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Silent No More!

WHRDs in SWANA Speak Out on Sexual Violence by State Security

I. Introduction

Women's struggles for freedom and equality constitute a vibrant part of any social movement for transformation and social justice. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs), as activists courageously working for the defense of their own rights and the rights of others, have always been at the forefront of these struggles. In South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), many of these women begin their struggle from within their homes- the private sphere to which patriarchy relegates them. Within that sphere, they challenge the norms, rules and traditions that have placed women in a subordinate and inferior position, as they strive to change their own lives and that of other women in their families. Later, as activists, they take that struggle to the public sphere, raising awareness and encouraging other women to join them in combatting violence against women, sexual harassment and other forms of oppression that keep women subjugated.

Women human rights defenders in the SWANA region must contend not only with patriarchy, but also with authoritarianism, militarism, occupation, fundamentalism, and economic neoliberalism in their struggle for rights and equality. The undemocratic regimes in power, which have an interest in preserving the status quo, use all methods at their disposal to silence and marginalize women human rights defenders and maintain authority and control over them. As women have become increasingly aware of their rights as the result of feminist and egalitarian movements, their demands for changing discriminatory constructs have grown stronger, and correspondingly, so has the pressure from security sectors and judicial systems in the region's authoritarian regimes.

Women human rights defenders who work to promote rights and address and eliminate harassment and violence against women are subjected to countless forms of violence themselves, including frequent summons and interrogations, judicial harassment, travel bans, restrictions on their civic and social activism, temporary detention, and imprisonment. Not surprisingly, sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse and even assault are also used against women human rights defenders in an effort to discredit them, render them inactive or punish them.

This report is based on research Femena has conducted in ten countries in the SWANA region, in order to classify and document the various forms of sexual violations and harassment used against women human rights defenders and highlight the health and psychological impact of these abuses on them. The report also outlines the challenges faced by WHRDs, and how their roles, despite the challenges, have expanded, resulting in increased security backlash, which include an array of security, terrorism and other charges brought against WHRDs. Drawing on the interviews, the report provides a set of recommendations on how WHRDs facing sexual violence as a result of their efforts to promote rights, can better be supported by an array of local, regional and international actors.

II. Methodology

This report is based on in-depth interviews with WHRDs, as well as desk research. Femena interviewed twenty-one women human rights defenders who had experienced some form of sexual harassment, abuse or violence by security or prison officials during interrogation, detention or while imprisoned. The WHRDs interviewed were from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen. In one case, Femena interviewed the family member of a detained WHRD who had experienced sexual harassment and abuse while in prison. Additionally, Femena also interviewed experts from regional and international human rights organizations who have documented sexual abuse against women prisoners, including women human rights defenders. This report further builds on Femena's findings from interactions in relation to Femena's efforts to support WHRDs at risk or under threat from across the region,

who had confided in our team members about their experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse during interrogation, detention or while in prison.

Interviews were conducted through secure means of communication. Femena informed all participants of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and how the information would be used. Each participant consented to be interviewed and was informed they could refuse to participate or end the interview at any time.

Many of the women interviewed, including those who have filed complaints against their abusers, prefer not to speak publicly about the abuses they have experienced during their detention, fearing for their own security or that of their family members. To preserve their anonymity, we have assigned them pseudonyms that have no connection to their real names.

This research was based on semi-structured interviews, and the research questions were devised with a trauma-informed approach through consultation with several experts to minimize the risk of further traumatization that recounting experiences could pose for WHRDs. Some interviewees were willing and prepared to share their experiences in detail, and others preferred not to go into painful details. The research process and analysis of interviews was also informed by experiences of the Femena team, who as WHRDs themselves have had similar experiences with security forces.

Femena began the research by interviewing those defenders known to the team and who had been arrested recently. Other interviewees for the report were later identified through organizations, lawyers, and activists in the movement. Finally, it is important to note that in order to stay impartial and true to the experiences of the defenders, we have not omitted or added to their accounts; the only small changes that were made were done when deemed necessary to protect the anonymity of the survivors or for purposes of clarity.

III. The Expanding Roles of WHRDs in the SWANA Region

Women human rights defenders in this region often have to battle discrimination and violence in their own private lives as well facing broader societal legal and structural discrimination. For many WHRDs, it is the private and personal experiences of discrimination and violence that encourages them to become socially and politically active. Many enter this work with the aim of changing the hearts and minds of their fellow citizens as well as decision makers, changing systems and structures of oppression and combating various forms of violence against women and girls.

In fact, prevention of violence is one of the main activities that WHRDs from this region are engaged in, whether it be through educating the public and lawmakers or through change of laws and advocacy for better protection of women. These WHRDs work to adopt protective legal measures for women facing domestic violence, set up and administer shelters, prevent early marriage, eliminate Female Genital Mutilation, and honor crimes. They not only provide services to survivors, but also engage in awareness raising, working with community members to eradicate behaviors and beliefs that contribute to a culture of violence against women.

WHRDs in SWANA also work to change discriminatory family and penal codes, provide support to women facing discrimination, including legal support for those seeking to divorce or obtain custody of their children.

Younger WHRDs in the region are also increasingly engaged in efforts designed to protect and promote sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy, including advocating for the rights of LGBTQIA communities, though given the conservative nature of some of the societies in which they work, this more sensitive work may be carried out in a less public manner.

WHRDs in SWANA are also engaged in efforts to ensure women and girls have access to equal opportunities, including access to education, improved economic conditions, especially for women from marginalized communities or women heads of households, and access to public space, engagement in the political process, including women's presence in decision making roles and in high level political positions.

With increased conflict in the region, WHRDs are also working more on conflict resolution and around the Women and Peace and Security agenda, as mediators and peacebuilders. Women human rights defenders are also increasingly active in protecting the environment, and preventing climate change. Toward this end, they often go up against corporate and government interests with the aim of protecting marginalized communities most impacted by environmental degradation. Women human rights defenders are also active in traditional human rights work that focuses on free expression and association, political rights, democratization and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

WHRDs are active in NGOs, community-based organizations, as journalists, teachers, syndicate members, union members, human rights lawyers, and politicians. Given the closed or shrinking nature of civic space and the limitations placed on civic activism by governments in the region, many WHRDs are involved in local informal and unregistered organizations or initiatives, making them vulnerable to legal action by the state.

