



Feminism at the Frontline: Addressing Women's Multidimensional Insecurity in Yemen and Libya

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM



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May 2017

Feminism at the Frontline: Addressing Women’s Multidimensional Insecurity in Yemen and Libya

1st Edition

32 pp.

Lead researchers: Vanessa Farr and Sarah Boukhary

Research coordinators: Rasha Jarhum and Together We Build It Research team.

This work would not have been possible without the courage, persistence and hard work of local activists in Libya and Yemen whose names shall not be disclosed for security concerns.

Designer: Dima Al Baba

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Caption: On the eve of Libya’s first democratic national election, Haja Nowara held a vigil in the square outside the courthouse in Benghazi, where she had spent many evenings supporting the revolution since early 2011. “I have waited my whole life for tomorrow, which will be a new day for Libya,” said Nowara, who would be voting for the first time in her life. “We sacrificed a lot to get here.”

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I. Background

Women were visibly present in the uprisings that swept across the Arab States from 2011: they were among the first to take to the streets, received air time as expert analysts and commentators, and dominated social media as eyewitnesses and activists interpreting the fast-moving events of those turbulent days. In official diplomatic circles, however, women's initiatives and inputs were as invisible and lacking in influence as they had been in Afghanistan and Iraq in the previous decade¹.

In late 2011, WILPF began to devise a programme to try to address this problem, as a concrete response to the quickly-moving political events in the Middle East and North Africa. In its first phase, the programme on Ending Discrimination and Reinforcing Women's Peace and Security in the MENA Region (MENA Agenda 1325) focused on exploring how women human rights defenders across the region, including women with years of experience in advancing international conventions such as CEDAW, might now expand their human rights activism². The programme's aim was to focus specifically on the threats of international and regional militarism as they began to combine with local- and foreign-

grown religious extremism, and the key intention was to build women's capacity to document and analyse the multidimensional insecurities³ they began to face, so they could more effectively resist the violent backlashes that almost immediately began to constrain their participation in the historic political events across the region. The project is true to WILPF's core principle that it is only when women themselves understand and speak out, in their own voices, about the insecurities they face, that sustainable responses can begin to emerge.

***Once you make inequities visible, you are also likely to make visible the power dynamics that create those inequities.... So not having a gender analysis of insecurity is a way to lessen the number of issues on the table. There's a lot of incentive to be incurious. Incuriosity is a political act. Every time one chooses to be incurious about something, one chooses a political outcome
(Enloe, 2013: 135-6)***

1- For an account of how the international community misused the WPS agenda in Afghanistan, see Claire Duncanson and Vanessa Farr, "The Failure of a Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Afghanistan," in Jacqui True and Sara Davies, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on Women, Peace and Security*, Oxford University Press: Oxford. Forthcoming.

2- In Libya, CEDAW was both signed and ratified in 1989. The first optional Protocol, which allows the international committee to receive complaints on human rights violations from either individuals or groups, was signed in 2004. Yemen ratified CEDAW even earlier, in 1984.

3- WILPF has coined the term 'multidimensional insecurities' to take further UNDP's 'multidimensional poverty' and 'gender inequality' indexes, tools devised to support the Human Development Report series (available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en>). While these indexes offer the best available insights into why people live in poverty, and how gender inequality centrally shapes how poverty is lived, they are not yet adequate to explain the nexuses between poverty and the insecurities of militarism, which we see as essential to exposing the imperialism of a late capitalism dependent on dwindling fossil fuel sources and a rapidly declining Energy Return on Investment (EROI).

II. Introduction

This report takes forward the work of engaging with feminist grassroots organisations involved in peacebuilding and WPS that was begun by WILPF five years ago, with a particular focus on the peace and security experiences, challenges, and concerns of women in Libya and Yemen. Due to both localised/internal insecurity and international military engagement in each country, the security situation has now degraded to the point where military dominions have left a very limited space for women to participate in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and peace processes, despite them constituting forces for revolutionary change at the beginning of the uprisings in both Yemen and Libya. This deliberate exclusion has engendered a significant lack of narrative and input from grassroots women on the topic of women, peace and security, which in turn brings forth an incomplete analysis of both the root causes of the conflicts and the peace and security concerns. To attempt to address this problem, WILPF is exploring how to work differently within the constraints of the insecurities women are facing in Libya and Yemen by primarily supporting our partners on the ground in engaging with grassroots communities as they have the expertise, knowledge, and access to every corner of the region in both contexts.

WILPF continues to explore ways to avail our partners of the organisation's unique position as a liaison point between ordinary women and the international community, which allows for the amplification of women's 'invisible' peacemaking – women's very quiet, localised, track three diplomacy. This often takes the form of inter-kinship negotiations,

which create immediate buffers, or promote calm that opens opportunities for greater security, and ultimately contribute to bringing peace. Together with our partners, we are committed to finding spaces in which women can reveal the multidimensional insecurities they are forced to confront in each country. WILPF's partners continue to challenge the belief that is only those who have cultivated 'high-level connections' or who can position themselves as 'representing a specific interest group' who deserve inclusion in formal peace processes. As such, WILPF remains committed to reversing the typical approach of admitting only elite or publicly visible women's thoughts, and finding ways to broaden the network of women whose opinions and actions can be counted, to allow a focus on the tiny, incrementally powerful, community-based initiatives women create and sustain in everyday life. As one research leader put it: "I know the women who go out in public and are visible. I respect them but I'm also aware of their lack of diversity, their lack of inter-generational access, and their privilege, for example, being able to travel alone. But what I see and they don't is that all Libyans, all of us as women, are connected to peacemaking and we all bring important elements to the process of making peace."

