

EVAP Episode 48_ Hala Al-Karib

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SPEAKERS

Hala Al-Karib, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:00

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Director of Policy and Research at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Hala Al-Karib, an African feminist, activist, and essayist who is the regional director of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, which is also known as the SIHA Network. Thank you for joining us today, Hala.



Hala Al-Karib 01:00

Thank you for having me.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:02

Hala, can you give us a bit of background on how your organization was founded and the work that you do for women and girls in the Horn and the women, peace and security agenda more broadly?

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Hala Al-Karib 01:12

Absolutely, so SIHA was founded by a group of women activists and peace activists at a very critical moment, you know, in the history of the Horn. Well, it seemed that, you know the Horn of Africa history, it's all very, very critical. You know, when we compare what was happening during the mid 1990s when SIHA was founded, it was the Somalia war, it was the Eritrean liberation, and it was, you know, the Ethiopian new regime taking over, and Eritrea was becoming a state. Also, it was the war between South Sudan and North Sudan, and it was kind of moving towards its ending. And so there was a wide sense of optimism that this region, at some point, is going to witness stability. So a group of women from across the region, they came together, and they have decided that they don't feel quite fitting in, you know, within the Eastern Africa or Northern Africa. And they felt that in the Horn of Africa, women have a specific identity, the extensive hybridity, you know, the geopolitical position between Eastern Africa, Northern Africa, and then across from the Arab Peninsula and so on. So they formed SIHA network, which was founded basically on the principle of challenging all forms of violence against women and girls across the greater Horn of Africa. And this is how we were founded. It was an initiative that was driven by feminists and they didn't had any resources, and they decided to make it a network, or an umbrella, you know, an institution that would include all the grassroots that works on women's agenda's across the region. And they managed to have their first conference at the time in Nairobi, Kenya, then they moved to their Secretariat, office of the network to Hargeisa, which it was at that point in time, It was the end of the Somalia war. But then again, it was difficult, so they relocated to Djibouti, and then finally, in the early 2000s the Ahfad University for Women has offered SIHA a home at the university premises. And this is where I found SIHA. It was about 2004, 2005, at that point in time, it was, you know, the Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement and then, but at the same time, another devastating conflict has started in in Darfur, so, and we were a classroom inside Ahfad University. We had three staff, so right now, we are more than 75 staff across the region. And you know, despite all the wars and the conflicts and everything, you know, we have our offices in all the regions, countries, on ground.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:59

As we mark 25 years since UN Security Council resolution 1325, what stands out to you as the most significant achievement of the WPS agenda? And where do you feel the agenda has fallen short, especially in conflict zones like Sudan or across the Horn of Africa?

H**Hala Al-Karib 05:19**

First of all, it's important to acknowledge the efforts of adopting the Women, Peace and Security agenda that's that's a collective effort, and it's an amazing effort that gives, you know, all of us, the legitimacy and the inspiration to continue to do what we are doing. So that's really very, very important. But it's also, as the years goes on, it's quite obvious that, you know having a broad agenda is not enough. That we need to invest more on, you know, on shifting attitudes and shifting behaviors, and be quite genuine and sincere about issues of awareness, about peace culture, about, you know, especially for us as women, about issues that matters, you know, justice and accountability on crimes that was committed against women. That's really very, very important, you know, for the stability of the region at the grievances being inherited from one generations to the others. And you know, this region has been through, I don't know how many peace agreements, but I think it's like the region with a massive number of peace agreements. If you look alone at Sudan, South Sudan, or Somalia, you know, or even Ethiopia, you know the number of peace agreements, but it's peace agreements that you know, just, you know, on papers, but you know the concept of peace itself, it's not being challenged or defined. And I think also the fact that most of those peace agreements, they didn't have mechanisms, safeguarding mechanisms, that can protect the agenda of the women and girls and their positions in the political process. So, it's, you know, there is a lot of good things and serious attempts, but I think we have to be very open as well, you know, for self criticism as we are moving forward.

J**Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 07:57**

Yeah, I think you started to touch on this with, you know, talking about the history and the women who have been at the forefront, but how have grassroots women's networks in your region shaped or reshaped the WPS framework over the years?