In fact, as the role of WHRDs and the sectors in which they are engaged expands, and their impact becomes increasingly visible, they have also proportionately become targets of state and non-state violence. As a result of their work to promote human rights, women human rights defenders in the SWANA region are subjected to the full array of rights violations that male rights defenders are subjected to, however these violations are often coupled with sexual harassment and sexual violence, including verbal harassment and threats as well as sexual abuse, violence and assault.

IV. Challenges Faced by WHRDs in the SWANA Region

Women human rights defenders in the SWANA region work in one of the most challenging environments and face a range of obstacles that limit their freedom to carry out their activities and advocate for human rights.

It is important to acknowledge the difficult context in which WHRDs in this region work, not only to have a better grasp of the barriers they are forced to confront, but also to gain deeper awareness of the reason why SGBV is so often deployed as a means of suppressing women activists.

Politically, the countries of this region are primarily characterized by authoritarianism, with closed political space that limits not only the rights of individual human rights defenders, but also places many legal restrictions on the ability of non-governmental organizations to exist and function. Press freedom is limited at best. The rights of assembly and association are curtailed. Vague and overbroad laws concerning national security are frequently used as a pretext against human rights defenders in trumped up political charges and trials to deter and dissuade them from political and social activism.

Additionally, some of the countries in the region are in the midst of armed conflict or in post-conflict transition. This situation not only jeopardizes the physical safety of human rights defenders, but also means that in addition to contending with the central governments in their countries, they must regularly confront other agents such as armed rebel groups, militias, paramilitary and other armed groups, including religious extremists.

Indeed, WHRDs in the SWANA region operate in some of the most militarized environments in the world, from defenders in Palestine who are under military occupation, to those in countries such as Syria and Yemen, where military conflict has not subsided, to countries where the military exerts a tremendous amount of control over political affairs, such as Egypt and Iran. Militarism normalizes military presence in civilian life and in decision-making structures. It also embodies hierarchy, non-transparency and rigid gender norms that impact WHRDs. In militarized societies, often, governments use the pretext of conflict and emergency to promulgate counterterrorism and other emergency laws that suspend civil rights and severely curtail freedoms.

Another challenge WHRDs in this region face is the growth of religious fundamentalism and extremism – modern political projects that use religion to obtain and retain power. Fundamentalist movements seek to exert their control through the selective reading and interpretations of religious text in order to create and impose a single collective identity considered to be pure and authentic. As such, they are especially hostile to any diversity of interpretations and any shortcomings or failure in adherence to religious tradition. Dissent is blasphemy, and blasphemy is to be severely punished. Religious fundamentalism is especially used to regulate the behavior of women – how they dress, who they marry, and whether they may work. These traditions emphasize women's symbolic value as guardians of honor in their family and community. Any woman who strays from it is dishonorable and more importantly has dishonored her family and community and may be punished, including through extreme measures such as death. From groups like the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, to the Taliban in Afghanistan and the theocratic establishment in Iran, religious extremism is a formidable obstacle in the path of WHRDs.

In the SWANA region, political authoritarianism, militarism, and religious fundamentalism all serve the interests of the patriarchy – the social formation that privileges men over women, separates the public and private worlds and assigns to women roles in the private sphere which are attributed lesser value and fewer rights, thus creating and perpetuating inequality. Patriarchy is reinforced by restricting women's autonomy and justifying violence as proper punishment for any woman who steps outside the social norms ascribed to them. This is why the authorities in these countries are so threatened by WHRDs and the manner in which they defy this order and seek to step outside of it and why they deploy sexual harassment and violence as a weapon against them.

Finally, the SWANA region, like many other parts of the world, has seen the implementation of neo-liberal policies focused on economic growth, the liberalization of the national economy, the privatization of public services, and the deregulation of trade and finance. The neoliberal economic order has widened the gap between rich and poor, caused environmental degradation, exacerbated social tension and competition for resources, often benefiting the ruling political and military elite. In this context, the struggle for economic, social and cultural rights is critical and WHRDs are at the forefront and central to such struggles.

V. Charges Levelled Against WHRDs in SWANA Region

As previously mentioned, WHRDs are often perceived to be transgressing the boundaries of the roles and

responsibilities to which they should limit themselves. In the patriarchal and authoritarian contexts of countries in the SWANA region, the ideal woman is one who is obedient and whose primary functions are to be a wife and mother. The women who choose to step outside this role, despite all the discrimination and repression they experience, are a threat to the system. They are seen as “bad” women and their gender is used against them. Although the activists are engaged in peaceful civic activities, their activism becomes a pretext for charging them with an array of crimes. The charges leveled against them most commonly include:

- Espionage;
- Contacts with Western governments;
- Relations with hostile neighboring countries;
- Acting against national security;
- Terrorism charges;
- Receiving financing from foreign countries;
- Membership in illegal organizations
- Colluding against the interest of the state;
- Spreading of propaganda and false information;
- Undermining the reputation of the country;
- Insulting leaders and government officials;
- Having immoral and improper personal relationships;
- Undermining family values;
- Promoting vice and prostitution;
- Promoting Western ideas and immorality.

These heavy charges are often leveled against WHRDs for carrying out simple acts of charity, community engagement or even for mere expression of their opinion, including on social media. One UAE human rights advocate interviewed for this study highlighted the case of Amina al-Abdouli and Maryam al-Balushi, from the UAE, both of whom have been in prison since 2015. Amina was accused of ‘financing terrorism’ after making donations to help a Syrian family. Maryam was arrested for tweeting in support of the Arab Spring on charges of violating national law.

Dima from Syria explained to Femena that interrogators wanted to learn about the financial resources of their organization, her international relations and activities and claimed these relations were against the regime.