WILPF hopes that supporting such micro-level engagements will keep alive some of the spirit that women showed when they first joined the public space opened by the uprisings. Throughout this report, we reflect on their perspectives on what life is like under a doctrine of "endless war".⁴

4- The USA is a key antagonist in both countries, both in terms of supplying/sanctioning weapons transfers and in terms of direct military intervention such as airstrikes. Discussions of a 'doctrine of endless war' have become commonplace in critical analysis of USA foreign policy against Muslim-majority nations after both Presidents G.W. Bush and Obama spoke of being engaged in a war lasting at least a generation. See, for example Gary J. Bass, 2010, "Endless War," available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Bass-t.html> ; and Glenn Greenwald, 2014. "Key Democrats, Led by Hillary Clinton, Leave No doubt that Endless War is Official U.S. Doctrine", available at <https://theintercept.com/2014/10/07/key-democrats-led-hillary-clinton-leave-doubt-endless-war-u-s-doctrine/>

III. Methodology

This paper draws its main findings from transcripts of discussions held in Arabic and Tamazight in some of the main cities in Yemen and Libya that were reachable by WILPF's partners. The work in Libya was led by our Libyan partner, Together We Built It organisation, while in Yemen the consultations were led by the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC), To Be for Rights and Freedoms, and another partner NGO whose name shall not be disclosed for security issues. Small groups of women met in Sana'a, Taiz and Aden, in Yemen; and Tripoli, Yefren and Sabha, in Libya. Our networks have persisted in trying to report on women's experiences and analysis of their situation. They have done so while facing both physical danger from diverse causes such as ongoing armed violence, degraded health services and internal displacement, and structural constraints such as a lack of electricity or the ability to move around within or between cities. They do their work in a rapidly shifting global political order that appears to have turned its back on the multilateralism of the United Nations.

As the security situation in both countries has worsened, WILPF could only support its partners via the internet: the primary field analysis gathered by our teams is therefore supplemented by secondary research, including a broad consultation of existing academic and media analyses of the situation in our focus countries. We cite from transcripts of focus group discussions (FGDs) held by our partners with women leaders, and with women who are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and women whose membership of an ethnic minority renders them doubly vulnerable to war-related violence⁵. In societies in which women do not usually have high levels of

access to information, and in which civil society organising of any kind is difficult, such FGDs serve two very important functions: they provide spaces for women to support each other as knowledge-makers who can give advice and opinions on matters that are kept politically beyond their control; and they allow for an assertion of solidarity and engagement on subjects that women are discouraged from understanding. Our partners on the ground could take advantage of personal connections to talk to many individuals and community women who have never been approached as informants. The Libya research team characterises as "unexpected informants" the women they talked to by accessing gatherings specific to women, including a baby shower. They talked to women who are never consulted even if they have been directly war-affected, and whose information may contradict official accounts of what is happening in the country: for example, in Yefren, a woman who had been displaced from Sobrata, and who would have never otherwise have been able to tell her story, gave an account of how her brother was killed by Daesh. In so doing, she challenges official denial that ISIS is present in Libya. Yefren women were also prepared to speak about rape cases by militia and assaults on women for exposing militia crimes, about narrowly escaping attempted gang rape by militia who attacked women in their homes, and about the legal difficulties of prosecuting perpetrators.

In Yemen, women in Taiz spoke of the personal courage they had shown in approaching militia leaders to negotiate for the release of prisoners of war, including through negotiating across kinship groups they are tied to through marriage. They also spoke openly to the research team

5. In Libya, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held by our partners, Together We Built It organisation, with 10 women working in NGOs in Tripoli; 8 ethnic-minority IDP women displaced to Felah camp in Tripoli from Tawergha; and 10 grassroots women in a semi-urban area with little civil society activism. Ages ranged from 21–86, education levels varied from primary school to university, and some respondents identified as disabled. In Yemen, FGDs were conducted by the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC), TOBE Foundation, and another partner NGO whose name shall not be disclosed for security issues. FGDs took place by three in Sana'a, Aden, and Taiz with 95 women, including IPD women, civil society representatives, and political activists. 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) were also held in the aforementioned cities in Yemen. All quotes have been translated from Arabic.

about their strategies for surviving sieges and other forms of military lock-down, including through sharing their tactics for smuggling medicines into health centres to treat those who had been injured in their resistance work.

These brief accounts are a reminder of how important it is for women in conflict zones to be offered safe spaces for discussions about how they experience and analyse the insecurity of war: women who would not otherwise speak did so with a high level of comfort and trust because the research teams approached them through their intimate networks. Many – in particular those who are war-displaced, in peri-urban areas, and illiterate or with low literacy – expressed their relief at being offered a short escape from their daily isolation. In both countries, women have experienced an increased level of difficulty in accessing public space and can only speak in the privacy of women's gatherings or private homes. All who participated in FGDs had been thinking about peace and security concerns, but had never been asked their opinions or offered a chance to share their lived experiences. By reaching out to these women, WILPF's partners were explicitly exploring and practising contextualised feminist research methods that are effective to reach women in very challenging situations.

Given the necessity for work to be conducted across several cities, both internally in Yemen and in Libya, the significance of supporting embedded researchers with high levels of trust and access is a crucial aspect of WILPF's solidarity work. Together, the research teams explored how to conduct research in conflict settings, focusing on how to overcome mistrust, stay safe, and compare women's common experiences even when their social and economic situations are very different.

We do not imply that women have, or can be forced to share, homogenous political perspectives⁶.

“The Women's Pact for Peace and Security [established by UN Women in October 2015] is becoming a means to marginalise us: every time the UN organises a discussion with women they bring the same people in that they've met before. They don't accept that we have diversified political opinions, more than one voice, or critical perspectives. They hold some sort of image of us as 'peaceful doves', not as individuals with political perspectives. They seem to want to act as a guardian preventing women from doing what we see as necessary.” – Feminist activist from Yemen.

“Why do we always have to stand together, whether we're from the north or the south, given Yemen's history? Men don't have to work from a common, consensual space, which is as impossible for women as for men in wartime. Just like the men, we disagree and we argue, and we want that to be respected.”

– Feminist activist from Yemen.

6- UN Women is not present in Libya. In Yemen, the organisation remains in Sana'a and invites women for consultations to that city only, refusing to accept liability for any security risk they may face when travelling to the capital, especially from the south. WILPF's Yemen research partners are highly critical of this approach, especially as it makes a-historical assumptions about women's capacity and willingness to work together across historical political divides that have become highly significant again in the most recent war. See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/10/yemeni-women-call-for-their-inclusion-in-peace-efforts>.