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Hala Al-Karib 08:15

I think the women have done what they can. I think the women have sustained the movements and they kept it alive under the most difficult circumstances, you know. What's really painful is that this is not being acknowledged, or seen, or recognized sufficiently. I think, you know, the women have constantly in the region, been making life and death decisions on behalf of their communities. And they were the one, and are the one, who are collecting the pieces after each conflict and every war. And they are the one who are keeping communities alive and maintaining, you know, the inter-communal peace despite all the violence around them. But I think, you know, doing that, they have not been sufficiently acknowledged or supported, and their efforts have often minimized and so that kind of, you know, positioned us as women somewhere in the middle, you know, so just receiving minimal, you know, minimal support, minimal acknowledgements. And, you know, we are trying as much as possible, you know, to do what we can, but again, it's a very, very hostile and difficult environment. So I strongly believe that any form of life, you know, that's currently happening and peace in the region, it's definitely because of the of the women's efforts, despite the very grim picture, but they are acting against an extremely hostile environment. And I'm speaking particularly about women leaders, women grassroots leaders who are at the front line, you know, so they, you know, they are trying their best, but often not being seen. They are off the communication radar. They are off the information. You know, radar information is not shared with them. The level of investment on them, as I said, is very minimal. They were remembered always last minute, you know, and just as accessories, you know, to any process, and when they were not taken seriously, and this is one of the reason that the WPS agenda continues to struggle. If you are not taking, you know, the actors who are carrying the burden of the WPS seriously, then the agenda will, never, you know, take its position within society.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 11:26

You know, on on the topic of the adversity that you're facing, while also, you know, being central to defending rights, I know that SIHA and other organizations are facing increasing backlash that threaten your vital work to end violence against women and girls. What form of targeting or restrictions do you face in Sudan and in the Horn and how is it affecting your ability to do your work?

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Hala Al-Karib 12:03

Well, you know, there is definitely, we're aware that we are working in a hostile environment. I'll tell you the expectations of you know, WPS activists and women's right defenders and women at the front line is to act as you know, as required. You know, at the background, not at the main actors. You know, you can't perform with your own voice. So you have to echo the voices of, you know, the different political voices, you know, so you can't as a feminist also network as a feminist institution. You know, we cannot afford doing that. But that does not sit well the expectation that we have to cheer for the, you know, for the political actors. We have to, you know, to pick fights and things like that, but not to act independently on behalf of the women and girls and there's different voices and agencies so, that's in itself, it kind of, you know, it triggers a lot of hostility, because what's expected from women is to act as cheers, to club, to dance, you know, but not to be the main candidate. And you know, to have a voice of their own. So resenting that role definitely, you know, has a price, and it generates risks, but then also when you expose perpetrators, when you talk about violence, when you talk about women suffering and who's actually causing that, you know, the perpetrators. You know in a society that they think that the conversations about sexual violence, about rape, about women being forcibly disappeared, abducted or violated, you know, that has to be, they expect, that that that should not be talked about. So when they see people like us who are very vocal about it, who are trying to really make sure that everybody knows and that this conversation is not, you know, not to be concealed, and that the victims have a voice and that women are not sidelined, of course, we experience also significant hostilities and threats. So we are experiencing layers and layers, also those who are not standing with us on the same, the you know, principles you know, speak about liberations of women, who speaks about the diversity you know, and the gender identities and all those things you know for them, we are even, so, We have so many enemies, I have to say, you know, as as feminists in this environment, but at the same time, we have plenty of allies and this is what keeps us alive and what gives us the energy to continue working. That we have support, we have solidarity, we have commitments from women at the grassroots level, appreciation and that does not happen for free. It happens because we are committed to that. Well, you know, more than 60% of our funds goes to sub-grants and small grants. SIHA provided significant support to grassroots women groups and women at the front lines. We give grants based on the fund that we have. You know, we can give a grant for \$200, we give individual grants, we give organizations grants, we give institution grants, we support women organizations to exist because we believe that the ecosystem we all have to be present. You know, if the women organization are not present, if the grassroots groups are not present, then we will not be present. And so we really have to make sure that we are all existing as feminist groups and as women organizations, and that's the most important thing that we believe, that as a civil society, even international and global civil society, must be aware that our existence is conditioned by the existence of each other's organizations cannot exist on their own, without others.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 17:06

Such an incredible story of, you know, working together to support your community, to support, you know, progress towards the change that is needed, but also just to support, you know, women and organizations that need survival at this stage.

