

**W O M E N ' S
P O L I T I C A L**
Biographies
in the MENAT Region



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Edited by
**Viola Raheb
& Heidemarie Winkel**

KREISKY
FORUM



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in the MENAT Region

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First Edition

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Edited by: Viola Raheb & Heidemarie Winkel

Foreword by: Ursula Plassnik

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Women in International Dialog

The Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog (BKF) has been addressing the agenda of Women, Peace and Security over the last decade. The first high-level panel and roundtable conference took place in November 2014 on Enhancing Women's Share in Peace and Security, under the auspices of the late President of the Austrian Parliament Barbara Prammer and chaired by former Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs Ursula Plassnik. The conference was in preparation for the high-level review on UNSCR 1325 and a contribution to the global study on UNSCR 1325. The two-day event brought together international experts from politics, governments, military, academia, media and civil society and was aimed at discussing major achievements, challenges, emerging priorities and future recommendations in implementing UNSCR 1325.

Ever since, the BKF has been committed to enhancing women's networking and collaborations on peace, especially through its program on "Women in International Dialog" curated by Viola Raheb. Throughout the last ten years, multiple closed seminars, mostly under Chatham House Rule, have been conducted. Some of these seminars brought women

of different backgrounds within the same country, providing a safe place for internal-political dialog. I would recall a seminar with Syrian women from within Syria and exile, and the seminars with Palestinian women from all over the world. Other seminars addressed emerging political themes such as women journalists, women refugees, and the “Female Face of ISIS.” Other seminars were on a regional level, such as that on Women and Transition in former Eastern Europe during the last two decades.

And last but not least, in 2021, a high-level conference on UNSCR 1325 Twenty Years down the Road: A Regional View on Participation, Protection, Prevention, Relief and Recovery brought together participants from the military establishment, civil society and international organizations. I would like to underline the important support of the Austrian Ministry of Defense and the enriching contributions and collaborations with our colleagues Günther Barnet and Melissa Mujanayi.

Based on these many years of continuous engagement, the last workshop in November 2023 on Women’s Lives and Agency in the MENAT Region: Between Political Activism and Realism underlined how important the participation of women from the MENAT region is in political life for advancing democracy, good governance, transparency, and equal citizenship.

The workshop, which generated the present publication, had an interdisciplinary approach, bringing women from different disciplines, organizations, and backgrounds together: political and social scientists, politicians, representatives of NGO’s, and grassroots organizations and activists. The workshop offered a platform to problematize, discuss, exchange, network and build alliances among engaged women from the region.

I would like to thank all the women who contributed to this book with their biographies, both from the workshop and beyond. I would also like to thank Viola Raheb and her colleague Heidemarie Winkel for editing the book.

I would like to dedicate this book to all the women who contribute to make this world more humane.

Gertraud Auer Borea d’Olmo
Secretary General - Bruno Kreisky Forum

Women's Political Biographies in the MENAT Region

Pramila Patten, the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, stated in her remarks at the UN Security Council Open Debate on “Preventing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Demilitarization and Gender-Responsive Arms Control” on 23 April 2024: “We meet at a time when the pursuit of peace and gender equality has once again become a radical act. The essential, existential task we face is to silence the guns and amplify the voices of women as a critical constituency for peace.”

Indeed, we urgently need to amplify the voices of women, not only in the MENAT region but around the world at a moment in history when the rights of many women are being openly contested. This analysis applies particularly to the MENAT region in light of the ongoing wars and protracted conflicts that have been underway for generations and have impacted the lives of so many.

In the news we receive from the MENAT region, silence too often weighs heavily on female voices. The result is a cruel lack of knowledge about the thinking, experience, engagement and aspiration of girls and women.

Only when we all learn to speak up and share our stories, from the brightest to the darkest, will we start to really know and more deeply understand our own societies and develop solidarities across the globe.

Everywhere in the Global Village, women need to be encouraged to share their struggle for justice, peace and equality; their achievements as well as the setbacks. Around the world, mothers, care-givers, law-makers, engineers, businesswomen, researchers, teachers and sportswomen are engaged in transforming their societies. Whatever their background, education or position, they often share the experience of not having been taken seriously by a predominantly male environment and, in some cases, by women as well, both locally and globally.

It is through telling and being listened to that we will all become confident that our voices and struggles matter, that they make a difference. In this book, eleven biographies from the MENAT region share their lives, political engagement and struggles with a wider public. In doing so, they invite us to learn to trust others to be interested in hearing what women have to say.

Ursula Plassnik, Austria

Making Women's Voices Heard

The Need to Listen and Acknowledge

Viola Raheb, Vienna

*"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'.
There are only the deliberately silenced or
the preferably unheard."*

Arundhati Roy

Women Dedicating their Lives and Work to Make a Difference

The news coming from the MENAT region is mainly coming during times of political turmoil and mostly focusing on war, conflicts and violence. Most of the "experts" analyzing, commenting on and explaining political developments are male. In many cases, these experts focus on the military and security aspects of political developments. This trend has been often addressed by the reports of the Global Media Monitoring Reports; women's voice hardly makes it to the news, be it as

subjects, reporters, experts, or spokespersons. In case it does, then for a short, reduced, isolated span, such as the case in the first few months of the “Arab Spring” or the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement.

On the ground, generations of women in the MENAT region have long been at the forefront of political activism, engaged in resisting colonialism, struggling for independence and state-building, fostering the rule of law, enhancing peace and social justice. Generation after the other, women have played crucial roles in various countries of the MENAT region from grassroots movements to high-level diplomacy, from community work to conflict resolution and peace-building. In many of these countries and at certain historic junctions, women-led initiatives often prioritized national struggles and reconciliation over women’s rights. Despite facing continued various obstacles and discrimination as women within their own societies, generations of women continue to mobilize, organize, and lead efforts to create a more equitable and just society in their countries and beyond.

Biographies of Resilience and Hope

Eleven biographies from seven different countries from diverse generations, backgrounds, and areas of engagement are presented in this book. In their biographies, the contributors address political developments over the last decades in their countries and the region. Historical political phases, be it the end of the colonial rule and the phase of independence in Tunisia, the Baath-rule era and the war in Syria, or the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 and the continuing wars and displacement of Palestinians, become embodied in the lives of the women narrators and how these phases shaped and still shape their

lives and work. In yet other biographies, the impact of life in exile, diaspora, or place of refuge or even during ongoing displacement becomes part of a longstanding struggle, bringing along more challenges in new contexts.

The involvement of the contributors spans various levels, from working with local communities, academia, art, media, up to the field of international negotiations. Women’s intersectional approaches in this book address root causes and the international, regional, local geopolitical interests and aspects of conflicts and wars in their countries and region, in the same breath that they address patriarchal domination, crack on freedoms and rights and injustice in their own context, thus emphasizing the interconnectedness of the various forms of oppression as well as social justice struggles. In many of the biographies, women emphasize the personal experience of injustice as the trigger for their interest and involvement in justice struggles.

The little glimpse we receive through the short biographies on women’s political engagement in the various contexts shows both success stories as well as setbacks. Nevertheless, women’s commitment to speak up, to stand for values of democracy and equality, for dialog, empowerment, while utilizing the power of non-violent methods and solidarity remains the red thread in all the biographies.

Through grassroots mobilization, advocacy work, building bridges across divides, and fostering understanding and solidarity, women create spaces for dialog, reconciliation, and healing, thus laying the foundation for sustainable peace and justice in their communities and beyond. Women-led movements—some of which are presented in this book, as those working for civil rights, democracy, and gender equality—

have historically challenged and continue to challenge various oppressive systems both internal and external.

Their involvement and contributions shed light on the transformative potential of women's leadership in building inclusive, peaceful, and thriving communities. The women's biographies in this book are living examples of employing unique approaches of political activism and steadfastness rooted in empathy, humanity, inclusivity, and resilience. Through their life and engagement, they interrupt injustice without mirroring it, thus contributing to a new tapestry of humanity woven by stories and actions of resilience, compassion, and hope. They advocate the meaningful participation of women in decision-making at all levels, recognizing that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but also a necessity for achieving lasting peace and stability. The peace they advocate is one based on justice at all levels.

The Need to Listen to and Acknowledge Women's Voices

We have opted for this format of women's political biographies, since we wanted to give both the women and the region faces, names, and stories to engage with. This is especially important, since the portraying of women from the MENAT region continues to be mainly one of "objects" or "victims" that need to be "saved." This has become even more important in times where Western official political approaches to the region are experienced as being hypotactic and based on double standards regarding upholding human rights. With many wars and conflicts rampant in the MENAT area and the existing polarization in the political public discourse, women's issues are often instrumentalized for certain political ends. In addition,

there is the growing dehumanization and hate speech in the media and public discourse as addressed by some women in this book.

In conclusion, the need to listen to female political activists cannot be overstated. We are confident that listening to diverse female political activists is essential for challenging stereotypes, biases and traditional notions of power and leadership that perpetuate gender inequality.

By amplifying their voices and recognizing their contributions, we highlight underlying causes of conflict, such as inequality, discrimination, and gender-based violence, which may be overlooked by traditional approaches, thus advocating inclusive, sustainable, peaceful, and equitable societies for all. Their perspectives, experiences, and insights are invaluable assets in the quest for peace and justice worldwide.

I want to thank all the women who have contributed to this book with their personal biography. It is not an easy task; it involves vulnerabilities and is nurtured by hope. I want to thank my friend and colleague Heidemarie Winkel for agreeing to be the co-editor of this book. I especially thank the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog and its Secretary- General Ms. Gertraud Auer Borea d'Olmo for the joint journey and collaborations during the last decade in the field of "Women in International Dialog."

1. For more information see <https://whomakesthenews.org/> (30.04.2024)

Growing up Under Colonialism and Male Domination

The Multiple Realities of Gendered Violence

Lilia Labidi, Tunisia

When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, women's lives were characterized by two forms of power: male dominance and colonial rule and violence. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, the marriage contract, then called the *Nikah* contract, collided with the aspirations of the new generation of women who dreamed of a different kind of relationship within the couple, especially since some had their own economic resources. Marriages were badly experienced by women because they saw it as a transition from one guardian to another, often leading to a loss of freedom and the management of their property. This constellation motivated my refusal of domination and my individual search for economic autonomy. Both, the rejection of male domination and economic autonomy were essential in my view to preserve free will, critical thinking and ethical perspectives.

The second form of violence is related to my experience of political domination and colonization in my childhood. Beatings on the fingers and being locked in a cupboard in the French elementary school in the morning gave full meaning to the words of my parents in the evening, who talked about the political situation under colonial rule while they thought their children were asleep. A few years later, as a teenager, I could listen to an evening program on a Tunisian radio dedicated to Algerian activists who campaigned against colonization. I discovered, among other things, the activist Jamila Boupacha who had been raped with a bottle by the colonial army during her arrest. This violence was intolerable to me.

These two facts are at the origin of my rejection of violence. They run through all my research. They are the basis of my work.

The Colonial Education System and Gender Injustice

First and foremost, I owe my rejection of the Western historical narrative, the "discourse unique," to the study of stories and literature. In Paris, where I completed my higher education, I found it strange that there were no students from Africa and the Arab world in the department I attended. A few years later, another Tunisian student enrolled in psychology, alongside her studies in medicine. I also found it strange that all the authors taught were French or English, while Islamic civilization was neglected, although it was rich in names of philosophers and doctors who dealt with psychology and listening as a therapeutic tool. This discomfort led me to enroll in anthropology alongside my studies in psychology, which was in high demand due to its openness to psychoanalysis and the famous names of its professors. In anthropology, I followed

the teachings of Professor Robert Jaulin, whose work focused on the negation and extermination of other cultures by the Western system.

This experience and teaching in France allowed me to quickly recognize the male domination of academic life as well as the authoritarian political regime after my return to Tunisia, even though some called it enlightened authoritarianism. My research was my defense. Working in hospitals and academic spaces as a psychologist with psychoanalytic training allowed me now to observe that women who sought health services and students at the faculty were both, because of their rural origin, victims of discrimination, sometimes by people from the same background who unwittingly reproduced the discriminatory behavior of which they themselves were victims.

Two examples may illustrate this point. One scene that I experienced in the early 1980s happened in one of the two university maternal and child protection centers in the greater metropolitan area of Tunis, where I showed documentaries on painless childbirth and the poor reception given to girls at birth, sexuality, contraception and violence within relationships. The screening of a film on painless childbirth gave rise to a vibrant discussion among the women present. Unanimously, they recommended that I show this film as a priority to doctors and midwives who work in hospitals, rather than only to them. Once they left the room, the doctor in charge of the center, who had kept the door of his office open to follow, without mingling with us women, the film and the debate, addressed me in these terms: "You should not show such a film to women and teach them such things." Yet, he never explained what he meant by this. Was he referring to the exchange of tenderness of the husband, who having witnessed the birth, moved, leaned over his wife, to kiss her? Was he accusing me of encouraging

women to discuss their experiences during childbirth? Or was he disturbed by the discussion among the women who clearly expressed how maternity services were sites for the reproduction of political and patriarchal power?

The second experience occurred during the 1990s, when the university opened up more to young people from the regions. Here, I was able to witness how students of the humanities were predominantly female, most often from rural and modest backgrounds, and were discriminated against. What at first glance appeared to be an opportunity for young people from the interior regions of the country to gain access to higher education, revealed in fact the disadvantages of “instrumentalized” selection. Teaching was provided in French to students who did not have a perfect command of the language and the books on which the teaching was based were rarely affordable due to their high costs from university libraries. The students dropped out very quickly. Finally, those who could reach the bachelor’s and master’s level often came from the middle class and from urban or suburban areas of the big cities. These discriminatory questions were never addressed, neither by the students and their representatives, nor by the professors. Additionally, people kept telling me a professor is someone who slaps. I found such behavior intolerable.

A more complete picture emerges when gender disparities in unemployment are considered. For example, in 2016 and 2017, unemployment among women with higher education degrees in rural areas reached 41.5% and 39% respectively, while the rate for men did not exceed 20.1% and 19%. Interregional disparities between women are ignored even though they are also very large. In 2014, more than half of the governorates had unemployment rates among female university graduates

that were higher than the national average. The cases of some unemployed young girls with higher education qualifications from rural areas made headlines in the local and international press. For example, Houda, who holds a master’s degree in sciences, was found selling traditional *tabouna* bread on the roads of Kairouan to meet her needs. Mouna, 30, from the Mahdia region, an unemployed English language graduate, blew herself up in 2018 in front of the national theater. For some who were against the “Arab Spring” revolution, she became a symbol of the terrorism they saw as induced by these events.

The inequality between urban and rural areas, which was at the origin of the youth uprising in 2011 and that succeeded in bringing down the Ben Ali regime, still persists today. The “Arab Spring” has not realized the aspirations of Tunisians who have been marginalized since the independence and earlier periods. The height of absurdity is that when one defends the rights of rural women, you face criticism and are often classified as an “Islamist.”

The International Community’s Negative Impact on Gender Justice

Three related issues indicate how the international community and its dominant views undermined women’s lived reality. First, let us take the case of the veil; it is treated as anathema by the colonial power, first in Algeria, and later in France, until today. The discourses around the veil in European societies show very well how it is used to serve political causes and to divide society. Finally, these discourses even undermine Muslim women’s chances of political, economic and social participation; in European contexts, Muslim women are instead racialized and denigrated in many ways for wearing a veil.

Another case is the reinforcement of women's precariousness as a result of European or US-American intervention. The American wars in Iraq, for example, which were supported by the UN, have only accentuated the precariousness of women in Iraq. This allows us to question the real goals of the actions of foreign countries in Muslim countries. We know that, since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, more than two third of the women interviewed as part of a survey think that their security has deteriorated, that the number of women in the civil service has declined drastically, that the embargo, which provoked the death of more than half a million civilians, increased the number of early marriages of girls, and in no way provided protection for girls.

Additionally, international organizations, founded after the Second World War, have become non-operational today. The anti-migrant speeches of those in power in Tunisia, echoing the slogans of the extreme right in Europe, accuse the sub-Saharan who are fleeing various forms of violence in their countries and seeking to go to Europe. They are accused of wanting to change the demographic composition of Tunisia; this has greatly damaged the peaceful image of this country. The limited resources provided by international organizations and European countries and local NGOs are unable to counter the violence against sub-Saharan Africans, who are finally pushed beyond the borders towards the Sahara, where many die.

