



german
cooperation

DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT



In Her Shoes, In Their Words

Implemented by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



Disclaimer

This booklet was commissioned and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The information and views set out in this booklet are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of GIZ. Neither GIZ nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Table of contents

• • •	Foreword	4
• • •	Acronyms and abbreviations	5
• • •	In her shoes, in their words	6
• • •	Youth shaping peace – Yemen	8
• • •	Youth shaping peace – Syria	16
• • •	Community voices for change	22
• • •	Pioneer voices in peacebuilding	30
• • •	Rethinking masculinities: A ‘HeForShe’ story	38
• • •	Women holding their ground	46
• • •	Feminism through an Islamic perspective	54
• • •	Intersectional activism in the Middle East	62



Dear reader

When I first assumed the role of manager for the regional Women4Peace Project, I was under no illusion that the task ahead would be straightforward. Advancing women's political participation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where women's lives are frequently constrained by both legal frameworks and entrenched social norms, and where political spaces remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, can be both exhausting and disheartening. Statistics paint a sobering picture: across the region, women participate in political, economic and social life to a much lesser extent than men and are disproportionately affected by all forms of violence and oppression. Adding other elements of marginalisation, the imbalance of power becomes even more pronounced.

And yet, the voices of women and of those who champion gender equality resound clear, insistent and undeterred. Across the region, both women and men persist in the struggle for equal rights. Too often, however, these voices are suppressed – by political adversaries, by governments or by the weight of social pressure. Each time I have had the privilege of meeting gender equality activists from the region, I have been struck by their extraordinary courage and resilience.

To continue the fight for themselves and their communities, while grappling with fragility in both their private and political lives and enduring silencing by polarised societal discourses, requires an almost inexhaustible reservoir of strength.

This collection of personal testimonies seeks to offer a platform for those voices. *In Her Shoes, In Their Words* interlaces stories that cross borders, generations and circumstances. Individually, they are profoundly personal; collectively, they embody something greater: the resilience, ingenuity and tenacity of women navigating challenges as formidable as they are varied, within a region of great diversity.

From public squares and classrooms to kitchens and refugee camps, their words remind us that the personal is political, and that even the faintest voice can reverberate powerfully enough to reshape our understanding of the world. Within these pages, women and men alike recount their struggles and fears, their triumphs and truths.

This booklet is, above all, a testament: to courage and vulnerability, to perseverance and solidarity. My deepest gratitude goes to all the women and men who entrusted us with their voices, and to the readers who now bear the responsibility of carrying them forward.

May these stories remind us that every silence holds the potential for speech, and every telling harbours the possibility of change.

Julia Becker
Head of Project 'Women4Peace' in MENA
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



Acronyms and abbreviations

- • • **FemPeace** – Feminist Peace and Security School
- • • **FES** – Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
- • • **GEM** – Guardians of Equality Movement
- • • **GIZ** – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
- • • **HTS** – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
- • • **INAP** – Iraq National Action Plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security
- • • **ISIL** – Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
- • • **LGBTQ** – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning
- • • **MENA** – Middle East and North Africa
- • • **NAPs** – National action plans for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security
- • • **NGO** – Non-governmental organisation
- • • **UN** – United Nations





In her shoes, in their words

- • • Youth shaping peace – Yemen • • • • •
- • • Youth shaping peace – Syria • • • • •
- • • Community voices for change • • • • •
- • • Pioneer voices in peacebuilding • • • • •
- • • Rethinking masculinities: A 'HeForShe' story • • •
- • • Women holding their ground • • • • •
- • • Feminism through an Islamic perspective • • • • •
- • • Intersectional activism in the Middle East • • • • •

Youth
shaping
peace
- YEMEN



“

Women were completely stripped of all the rights they previously had. Some could not even prove who they were.

....

Munia Muhammad always knew her work to improve women's rights was risky, but she had no idea how bad things were to become. When the war began in her country, Yemen, in 2014, the situation for women deteriorated overnight; three years later, as the conflict entered a new phase, the backlash only intensified.

'Women were completely stripped of all the rights they previously had, leaving them with nothing,' she says. 'They now could not travel without a *mahram* [male companion], some were deprived of having a national ID or a passport so they could not even prove who they were – in a way, women lost their identity. It's beyond even our traditions.'

While life in Yemen became incredibly difficult for all women, for non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers and activists such as Munia, there was jeopardy at every turn. As she was pushing for the repressive policies against women to be reversed and delivering training sessions on human rights, Munia's social media accounts, email and phone all began to be monitored. 'Our work was not now only dangerous,' she says. 'You could be arrested at any minute.'

Before the conflict, Munia had worked as a lawyer in Yemen's prisons, often encouraging reforms for women and children. At that time, she says, there were still some – albeit limited – opportunities for women to participate in political decision-making through meetings with Yemen's political leaders that enabled 'echoes of women's voices' to be heard. But following a brief moment of optimism for reforms in 2011 as women participated directly in political processes following major protests, those hopes were quickly shattered with the arrival of war.

Munia assisted in the emergency response, providing food and shelter to those who had been forced to flee their homes. She recalls her shock at seeing how women's rights were being consistently violated, and how rarely the

abuses were being reported. After working for various local peacebuilding NGOs, she headed up the Yemeni Women's Voices Platform, a GIZ-supported project providing a space for Yemeni women to exchange information on local-level participation.

Conscious that her work made her a source of suspicion for the authorities and that this could in turn cause trouble for her family, Munia felt compelled to take steps to protect them. 'I had to move around from place to place,' she says. 'But then every time it got harder.'

On one occasion, a fellow activist was arrested 10 minutes before they were due to meet each other. On another, an advisor came up to Munia as she completed a training session and told her that authorities had been asking for information about her. 'He told me, "Munia, take this as a sign that you are in danger, try to lessen your activities,"' she recalls.

Wherever she went in Yemen, Munia found herself a target. In Aden, in the south of the country, she was arrested as she tried to board a flight to attend training abroad; she subsequently discovered she had been placed on a list of suspected Houthi spies. Back in Houthi-controlled Sanaa, where she had lived before the war, the Houthis forced her mother to sign a statement saying that Munia had been spying for the other side.

No longer feeling safe anywhere in Yemen, Munia escaped to Cairo, Egypt. Despite still receiving threats from the Houthis, she remained determined to continue battling for women's rights back home and enrolled for a PhD in international law with a specific focus on cybercrimes and data protection.

'If authorities find personal photos on a woman's phone in Yemen, even if they are just of herself taken in a private setting behind closed doors, it's treated as a moral crime,' she says. 'There is also no law that protects a woman if her phone is stolen or if she takes it for repairs and they take her photos and blackmail her.'

“

Our work
was not
only
dangerous,
you could
be arrested
at any
minute.

• • • •

“

We need
to build
Yemen, and
this will
only happen
when
women are
included.

....





The school provided so much perspective on the differences in countries, cultures, religions and experiences.



Inspired by new ideas

While in Cairo, Munia's former colleague reached out to inform her of the Feminist Peace and Security School (FemPeace). Munia liked the look of the project, but she wasn't sure that she was eligible so was initially hesitant to apply. 'These projects often demand extensive experience and set high criteria, which can be challenging to meet,' she says.

Ultimately, inspired by the fact that there are limited opportunities for Yemeni women to participate in such international programmes, Munia decided to submit an application anyway. To her surprise, she was accepted.

'FemPeace stands out because it has so many new ideas,' she says. 'There is a richness in thought and culture. The school provided so much perspective on the differences in countries, cultures, religions and experiences, but at the end of the day we are all feminists and working towards similar goals.'

Munia particularly valued the fact that FemPeace allowed most of the participants to meet in person, as it enabled her to spend time with women she wouldn't have had the chance to if the programme had been only online.

'It was inspiring to meet young people in their 20s who are both feminists and activists for women's rights,' she says. 'The difference in the age of participants stood out to me because it allowed us to benefit from each other's diverse experiences and perspectives at different stages of our lives, which was invaluable for our learning.'

While Munia has been active in campaigning for women's rights for a decade, some of the topics covered at FemPeace were completely new to her, such as gender and power dynamics in Libya, which was explored in a session with Libyan academic Asma Khalifa.

Other sessions, such as those focused on Syria, Iraq and Sudan, provided Munia with the opportunity to learn from the experiences faced by women in other conflict and post-conflict settings. She especially appreciated the opportunity to develop her technical knowledge on the status of these countries' national action plans (NAPs) for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

'Looking at the NAPs in other countries and how they have been developed was very beneficial, because in Yemen we have a problem with implementing the NAP,' she says.

In addition to the more theoretical aspects of the programme, another highlight of FemPeace for Munia was the chance to develop a practical group project, something she says she has rarely experienced in other training programmes.

As part of a group with fellow participants from Yemen, Sudan, Syria and Palestine, Munia helped to develop a public policy paper on the work of women activists and politicians during wartime.



We can always work on women in economics or education, but it's politics where women clash with government policies and laws.



'We can always work on women in economics or education, but it's politics where women clash with governments, policies and laws,' she says. 'We conducted interviews and looked into the resources on women in politics to ascertain the rate of women's participation in peace talks. We then set out the challenges and our recommendations.'

Looking to the future, Munia hopes she can one day move back to Yemen and work on empowering Yemeni women. But this prospect still feels a long way off, particularly after she temporarily returned to defend her brother in court on charges she attributes to revenge for her own outspoken activism.

'For eight months we didn't even know where he was,' she says. 'His file was sent to the state security court

where sentences are between 7 and 25 years in prison – or even the death penalty. After many challenging times, he was able to get out, but it came at the cost of me not being able to stay and see him.'

Munia says that ultimately, Yemen needs constitutional change, with women in key roles at the negotiating table and represented equally in decision-making.

'If we talk about hope, I really hope that Yemen is ruled by women, because they are the ones who are aware of what happens on the ground and who would come up with policies and laws that can serve everyone,' she says. 'We need to build Yemen, and this will only happen when women are included.'