أحمد شهاب
AHMED SHIHAB

IV. “Society does not trust us, but we make change”: Grassroots women’s involvement in peace and security

4.1. The ‘Arab Spring’ and the creation of new needs for civic response

The long dictatorships of Muammar Al-Qadhafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen resulted in weak, divided civil societies with limited visibility and organisational skill.

“Women in [Yemen and Libya] bore the double burden of exclusion from public political and economic space, and of unabashed patriarchal control that relied heavily on belittling and undermining women as actors outside the realm of the family, in contradiction of seemingly progressive laws.”

In both countries, the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings and their call for social, economic and political freedom were electrifying for women. Many of those who

became politically active experienced an unprecedented awakening of themselves as activists with the right to a public presence, and as individuals who could act collectively to make a change, to forge a new solidarity with women and men of all ages and backgrounds: “we felt respected by all parties to the conflict. Our work was trusted and credible,” said Yemeni women leaders interviewed in Sana’a in November 2016. In Libya, displaced women, who had lost almost everything, still understood themselves as valuable contributors to reconstruction: “we are concerned, we are involved and we must do anything to promote peace” (Felah camp, December 2016). One of the respondents co-founded an organisation to advocate for security issues within the camps, and the statements and correspondences were all delivered to key stakeholders to take proper action. Respondents said that women could start from their own communities to become involved in peace and security: teachers in school, and nurses and doctors in hospitals, could all work to promote the culture of peace and security.

The importance of women’s mass entry into public life during the early days of the

uprisings cannot be overstated: *en masse*, they refuted their exclusion at every level of politics and from organising as civil society. Women also challenged strong taboos against them interacting with women and men who are not in their immediate kinship network, recognising that this important factor in keeping them politically isolated and marginal was manufactured by political consensus disguised as, and justified by, 'divine rule', and therefore open to challenge. Neither country had ever allowed citizens to develop strong civil society

structures, including any kind of mass political movements. The calls for freedom, dignity and social justice that took masses of people to the streets in 2011 were an effort to denounce exclusionary governance, and women issued and responded to this call as strongly as men. In the early days of the uprisings, and often for the first time in their lives, women were able to experience the street as a shared space to which civilians could go to challenge political oppression and call for non-violent change.

4.2. How have multidimensional forms of civic engagement in peace and security unfolded?

The early signs were not positive for the momentum of the streets to continue, and the backlash against women from conservative factions was an early indicator that their emancipation would not be so easily consolidated. Contemporary analysts observe that "[w]omen are losing the battle to turn their ideas into political influence and to sustain the active role they played initially"⁷: they are routinely ridiculed in the media as being ignorant or incapable of social and political commentary and organising, or face direct physical violence when they try to participate in public political life⁸.

In this report, however, we want to highlight the extent to which women's experiences of direct involvement in peace and security have impacted on how they continue to see themselves today. As a Libyan NGO member explained: "I started my activism to voice women's security concerns because, like other women and their children, and our society, I need peace" (Sabha FGD, November 2016). While the political and security situation in each country has greatly deteriorated since 2011, making it even more difficult to be an active citizen, in their FGDs women remembered their early participation as allowing them to experience a new degree of personal power which they still draw on today to support their resistance

efforts. Yemeni women reported: "The de facto authority was difficult to deal with; but because we believe in the values and principles of peace and security, we persisted" (women political leaders' FGD, Sana'a, January 15th 2017).

"We [as women] became involved in humanitarian issues such as referring displaced people's files, and releasing hostages, prisoners and abductees. We managed to open some closed doors. We influenced decision-makers. We want to tackle the country's challenges"

– Political leader from Sana'a.

Similarly, in Libya, women spoke of their support of reconciliation work, including with people who have become internally displaced, as well as their efforts to counsel young men to prevent their entry into armed groups, and to control arms: “All Libyans should work on and care about disarmament if they really want peace” said one respondent (Sabha FGD, November 2016).

The backlash and loss of position reported by women from across the Arab states notwithstanding (Pratt et al, 2015), women have proven to themselves that they can achieve success in civic engagement. WILPF’s partners, while reporting on the harshness of life under heightened military rule, remain positive about the necessity of women commenting on political and security concerns. No matter how informal their engagement with politics is, FGD respondents continued to imagine themselves building on the personal and cultural changes they had forged in the uprisings. A theme that is often repeated in their discussions is that women do not feel invisible anymore, and no longer accept that discussions of peace and security are taboo: “We had security issues [under Qadhafi] but nobody could pay attention and we were afraid to talk about them. Before, the violence was invisible, and now everything is talked about, including in the media”, reflected a middle-aged woman in a FGD with grassroots women in Tripoli.

There was no sense at all, despite their many differences, that women would accept being excluded again; indeed, the oldest respondent in the discussions, an 86-year-old woman, contributed this observation: “Women should participate, women have no one in Libya and women are the most affected” – Tripoli FGD, December 2016.

Consistently, in their FGDs, women position themselves as informed participants who have joined men in exploring new political spaces that were opened up through the uprisings. As Libyans, as Yemenis, as concerned citizens, they have tasted a new kind of communal and inclusive resistance to tyranny and militarised environments. For instance, women in Aden are focusing on countering violent extremism and radicalisation, and on social cohesion, disarmament and reintegration of combatants, and psychosocial support and relief. One respondent from Aden said: “we conducted awareness sessions on disarmament for a city free of weapons.” Women in Aden also address radicalisation among the youth through observing early warning signs, and conducting awareness sessions to reverse or de-radicalise. The women also resort to writing in the newspapers on radicalisation and terrorism. One respondent shared her experience by saying:

“We held awareness sessions targeting the youth. We explain to them the difference between resistance and terrorism. We explain to them how to spot suspicious groups and how to report them”.

– Respondent from Aden

7- Ruth Hanau Santini, “What Women’s Rights Tell Us About the Arab Spring.” US – Europe Analysis Series Number 52, November 10, 2011: 1. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-womens-rights-tell-us-about-the-arab-spring/> (accessed 9 March 2017).