Finally, the failure is reflected in the way international organizations helplessly witness the damage caused by Israel's war in Gaza. Over the past six months in 2023, according to figures from the Gaza Ministry of Health, there have been more than 32,000 Palestinian deaths, 70% of whom are women and children; there were 57,000 people including

8,663 children injured. We must also mention the arrests of civilians committed by the Israeli army. Humanitarian aid arrives sparingly or not at all. Health organizations like the WHO, UNICEF, etc., constantly declare that famine is ravaging populations and diseases are increasing. The population is without water, without bread, without medicine, and without care because hospitals have been destroyed. Nearly 75% of the buildings have been destroyed in Gaza, which will take between 7 to 10 years to rebuild. International communities also failed to enforce international law and protect women's and children's rights in Gaza. In the context of domination, Palestinians have experienced colonial oppression for 75 years, depriving them of the freedom to live their lives fully. In these circumstances, religious leaders have often expressed fear towards developments like the new "Family Protection Law" in Palestine that would call into question their values. However, these leaders, by not being attentive to the needs of women who were subjected to emotional abuse and physical violence, renounce universal values of Arab humanism and lose their capital of trust that women have placed in them.

Understanding Women's Stories and Identities in Tunisia

On my return to Tunisia in 1979, I became aware in my work as a psychoanalyst and anthropologist of the absence of a model for understanding and reconstructing the identity of young girls. Furthermore, contemporary Tunisian history made no room for the contribution of women. So, I decided to go looking for women who had made significant contributions. This is where my project started that then lasted about twenty years, where I collected life stories of women engaged in cultural and political activism between 1881 and 1955,

across different cities and villages of the country. I published the stories of some leaders in their own words despite the differences in dialect. Publishers refused to publish the stories of these activists. Historians specializing in national history did not recognize these figures. The censors were quick to remove the volume from print.

After the deposition of Habib Bourguiba, the first president after Tunisia's independence, Tunisia experienced a lull between 1987 and 1990. The women's stories were able to be published and the story which had been the subject of dispute was reintroduced. A dictionary of activists was finally able to see the light of day despite multiple difficulties. The publication of these works helped to restore women's contributions. I took other initiatives as well, including the organization of several exhibitions such as Women and Politics 1930-1955 (installation and documentary photographs); Women Demonstrate (documentary photographs, archives, press articles, urban plans and oral histories); The Movement of Women in the Formal Public and Political Space (traces of demonstrations organized by women); EIMor YaMor (photomontage and archival documents relating to Tunisian women in public space in the 1930s). These exhibitions gave visibility to women's activism and their contribution to the formation of symbols.

These exhibitions, accompanied by discussions, gave evidence to the participation of women in politics. Since then, essays on women activists, master's theses, articles in the columns of the written press (the Internet did not yet exist), including a collective work directed by a historian have seen the light of day and photos of women with whom I had conducted interviews are exhibited in one of the capital's museums. Feminists consider this contribution to be

what provided the foundations for the history of the feminist movement in Tunisia.

The Tunisian Women's Movement

Another cornerstone of the Tunisian women's movement and my involvement in it was the promulgation of the Personal Status Code in Tunisia on August 13, 1979. On this occasion, a few women attended a presentation by Gisèle Halimi, an icon of Tunisian and international feminism, invited by the Tabarka Festival, to give a talk on the promulgation of the Code. We were a small group at that time and, since then, we have continued to meet at the Tahar Haddad Cultural Center, the only center in the capital run by a woman, the writer Jalila Hafsia. Hafsia had agreed that the women would hold their meetings in what came to be known as the Tahar Haddad Club, which celebrated the life of Tahar Haddad, a feminist author who had published a book in 1930 in favor of women's rights.

In 1984, Marie Angélique Savanné, a Senegalese feminist intellectual and co-founder of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AFARD), met with this group of women in Tunis to found a branch of AFARD, which would later become AFTURD (Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development). At the end of the 1980s, this feminist group split into two: the ATFD (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women) and AFTURD, of which I am co-founder and which brings together women interested in research as a tool for feminist struggles and social justice. Evelyne Accad, a Lebanese feminist, wrote a book based on her stay in Tunisia during the 1980s, *Women of Tunisia*, which reports on the details of the movement.

Combining an Academic Career and Feminist Commitment

These two associations, which obtained their state authorization after Habib Bourguiba was deposed by Ben Ali, were the only associations that represented the independent feminist movement until January 2011. From the 2000s onward, these associations have experienced a rejuvenation. Several of my former students have held positions within these and other associations. This indicates that my professional career and my feminist commitment are inseparable and how they are related to my fight for social justice throughout my life at every point of my career and my personal life.

For example, after my return from France in 1979, I started to work in a hospital. This was an enriching experience, but it did not provide me with a framework for anthropological and psychoanalytic reflections. I sought collaboration with a team from the Center for Research on Medical Pedagogy, who agreed to hold a seminar where I would give a presentation. The director of the hospital at which I was employed, however, summoned me and forbade me from taking part in it. I experienced this ban as a form of violence and without knowing why, I went straight to the hairdresser where, like Antigone, I had my braids cut, which were long at that time. Following this cutting, the memories of Jamila Boupacha and Jamila Bouhired—two Algerian activists who fought colonization and whose stories I heard during my adolescence—came back to my mind. It was then that I made the decision to search for women who had been activists during the colonial period in Tunisia, and I was clearly drawing the parallel between colonial and postcolonial power.

On another occasion, during a discussion with a colleague who was a specialist in mental health and to whom I had shown my manuscript on women political activists (*Joudhour al-harakat al-nisa'iyya*), he asked me to include his name as author, alongside mine. I refused because I could not understand why I would put the name of a person who had no connection with this work. This person then went on to attack me publicly during thesis committee meetings and the other jury members did not intervene. This example shows how in a patriarchal and tribal society, a child or an intellectual work is considered as the property of the group. This was not my perspective at all. These sorts of episodes had an unfortunate impact on students, with several students, male and female, refusing to register for doctoral theses, and others choosing to leave for Canada or the USA.

I was confronted by rivalries, tensions, and censorship, which, I know, could also occur in some of the best institutions around the world. I refused to abandon my aims and I had to persevere to bring my projects to fruition. Despite all sorts of difficulties, I managed to set up annual conferences devoted to children and the environment, to which I invited psychoanalysts like Françoise Dolto, the Bonneuil Team led by Maud Mannoni, Serge Leclair, all from the Freudian School of Paris, to allow these ideas to be heard. I also set up the Aziza Othmana (1606-1669) study days, which focused on women. Aziza Othmana had bequeathed her husband property for the treatment of poor patients and to provide marriage dowries for young girls who had no resources. The first days dealt with medicine and women's health, and the proceedings were published in 1988 showing, on the cover, a postage stamp representing Aziza Othmana. At the same time, I produced a multidisciplinary bibliography of Tunisian writings devoted to women that had, on the cover, two portraits of female university hospital doctors.

Such portraits had never been seen before, because, at that time, the media only published portraits of the first lady or the president of the UNFT (National Union of Tunisian Women), an organization close to the government. In addition, during these first Aziza Othmana study days, organized within the Faculty of Medicine of Tunis, we addressed the contribution of women doctors. This session and those that followed made it possible to retain an audience over several years. Some young women doctors took up the subject of violence against young girls and women as topics for their theses in medicine.

Theorizing Women's Lived Experience of Inequality

If I was able to persevere, it is thanks in part to my constant effort to theorize my lived experience. With psychoanalytic and anthropological training, I was able to take a step back and see the underlying mechanisms. It is also thanks to my work ethic, which allowed me to protect my projects from toxic relationships, and to the weekly column I wrote over several years for the independent press that presented the writings of feminists from the region and elsewhere, enabling me to share my ideas, make women authors better known, and communicate my critiques of power, all of which helped me pursue my vision. And I heard some evidence that my little texts had achieved their goal when, in 2011, a presidential advisor publicly told the journalist Jean Pierre El Kabbach, in my presence and referring to me, that "she was Ben Ali's *bête noire*," which was, for me, a compliment.

Step by step, it was possible to reshape societal norms when teaching, sometimes, led to questions of ethics and social justice. For almost two decades from 1979, I was entrusted

with the weekly teaching on child psychology and the doctor-patient relationship to medical students at the Children's Hospital. Alongside this weekly teaching, I organized a visit to the National Institute for Child Protection, where abandoned children were taken in to allow medical students to discover the harm of hospitalization in infants; this was also an opportunity to discuss the conditions of women who, living in patriarchal societies, were obliged to conform to their values and were forced to abandon their children conceived outside of wedlock.

Often, I had to make decisions that went against administrative practices, in order to stay in tune with myself. In the 1990s, I was invited to give a lecture to ministry executives, as part of a training program set up by the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Elderly Affairs, in a disadvantaged agricultural region of Tunisia known to be conservative. As I entered the conference room, I was struck by the division of the audience along gender lines. Instead of encouraging exchange on the basis of equality, the administration maintained the legitimacy of sexual discrimination. I asked myself, how can we move the layers of resistance, shake up the issues of power and combat the segregation of public spaces? How can we say that women are not sexual objects, but human beings gifted with intelligence? Was I going to play the power game and agree to give a presentation as if I had not noticed this division? Immediately, I turned to the organizers to announce my refusal to speak in these circumstances. And following their unwillingness to change, I left and took the road home. My departure caused a lively discussion and by not lying, neither to myself nor to others, I made more of an impression than if I had agreed to give a presentation to men and women who were settled in their convictions. This is what I felt at the time.

I hence encouraged young women not to ask for jewelry for marriage, but rather for a computer because that was our horizon. I invited them to leave behind the traditional cultural notions that a woman is a womb for reproduction and cleaning, and learn to think differently or, as we say today, outside the box. Several years later, I met a few women who had participated in these sessions and they told me they had never forgotten this. Once, during a presentation I delivered in a cultural venue, a woman told me: "I gave my daughter a first name with your initials, so that later, like you, she would sign L.L." A man on the bus called out to me to say: "I read your book. I understood what you meant. Our behavior towards girls must change."

From Feminist Activism to Feminist Politics

After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, I found myself at the head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Rich in my experience as an anthropologist and psychoanalyst, working in the medical field and at the university, and as a feminist activist in the field of independent feminism and as a politically independent woman, I also worked now to advance the demands of rural women and feminists at the same time and to give legitimacy to the struggles of each.

Finally, during a restricted ministerial council, I showed how several Arab and/or Muslim countries had lifted various reservations concerning the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and that consequently Tunisia, which had experienced the revolution in 2011, could take this route. Lifting these reservations was also presented to the government in August 2011, and this was accepted.

Feminist Solidarity and Networking: From the Association of Midwives to Rural Women

Solidarity and networking with women in other contexts are essential. This is what I believe I have practiced throughout my life. By this, I mean that I was well aware that the work on political activists, while important, was not sufficient. Other women from other specialties had to get organized. I have organized several seminars, meetings and carried out research with different groups to encourage them to organize themselves.

The seminars I held with midwives gave rise to the creation of the first Tunisian association of midwives. Meetings I had with women scientists resulted in the creation of the first Tunisian association of women scientists. I held meetings with men and women judges, which resulted in the publication in 1997 by the Center for Legal and Judicial Studies of the only directory published on women judges, as well as the holding of an international congress by the same center. Finally, by publishing several articles on women artists, I have helped to highlight their contribution to the creation of new languages for writing the history of contemporary art. With psychologists, this was also what I did by creating an association to serve as a platform without ever being at the head of it.

In 2011, faced with the void of associations in rural areas for women, I helped here and there to set up women's associations whose sustainability was absolutely not certain. But at least the women knew that small initiatives had been taken, and that some will continue.

Life Ethic

I do not really have any advice to give. Each person must find their bearings. I can say that while my experiments were successful, they were not easy. I never sought to take power even when it had been offered to me several times. I only agreed to speak in public about my own work. It is this life ethic that allowed me to ignore the blows and continue on my path. I am mentioning for the first time what I report here.

Becoming a Lawyer for Human Rights and Women's Rights

Randa Siniora, Palestine

As a child in the 1960s, I realized that, within our Palestinian society, girls are discriminated against because boys are generally preferred. I always defied social norms and practices that place girls and women in an inferior position compared to boys and men. Through my intuition, I always defended girls' rights to equality and non-discrimination. When I was only seven years old, I solidly defended my right when one of our male relatives objected to me wearing shorts when using public transportation. I stood like a lawyer defending my right to equality and non-discrimination with the full support and admiration of my father.

As I grew up, I focused all my academic work as a social scientist and lawyer on women's rights issues, which later shaped my direction and helped me identify my interests and passion for my future career. I was introduced to the Palestinian human rights and feminist movement in 1985 during field research for my MA thesis in sociology-anthropology, which focused on women in the sub-contracting clothing industry within the Palestinian dependent economy. A subsequent position at

Al-Haq (Law in the Service of Man, a Palestinian human rights organization) as a legal researcher and coordinator of the women's rights project familiarized me with discriminatory laws, legislation and policies against women. So, I decided to pursue my LLM dissertation at the University of Essex in 1995 on state responsibility to protect victims of gender-based violence. I addressed the issue of due diligence and responsibility of states to ensure policies, legislation and practices to protect women victims of domestic violence by non-state actors or perpetrators. Inaction to take the necessary legal and administrative measures entails complicity of states, which should, therefore, be made accountable. From then on, I realized that official duty-bearers are complicit and violate women's rights by "omission" if they do not set forth laws, policies, and measures to protect victims of domestic violence. The combination of both activism and academic knowledge made me realize that I wanted to become a human rights defender, a role I have passion for and conviction about. I have been involved with WCLAC in the 90s during the Palestinian Model Parliament: Women and Legislation after the advent of the Palestinian Authority and the conduction of the first Palestinian legislative elections. I became the Head of the Advocacy and Networking Unit at WCLAC in 1997, but moved on to become Al-Haq's General Director in 2001 and the Executive Director of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) in 2007. My passion for women's rights, gender equality and human rights was there all the time and when the post of General Director of WCLAC was announced after the passing of the co-founder and director of WCLAC, Ms. Maha Abu-Dayyeh, I applied for the post and got it.

Patriarchal Oppression and Occupation in Palestine

Living within a patriarchal society with unbalanced power relations combined with a prolonged military occupation framed the social and political context in which I lived most of my life. I realized that most of Palestinian suffering is caused by systematic Israeli violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. While these violations impact all Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Palestinian women are disproportionately affected because they are already marginalized and discriminated against due to the patriarchal system. Both patriarchy and colonial occupation intertwine with each other, resulting in a multi-layered oppression of women and deepening discriminatory practices, stereotypes and sexism, thereby exacerbating the suffering of women and girls. This is further complicated when we look at the intersectionality of features and categories such as ethnicity, social strata or disability which increase the vulnerability of girls and women.

While defending women's rights on a daily basis on the ground, I also realized that another major challenge in our society is the Palestinian Authority's (PA) unwillingness to adopt progressive, nondiscriminatory laws and policies that are in compliance with its legal obligations under international law, including those emerging from the accession to numerous international human rights treaties and conventions. The submission of the PA to traditional elements within society and the compromise of women's right to gender equality in favor of political and economic interests at the expense of measures to protect and promote women's rights keep the official position at the level of rhetoric and lip-service to women's rights and gender equality. To overcome this situation, efforts among feminist and human

rights activists have been united to pressure decision-makers and officials to take the necessary measures. Ending violence against women is a process that requires collective efforts at the community, national and international levels, by people of all ages and professions, including activists, politicians, and clergy, to change attitudes and challenge existing power relations that are entrenched within the patriarchal system. This needs to be combined with legal and policy reform to eliminate all laws, legislation, policies and procedures that give lenient sentences for serious crimes against women and girls.

Another major challenge is the counter campaigns inciting against feminist and women-led organizations by traditional elements and extreme Islamic political parties that attack women activists fighting for gender equality. By using social media and other outlets, they try to defame and incite against women's and human rights defenders and activists by claiming that they carry "western agendas" and bring in "alien ideas" to our society. They claim that women's rights activists want to destroy the homogenous Palestinian family and our social norms and traditions. Such attacks are also met with complete inaction on the part of the Palestinian Authority, leaving women's and human rights defenders alone at the forefront.

Lack of International Responsibility

With the unfolding Israeli military aggression on the Gaza Strip for over six months, where war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide are being committed against the unprotected Palestinian civilian population, we feel that Palestinians are completely abandoned by the international community, especially by powerful countries like the USA and Europe.

We are currently witnessing grave breaches of international law, including collective punishment, attempts at ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Palestinian people, while no enforceable measures are taken by the international community, especially the UN Security Council, to reach a ceasefire and deal with the unprecedented catastrophic humanitarian situation of the whole 2.3 million Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip. We have seen international law being used with double standards, leaving all Palestinians in the OPT under the mercy of a colonial occupation that is systematically violating international law under the pretext of self-defense after the events of October 7.

