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IRAN: gov't approves bill to combat violence against women

Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women and family affairs, dedicated the move to 'worthy and patient Iranian women' in a tweet.

By Maziar Motamedi

Al Jazeera (04.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35dPcqk> - The government of Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has approved a longstanding bill that aims to better protect women against domestic and other forms of violence.

In a meeting on Sunday evening, cabinet ministers greenlit the draft bill, called Protection, Dignity and Security of Women Against Violence, which has been in the works since the administration of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The bill must now be reviewed and approved by the parliament, after which it will be sent to the powerful constitutional vetting body called the Guardian Council, consisting of jurists and religious experts.

The most senior woman in Rouhani's outgoing government hailed the move, which she said was the result of hundreds of hours of work by tens of legal experts, judges, executives and officials.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women and family affairs, dedicated the 58-article bill to "worthy and patient Iranian women" in a tweet.

The legislation completed its lengthy process of review by the judiciary in September 2019.

It defines violence as "any behavior inflicted on women due to sexuality, vulnerable position or type of relationship, and inflicts harm to their body, psyche, personality and dignity, or restricts or deprives them of legal rights and freedoms".

It obligates the judiciary to create offices to support victims of violence and hold educational courses for judges and other judiciary staff.

The bill also envisages the formation of a fund by the judiciary to support victims of violence and help imprisoned women, among other things.

The state broadcaster is also directed by the legislation to produce more programmes that promote the support of women and the prevention of violence against them as family values.

Moreover, the bill sees a role for the ministry of education in holding educational courses for students, teachers and parents, and in better identifying vulnerable students.

The ministry of health, on the other hand, is tasked by the draft bill to boost its medical and psychological services to women and train experts in handling women who have fallen victim to violence.

Law enforcement and prison organisations are among other entities that will have to increase their efforts as part of the vision laid out in the legislation.

In a report published last month, rights group Human Rights Watch said the bill had several positive provisions, including those that engaged different parts of the government and other entities in women's issues.

But the New York-based organisation said the bill "falls short of international standards" as it does not criminalise some forms of gender-based violence, including marital rape and child marriage.

The bill was finalised by the government after several high-profile incidents concerning women that took centre stage nationally during the past year.

In late May 2020, a 14-year-old girl called Romina Ashrafi was gruesomely beheaded by her father in an apparent case of "honour-killing". The father was given a nine-year jail sentence.

In September, decades-old sexual traumas were unearthed as Iranian women launched their own version of the global #MeToo movement on social media.

The movement implicated several high-profile artists and one major company, and led to at least one arrest.

IRAN's #MeToo moment: Women's tweets highlight alleged sexual abuse, rape by prominent figures

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFE/RL (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32EJNGV> - For 14 years, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatali kept quiet about the time she says a prominent painter sexually assaulted her.

Last week, the U.S.-based educator broke her silence on Twitter, detailing the alleged abuse that took place in the summer of 2006.

Omatali is one of many Iranian women who have in recent days taken to social media to tell their stories of sexual harassment and rape, breaking years of silence about an issue that remains taboo and is often swept under the rug in Iran.

Omatali said she had decided to interview the painter about an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. He insisted that she come to his office first, saying they would go to the exhibition together. After hesitating, she went to his office to find him naked under a brown cloak.

He then assaulted her, she said.

"He held me tightly, squeezing my body and trying to kiss my lips; I struggled as hard as I could to get rid of him," she wrote on Twitter.

Omatali managed to escape into the street. The painter later came out and acted as if nothing had happened.

"He came toward me and said: 'Shall we?'"

"It was as if I had no will of my own. I went," Omatali said, adding that she still becomes full of "hatred, fear, and helplessness" when she recalls that day.

Spotlight on abuse

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

One woman said she was raped by a friend after she visited him at his apartment. She had a glass of wine and woke up the next morning in his bed, naked, she said.

Others came forward claiming they had been raped by the same man, accusing him of drugging them beforehand.

Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi said on August 25 that the man identified by the initials "KE" had been arrested after several women said they were raped by him.

Several others accused a known visual artist, as well as a popular writer, while at least one spoke of past sexual misconduct by a prominent filmmaker.

Some named their abusers publicly, others alluded to their identities. Several men also joined the campaign, tweeting about their experience with sexual abuse.

Fashion photographer Reihaneh Taravati said she had been sexually harassed by "one of the pioneers of Iranian photography" when she was 19, while artist Leva Zand wrote how her friend had been raped by a man whom she described as a well-known, New York-based, Iranian human rights activist.

At least one woman recounted how she sought legal action against her perpetrator that resulted in the punishment of her offender.

Several lawyers offered tips and legal advice to Iranian women who face discriminatory Islamic laws enforced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that often favor men.

The global #metoo movement led to the downfall of a number of prominent figures, including the famous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, who is now in prison in New York.

The Iranian #metoo movement, which has resulted at this time in the arrest of one alleged rapist, appears to have empowered abuse survivors who had remained silent for years and, in some cases, blamed themselves for the predatory behavior of their abusers.

Omatali told RFE/RL she decided to publicize her alleged sexual harassment after reading some of the anonymous accounts of abuse that have been posted on social media in the past two weeks.

"I thought to myself, 'you're in the United States and have more freedom and protection than those in Iran to raise the issue publicly, why are you silent?'"

"I didn't find an answer that would satisfy me, and so despite the pressure and anxiety I knew I would face, I decided to write about my experience, hoping that it would be a starting point for the publicizing of similar incidents," Omatali said.

Absence of education

She expressed hope that the ongoing campaign will lead to increased awareness among people about the problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

"In the absence of systematic education about sexual issues in Iran, this group movement improves the atmosphere for a public discussion and creates a precious opportunity for education," Omatali said.

Sexual abuse is believed to be widespread in Iranian society, where women often complain about being sexually harassed on the streets in the form of catcalling and groping.

Many women have also recounted in past days about being sexually assaulted at work while having no choice than to stay in contact with the offender, who is quite often the boss or a colleague.

Tehran-based sociologist Saeed Madani told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that in Iran, like other countries, many victims of sexual abuse and rape are reluctant to speak out.

"They aren't usually inclined to seek legal action, therefore the number of cases that are referred to the [authorities] is very limited and those very limited cases are not publicized," he said.

Madani referred to rape figures reported by the media as "the tip of the iceberg," saying the majority of the cases are not being reported.

"One report said that the highest incidents of rape are in Tehran, with about 1,600 sexual crimes being registered annually, but it is estimated that some 80 percent of rape cases are not being reported," he said.

One reason is the taboo surrounding the issue while victim blaming is also preventing women from coming forward.

"In a patriarchal society, it is assumed primarily that the woman has done something wrong," Madani said.

Veteran women's rights advocate Susan Tahmasebi told RFE/RL that the current movement against sexual abuse and rape is likely to encourage more survivors of abuse to seek legal action.

"Already we see that the recounting of these stories has brought about change," Tahmasebi said. "Besides raising awareness among women survivors of rape and sexual assault, sending them the message that they are not to blame and that they will be safe in coming forward."

"It tells men that they can no longer continue their violent behavior against women with full impunity," she added. "At least in the eyes of the community they will lose face and this has already happened in the case of some high-profile men."

IRAN implements law allowing women to pass their nationality to their children

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality.

By Somayeh Malekian

ABC News (25.06.2020) - <https://abcn.ws/3ieXaEL> - Writing down her dreams in her diary notebook was the first thing Samaneh, a 16-year-old undocumented Iranian-Bengali, did after she learned she might officially get an Iranian ID.

"My daughter was over the moon when I told her the law was changed and she could get Shenanameh [an Iranian official ID card] through me. All she wants is to go to school and to the gym," Samaneh's mother told ABC News. She, like others interviewed in the story, did not want her name and her daughter's full name mentioned for personal reasons.

Samaneh is one of about one million undocumented children born to Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers who have had many challenges in accessing education, medical and other services because they were not recognized as Iranian nationals.

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality, so children of foreign national fathers and Iranian women were not considered Iranian. But, with the new law which will go into effect in two weeks, women will confer their nationality to their children like men, the spokesman of the government Ali Rabiei said, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

Most of the men with foreign nationalities who marry Iranian women are refugees from Iran's neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, Fatemeh Ashrafi, head of HAMI, an association for protection of refugee women and children, told ABC News.

"More than 100,000 Iranian women are married to [foreign men], mostly from neighboring countries," Ashrafi said.

"I hope the news is true," said Khaleghzadeh, a mother of five undocumented children to an Afghan father who still cannot believe the long ordeal of her children is over.

"If my children get Iranian IDs, they can go to work without being constantly worried about getting arrested and deported to Afghanistan," she added.

As Ashrafi said, the law is as much about women's rights as it is about refugees and their children. "This law helps women regain an important part of their rights," she said.

"I can't forget how terribly I was shocked when after my marriage I realized my children could not get Iranian ID despite the fact that I was Iranian," Samaneh's mother said. "I felt I wasn't a full person."

"I am happy that I can get my name registered at state schools like my other friends and can rejoin the kabaddi team," Samaneh said. She was a member of the kabaddi team at the gym in her neighborhood, but could not stay with the team after they made it to the next round of the city champion league, as she was undocumented.

"Lack of access to free education or work permission is not the only problem my children have, they are tired of being constantly humiliated for having an Afghan father," Khaleghzadeh said. "Now, they are happy that they can be recognized as Iranian."

The pain of being seen as inferior is what many Afghans and children of Afghan refugees complain about in Iran.

"One of the toughest things I have to deal with on a daily basis is hiding the nationality of my father. People would think of me as a lesser person if they realized my dad was Bengali," Samaneh said.

