

**MICHELLE**

Greetings, and welcome to today's virtual MIT Starr Forum, Violence Against Women and Girls-- A Case Study of Saudi Arabia. I'm Michelle English. And, on behalf of the Center for International Studies, I'm honored to have with us today Hala Aldosari and Rothna Begum.

**ENGLISH:**

I would like to thank my co-sponsors, MIT Center for International Studies, the Consortium for Graduate Studies in Gender, Culture, Women, and Sexuality at MIT, the MIT Program in Women's and Gender Studies. And I'd also like to thank my colleague Laura Kerwin for her help in making this event possible.

Before we get started, I'd like to invite you to future Starr Forums, which we are now planning and aim to offer virtually in May and throughout the summer. We will have these events posted on our website and on the MIT calendar. If you'd like to be added to our email list, there is a forum to do so on our website, or you can email us directly at [starrforum@mit.edu](mailto:starrforum@mit.edu).

Today, as the title suggests, we'll be exploring violence against women and girls. Our experts will use Saudi Arabia as a case study, and they will also share how this violence may be exacerbated during a pandemic. We will first hear from our speakers and conclude with Q&A from our viewers. Please use the Q&A feature on the toolbar to submit your questions.

At last, I'd like to introduce our speakers. It is an honor to have with us today Rothna Begum, a senior women's rights researcher focused on the Middle East and North Africa region at Human Rights Watch. Here she leads the research on violence and discrimination against women and the abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers.

And we are thrilled to have with us Hala Aldosari, both a scholar and activist, whose work examines the influence of gender norms on women's political, economic, legal, and health statuses in Arab Gulf states. She currently is a Robert E. Wilhelm Fellow at the MIT Center for International Studies. Please join me in welcoming Hala Aldosari.

**HALA ALDOSARI:** Thank you, Michelle, Laura, and Rothna, of course, for accepting to discuss the talk today.

And thank you for all the people who have attended. This is very much an opportunistic time to discuss violence against women because, mainly, this is a problem that has exacerbated because of the pandemic.

In social science, a problem is described as a wicked problem if it's difficult or impossible to

solve. This is mainly because, that problem, we don't have that much knowledge of the problem, or what we know about the problem is contradictory. The people or the opinions involved in the problem could be too many and difficult to conclude. The problem has economic burden, and there are interconnectedness with other problems.

And these are all the characteristics of the violence against women and girls problem. This is one of the most prevalent problems in the world at large, affecting one in three women. Most of those women who were surveyed have complained either of experiencing violence at least once in their lifetime or repeatedly.

I'm going to show you a set of slides now, and we're going to walk through some of the information that we've learned about violence against women in the Arab countries. And then we're going to move to a discussion with Rothna.

So, as you can see in this slide, there are so many different studies that have actually calculated the prevalence of violence in different regions of the world. Since 2002, the World Health Organization has conducted a multi-country study using the same methodology, the same questionnaires, to assess how prevalent intimate partner violence is among different populations and different groups. And, in that way, they wanted to generate information that can be applicable in different settings.

There are variations, as you can see, in different regions in the prevalence of violence. They've actually used intimate partner physical violence, not the domestic violence at large-- and we're going to talk more about the definitions and what violence is-- because intimate partner violence is considered as the most prevalent or most common form of violence in a woman's life.

There are countries or there are regions in which like, the high-income regions, that have reported lower level of violence. And there are regions, like the Middle East or the Arab countries, the Southeast Asian region, and the African region, that have reported a higher level. And, of course, within each region, there are different variations in the prevalence, depending on the position of the women, depending on where she lives, depending on even the characteristics of the community in which she's living at.

The variation also indicates that the problem isn't like fixed or irresolvable. The problem is modifiable. And this is something that there is a solution, but maybe it's not addressed in a

way that can improve the outcome of the problem.

Violence against women has so many different definitions. If you look at the textbook, if you look at the research used-- the research on violence in women, you'll find that they've used different definitions of violence. One of the most comprehensive and most, I would say, effective description of what constitutes acts of violence is the one published by the United Nations in 1993.

That is, "Any act of gender-based violence that results in or likely to result in physical, psychological harm or suffering to women, including the threats of such acts by coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether that happened in the woman's public or private life." It also happened within the family, includes those acts that happened within the family like sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, marital rape, or other practices that are harmful to women, but, actually, is done as a way of cultural practices.

It also includes acts that are happening in the general community, like rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassments, whether at work or in the community at large, trafficking, or forced prostitution, or those acts of violence that are perpetrated or condoned by the state. And we know that the police, for instance, in certain jurisdictions that are directly under the authority of the states, like the refugee camps, like the places of detention particularly, or in marginalized community, we know that the state either condone, practice, or tolerate violence against women.

Why it's important to discuss this during the COVID-19 pandemic? The same conditions that we need to protect ourselves from COVID-19-- staying at home, making sure that we're not contacting anyone from the extended family or friends-- are the conditions that perpetrate violence against women, forcing women to stay with abusers at home with a lot of stress, basically, and inability for women to seek help or to contact relatives or friends. So, also, it happens because abusers usually reduce women's access, coerce women, or reduce their access to necessary items or to access reproductive health care or other resources.

Women also constitute the majority of health care workforce. They are members of the first responders. And we know that women in the community or the health workforce are not only at higher risk of COVID-19, but, also, higher risks of being subjected to the acts of violence.