Rasha from Yemen explained that her interrogator kept shouting, ‘you have sold yourselves out to the Saudis’.

Roza from Iran explained that her interrogators insisted that her feminist activism was a foreign plot. She explained: “My interrogators were shouting at me, “Confess that you have spied, that you had carried out orders from the British in the guise of feminist activism.’

Aya from Egypt was convicted of misuse of social media and membership in terrorist groups, because she shared information about the mistreatment she and other women experienced in prison.

During her detention, Sahar from Iran was coerced into confessing to having sexual relations with certain politicians, as a means to pressure herself and her colleagues.

VI. Typology of Violations against WHRDs in SWANA

In the SWANA region, where WHRDs must contend with many obstacles and work in authoritarian political environments that limit the space for civic activism, WHRDs face a multitude of risks and human rights violations – many of them similar to those faced by their male counterparts. For example, laws that limit the ability of NGOs to operate and receive funding impact both men and women activists in the same way. However, often, women defenders suffer gender-specific forms of harm, or, because of the violation, they may suffer consequences specific to their gender. In addition, many women bear the risks and consequences of their activism in silence, facing risks that are taken for granted, under-reported, and unpunished.

The purpose of this report is to focus more specifically on the gendered nature of the violations. It seeks to highlight the way sexual violence is used as a tool of repression against WHRDs. It also aims to demonstrate how, in societies in the grip of patriarchy and religious extremism, the consequences of some violations have a disparate impact on women.

The women human rights defenders interviewed for this study stated that they faced these gendered forms of abuse at all stages of their interactions with the authorities: be it at the point of arrest, during interrogation, or during their imprisonment. The perpetrators of abuse were also varied: arresting officers, interrogators, female prison guards, prison physicians, and even other female prisoners.

The accounts shared below serve to highlight some of these abuses, and specifically to underscore their gendered dimension.

a. Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment, defined as unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favors, or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature is a manifestation of gender power relations. It is a form of sexual discrimination and sexual violence prohibited under multiple human rights instruments. Its purpose is to offend, humiliate and intimidate. As such, it is routinely deployed by those in power.

Many of the women interviewed by Femena indicated that they were subjected to both verbal and physical sexual harassment from the moment of their arrest – be it in public gatherings and demonstrations or at home - and during their interrogation and throughout their detention.

Dima from Syria and several other members of her group who distributed humanitarian aid were arrested at work. She explained: “The officer who grabbed my hand during the arrest touched my body. I was scared to death because I had heard many times that security forces could do anything they wanted to humiliate women. On the way to the detention center, he told me: “You are beautiful. Why are you doing these things? You can work in a different field! You can give pleasure to men if you want! Try working in your own field, whore!”

Khatoun from Sudan was arrested at a demonstration. She explained that she was chased by several male officers, while she tried to run away. “I tried to run and escape, but they kept lashing at me with their sticks to slow me down so they could arrest me. I and a few other girls were put in a truck and taken to the detention center. The male officers said that we were prostitutes and threatened to rape us.”

Sahar from Iran had a similar experience, when security officers broke into her home to arrest her. She explained that they were “using sexually vulgar language – words like bitch and whore, as they [searched my home].”

A similar experience was shared by Bayan, also from Iran, who was arrested along with several other WHRDs at a friend's house. Bayan explained that while in detention interrogators used filthy language to humiliate and intimidate her. "Every time the interrogator walked past me, he would say: 'You should be under your husband now, bitch. What were you doing in this house with all these boys? Does your husband know where you are!'"

Reem from Egypt was arrested on the street. Officers tied her hands to her feet and sexually harassed her. They tied her jacket around her neck and threatened to choke her if she did not give them her passwords.

Wesam, a lawyer from Yemen, was arrested when she was on her way to court to defend a client. Security officers took her to the police chief immediately. Without even looking at her, the police chief called in a



female officer who kept threatening to assault her with a long stick. She was then assigned to a male officer who took her to a different location for interrogation. As he took her there, the male officer continually ridiculed her and used sexually explicit language while doing so.

Lara from Palestine was arrested early in the morning when Israeli security officers raided her home: “They tied my hands behind my back in handcuffs for several hours. I was blindfolded. As I entered the cell, one of the officers said, “enter, or I will insert my [penis] in you.”

Roza from Iran explained how her sexuality was used to threaten and intimidate her during interrogations. “Although I assumed they don’t usually hit women, I was waiting to be physically attacked at any moment. It was terrifying. They sat me blindfolded and paced behind me, ridiculing, cursing, and calling me a whore, a woman who sleeps around. They said: ‘We will give your dead body to your family; you won’t get out of here alive.’ They were kicking my chair, and I was just crying in silence.”

In many countries in the region, where hijab and clothing of women are either legally or culturally mandated, women human rights defenders are harassed, subject to investigation and arraigned for the way they or other female family members dress in public, at private family gatherings or even while traveling abroad. When Iranian WHRD Hana’s house was being searched, she refused to wear the long tunic women are generally required to wear in public, and instead wore a shawl, blouse and trousers. According to Hana, throughout the three to four hours it took them to search the house, one agent kept insulting her by saying “Cover your filthy body. Cover that dirty body;” every time he walked by.”

b. Sexual Abuse, Assault and Rape

Women human rights defenders are vulnerable to all forms of sexual violence due to their gender. They are especially at risk of such forms of harm while they are in the custody of the state – be it during detention or while in prison – and under the control of security agents. These forms of gender-based violence, which are prohibited under both international human rights laws and a majority of domestic criminal statutes are employed fundamentally to manifest control over WHRDs, humiliate them and penalize them for their activism. The use of sexual violence against WHRDs also serves a larger purpose to delegitimize social and human rights movements and undermine civil society efforts at social change and democratization. The threat or act of sexual violence is often used to coerce false confessions or to pressure WHRDs to cooperate as part of larger security scenarios intended to crack down and punish organizations, movements and other activists.