Women, again, have been disproportionately impacted by the Israeli war on Gaza. About 70% of the "casualties" are among women and children. Over 80% of the forcibly displaced Palestinians are women and children. Pregnant women are not receiving the necessary primary health care; they are giving birth at shelters and in the streets under harsh medical conditions. Premature births have increased by one-third among the 50,000 pregnant women, and giving birth through C-section increased by 300%, often without anesthesia. Women's responsibilities under the current humanitarian situation increased tremendously; they bear the brunt of taking care of their families. On the long term, it is expected that they will also take the brunt of unpaid care services to the sick, injured, disabled and the elderly; there will be a remarkable increase in households headed by women, with the expected high possibility of exclusion of women from public life and decision-making positions.

The international community has legal and moral obligations to the Palestinian people, especially women who are disproportionately affected by the ongoing military

occupation. The international community also has to show responsibility for its inaction and complicity with a colonial power that is violating both international human rights and humanitarian law.

Struggle Against Gender-Based Violence, Both Locally and Internationally

Our daily work at the Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) to protect and promote women’s rights, combat gender-based violence and call for gender equality is an ongoing struggle, which we undertake with passion and responsibility. I am proud that I am in an organization that worked diligently to initiate shelters for women victims of gender-based violence (GBV), and developed the Palestinian national referral system for victims of GBV and protection networks for victims of domestic violence. Influencing policies and legislation through advocacy is another area where my organization was unique; we collaboratively worked through networks and coalitions to influence policies and legislation, including a family protection bill and changes in personal status laws.

I was the first Palestinian woman from a civil society organization to brief the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2018. I spoke on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security at the UN Security Council Open Debate on “Women, Peace and Security.” I specifically addressed the high rate of domestic violence in Palestine, the increasing rate of femicide there, and women’s exclusion from meaningful political participation. I also focused on the Israeli colonial occupation and its negative impact on Palestinian women and the important role of the UNSC in maintaining peace and

security; the UNSC needs to act in order to resolve and not only manage conflicts:

“The Israeli occupation and the resulting humanitarian crisis are deeply gendered and exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Women disproportionately endure the violence of occupation borne by all Palestinians, and often with gender-specific consequences. Little space has been made to integrate Palestinian women’s concerns into key political processes, including for achieving Palestinian statehood or for national reconciliation. The representation of women in key decision-making positions, including the Palestinian Authority institutions, is barely 5%.”

In 2019, I was named one of the 100 most influential people in gender policy, which is one of the most prominent global lists drawn from more than 9,000 nominations to recognize and celebrate the hard work on gender policy by many around the world.

As the leader of WCLAC, I represent one of the civil society organizations in Palestine that have been selected to the Generation Equality Multi-Stakeholder Leadership Group to advise and support UN Women’s decision-making during the 2022-2025 period.

I believe that my leadership is my struggle; as a human rights defender I continue to do my work with passion and high commitment.

Global Solidarity of the Peoples and the Palestinian People's Right to Freedom

The global solidarity of the peoples of the world for the Palestinian people's right to freedom from occupation and their right to self-determination and statehood means a lot to me. What we saw and still witness on a daily basis through the solidarity of the peoples of the world with us since October 7, 2023, has led to reviving the Palestinian narrative after 75 years of oppression and disposition. What we are currently witnessing is a gradually shifting paradigm towards the global south and the peoples of the world; this shift has exposed double standards of the governments of the global north.

Only through solidarity and networking among us within the MENA region and globally can we achieve our goals of justice, freedom and gender equality. We should join efforts in coalitions against war and militarization because we are convinced that conflicts, militarization and wars negate humanity and feminism. The Charter of the United Nations starts with the permeable: "We the peoples of the world..." and not "states of the world;" it is hence our right to reclaim the United Nations. Only when we combine our struggles with all those freedom fighters for equality, justice and freedom from oppression can we achieve our goals for a different world full of humanity which it is currently lacking!

Solidarity in Sisterhood

Always be positive and believe in what you fight for; join efforts, work together, trust each other and find solidarity in sisterhood and our rights as women and girls to equality, non-discrimination and human rights.

Upbringing in an Intellectual Damascene Middle Class: Women's Rights as a Foundational Principle

Hind Kabawat, Syria

I grew up in the vibrant city of Damascus, where my family was part of a thriving intellectual middle-class community. My mother was a highly respected professor at the local university, and my father was an accomplished diplomat and lawyer. Our family dinners were lively and engaging as we discussed various topics, ranging from politics to foreign affairs, human rights, and social justice. I will forever cherish the memories of these conversations, which were enriched by the presence of my parents' friends, prominent politicians, and writers. Their diverse perspectives and experiences broadened my view and inspired me to pursue a path of intellectual curiosity and social responsibility.

Growing up in a secular Christian background was an experience that shaped my perspective on the world. One of the most significant events in my early life was attending the same school as the children from families of the ruling party.

This was the pan-Arab socialist Ba'ath Party that took power in 1963. The party was founded by the Christian Michel Aflak and was supposed to be secular. It advocated unity with the other Arab countries, freedom and socialism. To cut a long story short, this failed big time and resulted in one party ruling and oppressing any other party of ideas with the support of the intelligence. As classmates, I had the opportunity to observe their behavior, attitudes, and privileges. It was apparent that they lived in a world of power and entitlement that was far removed from the experiences of others. As I interacted with them, I learned an essential lesson that has stayed with me throughout my life: I realized that we are not all equal and that some people are born with advantages that others can only dream of. The ruling party's children were a perfect example of this, enjoying privileges the rest of us could only imagine.

It was also clear that corruption was rampant and that those in power were more concerned with maintaining their status than serving the people they were supposed to represent. The stark contrast between the ruling party's children and the rest of us was a profound and eye-opening experience that shaped my worldview.

Ultimately, this experience taught me to be more aware of the privileges I enjoy and work towards a more just and equitable world. Our family has always been a strong proponent of equality; our household is no exception. The idea of women's rights is not just a topic of discussion but a foundational principle ingrained in us since we were young. Our parents have always been vocal advocates of feminism, and this influence has shaped our perspectives and beliefs. We never have to debate or question the importance of women's rights because it's already a given in our family. We understand that

everyone deserves equal treatment, regardless of gender, and we actively strive to uphold this value in all our lives.

Women as a Token in Official Politics

The political environment in Syria under the Ba'ath regime has long been unstable. In 1967 and 1973, we faced Arab-Israeli Wars, the Lebanese civil war erupted in 1975, the 1980s were determined by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Hama massacre as well as the massacre against Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, exacerbated by the economic problems, the recession and poverty in Syria, the detention of all the communists, the leftists and the Muslim Brothers, and the assassination of university professors by the Muslim Brotherhood or the massive massacre of the detainees in the prisons of Palmyra and Sednaya.

Accordingly, the so-called "equality and women's rights" rhetoric of the ruling Ba'ath Party in a dictatorship is nothing but a façade. Despite the presence of women in high-ranking positions such as ambassadors and ministers, political involvement for women is nothing more than a token gesture. In this system, they have no voice, women or men.

As I embarked on my journey as an attorney and international advisor on conflict resolution, reconciliation and diplomacy education, I have made a firm decision to stand up against any form of oppression that I witness. I strongly believe in fighting for the rights of the oppressed and marginalized, and I am committed to being their voice in a world that often neglects and overlooks them. I will use my skills and various platforms on the local as well as the national level in the Syrian political opposition movement, such as in the Syrian High

Negotiation Committee in Geneva, to advocate justice and equality for all and not shy away from taking a stand against the oppressors. My ultimate goal is to create a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of race, gender, or social status.

Conflict Resolution and Dialog as an Approach to Justice and Equality

I have encountered various difficulties throughout my life, as I refused to keep quiet on matters I felt passionate about. However, these experiences have inspired me to pursue my interest in dialog between different parties and mediation, such as interfaith dialog and peacebuilding. We can bridge gaps and solve complex problems through constructive and respectful conversation.

Furthermore, I have realized that God is too immense to be confined within the boundaries of a single religion. As a result, I have developed a deep appreciation for diversity and respect for different beliefs and perspectives. We can build a harmonious and inclusive society through mutual understanding and acceptance. In my own work, in every event, cultural, social or political, I make sure that everybody is included, including diverse religious and ethnic groups, women and youth. During my work as a lawyer, professor and member of the Syrian High Negotiation Committee, I always underlined that the key to any successful, fruitful meeting is diversity; the more we include, the more sustainable the outcome we can get.

At the onset of the revolution in 2011, my heart was filled with an unshakable desire to stand up for the oppressed. I was a

professor of conflict resolution in Damascus at that time, and my students were the ones who were out there in the streets, protesting against the oppressive regime. As I watched them demonstrating for their rights, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of admiration for their courage and resilience.

My students remained firm in their fight for justice and equality; this unwavering determination to fight for justice and equality was awe-inspiring, especially considering the immense danger to their life and the possible imprisonment they faced. They were from different backgrounds and religions, but they shared a common goal: to end the tyranny and oppression that had plagued their country for far too long. Proper safety and security can only be achieved when all citizens' rights are guaranteed and protected, and my students' unwavering commitment to this noble cause has only reinforced this belief.

As their teacher, I prioritized instilling the fundamental values of peaceful conflict resolution in my students. I recognized that to effect real and lasting change, collective action was often necessary. I encouraged my students to stand up for their beliefs, speak out against injustice, and fight for a brighter future for themselves and those who follow. By empowering my students in workshops, dialog or mediation sessions with these values and skills, I was helping to shape their futures and contributing to a more just and equitable society for all.

My Journey as a Lawyer and Peace Negotiator

It has been a tough journey for me over the years. My childhood began with the 1967 war, the Black September

in Jordan in 1970, followed by the 1973 war, the Lebanese civil war between 1975-1977, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the massacre of Hama in 1982, and Hafez Assad's control over all aspects of life. Finally, the Syrian revolution took place in 2011, and I witnessed all the crimes committed against the Syrian people. When the revolution started in Syria, I decided to be more involved in it. I quit my job as a lawyer and started working at the USIP (United States Institute of Peace). Later, I got elected to be in the High Negotiation Committee; I was a member of the legal committee, and since we did not have enough women, I created the women's consulting group, a team of women with diverse specialties to attend with us the negotiation rounds in Geneva. I was involved in the negotiation process in Geneva for seven years (2012-2019), during which many politicians tried to exclude women from the negotiation table. However, we fought for women's political contribution and succeeded in having them included in the talks.

As someone who has experienced the Syrian conflict, I have firsthand knowledge of how the international community let down my people. I was deeply troubled by the dire humanitarian situation of the Syrian people, which included the plight of those detained in prison, the children who were deprived of access to education, and the women who struggled to keep their families alive while also trying to survive. The difficulties in receiving international aid were also evident to me, as competing geopolitical interests in my country often took priority over the needs of the Syrian people. It was disheartening to see how power and self-interest came first, leaving the most vulnerable members of society to suffer.

Non-Violence and Dialog Programs in Syria: Women Fighting for Humanity

I am the founder of TASTAKEL, a women-led organization committed to using non-violent means and dialog to resolve the ongoing conflict in Syria. Our organization has launched several programs to promote the education and empowerment of women in Syria and the neighboring countries. These programs aim to provide education, counselling and mediation services, workshops on public speaking and law, or training on political engagement and peacebuilding for women in Syria.

Our education and empowerment programs have had a significant impact on Syrian women. Whether they live in Syria or as refugees in neighboring countries, the programs are designed to provide a safe and supportive environment for women to develop the skills and confidence they need to become leaders in their communities and drive positive change.

Our organization runs multiple women's education and empowerment programs in Syria and neighboring countries. Despite the ongoing conflict, these programs aim to equip Syrian women with the necessary skills to rebuild their lives and communities. We provide education services to Syrian women, including vocational training, language classes, and computer literacy programs. Our counselling services focus on mental health and psychosocial support, helping women deal with the trauma and stress of living in a conflict zone.

Furthermore, our organization hosts workshops on political engagement and peacebuilding for Syrian women living inside Syria and as refugees in neighboring countries. These workshops aim to enable Syrian women to participate in the

reconstruction of their country and advocate peace and social justice.

So far, we have trained and graduated 1800 women and youth dedicated to fighting for humanity, social justice, and human rights. In summary, our organization is committed to empowering Syrian women and creating a peaceful future for Syria. Women are crucial in building a just and equitable society and are dedicated to making that vision a reality.

Solidarity Among Women - A Survival Strategy

I am extremely grateful for the unwavering support of my mentors, coaches, sisters, colleagues, and friends. They have been the backbone of our organization, providing the much-needed guidance, inspiration, and support that has helped us succeed. As a woman, I have always found solace in the support of other women, learning from their diverse experiences and sharing stories. Together, we can create a meaningful impact and work towards a peaceful and prosperous future for everyone—coaches, sisters, colleagues, and friends.

I could not have survived all those years without the solidarity with women in the challenging times—mentors, coaches, sisters, colleagues, and friends; they are our backbone. Always find comfort in the support of other women, learning from different experiences and sharing stories. In the Syrian context, the most painful thing for me in the last few years was seeing the hospitals and schools being bombed by the regime, chemical attacks, the siege of Ghouta, and losing so many of my friends.

After working in negotiation and mediation for years in the Syrian context and still believing in political solutions, I discovered that the most important thing is to pass our experience to young women.

Think Big!

Believe in yourself and stay informed, humble, adaptable, and resilient. In politics, be assertive yet kind-hearted. Think big, prioritize self-care, and ensure your survival. Remember, the world needs you, and you have the power to make a difference. So, stay intense and focused, and keep pushing towards your goals. Remember, you are a warrior for justice, and nothing can stop you.

Becoming a Journalist as a Single Mother

Randa Abul Azm, Egypt

I had never imagined nor had I planned for television journalism to be my career, my life and my destiny. When I joined the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at a university in Cairo, I thought of applying to become a diplomat in the foreign ministry. My parents, who come from a traditional background, objected to a career that includes traveling and living abroad; they prioritized marriage to any career. I then worked in a bank for a year, a job which I neither liked, nor in which I saw myself succeeding. I left the bank and started my master's degree in Islamic Art and Architecture, got married and had my first and only child. Soon after, I suddenly found myself being in the role of a single mother, responsible for raising my daughter without a job or experience. That was a turning point in my life, twenty-nine years ago. My story may seem very personal. However, what I went through is quite common to millions of women in Egypt and all over the world; the details may vary but the main outlines are quite similar.

Back in 1995, I joined the MBC (Middle-East Broadcasting Centre), the first Arab satellite channel to be introduced, a novelty that allowed the coverage of news from different

perspectives and angles, as opposed to government-owned state television, which would only broadcast news about the president's achievements, void of any space for balanced reporting, opposition, or factual stories about democracy and human rights. If it were not for my family's support, my diversified education and my will to accept challenges, I would not have succeeded or continued in this difficult career.

Women's Rights as the Focus of Political Reporting

I was lucky to have had the opportunity to work in this field during its nascent phase, which helped in paving the way for other female reporters to flourish later on and overcome the obstacles in a field dominated by males. My first reporting in 1995 was covering the parliamentary elections. It was then when I noticed and also reported about the state monopoly of the results, the low percentage of female candidates compared to men and how the Muslim Brotherhood mastered the game of elections—themes that continued repeating themselves for over three decades with each election process.

The headlines during the late nineties and the start of the millennium were dominated by the terrorist attacks, which took place all over Egypt at the time. The main approach I adopted during the coverage of those events was to focus on human interest stories, which is the process of emphasizing the emotional aspect by personalizing the issue at hand.

Al-Arabiya news channel was launched in 2003, within a male-dominated field. Being a female reporter and successively the first female bureau-chief for a news satellite channel in Cairo allowed me to focus my efforts on topics such as raising

awareness about women's rights, following up on issues related to challenges in achieving justice in divorce cases, children's custody cases, inheritance issues, female genital mutilation, transgenderism, harassment and rape problems, women's education, women's labor, increasing female presence within the parliament, and so on.

Addressing Violence and Injustice Against Women

Despite being classified as sensitive topics, both on a cultural and a political level, I had success in bringing topics such as female genital mutilation to the spotlight. Over the years, I had worked on several reports, taking the form of short reports and special feature documentaries tackling this controversial topic. These works focused on the suffering that women who have undergone this procedure endured and how this had affected their lives. Optimistically, there had been cases where some have chosen to cease this practice and, by doing so, changed the course for generations to come. Government focus has also made efforts to combat this enduring practice by introducing strict new laws against the custom, leading to an observable decline in its performance. This gives hope that this predatory act may be altogether eliminated from our society.