8- See, for example, Jessica Neuwirth, 9 January, 2017, “Why are women not included in Peacebuilding efforts?” which discusses the 2015 murder of Libyan feminist leader Salwa Bughaighis, founder of the Libyan Women’s Platform for Peace (LWPP) <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2017/01/09/why-are-women-not-included-in-peacebuilding-efforts.html>, and Wameedh Shakir, 18 September 2015, “Yemen: New publication calls for women’s sustained inclusion in conflict resolution.”

As for women in Sana'a, their efforts primarily revolve around providing disparate services for internally displaced persons, such as relief, damage assessments, and advocacy for peace. Women provided psychosocial support to IDPs and shelter services, and collected donations to help IDPs, among others. Additionally, women in Sana'a organised themselves to release detainees. Women in Taiz focus on relief, peacebuilding, and security. They worked on organising relief convoys, smuggled medicines to hospitals in besieged areas, rescued injured citizens, and crossed during fire exchange to help stuck families escape fire lines. They worked on improving social services, including education. One of the respondents from Taiz shared her personal experience as follows: "One of the initiatives I undertook aimed at reopening the schools through communicating with militia leaders. It worked in some places and now we are working on reopening more schools. Another initiative I engaged with was the opening of humanitarian corridors from the east and west of the city, but unfortunately

our efforts were unsuccessful because of lack of commitment from both warring sides."

As active women citizens, they will not willingly go back to silence: WILPF's lead research partner in Libya said,

"Doing this work and seeing these incredible women helped me remember that we are all connected, we share a belief in freedom. I can see their hope and it mirrors my own. I can see their challenges and struggles, but I see their hope more than anything. I share it."

– Lead researcher in Libya



Libyan Women during event designed to encourage female candidates to participate more fully in the country's first free elections in nearly half a century. Credit: UN Photo/Iason Athanasiadis



Credit: dinosmichail/iStock

V. “There are so many punches against us” : women’s peace and security challenges, priorities and concerns.

5.1. Militarisation: publicly a taboo, privately a key concern

Discussions of militarism, and of militant sectarianism as a new political force, were always difficult in the past; but such discussions in the public spheres have now become virtually taboo. Women’s decreasing safety is more than physical: even as they become more fluent in using the agenda of women, peace and security to frame their political observations and concerns, it has become more dangerous for them to try to identify and understand, let alone comment on or critique, ‘national security’ decision-making and actions.

However, despite this difficulty, all participants and respondents who participated in the local consultations in both Yemen and Libya identified the issue of widespread presence and use of arms as a key peace and security priority that needs to be addressed. Internally displaced women in Libya complained about how weapons are widespread almost everywhere, even at weddings and in hospitals, and the presence of arms was the only common peace and security priority between the two FGDs. Participants directly and indirectly associated armed groups and/or militias with being mostly involved in peace and security, while reference was made to

women, children, civilians and the elderly as the most affected by peace and security. Some of them also said that because of the widespread presence of arms, women cannot do or talk about anything, thus linking lack of freedom of speech for women to the prevalence of armed rule. One internally displaced woman from Libya said:

“We do not need too much food; we do not need too much money, but just enough to feed our children and only bread and water. However, the most important means to reach security in our country is through disarmament.”

– Internally displaced woman from Libya

A woman activist from Libya, when asked about why disarmament is a priority for her, said: “I choose this issue because it is a must to achieve peace in Libya. All Libyans should work and care about disarmament if they really want peace”, and another activist answered: “Violence-free society is a healthy society for women, children

and men”. As a strategy to counter this pressing priority, respondents in Yemen said that women’s inclusion in the security sector is an essential step for improving security in the country. They identified the need to include women in development and implementation of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programs.

5.2. Multidimensional peace and security concerns

Other peace and security priorities identified were food security, housing, lack of security and protection in displacement camps, unemployment, sexual and gender-based violence, and the limited availability of financial liquidity and inflation, among many others (see below). Some of these priorities were common to both Libya and Yemen, while others were specific to each context.

In addition to the widespread use of weapons and sexual and gender-based violence against women in particular, respondents in Aden enumerated the following issues as critical challenges facing them: increased regionalism, forced disappearance, lack of qualified security personnel, and the use of illegal prisons. They voiced their concern about the paralysis of the judiciary system, called for reopening the courts, and complained about systematic marginalisation in the public sector and increased corruption. Respondents in Aden also raised concerns about threats of assassinations, including to women’s rights defenders, and restrictions of freedom of expression, and identified the support for women and families of martyrs and injured persons as a priority.

Similarly, to internally displaced women in Libya, IDP women in Aden voiced their concerns around the difficult housing conditions. IDP women in Aden live in harsh conditions including overcrowded accommodation that lacks privacy, shortage of food, hardship in enrolling children in schools, and problems with obtaining identification documents. They also accused humanitarian agencies of corruption and

unfair distribution; as one respondent said: “NGO X came to us and registered our names for food aid, but since then we haven’t received anything”. Displaced women in both countries identified income generation, shelter and rent for shelter, and food security among their top concerns.

“Displaced women in Sana’a noted that relief and humanitarian aid efforts are not fairly distributed, subject to favouritism, and often diverted by armed groups. One of them said: “Those who died are relieved. As for us, we are neither living nor are we dead”.

As one of them put it: “Aid goes to people who do not need it and we receive a little that doesn’t sustain our needs”. Another internally displaced woman from Sana’a said: “Those who died are relieved. As for us, we are neither living nor are we dead”.

Two concerns specific to Yemen are sexual harassment against children and indiscriminate shelling. IDP women in Aden, for instance, voiced their concerns

over unsafe community conditions with the spread of drugs and sexual harassment targeting children.

One IDP respondent said: “The police don’t listen to us. We complain about youth harassing our children but the police do nothing”. Women in Taiz identified insecurity as a concern, being targeted by all warring parties through airstrikes or indiscriminate shelling and sniping.

Women in Yemen observe that “informal groups are interfering in the running of our institutions...they have destroyed any social justice and fairness that used to exist. They have divided agendas that are not good for the homeland. In particular, the militias must be driven out of security institutions because they don’t deliver the Rule of Law to ordinary people” (FGD, Sana’a, November 2016).

