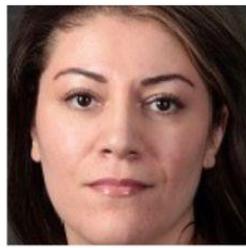


STORIES THAT MATTER
Women's Empowerment in MENA Region
Second edition | 24 January 2023



Summary

The European External Action Service (EEAS) - the Middle East and North Africa Department and the SG Gender and Diversity team- in collaboration with the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa organized a webinar on women's rights and participation in the MENA region, on 24 January 2023.

The webinar was titled "*Stories that matter*" and was attended by about some hundred participants, mainly from the EU Institutions and EU Members States, as well as from other international organizations and from civil society working on gender equality. It aimed at deepening the understanding regarding challenges that women face in their social, economic, and political empowerment. The discussions focused on the importance of inclusivity in incorporating the diverse voices in society – both men and women - to be part of the analysis, of programs, and of policy development and decision-making.

The webinar featured a diverse panel of eminent speakers from the region, all engaged in the fields of gender equality, and women's rights and participation. The panelists were *Hoda Elsadda* from Egypt (Professor in comparative literature and the co-founder of the Women and Memory Forum), *Dr. Sara Bazoobandi* from Iran (Marie Curie fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies), *Mr. Fadi Zaghmout* from Jordan (author and gender activist), *Ms. Asma Khalifa* from Libya (activist and researcher with focus on human rights, women's rights and youth empowerment), and *Ms. Majd Mashharawi* from Palestine (entrepreneur from Gaza).

The session was moderated by Ambassador Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa. It was opened by a video message by the Secretary-General of EEAS, Stefano Sannino, and hosted by Rosamaria Gili, Deputy Director for MENA and Head of Maghreb Division, EEAS.

Key recommendations from the meeting included:

- Continue support to gender equality and a rights-based agenda, as part of a wider effort in support of human rights and good governance in society
- Make efforts to create more inclusive processes, offering equal opportunities for women and men to take full part in all spheres of society.
- Ensure that women voices are regularly heard in international relevant bodies by policymakers, at all levels.
- Support initiatives, alliances and networks that fosters exchange and change towards gender equality.
- Make greater efforts to involve more men in gender equality programs.
- Sharpen the arguments on benefits for the whole society of greater gender equality and expand the outreach to parties that are not convinced that gender equality and women's participation can bring positive and tangible change.
- Invest more in arts and culture, as ways of unlocking change and contributing to civic engagement. Further work is also needed in integrating gender equality at an early age, for example as part of the educational system, through school curricula, in textbooks, etc.

Detailed report

In a brief opening remark, the moderator of the event, Ambassador Charlotta Sparre (Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for Middle East and North Africa), reminded participants of the MENA region's complexity and diversity. She underlined that while half of the population are women, their voices are often seriously under-represented in policy development and in decision making. Advancements have been achieved in recent years, but challenges persist on many fronts - legal, political, economic, and societal. She argued that gender equality is a win-win for men and women and that a society only can prosper if women and girls have equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities, and when they can fully participate. Sparre highlighted that gender equality is a core value of EU and she stressed that more work is needed to achieve inclusivity.

In a **video message, the Secretary-General of the EEAS, Mr. Stefano Sannino**, highlighted the global momentum towards gender equality, while noting that gender inequality is prevalent all over the world. He reminded that the COVID 19 pandemic as well as the Russian aggression on Ukraine has further increased economic and social inequalities, that particularly is affecting women and girls. Consequently, he noted that in 2020 the gender global gap index, estimated the gender gap to be closed in 100 years, but now - in 2023 - it is estimated to take 132 years. The Secretary-General strongly stressed EU's commitment to gender equality both inside the European Union and abroad, including in the MENA region. He highlighted that the EU work includes tackling crucial areas, such as enhancing women's participation, fighting gender-based violence, and supporting women's economic and social rights. He welcomed the webinar and its focus on incorporating the voices of inspiring actor of women and men who work for a "*world of equality*".