In Egypt, for instance, one physician was returning from her shift at a bus when members in the community refused to ride with her. And they forced the bus driver to stop. A female

physician, also in Egypt, died, actually, because of COVID-19 and was denied burial by the community for fear of infection. So you get to see all those kinds of aggressive behavior towards women who constitute, again, the majority of the health workforce.

And, of course, within the family, women who are now having higher stressor, beside having abusive husbands, because of the school closure, because of the disruption of their income, that also adds to their vulnerability or experience of violence. Their access to resources that are usually provided for survivors of violence, if existed, like the shelters, the access to hotlines, to the legal aid, it also might be scaled back because of this, because now the priorities are given to fighting the pandemic or prioritizing the pandemic.

There is a very good article in *The New York Times* that describes the high increase in the hotline calls, ranging between 18% to 30%, since the start of the epidemic, the pandemic. And I'm going to share with you the link to that if you want to read more about it.

I'm going to also talk a little bit about the limitations of research on violence against women in the Arab region. The definitional issues is also a problem. One of the main problems, as I've mentioned, is that, having a comprehensive definition of what constitutes act of violence. What are we measuring precisely?

You'll will find so many different definitions across different literature in the Arab world. They will measure domestic violence. They will actually shy away from saying intimate partner violence or spousal violence, and they will say domestic violence.

So, sometimes, it's even who is-- what kind of acts that they're measuring is very much also problematic. So the problems in generalizing finding is also caused by variations in methodology used and in the populations being studied. So not all the studies are being conducted in more of a like representative sampling or representative way.

And this is also because there is a reduced funding. Violence against women is not one of the main high priority on the health research agenda. Usually, the priority would be going in women's health to reproductive health, to reproductive health and women's health in general, but not to violence against women, despite the fact that it really affects almost a third, if not half, of the population in certain communities.

So the political and cultural limitations, like, for instance, how do you access women? How do you ask them these questions in places where violence is normalized? Acts of violence is very

much normalized. And it's not really considered as like problematic, and it's sometimes tolerated as means of disciplining women.

And the political climate that would not allow certain acts to be recognized as problematic because the political system itself-- like how can you research prisons, prison community or population, without access, without the acceptance and cooperation of the political system? This, as well, limits what we know about violence against women in the Arab countries.

I'm going to show you some of the selected publications of the prevalence of violence against women, particularly the intimate partner violence against women, which is the most prevalent in the Arab countries. And you get to see how much variation there is from the reported studies, even in one country like, for instance, in Egypt, between 22 to 34, or, in Turkey, between 11 to 62, or, in Iran, for instance, between 14 and 43.

And, sometimes, you wouldn't find that many studies at all. Certain countries, you wouldn't find it at all. And this variation, again, goes because-- happens because the studies are either using different methodology or either asking about different things or examining populations which are very much different in characteristics, populations which are either hospitalized in mental health institutions or refugee camps or from a certain sociopolitical class. And this very much contributes to the problem of understanding how much violence affect women at large in the community.

Now there is a way to organize different risk factors and protective factors that protect women or either perpetrates violence against women in different levels. And this is called the social-ecological model. And this is a model that has been used by the World Health Organization and most of the studies that try to generate more of similar or more of a generalizable results.

It is consistent of concentric levels because all of them are very much like relevant to each other. On the individual level, factors like the age of a woman and her husband, whether there is a lot of different gaps between the ages, the education level, the substance abuse by the husband, whether it's alcohol or drug abuse, things like whether the woman or her husband has witnessed parental violence as children-- and this very much like can normalize the use of violence. Or they themselves have been victims of violence, which would help to create this kind of environment for violence to become more of a-- like women could be victimized, or men could be perpetrators of violence.

On the relationship levels, factors like the increased marital conflict, how many times that

[INAUDIBLE] the severity and the frequency of marital conflict, whether the husband has different wives-- and this is something that is important also to mention within the context of the Arab countries, arranged or forced marriages. On the community level, how much poverty is there? Lack of social support, whether a woman is isolated or not, going again to the impact of the COVID-19, whether there are employment opportunities or not.

On the societal level, there is a measure of how people perceive the relationship between a man and a woman, whether the husband has a right to or entitlement to become a decision-maker or become dominant on decisions involving the family and the finance of women. And how tolerant are men and women to use of violence? Which situations guarantee that?

And there are other cultural practices, of course, that are dominant in certain classes within the Arab countries like honor-related violence and killing, and about the laws and policies, whether the laws and policies are actually protecting women or tolerating violence.

Now, in the Saudi context, I've used the ecological modern my research to study certain issues because I've only looked into the intimate partner or spousal violence as physical violence against women. I wanted to select the most important factors, the risk factors or protective factors, to assess.

On the personal level, I wanted to make sure that I asked women about whether they had a childhood experience themselves or their husbands if they are aware of, if the husband has a substance abuse problem. Now, on the marital conflict, I've asked them about marital conflicts, about the male dominance in decision-making and control of finance in the family. I've asked them about polygamy because this is something that is not regulated within Saudi Arabia. And a man can take up to four wives at a time without any kinds of conditions.

On the community level, I've asked about their employment, the woman and husband employment, their social isolation of the women and from her own family, whether she is visiting her family regularly or not, whether she is living in a different place from her family, whether she witnessed her husband using physical force or aggression towards other men in the community. And this is a sign that violence is tolerated as ways to resolve conflicts.