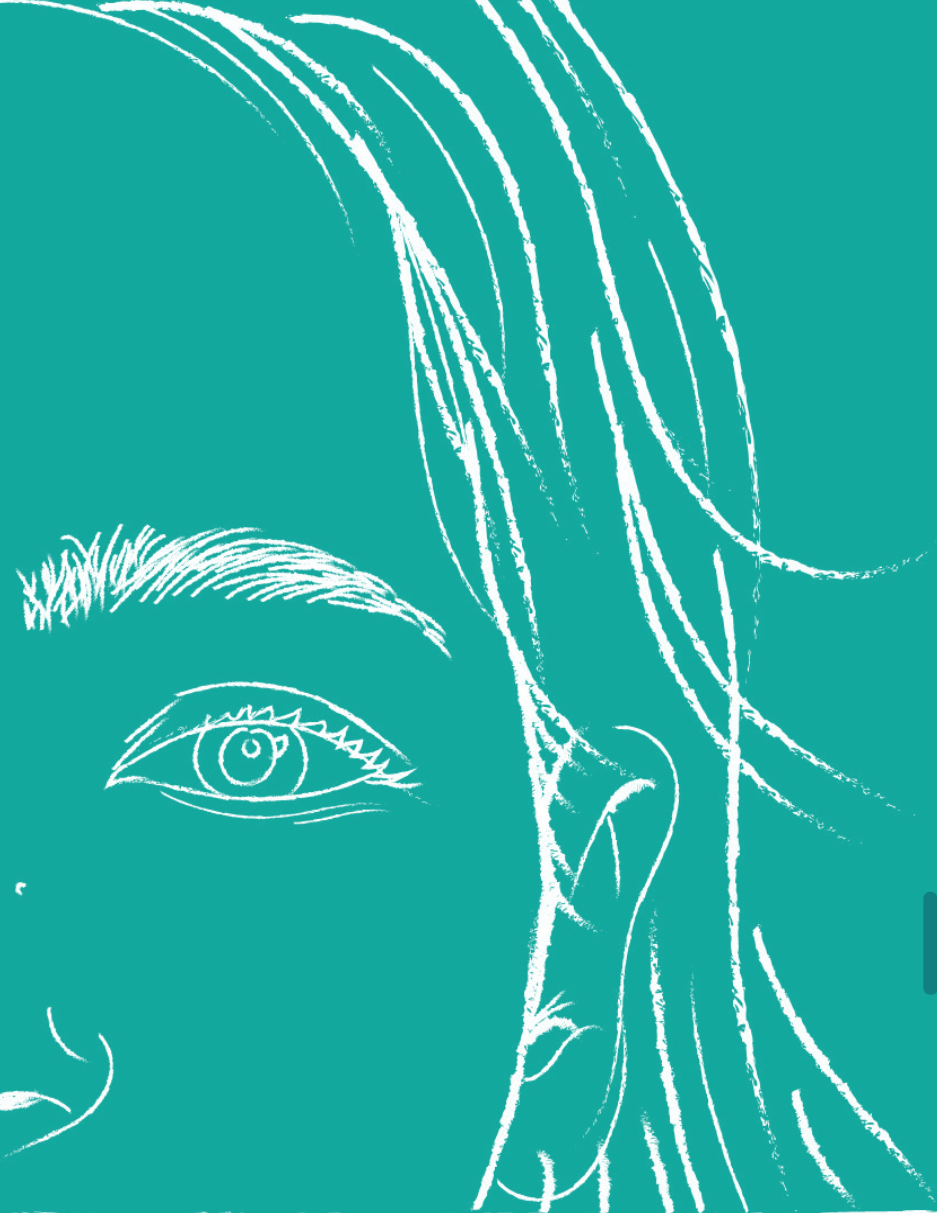
Focus on FemPeace

The Feminist Peace and Security School (FemPeace) is a feminist school conceived through GIZ's Women4Peace Project in collaboration with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). It brings together and educates young activists from across the MENA region, raising awareness of women's issues in patriarchal societies and encouraging the equal participation of women.

The feminist school is designed to strengthen the capabilities, skillsets and theoretical knowledge of participants, creating a platform to discuss disruptive and transformative ideas while laying the foundations for sustainable change on a national and transnational level. Through two in-person workshops and two online modules, it enables networking, connection and the sharing of experiences and best practices.



Youth
shaping
peace
- SYRIA



‘
Sharing
our
stories
builds our
resolve

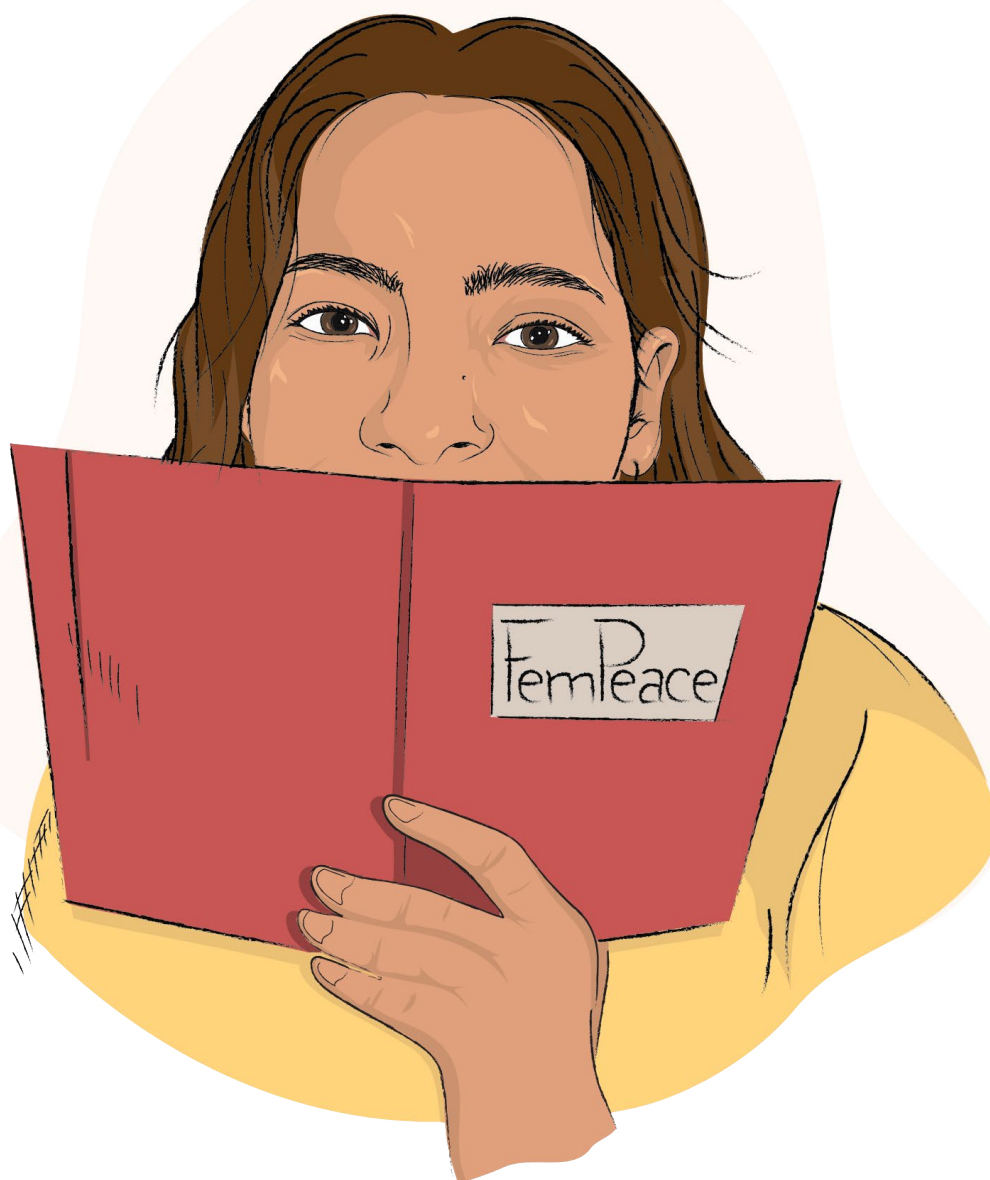
’

FP
FemPeace

“

I always
questioned
why
certain
things
should be
the way
they are.

....



Sarah* has never been content to simply accept things as they are; when she perceives injustice, she speaks up.

Born and raised in Damascus, Syria, Sarah recalls how her parents would initially allow her to play outside with boys. But as soon as she hit puberty, she was suddenly banned from spending time with her male friends. 'I was always questioning this and didn't listen to anyone,' she says. 'I grew up in a religious family and my Mum was particularly conservative, but she also raised me to be strong.'

Sarah's critical thinking extended into all areas of life, but she found herself particularly frustrated at the treatment of women and girls. 'I always questioned why certain things should be the way they are; why men should be better than women,' she says. 'Why should my brothers receive more inheritance than me? Are they going to look after my parents better than me? What are men doing extra?'

Years later, the mass protests began in Syria against Bashar al-Assad's oppressive regime. Scared for her safety, Sarah's family tried in vain to prevent her from joining.

* The name used is a pseudonym to protect the interviewee.



**They were surprised
that not only did I
participate in protests,
I was organising them.**



'They were surprised that not only did I participate in protests,' she recalls, 'I was organising them.'

Ultimately, Sarah was forced to flee Syria for her own safety and found herself as a refugee in Jordan. There, she supported refugees with their mental health struggles while simultaneously trying to process her own traumas from the war back home. 'Women came to me to disclose their personal stories; stories of capture, rape and torture, sexual harassment,' she says. 'I noticed that these stories were not unique, and what these women were sharing with me was something programmed into society.'

The impact on Sarah was formidable. She took part in training on documenting sexual violations and began to record the abuses she encountered. Later, with the women's permission, she published some of their stories. 'When our stories are out, it makes a difference,' she says. 'Even if it's a slow and small impact, it's an important one.'

Sarah also established a small feminist group for Syrian women to exchange information and ideas on topics such as hate speech against women working in the public sector or the media. 'For women in general, doors are not open for them,' she says. 'Imagine how hard it is for women in conflict zones.'



When our stories are out, it makes a difference.



Breaking down barriers

It was through Sarah's feminist connections that she first heard of FemPeace. Sarah always knew how crucial it is for women to be involved in peacebuilding, but she had doubts as to whether the programme was for her. She found limited relevant resources in Arabic and, concerned about her English, was initially hesitant to apply. However, after encouragement from her friend, Sarah registered for a language course and dedicated five months to learning English in depth.

Even then, Sarah considered withdrawing her application as she was struggling to find childcare for her young daughter. But after being offered the option to participate entirely online, the accommodation allowed Sarah to take up her position in FemPeace's first ever cohort, alongside 23 activists and practitioners from eight different countries.

'I've attended a lot of workshops and conferences, but this is the first time I've been part of training that's so detailed, in depth and focused on the work I do,' she says. 'I believe when we listen to each other's experiences we also understand each other better and learn from one another.'

As an example, Sarah highlights a contribution on language rights by Moroccan activist Karima Nadir, noting that this is something she can apply to a Syrian context.

'We also have ethnicities other than Arabs, and they have the right to language justice,' she says. 'There is a bit of bias towards the Arabic language, and those who speak Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian or Yezidi do not have the full right to use their language or talk about the history of their culture.'

A topic that Sarah found especially relevant to her work was conflict analysis, as explored in a session on gender and power led by Libyan academic Asma Khalifa.

'We talk about issues emotionally, because they are related to conflict, whether it's the Syrian conflict or the conflict between men and women,' she says. 'When you are working professionally, it's very important that you understand the issues professionally. You need to know the problem, the roots of the problem and what feeds it. This makes it easier for you to deal with it in a more strategic way.'