Harassment is yet another topic that I had focused on shifting attention towards. Events such as festivals and other areas with dense crowds have witnessed a change aided by media awareness. Over the past three decades, novel improvements have been introduced, such as intensifying the presence of security personnel, in order to protect women from harassment.

In my reporting, my gender gave me the advantage of tackling issues relating to female suffering from a different perspective compared to men. Recently, I was covering the government implementation of the removal of all residential houseboats. One of the affected individuals was Mrs. Ikhlas Helmy, an 88-year-old lady who had lived her entire life on one of the houseboats and was soon to be evacuated from her home. In a rare opportunity, I was able to raise her issue to President El-Sisi, who then took personal note of her story and issued a decree providing Mrs. Ikhlas with immediate alternative housing within the same area overlooking the Nile. I do consider this coverage as one of the happiest and proudest moments of my journalistic career. Shedding light on the day-to-day suffering of citizens and being able to convey this message to the highest local authorities pave the way for positive action to be taken.

It is impossible to isolate women's rights from human rights in Egypt, as they are mostly intertwined. Over the past three decades, I have witnessed a decline in certain areas and progress in others. New legislation and laws specifically targeting harassment, rape, divorce, and female genital mutilation have been revised. However, customs and traditions can be a strong force facing any legislation, making it difficult to implement laws properly in a male-dominated society that is infiltrated by Salafi and radical Islamic dogma, especially in rural areas. It is noteworthy to mention that female representation within the parliament and ministries has increased post-2014, yet the question remains whether this increase yielded positive results in relation to women's rights. Altering laws and policies is simpler than attempting to change customs and traditions that are deeply rooted in the culture and passed down onto future generations.

Women in Egypt constitute around half the population, yet their contribution within the work force does not exceed 15.4%. This is a significantly low percentage compared to the number of women's enrolment in higher education at 48.7%, whereas men account for 51.3% enrolment in higher education. As reported by the World Bank, if the percentage of women's employment is raised, this will reflect in a 34% increase in Egypt's GDP. Women working in informal labor, such as housekeeping, are in most cases responsible for supporting their families due to the absence, death, or unemployment of their husbands. They often work under harsh circumstances without access to social security or a stable income, often ending up unemployed. Personally, I believe that types of informal labor should be given more attention and regard, especially from the international community by providing training, subsidies and encouragement to workers. In addition, women have been the main victims of the economic crisis, which has been reflected in higher divorce rates, less enrolment in education and less job opportunities in comparison to men.

Women's Rights as a Political Target

Personally, I have covered and witnessed the so-called "Arab Spring" along with the revolution of 2011, followed by another change of regime in 2013. Egypt witnessed several sociopolitical and economic changes during this time, having observed one of the most severe polarization acts within its society. Women were systematically targeted during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square by harassment and occasionally by gang rape, for these doings to act as deterrents against joining in on the process of political change. There had been a growing momentum hoping to achieve the desired freedom, social

equality and democracy. These slogans were chanted for 18 continuous days and were soon hijacked by the radical Muslim Brotherhood. The rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt represented a major setback for the country, yet the main setback was in regards to women's rights. Unveiled women were singled out and targeted in many fields. I, myself, suffered from their targeted attacks during my own coverage of local events. Throughout my entire career, I had never felt unsafe, except during the time of their rule.

Forward to 2014, at the time of Egypt's battle against terrorism, the country witnessed a decline on several levels of acts of freedom, including freedom of media reporting, posing a major obstacle in getting accurate messages across. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have catalyzed the most severe economic crisis in Egypt's modern history. These issues have shifted the focus from the ordinary citizen, democracy and human rights issues towards the means of surviving the crisis with the least possible damage. With the recent war in Gaza, the priority for most Egyptians became living in a stable and secure country. The most recent presidential elections were an affirmation of this idea, having re-elected President El-Sisi, which indicated a preference for an army-based rule, as opposed to a civilian one.

Mutual Respect and Humanity Instead of Double Standards

Humanity, justice, peace, and equality are terms that are internationally agreed upon. However, the war in Gaza revealed the double standards that many Western governments hold, having selective attitudes and biases in implementing human rights, while disregarding the killing of thousands of innocent

Palestinian civilians (two thirds of whom are women and children) and not taking measures for a permanent ceasefire to put an end to the Palestinian massacre.

Solidarity, networking and encouragement of other women all over the world can help by sharing success stories and trying to implement them whenever possible, while taking into consideration the cultural and political differences between societies. Networking between civil society groups may bridge the gap between Western societies and the MENA region. An understanding between two cultures is achievable through mutual respect towards each other's differences and by agreeing on basic rights for everyone. To conclude, after almost three decades in my career as a television journalist covering numerous political, social and economic events, I still search for the truth and I see my work as a jigsaw puzzle; one may or may not see the whole picture at the time, however, the truth may still be revealed after decades.

A Journey Towards Activism

Amel Grami, Tunisia

The journey towards activism in the realm of women's and human rights is often personal, dynamic, and transformative. Like other activists, my journey was marked by personal experiences of discrimination and marginalization, whether in my youth or my studies in the 1970s and 1980s. It also involved recognizing injustices and making a commitment to challenging different systems of oppression, such as law and religion.

My father played a crucial role in encouraging my engagement in critical thinking and activism. He created an empowering environment at home, where I felt encouraged to read, voice my opinions, and engage in discussions. We had, for example, a weekly gathering of men in our home who debated political issues. This gave me insights into important topics, such as the relation between secular and religious forces. In particular, my father's support helped me challenge gender stereotypes and traditional expectations about women's roles and capabilities, both within the family and in society at large.

Through education, research on feminist knowledge during my studies in the 1980s, and participation in activities organized by

the Union of Students, Amnesty International, the Association of Tunisian Democratic Women, and other organizations, I have adopted a political approach grounded in principles of freedom, equality, justice, and the dignity and worth of every human being.

I have also been inspired by political actors and activists, such as Maya Jribi and Radhia Nasraoui, a Tunisian lawyer specializing in human rights, who militates particularly against the use of torture. She was one of the founders of the Association Against Torture in Tunisia, founded on 26 June 2003. Appointed president, she denounced what she sees as the “systematic torture” practiced in her country since the accession to power of President Ben Ali on 7 November 1987. Due to her professional activities in favor of human rights in Tunisia, Radhia Nasraoui continued to be exposed to repression and police brutality. Even after the revolution, she continued to denounce cases of torture and mistreatment of prisoners.

Sana Ben Achour is a professor of public law at the Faculty of Legal, Political and Social Sciences. She is active in several feminist organizations, such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates - ATFD), of which she has been the president. Also, she is active in the Association of University Women for Research and Development and has founded a women’s refuge shelter, *Beity* (translation: *My Home*), for single mothers and other women in need, including poor and abused women; Ben Achour is also a member of the Tunisian Human Rights League.

Ahlem Belhaj was a Tunisian psychiatrist and women’s rights campaigner. Serving at various times as President, Chair, and Director of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women

(ATFD), Belhadj campaigned for better treatment of women in Tunisia. She successfully fought for the right of women and children to apply for passports without permission of their husband or father. Belhadj led a march of thousands of women against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali during the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. She was the 2012 winner of the Simone de Beauvoir Prize. Belhadj died on 11 March 2023.

I have witnessed their struggle to build a democratic regime and create a more just and equitable world in the Association of Tunisian Democratic Women. Maya Jribi, in particular, was a strong advocate for human rights, democracy, and gender equality. She was a politician. From 2006 to 2012, she was the leader of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). From PDP’s merger into the Republican Party in April 2012, until her resignation in 2017, she was the Secretary-General of the centrist party. She played a pivotal role in the fight against authoritarianism during the Ben Ali regime. Despite facing harassment, intimidation, and oppression, she remained committed to peaceful activism and political change. Maya passed away in 2018, but her legacy continues to inspire Tunisians, especially women, to participate in politics and strive for a more inclusive and democratic society.

Dedication to Democratic Values and Civic Engagement

These prominent human rights defenders have dedicated their lives to promoting democratic values, transparency, and civic engagement in Tunisia. I share their desire to create a world where every individual, regardless of gender, class, race, or ethnicity, can live free from violence, discrimination, and inequality. If we examine Tunisia’s social and political

context, we can see that it is marked by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors. Over the past decade, the country has encountered numerous challenges in its transition to democracy, including economic instability, political polarization, and ongoing struggles for human rights and social justice. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Tunisia has made significant progress in promoting gender equality and women's rights, when compared to many other countries in the region. The Tunisian Constitution, which was adopted in 2014, incorporates principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. For instance, Tunisia has implemented the 2017 Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women (Law No.58) and has also ratified international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Obstacles to Gender Justice

Despite these achievements, Tunisia still faces significant obstacles in achieving gender justice. These challenges include gaps in the implementation and enforcement of laws, discrimination, and barriers to full participation in public life (including politics, the workforce, and decision-making processes), violence against women, and disparities in economic opportunities and resource access. Moreover, there are signs of a backlash against certain advancements in women's rights and other progressive reforms, which are becoming increasingly noticeable. For example, the new constitution was ratified and much of the language on women's equality was removed. The state also removed (parity law) gender quotas before the 2022 legislative elections. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts from government institutions, civil society

organizations, and the wider community. These efforts should aim to promote legal reforms, challenge patriarchal and discriminatory norms, and ensure meaningful participation and empowerment of women in all spheres of society. By addressing the root causes of political and economic crises, as well as social inequality, and by promoting social justice, Tunisia can further advance its democratic process and build a more inclusive and equitable society for all its citizens.

The Weakness of the International Community

One area where the international community has sometimes fallen short is in adequately addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality and women's rights struggles. This shortcoming is particularly evident in the implementation and enforcement of existing international commitments and conventions. Although Tunisia has ratified treaties such as CEDAW, the limited resources, capacity, and political will often hinder the fulfillment of these commitments. To truly make a difference, both the Tunisian government and the international community must take concrete actions to confront the root causes of gender inequality and empower women and girls. By doing so, they can advocate transparency, accountability, the rule of law, and the building of a more just, inclusive, and equitable society for all. Moreover, the government should collaborate with civil society organizations and international partners to establish and fund shelters, hotlines, and legal aid services for survivors of violence. They should also implement awareness-raising campaigns to challenge patriarchal social norms that perpetuate violence against women. Additionally, the government should implement policies that promote women's access to education, training, and employment

opportunities. This should include providing support for women entrepreneurs and small businesses. International support should focus on funding microfinance programs, vocational training, and initiatives that promote women's participation in non-traditional sectors.

The Post-Revolutionary Period

Tunisian women have a rich history of making sacrifices and contributions to the struggle for freedom, democracy, and human rights. Their courage, resilience, and dedication to justice and equality have made a lasting impact on Tunisia's political landscape and serve as an inspiration for activists worldwide. In the post-revolution period, Tunisian women continue to fight for humanity, equality, and justice; for example, women activists and politicians collaborated on the progressive 2017 violence-against-women law. The law recognized marital rape and political violence. Tunisian Muslim women also gained the right to marry non-Muslim men. Activists are still fighting for women's inheritance equality.

They understand the importance of solidarity and networking with women in other contexts who also stand for justice. By connecting with women from diverse backgrounds, activists gain insight into the unique challenges and experiences faced by different communities. This fosters empathy, compassion, and solidarity across borders.

According to Tunisian women advocating justice, equality, and dignity, networking with women in other contexts provides opportunities to amplify marginalized voices and uplift grassroots movements. They believe in the power of ordinary citizens to effect positive change from within society.

By sharing stories, experiences, strategies, lessons learned, knowledge, and resources, while recognizing and honoring the interconnectedness of their struggles, activists can build stronger and more inclusive movements. This will better equip them to confront the complex challenges of building a more just and equitable world for all. Standing together and offering solidarity in times of crisis, activists can bolster each other's resilience, inspire hope, and reaffirm their commitment to the struggle for justice, dignity, and equality.

Encouragement to Women Worldwide

As an activist dedicated to building a different world, I would like to offer the following encouragement to women worldwide: First, you are not alone. It is important for women activists to know that they are not alone in their struggles. Women from different countries, cultures, and contexts share a common vision of a more just, equitable, and peaceful world. By connecting with individuals and communities, women can find strength, support, and inspiration from each other.

Second, your voice matters. Every woman has a unique perspective, experience, and voice that is valuable and deserving of recognition. Whether speaking out against injustice, oppression, inequality, male dominance, colonialism, imperialism, or advocating real change and sharing stories of resilience and resistance, each woman has the power to make a difference in her own way. By speaking up and amplifying their voices, women can contribute to shaping a world that reflects their values, perceptions, visions, and aspirations.

Third, change is possible. While the challenges we face may seem difficult, it is important to remember that change

is possible. History has shown us that transformative social movements can and do create a lasting impact. By harnessing the power of collective action, solidarity, and resilience, women can challenge the status quo, dismantle oppressive systems, and create pathways to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Fourth, take care of yourself before caring for others. Fighting for justice, freedom, dignity, equality, and change can be emotionally and physically demanding. Therefore, it is crucial for women activists to prioritize self-care and well-being. Taking time to rest, recharge, and nurture themselves allows women to sustain their activism over the long term and avoid burnout. Self-care is an essential part of the struggle for a better world. The ethics of care emphasizes the importance of relationships, empathy, and interconnectedness in moral deliberation and decision-making.

Fifth, celebrate achievements, big and small. In the midst of challenging times, it is important to celebrate victories, no matter how small they may seem. Every step forward, every achievement, and every act of solidarity brings us closer to our shared vision of a different world. By acknowledging and celebrating progress, women can stay motivated and inspired to continue their efforts for social, political, and economic change.

No doubt, the message of encouragement from one activist to other women committed to creating a different world is one of solidarity, empowerment, and hope. By coming together, supporting each other, and staying true to their convictions, women have the power to shape the future and create a world that is more just, equitable, inclusive for all, and more humanistic.

Women's activism is often a lifelong commitment, and activists continue to work towards justice, dignity, gender equality, and prosperity for everyone, even in the face of challenges and setbacks. They draw strength and inspiration from the progress they have made and the collective vision of a world free from oppression, violence, and injustice. It is evident that a human and ethical world recognizes our interconnectedness as a global community and promotes solidarity across borders. Countries work together to address global challenges such as violence, injustice, poverty, inequality, climate change, and human rights violations.

Upbringing in a Religiously and Ethnically Diverse Environment:

Between Openness and Continuous Experiences of War in the Arab Levant

Laure Abi Khalil, Lebanon

I was raised in a district of Beirut in the 1960s that is characterized by its diverse population, representing a wide range of Lebanese communities. I mention this because, although Lebanon is a small country, it is demographically divided, which means that Christians and Muslims live in separate neighborhoods. I grew up in a district that had Christian, Muslim and Druze communities on the one hand, and Lebanese living side by side with Palestinians. The UNRWA school, which was attended by Palestinian children, was next door to us. Teachers and employees of the school were also living in the neighborhood. Growing up in such a context helped me to develop friendships with Lebanese from different backgrounds as well as with Palestinians. The fact

that my father was an open-minded person and a member of a secular nationalist party that did not distinguish between religious and national belonging encouraged me to be open. He encouraged me to value professionalism as an important value to build my personality. This has helped me to become a liberated individual committed to distinguishing between right and wrong.

Yet, my personal experience as a child living through the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 shaped my commitment to justice and my stance regarding Palestine. During the invasion, our Palestinian neighbors left our area and I asked my father to explain why. I remember my father taking a piece of paper and drawing the map of Palestine. He explained to us what happened to Palestine and the Palestinian Nakba in 1948. Then he explained that now we have militias in our area that cooperate with the Israeli authorities. Accordingly, our Palestinian neighbors had to leave to avoid being killed. This was a starting point for me to ask the same question I often heard my father pose: "what brought all this misery to my people?" Later, I started reading about the history of our region, the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the Balfour declaration of 1917 and all that followed during the French and British mandate, which changed the face of the entire region. Due to my father's political views, he also had to leave and go to Africa. I spent my adolescence with my father away from home. And I lived through the Lebanese civil war years, watching Lebanese killing one another for external agendas. It is in this context that I realized the importance of values of justice, truth and solidarity with the oppressed, especially in a context fragmented by political belongings and religious affiliations. And so, I came to realize that unity among Lebanese is one of my goals and Palestine is my cause as well.

I was a young woman in the 1980s, when I witnessed the atrocities committed by the Israelis in Lebanon, including bombings, killings and arrests of children, women and youth, the destruction of the infrastructure and the ways they attempted to cultivate a religious schism between Christians and Muslims through supporting particular groups against others. Being a person who believes in the separation between politics and religion and considering that religious affiliations are purely personal and by examining the different political and social agendas of the different parties active in Lebanon, I decided to join a secular resistance party against the Israeli occupation and a party whose ideological constructs match mine; I began participating in political life by belonging to party life and later assuming leadership roles.

