

Meeting summary

Women's role in improving security in Egypt, Libya and Yemen

Summary of discussions and recommendations from the second صوتنا قوتنا 'Our Voice, Our Strength' networking meeting held in Tunis, Tunisia, from 3 to 5 March 2014

Introduction

In March 2014 Saferworld held a three-day regional conference on women's roles in improving security in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The conference was designed to provide participants with an opportunity to exchange experiences and to define future roles for women in the area of safety and security. It brought together interested individuals from Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni civil society and government ministries under the umbrella of the صوتنا قوتنا (Our Voice, Our Strength) network.

Discussion of women's roles in improving security

Lack of security in Egypt, Libya and Yemen strongly affects women's safety and their ability to be active in public life. Political violence, rising crime, terrorist attacks, trafficking and weapons smuggling are all major concerns. Women also face specific gender-based violence. Security issues are exacerbated by a lack of effective security provision, and participants described the security services as unresponsive towards women's security concerns, and sometimes identified their members as perpetrators of sexual violence.

In response to some of these problems, the conference focused on identifying roles that women could play at the local and national levels to address security concerns, in particular those specific to women.

Roles for women

In light of these challenges, participants discussed a range of roles for women in improving security in

Egypt, Libya and Yemen in advocacy, awareness raising and as security sector watchdogs and actors.

Identified roles included advocating with policymakers, security providers, the media and local leaders, to influence their perception of women's place in society and make them adopt gender sensitive approaches to security provision, as well as exerting pressure for women's representation in all public institutions.

Women also have an important awareness raising role, in terms of informing women and men about women's rights and broader human rights, introducing these values to children and youth, and promoting acceptance of a wide range of professional roles for women, including within the security sector. They can also help identify what their communities and especially women want from security providers, facilitate dialogue and negotiations between security sector actors and communities, and increase buy-in within their communities for national security sector reform through their influence among families and friends.

Within the security sector itself, women can oversee and monitor security systems as part of civil society scrutiny, including with a particular focus on gender-specific concerns. They can contribute to security within their communities, for instance through creating shelters for victims of domestic violence. Participants also noted that women's groups can provide training for security forces on gender issues, diversity, and women rights and women's advocacy can shift policies in the security sector, including on recruiting and training security services in ways to ensure recruitment and retention of female staff.

Participants also exchanged examples of initiatives in their countries that are working to improve women's security. They outlined a women's grassroots campaign in Yemen to raise people's

awareness about sexual harassment and combat political and public denial over the issue, through the use of an interactive online map enabling people to anonymously report occurrences of harassment and through advocacy activities aimed at the Ministry of Justice about a law to criminalise sexual harassment. Other examples included initiatives that work with Ministries of Interior and families of victims to improve standards for women prisoners who are subject to sexual harassment, and to promote the increase of women prison officers.

Obstacles to overcome

Participants identified a series of obstacles that need to be overcome in order to enhance women's roles in improving security.

Discussions brought up the issue of social expectations that restrain women's ability to gain political office, enter security institutions and take part in public life. Participants explained that women are perceived to have a public role in the sphere of social work and hospitals, but their presence in the police force generates strong reactions. In Libya, an additional factor hindering popular acceptance of women police is the memory of Muammar Gaddafi's use of female bodyguards, which results in stigmatisation for women in the security sector.

Another obstacle that participants identified comes from key power brokers within religious institutions, 'informal' religious and tribal leadership, militias and armies. These powerful actors often oppose changes to the status quo and maintain influence over legislative and judiciary bodies.

Participants argued that practical impediments further add to a lack of political will, as public institutions lack the capacity to collect information and do not have access to some remote regions where women are unsafe yet difficult to reach out to.

Discussions highlighted that addressing these obstacles requires working with allies that can support the realisation of women's roles in improving security, such as: civil society organisations, the human rights sector and independent media; victims of abuse, who must be supported and encouraged to join efforts to promote better security and safety for women; international human rights monitors, international NGOs, and think tanks; and individual networks, including within families and personal and professional circles.

