

**MICHELLE
ENGLISH:**

I'm Michelle English, and on behalf of the MIT Center for International Studies, welcome you to today's Starr Forum. Before we get started, I'd like to mention that this is our last planned event for the fall. However, we do have many, many events planned for the spring. So if you haven't already, please take time to sign up to get our event notices.

Today's talk on digital feminism in the Arab Gulf states is co-sponsored by the MIT Women's and Gender Studies program, the MIT History department, and the MIT Press bookstore. In typical fashion, our talk will conclude with Q&A with the audience. And for those asking questions, please line up behind the microphones. We ask that you to be considerate of time and others who want to ask questions. And please also identify yourself and your affiliation before asking your question.

Our featured speaker is Mona Eltahawy, an award winning columnist and international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues and global feminism. She is based in Cairo and New York City. Her commentaries have appeared in multiple publications and she is a regular guest analyst on television and radio shows. During the Egypt Revolution in 2011, she appeared on most major media outlets, leading the feminist website Jezebel to describe her as the woman explaining Egypt to the West.

In November 2011, Egyptian riot police beat her, breaking her left arm and right hand, and sexually assaulted her, and she was detained for 12 hours by the Interior Ministry and Military Intelligence. Newsweek Magazine named Ms. Eltahawy one of its 150 Fearless Women of 2012. Time Magazine featured her along with other activists from around the world as its People of the Year, and Arabian Business Magazine named her one of the 100 Most Powerful Arab Women.

She is author, most recently, of *Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*, which is being sold here today by the MIT Press bookstore. If you haven't already, please get your copy and bring it down after the talk for a book signing which will take place at this table.

The discussant for today's event is Hala Aldosari. Dr. Aldosari is a Saudi scholar and activist whose work focuses on women's rights in Arab societies, violence against women and the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. She joined the MIT Center for International Studies as its 2019 Robert E Wilhelm Fellow. Dr. Aldosari has worked as a medical scientist, lecturer and an

administrator in the Saudi health and education sector. She has also worked as a consultant to the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia in research and planning of the country's national health policy and services.

A writer and a blogger, Dr. Aldosari comments on Saudi political and social affairs. Her writings have been featured in multiple media outlets. And just last February, she was selected as the inaugural recipient of the Washington Post Jamal Khashoggi Fellowship, which provided her a platform to produce opinion pieces for the Washington Post. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Aldosari to the podium.

[APPLAUSE]

HALA ALDOSARI: Thank you everyone. Thank you, Michelle, and Mona, of course, for coming today. It gives me just a great pleasure to be here today to discuss feminism with Mona. For me she's not only appreciated as a strong and renowned voice against patriarchy, but also as a strong ally for women in the Arab countries and particularly in Saudi Arabia, a country that she claims has traumatized her, and to feminism.

Mona has the unique profile of a journalist and a writer who has articulated and amplified women's needs and voices across the divide of the global north and south. This is particularly important at this time of rising populism and nationalism, to have illuminated the language and thinking around women's rights and priorities across the globe.

I first followed Mona after her much controversial article that turned later into a book, *Why Do They Hate Us*, in which depicted the inherent misogyny in the family system, as revealed by how women were treated after the Arab revolutions in 2011. Her recent book, which I relate to many of the sins in it, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*, is indeed a manifesto for women to defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy, exposing the various ways in which women all over the world have been resisting against cultural, religious, and political oppression.

The Arab Gulf States is no exception. It is not surprising that the United Nations Development Program has identified in its 2015 report that women's rights is one of the main three factors impeding human development in the Arab region. That was more than a decade ago, but still exists until today. The other two factors, political freedom and acquisition of knowledge, are fundamentally linked and needed for women to realize their potential.

The region has one of the highest prevalence rates of violence against women, 37%, as a symptom of women's subjugation. The two domains where women lag behind men in the Arab region were the political and economic participation and opportunities. The six Arab Gulf States, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, where consistently ranked among the lowest countries in the scores of gender gap despite the fanfares of economic visions and promises of reforms.

Women in these six countries continue to face serious challenges from patriarchal family relations, oppressive laws, reduced citizenship privileges and rights, an authoritarian system that prevent them from effecting significant and meaningful changes in their society. Historically, women have been segregated and marginalized as a social group in the Arab Gulf States. They were expected to uphold and reproduce the traditional gender norms and rules aimed at maintaining the political and patriarchal power. Their rights were complementary and not equal to men.

Authoritarianism has kept women in positions of dependency on men to access any kinds of opportunities or privileges. The state controlled print media has been the main traditional domain for a select group of women writers to advocate for any change. The print media has provided a limited space in terms of access, outreach and the action to follow.

Then came the social media a decade ago, and women became the most notable presence online among different social groups. This newly found space has allowed women to access information, disseminate knowledge, and form meaningful associations and alliances in their own countries and trans-nationally. It was a transformative space for women in heavily censored and controlled countries like that of the Arab Gulf States.

Across the Arab Gulf countries, women movements have started to gain ground and to make notable change. Some of the most notable ones are in Kuwait and Bahrain. The Kuwaiti led women movement Abolish 153, has started in 2015, was an act to remove a clause in the Kuwaiti penal law that grants men a lenient sentence of three years and a fine if they killed their female relatives after finding them in an unsavory sexual act.

The movement is trying to build a coalition across the Arab Gulf States to abolish similar legal codes. In Bahrain, women have been at the forefront of the massive protests of 2011, and many women activists have been instrumental in supporting their communities towards democratic transition. Saudi Arabia is one landmark case for digital feminism and how it has

the potential to positively and negatively influence a society.

Women have used online space to end the restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy. Out of all the campaigns and acts of activism in the Saudi society, it was the driving campaign of 2013 that started a strong social movement. Women drivers shattered the stereotype of gender by posting their driving in protest of the decades long women driving ban. Some were arrested, sentenced to various degrees of punishment, and some were caned.

The movement provided a model for other social groups to create a change in the country and became a seed for other online campaigns. In 2016, as a copy campaign was launched by the same women, using the same methods, to abolish the male guardianship system that required women to obtain a guardian permission to access fundamental rights and freedom. The online space soon became one of the most active spaces for women to organize and to push for a change in various domains.

Women's online presence have galvanized the somewhat dormant society in those countries for action, and fill the void in the public space for women leaders. Women campaigners became public figures, regularly consulted by international and local media, and also by Saudi women, to amplify their voices and support them in different ways.

Being exposed to heavily controlled private and public spaces, women campaigners themselves were transformed. They transcended beyond seeking singular social reform into the more fundamental questions of feminism. As public campaigners, they were faced with an unexpected set of questions on legitimacy, priorities, inclusiveness, intersectionality, or effectiveness of their approach. They have moved into the uncharted territory in which their rebellion have exposed.

They've exposed the unrealised magnitude of patriarchy and oppression in their own families, societies, and the state. It's simply created a new women collective conscience and a deeper realizations of women's personal and political vulnerability. It was therefore unsurprising that online feminism was branded by the Saudi security apparatus as a radical ideology.

The international backlash that erupted after such a classification caused the state of course to retract the classification. In reality, however, feminists are treated exactly like radical terrorists, targeted, imprisoned, tortured, and banned from engaging in social movement or on social media.

The online space is thus a precarious one. The Arab Gulf States leaders have actively used it to disseminate public propaganda and misinformation, influence public opinion, and track and target critics and agents of the change. The latest incidents of the Saudi officials infiltrating Twitter to access the locations and private information of thousands of critics is a stark example of the alarming cross-border outreach of technology.

It raises concerns on the ability of feminism to push for equality in an increasingly politically manipulated online space. It also calls for a greater reflection on the role of technology as a double sword of both freedom and oppression. So I'm going to stop here and ask Mona to come and talk to us about some of the incidences, because she is very active online, and she has engaged a lot with the online movement in the Arab Gulf States. And some of her past experiences is outlined in the book. And let the floor for Mona.

[APPLAUSE]

**MONA
ELTAHAWY:**

Good evening. Good afternoon. I guess it's somewhere in the middle, everyone. Thank you very much Hala for that wonderful comprehensive overview of what we're going to discuss today. And thank you Michelle and all the departments who organized today's events.

I'm especially excited and honored to be in conversation with Hala today, because I have so much love and respect for all the work that she does. I consider her a true sister and comrade in the revolution against patriarchy, not just in Saudi Arabia but globally. So it's really a big honor for me to be here today with you, Hala.

