



BAHRAIN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Defending and promoting human rights in Bahrain

BCHR's submission to the UNSR's thematic report to the HRC 2020

Violence against women journalists

Ruled with an iron grip by its royal family, Bahrain is notorious for its tight press space, harassing journalists. Fear that the regime could be overthrown led to an increase in the persecution and censorship of dissidents from 2011 onwards, especially after the uprisings by the opposition in the country.

Despite the praise given to the press as a "Human Rights Corner and a mirror of our emerging democracy," the Government of Bahrain maintained a repressive approach against anyone who defied its official vision. Violations against journalists in Bahrain touched both female and male journalists and can be classified as follows:

- Closing down newspapers and blocking websites;
- Dismissal from work, none of the 100 journalists and technicians who were dismissed in 2011 returned to work except 3 or 4 of them;
- Arbitrary arrests;
- Revoking nationality;
- Prevention from traveling;
- Problems renewing accreditation for journalists who work for international media;
- For foreign journalists, getting a press visa to visit Bahrain is very complicated.

[According to the Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#), 3 journalists were actually killed in Bahrain, where in the year 2020, six journalists still remain imprisoned.

On the other hand, Reporters without Borders RSF's 2019 annual World Press Freedom Index confirms Bahrain's hostility to free press, [ranking](#) Bahrain 167 out of 180 states. This is Bahrain's worst ranking since the index started in 2013 and aligns with increasing attacks on, and arrests of, journalists, bloggers, writers, and human rights defenders. The [organization](#) said: "Bahrain offers a perfect example of successful crackdowns, with an information blackout achieved through an impressive arsenal of repressive measures: exclusion of the foreign media, harassment of human rights defenders, arrests of bloggers and netizens (one of whom died behind bars), prosecutions and defamation campaigns against free expression activists, disruption of communications" .

In our submission we want to outline some of the cases of women bloggers and journalists whom were targeted and faced harassment by the official authorities in Bahrain for their engagement and activities.

For example, writer, blogger and women's rights activist [Ghada Jamsheer](#) continued to be embroiled in hearings in 10 different cases following her release on 15 December 2016 after spending three months in jail on a defamation charge for tweeting about alleged corruption at King Hamad University Hospital. Jamsheer was arrested after being summoned to CID headquarters for questioning on 9 September 2016. According to the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, she is banned from appearing on Bahraini radio or TV and her website has been blocked since 2009.

In 2017, three reporters, **Reem Khalifa** of the Associated Press, **Fareshtha Saeed** of Reuters and **Naziha Saeed** were banned from attending the head of the Al-Wefaq opposition group's appearances in court on 28 January and 25 February.

Eman Salehi, 28-year-old, a female journalist got shot dead in December 2016 in Bahrain in front of her young son. Salehi was shot

in the street on December 23 as her six-year-old son watched through the window of the car. The military court issued on Tuesday (March 21, 2017) a life imprisonment sentence against murderer of Eman Salehi, according to Military Judiciary Chief Youssef Flaifel. Activists said that murderer of Eman Salehi is one of the royal ruling family members. Meanwhile, official parties refused to reveal the identity of the murderer who killed Eman using a weapon he owns. It's unclear what sparked the Dec. 23 shooting. Salehi, known for her piercing blue eyes and friendly demeanor, worked as a sports journalist for Bahrain's state-run television broadcaster.

That night, her car was stopped in the Bahraini city of Riffa, a community popular with members of the ruling Al Khalifa family and the military. A man shot Salehi once in the head, then immediately turned himself into authorities.

Bahrain's Interior Ministry issued only a terse statement on Twitter saying there had been a "murder of a female." The state-run Bahrain News Agency identified Salehi's killer as a "34-year-old Bahraini man" who "was referred to the relevant judicial party to continue the necessary legal procedures."

The Gulf Daily News, a pro-government English-language newspaper, went a step further, describing Salehi's assailant as an officer in the Bahraini Defense Force. Bahrain's Ministry of Information Affairs declined to comment on the case.

Not to mention the prominent case of **Zainab Al-Khawaja** who is a Bahraini human rights defender and democracy activist. She is also a leading social media activist and has been a leading figure in the pro-democracy uprising that started in Bahrain in February 2011. Al-Khawaja was a constant target of the official authorities since 2011. She was arrested several times and imprisoned for her opinions and engagement in the prodemocracy movement. Even though Al-Khawaja was released there are still charges against her and she remained under threat of being re-arrested at any time. After the Bahraini authorities told the Danish embassy that they would arrest her if she remained in the kingdom, Al-Khawaja, who has Danish-

Bahraini dual citizenship, fled to Denmark immediately upon her release. She announced her exile from Bahrain on twitter.

