

# THE MOST PRESSING ISSUES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE SWANA REGION

## 2024



TRIGGER WARNING FOR SEXUAL/EMOTIONAL/PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND SUICIDE

# GBV IN SWANA IS A GLOBAL CONCERN

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region, coupled with other factors such as genocide, apartheid, war, disasters, and more, has become a focal point of global concern in 2024.

GBV in the region is endemic, driven by a complex mix of political, social, cultural, and economic factors. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are on the front lines, fighting against gender apartheid, systemic abuses, and the use of violence as a tool of war while they face severe repression from state and non-state actors.

Furthermore, the international community must confront its own role in contributing to and perpetuating these violations—whether through policy failures, insufficient support for women's rights movements, or actions that have destabilized the region—acknowledging that passive complicity and selective advocacy exacerbate the suffering of women in the SWANA region and beyond.

This report delves into the specific situations in several countries across the region, highlighting the urgent need for transnational feminist solidarity, resourcing, and funding.



## AFGHANISTAN: INSTITUTIONALIZED GENDER APARTHEID

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's rule has led to a state of gender apartheid, institutionalizing violence against women and girls (VAWG) at every level. Since their return to power, the Taliban has enacted policies that severely limit women's rights, including bans on education, employment, and freedom of movement, completely erasing women from public life. WHRDs face systematic persecution, including arbitrary detention, harassment, and even torture, as the Taliban targets any resistance to their gender-based restrictions.

The Human Rights Council also notes that "Afghanistan is experiencing a human rights crisis of gender discrimination on an unprecedented scale," where the Taliban's policies have created an environment of pervasive fear and violence. The international community must recognize these actions as not merely cultural or political issues, but as gross violations of human rights that necessitate urgent intervention and the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity.



# YEMEN: INTERSECTION OF CONFLICT AND GBV

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has severely exacerbated GBV, creating a dire situation for women and girls. The intersection of conflict and pre-existing gender inequalities has led to a sharp increase in various forms of violence, including child marriage, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. Armed groups have been reported to use sexual violence as a tactic to instill fear and exert control over populations, disproportionately affecting women and children.

The collapse of legal and protection systems, coupled with the economic crisis, has left women and girls more vulnerable to violence with little recourse to justice. UNFPA has reported significant increases in GBV incidents in Yemen, including a 50% rise in physical assault and a 35% increase in sexual abuse. The situation is further complicated by deeply rooted societal norms that often justify and tolerate violence against women. Despite these challenges, Yemeni women have displayed remarkable resilience, with women's rights organizations playing a crucial role in raising awareness and providing services to GBV survivors. However, the lack of specialized service providers and the limited capacity for self-protection among women due to marginalization and exclusion from decision-making processes continue to hinder efforts to address GBV effectively.





## SUDAN

In Sudan, the ongoing conflict has led to an increase in the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Human Rights Watch reports that military forces and militias are systematically using rape and other forms of sexual assault against women and girls in conflict zones to terrorize and displace communities.

The chaos of war many women with no access to justice or support services, further entrenching their vulnerability. WHRDs in Sudan risk their lives to document these atrocities and advocate for justice, often facing threats, harassment, and physical attacks by state and non-state actors alike. This use of sexual violence destabilizes communities and suppresses dissent revealing the intersections between military aggression and gender oppression in Sudan.

Alarming, recent reports indicate that the situation has become so unbearable. Approximately 130 women have reportedly taken their own lives due to the trauma of sexual violence.

Hala Al-Karib, regional director of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, stated:

*"Our bodies are being used as tools and weapons of war. It is heartbreaking that women in central Sudan are resorting to suicide."*

# PALESTINE



In Palestine, women face a dual onslaught of military violence and systemic GBV under occupation. Reports highlight that sexual violence is used as a tool of political repression, further marginalizing Palestinian women in occupied territories. WHRDs who document these abuses are frequently targeted, harassed, and arrested by Israeli security forces. Palestinian women are subjected to a unique matrix of oppression where military occupation and patriarchal violence intersect, creating an environment of constant threat. This violence is compounded by impunity which makes it difficult for survivors to seek justice or support, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and silence. The ongoing aggression in Gaza has escalated into what some experts describe as a genocide, with significant repercussions for women's reproductive health.

