COVID-19, Women and Peace and Security and National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325 in the Middle East and North Africa

Report from a regional consultation among women peacebuilders and civil society from the MENA region

September 2020

For decades, states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have faced deep-rooted, protracted armed conflicts, which have resulted in the displacement of over 22 million people across the region,[1] and created acute humanitarian crises.

The conflicts have exacerbated gender inequality and impacted women, young women, and girls in disproportionate, specific, and complex ways. Sexual violence has been used by armed actors in conflicts across the region, including in Iraq[2], Syria[3] and Yemen.[4] There is also evidence of widespread sexual violence, including hundreds of cases of sexual slavery, perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), against Yazidi women and other ethnic minorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[5] Moreover, the protracted conflicts and refugee crises have led to significant increase in early and child marriage, especially among refugee and internally displaced populations, who often see it as a way to protect their daughters from sexual violence.[6] Women have also been disproportionately affected by humanitarian crises and food shortages. For example, in Yemen, female-headed households have been more likely to have poor food consumption than households headed by men.[7] The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated many of these challenges. It led to an increase in rates of sexual violence and child marriage, increased the burden of unpaid care on women, and exacerbated women's economic dependence on their male relatives.[8]

At the same time, women have been key actors in addressing the impacts of conflict and humanitarian crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and working towards a sustainable peace in the region. Women's rights groups and other CSOs in the MENA region have lobbied their governments and the international community for inclusive conflict resolution, and demanded the meaningful participation of women at all levels of decision-making – including in peace processes and implementation of peace agreements and in constitution drafting.[9] Women also work actively, to mediate communal conflicts, monitor and document human rights violations, address the needs of women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and act as first responders in humanitarian emergencies.[10] During COVID-19, women peacebuilders in the MENA region have mobilized to distribute relief packages, food, medicine, and face masks. They raise awareness on measures to prevent the spread of the virus. In Iraq,

1   Statistic reported by UNICEF. Link: https://www.unicef.org/mena/humanitarianresponse#:~:text=With%20globally%20declared%20acute%20and,assistance%20across%20the%20MENA%20region%2C

2   Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, S/2020/487, 03 June 2020. Available at: https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf

3   Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, Condemns the Use of Rape and Other Forms of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Committed in Syria", 15 March 2018. Available at: https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/un-special-representative-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict-pramila-patten-condemns-the-use-of-rape-and-other-forms-ofconflict-related-sexual-violence-committed-in-syria/

4   Letter dated 27 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2020/70. Available at:https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_70.pdf

5   Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, S/2020/487, 03 June 2020. Available at: https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf

6   Ibid

7   Oxfam, "Yemen's shattered food economy… and its desperate toll on women", February 2019. Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfamus/www/static/media/files/Oxfam_in_Yemen.pdf

8   Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020). "Mapping the Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Peace and Security. COVID-19 and WPS Database". Available at: gnwp.org/resources/covid-19-wps-database/

9   Letter from the Permanent Representatives of Germany, Peru, the UK, and Northern Ireland to the United Nations to the President of the Security Council, 2019. Available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_39.pdf

10   Oxfam International and International Alert, "Now is the Time: Research on Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in the Middle East and North Africa", June 2017. Available at: https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620274/rr-gender-justice-conflict-fragility-mena-050617-summ-en.pdf?sequence=2

for example, local women's rights organizations such as Al-Amal, with whom GNWP has been working on the advocacy on the NAP, are leading relief efforts. They distribute food, medicine, and cash to vulnerable populations in the governorates of Anbar, Baghdad, Nineveh, Erbil, and Najaf. Their humanitarian efforts, most of which have been carried out by youth volunteers, go beyond meeting the urgent needs of the community. They also foster social cohesion, by promoting inclusive collaboration among youth volunteers from different backgrounds, and influence local governance, by strengtheningcooperation and coordination between civil society actors, local authorities, and other key local actors.

The tireless advocacy of women's rights groups and other civil society organizations in the MENA region in raising awareness of demanding accountability to the Women and Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has yielded results. As of June 2020, 5 of the 22 members of the League of Arab States (LAS)—Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia—have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS. At the regional level, LAS has adopted a regional strategy (2013) and a Regional Action Plan (RAP) on WPS in 2015.