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Hala Al-Karib 17:30

Absolutely. Yeah, I always ask the question, you know, imagine, just imagine the world without women organizations. Imagine it, how cold and miserable it will be. We have been in existence in the history of government movement for how long?

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 17:51

Yeah, women's movements are so incredibly powerful around the world, and you know, for what we've seen at the Global Centre, especially in atrocity situations. What are the biggest obstacles faced in trying to document violations and building credible cases for accountability in Sudan right now?

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Hala Al-Karib 18:13

I mean, you would be surprised, but I'll tell you, it's resources. Clearly, resources, it's not culture, it's not tradition. Those are part of it, but the most significant, the most significant barrier, is resources. Can you believe it that until now, despite the fact that international community is talking about the suffering of women and girls, there is no structural support that's been provided for women and girls, serious structural support on the ground, minimal, resources that's available for the women and girls. You know, we are working with victims in hundreds, who are really suffering and struggling to have access to mental health, to sexual reproductive health support, you know, women victims are being crushed by stigma and shame, and many of them are unable to go back to their communities. So it's very, very painful the lack of resources, and that has given us a very painful feeling that you know, that we're not, in terms of resources, there is no equality, that people, they think that it's okay, you know, for African women and for women in our community to suffer what they ask as if it's normal, and that's that's something that's extremely painful. So this is what we are struggling with. At the moment, you know, we are really fighting for minimal resources, very difficult circumstances. We have to deal with responding to the crisis, trying to save lives, but at the same time responding to a very tedious terms and condition to get small amounts of money that will help grassroots swimming groups to do what they were supposed to do. So that's, you know, that's one of the most, as I said, you know, painful part. I have been working in this field for more than two decades. I haven't seen times as harsh and as brutal as this, not only the war in Sudan, which in itself is a huge tragedy, but but basically the the lack of empathy is quite painful. And we are seeing that, you know, the lack of empathy with the conditions of women and girls, you know, the normalization of violence. Yeah, so, this would be, in my view, the most painful aspect.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 21:18

Given this lack of support, this lack of you know, as you know, the lack of empathy, even lack of attention, I would say, on the international level, to what's happening in Sudan now you know, how do you think international mechanisms could be more effective in providing protection to women and girls, to deterring abuses, to ensuring, you know, accountability for what's happened there?

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Hala Al-Karib 21:48

I think first of all, people have to approach Sudan from an atrocity prevention framework. They have to understand that this is the campaign of atrocities that's happening and it has to end, you know. And the way to end it is by looking at the, you know, at what the international community can do. What role does the international community play on civilian protection, you know. So we start with protecting civilians, and at the same time employ a comprehensive justice framework, which is, it looks at, you know, issues of accountability and justice at the international level, and at the same time putting enormous pressure and serious pressure on perpetrators and warring parties to respond to that. So that will be one thing to do. But the investment on the civilian protection in itself, is the form of justice. You know, the investment on the human rights, on the women rights, on the justice narrative. It's very important and critical for women, because they would understand, and they would see that there is attention. And you know, for the communities, you know, they wouldn't feel abandoned, and it would reduce the scale of militarism and violence and people taking justice into their own hands. At this point in time, the women organizations are struggling to sustain the language of peace, a language of justice, and the narrative about, you know, the importance of peaceful coexistence because of the extreme polarization that has happened and against it, there is no investment, you know, on inter-communal peace. There is no investments on human rights awareness and things like that. So, it's very important if we want this violence to end, its to show that you know what we are trying to do on the ground, you know, it has a value, you know, to show that, you know that human rights matters, that the frontline women lawyers and others and men lawyers who are trying to support women who are criminalized and sent to jail, you know, just for living on, you know, on other parties territories, or, you know, or for any reason, you know, the scale of criminalization of women is significantly increasing, or because of their ethnic identity. It's really matters, you know, it matters, you know, for the international actors to address the massive number of women who are forcibly disappeared in Darfur and getting killed and raped, and to talk about that. It matters to make people feel that at least there is acknowledgement of their pain. But when there is nothing, literally, and we are against a very, how do you call it, you know, narratives that keep talking about political compromises. You know, it sends a clear message that, you know, well, this is, you know, this issue then has to be, everyone has to resort to violence and and militarization increase, you know, and violence increase and so on.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 25:58

