



**SAFERWORLD**  
PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

# “It’s dangerous to be the first”

Security barriers to women’s public participation in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen



October 2013

---

“It’s dangerous  
to be the first”

**Security barriers to women’s public participation  
in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen**

SAFERWORLD

**OCTOBER 2013**

---

## **Acknowledgements**

This report was written by Joshua Rogers, Hannah Wright, and Saleem Haddad with contributions by Marwa Baabad and Basma Gaber. It is based on research conducted by the Alliance of Arab Women, the Voice of Libyan Women, and Partners for Democratic Change Yemen, in cooperation with Saferworld.

The authors would like to thank colleagues at Saferworld, as well as Rosy Cave, Claire Yorke, Dr Fatemah Khafagy, Dr Mediha El-Safty, and Dr Hoda Badran for comments and review. They provided invaluable comments and clarifications. All views and any remaining errors in the report are the sole responsibility of the authors and Saferworld.

This report has been made possible by a grant from the Arab Partnership Fund of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

---

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Women’s safety and security concerns</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Fears of armed conflict and crime	4
1.2 Targeted violence against women	7
1.3 State security provision: Part of the problem	12
<b>2. Effects on participation</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Engagement in political parties	16
2.2 Engagement in local government	19
2.3 Class and generational divides within the women’s movements	21
<b>3. Women’s responses</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 Grassroots responses	24
3.2 Influence on public policy	26
3.3 Women in security provision	30
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>39</b>
ANNEX A: International policy frameworks on women, peace and security	42
ANNEX B: Methodology and description of sample	44

---

# Executive summary

**EGYPT, LIBYA, AND YEMEN** are in the midst of unpredictable political transitions following the 2011 uprisings. This report examines the ways in which security concerns associated with this volatile environment impact women's political participation, as well as the ways in which women's participation in turn affects their security. Based on consultations with over 400 women and men conducted in late 2012 and early 2013, it presents a situation of considerable flux where widespread politicisation and greater opportunities for women's activism are accompanied by increased risk and a backlash against women's rights. This research forms part of a larger Saferworld project to promote networking, discussion, and debate around the safety issues that impede women's ability to participate in public and political life in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

## Women's safety and security concerns

Across all three countries women reported concerns over rising crime, the widespread availability of weapons, and violent conflict over the balance of power between armed groups. In addition, women face targeted violence, encountering harassment, sexual assault, threats of violence, and slander. While politically active men may face similar issues, threats associated with honour and reputation present a particular challenge for women owing to prevailing gender norms and the provisions of the personal status law in each country. Women who are politically active, challenge conservative mores, or become publically visible risk their reputations and sometimes their lives; but at the same time they are also seeing more vocal support from communities, including from men.

Closely linked to these concerns is the poor security provision provided by the central government in all three countries. Women voiced strong reservations about current security provision, describing their distrust of state security providers, concerns over abuse of power, and low faith in their ability to address women's security concerns. They viewed poor and abusive security provision as a central driver of insecurity and believed it was responsible for the sharp deterioration in their safety since 2011. Mistreatment, corruption, ineffective responses, and fears of being blamed or harassed are all reasons why women were unwilling to engage with police. Women took a strong stance on the need for fundamental changes to the way security forces in all three countries operate.

As a result of poor government security provision, women often rely on informal or communal ties. However, they believe that alternative security providers generate their own problems, citing a lack of consistency, conflict between different local security providers, and the fact that they exclude women – and especially those without the 'right' tribal, family, or religious affiliation.

## Effects on participation

Fear of violence and crime reduces women's mobility, their ability to mobilise and organise, and decreases their presence in public spaces, while harassment and slander deter activism and running for formal office. Women's perception that they are insecure has a strong political impact; this perception is being stoked and instrumentalised by established political players as a tool to ward-off challenges from women, further marginalising them. Barriers posed by insecurity coupled with gender insensitive and at times intentionally exclusionary institutions and political parties also mean that women's safety concerns are not taken into consideration by political party elites, or informal local power-brokers. This means that these concerns cannot be addressed by the political process, thus perpetuating them.

Divisions running through the women's movement along socio-economic, generational, and political lines also play a part in entrenching women's vulnerabilities and complicating access to power and decision-making. Because of class divides, avenues for influence and change identified by women from rural areas remain neglected, and women from these locations are not leveraged as active participants in improving local conditions. Similarly, generational divides mean that older women with more extensive networks and better access to decision-making tended not to be aware of some of the serious security concerns disproportionately affecting younger women, particularly around harassment, sexual assault, and slander. This highlights a broader divergence of generational priorities between the older generation's search for stability, versus arguments put forward by younger activists that long-term stability can only be achieved by achieving structural change and accepting a measure of upheaval.

## Women's responses

Many women have been meeting the security challenges they face head-on. In the face of growing insecurity and particularly harassment and assault, women have established grassroots initiatives to protect themselves and others against threats to their safety. In addition, the on-going transitions have opened up new opportunities for citizens to scrutinise and take part in government policy-making, particularly on security issues, and women have been part of this trend. Since 2011 there have been more women's groups working specifically on women's security issues, and groups focusing on women's political participation have picked up on the growing importance of safety and security concerns as barriers to women's participation in public life.

Large majorities of respondents in all three countries felt that directly involving women in security provision and increasing the number of women police officers and women in the army would help in addressing women's security concerns. Yet, in cases where the security forces are politicised, are under orders from political leaders to commit human rights violations, or are simply unaccountable to the law or the population they are intended to serve, much deeper changes are necessary to increase civilian oversight and promote democratic values and human rights. In addition, training and increasing the expertise of security service personnel, as well as improving the availability of medical and psychosocial support services to survivors, are essential.

## Recommendations

The report concludes with recommendations for governments and civil society to make progress on five key areas:

- **Creating a more responsive security sector** through reform processes that include women's perspectives and include women's specific concerns in setting national and local priorities.
- **Involving women in security provision**, by building on women's potential contributions in disarmament and linking police and communities, increasing the number of women police officers, and ensuring internal police procedures promote equality.

