

# 5. Gender Equality

by Gabriella Nassif



As described in the introductory piece of this issue, Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on Gender Equality, emerged from a long history of international activism and advocacy to secure the rights of women and girls. Beginning with the formation of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and culminating in the development of the 2030 Agenda, or the SDGs, this international framework has influenced women's rights organizations and feminist actors on the ground in the Arab region. Across various sectors, including healthcare and education, women's reproductive rights, and women's political rights, local actors have leveraged this international legal framework to better position their rights-based claims on their respective governments.

This section highlights the major areas of work done by women's rights organizations and feminists in the region in relation to SDG 5. It focuses on issues

such as violence against women and girls, women's political participation and empowerment, gender equality in legislation, women's participation in the labor force and the gender division of labor, and finally, the engagement of youth gender activists. While these topics do not cover all the indicators or areas of interest under SDG 5, they represent important and long-standing areas of work that our Institute has been involved with, aligning closely with SDG 5. In other words, these topics were chosen for this section to highlight the convergence or the "translation" of work between the Institute and international and UN-level dialogue and work on gender equality, using SDG 5 as a framework. This chapter presents the institute's work over the past 50 years, including its research, publications, programs, and conferences. It also highlights profiles of leading women, platforms, and organizations in the region.

## The Fight to End Violence Against Women and Girls: The Work of the Institute

The fight to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been a cornerstone of the AiW's mission. Throughout its 50-year history, the AiW has spearheaded countless women's empowerment programs, including *Qudwa*: The Basic Living Skills Program, and launched multiple awareness-raising campaigns, including its annual arts competition held in conjunction with the global 16 Days of Activism, to highlight the realities of gender-based violence (GBV) in Lebanon and the Arab region. One notable event in the Institute's history is "Talk In," held in honor of International Women's Day 1994 by the Institute that gathered more than 600 people to speak about issues they deemed important, such as the need to address violence against women. Thereafter, The Spring/Summer 1994 issue of *Al-Raida* focused on violence against women in Lebanon, featuring research papers and testimonies on its impact on women and girls. In this issue, then-editor of *Al-Raida* Randa Abul-Husn (1994) analyzed how violence against women and other "women's issues" are "confined" to the family sphere by patriarchal Arab governments and communities:

*When Al-Raida decided to tackle the problem of domestic violence in general and battery in particular, the persistent question was: 'What constitutes battery? Is it limited to brutality, or do other mild violations, such as a slap on the face, fall within the criteria?' The second interrogation that was raised focused on women's coping methods, followed by the legal and social facilities battered women can resort to, to protect themselves and their rights. (p.17)*

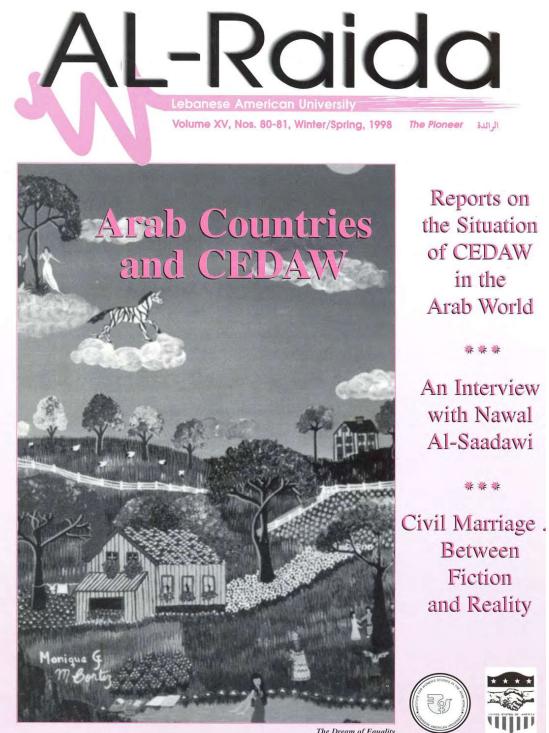


Figure 1. Issue of *Al-Raida* focusing on VAWG

Abul-Husn listed several prominent organizations in the region and in Lebanon that provide support services to women survivors of violence. However, she also noted that the "general inclination" in the Arab region "is to convince the woman to bear the situation rather than humiliate her family with a public scandal and protect the children from a broken home." Worse, she wrote that as of 1994, "there [was] little to indicate that Arab governments, legislators, and academe are concerned with domestic violence against women." She concluded that, "practically speaking, Arab women must choose between the family and battery" (p.17).

However, the Institute, an organization dedicated to women's rights, was not willing to let the issue of VAWG be sidelined. In that 1994 issue of *Al-Raida*,

the testimonies of survivors were put front and center. These testimonies captured the attention of two local newspapers, *L'Orient le Jour* and *Al-Anwar*, both of which published pieces about gendered violence using the information from the testimonies captured by *Al-Raidā* and the Institute.

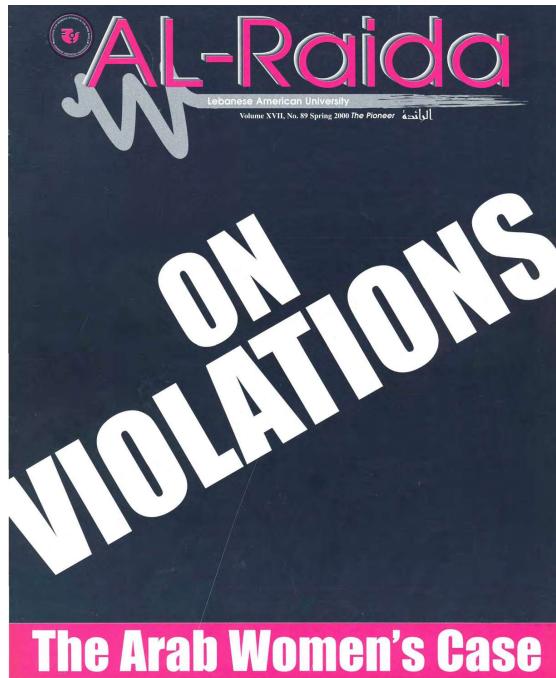


Figure 2. Issue of *Al-Raidā* focusing on VAWG

The Institute maintained this momentum by publishing the text of the UN Declaration for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the subsequent issue of *Al-Raidā* in the fall of 1994, "for added emphasis and for your information," according to the issue's editorial by Abul-Husn (p.3). By this time, the Institute was representing Lebanese and Arab women at international conferences focused on women's development. Among these was the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Fourth World Conference on

Women, where the subject of violence against women and the status of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) were discussed; in addition, plans were made to strengthen the implementation of CEDAW and the protection of women from violence.

From this point in time onward, VAWG was mentioned in almost every issue of *Al-Raidā*, and the subject would become a focal point of the Institute's work in local communities in Lebanon and beyond. In the fall of 1996, the Institute, under its newest editor, Laurie Irani-King at the time, published a special double issue titled "Women's Rights are Human Rights: Perspectives from the Arab World." In this issue various authors wrote about the status of women and girls in different Arab countries, focusing on the prevalence of VAW/GBV and the difficulties that face survivors seeking support services following an experience of violence. Interviews with Laure Moghaizel and Asma Khader dove into the issue of women's rights and VAW in Lebanon and Jordan, respectively, while a brief paper written by Randa Siniora, then Coordinator of Women's Rights Projects at Al-Haq in Ramallah, examined the status of women and girls in Palestine.

In another powerful article from the aforementioned issue, "Facing the Law, Bruised," Tina Achcar-Naccache (1996) analyzed the Lebanese legal system and how cases of VAWG are prosecuted, if they reach the point of highlighting formal prosecution at all. In 2000, and again in 2010-2011, the

Institute would dedicate entire issues of *Al-Raida* to the fight against VAWG, and to research on the subject both in Lebanon and across the Arab region. This latter issue specifically focused on the fight in the Arab region to advance and ratify national-level domestic violence and VAWG laws to protect women and girls and penalize acts of VAWG, including religious and secular authorities' pushback against a 2007 draft law on violence against women in Lebanon.

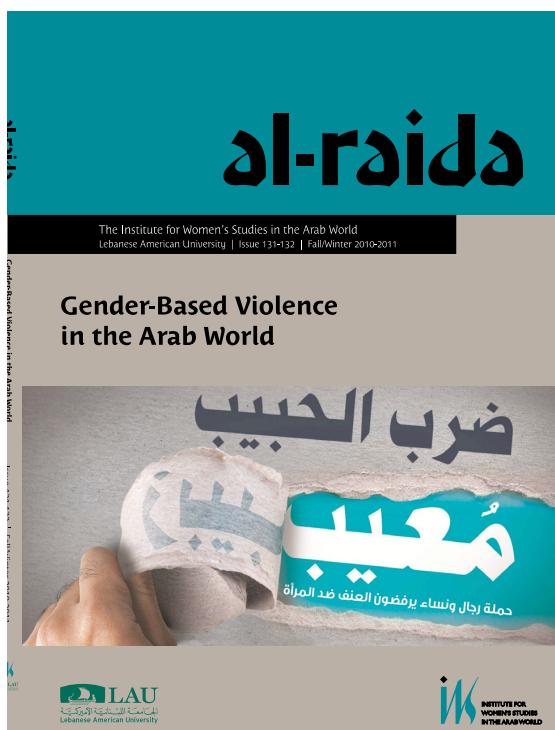


Figure 3. Issues of *Al-Raida* focusing on VAWG

## Preventing Gender-based Violence: The Work of the AiW at 50

Celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary means acknowledging the trajectory that the Institute's work on VAWG has taken over

the last two decades and even earlier. By 2010, the Institute had widened its non-research work on VAWG to include both refugees and non-Arab migrant domestic workers (Hamill, 2010-2011). This included developing a guide titled "What Should I know?" which was later published in several key languages targeting non-Arab migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, informing them of their rights (IWSAW, 2010-2011).

In 2014, in collaboration with the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), the AiW published a report in Arabic on "Child, Early, and Forced Marriage" (CEFM) in Lebanon, entitled "Protecting Minors from Early Marriage: Reality and Expectations" (Khamis et al., 2014). This report set the groundwork for another groundbreaking study on CEFM in Lebanon that culminated in one of the first prevalence studies of CEFM in South Lebanon among both refugee and citizen populations (Elnakib et al., 2022). Part of the AiW's work on CEFM has also included its continued participation in a Regional Accountability Framework of Action on Ending Child Marriage (RAF), coordinated by various UN agencies, which has brought together actors and organizations from across the Arab states region to discuss the issue of CEFM and to develop strategies for effectively combatting and ultimately preventing the practice from occurring (UNICEF, 2018).

By 2015, the Institute's work on GBV had become a core component of its programming. This shift reflected the influence of its newest director, Dr. Lina Abirafeh, who specialized in GBV prevention and response in conflict settings around the world. Under Abirafeh's leadership, the Institute

launched a continuing education program called Gender in Development and Humanitarian Assistance (GDHA), which included one track dedicated to GBV. In 2015/2016, the Institute helped launch a collaborative art competition with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in honor of the annual 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence, an international campaign raising awareness about the realities of GBV around the world. The art competition, hosted by the AiW and ESCWA, invites participants to submit a piece of art of any media—paint, graphic design, poetry, fiction, and other forms—that respond to the global theme chosen by UN Women each year for the campaign. In 2016 and 2017, two videos won the competition and in 2018, a young Lebanese rapper won for his song *Haqqik* (LAU News, 2018). The Institute's student-focused speaker series, "Food 4 Thought," has also concentrated on GBV/VAW and its effects not only on women and girls, but also on other marginalized groups, including the queer community, refugees, migrant workers, and women with disabilities.

