

# Voice and Vision: What the Women Say

## MENA/Asia

### Women's Rights, Peace and Security Forum Key Findings

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In the past decade Muslim majority countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia have experienced profound change including violent conflict, repression and the recent, largely non-violent transitions. Women, particularly civil society activists have been at the frontlines of these developments –as catalyst of non-violent protest, agents of positive change, and as key targets of rising intolerance, extremism and violence. Yet they have had few opportunities for regional interactions and exchange.

In September 2012 the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) convened the first regional “What the Women Say” MENA/South Asia Forum on Rights, Peace and Security with nearly 50 women representing 12 countries in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia region, with international partners. This

#### Summary of Key Themes

1. Women are active and vocal in their stance for plural, rights-based, democratic and just societies, but they need assistance to amplify their message and vision.
2. Extremism is systematic, spreading and supported by regional actors. The suppression of women is integral to this ideology.
3. The indigenous history of women's roles and status in society is being erased.
4. There is backsliding on equality and human rights laws. The risk of discrimination against women and minorities in new constitutions is very high.
5. Solidarity among civil society is a positive development and needs support.
6. Censorship is rising and freedom of expression is restricted. Negative messaging on women is pervasive, and should be countered.
7. There is little political will for transitional justice, so gender sensitive, grassroots initiatives are needed to address past injustices and promote reconciliation.
8. Security sector reform initiatives must integrate gender, human rights issues and take on a strong human security perspective.
9. Economic empowerment of women is urgent and fundamental but it must be progressive and come with a strong legal protection framework.
10. The provisions of SCR 1325 (1820/1888/1889) are urgent and relevant to the region.

group of peace and women's rights experts, practitioners, activists and scholars met over a four-day period to draw on the framework provided by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security to compare and contrast the fast-paced changes in the region. Their discussions included country situations analyses with attention to the gender dimensions of root causes and evolving political, economic, security, religious and socio-cultural trends; the threats and opportunities facing women's movements; and the gendered dimensions of key transitional issues notably, legal and constitutional processes, transitional justice, security sector and economic reform.

At a time when human rights—particularly women's and minority rights—and democratic principles are already at risk of being compromised, women in the region offer a positive alternative as they advocate for a clear vision of peace, pluralism and prosperity for their countries.



They offered sobering insight into ongoing developments, while highlighting the critical work of women in promoting rights and dignity for all, justice and reconciliation, human security and democracy. In these difficult times when human rights—particularly women's and minority rights—and democratic principles are already being compromised, women in the region offer a stark contrast as they advocate for a clear vision of peace, pluralism and prosperity for their countries. They also represent the aspirations of a wide cross section of the public in the region, but they lack the infrastructure or resources to

amplify their message. The findings here reflect the key emergent themes, and priorities.

## Key Findings

### 1. **Extremism is systematic, spreading and supported by regional powers.**

The positive changes and openings occurring in certain countries are threatened by the rise of religious extremism<sup>1</sup>—defined as a rigid ideology where specific, narrow or literal interpretations of religion are used to reshape society. While western policy makers assume that the anger is directed at the west, in the region women speak of rising intolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities (including Islamic minorities) and women. Participants concurred that extremists exploit religion to justify the use of violence and force, but their goal is power, control and domination. They are filling the vacuum left by the demise of the dictatorial regimes. In many of the countries in the region, the independent civil society movements have been under attack and are not strong enough to address basic socio-economic needs or able to reach out to share their vision of a future state and society. They also believe that extremists such as the Salafis in the Arab world and Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan are being sponsored and supported by regional powers. As a Tunisian participant stated, “we ask them, who are you? Where did you come from? Where were you during the revolution?”

<sup>1</sup> Participants made a distinction between fundamentalism, which many claim refers to adherence to the fundamental pillars of religion, and extremism that is a specific and manipulated definition. In the region there is an ongoing debate on these terms put forth by women.

- **Religious extremists are building alliances and influencing the formal political and legal arena, and securing impunity.** While so-called moderate Islamists

have won power through the ballot box, many are bowing to the demands of the extremists. Women and girls are being targeted with impunity. In Pakistan extremism has infiltrated politics and society. It took the heinous attack on a teenage schoolgirl to generate public outcry, but the Taliban has not

“First they attacked the dead, then the vulnerable, including women.”