Sarah also found the practical skills sessions particularly helpful, such as the workshop on feminist pedagogy, active learning and digital technologies by Gretchen King, a professor at the American University of Beirut. 'She gave us the tools and encouraged us to go away and apply them,' Sarah reflects.

The power of connection

Beyond the content of the sessions themselves, one of the most important elements of FemPeace is providing participants with opportunities to expand their networks and to learn informally from each other as peers. The forum provides participants with a safe space to share their stories and experiences, away from the discrimination, threats and dangers that they often face in their everyday lives.

For Sarah, some of the conversations held with fellow participants outside of the sessions were as significant as the programme content itself. 'These discussions were rich and deep; there were painful experiences and positive experiences,' she recalls. 'When we share our stories, it builds our resolve to continue. When you hear the experiences of others, you are reminded that you must keep going.'

A factor that Sarah found particularly energising was the diversity of the cohort, not only in terms of their different countries and backgrounds. She found it crucial that participants came from across generations and enjoyed both learning from and passing on lessons to younger activists.

'It was important that we shared our experiences and spent time with each other,' she says. 'I saw that the younger women also bring so much – and add fun. The women born in the 2000s have so much confidence in themselves!'

Now, she wants to ensure that others get the same opportunity that she had. 'I am writing to my friend all the time about FemPeace, that there are new things we need to work on and share the knowledge,' she says. 'I would definitely recommend it to others, without a doubt!'

Turning words into action

Many of the connections Sarah made at FemPeace look set to transcend far beyond the six months of the programme itself. She has kept in touch with fellow participants from Iraq and Yemen and invited them to speak with her Syrian feminist initiative. 'I've also talked with the women in North Africa about holding a session to share our experiences and to discuss the issues they have long campaigned on, which has enabled them to advance their rights,' she says.

Following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024, Sarah was finally able to return to Syria with her young family; after so many years in forced exile, she trembled with emotion as she crossed the border. Back in her old neighbourhood, she found her former home in ruins – the cold, soulless walls a haunting contrast to the warmth and laughter that once filled them.

“

When you hear the experiences of others, you are reminded that you must keep going.

...

For the first time, Sarah was also able to visit the grave of her brother who was killed by the regime. 'I cried as if he had just passed away,' she says. 'I was finally grieving – a sorrow that had been delayed for so many years.'

As she set about rebuilding her life in Damascus, Sarah simultaneously set to work helping to rebuild her country and pushing for a greater role for women in that process at all levels. 'There is no political solution without women's participation,' she says.

True to her proactive nature as someone who has never been willing to leave the hard work to others, Sarah continues to organise spaces for women to meet and connect, to deliver peacebuilding training and to write about women's issues and social cohesion.

Ultimately, she is determined to continue playing her part in Syria's future. 'I am working on myself to become more influential,' she says. 'I hope that one day I will be known as someone who made a change for Syrian women and our society.'

Community
voices for
CHANGE





‘
I am part
of this
community,
I want to
be part
of the
solution
,



It was like being erased in your own country.



Asma Khalifa's voice was not intended for the world's ears.

Born into a deeply patriarchal family in north-west Libya in the late 1980s, her path was already fraught with obstacles. Add in the fact that Asma is from the Amazigh minority, Libya's indigenous community whose identity was suppressed by Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorial regime, and the challenges to be heard only multiplied.

'Being Amazigh under Gaddafi meant living in a forced invisibility,' she says. 'Our language wasn't recognised, our culture wasn't allowed in public spaces – it was like being erased in your own country.'

Circumstances at home offered no sense of sanctuary. Growing up in a volatile household dominated by a father she describes as 'extremely controlling', Asma recognised very early on the kind of life she did not want to live. She did not want to be coerced, she did not want to be held back by arbitrary restrictions, and she did not want to be seen as a mere extension of the family.

Instead, she vowed to do everything in her power to gain some agency in her life. 'I realised I needed to

carve out my own space if I was going to have any kind of freedom,' she says.

By the time she was a teenager, Asma was already starting to map out her own goals and ambitions; when she turned 16 she got her first job. The money she earned was not only a useful source of income, it also represented a first taste of independence.

While she was constantly told that, as a woman, she should only study certain subjects, not travel alone and not have career aspirations, Asma continued to defy the societal pressure all around her.

She self-funded her university studies, which enabled her the flexibility to freely select her own academic course, ultimately settling on law. Asma also discovered a passion for theatre and later began to organise her own short holidays, something that had previously been unheard of within her family.

'I said to myself, "I don't care what everyone thinks,"' she says. 'To begin with, it required conscious effort to think like that. And then it just becomes your life that you are doing things for yourself.'



“

I realised
I needed to
carve out my
own space if
I was going
to have
any kind of
freedom.

....



Recognising that you have to take responsibility for your life is an extremely powerful feeling.



Taking responsibility

As with many Libyans, everything came to a head for Asma in 2011. After mass protests against Gaddafi's regime were met with violence and the first throes of civil war, she decided to put her early training in pharmacology to use and volunteer as a field nurse.

Treating those wounded in the fighting, she experienced at close quarters the traumatic impact of so much violence and witnessed the atrocities committed by both sides. It only strengthened her resolve to stand up and push for a Libya that respected all of its citizens equally.

Asma joined protests and was on the streets for months on end. 'It just gave me, and a lot of young people at the time, this fearless sensation that if we stood up to such violence and repression, we can do anything,' she says.

With the totalitarian grip of the Gaddafi regime weakened, she also started to claim space to talk about the deep-rooted gender inequality she had experienced her whole life. She initiated campaigns, took part in discussions and got involved in community events. 'Recognising that you have to take responsibility for yourself, for your actions and for your life is an extremely powerful feeling,' she says.

Asma knew she had a platform and education that other Libyan women did not and felt she needed to make the most of that position. 'Whether it's domestic abuse, harassment or sexual violence, I didn't care what society thought when I spoke about these topics,' she says.

In 2015, Asma and some of her Amazigh friends established the Tamazight Women's Movement, a

proudly feminist non-governmental organisation that openly campaigned for women's rights. They began leading awareness campaigns, conducted capacity-building training and engaged in high-level policy development.

'I wanted to create a space where indigenous women, especially, could reclaim their stories, their voices and their rights,' she says. 'It's about making sure we're not just remembered – we're seen, heard and included in shaping our future.'

The movement researched Amazigh intangible heritage, documenting a wide range of egalitarian practices, including a long history of matrilineal communities. Asma also notes that the first elections for the Amazigh Supreme Council in 2015 saw a gender quota of 50% women representatives. 'If you are a small number already, you cannot lose half of your population,' she says. 'You need everyone in order to survive.'

As a prominent young Libyan activist, Asma has won numerous awards, but no recognition means more to her than being named one of the 30 Most Extraordinary Voices by the African Women in Leadership Organisation in 2018. She felt humbled when reading the other names on the list, but it was particularly important to her to be seen as a proud African woman.

'Recognition is important when we are seen as being legitimate actors to work on social issues and not branded as foreign spies,' she says. 'As if wanting better rights and better conditions is something that we don't deserve and is being forced on us by someone else. I'm part of this community, and I want to be part of a solution for it.'

Challenges in common

While Libya has remained deeply divided since the first civil war in 2011, it is not only in Tripoli that Libyan women have strived to claim improved rights.

Samira*, who grew up in the north-eastern city of Benghazi, always felt that she had her rights respected at home. But when she started to study and work, she began to interact more with women from other backgrounds, classes and communities and realised that her experience was far from the norm.

‘I started feeling angry and that this is unfair for the other women,’ she says. ‘Why do I have my rights and they don’t?’

As a trained psychologist, Samira put her skills to use supporting other women and got a job working with women survivors of gender-based violence. In December 2023, however, the authorities in eastern Libya banned use of the word ‘gender’.

‘Because of that we changed the titles of our positions to “social workers”,’ she says. ‘We couldn’t focus only on women, so we started to work with women and men to make it lower profile – we were doing awareness sessions.’

“
I started feeling
angry and that
this is unfair for
the other women.
Why do I have
my rights and
they don’t?

• • • •

Samira also worked with internally displaced people, including those from minority communities, and in her spare time she continues to volunteer with various groups that bring together women and young people. ‘I believe in the power of networking among young people from everywhere in Libya and from all ethnicities,’ she says.

Mindful of the multiple barriers Libyan women face in accessing meaningful educational and employment opportunities, Samira has also led initiatives to guide young learners. ‘For most opportunities here, it’s not about your qualifications, it’s about whether you can travel without a *mahram*,’ she says.

It is, however, dangerous work. As a woman in Libya, the simple act of having a job can even be deadly. Samira points to a viral video of an employed woman who was kidnapped and murdered by militias. ‘They said she deserved it and that it’s her own fault because she was working,’ she says.

* The name used is a pseudonym to protect the interviewee.

“

We had to
hide a lot
of our work,
especially
anything
concerned with
gender-based
violence
and sexual
violence.

• • • •

Impact in the face of adversity

Asma has herself faced numerous threats and attacks due to her work and says the hostility has become worse in recent years. ‘We had to hide a lot of our work, especially anything concerned with gender-based violence and sexual violence,’ she says.

Having moved away from Libya to pursue her academic studies abroad, Asma initially regularly returned. But she has struggled to do so since the political situation deteriorated in 2022. ‘I’ve been told several times that I cannot fly to Libya and have been put on interrogation lists,’ she says.

Despite such setbacks, Asma still manages to identify important markers of progress. After she personally briefed the UN Security Council in 2021, subsequent UN resolutions on Libya have included specific language on gender and youth inclusion. Through their lobbying efforts, Asma and her colleagues have also managed to positively influence other international policies and statements.

However Asma insists that in a society that experiences a constant state of conflict, progress cannot easily be measured in the tangible way donors typically expect and that it is instead important to focus on the bigger picture.

‘Impact is evidenced in how I see young people speak these days about various issues, how they are very open on social media, even in a very oppressive environment,’ she says. ‘Fifteen years ago, women would use a picture of a flower as their Facebook profile picture, now they’re posting videos on TikTok of themselves dancing.’

Samira similarly takes heart from the little glimmers of progress she sees in everyday interactions. ‘What makes me leave my house every day is that people will send me messages: “I got accepted for that job,” or, “I’m now travelling,”’ she says.

She believes that while widescale change may not be felt by Libyan women in the years or decades to come, it is still vital to continue taking the ‘baby steps’ forwards.

‘I’m not working for this generation but for the next one,’ she says. ‘Hopefully things will be better for them.’



Not everyone has to be your best friend,
but you build alliances based on common
interests if you have the same values.



Alliances for the future

Neither Asma nor Samira is under any illusion about the rocky road ahead. With Libya, the wider region and much of the world experiencing a gender backlash, both women know that it will be more important than ever to forge alliances and work smartly with those that may share common values.

Asma says it is critical that women's rights advocates ensure they survive the return of authoritarian tendencies globally and build powerful transnational movements to push back.