On the societal level, I've asked women whether they accept or tolerate violence or beating, basically, by their husband under certain scenarios. I've also asked them, giving them certain scenarios to assess what do they think about the role of a man or the gender roles in the family.

So the study was a cross-sectional study done one-on-one interviews with 200 women selected from different primary health care clinics across Jeddah city, which is the second largest city in Saudi Arabia. My objectives were to assess the prevalence of intimate partner physical violence against women and to look at which risk factors or protective factors were mostly associated with the reports of violence and whether women had adverse health outcomes because of violence.

I've used several measures, as I've mentioned, the characteristics of women and their husbands or their relationship, the nature of their relationship, the perception of general health by the women, and their attitudes towards gender roles. I've asked them if they had childhood experience of violence or sexual assaults before they reached 15 years of age. I've asked them about their financial autonomy and, also, if they sustained injuries because of violence and how they reported it or if they have reported it.

My main findings was that it's very much similar to other smaller-scale studies in different cities is that 45% of women in my study have reported intimate partner physical violence in a lifetime. 16% of them said it happened last year. And 25% of women said that they had experience of a childhood sexual abuse.

Of those women who have reported violence, 18.5% have sustained injuries. 6.5% of them reported the cause of their injuries to a health care provider, which is a very small number. And, of those women who reported that they experienced the physical violence, they were more likely to report the poor perception of their overall health.

They were two times more likely to report pain or discomfort, 6.6 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts, and 17 times more likely to take anti-depressants and more likely to have substance abuse husbands and more likely to be dependent on their husbands, financially dependent on their husbands.

And I show you the attitudes of women toward gender roles. And I've looked into the attitudes, basically, in two dimensions where the women were having a more traditional views on the marital relationships or more progressive views. You get to see how women perceived-- almost half of them perceived that a good wife should obey their husband, that 80.5%, which is very important, 80.5% of women said that the family should only be-- the problems in the family should only be discussed within a family, which means that the main level of support or

the main circle support would be the woman immediate family and not the authorities or the community support or the resources.

60% almost of women said that the husband must show his wife that he is the boss. He's the decision-making entity. 49.5% of women said that a woman should not choose a friend where their husband has objected on. And, of course, others outside the family-- I've asked them if others outside of families should interfere if a husband mistreats their wives. Almost 55.5% said yes, but, again, a huge number of women, 44%, of them said, no, they shouldn't.

And then I asked them, as I said, about what kind of scenarios is tolerated if a husband decides to hit his wife. And you get to see that, if a woman is unfaithful, almost 50% of women said, yes, he has the right to hit his wife, but, also, a good proportion of women have also accepted the other-- sorry, the other reasons that if a woman fails to do the house chores, if she was disobedient, if she refuses to have sex, if she asks him about his relationship. And this is very much similar to the results of other studies in the region that shows that almost 90% of women accepted at least one reason why the husband has the right to beat his wife.

So the implications of the study, clinically, that there are available resources at the primary health care clinics. Yes, there are fewer women who have reported the injuries to health care providers, but women were readily disclosing those kinds of sensitive information to me, a researcher, because they felt that there is an authority. There are people who are asking the questions. And they're not-- they are not usually met with health care providers who are asking them if they have a problem.

And, of course, the restricted women autonomy in Saudi Arabia should be clinically addressed as well. Are woman able to ask about resources available? Are women going to health care clinics? They are usually going to health care clinics with their husbands. But are they allowed to have some kind of privacy just to disclose with the health care providers or the nurses or the people who are screening them that they do have a problem of violence?

And, policy implications, we need to realize that the violence, in general is very much like underreported. And there is a very weak legal and social protection. The best that a hospital could do is to refer to a woman to a social service. If her injuries is very much like severe, she needs to go to report it to the police. And then the police could post an order to the medical professionals to write a report of the injury.

Without the police involvement, it's very difficult for a woman to get a documentation of her

injury. And that whole process involves, at one point or the other, the involvement of the abuser or the husband, which makes it very difficult for women to document the abuse or use the documentation to, basically, file a law case.

And, of course, in policy implications, we need to understand that the norms that we live within the family privacy, the priority of maintaining familial ties, the rights to beat or disciplining of a wife, all of these familial issues or norms related to the role of a wife, the restrictions of divorce, the custody of children, the financial dependency of women, these are all producing a main health problem, main public health problems. And it extends to and creates this kind of vicious cycle in the families. And this is something that needs to be addressed on different levels.

On research, we need also to research husbands or, actually, the men in the society. We need to look into the effect of-- because, as I said, most of those women who were financially dependent reported violence. We need to look into, in women who are having better income, better employment, better financial capacity, are they able to find resources and, also, to evaluate what kinds of programs that can be done in the local community. And there is actually none, as I'm speaking.

What kind of programs at place in Saudi Arabia or in other Arab countries that can be evaluated and can be incorporated to improve the perception of gender roles or to improve how people address their problems and how they can resort to different means to resolve the conflicts, beginning from the school level and afterwards?

So I'm going to stop a little bit here. I'm going to end show and go back to Rothna. And I'm going to ask Rothna, actually, about one of the main impediment in protecting women in the Arab countries, but in general, which is the legislation. And, Rothna, could you speak a little bit about the legal challenges that we face in the region in actually effecting any kinds of a change when it comes to protecting women legally?