- 
- **Increasing opportunities for women to influence decision-making**, by making public space safer for women, being aware of barriers they face, and providing gender-sensitive access to formal and informal institutions.
  - **Backing women's networks and international and regional solidarity**, by strengthening regional women's alliances and encouraging them to reach out to grassroots constituencies.
  - **Changing messages spread about women**, by limiting the ability of all actors to threaten or incite violence against women or any other group and by helping the media fact-check stories, exercise due diligence, and refrain from libel and defamation.

---

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**WOMEN'S VISIBILITY IN THE 2011 WAVE OF PROTESTS** that shook the Middle East marked a watershed. Although women's activism was not new in 2011 and campaigns for women's rights and greater participation in economic, political, and social life had existed for many years, their centrality in the uprisings was remarkable: in Egypt and Yemen, women were at the forefront of the protests that ultimately toppled their long-serving presidents. In Libya, where protests quickly turned to an armed rebellion following government repression, women, in addition to protesting, took up arms, supported displaced people, kept local services running when the state withdrew, provided food and medicine to fighters, raised money, and delivered secret messages.

In the political transitions that followed, women appear to have come under increased pressure to 'leave politics to men' and 'return to normalcy'. Women interviewed for this report in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen felt increasingly concerned about their general safety and security, highlighting fears of crime and armed violence, harassment, beatings, and intimidation by government security forces and political actors, as well as fearing threats to their reputation through slander and defamation.

At the same time, public space in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen remains open to contestation in ways that it has not been for decades. Despite strong efforts to close-down this space, particularly in Egypt, where successive governments have cracked down on strikes and demonstrations and bullied the media and civil society, women are asserting their right to participate and are active and visible in ways in which they have not been before. Legal and cultural norms about women's roles are being renegotiated: mass politicisation, the groundswell of popular youth activism, and women themselves are carving out more spaces for women to be publicly visible, active, and influential; at the same time, women are being more viciously targeted for being politically active and there has been an overall hardening of religious discourse justifying inequality between men and women.

This report explores the relationship between women's security and their political participation, looking at the ways in which security concerns affect women's political participation, as well as the ways in which women's participation in turn affects their security.<sup>2</sup> Security is not the only issue that affects women's political participation: laws, education, economic and social standing, religion, ethnicity, and other factors

---

<sup>1</sup> This report examines women's participation in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, three countries affected by the 'Arab Spring'. The choice to only cover these three countries reflects Saferworld's operational programming and specific expertise in the region.

<sup>2</sup> In this report, 'political participation' refers to any activity that has the intent of influencing community or government action – either directly through making or implementing public policy, or indirectly by influencing those with the power to change policies. Political participation also refers to activism, participation in protests and demonstrations, or community-level campaigning. In more conservative areas in Yemen and Libya, discussions of women's 'political participation' remains a contentious topic, and so researchers referred to women's ability to "influence (public) decision-making".



all play essential roles in determining whether and how women are able to participate in public and political life. However, security is a concern that has been largely overlooked to date, particularly as it relates to public participation, even as people's sense of their personal safety has decreased and the risk to women of becoming a victim of violence appears to have increased in all three countries over the past years.

The report is divided into three chapters. The first focuses on safety and security concerns, exploring women's perceptions of crime, armed conflict, and the proliferation of weapons; violence explicitly targeted against women, discussing women's perceptions and experiences of harassment and sexual assault as well as slander and threats; and on the breakdown of security provision in the post-uprising transitions. The second chapter looks at the effects that rising insecurity and perceptions of increased risk have on women's ability to participate in public life and access national and local institutions. It highlights the way in which these perceptions and the use made of them by a range of political actors create strong pressures pushing women to be passive, retreat from public space, and to see themselves and be portrayed as victims. However, as the third chapter highlights, many women have been meeting these challenges head-on. It investigates how women are responding to these challenges and explores their perceptions of and potential for greater roles in achieving security for themselves and their societies in the transitions.

The report is based on consultations with more than 400 women and men in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya between December 2012 and February 2013.<sup>3</sup> Consultations encompassed 120 participants across four locations in Egypt, 146 participants across eight locations in Libya, and 145 participants across six locations in Yemen. While in Yemen and Egypt consultations were also conducted with (primarily male) community leaders and government officials, researchers were limited in their ability to access such figures in Libya, where community leaders were often unwilling to participate in focus group discussions. Participants in all focus groups were selected according to the criteria outlined in Annex A to reflect the opinions and experiences of women active in their communities, local charities, and in political parties across these locations; the report focuses on perceptions and does not claim to be representative of the overall female population. Initial findings were discussed with women activists in all three countries and at a regional meeting in March 2013.

This research forms one part of a larger Saferworld project to promote networking, discussion, and debate around the safety issues that impede women's ability to participate in public and political life in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Saferworld has also hosted national and regional-level workshops, roundtable discussions, and training courses on these issues, and discussions during these events have informed this report.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed breakdown of samples and methodology, please refer to Annex A.

# 1

## Women's safety and security concerns

**EGYPT, LIBYA, AND YEMEN** face unstable transitional situations, marked by violence and insecurity. A large number of women interviewed for this report discussed feeling unsafe and expressed concern that “there is no security on the streets” for both men and women,<sup>4</sup> as a woman from Manufiya, Egypt, explained.

Women in focus groups identified a number of broad security issues as being the most important for their day-to-day lives and their ability to be active in public life. They singled out increases in violent conflict and criminality as their main concerns and identified the availability of small arms and light weapons as a central cross-cutting issue that made these developments more dangerous and more intractable.

In addition to these overarching security concerns, women in all three countries also reported facing targeted violence and abuse as women. Many of the women consulted in this research believe that the violence they face is a deliberate attempt to curtail their political activities. While gender-based violence is always political in the sense that it perpetuates unequal relations of power between men and women, many of the instances described by participants in this research take on an additional political dimension in that they appear to be part of a backlash against women's increased visibility and political activity since 2011.

Women identified poor security provision by the state as a key cause of their growing sense of insecurity, compounded by direct abuses by government security services. In addition, contests over the balance of power between armed groups affiliated to different political actors and attacks on and defences of entrenched interests emerged as leading causes of conflict.