Maya from Egypt recalled that while she was in prison the warden summoned her for a talk: “Three female guards took me out, and I noticed all the cells were empty because the prisoners were out for exercise. Then, they blindfolded me. The warden threatened me, saying that if I did not cooperate with them, I would never see my child and spouse again. He started touching my body all over and told me that I had lost weight. He was getting closer and closer to me, to the point that I could feel his breath on my neck. He continued fondling me in this manner for six hours to force me to cooperate. I refused. They hit me on the head a few times. I was on the verge of passing out. I asked for some water and sugar. They brought me a soda. It was then that I realized he was recording everything. Then he told the guards to take me back to my cell blindfolded, so that the other prisoners would see me and I would serve as a lesson for those who wanted to disobey prison authorities.”

Sahar from Iran was similarly abused and forced to confess, especially during interrogations. She explained: “my interrogator used sexually explicit language. Sometimes, he interrogated me for seven or eight hours at a time. Once he pressed money on my breasts and said, ‘you must show them to me.’ He then left and



returned 20 minutes later and said: 'That [amount] is too little for your breasts.' He moved his hand slowly towards my lower body and asked how much that would cost. I was terrified. I noticed that the door was cracked slightly open. I sprinted towards it. I made it to the shared bathroom. He was following me but could not raise his voice because all the cells were full of prisoners. I went to the toilet and pushed my hand down my throat. My nails had grown long during my detention, and they cut every corner of my mouth and my throat. There was blood all around my mouth. I wanted to throw up so that he would leave me alone."

Nadin from Yemen said that she was threatened, tortured and sexually abused in prison until she was coerced into making a confession. Nadin told Femena that because of the torture she endured, she still experiences vaginal bleeding from time to time.

Sumaya from Egypt was arrested in a cafe along with her husband and her brother-in-law. During her arrest the security officers touched her all over her body, even though she shouted at them to stop. The arresting officers called her a prostitute because she was wearing ripped jeans at the time of her arrest. She added, "After our arrest the security officers kept my husband and I in a room with several other men. They repeatedly came into the room and put their hands or fingers down my pants. I was pregnant at the time, and I needed to use the bathroom frequently, but they wouldn't let me.

Lana, a women's rights activist from Saudi Arabia, was detained on more than one occasion and was forcibly disappeared in one instance. One of her relatives described her experience during detention: "Lana was seated on a chair in the middle of the room blindfolded. The men who were torturing her were sitting on a couch. She was flogged so severely on her buttocks that she couldn't walk. They kept touching her genitals, treating her like a sex object. They kept kissing her and talked dirty to her. And in one of the sessions, she was waterboarded."

Leila from Bahrain explained that what started out as verbal harassment during interrogation, quickly turned into assault: “First, they harassed me verbally. Then, it turned to physical harassment. They stripped me and beat me repeatedly. Then they raped me.” Leila was arrested after she returned from a UN conference on human rights and according to her, the arrest was punishment for her demand for justice and human rights in international forums.

c. Attacks Against Personhood and Reputations

Another common form of violation is attacking and destroying the character and reputation of WHRDs. The perpetrators use this tool knowing that in the SWANA region in particular, where women are expected to conform to certain gender norms and conduct themselves according to those norms, destroying a woman’s reputation can damage her credibility and make it very difficult for her to work. Therefore, threats to expose, spread rumors or publicly shame women can be an effective method of silencing them and rendering them inactive. Additionally, in this region, a woman’s reputation often is seen as a reflection of her family’s honor and standing, and her own social acceptability. Sometimes, shaming a woman can cost her the protection of her family, or make her vulnerable to being harmed by them, especially when the shaming or rumors are of a sexual nature. For this reason, state security agents usually threaten to share or actually share damaging accurate or false information about WHRDs with their family members, when attempting to shame women or destroy their reputations.

● *Shaming WHRDs before family and relatives*

Sahar from Iran, who had been repeatedly pressured to confess to false relations with political activists, explained that the authorities would taunt her husband, who is religious, each time he came to follow-up on her case, saying things to him like, “You are unaware of what your wife has been up to and who she has been sleeping with.”

Hana, from Iran who was arrested at her home, said that the officers were using profanities in the course of their arrest and then told her mother that she had raised “a morally corrupt girl who holds workshops in other cities to corrupt other women as well.” She added, “they also asked my father if he knows about his daughter’s [sexual] affairs and said they can provide him with photos as evidence.”

According to Bayan from Iran, her interrogators accused her of engaging in civic activism for the purpose of meeting someone and having an affair. They told her activists are all corrupt and that they will inform her family about her real motivations and did so while she was detained.

While the tactics of security forces to shame and destroy the reputation of WHRDs is often an effective strategy, at times family members don’t buy into the tactic.

Lara from Palestine who was detained by Israeli security forces explained that her family was contacted and asked if they knew what their daughter was up to. “They tried to destroy my character by blaming my family. My family, however, was very supportive because they knew that these things happened to other Palestinian prisoners as well.”

Roza from Iran explained that “During one of my parents’ visits to Evin Prison, the officers told my mother to leave the room, and asked my father if he knew about my sexual affairs and the fact that I have a boyfriend. They said ‘we are ashamed of your daughter and her lewd relationships. You don’t know what’s going on...’ My father grew angry and told the interrogator, ‘Shame on you! It is none of your business. My daughter’s

relationships are her business.' They had assumed my mother would be the more supportive one and that is why they had kicked her out of the room to provoke my father's so-called "honor" and "manhood" against me."

● *Public smear campaigns*

Those who wish to silence and intimidate women activists also often launch more public smear campaigns against them. Often, they will publish photographs of women in compromising positions. These photos may be real ones security forces have obtained from hacking and searching their computers and phones or searching homes, or ones which have been photoshopped. Sometimes, WHRDs become the topic of discussion on TV and radio talk shows and some have also been forced into false televised confessions, adding to the fire of public discussion. Casting the activists in an unfavorable light and turning public opinion against them, allows the authorities to continue their repression with even more impunity.

