

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nazik-awad/without-global-solidarity-women-s-movement-will-collapse>

Without global solidarity the women's movement will collapse

50.50 Inclusive Democracy

Nazik Awad



Halima Muzammil is one of many displaced women in Sudan, a country that the UN says is on the brink of genocide. Credit: PA Images/ TNS.

In the wake of rising populism and authoritarianism in many countries where democracy and human rights used to prevail, women rights and gender justice are in danger of losing ground like never before. The xenophobic policies that aim to build walls and close borders are harmful to many, but for millions of women around the globe it could be no less than a death sentence. These policies are not closing the borders in the face of terrorists. They are killing the hopes of women who are fleeing wars, terrorism and other authoritarian regimes. Those women once dreamt of safety and security for themselves and their children. They will now be forced to endure more violence and terror. And while US President Donald Trump's travel bans [stamp the seal](#) on what we can expect from his policies and views toward Muslims and migrants, they also have a dangerous effect on our ability to push for global gender justice.

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As women from the Global South, we were already facing major challenges to enter the United States in any capacity; especially those from the countries now banned by Trump's executive orders. For example, women refugees from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Libya already wait up to three years to be vetted by the American Migration authorities. We already face problems applying for visas to attend United Nations meetings or to engage with US-based women groups, deterring many from even attempting it.

This year's UN Commission on the Status of Women, coming after President Trump's travel bans, only worsens an ongoing trend. Women from the Global South have been denied access to the UNCSW for the most racist and xenophobic reasons over the years. A group of women from Sudan, one of the countries now banned, was denied the visa in 2014. They reported that the main reason was that the migration officer didn't like their accent and broken English. He said to them, "If you can't speak English well, why are you going to the United States and what are you going to do in the United Nations?" A member of the group replied, "The United Nations is a global ground and we are allowed to speak any language we can." One of the women said that "he denied us the visa not knowing that some of those women are witnesses of war crimes and genocide. He did not know how hard they worked to arrange this opportunity. They were trying to make the voices of their sisters heard, those who are facing mass rapes every day. Their hope was to demand justice and protection for the victims at home, and ask for international solidarity and support." Another member said that "the migration officer only saw those colored women with broken English as not more than potential asylum seekers or illegal migrants. He did not just deny us the visa; he silenced the voices of those women victims of war we were representing."

While the world is facing the worst refugee crisis in modern history, many countries are stepping back from their commitments to basic human rights under the pressures of right-wing populism. The international community is tragically failing to protect over 60 million displaced people, of whom 70 to 80 percent are women and children. Women's rights to security and protection are being compromised, as more countries are adopting closed border policies. The situation of women refugees in camps or in urban settlements is an extension of the horrifying circumstances they left at home. Sexual harassment, rape, human trafficking and discriminating working conditions are all risks faced by women and girl refugees while waiting for resettlement in a second country. [Young women](#) and girls waiting for resettlement are exposed to child marriage, early pregnancy and denial of basic education.

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Afghan refugees rally against Trump, racism and their living conditions outside the U.S. embassy in Athens on January 21, 2017. Credit: PA Images

According to the [United Nations High Commission of Refugees](#) only a hundred thousand out of 21 million refugees are being resettled every year; this is less than 0.5 percent of the numbers of refugees in the world. More than half of the refugees and displaced peoples in the world are women and girls, while the [United States Homeland Security](#) admitted that 72 percent of the refugees entering the United States are actually women and children. Therefore, the question remains, what is the USA and Europe afraid of? Are they afraid of vulnerable women and sick malnourished children?

One such woman, now affected by the [ongoing freeze](#) on the American refugee program, is that of Aziza * from my home country, Sudan. Aziza is an activist and victim of mass rape, twice. She survived mass rape by Islamic jihadists in her home country of Sudan back in the 1990s. When the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Sudan incited war again in her region in 2011, she decided to speak out and started an organization helping displaced women. That's when she was arrested and gang raped again. She had to flee the country carrying her psychological and physical wounds, hoping to find refuge and support. After waiting for four years she was finally referred to be resettled in the United States by the UNHCR. But President Trump's executive order came to stop the whole process, which has forced her to continue to work as a maid to feed her five children in a very hostile environment in Egypt . Her only hope was to be able to regain her life, and to be in a position where she can continue to claim justice for herself and for her people.

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The accomplishments of the women's rights movement over the last five decades are now in danger from closed borders and rising intolerance. Gender justice cannot be achieved without the strength of [women's solidarity](#) around the world. [Women's rights](#) groups all over the globe are challenged to fight; not just for the causes they support, but for their mere existence. Authoritarianism, fundamentalism, populism, and terrorism are dominating more countries every day, while women's rights groups find their workspace shrinking locally and globally. Grassroots women's movements in conflict and unstable countries are being suffocated under hostile working conditions. Without the solidarity and support from more established women groups in the developed countries, the women's movement will slowly vanish, and lose all ground gained over the last decade.



International Women's Day, March 8, 2017, New York City. Credit: PA Images/ Erik McGregor

Therefore, open borders for women's movements does not just mean access to engage in international venues and learn from other women's experiences. It also means hope, the right to be free as equal humans and to have a voice. Hope for change and hope for justice, which can only be claimed through women's solidarity.

Women in solidarity are undefiable. Consequently, women activists decided to do what they know best: to resist. Dozens of women groups recently [organized campaigns](#), signed petitions and rallied in the Global South to demand open borders for gender justice and women's rights. Hopefully this new wave of the women's movement will lead the world out of hatred and xenophobia into a better future for all.

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***Aziza is not her real name.**