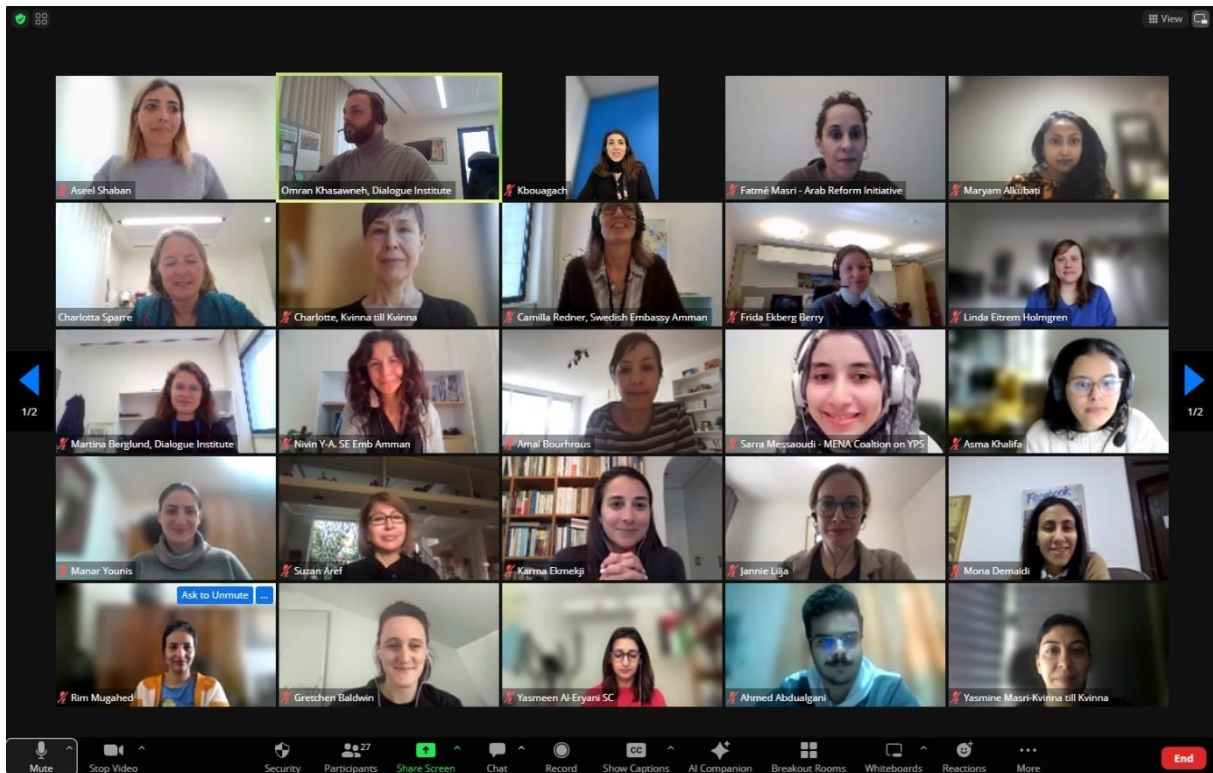# Report from a meeting on WPS

Discussion on shrinking civic space

Online meeting, 19 March 2024

Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Report

On March 19th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an online meeting on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The discussions focused on how the shrinking civic space is affecting women in peacebuilding and in society at large.

During the meeting participants expressed concern over the shrinking civic space and the pressure on civil society in general, and on women led organizations in particular. Other key points included concerns over the serious effects of reduced funding; and calls for more equitable partnerships; as well as calls for improved accountability and implementation on the WPS agenda, including National Action Plans.

Presentation of the "Supporting Arab women at the Table" (SAWT) project

The discussion was initiated by a presentation by Fatmé Masri from the [Arab Reform Initiative](#) (ARI), who introduced the [Supporting Arab Women at the Table (SAWT)](#) project, a project that aimed at boosting women's involvement in politics and in peace processes.

The SAWT project (2021-2023) presented by ARI, aimed to boost women's participation in the MENA region's political and peace efforts, both in quality and quantity. Collaborating with partners in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Palestine - with ARI leading efforts in Syria.

The project findings reveal that, despite the unique contexts in each region, four major trends were consistently observed regarding women's engagement in peace and political processes. Firstly, women's representation and participation, especially in high-level political dialogues, remain significantly restricted. Secondly, the discussion agendas typically prioritize traditional security concerns, sidelining women, and their issues in favor of broader societal needs related to human security. Thirdly, women leading these efforts encounter heightened security threats. Lastly, there is a noticeable resistance to the concepts and terminology associated with gender, peace-making, and feminism.

For more information about the SAWT project by [Arab Reform Initiative](#) (ARI), see: [Supporting Arab Women at the Table](#).

Discussion

The presentation by ARI was followed by a discussion amongst 20+ stakeholders, from civil society, think tanks/academia, international organizations, and private and public sectors, from the MENA region and Sweden/Europe.

Shrinking civic space

Throughout the discission participants expressed concern over the shrinking civic space and the pressure on civil society in general, and on women led organizations in particular. Several participants share concrete examples of how their work had become more difficult and more dangerous during the past years. In addition to challenging realities on the ground in conflict affected areas, the pointed to an increase in harassment and threats.

Representatives of the [Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation,](#) who attended the meeting shared insights from the organization's biannual mapping on "*The state of women human rights defenders 2023*". This report reveals a troubling rise in harassment and threats, and indicates that threats have expanded to impact activists' families. For more information about the report see: [The state of women human rights defenders 2023.](#)

Challenges to the Implementation of WPS

Participants also pointed to an ineffective implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in some countries. Among reasons for the inefficiency, they highlighted a lack of accountability and insufficient mechanisms to enforce the agenda's goals. The discussion underscored a need for better structures, clearer implementation bodies for WPS, and emphasized the importance of addressing gender-based violence that hinders women's participation in society.

Funding Challenges

Participants stressed that another serious challenge for civil society organizations working on the WPS agenda, was the reduction in funding that adversely impact civil society. Several participants expressed concern over shrinking funding and underlined that operating without sufficient resources is not sustainable. Additionally, they pointed to problems regarding distribution of funds, which predominantly favors larger, well-established organizations, sidelining grassroots organizations and networks and their unique contributions they make to their local communities.

Several participants also brought up the need of establishing better balanced partnerships between donors and recipients, to "meet the need of the organizations on the ground and not only to tick the boxes of the donors". Some pointed to a growing discomfort with a perceived financial bullying", where donors demand complete ideological alignment from recipients.

In this context representatives of the civil society underscored the importance of diversifying funding sources to ensure that organizations do not have to compromise on their values. They said that diversification is crucial for cultivating fair and equitable partnerships.

Reimagining the WPS Agenda

In the discussion participants pointed to a need to reimagine the WPS agenda. They underscored that while many organizations are doing valuable work, there is a need for more exchanges between different actors to find synergies and to support and strengthen collaboration, along with work to bridge silos and to better connect different parts of the WPS ecosystem.

The meeting concluded with a call for bridging the silos, closer coordination efforts within different parts of the WPS ecosystem and regular similar gatherings.