Reem from Egypt told Femena: "when I was in prison, a quasi-state media outlet published a story about me. They published my private photos, saying that I was not a good woman, that I drank, dressed improperly at parties, I welcomed men to my home and had sex with numerous men."

d. Invasion of Privacy and Violations Involving Personal Relationships

● *Raids of homes, offices, and searches through personal belongings*

Activists in the SWANA region routinely experience invasions of their private spaces. They are accustomed to being monitored and therefore take precautions. However, even with all precautions taken, they operate in contexts where security agents follow none of the usual restrictions that the law normally places on searches (such as warrants specifying that which is being sought). Agents frequently raid offices and homes, with the intention of harassing the defenders. At times, the raids of homes and offices are coupled with verbal and physical sexual harassment. Often, the raids are used to collect as much information about activists as possible and then weaponize this information against them. Again, in the context of the SWANA region, the airing of one's private life can have far more negative repercussions for women than men, since unfortunately double standards regarding the conduct of men and women persist to this day.

Aya From Egypt explained, "They kept asking about my personal life: who do you live with? Do you have a boyfriend? Where do you get money from? What do you do for them to pay you? The whole point of the questioning was to gather information to prove that we have no values and do not adhere to any moral principles and to portray us as bad people to the public."

Lara from Palestine who was detained for 30 days in Jerusalem and taken to a military detention center said that the officers wanted to shame her with her private photos. She added, "the officers were saying, 'You're a girl and it is an embarrassment to yourself, your family, and your community that you are in jail. Your hair is not even covered.' They held me in a cell next to a men's cell and kept threatening me with rape."

Roza from Iran explained: "They asked me why I wasn't wearing a headscarf in photos that were taken outside [in the public space]. They even had an opinion about the way other female family members were dressed in my photos saying: 'your cousin is not wearing proper hijab.' While being interrogated, two of my cellmates were shown their photos taken in bathing suits and were forced to write explanations [about the photos] in their signed interrogation forms."

Hana from Iran recounted that her private relationship became the subject of interrogations. She explained that during her interrogations, the interrogators used her private and compromising photos to humiliate



her. She added, “they would place the pictures in front of me and ask me about my favorite sexual position. They asked me about my sexual relationships. When I objected, they would respond, ‘oh, aren’t you feminists all very comfortable talking about these things?’”

● *Attacks and intimidation of family and community members*

Another effective way of intimidating and silencing WHRDs is to target individuals intimately close to them, such as members of their family, their friends, or colleagues. Security agents are aware that though WHRDs are prepared to face and have accepted certain risks to themselves and their safety, they may be less willing to see their loved ones or people they know suffer as a result of their activism. While these tactics are

used against both men and women rights defenders, women face greater scrutiny and judgment when placing their family members at risk because of their activism. Women are usually more likely to be held accountable for the security of their family members and more likely to be personally blamed when the family members come under attack or face risks as a result of activism of the WHRD. This blaming is often also accompanied with shaming related to the undermining of the family's honor, the order of the family unit and society.

Raghad from Egypt, managed to flee the country just before her prison sentence was issued. Since she left Egypt before her verdict was issued, the authorities arrested her brother instead. He was in the middle of performing his military service. He was tortured while detained and told that his sister is a prostitute. Eventually, after insisting that he had no contact with her, Raghad's brother was let go.

Sahar from Iran reported that while being interrogated, the authorities also made accusations against her sister, a college student at the time. They said, "Your sister is a whore, just like you. Your mother has raised sluts."

Dima from Syria explained that security agents "contacted my family and told them it was their fault that I was an activist. They threatened to arrest any member of my family who would get involved in similar activities. They even banned my family and colleagues from leaving the country."

When the Taliban arrested Yalda from Afghanistan, they also arrested her sisters. According to Yalda, they threatened to torture and kill them if she refused to talk: "They knew that was my biggest weakness."

Sumaya from Egypt had refused to appear before the authorities when they summoned her by phone and insisted upon an official summons. The authorities then arrested her mother, a teacher, which forced Sumaya to appear before them. According to Sumaya, her parents were repeatedly threatened, and her brother was unable to find a job because the authorities had barred him for security reasons.

e. Torture, Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment

In addition to routinely being subjected to verbal and/or physical sexual harassment, almost all WHRDS, when detained, are held in inhumane and degrading conditions. Some of the abusive and degrading treatment in detention is gender-specific, including the manner in which body cavity searches are conducted and virginity tests to which many WHRDs are subjected.

● *Body cavity searches*

It is customary for prisons to search inmates prior to their admission. Such inspections are usually carried out for security reasons and to prevent prisoners from bringing in forbidden items or contraband into the prison. Numerous guidelines informed by international human rights law exist that make recommendations regarding the way such searches are to be conducted. Invasive body cavity searches, which are seen as inherently degrading, are specifically only allowed if there is a high likelihood that a detainee has concealed prohibited and dangerous materials.

However, the experiences of WHRDs interviewed for this report revealed that body searches are used routinely and in unwarranted circumstances as a means of humiliating and harassing them, including strip searches and body cavity searches. WHRDs from Egypt reported to Femena that their body searches were conducted in unsanitary conditions and in front of male officers. In Iran, women sentenced to long prison terms were required to submit to body searches before every visitation, especially in-person ones, and the

manner in which they were conducted was left to the sole discretion of the female guard.

Aya from Egypt reported: “They made me take off all my clothes and stand in front of the prison door. A female guard came and wrapped her hand in used plastic to check my anus, which caused bleeding.”

Sumaya, who was arrested with her husband, went to the men’s detention center. Therefore, she was searched by a random woman fetched off the street. She says: “The male officers were standing outside the door but kept peeking into the room. I told the woman I was pregnant. She was a kind woman. She didn’t check my vagina.”

Later when Sumaya was transferred out of the men’s detention center she was subjected to another search. She explained: “One of the female guards wanted to body search me. I was really tired, so I didn’t resist and took off my clothes. She touched my nipples in a very strange way. I shouted and threatened to file a complaint against her.”