However, despite the progress in developing regional and national policies, there continue to be major gaps in implementing the WPS agenda in MENA. Women are excluded from official peace negotiations across the region. They constituted only 15% of negotiators in the December 2017 negotiations between Syrian opposition and government, and 4% of negotiators in the latest round of talks between the Yemeni government and Houthi government, held in Kuwait in December 2018.[11] The marginalization of women in peace processes is underpinned by their political and economic exclusion. The region has the lowest average of women's political participation in the world, at 15.2%.[12] Moreover, their contributions to peacebuilding, mediation, and conflict resolution outside of the official negotiations remain unrecognized and underfunded.[13] As a result, gender equality concerns have taken a backseat in peacebuilding and reconstruction.[14]

If implemented effectively, NAPs on WPS can become strong vehicles to galvanize support for women-led peacebuilding and crisis response, and women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations. GNWP has provided support to the development, implementation and monitoring of NAPs in more than 20 countries around the world, including Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. It has worked with civil society, governments, and journalists to advance the implementation of WPS, especially at the local level. It has also collaborated with Libyan, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni CSOs to ensure that local women peacebuilders' voices are meaningfully heard in the implementation of the Sustaining Peace agenda, and that the Convention on the Elimination Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as an accountability mechanism for the implementation of WPS resolutions.

On September 22nd, 2020, GNWP organized an online regional consultation on NAPs on WPS with leading women peacebuilders and civil society from the MENA region. The consultation provided a space to discuss the status of

11   Data from the Council on Foreign Relations, Updated 2020. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/
12   UN Women Arab States, "Leadership and political participation". Available at: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation
13   2015, WILPF: Leveraging UNSCR 1325 NAPs for Local Change: civil Society Opportunities in the MENA region. Link: https://wilpf.org/wpcontent/ uploads/2015/09/Leveraging-UNSCR-1325-National-Action-Plans-for-Local-Change.pdf
14   2019, World Bank: The Central Role of Women in the Middle East and North Africa Transition. Article: https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/central-role-women-middle-eastand-north-africa-transition

the NAPs in the region, and formulate practical recommendations to accelerate their implementation. It was also a venue to share to discuss NAPs as mechanisms for COVID-19 response and recovery. Participants from Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria shared insights into how the pandemic has affected WPS implementation at the local, national, and regional levels. They reflected on the current COVID-19 responses and challenges experienced by women peacebuilders and identified opportunities towards a more inclusive crisis-recovery.

The participants identified the following recommendations:

▶ National governments must ensure that all stages of NAP development and implementation – from drafting, through implementation, to monitoring and evaluation – are inclusive and allow for meaningful participation of diverse women and civil society actors, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)

▶ Given the complex nature of crises in the region, NAPs need to address the intersecting and mutually reinforcing impacts of conflict, emergencies and natural disasters; and all efforts to address humanitarian crises must integrate a WPS lens.

▶ National and local governments, donors and international partners and civil society should commit to Localization as a key strategy for WPS implementation and harmonization of NAPs and other national and local laws and policies.

▶ Governments should invest national funds to ensure ownership and sustainable implementation of the NAPs.

Below is a summary of the key messages from the consultation.

Key Message #1: Inclusive NAP drafting process is a pre-requisite to effective implementation and monitoring.

One of the key messages emphasized during the consultation was that in order for NAPs to be effectively implemented and impactful, the process of developing them must be inclusive. Participants emphasized that broad-base participation during NAP development is necessary to ensure ownership, which in turn can generate more adequate financing and increased accountability for NAP implementation.

For example, in Iraq, the development of the first NAP – which was also the first one in the region – was not done through a participatory process, and as a result, had many limitations: it did not address some of the key WPS issues in the country, and did not have a well-defined timeline, comprehensive implementation and monitoring mechanism or a clearly allocated budget.

However, the Iraqi participants reflected that the efforts to implement the NAP, and monitor its implementation – many of them led by the civil society – have helped generate greater political will on WPS implementation in Iraq. The formation of a national cross-sectoral task force on the NAP, with active participation from women civil society, has also contributed to better coordination. As a result, the process of development of the 2nd NAP was much more inclusive, and women's rights organizations were able to successfully advocate for the inclusion of a survivor-centered approach to addressing the impacts of sexual violence perpetrated by ISIL in Iraq's 2nd NAP. Women's

groups are also advocating for using Localization as a key strategy for NAP implementation. The experience of Iraq's 1st NAP was an important lesson learned, which highlighted the importance of an inclusive drafting process.

