



# GBV in the MENA Region

## A Crisis Beyond the Private Sphere

*by Kahina Bouagache*

*On 8 March, the world marks International Women's Day dedicated to celebrating women's rights and advancing gender equality. Governments issue statements, institutions host conferences and, in some countries, public authorities and private companies grant women a half or fully paid day off in recognition of the occasion. Yet, beyond these symbolic gestures, gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most lethal human rights violations worldwide and in particular in the MENA region. According to [UN Women](#) (2024), one woman or girl is killed every ten minutes by an intimate partner or family member, amounting to over 140 deaths every day worldwide. Globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime. Yet, despite this reality, governments continue to underfund prevention programs, or retreat from international commitments designed to safeguard women. GBV remains entrenched in a culture of silence, supported by harmful social norms that sustain, justify or dismiss abuse, especially intimate partner abuse or family violence, as a "private issue." It remains locked behind closed doors when, in fact, it constitutes one of the most pervasive issues of public safety, human rights violation, and development crises of our time. In many legal and institutional responses, police, health, and justice actors continue to advise survivors to resolve violence "as a family matter", reinforcing perceptions that GBV is not a serious public concern when in fact GBV constitutes one of the most widespread violations of public safety, human rights and development worldwide.*

## Why does it matter?

In the MENA region, GBV prevalence is similarly alarming. According to [UNFPA](#), almost one in three women in the Arab states have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Yet, fewer than [40%](#) of victims seek help, and among those who do, the vast majority turn to family or friends rather than formal institutions. Only 10% report to authorities, reflecting widespread distrust in legal systems, fear of retaliation, and inadequate protection mechanisms. Across the MENA region, legal frameworks addressing GBV remain fragmented and inconsistently enforced. Even where legislation exists, implementation gaps, weak institutional capacity, and entrenched social stigma continue to prevent women from accessing justice. Nevertheless, some countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Bahrain have taken meaningful legal steps to fight the phenomena, but often without the enforcement infrastructure needed to protect survivors effectively.

- Despite the fact that **Algeria** criminalized domestic violence in 2015, a [Human Rights Watch](#) study found that over half of all women still experience violence in their lifetime, and more than 60-70% of these never report abuse, largely due to fear of stigma, retaliation, or lack of institutional response.
- **Morocco** repealed its notorious “marry-your-rapist” clause in 2014 following the suicide of the rape victim [Amina Fillali](#), who was forced to marry her rapist, and has since proposed further family law reforms aimed at strengthening women’s rights. This reform represents an important progress, but [women’s rights organizations](#) continue to document persistent barriers to justice, including weak protection orders and limited survivor services.
- **Bahrain** abolished a similar rape exemption law in 2017 and established [Dar al-Aman](#), a shelter providing emergency accommodation and psychosocial support for survivors of domestic violence.

While these initiatives show willingness of the legislator and mark progress, it seems that broader enforcement and victims' access remain inconsistent. All these cases illustrate a central truth: Laws alone do not save women, only enforcement does. Even binding international agreements are ineffective without real implementation. In 2021, for instance, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, the world's first binding international treaty on preventing and combating violence against women, undermining legal protections against violence. In fact, Turkey has been both the first signatory and the first country to withdraw. Amnesty International called the move a "reckless and dangerous decision that puts millions of women and girls at greater risk." Turkish women's organizations report persistently high levels of gender-based killing over several years. According to the *We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu, KCDP)*, femicides tracked from 2021-2024 show growing numbers of women murdered by men, including record figures in recent years. In 2024 alone, at least 394 women were murdered by men in Turkey, and an additional of 259 women deaths under suspicious circumstances has been documented, the highest number of femicides since the platform began tracking cases in 2010. In the first six months of 2025, KCDP's mid-year report recorded 136 women killed by men and 145 who died under suspicious circumstances, reflecting continued high levels of gender-based violence. The figures show that femicide remains a severe and persistent problem often involving current or former partners and relatives. While causality cannot be reduced to a single policy change, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention sent a powerful political signal that women's safety is no longer a state priority. It emboldened perpetrators, weakened institutional accountability, and eroded public trust in protection.