Since October 7, 2023, over 45,159 people have been killed by the genocidal and apartheid state of Israel, with women and children making up approximately 70% of those killed. The humanitarian crisis has severely impacted access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), with many pregnant women forced to give birth in unsanitary conditions without proper medical care or anesthesia. Reports indicate that emergency cesarean sections are being performed under dire circumstances, with women often discharged just hours after giving birth, significantly increasing maternal and infant mortality rates. The psychological toll of the ongoing violence has also led to increased rates of miscarriages and stillbirths, with some reports indicating a 300% rise in miscarriages due to the stress of the bombings. The lack of accountability for such acts perpetuates a cycle of abuse and silence, making it exceedingly difficult for survivors to seek justice.

GENOCIDE AND SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE

# BAHRAIN

In Bahrain, GBV, particularly against foreign domestic workers, is alarmingly prevalent. According to a World Bank report, 30-40% of attempted suicides among foreign female domestic workers are linked to physical, verbal, and/or sexual abuse. While Bahrain has made some strides, such as implementing a National Strategy to Protect Women against Domestic Violence, these measures remain inadequate in addressing the root causes of GBV. The legal framework in Bahrain lacks comprehensive protection for women. For instance, while there is a Domestic Violence Law, it does not criminalize marital rape, and police often fail to investigate domestic violence complaints thoroughly. Activists report that women are frequently discouraged from pursuing justice due to societal stigma and a culture of impunity.

THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORM



# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE): LEGAL REFORMS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

GBV remains a significant issue in the UAE, despite recent legal reforms. In 2020, the UAE introduced a new domestic violence law that allows women to obtain restraining orders against abusers. However, the law's definition of domestic violence reinforces male guardians' ability to discipline their wives, female relatives, and children to an extent that authorities find acceptable. The law also does not criminalize marital rape. While these reforms are steps in the right direction, implementation remains inconsistent, and women continue to face barriers to justice. Women in the UAE experience harassment, discrimination, and violence in both public and private spheres. The government has made some progress in establishing shelters and hotlines for survivors, but systemic issues persist. Women who speak out against abuses risk retaliation, including detention and deportation. Despite these challenges, the UAE has strengthened workplace harassment laws, explicitly prohibiting sexual harassment, bullying, and any form of violence against employees. However, migrant women workers, particularly those under the *kafala* sponsorship system, remain especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The *kafala* system is a sponsorship-based labor system used in several SWANA countries, binding migrant workers to their employers, often resulting in exploitative conditions and restricted rights





# IRAN

## STATE-SANCTIONED OPPRESSION AND GENDER APARTHEID



The situation for women in Iran has become increasingly dire, with state-sanctioned GBV reaching alarming levels. The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran has documented widespread use of sexual and gender-based violence by state agents, including rape, gang rape, and electrocution of genitalia, committed against women and girls across multiple provinces. These acts form part of a systematic attack against civilians, particularly targeting those demanding freedom and equality. The brutal repression of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests, which began in September 2022, exemplifies the regime's violent response to women's rights advocacy. Security forces have killed hundreds of protesters, including women and children, often using unnecessary and disproportionate force.

WHRDs have always faced severe risks, including arbitrary detention, torture, and sexual harassment, for their activism. Iran's legal system perpetuates GBV at a systemic level through discriminatory laws such as mandatory hijab regulations. The "Chastity and Hijab Law" intensifies punishments for women accused of non-compliance, further institutionalizing oppression. Women face systematic harassment, intimidation, and harsh punishments, including state-sanctioned flogging, for violating these laws. The pervasive nature of GBV in Iran, coupled with the state's active role in perpetrating and sanctioning such violence, has led UN experts to describe the situation as tantamount to gender apartheid. There are growing calls for international action to address these systematic abuses and hold the Iranian regime accountable for its crimes against humanity, particularly those targeting women and girls.