And thank you everyone who came out today. And I travel the world to introduce myself in this way. Hello everyone. My name is Mona Eltahawy, and my declaration of faith is fuck the patriarchy.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. This is my message that I take everywhere with my suitcase. So now that we've got that out the way, I'll speak about what else I've come to speak about.

Hala ended her talk-- or towards the end of her talk she mentioned that the Saudi regime had recently classified feminism as a radical ideology. As a form of extremism. And this was actually just a week ago. It was a real gift to our conversation today that this happened.

And it's also a really interesting retraction. It's interesting that a regime that is so in charge of

everything finds it imperative to declare feminism a form of terrorism. And then having done so, quickly retracts because of the anger and ridicule that it was subjected to by feminists in Saudi Arabia, that then generated ridicule and anger around the world.

And that's a really important thing to remember, especially as the Saudi regime is trying to present, especially in the form of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, trying to present this very modern face. This very progressive approach. And it's an approach that, sadly and shamefully, has been propagated by the Trump regime-- because I call Donald Trump's presidency a regime most certainly-- and by his daughter Ivanka Trump, and by his wife when they went to Saudi Arabia. Notably, his first foreign visit after being elected president was to Saudi Arabia.

So recognizing that, and recognizing that Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump and the Trump regime at whole are upholding this image of Mohammed bin Salman as this progressive so-called emancipator of women. Also a title, by the way, that 60 Minutes was happy to bestow on him when Norah O'Donnell interviewed him during Mohammed bin Salman's first visit to the United States. So remember that back and forth, because the Saudi regime would not be able to do that if it weren't for the fact that Trump and other Western leaders uphold this ridiculous image of MbS, as he's known, as an emancipator of women.

Now let's talk about feminism and the online space. I've been on Twitter since 2009. I basically live on Twitter. And I first discovered Saudi feminists through another incredible sister and comrade, a feminist called Eman Al Nafjan. I first encountered Eman online. I've never met her. But I feel like I've known her now for years.

I first met her online when she was when she began to author the Saiduwoman blog. It was an era when blogs from across the region, the Middle East and North Africa, when those blogs basically opened the window into the lives, and the ideas, and the thoughts of so many people in the region who had been denied a platform.

Because this preceded, of course, the so-called Arab Spring. It preceded the various uprisings and revolutions in the region. And the importance of those blogs, and then those blogs moved into Facebook. And then those Facebook expanded into Twitter, and Instagram, and now Snapchat, and now TikTok, and all the other forms of social media that people much younger than me are using. And I stop at TikTok. I don't know what came after TikTok.

But what happened was, in the importance of all of those, which underpins the power of

women like Eman Al Nafjan, and others that I will speak about, is that they allowed their authors to say I count. And this was an I that had been repressed by every regime and every power that those regimes had imaginable.

I was born in Egypt, and I spent the first seven years of my life in Egypt. And then my family moved to Saudi Arabia, first and to the UK when I was seven, and then to Saudi Arabia when I was 15. And I lived in Saudi Arabia from 1982 to 1986. And then I would go back two or three times a year until the year 2000.

So I've seen how the regime in Egypt has silenced every I you can imagine. And I've seen how the regime in Saudi Arabia has silenced those I's. And as a journalist in the region with various media, but mostly with Reuters-- I reported for Reuters from Cairo and from Jerusalem. I reported from Syria, from Libya, Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, of course. And Morocco.

Having seen how all of those regimes in the region stamp out the possibility of any I, and then seeing, as a precursor-- because these were definitely catalysts to the revolution. No revolution suddenly happens overnight. No revolution begins because someone goes on Facebook and says we're going to have a revolution tomorrow.

So you have to see how the revolutions that began in Tunisia, and then spread across the region, where they began. And even before those revolutions began, you had protests in the street, as Hala mentioned, in Bahrain. The Bahraini activist scene has been an incredibly active one for many years. The Kuwaiti scene and the protests they have. And also the various protests that used to take place and continued until quite recently in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

All of these were happening. Maybe they didn't get so much media coverage. But all of those were happening in the mid 2000s, and all of them were feeding into those determined voices saying I count.

So when I encountered Eman Al Nafjan's Saudiwoman blog, it was part of-- there were other blogs in Bahrain as well, and others in Egypt. And at the time, at around 2009, 2010, I taught at various places as an adjunct or a visiting professor, and I would assign my students to follow these blogs.

And I remember that my students-- so I had students at the New School in New York. I had

students at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. And I had students at the University of Oklahoma. So three very different campuses.

And they would follow those blogs. And I remember, especially when they would follow Eman, that they would interview her by Skype. And then their assignment was to come and present their findings to the class at the end of the semester, and talk about why those bloggers were important.

And I will never forget that the students at the University of Oklahoma-- this was in 2010 in September. So it preceded the Tunisian revolution by two or three months. And as part of their presentation to the class, they quoted Eman as saying, by many accounts I lead quite a privileged life in Saudi Arabia. But I live in a golden cage.

And this idea of living in a golden cage, and recognizing that she had privilege, and recognizing that she had a platform through which to use that privilege to shine a light on those other I's that could not say I count. So you could go on Eman's blog, Saudiwoman woman blog, and read about how she has a PhD from a university in the United States. How the years of living in the United States afforded her an ability to address the world in English, an ability to explain what it was like to be a Saudi feminist in a way that readers from other parts of the world could understand.

And what Eman was doing was also a continuation of what several other Saudi women who had begun to use the online space had been doing for a few years. Because also before Eman, I had encountered online Wajeha al-Huwaider who had also been using the online space. She'd been using YouTube. And she had posted several videos on YouTube that were part of her driving protest, her rebellion, her defying, disobeying, and disrupting the patriarchy by getting into a car when it was illegal to drive in Saudi Arabia.

Wajeha also was part of a campaign to pressure the Olympics Committee, the International Olympics Committee, in forcing Saudi Arabia to take a position on women. Because for the longest time Saudi Arabia was sending an all-male team to the Olympics at no cost whatsoever. Whereas when the Taliban were ruling Afghanistan, they were penalized because of the gender apartheid that they had subjected women to in Afghanistan. And all the way back to when South Africa was under racial apartheid, and it was then penalized by the Olympic committee, the Saudi regime was not. Every four years it would send a team that was so blatantly male. And there were no women on the team.

So I remember that Wajeha had posted a video, after I think it was the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. And it was 2008 I think, right, Hala? It was before the 2012 one in London. Because the 2012 London Olympics were the first Olympics that the Saudi team finally sent women to.

So I'm giving you these examples. Wajeha al-Huwaider and then Eman and others, and showing you the impact that they were having. Because soon after many people began to pay attention to the fact that Saudi Arabia weren't sending women. The Saudi regime felt that it had to.

And so in 2012 in the London Olympics they sent-- I think at the time they sent two women, one who ran the 800 meters, and one who was in the judo contest. So they were trying. There was some kind of cosmetic attempts at showing, look-- this is before MbS, of course.

But at the heart of all of this, it wasn't just about being able to drive a car. It wasn't just about sending women to the Olympics. It was about what Hala told you about, the guardianship campaign. And even though Eman was arrested for driving, even though Hala was arrested for driving, even though so many other women were arrested for driving, and Wajeha al-Huwaider many years ago, their demands were not just about let us drive a car and we're going to go home and be happy.

They were not interested in single issue revolutions. Because the revolution never is about a single issue. And the revolution doesn't come from what we now call liberal feminism, or neo-liberal feminism, that basically says give me what I want to lead my life with all these individual achievements, and I don't care about anyone else.

Because many of those women who were taking part in those protests, be them protests against the driving ban, or protests against Saudi Arabia not sending women to the Olympics, or various other things that they were complaining about online. Many of those women, like Eman, led quite privileged lives. They could just leave the country, as long as they had the approval of their guardian.

But many women could not just leave the country, because they didn't have understanding or supportive guardians. Or many women couldn't just, after they were allowed to drive, get into a car. Because for some women, they couldn't even afford to have a car. So it became a matter of the systemic patriarchy. It wasn't just, give me what would allow my life to be great, and then I will go home and be happy.