Crime, targeted violence against women, violent conflict, and the widespread availability of weapons combine to create a context of insecurity in which many women do not feel safe enough to travel or even freely be present in and move around public space, particularly at night. While these issues are not solely a concern for women,<sup>5</sup> they have a particular impact on them. From personal concerns such as the inability to visit relatives, economic effects ranging from the ability to travel to work to feeling safe manning a store or street stall, to restrictions on activism or running for public office, women in the focus groups described a broad range of effects on their day-to-day lives

<sup>4</sup> Woman from Manufiya, Egypt, January 2013 focus group discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Women's perceptions appear to match those of men, and most of these issues have been identified as key insecurities facing transitional contexts in general. See, for example, Mattes H (2013), 'Politische Transformation und Gewalt in Tunesien, Ägypten und Libyen seit 2011: Ein Forschungsauftritt,' German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Working Paper No. 219.

due to gender-specific expectations of what level and what sorts of risks are acceptable for women to take.

## 1.1 Fears of armed conflict and crime

Violent conflict became a major feature of the uprisings and transitions in both Libya and Yemen and strongly affected women's sense of security. During the time consultations were conducted (December 2012 to February 2013), this was less of a central concern in Egypt, and Egyptian women were most concerned by marked increases in crime. However, perceptions in Egypt are likely to have changed considerably since the overthrow of the president, Mohamed Morsi, the military takeover, and subsequent violence. In all three countries, women also highlighted the proliferation and misuse of weapons as a major security concern.

### Libya

In Libya since Muammar Qadhafi's ouster, conflicts between towns, tribes, and armed groups over control of territory and resources, as well as for political leverage at the centre, are worsened by the widespread proliferation of weapons. The capabilities of the armed groups exceed those of the central government in both size and strength, and the government is struggling to bring these groups under its control. Instruments to unite and regulate them, such as the Supreme Security Committee (SSC) and the Libya Shield Force, possess unclear lines of authority and have become embroiled in internal conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

*"Here there is a lot of fear (of weapons). A woman was in her bedroom when an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] blasted through the wall. If you're not safe in your bedroom, where can you feel safe?"*

Woman from Misrata, Libya, December 2012

As a result, Libyan women listed violent conflict and the associated spread of weapons<sup>7</sup> as primary concerns during consultations in December 2012. Violence between armed groups, conflicts between tribes, and conflicts with neighbouring communities were consistently among women's top three safety concerns, closely linked to fears over weapons. For instance, in Zawiyah, focus groups identified conflicts with the neighbouring Wershafana tribe and the widespread proliferation of weapons as the two biggest concerns, while in Yefren, Jamil, and Zuwara, tribal conflicts – sometimes framed in terms of conflicts between pro- and anti-Qadhafi groups – also topped the list of concerns. In all remaining towns, weapons came first or second as a concern and discussions revealed that this was often used as a shorthand for armed conflict.

*"Civil society needs to campaign about the danger of weapons. It's my biggest concern!"*

Woman from Misrata, Libya, December 2012

In addition, kidnapping and carjacking were identified as threats for women, often linked to armed groups or raised in connection with concerns over the weapons proliferation that women felt made them possible.<sup>8</sup> "Before the war, there were occasional kidnappings, but they are more frequent now", said a female student in Misrata. Although women from smaller towns tended to think kidnappings were far more common in larger cities, most focus groups were able to name at least one victim of kidnapping within their community, and women were worried enough about the issue to discuss how kidnappings unfolded and how to respond to them, with a woman

<sup>6</sup> See International Crisis Group (2012), 'Divided we stand: Libya's enduring conflicts'. See also Wehrey F (2012), 'The struggle for security in Eastern Libya'.

<sup>7</sup> On weapons proliferation in Libya, see United Nations (2013), 'Final report of the Panel of Experts to the Libya 1970 Sanctions Committee'. See also Saferworld (2013), 'Lessons from MENA: Appraising EU transfers of military and security equipment to the Middle East and North Africa'.

<sup>8</sup> Across Libya, women in Zuwara, Misrata, Derna, Yefren, and Zawiyah expressed concern in focus groups over kidnappings and rated it among their top three security concerns.

in Derna, for instance, warning that armed groups “set off an explosion to distract people and kidnap amidst the chaos”.

Due to this range of threats, women in Libya often reported feeling concerned about leaving their local area, highlighting the way in which insecurity is reducing women’s mobility. The idea that “it’s only scary when you leave your city”;<sup>9</sup> was replicated across all locations, including in Derna and Sebha – two towns identified as being particularly dangerous by women in other areas. Despite this outside perception, women in these cities still felt safest in their communities and were unwilling to travel outside them.

### Box 1: Perceptions of the borders in Libya

In Libya women link concerns over weapons, drugs, and crime to a breakdown in government control of borders and an influx of illegal immigrants. A woman in Zuwara described Libya’s southern border as the “gates to hell”. While most opted for less dramatic language, she was not alone in seeing it as the source of all problems.

In Sebha, one of the largest cities in the south and a hub for cross-border trade and smuggling, a woman insisted that there were three main problems: uncontrolled borders, weapons, and drugs, but “if we fix the border issue, all three will be solved”. In cities further away from the southern border, borders were also perceived as an important issue, with a woman in Misrata, for instance, claiming that “Tunisia and Egypt have a bad influence on drugs and alcohol.”

There is little doubt that Libya’s porous borders pose serious challenges and are important conduits for smuggling, including of drugs and weapons. Yet with thousands of kilometres of desert borderlands, most of these problems are not new.<sup>10</sup>

In more candid moments, focus group participants reflected on the fact that “drugs and alcohol were present before, but much harder to get your hands on – and no one would take them in broad daylight”, signalling a more complex context in which the breakdown of state law enforcement and widespread availability of weapons is creating conditions in which laws and rules can be flouted. In addition, several of the consulted women across different locations expressed concerns that male family members, and especially young men who had fought on the front lines, were experiencing post-traumatic stress. They linked young men taking drugs and engaging in crime directly with experiences during the revolution and civil war and to the lack of opportunities for adequate treatment and discussion.

## Yemen

In Yemen war and violent conflict similarly emerged as a primary concern in many of the locations where women were consulted. These concerns were also closely tied to weapons. Although widely available before the uprising, the use and visibility of weapons in the main cities increased dramatically after mid-2011.<sup>11</sup>

Fighting in northern Yemen between government forces, tribal militias perceived to be aligned with the Islah party, and the Huthi movement spread to Hadja in early 2012, as the Huthis profited from fighting and divisions within the military to expand their reach. Since the second half of 2012, fighting has been sporadic with frequent local ceasefires. In Hadja all of the consulted women reported feeling fearful of leaving their homes and reported limiting their movements. Armed violence was their main security concern.