Dedication to Political Life Despite Manifold Obstacles for Women

The society I was born into was religiously compartmentalized and sectarian, but my father was a secular and educated man who taught me the importance of defending the land against Israeli occupation in Palestine and the importance of fighting to consolidate secular ideas in a sectarian country, sectarian par excellence. For me, defending secularism and the importance of civil society is hence the way to ensure equal rights and gender justice.

Two main reasons constitute an obstacle to the participation of women in politics: the lack of political awareness and the gender bias in favor of men in internal leadership positions of all Lebanese parties; particularly, when selections and lists are not made on the basis of democratic processes but rather on personal judgments of party leaders. This reduces women's

chances of accessing power positions and inevitably affects their ability to play a political role. It is the structure of parties embedded in family patriarchal leadership that limits women's access to political life. To access leadership positions in politics, women must be part of this political leadership.

As for the challenges that I face as an active political woman in Lebanon, I have to say that though Lebanon as a country has been able to change the election laws, thus opening the way for women to run for elections, a change in the patriarchal traditional thinking has not been achieved so far. In addition, internal actors often keep supporting the traditional system and their allies are thus hindering local efforts for political transformation. I, for example, wanted to run twice for the Lebanese elections, yet for the reasons mentioned above in addition to the lack of financial resources, I was so far unable to do so.

International Double Standards, Lack of Security and the Need to Act

In the 1990s, at the age of 20, I joined a secular political party in which I have been active ever since. As the party is present all across Lebanon as well as in other Arab countries in the region, I had the opportunity to travel and lecture on various themes. My academic career began in 1988, when I started to work at the Lebanese University. At that time, I was convinced of the vital role of the UN and of the international organizations in supporting justice and implementing accountability with regard to human rights violations in our region. Throughout the last 24 years, I have taught my students the importance of social justice, human rights, equality as well as the importance of standing up against injustice. Yet, having experienced the

war on Lebanon in 2006, the war on Syria and now the war on Gaza, I realize now the double standards with which we are confronted in our region and the fact that economic interests in the region are far more important than values. Watching the war on Gaza and the endless suffering of civilians, while the international community is unable to even take a joint stand for a humanitarian ceasefire, I wonder what options are left for our countries, people and us women? How can we join forces among us women of the region to develop a kind of a pressure group that can make a change?

The international community must act to end Israel's violations in our region because it has so far failed to force Israel to comply with international resolutions aimed at protecting the women and children of our society. Faced with the security challenges in our region, political participation becomes a luxury for women. Moreover, sectarianism and sectarian parties continue to impede the presence of women in leadership political positions, as these parties uphold religious beliefs where women are viewed as subordinate to men.

The initiative that I am proposing to the international community to help women in Lebanon is to support the law on quotas for women's participation in political life. This would break the culturally instilled perceptions and stereotypes of women as being less suited for political engagement.

Human Rights Advocacy at the University and the Middle East Council of Churches

I have been working for about two years as a project manager on an awareness program on the preservation of human dignity and human capital within the Middle East Council of

Churches. And I am also participating in a dialog table on ways to consolidate peace with the United Nations Women's Fund.

As part of the Preserving Human Dignity Program, a specialized team works at round tables and seminars that address the following topics: Palestinians and liberation from a Christian perspective, social justice in times of crises, threatened human dignity and the need for reintegration, women and human dignity, living in dignity for persons with disability, freedom and justice for all, the prisoner and human dignity, medical ethics and human dignity, dignity for the afflicted person, the issue of the kidnapped and forcibly disappeared, violation of human dignity, family planning and human dignity, the media and stereotyping of the other, human dignity and Palestinian refugees, school dropout and human dignity, etc.

Moreover, as a university professor at the only public university in Lebanon that caters to about 70,000 students and having contact with more than 300 new students every year, these concepts are always part of the courses I give and many of the students I supervise at the master's level continue to do their thesis on such topics.

Direct Communication with Women

Solidarity and communication with women who defend justice can contribute to the formation of advocacy groups to bring the reality of women, particularly in the Arab Levant region, which suffers from major security challenges, to the international agenda and to the decision-makers of the world. This helps convey the truth about the atrocities committed by Israelis in our region and thus inspires decision-makers to

demand justice. Moreover, this would hopefully lead to a redirection of resources into places that could be instrumental in bringing about such change, as for example, the Lebanese university and secular groups in Lebanon.

Adhere to Your Right!

I advise women who are exposed to violence and violations to adhere to their right to defend themselves, to face the double standards that may hinder them, and not to leave their land, but to fight by all means to obtain justice.

The Struggle for Women's and Human Rights and Political Approach

Saeede Fathi, Iran

Every woman in Iran has her own struggle story. My struggle began in my teenage years in the 1990-2000s with a love for basketball and aspirations to join the national team. When I made it to the national youth team, I realized that we effectively had no national team, due to the World Basketball Federation's ban on women participating in hijab. Our generation missed out on this dream, and we could only play within Iran. This realization sparked my determination to fight for change.

I left basketball, my teenage dream, to become a journalist at 17. I aimed to become the voice of Iranian female athletes in a different way, having experienced their struggles myself. At the end of high school, I entered this profession through one of my friends who was a journalist, starting with the 90 newspaper, which was focused on sports. Initially, as I was a basketball player myself, I wrote about this sport. Later, I also covered other sports such as volleyball, handball, tennis, futsal, and more and started to write extensively about the hijab ban in the media where I worked, including newspapers and magazines, urging the Iranian Basketball Federation to take

action. My efforts, along with communication with the World Federation, eventually led FIBA to allow women to compete in hijab in 2017. I had connections with the officials of the Asian Basketball Federation and had discussions with the president and secretary of the basketball federation during the meetings I attended between 2004 and 2017. I also reported on these topics in the media outlets I worked with and conducted interviews with the officials.

Throughout my career as a journalist, I have focused on the restrictions faced by women in sports in Iran. I wrote about girls who loved to ride motorcycles. I went to the street with one of them, who was a Baha'i, and the Iranian government had a problem with her and her family because of their religious beliefs and did not allow her to ride even on the motorcycle track. I left her motorcycle and we toured the streets together so that I could write a report on people's reactions to a woman driving a motorcycle.

Boxing is also forbidden for women in Iran. I covered stories of women who trained secretly at night, hidden from public view. Additionally, I wrote about girls who trained hard but lacked basic facilities and played for club teams without pay, contrasting with men signing lucrative contracts.

As a female sports journalist, I faced discrimination myself, barred from many stadiums and unable to cover events in fields like football, wrestling, gymnastics, swimming, and diving, solely for being a woman. Women were not allowed in stadiums, and as a journalist, I worked under these conditions, fighting against such discrimination. I endured baton strikes and tear gas, was confined for watching a basketball game, and was eventually imprisoned for my journalistic activities. In October 2022, amid national protests following Mahsa

Amini's death, I was arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence of Iran and spent two months in Ward 209 of Evin Prison. My arrest, just for wanting to be the voice of Iranian women and writing about discrimination, highlights the dangers faced by journalists in Iran. My 20-year journalistic career has been defined by a commitment to journalistic integrity, defending women's rights, and pursuing the truth, forming the cornerstone of my political approach.

Social and Political Context and Challenges of Gender Justice

The social and political landscape in Iran, particularly regarding gender justice, presents numerous challenges. As a journalist covering sensitive topics like women's rights and social injustices, I often face significant personal risks. The legal and societal constraints in Iran, notably the conservative dress code and restrictions on women's freedom, are major impediments.

Women, whether professionals, athletes, or citizens, frequently encounter systemic obstacles that are reflective of deeper issues within the country. My work aims to highlight these struggles, emblematic of the wider fight for gender justice in Iran, where women continue to confront significant barriers to achieving equality and autonomy.

The Role and Initiatives of the International Community

The international community's support for women's rights in Iran has been a mix of backing and sometimes insufficient action.

While international organizations and foreign governments often denounce human rights abuses, targeted support for journalists and activists is crucial. This includes safe havens, platforms for their work, and sanctions against human rights violators. Targeted support for journalists and activists in Iran can include providing them with secure communication tools and legal assistance to ensure their safety and freedom of expression. The international community ought to exert pressure on the Iranian government to create conditions that allow for the freedom of expression of journalists in Iran, and prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from easily arresting them. In 2022, over 100 journalists were detained during the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, facing charges for actions as minor as a single story or tweet.

A key issue is the international community’s occasional failure to effectively tackle the root causes of discrimination against Iranian women, possibly due to limited understanding of Iran’s unique cultural and social conditions. For instance, Iran’s legal system, heavily influenced by religious doctrine, uniquely impacts women’s rights, particularly in areas like marriage, divorce, and inheritance and also in sports. Furthermore, the strong influence of traditional gender roles in Iranian society often restricts women’s access to education and employment opportunities, creating barriers that are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric. Understanding these specific challenges is crucial for any meaningful international intervention or support.

Enhancing cultural and social links between Iranian women and global communities can bolster efforts against discrimination. International support should focus on empowering women within Iran, enhancing their ability to confront discrimination. Empowering Iranian women involves not only providing them with access to education and vocational training, but also

ensuring their participation in political and social discourse. This can be achieved through initiatives that support women’s rights organizations within Iran, facilitating their collaboration with international networks to share strategies and resources for overcoming systemic discrimination and promoting gender equality.

Educational and awareness initiatives can raise public consciousness and improve the legal and social status of women. Utilizing new technologies and social media to advance women’s rights discussions can be impactful. Additionally, strengthening international monitoring mechanisms to oversee women’s rights issues and ensure adherence to international laws and commitments is vital.

An Example of Fighting for Humanity, Justice, Peace, Equality

My record and actions offer a concrete example of the struggle for humanity, justice, peace, and equality, part of which I mentioned earlier. In Iran, it was forbidden for women to enter stadiums to watch football matches, so I reported on women who altered their appearance to gain entry. They cut their hair, used artificial beards, and wore loose men’s clothing to access gymnasiums. I interviewed these women, highlighting the discrimination they faced for simply loving football. I also covered the story of a girl who, after being arrested and imprisoned for trying to enter a stadium, tragically set herself on fire in front of the Revolutionary Court and died. This girl, known as Sahar Khodayari or the “blue girl,” became a symbol that led FIFA to pressure the Iranian Football Federation, resulting in a slight easing of restrictions. My continued coverage of sports and social issues, particularly those affecting women,

underscores the power of journalism as a tool for change, providing hope and inspiration for a more just society.

Solidarity and Networking with Women Around the World

Solidarity and networking with women across the globe, especially those standing for justice, are crucial. For example, during the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, women worldwide supported Iranian women in their pursuit of freedom, equality, and the elimination of gender discrimination. Female representatives in various global parliaments symbolically cut their hair in solidarity with Iranian women, amplifying their voices internationally. Such unity can foster empathy and empower female activists. This bond extends beyond shared experiences; it’s about building a global network for support and knowledge exchange. Networking across borders amplifies our voices, ensuring that our struggles and achievements are recognized and supported globally. Solidarity among women creates a united front to face challenges and promote justice, offering emotional and spiritual support, especially in the struggle for justice. It can inspire powerful role models and contribute to broader social justice and equality, playing a key role in social and political change.

Encouraging Women Around the World

To women committed to creating a more just world, my message is one of perseverance and hope. Each small step towards change is part of a larger movement for a more just and different world. You each have an important role in this change. Raise your voice, stand up for your rights, and know

that you are not alone. The path to change is long and filled with obstacles, but through our resilience and collective determination, we can make a lasting impact. Don’t give up on your values and goals, despite the challenges. Participate in communities and networks that support women’s rights, as solidarity and mutual support are powerful resources. Seek knowledge and education, as they are tools for tackling inequalities and promoting change. Share your stories and experiences to inspire others; every voice can create a wave of change. While striving for positive change, remember to take care of your mental and physical health.

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2. <https://shrr.ir/000Bnn>
<https://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-527653>
<https://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-730395>
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Don't Depoliticize Women!

Kholoud Mansour, Syria

Growing up my entire life under an oppressive regime in Syria, with a lack of political, economic, and intellectual freedom, and facing multidimensional inequalities, left me with no choice but to stand up for the values of human rights, freedom, and dignity. The daily violations, subjugation, and humiliations in my home country have continuously shaped and reshaped my views on justice and empathy. Gender disparities, entrenched patriarchal norms, and structural and legal barriers have further instigated my commitment to stand against all forms of discrimination and violence, particularly the challenges faced by women.

As a policy analyst and researcher in humanitarian affairs, gender, and peacebuilding, I have been actively involved in various initiatives, debates, and movements dedicated to advancing women's participation in decision-making. This involvement has uncovered a distinct form of injustice, setting it apart from the challenges women typically face in conflict zones, oppressive regimes, and patriarchal societies. I realized that women's ongoing struggle for human rights and gender

equality in Syria does not end when women leave the conflict; it takes on a renewed significance.

Obstacles to Women's Political Participation in Syria and the Geneva Peace Talks

In my article, "Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process," I highlight the three main aspects that make Syria a specific case: the form and effects of international support to women's political participation, the politics of women's representation, and challenges hindering political participation of Syrian women. During the first few years of the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict in 2011, there were focused and concerted international efforts to support Syrian women in their quest for political participation and inclusion in the peace process and decision-making. Several UN agencies and international organizations supported the formation of initiatives, such as the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy, Syrian Feminist Lobby, advisory groups like the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy and the Women's Advisory Committee of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), and the Syrian Women's Political Movement. International support extended beyond these formations to encompass the coordination of extensive meetings to promote Syrian women as peacemakers.

Following the lack of women's representation at the Geneva peace talks in June 2012, UN Women consolidated its efforts in 2013 and convened for a two-day meeting in Geneva in January 2014, to support women's participation in the Syrian peace process. The meeting ended with a detailed outcome document and the establishment of the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD) whose main

objective is to introduce a 30% quota for women in political negotiations in Syria. I was a member of the SWIPD from its inception until 2016, when the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) was established under the UN Special Envoy, not only to ensure an active role of women from diverse organizational backgrounds in the peace talks, but also to guarantee that gender equality is considered throughout the process in line with Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security.

The Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB): Depoliticizing Elements in the International Arena

Several international efforts, particularly the establishment of the WAB, have faced criticism for being contested or symbolic, hindering direct participation of women in the peace process, lacking transparency and systematic impact analysis, and overlooking grassroots women initiatives. Most importantly, despite the good intentions behind international efforts, I always argue and address the tendency of these efforts to present a depoliticizing element for Syrian women. This depoliticization fails to recognize women's legitimacy in holding diverse political opinions, imposing expectations that women should transcend party lines and ideologies. International support in many cases tends to dictate the use of neutral language and consensus positions, inadvertently stifling Syrian women on critical issues such as atrocities, barrel bombs by the Syrian regime, or suggesting lifting economic sanctions at the time of besieging civilians in different parts of the country. This depoliticization deprives Syrian women of their political agency and ownership, hindering their potential as integral contributors to the political process that is already

stalled. The focus on guiding women toward forging unity occasionally overshadows addressing their distinct needs, priorities, aspirations, and concerns, falling short of transforming women's participation into impactful action.

It is also important to recognize that women's involvement transcends conventional understandings that primarily focus on inclusion in decision-making mechanisms. Several published and unpublished studies show that Syrian women view all their actions as inherently political, particularly in the existing political frameworks, military and security conditions, and changing governance structures and de-facto authorities. Their actions are not only impacting their lives but also their communities, shaping perceptions of their presence in the public sphere. In many cases, Syrian women believe that political and societal change starts at the individual level, through shifting power dynamics within the family and in the workplace. In addition, bringing women's experiences and contributions from the private to the public sphere remains marginalized and is often addressed in isolation from traditional power structures and dynamics.

In her insightful article, "Women's Leadership for Peace: Towards a Model of Multi-Track Leadership in the Global Observatory" (2019), legal scholar Catherine Turner showed that while women are significantly under-represented in 'Track One' official diplomacy, as it has been the case in the formal Syrian political process, they are better represented in 'Track Two' unofficial processes, and over-represented at grassroots level, or 'Track Three' diplomacy. With the narrow focus on formal peace processes that often fail or stall, it is important to work on different tracks and further explore particularly 'Track Three'. This approach represents a dense array of grassroots initiatives and groups, and provides a rich mix of ideas, new

opportunities, synergies, and formulas. It also acknowledges this diversity and the value that complementary experiences and skill sets can bring to peacebuilding.

