



SEXUAL AND  
REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS  
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN:  
AN OVERVIEW OF AN  
INCREASINGLY  
WORRYING SITUATION





**As the world prepares to celebrate International Safe Abortion Day on 28 September, “Medfeminiswiya” is publishing a comprehensive series of articles on women’s sexual and reproductive rights in the Mediterranean region. For the drafting of this content, our journalists reported from Algeria, Egypt, Italy, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, Spain and Malta, countries where these fundamental rights are far from being achieved or remain very fragile.**



Marked with negations, advances and regressions, the situation of sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR) in the Mediterranean region is quite worrying especially on the southern shore: as pointed out by the RAWSA MENA network to which we are dedicating an article, only Tunisia authorizes safe abortion. This explains why at the regional level, many women die each year as a result of complications in countries where abortion is prohibited, therefore, unsafe.

The testimonies of young Algerian students collected by Ghania Khelifi remind us of the cruelty, loneliness and risks women run when they have to fend for themselves to terminate unwanted pregnancies in a context that criminalizes abortion.

While the voluntary interruption of pregnancy is widely authorized in southern Europe, it is still prohibited and severely penalized in several countries, including Malta where, as Helena Grech writes, the law criminalizes both women and doctors.

On the other hand, in Italy where abortion has been legal since 1978, an increasing number of gynecologists are asserting the conscience clause to legitimize their refusal to practice it. Thus, the national average of conscientious objectors reaches 70% as reports Monica Lanfranco in her in-depth article about women’s SRHR in Italy.

The scenario is even worse in Turkey. Although abortion has been legal since 1983, its access is fraught with pitfalls. “When activists from the

women's shelter Purple Roof called public hospitals in Istanbul in 2015 to ask if they carry out abortions, less than a tenth responded positively," writes Övgü Pinar. Besides, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has himself proclaimed loud and clear that he believes that "Abortion is murder."

The application of sexual and reproductive rights is never neutral, states Lebanese journalist Caline Nasrallah. In her article "Show me how you care: Birth control, is it (a) right?" she questions the government's discriminatory use of birth control to limit births among stigmatized and oppressed groups such as Palestinians, Syrians and migrant workers. Conversely, safe abortion is absolutely prohibited for Lebanese women.

More generally, Federica Araco demonstrates how patriarchal logics shape mentalities and behavior towards women who choose not to procreate. Referring to several edifying examples, she explains how those who do not have a child are faced with a largely internalized social disapproval.

The right of women to dispose of their bodies would therefore mean, for each and every one of them, having a fulfilling sexuality, controlling fertility thanks to easy access to various contraceptive methods, and, when the time comes -and if a woman makes the choice- experiencing a safe and harmonious pregnancy and childbirth while benefiting from support and respectful care.

Yet, as Lina Meskine states in her report on rural midwives in Morocco, remoteness to urban centers still too often exposes pregnant women to isolation and to risks that could be avoided if the profession of midwives was better recognized and valued.

Obstetric violence is also at the core of this issue. In Egypt, Marianne Roux analyses the exponential and unjustified increase in the practice of Caesarean sections across the country. A phenomenon that is also expanding in Italy, where 1 in 3 women gives birth by C-section. The journalist also explains how Italian women organize themselves to denounce the ill treatment they suffer during labor.

Lastly, Rama Youssef reminds us that no reproductive health in Palestine is possible without the awareness and responsible participation of men. Their ignorance of the great metamorphoses that women experience in their bodies and psyches throughout their lives is a fact that only solid sex education programs can counteract.

A message that is undoubtedly relevant to the rest of the world where the female body and its reproductive power remain major issues.



1.

## **MENA**

### **RAWSA: Network for Women's Rights and Access to Safe Abortion in North Africa and the Middle East.**

Set up in 2019, the RAWSA Network aims at changing mentalities, behaviors and legislations related to sexual and reproductive rights, as well as advocating for legal abortion in most MENA countries.



3.

## **MALTA**

### **Small island, strong convictions: How a minority of groups are fighting for reproductive rights in Malta.**

Malta is one of a handful of countries around the world to have an outright ban on abortion, criminalizing both women and doctors who perform the procedure or supervise them. In this article, we explore how a growing minority of voices across social, medical and legislative spheres are leading the charge in favor of a modern and inclusive system catering for reproductive rights.

2.

## **ALGERIA**

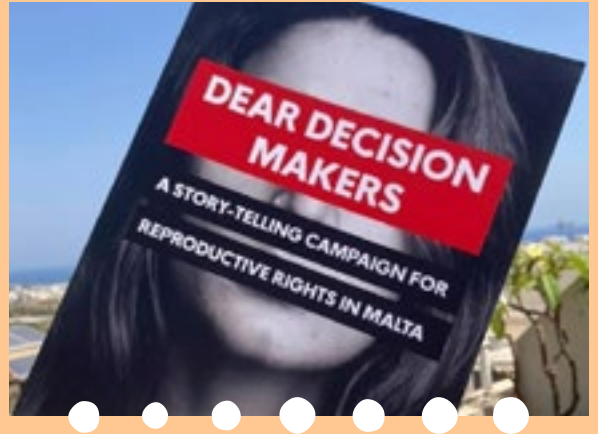
### **Clandestine abortion in Algeria. An absolute taboo.**

Observers and journalists hailed the health law promulgated in 2018 in Algeria as an important step towards the achievement of the right to abortion.

But in reality, there is nothing revolutionary about this legislation as the principle of strict prohibition remains intact.







4.

## ITALY

### Did you say wellbeing? Well then, talk about Italian women's reproductive rights.

In Italy, law protects abortion, at least on paper. But in practice, women are faced with a national average of conscientious objectors reaching up to 70%, and over 90% in the Molise, Trentino Alto Adige and Basilicata regions.



5.

## TURKEY

### Abortion in Turkey: Legally allowed but de facto banned.

Although abortion is legal in Turkey since 1983, access to it is not always guaranteed; a fact not unrelated to the condemnatory remarks by political leaders whose words may sometimes be more effective than laws.



6.

## LEBANON

### Show me how you care: Birth control, is it (a) right?

A look into the beginnings of the birth control movement in the United States paints a more complex picture, one whose insidious legacy has clear traces in Lebanon today.



7.

## TRANSNATIONAL

### Childless women and the suffocating stereotypes against them.

Not everyone today takes for granted the old saying that motherhood is our inevitable biological destiny. However, those who choose not to procreate still fall victims to deep-rooted prejudices and suffocating social pressures. It's like some sort of polarization in which we continually ask ourselves: "On which side are you?"



8.

## MOROCCO

### Midwives in Morocco: The "life-givers" are in danger.

In the shadow of the city, in rural and mountainous regions of Morocco, midwives are conducting work of capital urgency.



9.

## EGYPT

### Giving birth with an open womb: When caesarean section becomes the norm in Egypt.

Having a C-Section without being informed about the consequences or risks in a country where women have an average of 3 children is, to say the least, problematic. Caesarean sections carried out for the comfort of the practitioner and not the mothers are akin to gynecological violence. Here's how.



10.

## PALESTINE

### Reproductive health in Palestine: It's about time we speak up.

Reproductive health prods us to think about the means to attain it in a way that is accessible to all segments of society. Most Palestinian experts agree that this means spreading sexual education must be the top priority now.