5.3. Is grassroots women’s engagement in political developments and negotiations a myth?

Respondents from local consultations held in both Yemen and Libya exhibited different levels and types of engagement on political developments, more specifically on peace agreements and negotiations. Internally displaced women from Tawergha are familiar with the political agreement in Libya, and are particularly interested in the article about internally displaced people. In the Libyan political agreement, Article 25 in the governing principles briefly and generally tackles the issue of IDPs, and Articles 25.7, 27, and 59 mention similar points, such as the following wording: “Voluntary and safe return of refugees and displaced persons”. Some of the respondents described the political agreement as “insufficient” since there are no clear mechanisms of implementation, and others said that the conditions of return for the internally displaced are extremely difficult to achieve.

Respondents not only reflected a certain level of political awareness, but also demonstrated a thorough analysis and engagement on the issues that affect them directly. In this particular context, they did not exhibit a resistance to tackling the issue of violence against women or of the targeting of women political activists⁹. For instance, they mentioned the story of a woman who used to be directly involved in, and worked for, the women’s affairs unit – which falls under the Ministry of Social Affairs – and who was kidnapped from the

camp and is currently incarcerated. In that context, they tackled and discussed the issue of rape of women and girls in prison and detention centres. Article 28.4 of the political agreement mentions prisoners, but is not gender-specific at all. Respondents established a strong link between political negotiations and disarmament, which again reflected that the latter is a serious concern for them. One respondent said:

“The political agreement [in Yemen] should be discussing issues of disarmament, and the banning of the global distribution of weapons”

In this context, some respondents reported that NATO and other foreign forces made them feel unsafe, and that there is an urgent need to have a national army replacing different armed groups.

9- Field researchers in Libya noted that participants did not seem comfortable talking about violence against women (VAW), nor were they responding to issues or concerns specific to women. Although most of them acknowledge the widespread presence of VAW in Libya, there was a tendency among several respondents to normalise violence against women and girls.

Respondents in Yemen have also exhibited an advanced engagement and understanding of political developments, while maintaining a constructively critical standpoint of how negotiations are coming through. They described the peace negotiations as lacking sustainability and “seasonal”. Participants also criticised the United Nations for moving at a slow pace in pushing for a solution. They also reacted to the failure to have a 30% representation of women in the process, to a lack of political will, and to ignorance of Resolution 1325. Respondents also believe that the UN Special Envoy to Yemen can play a more assertive role in pushing for women’s inclusion. Women in Aden shared their disappointment in the peace talks that did not include the South issue, including self-determination, on the table, and did not include southern factions, including women from the South. The respondents described the road map that they aspire to have for a political solution based on national dialogue outcomes and on social justice and human security principles.

As opposed to other groups, some internally displaced women in Libya said that they have only heard of, but haven’t read, the peace agreement. Their responses reflected a much lower level of engagement, if any, in political negotiations. Some said that members of negotiating parties only take part in the negotiations to take advantage of “money and hotel stays” and that there are no positive or concrete outcomes that stem from these meetings. They also accused them of being “only concerned about themselves” and said that the peace agreement doesn’t revolve around the priorities and concerns of civilians.

Criteria for women who should be included in peace negotiations as per respondents’ perceptions:

- Qualified and competent women, including having mediation and negotiation skills, understanding the political context, and having advocacy skills.
- Enjoying political leadership and having community influence, and being a feminist or women’s rights advocate.
- Ensuring fair representation of regions, civil society organisations, media or opinion leaders, and different age groups.
- Impartiality.



أحمد شهاب
AHMED SHIHAB

VI. How is the prevention of women's freedom of movement in Libya and Yemen linked to the diminution of their participation?

“Say goodbye to yourself” is a quote taken from a discussion among grassroots women in Tripoli in December 2016, during which women explained what life is like in a city in which women are no longer able to move around freely, let alone express their opinions in a public political platform. “You can say goodbye to yourself if you want to move alone,” stated a young woman about the impacts of checkpoints. The group also discussed how impactful rumours and the intentional distribution of false information have become as a tactic to spread fear and prevent women's movement and participation. This is another way to make women ‘say goodbye to themselves’ – by creating an atmosphere of such psychological insecurity that half the population no longer finds participation in public life possible. We are highlighting these words because they bring us squarely back to a central pillar of SCR1325: the

focus on increasing women's participation in all aspects of security analysis and decision-making, so that they can, “ultimately, help shape societies where violence experienced by women would not be the norm.”¹⁰

In both Yemen and Libya, a significant decrease in their mobility has made women invisible once more, favouring conservative interpretations of women as bearers of their family honour, in need of men's ‘protection’ disguised as control. By paying attention to international culpability in the militarisation and political disintegration of Libya and Yemen since 2011, we will show how national mechanisms of patriarchal control easily find support from an international community that has done little but pay lip service to the WPS agenda.

Mobility, transportation and security checks

One of the primary issues participants reflected on in both Yemen and Libya around their peace and security concerns are issues of mobility and freedom of movement. Respondents from Libya and Yemen reported numerous common

challenges pertaining to mobility, that include but are not limited to the following: shifts in mobility patterns before and after conflicts broke out, military checkpoints, and male guardianship during movements.

10- Chowdhury, A. K. 2011. “The Intrinsic Role of Women in Peace and Security: Genesis and Follow-Up of UNSCR1325.” Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture, 17.3 & 4: 9-15, p. 10.

6.1. Mobility patterns

Almost all respondents observed negative shifts and changes in women's freedom of movement before and after the revolution. Quoting one of the internally displaced respondents in Libya, "before, women could move everywhere, but now it is impossible". Analysing mobility patterns after the war, respondents in Yemen reported that the time spent moving in conflict-affected areas has increased, and people are obliged to take routes that are difficult and expose them to volatile security conditions. One internally displaced woman from Taiz said: "a journey that takes half an hour in normal days within the governorate took me 7 hours because of the war... and the journey to Sana'a from Taiz, which usually takes 4 hours, took us 15 hours". In addition, the cost of transportation within Yemen has increased in general, but it rockets when it comes to transportation associated with displacement. One NGO representative from Yemen said: "Transport costs during displacement amount to between 150–450 USD per family, which cannot be afforded by most vulnerable families." In Sana'a, Yemeni women who work in civil society also indicated that they are now required to obtain permission to implement activities or projects. They sometimes resort to working confidentially to avoid the process of obtaining licenses. One respondent said:

"An activity as simple as visiting a school or meeting IDPs requires obtaining a permit that may take a month to obtain, if obtained at all".