Breakout group outcomes

To deepen discussions about women's roles in improving security and move towards practical recommendations, subsequent discussions were broken up into three breakout groups focusing on:

women and the security sector; media, gender and security; and women in safer communities.

Women and the security sector

Participants identified important roles for women both as actors within the security sector and as decision makers shaping the security sector. They argued that creating space for women in security provision and decision-making could help address negative attitudes towards women in the security sector, abusive policing and lack of responsiveness to gender-based violence.

Participants emphasised the links between the security and justice sectors, and identified legislation as one of the primary means to push for advances in security provision for women and ensure the respect, promotion and defence of women's rights by state institutions. In particular, they saw women's roles to lie in:

- building support for new laws criminalising gender-based violence, making proposals to parliament and lobbying parliamentarians, as well as taking part in legislative bodies;
- pressuring governments through international norms and frameworks, such as CEDAW, UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions, to comply with international standards and incorporate gender considerations into national laws. In the absence of appropriate domestic legislation, these international agreements can also serve to raise awareness and highlight problems and abuses;
- using strategic litigation to bring cases of violence against women to court and set judicial precedents, ensure perpetrators are sentenced, and new laws protecting women are applied.

Participants also highlighted women's role in changing attitudes towards women and challenging public opinion, as well as enhancing security providers' understanding of women's security concerns and appropriate ways to address them:

- addressing societies' prejudices against women in security provision through trainings, workshops and educational activities, as well as by supporting female role models who are active in the security sector;
- collecting information about women's security concerns, the positive impact of women's participation in decision-making on security policy and their active inclusion in security provision. This evidence base can strengthen women's advocacy messages and help build broader societal support. An important element of data collection concerns violations and abuses by the security forces themselves;

- providing training to police forces and advice on the reorganisation of police stations in order to provide better services for women who are victims of crime and to improve the working conditions of women police officers.

Media, gender and security

Participants discussed the role of the media in promoting both positive and negative images of women. Too often, participants argued, the media reinforces disempowering gender stereotypes in television programmes and spreads messages against women's participation in political life. Attacks against female public figures often take the form of rumours and slander, diffused through social networks and word of mouth, but also in media outlets in search of sensational headlines. Engaging with the media is therefore essential to improving women's security and countering negative images about women's roles in society.

Discussions highlighted the importance for women to engage directly with media professionals in order to influence their perceptions and enhance their professional standards and their awareness of the impact of media discourse. Participants also identified an active role for women to challenge the media with alternative messages:

- providing training to media personnel to raise their awareness of women's rights, violence against women, and the threats they face;
- engaging more systematically with media professionals to share success stories and positive images of women. This also requires women activists to have a better understanding of how to address the media and pitch stories;
- establishing independent media outlets, using online platforms and social media, and producing videos and interviews. Social marketing and other new media tools were mentioned as a way to advertise alternative messages about women and present the public with more positive images.

However, discussions also highlighted the importance of bearing in mind that new media does not reach out to all sectors of the population, and that other means of communication such as the radio as well as non-broadcast communication and artistic expression through murals, theatre, and other media are often more effective to reach people who do not have IT skills or live in rural and remote areas. Moreover, participants also discussed the fact that education and combatting illiteracy was an important prerequisite for more grassroots engagement with the media. Similarly, regulatory frameworks and laws on defamation and slander need to provide the right context for women to take action on these issues.

Women in safer communities

Participants highlighted that insecurity is experienced at a local level and that government institutions focus too much on a top-down 'national security' paradigm. Working on the local level is therefore an essential part of women's role in improving security.

Using their knowledge and understanding of their own local areas and communities, participants identified potential roles for women in improving local security and safety:

- monitoring security concerns that affect their day-to-day lives, women can try to shape priorities for local law enforcement to make sure real human-security concerns are taken into account and threats relevant to citizens' daily lives are identified. Participants saw this in opposition to centrally driven national security and counterterrorism agendas, which miss local concerns or even increase insecurity locally;
- evaluating the quality, impact and relevance of government security service provision within communities through monitoring. Women have a particular role in scrutinising security provision for women and girls as there is little focus on the quality and gendered impact of (poor) government services. Monitoring can be carried out by individual groups at a local level and aggregated by coalitions at the national level to increase their advocacy reach.