Libyan Legal Rights Activist

backed down. In Libya, before attacking the US mission in Benghazi, extremists had systematically attacked and destroyed ancient Sufi shrines and mosques, claiming that such sites encourage idolatry. “They attacked the dead, then the vulnerable, i.e. women,” said one legal rights activist. When civil society activists, including many women, demonstrated to protect a historic site against destruction, security forces allegedly associated with the government, arrested the activists instead of the extremists.

- **The involvement of international actors including drone attacks, military assistance and support to corrupt governments fuels the narrative of extremism.** From Yemen to Pakistan and

Afghanistan, participants remarked on the detrimental impact that international actors have on their efforts to support peace and development. There is significant frustration about the shortsighted approaches of some Western governments and multilateral organizations that seem to bolster ineffective governments and are unwilling to fully engage indigenous civil society movements that have a deep commitment to peace, human rights and stability.

- **Women are at the frontlines of the struggle against extremism, offering a constructive, pragmatic and inclusive vision of the future.** Extremists are targeting

women directly seeking to instill subservience and restrictions on their role and rights in the public sphere and within the family. To bolster their own power, they are attacking women’s human rights defenders and those working to counter extremism. Despite the

Islamists and extremists are attempting to paint women’s rights issues as ‘western’ influences that do not adhere to the region’s culture and tradition. In reality, for many Tunisians, Libyans, Pakistanis and others, the regressive ideologies that target women’s role, visibility and status, are more recent and alien.

dangers, throughout the region women are also at the forefront of efforts to de-radicalize young men and promote reconciliation. Civil society organizations run by women offer economic empowerment activities while raising awareness of Islam’s more inclusive, moderate and progressive messages and philosophy. As they fight for equality for women, they are also standing against the rise of discrimination and intolerance towards religious and ethnic minorities. Their work is difficult and their courage, extraordinary. Yet neither national governments nor the international community is heeding their call, strengthening civil society movements or engaging them systematically in transition related processes.

- **Patriarchy and conservatism are pervasive but the demand for basic rights and equality is also strong.** In Muslim majority countries much like other parts of the world, there have been multiple cultural forces at play in recent history. There is no doubt that patriarchal norms and attitudes

towards women are prominent. As a result, discrimination and violence against women is pervasive and condoned by some political groups. Politically, even the secular parties who claim to uphold women's rights often lack commitment and exclude women from decision-making. Meanwhile, the Islamists political groups are better organized, well funded, and with strong grassroots networks. They provide charitable services to address basic health, nutritional and social needs. But they have no commitment to civil liberties and are promoting a regressive message on the rights of women and minorities.

- ***The history of women's progress and achievements is being erased.*** From Pakistan to Egypt and Tunisia, most of the countries in the region have a history of home-grown feminism and progress on women's rights. Yet both the moderate Islamists and extremists are attempting to paint these gains as 'western' influences that do not adhere to the region's culture and tradition. In reality, for many Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Pakistanis and others, the regressive ideologies that target women's role, visibility and status, are more recent imports and alien to their indigenous culture and history.
- ***Gender based violence has become pervasive across the region and militarization heightens vulnerability.*** Women are routinely targeted and discriminated against because of their gender. In Iraq for example, women face regular verbal and physical harassment in streets but have no recourse to justice as they fear bringing shame on themselves and families. Restrictions on women's movements is rising, forcing many to be chaperoned. In some countries, those who experience sexual assault often face the wrath of their families for bring shame and some become victims of so-called 'honor killings'. Increased militarization as in Egypt and Syria has heightened women's exposure to sexual violence at the hands of non-state militias and state security forces. These new security risks feed the narrative that women should be protected by men and kept out of the public. This trend further erodes women's rights and is promoting a false narrative of women's roles in their societies.

**Constitution Drafting:  
Cultural Relativism vs Universal Rights**

Human rights and women's organizations are working to ensure that universal values are embedded into the new constitutions and national political frameworks. They fear backsliding on existing equality laws.

They are concerned about the rise of 'cultural relativism' and reluctance of the international community to hold the new leaders accountable to agreed universal standards.