- Activist from Yemen

6.2. Male guardianship

Commenting on resorting to having a mahram (male guardian/companion) for mobility, women working in civil society organisations in Yemen indicated that they do not require a mahram, but explained that some women choose to have a mahram for safety reasons, especially when going to areas that are not within their usual territory. Other respondents reported that in some areas such as Saada, they are obliged to have a mahram.

As for Libya, the majority of internally displaced women reported that they do not travel without male companions, and one of them said travelling alone poses serious security threats for women: "You can say goodbye to yourself if you want to move alone". One WPS woman activist from Sabha, Libya said: "I can move alone in close-by places within my community. But that changes when I move to farther places; in this case I move with a male companion – we pass many checkpoints and some of them are fake". The breakdown of any unified Rule of Law was exemplified in Libya in mid-February 2017 with an arbitrary, if spectacular, ban issued by one of the emerging military governors, Abdul Razzaq Al-Nazhuri, against single women travelling overseas unaccompanied by a male guardian. This ban was both unconstitutional according to the 2011 Constitution and unenforceable beyond Labraq airport, which is in Nazhuri's military control. Yet the illegality and unenforceability of his actions seemed irrelevant to him when he gave the decree. Only a sustained refusal of this attempted control, made public through social media, seems to have been effective in reversing it. This law, albeit reversed, holds within it several dimensions and repercussions for enforcing patriarchal control over women in general, but particularly over women activists in Libya. The lead researcher in Libya analysed this impact and said that:

“Women activists are being attacked in the East: the militarised authorities are afraid women might work against their agenda and interests.”

– **Lead researcher in Libya**

This is why the ban has been placed on women’s freedom of movement, using the excuse that it’s unsafe for them to travel alone or implying that their autonomous travel makes them ‘security threats’. The language of ‘security’ is easily manipulated.”

6.3. Checkpoints

In Yemen, mobility between northern and southern governorates is particularly difficult. There are many checkpoints that belong to different armed groups, a situation which is similarly widespread in Libya. The majority of internally displaced black Libyans reported feeling scared and threatened every time they cross a security checkpoint and recounted incidents of beating and sexual violence. Interestingly enough, other internally displaced women did not exhibit feelings of fear when reporting on harassment incidents, but said that “women bring this on themselves”. However, they both said that armed men controlling those checkpoints are friendlier to families than to female and male individuals. A phenomenon particular to Libya is the kidnapping of women at checkpoints if armed men want a specific woman. Analysing the particular repercussions of the heightened control measures against women in Eastern Libya, the lead researcher said that the self-declared military authority of the east (Libyan Arab Army, LAA) “...has virtually declared war

on women. We know this means assaults on women will increase. We understand exactly how they use domestic patriarchal values to impose a kind of ‘state guardianship’ on women”. Predictably, those who stood to benefit most from parlaying religious extremism into politics – the great majority of them conservative men – insisted vociferously that women who had joined public uprisings should have no future public role. Observing how willing they were to reinforce their message with public violence against women, WILPF, like our partners, focused on how women might respond to the extremist and militarised versions of political Islam that forcefully began to reshape social, economic and political life across the region. In this context, the lead researcher in Libya reflected: “[Militias] are just extending values already familiar to men through their intimate behaviours to create a larger structure of control. So far, activists have managed to stop this from happening, but it’s a warning of the methods they’ll keep testing – they will decide who gets ‘security clearances’ so that they can increasingly control public space and discourse, the local economy, and so on.”



Women chant and raise Libyan flags in Msallata, Libya
Credit: UN Photo/Iason Founten

VII. Is the international community normalising violent extremism and reinforcing national patriarchal control measures?

As our partners in the two countries repeatedly heard from the dozens of women they were able to interview at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, “Why aren’t the international guarantees for peace and security being activated?” “When all we want is disarmament, why are there more weapons than ever before – where are they from?” To answer questions like this, a historical perspective on SCR1325 is helpful, as Cynthia Cockburn (2011) has called for since its passage. In his account of events leading up to the passage of SCR1325, Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury¹¹ discloses how:

some of my colleagues expressed wide-ranging disinterest – even indifference – saying that the president was diluting the Council’s mandate by trying to bring a ‘soft issue’ to its agenda... The five permanent members of the Council resisted stubbornly through procedural and substantive manoeuvres.... Conceptually, it seemed they decided not to connect women, peace and security. Also, I found that, in general, ambassadors to the UN do not feel that women’s issues are a top priority for them – and many of them do not

get clear instructions in this regard from their respective governments (Chowdhury 2001, 11-12).

His account, which does not dwell on how 1325 was finally rewritten in such a way that it overcame the SC’s objections, is usefully cross-referenced with that of Cockburn, who is the first feminist peace analyst to observe how deeply compromised the language of 1325 had to become in order for the Security Council to agree to pass the Resolution at all. The 16 years since its passage have seen so little real change on the ground that the CEDAW Committee expressed its concern, at its 55th session in 2013, “about the limited political participation of women and their risk of exclusion and marginalisation, despite their active role during the transition processes in their respective countries.”¹²

At the time of writing this report, early 2017, social activism has effectively been curtailed in both countries and perhaps the most egregious loss to date is that women have also been squeezed out of spaces they occupied, even under the dictators, in judicial, security, police and military institutions (Fetouri, 2015).

11 - Chowdhury represented Bangladesh on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) during its membership in 2000-2001 and, in this role, issued the initial statement that would finally lead to the passage of the Resolution a year later.

12 - Available at http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/StatementOnTheRoleOfWomen_LibyaTunisiaEgypt.pdf

One reason for this setback is the emergence and encouragement of forms of political organisation, which also receive the support of conservative or ultra-religious women, that are even more authoritarian and militarised than the dictatorships the uprisings sought to unseat. It is also a result of deteriorations in everyday security which have made it more difficult for them to go to work or travel inside their own country. The international community is often guilty of making this situation worse because of its limited or incomplete perspective on the root causes of the insecurity it is supposed to address.