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Thanks, Hala. And thanks again for your presentation, which I think is incredibly illuminating, even though it presents a very grim picture of the situation of violence against women globally, which we need to be clear, it's a phenomena that exists across the world, but very specific on the case of Saudi Arabia in which-- the reasons for which this is happening as well.

I want to talk a little bit, as you said, Hala, on the situation of legislation regarding domestic violence. Now governments around the world have an obligation under international human

rights law to take steps to combat domestic violence. This is an epidemic. Women are dying every day at the hands of their families and their loved ones or their supposedly loved ones, and, yet, it's not actually taken that seriously.

And so we do look to see what does the law say about this. And are other laws there in order to protect women from such terrible violence? And one of the reasons for why domestic violence continues or is so widespread is because of that impunity that exists and because survivors have nowhere to go.

Now my own research at Human Rights Watch has really shown this, as has Hala's, for instance, where women I've spoken to that have-- it can take a really long time before a woman seeks out help. But I've interviewed women in Morocco, for instance, who talked about turning up to police stations bruised, burned, and bloodied, sometimes, in their pajamas and in the middle of the night.

And they found the police will turn them away, dismiss them, sometimes, force them to go back to their abusive husbands or put them through a very bureaucratic nightmare in which the women themselves have to go back and forth to try and get some level of protection, in which case, it may still be quite elusive.

Now, as Hala mentioned, COVID-19 is actually exacerbating all of that. It is exacerbating the situation with the increase in domestic violence, which is, basically, a silent pandemic. With the lock-downs, quarantines, and so on, we're now seeing social distancing measures designed to help protect lives, but could, essentially, be risking women's lives even further by trapping them in the homes of their abusers.

Now legislation, however, and policy measures can be effective in actually trying to prevent such violence from happening. And the Middle East and North Africa region has long been the region with the fewest legal protections against domestic violence. Across the world, it is the region which has the least amount of legislation that protects.

And, not only that, many of these countries have laws that excuse or pardon forms of violence against women. So we have legal provisions that allow for rapists to escape prosecution if they marry their victims. We have laws that say a man can be excused for killing his wife or female relative if he finds her in the act of having sexual relations outside of wedlock. We also have laws that even say that men have the right to discipline their wives and children, as they do in

Iraq.

But this is changing. Some of these laws have been repealed and as the result of incredible campaigns by women's rights activists and organizations. And, in the last six years, we have seen a surge in which, countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, almost half of them have now adopted laws or regulations against domestic violence.

Now some of them are still very weak, like Algeria, which only sought to criminalize some forms of domestic violence, but it did nothing else. Other laws don't encapsulate the broader form of domestic violence. Hala explained that in detail of the types of violence that we look for when we talk about domestic violence.

It's not just physical violence. It's not just the beating. It's sexual violence, but some laws, for instance, will say that rape does not include rape when it comes to raping a wife for instance. And it can be really difficult to prosecute rape in the situation of marriage.

Economic and psychological violence are also forms of violence under domestic violence. And the real key parts of those two forms of violence are about the controlling forms. Controlling women through controlling their means of income, controlling them through psychological violence by prohibiting them from moving to see their family or their friends are usually forms of violence that occur well before physical violence then takes root.

And it's really important to understand that holistic understanding of domestic violence and to have laws that really capture this in order for us to both criminalize it, but also to protect survivors who are undergoing it.

Now any law on domestic violence should include three distinct measures-- prevention, protection, and prosecution. Prevention measures are the kinds of things that Hala talked about, ways in which you can get programs and services to actually prevent it from happening and the data and monitoring that needs to happen to understand what the causes are and to prevent those from happening in the first place. This can be campaigns talking about how such violence is wrong, public service announcements, educational institutions, curriculums.

Protection is a little bit different. Protection is about how do you immediately protect survivors when they come into that situation. And this is shelters.

I, for instance, remember a woman I met in Morocco who had fled her husband after many, many years of violence. And she was only able to stay in the shelter for two months. Even

having taken this huge decision to leave him, she said to me that she was going to have to go back because leaving that shelter means that she would have been, effectively, homeless. So having shelter and actual accommodation is incredibly important.

Another life-saving measure is protection orders. Or, in the US it's known as no-contact orders or restraining orders. These are orders that, basically, mean that you can prevent an abuser from entering the home, or you can prevent an abuser from contacting you at work or during any other time. They can be incredibly important and prevent further violence from occurring.

And, lastly, prosecution, this third element in a law is incredibly important. The reason for why we see police officers and prosecutors not taking this situation seriously is because there's no law to mandate them to do so. They need to be mandated and obligated to actually arrest, file the reports, and to prosecute those who've committed domestic violence.

But, even with such laws, in a region like the Middle East and North Africa, the framework of discrimination is also important to bear in mind. Legal discrimination that persists against women means that such laws can still have very little effect if the women are discriminated. And that, for instance, includes the male guardianship system.

And here I would like to turn back to Hala to talk about Saudi Arabia. It may surprise you to know that Saudi Arabia is one of the countries in the region to have regulations on combating domestic violence. So, Hala, from your experience as a women's rights activist in Saudi Arabia, can you describe to us how effective such a law has been, particularly in a country where the male guardianship exists? And please do explain that for those who don't know what it is. Thank you.

**HALA ALDOSARI:** So the male guardianship is not one particular law or system. It's just like a set of laws and practices and memorandums that very much require women in Saudi Arabia, regardless of age, to present an approval or a permission from their guardian, their male guardian.