However, Ashrafi believes that the social discrimination against non-Iranians has historical reasons and is not a problem that can be solved merely by changing a law. "It is a deeper issue that needs a rather long-term cultural and social approach. This law is not going to help the wrong with that social damage," she said.

Khaleghzadeh has a 25-year-old undocumented pregnant daughter, also married to an undocumented Afghan refugee, who does not have a work permit in Iran. "If she can get my Iranian nationality, then she can pass it to her baby, too," she said. "At least they can get the cash subsidies from the government for the times her husband does not work," she added.

Iran distributes monthly cash subsidies of about \$2.50 per person. The humble amount still means a lot to families with no income in destitute areas of the country including border provinces like Sistan and Baluchistan, home to many families with Iranian mothers and Afghan refugee fathers.

Over a million Afghan refugees are officially registered in Iran. The number of undocumented Afghans is about 2.5 million, the government spokesperson said.

"Many of such marriages are a result of the poverty of families of these women in border provinces. Around 80% of women married to refugees in Iran are illiterate or barely literate and live in the slums. They are hardly aware of their rights, so they marry refugees sometimes for a small sum of money that is not inconsiderable for these families," Ashrafi said.

Although the implementation of the new law is the last hope of many families, experts believe it may cause problems as it contains some contradictions and loopholes.

"This bill is inconsistent with the Constitution, at some points. One of them is the ambiguity of the new regulations about dual nationals," Ashrafi said.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize dual nationality. It has left some families in obscurity whose children have already been granted their fathers' nationality.

"Both of my daughters have Iraqi ID," said Kolsum, an Iranian woman who lives with her Iraqi husband and her daughters in Baghdad. She is not sure if her daughters are eligible to get Iranian ID as they already are recognized as Iraqi nationals.

"I know the problem with dual nationality in Iran's constitution, but I really like my daughters to get Shenanameh, because it saves all the visa hassle we have at the border every time we want to visit my family in Iran," she said.

IRAN: Shocking charges against jailed women's rights activists, who must be released amid second COVID-19 peak

GCHR (22.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VyzBqz> - The world has been facing a pandemic that left prisoners including human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience very vulnerable among other populations in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. Since the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly in March 2020, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) has been calling for the authorities in the region to release all prisoners who pose no risk to society. GCHR is further concerned by a new trend in Iran of adding sentences to already imprisoned women human rights defenders, leaving them ineligible for furlough during the pandemic.

In Iran, the COVID-19 crisis has quickly taken a second peak as the country's health infrastructure has been too precarious after years of sanctions, corruption, and the state's obstinacy towards its international commitments. The Iranian authorities have put the country under strict laws and practices that are built on discrimination, segregation and proscription of women's rights, while committing mass human rights violations inside and outside the country.

Those who dare to speak against such human rights violations are persecuted and prosecuted with inane and lengthy sentences and become victims of a legal system that flaunts international standards of law. Freedom of expression and assembly in pursuit of gender equality are often regarded as acts against “national security,” “propaganda against the state,” “encouraging and providing for moral corruption and prostitution” and “insulting the sacred.”

In mid-March 2020, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a 37-year-old British-Iranian citizen, who has been in prison since 2016 when she was sentenced for five years, was released temporarily from Evin prison in Tehran. While here release has been extended, she remains required to wear an ankle bracelet and not move more than 300 metres from her parents’ home. Her release came following the serious threat of the coronavirus spreading through Iran’s prison system. Zaghari-Ratcliffe went on a water-only hunger strike to protest her continued imprisonment last year, when she was held in solitary confinement for over a month, according to her family.

In light of the COVID-19 risk, the Iranian judiciary said it had so far released 85,000 prisoners, half of whom were political prisoners. Yet, it is still unknown what proportion of women human rights defenders and activists is among those who have been released, or even those who are still in prison.

Among those who remain in prison is journalist and human rights defender Narges Mohammadi, the spokeswoman for the Centre for Human Rights Defenders in Iran, who has been imprisoned since 2015, serving a combined 16-year prison sentence. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison for establishing the Step by Step to Stop Death Penalty group (also known as LEGAM), as well as five years for “gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security,” and one year for “spreading propaganda against the system.” She was sentenced on 17 May 2016 and her sentence was upheld on 28 September 2016. According to the law, she must serve the longest sentence, namely the 10-year sentence. She has been held in Evin prison since 05 May 2015, already serving a previous six-year sentence.

In a ludicrous move that seems all the more cruel considering the COVID-19 threat, Mohammadi is facing new charges, even while in prison, which was revealed in an open letter recently sent by her brother to the Iranian authorities. Mehdi Mohammadi, exiled in Norway, explained in his letter that his sister had serious health problems but “was not allowed out of prison to see a doctor.” In May 2020, human rights groups reported that Mohammadi was facing up to five years more in prison and 74 lashes for various charges including “collusion against the regime,” “propaganda against the regime” and the crime of “insult”.

Also in June 2020, imprisoned woman human rights defender Atena Daemi, who is serving seven years in prison, was charged with “disturbing order” after being accused of chanting anti-government slogans on the anniversary of Iran’s 1979 revolution. She was sentenced to five years in prison in 2016 and in September 2019, a court added two years and one month to her sentence for “insulting” and “disseminating anti-government propaganda” after she wrote an open letter from prison criticising the execution of political prisoners. Daemi’s family says the new charges meant she would no longer be eligible for furlough on 04 July 2020 under the law, nor could she be freed under the current furloughs being offered during the pandemic.

On 1 June 2020, women’s rights activist Saba Kord Afshari was sentenced to 15 years in prison sentence by an appeals court after having been acquitted on 17 March 2020 by the Evin Prosecutor’s Office. She was sentenced for “promoting corruption and prostitution through appearing without a headscarf in public,” for her role in the White

Wednesday protest movement against mandatory veiling. Kord Afshari is already serving a nine-year sentence. She's also ineligible for a furlough during the pandemic.

In April 2020, United Nations human rights experts called on Iran to expand its temporary release of thousands of detainees to include prisoners of conscience and dual and foreign nationals who are still behind bars despite the serious risk of being infected with COVID-19, following concerns raised from inside the country.

Iranian activists' families have raised concerns over the ill-treatment, the lack of proper hygiene and the inadequate measures taken by the authorities to adapt and mitigate the circumstances linked to the spread of the coronavirus in the Iranian prisons.

GCHR calls on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all women's rights defenders detained for peacefully practicing their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and calling for gender equality. This is all the more pressing due to the health risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

IRAN's Rohani calls for stricter laws on 'honor killings' after beheading of 13-year-old girl

RFE/RL's Radio Farda (27.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3czVW2G> - Iranian President Hassan Rohani has called for harsher laws to tackle so-called "honor killings" after the particularly shocking slaying of a teenage girl, allegedly by her father, prompted a nationwide outcry.

Rohani on May 27 pushed for the speedy adoption of relevant bills, some which have apparently circulated for years among various Iranian decision-making bodies without any tangible results.

The call comes after 13-year-old Romina Ashrafi was killed last week in Hovigh, some 320 kilometers northwest of Tehran.

Local media reported that the teenager was beheaded while she slept by her father, who used a farming sickle.

The father, Reza Ashrafi, was said to be enraged after Romina fled the family home to marry a 35-year-old man she loved.

Both of their families complained to the authorities, and security forces detained Romina and her boyfriend, Bahamn Khavari, following a five-day hunt.

Although Romina reportedly told police she would be in danger at home and feared for her life, the girl was handed over to her father as required by Iranian laws.

After the killing, the father allegedly turned himself in to police and confessed to the crime.

Hovigh district Governor Kazem Razmi said the man was in custody, charged with murder. He said the investigation into the case was still under way.

Meanwhile, the vice president for women's affairs, Masoumeh Ebtekar, was quoted as announcing a "special order" from Rohani to investigate the killing.

Under current law, her father faces a prison sentence of up to 10 years if convicted.

According to the Islamic Penal Code, he was Romina's "guardian," so he is exempt from "retaliation in kind," meaning the death penalty in this case.

Iranian media occasionally report on cases related to honor killings carried out by relatives, usually male family members, when the actions of women and girls are perceived as violating conservative traditions on love, marriage, and public behavior. It is not known how many women and girls die from such killings.

In 2014, a Tehran police official reported that 20 percent of all murders in the country were "honor" killings.

Romina's boyfriend apparently faces no penalty since under Iran's laws, girls can marry after the age of 13, though the average age of marriage for Iranian women is 23.

IRAN: U.S. "maximum pressure" on Iran hurts the women it claims to help

To help justify its coercive measures against the Islamic Republic, Washington often evokes Iranian women's struggles for inclusion and equality. But evidence from today's Iran shows that U.S. policies are instead contributing to holding women back.

By Azadeh Moaveni & Ali Vaez

International Crisis Group (06.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3aJ1U0W> - On 21 May 2018, less than two weeks after the U.S. withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched Washington's "New Iran Strategy" before an audience at the Heritage Foundation. In his remarks, he insisted that Iranian women's long struggle for inclusion and equality matters dearly to Washington. As if to prove the point, the U.S. State Department's social media feeds since that day have interspersed announcements of new choking sanctions with twinkling reminders of Iranian women's potential ("Congratulations to Iranian-American and new #NASA Astronaut Jasmin Moghbeli!"). In January 2020, the State Department released a two-minute video on the history of Iranian women's rights. To a melody of maudlin piano and soaring strings, the video sweeps viewers past scenes of bare-headed women in silk blouses, wistfully recalling an era when Iran's women purportedly "enjoyed freedom and equal opportunity", before shifting to dark footage from after the 1979 revolution, when "women's rights in #Iran...regressed". No Iranian woman from either era actually speaks in the video, about either the Shah's regime or the Islamic Republic. But the final caption promises nevertheless: "The women of the U.S. will stand with the women of Iran".