Maya from Egypt, who had refused to hand over her mobile password at the time of her arrest, was stripped naked and searched in front of the male agents, not by a female guard, but by another female prisoner, brought in from the general prison population.

Bayan from Iran, who was imprisoned for several years, described the systematic body searches that took place on visitation days, throughout the term of her imprisonment: “There were one or two guards who didn’t insist on us getting completely naked. But there were a few who insisted on this, explaining that they had to do a thorough job. During one of my in-person visitations, the female guard took me to the bathroom and asked me to take off my clothes and do two squats. It was extremely humiliating. At that moment I told myself that this was her job, and it must be more humiliating for her to see my behind while I was doing squats! This is how I would try to convince myself to give in because these visits were my only way of communicating with family and the outside world once a week.”

Roza from Iran told Femena that before sending her to solitary confinement, the guards made her remove all her clothing and do squats for them. When she objected, they told her to shut up, used sexually explicit language, and told her, “You shouldn’t have done the things that brought you here!”

● *Virginity tests*

Forced virginity testing is another form of abuse that has been used in some countries against WHRDs. Since in many countries in the SWANA region, sexual relations outside marriage remain taboo, state security agents conduct these tests to shame and disgrace women activists in their communities. The accounts of women subjected to these tests demonstrate that the authorities’ primary aim is to humiliate and persecute them, as evidenced by the fact that in some countries, even married women or women with children were forced to submit to one.

Raghad from Egypt explained that after being transferred to prison “The female guard insisted that I have to be examined, despite the fact that I am married. She took a plastic bag out of the trash bin and wrapped it around her hand and conducted the test. This caused me to have many infections later.”

Aya from Egypt had been able to relay some reports on the prison and the inhumane conditions in the tiny cell she shared with tens of other prisoners to her friends. When security officers realized that she had leaked information to the outside world, they asked a female guard to drag her out of the cell and strip her naked. Aya added, “The female guard was shouting ‘This is the body of a woman, not that of a girl!’ She

made me squat several times in front of the male officers to find out if I was hiding anything. Since I had not used the toilet for hours, I lost control of my bladder in front of them. Later, they brought a doctor in to do an actual virginity test.”

Maya from Egypt explained that she developed an infection after her forced virginity test and insisted on seeing a gynecologist. “After some time, they took me to a doctor outside the prison. When examining me, the doctor used a very large speculum, ignoring my objections and cries of pain. I started bleeding severely. I was wearing my prison uniform and it had become soiled and bloody. They made me wear the same soiled clothes to return to the cell. They wanted to scare the other detained women and teach them a lesson.”



In Iran, as well, several young women human rights defenders were forced to undergo virginity tests during their arrest. [Atena Farghadani was among the first women to expose this practice publicly.](#)

● *Harassment by other prisoners*

Some WHRDs reported being harassed by other prisoners. According to Bayan from Iran, the authorities choose particular detainees as cell wardens, the chosen warden detainees are allowed and encouraged to bully and harass the other women prisoners. They often call them names, touch them inappropriately without their consent, and pressure them into relationships. Bayan explained that because of inappropriate touching and abuse at the hands of the chosen warden detainees, many prisoners are forced to change the way they dress to prevent unwelcome fondling and sexual abuse. According to Bayan, these chosen warden detainees create an unsafe, tense and hostile environment in the prison, all with the tacit or explicit consent and support of prison officials.

● *Inhumane detention conditions*

As the focus of this research was sexual and gender-based violence, Femena did not specifically inquire about detention conditions, though it is well-known that detention conditions in the region are quite poor.

However, some facts regarding detention conditions specifically mentioned by interviewees have been highlighted in this section, to provide a fuller picture of the conditions WHRDs endured.

Yalda from Afghanistan was arrested with her sisters. She was part of a group planning a protest rally and was arrested a day before the protest was scheduled to take place. She stated, “they had come with tanks and surrounded the entire area around the apartment. They carried us out in an awful manner and loaded us in the car. They behaved horrifically. They were kicking my sisters and I to silence us.” During the 26 days that she was detained, Yalda stated that she was tortured.

Fereshte, from Afghanistan, was arrested with her husband, her two children, and approximately forty other persons who had been hiding in a safehouse in their attempts to escape the Taliban. Several hundred Taliban troops surrounded their hide-out with armored vehicles. First the Taliban took the men to a room for questioning. Fereshte explained: “I didn’t want to lie to them about who I am. I said loudly as I wept that I detest the Taliban because they took our lives away. I told them about my childhood and the Taliban’s oppression and the harm they have done to us. They led me out of the room. They locked the door and beat my husband to a pulp. The doors and walls were shaking. My kids and I as well as other women could hear his screams. My children were crying in horror. She added that she and her family were denied access to food and water for several days. “For two days, they did not give us any water. There was a bucket of dirty water the Taliban used to wash their hands and drinking glasses. Out of desperation I filtered the dirty water by running it over the corner of my veil and gave it to my kids. For five days they had not even given us a piece of bread. There wasn’t enough oxygen in the room, and we could not breathe.”

Aya from Egypt described her detention conditions: “In May, when temperatures surpass 40°C (104 F), for 45 days, I was forced to wear prison uniforms made of nylon, without being permitted to bathe for long periods. They would turn on a heating device under my bed so that my body would burn with heat. My colleague and I, who was detained with me, had to drink unclean water, which later caused both of us to develop kidney problems. They fed us one meal a day, one piece of bread with cheese that had dead cockroaches on it. For 15 days I was only allowed to go to use the bathroom once a day which also caused me health complications.”

Sumaya from Egypt told Femena that despite being pregnant when arrested, she was made to wear the same undergarments for 20 days in a row, and was not permitted to change her clothing.

Maryam and Amina, who according to a UAE rights advocate interviewed by Femena, have been imprisoned in UAE since 2015, have been tortured, beaten, threatened with rape, and held in solitary confinement in secret prisons to extract a confession. Maryam attempted suicide as the result of humiliating treatments and prolonged solitary confinement.