You know, I really appreciate how you've highlighted the different dimensions of what is happening and also what's missing. The, you know, the missing atrocity prevention lens, the missing emphasis on human rights and intercommunal dynamics, which obviously will impact not just the violence now, but the kind of long term trajectory of Sudan's future. But it also, you know, there's so much nuance to what you've been talking about in terms of how women and girls have been uniquely targeted in this crisis. You know, often, especially in international spaces, policymaking spaces, everything gets distilled down to focusing just on sexual violence, which obviously is a grave problem, but you've just highlighted different ways in which women are being targeted, through detention, through disappearance that often isn't talked about in crises like these.

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Hala Al-Karib 27:03

No, absolutely, you know this, this war, this violence, atrocities that are happening in Sudan, you know, it's women's bodies are used as a tool in this war. You know, in different ways, forced disappearance has been quite prevalent. There is hundreds of women that nobody knows, where are they? My organization alone has documented close to 300 cases of women who are forcibly disappeared, nobody knows anything about them. And you know, when women disappear in our societies, nobody, they would rather, you know, just claim that they are dead. There is no acknowledgement, or they don't want to talk about it, families and communities. They feel so ashamed, you know, because they feel that they abandon their responsibility and they couldn't protect the women and girls. So they end up kind of vanishing completely, and there is huge silence around them, the trafficking of women across borders, sexually slavery. After the RSF was driven out of Khartoum, we have found it more than, at least more than 100 women, you know, who are who were detained in, you know, private locations. You know, somewhere in farmhouses by the rivers, others inside remote homes, and those were actually slavery hot spots and and you know, women and girls have been experiencing sexual violence for months, and we were told by some of the survivors that many have lost their lives and some have taken their own lives, and some have had children's and right now we have about 54 women that they don't want to go back, you know, and this is all, it's enormous suffering. They don't want to go back to their community because they feel so ashamed, you know? They feel so ashamed and and the communities are so traumatized. We have worked with mothers you know, who were trying to help their daughters. You know, one of the girls killed herself. She doesn't want the rest of her daughters also to commit suicides. Imagine a mother and three of her daughters were all gang raped and that did not happen to one or two, that happened to hundreds and hundreds of Sudanese women across the country. Across the country, the scale of brutality was massive, and right now, women who stayed in RSF territories, they were accused of being collaborators, especially poor women. So they were detained, you know, and charged with treason and sentenced to death, you know, so, you have the women prisons all of a sudden, backed with women and children, you know, and they were accused of being traitors, and, you know, and many of them are waiting for recoup, you know, for descendancy and it's, so, that's another, another issue. You know, sexual exploitation is quite rampant. You know, women, because they are not part of the decision making to access aid and relief, and they don't have information. And this is something we have been talking about for long time, but it's as if we are, you know, speaking into the fears, you know that women have to be part of decision making when it comes to humanitarian aid. They have to have information about it, and they need to know, you know, and they need to have the decision and leadership on this