Washington's evocation of Iranian women and their aspirations has become a feature of its marketing for "maximum pressure" – the campaign of economic coercion aimed at precipitating Iranian capitulation to U.S. demands or regime collapse. The marketing is stunning for its hypocrisy, focused as it is on the plight of Iranian women even as it says nothing about the injustices women face at the hands of Middle Eastern governments allied with the U.S. Moreover, as Washington has widened its claim that the Islamic Republic disallows any space for women, it has grown more detached from reality. One tweet this past December maintained that the Iranian regime denies women the opportunity to "participate in public life" – during a month when Iranian female directors and actors were shining at the Tehran film festival. Women have long been engaged in almost every aspect of Iranian public life from politics to political activism and from diplomacy to flying planes and driving heavy trucks. But perhaps the most regrettable

feature of this U.S. policy spotlighting the suppression of Iranian women's rights is that it has damaged the activism and independence of the very women it claims to support.

Of course, and despite women's prominence in public life, the Islamic Republic has a long and dismal record of keeping Iranian women second-class citizens in terms of civil and personal rights. The surge of women into higher education and the work force that accompanied the 1979 revolution galvanised women to demand more legal and social equality, not less. Yet the state has, for decades, defended a status quo of discriminatory laws like mandatory hijab. It was only in December 2019, under international pressure, that Iran's Football Federation committed to allowing women to attend matches in the domestic club league. Restrictions on women's public conduct and appearance have sown increasing resentment and alienation, especially among millennial women and girls, who are less inclined than their elders to view the relaxation of rules as sufficient progress. As one 19-year-old sports champion put it: "My generation wants [dress codes] removed. We compare ourselves to the rest of the world, where everyone is modernising and evolving, and we find this strictness ridiculous".

For much of the past two decades, the Iranian women's movement has encompassed diverse strands of activism: there have been radical and gradualist wings, single-issue campaigns seeking an end to mandatory hijab or access to sports stadiums, drives to reform divorce and domestic violence laws, and grassroots efforts aimed at mobilising rural and working-class women behind such legal changes. On occasion, these different currents have brought their particular struggles into the streets and endured crackdowns, before shifting course. The authorities have never smiled upon women's activism, and every subset of the women's movement, from state-affiliated religious feminists to secular-minded organisers, has encountered some level of official hostility and obstruction. The authorities' intolerance for women's organising has grown so severe in recent years that most of the movement's luminaries are now in prison, in exile abroad or in a self-imposed state of quiescence. But the state's response has not been limited to repression. At times, it has grudgingly tolerated – and even conceded to – women's demands as a reality with powerful electoral implications. Women's turnout has been critical to presidential wins by more moderate candidates since the late 1990s, and politicians now regularly emphasise women's concerns when courting voters.

The Trump administration is trying to appropriate the Iranian women's cause. Whether they are skirmishing with authorities in anti-hijab street confrontations, joining labour protests, such as last year's May Day demonstrations, or agitating against the government's November hike in fuel prices, women have been active in airing specific grievances. Most demonstrators have pointedly demanded an end to hijab laws, but they have received loud support – whether solicited or not – from anti-regime voices in Washington and among certain Iranian opposition figures outside the country, whose objective is toppling the regime. If this external pressure was supposed to help, there is little evidence that it achieved its goal. Iran's security apparatus, under siege and suspicious of citizens' real or imagined links with the outside world, has over the past year doled out some of the severest sentences for women activists in recent memory.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Iranian women waged sophisticated and far-ranging battles against both discriminatory laws and the patriarchal culture, shared by men and women alike, from which those laws partly emanate. But in recent months, all those intense and public rows among women, between generations of activists with varying priorities, over whether the most suitable terrain was the family living room, one's personal relationship or the public street corner, have fallen eerily silent. Internal debate among women activists in Iran now is largely about the frightening, pervasive threats to the country's security and well-being.

A sanctions campaign as broad and blunt as that which the U.S. has built up is bound to have inadvertent consequences for the target population. As the economy reels from sanctions, women entrepreneurs, particularly those in cash-based or service industries, have been particularly hard-hit. The 2010s saw a flourishing of women-owned businesses, with successes piling up in sectors women found themselves able to enter – from online clothing sales to cafés and restaurants. Those sectors might have appealed to women because they could better control their hours and workload, sidestep workplace exploitation or harassment, or discover opportunities for real economic advancement.

But as the Iranian currency began to sink in value in the summer of 2018, first in response to the Trump administration withdrawing from the nuclear deal, and then more precipitously, in anticipation of increasingly severe sanctions, sometimes falling by double digits in a single day, families coped by cutting back on leisure spending, on everything from clothes to hair salons to eating out. Small shops and retailers saw their revenue drop, while their rents skyrocketed. “Many women I know, often younger women who used to be activists or journalists and had turned to running cafés, are now going out of business”, said Sussan Tahmasebi, a long-time civil society activist who retains close ties with women counterparts in Iran. “They’re not just losing economically, but losing that liberating force of being able to be financially independent”.

Sanctions have also forced tens of foreign firms to close shop and lay off Iranian workers. These companies tended to offer forward-thinking and empowering workspaces for women, setting high standards – everything from attractive salaries to more professional management and expected conduct – that Iranian companies would have to match. Some organised anti-sexual harassment training for employees, to bring them in line with minimal codes of conduct in European firms. Sanctions halted that progress.

The record thus appears clear: by imposing stifling sanctions, the Trump administration has deprived Iranian women of economic empowerment and the social independence that can accompany it; by politicising the women’s movement in the service of its own goals, it has exposed them to graver danger; and by zeroing in on women’s rights in Iran while it ignores them elsewhere in the Middle East, it has highlighted its own insincerity. The monumental challenges that Iranian women face in fighting their government’s discriminatory laws and repressive policies are difficult enough without the debilitating impact of sanctions. If they could collectively send a message to Washington, they might draw from the words of the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Sa’adi, who said: “I do not expect any favours from you. Just do no harm”.

IRAN's sole female Olympic medalist says she's defected

By Vasco Cotovio

CNN (12.01.2020) - <https://cnn.it/2Re9pVt> - Iran's sole female Olympic medalist, Kimia Alizadeh, has announced that she's permanently left her country for Europe.

"Let me start with a greeting, a farewell or condolences," the 21-year-old wrote in an Instagram post explaining why she was defecting. "I am one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran who they have been playing with for years."

Alizadeh became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal after claiming bronze in the 57kg category of Taekwondo at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Affectionately known in Iran as "The Tsunami," Alizadeh announced she was leaving her birth country amid searing criticism of the regime in Tehran.

"They took me wherever they wanted. I wore whatever they said. Every sentence they ordered me to say, I repeated. Whenever they saw fit, they exploited me," she wrote, adding that credit for her success always went to those in charge.

"I wasn't important to them. None of us mattered to them, we were tools," Alizadeh added, explaining that while the regime celebrated her medals, it criticized the sport she had chosen: "The virtue of a woman is not to stretch her legs!"

Reports of her defection first surfaced Thursday, with some Iranians suggesting she had left for the Netherlands. It was unclear from her post what country Alizadeh had gone to.

On Friday the head of Iran's Taekwondo Federation, Seyed Mohammad Pouladgar, claimed Alizadeh had assured both her father and her coach that she was traveling as part of her vacation, a trip he claimed was paid for by the Iranian government. He dismissed the reports of Alizadeh's defection as politically motivated rumors amplified by the foreign media.

Alizadeh confirmed the rumors Saturday, saying she "didn't want to sit at the table of hypocrisy, lies, injustice and flattery" and that she did not want to be complicit with the regime's "corruption and lies."

"My troubled spirit does not fit with your dirty economic ties and tight political lobbies. I wish for nothing else than for Taekwondo, safety and for a happy and healthy life, she said adding that she was not invited to go to Europe.

She said the decision was harder than winning Olympic gold. "I remain a daughter of Iran wherever I am," she said.

Her defection came amid anti-government protests in cities across Iran Saturday and international pressure after Iran admitted it had accidentally shot down a Ukrainian passenger airliner, killing all 176 people aboard.

Canada, Sweden and other countries whose citizens died on the plane have increased demands on Tehran to deliver a complete and transparent investigation against the backdrop of fresh US sanctions on Iran and a dangerous escalation with Washington.

"Iran will continue to lose more strong women unless it learns to empower and support them," said US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus about Alizadeh's defection.

ISRAEL: Israeli schoolgirls in 'shorts rebellion' against sexist dress code

Israeli girls are protesting over instructions banning female students from coming to school wearing shorts.

By Rina Bassist

Al-Monitor (22.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qp0kon> - Israeli girls have been going to school this week wearing shorts, protesting several incidents where female students in shorts

were banned from entering school premises. The protest spread also on social media, with numerous Facebook pages dedicated to the protest.

On May 17, the government reopened high schools, after weeks of closure over the coronavirus outbreak. The reopening coincided with one of the harshest heatwaves the country has ever known. Temperatures in central Israel reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit and more in some places. The Israel Meteorological Service issued May 16 a heatwave warning for the entire week, stating that high temperatures would affect the country during both day and night. A few bushfires broke out in the north of the country. And though many education institutions in Israel are equipped with air conditioners, schools were instructed to advise students to stay in the shade and drink lots of water.

Still, despite the sweltering heatwave, several girls at a school in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ra'anana were sent home for wearing shorts.

The decision to send the girls home sparked anger among students and parents, with female students claiming that boys can come to school in shorts. For them, this was a clear case of gender discrimination and even of religious principles imposed on the secular school system.