'How can we build resources and networks and how can we find support?' she says. 'Not just from the global north, but how can we even try to mobilise the regional business community, who are maybe aligned with us a little bit when it comes to at least having freedom of speech?'

In these difficult times, Asma insists it is more critical than ever to learn lessons from past mistakes. Not least, to strive for collaboration with those who may have markedly different ways of thinking and to not get distracted by minor differences of opinion or political beliefs. 'Not everyone has to be your best friend, but

you build alliances based on common interests if you have the same values,' she says.

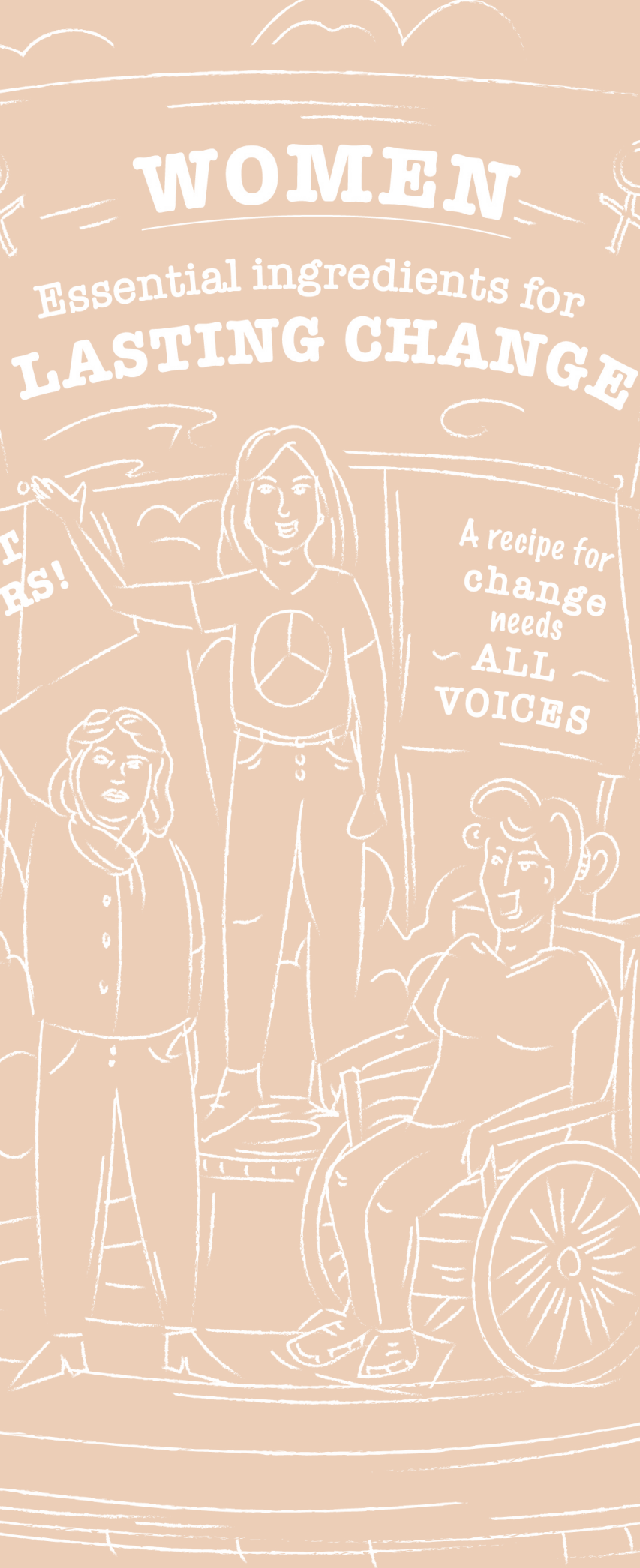
Asma remains energised by the new generation of women's rights campaigners coming through with fresh ideas and encourages them to lean on more experienced activists such as her for resources and connections.

'Reach out to people whose work you've seen, because we should do more mentorship,' she advises. 'There's a lot of work that's been done, so don't think that you have to start from scratch. See what can be built upon.'

Ultimately, she accepts that with the benefit of hindsight, there are inevitably things she could have done differently in the past. But the most important thing is to be able to say she made the best decisions she could at each moment.

'I've always held myself accountable for things,' she says. 'I always ask if I could live with myself if I do this or do that. I may have done things wrong, I may have messed up, but I am OK with who I am today – and that's a good thing to say.'

Pioneer voices in PEACEBUILDING



‘
When
men and
women
work
together
as equals,
the results
are always
better
,’

“

Leaving
your country
is a painful
process.
It feels like
your soul is
being ripped
from your
body.

• • • •

Rima Flehan vividly remembers the moment in September 2011 when she was forced to leave everything behind. Twenty-four hours earlier, she had been helping to organise protests against Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria. But when she discovered that three domestic intelligence agencies were actively pursuing her and had issued warrants for her arrest, she knew she had to flee – immediately.

‘When security forces wanted someone, it wasn't just about questioning them,’ she says. ‘It meant torture, disappearance or even death.’

Knowing the regime would also target her family, Rima sent her children ahead with her uncle to Jordan. Then, she used her contacts to smuggle herself across the border to join them. ‘Leaving your country is a painful process,’ she says. ‘It feels like your soul is being ripped from your body.’

It was exactly this kind of repression that Rima had opposed from an early age. At school, a friend's father had been a political prisoner for more than 10 years, and she felt the perpetual fear of those around her, even in their own homes. Growing up in an all-women household following the death of her father, she also experienced the injustice of a patriarchal society that restricted the role of women in almost all facets of life.

From the age of 18 she took an active stand as a human rights activist. She initiated a petition against honour killings and helped to rescue women and girls from domestic violence. Rima also started to document the various violations she witnessed.

Her actions quickly brought her into conflict with authority; her first boss sued her for writing about corruption, security services began to interrogate and threaten her, and in 2007 she was banned from travelling.

“

I used art as a
tool to deliver
messages because
we do not have
the luxury of art
for art's sake.

• • • •

Such experiences left Rima deeply frustrated, but also more determined to bring about positive change. Wanting to increase her impact, she started screenwriting, addressing major societal issues and women's rights through her TV drama series. 'I didn't do it just for the sake of writing,' she says. 'I used art as a tool to deliver messages because we do not have the luxury of art for art's sake.'

Everything came to a head in 2011 with the Arab Spring protests. Rima quickly became a prominent part of the peaceful movement and worked with the Local Coordination Committees alongside other high-profile activists such as Razan Zaitouneh.

After Rima led a petition calling for an end to the food blockade on the southern city of Daraa, she was subjected to a severe smear campaign in the state-controlled media. Undeterred, she helped to organise peaceful actions and joined demonstrations in cities across Syria.

After one protest in July 2011, she was arrested along with 21 others. Public pressure led to their release four days later, but for Rima the reprieve proved short-lived. Although she didn't yet know it, within weeks she would be forced from her home and into exile abroad.

A hostile atmosphere towards women

As Rima doubled down on her political and humanitarian efforts from Jordan, other women continued their activities within Syria.

Sabah al-Hallak had been advocating for women's rights since the 1970s. As a teenager, she helped her brother, a TV presenter, sort through letters from Syrian women for his show on violence against women. Years later, she joined one of the oldest women's organisations in Syria, the Syrian Women's League, and quickly began shifting its focus from motherhood and childhood to political empowerment and women's education.

In the years leading up to 2011, she helped to train feminist activists, organised workshops on gender equality and lobbied the government to improve Syria's highly restrictive Personal Status Law. 'We faced strong resistance, especially from political and religious parties that rejected any amendments granting women equal rights,' she says.

When the uprising began, Sabah came together with feminist activists and politicians to try and put women's rights on the agenda of the opposition forces. Initially, such efforts were completely rejected.

“

Men use us like spices to add some flavour,
but we do not affect the main ingredients.

....





Everyone was focused solely on overthrowing the regime, and there was no interest in women's participation or their issues.



'Everyone was focused solely on overthrowing the regime, and there was no interest in women's participation or their issues,' she says. 'But we knew from past experiences in Palestine, Iraq, Algeria and Yemen that women were always excluded from negotiations. If they're not involved from the beginning, they're sidelined after the conflict ends.'

Writer and political activist Khawla Dunia also experienced this marginalisation first hand. A long-time human rights campaigner, Khawla had spent six months in prison in the 1990s for her political activism; after her release, she had documented violations of political prisoners and advocated for the rights of detainees.

With the onset of the uprising in 2011, Khawla was prepared to play a leading role. As a founding member of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, she found herself as one of just five women among more than 60 men.

She later reflected that women were 'like spices for men' in the political opposition, saying: 'They use us to add some flavour, but we do not affect the main ingredients.'

Khawla elaborates that she felt women were simply added to the opposition coalition as a formality, but when it came to taking major decisions, their voices were ignored. 'Women are included in political spaces for appearances only,' she says. 'They are not given real power and are expected to conform to the expectations of male-dominated structures.'

Rima, who echoes similar sentiments, explains that women lacked strong allies within the Syrian opposition as deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes made it difficult for many men to accept women as equals in decision-making roles. 'There were a few individuals who were supportive of women's participation,' she says. 'However, the general atmosphere was hostile towards women in politics.'

Opposition members frequently undermined women's roles through ridicule or questioning their capabilities. Others resisted their involvement altogether. 'Some ideological groups or individuals viewed strong, independent women as a threat, especially if these women refused to align with male leaders,' Rima says. 'If a woman had her own stance, she became a target for attacks.'

In 2014, Rima was one of just two women in the 15-strong opposition delegation at the UN-backed peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland. Assigned the human rights portfolio, she recalls the fierce backlash that she received the moment she finished presenting her work.

'No matter how qualified a woman is, her capabilities are often questioned,' she says. 'Women in political spaces face exponentially more harassment than their male counterparts – targeted smear campaigns, rumours and defamation.'

Demanding meaningful representation

Rima, Sabah and Khawla all believe that part of the solution to the ingrained social and political biases against women's leadership is political gender quotas.

In the build up to the 2014 Geneva talks, Sabah – by now herself forced out of Syria – co-founded the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy. It explicitly called for women to make up at least 30% of participants in all negotiations.

Following her disillusioning experience in Geneva, Rima established the Syrian Feminist Lobby, which continues to echo these demands. 'Women must have a meaningful role in decision-making, making up at least 30% of any future governing body,' she says.

As Syrian women pushed for meaningful political representation, in 2016, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura took an eye-catching step to try and increase the profile of women's voices by establishing a Women's Advisory Board. Initially composed of 12 women – six from the Assad regime and six from the opposition – it aimed to ensure that diverse women's perspectives and the gender equality agenda were considered throughout the political process.

'This was a significant achievement,' says Sabah, a member of the Women's Advisory Board from the start. 'For the first time, we had an official body representing women in the political process.'

“

I've never felt like
I am just there for
decoration.
I've always
insisted that my
voice is heard.