By 2017, the extreme levels of internationally-escalated war violence already far too familiar to women in Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait and Iraq have been extended to Syria, and now Libya and Yemen.

The same international coalitions, the same military alliances, fed by the same corporate arms producers and exporters, began campaigns of relentless bombing with the same disproportionate impacts on civilian lives and the infrastructure needed to make those lives “liveable”

- Butler 2004.

Simultaneously, the familiar machineries of ‘mediation’ and ‘reconstruction’ brokered by United Nations agencies and institutions were rolled out to enable the international community, particularly the Permanent Five members of the Security Council, to convince themselves they were doing something to repair the damage caused by their military interventions and collusion. Profits mounted.¹³ Women continue to be ignored, overlooked and excluded from high-level meetings, ‘peace’ talks, and all other decision-making¹⁴. As the lead research partner in Yemen observes,

“Southern women are forced to travel to Sana’a to participate in UN-facilitated peace consultations, which is very dangerous for them. The UN makes women sign a waiver that they are not responsible if anything happens on the journey.”

The UN sits in its compound in the capital and has little interest in the country as a whole. The Secretary General’s special envoy has been to Aden once and did not meet with women. In Sana’a he met three or four times with women, but only with Pact members who had been vetted by UN Women. I suppose he operated on the assumption that this is like meeting with everyone, but it isn’t; and it doesn’t help defuse tensions on the ground”.

13 - <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-23/peace-loving-sweden-and-switzerland-are-among-top-arms-exporters-capita-world>

14 - When the Arab uprisings began, we did not yet have the Arms Trade Treaty, CEDAW’s GR 30 (on linking the Convention and the women, peace and security agenda) and SCR2122 (all from 2013), tools that now assist us in more critically assessing the multidimensional aspects of women’s insecurity.

The situation is similar in Libya in the sense that the international community does not take into account the repercussions on the ground that follow certain political and diplomatic choices.

For instance, giving international legitimacy to certain militias not only engenders severe multidimensional insecurities for civilians in general and women in particular, but also leads to unwanted and negative repercussions in the peace and political processes as a whole. As the lead researcher in Libya analyses:

“One of the on-the-ground impacts is that women not travelling with a mahram will not be able to participate in anything the international community organises. This is ironic because the international community recognised this militia only a short while ago – they brought them to the negotiating table, and the effect of that was to give the LAA credibility as a valid negotiator. So, the international community can't turn around now and pretend to be horrified. They can't say, 'oh, we don't recognise this travel ban. It's an arbitrary decision by an illegal warlord.' You can't just decide they're legitimate one day because you want them to sit at the table, and then dismiss them as making capricious laws about controlling women the next day.

“There are real consequences for ordinary people when a militia is given access to negotiations – it legitimates these guys in their own eyes, and when the talks you invite them to are over, they go back to the community they're ruling over and behave as they please.”

– **Lead researcher in Libya**



Credit: Ahmed Shihab

VIII. Concluding remarks

The situation in which women find themselves in 2017 was not inevitable. In the lead-up to and immediately after the uprisings in 2011, including in Yemen and Libya, the great majority of WILPF's regional partners were becoming aware that an unprecedented form of sectarian militarism was rising.¹⁵ To some extent, this was not unexpected, but formed part of a continuum of patriarchal resistance to their emancipation that women recognised from the 1980s. As CEDAW came into being, the exclusively male leadership of the Arab States ratified the Convention with reservations, using national legislation, usually as it was interpreted by conservative religious scholars, to block women from accessing their fundamental rights and freedoms. Women have worked for years to legally fight back, including through launching the regional 'Equality Without Reservation' campaign in 2006 in an effort to force national governments to lift reservations, specifically against articles 2, 9, 15 and 16, which regulate the marriage of minors, the practice of polygamy, equality in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance, and women's ability to transfer their nationality to their children.¹⁶

However, at the time of the uprisings, very few women had attempted to connect their CEDAW work with the women, peace and security Resolutions of the UN Security Council.¹⁷ As a result of living under extremely restrictive political regimes, few national or even regional discussions on broader security questions had been held by civil society organisations or national government stakeholders, and even less attention had been paid to the gendered impacts of the peace and security situation

of countries or the region as a whole. The introduction of this new framework through which to examine insecurity, especially forms of gendered violence to which women became subject as armed violence increased, was seen by WILPF's partners as an important avenue to express their objections to the selling out of the promise behind the Arab Spring.

WILPF, and our partners among women's groups focusing on peace and security in Yemen and Libya, call once more for the broad focus needed to address the cultural/social, economic and political causative elements behind the crises escalating in these countries. If a unified 'Western' perspective on finding solutions to the armed conflicts in both countries can still be said to exist, WILPF urges a refocus on supporting highly localised, community-based approaches to understanding and combatting extremism and the kinds of violence to which it gives rise. A crucial, and currently missing, element in this shift is the meaningful inclusion of women in both diplomatic and local-level efforts to identify and implement economic, institutional, social and political interventions that can support stabilisation and future growth. War violence constitutes an egregious form of violence against women, and the international community is both morally and legally obliged to prevent women from bearing its burden.

Among the most challenging findings of WILPF and our partners is that both state and non-state actors are determined to exclude women from any public decision-making – whether motivated by a narrow interpretation of Islam and a desire to

¹⁵ - In Libya, for instance, there was an immediate public debate about reversing Qadhafi's ban on polygamous marriage, which alerted women to the fact that the small freedoms they had enjoyed under the dictator might now be at risk. Polygamy was legalised in 2013. See Mustafa Fetouri, 23 March 2015, "Women face setbacks in new Libya" (available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/contents/articles/originals/2015/03/libya-women-murder-situation-gaddafi-regime-militias.html>)

¹⁶ - See <http://www.learningpartnership.org/citizenship>

¹⁷ - This is partly explained because they worked from the CEDAW framework, and in 2011, the passage of General Comment 30 (2013), which explicitly connects these instruments, was still some way in the future.

homogenously enforce its cultural expression among local communities, or by patriarchal cultural beliefs – and this goal finds a willing and equally patriarchal counterpart in the great majority of international diplomats, donors and other interlocutors. Collectively, dominant stakeholders see nothing wrong in the continued and complete exclusion of women from decision-making fora: put bluntly, the lack of motivation to include women is shared by Islamists and a male-dominated diplomatic corps. In both Libya and Yemen, the stereotypical language used to justify women's absence – which ranges from dismissing them as victims to declaring them unqualified to participate or not broadly representative of entire communities – is so

consistent that it appears scripted. In 2017, the call for women's participation in all aspects of peace and security negotiations and actions, as laid out in SCR1325 and subsequent Resolutions, exists only in the realm of rhetoric. The fact that there are real-world consequences for this continued exclusion remains overlooked, not least because of the devaluation of women's skills at early detection of rising extremism in their communities. Women's proven ability to deflect such extremism, especially when it occurs in their own kinship networks, is being deliberately undermined in favour of endless war.



