

# The “me too” movement in the Middle East and North Africa

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**The Me Too movement against sexual assault and rape has animated women throughout the world. In the Middle East too, despite the wars led by authoritarian states, various imperialist powers, and extremist religious fundamentalist forces, all of which promote patriarchy and misogyny, a Me Too movement is arising. How is this movement expressing itself in the Middle East? Below we will take up eight countries in the Middle East and North Africa.**

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## Turkey

In Turkey, a number of feminist and pro-feminist/leftist news sites covered the global #MeToo movement in detail. Numerous women have participated in the #BenDe (#MeToo) action in Turkey and shared on social media their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. (Men’s participation in the respective #BenNasılDeğişiceğim [#HowIWillChange] action was remarkably low.)

The most significant event inspired by #MeToo was the campaign #BenDeNEVİN (#MeTooNEVIN). In 2012, Nevin Yıldırım was sentenced to life long imprisonment after killing Nurettin Gider, a man who had raped her systematically for several years. Nevin’s case was taken to a higher court in January 2018 where appeal judges were to reevaluate the sentence. In January 2018, claiming that Yıldırım’s act was “lawful killing” based on self defense, a group of feminists launched the online campaign #BenDeNEVIN to demand justice for Nevin Yıldırım. At a street demonstration in Istanbul organized as part of the campaign, campaigners drew attention to the situation of women who for various reasons have to hide or cannot publicize the sexual assault they experience. They said, “We take strength from women who say #MeToo all over the world as well as from our own struggle and

revolt.”

Apart from this, several cases of sexual harassment in the film industry were publicized where women in the industry showed solidarity with victims of harassment at times by giving reference to #MeToo. All in all, the media attention to as well as the solidarity action in social media around these cases seem to be inspired by the global #MeToo movement.

## Syria

In Syria, sexual violence has been enacted by three different agents. The Syrian regime, the religious fundamentalist extremists, local men and NGO employees.

Since the uprising in 2011, mass rape and sexual assault were often utilized by government forces as a tool to enforce submission and means for punishment. [1] The aim was not only to gain physical dominion over women but also to induce a sense of humiliation on to the victim and her family.

“I lost my dignity”(2018) is a paper researched by the Human Right Council which covers cases of sexual and gender-based violence in Syria. [2] It found members of armed groups Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham responsible for rape war crimes and causing “severe psychological and physical harm on women and girls by imposing religious dress code and denying their freedom of movement.”

Employees of NGOs in the humanitarian aid sector have also been found guilty of sexual misconduct. Reports surfaced earlier this year detailing Syrian women being exploited by local men where sex was demanded in exchange of humanitarian aid. [3]

In the wake of MeToo, forms of resistance came in two ways. In Idlib, resistance to extremist groups was expressed through women’s organizations and an empowerment office. [4] Defiant radio shows, coordinated activities and raising awareness proved successful in challenging dogma.

The second form was withstanding cultural stigma surrounding rape by breaking the silence. [5] Self-condemnation, shame and disgrace often follow rape victims as a result of their assault. However, Syrian women found courage to come forward with their accounts and testimonies which enabled the monitoring and tracking of sexual abuse cases.

## Lebanon

Sexual violence in Lebanon affects two distinct vulnerable groups: Lebanese Women and Migrant Domestic Workers.

A survey (2017) found that 1 in 4 Lebanese women are victims of sexual harassment. [6] Almost 50% of the assaults are perpetrated by family members or relatives. Marital rape is not criminalized under Lebanese law. This can explain why only 24% of the victims report the assault to the police.

Many Lebanese women suffer from unwanted sexual advances at the workplace but for migrant domestic workers, rape outlines a different form of subjugation. It is one that is compounded by gender, racial, and economic stratifications. [7]

Domestic workers arriving from East Asian and African countries find themselves legally bound to their employer under the Kafala sponsorship program. Under this exploitative practice, women endure harrowing circumstances of wage deprivation, verbal assault and rape which is often used to

'discipline or punish' the migrant worker. [8]

The suspicious death of Lembibo, last September sparked outrage among activists in Lebanon. Lembibo had drowned in the pool of the employment agency after the agency found out that she was pregnant. [9] During the same month the body of an unidentified pregnant migrant worker who was found beaten to death was found in a suitcase. Both incidents remain unaccounted for.

