



POLICY BRIEF

Bullets are Cheaper than Sugar

The Need for New Approaches to the
Women, Peace and Security Agenda
in the MENA Region

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“Bullets are Cheaper than Sugar”: The Need for New Approaches to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the MENA region

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Preface

1325: I don't think that four numbers have ever had more recognition, generated more activity, creativity, scrutiny, or angst amongst women.

It was the first of ten UNSC resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) purporting to recognise the absolute need to end the exclusion of women from matters of war and peace and ensure participation in prevention, protection, and post-conflict reconstruction. Each of the ten have sought to develop responses to particular areas of concern, with sexual violence in armed conflict generating the greatest attention. Despite the well-documented lack of specificity, legal clarity, and failure to recognise the structural violence of militarism and the sale of weaponry, we had hoped that a door had been opened through which we could then pour to take our rightful places in decisions on security and ensure they are met with the demands of peace.

Not quite so fast! As this policy brief shows, the reality is somewhat different. Women have been active in all conflicts, always; it was just that by using 1325, women have shone a light on just how much is done, how vital those activities are in enabling social reproduction, and in laying the foundations for peace. Their work shows, too, that despite this, women continue to be patronised and excluded. The political economy enabling war continues, discriminatory laws institutionalise and justify so-called culturally driven distinctions, and political representation is reflective of structures that scream to be changed if there is to be peace.

Women in the MENA region know what has to be done and say so. How to effect that structural change, challenge militarism, and build sustainable peace. They know, too, what the United Nations and the international system should do to enable them to achieve this: no less than a fundamental rethink of how the WPS agenda should work for women, not simply grafting women into processes based on old patriarchal habits and assumptions.

Time is up!

Madeleine Rees

*Secretary-General
Women's International League for
Peace and Freedom*

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I. Context

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 (UNSCR 1325) and the nine subsequent resolutions adopted under the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is issuing this paper to reflect discussions and opinions by feminist activists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) on how they view the WPS Agenda and how they engage with it in their work. WILPF believes that it is important to examine what has been achieved, identify gaps and impediments, and have a grassroots-informed approach to the way forward.

This policy brief echoes the focus and main findings of WILPF's global report on the occasion of the 20th anniversary, that there are three primary challenges to progress on Women, Peace and Security:

1. Militarism and militarisation;
2. The patriarchal and political underpinnings of the agenda; and
3. Lack of accountability for implementation.¹

Celebrating the WPS Agenda is important, but a critical review is also essential in order to develop a strategy for moving forward.

The situation in the region

This policy brief focuses on the situation of women and girls in the MENA region, who are facing challenges at multiple levels that emanate from different conditions.

Some countries in the region are still experiencing protracted conflicts, specifically Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Others continue to suffer from the long-term impacts of past conflicts, such as Iraq and Sudan. Political unrest, military rules, authoritarian governments and failure to ensure the rule of law are also causing internal instability and further exacerbating the crisis in respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights, for example in Egypt, Lebanon, and beyond. Countries bordering those in conflict, and unrest, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia, are also affected. This is all compounded by economic instability and a widening wealth gap in the MENA region, with increasing feminisation of poverty. On top of all of that, one must not forget the prolonged and ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine since 1967.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 7.3 million refugees and people in refugee-like situations in need of protection in the Middle East and North Africa. Of these, 6.6 million are Syrian refugees. This is in addition to 5.6 million Palestinians who are registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as Palestinian refugees (with a large unknown number of Palestinian refugees not registered with

¹ Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years: Perspectives from Feminist Peace Activists and Civil Society (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2020), <https://www.wilpf.org/unscr-1325-at-20-years-perspectives-from-feminist-peace-activists-and-civil-society/>.

UNRWA). There are also 11.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region. Approximately 6.1 million of these are internally displaced Syrians, and approximately 3.6 million are internally displaced persons in Yemen.² Refugees and internally displaced people are expected to remain vulnerable over time, with their poverty likely to transfer from one generation to another.

UNHCR stresses that:



The outbreak of war in Syria in 2011 generated one of the largest displacement crises in recent history. Conflicts which occurred after the 'Arab Spring' in Libya, Yemen and elsewhere created massive protection needs and displacement that have lasted throughout the decade. The dynamics of conflict, ongoing hostilities and protection risks, with large parts of the displaced and conflict-affected populations in hard-to-reach areas, reaffirmed the need to ensure that humanitarian actors place protection at the centre of their work ...³

Conflicts in the MENA region have also led to the deterioration of population health and health care systems, with a drop in life expectancy including maternal mortality rate.⁴ Conflict and displacement have undermined the quality and availability of primary health care in affected countries, including reproductive health and immunisation, and have exacerbated the spread of infectious diseases.

Meanwhile, limited access to education in conflict countries, as well as low quality of education, early dropouts, and unsafe educational environments have resulted in a decrease in education enrollment and achievements in these countries. Overall, girls are more likely to be out of school than boys. A generation of refugee and internally displaced children cannot access education for reasons ranging from discrimination, lack of status and official documentation, and difficulty in adapting to unfamiliar curricula and languages. These circumstances are in addition to destruction of valuable infrastructure essential for development and life with dignity, including roads, hospitals, clinics, and schools. As a result of conflict, the region has witnessed the only increase in extreme poverty in the world.⁵

These challenges are further compounded by prevailing cultural and social norms that are biased against women and girls and value violent masculinity. Such norms are often protected and exacerbated by official discriminatory laws, regulations, policies, and practices.

These realities are taking place within a pre-existing context of low socio-economic investment in services, institutions, and infrastructure. In addition, civilians are regularly subjected to threats to their human security and violent extremism committed by politicised militias and groups, many of which are affiliated with the states where they operate or other states with political interests. Such groups and militias often continue to enjoy impunity. This has resulted in a range of abuses, economic exploitation, and a widening wealth gap, with gendered impacts, together with

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019 (Copenhagen: UNHCR, 2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>, pgs. 39 and 44.

3 Ibid, page 30.

4 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 (Beirut: United Nations, 2020), <https://asdr.unescwa.org>.

5 Ibid.

widespread violations of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as crimes under international law — many amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In this context, gender inequalities are exacerbated, especially through laws, cultural practices and those within the justice system, and law enforcement that systematically discriminate against women even during times of stability and peace. Security and humanitarian crises, instability, displacement, and lack of access to reliable and safe shelter and transport are among a host of circumstances that are causing heightened vulnerabilities for women and girls and lead to human rights violations such as rape and sexual violence, child marriage, and restrictions on mobility and access to education and health services, as well as limits on economic participation and security, a widening paygap, and decreased participation in public life. Conflicts have other inevitable damaging effects, including an increase in human trafficking as well as illicit financial flow and proliferation of arms, particularly small arms that have grave and disproportionate impacts on women and girls.

As the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) stated:



“Discrimination manifests in direct and indirect ways. Some forms, like laws, are easy to identify, and others, such as stereotypes and biased social norms, are intangible. Systematic inequalities in outcome, which often result from the intersection of different forms and levels of discrimination, are difficult to measure.”⁶

This deepens exclusion and marginalisation, causing regressions in development gains. The material and human costs of conflict, in addition to the damage to institutions and infrastructure, further widen gaps within and between conflict countries and others.

In the face of all these challenges, civil society organisations continue to be a main source of provision of services and support to women and girls. However, this is hampered gravely by by state measures aimed at shrinking spaces for civil society, manifested by restrictions on freedoms of association, expression, and assembly, and attacks on human rights defenders, feminist activists, and feminist organisations. Armed groups and traditional and tribal leaders are also contributing to restrictions on spaces for feminist groups and individuals and working towards silencing their critical voices.

Peace and security for women in the MENA region is therefore not a luxury. It is an agenda that relates to and impacts their daily realities, in conflict time, peacetime, times of fragility, and post-conflict. The WPS Agenda must be understood as being relevant to every woman and girl in the region, and as one relating to a persistent lack of sustainable peace and lack of inclusive security, no matter the setting. It must also be seen and enacted as an agenda for establishing laws, measures, institutions, policies, and plans that protect against the effects of conflict — and prevent violence and exclusion before they happen.

In the face of this reality, a diverse set of homegrown feminist movements is flourishing and realising great achievements despite the enormous challenges they face. Women and girls in MENA have made great strides in pursuit of progress and are moving forward towards even more, with variations and diversity both within countries and between them.

⁶ Ibid.

How do Feminist Activists and Feminist Organisations in MENA Engage with the WPS Agenda?

Feminist activists, women human rights defenders, and other civil society groups in the MENA region have been engaging with the WPS Agenda since the start because they believe it is an important tool for bringing real change for women and girls. However, this engagement also puts them at real risk.

A number of areas of work related to aspects of the WPS Agenda were highlighted in interviews conducted for this study, reflecting the wide-ranging roles, experiences, interests, and initiatives taking place in pursuit of the agenda. The following are extracted from the interviews (an illustrative and not exhaustive list):

Feminist organisations and activists focus on rights of women and girls in both the private and public spheres; highlight the importance of prevention, protection, and redress measures; provide legal, psychological and social services in an intertwined manner; combat hate speech and culture of violence; change social concepts and norms that are harmful to women; advance political participation, providing capacity building for women candidates, and engage with peace negotiations; work on legislative reform, constitutional drafting and reform of justice and security systems; litigate on behalf of women; carry out research and constantly monitor the situation of women and girls; play essential roles advocating for and developing WPS National Action Plans (NAPs); during emergencies cover an important gap when the State institutions and structures are weakened or even collapsing. They deliver their work at the national level as well as at the local level. Feminist organisations and activists are the ones mending the communities and bringing people together.