The Secretary General's video message was followed by **welcoming remarks by Ms. Rosamaria Gili, Deputy to the Director for MENA and Head of Maghreb Division at the EEAS**. She stressed the importance of exploring how different actors can better work together, to address obstacles, and identify ways to overcome them. She further highlighted that the EU is a long-standing defender of women's rights and gender equality worldwide. Supporting women's empowerment and gender equality has long been a pillar of the Southern Neighborhood policy and is now part of the reinforced dialogue and cooperation with the Gulf partners. Ms. Rosamaria Gili reminded participants of the challenges to gender equality also in Europe. In the MENA region the EU supports work at country and regional level to address structural challenges. She pointed to most recent EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) as the most comprehensive framework on gender equality to date, addressing crucial areas, such as enhancing women's participation, fighting gender-based violence, the green transition and the digital age, and women's social and economic rights. She underscored that EEAS commitment is part of a wider EU engagement for rule of law, democracy, good governance - in creating an enabling environment for both women and men alike.

After the presentations by the EU officials the moderator, Ambassador Charlotta Sparre, introduced the speakers and reminded participants of the importance of listening to voices of both men and women.

The diverse panel included eminent speakers from different part of the MENA region, all engaged in the fields of gender equality, and women's rights and participation. The panelists¹ were *Dr. Hoda Elsadda* from Egypt, (professor in comparative literature and the co-founder of the 'Women and Memory Forum'), *Dr. Sara Bazoobandi* from Iran (Marie Curie fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies), *Mr. Fadi Zaghmout* from Jordan (author and gender activist), *Ms. Asma Khalifa* from Libya (activist and researcher with focus on human rights, women's rights and youth empowerment), and *Ms. Majd Mashharawi* from Palestine (entrepreneur from Gaza).

Takeaways from the panelist and the discussion

The panellists were first asked what brought them to an interest and engagement in gender equality, women's rights, and participation:

Hoda Elsadda's interest and engagement, was sparked when she as young student developed a growing awareness of societal injustices. Literature by and about women had also opened her eyes to the stories and lives of women. **Sara Bazoobandi** described how experiences in her private life as a young girl in Iran had exposed her to discriminatory family laws and how she later, as a student and young professional had experienced limited access to certain educational areas and to internship opportunities being conditioned of adhering to compulsory attire. **Fadi Zaghmout** shared how he as a young man from the region had started blogging in 2006 when the then new "freedoms" on social media made it possible to communicate more freely about former taboo topics, such as sexual rights. **Asma Khalifa's** interest was ignited due to personal circumstances, being from indigenous North African 'Amazigh' background and discovering the challenges of being from a minority group. She had also found inspiration to engage in human rights, women's rights and minority rights by reading literature about courageous people who fought for what they believed in. **Majd Masharawi** had ever since childhood a drive for change and of helping others, in light of growing up in a Gaza *"where we lacked basically everything, let a lone human rights and women's right on all levels"*.

Their answers were as diverse as their respective backgrounds and yet they all had in common an early discovery of injustices and discrimination, that motivated them to engage for change.

In the following conversation, the panelists shared experiences and reflections.

¹ See bios with more information annexed.

Dr. Hoda Elsadda, who has played a leading role for promoting interdisciplinary women's studies in the Arab world, reflected on key challenges, and preventing factors facing gender equality in region. She dismantled the argument that "culture prevents gender equality" and underlined that the challenges facing women are political, not cultural. Culture is dynamic and constantly changes. The "cultural argument" has just been used as an excuse for not taking political decisions to change power structures. She also informed about the [Women and Memory Forum](#) that produces feminist knowledge to combat cultural perceptions regarding gender and women's role. Dr. Hoda noted that the beginning of women's movements in the Arab world in the 19th century witnessed different changes on liberation rights, especially in the 50's and 70's, when countries stepped away from colonialism, where women were granted some rights and freedoms that reflected in the public sphere, however rights in the private sphere; the family sphere were not obtained, and this continues to be the issue in MENA, as women are still viewed as legal minors. She added that some countries in the MENA region as Tunisia and Morocco have managed to create the space for conducive change, that were political not culture. Hoda concluded that the notion of "empowerment" assumes a lack of agency in women, which is not the case. Women are active and have clear ideas about their demands. What is missing is rather spaces that enable their voices.