## What is the big picture?

For decades, violence against women has been treated as a domestic issue, something to be resolved within families rather than addressed through public law and policy. As a consequence, GBV destabilizes families, fractures communities, overwhelms healthcare and justice systems, and undermines economic productivity. According to the [World Bank](#), violence against women costs countries up to 3.7% of GDP annually through healthcare expenses, lost productivity, legal costs, and social services, more than many governments spend on education. Furthermore, it causes deep intergenerational conflicts. Children who grow up in violent households do not simply “witness” abuse, their brains and bodies absorb the abuse. According to the [World Health Organization](#) and UNICEF, exposure to domestic violence during childhood is associated with impaired brain development; higher risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide; increased likelihood of perpetrating or experiencing violence in adulthood, and lower educational attainment and long-term economic instability. A major meta-analysis published in [BMJ Open](#) in 2022 found that children exposed to domestic violence were twice as likely to perpetrate violence later in life and significantly more likely to experience victimization themselves. Violence, therefore, cannot be confined to the private sphere, as it reshapes societies. When states fail to protect women, they are not merely failing individuals; they are manufacturing future trauma, and cycles of instability, insecurity and social fragmentation.

At the same time, this crisis is unfolding amid severe global reductions in funding for GBV prevention and response. [Major cuts to international aid](#), including reductions by the United States and European countries such as the United Kingdom, have led to the closure or downsizing of shelters, legal aid programs, crisis hotlines, and survivor services across fragile and conflict-affected contexts, including in MENA. Women-led

organizations, which deliver much of the frontline GBV response, are among the hardest hit. For instance, reductions in foreign assistance disproportionately harm women and girls and destabilize already vulnerable communities. Without sustained investment in protection systems, GBV prevention efforts that have been put in place are likely to collapse with serious implications for the victims but also for governance structures.

Hence, GBV persists not due to a lack of evidence-based solutions, but because of insufficient political commitment, declining and inadequate funding allocations, and the continued entrenchment of patriarchal norms and power structures. Governments are not operating in an information vacuum as extensive data, research, and policy guidance are readily available. The failure lies not in knowledge deficits, but in policy inaction, chronic underinvestment, and a reluctance to confront and dismantle the structural gender inequalities that enable abuse and perpetuate impunity.

## What comes next?

Ending GBV in the MENA region and beyond requires immediate, systemic, and sustained action across legal, institutional, financial, and cultural domains.

1. Governments must enact and enforce comprehensive, survivor-centered legal frameworks that criminalize all forms of violence, including marital rape, psychological abuse, and economic coercion. Legislative reform must eliminate legal loopholes and align domestic statutes with international human rights standards. Laws must clearly define offenses, remove evidentiary barriers that disadvantage survivors, and guarantee access to protection without discrimination.

2. Legal reform must be matched by effective enforcement mechanisms. This includes accessible and enforceable protection orders, which are adequately funded. Specialized, trauma-informed training for law enforcement personnel is required as judicial accountability mechanisms to prevent bias and secondary victimization. Finally, confidential, safe, and accessible reporting channels have to be introduced. Hence, justice systems must prioritize survivor safety and dignity, ensuring that institutions listen to victims and respond with consistency and integrity.
3. Sustained and predictable public financing is essential. Governments must allocate long-term funding to grassroots women's organizations, legal aid services, survivor health and psychosocial care, as well as prevention initiatives. Short-term or project-based funding undermines continuity of services and erodes institutional capacity, because protection systems cannot operate on unpredictable funding cycles.
4. Durable progress requires structural and cultural transformation. Public policy must address and challenge the social norms that normalize violence, silence survivors, and shield perpetrators from accountability.
5. While these measures center on legal, institutional, and structural protections for survivors and women, durable change will require sustained educational and social interventions aimed at boys and men. Challenging harmful norms surrounding masculinity, reducing the stigma associated with male vulnerability, and fostering respect, empathy, and equitable behavior from an early age are essential for the long-term prevention of violence.

## About the Author

Kahina Bouagache is a senior legal counsel, recognized Track 2 expert, and a certified coach with over 20 years of experience across the West Asian and North African region. Her expertise includes women's rights advocacy, gender-responsive governance, access to justice, youth and women's leadership development, institutional reform, and countering violent extremism (CVE). She brings a unique blend of legal, diplomatic, and coaching skills to complex environments, supporting transformational leadership, inclusive governance, and social cohesion. Kahina has led contract and program management initiatives in both corporate and development sectors, with a focus on driving systemic change and empowering underrepresented voices. Before joining CARPO as an Associate Fellow, she served in senior legal advisory roles in multinational companies, firms and led projects for international organizations such as AMIDEAST and the American Bar Association. She has also provided support to legal aid projects of several women's rights NGOs and governments and actively contributed to legislative reforms on gender-based violence and equality. Kahina holds double master's degrees in international business and humanitarian laws. Her work has been featured by various regional and international feminist networks such as the Wilson Center, *ABA Magazine*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, *Arab Digest*, *Mansklig Sakerhet*, and others.

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