The male guardian is, typically, a woman's father or her husband or her brother if she doesn't - if she's not married, and she doesn't have a father, or her son. At points when she's divorced, or her husband died, her sons become her guardian in order to access certain resources or services.

Now, in the last few years, women activists have campaigned, and many of them now are imprisoned and tortured, to abolish the male guardianship system. And we've worked with the

Human Rights Watch to document the different legislation, the different practices. And we've collected statements from so many women in order to present to the government some policy recommendations on how they can reform the system.

There has been some progress, along with some repressive measures that have taken place, in which women have-- the women's, basically, ability to drive has happened, actually, after so many years of demanding it. Women's ability to access passports and to travel has been repealed to access family identification documents or to change the civil status of her children if someone is born, someone is married, or someone is deceased. She couldn't do that. 15 years of age male can do that, but she, as a mother, couldn't do that.

So there has been some kind of a piecemeal fashion approach to reforming the regulations or the different impediments or choices, restrictions for women, but it is not holistic, especially when it comes to violence against women. And why we talk a lot about male guardianship system or the gender equality when we talk about violence against women because, basically, what keeps women in abusive relationships, what keeps them in abusive homes, is the huge restrictions on women's autonomy or mobility because of the authority of a male guardian over the choices.

That authority could not be challenged, even if you put a law in practice, even if you put the law for protection from abuse, which was passed in 2013, has actually been made to combat violence against women and girls, but not necessarily against it. It's very much like against anyone. So it's not very specific to violence against women problem. And this comes in the problem of defining what acts of violence that the law protects from. It doesn't protect from forced marriage. It doesn't protect from female genital mutilation, from rape.

And why we emphasize the marital rape as acts of violence because of the restrictions on divorce. Because women who are subjected to that cannot just go and divorce their husband. You know, there are so many difficulties inherent, as Rothna mentioned, in the family law and the custody.

So women would risk a lot if they go to courts, not only the bureaucratic circle, but also that the husband who, if she can't really prove in a court of law the abuse, which marital rape is not really much recognizable cause, she needs to pay her husband the dowry, which is something that many women who are unemployed or who are not having the support of their family are able to do. And she has to sacrifice also the custody of her children at a certain age.

One of the problems also is the shelter. So, yes, the law did obligate having shelters in different region because it's very much like not in the remote region, but the shelters are very restrictive when it comes to who gets to be protected in the shelter. And women who have children, boys children who are over seven years of age, cannot take their children with them.

Now the problem, also, in accountability, there is a very limited accountability to officials who do not respond properly to enforce the law when a woman complains or someone complains about a problem. And we see that all the time. We see women who are [INAUDIBLE] Saudi Arabia. There are videos that are all over, despite the fact that there are certain reforms, because the reforms are not done in a holistic way.

For instance, when a woman-- typically, when a woman goes and reports abusive guardian, for instance, a husband or a father, the guardian then goes and reports her as a disobedient. And this is punishable by law by sentencing or flogging. So this is something that is very much like inside Saudi Arabia that is very much limiting the capacity of women to challenge the authority of their guardians.

So reports of disobedience, reports of running away from home, even in accessing or traveling, there are certain conditions where a guardian can actually say that this woman doesn't have an income of her own. So I want to prevent her from traveling. Or she doesn't really have a need to travel because she is not working or doing anything in the different country.

So there are certain ways if women-- loopholes in the system in which men guardians can use against women to prevent their access to those kinds of resources. And the problem is we used to have women activists. We used to have civil society that actually amplified and promoted those calls for reform, the holistic calls for reforms, the loopholes in the system, that worked with different partners across the globe to share their knowledge and transfer their understanding.

In fact, the first reports on male guardianship, the first comprehensive report about the male guardianship in Saudi Arabia, was conducted by the Special Rapporteur for Violence, the UN Rapporteur for Violence, when she visited Saudi Arabia in the UN. And she actually cited the male guardianship system as a system that really perpetrates violence against women and subjects them-- makes women very much like vulnerable to violence.

And arbitrary deprivation of liberty as well is not part of the definitions of violence. And a lot of the families, if not beating their women, they actually deprive them from liberty. Now the most famous case is the King Abdullah's daughters will have been over 13 years being imprisoned inside Saudi Arabia, despite pleas of their mother to release them. And it's not only King Abdullah. This is like a practice, basically, punishment against women who are defiant of their family's wishes, even in simpler things like the dress code.

So things, for instance, like having to talk about the problems in the family or talking about issues of concern in their community could subject women to, basically, confiscating her own access, her own phones, her own-- basically, she could be very much under house arrest for life because the family honor is very much like-- most of the people think that, by punishing the women or depriving women of those kinds of accessibilities, they're actually trying to protect the family honor, protect what we think, which makes the changes in the society kind of impossible.

If we're prosecuting the activists who have been like the voices for those marginalized group, the voices for those who are not able to reach the authorities or to reach any kinds of platforms, if we punish any women who are trying to defy or, basically, push back against those kinds of restrictions, we're ending up with a very stagnant society where changes are not very much responsive to what women are witnessing and grieving from.

And this really takes me to the question of the top-down approach for reforms, which is very much celebrated by so many people, saying that, if we have a leadership that brings up reforms, then why do we need to have the grassroots movements. Why do we need to open spaces for civil society to point their certain problems or grievances? So what do you think, Rothna?