In Lebanon and Jordan, the NAPs were developed through broad consultations. In Jordan, broadrange participation among local, national, and international actors. Participants from both countries noted that the inclusive process contributed to the development of NAPs with a stronger normative framework thanks to inputs from diverse expertise and perspectives.

Participants from Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon stressed that an inclusive process should aim to reach a diversity of community members, including national and local governments, women, civil society groups, religious leaders, youth, as well as refugees, IDPs, persons with disability and other marginalized groups. A good practice in the Jordanian context was the inclusion of refugees in consultations that led to NAP development. As a result, the NAP specifically addresses the needs of refugees and the impacts of humanitarian crises in the country. This is particularly important given the unique challenges faced by women refugees in the country. For example, in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, despite the fact that women comprised more than 50% of the refugee population, nearly 80% of all cash-for-work opportunities targeted men.[15]

"We need to strategically use NAPs on WPS as a tool for civil society and women's rights to advance our agenda of inclusive and sustainable peace.

Even if these are government documents that they have to commit to politically and financially, it has to be clear that these documents are coowned by civil society. Localization is one of the key strategies to emphasize civil society ownership."

- Mavic Cabrera Balleza, CEO, GNWP

Despite the evidence of the benefits of an inclusive process, and the good practices within the region, broad-base participation is still not a standard practice in MENA. For example, participants from Yemen noted that the recent process to draft the NAP was not inclusive enough. Despite the fact that the NAP development was a direct result of advocacy by a feminist coalition of 76 women, the actual drafting was done without consultations with civil society and other key groups, such as mothers of detainees and mothers of children recruited by armed groups. As a result, the NAP does not address key concerns, such as the increasing recruitment of young women and girls by armed groups, or the rights of women with disabilities in the context of conflict. The NAP also portrays women as victims and does not recognize their agency and expertise.

Key Message #2: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the importance of integrating crisis response and recovery in NAPs in the region

Across the MENA region, the global COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women and girls. The crisis has worsened gender inequality, further

---

15   UN Women Facts and Figures: Humanitarian Action. Link: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/facts-and-figures#notes

restricted women's access to social and health services, economic and educational opportunities, and increased their vulnerability to violence and security risks. For example, in Palestine, nearly 95% of women working in small and medium enterprises experienced negative impacts of the pandemic, and 27% of women-led enterprises have shut down.[16] In Iraq, service providers for women's health have shut down, depriving many women of access to necessary healthcare. In Jordan, nearly 99% of informal workers, majority of them women, lost their jobs in April 2020.[17] In Lebanon, women experienced nearly 20% reduction in employment,[18] and in Yemen, the pandemic aggravated the already limited access to healthcare,[19] including maternal healthcare.19 Despite UN Secretary-General Antonino Guterres' call for a global ceasefire, fighting continued in Yemen and Syria, including by parties to conflict that initially heeded the call. The pandemic has also impacted WPS implementation. The consultation participants shared that in Iraq, the adoption of the 2nd NAP has been delayed, and in Jordan and Lebanon, the implementation of the recently adopted NAPs has slowed down.

Participants also highlighted that NAPs must be used as important instruments to include women's meaningful participation in decision-making about COVID-19 response and recovery. Currently, women are underrepresented in COVID-19 task forces and working groups across the region. In Palestine, there is only one woman on the Emergency Measures Committee that is mandated to respond to COVID-19.

"National Action Plans on WPS should be "living documents" that are flexible in order to adapt to emerging situations and respond to crises – including the COVID-19 crisis. Localization brings this flexibility."

– Lebanese civil society leader

The participants noted that NAPs should include clear objectives related to crisis prevention and response – including support to women-led early warning mechanisms, commitment to genderresponsive humanitarian action, including in the context of refugee crises, and commitment to women's meaningful participation in decision-making about crisis response and recovery. A participant from Lebanon also noted that NAPs should be "living documents" and there should be mechanisms to review and revise them if a crisis – such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – significantly changes the context and WPS priorities.

Key Message #3: Given the intersecting impacts of conflict, humanitarian crisis and human rights violations in the region, NAPs need to be holistic documents, and align with other international, national and local laws and policies.