Al-Khawaja continues her work abroad alongside her sister, **Maryam Al-Khawaja**, who has been traveling the world for more than 8 years to talk about her country and who was also exiled several years earlier, in 2014, after the government began prosecuting her in reprisal for her activism.

Rights activist and social media blogger, **Ebtisam Al-Saegh**, who documents government torture and other abuses with the advocacy group Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, has endured reprisals for her work. In May 2017, Al-Saegh was detained at the NSA and allegedly blindfolded, beaten, and sexually assaulted; her attackers also interrogated her about other activists and her association with the UN Human Rights Council, and attempted to coerce her to use her Twitter account to announce her retirement as a human rights activist. Instead, in July, she denounced the abuse of women by NSA agents and criticized the king on Twitter. Hours later, plainclothes officers, without a warrant, raided her home, confiscated her phone and national ID card, and took her into custody. She was released in October 2017, but now faces terrorism charges in connection with her tweets.

In September 2017, **Rawan Sanqoor** was arrested for tweets about the alleged denial of medical care to her imprisoned brother, Ali Sanqoor, and her communications with the International Committee of the Red Cross. She was held in detention for about a month, was allegedly isolated from others, and was denied visitation rights. She was released in October 2017, and has since made her Twitter account private.

On June 25, 2018, a Bahraini court sentenced online activist **Najah Ahmad Youssef** to 3 years in prison for running a page on the Internet publishing protests in her village against the "Formula One" race in Bahrain.

On May 25, 2017, a Bahraini court imposed a fine of 1,000 dinars (\$ 2,650) on journalist **Naziha Saeed** after being accused by the authorities of reporting to foreign media (France 24 and Monte Carlo International Radio) without a license. Naziha has been advocating for women rights and freedom of expression for the past ten years through

articles and collaboration with different regional and international media outlets.

The Public Information Authority (June 2016) refused to renew Saeed's work permit as a reporter for France 24 and Monte Carlo International Radio, although she has been a TV reporter for more than 12 years.

Naziha Saeed is currently residing in Europe because of the pressure of the authorities. She was one of the journalists who was arrested and tortured during a brutal security campaign in 2011. It is not known whether she will be able to return to work independently in Bahrain or will permanently reside in a voluntary exile like other journalists who have been forced to leave the country.

The case dates back to 22 May 2011, when Naziha Saeed, the correspondent of France 24 Channel and Monte Carlo Radio, responded to a request by the Riffa police station to attend the station. Naziha's visit to the police station lasted for 12 hours, where her eyes were blindfolded and she was subjected to a floodgate of brutality and inhumane mistreatment.

Upon her arrival to the police station, a black bag mask was put on her head and she was left in the care of a policewoman. The investigation started by attempting to establish whether Naziha was present in the Pearl Roundabout, the site of the public protests in Bahrain in 2011, and by virtue of the nature of her work as a journalist, she answered affirmatively, noting that her work requires her to cover the events.

Naziha said she was subjected to merciless and strong slaps on her face, then a female investigator took a plastic pipe and began hitting her on various parts of her body with violent and merciless strikes. When she fell to the ground Naziha was subjected to verbal abuse and mockery by the female investigators.

Naziha also stated that she was forced by the investigators to sit on a chair in the opposite way, her face facing the back of the chair, then she was brutally hit on her back while the verbal abuse and humiliation continued. Immediately after this incident, Naziha had a range of medical tests and obtained medical reports that prove her exposure to

torture. A delegate from the French Embassy contacted Naziha then and became witness on the torture she has been subject to because of the evident deplorable condition they found her in including infected facial scars. A decision was made then to send her to France to receive treatment.

For those who ask about the offense committed by Naziha, her only mistake was that she became a witness on the killing of a demonstrator Mr Issa Abdul Hassan by one the police officers.

By virtue of her work as a journalist, she had to cover the events of the early hours of 17 February 2011 at the Pearl Roundabout, when the army and police forces attacked the protester, Naziha's bad luck made her witness a security man put the barrel of his gun on the head of that old man and with one shot his brain exploded and scattered on the walls- a coincidence that the Bahraini police officers did not forgive her for.