• • • •

Sabah says that the Board's members have worked to bring the voices of real women into peace negotiations. She particularly highlights efforts to include the issue of refugee women's rights in formal negotiations, by consulting with them before each meeting and regularly updating them on developments afterwards.

However, the Board has also come in for criticism, with some saying it is tokenistic and that its advisory role only reinforces the fact that women are still largely excluded from direct political processes. 'I've never felt like I am just there for decoration,' Sabah says. 'I've always insisted that my voice is heard.'

Rima believes that the Board initially suffered from teething problems, including a lack of transparency in how members were selected and a 'communication gap' between the Board and feminist organisations. But she believes there are signs that positive steps have been taken in recent years to rectify some of those concerns. 'There is more openness, but there is also still room for progress,' she says.

New administration, new challenges

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, cautious optimism for the future has quickly been replaced with foreboding about the new administration's treatment of women.

Rima, Khawla and Sabah all point to the tokenistic representation of women in decision-making roles and the concentration of power in the hands of a small, highly conservative group. 'We did not go out and do a revolution to swap one authoritarian regime with another, just one with a religious identity,' Rima says.

Khawla, who felt it her duty to return to Syria to help rebuild the country, notes that for many Syrian women, the initial elation accompanying Assad's ousting proved short lived. In a country that remains severely fragmented by decades of authoritarianism and war, women are still bearing the brunt of Syria's fragile security situation.

Part of her work since returning has been to establish free spaces to try to support women throughout Syria and get their voices across. She points out that minority women in particular have been subjected

to abduction, human trafficking, sexual assault and murder, not least Druze women in Suwayda and Alawite women in the areas to the west of Hama. 'We still don't know how to document it all,' she says. 'There is a lot of fear from families of losing their daughters.'

Khawla adds that while minority women are particularly at risk, the lack of security affects all women in Syria. 'There is also kidnapping in other areas that does not get mentioned,' she says, adding that authorities often fail to register cases, instead alleging that women have run away with their boyfriends or moved to a different city for work.

All three women agree that the deep divisions within Syria are ominous and that healing them requires representative leadership that can develop common ground and build bridges. Fundamentally, that requires the meaningful inclusion of women.

'We want a government that represents the diversity of Syrian society, its ethnicities, religions and communities, and ensures women's participation at every level,' Rima says. 'When men and women work together as equals, the results are always better.'

“

We want a government that represents the diversity of Syrian society and ensures women's participation at every level.

• • • •

RETHINKING MASCULINITIES: A 'HeForShe' story





‘

Men are
beautiful,
loving
people
– if we
allow
them
to be

’

“

We can't
judge
someone who
has been told
something
their entire
life, and
now we're
telling them
something
different.

....

Scanning around the faces of the group in front of him, Anthony Keedi immediately recognised the look in the man's eyes. As the programme lead at Abaad – Resource Center for Gender Equality he had seen it plenty of times before in such sessions with men around Lebanon. It was the look of someone who had taught himself not to smile, not to be different and to hold his feelings back, well beneath the surface.

When the man opened his mouth to speak, he was not afraid to let Anthony know what he thought. 'He was challenging everything I said,' Anthony recalls.

This too was nothing new for Anthony. Talking with men about non-violence, gender equality and alternative forms of masculinities in a deeply patriarchal society like Lebanon's – or others across the region – is hardly straightforward.

'Sometimes it can almost feel like ridicule,' he says. 'You know, like, "No! Are you kidding me? So if someone does something, you're just gonna, what, turn the other cheek? You'll just let them step all over you?"'

Much like many of the participants in Abaad's sessions, Anthony was well aware that this particular man had a violent past. But he was nevertheless determined not to give up on him. 'People are not inherently violent and can learn to be non-violent,' he says.

He knew that in order for this man to begin challenging his own patriarchal and violent behaviours, he needed somewhere to vent and debate – including this safe space to criticise the ideas being introduced. While Anthony frequently found the conversations frustrating, week by week the man continued to come back, to engage and to ask questions.

'It's normal to accept some level of resistance,' Anthony says. 'We can't judge someone who has been told something their entire life, and now we're telling them something different.'

It didn't happen overnight, but slowly, Anthony noticed that the man's attitude began to shift. 'I saw that person develop into one of the coolest feminists that I have had the pleasure to work with,' he says with a smile. 'He's just very passionate about the cause and about making it about women, not just men.'



I just didn't understand why I was being accused of being insecure, especially by the women I loved.



Personal journey becomes political

Anthony's patience in persevering with men that show aggressive tendencies isn't just based on one example or on abstract theory. He can closely relate to aspects of their experiences due to his own personal journey.

Brought up in the United States, the son of Lebanese immigrants who had fled the civil war, in his youth he was surrounded by racism and violence. 'There were a lot of gangs, so I got into a lot of fistfights, a lot of aggression,' he says. 'I learned that if you're different, if people pick on you, that's the number one way that you can protect yourself.'

By the time he completed high school, Anthony was keen to understand Lebanese culture more deeply than he could from afar, so he left the United States and headed to Beirut to continue his education. Despite the change of location, however, he soon discovered that the behavioural patterns and defence mechanisms from his childhood accompanied him.

'I was dealing with a lot of issues as a young man,' he says. 'I worked hard, I kept in my emotions, I tried not to burden other people. I was being a "good man" by any standards of a patriarchal society.'

As he tried to uphold traditional ideas of masculinity, Anthony continued to act aggressively. He would get into confrontations with strangers, often verbal,

sometimes physical. But he also found that he was struggling with interpersonal relationships with those closest to him, particularly women. 'I just didn't understand why I was being accused of being insecure, especially by the women I loved,' he says.

Then one day, Anthony's girlfriend at the time bravely told him that he could be verbally abusive. At first, he was confused, and her words didn't make sense to him. But as someone who aspired to be a psychologist, he knew he needed to take them seriously.

Around this time, he stumbled across a book called *I Don't Want to Talk About It*. The title instantly resonated. 'I just was drawn to it because that's what I always used to say,' he recalls. 'People would ask me if I'm OK, or if something's wrong, and I would just say, "I don't wanna talk about it."'

As he read how men often feel unable to express themselves emotionally, and how this can manifest in violence against others, something in Anthony's mind began to click into place.

'I didn't understand why I couldn't just be honest about the way I felt, which was actually very loving or scared,' he says. 'It opened my eyes to how much men also lose due to patriarchal masculinity. The personal became political for me.'

TOXIC MASCULINITY

**SUPPRESS
YOUR EMOTIONS!
DON'T CRY!
FIGHT BACK!
COMBAT IN WAR!
USE VIOLENCE!**

INSECURITY

FISTFIGHTS

CONTROL

RESISTANCE

ABUSE

VIOLENCE

MISOGYNY

PATRIARCHY

AGRESSION

POSITIVE MASCULINITY

Release your Emotions.
Show Vulnerability.
Fight for Women's Rights.
Combat Discrimination.
Engage in Communication.

empathy

non-violence

collaboration

patience

support

anger management

feminism

wellbeing

respect

compassion

“

A lot of the men who
pick up the guns are
doing so because they're
told from a very young
age that if you really
love, then you're willing
to have that horrible life
to protect others.

....



It's about starting conversations in which people can question behaviours in their lives.



Starting a conversation

Undoing a lifetime of societal expectations didn't happen overnight, but step-by-step Anthony worked on his own perceptions of masculinity. He read more books, wrote university papers and consciously challenged his own behaviours.

'I realised how much these types of things are ingrained by the way we raise young men and how much of it turns into violence against women in so many different forms,' he says. 'The real truth is there are a million ways to be a man or a woman or a person, and you can decide. Yes, claim your masculinity, but it doesn't need to be the same masculinity that you've been spoon-fed.'

In 2007, Anthony had a chance meeting with Ghida Anani, the woman who would become his feminist mentor. Ghida was working for a feminist organisation focused on countering violence against women and wanted to start work on engaging men as part of the solution. 'It was just a match made in heaven,' Anthony says.

With Ghida at the helm, they pioneered a way for other men in Lebanon to challenge their sense of masculinity, as Anthony had. To begin with, they simply aimed to reach men on a very genuine level, asking them about the burdens and pressures of masculinity. 'It's about starting conversations in which people can question behaviours in their lives,' Anthony says.

When Ghida co-founded Abaad in 2011, one of the first steps they took was to establish a psychological clinic for men. Over time, Abaad also developed manuals on topics such as stress and anger management, combating gender discrimination and violence, and positive fatherhood, using them as the basis of their community work and group training.

Conscious that there are certain 'trigger words' that can foster resistance to their work, Anthony explains how Abaad has always been considered in the language they use when promoting their activities.

'I had only heard a very radicalised, almost satirical version of feminism from very patriarchal sources,' Anthony says. 'So a lot of our mission was, how do we have a real discussion with men about feminism without calling it feminism at first? How do we talk about gender without calling it gender?'

Similarly, they have to be conscious of the fact that many of the people who most need their support likely don't yet realise they need it. 'We did a campaign to get men to come into the men's centre, where we alluded to violence in the home, but we didn't mention it outright, because men don't know they're abusive until we do that work,' he says.

Changing the narrative

One of the biggest challenges is the militarised societal context in which men in Lebanon and the wider region grow up. Anthony highlights that cycles of violence are perpetuated by protectionist ideas of masculinity that are constantly reinforced from all angles, whether through the media, politics, the family or religious leaders.

‘When there’s violence in the country and people lose their loved ones or feel like their culture, religion or people are being attacked, there’s a narrative that is very violent, that is very patriarchal, and it’s one they have been accustomed to their entire life,’ he says.

‘A lot of the men who pick up the guns are doing so because they’re told from a very young age that if you really love, then you’re willing to have that horrible life to protect others. We need to start working on those narratives in our culture, because men are beautiful, loving people, if we allow them to be.’

Anthony emphasises that while violent and unstable societies impact everyone, it is always women who suffer the most. Perversely, during conflicts, women’s rights, women’s political participation and ideas of a feminist peace are almost always deprioritised.

In a world of limited resources and shrinking space to discuss feminist ideas, he therefore feels a particular accountability to ensure that Abaad’s efforts always keep women at the forefront of everything they do.

‘If it’s only men who benefit and we never really get to the point where we’re impacting the lives of the women and girls that those men are in and around, then we’re not really being feminist,’ he says.

Amidst a global backlash against women’s rights and ongoing conflicts in the region, Anthony is under no illusions about the scale of the task ahead. But while he knows that Abaad’s work is just a drop in the ocean, he hopes it can help to lay the foundations for different, more healthy ideals of masculinity in Lebanon and beyond.

‘My experience has taught me to be happy with the ripples that maybe can cause the waves later on,’ he says. ‘Maybe that’s just one person or a few fathers. Sometimes it’s planting the seed and hoping that seed has fertile conditions to grow in the future.’

“

If it’s only men who benefit and we’re not impacting the lives of the women and girls that those men are in and around, then we’re not really being feminist.