Similarly, women were concerned about armed violence and open conflict in Abyan, where one woman related how her brother and another family member were killed by al-Qaeda. Women in both Mareb and Abyan relayed their fear of armed conflict between the government and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, which occurred when the transitional government attempted to regain control of these areas.<sup>12</sup> While not happy about the presence of al-Qaeda, consulted women singled out government shelling

<sup>9</sup> Young woman from Zawiya, Libya, December 2012 focus group discussion.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Cole P (2012), ‘Borderline Chaos? Stabilizing Libya’s Periphery’.

<sup>11</sup> On the status of weapons in Yemen before the uprisings, see Yemen Armed Violence Assessment (2010), ‘Under pressure: Social violence over land and water in Yemen’; and Hill G (2010), ‘Yemen: Fear of failure’.

<sup>12</sup> Several towns in Abyan governorate, including the capital Zinjibar, came under control of Ansar al-Sharia, a group considered a close affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula, during the 2011 uprising in Yemen. Al-Qaeda affiliated groups remain active in Abyan, Mareb, Shabwa and other governorates. Compare, Winter L (2013), ‘The Ansar of Yemen: The Huthis and al-Qaeda’, and Abul-Ahad G (2012), ‘Al-Qaida’s wretched utopia and the battle for hearts and minds’.

rather than the activities or presence of al-Qaeda itself as the main threat, highlighting the dangers to civilians of a heavy-handed government and international response. Consultations also included substantial numbers of women forced to flee fighting, who described how the resulting displacement has generated disrespect, shame, a lack of support, exclusion, and new threats exploiting their vulnerability and lack of community ties.

Additionally, tribal revenge killings, conflict between tribes and the security forces, and sectarian tensions, including in locations where they had not previously been an issue, were frequently cited in the focus group discussions as concerns that affect women's safety. In Taiz, for instance, fighting between security forces and armed groups began as an extension of the Sanaa-centred political conflict in 2011, but has since, in the perception of consulted women, taken on a life of its own and continues to be a major security concern as gangs fight over control. A similar dynamic is evident in Aden, where women identified armed groups and gangs as a major concern.

## Egypt

Egypt did not experience violent conflict on the same scale as Libya and Yemen at the time of the consultations. Instead, women's concerns focused on what they described as criminal activities, even when they included armed violence similar to some of the concerns in the other countries.

Particularly in the larger cities, robberies and muggings featured as the main concern and women felt they were widespread: a political party representative in Manufiya, for instance, referred to "the many repeated cases of robbery" in the town, and both men and women in Alexandria and elsewhere discussed sharp increases of women's handbags being stolen especially at times when they cashed their monthly pay – to the extent that some women reported that they stopped carrying handbags and put their money in wallets or in their pockets.

Official crime statistics are unreliable, but seem to bear out this trend, with the Egyptian Ministry of Interior stating, for example, that homicides have tripled and armed robberies have increased twelve-fold in Egypt between 2011 and 2012.<sup>13</sup>

Perceived increases in crime are also changing the way women and men act in their daily lives and have prompted an increased reliance on personal weapons. In Qena, for instance, a woman reported that "some people are carrying weapons to defend themselves against robbery and against kidnapping". Although tolerated as a method for providing security in the short term, many women felt that weapons, including those in their own home, are not a long-term solution to current security challenges.

Beyond crime, violent confrontations with the police, during intense crackdowns on protests, involved the deaths of hundreds of protestors, the burning down of police stations, and the killing of police personnel during and after the '18 days'.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, confrontations between pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood protestors, sectarian violence, and operations by armed groups in the Sinai Peninsula have all increased over the past year. While none of these issues featured prominently in women's perceptions of security concerns in Egypt at the time consultations were conducted in January and February 2013, they did arise during validation of the findings in late March 2013, and appear as major concerns following the army's overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, the mass killings of pro-Morsi demonstrators, and the sectarian backlash in Upper Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> In Egypt, Ministry of Interior data is not publicly available, unless selectively quoted by Ministry officials themselves. This raises major questions about its reliability and numbers can be easily fabricated and used for political ends. For this figure, see Daragahi B (2013), 'Egyptians become victims of soaring crime rate'. Initial evidence from surveys after February 2011 seemed to suggest that while fear of crime increased, experienced instances of crime had not; see Hellyer H A (2012), 'Fewer feel safe in several Arab Spring countries'. Evidence from focus groups, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, and more recent anecdotal evidence suggests that since that poll was conducted, actual crime has also markedly increased.

<sup>14</sup> The '18 days' refer in Egypt to the period from 25 January 2011, when mass protests broke out, to 11 February 2011, when Mubarak was forced to step down. Large-scale confrontations between protestors and state security or military forces, each involving the death of more than 20 protestors after 11 February 2011 include: protests at Maspero in October 2011, Tahrir in November 2011, Port Said in February 2012, Ittihadia Palace in November-December 2012, Canal cities in January-March 2013, and in Cairo 3-4, 8 and 27 July 2013.

## 1.2 Targeted violence against women

While the security concerns outlined above affect both men and women, albeit in different ways, women also discussed physical violence and verbal abuse directly targeted at them. They believed such actions were deliberately intended to reinforce gender roles. Although these can be asserted based on cultural, social, or religious values, how they are interpreted is frequently underpinned by political motivations, and consulted women felt that the prescribed roles put forward by religious leaders and on national and satellite television had distinctly political implications.

Gender-based violence<sup>15</sup> aimed at controlling women's behaviour occurs both in public and private. However, the women participating in the consultations focused largely on violence in public spaces, rarely referring to domestic violence. Although it is difficult to reliably measure the prevalence of domestic violence and little recent data is available, there is evidence to suggest that domestic violence is widespread in all three countries and seriously affects women across the region.<sup>16</sup> Yet it was raised by only a handful of respondents, none of whom referred to personal experiences. This is likely due to the fact that, while space for talking about certain issues such as street harassment is opening up, there remains a strong taboo around talking about domestic violence. In addition, many women may not think of domestic violence as a legitimate and important concern: a 2005 survey found that many women do not report domestic violence because they believe it is "not important".<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the silence surrounding domestic violence, consulted women spoke out clearly about public threats. The majority of focus group participants singled out harassment, threats of violence, attacks on their character, and slander as their main concerns. While slander and threats were raised frequently in all locations, physical attacks, including sexual assault, were a much larger concern in urban areas, which may reflect a greater openness to talking about these issues. However, this also suggests that rumours and slander are more effective tools for regulating women's behaviour in rural areas where attitudes tend to be more conservative and victims and perpetrators are more likely to know one another, whereas reinforcement of gender norms in urban areas appears to require a resort to more overt violence.