Because if it were that kind of feminism that they were demanding, it would have begun and ended with the fact that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appointed a woman to be Saudi Arabia's ambassador to DC quite recently. And this was after the Saudi regime murdered and dismembered the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Because again, these were cosmetic changes that it wanted to apply to show the world that look, here we are. We have opened up. We're allowing women to drive. We've sent a woman to be the ambassador in our most important embassy in the world. Come and visit Saudi Arabia now. Because now they have this massive campaign for tourism.

So when I talk about these campaigns, and when I talk about these activists, I want you to remember that they were not fighting for just these single issue things. They were fighting to dismantle what I call the trifecta of misogyny. Because when we talk about the guardianship system-- Hala mentioned how the state was-- and many people who support the state are complicit. Especially women who are given access to state controlled media and then start going for that trickle down kind of rights.

When I talk about the trifecta of misogyny, I'm talking about the kind of revolution that recognizes that it's not just the state that oppresses women. Because when I wrote that essay Why Do They Hate Us that Hala mentioned, that I then turned into a book called Headscarves and Hymens, Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution, I wrote that essay in April of 2012.

So this was very soon after the various revolutions and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, including in my own country Egypt. Because I wanted to know where is gender liberation in the revolution. And I would always be answered with, this is not the time to talk about gender liberation. We're fighting the state. We're fighting against torture. We're fighting against a whole list of things, and therefore women must wait, and gender liberation must wait.

And they would say to me, don't you know, Mona, nobody is free. And I would say it's true. Nobody is free, because the state oppresses everyone. Men and women.

But-- and this is a massive but-- the state, along with the street, and along with the home-- and this is what I call the trifecta of misogyny. It's that triangle. State, Street and home, together oppress women. And you can see that most acutely in Saudi Arabia.

Because the guardianship system is basically-- the Saudi regime says nobody's free because it's an absolute hereditary monarchy. However, we will give men the right to oppress women

the way that we oppress everybody. And so therefore men are complicit. It is in men's interest to keep this trifecta of misogyny in place.

Because if they recognize that the state most certainly stands in the way of their freedom, the state at least gives them the ability to stand in the way of women's freedom. And that gives them a form of power. That numbs the edge of the state's sword on them, basically.

So always remember that. The trifecta of misogyny. And you see that happening the most when the Saudi regime says the people are not ready for freedom. The people are not ready for women to drive. The people are not ready to lift the guardianship system.

Which people are they talking about? Because when women went out to drive in Saudi Arabia, yes there were police officers who were arresting them and then calling their fathers or their guardians in to sign release forms, and forms in which they vowed they would never do this again. But they were also men there who were signing those forms because they recognized that their freedom is tied with the freedom of those women they were related to. That they were basically going to sign to basically bail them out.

So you have to ask why does the Saudi regime say that people are not ready? Or they're basically saying men are not ready for women's liberation. Because they're reminding the men that your liberation is not going to come. But until that liberation comes, enjoy suppressing the women in this country. That trifecta of misogyny.

So the most important fight that those women have struck or started against the regime is the one that dismantles that. And you saw that with Wajeha al-Huwaider, and you saw that with Eman, you saw that with the women who were fighting to lift the driving ban. And you saw the most acute response to that in March of 2018, when the Mohammed bin Salman regime arrested the women who were considered the leaders of not just the campaign against the ban on driving, but those same women, and some men, were also the leaders against the guardianship system.

Because they went straight to the heart of that trifecta of misogyny. And they had been doing that online for a very long time. And they've been doing that on the streets for a very long time. And they've been doing that in their homes for a very long time.

And it was convenient for the Mohammed bin Salman regime to get those women out the way, so that a few months later, in May of 2018, when the ban on driving was lifted, Mohammed bin

bin Salman could say, you see, I am the emancipator of women. But you have to ask yourself why he felt he had to imprison those women. Why he felt he had to announce that the ban on driving would be lifted several months before at a joint event, one in DC, and one in Saudi Arabia.

And then why were the pictures of those women and men who were imprisoned put on the front page of Saudi media and they were labeled traitors. And then they were labeled traitors, and they were accused of taking money from abroad, and the regime said that they would put them on trial for charges we didn't really know what they were. They were quite amorphous at the time. But they were basically setting up that trifecta of misogyny against them because of treason.

Fast forward a few months after that, when news began to leak out that those women and men were being tortured in prison. The form of torture that they were subjected to was almost identical in many forms to the kind of torture that we've heard the United States subjected terrorism suspects to. One of the feminists in prison, and she remains in prison, and she has been in solitary confinement for I think more than 500 days now, is a woman called Loujain al-Hathloul.

This is a feminist who has been subjected to water boarding. That's a form of torture that is usually associated with extraordinary rendition, by which the United States basically abducts suspects, takes them to friendly countries, that then do even worse acts of torture for them. Like Egypt, like Morocco, like Syria. And the United States of course subjected suspects in the 9/11 attacks and others in Guantanamo, who have never been charged with anything, by the way, and Guantanamo remains open, and most of the men there are probably going to be there until they die.

So why would you subject a feminist to water boarding? The answer to that question became apparent again-- and it coincided with another online campaign in January of 2019. So it was earlier this year. A young woman, 18 years old, called Rahaf, escaped while her family was on vacation in Kuwait. She could not travel from Saudi Arabia to anywhere else unless she had the signature of her guardian.

Because the guardianship system basically says all women and all girls in Saudi Arabia need their male guardians permission to do the most basic of things. To travel abroad. To get married. To leave prison. To have various surgeries, various medical procedures done on

their bodies. To study at various schools at university. Many things.

So this young woman could not have escaped if her family were traveling within Saudi Arabia. But they were traveling in Kuwait, which does not require the signature of a male guardian for a woman to board a plane. So she bought herself a ticket to Australia because she wanted to apply for asylum in Australia. And she had to transit. She had to layover in Bangkok. In Thailand.

Her family complained to the Saudi authorities. The Saudi authorities contacted the Thai authorities, who intercepted her at the airport in Bangkok. She got herself a hotel room and they-- well, before she got her hotel room, they took her passport, and they took her boarding pass onward to Australia, and they told her that they were going to send her back on the first plane back to Kuwait from where she would be deported to Saudi Arabia.

And she understood that her life would be in danger if this were to happen. She said that she had renounced Islam, and that her family had found that out, and that she was worried that they would kill her if she was returned forcibly to Saudi Arabia. So she wanted go on to Australia where she wanted to apply for asylum.

I found out about Rahaf again because of how active Saudi women are online. So I got a tweet. I think it was right-- Rahaf had begun to tweet. And it became apparent to me later that was it was a group of three Saudi women, who were very close friends of Rahaf, each of which were living under asylum applications. The three of them had applied for asylum in three different countries.

One of them in Australia, one of them in Canada, and one of them in Sweden. So this is by way of explaining how so many Saudi women organize online even though some of them have never met each other. And in this case Rahaf knew one of them, and that's why she wanted to go to Australia. But they understand the power that they have online.

So those three women set up a Twitter account for Rahaf. Another Saudi woman who had applied for asylum in the United States sent me a tweet. And by the time I saw her tweet, Rahaf only had 24 followers on Twitter. And the woman in the US asked me to help Rahaf. She said Mona, please help Rahaf. Her life is in danger.

And so I went on to see what was going on. And I saw all these tweets in Arabic written by this woman who said her name was Rahaf. Now I've been on Twitter long enough to understand

that not everyone on Twitter is who they say they are. So I had to be very careful, because I wasn't sure if this was some kind of troll, if this were some kind of person from the Saudi regime trying to show that look, see, when Saudi women claim that their life is in danger it's not true. Because they wanted to discredit them. I wasn't sure.

But also at the same time, I didn't want to take a risk of not believing a woman who says her life is in danger. So I said, look. This is a woman who says her life is in danger. These are her tweets. I'm going to translate them. And I want everyone who follows me to pay attention to this and spread this news far and wide.

And because I have a large following on Twitter, people pay attention to what I say. And I also contacted privately Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and all the journalists that I knew who pay attention to cases like this. Very soon after I began to translate Rahaf's tweets, an Australian journalist contacted me privately by DM on Twitter. And various human rights activists from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Now this Australian journalist, called Sophie McNeill, bought herself a ticket on her own dime, and flew to Bangkok so that she could be in the hotel room with Rahaf in case they forcibly deported her. So basically her story has been told so many times. You can go on and read her story on the BBC, on Reuters, on the Guardian. And Human Rights Watch wrote basically a blow by blow account of what happened.

