

**WILPF POLICY BRIEF**

**TOWARDS A MENA REGIONAL  
WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY  
STRATEGY**

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## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have impacted women and girls in specific complex ways. The increasing violence accompanied with lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law and human rights norms resulted in dire humanitarian need, failure of the rule of law, and significant proliferation of arms, impacting women and girls gravely and disproportionately.

Nevertheless, women across the Middle East and North Africa have responded to the evolving and unpredictable situations in innovative and courageous ways, ranging from monitoring and documenting human rights violations, assessing and responding to the needs of women including survivors of violence, campaigning for inclusive peaceful resolution of the conflict, and fighting for active participation of women in all levels of decision making including in peace processes.

Since 2013, WILPF and partners in the region have been working together to advance women's rights and enhance a holistic national and regional Women Peace and Security agenda through strengthening the capacity of women civil society to address the root causes of conflict and increased ability for meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace-building.

With this in mind, WILPF has facilitated a number of cross-learning experiences so that women activists from conflict-affected countries can be exposed to the experiences and ideas of other women activists from different conflict and post-conflict contexts. Through these exchanges, we aim to change the narrative of women as victims by capitalising on the existing experiences and empirical knowledge of women who went through an armed conflict and struggled for women rights.

These cross-learning experiences have included events aimed specifically at women from the Middle East and North Africa region, including the “women organising for change in Syrian and Bosnia” conference that was held in Sarajevo in February 2014 gathering activists from Syria and Bosnia, and two “strategies for change” conferences held in Istanbul on January and December 2015 gathering activists from Syria and Iraq.

Building upon the success of these exchanges, WILPF convened a meeting of approximately 25 women activists from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen in Erbil, Iraq, from 25-27 September 2016. Some activists, a mixture of lawyers, engineers, psychologists, physicians, businesswomen, and community organizers, work within these countries, whilst others work from exile in neighbouring countries.

Having conducted a needs assessment of women activists from these countries in late August, the objective of the meeting was defined as two-fold. First, to provide women activists from the region with information on priority issues of importance to their work:

international humanitarian law, gender and the impact of weapons and disarmament, and trust and coalition building. Second, to provide a forum in which activists could share their rich experience with one another and to identify common regional approaches to priority concerns.

To this end, the workshop provided training on the basic elements of international humanitarian law and gender and the impact of weapons and disarmament. International practice on the central role of civil society in the implementation of the international women peace and security framework was also shared within the context of discussions on trust and coalition building. After this training element, the participants shared with each other their experience in the areas of prevention, protection, participation in peace and political processes, local peacebuilding efforts, and countering extremist ideology. During the final session of the workshop, participants discussed their strategies for working together at the regional level to respond to the priority challenges facing women in the region.

This Policy Briefing sets out the strategies proposed by the women activists during the workshop aimed at working together at the regional level to respond to the challenges facing women followed by recommendations addressed to the international community to support implementation of the strategies proposed by the women activists from the region.

## ELEMENTS OF A MENA REGIONAL WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY STRATEGY

### 1. OVERVIEW OF THE MENA REGIONAL WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY STRATEGY

The women activists from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen discussed and identified some ideas of what they would like to do at a regional level, how and with whom in order to respond to the issues facing them and others as women in and as a result of the ongoing conflicts in the region.

The activists identified **four strategies** to strengthen the protection of women and girls and to increase and enhance the participation of women across the peace and security spectrum as follows:

- Build trust, coalitions and partnerships amongst civil society actors at the local, national, regional and international level;
- Develop capacity of women activists and broader civil society;
- Advocate at the local, national, regional and international level; and
- Raise public awareness and transforming education and aspirations.

The activists identified a number of priority actions to implement these strategies, some of which straddle more than one strategy. It is worth highlighting a couple of **priority actions mentioned repeatedly across all four strategies** as follows:

- Build upon the extensive experience of women activists in all four countries and in the MENA region more generally working to protect and promote the rights of women in conflict contexts;
- Ensure focussed efforts to influence generally male local decision-makers, reflecting the central aspect of the women activists' capacity to shape local conflict dynamics on the ground;
- Use [interpretations of] Islam to change the predominant discourse on women's rights and women's role and contributions in society;
- Ensure change in the quality of education delivered to children and young people as a means of providing alternative futures and giving hope to young people;
- Use traditional and new media to combat extremist ideologies and, more generally, to advocate for the protection of women and inclusion of women in peace and political processes.

