Day of Dialogue on Inclusive Peace and Women's Political Representation: with Women Activists from Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Palestine

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) through its Supporting Arab Women at the Table (SAWT) project, funded by the European Union (EU) organised a Day of Dialogue in Paris on 8 December 2023. The event focused on exploring perspectives and solutions put forth by those leading efforts to build peace within their communities. The discussions were informed by the body of evidence produced by country partners in this project, including Together We Build It in Libya, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies in Yemen, the Iraqi Al-Amal Association in Iraq, ARI for Syria and the Culture and Free Thought Association in Palestine.

The day featured interactive discussions among women peacemakers, civil society activists, and human rights defenders from the countries of intervention. European donors, policymakers and practitioners also participated assessing key challenges and brainstorming practical solutions to enhance women's representation and promote inclusive peace.

Key Highlights

- Common trends in the region limit and obstruct women's political representation and participation, encompassing the exclusion from agenda-setting and spaces at high-level political discussion tables; security threats to those leading peace initiatives at different levels; and the increasing backlash against terminologies referring to gender, feminism and peace-making.

- The backlash against terminologies related to gender, feminism and peace and, by extension, those working on these issues has intensified over the past year in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Maintaining constant communication with women leading these initiatives is vital to align donor strategies with the rapidly changing on-the-ground realities and ensure the protection of those at the forefront.

- While there is community support and acceptance for women leading political and peace initiatives in most countries of intervention, male-dominated political elites continue dominating the political landscape, therefore, sidelining women's political participation.

- The international community could exert more pressure on local actors to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace and political processes.

- Human security is anchored in the peace-building and peace-making needs of broader sectors of society. There needs to be an effort to bridge gaps between mediation and political tracks, where the experiences and solutions of grass-roots actors should be part of high-level political agendas.

- Some describe the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda as no longer fit for purpose. Young women fellows in the project commonly concluded that the WPS agenda does not represent them and needs to be reimagined to adapt to current realities.

- There is a pressing need for a new space that brings together women leading grassroots peace initiatives in the region, along with multilateral and bilateral actors, to collaboratively devise solutions for the current increasing backlash against gender.

- Embracing divisions among civil society and women's groups can foster a deeper understanding of diverse local perspectives. The international community should embrace these differences in exchanges, as a means of including various perspectives and realities.

Understanding the landscape: Representation, Participation and Agendas

While women's participation in peace and political processes in the region needs to be understood in each context, four key common trends emerged throughout the project. **Representation and participation** of women in these processes, particularly in high-level political discussions, are very limited. The **agendas** of these discussions are often framed within traditional forms of security, where women and women's issues tend to be excluded in contrast to the needs of broader sectors of society around human security. Women at the forefront of these initiatives face **increased security risks**, and there is a backlash against notions and **language** surrounding gender, peace-making and feminism.

In **Libya**, the SAWT studies reveal that women have long led peace and mediation initiatives at the local level, holding the potential for significant influence in high-level political discussions due to their deep community knowledge. However, local actors and the international community often neglect them, perpetuating flawed agendas and male-dominated seats. **The international community could be putting more pressure on local actors to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace and political processes.**

In **Yemen**, male political elites dominate the political landscape, therefore, women continue being sidelined and are non-existent in high level political discussions. A significant gap exists between grassroots peace efforts and high-level political agendas driven by a state security framework. In focus group discussions with 128 women and men in Yemen, as well as interviews with 20 social

and religious leaders, a common trend emerged where peace is highly understood within a human security framework. **Efforts must be made to bridge gaps between tracks, where grassroots experiences can be part of high-level political agendas.**

In **Iraq**, the women's quota in parliament has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has been an important and necessary tool that provided access to politics, but it had also been misused to justify women's seats in parliament voided of meaningful decision- making powers. As in other countries in the region, community support for women candidates surpasses that of male-dominated political parties. Challenges such as the lack of economic resources for electoral campaigns and insufficient meaningful protection mechanisms for women facing threats and harassment act as deterrents to many women to access or pursue a career in politics. **It is important to address misinformation on WPS, along with providing protection mechanisms to women leading political processes in both law and practice**.