But basically, because of all of these things that we did, we managed to help Rahaf get UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, to go and meet with her in her hotel room before the Thai authorities could forcibly put her on a plane to Kuwait. Now she was a very resourceful and very courageous young woman.

Any time someone says to me, you saved Rahaf, I say, no, I did not save Rahaf. Rahaf saved herself. Rahaf is the one who got onto that plane, and at great risk to her life, got herself to Bangkok. And then she not only got herself into a hotel room, but she pushed the bed, and the set of drawers, and everything there, and basically just locked herself into the room and refused to open the door.

This is an 18-year-old. And she stayed in that room and demanded that UNHCR come to see her. This is true defiance, disobedience, and disruption of the patriarchy. I helped someone who already helped herself. And this is what is really important to understand here.

I am not here to save anyone. None of these feminists are there saving anyone but themselves. But through our collective power online, and through our ability to say I count, and through Rahaf's ability to say I count, she is now living in Canada awaiting her asylum application. She is safe.

Many other women are not. Two years before Rahaf's escape, one Saudi woman called Dina Ali Lasloom was not so lucky, because she was intercepted in Manila airport until two of her uncles came, beat her, taped her mouth shut, bound her arms and legs, and dragged her onto a plane out of Manila airport. She too had wanted to go to Australia to apply for asylum.

She was dragged onto a plane with her mouth taped shut and her arms and legs bound. This is a 24-year-old woman. So Rahaf is very lucky. But Rahaf also fought hard to be where she is. There are so many other Rahafs. And when Sophie went home, she did a report on-- Sophie and I went to meet Rahaf in Toronto, and Sophie interviewed her and interviewed me.

And the question I asked on Sophie's program on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation show called Four Corners remains the question I always ask. What the fuck is Saudi Arabia doing to women that they want to escape like this? And what it's doing to women is it's treating feminism as a form of terrorism. It is torturing feminists in prison. It's water boarding them. It's electrocuting them.

And these women, all they were fighting for was to dismantle that trifecta of misogyny. So this this is by way of explaining some of the Saudi women that I've been following from as far back as 2005, 2006, through 2009, through the driving campaign, through the campaigns against the guardianship system. Because these are women who I consider the vanguard of the revolution in Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed bin Salman is not an emancipator. Thomas Friedman very shamefully and now infamously said that Mohammed bin Salman is bringing the revolution to the Gulf. No he is not. He is the number one obstacle to the revolution in the Arabian Gulf and the entire region.

The people bringing the revolution to that part of the world are those women in prison and those men who were there as their allies. So that's specific to the part of the world that Hala and I will be talking about more in our conversation. But I also want to mention briefly a campaign that ties that part of the world to the rest of the world that I was involved with on Twitter, because like I said I live on Twitter.

And I love the hashtags that we come up with on Twitter. And about a month after what happened-- no, this was a year before what happened with Rahaf. In February of 2018 I heard from one of my followers on Twitter that there was a young woman in Pakistan called Sabica Khan who had posted on Facebook that she had been subjected to sexual assault in Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Mecca is Islam's holiest site, and Sabica had been there with her family performing pilgrimage. And this struck home with me on many levels, because soon after my family moved to Saudi Arabia in 1982, when I was 15 years old, we went on Hajj, the pilgrimage, which is Islam's fifth pillar. And at the age of 15, for the first time in my life I was covered from head to toe in what is usually known as hijab.

I was subjected to sexual assault twice. Once by a man behind me during the pilgrimage who I assumed was a fellow Pilgrim, and the second time by Saudi policemen right next to the kaaba. The kaaba is that cubicle structure towards which Muslims pray five times a day. Twice when I was 15 years old. And this was three weeks after we arrived in Saudi Arabia, as we were performing the fifth pillar of my religion.

I didn't realize at the time how much that had broken me. Because I buried that deep, deep inside. I couldn't tell my parents. I didn't tell anyone for years what happened. I burst into tears. I froze. A very normal and natural reaction to sexual assault. I was only 15 years old.

When I heard that this happened to Sabica, and when I heard that Sabica was getting a lot of push back and was being called a liar, I decided to go online and form-- I started a hashtag called #mosquemetoo to show solidarity with Sabica, but also to carve a space within the MeToo movement for women of Muslim descent. Since 1982, when I was assaulted during Hajj, I have written and spoken in English and Arabic, I've written in my book, I've written in essays, I've spoken on Egyptian TV about it, about what happened to me.

So this wasn't the first time. But I went online to support Sabica and to also encourage other women of Muslim descent who felt that they could share their own experience with sexual assault in the holy sites. And the hashtag, #mosquemetoo-- I think I sent it out on February 5th some time. And within hours it went viral.

Because very soon after I posted about it Indonesia woke up. And Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim country. And the Indonesians began to tweet about it. And so many Indonesian women went on and embraced the hashtag and said, you see? This is what I told you

happened to me during pilgrimage, and you didn't want to believe me.

And then it spread across the entire world. Indonesia, India, Turkey, Egypt, various parts of Europe, until it reached the US. It went basically around the world. It was covered by the BBC in five different languages. It was covered by many, many media.

And this wasn't just solidarity with Saboca as I said. But this was also to carve a space within the Me Too movement for women of Muslim descent. Because many of you I hope by now know that Me Too was begun in 2006 by the black feminist activist Tarana Burke as a way to support young black women who had been subjected to sexual assault, and had no resources and no help.

So Tarana's movement was for those who were not rich, not famous, and not white. But at the end of 2017, when several Hollywood actresses very courageously, and I salute them for this, began to speak out against the producer Harvey Weinstein, and began to use the hashtag MeToo, and it went it went global, that movement began to be to be associated with a very rich and very white and very privileged kind of milieu.

And it was very damaging on many levels that was the case. Primarily for me it was damaging because it allowed a lot of men to say, you see, I'm not Harvey Weinstein. I'm not these rich powerful white men. This has nothing to do with me.

But it also kept out a lot of women who needed the support of the Me Too movement. Those who are not rich, not white, and not famous. So disabled women, women of color, Muslim women, trans women, queer women of all kinds, working class women, women working in factories, not women who make millions of dollars and are able to speak out against producers like Harvey Weinstein, et cetera. So that mosque me too was also inspired by #churchtoo, which was begun by evangelical women in the United States who were also speaking out against sexual assault in their community. Because it's very difficult for them to speak out about it.

And of course I tied all of this to the sex abuse in the Catholic Church, where Catholic priests for years have been-- and with little to no accountability-- sexually abusing boys and girls. So #mosquemetoo went viral, and to this day, it's still being used. And women across the world are using it to finally break a lot of taboo and a lot of shame.

Because when sexual assault happens in sacred spaces, the usual taboo and shame that

silence women when they're sexually assaulted anywhere of course are at play. But it's especially difficult as a Muslim woman to speak out about sexual assault. And it's especially difficult to speak out about it at the holiest site for your religion.

Because Muslim women, like women who live in marginalized communities-- this is for Muslim women especially who live as minorities, we're caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock are racist Islamophobes who want to use what we say when we speak out against misogyny, or when we speak out about sexual assault, and say, you see, Muslim men do x, y, and z. We told you.

And then the hard place is the Muslim community, which wants to silence us. Because they say every time you speak out the right wing and the Islamophobes use what you say. And neither this side nor that side care about us and what we're talking about. They're basically fighting over our bodies.

And so I tell them to fuck off and I tell them to fuck off. Because neither of them is my friend. And I will never ally with the right wing or the Islamophobes, and I will never shut up. So--

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. So that's my way of talking about #mosquemetoo, which I'm very glad to see still making it across the world. And as a kind of p.s. to that, and before I wrap it up, I would encourage you to read a book that was authored by another sister and comrade of mine, a British Muslim woman called Mariam Khan. It's called It's Not About the Burqa, in which Muslim women, mostly in the UK, but I'm among them, I don't live in the UK obviously, write about being stuck between the rock and a hard place, and about what it's like to be a Muslim woman caught between all of these people and groups trying to silence us.

So that's #mosquemetoo, which has gone viral, and was one of the inspirations for the Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls. Five days after I began #mosquemetoo, and I'm truly going to wrap up here, I was out dancing. Because we often talk about self care, and how you need to take care of yourself. And Audre Lorde very famously said-- the black lesbian poet and intellectual-- Audre Lorde very famously said that self care is not an indulgence or a luxury, but an act of political warfare.