**The priority actions provide a preliminary roadmap at the MENA regional level to assist civil society, states and international partners prioritize and step up**

implementation of national and international commitments on women peace and security. These priority actions are not intended to replace national efforts. Instead, activists envisage that a comprehensive regional strategic approach should compliment, build upon and support local and national efforts, through maximizing existing experience, capacity development, advocacy and resources (human, financial, material).

#### PRIORITY ACTIONS OF THE MENA REGIONAL WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY STRATEGY

***i. Build trust, coalitions and partnerships amongst civil society actors at the local, national, regional and international level***

To this end, the following priority actions were identified:

- **Establish a virtual MENA women peace and security network comprised of women activists from across Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen.** The network would facilitate sharing of experience, information and learning, strengthen solidarity amongst women activists, build coalitions to respond to specific issues, coordinate regional efforts, ensure linkages with international partners to maximize global impact, and identify principles of a common regional agenda for peace. Such a regional network would complement and build upon the strengths and expertise of the national SCR 1325 networks that exist in some countries of the region, such as Libya and Iraq. The MENA women peace and security network would actively target inclusion of grass-roots women activists across the breadth of the four countries and also include those actors not already active within the women peace and security agenda in these countries, for instance, writers, journalists etc.
- **Reach out to women activists from beyond the four target countries** to exchange experience, information and learning. In the case of Tunisia, Turkey and Egypt, the activists would be interested in learning more about the role and contribution of women in the political processes, and in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, key entry points would be to see how to leverage the influence Saudi and Iranian women have in their own societies to affect change in the four target countries. This could also lead to creation of regional professional groups to take targeted action, such as a regional women's parliamentary caucus.
- **Develop SCR 1325 national action plans by building upon regional experience in developing such plans.** The experience of the two 1325 national action plans developed in the region to date, in Iraq and Palestine, are considered to provide particularly relevant experience regarding coalition

building, the consultation process, advocacy strategies, and the process of adjusting the Iraqi plan to meet the evolving urgent threat of ISIS on the ground.

***ii. Develop capacity of women activists***

- **Convene regular meetings in person between women activists from the region to exchange information, ideas, and experience with each other** and to monitor progress in implementation of agreed strategies.
- **Deliver trainings (in person and via webinars) to women activists to facilitate exchange of experience, information and learning and to develop individual and organizational capacity.** Priority training areas identified include international humanitarian law, gender and weapons, track 1 and 2 peace processes, local level outreach, dialogue and trust building, political economy and conflict analysis, CEDAW, and working with United Nations agencies funds and programmes and peace missions. Other organizational skills identified to support women become policy and decision makers include public speaking, campaigning, influencing, working with the media, etc.
- **Develop and share guidance on [interpretations of] Islam that promote women's rights and role in society.**
- **Develop guidance and documentation** on the MENA women peace and security agenda and disseminate broadly to women activists. This could include analysis, international practice, handbooks and other how to tools, and training of trainers' with a focus on the challenges faced by women from the MENA region.

***iii. Advocacy at the local, national, regional and international level***

- **Develop advocacy campaigns to respond to common challenges**, including the recruitment of children as combatants, forced marriage, the protection of women human rights defenders, increasing the number of psychosocial care and rehabilitation centres by both state and civil society actors, countering of extremist ideologies, promotion of international humanitarian law, combatting of militarization in society and the impact of weapons on civilians, particularly women and girls.
- Advocacy campaigns should be built **upon assessments conducted at the local level by grass roots women activists**, for instance on the impact of

weapons on gender based violence. Local and national level activists should benefit from working in partnership with **international civil society organizations** and maximize the leverage, influence and access (private/quiet and public) these organizations wield at the global (including multilateral and bilateral) policy level, for instance advocacy against the export of weapons to conflict areas.