Most recently, under the guidance of its newest Director Myriam Sfeir, the AiW has published a standout research piece, with funding and support from UN Women, entitled "Comparative Study of Violence Against Female Reporters and Male Reporters during Lebanon's 2019 Protest Movement" (El Kaakour, 2021). The report was the first of its kind to systematically document, through interviews with reporters and through an extensive search and analysis of these reporters' social media pages, the various forms of violence reporters faced when reporting on the 2019 uprising. The second of two UN case

studies, this report documented the ways that violence against reporters differed depending on the reporter's gender, with women reporting much higher levels of sexual violence, including sexual harassment online and in person, than male reporters. Specifically, the sexual violence facing women reporters was linked to higher safety concerns for women and, in some cases, women reporters changing their reporting habits and/or the subjects they reported on in order to avoid violence while they were out in the public sphere.

Both Abirafeh and later Sfeir have ensured that the AiW remains a key regional advocate in the fight against GBV. Through the Institute's role as a Regional Convener and Leader on GBV, selected by the global organization Women Deliver, the Institute has been responsible for presenting on the status of Arab women and GBV/VAW at Women Deliver's annual conference in 2023. The Institute was tasked with convening several panel discussions and producing research briefs on the status of women and girls in the region as a primer for the annual conference.



Figure 4. Harasstracker Logo

### Harass Map (Egypt) and Harass Tracker (Lebanon)

In 2010, Harass Map was developed, followed by Harass Tracker in 2016. These technology-based initiatives

provide survivors of GBV—including sexual assault, street or workplace harassment, name-calling, and inappropriate gestures—a platform to document their experiences. The goal is to inform other users about the incidents and raise awareness. In Egypt, Harass Map was launched by a group of gender experts, volunteers, and activists working in different sectors, all of whom had experienced sexual harassment:

*We were all overwhelmed by the sexual harassment that we, and almost everyone we knew, were exposed to on a daily basis. We felt that we could not continue to stand by and quietly tolerate the damaging effect sexual harassment was having on our daily lives, choices, and feelings of safety and pride in this country. (Harassmap)*

The group noticed that one of the major issues affecting survivors was that sexual violence and harassment were considered taboo in Egyptian society. This meant that most survivors would never disclose or talk about their experiences with others. Not only did this make their recovery process more difficult but, they realized, it might put others at risk. The goal, therefore, was to give survivors a place to talk about their experiences and to create a platform for people to be informed about the high rates of sexual harassment in Egypt. Harass Map aimed to challenge the “social acceptability” of sexual harassment by documenting and tracking cases across the country. In doing so, the group hopes to eventually create a social environment where sexual harassment is not tolerated and punishable by law.

HarassTracker also aims to give “a voice to both victims and witnesses” of sexual harassment and works to “increase public awareness about sexual harassment in

a society that still considers it taboo to talk about” (Ershad, 2016). The goal of the online platform is to help document the high frequency of sexual harassment and to help raise awareness about the different forms it can take. Founded by Nay El Rahi, Sandra Hassan, and Myra El Mir, the application seeks to challenge the “vicious and virulent” culture of shaming victims who come forward about their experiences (Owens, 2016). As El Rahi notes, “the idea is that in saying this is wrong and this is happening, the act of reporting itself is empowering” (as cited in Owens, 2016).

The impact of Harass Map and HarassTracker has been palpable on the women’s rights movements in the region. As the founders of HarassTracker note, these applications are a powerful way of forging solidarity between survivors both within and beyond the region. The applications have also helped the women’s movement make progress in raising awareness about the frequency of GBV and advocating for policies to protect and support survivors of violence.

## Profiles

### ALANOUD AL SHAREKH

**Co-Founder of Abolish 153  
Campaign (Kuwait)**

**By Sabine Dakkak**

An activist, academic, and researcher, Dr. Alanoud Al Sharekh is an advocate for women’s rights in Kuwait. She currently serves as an Associate Fellow at the Chatham House MENA Program and the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, D.C. Dr. Al Sharekh co-founded Eithar,

an organization that supports and helps survivors of domestic violence, and Mudhawi's List, an initiative designed to assist women in reaching elected office. Additionally, she is the Director of Ibtikar Strategic Consultancy, where she led their Empowering Kuwaiti Women in Politics program in 2018, training 15 Kuwaiti women in political leadership and dialogue.

Al Sharekh's most essential and significant body of work to date is her commitment to protecting women and girls from violence across the Arab States region. Dr. Al Sharekh is arguably best known as the co-founder of the Abolish 153 campaign in Kuwait, which was founded in 2014 to eradicate Article 153 from Kuwait's penal code. She first became aware of this law while researching discriminatory Kuwaiti laws for another project. The law effectively grants men "regulatory, judicial, and executive power" over their female kin, in blatant disregard of the constitution, international agreements on human and women's rights, and even Islamic shari'a. Under this law, "honor killings" are protected and perpetrators face lenient legal consequences.

In 2017, after three years of raising awareness on Article 153 and honor killings in Kuwait, Al-Sharekh and the campaign members successfully influenced five members of parliament to sign a bill to examine the abolishment of Article 153. This effort culminated in 2020 with the passage of Kuwait's first domestic violence law by the Kuwaiti National Assembly (The National, 2020). Abolish 153's outstanding work earned the group the European Union's Human Rights Chaillot Prize in 2016. The French Government also awarded Dr. Al Sharekh

a knighthood in 2016, recognizing her significant work in protecting women and advancing their rights in the region. Additionally, she received the Arab Prize for "best publication" from the Doha Institute in 2013 and 2014, and the Voices of Success Kuwait award in 2012. Dr. Al Sharekh was also recognized by the BBC as one of the 100 "most influential and inspiring women in the world" for 2019 and 2020.

## RANA HUSSEINI

**Jordanian Human Rights Activist**

**By Sabine Dakkak**

Rana Husseini is a Jordanian human rights activist and an investigative journalist who has been a pioneer in unveiling the horrors of "honor crimes" in Jordan. Husseini began her career at *The Jordan Times* in 1993, and her activism started shortly thereafter when she reported on a story about the rape of a young girl who was killed by her brother. The young girl was raped by her brother, and later, after becoming pregnant, underwent an abortion and was forcibly married to a much older man. When this man divorced her, a second brother murdered her as part of a plot devised by her uncles. The case was even more enraging, Husseini recalls, because of the lenient sentence that the young girl's killers received: only six months to one year in prison (Swanson, 2010). The case pushed Husseini to become an outspoken advocate for the rights of women and girls affected by violence. Despite the criticism and threats that both she and *The Jordan Times* received after publishing this first article, Husseini



**Figure 5. Rana Husseini**

continued to raise awareness about the realities of violence against women:

*I wanted the [Jordanian] society to know that we have problems and that we need to fight it, not hide our head in the sand. And yes, some people accused me of being a Western agent or wanting to encourage women to become sexually free and all of that, but I didn't listen to anyone. I listened to my heart and to the fact that what I'm doing is not against any religion or any human rights concepts or values, because human beings' lives are sacred. We should all fight to maintain or protect people and not to be quiet or pretend that this does not exist." (Risheq, 2021)*

Husseini's work led to some major changes in Jordanian society. The awareness raised by Husseini's work contributed to the formation of the National Jordanian Committee to Eliminate the So-called Crimes of Honor in 1998. The Committee's advocacy and policy work eventually led to the 2017 amendment of Jordan's penal code, including its "Marry Your Rapist" law, which provided a legal loophole for perpetrators of rape who chose to marry their victims (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Husseini wrote her first book in 2009, *Murder in The Name of Honor: The True*

*Story of One Woman's Heroic Fight Against an Unbelievable Crime.* The book was written "to be a reference and documentation of these problems" in Jordanian society because, at the time, there "were hardly any books" about violence against women (Swanson, 2010). In an interview about her book, Husseini stated:

*I also wanted the book to be an advocacy tool for activists in other countries, and at the same time I wanted to document the work that was done in several countries, including Jordan. I include activism work being done in several countries around the world, including the UK, the US, Europe, Pakistan, Turkey, Palestine and Jordan. I end with a chapter of recommendations of what needs to be done and also to give hope for abused women who think they are alone or cannot seek help. Finally, by documenting so many stories, I wanted it to be an eye-opener for any women who are living under dangerous circumstances, and they do not realize it. I want it to be a sort of warning for women. At the end of the day, I want to be able to save women's lives, and that is the most rewarding thing one can achieve in this life.*  
(Swanson, 2010)

Following the success of her first book, Husseini wrote a second book, *Years of Struggle: The Women's Movement in Jordan*, which documents the history of its eponymous subject. Like her first book, this one is intended as an advocacy tool for activists in Jordan and other countries worldwide. Husseini's work extends today to leading workshops for young or new reporters and journalists on issues of gender, human rights, and violence against women. She has served as a regional coordinator, consultant, and advisor for prominent organizations including UN Women, UNICEF, Equality Now, Freedom House, UNFPA, and the Solidarity Is Global Institute (SIGI), among others. Currently, she sits on the Advisory Board of Equality Now, based in the U.S, and on the Jordanian National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation. Husseini's tireless efforts to raise awareness about violence against women and advocate for women's rights have garnered international recognition. In 2003, she was awarded the Ida B. Wells Award for Bravery in Journalism. Most recently, in 2019, she received The London Arabia Organization Arab Women of the Year Awards for Social Impact.

### **YANAR MOHAMMED**

#### **Iraqi Activist**

#### **By Naomi Buhmann**

Death threats, prosecution, and arrests are enough reason for most people to flee a country and seek shelter elsewhere, but not for Yanar Mohammed. This Iraqi activist has honed her skills in evading pressure coming from an unaccommodating government and staying safe from religious extremists, all while helping thousands of women

in need. Mohammed leads the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) and organizes safe houses for victims of trafficking in her country (Nobel Women's Initiative).

Having fled Iraq in 1993, she experienced exile and the difficulties of feeling unsafe in the place she grew up in. She was forced to build a new life, all the meanwhile, being forced to witness, from abroad, the many human rights abuses that were occurring in her home of Iraq (Sengupta, 2015), becoming increasingly aware of the struggles of Iraqi women. Determined to make a difference, she decided to set up an organization for this cause. What started as the Defense of Iraqi Women's Rights initiative was later renamed the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) and became Mohammed's main occupation. This work was so important to her that she decided to relocate back to Iraq after the fall of the Hussein regime, describing it as "a better start to the rest of my life" (Romandash, 2023).

From 2003 onwards, Mohammed advocated against honor killings and helped remove the taboo surrounding the subject by highlighting its importance. Mohammed also established shelters for trafficked women, addressing a crime that affects around 100,000 women within Iraq's borders at any given time (Global Fund for Women, 2016). Despite the Iraqi government's promises to uphold and strengthen women's rights, as outlined in the Iraqi National Action Plan under the United Nations Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (2000),

there remains a significant gap between these commitments and the reality. Unfortunately, traditional and patriarchal structures deny protection to victims of sexual crimes, exacerbating the problem Mohammed tirelessly works to combat. She said: “We need to protect the women from their families, from the state and the security agencies of the state” (Romandash, 2023).

Mohammed’s criticism of the current situation in her country comes with risks to her safety. She reports that she frequently faces arrest and sometimes needs to leave the country temporarily. To avoid being targeted by governmental agencies, she must conceal her whereabouts and rely on close friends for protection (DePaul, 2007). Colleagues of hers discreetly connect affected victims to Mohammed’s shelters, as she cannot advertise them publicly due to safety concerns.

