 has deepened the inequalities that women face in the region; the threats faced by WHRDs in their attempts to claim public space, are deepened by the measures and impacts of COVID-19. Authoritarian states in the MENA region have responded to the pandemic with restrictions on people’s mobility and freedoms, without providing any significant form of social protection or support to those hit hardest by the pandemic.

COVID-19 is reducing the funding and space for HRDs, giving priorities to new dangers other than human rights and equity issues. COVID-19 has been linked to an increase in domestic violence in several countries. Women faced severe health and economic impacts.

“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”.

Covid- 19 has placed an extra burden on women revealing how their communities are poorly equipped to deal with the health crisis. Leila from Iran describes how the pandemic has exacerbated the challenge WHRDs face in securing funding and recognition to continue their work. “Covid-19 threatens the existing resources, and makes the economic situation even worse. Security becomes the primary concern and no one is talking about the attacks on women human rights defenders or even the violence that is happening in communities and homes.”

In Lebanon, Nadine considers that the spread of COVID-19 threatens the safety of thousands of women. “In addition to the health risks of this virus, women have lost all kinds of protection or basic needs to maintain a decent life during the lockdown.” According to the Internal Security Forces, during March 2020, there was a 100% increase in domestic violence which was increasing rapidly in 2021 due to the lack of basic commodities and the poor economic situation. In addition, the psychological, social, and economic protection needs have increased, especially for women survivors of domestic violence.



Lack of support and funding

Nedal describes the challenges of continuing her work in Bahrain due to the government's restrictive measures on civil society organizations, "My organization is banned. Not a single human rights organization is registered in Bahrain. By registering in Denmark, I was able to continue working, but the ban also affected our resource base. We cannot get any funding . The shortage in funding opportunities reduces our access to justice, defense, and protection."

Additional challenges (legislative, judicial, and political)

Most of the national legal framework is inconsistent with international standards; most legislations in region are legislated and interpreted in means that restrict the activities of HRDs, especially those related to counter-terrorism. Criminal, civil, and administrative laws are used to target HRDs and delegitimize their efforts. Furthermore, weaknesses in the judicial system are exploited to prevent WHRDs from adequately accessing justice and obtaining fair and effective remedies and adequate compensation. There is a lack of access to the information, networks, and tools that WHRDs need to communicate with the United Nations and its mechanisms, in addition to its representatives in the field of human rights and special rapporteurs and international human rights bodies. The defenders have related a number of measures they have been subjected to:

- Travel ban
- Seizure of bank accounts and confiscation of funds
- Accusation of treason and violation of national values, as in Iran
- The existence of several laws within the criminal law that restrict their activities
- Lack of national protective mechanisms
- Exposition to judicial surveillance and harassment.

Resilience Strategies

When WHRDs face marginalization, they are labeled as "bad" women/ mothers which is unacceptable unacceptable in the society.

This social stigmatization undermines their social standing and power to resist. The constant threats, surveillance, and abuse become overwhelming, leaving WHRDs with few options to continue their advocacy and few resources to care for themselves and their families.

Stress, burnout, uncontrollable emotional outbursts, depression, anxiety, are some of the effects faced by WHRDs due to their work in defending human rights, which leads them sometimes to quit.



The more resilient we are the more resistant we become.

“We feel burnt out. How can we sustain and maintain our work in this patriarchal scene with all these limited resources? Taking care of our mental health and well-being is an essential part.

We become accustomed to loss, but still have hope that struggle can never end and we need to find all the mechanisms and tools that strengthen our resilience.”

It is challengeable how emotional and mental stress is not recognized as a collective stress. When WHRDs are continuously attached, then everybody is impacted; people who support them and supported by them also become affected.

Leyla adds “We don’t have the luxury to stop or lose hope. The more resilient we are ... the more resistant we become... we need to be able to live well, healthy and balanced, and to be able to conduct our work without fear and violence”.

Contribution of WHRDs to peace and security

Despite the challenges, women’s organizations are working to promote women’s rights and gender equity, and advance peace, democracy, and human rights in the region. They have been at the forefront of democratic protests and movements that have swept the region. WHRDs are involved in crisis prevention, conflict resolution, and in promoting peace and security in response to United Nations Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000 and the subsequent resolutions that form the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. WHRDs play a critical role in addressing the causes and consequences of conflict by organizing and advocating for the rights of the most vulnerable. They have shaped international human rights frameworks, ceasefires, coordinated humanitarian relief and led reconciliation efforts.

Recommendations

WHRDs play a vital role in promoting peace, justice, and human rights, and this role entails obligations of state and non-state actors, including individuals, groups, and bodies of society to protect and support the work of WHRDs that are universally recognized, and these obligations were articulated in United Nations resolution 68/181, adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2013 <https://undocs.org/ar/A/RES/68/181>. The resolution calls on states to protect WHRDs, respect and support their activities, condemn and prevent human rights violations and violence and discrimination against them, and create a safe environment for defending human rights from a gender perspective- without fear of criminalization, intimidation or reprisals.