• • • •

Women holding
THEIR GROUND





‘

All we've
ever done
is call for
peaceful
action

–

nothing
more

,

“

We didn't
expect this
sudden blow,
and as
organisations
we do not
have all
the tools
to stand up
against these
attacks and
accusations.

....

Afnan* is not easily flustered. A veteran women's rights advocate of almost two decades, she's experienced a great deal of anguish and disappointment over the years. But even for her, the present gender backlash in her country, Iraq, is alarming. 'The situation has really become scary and dangerous,' she says.

In the part of southern Iraq where Afnan lives, talking about improving the lives of women has always been tough. A deeply conservative area with a patriarchal and tribal social structure, a limited understanding of women's rights is the long-established norm. In recent years, however, a combination of hostile political actors, a weak civil state and vicious online misinformation campaigns have proved a poisonous combination.

'Someone sent me a screenshot of a WhatsApp chat where another person is calling for my death just because they had seen an online post with false information about my organisation,' she says. 'The person in the chat says, "Just tell me where she is and leave the rest to me."'

Afnan, whose organisation has worked on gender equality issues and tackling gender-based violence for years, says that much of the current backlash can be traced back to the Iraqi government banning use of the word 'gender' in 2023. Insisting instead on 'equality between men and women', the restriction on free speech signalled a worrying sign of things to come.

* The name used is a pseudonym to protect the interviewee.

“

‘We didn’t expect this sudden blow, and as organisations we do not have all the tools to stand up against these attacks and accusations,’ she says.

The vitriol and threats against Afnan reached fever pitch when her organisation was falsely accused in a social media post of working on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) issues. Rather than offer protection, local authorities responded by accusing them of violating Iraq’s recently passed legislation that imposes strict penalties for promoting same-sex relations.

‘We asked the authorities: “Do you have evidence, or this is only because of an online post?”’ Afnan says. ‘They said it was only because of a post. With this kind of approach, they cannot protect or defend you.’

Due to the rapidly deteriorating circumstances, Afnan and her colleagues have been forced to make emergency changes to the way they work, minimising their public presence and never sharing their locations.

‘We’re talking about organisations that are peaceful and do not have weapons,’ she says. ‘All we’ve ever done is call for peaceful actions – nothing more.’

With this
kind of
approach,
they
cannot
protect
or defend
you.

...

Brief windows of opportunity

The present level of hostility towards women and their rights is by no means an inevitability when viewed in the context of Iraq's fluctuating socio-political history.

Influenced by the discourse of Iraqi women's rights groups, who had been active since the early 1920s, at the turn of the 1960s the new Iraqi Republic introduced some of the most progressive women's rights in the region.

The 1959 Personal Status Law, which helped to unify Iraq's fragmented court system, was more egalitarian than the highly patriarchal religious and customary rules that had been institutionalised by previous authorities.

While women were still considered legally inferior to men, the landmark piece of legislation saw women gain increased rights in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody.

Such early glimpses of progress were initially continued by the Ba'ath regime, but this was quickly shown to be a smokescreen. 'There was only one side that was talking about or addressing women's rights and it was also only guiding women to the benefit of this sole party,' Afnan says.

Gender-based violence became a core component of the regime's practices, and by the time of the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation, Iraq had become a dangerous and deadly place for women. 'I always had this passion to communicate and socialise with other people and to learn from them, but because of the political landscape I stayed away from it,' Afnan says.

In the years that followed the invasion, that began to change. Based in an area that suffered less insurgency and sectarian violence than other parts of Iraq, Afnan found herself increasingly able to engage with her local community.

She strongly believed that other women should also have the opportunity to be more active, alongside men. 'The climate was heading towards a space to talk about and advocate for women's rights,' she says.

The new 2005 Constitution stressed equality between the sexes, while the 2006 Iraqi Nationality Law explicitly enabled women to pass their nationality to their children. This law protected children who would previously have ended up stateless – and subsequently without access to education and other basic rights – if their father was unknown, absent or a foreigner. 'There was more understanding for women's rights issues, and we could work on it more,' Afnan says. 'We even had six women ministers.'

Initially, Afnan joined a national women's rights group, but over time she felt she could have greater impact by focusing her efforts at a more local level.

'Now I can do better research and see what is needed for women in these communities, and we tailor our training and awareness-raising activities accordingly,' she says.

“

There
was more
understanding
for women's
rights issues.
We even had
six women
ministers.

...

“

We always say the INAPs
are born to die.

....





‘INAPs are born to die’

In February 2014, mere months before the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) grabbed large swathes of territory in the north-west of the country, Iraq became the first country in the wider region to adopt a national action plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

One of Afnan’s proudest achievements as a women’s rights activist has been working with departments of women’s affairs to successfully establish Iraq National Action Plan (INAP) coordination hubs in a number of Iraq’s governorates. Each coordination hub consists of various agencies and institutions that deal directly with women, from community policing to social welfare, health and education.

Given the vastly different contexts for women in different parts of Iraq, the hubs are designed to be responsive to local circumstances. ‘For example, in the south we do not have women who survived ISIL, so this will not be applicable to us, but we can benefit from political empowerment and economic empowerment,’ Afnan says.

To Afnan, the establishment of these coordination hubs represents the potential of successful collaboration between government and civil society. Organisations such as hers have also carried out capacity-building training for hub staff and published an INAP implementation manual.

Despite the success in establishing the coordination hubs, however, Afnan is frustrated that implementation of the INAPs on the ground has been distinctly lacking and points to a range of factors, including a lack of funding and monitoring. ‘We always say the INAPs are born to die,’ she says.

**Anything
negative that
happens is
blamed on NGOs
and activists are
held responsible
for all the ills in
society.**



Another key missing factor is political will. Afnan says that all of the impetus for carrying out the INAPs comes from civil society organisations such as hers. ‘We established these coordination hubs, we trained the staff, we created the curriculums for them, so it’s us that’s pushing them to work on this,’ she says. ‘But is there any real interest on the part of the authorities in implementing the INAPs? Unfortunately, there is none.’

Such reticence is part of a wider concern for Afnan, who says government institutions are often reluctant to work constructively with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). ‘Anything negative that happens is blamed on NGOs and activists are held responsible for all the ills in society,’ she says. ‘But civil society organisations are the ones who are trying to address these issues positively.’

Resilience amidst the setbacks

When Afnan first started researching women's rights in southern Iraq she found huge levels of social injustice, particularly in rural areas. Violence against women and early marriages were common while access to education and basic health care was often extremely limited.

Almost 20 years later, she fears that any progress made in the meantime is being rapidly undone. 'Women are seen as second-class citizens,' she says. 'We have gone backwards a lot.'

As a high-profile case in point, Afnan points to recent legal changes that have severely weakened protections for women. Despite strong lobbying attempts from Afnan and her colleagues, in early 2025 the Iraqi parliament passed an amendment to the 1959 Personal Status Law, granting religious authorities considerable discretion to implement their own *mudawana* (code).

Activists fear this will enable loopholes for a range of deeply harmful practices, including child marriages. 'This law will have the biggest impact on the poor and less educated class of society,' Afnan says.

The amendment also allows a husband to unilaterally change the legal school under which his marriage is governed without the permission, or even knowledge, of his wife. 'A marriage contract is between two parties, so how can one party go and change it without the knowledge of the other side?' Afnan says.

Despite all the setbacks in recent years and her reservations with Iraqi authorities, Afnan insists that women's rights activists must be pragmatic in their approach. 'It's important to work with the government, because they are the decision-makers,' she says.

Although she feels the strain of being relentlessly targeted for her work, Afnan draws strength from her colleagues and fellow activists. 'Having an activists' network is super important, not just to protect each other but to support each other and exchange ideas,' she says.

It currently feels unimaginable, but Afnan still dreams of an Iraq where everyone – women and men of all ethnicities and religions – has equal access to quality education and other basic services. To have any chance of achieving it, she knows there is a huge amount of hard work ahead, but she shows no sign of giving up.

'Working for women's rights is an amazing job; it comes from the deepest values and faith that I grew up with,' she says. 'I will also teach these values to my daughter, so that she can pass them on to her own daughters.'

“

**It's important
to work with
the government,
because they are the
decision-makers.**

...

Feminism
through an
ISLAMIC
PERSPECTIVE



‘
I wear a
hijab and
pray, but
I support
women’s
rights in
all forms

’

“

The patriarchy
they were
subjected to
prevented
them from
education,
from working
and from
their basic
rights.

• • • •

Speaking up doesn't necessarily mean shouting louder, and Hanan Halimah is living proof. She may not always be the most forceful voice in the room. But having listened, reflected and ensured she understands the context, she always makes sure her voice is heard.

'I want to change society step by step,' she says. 'If we go too fast, we'll be labelled the enemy when the real enemy is those who bomb or oppress us.'

Brought up in the south-west Syrian city of Douma, Hanan has steadfastly campaigned for women's rights her entire adult life. In her early 20s, as a volunteer at a charitable organisation working with families who had lost their main breadwinner, she witnessed how women had little autonomy in decision-making and were often controlled in all areas of their lives.

'The patriarchy they were subjected to prevented them from education, from working and from their basic rights,' she says.

Hanan's volunteer work focused on raising women's awareness of their limited rights in Syria and drawing on her faith to challenge harmful, entrenched narratives such as those that attempt to justify violence against women. 'Islam doesn't allow people to abuse women; it doesn't permit violence against them,' she says.

As she supported women to continue their education and gain an element of financial independence, Hanan was not simply parroting theoretical messages. Having earned a university degree in English and secured paid work through her volunteer experience, Hanan's credibility came from leading by example.

In a conservative area where it was virtually unheard of for a woman to sleep outside of the family home, Hanan also lived by herself. She travelled freely, had both male and female friends, and pursued interests and causes that were important to her.

“

**She has rights in
Islam and in law.
She has the right
to participate
politically, work
independently and
make her own
choices.**

...

Others whispered about her or made their judgements known, but Hanan drew emotional resilience from the backing of her close family. Her father, when faced with unsolicited opinions from neighbours or relatives, would respond with a kind smile and a simple question: ‘Is she bothering you in any way?’

‘I didn’t care what anyone else thought,’ Hanan says. ‘My family were very supportive of my work, my travel, my studies and the career path I chose. It felt like a privilege that I needed to use to help others.’

‘We had to adapt’

When the uprising began in Syria in 2011, women initially gained a little more freedom and took on roles that had been exclusively reserved for men. But in many areas of life it also exacerbated existing concerns. ‘We immediately started revolutionary activism, protesting and demonstrating, because we saw the injustice,’ Hanan says.

One particularly acute issue Hanan witnessed was an increase in forced marriages. Often out of financial desperation or fear of regime raids, families increasingly married off their daughters, who Hanan says were sometimes as young as 11. ‘Many people told me they had no other solution,’ she says.

As the revolution continued, Hanan met activists from other regions of Syria, expanding her exposure to the issues faced by women throughout the country. She soon came to appreciate that the struggles surrounding her on a daily basis were far from isolated examples.