VII. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence as a Tool of Repression

It is not surprising that so many of the human rights defenders Femena interviewed, themselves long active in the movement to combat violence against women, have been subjected to it.

The accounts of their experience with sexual harassment and violence make it abundantly clear that sexual harassment and violence is used to humiliate, isolate, threaten, intimidate, and exert control and power over them. It is undertaken specifically to punish them for daring to challenge societal and patriarchal

norms. It is also aimed to prevent them from pursuing activism and make them an example to anyone else thinking about becoming socially and politically active. The interviewees echoed these same thoughts and sentiments.

Roza from Iran explained “They want to humiliate you based on your gender, to undermine you, to make you weak, passive and “apolitical.” Furthermore, they want to “domesticate” you by imposing their gender ideology and turning you into a woman who knows her place – in the home and with her family. They want to eliminate potential threats to their political system and to neutralize the danger your example poses to their propaganda on gender roles.

Maya believes that in Egypt the systematic harassment of women in detention was intensified during the Egyptian revolution and extended beyond activists to ordinary women protesters. “Security forces used harassment as a weapon against women demonstrators, and to prevent them from becoming activists. They also do it to teach a lesson to others and scare them. Nobody wanted to have any contact with me because they feared they would suffer the same fate.”

Lara from Palestine believes the Israeli security forces carry out abuses systematically to “suppress Palestinian activists, ruin their reputations, and force them into silence. They consider us their enemy and know that the effects and trauma that result from sexual harassment are among the hardest challenges to overcome.”

Khatoun from Sudan explained that security uses “sexual violence as a weapon, because it is closely connected to notions of honor, shame, and ownership of a women’s body by tribes, families and society. In Sudanese society, feminist women are often considered to be infidels and women’s rights activists are generally isolated.”

Leila from Bahrain explained that sexual violence used against WHRDs was intended as an act of vengeance. She went on to say it was intended to “make me and the others stop demanding human rights and stop exposing state rights violations.” Leila explained further that sexual violence against her was used so that she would serve as an example to others, to show that they would end up in jail, be beaten and sexually assaulted if they became active and demanded their rights. “The act [of sexual violence] was and will remain as a message of hate.”

Raghad from Egypt said: “They do it to crush women psychologically, so they won’t be able to do anything. All these abuses are carried out systematically.”

These accounts echo what has been stated: the systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence is meant to humiliate and crush activists, put an end to their activism, and deter others from doing the same.

VIII. Repercussions of Sexual Violence and Abuse on WHRDs

The impact of these violations continued to haunt women human rights defenders long after they occurred. Women suffered both physically but also psychologically as a result of the traumatic experiences long after experiencing sexual abuse and violation as a result of their activism. Clearly the violations experienced by WHRDs – enduring inhuman conditions of detention, being subjected to gender-based harassment and sexual abuse – have a profound and lingering impact on their physical and mental health, as well as their public lives. They discussed some of these impacts in their interviews with Femena.

While in prison Fereshteh's defense mechanism kicked in to protect her, but after release, she is feeling the full-scale impact of her time in detention in Afghanistan. "I am still experiencing trauma and I relive memories of my time in prison. I have started therapy. I also take anxiety medication. Sometimes I black out. When I was in prison, I was in denial, but now I feel like my body is falling apart. I'm doing my best to start working again."

Beyond physical evidence of torture that continues to linger, Leila from Bahrain stressed that the emotional impact continues and is harder to overcome. "I suffered from a lot of bruises, especially my broken nose is the biggest proof of the torture [I endured]. Mentally, I'm still suffering. I don't think this will ever go away. I'm scared of the dark because I was blindfolded the whole time of my torture and interrogation."

The humiliation and sexual violence experienced in detention continues to haunt Roza from Iran and has influenced her behavior and life long after release. "To this day I am not free from the memories of the humiliation I suffered. The hatred I feel caused by being insulted and sexually violated is very much alive. One mention of those days is enough to keep my mind occupied for a long time. The stress and trauma of this experience stays with a person and shapes the way you live even after your release. Before my arrest, I wrote about my personal feelings and experiences. I was not only candid, but also fearless. But since my release, I feel I am constantly being monitored. I do not want to write about myself to avoid the pain of having to defend what I've written when and if I am arrested again. I delete all my private and personal conversations. I do not keep any personal or family photos on my cell phone. It's not out of fear – it is the humiliation and invasion of privacy that is really appalling."

Hana from Iran explained her experience of detention has profoundly traumatized her and negatively impacted her ability to trust others or to live normally as she did before. "I was psychologically traumatized, and for a while I was not even able to perform everyday tasks. Trusting people has become very difficult. I have limited the extent of my relationships with friends. I used to be able to sleep easily, but this too has been taken away from me. On any given day a certain word throws me back into that interrogation room."

Sahar from Iran has had to contend with serious mental health issues post release from prison, which continue to create challenges for her. "At the time of my arrest, I was in top physical and mental health. But by the time of my release, I was taking 15 psychiatric pills a day, which had been prescribed by the prison doctor. For one year after my release, I was sick and moving from one mental health provider to another. For many years after, I would take 8 -10 pills a day and I had to see a therapist."

While severely impacted by the trauma of her detention, Bayan from Iran explains that she has been able to resist some of that impact due to sheer will. "Knowing that my private life could later be used against me made me lead a very conservative personal life. I stopped attending parties and gatherings, afraid that the police might raid it and make arrests. But when I was released after my second arrest and after spending a few years in prison, I had a different attitude. I stopped being so cautious, meaning that I no longer wanted to let my fear stop me from living like a young woman."

In addition to grappling with physical and mental health issues resulting from their detention and sexual violations, after their release, some WHRDs must contend with the fact that others - family, friends and even colleagues - change their attitudes and behavior towards them. Many begin to feel isolated and ostracized as a result.

Upon release from prison, Aya had to contend with her own mental health issues, which were compounded

by the fact that her boyfriend rejected her, and her family isolated her. “My boyfriend broke up with me because he was afraid of being arrested. For their own safety, my family decided to stay away from me altogether.”