The Lack of Grassroots Movements and Other Failures of International Support

However, there have been some discussions recently among Syrian women on whether using or over-using the language of tracks and in particular Track Three in feminist knowledge production is optimal. In addition, there is also the importance of redefining the concept of 'grassroots work' to appreciate the value of women engaging in political endeavors, regardless of which approach they choose. The focus on the formal process further exacerbated the gap between the different processes and mechanisms, leading to ignore the work of Syrian grassroots women initiatives and the impact they make on the ground, since it is not reflected or seen in the formal 'Track One'. Amidst the stalled political process in Syria, it is important to adopt multi-approach diplomacy and shift the focus away from one high-profile process towards recognition of the different ways in which leadership is exercised across the conflict spectrum. This would reinforce the complementarity of different efforts, rather than prioritizing one over the other. It will also bring more to the discussion why grassroots women initiatives and their efforts in prebuilding and mediation are not equally valued in international peace and security, and often ignored in mainstream narratives.

Furthermore, international support often fails to see us women as a highly heterogeneous group and that our differences mirror wider societal, political, economic and conflict divides. The tendency to often categorize women based on their presumed

needs or family roles and not their rights in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, exacerbates the fragmentation and stereotypes in regards to women. In addition, using specific language in fragile and conflict-affected settings exacerbates stereotypes of women. The term 'meaningful' participation is often reserved solely for discussions involving women, implying that their involvement or participation lacks significance. When addressing the 'representation' of women, questions about their 'skills and expertise' arise in the political process, whereas a similar scrutiny is rarely applied to men in negotiations and peace processes.

The Importance of Regional Feminist Coalitions and Networks

I have had the privilege to participate in discussions with other women from the MENA region in different events and meetings organized by organizations like Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Scotland Beyond Borders, Kreisky Forum and the Arab Reform Initiative to immediately recognize and acknowledge that our struggles, whether within our national contexts or at the global level, are very similar. International support often adopts a one-size-fits-all formula, albeit with minor modifications at times. The grievances of women in the MENA region towards international efforts, particularly those of the UN, are frequently debated.

Establishing women networks and feminist coalitions across the MENA region is essential. However, these efforts often falter in making these networks sustainable, extending beyond a one-time event, or merely creating a WhatsApp group for connection. One could argue that the responsibility lies with women themselves to maintain long-term connections and

introduce initiatives for collaboration. However, if the initial international support did not envision or plan for creating sustainable and long-term solidarity and networks, it is unlikely to be organically sustained. The debate on solidarity and international support faces another ethical dilemma when some international donors and organizations support women in certain conflicts, while remaining complicit and silent in crimes that target women, children, and civilians in other contexts.

Personal Stories and Vulnerabilities

As a woman with a lived experience of protracted conflict and forced displacement, navigating professional spaces is often challenging. Sharing a personal story and experience in professional settings or public policy spaces could potentially cause professional and personal harm and this idea has been consistently troubling. It could potentially invalidate my narrative, undermine my ability to manage my own story, and, most importantly, disconnect geopolitical debates from the influential power of storytelling and vulnerabilities. There have been instances where openness and sharing a journey in conflict and exile were used to undermine my arguments on integration and discrimination, in Sweden for example. On several occasions, my professional expertise and objectivity were questioned, with doubts raised about the ability to deliver objective and impartial work due to my political stance on events in Syria. The notion that individuals cannot have a political view on their own deeply polarized and fragmented country has always troubled me, especially when these inquiries come from the donors and organizations with their own political agendas, inconsistent policies, and volatile priorities regarding Syria. What is more surprising is when such questions arise from entities that supposedly support the political participation of

Syrian women. As we navigate through conflict and exile, it becomes imperative to reconsider how we women articulate our experiences, shed light on these invisible personal struggles and elevate them to the forefront of public discourse.

My Journey to Advance Women's Rights to Water and Health

Reem Abu Shomar-Alyazouri, Gaza/Palestine

Born in Libya in 1974 and raised in Saudi Arabia till the age of sixteen, my educational path led me back to my homeland, Palestine, where I pursued degrees in medical technology, public health, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), including a bachelor's, master's, and PhD. I started my PhD journey by joining the first accredited scientific joint PhD program in Gaza on water technology. The joint PhD program was launched between the two largest universities in Gaza (Al-Azhar University and the Islamic University) in 2018. I embarked on a journey that would shape my dedication to public health and WASH advocacy. With a focus on empowering communities, I served as a senior public health and environmental expert at the Austrian-supported program coordination unit within the Palestinian Water Authority. Before that, I held the role of Global Fund Programme Coordinator at the UNDP/PAPP. As an independent Palestinian professional woman, I have been unwavering in my commitment to advancing women's rights to water and health, collaborating closely with women NGOs and the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs. My efforts have

centered on advocating for the recognition and respect of rights to water and health, both locally and on the international stage.

Navigating Strength: A Woman's Journey Amidst the Labyrinth of Occupation, Siege, and Wars

In Gaza, the southwest coastal strip of historical Palestine, where every sunray carries tales of resilience and hope, my narrative explores what it's like to be a woman living and working in that complex environment. Here, the air is filled with the echoes of modern history such as the British mandate since the 1920s, the effects of the Nakba in 1948 which brought about 200,000 refugees to Gaza, the Israeli occupation of Gaza accompanied by Israeli settlements in 1967, present challenges such as the physical barriers that restrict access to land, the total blockade and the repeated Israeli military wars since 2006, and ongoing dreams for a future free from conflict.

In this environment, where women and girls stand at the forefront of the crisis, I navigate through obstacles, embracing resilience and coping mechanisms to carve out a space in a society marked by the complexities of the existing struggle amid the occupation, wars, and conflicts. I have become a woman who, in the face of adversity, shapes her narratives.

Lack of Safety, Embodying Strength, and Resilience

Personal life and safety in Gaza are inseparable from political complexities. From pursuing education and professional aspirations to navigating familial and societal expectations,

each woman embodies strength in the face of adversity. Women in Gaza are not passive observers but active agents of change amidst the rubble of conflict, challenging ingrained norms and a complicated reality through advocacy for a more inclusive society.

In the intricate tapestry of life in Gaza, the threads of advocacy and resilience are woven into daily existence, defined by longstanding occupation, siege, recurrent wars (2008/2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2022), movement restrictions due to the total blockade since 2007, conflicts, and the perpetual struggle for basic rights.

Wars leave scars that resonate through generations, shedding light on the transformative power of women's resilience, challenging victimhood narratives, and amplifying the call for justice amidst conflict, siege, and occupation.

The continuous Israeli violations against Palestinian women continued throughout the last seven decades and resulted in fatalities, injuries, pregnancy losses, and psychological traumas. However, the participation rate of Palestinian women in education remains one of the highest in the MENA region. Their participation in decision-making and leadership positions is still limited compared to men, which is a gap that needs to be addressed.

The International Silence: The Lack of Strategies for Women's Protection in a Conflict Zone

Within this tapestry, the international community's response to the challenges faced by Palestinian women in Gaza echoes through daily life. The impact of conflicts, occupations, and

siege knows no borders, yet calls for justice often seem to dissipate into diplomatic inertia.

In Gaza, I find myself caught in a paradox where international support feels like a distant promise rather than a tangible reality. The displayed resilience by Palestinians is not just a response to local adversities but also a call for more robust international involvement, emphasizing the consequences of a lack of comprehensive strategies for women's protection and equality in conflict zones. Amidst the echoing international silence, the advocacy and resilience of women in Gaza take center stage, urging the international community to bridge the gap in its response and actively engage in initiatives that safeguard women's rights and dignity.

My journey as a Palestinian woman in Gaza unfolds against the backdrop of occupations, sieges, and wars, marked by tenacity and triumph. From facing displacement during wars to pursuing postgraduate education despite movement restrictions, my story reflects a commitment to representing Palestine on international platforms, such as my participation and presenting at the PADUCO 2nd conference in the Netherlands in 2015, the international roundtables on "Ending Palestinian Fragmentation Through Women's Empowerment," convened by the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog in 2016 and 2017 in Vienna and the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) 7th regional conference in Jordan in 2021.

Throughout my career, I have worked to serve Palestinians in Gaza, focusing on safe water, sanitation, hygiene, health, and well-being within the challenging context. Despite facing personal challenges during wars, my commitment to advocating basic human rights persisted.

During previous wars, I had been deeply involved in the provision of assistance and support to the most vulnerable populations affected by conflicts. From needs assessment to the provision of water, sanitation, and hygiene services, I worked in full cooperation with national and international partners such as the Ministry of Health, Environmental Quality Authority, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, UN Women, and the UNDP. However, the current war presents a grim reality where two mothers are killed in Gaza every hour, emphasizing the desperate need for immediate protection.

Navigating postgraduate education amid occupation, siege, and wars presented formidable challenges, showcasing how resilience became a transformative force. Education, as a form of resistance, became a powerful tool in advocating for change and challenging confining narratives.

Representing Palestine on the International Academic and Political Stage

Representing Palestine in scientific conferences became an extension of my advocacy, highlighting the significance of being a voice for Palestine on the international stage. Breaking barriers of restricted entry, I shared narratives that transcended political discourse. This chapter illuminates personal achievements within the broader tapestry of Palestinian women's experiences, emphasizing the transformative potential of education, resilience, and representation in advocating justice and equality. Education serves as a beacon of empowerment for professional women navigating the intricate challenges within Gaza's tumultuous landscape of occupation, siege, and conflict. Through education, I gained not only enhanced skills, but also the resilience needed

to confront and transcend these adversities. Armed with evidence-based information, the advocacy for the rights to water and the health of Palestinian communities was enhanced with greater efficacy. Moreover, education opened doors for my career development, enabling me to carve my path to success despite the barriers imposed by conflict and instability. By investing in education, professional women in Gaza not only enhance their own capabilities, but also contribute to the resilience and progress of their community amidst the labyrinth of challenges they face.

In the intricate narrative of my journey as a Palestinian woman, I reflect on the intersectionality of my identity as a descendant of Palestinian refugees, my grandparents, who were forcibly displaced from Beit Tema to Deir El-Balah in Gaza during the Nakba in 1948. My mother, accompanied by her children (my brother and me), returned to her ancestral home after the Oslo agreement in 1993 with the hope of continuing my education in Palestine and being part of shaping the Palestinian vision for sustainable development. This journey began with obtaining my high school certificate and embarking on university education in Gaza, a testament to perseverance and determination against the backdrop of movement restrictions imposed by the occupying power.

The challenge of acquiring travel permits was a recurring theme, often met with denial by the occupation power, yet I persisted, applying multiple times to participate as a presenter in scientific conferences. The travel, however, was accompanied each time by a dehumanizing inspection at the checkpoints that underscored the complex realities of life in Gaza.

My passion for leading a meaningful life extended into my career. I worked with international and national agencies

to address the rights of well-being and access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services by all Palestinians in Gaza. For over a decade, I served as a public health and environmental expert in the Gaza program coordination unit, a program established by the Austrian Development Cooperation, hosted by the Palestinian Water Authority. My role included managing projects related to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). The nexus thinking approach, integrating gender analysis into the water sector and mainstreaming gender within various initiatives, was a pioneering effort in the Palestinian context.

Together with colleagues, I championed gender mainstreaming in national plans, Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM), and environmental/social impact assessment (ESIA) studies. I actively contributed to national strategies aligning with global sustainable goals for WASH and public health. Before this, I served as the Global Fund Programme Coordinator with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP/PAPP), focusing on scaling up public health services and reducing HIV-related stigma in Palestine.

Contributing to the development of national strategies aligned with global sustainable development goals, my work aimed to create positive impacts on public health and WASH. My efforts were recognized through awards from the American University of Beirut's Global Health Institute (AUB-GHI) and MEDRIC Innovation fellowships. The completion of my PhD thesis, addressing combating the spread of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria through safe WASH services in healthcare facilities, was another recognition of the efforts made during the last years that led to the publication of several scientific papers on public health and WASH.

Displacement and Survival

The experience of displacement during previous wars in Gaza was different from the one that began in October 2023. In the aftermath of 120 days of harsh hostilities, around 30,000 Palestinians lost their lives, with a disproportionate impact on women and children who represented more than seventy percent of the victims. Survival meant witnessing loved ones endure unimaginable suffering, from injuries to amputations, sickness, and starvation. The international community's calls for protection and humanitarian interventions seemed to fall on deaf ears, leaving Palestinian women and children exposed to unprecedented risks.

As a Palestinian woman navigating occupations, siege, wars, and restricted travel, the significance of solidarity and networking with women advocating for justice globally resonates deeply. Solidarity is a profound collective voice that transcends borders, serving as a source of strength in a world where political landscapes often seem insurmountable. Networking with women standing for justice becomes a bridge between shared experiences and diverse struggles, fostering mutual empowerment, knowledge exchange, and amplification of voices. The international sisterhood becomes a beacon of hope, magnifying the impact of advocacy and creating a shared narrative that transcends political boundaries.

Solidarity and the Participation of Women in Decision-Making Processes

Solidarity and networking are pillars of resilience sustaining the spirit of advocacy. Together, our collective strength challenges

injustice and shapes a narrative of hope for a better, more equitable world. Networking helps secure regional and international support for the Palestinian vision through multilateral diplomacy and smart resistance campaigns. Inequalities affect every aspect of life, and the participation of women in decision-making is essential. Palestinian women living under occupation face multiple layers of inequalities, requiring resilience to turn challenges into opportunities for a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future.

To my fellow women committed to justice and transformative change, I offer encouragement drawn from my journey as a Palestinian woman in Gaza. Advocacy and resilience have been the cornerstones of my efforts, and I extend these reflections as inspiration for those navigating their paths. The unwavering support and solidarity of sisterhood and women's networks have been instrumental in navigating numerous challenges throughout my journey, particularly in 2016, 2017 as well as during the current war. When my travel permits were difficult to acquire in 2016 and 2017, my dear sisters at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog leveraged their networks and efforts to facilitate my departure from Gaza, enabling me to participate in the roundtables. Once again in the midst of an ongoing war, the invaluable help through sisterhood networks enabled my safe exit from Gaza after months of displacement and my reunification with my family and loved ones in Cairo.

Embrace Your Narrative and Share Your Wisdom, Support, and Inspiration

In the pursuit of a different world, know that your voice is a formidable force. Embrace your narrative, speak your truth boldly, and remember that advocacy is reclaiming the power

of your story. Resilience is transformative energy, and solidarity is a cornerstone of collective strength.

The global sisterhood is a source of shared wisdom, support, and inspiration. Networking with others committed to change amplifies the impact of advocacy, creating a web of resilience that spans the globe. In the pursuit of justice and equality, progress may be incremental, but each step forward is a testament to our commitment.

Our dedication to a different world is a beacon of hope. The transformative power of individual dedication contributes to a collective momentum shaping the future. Even in the most challenging circumstances, the pursuit of a different world is both noble and achievable. Together, as architects of change, we pave the way for a more just and equitable future.

Education and Art as Resistance

Negin Rezaie, Iran/Austria

I was born in the 1990s into a multicultural family in southern Iran, where I learned about the resilience of my ancestors in the face of various forms of suppression. Our ethnicities, Qashqai and Bakhtiari,³ cultivated a community characterized by kindness and inclusivity. We welcomed newcomers irrespective of their ethnicity, provided they shared our values of humanity and freedom.

However, the most significant influence in my life has been my mother. Amidst adversity, she championed education as a form of resistance. Her motto, to seek beauty and love in life, deeply ingrained in me a profound appreciation for humanity. She emphasized the importance of political awareness, especially for marginalized groups, like women. Her teachings revolved around questioning our position, understanding systems of oppression, and confronting the political shame surrounding these structures. Her unwavering commitment to questioning, awareness, and solidarity continues to shape my advocacy for women's and human rights. She educated countless children and adults.

My mother and I continue to work together on numerous artistic, political, and cultural projects using storytelling, performing art, drawing, literature and playwriting. At the core of our mission is the belief that every individual can learn and flourish when provided with the right education and a safe, supportive space. We aim to educate young minds who not only care, love, create, and feel but also become the authors of their own life stories. By empowering participants to develop their unique paths, we contribute to the creation of a better society.

Despite facing challenges associated with living in Western society as an adult immigrant woman, she perseveres. My mother lives in me. I am my mother, and I carry forward her path.

From a Multiethnic Family Background to a Refugee Without Rights

In Iran, women and other sexual minorities from diverse backgrounds face various challenges due to the centralist, classist, and totalitarian regime. Although the system suppresses all genders, the situation is complex. Personally, being born into a multiethnic family in southern Iran imposed an external form of intersectional suppression. My maternal family, faced historical and political erasure by the system, which created a void in our existence. Women had to restart their fight for rights from scratch.