Young children play on swings in a square in Zawiya, Libya, a town that saw heavy fighting as one of the first to rise against Muammar Al-Qadhafi's regime in February 2011 and the last to be liberated. Credit: UN Photo/Iason Founten

IX. Recommendations

WILPF urges Human Rights Council members and observer states to:

Protect civilians and migrants

- Honour international commitments, as outlined in SCR1325 (2000) and subsequent women, peace and security Resolutions, the Arms Trade treaty and CEDAW, to prevent the disproportionate impact of war violence on Libyan and Yemeni women and their children. Such violence remains especially egregious because women continue to be excluded from virtually all security-related decision-making, as well as formal peace negotiations and processes.
- Ongoing military interventions in Yemen and Libya will only strengthen extremist groups already active in both countries. Armed attacks are deepening the misery of civilians, who are the overwhelming majority of casualties. The deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure – including health centres, schools and markets, as well as community gatherings such as weddings and funerals – has particularly severe consequences for women and their children.
- Call for an immediate end to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including aerial bombardment, indiscriminate shelling and the laying of landmines; encourage and enforce unilateral ceasefires, and continuously monitor and report on the activities of international and regional actors; impose neutral buffer zones in highly populated residential areas; remove arms depots and military camps from highly populated areas.
- In Yemen, lift any siege imposed internally on any governorates; establish and safeguard humanitarian corridors.
- Stop directing financial aid, vitally needed for humanitarian actions, to military operations intended to ‘end terror’ or ‘control extremists’, including ISIS. This only leads to an increased militarised environment. Start funding long-term development interventions that address the root causes of the unrest; supporting women’s economic independence is a critical contribution to long-term stabilisation.
- Address the human rights crisis faced by refugees, the internally displaced and migrants from the crises, who continue to lack services and are especially vulnerable to trafficking, torture and other ill-treatment, unlawful killings and sexual exploitation.
- Ensure that IDP women and their families have decent shelter options including provision of rent subsidies; facilitate the process of obtaining identification papers and legal papers and ensure that women who are single, widowed or otherwise separated from male kin by war are supported to obtain necessary documentation;
- Prevent and condemn forced disappearances, arbitrary detention and kidnapping of civilians.

Arms control

Recalling the Arms Trade Treaty, Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, and the EU common position on arms transfers:

- Continue the UN embargo on all weapons sales to Libya, including by investigating online markets; call for an embargo on arms sales to countries involved in attacks on Yemen.
- Consider sanctions against countries violating the Libya arms embargo.
- In Libya, prevent further undermining of the GNA or overlooking of embargo-breaking weapons sales to Libyan warlords, which remains an obstacle to unified governance and the honouring of human rights in Libya. History has shown weapons are too easily diverted to emerging militia, especially in a governance vacuum.
- In both countries, immediately reinstate demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes for combatants, especially women and children. The release and rehabilitation of children does not require a political settlement but is an urgent human rights issue, as most recently reiterated in SCR2225 (2015).

Prioritise women's participation in mediation and peacebuilding

- Support efforts to maintain regional stability by providing neutral meeting space to Libyan and Yemeni women calling for peace; broker meetings and capacity-building activities between strong women's movements (e.g. in Tunisia and

Morocco) and their Libyan and Yemeni counterparts.

- By encouraging engagement in a coherent mediation and political process, ensure that parties agree on a consensual solution for the political deadlocks in both countries; draw on the particular contributions women peace activists can make; include women in developing local security plans, which contribute to national and regional security.
- In Libya, ensure implementation of the calls in SCR2323 (2016) for "full, equal and effective participation of women in all activities relating to the democratic transition, conflict resolution and peacebuilding"; in Yemen and Libya alike, ensure that SCR1325 and subsequent Resolutions on WPS are referenced and reinforced through well-funded and implementable National Action Plans.
- Prevent armed groups and militias from controlling local institutions, which in both countries has led to the exclusion of women from public office; reduce restrictions on civil society work, especially that of women's rights organisations.
- Focus on reinstating an independent judicial system in post-conflict, liberated areas. The promulgation of specific laws to protect women, and a legal process for minors, should be an urgent priority.
- Honour commitments to include women in all decision-making: cadres of committed and capable Libyan and Yemeni women peace-makers stand ready to offer alternative solutions to 'endless war', but they are not included in decision-making on their country's futures; women's efforts to counter extreme violence, and to prevent extreme violence and address

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The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) with National Sections covering every continent, an International Secretariat based in Geneva, and a New York office focused on the work of the United Nations (UN).

Since our establishment in 1915, we have brought together women from around the world who are united in working for peace by non-violent means and promoting political, economic and social justice for all.

Our approach is always non-violent, and we use existing international legal and political frameworks to achieve fundamental change in the way states conceptualise and address issues of gender, militarism, peace and security.

Our strength lies in our ability to link the international and local levels. We are very proud to be one of the first organisations to gain consultative status (category B) with the United Nations, and the only women's anti-war organisation so recognised.



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM

WILPF Geneva
Rue de Varembe 1
Case Postale 28
1211 Geneva 20
Switzerland
T: +41 (0)22 919 70 80
E: secretariat@wilpf.ch

WILPF New York
777 UN Plaza, New
York
NY 10017 USA
T: +1 212 682 1265