Participants also highlighted women's role in working directly with vulnerable women in their communities, for instance:

- raising awareness among women in urban and rural areas about their rights and including them in discussions concerning their own security. Reaching out in this way, especially to poorly educated women and those from rural areas, can ensure their perspectives are present in political discussions;
- providing psychological and legal support and protection to survivors of gender-based violence through creating and working to improve social services such as shelters and support centres within communities.

Discussions also emphasised women's role and capacity to influence local power holders, both formal and informal. In particular, participants saw a role for local level organisations:

- raising the awareness of important local stakeholders, in particular community leaders, on the dangers that women face and working with them to address these issues appropriately. Participants believed that working with local authorities was an important way to

- influence attitudes towards women and improve security and justice services for them;
- establishing partnerships between women's rights organisations and local security providers. Several participants discussed examples of sometimes difficult relationship-building processes that has allowed them in the medium term to build on shared interests with the police to address concerns such as human trafficking, child marriage and violence against women, with civil society playing an active role including in training police and reporting cases of concern. At the local level, this can make security provision more responsive to people's – including women's – actual security needs.

Project ideas

In the final sessions of the conference, participants built on discussions of the preceding days to develop concrete activities and project ideas, identifying steps towards and activities surrounding three roles prioritised from breakout group discussions. The following provides a short overview of the main activities proposed in each project.

Reinforcing and developing new laws for women's safety and security

- Develop civil-society-led draft laws to criminalise sexual harassment;
- Provide workshops for the police and parliamentarians, and collaborate with Ministry of Justice personnel on the proposed law and the reasoning behind it;
- Form a monitoring body composed of individuals and civil society organisations to assess the legal context for sexual harassment in each country, taking a comparative approach across MENA;
- Link advocacy efforts with supportive media professionals, and target decision-makers in advocacy outreach.

Increasing women's role in training media personnel

- Train media personnel to include women's perspectives in their work and change the language used by the media when reporting on women through enhancing their capacity to disseminate this learning within their organisations and the professional sector;
- Provide information to media personnel on international standards and treaties as well as national legislation and constitutional provisions protecting women's rights;

- Build partnerships between women civil society groups and the media in order to inform journalists with concrete examples and bring attention to cases of violations, change negative prejudices against civil society organisations and promote a positive image of their work.

Building local support centres for women and providing access to services

- Create local women's centres, building on existing support structures, with a broad mandate to support women economically, socially and legally;
- Ensure centres are routinely visited by lawyers who can provide legal advice to women survivors of violence and inform them on their rights, and by psychologists to support survivors and accompany them through their recovery;
- Work in partnership with other local organisations providing services that can support survivors in their recovery, access to justice, educational and capacity building.

Feedback and next steps

Participants felt that the meeting provided a valuable opportunity for continued networking, and a chance to learn lessons and exchange experiences. They felt that the صوتنا قوتنا (Our Voice, Our Strength) network has enabled them to build relationships with organisations working on related issues and to exchange information between different regions within their countries as well as across the three countries. Participants expressed the intention to use the relationships they have formed through the network in their future work.

For future work, participants expressed interest in learning further from outside expertise, such as that of high-level analysts and practitioners, as well as gaining more specific information on international legal frameworks as a tool to influence policymaking and monitor security provision and implementation of changes.

This conference formed part of Saferworld's project 'Strengthening women's public voice in Egypt, Libya and Yemen', which was funded by the Arab Partnership Participation Fund from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

About صوتنا قوتنا (Our Voice, Our Strength) network

Security and justice are difficult areas for civil society to engage on and are often perceived to be 'male' issues. However, this network is based on the belief that women's contributions to these issues are critical. It brings together women's organisations that are engaging on security and justice and encourages them to form coalitions with other similar national and regional initiatives, to exchange experiences and benefit from successes and failures in other transitional contexts.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

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