While Sumaye from Egypt should have been supported by her colleagues upon being released from prison, she was instead shunned and isolated. “A number of activists and women human rights defenders said they no longer wanted to have contact with me because they were afraid of being arrested, and that isolation was very distressing.

In addition to mental health issues, many also spoke about the physical repercussions of the treatment they experienced in detention, including vaginal bleeding, broken bones, poorer health, and kidney and other health problems resulting from lack of water and food in detention.

IX. WHRD Resistance to Sexual Violations and International Mechanisms of Support

Despite facing tremendous restrictions in carrying out their work, and despite the threats and abuse WHRDs experienced before and after their arrests, the women interviewed for this report, like many of their peers, have not ceased their struggle. Although some were forced to flee their countries for their safety, they continue their activism in exile and maintain connections with activist colleagues at home. Those who remain in their countries have not given up on the struggle to improve women’s status and conditions.

International human rights law and standards establish and protect the right to defend human rights as an autonomous and independent right. In December of 1998, by adopting [the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), the UN General Assembly recognized the crucial role played by human rights defenders in the defense and promotion of human rights which often exposes them to additional and specific risks and thus requires measures explicitly for their protection. The UN HRDs declaration also establishes that states bear the ultimate responsibility to protect defenders, to prevent and effectively address allegations of violations and abuse committed against them, and to ensure that they can carry out their work in a safe environment. In 2014, [the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 68/181](#), specifically on WHRDS, and called specifically for the recognition of the special risks faced by WHRDs, their crucial role and responsibility, and the need to protect them. Additionally, [the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders has submitted thematic reports dedicated to the specific risks and challenges faced by WHRDs based on their gender](#). These reports are instrumental in highlighting, affirming, and amplifying the experiences of WHRDs and the challenges they confront.

There also exist several institutions and mechanisms at the regional level to promote the protection of HRDs. [The European Union and its member states have adopted several instruments concerning HRDs](#). Additionally, [the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe is also mandated to support the work of HRDs](#). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has an HRD focal point who monitors challenges defenders face and in 2014, [adopted specific guidelines to protect HRDs](#).

Some regional protection mechanisms also exist in the Americas, through [the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights](#). In 2004, the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights adopted [a resolution on the protection of HRDs in Africa](#), in which it created a Special Rapporteur mandated, among other things, to develop and recommend effective strategies for their protection.

Lastly, as the state is ultimately responsible for the protection of its HRDs, several states, especially in Latin America, have taken steps at the national level to create national mechanisms to provide protective and preventive measures for HRDs. Although [civil society organizations in these countries have expressed concern over the lack of resources and effective implementation of such mechanism](#). Unfortunately, national protection mechanisms are severely lacking in the SWANA region, where the state is often the biggest perpetrator of violations against HRDs.

In fact, many states around the world and especially in the SWANA region are failing in their obligations to respect and protect the right to defend human rights.

X. Recommendations

This report would not have been possible without the cooperation and support of the women human rights defenders who shared their experiences with us – strong, resilient women who, despite enduring different forms of harassment and harm, continue their struggle and fight for human rights. It is in appreciation of these defenders and the path they have forged, and in hopes of seeing the day when no activist in this region experiences repression at the hands of the state and its security agents simply for seeking their basic rights, that we make the following recommendations:

States in the SWANA Region

- Repeal and reform laws that discriminate against women and LGBTQIA populations.
- Recognize the legitimacy of WHRDs and publicly facilitate and support their work.
- Adopt and implement legislation which recognizes and protects WHRDs; and repeal or amend legislation that may place obstacles in the way of legitimate activities to promote and defend human rights, including with regard to the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy with respect to sexual harassment and abuse within government institutions, especially security agencies, the police and prison systems and actively and forcefully prosecute perpetrators.
- Effectively address threats, attacks, harassment, and intimidation against HRDs, including, where applicable, by thoroughly, promptly and independently investigating human rights violations and abuses against them and bringing the suspected perpetrators to justice.

International Community

Accountability on violation of rights:

- The UN and governments should have a coordinated and uniform human rights policy toward the region, holding all violators accountable in a principled and consistent manner.
- Closely monitor, report on and publicly condemn the use of sexual harassment and violence against WHRDs by state security systems.
- Aggressively hold state perpetrators of sexual violence against WHRDs accountable.
- Ensure WHRDs are able to safely communicate with UN rights bodies as well as international human rights organization to report the violation on their rights, including gender based and sexual violence.

- Ensure that WHRDs from the SWANA region can safely participate in various UN events related to women's rights, or violation of women and WHRD rights, including through allocation of funds for travel and issuance of rapid visa, including multiple entry visas.


Ensuring an enabling environment:


- Hold states accountable for attacks on civic space, and pressure them to facilitate the work of human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders, through a variety of means, including placing contingencies on foreign aid and funding to governments in the SWANA region.
- Prevent further backlash and regression on women's rights and human rights at the international level, so as to not lower the bar for WHRDs working in SWANA in difficult and hostile environments.
- Prevent closure of international civic space, and actively work to expand civic space at the international level, including at the UN by ensuring full participation of WHRDs in various events.


Emergency and urgent support:

- Allocate funding for urgent support for WHRDs at greatest risk.
- Expand relocation schemes for WHRDs at greatest risk who have been forced to leave their countries.
- Ensure adequate funds for organizations that support WHRDs, especially intermediary organizations that support WHRDs as they try to access emergency funds.
- Create temporary respite opportunities for WHRDs at high risk who need to temporarily leave their country for a rest of or to avoid security backlash, through funding and visa programs.
- Support wellness, self-care and holistic security programs for WHRDs in the SWANA region, especially those working in the most hostile environments.



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Femena supports women human rights defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA). Femena is particularly focused on contexts where civil society space is limited or closed and aims to raise awareness about the impact of shrinking civic space on women and progressive feminist movements.

Femena's country and regional briefs provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and movements.