The rights of WHRDs are also based on a wider body of international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the subsequent complementary resolutions that shaped the “Women, Security and Peace” agenda (1820-1889-1888 1960-2016-2022 - 2242 - 2467 - 2493), and the sustainable development goals, especially Goal 5 and Goal 16.

Given the wide range of threats and violations that WHRDs face as they attempt to advance peace and human rights in their countries, they are in urgent need of protection within a comprehensive approach that includes a wide range of stakeholders. According to Salwa from Tunisia, "If women human rights defenders are not recognized because of the violations and challenges, the human rights system in the region will be threatened." Therefore, we must have working groups and networks to document and share the cases of all WHRDs, so that they do not pay the same price as Fatima al-Bahadli. Lamia adds "Joining our efforts through groups, coalitions, joint networks, campaigns is an important source of our resilience."

The need for visibility and recognition

International recognition and visibility are essential for WHRDs. It can help keep women safe. The international and local community must recognize their valuable contribution and condemn human rights abuses perpetrated against them. WHRDs who are not visible and not recognized are at even greater risk. Reem adds “we need to work on increasing the visibility of women defenders, channeling different sources of funding to change patriarchal views towards us and create pressure on governments to recognize and protect the invaluable contributions of women rights defenders”.

Legitimate and inclusive role in building peace and security

WHRDs are delegitimized and prevented from meaningfully participating in peace dialogues and negotiations, crisis management and post-conflict resolutions. For their role to be taken seriously in peace processes, states and the international community must defend their legitimacy in promoting human rights, peace and security.

WHRDs face attacks from both state and non-state actors, including governments, police forces, the military, family members etc. The ongoing impunity of perpetrators and inconsistent enforcement of legislation creates an environment that normalizes their discrimination. Prevention from these violations requires the strengthening of women’s rights under national law and prosecution of perpetrators violating these laws. They are not afforded adequate physical, emotional or financial assistance to carry out their work safely and effectively. In this sense, holistic support is particularly key for WHRDs who serve on the frontline in times of conflict and humanitarian disasters need holistic support.



Well being is not a privilege. It is a right;

Protection Mechanism

WHRDs urgently need protection. As HRDs, they face authoritarian governments that suppress them as defenders, and in addition, as women, they also face gender based violence in patriarchal societies. In many cases, violations are considered part of the domestic sphere and given less priority by judicial systems.

“We do not want to lose our voice and the basics of our resilience.”

WHRDs in the MENA region need a variety of forms of protection such as well-being and digital protection.

Well being is not a privilege. It is a right; being emotionally well is central to fully and actively participating. The concepts of self-care and mental health are essential parts of protection. Protection programs should also include the families of WHRDs. WHRDs believe in the importance of providing a safe place where they can be hosted to sustain their work. WHRDs need training in digital security to protect their privacy and documented information and data.

Capacity Building

WHRDs need to broaden their knowledge of global standards on specific protection mechanisms at the national and international levels, especially the basic contractual and non-contractual mechanisms. WHRDs need to build their capacities in writing reports and communication mechanisms with special rapporteurs. WHRDs need training in psychosocial support programs so that they communicate with their target groups, particularly those who survived violence and who suffered traumatic experiences.

“We are stronger when we work together for human rights.”

Financial support

WHRDs in the Middle East and North Africa region need flexible and accessible funding that can be used to strengthen their organizations, fortify infrastructure and training, promote networking, and build coalitions. What should also be emphasized is the importance of donor flexibility in rapidly supporting and protecting the privacy of defenders. WHRDs stress the need to provide financial support to those who are forced to leave their countries.

Networking, communication, exchange of experiences, and building action plans

WHRDs acknowledged the strength of the security and safety provided by teamwork, so they insisted on the need to form a regional network or coalition that helps exchange experiences and build a joint action plan through which they can strengthen the tools of resilience and support for each other. Working groups and networks to document and share the cases, coalitions, joint networks, campaigns are an important source of our resilience.

- Preparing action plans, programs, joint activities, and tools that are appropriate to the local context in which WHRDs work. They need to be in contact with international networks, issue reports or recommendations, highlight specific issues, and advocate to get international solidarity.
- Creating a digital platform for WHRDs on their basic rights and relevant references.
- Communicating with secure networks, coalitions, and organizations that can contribute to a secure protective environment.
- Holding periodic meetings for WHRDs.
- Prioritizing the work of WHRDs in international events
- Also, international occasions should be organized to highlight some issues related to WHRDs, especially in hostile environments. These occasions are used to put pressure on states and demonstrate solidarity and public support for WHRDs.
- Grabbing the attention of international institutions and human rights organizations about these individual issues and the threats to WHRDs, especially in hostile environments
- Preparing a unified methodology for documentation based on international standards and preserving the specificity and context of each country
- Organizing advocacy campaigns that highlight the achievements of WHRDs
- Organizing pressure campaigns on governments

