



**WOMEN'S  
MARCH GLOBAL**

*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

**Feminist coalition at the 63rd Commission on the Status of women call for Saudi women's rights activists to be freed after 300 days of imprisonment and gruesome torture**

**WORLD | March 13** - A feminist coalition called for women's rights activists imprisoned for over 300 days in Saudi Arabia to be freed, during a parallel event at the 63rd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York on 12 March 2019.

The event at the UN Correspondents Association, entitled *Reality of Saudi Women Activists - Over 300 days of imprisonment and gruesome torture*, was organised by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), CIVICUS, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and Women's March Global and co-sponsored by the Global Fund for Women, Scholars at Risk, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights.

Dr. Hala Al-Dosari, a Saudi scholar and woman human rights defender, started by pointing out the role that leading women activists have been playing in lifting the driving ban and abolishing the male guardianship system. Al-Dosari was recently given the Jamal Khashoggi fellowship by the "Washington Post".

"Since the Crown Prince came to power we have witnessed a wave of repression" of anyone who criticised the government, said Al-Dosari. She said the roundup of women's rights defenders "was really unprecedented because they accused the women and the men who supported them of treason." They have been smeared in the media, and "it was a horrific thing to witness," she said. "After Khashoggi's murder in October, when their families were finally allowed to visit them, we learned [horrible accounts of torture](#). We also learned of sexual abuse, which wasn't something we anticipated." She also mentioned that nothing came of the investigation of the National Human Rights Commission, and "there was no recognition of the torture they suffered."

Event moderator Kristina Stockwood of GCHR noted that the aim of the event was to inspire more UN action on Saudi Arabia, a member of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) which has largely avoided accountability for gross human rights violations, including the torture and imprisonment of women's rights defenders in 2018. She encouraged other UN member States to sign the joint statement (until 22 March) issued at the UNHRC last week [when a cross-regional group of 36 States](#), called for the release of the women's rights defenders, and a proper investigation into the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The joint statement called for the release of Loujain Al-Hathloul, Aziza Al-Yousef, Eman Al-Nafjan, Nouf Abdelaziz, Hatoon Al-Fassi, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah, Mohammed Al-Bajadi, Amal Al-Harbi and Shadan Al-Anezi, among other rights defenders.

Omaima Al-Najjar, a Saudi blogger and woman human rights defender participated by video. She urged the international community “to act faster before we have another mass execution like in 2016.” She said that the women activists could be facing lengthy sentences of at least five years in prison or even the death penalty. But international pressure can help, as it did with the case of Israa Al-Ghomgham who was facing the death penalty until it was dropped, or the case of Raif Badawi, who was facing more lashes, before it was dropped. She also highlighted the importance of politicians in the United States, Saudi Arabia’s strongest ally, to mobilise pressure on the Saudi authorities to free the women’s rights defenders “before it’s too late.” She also called for an end to arms sales to the country.

Safa Al-Ahmad, a Saudi filmmaker and journalist, noted that just by being in the room at this event, participants were in violation of Saudi Arabia’s wide-ranging anti-terror law enacted in 2014 “for sowing discord in society.” Al-Ahmad, who has made award-winning documentaries about protests in Saudi Arabia and the war in Yemen, said it’s not enough to ban weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, or stop doing business with the country. “One of the things very few people know about is that in 2011 Saudi Arabia did join in the uprisings that swept the region,” she said, including women protesting against prisoners of conscience who had been languishing in prison.

Uma Mishra-Newbery, Executive Director of Women's March Global, talked about the work of the Free Saudi Women Coalition, which includes coordination of advocacy efforts, including a [joint letter](#) to UN member states calling for a resolution on Saudi Arabia, and [a petition](#) which has now been signed by almost 250,000 people calling for the Saudi women activists to be freed. She noted the importance of following up on the UNHRC statement to get real action to free the imprisoned rights defenders now and to hold the Saudi authorities accountable for their torture.

On 13 March, 11 of the defenders were expected to begin trial in the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), typically used to try terrorism cases, but the cases were then referred to criminal court, perhaps due to international pressure.

Amani Al-Ahmadi, a Saudi American feminist and human rights whistleblower, prepared a video for the event in which she talked about “the war on free speech in Saudi Arabia,” where there is a continuous crackdown on journalists and human rights defenders who are “scared to death to express their opinions.” She concluded, “In times like this, we are forced to demand other countries to bring about change. We need global interference, we need action and we need it quickly.”

Video of the event can be found [here](#).

## **ABOUT WOMEN’S MARCH GLOBAL**

Women’s March Global empowers communities, organisations and individuals to start Chapters,

take action, organise events and learn. Women's March Global community chapters are run independently, under a free license from Women's March Global.

**Websites:** [www.womensmarchglobal.org](http://www.womensmarchglobal.org)

**Medium:** [@Womens-March-Global](https://www.facebook.com/Womens-March-Global)

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