In Iran, the system imposes intersectional suppression on different societal groups, leading to various forms of shame, particularly among women and minorities. Shame, fear, and social exclusion weigh heavily on them. Upon arriving in Vienna in 2015, I hoped to shed the shame carried as a woman,

but instead, I lost my social class and became labeled as a refugee. This stripped away my privileges, rights, and identity, subjecting me to societal stereotypes.

This transition not only transformed the shame from Iran's oppressive regime into something heavier, but also deprived me of basic human rights. Falling into the refugee class plunged me into long-term survival mode. I realized the symptoms and existence of a colonized human being within myself, without any memory of the past, only able to hold onto negative points and pains of the past, without any perspective of the future, and suspended in the anxiety and distress of the present. Like a convict sentenced to death without being told the date of their execution, I was condemned to fruitlessness and ineffectiveness. This dehumanizing situation shifted my focus from fighting for women's rights in Iran to questioning my humanity in Vienna. Gender became secondary as I grappled with my very existence.

Lack of Representation of Women with Multiethnic Backgrounds in the International Community

I can only speak from my personal experience, but I believe there's a significant gap in representation for women like me within the international community. In the West, Iranian women who often have platforms to discuss women's rights typically come from elite backgrounds or are born and raised in Tehran, the capital city, where the experiences of other ethnicities and minorities are often overlooked or suppressed. As a result, these representatives may not fully understand or accurately represent the struggles faced by women from diverse backgrounds, like mine.

Furthermore, the destruction of our histories and archives has left our stories largely untold, except within our own communities. We lack access to the specific language and coding used by the international community, making it difficult for our voices to be heard on a global scale.

Women in my community endure daily shame, yet lack the means to articulate their experiences. We need the opportunity to share our stories, to shed light on our struggles, and to gain recognition for our class and our unique challenges. It's essential for the international community to provide us with this platform and acknowledgment.

The Value of Knowledge and Political Action in Solidarity

I employ education, utilizing both pedagogy and andragogy, as a means of resistance. By creating inclusive spaces and opportunities, I empower marginalized and suppressed individuals to educate themselves and recognize the value of their knowledge. Solidarity for me means radical political action! We should be politically aware of race, gender, and class issues and then take immediate and appropriate action regarding them.

Freedom Requires Continuous Effort

- Educate yourself about the political systems that perpetuate oppression.
- Understand which systems are infringing upon your rights.

- Recognize your own privileges and begin sharing them with other women.
- Acknowledge the struggles and intersectional suppression faced by women from different classes, genders, and races, and act to support them.
- Be aware of the specific forms of suppression that your systems impose on women from other races, classes, and genders.
- Step out of your comfort zone and actively advocate others, understanding that freedom requires continuous effort and being willing to embrace discomfort in the fight for the rights of all.

3. The Qashqai ethnicity is a nomadic Iranian group primarily inhabiting the Fars Province of Iran. The Bakhtiari Haft Lang ethnicity is a subgroup of the larger Bakhtiari tribal confederation, predominantly residing in the mountainous regions of western and southwestern Iran.

Academia: my field of engagement in addressing women's rights

Aylin Ünver Noi, Turkey

I chose to study and work in international relations (IR) because I think women contribute much to diplomacy and the field, despite the fact that women make up a relatively small percentage of this field. Compared to other areas of the IR, working on security-related issues in a male-dominated field is particularly challenging for women. This is why I initially chose to write a doctorate on the US and EU foreign policy concerning security in the BMENA.

Writing my book, entitled *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Competing or Complementary Projects?*, gave me the chance to analyze several human rights and women's rights initiatives and programs in the BMENA. The political and legal shortcomings in the region showed me that each country has its own distinct characteristics. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all model for empowering women that can be applied to each country in the region. This does not, however, alter

the fact that everyone must be entitled to the application of universal human rights without being particularistic.

A couple of years later, in a piece I wrote for *The Huffington Post* entitled “Will Reinstatement of the Death Penalty in Turkey Prevent Violence Against Women?”, I highlighted the fact that despite the presence of legal and political measures to prevent violence against women, the enforcement of laws can sometimes be incomplete. Enacting rules or making reforms sometimes cannot help to prevent violence or discrimination against women if there is no proper implementation of laws by judges. That is why the internalization of the reforms is as important as making them. Otherwise, reforms made seem to remain merely cosmetic.

Women’s empowerment, which was identified specifically by the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) Arab Human Development Report of 2002 (Creating Opportunities for Future Generations) and the UNDP’s Arab Human Development Report of 2003 (Building a Knowledge Society) as one of the deficits of the MENA region, poses a serious threat to human development in the Arab world. According to this report, women of the MENA region have been playing a minor role in economic and political life. Some countries of the MENA still have some reservations about the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The “Arab Spring” in the region fueled aspirations for democratization and the advancement of women’s roles in society. However, subsequent events that resulted in civil wars, failed states, terrorism, and proxy wars left human rights development efforts and their proponents (activists in the region) fighting for more rights and a place in their countries alone. The

state of affairs in the MENAT region has deteriorated since the Arab Human Development Reports of 2002 and 2003 were published by the UNDP. The economic crisis and recession, which originated from the inability of neoliberal economic policies to meet demands, were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and wars including the war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Hamas war, as well as the resulting volatility in energy, food, and commodity costs.

Economic stagnation and decline have led to the emergence of economic nationalism, xenophobia, and polarization of societies. Democratic backsliding and illiberal democracy have become new trends in politics. International organizations, such as the United Nations, have experienced a progressive decline in their effectiveness due to inherent structural deficiencies that impede their ability to make timely decisions aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts. Briefly, at the current transitional phase, we are witnessing the erosion of norms and institutions of the rules-based liberal international order.

The current security landscape bears resemblance to the pre-Second World War (WWII) era. One of the worst economic crises in history occurred during the 1929 Great Depression. A collapse in democracy was brought about by the punitive order of Versailles and the economic crisis. Fascism and Nazism emerged in Europe through democratic elections, and the era was marked by economic nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and genocide. Between the two world wars, a multipolar international order arose, and revisionist states—states dissatisfied with the status quo—also formed. Due to conflicts throughout the world, including Russia’s invasion of Finland and Germany’s invasion of Poland, the League of Nations, which preceded the United Nations founded with the same goals of preventing war and preserving peace, was unable to stop WWII.

Antonio Gramsci described the world in transition before WWII with these sentences: “the old world is dying, and the new world is struggling to be born; now is the time of monsters.” With these words, Gramsci was symbolizing the period of change, transition and uncertainty. The current rules-based liberal international order that was established after WWII is in decline, a new one struggling to be born. We are confronted with obstacles that engender a sense of “collective helplessness” as a result of the rise of revisionist powers and the incapability or unwillingness of existing institutions and the leaders of this rules-based liberal international order to address these challenges.

An Analysis of Turkey and MENA and Recommendations

The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) launched initiatives and projects to advance women’s rights and the role and status of women in MENA countries during the 2000s. In addition to the empowerment of women, certain initiatives had an additional goal to the resolution of disputes between rival factions in the MENA region. Some of these initiatives launched prior to the “Arab Spring” in the region contributed to change in laws in some MENA countries. Women of the region became the agents that shape the region.

Prior to the “Arab Spring,” Turkey became one of the pioneer countries launching several initiatives and reforms for women’s rights as part of its EU membership process and democratization efforts. Besides actively making democratic reforms domestically, Turkey at the same time assumed a role in EU-led projects and hosted several conferences related to women’s rights. For instance, the First Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference of the EU-led Barcelona Process on

“Strengthening the Role of Women in Society” was held in Istanbul in November 2006. The purpose of the conference was to make possible equal participation of women and men in all spheres of life, which is accepted as one of the essential elements of democracy. To this end, the expectation of participants was to fully and effectively implement the CEDAW by the countries of the MENA.

Turkey also played an active role in the US-led initiatives such as the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative. Governments of Turkey, Italy and Yemen, in partnership with their civil society organizations—namely, No Peace Without Justice, the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and the Human Rights Information and Training Center—became part of the US-led Democracy Assistance Dialog (DAD). The major aim of this initiative was to support and encourage democratic reforms in the region by fostering constructive dialog between governments and members of the civil society. Hence, the BMENA Gender Institute, which facilitates and supports the review of the full and effective implementation of the CEDAW in the countries of the region, was launched by Turkish NGOs, the Global Political Trends and TESEV in 2009. However, the emerging environment that put security above liberties following the “Arab Spring” caused the viability of various projects and programs pertaining to women’s rights and empowerment to lag behind. The prospect of projects and programs to fulfill commitments under the current state of affairs in the region remains uncertain.

The Case of Turkey

The first condition for being a modern society and establishing the rule of law is to recognize and respect the rights of women.

Acting with this understanding, Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, made reforms that gave Turkish women social and political rights such as the right to elect and be elected locally (in 1930) and nationwide (in 1934), which was neglected for centuries. Hence, the establishment of Turkish democracy was rooted in the improvement of women's legal conditions.

The prospect of the European Union (EU) membership accelerated already existing efforts of the women's movements in Turkey with respect to improvement of women rights. Turkish women's organizations considerably broadened their influence and benefitted from the collaboration of other European feminist NGOs. The Europeanization process, characterized by the EU's influence on Turkish political and administrative structures as a candidate state, has contributed to the advancement of democratic efforts. It has had considerable influence on the expansion of women's rights through the Turkish legal system in its recent history. More importantly, it corresponded also to the demands of society for a more democratic and liberal political system in Turkey.

After the EU's Turco-sceptic leaders offered Turkey a "privileged partnership" rather than "full EU membership", vetoing the opening of several chapters in Turkey's EU accession talks, reforms have slowed and membership prospects have dimmed. Both internal and external developments have had a significant impact on Turkey's democratization process; the lost ground in mutual trust, the decline in enthusiasm in Turkey, and the diminishing allure of the EU. The accession of Cyprus arose as an additional barrier during the accession negotiations, vetoing six chapters. Due to Turkey's failure to implement the Additional Protocol extending the EU-

Turkey Customs Union Agreement to Cyprus, the EU froze an additional eight chapters in June 2010, and no chapters have been opened since then.

The disappointment experienced by Turkey in relation to its potential membership in the EU has had a detrimental effect on the endeavors to enhance the position of women. Turkey, which was the initial signatory of the Istanbul Convention, formally referred to as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, signed in 2011, has become the first country to withdraw from the convention on March 20, 2021.

De-Europeanization has subsequently hindered the reform efforts and left the reformist elite in Turkey without a cause to defend. Without a credible prospect of EU membership, the EU lacks the political leverage on Turkey. Anticipating any meaningful reform process, including women's rights, under these conditions will not be realistic. The roles and status of women have consistently had a crucial influence on shaping many political endeavors in Turkey.

Reinvigorating the EU-Turkey relationship by resuming the EU accession process, addressing relevant topics, and enhancing collaboration in areas like updating the Customs Union agreement and advancing women's empowerment in the economy could potentially support Turkey's efforts to achieve EU membership in a trustworthy manner. This method has the potential to act as a catalyst for the process of reform and to provide a strong incentive for individuals in Turkey who are inclined towards reform to actively support and promote change. Revitalizing the Turkey-EU relationship holds the capacity to bring about a positive transformation in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey (MENAT) region,

which is currently in urgent need of such a shift. This could enhance the implementation of women empowerment programs and specifically support the establishment of a regional effort within this region.

A Regional Initiative: Council of the Middle East and North Africa (CoMENA)

The new impetus might be provided by establishing a Council of the Middle East and North Africa (CoMENA) similar to the Council of Europe. The calls for human rights standards to protect citizens from abuses by their governments gained enormous importance after WWII. The Council of Europe was established to provide reconciliation among the people of Europe that would prevent the re-emergence of a conflict, as well as to protect individuals in Europe by establishing common institutions, standards, and agreements.

The changes in the MENA have already demonstrated the imperative of ensuring human security in the region. The foundation of such an organization is crucial due to the detrimental repercussions of developments on human security in the MENA region and the inevitable influence these trends have on the European continent. The MENA region requires immediate assistance and guidance in prioritizing human rights over radicalization and extremism, which significantly contribute to the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia in Europe.

The formation of a CoMENA could potentially facilitate the implementation of conciliatory strategies, which are critical in the region at this time. Perhaps the subsequent course of

action for Turkey and the EU would be to offer direction to the MENA nations on how to initiate the formation of a CoMENA. CoMENA can provide a platform for the nations of the region to present a second opportunity for their citizens to advocate human rights that they are entitled to as well as for their governments to adhere to human rights standards.

A control mechanism, if established and enforced effectively, might potentially impede and deter member countries from perpetuating human rights violations. The persistent criticism for rule violations may compel member states to implement a range of measures aimed at enhancing human conditions. MENA countries that opt to join such an organization have an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment and adherence to universal values and to enhance their worldwide reputation and standing.

The UN Member States affirmed the universal value of human security in the General Assembly Resolution 66/290, adopted in 2012. Accordingly, they agree “that human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.”

For many years, the Council of Europe has assisted European nations in ensuring human security on the continent. It may be time to contemplate the establishment of a comparable institution for the MENA region. Although traditions, cultures and religious backgrounds may be different, human nature is universally the same. Any attempt to bring in cultural and religious particularism harms the universal character of human rights and fundamental freedoms, since it causes double standards/double standardization of values. The CoMENA should distance itself from this particularism. This feature of

CoMENA could make it possible for such an organization to also contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

Women's Political Life in the MENAT Region from the Perspective of Western European Academic Discourse

Heidemarie Winkel, Bielefeld

*"Justice. To be ever-ready to admit that another person is something quite
different from what we read (...).
Or rather, to read in (her) that (s)he is certainly something different, perhaps
something completely different from what we read." Every being cries out
silently to be read differently.*

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge, 1972, 121

How can we understand the political situation of women in such diverse lifeworlds in the MENAT region as told in this book? And how can we approach the experiences of these women and their understanding of political conflicts, wars and male dominance—here in Western European academic contexts such as Austria or Germany? Women's political biographies are complex and admirable: they tell how women stand up for their rights, for justice as well as political, economic and social security, and they tell about women's commitment to political and social change for everyone, for society as a whole. Whether

in politics, journalism, sports or education, the women in this book display a tremendous, highly specialized commitment as advocates for human rights and women's rights.

In this sense, the biographies show that feminist concerns are always relevant to society as a whole, and that social and political concerns are always a feminist issue. And they remind us of the long herstory of women's movements in the MENAT region from the end of the 19th century to the present day (Winkel, Raheb, Bechmann 2017). It is a reality as well as a commitment that are hardly known in the Western European realm.

Western European Involvement in the Reality of War and Violence in the MENAT Region

Moreover, the analyses and reflections in these stories show the all too often negative impact of international organizations and the international community on life in the MENAT region, in general, and on women, in particular. In this sense, the stories urge us to ask how 'we Europeans' in Austria or Germany are involved in these realities characterized by war and violence and what part we play in them. The analyses and reflections clearly indicate that human rights have never been universal, never inclusive, and that the societies of the Global North, such as in the Western European realm, contribute strongly to this injustice with their one-dimensional, interest-driven geopolitics (Winkel, Roth, Scheele 2022). As Lilia Labidi writes in this book, European or US-American interventions have only increased the precariousness of women, be it in Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine. Palestine is a paradigmatic example of how Western intervention promotes political polarization, institutional weakness as well as political fundamentalism—

and consequently also the contestation of women's rights (El Kurd 2019); namely in a context in which political (and religious) fundamentalists are considered clearly identifiable. Political fundamentalists and right-wing extremists should not be underestimated; however, global, transnational influence all too often contributes to the demobilization of civil society and the reinforcement of fundamentalism, as in the case of Palestinian society (El Kurd 2019).

Are we "ready to admit that another person (could be) something quite different from what we read," as Simone Weil suggests (1972, 121), namely beyond categorizations and typifications? And are we ready to dismantle or, at least, to consider in which way 'we Europeans' are entangled in the disastrous situations in which societies in the MENAT region are today? Books on global structures of sexism and racism, and how these are shaped by economic, geopolitical or military dependencies on a global scale, fill entire libraries (Bhattacharyya 2001; Moute 2001; Harrison 2005; Umoren 2018; Winkel, Pofel 2021). It is well known how global neoliberalism or Western military intervention in the MENA region intensifies global inequalities and hegemonies (Enloe 2001, 2007; Fisk 2007).⁴ Why is it so difficult to realize—or at least take into consideration—from a Western European perspective that our understanding of women's lifeworlds and gender relations in the MENAT region is too often misleading?