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Thanks, Hala. Absolutely, I mean, I think you've just highlighted earlier about how Saudi Arabia has been issuing certain reforms and women's rights. And many of you may know about the fact that Saudi women can drive now. And, in the last year, we saw that the Saudi authorities have lifted the requirement, and now women over the age of 21 can now travel abroad and obtain passports. And that is a big deal that that's happening because women could not travel at all without male guardian permission.

Now these reforms, however, are coming at a time of incredible repression. And I want to say from the outset that Saudi Arabia is a country-- Hala knows intimately, as a Saudi woman. This

is a country that has no independent human rights organizations, no trade unions. There is not the right to protest, no freedom of association or assembly.

It is an absolute monarchy. And it has very few laws. There's no criminal code, for instance, no written criminal code for instance. And civil society has always had very little space for such a long time.

And, even then, we've really seen a push-back. Saudis have really come to the fore and tried to find different ways to demand things through petitions and other forms of activism. And the social media has really changed that environment to allow Saudis to come forward and make complaints about what is actually happening.

But, since Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince, we have seen an increase in repression unlike anything before in which there is not a single voice of dissidence that exists anymore, not in the royal family, not even in actors or in terms of writers circles and things like that. And, in particular, that repression has been severely marked when it comes to women's rights activists.

You know, previously, we have seen women's rights activist have been, of course, arrested, but, often, after they've defied a law. Like they've defied the driving ban for instance. But, usually, what would happen is that they would call a male guardian, ask him to sign a pledge, and have her sent home because they wouldn't deem a woman to be in her own legal right to be defying the law.

But now what we've seen is, under Mohammed bin Salman, just before the driving ban was lifted in the last year or so in 2018, during that time, just beforehand, they started a concerted arrest campaign where they arrested dozens of women's rights activists in a bid to ensure that they had a very PR concerted line, a show in order to ensure that, when international journalists came flying in to Saudi Arabia to document this historic moment where women would be allowed the right to drive, not a single women's rights activist would be there to be the ones to take credit for this incredible and important achievement that women's rights activists had been able to get.

And the main reason for that was really to ensure that Mohammed bin Salman could get the full credit for these reforms and, secondly, to send a message that you cannot demand reforms in this country. You can only hope to receive it. So what does it mean, going forward, in a country where you're starting to see some reforms in women's rights, but it's coming top

down with no civil society really present any more?

Because this is happening largely as a result for the international community to grab the newspaper headlines, what we will see is that these reforms will come to a very slow halt. The other issue is that, these reforms that are happening, we will never know how well they are being implemented because women will not be able to-- we will not be able to monitor them. Women will not be able to critique them.

And, more importantly, without these critical independent voices, it is really hard to see longstanding change. One of the big things that women's rights activists were doing was changing hearts and minds. And that is a societal change that needs to happen. And you need civil society to help that with the government as well. And so we are denied that space as well.

We have seen other countries doing very similar things where they may be pro women's rights or at least not, on the face of it, anti women's rights, but they have been incredibly repressive towards women's rights activists. Egypt is a good example of that where the president has tried to make himself seem as if he's the women's president, but he has been incredibly repressive by issuing travel bans of women's rights activists and having cases against the existing civil society organizations that do exist.

We are seeing a spurring of reforms in terms of women themselves in countries in the Gulf where there is a strong intimidation against women in places like Qatar and Oman, but women are trying to come to the fore and finding themselves facing intimidation. And it's incredibly difficult in such environments to actually push for reforms to be taking place at a longstanding level.

Now, given all of that, I do want to talk more about the strategies to combat violence against women and the space that women do have to actually push for these reforms. So, Hala, I want to ask you about, given how prevalent violence against women is and, particularly, in the countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, what, for you, do you think is an effective strategy to combat violence against women?

**HALA ALDOSARI:** I think there is no way to understand a problem because this is a wicked problem, as I've mentioned. And the wicked problem comes with different acts of violence in different contexts and different culture. In order to understand it, you need to listen to victims, to survivors of violence.

You need to listen to what people think about violence. You need the research. You need the voices of women. You need the advocates. And you need the champions, basically, from different levels of society.

And, in order to do that, also, you need the support and solidarity from the community at large and the transnational movement. The transnational movement provide us with shared experience, with tools that have been developed in different-- the best practices, basically, sharing across different countries. And this is really something that we need to work with on from a different level.

And I want to, just because of the shortage of time, highlight that the multisectoral approach to combating violence against women is very much like embedded in Every Woman Treaty.

And this is an initiative done by thousands of women activists, scholars, survivors who have developed the treaty as an interdisciplinary to look into the different levels of prevention, intervention, and education and awareness and provide the governments with ways to monitor and to implement certain reforms in order to not only to intervene to support women and to deter abusers, but, also, to prevent it from early on in education. I want to stop here, and let's take some of the questions because I think there are some of them.

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Yeah, some really important questions. Do you want to take the first one from [? Makeesha? ? ]

**HALA ALDOSARI:** So [? Makeesha ?] is asking about cultural norms in Saudi Arabia and whether those cultural norms would allow women to seek help through the authorities or through different organization or NGO. And, as-- you know, as we've mentioned in the talk, it's very difficult to seek because of the control on women's autonomy and mobility. Even if she's able to drive, she cannot really leave the house without the explicit, basically, support of her guardian. Especially now, in cases of abusive guardians, this is very, very problematic.