However Hanan found that the approach to addressing them needed careful consideration of the local context. ‘In areas like Damascus, the coast or Homs, things were more open; you could speak more freely and share ideas,’ she says. ‘But in places like rural Aleppo, Idlib or rural Damascus it was harder, so we had to adapt.’

In many cases, safety concerns for women who were vulnerable to harassment or physical attacks from local authorities or family members necessitated a flexible approach. ‘We agreed to avoid certain words, because you can’t cause harm to the women you work with, especially if you’re in a safer place while they’re facing real danger,’ she says.

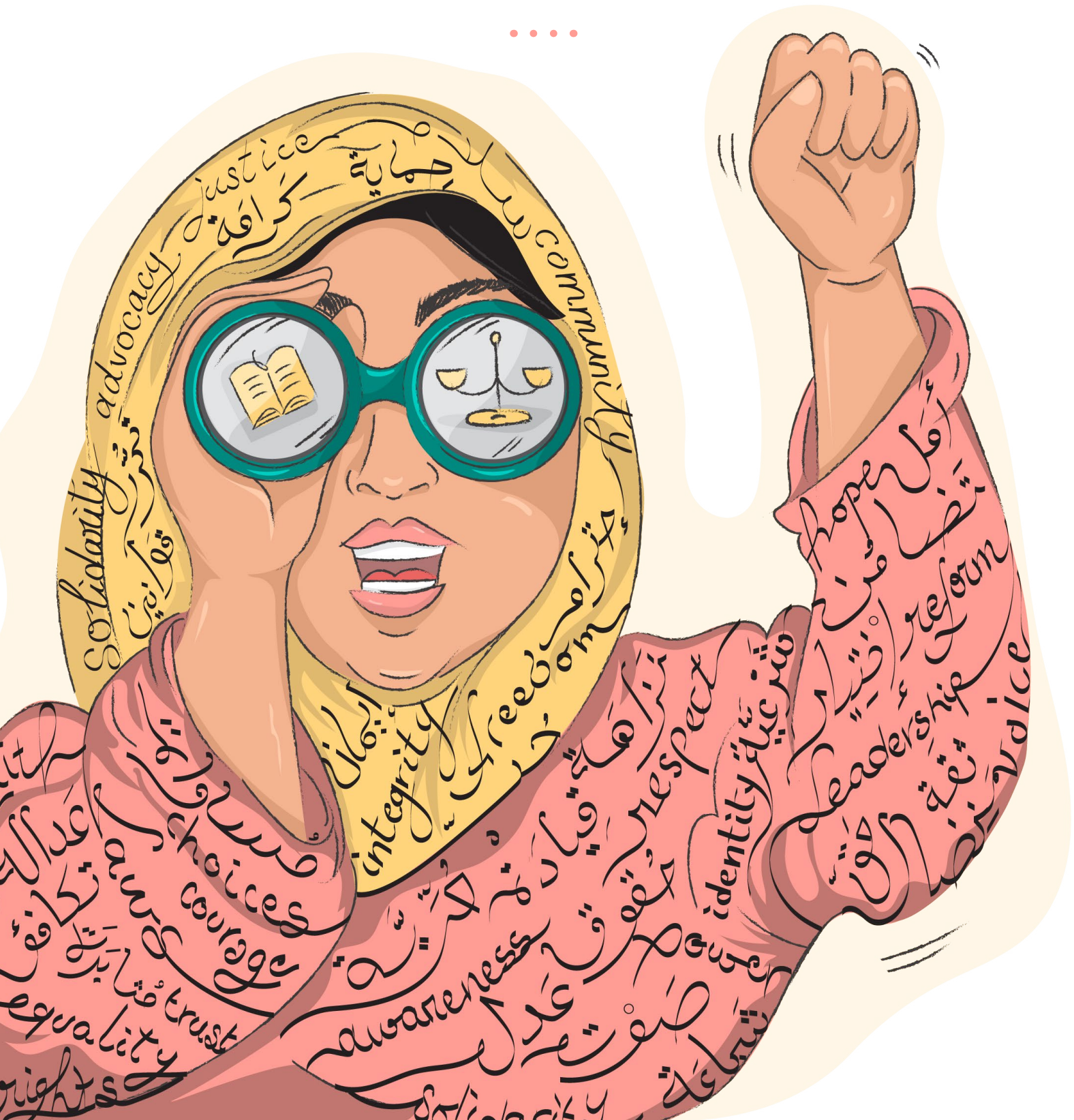
On other occasions she found that a slight change in terminology simply helped to ensure people were more receptive to ideas. ‘The word “gender” scares people, especially conservative men,’ she says. ‘They say, “You want our women to get divorced and go wild.”’

Hanan would insist that this was not the case. ‘I’m not here to tell her to change her religion,’ she would respond. ‘But I do know she has rights in Islam and in law. She has the right to participate politically, work independently and make her own choices.’

“

Islam doesn't allow people to abuse women; it doesn't permit violence against them.

....



Grounded in faith

In some communities, Hanan's Islamic faith helped her to build connections and communicate ideas in a relatable way. On occasion, she used religious framing to discuss gender-related topics.

Seen by some as a barrier to greater freedoms for women, Hanan argues that Islam in fact supports many women's rights but is often misused by those in positions of influence to protect their own interests.

She asserts that the qur'an contains rights for women, if only religious leaders would actually apply them fairly.

'They could use the same verses to support equality and fairness,' she says. 'Some women scholars have done this by studying deeply, understanding every verse and using them to argue for justice. These kinds of scholars can be a positive force, but unfortunately, most religious men don't want to engage in real dialogue.'

Hanan further argues that while religions have some grounding aspects, their ideas can – and should – evolve with time. 'This flexibility can lead to greater freedoms and solutions that fit our reality, our society and our connections with the world,' she says.

Ultimately, Hanan believes in working towards separating religion from the state, but one step at a time, and only once adequate civil laws are in place. Any change must happen at a pace that the Syrian population is comfortable with and not feel like something that is being imposed from outside.

'We need to balance things,' she says. 'Otherwise we risk losing ground, people and everything we've worked for. Our goal is to build a country that accepts everyone, as Syrians, regardless of their religion, dress, beliefs or identity.'

“

Our goal is to
build a country
that accepts
everyone,
as Syrians,
regardless of
their religion,
dress, beliefs
or identity.

...



Some of the more secular feminists would assume that any woman wearing a hijab is oppressed or brainwashed.



‘Judge me for my work, not my clothes’

Over the past decade and a half, Hanan has been part of numerous feminist networks, working with Syrian women both at home and in exile around the world.

After she was forced to leave Syria in 2013, she helped to found the Syrian Women’s Network in Cairo, Egypt. Later, she moved to Turkey and continued her work with women-led non-governmental organisations, supporting former detainees who experienced gender-based violence and developing initiatives for women’s economic empowerment.

As she worked more and more with other feminists, however, Hanan says that she at times felt an intolerance towards her based on outward appearances. ‘Some of the more secular feminists would assume that any woman wearing a hijab is oppressed or brainwashed,’ she says. ‘They’d say things like, “You pray? You fast? How can you be a feminist?”’

Sometimes she would challenge them, but on other occasions she would simply walk away. ‘Over time, many began to see that hijabi women in Syria are doing real work and have strong, unique perspectives,’ she says. ‘Even if I wear a hijab and pray, I support women’s rights in all forms.’

Just as Hanan stands up for women leaders who are attacked online for wearing a swimsuit, she similarly expects to be assessed solely by her actions. ‘I love my faith, and my relationship with God is no one else’s business,’ she says. ‘You can judge me for my work, but not my clothes.’

Her stance is not about defending any one choice, but about defending the right to choose independently. ‘Some women are forced to wear a hijab, and I completely support their right to remove it if they want to,’ she says. ‘But others, like me, choose it freely. That’s the point: freedom to choose.’

For Hanan, with so many people hostile to their rights, women need to stand firm together. ‘We need both types of feminists: the fierce ones who push boundaries, and the moderate ones who can bring along other women and even men,’ she says.

Indeed, it is precisely this diversity of experience and approach that Hanan believes gives Syrian women’s rights advocates their strength. ‘I know many brave Syrian feminists, some I agree with, some I disagree with, but I respect them all,’ she says. ‘We may fight in meetings but remain close in daily life. That’s the beauty of Syrian sisterhood.’

“

We need
both types of
feminists:
the fierce
ones who push
boundaries,
and the
moderate ones
who can bring
along other
women and
even men.

....

Fresh start, familiar marginalisation

After the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, Hanan returned to Syria to help rebuild her country. However she has been disappointed by the early indications for women's inclusion, not least the decision to establish a Women's Affairs Office.

'It's one of the worst things you can do,' she says. 'It's like saying, "We'll isolate the women over here and keep them away from decision-making."'

She is also frustrated by the interim administration's marginalisation of talented women who were instrumental in the revolution. 'Women have been pushed aside again,' she says. 'We have brilliant women in Syria, in every field, but instead of involving them they put one or two women in token roles and call it "representation" – that's unacceptable.'

As she begins to rebuild her life in Syria, Hanan still faces many uncertainties about what her own future may hold. But two things are clear: she will continue to stand firmly for women's rights, and she will keep doing so in a way that brings as many people with her as possible.

'I support the concept of feminism completely,' she says. 'But if we can soften it a bit to make it more acceptable in our society, why not?'

INTERSECTIONAL activism in the Middle East



‘
It’s not
enough
just to
protest
and
scream
– we must
do the
practical
work
,’

“

I began to understand that change cannot be achieved solely by pushing. It should be through influencing.

....

Few people would begrudge Francois Zankih the right to scream his grievances with the world from the rooftops. Still aged just 25, he has already endured more personal tragedy than most people experience in a lifetime.

But despite surviving more than a decade of perpetual violence, grief and displacement, he speaks with a measured composure far beyond his years. ‘People will be less violent when they are healing,’ he says.

Hailing from Idlib in north-west Syria, Francois was only a child when the war began. By the age of 11, he and his teenage sisters were fending for themselves in a city under siege by the governing regime of Bashar al-Assad. His father, arrested and tortured for days on end, had died in front of him; his injured mother had been evacuated to Turkey.

Then there was the abuse from his older brother. Francois describes how his brother turned violent towards the family after being tortured in the notorious Sednaya prison following an attempt to defect from the Syrian army; he would later die by suicide.

Despite experiencing so much devastation at an early age, Francois refused to be sucked into the destructive spiral. ‘My mission became to break the cycle of violence,’ he says.

At the age of 16, he took his first steps in political activism and campaigning for human rights. Reflecting on that period, he now believes that working towards something bigger than his own personal traumas offered a subconscious means of escaping the pain all around him. ‘I did it without thinking about it,’ he says. ‘It was my wings to fly away.’