- **Advocate for the participation of refugees in the development of safe, sustainable conditions to facilitate temporary and longer term return.**
- **Ensure that all advocacy strategies respond to specific local contexts and reflect local power structures and dynamics**, including predominantly male political/tribal/religious leaders.
- Advocate that the **United Nations Security Council and relevant United Nations agencies funds and programmes deployed to the conflict areas respond more effectively, robustly and impartially in partnership with local civil society actors** to the protection needs facing civilians impacted by the conflicts across the region, including as refugees and displaced persons, and that **United Nations peace missions deployed to Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen actively support the equal meaningful participation of local women in the peace and political processes.**

***iv. Raise public awareness and transform education and aspirations***

- **Deliver tailored public awareness campaigns to challenge the narrative of extremist ideologues and armed actors and their negative impact on women's rights.** This could include ground-based research across the four focus countries to analyse and understand the causes and types of extremist ideologies and the impact of extremist ideologies on women. This research could be followed by efforts to strengthen intercommunity dialogue and understanding, building upon regional experience of working through women and with moderate religious leaders.
- **Deliver targeted public awareness campaigns on international humanitarian law for various audiences**, including lawyers, human rights activists, recruited persons, persons at risk of recruitment, armed groups, local decision makers, armed forces and state officials including from the ministries of



defence, interior, justice, including through trainings (in person and webinars), focus groups, publications etc.

- **Deliver targeted awareness raising campaign on impact of militarization of society and specifically impact of weapons on civilians**, in particular women and girls, [learning from KRG experience] with specific outreach to decision makers, including [male] tribal, religious and political leaders, and mothers.
- The potential positive role of traditional and new media in combatting extremist ideologies and, more generally, in advocating for the protection of women and inclusion of women in peace and political processes, should be maximized, including through the **active, visible participation of women and their voices, particularly in social media networks**.
- **Raise profile of positive contributions of women and girls during conflict in the region** through compilation and dissemination of stories, documentaries, recordings etc.
- **Provide quality gendered education to children and young men and women at school**, including through inclusion of peace topics in curricula and retraining of teachers.
- **Provide quality vocational opportunities and sustainable employment programmes to young men and women** that lead to economic opportunities, as a means of creating alternate peaceful empowering hopeful futures.
- **Raise awareness of protection and other needs facing refugees within host communities** to facilitate integration within host communities, strengthen host-refugees relationships and prevent discrimination.

### **On peace building policies in the region:**

- Ensure that United Nations Security Council and relevant United Nations agencies funds and programmes deployed to the conflict areas partner with in local civil society actors to respond more effectively, robustly and impartially to the protection needs facing civilians impacted by the conflicts across the region, including as refugees and displaced persons.
- Ensure that The United Nations peace missions deployed to Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen actively support the equal meaningful participation of local women in all levels of governance and peace and political processes.
- Put in place policies to allow the participation of refugees in the development of safe, sustainable conditions to facilitate temporary and longer term return.
- Provide quality vocational opportunities and sustainable employment programmes to young men and women that lead to economic opportunities, as a means of creating alternate peaceful empowering hopeful futures.
- Address protection and other needs facing refugees within host communities to facilitate integration, strengthen host-refugees relationships and prevent discrimination.

### **On addressing the issues of women and girls:**

- Support the development of guidance and documentation on the MENA women peace and security agenda, including analysis, international practice, handbooks with a focus on the challenges faced by women from the MENA region.
- Prioritise quality gendered education to children and young men and women at schools, including through inclusion of peace topics in curricula and retraining of teachers.
- Support feminist scholarly efforts to develop and share guidance on interpretations of Islam that promote women's rights and role in society.

### **On technical and financial support to grassroots civil society:**

- Provide technical and financial support to civil society and support efforts to develop and implement regional Women Peace and Security strategies.
- Focus on developing capacity of women activists to respond to Women Peace and Security issues through delivering thematic trainings and supporting national and regional convening to facilitate exchange of experience, information and learning and to develop individual and organizational capacity.