“We are applying a human rights approach to the peace mediation process and we are holding people accountable. When they see us holding everyone accountable, so there is no politicisation of our work, we gain trust.”

– Feminist activist, Yemen

A note on the methodology

This document is based on opinions presented by six feminist activists from various MENA countries through specially designed semi-structured interviews that lasted around one hour each. The interview questions were divided into two main areas reflecting the two primary themes explored in this paper: participation and militarisation.

Questions were asked to gauge the respondents’ assessment of the work of women activists in their country (or at a regional level) on the specific theme; their own assessment of the approach of the UN Security Council and States; and to identify recommendations. Questions were also asked about the role and challenges facing them and other women human rights defenders.

The respondents were selected for their deep knowledge and experience in the WPS Agenda in their respective countries; their long engagement with it, including through cooperating with a wide network of other organisations at the national and regional levels; and their knowledge of the WPS Agenda at the international level. Due to sensitivity of the subjects dealt with in these interviews, names are withheld.

The findings from these interviews are complemented by a review of relevant literature and an analysis of all Security Council WPS resolutions. Information from consultations held by WILPF to assess the impact of COVID in the region, which were later presented in a report, have also been incorporated into this document.⁷

2. Participation and Representation

Participation and representation of women is essential to ensure that issues pertaining to women's peace and security are being addressed, and that the essential gendered perspectives and analyses from women at various levels form an integral part of the political, governance, and peace processes.

Therefore, their exclusion from planning, design, implementation, or monitoring of political and peace processes, whether wilfully or in practice, results in an incomplete assessment and response to both the root causes of conflicts, as well as the associated peace and security gendered impacts and concerns, and of needed solutions.

What does the Security Council say about women's participation?

Resolution 1325 establishes and sets the framework for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in its different pillars. It focuses on increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.

Resolution 1820 encourages a higher percentage of women peacekeepers or police. It urges the UN Secretary-General and his Special Envoys to invite women to participate in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, the maintenance of peace and security, and in post-conflict peacebuilding. It encourages all parties to such talks to facilitate the equal and full participation of women at decision-making levels.

Resolution 1888 notes with concern the underrepresentation of women in formal peace processes, and focuses on representation of women in mediation processes and decision-making with regard to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It also expresses its intention to hold interactive meetings with local women and women's organisations working at the local level.

Resolution 1889 focuses on improving women's participation during all stages of peace processes, particularly in conflict resolution, post-conflict planning, and peacebuilding, including by enhancing their engagement in political and economic decision-making at early stages of recovery processes and through women's leadership in aid management and planning. It calls for the UN Secretary-General to submit a report on women's participation and inclusion in peacebuilding.

Resolution 2106 requests the UN Secretary-General and relevant United Nations entities to assist national authorities, with the effective participation of women, in addressing sexual violence

7 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, COVID-19 and Gender Justice: Feminists in MENA Defying Global Structural Failure (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2020), https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WILPF_COVID-19-MENA-Consultation_Web.pdf.

concerns explicitly in: (a) disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes; (b) security sector reform processes and arrangements; and (c) justice sector reform initiatives. It stresses that women's participation is essential to any prevention and protection response in relation to sexual violence. It recognises the need for more systematic monitoring of and attention to sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations and expresses its intent to employ, as appropriate, all means at its disposal to ensure women's participation in all aspects of mediation, post-conflict recovery, and peacebuilding.

Resolution 2122 recognizes that the economic empowerment of women greatly contributes to the stabilisation of societies emerging from armed conflict. It recognises the need to focus more on women's leadership and participation in a wide spectrum of activities, including: disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, elections, security sector and judicial reforms, and post-conflict reconstruction. It requests the Secretary-General's Special Envoys and Special Representatives to regularly consult with women's organisations and women leaders, including socially and/or economically excluded groups of women.

Resolution 2467 affirms the importance of sustained engagement and meaningful participation of civil society, including women leaders and women's organisations, in all peace processes. It also encourages states to ensure opportunities for the full and meaningful participation of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence at all stages of transitional justice processes, including in decision-making roles, recognising that women's leadership and participation will increase the likelihood that transitional justice outcomes will constitute effective redress as defined by victims. It calls on parties to a conflict to ensure that women are present and meaningfully participate in political pre-negotiation and negotiation processes.

Finally, **Resolution 2493** urges States to commit to implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and its priorities by ensuring and promoting the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in all stages of peace processes, including through mainstreaming a gender perspective. It also encourages support for the participation of women-led peacebuilding organisations in planning and stabilisation efforts in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery, and to ensure equal, meaningful, and more inclusive participation of women overall.

In Brief: The UN Security Council's Focus on Women's Participation

A review of the Security Council resolutions on the WPS Agenda shows that the approach of the Security Council focuses on the following aspects of women's participation:

- Levels of decision-making in conflict resolution and peace processes.
- Prevention and resolution of conflicts, including through increased representation as peacekeepers or police.
- Mediation processes and decision-making processes with regard to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- Peace processes, particularly in conflict resolution, post-conflict planning and peacebuilding (and in later resolutions the Security Council focuses on all stages of peace processes).
- Political and economic decision-making at early stages of recovery processes.
- Women's leadership.
- Addressing sexual violence concerns, including prevention and protection responses.
- Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration.
- Security and justice sector reform.

- Transitional justice processes.
- Post-conflict reconstruction and recovery.

In the more recent resolutions, the Security Council stressed the importance of participation of women-led peacebuilding organisations, and urged the Secretary-General and his Special Envoys and representatives to invite women to participate in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, as well as to regularly consult with women's organisations and women leaders.

Issues with the Security Council approach

The Security Council repeatedly refers to conflict resolution, post-conflict processes, and peacebuilding. It does not seem to focus on participation in conflict prevention, including various forms of participation during peacetime, and other forms of participation during conflict.

Our interviewees highlighted the importance of strengthening participation of women in the stages of pre-conflict, fragility and instability rather than focusing solely on the conflict and post-conflict stages. The participation of women during peacetime will not only make it acceptable and natural for women to participate during conflict and post-conflict, but, importantly, will contribute significantly to making institutions and bodies responsive to rights and needs of women at all stages of conflict and peacetime and in any context.

Our interviewees also highlighted the need for more efforts to increase the participation of women in political parties and trade unions. Male dominance of the majority of political power — as heads of State, members of parliament, government officials, and members of political parties — affirms stereotypical views that men are better able to lead, and that the public space is theirs and theirs alone. The increased participation of women at these levels will also help to shift these perceptions and normalise the presence and visibility of women in political and leadership roles in times of conflict, peacebuilding, post-conflict and beyond.

Increasing women's participation in these bodies will require changing attitudes within political parties, changing laws, adopting policies, and enacting new measures towards this goal. For example, a quota system could be enforced that requires a certain number of women to be represented within political parties and during elections.



“The importance of a quota in political parties is that when there are negotiations, political parties (both in power or outside it) are the ones that sit and negotiate.”

– Feminist regional expert

Limiting women's participation to peace negotiations was also repeatedly discussed by the interviewees, who stressed that this is a very shortsighted approach. Interviewees emphasised that participation should encompass many other forms, including access to public spaces, economic participation, and participation in social and political spheres. Even within the complicated contexts of conflict countries, although participation may feel in vain, it is a right and must be practiced.



“Participation is a cross-cutting issue... it is not about how many young women received training on participation or governance... This limited approach to participation is far from reality.”

– Feminist activist/Syria

Women’s political participation has become a primary focus of international funders — who, by and large, only understand or acknowledge participation in its narrowest sense: the number of women receiving training on participation or governance, for example, or the number of women represented in peacebuilding processes. Feminist organisations are expected to prioritise the achievement of these metrics in their programming, which are used by funders and others to measure their success and impact. However, this narrow view of participation disregards the many difficult-to-quantify aspects of their work, including changing attitudes and challenging prevailing norms and assumptions. As a result of these factors, feminist organisations are finding it difficult to access funds and international support to continue their work and pursuing their priorities at the local level. (See more below about funding.)

The Security Council does not address the changing and strengthened role of women as social structures change and when the state is weakened or collapsing because of conflict.

During times of conflict and fragility, women’s roles change. As men become engaged in active conflict and the resulting displacement, women are increasingly found in traditionally male spaces throughout society.

This shift often results in the increased role of women at the microlevel within the family as they become the primary or sole breadwinners, providing for themselves and their families. In many cases, when men are not able to work, for example as a result of disability resulting from conflict, women take on the responsibilities of caring for them, supporting them, and running the household.

There are also indirect impacts as women increasingly enter the public sphere (political, economic, and social), especially with the fragility or collapse of government and local authorities. At this macroscale, women often step in and start initiatives that are essential for the community, as well as take over structures that were previously difficult for them to access. In these situations, women community leaders become engaged in peace building and peace initiatives at the local levels, work to prevent the recruitment of children within the conflicting parties, and prevent and combat violent extremism. They are also involved in humanitarian negotiations at the local level.

They also assume more visible roles as activists in the community and at the political level, and play a more visible role in defending women’s rights through civil society organisations (CSOs) and community services.

Another important effect of this changing role of women is that when women are given the opportunity to occupy spaces that are typically dominated by men, both in the private and public spheres, they also enhance the role of civil society organisations and community services, especially for women in CSOs, and become increasingly engaged with them. This aspect of women’s participation must also be recognised and supported.

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“For example, in the Yemeni city of Tuez, when the state dissolved and municipal services collapsed a woman took over the responsibility for garbage collection for more than a year and a half. In Abiyan, a woman took over as an interim governor when the governor left. She facilitated the work of CSOs during an extremely critical time.”