*We went into an empty building and took the best room and hung the sign OWFI on the door. The upper floor could serve as a shelter for women in need. [...] We do not admit in Iraq to these shelters. We do it in secret from the government. (DePaul, 2007)*

Despite these obstacles, Mohammed remains steadfast in her work. She contributes daily to restoring the liberties and rights of women, offering them protection in times of need. Through the OWFI’s work, trafficking victims can avoid harsh prison sentences, escape persecution, and withstand unjust treatment by misogynist authorities. The safe houses also offer educational programs to help victims restart their lives after traumatic events (DePaul, 2007). Since founding her organization, Mohammed has offered shelter to more

than 1,300 women, even during times of armed conflict. For example, in response to ISIS’s enslavement of thousands of women in Iraq and Syria, Mohammed utilized a recently established Network of Anti-Trafficking of Women in Iraq, enabling roughly 40 local NGOs to cooperate and represent the needs of survivors (Nobel Women’s Initiative):

*We will work on this until we get the government to pass laws that make the suffering of these women less, and also that open the way for us to protect the women from this kind of violence.*

International support is important to Mohammed, as recognition of her activism across the world has led to increased collaborations between foreign women’s initiatives and her organization. She was awarded the Eleanor Roosevelt award for human rights in 2007, the Gruber Prize for Women’s Rights in 2008, and the Rafto Prize in 2016. Mohammed’s feminist message remains strong as ever, and her passion for giving a voice to women suffering from sexual violence and “crimes of patriarchy” is inspiring.

## Women’s Socioeconomic and Political Equality

### Promoting Women’s Political Participation: The Work of the Institute

Women’s political participation has been a key focus of the Institute, expanding in scope over the past two decades. In 2001, in an editorial for *Al-Raida* entitled “Feminizing Politics,” Fawwaz Traboulsi theorized some of the critical

pitfalls facing the women's movement in its struggle to strengthen women's political participation. Traboulsi's astute analysis previews some of the very same theoretical and conceptual arguments that feminists continue to grapple with today. For example, Traboulsi asks whether quota systems really work or if they merely provide a superficial solution to enhancing women's political participation? Conversely, he questions how truly transformative political change that benefits women can be achieved without instituting such systems as a first step to increasing the number of women in politics (Traboulsi, "Feminizing Politics"). The rest of this issue of *Al-Raida* (Figure 6) is dedicated to answering some of these questions and embarking on "a quest for a new approach to politics in general" (Traboulsi, "Women and Politics," p.10). The issue presents testimonies of women already in politics, including then-member of parliament Nayla Moawad, and the findings of several surveys on political acceptance of a women's quota in government.

Since that 2001 issue of *Al-Raida*, the Institute has delved into the subject of women's political empowerment and participation in various ways, including dedicating a second issue of *Al-Raida* in 2009 to women and parliamentary quotas in the Arab region. Once again, the Institute collected research pieces, testimonies, and interviews, each offering a particular, and often differing, point of view on the subject, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the feminist arguments surrounding women's quotas and political participation.

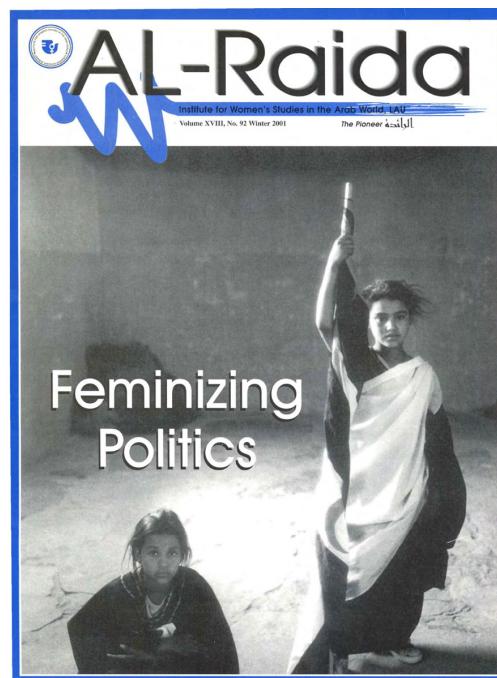


Figure 6. *Al-Raida* Vol. XVIII, N° 92, 2006

The AiW's efforts to support women's political participation most recently focused on women's roles in Lebanese parliamentary elections. This involved developing a capacity-building program and training course for a select group of women interested in running for parliamentary or municipal elections in Lebanon, as part of the "Supporting Political Participation of Targeted Women in Lebanon" project. This project, in collaboration with the Embassy of Finland in Lebanon and the Academy of Continuing Education (ACE) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) culminated in an important panel discussion titled "Gendering Political Participation," held in July 2022. The discussion brought together experts and newly elected women parliamentarians to share their experiences and underscored the importance of such capacity-building programs (LAU News, 2022).

Under the “Equality for Everyone: Gender Reform from Grassroots to Government” project, funded by the United States Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Institute produced an Elections Toolkit aimed at building the capacity of women aspiring to run in municipal or parliamentary elections in Lebanon. Divided into six chapters, the toolkit covers topics such as the pre-elections period, campaigning, preparing for the periods before and during election days, and electoral appeals (Figure 7). Additionally, “Equality for All” included several panel discussions, open to the LAU community and the wider public, focusing on women’s political participation and the importance of strengthening women’s capacity to run for electoral office. In one of these panel discussions, the Institute was able to secure the participation of several key women’s rights activists, political journalists, and former and current members of parliament to discuss women’s progress in the political arena (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Elections Toolkit, published by the AiW under the “Equality for All” project



Figure 8. A photo of panelists featured in the “From Grassroots to Government” panel discussion hosted by the AiW

## Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice

In 2020, the AiW embarked on a project to document the growing backlash against feminist and women’s rights movements in Lebanon, as part of a larger consortium documenting similar trends worldwide. Over the course of five years, this project, funded by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, has aimed to document the diverse forms of anti-feminist and anti-women’s rights backlash that have manifested in Lebanon, and how women’s rights movements and advocates have challenged and responded to these threats. The Institute has conducted primary research on the ways that backlash evolves depending on the “challenges” posed to the existing patriarchal order by feminist allies and women’s rights advocates. Backlash thus represents a dynamic process through which the patriarchal order—and specifically, its beneficiaries—seek to undo the progress made toward women’s rights and gender equality.

Among the Institute’s biggest achievements regarding this project was the 2023 global

conference held in Beirut on the topic of anti-feminist backlash (Figure 9). This conference convened project partners, as well as external researchers, policymakers, and activists to examine the growing anti-feminist backlash worldwide and the similarities and differences in these trends across various regions of the world. Notably, the conference featured an innovative theatrical production by Lina Abyad, a former LAU professor of theater, based on the testimonials of women interviewed in India by one of the global consortium partners - Gender at Work and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in Bangladesh (Younis, 2023). Additionally, the Institute published some of its findings in a paper for the *IDS Bulletin* in 2024 (El Rahi & Antar, 2024).

Most recently, the project's work was highlighted at an event held during the week of the Council on the Status of Women (CSW) 2024, titled "Sustaining and Expanding South-South-North Partnerships and Knowledge Co-Construction on Global Backlash to Reclaim Gender Justice" (Countering Backlash, 2024).



**Figure 9. Myriam Sfeir, Director of the AiW, gives her opening remarks for the “Countering Backlash” conference held by the Institute in June 2023**

## Gender Equality in Legislation

One of the Institute's strongest commitments to gender equality in legislation has undoubtedly been its work to challenge and ultimately repeal the inequitable personal status codes that significantly impact women's lives across most of the Arab region, alongside addressing the inequitable position of women within Arab constitutions. Since its inception, *Al-Raida* (1978; 1979) has published articles discussing the status of women living under personal status laws in the region (*Al Raida*, 1984, "Women of Egypt and Algeria"). In Issue 49 of *Al-Raida*, the subject of women under Arab laws was the main point of focus. In this issue, the Institute highlights the discrepancies between women's formal status as citizens under the constitution and their treatment as second-class citizens under the framework of the personal status codes in Lebanon and throughout the Arab region. As Randa Abul-Husn noted in her editorial for this issue, the Institute aimed to move beyond theoretical debates to get at the heart of the issue. To do so, they interviewed two Lebanese judges, one woman and one man, about the discrepancies between women's rights according to the constitution and their limited rights under the personal status codes (Abul Husn, 1990). The issue also featured testimonies from women undergoing legal training, along with research papers on the status of women under inequitable laws in other Arab countries.

In 2010, the Institute would publish an entire issue of *Al-Raida* entitled *Citizenship and Gender in the Arab World*, focusing on the inequitable legal frameworks controlling the lives of women in the Arab region. This issue highlighted the plight of women vis-à-vis patriarchal nationality laws across the region, which prevent them from passing on citizenship to their children. It also reviewed feminist research on the legal concept of “the family” in the Arab region, highlighting how “the family” serves as the primary legal unit in the Arab region, leaving women without access to their rights (Sensenig-Dabbous, 2010). Just a few years later, in 2014, the Institute hosted a regional conference dedicated to women’s inequitable status under Arab laws, in response to what later became known as the Arab Spring. Titled “Arab Countries in Transition: Gender Rights and Constitutional Reforms,” the conference was held at the LAU and was organized collaboratively by the AiW, alongside the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Rule of Law Program MENA Region; the Danish Centre for Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity, KVINFO; and The Women and Memory Forum in Egypt.

The above conference brought together scholars and activists to discuss women’s critical role in these revolutions and the ensuing debates about women’s rights as constitutions were (re)drafted in light of the revolutions. The success of the conference prompted the Institute to publish a special double issue of *Al-Raida* (Issues 143-144) containing presentations and discussions held over the course of the three-day conference. The first part of the issue (Issue 143) featured the theoretical debates presented during the conference, while the second part

(Issue 144) documented the testimonies of activists and advocates in the region about women’s rights and the fight to secure these rights during and after the Arab Spring. Most recently, in its role as Regional Convener ahead of the 2023 annual Women Deliver conference, the AiW produced a research paper on the current status of women’s legal and gender equality in legislative frameworks across the Arab region.

## Women’s Labor Force Participation

Considered as one of the crucial indicators of gender equality, women’s participation in the labor force, both formal and informal, has long been a focus of the Institute’s work. During Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr’s tenure as the Institute’s first director, she and other staff engaged with representatives from various women’s institutes and organizations to discuss, among other things, the importance of women’s labor force participation and strategies for bolstering it (*Al Raida*, 1981). In 1980, the Institute published its inaugural monograph on women’s labor force participation, entitled *Women and Work in Lebanon* (Figure 10), comprising three research papers, one of which was co-authored by Dr. Abu Nasr and Lorfing, examining women’s work in Beirut’s suburbs. This was followed by a second monograph in the same year, also titled *Women and Work in Lebanon* featuring three additional research papers, including two by Dr. Abu Nasr and Lorfing, focusing on working women and women-headed households in Lebanon (Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, 1980). In 1985, the Institute hosted a regional conference

on women's development status titled "The Conference on Planning for the Integration of Arab Women in Economic Development", where 18 different women researchers from 10 Arab countries presented on women's economic status and labor force participation.