2. ***There is back-sliding on equality laws. The opportunity to embed human rights, principles of good governance and citizenship into the region's political culture and future is being squandered.*** The region's new leaders are not drawing on the lessons of wide public consultation and transparency that guided the drafting of constitutions in other transitional countries, notably South Africa. Instead they have instigated short term, opaque processes that are disconnected from the public and exclude civil society voices. They seek public referenda but provide virtually no time for

civic education regarding the implications of the constitutions. There is tremendous concern that the constitutions being drafted will not meet international standards on equality and rights and instead embed discrimination against women and minorities into the legal framework.

- ***Women are among the most legally vulnerable. Conservative interpretations of Sharia law will threaten to increase their discrimination.*** Laws that discriminate against women remain on the books. Even where legal protections exist, they are often not implemented properly. Meanwhile particular proposals to base women’s rights (among other rights) on Islamic Sharia law are of immense concern to women seeking legal guarantees for equal rights. Women’s rights groups are working to identify alternative and progressive interpretations of Sharia law to justify their demands.
- ***Many new female legislators are political window dressing. Others that are serious about gender issues receive little support.*** While women’s movements have galvanized to engage in the political and legal processes, they continue to be grossly under-represented or excluded from decision making processes. The handful of progressive women politicians often lack the support of their party leaders and are constrained in their abilities to push specific agendas. Meanwhile in an effort to appear progressive or meet election requirements, Islamist groups have put forth female candidates for parliamentary elections and political office. Many of these women, however, lack a gendered understanding of socio-economic, political, legal and security issues. They do not support equal rights and have undermined women’s demands by introducing or supporting regressive legislation that targets women’s gains.
- ***The international community must uphold the basic demand for equal rights, support implementation of existing laws and help strengthen women’s capacities to engage.*** Faced with a myriad issues and daily challenges, women’s groups cannot fight the fight for equality alone. They need the support of other civil society movements and international actors (the UN, governments, regional organizations etc) and expect that the international community does not make concessions on their behalf. In their advocacy efforts, women’s movements must build strong coalitions with other civil society groups, politicians, political parties, and constitutional drafting committees, to bring gendered perspectives to the constitutional process. They also need capacity development to draft legislation guaranteeing human rights including women’s rights and learn of strategies to initiate amendments and establish monitoring and implementation mechanisms if and when constitutions are adopted.

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### **3. Solidarity and mobilization across sectors of society and throughout the region is urgent and fundamental.**

The Arab revolutions have opened spaces for solidarity across different sectors of society. From Tunisia to Yemen this is one of the most positive aspects of the changes taking place. In addition



for the first time in decades, there is opportunity to reach out to a wider public and raise awareness of fundamental human rights and norms. But it is difficult as activists are under pressure to keep up with rapid developments ranging from legal and judicial reform to conflict prevention and humanitarian relief, under restrictive conditions. In Iran, for example, they are experiencing significant pressure that has targeted civil society and weakened the momentum of the women's movement. Yet they assert that regional collaboration and solidarity is ever more important. Pakistanis, Afghans and Syrians are experiencing direct and increasing levels of violence, but they also highlight the importance of regional outreach and global networking.

The SCR 1325 agenda is highly relevant to the developments across the region. The provisions of the 5 security council resolutions can provide a practical guideline for integrating gender perspectives and ensuring inclusivity in regional and national strategies for security sector reform, constitution building, transitional justice and socio-economic recovery.

- **International assistance to strengthen women's movements is essential, but donors should prioritize women's own agenda and not dictate them.**

Participants at the ICAN Forum stressed the importance of strengthening women's movements in the region to counter the external threats and internal challenges they face. They asserted however, that international actors that patronize or seek to advance their own priorities can do harm to the legitimacy and credibility of local civil society. Moreover they noted the dilemma of

working with international actors that sometimes expect local organizations to administrate short-term projects, whereas the critical need is for movement building, so that indigenous civil society is strengthened and capable of affecting real and positive change. They highlighted additional external challenges including the lack of a supportive legal environment for civil society and weak grassroots connections—legacies of the dictatorship years when civil activism was suppressed.



- **While there are many strong women leaders and individual organizations, women's movements in the region are fragile.** Despite common goals and principles, organizations have little experience in collaboration, coalition-building and mechanisms to resolve intra-group conflicts. Wary of being controlled by the state or external actors, many groups also fiercely guard their independence. But with the onslaught of the transition and crises in the region, many organizations are overwhelmed

with the range and depth of issues they need to tackle. At the same time, they must continue with their medium and long-term goals of addressing violence and peace, and ensuring that women's rights and inclusivity issues are acknowledged as being indigenous to the region.