– Feminist activist, Yemen

Despite the extensive impacts created by women’s increased involvement at various levels of society during times of conflict, these initiatives do not receive adequate support by the multilateral system of inter-state bodies or agencies, including the UN Security Council and the Secretary-General’s envoys, representatives, or missions, where they exist. They remain initiatives by civilians with limited possibility of success. During the crisis of Ghouta in Syria, for example, an initiative was launched by local civilians of women and men.

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In al Ghouta, “the Security Council did not support the civilian initiative. It only supported the military initiative, which does not take into account civilians or women, but promotes violence. It seems that the approach of the Security Council is to bring a woman to talk about the subject when it wants to address a humanitarian situation. But nothing beyond.”

– Feminist activist, Syria

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the vital need for the international community to recognise and support the involvement of women in various spaces and processes, whether formal or informal, and at various levels.

The Security Council focuses primarily on participation of women leaders and women representatives in state bodies and authorities. On the one hand, there is an assumption that such participation of women always results in advancing women’s rights. On the other hand, there is not enough recognition of the role of women at the local levels.

Evidence shows that there have been improvements in the participation of women in MENA at the level of government cabinets, although they generally remain confined to so-called “soft” portfolios associated with the traditional roles of women in society, for example education and healthcare. In the public sector, women are over-represented in fields associated with their traditional roles, such as education, health, and social development, and women contingents in ministries such as the interior, finance, or defence remain much smaller, as such domains are traditionally seen as “less suitable for women”.⁸ Ample evidence and feminist analysis shows that greater participation of women in local councils, the judiciary, parliaments, and executive branch of government — especially in high positions in areas that are not typically associated with women’s roles — contributes to the gradual acceptance of women’s participation in public space,

⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Women’s Political Representation in the Arab Region (Beirut: United Nations, 2017), <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/women-political-representation-arab-region-english.pdf>.

governance, political life, and in formal and informal political processes, including in relation to conflict, as necessary.

Several of those interviewed discussed quota systems as means to promote and increase women's political participation.

“

“The systems of quotas or direct appointments are still needed in order to increase people’s acceptance of women’s political participation.”

– Feminist regional expert

However, an often-repeated criticism indicates that although the “numerical approach” for women's participation may be useful in changing public opinion, so that the public accepts more women in leadership and representative positions, it does not ensure those women leaders are representative of the needs and issues of women from different walks of life. Often, they represent their class and political affiliations, but not necessarily an all-encompassing feminist agenda focussing on the priorities identified by women and the women's rights movement in the country. They also do not advance the need to create wider structural change that enables transformative measures for realising equitable rights by challenging a system that fails to accommodate women's needs and aspirations.

For example, in one situation discussed in an interview, it was mentioned that some women members of parliament (MPs) in Egypt were against efforts to set the minimum age of marriage for girls at 18, to restrict polygamy, or even to criminalise female genital mutilation (FGM).

“

“The problem with the numerical representation approach is the fantasy of having more women regardless of the agenda they believe in. ... The numerical representation is a huge thing for the state and sometimes for certain feminist organisations and women's rights organisations. It is important to have more women and familiarise the public with the idea of women in certain positions. But also, what messages do these women convey? This is an important question to be addressed.”

– Feminist activist, Egypt

Another issue discussed by interviewees involved efforts by different states to portray themselves as defenders of women's rights. As one participant stated, “Usually our State loves to act as the defender of women's rights at the international level.” However, what is often referred to as “State feminism” remains a highly controversial concept. It has been criticised by civil society actors as a way for male-dominated regimes to project “a veneer of modernity” or efforts for democratisation. However, this is done in a way that does not threaten their hold of power. This has resulted in women's rights being used to serve the interests of self-proclaimed “progressive”, but less than democratic, regimes.⁹

Of particular concern is the fact that some governments claim to be advancing women's participation, for example through the adoption of a quota system, are the very governments that are suppressing the feminist movement that is working on the same issue of promoting participation of women. For example, in Egypt, the work of Nazra for Feminist Studies, a leading Egyptian women's rights group that promotes women's political participation and provides mentorship for potential female candidates, is currently being blocked as the organisation faces continued restrictions on its work and its access to funds.¹⁰

Another important issue relating to the role of women leaders is that often, women's groups focus their work at the grassroots level to fight and advocate for wider political participation and representation, as well as other human rights. Therefore, their focus is a broad network of women rather than women leaders. This approach has been effective in bringing women's rights and concerns to the national agenda. Therefore, work at the community level, and the need to adopt new approaches to women's participation and leadership, requires moving away from highlighting the role of individual women leaders to promoting a more comprehensive approach focussing on collective community leadership and reaching out to a wider range of women, thus valuing collective efforts.¹¹

The importance of women's political participation in local governance, and not only national government, was repeatedly emphasised in the interviews. A Syrian feminist illustrates the point well, arguing that "[t]he future of Syrian civil society and women's participation will be decided as much in the country's provinces as in Geneva or any other international city. Political participation is the bedrock of ensuring rights-respecting spaces – this should be supported at all levels."¹²

Security Council resolutions do not adequately emphasise and operationalise women's right to participate in peace processes and peace talks on equal footing.

The resolutions call on the UN Secretary-General and his Special Envoys and representatives to invite women to participate in discussions pertinent to the prevention and resolution of conflict, and to regularly consult with women's organisations and women leaders. But the resolutions do not specify in what capacity women should be participating. As observers? Advisors? Or full members?

Our interviewees highlighted problems and inconsistencies in the approach of the UN envoys and missions. The practice seems to foster the role of women as advisors rather than sitting on equal footing at the negotiations. Having women advisors sitting "behind" the envoy, or meeting separately or in a separate room, seems to emphasise that women are supportive but not equal players in the peace and political processes. It also contributes to the systematic marginalisation of women's issues, needs, and perspectives, as stressed by the interviewees (see further below under accountability).

10 Nazra for Feminist Studies, "Court Rejects Nazra and Mozn Hassan's Appeals," July 18, 2020, <https://nazra.org/en/2020/07/court-rejects-nazra-and-mozn-hassans-appeals>.

11 Maria Al-Abdeh and Champa Patel, "'Localising' humanitarian action: reflections on delivering women's rights-based and feminist services in an ongoing crisis," *Gender & Development* 27, no. 2 (2019), 237-252.

12 Ibid.



“Women’s participation is being dealt with as a matter of folklore [tradition]. Women are not sitting at the negotiating tables. Therefore, negotiations do not deal with women’s issues.”

– Feminist regional expert

Even when a quota is agreed for representation of women in peace processes, parties are not implementing the agreement, and no adequate pressure is put on them in this regard by those leading and sponsoring the political process. In the case of Yemen, women are not included in Track I negotiations — official diplomatic efforts — despite a previous agreement that women would represent 30 per cent of the members of all bodies and fora, as agreed in the outcome of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), held in March 2013. Feminist activists and women’s groups are trying to mitigate this by sending women to participate in parallel delegations organised and funded by international NGOs, but still the official delegations of the conflicting parties are not committing themselves to respect the quota. In addition, women’s groups and feminist activists are actively involved in the discussions around forming a new government, calling for a 30 percent representation of women in the government, and even nominating specific people for that. But they are not receiving any guarantees that this will happen.

The Security Council resolutions emphasise women’s participation to address the crime of sexual violence. However, the Security Council does not address the failure of States to provide services for victims of sexual violence and document cases.

This is a very important area of work that must continue to be supported. However, there are many challenges associated with it that must also be recognised and tackled by the UN and States.

There are many difficulties in documenting sexual violence. Collection of information is critical for developing evidence-based policies and solutions, and for ensuring a gender-sensitive, victim-centred approach to identification of harm and taking up transformative approaches to justice.

Further, States are failing to provide medical, legal, social, and psychological services to women survivors. They are relegating this work to CSOs, sometimes through agreements, but mostly because of their failure to fulfill their obligations to carry out that role. Therefore, women’s groups and organisations are often involved in providing legal and psycho-social services and advice, while having very limited resources. In some cases, these restrictions limiting access to resources are being imposed by States at the same time the State is failing to provide these services. Outside the context of conflict, women survivors of violence often do not access services provided by the State or civil society for fear of stigma and disapproval by the society, or fear of repeated victimisation and attacks. At the same time, while these CSOs are sometimes accepted by the community, such work in a conflict context requires constant vigilance due to security challenges to them and to the women they serve from both State and non-state actors.

States, inter-state agencies, and international NGOs must support efforts by local civil society groups who are well-informed of realities on the ground and are able to develop feasible solutions, and allocate adequate funding for the realisation of such solutions. Plans must also be put in place to challenge stigmatisation and work towards changing public views. States must make their services available and accessible to women who need them without fearing risks, and must work closely with feminist groups to ensure these services respond to the actual needs of women, informed by a sound gender analysis of the situation on the ground.

Violence against Women and Girls during COVID-19

Physical and psychological violence against women and girls during COVID-19 has increased in many countries in the world, including those in the MENA region. As women are locked down in homes where they have faced pre-existing domestic violence, the possibility and actual occurrence of violence has increased. At the same time, State services and institutions necessary to deal with gender-based violence were either in full or partial lockdown (including courts). In many areas, these services and institutions were already limited, weak, or ineffective prior to COVID-19 and the pandemic further hindered access to them due to restrictions on movement, the deprioritisation of women's services by States, and other reasons. Additionally, in many countries in the MENA region, the response to the pandemic for enforcing the lockdown and other measures was led by the police or security forces. This has resulted in increased restrictions on movement, expression, and opinion, resulting in restrictions on the work of CSOs serving women. In addition, there has been a decrease in funding and government support for institutions dealing with issues relating to daily lives of women, such as violence, custody, and alimony.