Because it's part of my war and her war and all our wars against patriarchy. So I take care of

myself by going out and dancing. So five days after being inundated with the most horrific stories of sexual assault and silencing in various Muslim holy sites, my beloved and I went out dancing in Montreal, Canada.

Now I was 15 years old in 1982 and dressed in her hijab when I was sexually assaulted twice. I froze. There was nothing I could do about it. So many men came on my Twitter account to tell me after I started #mosquemetoo, why didn't you do something about it? Why didn't you fight back? Why didn't you do something about it?

Five days after I'd began the hashtag, I was dancing in a club in Montreal. This time I'm 50 years old, I'm wearing a tank top and jeans, and I feel a hand on my ass. And I'm like, you've got to be fucking kidding me. How is this still happening? And so I turn and by complete instinct I see the man who did it. And I know who it is because he's walking through the dance floor, and everyone else is dancing with their partner.

So I went up to him, I pulled his shirt, I tugged his shirt from behind, he fell, and I sat on top of him, and I punched and I punched and I punched. And I beat the fuck out of this guy. And it was glorious.

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

This time I started a hashtag called #Ibeatmyassaulter. And guess what. When this went viral, all the men wanted to know, don't you think you overreacted? So once again, fuck you to this side and fuck you to that side. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Can we sit?

HALA ALDOSARI: OK, thank you Mona. That was-- I don't know if you can hear me? Can you hear me?

AUDIENCE: No.

MONA Hi, Caitlin.

ELTAHAWY:

HALA ALDOSARI: So one of the most, I think, first of all of the sins that you've mentioned in the book are

completely opposite to anything that women are raised and being accepted in a society in most of the Arab States, and more specifically in the Arab Gulf States. We are raised not to seek attention, not to compete with power. To be basically docile and obedient and considerate of everyone but ourselves.

So basically most of those sins have been contradictory, or the complete opposite of everything that we've been raised for. But I relate mostly to anger in this, because basically it's this feeling of very much like unable to do anything because of the lack of association. Because of the lack of spaces for people to come together. And because of continuous ignorance of what's the impact of these things on us.

And I remember-- and of course anger has helped me a lot in my writings, and my best writings have been done while I was very angry. And of course in defying and disrupting the system and the patriarchal system.

One of the things that I remember when you first posted under the mosque me too is Jamal Khashoggi. And he is a practicing Muslim and very conservative. He was one of the first people-- and he's a social influencer-- he's the journalist who was murdered by the Saudi regime. He was one of the first people to basically take a look-- and I would have assumed that people would be very much offended by this declaration in the holy mosques or in the pilgrimage.

But I remember Jamal Khashoggi, has actually quote retweeted your hashtag and your writings. And he actually instructed most of the people to reflect. And I don't think any of the people inside Saudi Arabia who have been witnessing those things have actually been talking about this.

So one of the questions I had for you is how do you assess the following, or what kind of reactions your declarations, your exposure, basically of those things? What kind of reactions you've received from people in the Arab Gulf States? And I would say specifically from men. Because that would be something that is enlightening in a way.

MONA

ELTAHAWY:

Yes. Thank you for reminding me that Jamal was one of the first people who shared mosque me too. So I'd written an op-ed about it for the Washington Post in English, and it was translated into Arabic. And I made a video for them. And Jamal shared the Arabic. Jamal shared the Arabic translation of my op-ed because he wanted it to be read in Arabic, because he knows he has a very large Arabic speaking following.

And not only did he share it, but he said this is a very difficult essay to read by Mona. But I have spoken to my female relatives about this, and this is something that they have told me happened. So I urge everyone to reflect on this.

And I was really appreciative of the fact that Jamal did that. And I wondered, because before I realized that Jamal had done that, I was on a train, and all of a sudden my Twitter mentions were just flooded, flooded with the most vile hate you can imagine. And I was like, what the fuck is going on?

[LAUGHTER]

And then I realized that they were responding to me and Jamal, because he was being followed by these what we now know as troll farms that are paid for by the Saudi regime, specifically by a senior aide of Mohammed bin Salman. And they basically just go after anyone who they consider to be powerful and to have a large following, and anyone that who also is in communication with them.

It was incredible. It was three days of the most vile hate. They would put my face on top of monsters. They would call me-- Ronald McDonald was the least thing that I got from them. You're a clown. You're a clown. OK, yeah, I have red hair.

But it was unbelievable. The hate was unbelievable. And I mean it sounds funny now, but before Jamal died, and Ahmed Abdulaziz, who's a Saudi dissident who lives in Montreal, between the two of them so much Western media were able, because of what they exposed, to track down what those troll farms were doing to dissidents and anyone who criticizes the Saudi regime.

So that was one of the responses by men. Another response by men, just to kind of put it in context, and not just in Saudi Arabia, when I first spoke about this on TV, and it was an Arabic. It was on a very popular Egyptian TV show in 2013. And a friend of mine was the producer who invited me to go on that TV show. And I said I've been sexually assaulted twice. When I first went on hajj, because I've been on four pilgrimages.

But the first one I went on I was sexually assaulted twice. And the presenter couldn't believe it. She was also a woman of Muslim descent. And she was like, this is terrible. I've never ever heard of this happening before.

After this, I found out from my friend, the producer, a man, that he was almost fired. Because no one has ever before-- and I think no one has ever since-- said on Egyptian TV that she had been sexually assaulted during hajj. And so this was just considered way beyond the pale.

And I think what also angered a lot of people was that in my essay, that the op-ed that Jamal shared, I said that this is what I want from the Saudi regime. I want them to instruct. Because they do instruct the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, to basically during Friday prayer, when he leads congregational prayers, and he gives the sermon that is watched by Muslims, millions of Muslims around the world, and during the sermon that he gives during the pilgrimage, to say that we know that men are sexually assaulting women and girls during the pilgrimage. And this must stop. And we will do x, y, and z.

And I pushed for the Saudi regime to do something about it and take it seriously. But of course, none of this has happened. So the men are not happy.

HALA ALDOSARI: Yeah. [INAUDIBLE], this is one thing as well, the increased voices of women. This has been really the case in Saudi Arabia and other places. Increased voices of women online. This is what the online space has given us. A place where we can at least voice those issues.

Have actually resulted in a good and positive outcomes, like the lifting of the-- women have recognized what do they need really. And they've basically demanded from their own states the lifting of the driving ban, the guardianship, that wasn't actually part of the narrative or the national dialogue inside Saudi Arabia, until the women had brought those issues into the public discussion or debate.

So one of the most important things I would say is the right to association. And how do you see the online space as a not necessarily safe, but at least a feasible way for people to come together, especially with the risks now that are facing people, especially from the Arab Gulf States and of course in Egypt and other places. But also in the Arab Gulf States as they're trying to manipulate the whole space for their own political agenda. How do you see the trajectory, basically, of women campaigners or activists online, or feminists in general?

MONA

Yes. I think it's an incredibly important space that women will not leave despite the risks.

ELTAHAWY:

Because despite the fact that there are so many feminists that we know who are either in prison or who are standing trial, and those who have been threatened into silence, basically, because I know because they--

HALA ALDOSARI: A lot of them actually are now able to engage online, or-- we had a very dynamic and very much noticeable community of feminists and activists inside Saudi Arabia. You can hardly hear anyone but the state propaganda.

MONA

ELTAHAWY:

Yes. And several of them have had their relatives punished by being sent to prison just because they're feminist. There's one particular feminist that I'm sure that you know as well, who her husband was detained just because he supports her. And so they're punishing not just the feminists themselves, but they're punishing anyone who supports them. Whether they're activists, or they're husbands, or they're brothers, or anyone around them. So men too. Not just the women.

And I think as terrible as that is, and I hope that this ends, this silencing of feminists ends, I think it also speaks to, in the same way that it does in China, and in the same way that it does in Uganda, because I mentioned both of those countries. And I'll mention why in a minute. It speaks to the power and importance of feminism.

And it speaks to the fact that you're talking about regimes that control everything. I mean like I said, this is an absolute hereditary monarchy. What threat do feminists online represent to an absolute hereditary monarchy that sits on the world's largest oil reserves, that has the world's most powerful man and his family as their number one ally, that basically controls so many of the regimes in the region because of the money that it funnels into them. I'm thinking of Egypt. The Sisi regime has for years been, and before him the Mubarak regime, through the petrodollars of the Saudi regime.