In light of recent developments in Iran, **Dr. Sara Bazoobandi**, who comes from Iran but currently lives in Europe, reflected on the current situation with a mix of a legitimacy crisis for the regime and a fragile socioeconomic situation in the country – and where women's participation in labour force is only 10-20%. She underlined that the marginalization of women and the structural barriers, which deprives Iranian women from access to equal socio-economic opportunities, takes various forms, e.g. depriving women from certain areas of university majors as medicine and engineering, through government-imposed quotas. She emphasized on the government's decades long policies that are aimed at presenting a certain role model for Iranian women under the Islamic Republic. As a result, women are being pushed out of socio-economic and political realms in Iran, even the image of women and girls are wiped out in recent years from the school textbook covers. On a brighter side, she stated that interest in gender equality issues has been increasing, as women have been in the forefront in recent manifestations, displaying outstanding bravery. She also mentioned that the struggle of Iranian women did not begin in 2022. Years of civil activities have taken place by Iranian women such as "One million signature campaign" that was fighting against anti-women laws in the country. She added that while there is always a hope for change, achieving sustainable change under the current political structure would not only be a difficult but likely an impossible path. She reminded of the level of violence that the state is using in oppressing the any form of civil and political activism is extreme. Moreover, the state sponsored campaigns to change narrative and image of "successful Iranian women" mean is alarming.

The Jordanian author **Fadi Zaghmout**, who has written several novels that challenges the traditional gender roles in the region and who describes himself as a gender activist, highlighted the need to work on gender roles for all and already at an early age. He pointed to segregated education systems making it difficult for boys and girls to know and understand each other. He also pointed to school text books lacking basic information about gender related issues. Fadi also pointed to the need of cultural empowerment of men to deal with changing gender norms, break stereotypes and to encourage men to further engage on gender equality. Moving forward, he emphasized the key role of culture in contributing to change and shaping society, where for example literature can break taboos by bringing on multidimensional perspectives about issues. As example he shared the reactions he had received on his books and how they had triggered discussions. While Fadi had been amongst those who - some 10-15 years ago - got more socially engaged thanks to a new “open” space on social media, he was today more cautious and pointed to a shrinking digital space, with censorship, monitoring and hate speech as risk factors, limiting political and social engagement and debates.

The Libyan activist and researcher **Asma Khalifa**, who has worked at grassroot level as well as with policy formulation on human rights, women’s rights, and youth empowerment, shared her reflections on the importance of inclusivity. She said that improved connectivity leads to more synergetic thinking and stressed that it is essential to “break the silos” to create sustainable political and development processes and finding tangible solutions. Emphasizing the importance of working with grassroot organisations and including voices of wide spectrum of community members, Asma pointed to the crucial importance of connecting work at the localized level with policy and decision makers. She also stressed that women have every right to be at the table of peace negotiations, exactly as men, pointing that there is a need for everyone to have a voice to be able to develop more comprehensive solutions. Similarly it is essential to give space for youth in these processes and to foster exchanges between generations. However, she stated that change requires time, as it entails both behavioral and psychological change. Asma also pointed to the limited documentation of the work and journey of activists in Libya, noting that supporting the documentation is key for future generations, as it brings stories of sacrifices, as well as stories and lessons of successes.

Majd Mashharawi is a young woman entrepreneur from war-torn Gaza and the founder of ‘Green-Cake’ and ‘SunBox’, two companies presenting environmentally friendly development solutions for local communities. Majd shared the story of how she “against all odds” had become who she is, thanks to studies, hard work and supportive parents. Her desire to create change came were linked both to the development challenges in Gaza (lack of building material, lack or energy, etc.) and to the many challenges that

women face in their personal and professional lives. As an example she mentioned difficulties for women who choose to pursue an untraditional university major or their disadvantages when applying for funding. She also brought up the questions of social norms and perception of society, indicating that many men fear strong women and see her as a threat. Mentioning that her own relatives initially had been against her stepping into the business life, she said that they were now among her first supporters and even even partners in the companies.