In **Syria**, alternative paths for women's political participation have traditionally focused on humanitarian, women-led initiatives, or on other forms of advocacy. These initiatives have offered avenues for women leaders to be more involved and not to be sidelined as in the official political institutions. Women leaders get more power and influence when they can form coalitions and have a clear vision of the change they want and their roles. However, there is a gap and resistance between the existing political institutions and these women leaders when it comes to facilitating the transition for these women leaders to have full political participation. **Differences within coalitions can foster a deeper understanding of different perspectives, therefore bringing more wealth in consultations with civil society. A multi-track approach needs to be envisaged.**

In **Palestine**, women's participation has occurred through various angles, contributing to collective engagement. Understanding the root causes of the conflict and the occupation context is essential to understand the marginalisation of women and current power dynamics and oppression. **In a context lacking elections or social movements, the circles of oppression for women are tightened. It is, therefore, important to create a co-leadership feminist model.**

Security and Language Challenges

Dilemmas with language and donors' requests

The SAWT study in Yemen brought attention to a complex linguistic landscape. It revealed that while terms like '*peace'* are deeply rooted in Arabic language and religion, concepts such as '*peace-making'*, '*gender'*, and '*feminism'* are often perceived as Western imports, making them less acceptable to broad sectors of the population. This cultural gap has resulted in the exclusion of terms like 'gender' and 'women empowerment' from project descriptions, creating a disconnection between initiatives and the expectations of international donors. A similar backlash against gender-related

language has been observed in Libya and Iraq.

In response, civil society organisations must adopt innovative approaches to address these issues and navigate a challenging terrain with international donors who insist on the inclusion of these terminologies to meet key indicators. Paradoxically, in certain contexts, the use of terms such as *'gender'* can lead to the shutdown of programs by local de facto authorities, putting those involved at risk. The issue has now extended to include other terms like *'reproductive health rights'*, *'children's vaccination'*, and even *'peace'*. **This evolving situation urgently requires further understanding from donors and the international community. Constant communication with women leading these initiatives is vital to align donor strategies with the rapidly changing on-ground realities**.

Disconnect with realities on the ground

In relation to Palestine and Syria the panel emphasised that the way we speak about issues define the way we deal about the issues, and therefore, how the international community decides to describe a context and the backlash against women will define its action. It was noted that there seems to be an increasing disconnect by the international community from the reality on the ground which has a negative impact on the shrinking space for civil society. Peace building efforts seem to be state-centric and not centred on the needs of broader sectors of the population, therefore the narratives developed and used around peacebuilding reflect that. **Language can become an obstacle to a solution and therefore it is paramount to step in the realities of those on the ground. It is necessary to amplify visions and strategies and be cautious of language, even when it is used with the best of intentions.**

Trans-National Networks and Coalitions

Women engaged in advancing the WPS agenda in the MENA region encounter significant challenges and risks. While a network or shared dialogue space can offer a sense of belonging and solidarity, the current frameworks may no longer be fit for purpose. An interesting indicator is the consensus among the youngest cohort of fellows in the SAWT fellowship programme, who expressed that the WPS agenda did not represent them and their needs. In the face of this changing environment, **re-examining current spaces and re-imagining new ones that integrate local realities of younger generations would be needed.**

A notable point of agreement emerged across women activists from the region, as well as EU donors and policymakers. Despite the existence of numerous networks and coalitions dedicated to WPS, there appears to be a lack of communication between actors working on this issue at different levels. This communication gap is sometimes attributed to a lack of trust and differing understanding of roles, with networks tending to concentrate either on the top level or very grassroots level.

Addressing this issue necessitates a deeper understanding of the realities faced by those on the ground. **New creative spaces that transcend various boundaries and convene grassroots women, multilateral, and bilateral actors must be envisioned and established.** The emphasis should be on creating and strengthening networks of women-led organisations, fostering the exchange of experiences and positive stories. This approach can amplify the voices of women and enhance their influence in international arenas.