And this is why the women activists, before their arrests, were making use of the NGO law that was passed in Saudi Arabia in 2015 in order to launch-- to get a permit or a permission to establish a shelter where you're not really restricted. Anyone who wants to come can come without having to call a hotline, without having to be screened, without having to leave your boy children at home. They were actually trying to provide a holistic service-- legal, social, medical-- to the women without having for them to make compromises that makes the seek-- makes seeking help or finding resources difficult.

But even that was considered as organized movement to or action to destabilize the unity of the state and is taken against the women, instead of supporting the acts of the women. And, as I've mentioned, in the research that I've finding and in different research, women usually tend to look for community level, rather than formal level.

So your question is very relevant. And this is really complicating-- well, and, even in women activists themselves, they were getting calls for help for women. And these women were not able, actually, to seek resources.

They were deterred by authorities, as we've mentioned. You know, they were very much like screened. They were asked by officials not to report the violence because their family would be broken. And they have to think about their children.

So they went to the activists actually. And the activists have helped in bringing so many cases into the public attention. On Twitter, for instance, you get to see so many people who were reporting that this is a child who was killed. And we have a case just happened like a few days ago. This is a child who was killed.

And then, when the case becomes a public opinion, then the authorities would intervene and hold the perpetrators accountable. So we do see the impact of individual community members and women activists in bringing attention to those kinds of issues, which are not part of the political agenda or the official prompt response.

And how to help? I think we need to work on the political reform because you cannot really help women without thinking about the political reforms. You need an accepting and tolerating political system that would allow the community to voice their grievances and to work together and to work cross-nationally.

And this is not a crime. You need to work with the community, the international community, in order to share the knowledge, to get the resources, and to support the people in your own community. And we can't do that without the political reform, and this is what we're advocating for. Claire, I think this is something that you've commented on, Rothna. Do you want to answer that?

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Sure, I mean, absolutely, I agree. And I think I've just talked about the fact that there's been this dichotomy of both handing out reforms on women's rights, but, at the same time, arresting

women's rights activists, including members of the royal family of course. And, certainly, I think one of the things that we've been really trying to highlight is that approach, is that, when you're providing for women's rights, how strong are these women's rights reforms. And the people who are really taking-- who should be taking credit for this are these women's rights activists.

And so what we've been calling for is the release of all women's rights activists and all political rights activist as well, particularly Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi. These are women who are still in prison to date, almost two years on, and suffering because of things like their calls for the end of the male guardianship system or calling for the right to drive. And these are the things that authorities themselves are saying that they're doing. So it makes no sense why they would hold them if they're, supposedly, going out of their way to provide for these so-called reforms.

At the same time, I think we have to still interrogate every time a reform happens because there always comes out with this great hurrah and these great headlines. And we have to be careful about how those reforms are being sold and that they're being sold without the actual women who provided for these reforms.

And we should keep going back and talking about what space and what honor is being provided to these women's rights activists. You know, they should have been heralded and credited and given that and celebrated for the work that they have done. And we should not be waiting and just saying, oh, things got a little bit better now for Saudi women. That's it.

We need to be ensuring that that civil society space exists. And that can only exist when these women are released and when there is an actual space in which they are free to be critical and to be informative and to be there, basically, to be able to do that. Hala, I think there's a couple more questions for you if you want to take the next couple.

**HALA ALDOSARI:** So the question is on-- I want to answer the question on whether you can put conditions in your marital contract in order to protect your rights or protect yourself from violence. Now you're going to go to the same thing. Even if you want to be protected, what about the custody, right? What about making sure that there is a deterrence?

And we've seeing cases in which women, even if they're not actually talking about violence, certain issues are not considered as violence act-- violent acts under the local laws, as I've mentioned, the arbitrary deprivation of liberty, beating, for instance, for certain moral acts or immoral acts or, for instance, things like marital rape.

How can you put that into-- there is also a dispute on what constitutes legitimate conditions to be put into [INAUDIBLE] contract. So there is no way to avoid having to deal with the legal system, having to deal with the context of the law itself, in order to make it very much consistent with the definition of violence, as experienced by women, not as dictated by the local culture.

Of course, women in a tribal area, we don't know for sure to be honest, but I've read some of the research on tribal groups in Jordan. And it's very much like an eye-opening because we also think-- we always thought that education is very much-- higher educational attainment is a protective factor for women from being abused by her husband.

In those contexts, because women are highly educated than husbands and, often, are the breadwinner, they are actually subjected to more violence than non-educated women who do not usually rebel or dictate, basically, the financial decisions in the family. So this is something that was very strange when you think about tribal areas where there are huge differences between the income or the educational attainment of spouses. But, of course, as I've mentioned, we need more research in order to understand this context.

I think we've answered most of them except one. How can I seek-- OK, so I think one more important thing for a person to be liberated or emancipated is increase their awareness of the context in which they live and understand the limitation of the legislation, the harmful practices, understand what kind of resources are available out there.

And I think that would help you understand. Understand the patriarchal structure, the patriarchal structure that is very much like embedded in the legislation, the policies, the justifications given for the oppression of women and the abuse of women. And I think that would definitely help you become a better person.