In the following discussion and Q&A, a question came up on the role of religion in impacting the women's status in MENA. The speakers reminded that Islam, just like Christianity and Judaism (and other religions) represents itself in different forms and yet, interpretations of Islam have been highly impacted by politics, rather than religious or cultural aspects. The speakers reminded that there are also progressive voices of Islam, including work of Islamic feminists, who have intellectual project to reinterpret Islam by a progressive lens.

Recommendations for actions to promote gender equality, women's rights, and participation in MENA

➤ On rights and inclusivity

- Continue support to gender equality and a rights-based agenda, both through political dialogues and through support to local civil society. *"Shedding the light on issues related to human rights should always be key on any diplomatic/development agenda."*
- Advocate for gender equality and women's rights and participation, to create a political environment that is conducive for change.
- Support more inclusive processes, offering equal opportunities for women and men to take full part in all spheres of society. Incorporating diverse voices is key for peace and sustainable development.

➤ On spaces and alliances

- Support spaces that offer opportunities for women and men to take part in policy development.
- Ensure that women voices are regularly heard in international relevant bodies by policymakers, at all levels.
- Support initiatives, alliances and networks that fosters exchange and contribute to change towards gender equality.
- Make greater efforts to involve more men in gender equality programs.
- Sharpen the arguments on benefits for the whole society of greater gender equality and expand the outreach to parties that are not convinced that gender equality and women's participation can bring positive and tangible change.

➤ **On education, culture, and art**

- Contribute to the introduction of gender equality concepts in schools' textbooks to cultivate societal change and facilitate accessibility of information available in Arabic to support common understanding and exchange with others.
- Invest more in art and culture, and in storytelling in a methodological manner for advocacy and activism as tools for civic engagement.

Speakers Bio's

Egypt



Hoda Elsadda

Dr. [Hoda Elsadda](#) is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cairo University, a feminist and an activist for women's rights. She co-founded in 1995 the Women and Memory Forum, a research organization that focuses on the production and dissemination of alternative knowledges on women and gender studies (www.wmf.org.eg). She previously held a Chair in the Study of the Contemporary Arab World at Manchester University and was Co-Director of the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World in the UK. She is member of the Editorial Board of *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*; member of Editorial Board, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (JMEWS); and member of the International Advisory Board of the Asfari Institute at AUB. She was also member of the 50-committee that drafted the Egyptian constitution endorsed in a referendum in 2014 and was coordinator of the Freedoms and Rights Committee in the constitutional assembly. Her research interests are in the areas of gender studies, comparative literature and oral history. She is author of *Gender, Nation and the Arabic Novel: Egypt: 1892-2008* (Edinburgh UP and Syracuse UP, 2012); and co-editor of *Oral History in Times of Change: Gender, Documentation and the Making of Archives* (Cairo Papers, 35:1, 2018).

Iran



Dr. Sara Bazoobandi

Dr. [Sara Bazoobandi](#) is a Marie Curie fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. She runs a European funded project titled: "DIRESIRAN" in which she studies the policies and implications of Iran's "Economic Resistance". She closely examines the impacts of such policies on inclusion of women in Iran. She was previously the managing director of Middle East Risk Consulting, a boutique consultancy firm providing risk management and business intelligence for global clients. She is also a non-resident fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and an associate fellow at ISPI in Milan. She was a senior lecturer in international political economy at Regent's University London. Dr. Bazoobandi has contributed to various global and regional Track II initiatives and research projects on political, economic, and social affairs of the Middle East and North Africa. She holds a PhD in Arab and Islamic Studies from Exeter University and an MSc in economic development in emerging markets from the University of Reading. Dr. Bazoobandi speaks Persian, English, and Arabic. Her work and commentary on global affairs have been widely published in Farsi and English media.

Jordan



Fadi Zaghmout

Fadi Zaghmout is an author and gender activist. His first novel *Aroos Amman* (Bride of Amman) was published in the Arabic language in Jordan January 2012. It's a feminist novel that addresses issues of gender and sexuality in the city of Amman. He has since published another three novels - Heaven on Earth, LAILA, A Needle and a Thimble. He holds an MA in Creative Writing and Critical Thinking from Sussex University in the UK.