All of these factors have resulted in situations where women are trapped with no ability to escape violence, to report violence, or to seek support.

The pandemic has also further revealed governments' lack of understanding of the gender dimension of power relations within families and society. For example, women were encouraged not to complain to the police when facing violence — a reality that, combined with limited or lack of services or reporting channels, has resulted in official statistics in some countries showing a decrease of cases of gender-based violence. Decreased funding and government support to programs for women's rights and the judicial system and institutions dealing with issues relating to daily lives of women, such as violence, custody and alimony, resulted in reducing the possibility of women escaping violence.

At the same time, feminist organisations across the MENA region witnessed a sharp increase in cases of violence reported to them. As a result, feminist organisations had to step up and carry most of the burden without increased resources and support. Simply put, official responses were not in line with the magnitude of the complex pre-existing challenges and did not adequately address the added challenges created by COVID-19.



“Now with COVID, it is more challenging. There are less grants for protection. We have our women human rights defenders abused by society and the family and we don't have money for protection grants. We only have grants if they have COVID or COVID-related problems. It is so bad.”

– Feminist activist, Yemen

The Security Council recognises that the economic empowerment of women greatly contributes to the stabilisation of societies emerging from armed conflict, but does not recognise the importance of this in all situations.

Women's economic participation is very important, and it is welcome that the Security Council recognises this. However, as explained above, the Security Council focuses on post-conflict settings, and not on women's economic participation in general.

There are many aspects to consider in this regard. It is important that the Security Council and States place adequate emphasis on women's participation and representation in processes and institutions which relate to economic policies and decision-making in pre-conflict, during conflict, peacebuilding

and post-conflict times, and not only in societies emerging from conflicts. Economic and social empowerment of women, and their participation in economic decision-making, is very important.

There is also the issue of poor representation of women in parts of the organised white-collar sector, which reinforces stereotypes that women are less capable and qualified to lead in the public sphere than men — particularly when it comes to making important decisions related to the economy. This lack of participation serves to keep women dependent on men and limits opportunities for women to have their economic interests effectively represented.

Women's lack of representation in the white-collar sector is directly tied with the institutionalisation of women's poverty in MENA countries and the devaluing of their labour. There is a wide gap between the participation of women and men in work in general in MENA countries. Unregulated and poorly paid work, with no social protection, is mainly carried out by women. Labour laws also often directly or indirectly discriminate against women. This, in addition to the huge toll of unpaid care, contributes to a wide gender pay gap. Conflicts, in their various forms, increase the feminisation of poverty, and women remain at the greatest risk in the absence of job opportunities, in addition to the pre-existing absence of safeguarding measures and guarantees.¹³ As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many women working in the informal sectors and without documents lost their jobs. Also, during lockdown, women were forced to relegate to their traditional roles. In addition, funders and governments have prioritised responding to the pandemic without taking into account its gendered impact, resulting in funds for feminist organisations or initiatives that relate to women's rights in general being decreased or eliminated.



“Women have specific protection needs that should be met but they are also fighting every day to preserve their space in the public sphere. They take immeasurable risks in doing their work to continue to support other women, their children, and their communities. They are often at the frontlines of response and most exposed to risk. To do this, under the most oppressive conditions, is a mark of great resilience and strength.”¹⁴

Women's economic empowerment is essential for their independence, and enables them to make decisions that are fundamental to their lives, including the ability to escape living with domestic violence. It lifts them from economic hardship, enabling them to participate fully in society, better themselves and their family members, flourish as persons, contribute to the development of their country, and much more. In times of need, they can increase their access to health care, food, housing, and other resources, especially when access to these resources is dependent on financial assets.

13 International Labour Organization, “Gender Equality in the Arab States,” accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/equality-discrimination/WCMS_712089/lang-en/index.htm.

14 Maria Al-Abdeh and Champa Patel, “‘Localising’ humanitarian action.”

3. Militarisation and Its Impact

The Security Council, through its WPS resolutions, does not address the issue of militarisation as such. There are only a few mentions in the resolutions that are directly or indirectly relevant to the issue.

What does the Security Council say about militarisation and armament?

Resolutions 1820 and 1960 stress the need for measures to protect civilians, including women and girls, from all forms of sexual violence. These measures could include enforcing appropriate military disciplinary measures and upholding the principle of command responsibility, training troops, and so on.

Resolution 1820 also urges military groups and police in conflict countries to take appropriate preventative action, including pre-deployment and in-theatre awareness training and other actions to ensure full accountability. It also calls for the development of effective mechanisms for disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes, and for justice and security sector reform efforts.

Resolutions 1820 and 2106 also note that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.

Resolutions 1888 and 2122 encourage Member States to deploy greater numbers of female military and police personnel to United Nations peacekeeping operations, and to provide all military and police personnel with adequate training to carry out their responsibilities.

Resolution 2106 notes the provision in the Arms Trade Treaty requiring that exporting States take into account the risk of covered conventional arms or items being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children.

Resolution 2242 urges gathering of gender-sensitive research and data collection on the drivers of radicalisation for women, and the impacts of counter-terrorism strategies on women's human rights and women's organisations, in order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programming responses.

Resolution 2467 recognises that sexual violence in conflict occurs on a continuum of interrelated and recurring forms of violence against women and girls, and recognises that conflict also exacerbates the frequency and brutality of other forms of gender-based violence.

Issues with the Security Council approach

The Security Council does not consider the devastating impact of armaments on women and girls.

The experiences of WILPF and its partners show that there are various well documented negative and devastating impacts on human rights posed by the arms trade of conventional

weapons, both regulated and unregulated, diverted, or illicit, including exacerbating all forms of gender-based violence.¹⁵

The proliferation, possession, accumulation, and use of small arms and light weapons, explosive weapons, and all other conventional weapons have gendered impacts, and lead to destabilisation, displacement, and harms that further exacerbate gender-based violence. Militarisation is a threat to women and girls' rights to life, security and physical integrity, public and political participation, movement, assembly and right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, as well as rights to health, work, and education, to name a few. In this regard, it is essential to consider arms control and disarmament in relation to weapons as well as ammunition, parts, and components.



“WILPF underscores that the net outcome and impact of the proliferation of weapons in a community, regardless of whether they were acquired legally or illegally, contributes to increased militarisation in that community and will inevitably have negative impacts on all groups of society, including women and girls. (...) WILPF reiterates that in most cases the ultimate responsibility and accountability of human rights violations caused by diverted or unregulated weapons lies with national governments and weapons producing companies. As Manuel Martinez Miralles of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) notes, ‘The vast majority of diverted or unregulated weapons had a legal origin, they were produced industrially in a factory registered with production permits granted by a government, were marked with a serial number, and were prepared for commercial distribution.’”¹⁶

WILPF believes that weapons are about power, not security. Guns are about control and dominance through violence, not cooperation or equality. The proliferation of conventional weapons correlates with an increase in gender inequality and a generalised culture of violence against women, who are most often the victims of gender-based violence facilitated by small arms.¹⁷ Evidence shows that violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community also increases with the proliferation of weapons.¹⁸ Therefore, “addressing and preventing the acquisition, possession, transfer, diversion, and use of conventional weapons necessitates an understanding of gendered root causes of violent behaviour, and the recognition that bringing about changes in masculinities and gender norms is an effective tool for the prevention of human rights violations and conflict more broadly.”¹⁹

15 See publications listed at “Challenging the arms trade,” Reaching Critical Will, <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-andresearch/research-projects/10738-challenging-the-arms-trade>.

16 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, “Submission from the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the impact of the diversion of arms and unregulated or illicit arms transfers on the human rights of women and girls,” April 2020, https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/WILPF_OHCHR_submission_April2020_Final.pdf, pg. 8.

17 Ibid and Reaching Critical Will, *Small Arms, Big Picture: Armed Violence Beyond First Committee* (New York: Reaching Critical Will, 2014).

18 See The Human Rights and Gender Justice Clinic of the University of New York School of Law, MADRE and the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq, “Communication to the ICC Prosecutor Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute Requesting a Preliminary Examination into the Situation of: Gender-Based Persecution and Torture as Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq,” November 8, 2017, <https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/CUNY%20MADRE%20OWFI%20Article%2015%20Communication%20Submission%20Gender%20Crimes%20in%20Iraq.pdf>.

19 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Submission from the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights,” February 2019, https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/WILPF_Submission_Firearms_Human_Rights_Feb2019.pdf.



“At the end of the day, those who have more weapons can rule, can interrupt food from reaching people, ... control the lives of people and their rights ...”

– Feminist activist, Syria

The availability of small arms among people and members of armed groups can cause and fuel internal disturbances to peace. This causes real threats to women’s security, including in peace time, both in the public and private spheres. Women and girls are simply not secure when weapons are available or widespread.²⁰ The need for serious disarmament efforts to avoid conflicts and to quash threats to women’s peace and security can never be overemphasised.

Interviewees for this study stressed the need for a prevention agenda. Even in what is seen as non-conflict settings, when people have arms, they end up using them against each other. This causes political polarisation.



“The prevention element of the WPS is the weakest. There is not enough work on enacting laws and regulations for prevention before conflicts. The prevention pillar tends to be the weakest in NAPs.”

– Feminist regional expert

The UN Secretary-General highlights that ownership and use of arms are closely linked to specific expressions of masculinity related to control, power, domination, and strength. Correspondingly, the overwhelming majority of small arms owners are men, and young men perpetrate the vast majority of armed violence.²¹ This is echoed in our interviews.