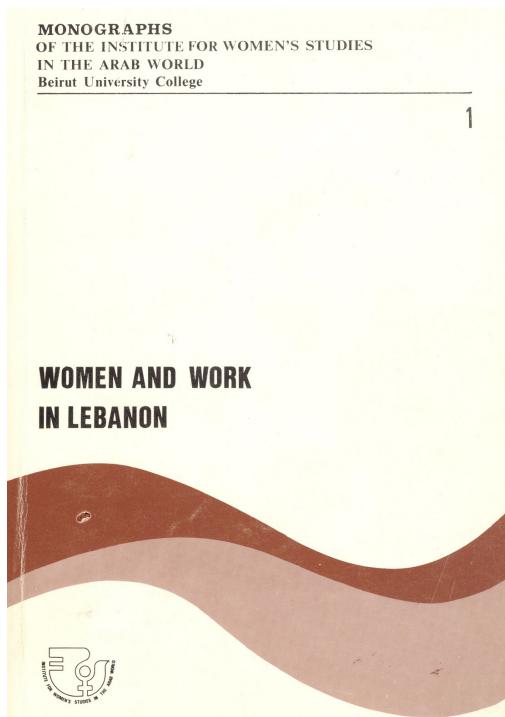


Figure 10. Women and Work in Lebanon

The Institute's commitment to women's labor force participation strengthened under its second director Mona Khalaf, who, as an economist by training, understood the overwhelming importance of improving women's labor force participation rate in Lebanon. Khalaf's expertise in economics enabled her to develop contextualized research, providing a nuanced understanding of the economic complexities influencing women's entry into the labor force in the Arab region. At an event hosted by the Institute commemorating International Women's Day (1992), Khalaf quoted a

research participant who responded to her question of "what do you do?" by noting that only by waking up at three in the morning was she able to prepare her household members to leave home for work - by cleaning, cooking, preparing hot water, and getting them dressed. "When do you expect me to find time to work?" she bemoaned to Khalaf, who later analyzed this exchange as evidence of the multilayered and intensive *labor barriers* that women face. These "domestic obligations and duties," Khalaf noted, are in large part preventing women from entering the *formal* labor force outside the household (as cited in Abul-Husn, 1992).

By 1993, the Institute had produced an entire issue of *Al-Raida* dedicated to women in the labor force, entitled *What About Career Women*, that focused on the "increasing volume of career and working women in Lebanon, the Arab region, and the world" who were "challeng[ing] traditional norms [that] prefer to see them safely established at home rather than wheeling and dealing with men" in the labor force (Abul-Husn, 1993, p.2). The issue also addressed the "controversial" creation of "women's health" as a new medical specialty, and produced an insightful piece featuring quotations from medical professionals that shed light on this "new" field that exposes the "natural consequence[s] of the integration, in medicine, of cultural values, norms, and unwritten laws" about women and their "inferiority" to men (Papazian, 1993).

One of the most significant achievements of the Institute under Khalaf's leadership was the publication of the country's

first-ever study on women's labor force participation rates, experiences, and challenges, titled *Female Labor Force in Lebanon*. Launched on International Women's Day in 1998, this study marked the first time such a large and systematic study had been conducted on the role of Lebanese and non-Lebanese women in the country's economy. The study aimed to "provide the data base needed to formulate [a] prioritized strategy related to the supply of and demand for women in the Lebanese labor market and to design adequate plans of action and policies to implement such a strategy" (IWSAW, 1998). In conjunction with the release of the study, the Institute also published an entire issue of *Al-Raida* (1998) dedicated to examining women in the labor force. True to its feminist name, the journal featured personal testimonies and life stories from women in sectors considered unconventional at the time, such as "A Woman Taxi Driver" and "Two Unconventional Jobs Held by One Woman." It shed light on the "double shift" that working women in Lebanon were undertaking, balancing professional roles with the majority of household or domestic tasks (IWSAW, 1998).

The Institute's efforts concerning women in the labor force have significantly expanded over the past few decades. However, it persists in challenging prevailing patriarchal norms that hinder women, both Lebanese citizens and those without citizenship, from entering the paid labor force. In 2010, in collaboration with the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Institute developed an Awareness Guide for Female Domestic Workers in Lebanon. Published in multiple languages to cater to various migrant communities, the

guide provides information about the Lebanese legal system and the rights of migrant workers (IWSAW, 2010-2011). Additionally, through its occasional paper series, *Aqlam*, the Institute has showcased the work of several authors focusing on the plight of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. For instance, Nour Kuzbari's paper has analyzed the structural determinants of migrant women's exploitation as domestic workers in Lebanon (Kuzbari, 2018). Furthermore, the Institute has conducted research on refugee women's employment and has featured this topic in its *Aqlam* series as well (Abou-Raad, 2018).

The Institute's recent work on women in the labor force has centered on maternity and parental leave policies in the Arab region. As part of the multi-year project "Equality for Everyone: Gender Reform from Grassroots to Government," funded by the United States Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Institute compiled several policy briefs on this issue. Collaborating with the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), the Institute prepared, gathered necessary signatures, and submitted a draft law to the Lebanese Parliament aimed at amending labor laws to enhance parental leave policies. Drawing on the original research conducted for this project, the AiW launched a national advocacy campaign to raise awareness about the inequitable burden faced by women in the formal labor force and the importance of implementing equitable parental leave policies to support working women. As part of this campaign, the AiW produced informative videos highlighting the rights of women in the workplace and strategies for protecting them, along with key policy papers emphasizing the

significance of parental leave for gender equality in Lebanon.

## Introduction: Youth and Feminist Activism

### Supporting the Next Generation of Feminists: Youth Activism for Gender Equality

Because of its position as a research institute within a university, the AiW has consistently prioritized the interests of LAU students. For the AiW, the students at LAU represent the next vanguard of feminist activists and women's rights advocates in the Arab region and in the world. To cultivate this young generation, the Institute has focused much of its everyday work toward supporting this generation by holding events, seminars, discussions, and even artistic competitions to generate discussions about gender among the youth and to encourage them to become active in the Institute's work and in other gender equality work on campus and beyond.

A key component of the Institute's portfolio has been its student lecture series, which has evolved into the monthly speaker series known as "Food 4 Thought." This series has been a centerpiece of the Institute's work for the LAU student body, as it invites speakers to address topics selected or highlighted by students themselves. Food 4 Thought topics are often aligned with subjects covered in LAU undergraduate courses. As Myriam Sfeir (2022) writes in an *Al-Raida* editorial:

*These events gave our students the opportunity to engage directly with women's*

*rights practitioners and feminist activists on a variety of subjects. The speakers they encountered motivated our students and inspired them to pursue gender equality in their coursework and beyond. The webinars also gave students the opportunity to deliberate important gender issues with speakers whose work and activism have broken many gender barriers in the fields of violence against women, human rights, politics and conflict transformation and peace building, gender activism and gender justice, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the rights of marginalized groups.*



Figure 11. The Institute's Inaugural "Food 4 Thought Lecture Series", September 2015

Under its new format and name, the Food 4 Thought Speaker Series (Figure 11) debuted in 2015 with a lecture led by the AiW's newly appointed director at the time, Dr. Lina Abirafeh. Her talk, titled "Gender: What?! Why?! And who cares?!" provided students with an opportunity to learn about the AiW's work and how they can become more engaged with the Institute and gender equality effort on LAU's campus and beyond (LAU News, 2015).

More recently, the Institute has involved students in a wide variety of topics, ranging from gender and the environment to gender and addiction,

women's political empowerment, and gender and conflict. Additionally, the Institute has facilitated student engagement by encouraging them to contribute to *Al-Raida* through the Mary Turner Lane writing competition. Established by Dr. Mary Ellen Lane in honor of her mother, Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women's studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Mary Turner Lane Award recognizes the best student papers on women and gender issues submitted in the yearly competition. Submissions include both research papers as well as artistic or creative pieces, giving students the opportunity to express themselves and their interest in gender issues in a manner that suits them best.

Over the past few years, the Institute has given LAU students more opportunities to publish their work in *Al-Raida*. Each year, the Institute commits to publishing one full issue of *Al-Raida* dedicated to papers produced by students, selected to be part of the U.S. MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars program. In the inaugural double issue of *Al-Raida* dedicated to MEPI-TL Gender Scholars, published in 2022 (Figure 9), the Institute showcased the best work of these students, whose papers provided a wide spectrum of issues, including feminist political economy, political and social gender issues, conceptual variations between different feminist analytical frameworks, and comparative analyses of renowned women's rights scholars from the region.

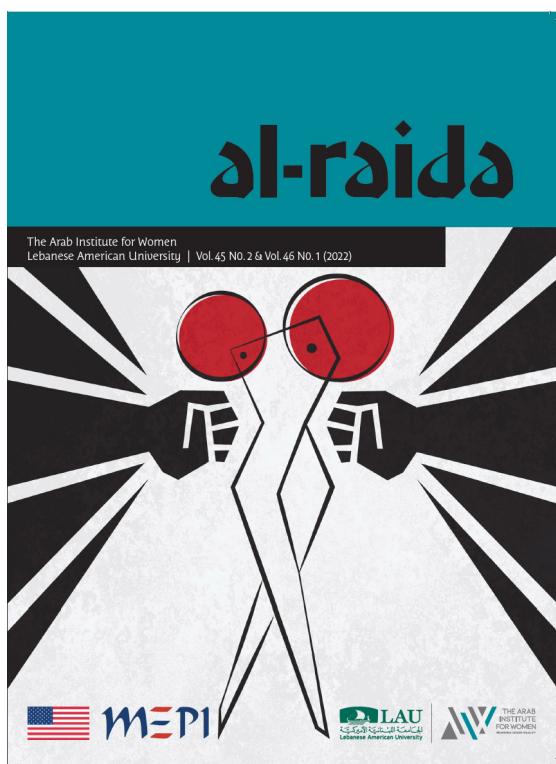


Figure 12. *Al-Raida* Vol. 45-46, N° 1 & 2, 2022

## SDGs Covered in this Section



### Methods:

The profiles documented in this section are designed to introduce readers to the work that organizations and activists in the MENA region are doing to promote gender equality. This section addresses several cross-cutting themes, including socioeconomic rights and labor rights, women's political participation and representation, and disability rights.

To select the profiles included in this section, we:

- Consulted experts on gender equality and women's socioeconomic rights
- Included profiles of organizations and activists who have been active over the past five years
- Included people and organizations who might not be as well-known as other activists and others working in the field today
- Included work that has been acknowledged by the UN as contributing to the goals of SDG 5 and others that tackle gender equality.

## Profiles

### ESRA ALAMIRI

#### Kuwaiti Women's Rights Activist and Lawyer

Esra Alamiri, a Kuwaiti women's rights activist and lawyer, has been dedicated to advancing women's legal rights in Kuwait since earning her legal degree in 2007. Notably, she has worked with the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights at the Women's Refugee Commission and later co-founded the Human Line Organization (HLO). This NGO specialized in researching and documenting human rights violations in Kuwait. As part of this work, Alamiri advocated strongly for the inclusion of women within Kuwait's judiciary, a recommendation that eventually became part of the CEDAW periodic review for Kuwait in 2011 (Alamiri, 2024).

In 2018, Alamiri collaborated with graduate students at Fordham Law School to draft a "master bill on protection from sexual violence," titled "Aman" (meaning "safe" in Arabic). This initiative was undertaken in partnership with the Kuwait Democratic Forum, the Kuwait Bar Association, and several established legal experts in Kuwait (Fattahova, 2022). The objective of the draft law was to "fill the gaps" left by previous legislative attempts to criminalize sexual harassment and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Kuwait, as highlighted by Alamiri. Additionally, Alamiri was also part of an international team that produced the Women's Access to Rights and Care in Kuwait (WARCATI), focusing on women's legal rights in Kuwait.

## LATIFA BOUCHOUA Moroccan Women's Rights Activist



Figure 13. Latifa Bouchoua

Latifa Bouchoua is a Moroccan women's rights activist and legal advocate. She co-founded the Moroccan Democratic League for Women's Rights, which was later renamed the Federation of Women's Rights League (FLDF), of which she later became the president in 2016 (100 Femmes). During her tenure, the FLDF has become a leading organization in the fight for women's rights. The organization plays a crucial role in documenting and gathering evidence on the status of women and girls in Morocco, particularly focusing on issues of violence against women and girls (Basch-Harod & Pederson, 2024).