The rising anger encouraged many other girls to come to school wearing shorts, and groups of girls in shorts posted group photos on social media networks. On May 19, dozens of schoolgirls from the Hefer Valley Regional Council arrived to school wearing shorts in protest. The school management banned them from entering the campus. But by May 20, these short-wearing initiatives turned into a wave of protests that swept across the country, with shorts-sporting girls in high schools and middle schools demanding equality in dress code, especially during heatwaves. Girls in Kfar Saba, Modi'in, Lod and many other towns were wearing shorts to school.

The short rebellion was aggravated by another incident that occurred May 18, involving a 7-year-old girl in a school in Petah Tikva in central Israel. The second-grader arrived at school in a sleeveless dress. Shortly after her entering her class, a teacher demanded that she change her attire and gave her a T-shirt, but no pants. The frightened girl took off her dress staying in her underwear for the entire school day.

Labor Knesset member Merav Michaeli, known for her longstanding battle for gender equality causes, posted a video clip on her Twitter account, encouraging the protests of the girls: "Today I want to applaud all of these courageous girls who dared coming to school with their legs [showing]. Yes. This was a courageous act. ... They stood together and insisted on their basic right to come to school with their legs [showing]. Boys also came with their legs [showing], but this was quite OK for the female teachers and headmasters who chose to punish just the girls."

KUWAIT: Domestic violence law signals hope for Kuwait's women

Government should implement legislation, address gaps in protection for victims.

By Rothna Begum

HRW (29.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nnWZtq> - This month, after years of activism, Kuwaiti women's rights activists won a new law establishing protections against domestic violence. The need for this law was underscored on September 9 when Fatima al-Ajmi,

aged 35 and pregnant, was shot repeatedly and killed, reportedly by a family member for marrying a man outside of her family's community. Her killer had reportedly threatened her before.

In 2019, I spoke to nine women in Kuwait who described facing abuse from family members and husbands. They said they were either scared to go to the police or were turned away when they did. One hundred and fifty-five countries have legal protections against domestic violence, but until now, Kuwait had no explicit law setting out protection measures against domestic violence, or even shelters they could go to. Some laws, like article 153 in Kuwait's Penal Code, even provide men with reduced sentences for killings of women found in the act of adultery.

On September 20, Kuwait began catching up to the global norm and issued a new Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, after the National Assembly passed it on August 19. The law creates a national committee – with representatives from different ministries and civil society – to draw up policies to combat and protect women from domestic violence. The committee will also submit recommendations to amend or repeal laws that contradict the new domestic violence law. The new legislation also establishes shelters and a hotline to receive domestic violence complaints, provides counseling and legal assistance for victims, and allows for emergency protection orders (restraining orders) to prevent abusers from contacting their victim.

However, the new law has serious gaps. While it provides penalties for violating protection orders, it does not set out penalties for domestic violence as a crime on its own. It also does not include former partners or people engaged in relationships outside of wedlock, including those engaged to be married or in unofficial marriages.

As the tragic killing of Fatima al-Ajmi has shown, these long-awaited protections are crucial. Kuwait's real test will be ensuring implementation of its new law, filling remaining protection gaps, and emphasizing prevention, including by repealing discriminatory laws that leave women exposed to deadly violence.

LEBANON: Underage marriages increase in Lebanon during pandemic

Child protection campaigners say closed schools and rising poverty, along with the lack of a legal minimum age, are pushing more girls under 18 into marriage.

By Cathrin Schaer

Die Welt (15.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2SB7ZZw> - Aid groups in Lebanon say the country's ongoing economic crisis, compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, is forcing more children into underage marriages.

"From what we have been able to observe in the field and from what our local partners are telling us, we believe that child marriage is increasing as a result of the difficult circumstances here today," Johanna Eriksson, who heads UNICEF's Child Protection Program in Lebanon, told DW. "It is just one of the negative coping mechanisms that people here are resorting to."

Farah Salhab, of the Save the Children organization in Lebanon, said: "Since the pandemic, we have seen a direct link between COVID-19 and a rise in child marriage."

In March, UNICEF put out a statement saying the pandemic could result in as many as 10 million more girls being put at risk of being married over the next decade worldwide. Although some young boys are forced into marriage, this problem mostly affects young girls.

Dangerous conditions

Researchers who study the topic have concluded that the health and economic crisis in Lebanon are creating the kinds of conditions they already know will increase the number of underage betrothals.

Plan International, an organization that focuses on children's rights, looked at what happened during past crises — for instance, the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa — to compile a May 2020 report on children living under lockdown. School closures had a huge impact, the organization found. Depending on such factors as whether families ask for dowries, Plan International concluded that school closures could increase a child's probability of being forced into marriage by 25%.

Because remote learning simply wasn't possible for many children in Lebanon, a lot of girls dropped out of school altogether, Salhab said: "We have spoken to girls who told us they were forced to get married after leaving secondary school."

Even if schools in Lebanon were to reopen tomorrow, there will still be a lot of girls who never return to class, Eriksson said.

Beyond refugee groups

Other factors that are known to increase child marriage include the curtailment of development or aid programs, the potential for an unplanned pregnancy, the possible death of a parent or caregiver, and economic pressure, Plan International researchers wrote. The latter is one of the most significant factors in Lebanon.

Although there's no dowry tradition in Lebanon, and no money changes hands when a girl marries, she does become her husband's economic responsibility, Eriksson said. "From an economic perspective, her family sees that as positive," she noted. "They believe they are doing what is best for their child."

Perhaps one of the most concerning issues in Lebanon currently is that underage marriage seems to be becoming more widespread.

In the past, certain parts of the population in Lebanon had more underage or forced marriage than others. Some of the latest numbers, collected by UNICEF between 2015 and 2016, before the current crisis, indicated that about 6% of Lebanese women were married before they turned 18. However percentages are much higher among the country's refugee populations. About 12% of female Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, 25% of female Palestinian refugees from Syria and at least a quarter of the newest arrivals, female refugees from Syria's civil war, were married before they turned 18.

Now, researchers believe that children are also increasingly being married off outside of Lebanon's refugee populations.

"We are starting to hear and see that this is also affecting the Lebanese population," Eriksson said. "But that's not surprising considering that levels of poverty are rising."

No age limit

There is no firm data on this yet. Salhab said. Before the current health and economic crises, she added, the numbers for underage marriages in Lebanon had been going down. "But we can say that child marriage is more visible as an issue among communities where it was not necessarily a problem," Salhab said.

Another reason why child marriage is possible in Lebanon is because, unlike many of its regional neighbors, including Iraq, Egypt and Jordan, the country does not have what is known as a "personal status law." This kind of law regulates things such as inheritance, custody of children and the legal age of marriage.

Inside Lebanon, each one of the 18 recognized religious groups sets its own rules on the legal age to wed. These range from 14 years old for Catholics to 18 for members of the Greek Orthodox Church. This week, the country's ranking Sunni Muslim religious authority raised its minimum age for marriage to 18. A few weeks earlier, Shiite Muslim religious authorities said nobody should marry before they turned 15.

Camale Cherfane, a member of the Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering, told DW that raising awareness of the dangers of underage marriage is also important. "Creating laws is not enough if individuals are not interested or trusting of them," Cherfane said. "More awareness will be a catalyst for further development and a change in law."

Remedies available

Lebanese civil society activists have been trying for years to get the government to pass a personal status law. One was introduced to the Parliament in 2017. It would have criminalized child marriage but was never passed.

The fact that the rate of child marriage is rising in Lebanon is obviously not welcome news for the many organizations fighting the issue. However, specialists have a good idea of what is needed to bring the numbers back down, Eriksson said.

Before the civil war in Syria, only about 10% of girls there were married younger than 18 — far lower than the 25% in recently arrived Syrian refugee families in Lebanon today. "So it's not just a social or cultural issue," Eriksson said. It was only after these families became refugees and were confronted with economic hardship that they started to have their children enter into marriage far younger, she added.

To resolve this, several things must happen in tandem, Eriksson said. Firstly, Lebanon needs a personal status law, or something like it. "Secondly, service and support for families and children is needed," Eriksson said. This involves everything from access to educational opportunities and information on sexual and reproductive health for teens to emergency cash transfers to families in need. And then, finally, there needs to be widespread promotion of different attitudes toward gender roles — including the idea of early marriage.

"With all those things combined we know we would have a stronger protective environment and there would be less child marriage," Eriksson concluded.

LEBANON: Broken promises on women's rights

UN review should focus on increased protection against violence, bias.

HRW (04.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nfm7BH> - Lebanese authorities are falling short of their international legal obligations to protect women and girls from violence and end discrimination against them, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch has [submitted a report](#) to the United Nations Committee reviewing Lebanon's compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is tentatively scheduled for June 2021. The country has not made progress to carry out a number of recommendations from its previous review in 2015, including not creating a unified personal status code that would guarantee equal treatment for all citizens and amending the discriminatory nationality law to ensure that Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese men can pass on their citizenship to their children.

"Another five years have passed, and Lebanon has done little to end discrimination against women and girls under its international obligations," said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon's authorities should show that they are serious about women's rights by coming through on long-overdue reforms before they have to answer to the United Nations again for their failures."

Lebanon has not taken any steps to issue an optional civil code or to reform its 15 religion-based personal status laws and the religious courts that apply them. These courts discriminate against women across the religious spectrum and do not guarantee their basic rights, especially in matters such as divorce, property rights, and responsibility for children after divorce.