So what do they fear from feminists that even those who are online are silenced by them? And I connect that to China and Uganda because I give examples of both of those countries in my book. Because in 2015 in China, the regime there-- because again it's a regime-- imprisoned five women, who became known as the feminist five, for daring to go out there and fight against street sexual harassment and against patriarchy generally.

This is the Communist Party that has been in power for 70 years. 70 years and is scared of young queer feminist activists. And in Uganda, where Yoweri Museveni has been in charge for I think 34 years now, there is a woman in prison in Uganda called Dr. Stella Nyanzi who is a feminist hero of mine. And she is in prison even though Museveni controls everything. The weapons, the money, and everything. Because she offended him through a poem on Facebook.

And this is a woman who is a great proponent, and this is why she is one of my heroes, profanity, you could have told what I was on the podium, I'm a big fan of profanity. And one of the sins is profanity. And this is a woman who has written, and in her interviews when she was released from the first time she was imprisoned in 2017, she says Museveni's regime has all the guns. Has all the grenades. Has all the tanks.

All I have are my words. And when she was being charged, when she was being sentenced, they wouldn't take her to the court, because they know how wonderfully disruptive she was. So they basically use closed circuit TV to beam her into the court. And she stood there as the judge, a woman judge of the patriarchy, was sentencing her. And Stella Nyanzi removed her top, and jiggled her breasts, and shouted fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

So this is a feminism that terrifies the men in charge. And patriarchy is not men, obviously. But these are the men in charge.

So this is a kind of feminism that terrifies patriarchy, even though this patriarchy has the guns, the tanks, the oil, the men-- the men and the women who do their bidding for them. Incredible. So yes, they're silenced now. But I'm convinced that the fact that they're being silenced is testament to how powerful they are rather than how weak they are.

Because when you say I count, you are creating a space online that doesn't exist in the so-called real world. But the so-called virtual world is as real as any other world. And if it wasn't a real world, these regimes would not be coming after us generally.

HALA ALDOSARI: But do you see that as something that they can continue to do, especially with everything that is happening?

MONA The women?

ELTAHAWY:

HALA ALDOSARI: Yeah.

MONA Yes. I'm convinced they can. Because for those who can't speak inside-- it's kind of like when
ELTAHAWY: the Mubarak regime put Egypt on lock down, and shut down the internet, and shut the internet

down. People still found-- so what happened then was, it actually encouraged more people to go out and join the revolution. Because there were so many people who were watching at home, and then they couldn't go on Facebook anymore. And they couldn't go on Twitter anymore. So they were like, fuck it. I'm going to the streets.

And so basically Mubarak encouraged a lot of people to go on the street. But then there were also ways for people to communicate with those outside. So then it becomes imperative on those of us who are on the outside. And I see Saudi women who are living outside, such as yourself, Hala. I see your incredible courage.

I see the incredible courage of so many other Saudi feminists I know here in the US and in other parts of the world, as I see with Egyptians as well who live outside of Egypt, who are shouting even louder. Because you know that your position here is a platform that you can use to amplify those who are being silenced for now. But I am convinced that this is not a permanent silence.

I love that these regimes are terrified of feminists. Because I want patriarchy to fear feminism. This is the central message of my book. Patriarchy must fear feminism, because I want it to be scared.

I was in Australia two weeks ago. And I said on an Australian TV show, how many-- thank you. I asked on Q&A, how many rapists must we kill before men stop raping us. The show was banned. The network is investigating the show.

A minister issued a statement of disgust. And there's going to be a parliamentary inquiry.

HALA ALDOSARI: Wow.

MONA So patriarchy must fear feminism.

ELTAHAWY:

HALA ALDOSARI: Thank you. We're going to stop here and maybe have questions. If you can speak to the microphones.

AUDIENCE: Hello. Nice talk. Liked it. I was just passing by accident, but I like this talk.

MONA Welcome.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: Yeah. I just left my lab and come here, so. I'm just wondering. You've been really give a good talk about sexual assault and how bad it is. It really exists everywhere. You say it's Mecca and [INAUDIBLE].

You're [INAUDIBLE] the sexual assault, but on the other side, you keep mentioning the word fuck like 20 times. I'm just wondering, isn't this one considered assault itself?

MONA I'm sorry, say that again? The last part?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: What I mean is, using the word fuck in such a speech, isn't it considered kind of assault?

MONA My saying fuck is assault?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

MONA To who?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: I don't know. Just in the speech in general. I just heard it many times.

MONA OK. I think that is one of the most ludicrous questions I've ever got. Thank you, but I'm not really going to answer that.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: I don't care. I need the answer.

MONA Nope. I'm not going to dignify that with an answer. Next?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: Good job.

MONA Yeah. I am doing a good job. Next time you should think about where you go and what

ELTAHAWY: question you ask. Next?

AUDIENCE: My question was actually about-- I was wondering if you had any connection with migrant workers in the Gulf? And feminist activism on the part of migrant workers? And if you could talk about that, I'd love to hear more about that.

MONA Yes. Thank you for asking. Oh, do you have another question?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: I do.

MONA Tell me.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: So as a Saudi woman living in the West, I was wondering if you could also talk a little bit about how you navigate the kind of essentializing anti Gulf reaction here in the West? Just conflating the Gulf with extremism and essentializing Islam in a way that can make it difficult to talk about the Gulf in a complex way, when you're talking about the intersection between feminism and Islam.

MONA Yes. Thank you for both those questions. Were you here when I talked about the rock and the hard place that Muslim women find themselves caught between?
ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: Unfortunately I missed that because I came in late.

MONA You just came in now?

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: No, I came in maybe half an hour ago.

MONA OK. Because I did talk about that. I said that we're caught between-- and I said women of
ELTAHAWY: Muslim descent, but women generally who live in minority communities, and women of color, especially, are caught between a rock which is the racist Islamophobes who want to use everything we say against our communities and in our communities who want to silence us. And so it makes it very difficult to be able to speak. Because both sides are basically just fighting over us.

The first part, or your first question, rather, about migrant workers, thank you for asking that. There are groups in the region who have been fighting. I'm thinking of, there's one group called Migrant Rights that has been using social media for a very long time now to talk about the plight of migrant workers. And I know that various human rights groups in the region have written about them a lot.

I try as often as I can, when I write about feminism in the region, both in my first book and in this second one, to talk about how if Saudi women, or Kuwaiti women, or women who are from

that part of the world, are caught in that-- I call it the trifecta of misogyny-- or caught in basically the various hierarchies of patriarchy, that migrant women workers especially are caught in even more.

I ask people to think of patriarchy as an octopus. The head of the octopus is patriarchy, but the eight tentacles of the octopus are the systems of oppression that basically strangle us depending on where we live. Because patriarchy doesn't just use misogyny. Because here in the United States, for example, the tentacles would be white supremacy, capitalism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism, et cetera, et cetera.

In the Gulf the women who were born and raised in the region have a set of tentacles that are suffocating them from that octopus. But migrant women have another tentacle that applies just to them. So this would be racism. This would be misogyny. Would be all kinds. And obviously because they're mostly women from impoverished backgrounds, so you're talking about the challenges that working class women face.

So they have multiple levels of oppression that women from the region don't themselves often face. But I think that at the end of the day, seeing patriarchy as the number one enemy of all of the women there, but recognizing that there are women who are a step or two down and faring even worse, is the best way to go. Because I know that feminists will often get into a fight about, well which one should we fight for first.

And I think this is ridiculous. There isn't a first and a second. I think we have to fight for all of them. Because the feminists in Saudi Arabia who don't see that they're also fighting for those migrant women, it's like the white women in the United States who are fighting a kind of feminism that just recognizes misogyny, only and doesn't recognize the role of white supremacy, and what the Trump regime is doing, and capitalism, and all of that.

So I think I would actually compare the women who are migrant workers in Saudi Arabia to the feminists of color here in the United States in the fights that we have here. They're very, very parallel in how we talk about intersectionality. And my contribution to intersectionality is the octopus. Who's next? Over here.

AUDIENCE:

Hi there. Thank you both so much for the very interesting and engaging conversation. Mona, you mentioned at the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, how people told you it wasn't the time to talk about gender. Notably now with what's happening in Lebanon and Iraq, and even a few months ago in Sudan, it's been noted that women have been at the forefront

of these activities.

And so I'm just curious what your thoughts are on the implications of that on the temperature for the receptiveness to feminism in the region right now. And what are the opportunities to capitalize on that momentum, to expand a greater impact in the region?