In recent years, Bouchoua and the FLDF have been outspoken advocates for the amendment of the Moudawana, Morocco's personal status laws. Criticizing the increasingly conservative interpretation and implementation of the Moudawana, Bouchoua and the FLDF have advocated for several new legislative proposals to help strengthen the Moudawana in a way that is "true to its original purpose," notes Bouchoua, which is to protect women and girls and to promote women's equality (Ibriz, 2023).

## RAJA ABDULLAH ALMASABI Yemeni Disability Rights Activist



Figure 14. Raja Abdullah Almasabi

Raja Abdullah Almasabi is a prominent Yemeni disability rights activist and serves as the chairwoman of the Arab Human Rights Foundation in Yemen. She is a lifelong activist and was one of the very first women disability rights activists in Yemen. As the only woman working with four other men, she helped put together a formal request to the Yemeni Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor demanding recognition of people with disabilities. When their proposal was initially rejected, Almasabi and her fellow activists staged a three-day protest in front of the ministry building, culminating in a direct confrontation with the minister. This pivotal moment led to the establishment of Yemen's first association for people with disabilities in 1988 (Almasabi, 2024). In 1991, Almasabi's activism and advocacy efforts also contributed to significant milestones such as the establishment of the Supreme National Committee for the Disabled, as well as a legislative proposal aimed at improving care and rehabilitation services for people with disabilities. Her work extended internationally, where

she played a crucial role in the drafting of the international Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2020, Almasabi was invited to address the UN Security Council (UNSC), making her one of the few women with disabilities to speak directly to this esteemed body (Amnesty International, 2020).

## **CENTER FOR EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S LEGAL ASSISTANCE (CEWLA)**

Founded in 1995 by Azza Soliman, an Egyptian lawyer and advocate for women's human rights, the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) was created, according to Soliman, "as an initiative to combat violence against women through raising their legal awareness, and supporting women to access their legal, social, economic, and cultural rights" (The Pixel Project, 2023). Beyond these objectives, CEWLA also provides grassroots support to local women's rights activists and organizations, and conducts training sessions for marginalized women. However, the work of CEWLA has drawn the attention of the Egyptian government, leading to threats of censorship. This includes the government revoking its formal registration status as an NGO, leaving the CEWLA without access to necessary funding needed to sustain its programs (Global Fund for Women, 2016). The precarious status of CEWLA is not specific to the organization, as most human rights organizations face censorship by the Egyptian government.

In 2021, the organization faced further threats due to its collaboration with the Center for Economic and Social Rights

(CESR) in reporting on the Egyptian government's progress toward the recommendations made by the CEDAW report (Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2021). Today, CEWLA continues to actively support women's rights, including the rights of Palestinian women who fled Gaza and other parts of Palestine as a result of the current war. CEWLA supports these women in securing legal status in Egypt and equally advocates against the violence in Gaza. CEWLA's advocacy efforts and its stance against the Israeli occupation have once again put it in a vulnerable position. Following Soliman's signature of a global petition on October 24, calling for an end to the war in Gaza and urging organizations and individuals to support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the German government cut its funding for an anti-trafficking program operated by CEWLA (Mamdouh, 2023). But Soliman and the CEWLA have continued to speak out, with Soliman noting:

*We are in a decadent and critical historical stage in which the masks are falling off the faces of all supporters of human rights. (Mamdouh, 2023)*

## MUSAWAH

Founded in 2009, Musawah has emerged as one of the most well-known, transnational and global organizations fighting for the rights of Muslim women and others living under Muslim family laws. This global movement includes NGOs, academics, scholars, policy makers, government representatives, grassroots organizations, and women's rights activists from around the world. Musawah traces its roots back to Malaysian groups like Sisters in Islam; in 2009, Musawah emerged following a global conference hosted by Sisters in Islam in Kuala Lumpur, co-founded by Zainah Anwar (Musawah, 2021). Musawah's rise in prominence in the fight for Muslim women's rights has simultaneously encouraged the rise and development of Islamic feminism (Segran, 2013). Islamic feminism, according to Anwar, "reconciles religion and rights in a world in which women would otherwise be forced to choose between being a feminist and a Muslim" (Sister-hood Magazine, 2020). Ziba Mir-Hosseini, another co-founder of Musawah, emphasizes the organization's mission to "link academic research with activism in order to present fresh perspectives on Islamic teachings and to contribute constructively to the reform of family laws and practices" (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). Musawah has played a crucial role in advancing a nuanced understanding of how Islamic scripture and law can and must promote gender equity. According to Islamic feminists, any reading that is not equitable is fundamentally contrary to Islamic principles. More than a decade after its founding, Musawah remains a pivotal transnational actor in the field of Islamic feminism.

## SOUMAYA RAZGHALLAH

**President of *She is the Goal*, Tunisia**

**By Lara Sammour**

A feminist, environmentalist, and community builder, Soumaya Razghallah, 38, is the president of the local Tunisian association, *She is the Goal*, which promotes the economic independence of women while preserving the cultural heritage of Tunisia. Founded in the town of Chenini-Gabès in 2021, *She is the Goal* first launched with 50 women. Razghallah focuses on craftsmanship, offering a wide range of workshops on craft making. Each workshop is unique to a single material, such as henna, cane, or traditional textile. The aim, according to Razghallah, is to provide women with skills that keep them financially productive and stable despite changes in the availability of raw material. In other words, these trainings are meant to help women support themselves while simultaneously addressing the changes in the environment taking place due to climate change.

Razghallah describes her association as a free space for people to grow, welcoming volunteers from different corners of the world. She hopes to expand the association to different governorates, helping more women support themselves and their families through the use of raw material while preserving the heritage of Tunisia.

## LULA AL AWADHI

Bahraini Lawyer

By Naomi Buhmann

It takes courage to be the first woman practicing in a male-dominated profession —courage that Lulwa Al Awadhi showed early on in her career. The Bahraini lawyer's work marks a milestone in the fight for women's social and legal status in the Gulf state. Witnessing the exclusion of women from civil society and their lack of rights when it comes to personal status (Nonoo, 2012), Al Awadhi concluded that she was in a unique position to advocate for change. Al Awadhi had been practicing law in Bahrain for decades; in the beginning, she and one other female colleague were the only women in the profession in the entire country (Arabian Business, 2012). This experience pushed her to focus on women's issues, alongside her personal experiences of handling family disputes through the personal status laws. Al Awadhi began "to realize that in the seventies there was a difference between religious rulings and what is being implemented" (Al Tamimi, 2006). Consequently, her focus shifted toward activism to protect the liberties and rights of women in Bahrain. Al Awadhi has not let criticism or external pressure stop her, despite setbacks (Arabian Business, 2012). Today, she coordinates her work through the Supreme Council for Women, a Bahraini organization where Al Awadhi serves as the secretary-general (Arabian Business, 2012). She has also been active at the forefront of national politics, and was appointed to the Consultative Council, the legislative body of the state, in 2001 (Nonoo, 2012). In this role, Al Awadhi helped pressure the Council to advocate for a new personal status law to protect women's best interests in cases

of divorce and inheritance. Al Awadhi remains a symbol of the fight for women's rights to political participation and legal protection.

## MONA EZZAT

Egyptian Labor Organizer and

Activist



Figure 15. Mona Ezzat

Mona Ezzat is an Egyptian labor organizer and activist currently serving as the director of the Work and Women program at the New Woman Foundation (Mada Masr). A lifelong labor activist, Mona Ezzat's work focuses on how Egyptian women's participation in the labor force, alongside the "double shift" most women work in the home because of traditional gender roles, has made women workers keenly political subjects. Between 2006 and 2011, leading up to the start of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and the Arab Spring, politically active working women in Egypt played a key role in various labor strikes, including the protests at the Mansoura-Spanish Company in the Nile Delta (Naber, 2020). However, as Ezzat notes, even though women played an active role in these labor protests and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, their participation is still not

acknowledged. Ezzat is working to rectify this through her own work, where she continues to write about the mobilizations of working women across Egypt (Gamil, 2012).

### **OLA ABU AL GHAIB** **Palestinian Disability Rights Activist**

Ola Abu Al Ghaib is a Palestinian disability rights activist and the founder of the Stars of Hope Center, an organization that supports women with disabilities. Abu Al Ghaib's work began in high school when she advocated for the inclusion of people with disabilities in children's books. Her commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities in all sectors of society led her to the UN, where she was appointed manager of the Technical Secretariat of the UN Partnership of Persons with Disabilities at UNDP in 2019 (Swedish Organization for Global Health, 2019). She was also appointed vice-chair of the International Disability and Development Consortium and later became the director of Global Influencing and Research at Leonard Cheshire Disability (Athena40forum). In 2019, Abu Al Ghaib's work was internationally recognized when she was named to the Gender Equality Top 100 list of most influential people in global policy (Apolitical, 2019).

## **Gender Equality and the Arts**

### **Using Art and Other Media in the Fight for Gender Equality**

The role of gender in art and media has been a central focus for the AiW since its inception. Art and media are prominent features in both *Al-Raida* and the AiW's work on campus and beyond. In 1977, in only the second issue of *Al-Raida* to be printed, the Institute supported a project led by Helen Khal, focusing on women artists in Lebanon. Khal was able to identify the class connections between the category of "women artists" and their own or their family's socioeconomic status, noting that most recognizable women artists in Lebanon came from wealthier families. Reporting on the high numbers of women artists in Lebanon, Khal argued that art "is something they can do at home, which permits them to exercise their individuality without endangering their protected status. It is one of the few permissible windows in the woman's harem. Through it she can directly express all that she feels and thinks" (*Al-Raida*, 1977, p.2). In 1988, the AiW published its first journal issue dedicated entirely to women artists (*Al-Raida*, 1988). The issue featured photo reprints from exhibitions by women artists in Lebanon and the wider region, alongside analytical pieces examining the impact of various Western art movements on artists in the region (Musfy, 1988).

The AiW's support of the arts extends well beyond showcasing women and feminist artists. During its first decade of publication, *Al-Raidā* frequently spotlighted the literary works of local women writers. In 1982, then-editor of *Al-Raidā* Rose Ghurayyib translated from Arabic to English the work of a Syrian poet Mumina Al Auf, called *Shahryar's Whip*. Issue 25 commemorated the passing of celebrated Lebanese poet Nadia Tueni, alongside the works of Bahraini poet Hamda Khamis (*Al-Raidā*, 1983). Later, renowned authors like Evelyn Accad had their works published alongside the poems of local women, such as Nuha Salib Salibi (*Al-Raidā*, 1984, "1984? The Beginning of a New World"). Salibi's poems, reflecting her experiences during the Civil War in Lebanon, were featured in a coeval issue of *Al-Raidā* (1984, "Women and War"). In 1985, the AiW released its first issue entirely dedicated to Arab women and literature. This included a critical research paper titled "Arab Feminine Literature Between 1850 and 1950" (Ghurayyib, 1985), chronicling the emergence of women writers from across the Arab region, beginning with writers such as Aisha Timur (1840-1902) and Warda el-Turk, and concluding with more prominent writers, including May Ziadeh, Malak Hifni Nassif, and Salma Sayegh, among others.

## SDGs Covered in this Section

5 GENDER EQUALITY



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



### Methods:

The rise of feminist action across various types of media, especially digital media, has exploded. Across social media platforms like Instagram, X, and Facebook, countless new accounts have emerged, many with the explicit goal of bringing gender equality and feminist issues to light. As a result, *Al-Raidā*'s research for this section was overwhelming, with numerous accounts and profiles to examine and potentially include in this issue.

To choose which profiles to include in this section, we:

- Consulted experts on gender equality, digital media, and fine arts
- Included profiles of organizations and activists who were consistently active on their platform, particularly over the past two years
- Featured those whose work was multilingual (both Arabic and English) OR whose work was circulated both in the region and in the diaspora
- Highlighted work that has been acknowledged by the UN as contributing to the goals of SDG 5 and other efforts tackling gender equality.