### Rumours and threats

*"My biggest fear is for my reputation."*

Woman from Zuwara, Libya, December 2012

Consultations revealed that one of the primary means of regulating women's behaviour and restricting their ability to fully participate in public life is through verbal rather than physical intimidation and coercion. Across the different focus groups, women talked about a range of behaviours, from the spreading of negative rumours, slander, and pressure from women's families to conform to expected behaviour,<sup>18</sup> through to threats of physical violence.

In Yemen threats to women's honour and reputation emerged as a primary safety concern for women, and were seen as highly political. "Women are exposed to gossip solely intended to damage their reputations in order to block them from expressing their voice," according to a woman from Mareb. A woman in Taiz argued that this was done to restrict women from challenging existing political or social norms: "It seemed like the entire drive behind the media and partisan politics [during the past two years] was aimed at sending women back home and restricting their participation in the squares."

<sup>15</sup> In keeping with United Nations definitions, 'gender-based violence' is used here to denote not just physical violence but also verbal abuse, including slander, rumours, and threats of physical violence.

<sup>16</sup> For example, one small survey suggested that in Sanaa, 46 per cent of women had been beaten by their husbands; see Ba-Obaid M, Buleveld C J H (2002), 'Violence against women in Yemen: Official statistics and exploratory survey'. In Egypt a survey found that a third of women have experienced violence at the hands of a husband, see: al-Zanaty F, Way A (2006), 'Egypt demographic and health survey 2005', p 225.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp 229–30; the study also found that half of women in Egypt believe that it is 'sometimes justified' for a husband to beat his wife.

<sup>18</sup> In all three countries reported instances in focus groups included threats and harassment over staying out 'too late', attire claimed to be inappropriate, or simply moving about alone or without a male relative, especially outside of the local community.

Similarly, women in Libya believe slander is a particular problem for women engaged in political activity. In Yefren in north-western Libya, for example, a female teacher related that "people talk when women travel, especially for civil society work", while another highlighted how women's families would be affected, saying: "The husband's co-worker will say 'I saw your wife on TV or heard her on the radio,' and will begin gossiping." Likewise, in Qena, Egypt, a female member of the local council described how other council members spread rumours about her when she publicly criticised a council decision.

### **Box 2: Renegotiating public shame – Samira Ibrahim and the SCAF's 'virginity tests'**

Under the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt, military forces were responsible for abuses against peaceful demonstrators, including beatings and sexual harassment of both men and women. On 9 March 2011, Samira Ibrahim, a young Egyptian activist, participated in an anti-SCAF sit-in at Tahrir Square. After the military violently dispersed the protesters, Ibrahim and a number of other women were detained. During their detention the women were beaten, given electric shocks, strip-searched, and subjected to 'virginity tests'.

While such tests have in the past taken place, female victims did not speak-out against them for fear of being publicly shamed. However, in a rare move, Ibrahim publicly spoke out about the tests she was subjected to and placed the case in front of a civilian court.

A senior Egyptian general justified the virginity tests undertaken against Ibrahim and others as a necessary step to prevent female protesters from accusing the military of rape<sup>19</sup> and claimed it conformed to standard operating procedure.<sup>20</sup> In an interview with CNN, he argued that the arrested women "were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters".<sup>21</sup> Such claims were an attempt to shift the public's blame onto the victims rather than the perpetrators and justify violence against women in terms of maintaining 'national' or 'authentic' Egyptian values, which are closely linked and often conflated with 'Islamic values'.

Nonetheless, Ibrahim continued to challenge SCAF's virginity tests on the grounds that they were an abuse of her human rights (rather than a violation of her honour), and the tests were widely condemned by Egyptian and international human rights organisations. Many young Egyptian activists heralded Ibrahim as a revolutionary hero and an example of the widespread abuse of citizens under SCAF. Public support for Ibrahim was celebrated through graffiti images, and in this case the onus of 'shame' was placed on SCAF practices rather than on Ibrahim herself.

Overall, several women in the sample in each country were forced to stop their public activities after concerted campaigns against them, and many faced pressure to stop by their families for fear of what their political activism may do to their and their families' reputations. In several of these cases, women identified the media as an important vector of rumours and slander. Their criticism centred on what the media did not do – it has failed to fact-check stories, has reproduced rumours and misinformation, and accords little news value to women's concerns.

*"It's dangerous to be the first. In order to do something new, you should not be the first or you will be the target of all the slander."*

**Woman from Zuwara, Libya, December 2012**

Rumours function by emphasising restrictive social norms that combine with the provisions of the personal status law in each country<sup>22</sup> to create mutually reinforcing legal and social pressures. For instance, for many women, their security – livelihoods, social capital, and ability to claim their rights – is closely bound up with their marital

<sup>19</sup> Subjecting a person to an invasive procedure so that at a later stage the state could disprove an allegation that the detained person has yet to make grossly violates well-established human rights norms, including those codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), particularly Article 5 (UDHR)/ Article 3 (ECHR) on the prevention of torture and inhumane treatment. See: United Nations (1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Council of Europe (1950), *European Convention on Human Rights*.

<sup>20</sup> The fact that this implies applying military practices against civilians and Egyptian citizens and thus treating them as enemy soldiers did not escape Egyptian commentators.

<sup>21</sup> See Amin S (2011), 'Egyptian general admits "virginity checks" conducted on protesters'.