Efforts to combat gender-based violence in Lebanon have grown considerably in the MeToo era. Anti-harassment campaigns circulated via social media addressed the pervasiveness of street harassment as women shared personal stories under the hashtag #MeshBasita (Not Ok) and #NotYourAshta. As of late last year, an online website was launched to track cases of sexual harassment. [10] Earlier this year, a new initiative under the Gender Equality Program by ABAAD (NGO) was launched. It aimed at redirecting the cultural habit of victim-blaming by launching a social experiment called "Shame on Who?".

While these initiatives aim to be progressive, they are still limited in their scope as they do not include working class and African and Asian migrant women. Lebanese authorities have frequently targeted and deported volunteers fighting for Migrant Rights. For now, domestic workers escaping abuse are finding refuge in a secret underground network of churches, migrant community groups and local people's homes. [11]

## Palestine

In her latest essay, columnist Yara Hawari states "Patriarchy exists in Palestine not only in the form of problematic social dynamics and gendered violence among Palestinians, but also in the form of occupation and settler colonialism." [12] She continues, "Palestine is a perfect example of how colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy work together to keep women, as well as the poor and the marginalised, under a devastating system of oppression."

Me too has played a significant role in addressing these issues. Tweets shared on social media under the hashtag #AnaKaman demanded justice against sexual harassment. Earlier this month, research by the The Arab Center for the Development of Social Media found that 1/3 of Arab women experience sexual harassment online.

'Not your Habibti' which translates to 'Not your darling' is a campaign launched by 21 year old Yasmeen Mjalli in response to her own experience. [13]

## Iraq

The wave of violence against women and the LGBT community demonstrates the confluence of regressive factors in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. The UN/US sanctions regime changed gender relations dramatically. [14] The collapse of the state after the U.S. invasion in 2003, has also disproportionately harmed women through impoverishment of the welfare system and slashing of state jobs. Additionally, the repressive Saddam Hussein regime used the sanctions as pretext to target social liberties and empower religious institutions, causing further erosion of achievements made by the feminist movement. The US invasion, conducted under the pretext of liberating women despite the country's strong tradition of feminism, increased the level of gender-based violence. This violence has included sectarian militias as well as those of the US and other invading forces themselves.

Since the invasion, the US-installed sectarian regime ruling the country has worked to undermine the progressive Personal Status Law set forth by leading feminists and communists in 1959. [15] As laid out in IraQueer's latest report, "Fighting for the Right to Live; The State of LGBT+ Human Rights in Iraq" (2018), killings and a systematic campaign of extermination have been perpetrated by government-aligned militias with the help of the state's Islamist regulations and lack of enforcement of any existing protections. [16]

Tara Fares, Rasha al-Hassan, Hamoudi Al Mutairi were some of the latest to be killed in a wave of misogynistic and homophobic attacks aimed at silencing diverse voices aiming to liberate their future from the dichotomy of extremisms. [17] [18] Such voices of resistance include artist Marina Jaber, whose "I am society" campaign set to reclaim women's role in the public space. [19] Another is the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, which after rejecting the US invasion has continued to mobilize in its aftermath, organizing protests against domestic violence in Baghdad, calling for the International Criminal Court to prosecute the Islamic State for its crimes against women and LGBTIQ individuals, and establishing shelters for women escaping domestic violence and later for those escaping society and the sexual violence of the Islamic State. [20] [21] [22] [23] The struggle for women's emancipation in Iraq is a fundamental one, extending that for independence and liberation.

