

Together we are ending impunity and making history

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A landmark joint statement condemning Saudi Arabia and calling for the release of arbitrarily detained women's rights activists has punched a hole in the wall of impunity and shown the progress that is possible through principled action based on shared values.



Dear friends

For many years, Saudi Arabia was considered untouchable at the United Nations. Its leaders enjoyed absolute impunity for their human rights violations, including the widespread detention of human rights defenders and the systematic oppression of women. I've lost count of the number of meetings I've had with governments over the last six years which concluded that the Kingdom was too politically, economically and strategically important to be sanctioned.

Cracks began to appear when a number of governments rightly condemned Saudi authorities for the brutal and barbaric murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last October.

And a major hole in the wall of impunity was punched last Thursday when, for the first time ever, a group of 36 governments joined forces to [collectively condemn Saudi Arabia](#).

In what *The New York Times* described as a '[landmark initiative](#)', Saudi was lambasted for its arbitrary detention, ill treatment and torture of women human rights defenders – women who had the courage and tenacity to demand dignity and equality.

I am so proud of the work of my ISHR and NGO colleagues who refused to accept that women defenders should be detained for their work to end discrimination. They rejected the diplomatic orthodoxy that Saudi Arabia is beyond scrutiny.

Together with partners from the *Free Saudi Women* coalition, ISHR staff worked tirelessly and collaboratively to secure the unprecedented joint statement demanding the release of women's rights activists, together with all other people detained for exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Addressing the UN Human Rights Council on Friday – International Women's Day – ISHR said, 'These women human rights defenders are detained only because they fought for their right to exist equally as men in their country'. With all ten remaining in detention, and some facing further charges, continued and increased international pressure is essential to secure their freedom.

It is apt that the joint statement – signed by all 28 European Union States as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway, among others – was delivered by one of the smallest States of them all – Iceland. Apt because it shows that committed individuals and coalitions, prepared to put principle above political expediency, can successfully challenge authoritarianism and prejudice. And we will ultimately prevail. Success may not come immediately. There will be challenges and setbacks. But progress is achieved and history is made by those who value justice, equality and freedom over discrimination, fear and oppression.

Thank you for [supporting those values](#) and helping us make history.

Phil Lynch

Director

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