**MONA
ELTAHAWY:**

Right. That is a great question. And I have held off from commenting on, women are in the lead, and women are central, and women are core to x, y, and z revolutions. Whether it was Sudan, whether it was Algeria, or Iraq, or Lebanon. Because having experienced what happened in Tunisia and Egypt and all the other revolutions, I think that, first of all, they make great pictures. And they make great copy. And they make great TV footage.

But I'm going to hold off on any kind of commentary until I actually see that the revolution goes home. Until I actually see that the revolution is aiming for that trifecta of misogyny. Because while I send my love and solidarity to all the women out there on the street, and all the queer people out there on the street, because I'm seeing in Lebanon, especially, there is a lot of queer-- the revolution has been queered in Lebanon most definitely. And I most wholeheartedly support it.

But it has to go from the street into the home. And has to affect every level of Lebanese society. Because Lebanon, even though on the veneer, and a lot of people like to consider Lebanon one of the most progressive countries in the region, it actually is not.

Because when you look at Lebanese law, and domestic violence, and all kinds of trappings of patriarchy, it has a long-- all the countries in the region have a long way to go. So I'm very, very, very glad to see women out on the streets. But I know from my experience in Egypt that we go out there and we risk our lives. And we are shoulder to shoulder with the male comrades.

And then when it's time to talk about power, it's like, thank you. You can go home now. And we'll get to you eventually.

Because they did that in Sudan. Even though women were being raped and detained and imprisoned. And then when they were signing the declaration with the military there were no women. And then finally when they said hello, I think they included two women on the committee.

So I'm holding off. I support them wholeheartedly. But I want to see, are we going to dismantle that trifecta of misogyny or not? Because until we do, we're risking our lives so that we can help one group of men fight another group of men.

And I call it now, because I'm profane, and I like to upset people with the number of fucks I say--

[LAUGHTER]

--these revolutions will remain cis-gender dick swinging contests until you recognize that the trifecta of misogyny has to be dismantled and we kill that patriarchal octopus.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

AUDIENCE: Hi. I'm wonder-- I definitely believe that every kind of speech is extremely important. You have to have the whole spectrum. I'm curious, though, what kind of solidarity do you show towards women, for instance, who are fighting the fight but from within the culture? I have a specific example, for instance.

The Palestinian, the first sharia judge who is Palestinian, and of course she was deposed from her position. But she's not giving up the fight. Her husband was very supportive and so on.

So I'm just very curious about-- I know it's extremely difficult to have that rapport. But but. What are you doing in that respect? Thank you.

MONA

ELTAHAWY:

Thank you for your question. It is difficult. And you asked me this as a friend of mine who is associated with the Church of St. John the Divine, or the cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, has been writing to me from London, where she went to support her friend who has just been appointed-- she's the first black woman bishop in the Church of England.

And a very good friend of mine is the Islamic feminist scholar Amina Wadud. And I also mentioned in my book two Hindu feminists who made history in India earlier this year by entering a Hindu temple after the Supreme Court in India lifted a ban on women and girls between the age of 10 to 50, quote unquote menstruating age, because they're considered impure when they enter those temples on their periods. So these are all examples of women fighting for change within various faith backgrounds.

In faiths, and I expanded it to Hinduism, and I expanded it to Christianity, because I want, and I am very cognizant of the fact that this is something that is often just asked of Muslim women, this is something that all religion has to contend with. Because all religions are patriarchal. And all religions are misogynist.

I'm often told that there are some pre-colonial African religions that are not, but I'm not an expert on them. So I'm going to stick to the Abrahamic religions and Hinduism. They're all patriarchal. They're all misogynist.

But I mention Amina Wadud especially because of the Sharia judge that you brought up. Because in 2005, I prayed behind Amina Wadud when she was the first woman imam to lead Friday prayer of men and women praying side by side. And this was in a room next to St. John the Divine. Not in the church itself, but next to St. John the Divine.

And it was one of the most moving moments in my life. I write about it in my book. It was Amina Wadud as the imam. There was a woman who gave Adhan, then the call to prayer. And it was 50 women and 50 men. And I prayed without a headscarf, I prayed on my period, and I prayed next to a man, which is a triple whammy for anyone in the room who is a Muslim.

[LAUGHTER]

And I'm not an Islamic feminist. And I'm fighting outside. But I fully salute and appreciate the fight that Amina is fighting as an Islamic feminist, because we need the fight everywhere. I might not have a lot in common with the Sharia judge. I doubt we have anything in common other than the fact that we're both of Muslim descent. But we need someone to be fighting from inside.

And one of my biggest struggles and challenges is, what do we do when a woman wants to enter a space that has been hostile to women for centuries. And this doesn't just apply to religion, it applies to the military, I'm completely anti-militarist. I'm an anarchist. I want to dismantle the military.

But here we have women going, I'm the first woman to bomb I don't know what. I'm the first woman to lead 5,000 people in I don't know what. I don't want you to lead these killing machines.

But so we've got a woman who's head of the CIA. Now it's difficult to compare a woman head of the CIA and a woman Sharia judge, but these are basically places that have been incredibly

hostile to women and that women want to enter. For the life of me, I don't know why. But they want to enter.

But what I do understand is that we have to fight patriarchy wherever it exists. And so I tell people, if you want to fight patriarchy within Islam, go and read all the stuff that I Amina Wadud has written, because she is giving you all the weapons and ammunition you know. I'm out here fighting anything that hurts women and girls.

And then at the same time I'm also saying that you have to recognize, if you go into these spaces that patriarchy has controlled for the longest time, and then opens up one door for you and says this is progress, you have to recognize that sooner or later that door is going to close. And patriarchy is going to say, I'm out of throwing you crumbs now. Because you're basically entering inherently patriarchal institutions.

So I don't want to enter those spaces. I recognize that women do. And then finally, I would never tell a woman in her position, or any woman who wants to stay inside a faith, you have to leave your faith because it's patriarchal. Because I recognize that patriarchy exists outside of the faith as well.

Patriarchy isn't just inside. Patriarchy is everywhere. So I want everyone to recognize that there's a fight inside, and we have to fight patriarchy inside, but there's a fight outside as well. And it's very entitled and very privileged to tell a woman, just leave your religion. It's patriarchal.

No, you have to help her fight. Because some women don't want to leave, and some women can't. But this is a really contradictory answer. I get it. Because it's really difficult for me to understand why someone would want to be part of a system that is inherently patriarchal.

But I will fight patriarchy wherever it exists, inside or outside. And I'm glad that women like Amina Wadud, at least, exists. Sharia judges are a bit more difficult. But good luck to her.

My grandfather was a judge in family court by the way, so my grandfather regularly handed out Sharia rulings. I wonder what he would think of me today.

[LAUGHTER]

Over here.

AUDIENCE: Thank you very much for your talk. So I have a question. How much do you think digital feminism can engage women, or people in general, from rural areas or remote areas, where patriarchy might be much more present?

MONA ELTAHAWY: Right. It depends on access to the internet. Because I think that's what you're also asking, right? Women who don't always have access to the internet.

I think it depends on where you live. Because when you live in many of the Gulf countries are very, very connected. So there's a great deal of accessibility.

But I also think it's important to recognize that digital feminism, or the feminism that happens in online or so-called virtual spaces, is not disconnected and doesn't happen in a vacuum from the so-called real world. Because the women who are engaged in these fights are also engaged in fights outside of the internet.

Many of the women that Hala spoke about and that I speak about, both here today and in my book, and through Hala's own research and studies, move back and forth. So I think for those women who don't have access to the internet, for those women in Egypt, for example, who can't read or write. So regardless of whether they have access to the internet or not, it's really important to be able to move in and out between those spaces.

Someone Amina Wadud for example, the Islamic feminist that I mentioned, she has an online presence. But she also gives workshops to activists as part of a movement that I also belong to, called Musawa, which musawa is the Arabic word for equality. And it's a feminist movement that was launched in Malaysia. I was there in 2009 when it launched. That brings together secular feminists, that's what I consider myself, and Islamic feminists from across the world who are of Muslim descent.

And what Amina does, and what other Islamic feminists to do have an online presence do, is that they have workshops across the world where they bring together activists who straddle the so-called real world and the so-called virtual world. So they give them tools to be able to use in the online space, and to go out to their communities that don't have access to the online space. Do you know what I mean?