# EGYPT

The current state of GBV in Egypt in 2024 is of significant concern, with various indicators highlighting the pervasive nature of the issue. GBV is widespread in Egypt, affecting millions of women. According to the Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey conducted in 2015, around 7.8 million women suffer from all forms of violence annually. The forms of GBV include physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is particularly prevalent, with 41.80% of married women experiencing psychological violence, 31.13% experiencing physical violence, and 11.76% experiencing sexual violence. IPV significantly undermines women's labor supply and bargaining power within households. Despite some legal advancements, such as the 2014 law criminalizing sexual harassment, the enforcement of these laws remains a challenge. Recent proposals aim to increase penalties for domestic abuse and introduce mandatory psychology exams before marriage to reduce family crimes. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated domestic violence, with a notable increase in violent crimes against women. In 2021, the Observatory of Crimes of Violence Against Women recorded 813 cases, up from 415 the previous year. Women's rights groups continue to push for reforms and better protection mechanisms. Grassroots efforts have led to increased civil discourse on domestic violence and policy reforms, although the effectiveness of these efforts is still being evaluated. Despite the existence of laws and policies, there is a significant gap between legislation and enforcement. Many laws remain unimplemented or poorly enforced, leaving women without adequate protection. Conservative gender role attitudes persist, contributing to the prevalence of GBV. These attitudes reduce women's bargaining power and increase their susceptibility to violence.



# SAUDI ARABIA: PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

While Saudi Arabia has made some progress in addressing GBV and women's rights in recent years, significant challenges remain. The country has implemented some reforms, but women still face systemic discrimination and oppression. In 2018, Saudi Arabia passed an anti-sexual harassment law, marking a step forward in protecting women's rights.

The government has also relaxed some restrictions on women's freedoms, such as lifting the ban on women driving in 2018 and allowing women to obtain passports and travel without male guardian permission in 2019. However, these reforms have not fully addressed the deep-rooted issues of GBV and women's oppression in Saudi society. The male guardianship system, though somewhat relaxed, continues to be a significant barrier to women's autonomy. This system often traps women in abusive situations, as they require male guardian approval for many important life decisions. Women in Saudi Arabia still face judicial oppression and harassment, particularly from state actors enforcing restrictive social norms. Marginalized groups, such as migrant domestic workers, are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The country's legal system, based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, often fails to adequately protect women's rights. WHRDs and feminist activists face severe risks for their advocacy efforts. Many have been subjected to arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and even torture for speaking out against the government's policies. The arrest of several women's rights activists in 2018, just weeks before the lifting of the driving ban, highlighted the ongoing suppression of dissent.



# TUNISIA: INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES AND RISE IN AUTHORITARIANISM



Despite Tunisia's progressive legislation on gender equality, notably the landmark 2017 law aimed at eliminating violence against women, GBV remains a significant issue in 2024. The gap between legal protections and their implementation poses a substantial challenge, as many women continue to experience various forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and online violence. GBV is perceived as the most critical women's rights issue in Tunisia, with many acknowledging that men are never justified in using physical force against women. However, a substantial portion of the population still believes that GBV is a private matter best handled within families, leading to underreporting of incidents. The political landscape in Tunisia has shifted significantly under President Kais Saied's administration, particularly following the October 2024 elections. Saied's consolidation of power has led to increased restrictions on civil liberties and dissent, which directly impacts activists working on women's rights and GBV issues.

