

Fighting for Women's Rights in Yemen Through Film

An Interview With Filmmaker Khadija Al-Salami *

By Carolyn Ji Jong Goossen **

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Editor's note: Khadija Al-Salami, considered Yemen's first female filmmaker, has made more than 20 documentaries for TV stations in France and Yemen. Her latest documentary, "Amina," was screened during the Arab Film Festival, which was held in October in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The film's center is Amina al-Tuhaif, a Yemenite woman who has been incarcerated for the past 10 years, awaiting execution. At age 11, she was united in an arranged marriage to a man many years her senior, and at 14 she was sentenced to death when a court found her guilty of murdering her husband. Amina strongly argued her innocence throughout the process, insisting that her husband had been strangled by a cousin over a land dispute.

Amina was scheduled for execution in 2002 when she would have been old enough to be hanged under Yemen's laws, but by that time, she was pregnant. The prison staff decided to push her execution forward until 2005, when her child would no longer be nursing. The filmmaker, who lives in Paris, spoke by phone with NAM editor Carolyn Ji Jong Goossen about Amina, the challenges of filming a prisoner and the barriers women in Yemen face.

NAM: What made you want to investigate the story of Amina?

Al-Salami: In the newspaper, I just read that this woman killed her husband, and that her lover, helped her, his cousin. I didn't think she was innocent necessarily at that point, but I wanted to hear her point of view. But when I found out how he was killed, I knew there was no way a woman could do that—he was strangled, and then his body was taken to a cistern and he was [made to look as if he had] drowned. But if she had killed him why would she tell the authorities that it wasn't a natural death? Because originally, they just thought that he had drowned. So when I heard this story, I thought, we've heard from that side, but we haven't heard from her side.

NAM: Much of the film is spent inside the prison walls. How did you gain access?

Al-Salami: When I first told friends in Yemen that I wanted to go meet Amina, they said, 'Don't even try.' One friend, the minister of human rights, told me it would be difficult because the prison is controlled by the Ministry of the Interior. I kept faxing the Ministry of Interior, and every time they said they hadn't receive anything. So I decided to go to Yemen and give it them directly by hand. Even though Yemen's general prosecutor (similar to the



U.S. attorney general) didn't want me to do it, I went inside anyways without him knowing. The director of the prison then let me come several days. I was lucky. I think that part of it was that nobody knew what I was doing. If people knew, they wouldn't have let me continue filming, so I was discreet about it.

NAM: Amina and the other female prisoners in the documentary seem to be very comfortable talking about intimate details of their lives on camera.

Al-Salami: Because I couldn't bring a crew to the women's prison, I filmed it myself. And Amina had never seen a camera before in her life, so she would talk to me without paying attention to the camera. I would just talk to her, and I had the camera in my hand, so she was very natural and spontaneous.

NAM: In the film, you mention that Amina did not have proper representation throughout her trial. Is this common in Yemen?

Al-Salami: She was already a criminal in the eyes of the society because they thought she killed her husband. And at the beginning she was held at a prison near her village, so there were no civil laws used over there. It was tribal and Sharia law-based. Then at one point she ran from prison, so that was a crime. And then she was pregnant, so that was considered another crime.

Later, there was a lawyer who tried to represent her, but the death warrant had already been signed. They said they were going to wait until her son was 2 two years old, but she was still supposed to be executed.

NAM: At the end of the film, we learn that you have been able to free Amina. How did you do this?

Al-Salami: I met Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of Yemen, when he came to Paris. I had recently won first prize at the Beirut film festival for another film, about a little girl who refuses to wear the veil and is criticized by everyone around her. To my surprise, his reaction to that film was positive, so I was courageous enough to bring up Amina's story. At first he was upset. How did I get access to the prison? He was afraid we were showing a bad side of Yemen to the world. But I told him, 'You always say in your speeches that we need to be open and transparent in order to change for the better.' So I'm just following what you are saying—I'm trying to make change for the better. I told him that even if she had killed her husband, she had been a minor at the time. The president was surprised. They did a medical exam [to confirm her age] and he agreed to stop the execution but he still said she would spend her life in prison.

Then a French minister of corporation and development went to Yemen for an official visit, and she asked me to join her. I asked her to talk to the President about Amina's case, and she did. At that point, he told one of his secretaries to have a decree on order to pay the blood money to the family [payment to the victim's family is considered an acceptable alternative to execution under Sharia and tribal law.]



NAM: Where is Amina now?

Al-Salami: Amina is in Yemen, and I've been moving her from one house to another. She's been out almost a year, but since then I've moved her to seven houses. I'm trying to get her out of the country. After Amina was released, the man who killed her husband was executed. The family is now looking for Amina to take revenge.



Film director Khadija Al-Salami (left) and Amina al-Tuhaif

NAM: How many women are imprisoned in Yemen?

Al-Salami: There are not more than 70 women in the biggest prison in Yemen, where Amina was held. In other smaller prisons, there are 10 or 20 women. The women that we saw incarcerated are mostly poor women. Some are criminals who stole. One lady stole her friend's jewelry, and some said they killed their husbands, but some were innocent. Some were found in the presence of a male that is not from her family. She doesn't know her rights so she cannot defend them and policeman take advantage of these people. Sometimes they ask them for money and let them go, but if they don't have money, they send them to prison.

NAM: You were in an arranged marriage, at age 11. How did that affect your life?

Al-Salami: I was luckier than Amina, because I grew up in the city, and I had already started school before my family forced me to get married. I knew that education was a chance to escape all these traditional customs. But unfortunately Amina was in a rural area, where there was no school.

My father was a doctor, but then he became mentally ill because of the war and became violent towards my mother. It was a very difficult childhood—I knew I didn't want to live like my mother so I worked hard to get out of the life she had.

Education helped me to deal with my problems—early marriage, family problems and abuses. And it helped me have my own life in my hands. I came from a modest family, very traditional and conservative, but in order for me to get out of that situation, I used education.



You have to be brave and courageous, because it's not easy at the beginning, but after you do it, people admire you and respect you.

NAM: Have Yemini people been able to see the film? And if so, what was their reaction?

Al-Salami: I originally made the film in Arabic because my goal was to show it in Yemen so we could [use it as a tool to] discuss our problems. Then the Ministry of Culture's censorship committee banned the film, but I didn't listen to them. I left Sanna, the capital, and I went to other cities and villages in Yemen where I showed the film to men and women. Afterwards, we would have [discussions.] Most of the people talked about their problems so openly, I was shocked, but I was so happy.

Girls said, "How do we tell our fathers that we don't want to get married at an early age? What are our rights?" Men would also say, "Early marriage is not a good thing." I thought a lot of people who be against me, but the majority were positive. The authorities found out later, but it was too late.

The film was then showed on Al Arabiya, a news station based in Dubai whose main competitor is AlJezeera. Through satellite TV, many Yemeni people watched the film and talked about Amina. Now Yemini TV wants to show it, too.

* **Khadija Al-Salami, Khadija Al-Salami**, born 1966, in Sana'a, is Yemen's first woman film-maker. She has made over 20 documentaries for TV stations in France and Yemen. She has received several awards at various film festivals. She currently serves as the Press Counselor and Director of the Communication and Cultural Center at the Embassy of Yemen in Paris.

** **Carolyn Ji Jong Goossen** is an editor, writer and video producer for New America Media, a national association of ethnic media organizations based in San Francisco.

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