“When militarisation increases, masculinity which violates women’s rights increases. Masculinity is the other face of militarisation.”

– Feminist regional expert

The Security Council does not adopt a broad approach that considers the impact of high military spending in comparison with low budgets made available for essential means for realising human rights.

A report by the UN’s ESCWA states that “the Arab region has the world’s highest military expenditures as a share of GDP, around 6.2 per cent in 2016, compared with the second highest figure of 2.06 per cent in North America... Spending on social protection, on the other hand, is relatively low, hovering at around 2.5 percent of GDP (excluding health care). The distributional impact of such policies on wealth among regions and social groups has been generally limited.”

20 See United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of arms transfers on human rights (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 2020), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/151/84/PDF/G2015184.pdf?OpenElement> and Reaching Critical Will, Small Arms, Big Picture.

21 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of arms transfers.

ESCWA concludes that “[g]rowing military and security expenditure across the region is draining public budgets of valuable resources needed for development.” It adds that conflicts have “reversed development gains, severely damaged industries and productive capacities, and destroyed vital infrastructure as well as entire cities in some cases. It has diverted domestic resources and foreign aid towards humanitarian relief and already bloated military expenditure.”²²

WILPF also found that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas results in not only killing and injuring civilians, but also causing destruction to civilian infrastructure relating to housing, health, and education. This has gendered impacts as well as broader human rights implications.²³ The cost of rebuilding infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, now comes on top of already chronic funding gaps. This all reduces capacities to respond to gender-based violence through integrated efforts.

The individuals interviewed for this study overwhelmingly expressed concern that the military budget is much higher than that of other ministries, like education and health. It was highlighted that military spending is not only related to buying weapons. It also includes associated expenditures on institutions, operating costs, and salaries. There is also international assistance being provided in the form of military assistance. It was stressed that this is all assistance with a shared goal of enabling conflicts.



“During the Ghouta crisis, military spending was crazy [by all parties]. More spending was proportionately leading to increased numbers of killing of people. [...] We reached a stage when bullets were cheaper than sugar.”

– Feminist activist, Syria

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that military spending continues to increase across the MENA region despite the countries’ significant deficits and fiscal imbalances.²⁴

Another issue that was highlighted by several interviewees is lack of transparency around military budgets, including expenditure. This seriously reduces the ability of the public to scrutinise and hold the military accountable. Therefore, assessing militarisation must take into account that our knowledge of facts regarding military spending is limited. This, in many cases, means that parliaments cannot scrutinise budgets.

While the Security Council refers to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in the resolutions adopted under the WPS Agenda, it does not require strong control of arms, the arms trade, or disarmament.

Article 4 of the ATT requires that exporting states must make assessments of the risk that the arms covered in the treaty are being used “to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based

22 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Women’s Political Representation.

23 Reaching Critical Will, “Explosive weapons and the right to health, education, and adequate housing,” May 2016, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/publications-and-research/publications/10914-explosive-weapons-and-the-right-to-health-education-and-adequate-housing>.

24 Vision of Humanity, “Military spending and fiscal deficit in MENA post-Arab Spring,” accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/military-spending-and-fiscal-deficit-in-mena-post-arab-spring/>.

violence or serious acts of violence against women and children.” Security Council Resolution 2106, adopted under the WPS Agenda, notes this provision in the ATT. However, the resolution does not operationalise this and provide specific recommendations, as would be expected, considering that this is the specific Security Council resolution that connects the ATT with gender and conflict.

The evidence shows that proliferation of arms is a threat to women’s rights in private and public spaces. Security Council Resolution 2467 addresses the “socioeconomic consequences” of the illicit transfer of arms, and of the accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons for women. Interviews highlighted weak or non-existent laws, policies, and institutions to combat illicit arms and for disarmament.

“

If work on disarmament was efficient, “we would not have seen military groups taking over cities.”

– *Feminist activist, Yemen*

Lack of accountability for countries transferring or exporting arms was also highlighted in the interviews.

The availability of weapons within civilian spaces and between the population risks them being used anytime, and thus putting the safety of women at risk. A creative proposal for disarming populated areas was presented in an interview:

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“As women, we asked for city demilitarisation. We were the first to ask for that. Our cities are full of military camps and depots. This is not included in any resolution of the Security Council. The population is a human shield for these camps. [...] It is affecting women for sure, because when they start fighting, the fight happens in the streets in residential areas because weapons are available.”

– *Feminist activist, Yemen*

This example echoes other such calls and cases that WILPF has previously documented and continues to collect information on. For instance, in Atmeh IDP camp/Idlib in Syria, a personal dispute over the public water tap in the camp ignited other hidden tensions; soon the fighting escalated. This was not a unique incident. The spread of personal weapons in the camp, on the one hand, and the absence of a governing law, on the other, were the main reasons behind this and similar incidents. A campaign was launched by a woman activist in the camp, joined by many others, calling for “No use of weapons inside the camp”, among other calls. While it is difficult to assess the impact that the campaign had, there is a general feeling that there has been a decrease of the number of incidents involving weapons.²⁵

In some countries, the State’s relation with tribes as a result of their influence, which is often connected to the degree they are armed, undermines women’s peace and security (see more below on tribes).

25 BADAEL and Kvinna till Kvinna, “Peacebuilding defines our future now”: A study of women’s peace activism in Syria (Istanbul: Badael Foundation, 2015).

The Security Council emphasises the need for increasing women’s participation in the military and security apparatus in addition to peacekeeping.

There is no evidence that the increased participation of women in the military can lead to reducing conflicts or crimes against women during conflicts.

Women’s participation in the military does not change the fundamental paradigm that militarisation does not guarantee security. Militarisation is essentially based on violent resolution to conflicts, instead of achieving human security, respect for human rights, and preventing conflicts from occurring in the first place. In addition, the assumption that adding women to the military means that militaries become “less aggressive”, and possibly less likely to violate women’s rights, is also faulty. This relies on the stereotypical perception of women as less aggressive, more peaceful, and more tranquil. This also disregards that armies are structured around the basic drive for the need to win over the enemy. The methods and means used by the military to win are aggressive by their nature, even if they are consistent with international law, as international law does not prohibit the use of force in armed conflict but only regulates it. Therefore, adding women to military structures and systems does not change this basic doctrine.

There is even evidence that women in the military seek to prove that they are equal to men by resorting to “even more” aggressive and violent methods. Therefore, participation of women in the military can be seen as only an increased militarisation of society.²⁶



Militarisation is highly male dominated. Increased militarisation only leads to tensions and conflicts. It is during conflicts that we see increased GBV, and sexual violence used as a weapon of war. Women are the main victims during conflicts.²⁷ The region is a clear proof of that. Women are always being used as tools and weapons in conflicts. Therefore, it is not in the best interest of women to see expansion of militarisation. Representing women in the military is not the answer. Making changes to the military system by increasing the number of women in them has a very limited impact. These women become part of the system. Their ability to make breakthroughs is limited, especially that most of the time they are subordinates, and are not in decision making levels. Having women in the military but not in decision making will not result in engendering the system. Having women in the military system negates the peace and security approach, and only encourages conflict, to which women are the victims. The whole structure of the military is against gender justice.

– Based on an interview with a feminist activist, Palestine

The Security Council has not addressed situations where militarisation and armament encroach on civilian spaces.

26 See a discussion of various aspects of the issue in Women Peacemakers Program, Gender and Militarism: Analyzing the Links to Strategize for Peace (The Hague: Women Peacemakers Program, 2014).

27 Men account for the majority of those killed or directly injured in conflicts, while women disproportionately suffer from long-term secondary impacts, in addition to the direct and indirect impact on them during conflict.

Militarisation and conflict have devastating consequences on lives. However, many cases outside the framework of conflicts show that armament and expanded militarisation is encroaching on civilian spaces. This is having a devastating impact on civilians generally, and women and girls particularly.

There are multiple examples showing that armed political groups, sectarian militias and tribes all pose threats to women's peace and security. Their power largely emanates from their possession of arms, including small arms, which the State is well aware of but does not do much about, if anything at all; they are generally allowed to function without the interference of the State and threats by these groups take place with the knowledge of the State. For example, recent attacks by tribes on States' ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which were witnessed in several MENA countries, risk undermining commitments to international standards and progress towards better rights for women and girls.

There are also many examples of attacks by sectarian and opposition militias on women activists or prominent women professionals witnessed in a number of MENA countries.²⁸

Discussing the dangers of arms in the hands of religious militia, an expert interviewed for this report said:



“They are against women’s rights and women’s issues... So the more they are militarised, the larger the threat it is for women’s rights.”

– Feminist regional expert

Weakened human rights guarantees and safeguards in countries can only mean a weaker WPS Agenda at the national level. This is why it is paramount that States, the UN, and intergovernmental bodies work towards limiting the power of these groups. Disarmament is only one step in that direction.

In several countries in the region, women who are taking an active role in society have been attacked, kidnapped, or killed by these forces, who are able to do so only because of the power of their weapons.



“In areas under the control of armed religious militias or tribes, masculinity and dominance increase. This results mainly from their power, which is associated with their armament. Women’s rights are therefore violated. Women’s stereotypical roles are emphasised, and women are seen as a tool of sexual pleasure. [...] when militarisation increases, masculinity which violates women’s rights increases. Masculinity is the other face of militarisation.”

