Report from a meeting on WPS -

Discussion on how policymakers can support the implementation of the WPS agenda

Online meeting, 30 May 2024

Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Report

On 30 May 2024, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted an online meeting on Women, Peace, and Security. The discussions focused on how policymakers can support the implementation of the WPS agenda in the MENA region.

Participants underlined the need for strengthening the WPS ecosystem in the face of the backlash that many organizations face, and for breaking out of the "WPS silo" and explore cooperation with new partners, including expanding the work to engage more men. There was also a call for broadening the scope of the agenda and to look at connections between WPS and other issues such as migration, armament/disarmament, etc. Other key points included concerns over the shrinking space for women's rights organizations, and a need to in parallel focus on protection and participation.

Presentations

The discussion began with presentations by Fatmé Masri, from the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Jannie Lilja from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SPIRI) and Anna Widestam from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

Fatmé Masri shared experiences from Arab Reform Initiative's work on building communities between different stakeholders involved in the WPS agenda, from independent women's rights groups, new political parties, and diaspora groups. In this work ARI is both aiming to provide safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue for these groups and to connect them with policy and decision makers. She said that a challenge for the implementation of the WPS agenda is that many organizations involved tend to work in silos. ARI's initiatives aspire to bridge these silos, bring diverse groups together and also to provide training to increase the impact.

Jannie Lilja from SIPRI noted that WPS coalitions in the MENA region could learn from their counterparts (other coalitions and mobilization movements) around the globe and be inspired by successful organizational strategies. She emphasized the importance of exchanging experiences through increased interconnectedness across countries and regions. This includes further developing connectivity within the WPS movement, as well as collaborations with political and regional actors, including those who can promote WPS principles even when that is done without explicit references to the WPS agenda. Such efforts will contribute to a broader view of the WPS ecosystem and help identify new, like-minded actors who can advance the agenda. Identifying connectors who can find unifying messages and link regional and international actors is crucial in this process. The current dependency of many WPS projects on a very limited number of donors could be alleviated by exploring a broader range of potential funding sources, not just like-minded governments.

Anna Widestam from Sida informed about the Swedish Government's new strategy for the MENA region[1]. She noted that many partner organizations are pointing to challenges in working on WPS issues, as gender equality is often portrayed as associated with "Western values". She therefore argued for a need to repackage the issues, without losing the fundamental values at their core. She also suggested that WPS movements should focus on new opportunities, for example working with themes such as positive masculinity and men as agents of change.

Discussion

The presentations were followed by a discussion amongst the participants, during which the following main points were raised:

Strengthening the WPS ecosystem in the face of backlash

Participants stressed that more efforts should be made to strengthen WPS networks in the face of the current backlash against women's rights, including by increasing cooperation and synergies within the networks, sharing of experiences/best practices, and avoiding negative competition for funds between organizations. The WPS community should focus on making the best of what already exists, building on existing initiatives and government commitments. Several participants also underlined that peace and women's organizations should be viewed, not just as implementors of programs, but as agents of change.

Broadening the scope of the WPS agenda

Several participants emphasized the need for broadening the scope of the WPS agenda and to explore how other central issues should be included in the discussions on women, peace and security. Such issues could for example be migration, armament/disarmament, and occupation. The approach to the issues should be one of reciprocity, not as a one-way scrutiny by Western countries of countries in the global South.

Breaking out of the WPS silo

Participants strongly agreed with the speakers that the WPS agenda increasingly should be used as a base from which to collaborate with and learn from others outside the WPS silo.

Some pointed to a need to diversify the sources of funding, including through collaborations with new/alternative donors who do not specifically focus on WPS, but who are active in other related areas. One example could be healthcare and the Melinda Gates foundation. Opportunities for more South-South cooperation could also be further explored.

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[1] strategy-mena.pdf (government.se)

Ensure continued focus on women's participation, in parallel to work on protection

While it remains central to work on protection (especially given the increasingly harsh environment for women's organizations) participants stressed a parallel need to focus more on strengthening women's participation in politics, economy and in society at large.

Broadening the group of counterparts for dialogue on WPS issues

In the discussion, participants pointed to the need for broadening the group of counterparts for dialogue on WPS issues and not least to enhance efforts to engage more men, from diverse parts of society.

Some participants suggested to engage more in dialogues with influential actors "who often play a strong role in society, but often are forgotten by the WPS ecosystem". This could for example include traditional and religious leaders, as well as the private sector.

Another point raised was that it sometimes could be challenging to identify and reach actors with actual influence on the situation on the ground. In some cases, it might be necessary to not only try to reach local actors, but also regional powers or international organizations.