## **Tunisia**

Tunisian women's rights activists have generally been ahead of their peers in the Maghreb and the Middle East before and since the Arab Spring. In this vein, Tunisia's progressive Personal Status Law and advancement of and interest in women's issues brought against the feminist movement are notable, for example in setting in place protection mechanisms against domestic violence. [24]

In its nation-building project, Tunisia has portrayed itself as exceptional in the region with its modernist and Westernized system of women's rights. [25] These rights however, administered through an exclusive class of statist feminists, have been used to circumscribe the boundaries within which women are allowed bodily autonomy and to reinforce the state's control over society as the state continues to position itself as a bulwark against the regressive forces of Islamism.

Black and labor feminist movements have called for the state to move beyond state-sponsored feminism to set in place protections and enhance labor laws and confront racism, all issues which are dismissed as the relative progressivism of the state is pointed to. [26] At times, LGBT groups have also called upon ruling elites to gain the political courage and imagination to heed the calls of the community to confront such regressive rulings as the sodomy law and hold the law's bigoted enforcers to account. [27]

The inertia faced by such groups outside the circles of the state outline the limits of state-sponsored feminism as one that is of the liberal educated classes of the city, not only in Tunisia but beyond. The elite feminism of such groups must be transcended in working for a truly transformational change to be affected by grassroots movements, in such a manner that does not act as an impediment to women's autonomy. [28]

## **Saudi Arabia**

The regime of Saudi Arabia under its current leadership by Prince Muhammad bin Salman has intensified its longstanding assault on women. These assaults can be seen in the lack of rights of

domestic and foreign workers, the onslaught upon women's rights activists and feminists, and abroad as intensified aggression upon Yemen, and support for such repressive regimes as those of Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Israa al-Ghomgham was arrested due to her participation in the peaceful protests that occurred in al-Qatif. The state's treatment of her has reflected the double repression that women and the Shia religious minority face in the country. Although the state prosecutor called for her execution by beheading, because of international protest and support for Ghomgham, the beheading sentence was dropped. [29] However, Israa will still have to serve a prison term. She has thanked her supporters but has pointed out that her husband and many other activists are currently in prison. Some might be beheaded because of their anti-government protest activities.

In an acceleration of the crackdown on civil society, and specifically the women's movement, dozens of women and feminist human rights activists have been arrested. One of the first to be arrested was Loujain al-Hathoul, whose torture was personally overseen by royal advisor Saud al-Qahtani. [30] Others include Samar Badawi, Nassimah al-Sadah, Hatoon al-Fassi, Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, Mayya al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdulaziz, Noha al-Balawi, Maria Naji, Mohammed Rabiah, and Ibrahim Madaamegh. [31] [32]

Lately, some Saudi women have taken the step of seeking asylum and fleeing their country. One of the most ill-fated is that of Dina Ali, who attempted to flee an arranged marriage by seeking to reach Australia. [33] However, when she was in the Philippines, the Philippines government held her until her family came and forcibly returned her to Saudi Arabia, where her fate remains unclear. Another woman, Maryam al-Otaibi, was arrested and later released after she attempted to live independently of her father in a challenge to the guardianship laws, with the regime colluding with her brothers and father to keep her under guardianship. One of the most recent cases is that of Rahaf Alqunun, whose family worked together with the Thai and Saudi states in order to return her to Saudi Arabia, where she may have been killed. However, due to international attention, she was able to gain refugee status from UNHCR, allowing her to reach Canada.

One of the most prominent women's issues in the country is that of migrant domestic workers. As noted by United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), these women are disproportionately vulnerable to abuse due to male guardianship laws, lack of access to legal avenues, lack of governmental oversight and enforcement, and lack of social services and protection for survivors.

Regionally, the war that Saudi Arabia has been waging on Yemen has had a disproportionate effect on Yemeni women. The majority of civilian casualties and internally displaced due to the war have been women and children, while gender-based violence has increased by 63 percent since the war broke out. Healthcare and services generally have broken down, causing a disproportionate effect on women's health while women's economic status and gender roles have placed them at much greater risk of famine and cholera.