Activists advocating for women's rights and against GBV face harassment and intimidation. The societal stigma surrounding GBV reporting is compounded by fears of backlash from authorities and community members alike. This atmosphere discourages victims from seeking help and silences those who might advocate for change. The international community has expressed concern over Tunisia's direction under Saied, particularly regarding human rights violations and the treatment of activists. The alignment with non-Western powers like China and Russia signals a potential shift away from international scrutiny regarding human rights issues, highlighting the ongoing suppression of dissent.

# LIBYA: CONFLICT-DRIVEN GBV

Libya is characterized by an interplay of humanitarian crisis, ongoing conflict, and significant challenges in providing adequate support and protection for vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls. GBV remains a critical issue in Libya, exacerbated by the ongoing instability and the influx of refugees. Reports indicate that many refugees, particularly women and children, arrive in Libya traumatized and vulnerable to further violence.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has noted that a significant number of Sudanese refugees arriving in Libya are survivors of GBV, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive protection services. Despite efforts to improve legal protections against GBV to draft a comprehensive GBV law, enforcement remains weak. The lack of an adequate legal framework continues to hinder effective protection for women against various forms of violence. Adding to this, existing support systems are strained due to limited resources and ongoing political instability.



# SYRIA: WARTIME SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

In Syria, the ongoing conflict has intensified the risk of GBV, with sexual violence being systematically used as a weapon of war by various factions. According to [UNHCR](#), women and girls in Syria face multiple GBV risks, including rape, sexual assault, and forced marriage.

The breakdown of social structures and the lack of access to justice and support services have left many survivors isolated and vulnerable. Syrian WHRDs and activists are often targeted for documenting these abuses, facing threats, harassment, and violence from both government forces and armed groups.

The urgent need for international intervention to protect women in conflict zones and ensure accountability for GBV crimes is primordial, as the country remains one of the most dangerous places for women in the region.



# MOROCCO: AWAITING A NEW FAMILY CODE

GBV continues to affect millions of women and girls in Morocco. Reports indicate that a substantial number of women have experienced various forms of violence, including domestic abuse and sexual harassment. For instance, a study highlighted that approximately 66.4% of women in certain regions had faced psychological violence, while nearly half reported physical violence. The enactment of Law 103-13, aimed at eliminating violence against women, demonstrates the government's commitment to addressing these issues; however, implementation remains inconsistent, and many women still face barriers when seeking justice or support. Survivors of GBV, particularly those affected by the September 2023 earthquake, have faced additional hardships. Many were left without adequate support systems, exacerbating their vulnerability to violence. The lack of comprehensive care facilities and legal protections continues to hinder recovery efforts.

The *Moudawana*, or Family Code, which governs personal status laws in Morocco, has been a focal point for feminist activists advocating for gender equality. Although some reforms have been made since its introduction in 2004, many activists argue that significant changes are still needed. Key reforms that remain pending include:

- Amendments that would provide greater legal protections against domestic violence and ensure equitable rights within marriage and divorce,
- Forbidding child marriage and, necessitating stricter enforcement and,
- Legal reforms to protect minors.

Feminist activists in Morocco have increasingly faced online harassment and targeted attacks as they advocate for gender equality and reforms related to GBV. This digital harassment aims to silence their voices and undermine their efforts to promote awareness about GBV issues.



# IRAQ: PUSHING FOR CHILD MARRIAGE



Ongoing challenges exacerbate GBV of the country's tumultuous history and socio-political dynamics. The situation is characterized by high rates of domestic violence, a lack of comprehensive legal protections, and significant societal stigma surrounding victims. An estimated 1.32 million people in Iraq are at risk of various forms of GBV, with over 75% being women and adolescent girls. Reports indicate that 77% of GBV incidents are linked to domestic violence, which has surged due to the legacy of conflict and socio-economic instability. The enduring effects of decades of conflict have reinforced traditional gender norms and increased women's dependence on male providers, contributing to rising rates of intimate partner violence.