<sup>22</sup> Important provisions of the personal status laws differ between countries – such as whether a wife may initiate divorce proceedings against her husband – but there are broadly shared similarities ranging from requirements for women to be under the guardianship of male relations, to unequal laws on divorce and polygamy. For a general overview, see Welchman L (2007), 'Women and Muslim family laws in Arab states: A comparative overview of textual development and advocacy'. For more information on Yemen, see al-Zwaini L (2012), 'The rule of law in Yemen: Prospects and challenges'. On Egypt see: Tamir M (2012), 'The Rule of Law in Egypt: Prospects and Challenges'.

status. Rumours that paint a woman as dishonourable or ‘rebellious’, and particularly *fatwas*<sup>23</sup> declaring a specific woman to be an ‘infidel’, can seriously undermine an ability to get married and start a family, lead to divorce,<sup>24</sup> and generate rejection by the community and her own family – and may encourage and be seen to legitimate violence against her.

Using religion to invite and justify violence against women was a major concern in all three countries, and women identified a rise in fatwas targeting female political and community activists. Particularly in Egypt and Yemen, consulted women singled out conservative and ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam as underlying many of the most restrictive statements of their appropriate role and attacks against them. According to a woman from Taiz, Yemen, “the tools of oppression of women changed in 2011 and have become oppression in the name of religion”.

Moreover, legal provisions reinforce such restrictions. For instance, in Yemen, where personal status laws are particularly restrictive, an unmarried woman cannot access most government services, travel, or seek employment without consent of a male guardian and must struggle with very low social status and multiple exclusion.<sup>25</sup>

*“How can a woman be courageous and participate in street demonstrations when she is always under threat that her husband can have another wife, can divorce her, throw her out of the home and beat her for no reason?”*

Woman from Alexandria, Egypt, January 2013

### Box 3: Being called an infidel in Yemen

“Both male and female activists in Yemen face a lot of obstacles. However, women activists face a double challenge,” said Samia al-Aghbari, a human rights activist, who was proclaimed an infidel by a government official associated with Islah party.

Questioning women’s religion and attacking their honour are becoming political tools against activists, al-Aghbari notes, “They use such tools to weaken and discredit our opinions and perspectives.” Bushra al-Maqtari, a writer and activist, has faced similar allegations and concurs: “It is more about politics than it is about religion.”

As a result, both activists have to face and deal with a daily fear for their life, with al-Maqtari stating: “After being religiously attacked I could not practice my life as before.” For al-Aghbari, “under the pressure of my family I had to cover my face in order to be able to go out and continue my activism”. These types of religious attacks and accusations affect families as well as activists and many families prefer to prevent their daughters from activism and community work to avoid any such allegations.

## Violence and harassment

*“We cannot move alone and harassment is now a regular occurrence in markets, streets, and other public places.”*

Woman from Aden, Yemen, December 2012

Where social pressure fails to enforce strict gender norms and keep women out of public spaces, physical intimidation is being deployed against them.<sup>26</sup> In some cases this is violence meted out by government security forces, while in others it is committed by civilian men on the street, protesters, or other political actors. While the consulted women frequently talked about ‘harassment’, this word was used to refer to a broad

<sup>23</sup> A fatwa is an Islamic legal pronouncement, issued by a religious law specialist on a specific issue.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in Yemen a number of women in urban areas discussed how their political activism in public led to fierce disagreements in their household, with some eventually reporting having to divorce as a result of their activism. In some cases, this was highlighted as their main security concern. In one case a female activist with the Islah party in Yemen described how three attempted kidnappings, an attempted murder, and threats she received on her phone, resulted in her husband divorcing her.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.* al-Zwaini L (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Enforcing women’s subordinate role in society appears to be one of several reasons why men harass women in public spaces. A full exploration of men’s motivations is beyond the scope of this research, but is explored further in el-Deeb B (2013), ‘Study on ways and methods to eliminate sexual harassment in Egypt’, which also cites factors including unemployment, boredom, and the rising age of marriage. Regardless of the intent of the perpetrators, the effect of harassment is often to enforce conservative gender norms.



range of behaviours, from derogatory comments to groping, sexual assault, and rape.<sup>27</sup> Fewer participants related experiences of assault and sexual assault than verbal harassment, which may reflect the greater taboo around this subject as much as the lower prevalence of this type of abuse. However, where physical assaults did occur they had a severe impact on women's activism.

In all three countries, women perceived harassment to be on the rise, becoming both more frequent and more serious, albeit from different baselines. In Egypt sexual harassment was notoriously common before the revolution with a 2008 survey finding that 83 per cent of Egyptian women had been harassed.<sup>28</sup> Almost 50 per cent of women interviewed in the most recent survey claimed that harassment has increased and more than 99 per cent reported experiencing harassment.<sup>29</sup> Very little data is available for Yemen and Libya, where rates anecdotally appear to have been lower than in Egypt, both before and since the uprisings, though one recent report, whose figures have been disputed, found that 90 per cent of Yemeni women had experienced harassment.<sup>30</sup>

In consultations one public space in particular dominated perceptions of sexual harassment: Cairo's Tahrir Square. Mass harassment and rape in and around the square have been widely reported, and documentation and reactions by both female and male activists has been essential in raising awareness of harassment and beginning to establish models for women's rights activists and broader civil society to respond to such events (see Box 4 and chapter 3 below). As a result, Tahrir was central to the way Egyptian women from all governorates thought about harassment and rape. For example, women in Alexandria experienced harassment during demonstrations there, but remarked that there was "less sexual harassment than in Cairo" and discussed the issue in relation to media reporting or their experiences of travelling to Tahrir. It was also an important point of reference for women consulted in Yemen and Libya, with women in all of these locations insisting that their experience of harassment differed fundamentally from that of Tahrir Square.

Outside of Tahrir, most of the cases of harassment described by participants occurred not at political protests but on the street or on public transport. Older women often claimed that there was no harassment in their area at all. Young women's experiences, however, tended to contradict these perceptions. Though levels of violence are lower and mass attacks are rarer outside of Tahrir, younger women in particular related many personal experiences of harassment. In addition, fear of sexual assault was expressed in most focus groups and many related local instances of rape. In Manufiya, Egypt, after an older woman argued that harassment was not an issue in the area, a young woman retorted that "harassment has definitely increased after the 2011 revolution, both verbal and physical. Parts of a woman's body are touched..." Similarly a mother in Derna in eastern Libya challenged other participants' sense that harassment was not a concern in the new Libya by insisting: "My youngest daughter doesn't ever go out alone. Not because I don't trust her, but because she's either harassed by creeps or bothered by very religious types." Young women across Egypt, Libya, and Yemen stressed that harassment predominantly affects young women in these locations and is often hidden from the older generation because of taboos against speaking about it publicly.