And that way they're able to straddle both spaces and to be much more effective. So I think that's probably the best way. And I also remember, when I was in Oklahoma, and I was teaching there in 2010, many of my students, I would tell them that you're front line feminists in

a way that feminists in New York are not front line feminists. Because these were feminists who are going out there to protest every week against so-called person hood bills, which the the Republican Party were have been successful at pushing. By which a fetus is recognized as a person.

And a lot of these feminists were online, but then also every week they would go and they would either help with clinic escorts outside abortion clinics in the few places they still existed, or they would go out and protest against person hood bills. So this applies also to the United States. Because there are some women in rural areas who don't have access to online feminism. So wherever.

So I think the importance here, or the thing to remember, is to straddle both of these spaces, and take what we are able to do onto the so-called real world. The Alliance of Domestic Workers, Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement, just three examples of that kind of movement here in the United States that has been able to go back and forth.

Also migrant workers. Migrant workers who have been able to go on strike in the United States against McDonald's, against various farms and owners of farms, have also been able to do the online and the offline. So I think it's a question that we have to keep in mind across the world. Thank you for that.

AUDIENCE:

Hi. First I want to thank you for being who you are. And I really appreciate everything that you do for the world to make it a better place. The first time that I heard your name I was 17 years old, and the person who mentioned you as my sociology teacher who is a hijabi. And she wanted to talk about feminists who kick butt.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. And your name came up first.

MONA

I'm honored.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE:

Yeah. That was a few years ago. And since then I've been following your work. And I just had one question. What is the first step for a young woman to find her way? So how does she get started on that path?

MONA

Thank you very much for telling me that. It means a lot to me. And if you're still in touch with

ELTAHAWY: your teacher, please tell her that Mona is honored.

AUDIENCE: I certainly will leave her a message.

MONA Thank you. I appreciate that. I get that question a lot. And I always begin my answer by saying

ELTAHAWY: I did not come out of my mother's womb yelling fuck the patriarchy.

[LAUGHTER]

I love that image of baby Mona doing that, but unfortunately it did not happen. It took years. It took years. And I liken the feminist fight to weight lifting. You have to begin with a two pound weight, and then a five pound weight. And then you go into seven and a half, and then you go onto 12 and a half. Or 10, and then 12 and a half, and then 15.

And then when you hit 15, you're like oh wow. I've got muscles now, maybe. So this is why I came up with what I call feminism in 3D. And the three D's are defy, disobey, and disrupt.

And I came up with those as well because I would often be asked, OK, look. I can't protest. During the Egyptian revolution, for example, many young women wrote to me and said my parents won't allow me to protest. I cannot.

Or I have a curfew. I have to be at home by 8:00 PM. So how can I join the revolution?

So I would advise, most humbly, to try the three D's, which is defy, disobey, and disrupt. Find a way everyday to defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy in whatever way you can. And it can be the smallest thing building up to the biggest thing.

Because basically what this is is like weight lifting. You're flexing your feminist muscles. And it could be someone in-- if you're at university, someone in your class says something incredibly misogynist, or homophobic, or transphobic. Talk to them about it.

It could be something at home that happens, where you see something that is patriarchal, misogynist, that you can confront. Confront it. It could be someone in public space.

Your number one priority is to survive. Because feminism needs you alive. So when I beat that man up in the club, a lot of women, after the hashtag went viral, wrote to me and said God, I wish I had beaten up my assaulter.

And many of them wrote to me and said, you know what, he was 6'5" and he had me pinned

on the couch. And there was no way I could have fought back. And so I always say fight back, but survive.

So my number one priority for you is to survive. And then flex your feminist muscles and empower them through the three D's. Defy, disrupt, and disobey every day in whatever way you can. And tell the patriarchy to fuck off.

[LAUGHTER]

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

MONA You're welcome.

ELTAHAWY:

HALA ALDOSARI: So I think that's a good ending for our talk. And Mona will start signing--

MONA Oh, do you have one more question?

ELTAHAWY:

HALA ALDOSARI: Do you have a question?

MONA OK. I'm sorry. I'll answer very quickly.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: Yeah. So I also want to thank you for the amazing talk. I also heard about you from a professor just across the bridge in Boston. So I just want to thank you so much for everything in your work.

MONA Thank you.

ELTAHAWY:

AUDIENCE: And so my question is a little bit of an addition to the first question you got asked about the negative reactions you receive from men.

[LAUGHTER]

Which we have seen. I'm interested also about the negative reactions you receive from women, especially since we know that women can and do play a part in the patriarchy and perpetrating it. And so I was wondering what negative reactions you've gotten, if they've been surprising, and also what you think is so enticing about the breadcrumbs, as you say, that the

patriarchy throws to women in these positions to have them do so?

AUDIENCE:

Thank you. And thank you for sharing that your professor told you about me. And please thank them as well. I appreciate it.

Yeah, so I often say, and it has to be said over and over that patriarchy is not men. Patriarchy is systems of institutions that privilege male dominance. And women too have internalized patriarchy. And some women accept crumbs from the patriarchy in return for their proximity to the power that patriarchy gives them. In return for spaces that are normally not open to women but are given to some women. And then we're told this is progress, like Gina Haspel, head of the CIA.

And I've always said that I don't want the crumbs of the patriarchy. I want the whole cake. And I don't even want the whole cake of the patriarchy. We have to make our own cake.

So we have to refuse those crumbs. Because those comes come at a cost. And I've taken to calling women who do the bidding of the patriarchy, and who attack me on behalf of the patriarchy, foot soldiers of the patriarchy. But then what happened in Australia, where this episode that I was on was banned, and I have been, for the past almost three weeks now, everyday consistently attacked by white Australian men, in a way that has outdone the way that Saudi men have attacked me. This is an incredible achievement.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm like, white Australian men, wow. Bravo. And I've seen Australian women come online and defend these white Australian men who are attacking me. And I just began thinking, foot soldiers of the patriarchy is too nice a term. So now I call them boot lickers of the patriarchy. Because they've got to be demoted, you know?

So kind of hate that I get from them is things like-- and it's very telling-- I don't need feminism. I run my own corporation. I don't need anyone to pay my way. I don't need feminism.

My daddy-- oh god. When I wrote Why Do They Hate Us, my God. So this is women in my part of the world now. But it's all the same, basically. Because patriarchy is universal.

number of open letters to Mona Eltahawy. Dear Mona, my dad doesn't hate me. I'm like, it's not about your dad. It's not about your father. It's not about your brother.

It's not about these individual men. Because when these individual men leave the house, they are privileged by all of these systems and institutions and oppressions that privilege male dominance. So I tell women who have internalized the patriarchy-- and here in the United States, I especially address white women. I especially address white women who voted for Trump.

I especially address white women who voted for Trump who have allowed their race to trump their gender, because of their proximity to that power, and who recognize that they get power through those men in their lives, husbands, fathers, brothers and all of that, through the money that they have. Through the power that they have. And through the power of their whiteness. I tell them that that power and that whiteness will not protect you.

Because nothing protects you from the patriarchy. And I especially address it to white women in the United States. The majority of the white women voters have consistently voted for the Republican Party. This is not new. So Donald Trump is not the first one that they voted for. But the Republican Party has consistently been anti feminist, has consistently fought against not just feminist goals, but has been racist, has been homophobic, has been anti-immigrant, and now we have concentration camps on the border with Mexico.

And Donald Trump has been accused by at least a dozen women, I think 21 at the last count, of sexual assault. So those are the kind of push backs. And interestingly, just to wrap this up now, when I helped Rahaf, I had several of those white women who voted for Trump come on my timeline. Because they were doing that rock and hard place and saying, this is the real feminist struggle. Not what these feminists in the United States want, because men are man spreading in the subway and I don't know what.

This is what the struggle is in Saudi Arabia. And I would go on their bios and I would see that they were MAGA people. And I would say to them, excuse me, the feminist struggle is also against you and against this white supremacist, misogynist, fascist fuck that you supported. And then they're like, no! No!

And then all of a sudden they stopped supporting Rahaf. So the rock and hard place again. So stop accepting the crumbs of patriarchy. And tell the patriarchy to fuck off. How many times have I said that now?

[LAUGHTER]

Thank you.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

[APPLAUSE]

HALA ALDOSARI: So anyone who wants to buy a book and sign it, Mona will be here signing the books now.