When discussing the integration of gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive response and recovery from humanitarian crises into NAPs, the participants also reflected on the importance of existing commitments in this regard –

---

16   UN Women, 2020
17   UN Women, 2020
18   UN Women, 2020
19   UN Women, 2020

including those made under the **Grand Bargain on humanitarian action.** A participant from Yemen noted that including strong references to the Grand Bargain and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was among the main recommendations of the civil society during the NAP development process. However, the final NAP does not include such references.

The participants have also emphasized the importance of aligning the NAPs with other international normative frameworks on women's human rights, such as the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Elimination Against Women (CEDAW).** In Palestine, civil society and the government have used CEDAW as a mechanism to support stronger accountability for the implementation of the country's first NAP. In 2018, GNWP provided a training on the use of CEDAW as a mechanism to report on progress in WPS implementation for Palestinian government authorities and women civil society from both Gaza and the West Bank. The training was held ahead of Palestine's scheduled reporting to the CEDAW Committee during the 70th Session in July 2018. Following the training, civil society held several follow-up workshops and conferences. The Palestinian Coalition on 1325 also held meetings and consultations to prepare a shadow report on UNSCR 1325 to the CEDAW Committee. The report was submitted, and a delegation from the Coalition on 1325 was present in Geneva to present it and respond to questions. As a result of these efforts, the Palestine's State Party report to CEDAW included substantive analysis of the implementation of WPS in the country, including the recognition of the importance of women's participation in decision-making on peace and security. The shadow report submitted by the civil society also included an in-depth analysis of WPS implementation, including a call for more meaningful inclusion of women in the ongoing peace negotiations.

Equally important is the harmonization of the NAP with existing national and local laws and policies. Participants from Jordan noted that, during the NAP development, an analysis was conducted to ensure that the NAP is aligned with other policy frameworks, including the country's Refugee Response Plan, to avoid duplication. Participants from Palestine highlighted that it is critical for the 2nd National Action Plan, currently being developed, to be aligned with the Family Protection Law. The recent adoption of the law has been viewed as a success of the women's movement and civil society advocacy. However, its implementation is weak, and women activists advocating for it have been subject to threats and attacks. A participant from Syria has also shared that a NAP could be a powerful tool to advance women's meaningful participation in the peace process – but only if it is aligned with the ongoing national and local processes and advocacy towards this end.

Multiple participants identified **Localization of WPS** as a critical tool to ensure harmonization of the NAP with laws and policies at the local level.

Key Message #4: A dedicated NAP budget is necessary for effective implementation

Reflecting on the gaps in the implementation of past NAPs, participants from Iraq and Palestine identified lack of dedicated budget and insufficient resources as a key barrier. Participants from across the region have agreed that adequate and dedicated budgets for NAPs are a pre-requisite of effective implementation.

Participants from Jordan and Lebanon shared that costing and budgeting workshops, facilitated by the GNWP and supported by UN Women in both contexts, were a useful exercise that helped create realistic budgets for the NAP and ensure that dedicated funding was available for it. The costing and budgeting was a participatory exercise, which brought together representatives of different Ministries, civil society, security sector and international development partners. Through the workshop, the participants built their capacity on gender-responsive budgeting and strengthened their awareness and understanding of the NAP. Costing and budgeting is also an exercise that can generate financial commitments. In Jordan, the workshop was also successful in mobilizing greater ownership and political will for the NAP implementation, which led to the allocation of national funding for NAP implementation.

> *"The 2nd Palestinian NAP will need human, technical, and financial resources – and coordination among local organizations, local authorities, the UN - and it must ensure the representation of women in relief and recovery of crises and decision-making for COVID-19"*
>
> – Palestinian woman civil society leader

Participants from Iraq also shared that civil society is calling for a dedicated national budget for the country's 2nd NAP. They noted that lack of dedicated financing and clear indicators were two key reasons why Iraq's first NAP also proved unable to respond to the various political, economic, and conflict crises in the country.

The participants also noted the **importance of documenting achievements and effective monitoring and evaluation** in ensuring funding for the NAP. They noted that monitoring and evaluation is another important process that can help generate funding for NAP implementation, including Localization. They called on national and local government actors to fund and publicize Localization initiatives that demonstrate implementation success.