– Feminist regional expert

28 See, for example, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *We Are Still Here: Mosulite Women 500 Days After the Conclusion of the Coalition Military Operation* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2019) and Marwa Mohamed, "UN Security Council Briefing on Libya," Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, September 4, 2019, <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/peacebuilder-resource-un-security-council-briefing-libya-marwa-mohamed-09-2019/>.

The other area of concern that is starting to be witnessed is also the appointment of military personnel to local councils (for example in Syria).

The example of Egypt is another case showing that the expanded role of the military is encroaching on many aspects of civilian life with grave impact, as the military is gaining powers to control even the economy, civilian public administration, and beyond. This can only lead to increased polarisation in Egyptian society, as people become either closely connected to the power of the military, or are negatively affected by the widespread human rights violations in Egypt, also associated with the military.



“People should not have to choose to be, or not, with their own military, because at the end of the day, these are our family members, we did not hire them from another country and their main job is to defend the country at the borders.”

– Feminist activist, Egypt

Case Study: The Economic Role of the Military in Egypt

The role of the military in Egypt extends far beyond the norm. For decades, the Egyptian military has been engaging in economic activities, said to be a way of reducing the official defence budget. Since 2013, when the military took power, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a former general who became president in 2014, has relied on the military to take over major management roles in the civilian economy. Additionally, a recent law mandates the appointment of a military advisor to each provincial governor, therefore enshrining in law what had already been happening in practice: a military officer with veto power is placed alongside high-ranking civilian officials such as ministers and governors.

Accordingly, the military provides civilian markets with affordable goods, including food, and raises revenue for the state treasury. Yet, by relying on the military to compensate for the failings of civilian agencies to manage the economy, public infrastructure, and markets, analysts indicate that the government itself is weakening and marginalising those same agencies. Further, the military companies benefit from conscript labour and free access to vast tracts of government land. As a result, it is estimated that the military now manages approximately one-quarter of total government spending in housing and public infrastructure. The economic consequences are increasingly negative, because Egypt is borrowing heavily to fund these projects. Large parts of the military economic activities enjoy tax-free status, which therefore denies the country from a major revenue.

Egyptian military accounts are not shared with anyone at all—either outside or even inside Egypt. Further, no income coming into the military goes back to civilian agencies. It all goes into army funds.

The power of the army is also manifested in the import of arms. Egypt was the third largest importer of weapons in the world from 2015-2019, more than doubling its percentage of imports compared to the previous five-year period.

Sources: Yezid Sayigh, “Egypt’s Military Now Controls Much of its Economy. Is This Wise? Q&A”, Carnegie Middle East Center, 25 November 2019; and Michele Dunne, “Egypt: Trends in Politics, Economics, and Human Rights”, Testimony before U.S. House Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, 9 September 2020, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

4. The Need for New or Additional Approaches to the WPS Agenda

In light of the above, the interviews highlighted the need for the Security Council and for States to adopt additional approaches to the WPS Agenda in their bilateral and multilateral considerations.

Foreign occupations are a threat to women, peace, and security

Security Council resolutions adopted under the WPS Agenda so far do not refer to foreign occupation as a threat to peace and security. The reality of the Israeli occupation of Palestine shows that the very existence of the occupation is a threat to women's peace and security. It is an occupation by force, and in order for the occupation to maintain its continuation, it adopts a host of laws, policies, and measures touching on almost every aspect of daily lives. They are by their nature violent, obstructive to human development, contrary to human rights, and violate international law. Many such laws, policies, and practices are grave breaches to international humanitarian law, constituting war crimes or crimes against humanity. Examples include the following:

- Violent night raids of homes by Israeli forces, where people are arrested, houses are ransacked, and items stolen. This results in long-lasting psychological effects on women and their children. The purpose of night raids is to intimidate civilians as part of a systematic strategy to maintain authority. In many cases, women continue to suffer from trauma following a night raid.
- Violence by illegal Israeli settlers against Palestinians with immunity, particularly against women and children. Many Palestinian women fear their children will be injured, arrested, or killed by Israeli settlers for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Women always have to stay alert to ensure the well-being of their families. In addition, women are scared to leave their houses alone after having experienced settler attacks during both day and night.
- Soldier and settler violence, vandalism, and destruction of private property, including housing demolition, particularly in areas around illegal Israeli settlements, overburdens women with increased responsibilities, including financial ones, for members of their families.
- Due to Israeli laws and regulations, Palestinian women who live in East Jerusalem lose their temporary residency permits through a family unification procedure if the husband decides to divorce her or to remarry. If her children have a Jerusalem identification card, and remain with the father, women will no longer be able to live in the same city as their children, or even visit them. If a woman is a victim of violence in the household, they will be reluctant to go to the Israeli authorities for fear of being forcibly transferred outside East Jerusalem and losing their children's custody.²⁹

29 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Palestinian Women Under Prolonged Israeli Occupation: The Gendered Impact of Occupation Violence (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2020), <https://www.wilpf.org/report-release-palestinian-women-under-prolonged-israeli-occupation-the-gendered-impact-of-occupation-violence/>.

The need for emphasis on the role of civil society organisations and WHRDs and mitigating the risks they face

The approach of the Security Council to the role of civil society organisations and WHRDs is very limited. The Security Council recognises only very limited aspects of the work of CSOs, with a focus on service delivery and work on women's participation. It affirms the need to consult organisations in post-conflict settings, including for management of humanitarian assistance. It particularly calls for provision of assistance to organisations that provide services to victims of sexual violence, as well as to organisations that work on promoting women's participation.

As presented in the introduction of this document, the work of civil society organisations is much wider and more diverse than this limited approach. Civil society organisations work on aspects of all the pillars of the agenda during different periods, which extend from peace time to conflict to peace-making and post-conflict reconstruction. They work at the local and national levels, as well as working outside their country of origin, with migrant and refugee communities. It is very important that the Security Council recognises this diversity of the work of civil society organisations and calls for its continued support.



“It is not only our work that is being targeted but also us as human beings and persons. We're targeted in our personal lives. They are using our families to pressure us.”

– Feminist activist

Further, feminist activists and WHRDs in general often work in circumstances that are risky to their physical and psychological safety. In addition to that, there is the added challenge that women's rights may not be accepted culturally, socially, or politically. Because of their increased visibility, and the fact that they often challenge societal, political, and customary norms that question masculinity and patriarchal structures, feminist activists are at increased risk of harm. In several countries, many of these women who gained prominence have been killed, injured, attacked or continue to be under constant threat. Many feminist activists routinely face attacks on their reputation, social standing, and morals.

These risks are increased in many countries, even outside contexts of conflicts, by armed non-state actors (in the form of political militias or armed political parties), or the presence of customary clans and tribes.

Local women's organisations also highlight the importance of working on protection, economic empowerment, and awareness raising. A feminist from Yemen states that initially, they focussed mainly on the participation of women in peacebuilding.



“Now we are adding the protection aspect because of the insecure and fragile conflict situation in which our partners work. Our partners risk their lives and receive threats on a daily basis.”

– Feminist activist, Yemen

Another feminist from Syria says that:



“Initially we were focussing on participation in general, but then we started realising that you cannot have participation without protection, without economic empowerment, without knowledge. So we started working on these issues slowly. Then we discovered the WPS Agenda, and discovered that there was an intersection between our work and the Agenda.”

– Feminist activist, Syria

Later in the interview she clarified that when she talks about protection, she also means security for women.

Feminists in Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine who were interviewed stressed the importance of the protection aspect of the agenda, and that this is becoming a priority for their work. They also noted that while they have programmes and support for addressing issues related to protection, the need is huge and requires more international attention.

Feminist activists report being threatened and attacked even in relation to their engagement with the UN Security Council. There are reports of hacking, or attempts to hack bank accounts, email, and social media. This is a concern for them. One activist said:



“You develop paranoia working in this field.”

– Feminist activist, Yemen

Security Council Resolution 2493 (2019) makes marked progress in that it recognises that civil society organisations are facing many restrictions by States. It strongly encourages States “to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors, and those who protect and promote human rights, to carry out their work independently and without undue interference, including in situations of armed conflict, and to address threats, harassment, violence and hate speech against them.”³⁰ This is a very important recognition that should continue to be stressed.

The Security Council also needs to stress the importance of protection of women human rights defenders from attacks by armed groups. It also needs to recognise the intimidation and acts of reprisal that women human rights defenders and feminist activists face from States and armed groups when engaging with the WPS Agenda, various human rights mechanisms, and other UN bodies, including the Security Council itself.³¹

In February 2020, Security Council members organised an Arria-formula meeting on reprisals against women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders who engage with the Security Council and

30 United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2493 (2019): Adopted by the Security Council at its 8649th meeting, on 29 October 2019,” October 29, 2019, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/339/37/PDF/N1933937.pdf?OpenElement>.

31 See regular reports of the UN Secretary-General on intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders.

its subsidiary bodies.³² This is a welcomed step. The Security Council now needs to translate these discussions into practical recommendations. It must ensure that the UN system adopts measures that facilitate the participation of women human rights defenders and protects them.

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“It is time for the SC to take the situation of HRDs seriously, and consider it within the WPS agenda.”

– Feminist activist

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda must be understood to apply in all settings and at all times

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“Peace here means for a person to live in a secure manner, so that they are not threatened all the time by their neighbours, by the police, and by the community because of who they are... If people are not safe in their houses, they will never be safe in the streets.”

– Feminist activist, Egypt

Threats to women’s peace and security are not limited to conflict and post-conflict settings. There are often many conditions that put women and girls at risk: political tension or polarisation; armed tribes, clans, and militias; weak rule of law; weak institutions; customs and beliefs associated with gender, masculinity, and stereotypical roles of women and girls; male entitlement, including sexual entitlement; and many other such factors that exist in peacetime and continue during conflict.