The authorities have also not reformed the nationality law, which prohibits Lebanese women married to foreigners from passing citizenship to their spouses and children, while men who marry foreign nationals can pass on their citizenship. This prohibition affects almost every aspect of the children's and spouses' lives, including legal residency and access to work, education, social services, and health care. It leaves some children at risk of statelessness.

Legal protections from domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment remain inadequate. In August 2017, Lebanon repealed article 522 of the penal code, which allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims, but left a loophole with regard to offenses relating to sex with children aged 15 to 17, and sex with virgin girls, with promises of marriage.

The current domestic violence law defines domestic violence narrowly and fails to specifically criminalize marital rape. Members of parliament have introduced multiple draft laws since 2017 on sexual harassment, but parliament has yet to take any action. A lack of coordination in the government's response to sex trafficking continues to put women and girls – especially Syrians living in Lebanon – at risk.

Human Rights Watch has documented how women and girls, especially trans women, sex workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, have experienced systemic violence from Lebanese authorities, particularly in detention centers. Trans women have described being placed in men's cells, being denied food and water, and being coerced to confess. Allegations of sexual violence, including rape, against women in custody are common. As an example, Loyal al-Kayaje was arrested on September 21, 2015 for "harming the military's reputation" after she alleged being raped and tortured by two soldiers in military custody in 2013.

Lebanon has consistently failed to properly investigate, prosecute, and punish those responsible for torture. In 2016, parliament passed legislation creating a national body, the National Preventive Mechanism Against Torture, to monitor and investigate the use of

torture, and in 2017 it adopted a new anti-torture law. The body's five members were named on March 7, 2019, but the government has still not allocated its funding.

Lebanon's economic crisis, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the port explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020, has made life worse for marginalized populations, not least for migrant domestic workers, the majority of them women from African and Asian countries. Many have reported increased incidents of abuse by their employers during the lockdown, and at least seven have taken their own lives since March. Migrant domestic workers remain excluded from Lebanon's labor law protections provided to other workers, and their legal status remains tied to their employer under the kafala (visa sponsorship) system.

On October 14, 2020, Lebanon's State Shura Council, the country's top administrative court, delivered a sharp blow to migrant domestic workers' rights when it struck down a new standard unified contract adopted by the Labor Ministry on September 4. The new contract introduced new protections for migrant domestic workers, including vital safeguards against forced labor, and would have been an important first step towards abolishing the abusive kafala system.

"For the past year, women from all walks of life have taken to the streets to demand equality and an end to all forms of discrimination," Majzoub said. "While the authorities have taken some steps, they need to heed calls for systemic change for equality."

LEBANON: UNFPA helps maintain dignity of women and girls affected by Beirut port blast

UNFPA Arab States (06.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33ps4nc> - A month after the Beirut Port explosion, essential needs of affected women and girls have changed. Initially, the top priority concerns were safe access to healthcare, food and shelter. Now that many have resettled in their homes or in temporary shelters, their worries have shifted to their economic situations and the challenges in accessing medical services and acquiring medicines and other health supplies, including hygiene products.

An estimated 150,000 women and girls have been displaced as a result of the 4 August explosion, 81,000 of whom are women of reproductive age, including 48,000 adolescents. In order to respond to their critical hygiene needs, UNFPA is working with 12 partners on the ground to distribute prepackaged and ready to use dignity kits. The kits, which include sanitary pads, soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and towels, are intended to facilitate the mobility of women and girls, to help them maintain their personal hygiene and, most importantly, their dignity.

"Just like I would want my girls to be fed, I would also want them to have these basic hygienic needs," said Hayat Merhi, a mother of three adolescent girls.

Importance of sanitary material

The lack of hygiene items does not solely impact women and girls' dignity, but also their health, mobility, community involvement, family functioning, and security as well as increasing likelihood of period poverty. These supplies restore women's confidence and provide them with the basic products to overcome these issues.

Rima Al Hussayni, director of Al Mithaq Association, has been canvassing impacted areas to distribute the kits door-to-door. "The look on the faces of young women and girls is so gratifying, no picture can capture that. It's a small caring gift to say 'hamdallah al

salameh' [Thank God for your safety]," says Rima. "Bringing light into their broken homes and telling women and girls that their dignity, safety and personal needs matter to the world in these difficult times is the least we can do."

Many people in Lebanon have lost their jobs in the last few months as a result of the country's unprecedented economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically curtailed purchasing capacity across the country. "There was a time when my daughters were using a piece of cloth instead of pads," said Lina Mroueh, a mother of three adolescent girls.

Raise awareness through distribution

The distribution of dignity kits also serves as an important opportunity to listen to women and girls' primary concerns and raise awareness about the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including for women and girls with disabilities.

"These products can be difficult to afford sometimes, and we believe that everyone has the right to feel fresh, clean, and comfortable," said Gabby Fraidy, of The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Woman. "We trained our staff to demonstrate how to use and maintain the items in the kit. We had 11 year old girls who came to us, and our role was to share information about menstruation and explain to them that it is a natural and a biological process that occurs, and that it's a part of growing up," she added.

Ensuring that women and girls with disabilities receive this crucial support is equally as important. We estimate that approximately 12,000 disabled persons have been affected by the blast. Dignity kits are included in the pressing aid services being distributed to women and girls with disabilities by Akkarouna and Al Makassed associations in partnership with UNFPA.

"It is very important to remember that dignity kits are helpful to women and girls, not only for the menstrual hygiene products, soaps and other items, but also as a way to reach women and girls with key messages about sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse services and information", said Felicia Jones, UNFPA's humanitarian coordinator. "This becomes even more critical when we are reaching out to the most vulnerable among us, including women and girls living with disabilities who often do not have access to the SRH or GBV services and information that they need to live healthy lives with dignity".

Together, with our partners and communities, we are creating a world with dignity, health and opportunity for all.

LEBANON: The Syrian women and girls sold into sexual slavery in Lebanon

Syria's refugee crisis has shone a light on sex trafficking in Lebanon, where victims are often treated as criminals.

By Daniela Sala

Al Jazeera (11.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uLjXUU> - "How do I know most of the women working as prostitutes are controlled?" asked Paul, a volunteer for the Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, before answering his own question. "[Because] the last time I tried to help one of them get in touch with an NGO, I got beaten and threatened by her captors."

Everyone in Lebanon's "sex trade" seems to be involved in trafficking in one way or another: Sources at both the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the General Directorate of General Security (GS) in Beirut told Al Jazeera that even pimps working further down the chain of command ultimately report to a bigger network of organised traffickers.

Paul has learned the ins-and-outs of Lebanon's trafficking world over the years. Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and Jounieh, a coastal town about 10km (6.2 miles) north of it, are where most victims of sex trafficking end up in Lebanon.

A GS officer estimated that there are at least 800 women and girls who have been forced into prostitution in these areas. But the numbers are hard to verify because of the hidden nature of the problem.

While the ISF formally identified 29 victims - 10 of whom were Lebanese and 13 Syrian - of sex trafficking in 2017, the most recent year for which there is data, other sources, including officers at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.

The law

The plight of these women is compounded by the way the law is applied in Lebanon. Article 523 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalises "any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it". The punishment is a prison sentence of anything from a month to a year.

It is not illegal to work as a licensed prostitute but seeing as the government has not issued any such licences since the 1970s, those working as prostitutes are vulnerable to being arrested and punished.

Beirut is no stranger to the sex industry. Prostitution was legalised in Lebanon after World War I when the government decided that concentrating prostitutes in one area - Mutanabbi Street, which became Beirut's downtown red-light district before it was destroyed in the Civil War - would protect Lebanese women from French and Senegalese soldiers.

According to the Lebanese Prostitution Law of 1931, brothels were divided into two groups: public brothels and escort houses. The law also set conditions for those working outside the brothels, dividing them into groups of workers; cafe girls, mistresses and "artistes".

After Lebanon's Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, secret - meaning unlicensed - prostitution became a crime.

But hundreds of women enter Lebanon each year, particularly from Eastern Europe and Morocco, with an "artiste" visa, to work as dancers in clubs. "Artiste" is widely understood to be a euphemism for "prostitute".

Life on the streets

It is about 8pm on a Saturday, close to the Daoura intersection near Bourj Hammoud in Beirut's Armenian district, on a crowded road full of busy shops and cafes. From his car, Paul has just spotted a woman leaning towards a black SUV. She and the driver talk for a few minutes. Eventually, she gets in the car. The transaction is quick, and people passing by do not even seem to notice.

"They found a deal," explains Paul's wife, Ray. The couple, both in their 40s, have been volunteering for the church for years. Paul first got involved 20 years ago when he discovered that one of his neighbours was being forced into prostitution. He says he considered it his "Christian mission" to help. Ray decided to join him soon after they met in 2010.

Paul and Ray are Armenian-Lebanese and asked that their real names be withheld because of the sensitivity of their work. For the past 10 years, they have distributed food and medicine once a week to "people in need", the couple's term for the homeless, drug addicts, beggars and women exploited into prostitution in Beirut.

As they drive around Doura, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, the main road is still crowded. Two policemen are patrolling the area. But right around the corner, Ray spots another woman sitting in a car with a man. They have seen her here before, waiting on the street corner.

"We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course," says Paul. "In my experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only ones I have seen leaving a trafficker - it was because they were handed to another [trafficker]."

The Chez Maurice case

It came as no great shock to Paul when, in 2016, news broke that 75 Syrian women had been trafficked and held captive in a Jounieh brothel for years.

What became known as the "Chez Maurice case", after the brothel in which they were held, only came to light because four women managed to escape.

Legal Agenda, a Lebanese NGO that collected several testimonies from survivors of the Chez Maurice brothel, described the place as a "torture chamber".