**My mission became
to break the cycle
of violence.**

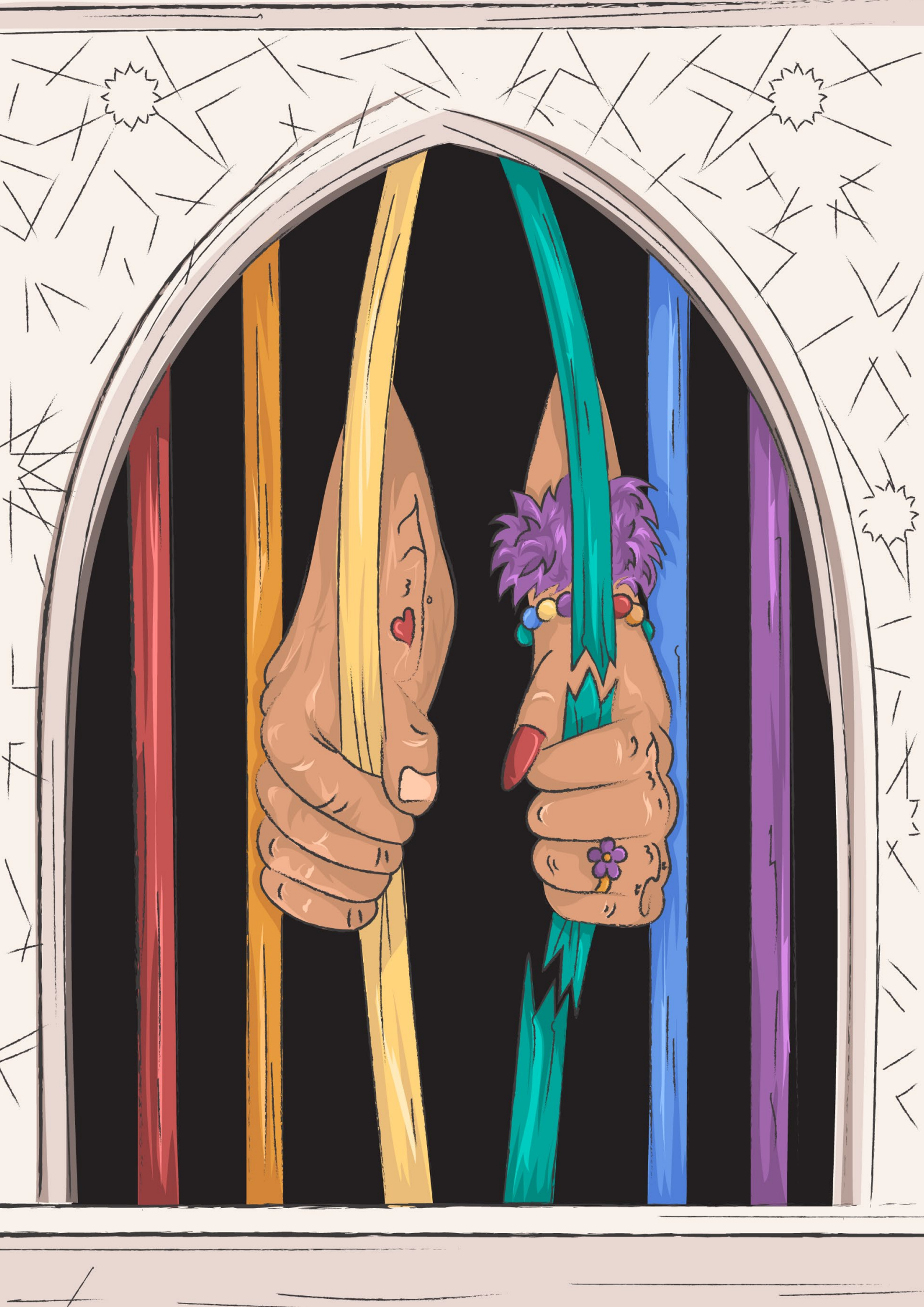


While his activism offered Francois some emotional solace, it also jeopardised his physical safety. Idlib was by now controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – then known as Jabhat al-Nusra – which at the time was affiliated with Al-Qaida. After publishing an article on women in politics, he was abducted and brutally tortured for the first time. Two years later, it happened again.

Undeterred, Francois continued to be a vocal advocate for women's empowerment, engaging with feminist organisations and others that were pushing for a more just Syria. He also conducted field research on the conflict, security and human rights and became known in activist circles for his ability to mobilise others.

At times, he concedes, his early activism was raw and sought unrealistic outcomes given the political reality. 'I wanted women to lead Idlib at that time,' he says. 'Others would tell me to talk with lower expectations.'

Such experiences were critical foundational experiences, however, and helped Francois to focus his energy more strategically. 'I began to understand that change cannot be achieved solely by pushing,' he says. 'It should be through influencing.'





You are attacked by everyone,
even by allies sometimes.

....

Filling Syria's LGBTQ advocacy void

As he worked more closely with women's groups and campaigners in Syria, Francois began to notice that there was a segment of the population that was conspicuously absent from their discussions. 'I never saw LGBTQ people being mentioned, not even indirectly,' he says.

When he tried to introduce LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) rights into the conversation, he would often find his voice shut down. Determined that, no matter how hard it was, LGBTQ people in Syria needed somebody to advocate for them, Francois decided to fill the void.

In early 2020, he began to conceptualise a social initiative for LGBTQ Syrians. The political environment in conservative Idlib, which was still controlled by HTS, meant it had to remain deeply underground for his own protection.

'I knew it was going to be hard – and it was extremely hard,' he says. 'You are attacked by everyone, even by allies sometimes.'

Despite his caution, Francois was by now a marked man. In February 2020, armed groups issued a 'death sentence' against him, and he was forced to flee Syria overnight. He ultimately reached Gaziantep in Turkey, where he began to process the years of trauma he had survived.

It was while he was in Turkey that the Guardians of Equality Movement (GEM) really began to take shape. Francois teamed up with fellow queer and non-queer activists, formalised the organisation's structures and began to build a team to work across Syria.

GEM field coordinators now provide day-to-day updates from all regions of the country, helping to build a more informed picture of the situation on the ground. 'We're trying to provide more data on Syria because it's like a black hole when it comes to LGBTQ issues,' Francois says.

The organisation uses the information to help provide a wide range of services to LGBTQ Syrians, including mental health support, protection services, cash assistance and digital security support. An 'Abroad Task Force' similarly helps to provide an emergency response during crises outside of Syria.

GEM also supports Syrian LGBTQ individuals who may be experiencing economic challenges due to discrimination within the local market. Trainers coach them to work remotely and develop their existing skills to access potential clients around the world.

Capacity-building training is further delivered to service providers, who Francois says are often simply ill-informed when it comes to LGBTQ issues. 'Many organisations discriminate against LGBTQ people unknowingly; we can't blame them,' he says.



Not all of us spend all our time in nightclubs, not all of us are drug addicts, not all of us are sex addicts – because those are the stereotypes.

• • • •

Adopting a pragmatic approach

In a rapidly changing global context, Francois believes that the broader human rights movement around the world is experiencing something of a crisis. But rather than despair, he believes that organisations such as GEM need to be more strategic in their approach.

‘It has become a stereotype that human rights activists only protest and oppose everything, but dramatic work is not helping us anymore,’ he says. ‘It’s not enough just to protest and scream, we must do technically responsible, realistic work. For me, all types of activism are important, but we’re often missing a big element, which is the practical part.’

To that end, Francois strives hard to ensure that his advocacy is always pragmatic and professional, even preferring to call himself a ‘policy practitioner’ rather than a human rights activist. Understanding better than most the sensitive and complex operating environment, he focuses on evidence-based outcomes, skilfully navigating systems rather than attempting to bypass them completely.

He uses the example of GEM’s response after two transgender women were attacked in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Rather than using terminology around LGBTQ rights, which they knew would be controversial for many people in

Syria, their response instead focused on condemning ‘torture’ and upholding ‘human rights’.

By referencing international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture, they also sought to frame such attacks as a threat to the prospect of other countries lifting their economic sanctions on Syria. ‘We always try to consider the geopolitical context,’ Francois says.

While keeping one eye on the bigger picture, GEM has the other on subtly shifting harmful perspectives towards LGBTQ people within Syria. Part of that involves countering the narrative that LGBTQ issues are an externally imposed Western invention by researching the history of queer figures from the region, such as the renowned 8th century poet, Abu Nuwas.

It also means engaging with a range of local languages, marking the celebrations of different communities and demonstrating that LGBTQ people are not to be feared.

‘We’re trying to talk in a language that people understand,’ Francois says. ‘We’re trying not to look strange, to highlight our diversity, to show that not all of us are drag queens. Not all of us spend all our time in nightclubs, not all of us are drug addicts, not all of us are sex addicts – because those are the stereotypes.’

In it for the long haul

Taking such a pragmatic approach to human rights advocacy is not without its critics.

Since the new HTS administration swept to power in Syria, Francois has been challenged for not taking a more adversarial stance towards the same group that once tortured him and caused him to flee his homeland. But he is adamant that in this highly sensitive transitional phase, it is essential for groups such as GEM to work within the present reality.

While he naturally remains sceptical of the new administration, he believes it will be closely scrutinised and should ultimately be judged by its actions in government.

‘The current power is promising that all Syrians will be safe under them, and we are counting on this,’ he says. ‘I think they have to be good as they can do nothing with Syria sanctioned. The Western governments are talking to them very clearly and insisting that Syria should be inclusive of everyone.’

But Francois knows that it is not only those in charge that may pose a potential threat. The war, instability and decades of brutal authoritarian rule that preceded it have inevitably left their scars on a traumatised population that Francois says was ‘weaponised’ against minorities by the former regime.

‘Any security fragility or political change always affects LGBTQ people,’ he says. ‘Instability, violence and wars impact societies, especially marginalised groups. They make society a big source of danger for the LGBTQ community.’

Looking to the future, Francois is characteristically realistic that any meaningful change for LGBTQ people in Syria will likely be slow and incremental. ‘Rehabilitation from radicalisation and extremism takes decades,’ he says. ‘That influence cannot be gone in one day.’

Ultimately, he hopes that with an end to the violence, improved living conditions and humanitarian support, Syria can become a functioning democracy and take steps towards becoming a place where LGBTQ people can start to feel safe.

‘You can’t talk about these topics when the country has no electricity, when the country has no water, when the country has nothing,’ he says. ‘We need more stability, fewer wars, so we can focus on such things and get an opportunity to influence more.’

“

**Instability,
violence and
wars impact
societies,
especially
marginalised
groups.**

...



Community & Respect

مجتمع واحترام

Community & Respect

مجتمع واحترام

Imprint

Published by

the Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices

Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

'Empowering women to participate in peacebuilding and policy-making processes in the MENA region (Women4Peace)'

Phone +49 (0)00 123 456 789

Fax +49 (0)00 123 456 789

www.giz.de

As of

October 2025

Design and layout

Rim El Baltaji
Beirut

Text

Jack Butcher, Asuda M. Amin

On behalf of the

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

