**Strengthening protection networks for women human rights defenders to combat discrimination. Thursday 18 May 2017, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**Intervention of Farah Salka, WHRD-Mena Coalition**

WHRD Mena network's coordination office is based in Lebanon but the network covers more than 12 countries and 40 groups in 3 regions: the Levant, North Africa and the gulf.

Since Jan 2016, the coalition has been facing many challenges due to increased instability in the region. This instability is caused by an ongoing struggle by 2 forces, the first would be the state & the second would be a spectrum of Islamic factions and parties that aren't homogenous. This struggle over power differs in each sub region in its manifestation & impact on the WHRDs, but also on the coalition’s activity. The coalition's members, like most of the civil society actors are stuck amidst this power struggle, invisible to the international community but clear and targeted by both entities. Again, both state & non state actors.

Travelling within the region is proving so difficult, the coalition has been relying on the fact that entry to Lebanon is considered the most accessible to WHRDs that are able to fly from their countries. Our members have reported also increasing difficulty in obtaining visas to Tunisia and Egypt. WHRDs from Yemen are now not allowed to enter Jordan or Egypt which complicates their arrival from inside Yemen to Beirut for future trainings or any important convenings.

Also, WHRDs from Syria that are living outside of Beirut have reported that checkpoints are targeting Syrian women, & since most of our WHRDs have no legal status, they are fearing to move in & out of Beirut. This was evident as we prepared for the digital security & documentation training.

As a coalition we fear the following in the future:

1- Police state such as Egypt will literally close down all public spaces & not respond to the international law or pressures. This will be used by other countries & there will be an increase in targeting WHRDs thru travel bans and unfair trials. This will impact continuity of WHRDs and their safety & will bring down the morale of so many others who used to find a haven of inspiration and drive from the older WHRDs who were targeted and silenced now.

2- Increased presence & land control by groups such as Isis where they don’t adhere to the rule of law or acknowledge international conventions. Such groups are active in in silencing WHRDs or causing them to flee the country and be in forced exile. Just like the other side of the coin, which are the dictatorships that are still in place and that have affected and continue to affect the lives of whrds, especially those who have stood firmly against violence and called and continued to call for freedom, human rights and democracy. These dictatorships have affected the lives and spirits of whrds doing activist, feminist or humanitarian work in the worse ways possible

3- The rise of the national anti-terrorism laws across the region, where it’s been used to target civil society & WHRDs with no accountability & no clear definitions of terrorism. So under the guise of anti-terrorism, you have states abusing this to imprison women human rights activists and defenders right and left.

Some security threats involving members of coalition or reported directly to coalition.

The coalitions founders (Nazra, elnadeem center, cewla) have consecutively been targeted by the Egyptian state under accusations of foreign funding. This year, elnadeem center (which works on documentation & rehabilitation of victims of torture) faced 2 attempts to be closed by the police, causing much fear over the safety of its 2 founders: magda adly & aida saif eldawla.

In addition, on June 28, 2016, Mozn Hassan our coalition’s advisor, was banned from travelling due to the orders of the judge investing the case 173. This was followed by both Mozn Hassan, and Azza Suleiman, not only being banned from travelled, but their individual and organizational assets were frozen and they were completely forced to halt any of their human rights work.

This has caused an impact on the coalitions, internally, since Mozn was responsible for networking & promoting the coalition. The targeting of Mozn has brought a sense of distress to the members & to the way we would want to think about protection, since despite her fame and recognition to the international community, her international awards & her popularity, Mozn Hassan was still targeted & all efforts to engage with the Egyptian state have failed. If we fail to provide any sort of protection to the whrds recognized with such big visibility, what can we even do about all the others invisible whrds? So it is something to think about.

Such a precedent brings a new reality to the word we need to be doing around the region and as a coalition and international partners we must revisit the tactics used especially when dealing with unresponsive regimes, (and there are many of them) & also weight of the impact of Mozn’s case on other WHRDs in Egypt that are not as known being discouraged & intimidated by the states actions.

In Sudan, a raid on alkhatem center in Khartoum, have resulted in the arrest of 2 WHRDs, arwa elrabie and imany-layla, among 6 other human rights defenders, after they appeared for court on May 22 2016. The 2 WHRDs have been released on June and await trial in a case that also criminalized them for receiving foreign funding. Arwa elrabie is one of the few WHRDs still working in Sudan since many have left and sought refuge in Egypt and other countries bcoz of fear of being prosecuted by the Sudanese government. The coalition’s activities with the Sudanese WHRDs are decreasing due to the fact that they’ve been fleeing the country, or that they are shutting down their organizations. This is impacting the info we are obtaining from Sudan, and also isolating the WHRDs inside Sudan further and further

WHRDs in Libya have reported an increase in attacking WHRDs where 33 fatwa were issued all aiming to limit women’s presence inside the public space, & obliging a male companion w/ women while travelling. The head of the Libya network for human rights defenders have reported that she survived 3 assassination attempts this year as a response for being vocal against child soldiers and their right to wellbeing. WHRDs from Syria are mostly living in diaspora & those who are working inside Libya have had restriction over their movement. Our digital security training and documentation wasn’t successful in including WHRD from Libya due to the safety concerns over her mobility.

In Iraq, our members have reported an increased rate of bombing in Baghdad, couples w/ more harassment from militia & police to the WHRDs working in emergency aid.

Yazidi WHRD participating in our regional meeting have reported receiving threats of physically and sexually harming her due to her work defending the rights of the Yazidi minority. The institute of women leadership in iraq have also communicated w/ the coalition abt having to relocate their offices due to the threats from religious groups. The Iraqi government on the other hand have been intimidating lawyers who worked on lobbying against the jaafari marriage law, a law that decreases the age of marriage of women to 11, and although the law was retracted, the smearing campaign is still active targeting WHRDs involved in the process because they had a voice on this. Our members in Iraq are being targeted by state & non state actors, one of the main challenges is finding secure locations for our members to implement the local digital and documentation trainings for other local WHRDs.

And this is all just a glimpse. The regional MENA coalition, composed of individual whrds & organizations, builds on lessons learnt with its mission of enhacing protection of whrds in the mena region thru empowering local networks & providing regional solidarity & support, breaking isolation, & building a stronger feminist movement to maximize the voices of those of us being silenced, or being their voice when they are being completely cornered out of public access, reminding each other that we are never alone. We dream of a day where all whrds are safe from violence and attacks, all women actually.

So we have so much to do, and we just need the collective will power to make the lives of WHRDs more valued and protected.