"I didn't think there was a state [law and order] in Lebanon," one of the trafficked women told Legal Agenda. "[One of the traffickers] told me that he bought the state with his money. I believed him the moment I was detained in the General Security building for 24 hours and then released scot-free."

Despite the media uproar surrounding the case, the owner of the brothel, a Lebanese businessman, was soon released on bail. Hearings into the case have been postponed multiple times and, three years on, the trial is only just about to begin.

'No trust in the system'

In 2011, the US State Department had placed Lebanon on its tier 2 watchlist of countries not fully complying with standards to combat human trafficking. Following pressure from civil groups such as Legal Agenda, Lebanon passed a new anti-trafficking law.

Since then, however, the Syrian crisis has precipitated a mass influx into Lebanon. Many of the refugees are women and children who have already suffered trauma and may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Al Jazeera heard accounts of several scenarios in which Syrian women and children ended up in the hands of traffickers. One involved marriages, either in Syria or Lebanon, where the "husband" later revealed himself to be a trafficker. Another involved groups of women and children being trafficked across the border. There are also cases of women

and girls being forcibly recruited within refugee camps or even sold by their families to traffickers.

However they arrived in Lebanon, human rights groups and aid workers say not enough is being done to protect them. Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at NGO Kafa ("enough" in Arabic), which focuses on gender-based violence, explains: "There is no trust in the system. Victims do not ask for help and do not report. And, at the same time, there is no outreach programme for the victims."

When the numbers do not add up

According to Lebanon's ISF, the number of identified victims of trafficking - including those forced into begging, labour exploitation and prostitution - has remained steadily low: 19 in 2015, 87 in 2016 (mainly the Chez Maurice survivors) and 54 in 2017. Most were Syrian.

However, Dima Haddad, programme officer at the IOM, says the official statistics do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the problem.

From her office at the IOM headquarters in Beirut, she coordinates a regional taskforce to counter human trafficking in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan - the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by charts showing the dozens of tasks her team has planned for the next few months, she says: "Wherever there is a crisis, there is human trafficking.

"Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing."

Asked whether there are gaps in the system for identifying the victims, Haddad answers immediately. "Absolutely. If I have to be more diplomatic, I would say there is a lot of work to do. It is urgent, as we consider anti-trafficking a life-saving intervention."

There are also great obstacles to women being able to tell their stories. Aside from the shame and stigma that prevent victims from coming forward, it can also be difficult to access them. Approaching women on the street is dangerous - as Paul has found over the years - as they are watched by their traffickers.

In researching this feature, Al Jazeera tried to speak to survivors through NGOs, local journalists and local refugee camp leaders. However, those who were prepared to speak asked for money in exchange, requests that appeared to come from husbands and other relatives. Permission to access Baabda female prison - where many of the women arrested for prostitution are held - was not granted.

Falling through the cracks

During 2017, the ISF adopted a policy of trying to root out all cases involving potential trafficking victims through its Human Rights Unit. As of 2018, at least 108 training sessions had been given to the 37 law enforcement agents attached to the unit to help them identify and deal with suspected trafficking cases. But, according to Alef, a human rights watchdog based in Beirut, and other organisations, these training sessions are rarely given to those on the front lines and are, therefore, missing their target.

Ashraf Rifi, who served as minister of justice between 2014 and 2016, and who was ISF director-general from 2005 to 2013, says it could take 10 to 15 years before there are significant changes in how cases of human, and specifically sex, trafficking are identified and combatted.

"It is a cultural problem," he explains in his office, referring to the low numbers of women - and particularly Syrian women - identified as victims of trafficking. "It's not unusual, because of stigma and discrimination, that Syrian women are considered 'just' prostitutes."

The ISF is also responsible for investigations into exploitation networks. And yet, Rifi adds, one of the main challenges is the "high level of corruption", including within the ISF itself.

In August 2018, the head of the ISF's Human Trafficking and Moral Protection Bureau, Johnny Haddad, was arrested on charges of corruption in connection with a prostitution ring. To date, he is still under investigation by the ISF's ethics committee, meaning that all information related to the case is classified.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women continue to fall through the cracks - treated like criminals instead of victims.

In 2016, 304 women were arrested on charges of prostitution, according to the ISF's data. More than half of them were Syrian. All were placed in prison.

The only support available to these women after they are released comes from charities. Dar Al Amal, a local NGO, helps women recuperate in its sparse offices in Sin el Fil, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

Here, the volunteers provide emotional and practical support to women who were forced into prostitution, trying to address their legal, medical and psychological needs.

Ghinwa Younes, a social worker who regularly visits the Baabda women's prison, says: "All the women I met want to quit this life. Most of them are in fact trafficking victims - but ISF did not understand they were victims. As soon as they leave the prison, they rarely get any kind of support and they are immediately back in the network of their exploiters."

When Al Jazeera spoke to Joseph Mousallem, a spokesman for the ISF, he acknowledged that the difference between prostitution and trafficking is not well understood by police officers. "But it is a cultural issue involving the whole of society, not only the security forces," he says.

"Countering trafficking is a priority, but we do have thousands of priorities: the whole system is under pressure. We do our best, but not have the means or the resources to track the victims."

'Of course they are victims'

Lawyer Hasna Abdulreda meets dozens of these women during detention visits. For 10 years, she has provided legal support to women in jail, and she is currently the head of the legal department at the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, a local NGO.

"In the past five years, every month at least two or three [women] reach out to me, after being arrested as prostitutes," she says. "Most of them are Syrians and, of course, they are victims of trafficking."

But there is little she can do.

"The trials are very fast and if the judge is given any reason to think that the woman is consenting to prostitution (for example because she keeps a share of the money), then he will just send her to prison without any further investigation," Abdulreda explains.

This is despite the fact that both the UN Convention on Human Trafficking and Lebanese law state that the victim's consent should be considered irrelevant.

"The only thing I can do is to give [detained women] my phone number and ask them to call me once they leave so that I can refer them to a shelter or an NGO. In prison, they do not have a phone, so I can't contact them once they are released," Abdulreda adds.

Despite many women asking for help, in 10 years nobody has called back.

For Syrian women, it is more complicated. Because they are foreigners, they are held by the GS for up to two days after being released from Baabda, Abdulreda says.

"I'm not allowed to access their files. I just lose every contact with them."

'Double standard'

Even when trafficking cases go to court, the odds appear stacked against victims of sex trafficking.

Legal Agenda analysed the 34 trafficking cases that made it to court in Lebanon between 2012 and 2017. According to lawyer Ghida Frangieh, who put that report together: "There is a clear double standard in the judges' attitude towards prostitution and begging.

"While in all cases involving forced begging, judges were quite fast in ruling that it was a trafficking case, when it comes to prostitution, they were digging deeper into the means of exploitation, asking for proof that the woman was actually forced into it. In certain cases they ruled that the woman was not to be considered a victim of trafficking as she consented, at least to some extent."

Frangieh says that as well as reflecting a general prejudice against women in prostitution, this view has also been influenced by the Chez Maurice case.

"[Chez Maurice] became the victim paradigm. If you do not fit into this stereotype, you are hardly considered as a victim of trafficking," she explains.

But this is not how trafficking works.

According to a former senior GS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, sex trafficking generally happens in one of two ways: through highly organised rings operating in brothels (such as Chez Maurice) or through so-called "free agents".

But, despite their name, free agents still operate under the protection and control of a trafficker. "There is no prostitution that is not linked to the main traffickers," the former officer says.

'Long-term solutions'

"Alone, we cannot do much," says Jabbour from Kafa.

Along with the Catholic NGO network Caritas, Kafa runs a shelter for female survivors of violence, mainly domestic workers who have been abused by their employers. The ISF occasionally refers trafficking victims to them.

But their resources are limited: Since 2015, Kafa has been able to offer protection to approximately 100 women, 20 of whom (all Syrians) were sex-trafficking survivors.

"These shelters are just a starting point," says Jabbour. "What we need are long-term solutions."

Some of these women were relocated overseas, some got married, but others, without a proper support mechanism, simply went back into prostitution - either forced or out of desperation.

"Countering trafficking and identifying victims is something that cannot be done by NGOs. It is a state's responsibility," says George Ghali, director of Alef.

According to Ghali, the problem is not the law but rather in the implementation of the law. "Where are the investigations? We are talking about organised crime. This is not something you can expect NGOs to deal with."

Back in Doura, Paul and Ray keep providing basic help to people in need. They do not have success stories to share.

Paul says he has not received any further threats from the traffickers. "[Why? Because] we make no change in the situation. And even if a girl manages to quit, they would have another one."

He admits that lately, he has considered stopping his volunteer work because of the emotional toll it has taken.

PALESTINE: How one woman with a disability builds a life in Gaza

People with disabilities find strength despite discrimination.

By Paul Aufiero

HRW (03.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3gn4RYS> - "I think I wouldn't have achieved so much in my life without my disability," said Doaa Qashlan, a university graduate and disability rights activist living in Gaza. Doaa, who was born with a physical disability and uses a wheelchair or an electric mobility scooter to move around, has a supportive family. She even became the first in her family to travel abroad. But back home in Gaza, life has been increasingly difficult.

Doaa uses her mobility scooter to get around the inaccessible streets of Gaza. "They're my legs," she says of her assistive devices. A few months ago, Doaa's scooter was damaged. She has still not been able to fix it, she says, as many necessary parts can't be found in Gaza and there's a lack of expertise to repair damaged devices. In part this stems from sweeping Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and people into and out of Gaza. Today, Doaa says, she feels trapped at home.

Doaa nonetheless maintains a sense of humor, resiliency, and a hope to see things change. She is a member of the Public Relations and Media Board of the Palestinian General Union for People with Disabilities and has collaborated with international and local organizations in Gaza to raise awareness on disability rights. Her work is a testament to her perseverance. Still, life in Gaza can be hard.