In 1989, the *Al-Raida* issue titled “Women and Television” was published, featuring research articles documenting the status of women in Arab media. These articles explored their representation in Arabic language fiction as well as in advertising. The issue highlighted the limited presence of women in journalism and television, particularly in on-screen positions, attributing this phenomenon to normative gender roles (*Al-Raida*, 1989). Nonetheless, the issue listed several established women journalists and television news anchors from around the region, including Salwa Shaker, a Saudi Arabian woman who appeared on television as part of a program dedicated to family and health issues (Ghurayyib, 1989, p. 4).

By the 1990s, *Al-Raida* revisited the themes of women in the media (1996, Issue 72), women in the arts (1996, Issue 73), women and literature (1997, Issue 78), and Arab women and cinema (1999, Issue 86-87), approaching them with a more critical lens. These issues delved deeper into the subject matter, featuring a range of research articles alongside interviews with women artists, reports on film festivals, and film and literary book reviews. Gender and media issues remained of critical importance for the AiW, prompting the publication of another standalone issue of *Al-Raida* dedicated to the theme. However, this time the coverage shifted towards examining how media portrays various aspects of gender, such as GBV and its depiction in news media outlets. This focus on media extended to events hosted by the AiW. In 2000, the AiW organized its inaugural film festival, titled “On / By Women—Documentaries

and Videos,” along with a photo exhibit showcasing Arab women pioneers. Additionally, the Institute supported the production of a live interview between feminist writer Hanan Al-Shaykh and Doha Chams, a journalist. By the 2010s, the AiW was regularly hosting theatrical performances—including a forum theater performance by KAFA (Enough!) Violence Against Women, a Lebanese organization, as well as film festivals and art exhibits. Furthermore, the Institute organized film screenings featuring feminist documentaries and movies from both the Arab region and other parts of the world.

Today, the AiW continues to produce research on and raise awareness about issues of gender discrimination and inequality in the media. Most recently, the AiW published a powerful report documenting the violence faced by women journalists, with a particular focus on the experiences of Lebanese women journalists who were active during the October 2019 revolution, or *thawra*. The AiW has also supported the development of an entry-level university course on gender and media, aimed at building the capacity of students to understand issues of gender in the media. Additionally, the Institute has worked to enhance its own media presence, utilizing social media platforms like Instagram and X, formerly known as Twitter. This effort aims not only to share the work being done within the AiW but also to highlight the work of feminists from around the region. The next section aims to showcase and profile some of the most exciting online work on gender emerging from the region.

## Profiles

### MY.KALI

By Reem El Zouheiry

**“Most of us are spread around numerous countries living in isolation just because who we are is illegal. Most of us probably went through times feeling like being all alone, going through an identity crisis, a family crisis, and a society crisis.”**

(Gayday Magazine, 2012)



Figure 16. My.Kali Magazine

*My.Kali* is an online magazine published in Amman, Jordan, that is LGBTQIA+ focused, the first of its kind in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region since it launched in 2007. With over a decade and a half of publication, it fights against homophobia and transphobia and challenges the gender binary. In its inclusive, open approach, *My.Kali* cultivates and promotes discussions about acceptance and tolerance, featuring queer models on its covers as well as straight artists and other allies. It covers a wide variety of topics, publishing informative articles, opinion pieces, and personal narratives, many of which offer powerful statements on reality. When *My.Kali* first launched in 2007, with founder Kali on the cover of the magazine, it received a vitriolic backlash from conservative media outlets and pundits, with one commentator deeming the magazine part of “The Revolution of the Homosexuals” in Jordan. This led to a smear campaign against Kali, who, along with some friends, continued to publish *My.Kali*.

The magazine’s success in the region and beyond helped open the publishing landscape to other LGBTQIA+ magazines to emerge. The magazine also raised awareness about LGBTQIA+ non-profit organizations and activist collectives around the region (Gay Asia News, 2014). *My.Kali*’s range of topics is diverse, from informing about asexuality, disability, and cross-dressing, to subversive conversations about the limitations in hair expression as a symptom of patriarchy’s influence on queer people and on women. Taboo

topics such as masturbation and sex are normalized. The magazine also debunks myths, such as that of the asexualization of people with disabilities and that of cats and infertility. The latter is linked to the patriarchal value of fertility and motherhood, which only exemplifies one of the ways *My.Kali* creates a space for feminist activism. Pieces, such as “I Belong to Myself: A Response to Custodians of the Patriarchy,” shed light on child abuse, sexual assault, and solidarity among women. Others criticize guardianship and custody laws that commodify women and call for dismantling the patriarchy through empowered personal narratives. Above all, a common theme is ownership—owning yourself and your body. This is why the publisher, Khalid “Kali” Abdel-Hadi, named the magazine after himself. When asked about this choice of name during an interview, Kali noted that:

*I really hate to answer this question, because I know how it'll appeal to whoever reads this! It stands for my name. However, the title doesn't represent a narcissistic call! It envisions a lost privacy, highlights the feeling of dis-ownership, the fact that you can't own, and that's how I feel about My.Kali, that I can't own it, just like many other things in my life, including privacy. It's that nagging voice of “be mine!” The name by itself was decided on as a tribute to that feeling (Gayday Magazine, 2012).*

*My.Kali* also brings to light new faces, such as transwoman Lalla Rami in its 73<sup>rd</sup> issue “Ya Leil Ya Eyein,” and gives a platform to activists, such as the queer Iranian woman in exile, Yasaman Pormosa. Ultimately, *My.Kali*'s mission is to fight against oppressive systems and repressive norms by giving a voice to social justice, promoting diversity, and providing minority groups a place to feel included and safe.

## INKYFADA

By Reem El Zouheiry

**“ An advocate of inclusive storytelling, Inkyfada was the first media group in Tunisia to write exclusively with gender-sensitive language on its French-language platform. ”**

(Inkyfada, “Who we are”)

In response to the events of the Tunisian revolution in 2011 and 2012, a group of journalists, with the support of Ebticar Media, founded *Inkyfada*, an online magazine dedicated to “earning [Tunisian] readers’ trust.” As one of its founders, Malek Khadhraoui, notes, “*Inkyfada* was born of a very clear need because, in 2011 and 2012, we moved from a time when there was no news and citizens couldn’t express themselves, to an over-abundance of expression and channels for discourse” (Canal France International, 2021):



### Gender-Based Violence

Since the very beginning, inkyfada, as a definitely feminist media, aims at exposing all forms of discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation - always from an intersectional perspective - and underlines the oppression experienced by women whether it is from the state, in their household, or in the workplace, etc.

**Figure 17. Inkyfada's Gender-Based Violence sub-section of its webpage, dedicated to issues of gender inequality and women's rights in Tunisia and the Arab region**

*Our primary mission was to try to hold the political leaders accountable for their actions by taking a critical look at their decisions and the impact they have on the lives of Tunisian people. Inkyfada strives to denounce all forms of discrimination, defending everyone's economic and social rights, personal freedom and respect for minorities, i.e., the demands that sparked the revolution. The media group also defends gender equality and has declared itself feminist, whilst tackling the border issue and migration crisis as well.*

Today, *Inkyfada* has become one of the most reputable sources of news in Tunisia and beyond. The group is dedicated to tackling systemic injustice and shedding light on the real issues affecting people's lives, rather than the often opinion-based, polarizing, and frequently corrupt portrayal of news by mainstream media outlets in Tunisia and in the region (Foroudi, 2020).

*Inkyfada*'s work on gender equality issues and women's rights has also made it a standout publication in the region. The magazine's journalists frequently address issues considered taboo, such as sex work and sexual harassment in the workplace. They provide fact-based, analytical coverage on these issues to raise awareness among their readership. Also, in fighting against the oppressive patriarchal system, they dedicate a section of their website to gender inequality (*Inkyfada*, "Gender-based violence"). This section not only addresses mainstream women's issues, but it also examines intersectional injustices and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community. For example, in two recent pieces for the section, *Inkyfada* addresses issues of safety for the queer community and examines the topic of abortion in Tunisia. While Tunisian law exceptionally allows women to seek

an abortion within the first trimester, *Inkyfada*'s research indicates that this is not the reality for most Tunisian women. Practical limitations and restrictions make it nearly impossible to access an abortion, especially in rural areas.

Other aspects of *Inkyfada*'s gender work include podcasts such as "Women on borrowed time, from abuse to femicide," which tells the stories of women victims of violence in Tunisia and the structural factors that allow such violence to continue with impunity. *Inkyfada*'s work is inclusive, intersectional, diverse, and accessible. As such, it empowers women and other marginalized communities, raises awareness on key issues among its readers, and fights against discriminatory practices and unjust systems in Tunisia and across the wider Arab region.

## **KHATEERA**

**By Lara Sammour**

**“ Khateera represents every woman whose intelligence is no longer satisfied by prejudices. Khateera encompasses all women who have shattered glass ceilings and stereotypes, as well as those who make a difference, whether on a small personal scale or in the public sphere. Khateera is an electronic magazine that focuses on women and their diverse experiences and issues. ”**

**(Khateera)**

*Khateera* is an Arab feminist digital platform that was launched in 2019. *Khateera*'s mission is to challenge and reshape the narrative surrounding Arab women. It leverages the power of digital media to debunk existing gender stereotypes in the Arab region and promote a more inclusive society for all genders. The platform has seen significant growth since its inception, reaching over 150 million people and amassing over 1 million followers across various platforms. The name *Khateera* translates to “dangerous” or “impactful” woman in Arabic, which is at the “heart of what the media company is doing”: the dangerous work of challenging the structural systems that continue to disadvantage women and girls, gender non-conforming people, and the LGBTQIA+ community across the Arab region (Hodali, 2023). The brilliance of *Khateera* lies in its often sarcastic and comedy-ridden portrayals of “average” people in the region discussing taboo topics. In a video series entitled *Smatouha Minni* (“You heard it from me”), the main character tells the audience:



**Figure 18. Human evolution with a feminist twist, Smatouha Minni, Episode 10**

*I know you won't believe it but they found out women have been on earth the same amount of time as men have. So why do most men act as if this planet is theirs and women are here*

*as guests?” she asks in the first episode, *The Value of Women*, with her trademark sarcastic smile. “Why?” (Vidal, 2020)*

The speaker goes on to hold up an image of human evolution, wherein Beyoncé represents the most evolved version of *homo sapiens*. Alongside *Smatouha Minni*, *Khateera* publishes articles and maintains a presence on its Instagram page, where topics such as unpaid domestic labor, sexual harassment, gender discrimination and stereotyping, and the difficulties of living with marginalized identities—for example, being trans\* and a refugee—are all covered through *Khateera*'s distinctive sarcastic and comedic tones. Equally importantly, *Khateera* has made it a priority to publish materials in Arabic for women in all Arabic-speaking parts of the world. As Amanda Abou Abdallah, one of *Khateera*'s founders, notes, she wanted *Khateera* to respond to the needs of those in the region and especially the youth. Abou Abdallah avers:

*When I was a child, I would have liked to watch something like [Khateera] in Arabic, not just in the Western content, which I don't always relate to. It's not always the same context, even though the gender issue is a global one. (as cited in Hodali, 2023)*

*Khateera* has also worked to support a more inclusive feminism than what is known as Western (or white) feminism by challenging its lack of intersectionality. This is clearly seen through the creation of the first Palestinian female comic superhero Yafa. This character was developed in response to Marvel studio's announcement of its new 2025 movie, *Captain America: A New World Order*, which features xenophobic portrayals of Arabs as antisemitic and lauds the main character, named Sabra, a woman

who hates Arabs because her son was killed by an attack conducted by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Yafa's story, which is set to be released in November 2023, challenges these harmful and racist portrayals of Arabs and the whitewashing of Israel's settler-colonial crimes in Palestine. With her nature-based powers, the "Daughter of the Earth" protects her people from the continuous onslaught of settler-colonialism in direct response to these harmful depictions of Palestinians and Arabs more generally (Essaid, 2023).