Therefore, peacetime is an important period when States can develop their capacities for prevention, protection, and participation. Laws, policies, and institutions can be put in place to foster prevention, and enable fast and adequate protection when needed. Participation during peacetime in running public affairs, in political parties, and in institutions is essential, and it will also foster and enable participation of women, when needed, for peace building.

Women and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Threat to Peace and Security

Interviewees stressed the need to understand and use women, peace and security frameworks in all kinds of emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women powerfully illustrates the point.

The current situation under the pandemic highlights that women are experiencing increased violence and threats to their socio-economic independence, and illustrates the importance of participation of women in process, design of programmes, and in decision-making. Without this, the resulting solutions are proving not to be gender responsive.

32 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 2020), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/239/52/PDF/G2023952.pdf?OpenElement>.

In their efforts to deal with the crisis, governments did not consult adequately with women's groups, despite the evidence of increased violence and the disproportionate negative impact of the crisis on women. This has resulted in programmes that fail women and their needs. For example, governments did not adequately address the need for measures to prevent and protect women from violence, despite the evidence that women are reluctant to leave the home to report cases of violence, for fear of stigmatisation and risking exposing themselves to their community.

Another important aspect that this situation highlighted is the importance of State investment in services for fulfilling people's human rights. Problems with health systems were evident and affected people from different classes and backgrounds, as the State continued to have low investment in health while investing in militarisation.

The evidence also shows that the lack of targeted programmes and policies, developed for women, with women and by women, backfired and led to relegating women to the household, therefore negating years of work and slow gains.

The class dimension of the WPS Agenda

“Feminisation of poverty” has a particular meaning and impact in the context of conflict and insecurity and the way they impact women. In normal times, access to economic resources is often important to facilitate access to services and institutions for health, education, and so on. Women's marginalisation in the labour market (see above), the burdens of care duties, as well as their limited access to assets and property, exacerbated by discriminatory inheritance and labour laws, places women in a position of economic vulnerability and increases their marginalisation. This is perpetuated by systematic and structural patriarchal practices prevalent in both the private and the public spheres. This is illustrated clearly in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women.

Feminisation of Poverty Resulting from COVID-19

A WILPF report on the impact of COVID-19 in MENA revealed the economic impact of the pandemic on women.³³ Key findings included:

“Low-income households, women heads of households, women survivors of domestic violence, and women working in the informal economy without social protection were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and by inadequate governmental responses to it.”

“Additionally, the absence of economic security and basic welfare measures has threatened women as they were the first to be subjected to arbitrary dismissal with the onset of the pandemic, particularly in the service sectors where women represent the majority of workers in MENA countries.”

“Governments, according to partner organisations, have failed to properly respond to the mounting pressure on healthcare and social support systems by favouring continuity of business and economic activities over the livelihood and safety of the most vulnerable groups.”

“The increase in rates of poverty and unemployment, the dire living conditions of women and families, [and] inflation and currency fluctuations [are] among other key markers of the increasingly dire impacts of the government's lack of response to the needs of vulnerable populations.”

33 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, COVID-19 and Gender Justice.

“The government's responses furthered the feminisation of poverty, with grave and disproportionate burdens and impacts on women. Enforced lockdown measures by governments cannot be endured by many groups, namely women heads of households and those engaged in subsistence or informal work to support their families. Additionally, the absence of economic security and basic welfare measures has threatened women as they were the first to be subjected to arbitrary dismissal with the onset of the pandemic, particularly in the service sectors where women represent the majority of workers in MENA countries.”

Therefore, it is important to address economic standing of individuals as well as structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty and classism.

Violence against women and girls was referred to as an area that illustrates class dimensions of the WPS Agenda. While violence occurs everywhere, across classes and all kinds of backgrounds, women from different classes seem to have different reactions to violence.



“It is important to reflect on how each class is facing the different forms of violence, why [women in upper classes] are not reporting, why have they been silent for all these years? How is this also reflected with the middle or lower classes or less privileged people. It is important to take class into account in analysing how the state is responding.”

– Feminist activist, Egypt

Resource allocation by States also influences which women are able to report violence and how those reports are responded to. For example, resource allocation determines the availability and accessibility of goods, services, and infrastructure in different communities, including schools, hospitals, clinics, police stations, and other such institutions. The ways in which State institutions interact with people also differs based on class. This brings up questions such as: do the police react to a complaint of rape from a woman from the upper middle class the same way that they react to a complaint by a woman from a less privileged background? Do institutions and providers of services treat people equally regardless of class? And are services and rights equally available and accessible?

Despite class determinants, it is important to stress that agency of women and girls is not limited or associated to their class or financial means.

Harmony between the WPS Agenda and the Security Council deliberations on country situations

Nine of the ten WPS UNSCRs speak directly to the Security Council's commitment to incorporate WPS UNSCRs in country-specific mandates. Therefore, while the WPS Agenda is a cross-cutting agenda relating to the UNSC's broader mandate of maintaining international peace and security, it must also relate to women in a specifically localised way if it is to achieve its aims. Incorporating WPS UNSCR commitments into country-specific mandates is therefore essential and serves this purpose.

Security Council resolutions under the WPS Agenda incorporate a number of commitments for various actors responsible for their implementation, including the Security Council itself and States. A study by WILPF and London School of Economics (LSE) analysing the commitments under the WPS Agenda and country resolutions related to Libya, Syria, Yemen, and DRC found that while it is expected that these commitments are reflected by the Security Council itself in its own country resolutions, this in fact is largely not happening. Further, it found that the UN Security Council does not receive the information it should receive on the status and implementation of the WPS Agenda in the UN Secretary-General's reporting on country-specific situations, and from envoys, missions and representatives. Further, the study asserts that women take risks to provide the UN Security Council with accurate information on the agenda items for which they brief. It is expected that this information should be reflected in the UN Security Council's resolutions and actions. However, it seems that it is not.³⁴

The need for a new approach for accountability

Interviewees have repeatedly expressed concern that the WPS Agenda is not linked to an accountability system. States are encouraged to develop National Action Plans (NAPs) and to submit voluntary reports. However, these are not examined thoroughly the same way that State reports to the UN human rights system are. On their part, UN human rights mechanisms, especially CEDAW, are increasingly calling for States to report on the implementation of the WPS Agenda. But States do not necessarily respond or provide concrete information that allows for proper examination.

The Security Council must develop accountability for implementation of NAPs. In the Middle East, there are now NAPs in Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Yemen. There are now steps towards developing NAPs in several MENA countries, including Sudan, Egypt, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is essential that NAPs are realistic, and they must receive financial, technical, and human support so that they are implemented, including through international assistance. It is also essential that NAPs are reviewed regularly, with the full inclusion of civil society in the process.

It seems that interest in developing NAPs is not always necessarily because of commitments to the WPS Agenda. Rather, it may reflect interest in implementing international commitments to show that the State is in harmony with the international community and its expectations. In that connection, it was observed that in some countries, the NAP is linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which may be reflective of a perception that this is an exercise of international relations. Therefore, the question is to what extent do NAPs actually create change at the national level? It was also observed that developing the NAPs and their implementation is closely linked to National Women's Machineries (NWMs), as is the case in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and Tunisia. This therefore highlights one of the aspects of the importance of the role of NWMs in the WPS Agenda.

There is a repeated complaint that UN envoys, representatives, and missions engage with women and women's organisations only occasionally, in an unorganised and unsystematic way. This is resulting in briefings from these bodies to the Security Council that lack depth or gendered analysis. Consultation between UN envoys, representatives, and other such bodies with CSOs and feminist groups must be under regular scrutiny to ensure that consultations are meaningful and effective. Envoys and representatives must also profusely promote the effective participation of women with parties to peace negotiations.

34 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, *Where are the Words?* (Geneva: WILPF and LSE, 2020), https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-WILPF-LSE_Web.pdf.

A new approach to international assistance and partnership

Working with international partners must be based on their understanding of local issues, needs, and priorities, specifically in relation to women's experiences, which are rooted in local realities and contexts. It is important that this understanding is developed by listening directly to the experiences of women's organisations on the ground about their work and the ways in which international partnerships can help facilitate it. There is also a need to think beyond the short-term response to urgent needs. Assistance should not be approached in a compartmentalised manner whereby pillars of the WPS Agenda are supported separately. Assistance must emphasise interconnectivity in approach and outcome of supporting the WPS Agenda.

Donors must provide partners with the funds that will allow them to focus on carrying out their work creatively. This will require provision of core funding, rather than project-based funding and flexibility in reporting. This unrestricted funding will enable organisations to work on the WPS Agenda according to priorities they identify, and not according to priorities that are predefined by donors. Further, the WPS Agenda often relates to areas of work that are moving and changing quickly. Core funding will enable organisations to adjust and respond to this reality, while project funding keeps organisations trapped on issues that may become less of a priority in a rapidly shifting context.

WILPF's experiences and lessons acquired from past work indicate a number of fundamental points relating to the relationship between funders and recipient partners:

- The donor-led funding environment, with its restrictive and highly politicised funding policies, has proven to be inaccessible for many organisations. This has resulted in rigid and top-down approaches, making it difficult for feminist agendas to be prioritised or maintained. Therefore, flexible funding is essential in order to alleviate financial pressures, allow CSOs to focus on their individual organisational needs and subsequently support them in furthering their feminist agendas, paving the way for increased time and resources to sustain their activities and programmes.
- Feminist organisations want to be able to set and develop their agendas according to locally defined priorities and needs, and develop and maintain networks of collaboration and support. They want to take small risks that could lead to ground-breaking and daring initiatives for social and political change.
- It is important that funding is combined with tailored technical support, the focus of which is to be decided by the partners through a thorough and individualised capacity assessment process.
- Clear and ongoing communication that is based on mutual respect and understanding is essential. It is important that the funders understand the local context and see it through the eyes of partner organisations, and not come with preconceived views.