A report by the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights highlights how conflict-related factors continue to perpetuate domestic violence, making homes increasingly dangerous for women and girls. Despite the alarming rates of GBV, Iraq's legal framework remains inadequate. The absence of specific laws criminalizing domestic violence allows for a culture of impunity. Article 41 of the Iraqi Penal Code permits men to "discipline" their wives and children, blurring the lines between discipline and violence. Although there have been efforts to draft an Anti-Domestic Violence Law, progress has been slow and met with resistance.

In 2024, there are discussions surrounding proposed legislation aimed at lowering the legal marriage age for girls in Iraq. This move has sparked significant debate among various stakeholders, including women's rights advocates who argue that such changes could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities among young girls. Activists emphasize that lowering the marriage age could increase the risk of early pregnancies and further entrench cycles of poverty and abuse among young women.



# LEBANON: ECONOMIC CRISIS AND GENOCIDE

The state of GBV in Lebanon has significantly deteriorated amid the ongoing genocide and humanitarian crisis that escalated in 2024. The combination of intensified hostilities, mass displacement, and existing socio-economic challenges has exacerbated vulnerabilities, particularly for women and girls. Since mid-September 2024, Lebanon has faced a surge in violence, leading to over 1 million people displaced, including 520,000 women and girls.

The bombing from Israel has resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries, with many casualties occurring in just a few weeks. This escalation has increased the risks of GBV, as many women and girls are forced into overcrowded shelters where they lack privacy and access to essential services. The ongoing economic crisis has worsened conditions for women, making them more susceptible to exploitation and violence. The healthcare system is under severe strain with numerous health facilities closed due to the Israeli aggression. This limits access to critical services for survivors of GBV, including medical care and psychological support.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**1**

Sustainable, flexible core funding should be prioritized for grassroots and feminist organizations in the SWANA region to strengthen their capacity for long-term GBV prevention and response. This includes establishing emergency funding mechanisms to support rapid responses during crises such as war or climate disasters. Flexible funding models must avoid restrictive conditions and bureaucratic barriers, ensuring that smaller, community-driven initiatives are not excluded and can effectively address the needs of women and girls in their communities.

**2**

Strengthening GBV prevention and response programs requires addressing systemic and community-level challenges. Governments and NGOs should implement culturally tailored initiatives that engage men and boys in challenging harmful gender norms while criminalizing and enforcing laws against all forms of GBV, including marital rape. Survivors need access to robust support services, such as shelters, legal aid, and trauma-informed counseling, particularly in marginalized or conflict-affected areas, to ensure their safety and empowerment.

**3**

Increasing digital literacy among women and feminist groups in the SWANA region is essential to support them to advocate effectively and navigate online spaces safely. Training programs should focus on digital security, social media advocacy, and the use of technology to amplify grassroots movements. Equipping women with these skills will help them document abuses, share narratives, and connect with global audiences to foster international solidarity while protecting themselves from cyber threats.

**4**

International organizations and allies must prioritize inclusivity by actively supporting SWANA women's participation in high-level events. This includes addressing barriers such as visa restrictions, financial constraints, and lack of access to decision-making platforms. Allies should amplify SWANA women's voices by providing resources for travel, translation, and strategic advocacy and avoid tokenization by ensuring these women are not just included but meaningfully engaged in shaping global policies on GBV and related issues.

**5**

To address GBV comprehensively, fostering transnational feminist solidarity is crucial. This requires building coalitions across borders to exchange knowledge, amplify advocacy efforts, and coordinate responses to shared challenges. International allies should provide technical, financial, and moral support to SWANA feminist organizations and avoid imposing Western-centric solutions. Collaborative efforts must center the voices and leadership of SWANA women, emphasizing intersectional approaches that respect local contexts and expertise.

**6**

The need to push for international support and attention to women and girls who have been at the forefront of these crises and conflicts, including: providing humanitarian responses and services, instrumental in documenting violations, advocating for peace and liberation at all levels and so much more. They are building and sustaining movements without the resourcing, funding, and attention from intersectional sectors.