Libya



Asma Khalifa

Ms. **Asma Khalifa** is a Libyan activist and researcher who has worked on human rights, women's rights, and youth empowerment since 2011. She has spent her career contributing to the building of Libya's civil society and has worked on peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the country. For her efforts, Khalifa received the 2016 Luxembourg Peace Prize during the World Peace Forum in the European Parliament and, in 2017, she was named one of the "100 Most Influential Young Africans" by the Africa Youth Awards. Khalifa is also the co-founder of Tamazight Women's Movement, a think/do tank that is working on gender equality and research on the indigenous women of Libya and North Africa. She is also the co-founder of Khalifa Ihler Institute.

Palestine



Majd Mashharawi

A resident of war-torn Gaza, Ms. **Majd Mashharawi** observed the acute need for access to construction material in order to rebuild damaged buildings. She strove to meet this need by founding Green-Cake, a company that creates environmentally friendly bricks from ash and rubble. In the summer of 2017, she developed SunBox, an affordable solar system that produces energy to alleviate the effects of the energy crisis in Gaza, where access to electricity has been severely restricted to less than 3 hours a day. Ms. Mashharawi received her BS in civil engineering. In 2018, she was selected as one of the most creative people in business, and SunBox won the MIT Pan Arab Competition. Her TED Talk has received nearly 2 million views so far. Ms. Mashharawi was also awarded the Muhammed Ali Humanitarian Award in Louisville by the Muhammad Ali Center.

Moderator and hosts



Charlotta Sparre

Ambassador [Charlotta Sparre](#) has 30 years' experience of international diplomacy, with a special focus on the Middle East North Africa region. Since 2019 she is the Director of the [Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa](#). She has previously served as Ambassador of Sweden to Egypt 2013-2017; and to Jordan 2008-2013, as Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU 2003-2008, as Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of Sweden in Cairo 1999-2003, and held different positions in the Swedish Foreign Ministry since 1986. Between 2017-2019 she served as director of the Swedish Diplomatic Programme. During the last decades Ambassador Sparre has been an active participant and moderator in several Track II and academic meetings on the Middle East, with a special focus on regional security issues, democratic development, human rights and gender equality. She has published numerous articles and was the co-editor of the book 'Reconstructing the Middle East', published by Routledge in 2017.



Ms. Rosamaria Gili

With 28 years' experience in the European institutions, both at Headquarters and in post, Ms. Gili is Deputy to the Director of MENA and Head of Division for the Maghreb since September 2019. Ms. Gili joined the DG for External Relations of the European Commission in 1994 in the Directorate responsible for multilateral relations in the European Union. Responsible for Croatia and Bosnia from 1998 to 2002, she coordinated the negotiations of the first Stabilization and Association Agreement of the European Union with Croatia and the first steps towards Croatia's application for EU membership. She was Head of the Political, Economic and Trade Section in the Delegation of the European Commission to Morocco, then Head of the Political Section in the Delegation to Indonesia and finally, Director of a local development project in Lebanon. She returned to Headquarters in 2012 and has led the Division for the Gulf countries, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen in the European External Action Service.

About The European External Action Service (EEAS)

The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the European Union's diplomatic service. Since 2011, the EEAS carries out the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy to promote peace, prosperity, security, and the interests of Europeans across the globe.

The EEAS works under the political guidance of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (often referred to as HR/VP).

A strong asset of the EEAS is its ability to work closely with the foreign and defense ministries of the member states of the European Union (EU) as well as with the EU institutions such as the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament. It also has a strong working relationship with the United Nations and other international and multilateral Organizations.

Website: [EEAS | EEAS Website \(europa.eu\)](#)

About the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa

[The Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa](#) is a Swedish governmental agency that serves as a platform for contacts and dialogue between on the one hand Sweden and the countries of Europe and on the other hand the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The Institute has a regional mandate to address issues that are important for political, economic, and social development in the region, or for relations between the countries in the region and Europe.

The Institute's key areas for activities are Peace & security; Sustainable development; and Inclusive participation.

Website: [Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa](#)