New research released on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities describes how Israel's 13-year closure and Hamas authorities' lack of services or efforts to make public spaces accessible contribute to making life extraordinarily difficult for tens of thousands of Palestinians with disabilities in Gaza. "The situation [in Gaza] is already dire," Doaa said. "You see how people in Gaza suffer? People with disabilities suffer double."

Electricity outages are Doaa's biggest daily worry. She must keep her mobility scooter charged. But Gaza's chronic power outages, a product of restrictive Israeli policies and squabbles between Palestinian authorities, leave residents with as little as five hours of electricity per day and up to 15 hours on the best days. For Doaa and other people in Gaza with disabilities, these electricity cuts present serious obstacles to daily life – especially for those who rely on equipment powered by electricity, such as elevators and electric mobility scooters.

Even when she can leave home, Doaa struggles with living in a relatively inaccessible area where it can be difficult for her to move about, and many in her community do not understand her needs. "Our neighbor built a speedbump in our area to slow cars down. He wasn't aware that this could injure us."

Doaa, like others with disabilities in Gaza, particularly women, faces deeply entrenched stigma. There are little to no job prospects and their social circles run small. Even things society places high value on, like marriage, are largely out of reach. For Doaa, this stigma is a constant source of frustration. "One day, a group of girls were speaking about marriage. They mentioned that a girl with a disability got married. One of them jokingly asked, 'I wonder how she got married?' I got angry and asked her, 'Has anyone asked you how you would get married?' The girl did not reply."

Even getting an education presented challenges for Doaa, each step of the way. By grade five, Doaa's muscles had begun to severely weaken and walking became challenging. She recalls an incident in grade six, when she used a walker. "I wanted to go to the bathroom. In order to reach the toilet, I had to walk a long distance on an unpaved, rocky path. Some students pushed me while I was walking, and I fell down and wet myself." When her father came to get her, he took her out of school. It was only at her mother's insistence – her mother even left the house until her father relented – that Doaa returned to school.

Doaa's mother is a constant source of strength for her and her younger sister Abeer, who also has a physical disability and uses a mobility scooter. When Doaa went back to school, she would arrive early to change from her mobility scooter to her wheelchair, and sometimes her mother would go over schoolwork with her while they waited for class to begin. One day, a group of people saw them, and one of them said to Doaa's mother, "Why are you teaching her, you think she will succeed? She's half human, go and give birth to a complete human." Doaa says that when she used to feel depressed and didn't want to go to school at all, sometimes counselors would visit her for psychosocial support. Later Doaa found out her mother had been arranging for that herself.

Doaa received an opportunity to attend a training program in the United Arab Emirates through a United Nations program for young people with disabilities. But after two years,

Doaa made the difficult decision to return home. She was distraught coming back to Gaza but enrolled in a university program in office administration. At one point, Doaa had to leave university for a year because she and Abeer had to share one mobility scooter between them, and Abeer needed it to finish secondary school.

Having a disability in Gaza can sometimes be life-threatening. During the war in 2014 between Israel and Palestinian armed groups, Doaa was constantly afraid of being unable to escape danger in the event of an Israeli airstrike. "Each time I got into the bathroom, I was afraid if a nearby escalation took place and I needed to flee quickly, I couldn't. I was already slow." Doaa and her sister would sometimes even hear family members say things like, "Your family might flee and forget you at home."

During the war, Doaa's and Abeer's family did have to evacuate from their home. They went to live with their aunt, whose home was not accessible. Doaa was not able to use her wheelchair in the house and had to crawl to move about. But she was embarrassed to do so in front of her male relatives in the house, so would avoid moving when they were home.

And what if she and her sister needed to flee or quickly escape a building that came under attack? The stress of the fighting, compounded with not knowing what would happen to her and Abeer should their family have to evacuate, weighed on her emotionally. "The most difficult thing was when I heard my sister say, 'I don't want to die and leave you on your own. I don't want you to die and leave me on my own.'"

Today, Doaa draws hope from her friends, all of whom also have disabilities, and from her desire to see the situation change in Gaza. Before her scooter was damaged, Doaa would spend her time at the General Union to work on disability rights-related activities or attend training sessions. She is excited about efforts by local organizations that can help people with disabilities, specifically women and girls. "Focus on youth and a double focus on girls. Girls need support because they're incredibly marginalized. They need to get a space to speak out."

One organization has made a huge difference in her life already. Recently, the nongovernmental group Humanity and Inclusion enhanced Doaa's home to make the kitchen and bathroom more accessible. "Now I am able to get into the kitchen and make food for me and my family." This small improvement left an enormously positive mark on Doaa's life, highlighting how such modest efforts to improve accessibility can go a long way to relieving the immense barriers that people with disabilities face just trying to live independent lives.

When asked what Israeli and Palestinian authorities should do for the tens of thousands of people with disabilities in Gaza, Doaa had one simple message: "Remember we are humans."

PALESTINE: New report from UN Women brings forth voices of Palestinian women under COVID-19 lockdown

UN Women (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fC5KLu> - "I always dreamed of taking a long holiday and spend it at home with myself, my children and my husband. Now the dream has turned into a nightmare," shares Rawan*, a Palestinian woman who works in the public sector in the West Bank. "I have more burden doing home chores, childcare, teaching... while ensuring that my husband who is doing work from home [has] a quiet space to do that."

Early into the COVID-19 crisis, UN Women, in partnership with Arab World for Research and Development, conducted in-depth interviews with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza for a new [study](#) that sheds new light on the situation and needs of Palestinian women and girls. More than 30 women-led organizations and woman leaders in the area participated in surveys and meetings that gathered data about women's experiences.

In an effort to curb the spread of the new coronavirus in Palestine, a state of emergency was declared in March, followed by lockdown measures across the West Bank and Gaza. Initially, only female employees with children working in the public sector were relieved of their professional duties to care for their children, reinforcing gender stereotypes that expect women to be caregivers and men to be breadwinners. Later, even when all non-essential government employees were asked to stay home, the burden of domestic work and childcare remained with women.

"We must take care of our own homes and take care of the hygiene measures. My husband is under quarantine in our house and I have moved with my kids to a neighbour's house. I take care of all the responsibilities, the children, the cleaning, budget management, and checking in on my husband's needs," explains Asma* from the West Bank, another respondent to the UN Women survey.

According to the study, 68 per cent of Palestinian women have reported increased unpaid care work since COVID-19 confinement measures took effect.

The situation is even more stressful for women who are expected to work from home, because they are expected to simultaneously take care of their children and housework. When both male and female partners in a household are working remotely, men's paid work is prioritized more than that of women.

Thirty-eight-year-old Um Ahmad, a mother of three, from Nablus, is also feeling the stress: "I must now care for all aspects of my children's welfare. With the introduction of e-learning, I am the only one who is really following up with the children to do their schoolwork. They are confined and stressed, and I must deal with that, but I am also stressed!" Um Ahmad wants psycho-social support for families as they struggle to cope with the new normal that COVID-19 has ushered in.

"While it is nice to have the family together, my husband [has] nothing to do. He is bored and... Boredom is making him edgy and prone to violence," shared Heba* from the West Bank, signalling the rising threat of domestic violence—the shadow pandemic—that women around the world are facing during COVID-19.

The Palestinian Working Women Society reported more than 510 calls for support, including from victims of domestic violence between 22 March and 4 April. SAWA, another women's organization, has reported 3 cases of suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, incest, harassment and attempted rape within a period of one week (9 - 16 April). And these are just the ones that have been reported – reporting of domestic violence is usually lower than the actual rate of incidents, and in times of crisis, many women may not have the opportunity or safety to report violence.

The lockdown measures that are necessary to contain the spread of the virus have created new barriers for women survivors seeking vital services. The restrictions on movement has also normalized the prevalent patriarchal notion that, "a woman's place is at home".

Economically, the crisis is expected to hit women's livelihood harder, since most women work in the informal sector and small businesses. A survey conducted by Arab World for Research and Development showed that 76 per cent of women had lost their income (compared to 65 per cent men). According to a flash survey by UN Women, 95 per cent of women owners of micro, small and medium enterprises said their work had already been impacted by COVID-19. Furthermore, the report found that almost 25 per cent of Palestinian women working in the private sector have no contract or pay protection.

Amal Hamad, Palestinian Minister of Women's Affairs stresses that economic violence and domestic violence are intrinsically linked under present circumstances. "As a result of the economic conditions, loss of jobs, and with the current state of anxiety, there is deterioration in the economic situation of women, and this is leading to economic violence in the home and is also higher rates of domestic violence."

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Palestinians, UN Women's report makes a strong case for prioritizing gender considerations in the country's COVID-19 response plan.

"The pandemic is not showing us new problems; it is worsening known issues," says UN Women Special Representative for Palestine, Maryse Guimond. "We know that crises can worsen the economic, social and political situation of women and girls, deepening existing inequalities. But this can also be an opportunity to move forward and not go backward."

To emerge from this crisis with resilience, and to build back better, gender equality must take centre-stage in all aspects of recovery efforts—from ensuring that stimulus plans address the needs of both men and women equally to encouraging and promoting the role of men at home and in childcare as equal partners in the household. For more recommendations, read the full report.

PALESTINE: Palestinian men take up cooking in quarantine

Forced to stay at home due to precautions against COVID-19, some Palestinian men are learning to cook for the first time in their lives.

By Sanaa Saida

Al-Monitor (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xn3tDG> - Samar Titi laughs and says her husband, Hassan, has hardly ever stepped into their kitchen throughout 27 years of marriage, not even to pour himself a cup of tea.