Hence, by leveraging digital media, Khateera has been able to engage millions of individuals and promote a more inclusive society. Its commitment to using data-driven research, humor, and sarcasm to debunk stereotypes and encourage gender equality has made it a valuable resource for young people in the Arab region. Through its content and community-building efforts, Khateera is creating a space for individuals to learn, grow, and advocate for gender equality.

## MS. SAFFAA

By Reem El Zouheiry

Ms. Saffaa's emblematic work emerged as the visual face of the Saudi Arabian women's protest movement #iammyownguardian. The movement, led by a handful of Saudi women activists in the country and in the diaspora, highlighted the plight of the stringent and misogynistic guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia (Malik, 2016). According to guardianship laws, women are restricted in what they can do—such as travel, work, get married, or even obtain a passport—without the explicit support

and accompaniment of a male guardian (Beckerle, 2016). The image that would become the face of the 2016 movement was a response to what Saffaa called a "humiliating" experience she suffered: While studying for her university degree in Sydney, Australia, she received a government notification that she must be living with a male relative (her guardian) in order to continue studying abroad. This, coupled with the "hours of humiliating pleading with Saudi bureaucrats" in Sydney, "fueled the rage behind her protests." Saffaa, recalling the event, noted. "You have to play their game. You have to act like the weak woman and say, 'Thank you for doing this for me, it's a huge favour.' You have to play that role in order to get your shit done" (as cited in Malik, 2016).



Figure 19. I Am My Own Guardian

In 2012, when Saffaa created some of the first iterations of her now-famous "I Am My Own Guardian" image, social media helped launch the images to the forefront of the feminist movement

to repeal the guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia. “Social media gave my work a platform,” Saffaa recalls, “to reach out to people and bypass [those] who control media—the gatekeepers” (as cited in Perrone, 2019). Saffaa, in this source, also notes that her art is a “way of proving that [she] exist[s]”:

*It's a way of proving that there are different kinds of Saudi women. There are different identities that need to be portrayed. Just a few years ago, you would only see Saudi women dressed in black from head to toe in Western media. Now you google 'Saudi women' and some of my images come up! And you will see that there's a lot more color when Saudi women portray themselves. There are a lot of women who dress in black from head to toe, either because they're forced to dress that way or because they choose to. But that isn't me! My head is shaved, I dress in colors, I wear shorts and sunglasses, I skate, I hula-hoop – I do a lot of different things. And every time I googled Saudi women I didn't see myself reflected in there. As if I didn't exist. (as cited in Perrone, 2019)*

Saffaa always uses her art to make a statement. “If art is not subversive,” she says, “it is not good.” She purposefully gave the woman in the “I Am My Own Guardian” image a shemagh, a headscarf traditionally worn by men. In doing so, she makes a powerful statement about reversing gender normative power dynamics. In her work and activism, she puts a big focus on the work of other women. Saffaa makes sure to speak about the bravery and strength of Saudi women in general, emphasizing that “[Saudi women] have a voice, that [they] are active agents in [their] society.” Part of this work has included a mural of several anonymous Saudi feminists and activists on the side of a restaurant in Sydney.

Unfortunately, Saffaa has faced and continues to face harassment from those opposed to her message both in Saudi Arabia and in the diaspora. But her persistence and support from her thousands of followers have enabled her to create a network of support, allowing her to continue producing purposeful artwork. In Sydney, where her mural of Saudi women activists was defaced, painting materials and other forms of support – from followers, community members, and even political leaders – allowed her to produce an entirely new mural that included contributions from other artists. Together, they produced a brand-new mural that included other feminists, such as indigenous feminists from Australia, and others from around the world. Despite the bullying and harassment, once reported to the Saudi authorities, her art remains a pillar for the Saudi feminist movement. Her work is not only driven by the injustice she sees but also by a need for self-expression.



Figure 20. Mural located on the side of Moroccan Deli-cacy, Sydney, Australia

## QAHERA: A COMIC BY DEENA By Reem El Zouheiry

Feminism and activism can take many forms, and in the case of Deena Mohamed, the author and artist of Qahera, it

takes the shape of a webcomic series featuring a veiled Egyptian female Muslim superheroine. Qahera, the name of this character, is the female form of the Arabic word qaher, meaning someone who has been triumphant: a victor. But Qahera is also the Arabic name for the city of Cairo, emphasizing Qahera's role as a heroine in Egypt. She helps women as well as men, the poor and underprivileged, and even animals. The webcomic currently has 10 parts, all available for free online, in English and in Arabic (Qahera).



Figure 21. An excerpt from the first Qahera comic strip

Qahera is a semi-satirical work that criticizes patriarchy, including white exclusionary feminists who make unfounded assumptions about or victimize women of color. Qahera brings to light issues of sexual harassment, Islamophobia, and victim-blaming,

showcasing how the legal system fails survivors of assault—and even blames them. Qahera is not the first veiled superhero to appear in graphic novels; however, she is the first Muslim, Egyptian superheroine created by a Muslim, Egyptian woman.

Deena Mohamed, the creative force behind Qahera, is a 28-year-old Egyptian graphic novelist and illustrator whose work integrates Islamic and feminist values. She began her work at the age of 18 with her webcomic Qahera, which went viral. In addition to Qahera, she has worked on a variety of other projects. Most recently, she published a graphic novel trilogy titled Shubeik Lubeik, which translates to “Your Wish is My Command” (Gharib, 2023).

Mohamed has also done freelance work locally and internationally with UN Women, Google, Harassmap, Viacom, and Mada Masr. She has participated in events, panels, symposiums, and conferences that feature her work and discuss the power of graphic media for conveying important political messages, including feminist awareness-raising.

## LINA BEN MHENNI

### Blogger

Lina Ben Mhenni was part of a vanguard of social media activists who—despite threats of physical violence amid strict government censorship—served as a frontline source of news during the Tunisian Revolution, which began in 2010 with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid, in response to continued harassment by the police. During the early days of the revolution and afterward, Ben Mhenni reported on some of the most egregious rights violations occurring in cities where international and even Tunisian news outlets had limited or no access. For many, Ben Mhenni became a critical source of information on the Tunisian Revolution, publishing her observations on her blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, which she started in 2007 to write about human rights. Eventually, the stories she documented on her blog turned into a book, *Tunisian Girl: A Blogger for an Arab Spring*.

Although people are predominantly familiar with Ben Mhenni's work related to the Tunisian Revolution, her fight for justice extended beyond it, including an initiative to create libraries inside prisons. Following her death on January 27, 2020, Ben Mhenni's work was recognized by countless platforms, including the Delegation of the European Union to Tunisia, which set up the "Prix Lina Ben Mhenni pour la liberté d'expression" (The Lina Ben Mhenni Prize for the Freedom of Expression). At one point, she was a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. She was described fondly as an "icon of civil activism" by prime minister-designate Elyes Fakhfakh and as a woman who "ma[de] history" by President Kais Saied.

## An Interview with Hanan Ishaq

### Multimedia Artist

I am Hanan—writer, photographer, and visual artist currently based in Yemen. I began working in the humanitarian field soon after the war erupted in Yemen. I currently work as a humanitarian worker for a UN agency. I initially started exploring visual arts during Yemen's civil unrest in 2010 through photography. Being forced into the throes of an external conflict brought about the need for an internal resolution and reinterpretation of the world. I worked on several photographic projects which have been showcased internationally and locally. My work as an artist today has shifted from photographic works to hand-drawn ink on paper, which has opened a new door for me both into myself and to the outside world.

Through my ink-on-paper works, I have been able to express complex interpretations and emotions (Ishaq). My artwork explores a range of concepts, including the realities of everyday life, relationships, ideological development, and moral superiority in the context of a conservative and complex socio-political reality [in the Middle East]. In addition, I have expressed my personal philosophical interpretations of social structures, collective consciousness, and challenging the status quo. My oldest talent was writing, especially poetry. My writing has melded with every stage of my life as an artist and remains an important part of my self-expression.

*How do you see your work in relation to the fight for gender equality and/or women's rights in the Arab/Islamic region?*

My work focuses on and symbolizes several social issues, especially women's rights and gender equality/inequality. Being a woman based in a region deeply rooted in religious ideologies and described as one of the worst areas in the world to live in as a woman, I face these issues myself, daily. My experience has led me to explore the philosophies and psychological structures that support the existence of (and perpetuate) such societies. Drawing has been my voice against this reality. Examples of concomitant subject matters that I have explored in my artwork include patriarchy, and its religious and cultural influences on ideology and behavior, and also, the power of the liberated and conscious individual.

*What do you hope your work can contribute to the struggle for gender equality/women's rights?*

I hope my work inspires a revolution of self. In transcending the self and ideological frameworks that have been handed down to us from society, we gain our power back, and we are able rewrite our stories. My work hopes to bring this conversation to the table: I want people who see my work to revisit the status quo and explore shifts in their current perspectives. In transcending this self and eventually the collective self, we are more capable of growing into the truest and most authentic version of ourselves, personally and collectively.

## **SARAH HEGAZY**

### **Writer & Activist**

Sarah Hegazy's life is a testament to the revolutionary amounts of courage, will, and belief that it takes to live a queer life in

a world that has, at every opportunity, proven to be hostile. In both life and death, Hegazy represented for many queer Arabs and others in the Arab region and its diasporas the ongoing struggle for recognition and dignity for queer communities. Born in 1989, Hegazy's life was spent learning about and engaging with questions of social justice, labor rights, class power, and dignity at established universities such as Columbia University and the University of London. A queer feminist activist, Hegazy's work was recognized through her writing and her work with the Bread and Freedom party in Egypt. She was also an active critic of the dictatorial rule of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, the president of Egypt (Maurice, 2021).

In 2017, Hegazy rose to global attention after she raised the rainbow flag, a symbol of the LGBTQIA+ community, at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Egypt. Before disbanding in 2022, Mashrou' Leila was a Lebanese band whose lead singer Hamed Sinno was an openly gay activist. This, alongside the group's inclusive song lyrics that fought against conservative backlash against the LGBTQIA+ community, led to continuous harassment of the band by conservative groups and religious governments in the region, with some countries banning them from performing. Following the concert, Hegazy and others—the exact number of people remains unknown—were arrested. Hegazy was detained for three months. During that time, she was put in solitary confinement, was not allowed to talk to other people, subjected to electric shock torture, and sexually harassed and tortured by prison staff and

other inmates because of her sexuality (El Srigany, 2020).

Under pressure from activists around the region and the world, Hegazy was finally released. However, the fear of being arrested again drove her to flee to Canada. In 2020, Hegazy killed herself. At only 30 years old, Hegazy's death sent a shockwave around the global Arab region and LGBTQIA+ community; yet another young queer person was dead because of the global oppression facing the community (Herstory, 2022). Tributes followed, honoring Hegazy's life and reiterating the continued struggle for freedom, especially in the Arab region. A year after the news of Hegazy's death, a group of lesbian and queer feminists launched "MENA Lesbian and Queer Women's Pride Day." The joint statement, signed by more than 39 organizations, noted, "On this day, let us remember Sarah Hegazy and all the women fighters we have lost on this path."

## **The Performing Arts**

### **SALMA TARZI** **Feminist Filmmaker** **By Reem El Zouheiry**

If you search "Salma Tarzi" on Google, you'll find numerous links, including her Instagram and other social media profiles, as well as brief biographies on websites like Mada Masr, IMDb, and other film websites. These sources reveal Tarzi as an independent feminist filmmaker, visual artist, and essayist known for her film *Underground on the Surface* (2013) and her more recent works challenging rape culture within Arab film media.