**4. Freedom of expression is seriously challenged and undermining progress towards democratization. Positive messaging on women's rights and status in mainstream media is essential.**

Freedom of speech remains a major challenge for some countries, including Turkey and Iran, with journalists and dissidents, including women, in prison. In other countries self-censorship by women is on the rise and reflective of a harsh environment. Meanwhile the media is either state-controlled or serves the interests of groups promoting regressive messages who have unfettered access to satellite and national media. Negative depictions of women keeps those who advocate progressive or alternative views out of the media. Too often the women who do appear are adherents to the most conservative views. In Egypt for example, there was great publicity surrounding recent appointments of female television news anchors wearing the full-face veil.

- **The internet and social media are important but messaging must aim for mainstream outlets.** Although internet penetration is limited and censorship is rising in some countries it still provides the most free and accessible space for addressing and discussing human rights and equality issues. Strategies to link informal social media and mainstream outlets are needed to widen public outreach and information on women's rights, status and contributions to society, and to challenge negative stereotypes and intolerance. At a minimum it is a means of presenting alternative but more inclusive and tolerant views of society still based on religious, historic and cultural norms.

Women's economic empowerment programs must include human rights and legal protections. Otherwise, there is a high risk of promoting economic exploitation and legal and social subservience.

**5. Emerging leaders have little commitment to accountability for the past or inclusivity, justice and reconciliation. Grassroots support for transitional justice and reconciliation efforts is needed.**

Throughout the region there is a need for comprehensive transitional justice and reconciliation processes to tackle the history of dictatorial rule and state violations committed during the revolutions. But the Iraqi experience indicates that unless the political leadership is committed to transitional justice and transformation of relations between the political elite and society, the mechanisms introduced will not address people's needs. Instead of top-down initiatives, it is important to develop public awareness and grassroots support for transitional justice and reconciliation initiatives.

- **Only those transitional justice and reconciliation (TJ) initiatives that support systematic gendered perspectives should be supported.** The differential experiences of men and women must be accounted for in any TJ initiatives that are developed. This includes ensuring that commissions and judicial processes that are established include gender-based crimes in their mandates, and gender expertise in their structures. Drawing on lessons from other regions and the International Criminal Court, processes must be designed to provide maximum protection to female victims as they may face additional threats from their own families in cases of rape or sexual violence. Women's experience of widowhood, displacement and other forms of violence must also be addressed. While some violations have been documented (e.g. in Libya, Syria and Egypt), the assumption should be that most victims will remain silent. The provision of psycho-social and health care in

refugee camps is critical in the Syrian context, for the recovery of victims and because through these services cases can be identified. Women's rights activists in Lebanon and Iraq highlighted key civil society initiatives aimed at holding human rights violators accountable. But in Iraq, they also noted that women have not been well represented in some UN supported efforts.

**6. Security sector reform (SSR) should integrate a strong human security framework and ensure gender sensitivity in all areas.**

Throughout the region and for decades the security sector has served to protect the government, not the public. As such, there is urgent need for reform of the sector, including mandated civilian oversight of the security forces, infusing the national policies with a human security paradigm and ensuring that gender sensitivity is emphasized for all personnel in national security, rule of law and justice sectors. Participants agreed that ensuring gender sensitive security sector is catalytic for improving the security sector across the board. They also acknowledged that while many women's organizations may have limited direct experience of SSR, there is regional expertise to draw upon to build their capacities.

- **Community based reconciliation and disarmament efforts are urgent and women are taking a lead.** In Libya women's groups are working at the community level to disarm the population. Some organizations have engaged in reconciliation efforts across the country but their efforts, insight and warnings have not been acknowledged. In Yemen and Sri Lanka women are engaging the police force to provide training on human rights and protection issues.