It is important that funders support efforts for coordination, mutual learning, opportunities to connect and share experiences and achievements, and opportunities for training. These can be incorporated into projects or supported separately.³⁵

35 See Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "WILPF Partners With 19 Syrian Feminist Organisations in Pilot Project," June 4, 2018, <https://www.wilpf.org/wilpf-partners-with-19-syrian-feminist-organisations-in-pilot-project/>.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no need for new resolutions affirming the previous normative framework. The current resolutions are adequate. There is a need for a new approach to the WPS Agenda by the Security Council, all the systems and bodies of the UN, as well as States and regional bodies.

The WPS Agenda needs to be recalibrated. Women are active agents of change in all aspects related to the WPS Agenda, which requires their participation in all efforts, processes, and institutions.

Women's human rights cannot be separated from peace and security concerns. Therefore, there is a need to expand the collective understanding of women, peace, and security. It should not be understood to be linked only to conflict settings; other types of threats to women's peace and security must continuously be considered by States. Consequently, the Security Council must stress that the WPS Agenda relates to all States at all times, and call on States to take steps and adopt measures as soon as they can, starting in times of peace.

The reduction of the WPS Agenda in many countries of the Global North to a set of recommendations and possible funding that they bring to the Global South strips the Agenda of its meaning and purpose. The Agenda is as relevant to countries of the North as it is to countries of the South; it is as relevant to countries in conflict as it is to countries that are not in conflict. An important aspect of the relevance of the WPS Agenda to countries in the Global North is that most of the weapons that are causing and enabling conflicts in the Global South are produced by the North and sold to countries of the South or to armed groups in these countries, where most of the world's conflicts are taking place.

Therefore, the WPS Agenda must be understood in a holistic way in order to effectively encompass and address different crises, as the COVID-19 crisis has shown, and to deal with root causes and enablers of conflict. Therefore, the WPS Agenda must be taken seriously by all states.

The WPS Agenda and the Global North

This prevailing misconception is apparent in the outward-facing National Action Plans (NAPs) of Global North countries, who, as pointed out by representatives from WILPF Sections in the Global North, often consider themselves as peaceful nations. By the end of 2019, 21% (18 out of 86) of NAPs ... focused on implementing WPS outside of the given country's border where a NAP was adopted. Pointing at the heavy external emphasis of the country's NAP, a representative from WILPF Australia, for instance, stated that "Australia did WPS to others." In other words, the country focussed on implementing the WPS Agenda internationally, without paying attention to what could have been done at the domestic level or thinking about the interlinkages of the two domains. Likewise, a representative from WILPF Denmark pointed to the country's NAP focused on "helping" women in Afghanistan, and added that "they [the Danish government] didn't ask the women what they wanted," ignoring the fact that "there are women's organisations that [already] work with women in Afghanistan." This outward-facing approach to implementing the WPS Agenda perpetuates a neocolonial framework of intervention, with Global North countries coming to the rescue of Global South countries to solve their supposed problems. This approach also fails to account for the role of some Global North countries in contributing to these supposed problems through long-standing colonial pasts and legacies, including global capitalism ...

In implementing Resolution 1325, states must remember that the domestic, foreign, and transnational policies are intricately connected, with political implications for the lives of women within and across borders as well as for civil society members working towards the implementation of Resolution 1325... The WPS Agenda should not be seen as a foreign policy and development tool alone. Instead, States should also utilise the WPS framework to promote and advance peace and gender equality domestically.³⁶

Participation is clearly a cross-cutting issue. It is not a stand-alone pillar. Participation in various areas and issues, in various institutions, in different forms and fora, at different times, and despite all challenges, enables women's resilience and is a mark of great strength.

Women's participation must be strengthened long before conflicts and internal fragility begin. It is only when women's participation becomes normalised in peacetime that their participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building becomes possible and meaningful. Therefore, the Security Council must adopt and recommend to States an inclusive women's participation agenda through broad reform programmes. This must not focus only on participation in negotiations or emphasise leadership positions at the expense of wider participation.

A commitment to a women's empowerment agenda by States can tremendously accelerate its adoption in society at large. The inclusion of women's political representation in the national agenda paves the way for wider acceptance of women's participation. It is therefore essential that various factors, when combined, are established in order to lead to an overall environment favourable of women's public participation and representation. Reform of legislation, especially the personal status law, towards eliminating inequalities and discrimination in the private sphere can positively impact women's political participation and representation. This requires political will to introduce changes.

Funding must be made available to support feminist agendas, and not just programmes for women. This includes locally defined programmes for advancing women's participation, and providing support to women leaders who are working at the community, national, and international levels to advance a feminist agenda.

36 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years.

Political parties, trade unions, and other such bodies must include more women in their leadership, including through requirements imposed by law and through incentives. Political parties and trade unions must also adopt gender sensitive processes, approaches, and practices and be held accountable for failing to sustain them.

The reality remains that feminist activists, women human rights defenders, and women taking an active role at various levels face multiple challenges. Working across dispersed localities also presents other challenges, including if they are working on sensitive or controversial issues – such as refugee or IDP rights.

Militarisation and armament simply have devastating impacts on women and girls during peacetime and in conflict. They foster masculinity that oppresses women's rights. They are used in and facilitate crimes, including gender-based violence.

Support to Civil Society Organisations

It is very important that the Security Council, States, and organisations recognise and support roles of women during peacetime, including in legislative reform, promoting participation and representation of women, prevention of conflicts, and efforts of national conciliation, as well as furthering feminist spaces, agendas, and education.

The Security Council must recognise all threats that feminist organisations and activists face, whether such threats are through policies and actions by States, or by armed groups and customary tribes. The Security Council must continue to call on States to ensure and respect an enabling environment for CSOs.

The Security Council must institutionalise systematic mechanisms and opportunities for CSOs and briefers to convey their localised and gendered analysis of developments, whenever it convenes to discuss issues pertaining to women, peace, and security, as well as in relation to country-specific situations. The Security Council must, therefore, set up tangible mechanisms to employ their recommendations and nurture a culture of accountability.

To facilitate this, the Security Council must establish a system to protect and support organisations and individuals involved.

This type of engagement with local CSOs must be long-term and sustained, rather than a one-off event. For this to happen and succeed, CSOs must be enabled and supported financially and logistically. This includes support by States and the international community.

There is a need to support assistance programmes for survivors of sexual violence through the provision of flexible funds and ensuring access to affected areas. UN missions must coordinate with CSOs working in this field to raise capacities and contribute to ensuring security for these initiatives.

International partners and donors must base their funding on understanding the specifics of women's local experiences, and they must rely on grassroots actors to define those experiences. Funding must allow for flexibility to react to the priorities of the WPS Agenda, ensure long-term security for organisations and their programmes and projects, and simplicity in reporting, recognising that often, success and outcome cannot and must not be attributed to one organisation alone. It is often a result of collective effort over a long period of time. This will require provision

of core funding, rather than project-based. Funding must also be complimented with technical assistance, training, and support that are contextualised, locally informed, and built with systemic involvement of those who will use them.

There is a great need for support for projects geared towards economic recovery for individuals and collectively, and not only for humanitarian aid. Grassroots actors must be involved in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of humanitarian aid projects, and in establishing accountability frameworks for these initiatives.

Militarisation and armament

The Security Council must address the root causes of violence and militarisation in its deliberations, and not only their effects. In doing so, the Security Council must consider the socio-economic, political and other needs of civilians in general and women and girls in particular, in order to prevent conflicts.

The Security Council must address the problem of diversion of State resources towards militarisation at the expense of the needs of the population. Budgets must be reoriented away from weapons and military apparatus and directed towards the critical needs of women. For that, States must be called on by the Security Council to respect and fulfil their obligations under international law, particularly international human rights law, and allocate the needed resources for that.

It is essential that the Security Council and other UN bodies continue to link human rights-based analysis and concerns with arms control and disarmament efforts.

Foreign occupation

It is paramount that the Security Council refers explicitly in its resolutions and deliberations to “occupation” as one of the situations, like conflicts, that threaten women’s peace and security.

The international community of intergovernmental bodies and states must hold the Israeli occupation accountable for its crimes and other violations under international law committed against Palestinian women, which threaten their peace and security. The Israeli occupation must be recognised as a threat to Palestinian women’s peace and security.

Accountability

The UN and States must adopt a human rights-driven approach to the WPS Agenda, reflective of international commitments and legal obligations, and accountability.

The Security Council must utilise UN human rights mechanisms and call on States to report on their commitments under the WPS Agenda to the UN human rights mechanisms in order to allow for specialised and independent scrutiny.

The Security Council and the UN Secretary-General must ensure a robust accountability for the UN envoys and Representatives in delivering their responsibilities. The UN Secretary-General’s envoys and representatives must engage in regular, systematic, genuine and meaningful consultations with feminists and feminist groups.

This policy brief adopts a feminist lens in reviewing the existent UNSC framework on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the MENA region.

It analyses the adequacy of existing measures, and focuses on bridging its gaps and limitations.

It is designed to serve as a tool for policy dialogue on the WPS agenda, to help identify the national WPS priorities and facilitate an exchange to take stock of the existence, effectiveness, and results of legislation, policies, institutions and programmes to address and advance WPS priorities.



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