In the field of women's rights as in many other fields, the situation has seen even further erosion despite the rhetoric being put forth by the ruler, Bin Salman and his beneficiaries. However this has not stopped women from continuing to push for emancipation. They are resisting the male guardianship system and civil laws, organizing against migrant domestic worker conditions and Saudi Arabia's military interventions abroad.

## Egypt

Despite their strong political and civil tradition, Egyptian women are under assault by the Sissi regime and its allies as well as by Islamists including the Muslim Brotherhood. During the 2011 revolution and other protests afterwards, the state allowed for and participated in sexual violence against female protesters, subjecting them to specifically sexualized assault as compared to men.

The Sissi regime has unleashed and empowered the so-called 'morality police' to an unprecedented extent, targeting sex workers and the LGBT community. The Egyptian street continues to grapple with an epidemic of sexual violence including street harassment and honor killings in part due to cultural conservatism and incitement from the media and political elites.

In addition to the feminist movement, the labor movement is calling for an end to harassment and other sexual violence in the workplace, where labor and gender relations contributes to high rates of sexual assault.

Revolutionary feminist and liberal feminist women must confront the fact that the anti-Sissi liberal class has not stood with survivors of sexual assault committed by those of their own liberal ranks. Deutsche Welle has confirmed that reports of former host Yosri Fouda committing sexual abuse are credible. [34] [35] However, liberal supporters have propagated his own conspiracy theories of regime-plots. The leadership of the revolutionary Bread and Freedom Party has been accused of committing rape and harassment against women and subsequently covering up their actions up.

Such cases indicate the gravity of the crisis and the sweeping nature of the challenge facing Egyptian feminists. Within the revolutionary movement we see the reproduction of the same violence and sexism that can be seen in the broader society.

## Iran

The courageous acts of the Girls of Revolution Avenue (women have taken off their headscarves in public and have faced assaults and prison time), and a movement called "Me Too" among former and current political prisoners (women and men) to expose the torture and abuse which they have endured in the prisons of the Islamic Republic, are important developments.

Now, some of the Girls of Revolution Avenue, other feminist and human rights activists as well as the mother of a woman executed for killing her rapist, the parents of a feminist political prisoner and parents of political prisoners killed after the 2009 Green Movement, have issued a petition. They demand justice for Iranian women after 40 years of torture, physical, sexual and emotional abuse and rape by the Iranian regime. [36]

Last June, protests took place in Iranshahr (province of Sistan & Baluchestan) against the abduction and rape of 41 women. So far, no suspect has been prosecuted. In early January, Zahra Navidpour, a young Iranian woman published audio and video clips on social media in which she accused Salman Khodadadi, a member of parliament of having raped her. Subsequently, Navidpour's dead body was found at her mother's home. Her body was secretly buried by the authorities without an autopsy. It was reported that she had "committed suicide." A campaign started by "Justice Seeking Teachers" in memory of Navidpour, issued the Persian-language petition below:

## **Conclusion**

In sexual violence, gender oppression and the reproduction of power are intertwined. Rape is often used as a weapon for subordination and degradation in the name of honor and pride. [37] The recent killings of Rasha Bassis in Syria and Hammudi al-Mutayri in Iraq are examples of this phenomenon. [38]

Me Too is not a heteronormative issue nor is it bound to a specific geographical location. [39] It is a movement that is striving to include an intersection of class, race, gender and sexuality to thoroughly examine the underlying power dynamics of oppression.

Dove-Taylor oppression as the marriage of power and prejudice. Through it, a reality is defined which grants privilege to the dominant group and consequently restricts the rights of the marginalized. More importantly, oppression operates through a structural format as it enlists institutional policies to enforce dominion in a systematic manner.

So if oppression under capitalist patriarchy is structural and systematic, it seems logical that that which would counter it is a rhizome-like network of interconnected struggles and resistance.

**By various members of the Alliance of Middle Eastern Socialists**

*February 5, 2019*

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**P.S.**

• Alliance of Middle East Socialists:

<https://www.allianceofmesocialists.org/the-me-too-movement-in-the-middle-east>

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## **Footnotes**

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