

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## External Document

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### **Speech of the Secretary General at the SVAW regional launch in the Middle East and North Africa in Amman, Jordan**

Your Majesty, let me begin by saying how deeply honoured we are to have you here with us today. Through your advocacy and your efforts to improve the situation of women and girls in Jordan and around the world, you provide a role model for leadership in this region. Through your presence here, you acknowledge the contribution of all those who work to defend human rights, so thank you for gracing this occasion.

Your Majesty, honoured guests, friends,

Our campaign to Stop Violence Against Women gives voice to the millions of women in the world and in the Middle East and North Africa who suffer from violence simply because they are women.

o The women of Iraq, who live in daily fear of being kidnapped, raped or murdered amidst continuing insecurity. They fear also a backlash against women's rights in a climate of political uncertainty.

o Our campaign gives voice to the women in the Occupied Territories of Palestine whose suffering is rarely covered by the media. We do not hear how women suffer when their husbands, fathers or sons are detained or killed, or become jobless. We do not hear how women suffer from the demolition of homes, the closures, the building of the wall. Today, we will hear the story of one Palestinian woman.

o Our campaign gives voice to countless other women in countries stretching from Morocco to Iran, from Yemen to Iraq, who suffer violence in their own homes and communities. Today we will hear the story of one woman's fight to escape such violence and find justice. As it happens, this survivor is from Morocco - but she could have come from any country in this region - or for that matter any country in the world.

Violence against women is a global scandal. One in three women in the world - a billion women - suffers serious violence in their life time. Millions of women are raped, attacked, beaten and abused in the context of war or in their homes. Two million girls each year are genitally mutilated. In some parts of the world, women are killed by their families in the name of honour. In other parts of the world, they are burnt to death because they fail to bring a dowry. And even in the richest, most developed countries of the world, they are battered by their partners. In the United States, every fifteen seconds a woman is attacked. In the United Kingdom, every week two women are killed by their partners.

But the uncomfortable truth is that VAW is not just something that happens over there. It happens here. It happens to us, to our friends and to our families.

It happens because of impunity, inequality, apathy and tolerance.

It happens because governments turn a blind eye to violence and allow those who commit it to get away with it. 79 countries, including most countries in the Middle East and North Africa, have no laws on domestic violence. 127 countries, including most countries in the Middle East, have no laws against sexual harassment. Only 16 countries have laws that specifically refer to sexual assault, none in the Middle East. Even where there are laws, police and the judiciary fail to apply them properly.

VAW happens because laws, policies and practices discriminate against women, politically, economically and socially, and create an environment in which women can be suppressed and attacked. At least 54 countries in the world, many of them in the Middle East and North Africa, have laws that actively discriminate against women. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by a number of countries in this region but so many reservations have been put on it that it virtually nullifies the effect of the convention.

VAW happens because women are denied equal access to social and economic rights and opportunities. We see in a globalized economy that more and more of the poor are women today. Women trapped in poverty are more exposed to violence, less able to escape it. Think of the marginalized women in our societies, migrant workers, domestic workers.

VAW happens because we allow it to happen. As women we are too afraid and ashamed to speak of it. As men we deny it. As society we tolerate it, and find excuses for it, in the name of religion, custom, culture and tradition.

Freedom from violence is not a privilege, it is a universal human right. All women are entitled to be free from violence by state or private actors. Governments are obliged under international law to uphold this right. No custom, culture or tradition, no law, policy or practice can be used to deny women their human right. Nothing can excuse violence against women.

VAW is severe in the Middle East but is not insurmountable - there has been progress, thanks to change from within, thanks to the efforts of thousands of women in the Middle East who are organizing themselves to fight violence. They are breaking taboos and speaking out against abuse. They are standing up and lobbying for change in their political, economic and social status.

And we are seeing change. It is very important to acknowledge and recognise progress that has been made. Enrolment rate for boys and girls in primary schools has now reached parity in Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon, the UAE and Palestinian Territories. More than half the undergraduates in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar are women. There are six women in the Cabinet in Tunisia, and three in Jordan. Morocco has just introduced a very progressive family law in the region. Jordan's family protection unit won the UN Human Rights Prize last year for creating a model to address domestic violence in the region. I have been told that Jordan has adopted bylaws on shelters for women and is considering changes to legislation on domestic violence. Recently, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) declared that they will establish a committee on women's issues, including employment.

These are important changes but there is still a long way to go and there are many obstacles on the way. Half of Arab women cannot read and 4 million girls are not in school. Only six percent of the parliamentary seats in the Arab states are held by women (as compared to 16 percent). Social and cultural attitudes and misperceptions about religion belittle women, subjugate and subordinate them.

VAW remains rampant in the region. The biggest challenge of all is how to fight entrenched positions, how

to bring change while preserving values.

But if there is challenge there is also change in the wind - and we must encourage it, support it and build on it. It is with that goal in mind that AI is launching its campaign to stop VAW in the Middle East. Our campaign will focus on violence in the family and violence in war.

Working together with women's groups and other partners in the region, we will call on governments to publicly pledge to make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a reality for all women. We will urge them to ratify international treaties on the rights of women and to lift their reservations.

We will campaign to change laws which discriminate against women and perpetuate violence. We will call for laws to protect women and criminalise rape and other forms of sexual violence. In every country we will demand that governments live up to their obligations, to respect, protect and promote the right of women to be free from violence.

The key lies in changing attitudes. Earlier, in a private audience, Her Majesty the Queen stressed the importance of educating the youth, young boys and young girls on this. We will support and develop human rights education and awareness programs for all levels of society. And most importantly, we will call on men to join this campaign, so that together we can make a difference.

Your Majesty, during a recent visit to London, you said, "in Jordan we measure our efforts not by how far we have come, but by how far we are determined to go". I agree with you. The real test is one of political resolve and commitment of the leaders in the region and it is now urgently needed. Because at the end of the day, it is not only women who suffer but society as a whole.

"A nation is like a bird with two wings - if one wing is broken, the bird cannot fly."

At that same meeting, Your Majesty reminded the participants that every individual has the power to make a difference. You said, "you are one person in the world but to one person you are the world." Amnesty International is an organization of 1.8 million members in more than a hundred countries of the world, working for and with individuals. So, we in Amnesty are great believers in the power of ordinary individuals to bring about extraordinary change. We are calling on all individuals, men and women, to join us in this campaign - to speak out, to stand up, to say, "no. I will not commit violence against women. I will not tolerate it. I will not permit others to do it and I will not rest until it has been eradicated." Working together we can make a difference.

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