What you will not see, however, in your Google search is Tarzi's courageous and unapologetic struggle against a violent patriarchal culture in the Arab region that protects perpetrators of sexual violence. Tarzi was tried and found guilty of "defamation" of film director Islam Azazi by an Egyptian court, as a result of her solidarity with several sexual assault victims of his. After speaking out on the case and on their behalf, several of whose testimonies were published on the Arabic-language blog "Deftar Hekayat," Tarzi was accused of slander, violation of privacy (of the perpetrator), and "intentional disturbance" (Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa [WHRDMENA], 2022). In February, 2023, a decision by an Egyptian appeals court upheld the guilty verdict against Tarzi, imposing a fine of over 50,000 Egyptian pounds that she must pay to Azazi.

Tarzi's case is not the first of its kind in Egypt. Unfortunately, as noted by WHRDMENA—a human rights watch network—such cases are becoming increasingly common, with feminist advocates, especially those that speak out on behalf of victims of sexual violence, often facing punishment by a growingly carceral and patriarchal state. Furthermore, the widespread use of social media, as well as the viral nature of high-profile sexual assault cases, has not empowered victims and survivors of high-profile sexual assault cases, but has instead provided perpetrators with additional tools to retaliate. According to WHRDMENA, the outcome of Tarzi's case, both the initial verdict and the appeal's decision, set a "dangerous precedent in legally punishing [women human rights defenders] and feminists for their

solidarity with victims and survivors of sexual violence" (WHRDMENA, 2022).

As Tarzi herself has said, the danger of such "individual incident[s] that happen" is that they can "lead [a person] into the trap of isolating [oneself] and believing [you are] an individual victim," when instead, these things "happen to us" (Tarzi, 2020). Indeed, these incidents are a reflection of the violent and patriarchal structure that we all live in. These are the words that Tarzi wrote in two email correspondences to friends after her own experience of sexual violence during a burglary that took place in her apartment home in Cairo, Egypt. In an edited and consolidated version of the two emails published on *Mada Masr*, Tarzi powerfully describes the circular nature of "the system": how it "corners you" so that when "an incident happens to you, because of the system...you're left with no other choice than to use the tools of this system, not because they are the only ones that work but because the system does not allow for other ones to exist." Tarzi continues: "the system creates a full circle, and when it's your turn to become the victim, and you're isolated and helpless, the system gives you a smug smile that says: 'Do you see now that I was right?'"

"My biggest fear was that I might believe them, believe that they are right," writes Tarzi. Tarzi's experiences, both personal and work-related, exemplify this type of thinking. She emphasizes the interconnectedness of issues often romanticized by the system as "individual" things and urges reconsidering how such an individualistic approach hinders our ability to challenge the system. "We are not ok, but we are awesome," Tarzi concludes, "and we will be fine."

## ANYA KNEEZ

**Drag Queen Activist**

**By Salwa Abu-Chaar**

**“ I felt like I was conquering the world by just wearing a pair of heels. ”**

**(Cold Cuts Online, 2017)**

"I always say that I'm fully blooded Lebanese. I was raised in a very Lebanese way, with very Lebanese parents in a very Lebanese family, that went to every Lebanese festival in California." That is how Anya Kneez, a Beirut-based drag performer, introduces her personal history in the documentary *ANYA KNEEZ: A Queen in Beirut*. While studying fashion in New York City, Anya Kneez developed a love for performance arts, self-expression, and drag. Not long after, she began performing in drag shows at different locations across the U.S.

Despite her three years in New York being "the best of [their] life," Anya Kneez has moved back to Beirut. "I do not regret one bit that I moved to [Lebanon]", she says, acknowledging the complexity yet necessity of their return. There, Anya Kneez describes a flourishing career: "[Moving back] has been amazing for my career," she reflects, even while shouldering the heavy responsibility of caregiving for her parents, whose health at the time of the documentary was preventing them from earning a living.

In addition to family responsibilities, Anya Kneez is "hiding," in their own

words, in their own house, to avoid a confrontation with their parents about their sexuality. Outside her home, however, Anya Kneeze became a household name among the drag circuit in Beirut, which she helped pioneer. In 2014 and 2015, Anya Kneeze began working with Sandra Melhem, the owner of Projekt, a gay club in Beirut, to perform and eventually host drag shows for private parties. Anya recalls her first performance feeling “like a TED[x] talk”: “I had to sit people down and say, ‘You have to understand that I’m not trying to be a woman: I’m not a woman. And I’m paying homage to femininity, in the way of performance art” (as cited in Khaled, 2021).

Recognizing the achievement of building a drag scene in such a short time – only six or so years since that first show – is remarkable, given the context. “One very important thing is the fact that we are talking about drag in the Middle East. I never thought that I would be able to be queer or to do drag in my home country. I never in a million years thought that would be possible. The fact that we were able to do it and cultivate safe spaces for people was especially important because it’s very difficult in the Middle East.”

Building this drag scene in Lebanon immeasurably contributed to the struggle for gender equality in the country. But difficulties remain, especially for queer people. The younger generation “is much more courageous than we were 10 years ago,” Anya notes. “They think Beirut is New York, where they can be as out or extravagant or eccentric as they want to be. This is something that we wish we could do in Lebanon, but I think it’s a matter of baby steps if we’re going to continue cultivating this queer scene.

Our voices and our presence were too big to keep the scene underground and we slowly moved above ground. But we have to do it first in safe spaces, spaces that we have created before we infiltrate spaces that were not meant for us.”



Figure 22. Anya Kneeze for Paper Magazine 2024

Anya Kneeze’s drag performances have not only built the drag community in Beirut. Their work has supported the broader LGBTQIA+ community during times of continued socioeconomic and political crises that have left marginalized people and their households in dire need. Following the 2020 explosion at the Port of Beirut, Kneeze raised awareness about the Queer Relief Fund (Al-Raida, 2022) and facilitated the transfer of monetary donations to those in need, even though she was in New York at the time and not Beirut.

Today, Anya continues her advocacy work from abroad and remains an important parental figure to the Beirut drag community. Recently, Anya has used her platform to raise awareness about the post-October 7<sup>th</sup> genocide

occurring in Gaza in collaboration with *Paper Magazine* (Figure 22). As part of the larger project “Clash of the Prints,” Anya Kneeze wore an outfit made entirely from Palestinian *kuffiyehs*; writing about her outfit, she noted in her Instagram post that “nothing makes me happier than when I am able to be political with my art and this was the moment to do it” (as cited in El Gharib, 2024).

## BuSSY Egyptian Theater Project

By Dana Sammak

**“People generally don’t think their own personal stories are important. Most say ‘yes, but my story’s not important enough to share,’ but we say ‘no, it is important.’”**

**Sondos Shabbayek,  
Director of the BuSSY Project**

Inspired by a viewing of Eve Ensler’s “*Vagina Monologues*” at the American University in Cairo (AUC) in 2004, the BuSSY project was created in 2006 by a group of young women with the aim of providing Egyptian women a platform to share their stories and make their voices heard. While the content of the original *Vagina Monologues* inspired Sondos Shabbayek and others to start BuSSY, it was the format of “public performances based on life-stories” that truly resonated with them (Attalah, 2010). Putting women’s stories center-stage proved to be instrumental in engaging audiences on topics traditionally considered taboo or dismissed as “women’s issues” not

worthy of discussion in the public sphere. In fact, the successes of BuSSY’s performances far surpassed their other, more “traditional” activities, such as “organizing lectures, conducting research, and screening films on women’s issues.” Eventually, BuSSY came to focus exclusively on these theatrical performances. One of BuSSY’s co-directors, Menan Omar, pointed out that “the performances are a more innovative way” of engaging audiences on these issues, leading the group to prioritize this format.

Even the name of the project, BuSSY, straddles this line between “traditional” and radically open and transformative. In Egyptian colloquial Arabic, the term *bussy* is a transliteration of the feminine version of the Arabic command “to look at.” Yet, as Nehal Elmeligy explains, “in the project’s attempt to stay true to its source of inspiration” – the *Vagina Monologues* – “the word ‘bussy’ was purposefully chosen because it’s a play on a slang word (pussy) used to refer to vaginas,” with the “b” representing the way Arabic speakers often pronounce the English letter “p,” as the “p” sound does not exist in Arabic vernacular (Elmeligy, 2018).

Since its inception, BuSSY has brought awareness to gender issues affecting Egyptians every day, irrespective of their gender, class, or other identity status. The monologues performed by BuSSY allow people to share their own stories on stage, without any intermediaries, offering them “a space for free expression on issues that society often fail[s] to address.” These topics include “harassment, rape, gender discrimination, honor

killing, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, motherhood, domestic violence, child abuse, mass sexual assaults, and others (BuSSy).

BuSSY's impact has taken it from a performance initiative based at the AUC to a regional and now international phenomenon. The project has been performed in various countries in Europe and the Arab region, and in India. Initially rooted in Cairo, the BuSSY project has since evolved from a university group into an independent theater project that travels across Egypt and beyond, sharing the stories of women through performances and storytelling workshops.

Today, the BuSSY project is revered as one of Egypt's most prominent feminist social movements, renowned for its role in conscious-raising and empowering both storytellers and listeners. By centering women's stories and feelings, BuSSY enables individuals to reclaim their narrative and achieve liberation by turning memory into weapon and awareness into action.

### **An Interview with Thana Farooq, Visual Artist**

I was born and raised in Yemen. I lived in Canada, the U.S., and London, until I settled in the Netherlands five years ago. I studied Art and photography abroad, but my artistic vision took shape in Yemen. The urge to express and create grew in me while living there. Later, after emigrating to the Netherlands during the war, I focused on exploring the changes that have shaped and defined my life, specifically my sense of belonging (and not belonging) both in Yemen and the Netherlands. My point of photographic

production and arrangement comes from a place of deep understanding, of empathy, and of carnal experience. I work with images, texts, and sound. My work for the past three years has been about settling myself in the unfamiliar and negotiating themes of memory and intergenerational trauma.

*How are you affected by gender norms and inequality?*

There are these tiny things, like being unable to ride a bike in the streets, and then there are the big things, like the reality that I was challenged to carry on my work as a female photographer in the context of conflict and gender norms in Yemen. Between these small and big details, I always felt how incredibly difficult it is to be a woman in this region.

*How does your work intersect with themes surrounding gender norms and inequality?*

In my work, I have been on a mission to create an archive of memories of the emotions and the feelings that are often lost in histories of migration and displacement, including nostalgia, joy, loneliness, and not feeling much at all. I investigate not only the pressures of arrival, but the emotional exile already experienced at home because of pervasive patriarchal relationships. My work is sometimes rooted in my autobiographical memory of experiencing these inequalities and the emotional exile I experienced.

*What do you want people to take away from your work? How do you want them to be affected by it?*

In my projects, I stress the importance that the viewer does not see my subjects as fodder for news articles, or as infantilized victims to be pitied. I aim, instead, for the viewers to cohabit the purgatory of my subjects with me, to consider the real lives of refugees, and to know their names. This is especially important in my work on women migrants. I want the audience to engage with their stories which are infused with their resilient and unbroken spirits, unfailing and devoid of self-pity. I also love this quote by Sara Ahmed, "When you have to fight for an existence, fighting can become an existence" (feministkilljoys, 2023). I want my audience to feel that fight in my work.

*How do you define yourself in relation to the term "feminism"?*

I am a visual researcher who hunts to visualize the buried powerful, unsung stories of women from under the rubble of patriarchy and social inequality – an artist who seeks to challenge the audience with difficult questions through words, photography and moving image.

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