

SECOND ANNUAL PRISONERS' JUSTICE FILM FESTIVAL
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Women Political Prisoners of the Middle East
Introduction and Welcome Remarks

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These are not easy times for women of the Middle East. We are living daily the consequences of a prolonged hostility and are facing renewed condition of animosity started before September 11, 2001 and has continued unabated since. The extreme right, both in the West and in the Middle East, have created horror, carnage, and are fueling the culture of fear throughout the world. Under these conditions, Islamophobia, anti-Arabism, and other forms of racism are quite often overtly expressed.

My purpose in researching, advocating, and mobilizing around the issue of women political prisoners in the Middle East is first to critique those theoretical perspectives that opposes Orientalism, Islamophobia, anti-Arabism, and racism, but do not rigorously challenge patriarchal power relations in which Islam is theoretically and politically implicated. So what we are facing with is a body of knowledge where women in the Middle East, as a category of analysis, are predominantly reduced to their religious belonging – women are essentialized as Muslims. In fact, this essentialization, that is reducing the entire Middle East, to religion, is in line with Orientalism, and with the politics of various US and European administrations which seek the roots of all their Middle Eastern problems in Islam.

Second, I would like to argue that in the last two decades, the annual reports of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UNIFEM, CEDAW, and reports from majority of women's NGOs from the region, depict a gross picture of patriarchal violence committed against women, from 'honour killing' to 'stoning' to sexual violence under the custody of police, to all sorts of daily and nightly violation of women's rights. My questions to critical, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist feminists/activists are:

1) What have we done with these data? How this information is being processed, analyzed, theorized, and politicized in your activism and scholarship?

2) Why aren't we outraged by the glaring omission of state patriarchal violence against secular and socialist women? Why haven't we written the history of women political prisoners throughout the region? Why in the Middle East diaspora communities, that is, in the safety of hostland, only a limited body of knowledge is being produced on the experience of these women?

My hope is that the presentation of three of powerful films tonight will urge you to think, reflect, and mobilize you to act.

The first film is *Red Names (nahrassidand az marg)* by: Amin Zarghami & Shahrzad Arshadi. This is a short video celebrating the legacy of thousands of women who lost their lives in Iran between 1979 and 1999 due to their political, social and religious beliefs. It is intended as a testament both to their suffering and to the political tyranny that led to their execution.

The second film is *Women in Struggle*, Director/Producer Buthina Canaan Khoury

which depicts lives of four Palestinian women ex-political prisoners and their struggle during their years of imprisonment in Israeli jails exploring the affects and influence on their present life and their future outlook. Although these four women are out of the Israeli prison they actually find themselves in a bigger prison carrying "prison" within them in every aspect of their life.