**7. Economic empowerment is essential for the region, especially for women and youth, but it must come with legal protections.**

While the revolutions and uprising in the region were about human dignity they were also about economic opportunities. Participants identified economic empowerment as a key factor to improving women's social and political status in the region, but noted that there are efforts under way to curtail women's economic rights. In some instances there is a push to increase women's economic productivity, without proper compensation and while limiting their legal and social rights. In other cases such as Iran, women are being squeezed out of the job market and education at a time when sanctions are pressuring families even further. The fact that women tend to work in informal markets, as domestic or agricultural workers, makes them even more vulnerable to exploitation, as they lack social security or other legal protections.

- **Women's movements call for progressive economic empowerment programs.** Women's organizations tend to engage less in economic policy advocacy. Many prioritize legal rights and political reform as a means to greater economic equality. They do however stress that women's economic independence is critical and call for national and international actors to support progressive initiatives that promote equal opportunities to integrate women in technical fields (e.g. electronics, plumbing and construction) and support entrepreneurship.
- **The devastating impact of sanctions on women must be understood and mitigated. The Iraq experience should not be repeated.** Many countries in the region (Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Iran and



now Syria) have experienced economic sanctions. In each instance the vulnerability of women and children has increased, including through a rise in violence against women and regressive social policies. In the case of Iran, the issue is extremely urgent as women are already feeling the effects on access to health care, education and employment. Regardless of the political motivations for sanctions, the long-term impact and potential blowback must be considered seriously. Current policies must be adjusted to limit the damage to civilians.

## **What Women Do**

### **A sample of participants' ongoing activities**

#### **On promoting peace and human security:**

- Disarming rebels, promoting reconciliation and de-radicalizing young men.
- Training police and security personnel on human rights and civilian protection.
- Preventing religious and sectarian violence targeting women and children, promoting a culture of peace, and ensuring that women are present in noticeable numbers in efforts to bring tribal leaders together to negotiate peace deals.
- Setting up shelters, health, legal aid and community centers.
- Countering negative impacts of sanctions and war.
- Assisting victims of conflict related sexual violence.
- Humanitarian relief and recovery.

#### **On women's rights and effective participation**

- Campaigning for legal reform, conformity with international human rights standards, and working to prevent limitations on women's reproductive and other rights.
- Encouraging female parliamentarians to support a gender equality agenda.
- Promoting independent media and freedom of press.
- Advocating for and passing quotas to ensure women's presence in parliament and political parties and working to ensure women run for office.
- Passing laws to prevent violence against women and religious-based violence.
- Working to end gender inequities.
- Offering more inclusive and moderate interpretations of Islam to counter regressive narratives.
- Breaking social stereotypes against women, ending child marriage, addressing women's illiteracy, promoting employment for women, conducting research.

## What's Needed Now

### Support for:

1. Indigenous leaders including civil society actors who are articulating a positive, progressive and inclusive vision of the future and countering the intolerance that is currently rising.
2. Specific attention to the root causes and sources of extremism in partnership with women's CSOs, to identify effective means of mitigating and countering these forces including through mix of economic, social, political initiatives.
3. Civil society, especially women's movements at national, regional and international levels including through funding and technical support for strategic and organizational development.
4. Technical capacity building for women's movements to enable strategic engagement and gendered perspectives on political, security sector reform, justice and economic issues.
5. Civic education programs that explain the history and articulate the provisions of the universal declaration of human rights and other international conventions and resolutions, including those addressing civil, political and economic rights.
6. Country specific and regional public outreach campaigns that promote aspects of Islam that condemn violence and uphold equality, respect and inclusivity.
7. Regional networking with outreach to other Muslim majority countries and sub-regional networks (South Asia), and opportunities for networking between Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.
8. Peer-to-peer learning and south-south support to exchange detailed 'know-how' on effective strategies, programming and advocacy.
9. Regular interactions with international counterparts across sectors including government, NGO, academia, media and private sector. The ICAN forum is an important annual platform.
10. Documentation of women's activism and know-how and gendered analyses of ongoing developments.
11. Increased participation of MENA/Asia women's rights and peace practitioners in major international fora and processes.
12. Review of development strategies to ensure effective outreach to vulnerable youth, women and marginalized sectors of society to provide viable dignified life alternatives, while ensuring respect for women's rights, violence prevention and peacebuilding.

This brief is available on our website at:

[www.icanpeacework.org](http://www.icanpeacework.org)

For further information please contact:

International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)

Suite 100, 1776 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington DC 20036, USA

[icanmena@gmail.com](mailto:icanmena@gmail.com)