

Report from online meeting on Women, Peace, and Security

October 16, 2023



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Report

On October 16th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa convened an online meeting to discuss the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, considering recent regional trends and developments. The meeting gathered a group of prominent experts from the MENA region, Europe, and Canada, representing diverse sectors such as academia, civil society, international organizations, and public sector.

The participants had originally been invited to a Regional Policy Forum on Women, Peace, and Security which was supposed to take place on the 16th–17th of October in Beirut, organized by the Issam Fares Institute (IFI) at AUB, UN Women, and other partners. Due to the regional developments after October 7th the forum was postponed until 2024.

The meeting was opened by Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Dialogue Institute, who acknowledged the tragedies of the ongoing conflicts in the region and stressed the need to maintain dialogues during these challenging times. She also emphasized the crucial importance of applying an appropriate WPS response to conflicts, highlighting women's vital roles and the centrality of the protection pillar.

Recent regional developments

The meeting began with some analytical reflections on the regional developments and their implications for the geopolitical landscape. After a period of de-escalation, including the Saudi-Iranian detente, there was a distinct shift following the October 7th terrorist attacks and the outbreak of war that had significantly altered the dynamics. Analysts pointed to the risks of the conflict theatre spreading beyond Gaza and a possible regional escalation. The persistent nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was highlighted, and participants said that the lack of resolution of the conflict and the absence of a just and sustainable peace will continue to have serious consequences for the region and for the whole world. They also underlined that this was a completely unprecedented situation for the region, with global reverberations.

Several participants pointed to “a growing gap between the Global South and the Global North”. They criticized the international system's failure to halt numerous conflicts, expressed disappointment in the application of international law, and argued for an urgent need to rethink the existing multilateral systems.

The role of civil society and concern over the shrinking civic space

While women's prominent role in the context of civil society was highlighted, participants expressed serious concerns in the face of shrinking civic spaces, pointing to women facing increasing threats and gender-based violence (GBV), which in turn creates an environment where essential voices are restrained, participation is undermined, and societal advancement is hindered.

Participants underscored a need for supporting movement building, particularly in countries affected by conflict. Grassroots initiatives and wider movements advocating for

the WPS agenda are repeatedly met with severe opposition, and women champions of equality and peace frequently face backlash and threats. At the same time, these initiatives often prove effective at a local level and play key roles in mediation and in addressing grassroots needs. Participants argued that the challenging and complex landscape highlights a need for a profound shift in attitudes towards conflict resolution, moving away from winning wars, towards a focus on ending them. This way of thinking would support a better understanding of how war affects people and would encourage enhanced cooperation in effectively building sustainable peace, which honors and upholds human dignity and rights.

Several participants highlighted the significance of integrating marginalized voices in peacebuilding. They also underscored that all future forums and other meetings on the WPS agenda in the MENA region should address the particular challenges for women living under occupation, as well as the situation for other marginalized groups in conflict contexts. Including firsthand experiences from marginalized groups in such meetings is essential for shaping informed and effective policies and strategies.

Another issue raised was funding, where one participant highlighted the disproportionate funding directed towards militarization, while limited funding goes to supporting conflict-impacted regions in the Global South.

Stressing the implementation of the WPS agenda

Throughout the discussions, participants engaged in a rich exchange of perspectives, delving into the complexities of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and its implementation in light of recent regional developments. They called for a comprehensive reevaluation of peace strategies and for enhanced efforts to develop inclusive and sustainable processes.

Central to the discussions was a unanimous recognition of the critical role of women's comprehensive participation within all societal frameworks and on all levels of peacebuilding processes. Several participants expressed concern over women's involvement still being limited, in particular in more formal settings, such as in decision-making and around negotiating tables.

Another prominent issue concerned the National Action Plans (NAPs) and their role for the implementation of the WPS agenda. A civil society participant pointed out that civil society organizations and feminist groups often are sidelined in the formulation of National Action Plans, which consequently leads to lack of grounded implementation.

Furthermore, some participants pointed to a lack of accountability surrounding the implementation of the National Action Plans. They expressed concern over hesitancy among governmental bodies to seriously pursue these action plans, an unwillingness often rooted in a reluctance to redistribute power within societal and political hierarchies. These challenges underscored an urgent need to enhance advocacy strategies, creating incentives, and building a compelling case for the broader societal and governance improvements that can be achieved through genuine commitment to the WPS objectives.

Key takeaways

Some of the key elements brought up by participants included:

- ❖ **Inclusive participation:** Ensuring women's active and meaningful involvement across all facets of society is fundamental to realizing the full potential of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Current limitations on women's roles, particularly in decision-making, undermine comprehensive progress.
- ❖ **Shrinking civic space:** The shrinking civic space leads to diminishing avenues for women to engage within civil society and poses a threat to democratic principles and broader societal development. Addressing the hostilities and barriers that women face is critical.
- ❖ **Integrating marginalized voices:** Several participants underscored that all future forums and other discussions on the WPS agenda in the MENA region must address the particular challenges for women living under occupation, as well as those of other marginalized groups in conflict contexts. Their firsthand experiences are essential for shaping informed, effective policies and strategies.
- ❖ **Importance of movement building:** The essential work at the grassroots level was stressed as pivotal for conflict resolution and for the dissemination of WPS principles, especially within nations affected by conflict. However, the significant risks that women face necessitate comprehensive support structures, ensuring their safety and their possibility to continue advocacy work.
- ❖ **Multilateral system reevaluation:** There is a need to reevaluate the multilateral system as well as to reassess and modify strategies to ensure effective mitigation of conflicts and a strengthened implementation of the WPS agenda in an evolving geopolitical landscape.
- ❖ **Paradigm shift in conflict resolution:** A fundamental change in perspective is needed, moving from a mentality of winning wars to one dedicated to ending them. This approach underscores the importance of sustainable peace strategies, prioritizing human rights and long-term societal stability over temporary military victories.
- ❖ **Accountability in NAPs:** The effectiveness of National Action Plans (NAPs) is hindered by a lack of genuine commitment to their implementation, often stemming from governmental reluctance to alter existing power structures. Advocacy efforts should be intensified, highlighting incentives in terms of societal and governmental benefits that sincere implementation of the WPS agenda can bring.