

MENA: Women activists defiant in face of repressive crackdowns

women human rights defenders challenges

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USPA NEWS - In 2018, women human rights defenders faced a catalogue of abuse from governments and armed groups across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but were also at the centre of compelling stories of hard-won change, said Amnesty International today.

The organization is marking Human Rights Day by recognizing the substantial role women activists have played in the MENA region to challenge entrenched gender discrimination and other patterns of relentless human rights violations. The overview of the situation for women human rights defenders in MENA is published as part of Rights Today, Amnesty International's review of key human rights issues around the world in 2018.

"From successfully campaigning to lift the driving ban in Saudi Arabia to protesting against Iran's abusive and degrading practice of forced hijab, women across the MENA region have been standing up and speaking out to stamp out discriminatory government policies. In the process they often risk arrest and detention," said Heba Morayef, Amnesty International's MENA Regional Director.

"This year, we have seen women human rights defenders standing together with their male counterparts on the front lines against crackdowns on freedom of expression. They have often been ludicrously branded as security threats by governments in an attempt to delegitimize them and portray them as undermining national interests."

In Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, women have been part of protest movements and felt the backlash of authorities' anxieties about those challenging the status quo.

In 2018, 66 women human rights defenders were detained in Iran, 14 in Saudi Arabia and three in Egypt.

"In 2018 women's rights activists across the MENA region have defiantly confronted repression. Governments in countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt must immediately reverse their oppressive approach to human rights defenders, and unconditionally release all women rights' activists detained for peacefully demanding their rights," said Heba Morayef.

In Iran, over the past year the authorities have responded to peaceful protests by women's rights activists against the abusive practice of forced hijab by assaulting and arbitrarily detaining dozens of women. Many were prosecuted and imprisoned for their peaceful campaigning.

In November, Amnesty International documented how human rights activists in Saudi Arabia, including a number of women in arbitrary detention faced unspeakable abuse including sexual harassment, torture and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation.

In Egypt, the outrageous arrest of Amal Fathy, amongst many other women activists, epitomizes the abysmal human rights situation in the country. Amal has been arbitrarily imprisoned since May simply for posting a video online speaking about her experience of sexual harassment and criticizing the Egyptian government for neglecting survivors. She was sentenced to two years in prison over the video in September and an appeal verdict in this case is due on 30 December. She is also facing further charges in a separate case and a judge is expected to decide on the renewal of her detention in relation to that on 26 December.

Social justice activist Suha Jbara described to Amnesty International how she was tortured by her interrogators in the Palestinian security forces over the course of three days in November. She said she was beaten, slammed against a wall and threatened with sexual violence, as well as punished for going on hunger strike.

"Governments that enjoy strategic alliances and lucrative trade links with MENA states have a vital role to play in denouncing the targeting of women human rights defenders and their male counterparts. Some governments claim they are engaged in "quiet diplomacy" on such cases, but the public appearance of business as usual often raises the question whether "quiet" effectively means

“‘silent’, “¹ said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s MENA Research and Advocacy Director.

“Despite the shortfall in international pressure, the hard-won gains of women human rights defenders in this and previous years raise hopes that more change is on the horizon. Looking ahead to 2019, their work will continue to be vital to stemming crackdowns by governments across the region, pressing for accountability for abuses and advancing women’s rights in MENA and beyond.”²

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