Recommendations:

National governments must ensure that all stages of NAP development and implementation – from drafting, through implementation, to monitoring and evaluation – are inclusive and allow for meaningful participation of diverse women and civil society actors, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)

1. NAP development processes should take place in close collaboration with women-led civil society. Women, including women from diverse backgrounds and women refugees and IDPs, should be included in all discussions and decision-making about the NAP;

2. Governments and donors should address the gendered digital gap and provide support for women, in particular rural women, refugee and IDP women, and women living in remote areas, to access technology, in order to be able to participate in discussions and processes related to NAP implementation and contribute to monitoring;

3. Governments, donors, and civil society should dedicate human resources to implement the NAP and monitor its implementation, and clearly assign responsibility for implementation between actors/agencies. Clear assignment of roles will facilitate coordination and civil society access to decision-making about NAP implementation;

4. National and local authorities and civil society should create coordination mechanisms to advance NAP implementation and monitoring. Coordination mechanisms, such as working groups or task forces on the NAP should not be dissolved after a NAP is adopted, but continue to meet regularly to assess progress on NAP implementation;

5. Donors and international organizations, including the UN, should support and encourage cross-learning and exchange of good practices between civil society and government actors from different countries in the MENA region – especially those who have already completed one phase of NAP implementation;

6. Donors, the UN, and governments should support independent civil society monitoring of NAP implementation both politically and financially.

Given the complex nature of crises in the region, NAPs need to address the intersecting and mutually reinforcing impacts of conflict, emergencies and natural disasters; and all efforts to address humanitarian crises must integrate a WPS lens.

1. National Action Plans should include provisions for guaranteeing women's – including refugee and IDP women's – access to services, maternal health and psychosocial support during humanitarian crises; as well as provisions for including women in disaster and crisis early warning mechanisms, and in decision-making about crisis response and recovery;

2. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should consider reviewing the NAPs to make sure that their provisions are relevant to the new reality, and that they promote women's meaningful participation and protection in the context of the pandemic and gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery;

3. The commitments of the Grand Bargain, including on the collaborative, multisectoral response and support to local responders, including local women, should be integrated into NAPs on WPS to ensure that harmonization of WPS and humanitarian commitments;

4. Donors should ensure sustained funding to local women-led peacebuilding organizations during COVID-19 and support projects that establish systems to monitor the levels of violence against women during the lockdown and ensure that efforts to implement WPS commitments are not stifled by the pandemic.

National and local governments, donors and international partners and civil society should commit to Localization as a key strategy for WPS implementation and harmonization of NAPs and other national and local laws and policies

1. National governments, civil society and international and regional development partners should commit to disseminating the NAPs at the local level – including through translating to local languages, if needed, and

conducting awareness-raising and capacity-building for local authorities, traditional and religious leaders, grassroots organizations, local women and youth, and other key actors;

2. National governments and donors should support Localization, as a long-term process to adapt NAP commitments to local realities and local needs – through adoption of Local Action Plans or the integration of WPS provision in existing Local Development Plans;

3. Media organizations and civil society, in partnership with local governments, should create a media plan, that includes local media organizations and local journalists to raise awareness of WPS at the local level;

4. Local governments should ensure that their Local Action Plans are properly costed and allocate adequate budget for NAP implementation at the local level;

5. Local civil society actors should develop and strengthen partnerships – with governments, with private sector, academia and other actors, to ensure implementation of the NAP at the local level;

6. Local governments should establish steering committees for WPS implementation at the local level, to ensure effective coordination and collaboration with civil society and other key stakeholders, and to regularly track progress in implementation.

Governments should invest national funds to ensure ownership and sustainable implementation of the NAPs.

1. Governments should ensure that their NAPs are properly costed and budgeted through inclusive exercises with meaningful participation of diverse Ministries, civil society and international partners and donors;

2. National and local governments should allocate funds within their budgets for NAP implementation, to ensure ownership and sustainability of efforts;

3. Donors should provide adequate, accessible, flexible, and long-term funding, particularly to women-led civil society and youth organizations and involve civil society in the design of funding priorities related to WPS implementation;

4. Civil society organizations should mobilize and build on each other's efforts and resources to plan projects and support the implementation of the NAP, including through activities that can be done at little or no cost.