I think we've answered most of the question. There is one question about the operability of the indicators. And this is something that standardizing any kinds of an instrument in order to assess a certain concept is very much in infancy. It's very much problematic. What I have used in the research is a standardized instrument developed by the World Health Organization. And I followed, of course, the ethical guidelines and everything.

But this is also something that is problematic in translating it into different languages, into what even women understand. If you ask women, for instance, have you been sexually assaulted

as a child, what does sexual assault mean? If you ask a woman, for instance, have you had marital conflict, what kind? What does marital conflict mean in that context?

As I've mentioned, there are so many different understanding of concepts. And it's one of the challenges, as I mentioned again, of any wicked problem is the opinions of people that differs that makes a problem difficult to solve or to understand. So I think we've mentioned-- we've answered all the questions.

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** There's a last answer-- or question about men. What interventions by men are more substantive in supporting?

**HALA ALDOSARI:** OK, there are some of the research in Jordan that looked into men behavior. And, yes, men do think that, in order for them to protect the honor of the family and the honor of their sisters and wives, they do believe that they have the right to beat their wife, disciplining their wives or their sisters.

In Saudi Arabia, there has been a research that was conducted like a decade ago, maybe 2004 or something, that 37% of men have used violence against their sisters, against their-- it's very much highly prevalent. And I know for sure that some of the women and some of the men who talk to me from Saudi Arabia and from Egypt, from other places, have said that, when a report of violence, a beating of a woman, has been handled, and, when the man says, well, I just saw that she is talking on the phone with someone, or I just saw that she wasn't dressed in a moral way or a decent way, the authorities would just disregard the whole thing.

They would accept that. He's doing that for the protection of the women. So it's very much-- what we know about men, what we know about the changing perception of gender roles, what we know about the justification for violence, and, of course, we can just see the number of women who are [INAUDIBLE] from those countries.

So many women are running away, so many, not only outside Saudi Arabia or outside the countries, the Arab countries, but within Saudi Arabia. So we can just judge by that to see what are they running away from. I think--

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Just to add, in terms of interventions by men, certainly, there's been studies that show that men who commit violence against women believe that other men agree that it's OK for them to do such things. So, actually, dealing with men's attitudes and educations early on is actually incredibly helpful to prevent it from happening in the first place. So the kinds of attitudes and

opinions that are formulated early on need to be tackled with.

And, sometimes, that also comes into the gender roles and the notion of masculinity, the notions of what women are allowed to do and not allowed to do. All of those things have to also be tackled. So it's not always just about violence. Violence is often something that goes on top of existing understandings of discrimination and gender norms that needs to also be tackled as well. Hala, do you want to give your final thoughts now?

**HALA ALDOSARI:** Well, I think the problem of violence, as I've mentioned, not unique to Saudi Arabia, but very much like specific to certain practices within Saudi Arabia, the under-regulation, the lack of voices of women in the framing and devising what kinds of protection measures that need to be in place, the fact that we need to tread on a very much like eggshells in order not to displease the political leadership so that they do not think of what we're calling for as a threat to the community, a threat to their own leadership or to the peace, basically, I think these are all problems that indicate that we do need to have like a political reform in order for people to be engaged in decision-making, women to be engaged in decision-making.

Other than that, we're going to have to see-- we're going to end up seeing more and more women subjected to violence. And this is like going to be a vicious cycle that can be transgenerational. So, yeah, I do call everyone to-- call on everyone to look into the Every Woman Treaty, which is [everywoman.org](http://everywoman.org).

Please sign on the treaty. Please read the treaty. And think of it as a way to support countries and to have some kind of accountability for victims. Rothna?

**ROTHNA BEGUM:** Thanks, Hala. Thanks so much for your presentation. I think your research is incredibly interesting and really highlights just the sheer discrimination and the causes of violence that continues today in Saudi Arabia. I think what we can really take away from this is the framework in which violence against women really exists, so the way in which the male guardianship system traps women in situations of violence, in domestic violence in particular, and why all of those intersecting areas really matter, so needing to have that civil society space to have those champions, the women to be able to support other women, to be able to call for those reforms.

Secondly, the male guardianship system, the bigger discriminatory frameworks that leave women trapped in the first place or what's causing the violence in the first place, and, lastly, the legislation, the policy measures that we need to actually ensure that-- to prevent it from

happening, to deal with it when it happens, and to ensure that women have the protection as it happens.

And what we're really talking about right now is actual lives. Women are-- you know, women's lives are at risk simply for being women, which is absolutely ridiculous. And this is an epidemic that's been going on for a very long time. And now women are more at risk than ever before.

One of the really sad issues right now is that we've got countries around the world that are telling us that there are increased rates of domestic violence because they have national hotlines. We have no way to assess that in Saudi Arabia, but we can assume that things have gone up even more now that there are lock-downs in Saudi as well.

So I think we can take away from this. Hopefully, I hope you have all been able to learn something today about the kinds of things that we need to-- the fight that we have on our hands, but, also, the amazing activists that we have, like you, Hala, that have been championing these causes, that have been out there to try and sort of really inform, to understand, and to really move forward in actually tackling this incredible problem. Thank you.

**HALA ALDOSARI:** Thank you. Thank you, Rothna, for being here.

**MICHELLE ENGLISH:** And thank you so much, Hala and Rothna, for your work and providing us with an update and directives going forward. Unfortunately, our time has come to an end. I want to thank our viewers for joining us for this important conversation. And I do hope to see you all back again at future Starr Forums. Until then, be safe, and be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]