
The Rise of Violence against Women and Girls since the Arab Spring

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Introduction

This is a summary of a panel discussion that was held at the Excel Centre, London as part of the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict on 10 June 2014. The discussion was on the record.

The Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, co-chaired by UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Special Envoy for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Angelina Jolie, was the largest global meeting on this issue ever convened. The principal purpose was to create an irreversible momentum against sexual violence in conflict.

The event, as part of the summit fringe, brought together over 150 participants from national and international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, the private sector and the public to consider the experiences of women facing violence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the Arab Spring. Panellists also explored the effectiveness of responses at the individual, community and government levels to the rise of violence against women and girls.

Baroness Scotland

Baroness Scotland opened with contextual background about the issues involved. Sexual and gender-based violence affects a third of women in the world, and is one of the worst global epidemics it has faced. If violence against women and girls were a disease, action would have been taken more urgently. The chair emphasized that this issue could not be viewed as limited to the MENA region, when sexual and gender-based violence affects one in four women and one in six men in the United Kingdom.

Nervana Mahmood

Nervana Mahmood presented the Egyptian context of violence against women and girls post-uprisings. In light of the recent attack in Tahir, she emphasized that sexual and gender-based violence is not a new phenomenon in Egypt – it is a chronic and systemic issue with 80 per cent of women harassed daily. The revolution politicized violence, and the political situation has compounded violence against women and girls. The speaker expressed concern that there was a danger of Egypt becoming known as a ‘country of rapists’ when there had been a strong and active history of feminism for five thousand years. She said there was a need for a change in mentalities across the media, as well as in education and religion, and a cohesive national strategy for Egypt with a change in the law.

Nicola Pratt

Nicola Pratt expressed concern about an increasingly narrow focus on sexual violence to the detriment of other forms of violence against women and girls. There have been new challenges and new types of violence against women that can be intrinsically linked to the political uprisings of the Arab Spring. Women’s bodies are being used as battlefields and are being instrumentalized in political rivalries across the region. For example, women’s bodies in Egypt are being controlled in current rivalries – they are being used to break the opposition and assert authority, and are being exploited for profit and pleasure. Violence is both strategic and opportunistic, and thrives where women stay silent. Since 2011, women and some men have been breaking the silence on sexual and gender-based violence in the Arab world – an essential step for civil society efforts in tackling such violence.

Fida Shafi

Fida Shafi expressed the view that violence against women and girls flourishes in conflict, and rape is a weapon of war as effective as any conventional weapon like bullets, landmines and bombs. Syrian refugees have fled to Jordan due to rape, and the fear of rape and its stigma, in the ongoing conflict. Media coverage has fuelled violence against women since the Arab Spring, and this is apparent in the Syrian conflict. Syrian women lack autonomy over their bodies while men feel entitled to them. Further, perpetrators must be accountable for their crimes – policies are not enough.

Ghaidaa al Absi

Ghaidaa al Absi spoke of Yemen's national dialogue and the manipulation of women's voices. There has been a change in attitudes with regards to sexual and gender based violence – violence against women and girls is increasingly discussed in the home, as well as being raised in constitutional talks. However, there are not enough qualified women on the constitutional council and there are concerns that the rights of women will be manipulated in the future. Violence takes many forms and affects all types and strata of women. However, the speaker emphasized that it was dangerous and incorrect to simplify women as victims and men as perpetrators. Yemen needs a comprehensive national strategy, increased representation of women, and an elimination of the taboos surrounding sexual and gender-based violence.

Discussion themes

- Stigma and shame are at the forefront of many men and women's minds, and this stigma is put upon victims and those who raise their voice. Questions were raised as to how shame is projected onto the victim, family and nation– it was suggested that there is often a state of denial that this is a national problem.
- The impact of legislation is limited without consistent and effective implementation. The Anti-Harassment Law in Egypt is strong, but it lacks real implementation. It must be applied to all, rather than selected individuals, with fair trials and the right perpetrators held to account.
- Men have been increasingly engaged in challenging gender norms since 2011. Political violence in the Middle East instrumentalizes men as well as women, and men are also victims of sexual and gender-based violence. Violence against women and girls will not be eliminated without the involvement of men.
- There has been a barrier to progress from the association of feminism with the West, and in the case of Egypt the association of feminism with cities. Feminism in Egypt has been Cairo-based, and has few roots in rural areas, though feminism itself may evolve with more women associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in rural Egypt. Similar issues can also be seen with the lack of improvement and acceptance for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, as sexual minorities are also often seen as Western.
- There was some concern as to whether national strategies are the most effective way to combat violence against women and girls in the MENA region. Some speakers emphasized the importance of national plans, but others highlighted how such strategies have been co-opted by actors with less laudable agendas.

- The concept of a blanket strategy for the MENA region, which could be tailored for individual countries, was also discussed. Questions were raised about this given that there is no universal woman, that violence is very specific and that each country faces unique challenges. One speaker noted the risk of tools like Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women marginalizing the contextual issues central to violence against women and girls.

Key findings

- Violence against women and girls is not a recent phenomenon in the MENA region. Sexual and gender-based violence is chronic and endemic. However, the MENA region is not the only one affected – violence against women and girls is a critical concern for all societies with one in three women affected worldwide.
- There are new forms of violence against women and girls intrinsically linked to the political uprisings of the Arab Spring - women's 'bodies are battlefields' and are being instrumentalized in political rivalries
- Violence against women and girls is not selective. Women from all classes, all religions and all countries across the region are experiencing violence. Perpetrators of violence against women similarly come from all social, religious and geographical strata.
- There is a danger of reducing violence against women and girls to sexual violence. This narrow focus can have a significant detrimental effect on tackling other forms of violence faced by women and girls.
- There remains a gap between the collective recognition of violence against women and girls, and political will to pursue the collective implementation needed to tackle it. States must convert legislation and policy commitments into concrete practical action.
- The stigma and discrimination faced by victims of sexual violence is not only an affront to human dignity, but it prevents women from reporting attacks and continues a cycle of impunity for perpetrators. To break the taboo that surrounds sexual and gender based violence, there is a need to challenge community attitudes through education, the media and religion.
- There must be improved investigations and non-judgmental documentation of the occurrence and prevalence of violence against women and girls. The lack of reporting on sexual and gender-based violence, and the absence of accurate and reflective data, is a critical barrier to the elimination of violence against women and girls.
- The full, active, and equal participation of women at the local, national and regional level is essential. In the Middle East, particularly where new constitutions are being drafted, there must be meaningful representation with women having a seat at the table.
- Women in the MENA region have different needs in different contexts. Civil society, and particularly the voices of women affected, must be engaged with to ensure effective survivor-centred responses.
- It is imperative to understand gender norms and how they exacerbate violence against women and girls. Without addressing the root causes of violence against women, including sexual and gender-based, in peacetime, it is not possible to realize the full political, social and economic empowerment of women, eliminate such violence in the MENA region and achieve sustainable peace.

- Though there are many challenges ahead, there has been progress and real passion within civil society to challenge gender norms and instigate change since 2011. While the Arab Spring may have been disappointing to some politically, socially it has been very exciting.

Further information

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