One reason was that Hassan, a video journalist, was rarely home. The father of three would have coffee with his wife in the morning, then rush to work most days of the week.

But since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the Palestinian territories a month ago, Hassan, like most of his colleagues, is staying home. In April, the Palestinian government declared a state of emergency and shut down public places, including schools, universities and markets.

At home in Nablus in the West Bank, Hassan dabbled in the kitchen and prepared his first dish: msakhan, a Palestinian delicacy of chicken, onions, olive oil and bread.

"It was delicious," Samar said, explaining she had little to do with the preparations. Her husband had found the recipe online and didn't consult her.

Hassan said, "I was tired of doing nothing and picking up arguments with my wife because I was restless and on edge. I was surprised to discover that there are a lot of men cooking. At first, I felt shy cooking in front of my wife and daughters."

But once he discovered that he could, Hassan started working with Samar in the kitchen. Samar said she was "so happy" because the lockdown afforded her some time with her husband.

Then Dina, their youngest daughter, a student of marketing and human resources, filmed her father and posted the videos on Facebook.

"I saw my parents working together on one of our family's favorite dishes that we had not done before, as we did not have time," she said. "So I decided to record these special moments and share them with my friends. Cooking, baking sweets or coming up with healthy recipes is also a way of spending time together."

In the Gaza Strip, where the situation is more difficult because of the Israeli blockade, Mohammed al-Ramlawi and his wife Noor also cook together at home in Gaza City.

Mohammed also helps Noor clean the house — which is perhaps even more rare than a Palestinian man cooking, as men, in Palestinian society, typically do not help with domestic affairs.

Noor said the quarantine has changed the habits of some men, who are putting aside the mentality that real men do not do housework. But she admitted that her husband would rather cook than clean.

Mohammed said he had never helped in the house over six years of marriage because it was neither necessary nor requested. "Most of the time, I was working outside," he said. "When I came home in the evening, everything was done and ready."

Both the Ramlawis and the Titis have found a way to cooperate and help each other during these days of self-isolation. "There have been many reports of violence — both toward women and children — in quarantine in the Palestinian lands," Laila Abu Aisha, a family counselor from Gaza City, told Al-Monitor.

"Many men who are forced to stay home suffer from stress and frustration, particularly if they have lost their income," she said. "Fear, insecurity and stress negatively affect their psychology and they resort to violence — they abuse their wives and children."

She called on the Palestinian government to help alleviate Palestinians' financial difficulties and protect women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women's groups active in the Middle East have warned against a potential increase in domestic violence since the coronavirus outbreak, saying that tight-knit family structures and multigenerational living conditions in confined spaces could increase violence. Stressful situations often lead to physical abuse, which was high in Palestine even before the added stress of the coronavirus.

Though many women's groups have warned of increased domestic violence in the Middle East, no figures have been released since the start of the pandemic in the region.

TURKEY: Turkish human rights lawyer dies after hunger strike

OHCHR (02.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32fPjgF> - The death of Turkish human rights lawyer Ebru Timtik after a long hunger strike was entirely preventable, UN human rights experts* said today, calling on Turkey to release other human rights defenders.

"No one should have to die in pursuit of a fair trial; it is a fundamental human right," they said. "This is an utter waste of a human life, and we are greatly dismayed at the death of this, courageous woman human rights defender, as well as the circumstances that led to her death."

Ebru Timtik died on 27 August 2020 after three years in detention and a hunger strike lasting 238 days. Along with other lawyers from the People's Law Office, she was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to 13 years and six months in prison under the charges of belonging to a terrorist organisation. She went on a hunger strike on 02 January 2020 claiming her right to a fair trial.

Shortly after the lawyers were arrested, the UN human rights experts formally asked the Turkish government to explain the legal basis for their arrest and the accusations against them.

"We asked the Turkish Government in 2017 to explain how their arrest and conviction were compatible with the State's obligations under international human rights law", said the experts, highlighting allegations of unlawful detention, unfair trial and restrictions on the freedom of expression and of association. "While we acknowledge and appreciate the engagement of the authorities with us on the issue, we regret that little was done to prevent this tragic outcome."

The experts called for an effective investigation into her death. "We call on the authorities to establish an accountability process for the victim and to uphold fair trial principles by reopening the cases of arrested human rights lawyers. The Government of Turkey must also take immediate action to release individuals detained and sentenced contrary to international law."

TURKEY: Turkish women rage against sexism with topsy-turvy tweets

Ever since last week, Turkish women have been giving their male counterparts a taste of sexist remarks by switching sex in popular sayings or political statements.

By Nazlan Ertan

Al-Monitor (10.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2NieHhb> - An unprecedented flurry of reverse sexism raised its head in Turkey's lively Twittersphere last week. "I am a modern woman, so I help my husband with housework," said a tweet, whilst another declared, "The greatest gift a man can offer his wife is his virginity." Simply by switching the word "woman" with "man" and "wife" with "husband," Turkish women — and some men — of all walks of life mocked misogynist or chauvinistic expressions, idioms, maxims and particularly political statements that discriminate against women.

"Thousands of tweets under the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace were witty and impactful," Meltem Agduk, gender programme coordinator at the United Nations Population Fund in Turkey told Al-Monitor. "No wonder that some [conservative or chauvinistic] groups felt threatened by it and tried to counter it with another hashtag — #womenshouldknowtheirplace — or criticize it with media declarations. But these attempts have been futile; even after a week, the online campaign is still going strong."

The spontaneous campaign started June 3 with a single, punchy tweet, "My husband can work if he wants" — an allusion to an often heard saying by men who try to drive home the point that they "allow" their wives to work. A 2001 legal amendment gave married women in Turkey the right to work without seeking spousal consent. But traditions, mentality and a host of legal and structural obstacles — such as the absence of child care centers and gender pay gap — prevent many women from joining the workforce. Only 34.5% of women in Turkey work, which is nearly half of the European Union average (61.4 %).

Replies to the tweet by Ruq, who now has more than 95,000 followers, poured in, repeating all-too-familiar sentences with the roles reversed: "I would never allow my husband to work, his job is to take care of my kids" and "Since we both work, I lend a hand to my husband while he does the housework. I even load and unload the dishwasher or shop on the weekends. What's the big deal with housework anyway?"

But it was only after Gaye Su Akyol, a singer, activist and wit, started the hashtag #menshouldknowtheirplace that this initiative snowballed into a trending topic. Retweeting Ruq's tweet, Akyol commented, "Men should be chaste. They should not laugh out loud in public." This was a reference to a comment in 2014 by Bulent Arinc, one of the heavyweights of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) then and a notorious anti-feminist, who said that women should be chaste, act with modesty and "refrain from laughing out loud in public."

Within hours, many women's rights activists and Twitter users joined in creating a chronicle of headline-grabbing sexist statements by government officials or acts of violence against women. One said that a man wearing shorts on public transport is "asking to be harassed," which alluded to a nurse who was kicked for wearing shorts on a bus in Istanbul in 2016. "Why would a decent man be out on the streets in the early hours of the morning?" joined in a male tweeter, referring to some of the statements made when a 19-year-old was threatened with a knife and raped in Istanbul's posh Bagdat Caddesi four years ago.

Most of the political satire targeted AKP officials whose statements often border on chauvinistic and misogynist. Many users switched around President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks that motherhood was the highest honor bestowed upon women and that women who rejected motherhood were "deficient." Others mocked the words of an ex-minister who said that family values were threatened if "men" did not know how to bake a good traditional borek.

Opposition politicians joined in the campaign. "We are going to put up men from each constituency [in key posts] so that men can start being actors in politics, not mere accessories," tweeted Canan Kaftancioglu, the Istanbul chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP). Some CHP municipalities started tweeting that they were considering the launch of "blue buses" so that men can commute without harassment, mocking the AKP initiative of women-only pink buses.

Ruq was surprised by her newly-found fame. "I posted a [similar] tweet last year but nothing happened then," she tweeted. Akyol explained that the campaign had snowballed

because women have become tired of femicides, domestic violence and daily demonstrations of sexism. “We are tired of this nauseating system where the name of the murder suspect is disguised, but the morality, life and choices of the victim are questioned. ... It is 2020 and we want to do something about this.”

“The initiative showed us plainly how sexism exists in the everyday life in word and deed,” Agduk noted. “It compliments, motivates and encourages other — more formal and structured — gender equality campaigns that international organizations and private groups carry out in Turkey.”

One of those groups — Koc — launched in 2017 a Manual for Gender Mainstreaming in Communications, proposing alternatives for sexist forms of speech.

“From a communicator’s point of view, this was a brilliant campaign,” agreed Zehra Gungor, a communications expert and an activist for women’s entrepreneurship. “The tweets were spontaneous, intelligent and very, very funny.” She told Al-Monitor that she had also joined with a tweet that read, “We support our male colleagues who want quotas for men in political parties.”

Not everyone was amused. While most women’s groups, such as Stop Femicides Association, applauded the campaign, Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), vice-chaired by the president’s daughter Sumeyye Erdogan Bayraktar, lambasted it, saying it was against the “values of society.” On June 9, Ismail Kilicaslan, a columnist of Yeni Safak, also blasted the initiative, saying what started “innocently” had turned into offending religion by paraphrasing certain words of the prophet. “This is a dark project,” he wrote, comparing it to the attempted coup against the government on July 15, 2016.

A feisty Akyol retorted with a tweet saying she was surely on the right path if her tweets irked conservative and chauvinistic groups. Posting an image of herself on a sunbed, she said she was toasting “to bury bigots who are disturbed [even] by the ‘f’ of freedom and the ‘w’ of woman in the dusty pages of history.”