and but that is not happening. You know, little girls are exploited, you know, sexual assaulted just to access food across the country, literally, an after was normalized, and let alone the other forms of violence that women are experiencing, you know, so it's quite horrendous what Sudanese women are currently going through, to be honest with you. There is, even in areas where education and schools were open, there is large numbers of girls who are not willing to go back to school because they are traumatized, because they are too afraid to leave the house. I have my own cousins, you know, their daughters, they couldn't leave. You know those who are average student age, people who are, you know, working class, and they just couldn't leave. They said, they kept telling me, where would we go? So the children's, you know, who were 10 and 11 years old, they for a whole year, they were sleeping underneath the bed, you know, underneath beds, because they were too afraid. They were too afraid. And it was very difficult for us as well, because we could every day, we were thinking, what would happen to them if they are going to be raped, if they are going to be abducted, you know, I have relatives who had to hide their daughters, you know, cover them with hay, you know, they are in their villages south of Al Gezira, you know, when the RSF vehicles pass, because they could easily take them. The trauma that has happened, you know, and it's still happening to the women, you know, it requires significant investment, because it's also affecting communities. And this is what people they don't realize, you know, I have seen that in South Sudan. I have seen that in Somalia. You know, sexual violence doesn't happen to women alone. You know, it happened to women within communities. And you know, unless it was confronted head on, it will continue to be inherited from one generation to the other. The violence will be inherited from one generation to the other.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 34:26

That's just extremely, extremely difficult to deal with on an individual level, and as you said, on a community level, knowing what's happening and knowing the long term impacts that it will have on the women and girls who have faced this. I want to turn back to you know, how we started the conversation talking about WPS, and, you know, you gave tribute to the women who led the WPS movement, and led to its creation, and to how much WPS has made a difference globally over the last 25 years. But I think the stories you've told, especially about, you know, what women's organizations are facing, show that it's not truly a success story yet. There's still a great distance we need to go. So if you could set priorities for the future, what would you insist that the international community and national governments do differently to, you know, ensure that women are getting their voice heard, are, you know, being fed the information they need to hear from decision makers and actually get what they need in crises like what's happening in Sudan.

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Hala Al-Karib 35:53

I think we have to be very serious about it, and there should be accountability when it comes to matters related to gender equality within societies. I don't think that should be an issue of compromise. And I think in my part of the world, the humanity and the equality of women has been a matter of compromise for very long time, and there have not been any serious accountability measures in this regard. You know, politicians, patriarchal institutions in control, they were never held accountable for that. So that's, that's one thing that's really very, very important, you know, we remain strongly believing in that. You know, if there is no mechanisms that would hold, you know, the dehumanization and the violence against women, you know, seriously, start from the bilateral, multilateral institutions all the way to grassroots groups. We have to be serious to humanitarian agencies. You know, they need to show, everyone, has to show serious, you know, commitments and evidence that they are committed to equality, they are committed to WPS agenda and and that's not a place of compromise. That is not happening now. We could, you know, everyone think that they could manipulate the women rights. Everyone think that they could, you know, just by saying a few words, manipulate Women, Peace and Security agenda, you know, and it's just tiring, you know, it makes you tired that they think that with a few words, you should be happy with them. For what? You know, humanitarian international organizations, they are not even close, you know, to that. And there is no accountability. We have to have accountability, even local civil society, you know, they have to be held accountable, you know, and, of course, policy makers and top government you know, at the top government levels, you know, state actors and non-state actors, they shouldn't, we shouldn't have anyone excluded, you know, from the accountability of, you know, when it comes to the dehumanization and the violation that's systematically committed against women. So that's something that I feel the WPS agenda has not, you know, sufficiently addressed, not sufficiently. I think we kind of settled in, you know, to the very basics. And that is not acceptable, you know, and it's not enough at all. Yes, we have the narrative. We have some mechanisms. It's not working. It's not working because there is no accountability. That's very, very important. And accountability in participation, and participation, it doesn't mean presence. Participation in itself, you know, if it's not been bound by accountability, it's meaningless if it's not, you know, a legitimate participation, if it doesn't have mechanisms to hold us accountable to those that we are representing. It's not enough that we are seated in certain positions. And so what? You know, who's holding us accountable? You know, so those, this is, that's one of the, I think, in my view, one of the biggest gaps of the WPS framework. You know, the issues of accountability and legitimacy. And while representation is critical, but representation without legitimacy and without accountability and without, you know, engagements, serious engagements, you know, it's proven that it doesn't take us anywhere.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 40:46

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