Naziha's determination to bring to bring to justice her abusers made her embark on a legal battle that lasted for 4 years. The Bahraini Public Prosecution Office filed charges against Lieutenant Sara Mousa for the "use of force to extract confessions from the journalist and beating her causing her injuries". The legal battle ended after the appeal stage where the officer was acquitted of all charges.

It was a clear confirmation that "Reporters without Borders" organization, renamed the street, where the Bahraini Embassy in Paris is located at the beginning of this month and called it "Naziha Saeed Street" in a symbolic gesture towards the embassies of countries where the perpetrators against journalists escaped with impunity in an attempt to "draw the attention of these countries and remind them of their duty to take action and investigate these crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice" according to the organization.

In addition, Saeed won Johann Philipp Palm Prize for freedom of expression and press in 2014. The Foundation said that Naziha has been awarded this prize in recognition of her work in to support the freedom of the press in her home country, noting that her case has attracted international attention and that her ordeal has attracted attention to her fellow prisoners as well. Furthermore, the Foundations has launched a

project to train journalists in Bahrain to conduct their risky mission with as much safety as possible, and to produce impartial reports in line with the principles and ethics of journalism.

Palm Foundation trustees Board referred to the nomination of Naziha by the Committee to Protect Journalists, noting that she has exerted remarkable efforts and demonstrated courage in order to contribute to the democratic transition in her country and the promotion of freedom of the press.

Furthermore, on 2012, the eve of the first anniversary of protests to demand democratic reforms in Bahrain, the Bahraini authorities deported two US activists and journalists, **Huwaida Araf and Radika Sainath** who were in Bahrain as part of an international solidarity effort aimed at providing an international civilian presence to report and monitor the situation on the ground. The two activists were handcuffed behind their backs during their 6 hours flight from Bahrain to London. Sainath was hit 3 times in the head to force her on plane; Araf hair was pulled on plane; no food/water/restroom during whole flight - pilot refused to respond. For years now, Bahraini authorities had prevented journalists, human rights observers and other internationals from entering the country. The two women were part of the Witness Bahrain initiative (www.witnessbahrain.org), which arrived in Bahrain in response to a call by Bahraini democracy activists for international observers.

On electronic harassment and persecution level, from 2011 onwards, progovernment internet users frequently posted photos of protestors on social media in order to identify and punish them in “electronic witch hunts.” Government services and housing can be withheld from those bloggers accused of participating in protests, and some have seen their employment terminated for their political opinions.

Women journalists routinely face gender-based discrimination and harassment. Women journalists often receive anonymous threats, even blackmailing, over email and social media. They also receive negative comments online for reporting on religious, political, or other controversial subjects

Several reports have documented the government's use of spyware against dissidents. In November 2015, new evidence showed that Bahrain had used the Remote Control Systems (RCS) from Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team. The spyware allows remote monitoring, including recording phone calls, logging keystrokes, taking screenshots, and activating cameras, among other functions. Malicious links are often sent from Twitter and Facebook accounts impersonating well-known opposition figures, friends, or the accounts of arrested users. In October 2015, at least four cases were recorded in which opposition members received emails containing malicious spyware.

In Bahrain there are [no policies to address gender discrimination](#) against women journalists and bloggers. The Bahrain Journalists Association (BJA), was founded in 2001, and is supposed to “represent and protect the interests of all Bahrain-based journalists.” However, the association is not an independent society. Additionally, there is no press union. The absence of a press union and the lack of the BJA's independence limit journalists' ability to conduct awareness-raising sessions or trainings, particularly surrounding gender-based issues for women journalists.

Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) recognizes Bahraini journalists who have faced, and continue to face, arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and death at the hands of the Bahraini government because of their work. BCHR condemns the Government of Bahrain's attacks on journalists, bloggers, writers, and human rights defenders and suppression of free expression and it call upon Bahrain to take serious steps to hold perpetrators of violence against journalists accountable for their crimes.

Recommendations:

- The immediate and unconditional release of all media professionals and detainees of opinion and conscience who have been detained for expressing their views.

- Commitment of the Government of Bahrain to grant journalists protection as well as civilians in conflict situations, strengthen national laws, reform justice system.
- Abolition of laws that do not match the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in the Bahraini Penal Code and Decree-Law No. 47 of 2002, which limits freedom of expression and freedom of the press.
- Allowing Al Wasat newspaper to return to work without conditions or restrictions that do not meet Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Unblocking international news agencies and satellite channels, and allowing them to visit the country, cover events and open offices without imposing conditions and restrictions that limit the possibility of conducting media work freely.