How Western European Gender Scripts Blur a Deep Insight into Realities in the MENAT

In everyday life, the social understanding of society, politics or gender is characterized by an unawareness of its historicity and cultural becoming, such as in the case of the bourgeois

gender order in capitalist European societies. As is well known, this gender concept includes a problematic notion of the private sphere as a more or less unpolitical space of social reproduction where care work is done out of love; it obscures the fact that this gender script legitimizes inequality and undermines women's full participation in various spheres of social life until today (not only the work life), despite the insistence of women's full liberation and self-determination. What is less well known is how this gender script blurs a deeper insight into social realities of contexts beyond European understanding of the world, such as the MENAT region, that is, how women's political action is often misunderstood from a Eurocentric perspective, even though the MENAT region is rich in women's movements dating back to the 19th century.

Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1975) already explained in the 1970s that the bourgeois gender concept is just one symbolically based gender script among others, just one way of legitimizing women's inequality. Mernissi was one of the first sociologists who pointed to the need to historicize gender scripts and demystify orientalist notions of 'the' Islamic gender order, namely long before the male dominated bourgeois gender contract was decoded by political scientist Carole Pateman (1988) as a guiding political idea of European societies (Nussbaum 1999; Okin 2004). While Mernissi highlighted the existence of multiple paths and logics of legitimizing gender inequality in relation to Arab contexts, taking Morocco as paradigmatic example, gender was still predominantly treated as a universal category of analysis in Western European contexts, as if women worldwide had the same experiences of inequality and as if women worldwide are one homogenous category. This ignores not only colonial history but how colonialism, empire and enslavement "constitute the conditions of (Europe's) very possibility" and

self-understanding (Bhambra 2014, 152; 2007). Women of color are hence affected in multiple ways by social inequality and gender discrimination; consequently, it is also misleading to conceptualize gender against the background of European history only, "as if all women were white" (Lugones 2007, 202; 2008). As María Lugones (2007, 186) argues, colonialism created a new gender system with two "very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. (.), it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations," also in relation to *white* women.⁵

Meanwhile, much more attention is being paid to feminist postcolonial and intersectional approaches that focus on *white* women's involvement in systems of oppression and power asymmetry. The political, literary and academic movements of *Black Feminism* or *Chicana Feminism*, for example, are getting more attention in the last decades; this includes authors such as Audre Lorde, Angela Davis or Gloria Anzaldúa (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1996, 166-167). Feminists as well as women's and liberation movements from the MENAT region, however, hardly play a role in Western European gender studies.⁶ Some might know Nawal El-Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi or Assia Djebar and Aminata Traoré; but others like Aisha Al-Taymour, Layla Baalbaki, May Ziadeh or Fadwah Tuqan, Ghada Al-Samman, Inaam Kachachi or Sahar Khalifeh, Samar Yazbek, Badryah El-Bishr, Lina Ben Meenni, Joumana Haddad and Latifa Al-Zayat, just to name a few, are widely unknown.

Feminism in the MENAT is Overlooked

My assumption is that feminism in the MENAT region is either overlooked or perceived differently due to the specific

epistemic and discursive contour of colonialism in the region, embedded in a particular claim to cultural hegemony. In particular, the notion of *gender culture* evolved into a semantic that is still being used today to claim cultural superiority or to attribute cultural difference and inferiority in terms of othering and orientalisation. In parallel, *gender culture* also functions as a constitutive signifier in the symbolic order of Western European self-understanding; 'gender' is not only a center of rising nationalist discourses all over Europe, but also operates time and again as a general marker of social progress in contrast to non-European women—for example, in terms of women's liberation and self-determination. Although *culture* is known as a key concept for making sense of supposed differences to the examined 'other' (Abu-Lughod 1991), the culturalist lens consistently tends to shape the *white* Western researcher's notice. In the case of the MENAT region, the perception of a 'specific' culture is typically substantiated with reference to religion; religion finally operates as the epitome of cultural inferiority in Western European discourses. In contrast, the **white** European researcher's mental map is strongly shaped by secularity, in the sense of a disposition that is linked to a specific ethos as Judith Butler (2013, 108f.) emphasizes. The notion of secularity also includes unexamined cultural assumptions that are constituted by the dichotomy of religion and culture, on the one side, and secularism and liberalism, on the other (Winkel, Pofertl 2022).

Reproduction of Colonial Feminisms

Particularly in the last two decades, the postcolonial relation between Western European countries and the MENAT region was reasserted by the reproduction of colonial feminisms (Ahmed 1992). The framework was the 'clash of civilizations'

and the 'war on terrorism.' Lilia Abu-Lughod (2002, 783) warned right from the beginning to look "at the dangers of reifying culture, apparent in the tendencies to plaster neat cultural icons like the Muslim woman" and recommended to consider "our own larger responsibilities" and instead "to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the world." As the political biographies of the women in this book show, their current lifeworld experiences are in many ways fragile, fragmented and affected by violence in which societies of the global North are causally involved; even if this is not the focus of the stories. The narrated experiences range from life under European colonialism to the experience of double legal, economic and political injustice under the occupation in Palestine to legal, cultural, economic and socio-political exclusion and devaluation as a migrant from the global South in European societies, as in the case of Austria.

Against this backdrop, *white* Western women in European societies might perceive themselves as privileged, as having all relevant rights and freedoms of action, while women in the MENAT region are (still) struggling to achieve this. However, this perspective has blind spots and culturalist traits, as discussed above. On the one hand, it fails to recognize global structures of economic, geopolitical and military injustice (and how Western European women participate in structural injustice). On the other, it fails to see that women's rights have become a contested issue worldwide due to the rise of far-right, populist and fundamentalist movements and groups, including Western European societies (Scheele, Roth, Winkel 2022). In particular, however, the structural imbalance between women from contexts in the global South and North is lost from view, and with it the share that women in the global North have in global inequalities, e.g. in the area of capitalist, neoliberal modes of production and lifestyles. And this is—in turn—accompanied

by the constant risk of an essentialization of 'the' gender order, be it in the form of normative categorizations and attributions or culturalist representations of women and their political struggle for rights in the MENAT region (Winkel 2021).

The Pursuit of Justice that Postcolonial Social Realities Deny

So, how we understand women's political situation and their experiences in the MENAT region and what they can mean for us depend on the extent to which we are able to take culturalists and colonial legacies into account, consider their postcolonial effects and open up to these lifeworld experiences; just as Simone Weil (1972, 121) emphasizes in her quote: "To be ever-ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read. (...) Or rather, to read in (her) that (s)he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different from what we read." This can be understood as a question of research policy and research ethics; but it is also an epistemological question of methodological attitude. It presupposes questioning one's own experience, 'truth' and positionality in the *white* dominated global North, such as in my case when I am writing against the backdrop of my privileged position in the German academic system. In this sense, it is also a question of justice to listen to the political biographies in this book, without ifs and buts.

This also includes, in my view, a necessary reflection of the social discourses about and the understanding of conflicts and wars in the MENA region right now, when they are traced and translated into the semantic landscape of Western European understanding of political reality and knowledge production. It seems to me that from a global perspective we—women in

the global South and North—are unfortunately moving further and further apart; not just since the current war in Israel and Palestine, but since then it has become noticeable in a new way. However, the postcolonial 'encounters' that range from Iraq 2003 to Afghanistan in 2022 already show the lifeworldly distance as well as the repeated use of culturalist assumptions that sadly continue to separate us. The current wars show us anew that human rights have never been universal and how unbearable and intolerable this is.

That is why I am so grateful to Viola Raheb and the admirable authors of the texts presented in this book for the chance to listen to their political biographies. These women are not only representative of generations of politically active women; they have achieved tremendous things for their societies as well as in their lives, despite global circumstances and local power asymmetries, and *not because* of international interventions. In each of these biographies, it is the expertise, will and foresight of the women that push the realization of gender projects, whether in the framework of education, media, sports or academia.

The lesson we can learn from this is not to translate these experiences into our horizon of understanding and not to measure them and compare them, but to acknowledge them for what they are: expressions of the pursuit of justice that postcolonial social realities deny.

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4. For expert opinions on military intervention see for example EDAM, The Center for European and Foreign Policy Studies. <https://edam.org.tr/en/blog/westernmilitary-interventions-in-the-middle-east>
 5. White/ness signifies a power relation that takes effect via the economic, political, legal, and socio-cultural marginalization of non-white, colonial others, and via racist modes of exclusion and boundary-making based on an ethnocentric notion of (gender) culture (Dietze 2010).
 6. I am not talking about Oriental or Islamic Studies.

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Biographies in Alphabetical Order



Amel Grami

Amel Grami is a professor in the Department of Arabic Studies of the Faculty of Literature, Arts and Humanities in Manouba, Tunisia. Her fields of specialization include Islamic and gender/women studies (with a focus on Maghreb), comparative religion, and dialog between religions and cultures. Grami wrote her doctorate on the difference in Islamic culture at the University of Manouba and holds a PhD in the topic of apostasy in Islamic thought from the University of Tunis. Amongst various academic publications, she also wrote numerous studies and articles on “the voice of women” and gender analysis in the Arab media as well as human rights with a focus on the impact of (new) media. Her fields of interest include reforms in the Middle East as well as the new reformers in Tunisia. She is a member of several dialog and research groups concerning religious media discourses and also a member of the Association of Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights.



Aylin Noi

Aylin Ünver Noi is a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations (CTR) at the Johns Hopkins Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She is a member of the board and advisory council of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation-FACM in Valencia. She is an associate researcher at the European Institute for Research on the Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation – MEDEA in Brussels. Ünver Noi is an associate professor and head of the International Relations Department at Istinye University since May 2017. She was the director of the European Union Application and Research Center (2015-2016) and an assistant professor at the International Relations Department (2011-2016) at Istanbul Gedik University. She holds a BA from the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara and an MA and a PhD from the Department of European Union Politics and International Relations at the European Union Institute at Marmara University, Istanbul. Ünver Noi has a blog on *The Huffington Post*.



Gertraud Auer Borea d'Olmo

Gertraud Auer Borea d'Olmo studied languages, architecture, theater and international politics in Paris and Vienna. Between 1980-1991, she worked as a freelance professional (Centre Pompidou, Vienna Festival, Lainer-Auer Architects). Between 1991-1995, she served as an advisor on international and cultural affairs at the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture in Vienna, Austria. Between 1994-2004, she was the project manager for the Middle East Youth Peace Forum at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog. Since 2005, she is the secretary-general of the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog.



Heidemarie Winkel

Heidemarie Winkel is a professor of sociology at Bielefeld University, Germany, and senior research associate at the University of Cambridge, St. Edmund's College/VHI, UK. Her research centers on gender and religion with a particular interest in global perspectives and the Mashriq. This includes religious orders of knowledge, such as gender codes and counter movements as well as notions of gender justice. Part of Winkel's interest in global perspectives are postcolonial approaches; this resulted in a growing focus on gender and religion as colonial knowledge categories. A current publication is: *Global Contestations of Gender Rights (2022)*, OPEN ACCESS at transcript, Bielefeld, edited together with Alexandra Scheele and Julia Roth.



Hind Kabawat

Former deputy head of the Syrian Negotiation Commission's Geneva Office and a former member of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). She participated in all eight rounds of the Geneva peace talks on Syria (2017). Presently adjunct professor and director of Interfaith Peacebuilding for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution (CRDC), Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University. Ms. Kabawat is the president of TASTAKEL women's organization for women's empowerment and peacebuilding.



Kholoud Mansour

Kholoud is a policy advisor, researcher, and human rights advocate with extensive experience in humanitarian affairs, gender, and peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Kholoud has worked and published for leading international organizations, UN agencies, and prominent think tanks such as Chatham House, the UN Migration Agency (IOM), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University. Her work has significantly contributed to advancing public policy, influencing donor communities for advocacy purposes, and informing decision-making processes. Kholoud has been actively engaged in several feminist movements and women's peace initiatives aimed at enhancing gender equality and women's inclusion. She has assisted in and authored several papers on women's participation in negotiations and peace processes and has conducted numerous gender-responsive conflict analyses and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) analyses for various donors. Additionally, she has played a key role in facilitating a series of national consultations with women's groups to rethink peace processes from gender and feminist perspectives. Kholoud holds a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies, with a post-graduate education background in International

Economic Relations, as well as a diploma in Conflict Prevention, Resolution, and Reconciliation.



Laure Abi Khalil

Laure Abi Khalil is a professor of political science at the Lebanese University. She is an expert in anti-corruption affairs, violent extremism, and public policy formulation. She is supervising dozens of university research and is an adviser to the Middle East Council of churches and director of the Project for Human Dignity and Human Capital. She is a member of the Executive Board of the Arab Association for Academic Freedoms, a member of the Arab Association for Political Science and an adviser to the Kuwaiti Federation of Women's Associations.



Lilia Labidi

Lilia Labidi is an anthropologist and psychologist, formerly professor at the University of Tunis, Tunisia. She has taught at universities in France, the USA, Egypt, and Singapore, lectured in a number of countries in Europe, the Maghreb, Africa, and Asia, and is a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, D.C. She is the author of several books and numerous articles on the Arab world, treating subjects, such as the history of the femi-

nist movement, the construction of identity, the aftermath of the "Arab Spring," among others. She has organized several documentary exhibitions on subjects such as women's movements in Tunisia, wedding photographs over three generations in Tunisia, installations on political violence, and, at the New York Public Library, exhibits on Tunisian cartoonists and the legacy of Ibn Battuta.



Negin Rezaie

Negin is an interdisciplinary artist, performance artist, curator, inventor, artistic researcher, activist, and archivist. She is deeply committed to using her skills as an artist and archivist to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. In 2018, she was one of the curators of the permanent exhibition "The Coasts of Austria" at the Volkskundemuseum Wien. Since 2019, she has been part of the artistic research program "Autosociobiography" at the Film Academy Vienna and, since 2022, part of the curatorial team at the forum "Cultures in Motion." Her work revolves around topics such as women, body, identity, learning and unlearning and she has set up performative discussion spaces most recently on the "Archive of Fleeting Forms of Protest" on the occasion of the protest movement "Women, Life, Freedom" in Iran.



Randa Abul Azm

Randa Abul Azm is currently working as Al Arabiya news TV Cairo bureau chief since it was launched in 2003. She started her career in 1995 by joining MBC television as their news correspondent based in Cairo. She graduated from the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University and holds a master's degree in Islamic Art and Architecture from the American University in Cairo. Abul Azm covered major events in Egypt since 1995 onwards, namely political, social and economic ones including extensive coverage of the 2011 revolution and consequently the 2013 revolution. She worked and produced thousands of news reports, several documentaries and anchored special programs, hosted hundreds of interviews with decision-makers, politicians as well as renowned artists. She also worked on numerous documentaries about terrorism and terrorist organizations as well as on the Muslim Brotherhood.



Randa Siniora

Randa Siniora is a feminist and a human rights activist. She is the general director of the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). Ms. Siniora has served as senior executive director of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights (2007-2015) and the general director of Al-Haq, Law in the Service of Man (2001-2005). Ms. Siniora was the first Palestinian woman from Palestinian civil society organizations to brief the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2018. In 2019, she was selected as one of the 100 most influential people on gender policy around the world.



Reem Abu Shomar

A senior specialist in public health and management. She holds a PhD in water technology, MA in public health and BS in medical technology with excellent grades. She has over 20 years of professional experience in WASH, health management, medical technology, monitoring and evaluation, and quality improvement. Her working experience involved national and international organizations including the UN, NGOs, and universities. She conducted many research assignments and consultancies in public health and she has several publications related to public health, WASH, and HIV stigma reduction. She has participated in the International Leadership training program on “Global Women’s Health Issues” and has been involved in the development of national strategies and guidelines, in resource mobilization and in public awareness activities.



Saeede Fathi

Sports journalist and first female editor-in-chief of the Iranian sports magazine, *Saheban-e Varzesh*. Her articles focus on women’s issues in sports. Fathi has been a long-time freelance reporter, covering both international and national sports news for various Iranian media. She used to be a professional basketball player, but quit after she was unable to play in inter-

national competitions that banned the hijab. In 2022, she was imprisoned in Evin prison for two months.



Ursula Plassnik

Ursula Plassnik is trained as a lawyer and had spent more than 40 years in the Austrian diplomatic service. Between 2004-2008, she served as Austrian Foreign Minister. In her work as a parliamentarian, politician, and university lecturer, she focused on European affairs, women and geopolitics.



Viola Raheb

Viola Raheb is an Austrian citizen with Palestinian roots. She is trained in evangelical theology, education, and religious studies. She is a lecturer, writer, independent consultant for various NGOs and curator of various programs and initiatives focusing on inter-cultural and inter-religious dialog, women, peace, and security. She is the curator of the program “Women in International Dialog” at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialog. She is a co-founder of ADAM (Academy for Dialog Appliance and Mediation).