*"A friend of mine was at a demonstration and a man pulled her breast, so she swore she would never participate again."*

**Female activist in Alexandria, Egypt, February 2013**

<sup>27</sup> While such vagueness was important to allow this highly sensitive subject to be discussed, it brought with it a measure of ambiguity of the exact nature of events participants were discussing and means that comparisons, particularly between countries, is difficult. For instance, according to a recent study conducted by UN Women on harassment in Egypt, women identified whistling and verbal abuse, stalking, including telephone stalking, and, touching of women's bodies as among the most common forms of harassment. *Ibid.* p 10.

<sup>28</sup> Hassan R M, Shoukry A, Abul Komsan N (2008), *Clouds in Egypt's Sky*.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013), p 7.

<sup>30</sup> al-Muraqab A (2013), 'Yemeni women subject to frequent sexual harassment'. In Libya too, though some consulted women insisted that there was no sexual harassment in the 'New Libya', there are increasing reports of verbal and physical harassment.

#### Box 4: Sexual violence against women in Cairo's Tahrir Square

*"In Tahrir Square women were harassed violently while everyone watched. They even blamed the women for being there or for what they were wearing."*

**Young female activist, Cairo, Egypt, January 2013**

While initially reporting feeling safe in Tahrir Square, women in Cairo identified International Women's Day on 8 March 2011 as a turning point. On that day, female protesters in the Square were physically attacked and sexually assaulted by large groups of men.

Since then, women have faced escalating violence in Tahrir Square: they were severely beaten by the army and police in protests against SCAF and faced increasing incidents of mass sexual assault. For instance, at the two-year anniversary of the January uprising, 25 cases of sexual assault were reported, while 6 months later, during the week of protests following 30 June 2013, a total of 169 cases of sexual assault were reported in Tahrir Square.<sup>31</sup> Attacks have also escalated in intensity, including increasing numbers of rapes.

*"Suddenly ten men started pushing me aside and another five circled me in a narrow alley branching off the Square. Some of them were trying to open my blouse while others had their hands all over my body... This type of harassment is a political rather than a sexual act."*

**Woman activist in Cairo, Egypt, January 2013**

Consulted women in Cairo perceived harassment as a systematic attempt to deter women from political activism and many believe that men and street children are being paid to carry out these attacks. The police have also continued to use violence and sexual harassment against female protesters, and in some cases the police have contacted women's families and threatened them to prevent them from demonstrating.<sup>32</sup>

Women in the focus group discussions explained that people in the street are less likely now to help women who are being harassed, for example by challenging the harasser. They felt that the police mock those who try to report incidents of harassment, fail to take action,<sup>33</sup> and that legislation on harassment is patchy and poorly enforced.<sup>34</sup> They also reported that there is a general perception that women are to blame, a perception fed by media coverage of harassment and statements by the authorities.

*"One day a mother and her daughter were returning home from a wedding when a young man attacked her daughter... because of customs and traditions the mother did not dare to report the incident, and she suffered from being blamed. The victims are always the ones who are blamed."*

**Female political activist, Qena, Egypt, January 2013**

This tendency toward victim-blaming in cases of gender-based violence is common (not only in the Middle East), serving to protect perpetrators and stigmatise victims. Several of the consulted female activists themselves held such views, with one woman from Zawiyah, Libya arguing that "sometimes girls do it to themselves when they get harassed – they don't dress appropriately" and an activist in Alexandria, Egypt stating that "in general, it is what the girl wears that is the reason for harassment and rape." These views are contradicted by strong evidence that whether or not women are targeted for harassment bears no relation to what they are wearing<sup>35</sup> – something consulted women also argued, as when a party activist in Cairo affirmed that: "Every woman suffers from harassment, whether she is veiled, unveiled or wears *niqab*." However, while victim-blaming remains common, many activists have risen to challenge this phenomenon, placing the onus of 'shame' on the perpetrator rather than the victim.

<sup>31</sup> See: Kingsley P (2013b) 'Tahrir Square sexual assaults reported during anniversary clashes' and Kingsley P (2013c), '80 sexual assaults in one day – the other story of Tahrir Square'.

<sup>32</sup> Data from focus groups. Similar statements documented e.g. at Amnesty International (2013), 'Egypt: Gender-based violence against women around Tahrir Square'.

<sup>33</sup> For example, 93.4% of female respondents said that they received no help from security forces present on the scene of harassment; *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013).

<sup>34</sup> Harassment (and domestic violence) are not criminalised in Libya, Abaida M (2012), 'Women in Libya are in a state of denial regarding women's rights in Libya'. In Yemen, laws applicable on the books are vague, see e.g. Yemen Post (2013), 'Women of Yemen – the taboo of sexual harassment'. Legislation is more robust in Egypt, but rarely enforced. See: Harassmap (2013), 'Laws against sexual harassment in Egypt and Samir D (2012), 'Fighting the good fight against sexual harassment: New, effective initiatives'.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, women wearing conservative clothes and no makeup make up a large majority of those harassed. See: *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013).

### 1.3 State security provision: Part of the problem

*"The police are absent from the street. There is no security. The moral code has deteriorated and there are thugs everywhere."*

Woman from Manufiya, Egypt, January 2013

The threat posed by crime, violent conflict, and targeted violence against women is exacerbated by both a lack of state security provision and abuses by the security forces themselves.<sup>36</sup> Across all three countries, consulted women believe that inaction and weakness of the security services has provided criminals with more space to operate. At the same time, they feel that women's and citizens' security is not a police priority and that women face particular barriers to accessing the security provision that does exist. Therefore simply strengthening the police would do little to address their concerns.

#### A legacy of abuses

Following decades of focus on regime survival at the expense of people's security, the quality of official security provision in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as well as levels of trust in the security forces, are at a low. The legacy of security forces' past abuses, the use of torture against criminals, the poor, young people, political opponents, and a broad range of other 'suspect' populations over the past decades has contributed to a deep break in trust.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, paralysis and neglect in the aftermath of the uprisings have further eroded relations between security services and communities.

This legacy was deepened during and since the uprisings when, in all three countries, thousands of peaceful protesters were attacked and hundreds were killed by security forces. Security forces, in turn, are increasingly becoming victims of assassinations and attacks. Two years after the first protest, and long after the authoritarian leaders fell, politically active women continue to report direct repression by security forces and security forces continue to use excessive force against protestors, most dramatically in the recent mass killings of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt.<sup>38</sup> In Yemen, a number of women, particularly in Aden, reported exposure to arbitrary arrests and detention as a result of their political activities, while in Cairo and Alexandria activists reported beatings and arrests by the Central Security Forces. However, women across the three countries also stressed the need to reconcile with the police if broad-based reforms of the security forces occurred, and differentiated between those responsible for planning and ordering attacks and lower ranking police staff. Government-led efforts to reform the police are underway in Libya and Yemen.

It is worth noting that, during consultations, women activists often stressed that they were targeted as 'activists' rather than as 'women'.<sup>39</sup> They underlined that men also face

<sup>36</sup> By 'security forces' this report refers to the institutions and personnel responsible for the provision of security inside a country. Commonly, this includes the police and paramilitary forces, such as Egypt's Central Security Forces, tasked with policing, public order functions, and securing government buildings and other public spaces. In some contexts, notably in Egypt under military rule and in Yemen, the army, military police, and other military forces must be considered an element of the security forces to the extent to which they play a role in policing demonstrations, securing public buildings, and other domestic security functions.

<sup>37</sup> This is perhaps most evident in Egypt, where protests initially began on Police Day and were mobilised on the basis of protesting ongoing police brutality. Since January 2011, hundreds of police stations have been burned down throughout the country, reflecting both popular anger at the police and its degraded capacity to protect itself. In Libya the police likewise were and to some extent remain targets of popular anger.

<sup>38</sup> Much has been made by the current Egyptian government of violence on the part of protestors before and during the clearing of the Rabaa sit-in. According to Human Rights Watch, "the decision to use live ammunition on a large scale from the outset reflected a failure to observe basic international policing standards on use of lethal force and was not justified by the disruptions caused by the demonstrations or the limited possession of arms by some protestors." Human Rights Watch (2013), 'Egypt: Security forces used excessive lethal force'.

<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to note that there is a gendered element to violence faced by women and men. In Yemen, some women reported feeling less exposed to attacks by security forces compared to fellow male activists. Additionally, in Libya, while both men and women were confronted with government-sponsored violence, male and female activists reported facing different responses. Women shared stories of police reporting their activities to male relatives and requesting punishment and cessation of activities while men faced more direct violence. A similar dynamic was at work in some parts of Egypt. A young activist in Qena, for instance, described how the police contacted her father to stop her collecting signatures for a petition. Her male colleagues were arrested and beaten by the police, while she faced the sanction of her family and neighbours, highlighting the gender-specific threats activists face from the police and their communities.

many of these threats and insisted on locating violence against them in the wider context of political and military struggles over control of the state.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that female activists have in many cases been subjected to the same levels of violence as male activists marks a change in the gender dynamics of political oppression in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. This is illustrated by the case of the ‘girl in the blue bra’ in Cairo, a protester who was stripped and beaten in the street by Egyptian Central Security Forces and whose image was published by news outlets across the world. Video footage of the beating caused outrage and became a symbol of the brutality of the military regime precisely because the beating and humiliation of a woman was considered particularly shameful. In response, protesters reportedly chanted, “The women of Egypt are a red line.”<sup>41</sup> As women have challenged existing gender norms through their participation in political activities hitherto seen as the domain of men, security forces appear to have responded by stepping up violence against them.

### Lack of state security provision

In Egypt lack of police action in response to increased crime coupled with police violence against protestors was frequently criticised in the urban focus groups. Meanwhile, in more rural locations women identified the absence of police as the main security concern, as participants stated that “there is no police in the streets.” Similarly in Yemen, according to a recent survey only 15 per cent of the population believe the police is “active in a positive way” in their area. This figure is lower still outside the main cities, and in Mareb only three per cent believe the police bring security to their area. The army, which is more visible, fares little better.<sup>42</sup>

In Libya association of the security forces with the old regime, the proliferation of parallel security structures, and the violence and vehemence with which regime-affiliated organisations were dismantled led to the most severe destruction of police capacity of the three countries.<sup>43</sup> Focus group participants believe the police to be weak and ineffectual, with a female teacher in Yefren stating that “the police and army are not working after the revolution. They need to reactivate, and start helping with safety and security.” A vocal minority of consulted women in Libya also believe that Qadhafi supporters remain in charge of security and need to be removed before they are willing to place any trust in the police. Even in areas where the police are currently present and visible, such as in Sebha, police appear to be linked to and cooperate with smuggling networks and other criminal activity.<sup>44</sup>

### Additional barriers to access

*“A girl is blacklisted if she enters a police station!”*

Woman from Zuwara, Libya, December 2012

In addition to their general distrust of the police and fears of state-sanctioned violence, which women broadly share with men, women face particular barriers to accessing the services that are available. Women reported feeling scared to go to police stations due to cultural stigma and expectations of poor police treatment of complainants. As a result, women said that they often do not know where to go to report crimes, particularly harassment, rape, or physical and verbal abuse. In Yemen multiple focus groups discussed instances of women being harassed, kidnapped, raped, and even murdered that were never reported to the police. A Member of Yemen’s Parliament explained

<sup>40</sup> Men appear to be more at risk of facing public, particularly state-sanctioned violence, and also face high rates of sexual violence and torture, particularly in detention. See: Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture (2013), ‘Failed promises... and torture continues’. See also Al Ahram Online (2013), ‘Sexual torture still rife under Morsi: Egyptian rights groups’.

<sup>41</sup> National Post (2011), ‘Police beating of “girl in the blue bra” becomes new rallying call for Egyptians’.

<sup>42</sup> Yemen Polling Center (2013), *Public Perceptions of the Security Sector and Police Work in Yemen: Major Survey Findings*. On Egypt, see also: *Op. cit.* Hellyer HA (2012).

<sup>43</sup> See Wehrey, F and Cole, P (2013), ‘Building Libya’s Security Sector’.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.* Cole P (2012).

that "one of my sisters was a victim of an attempted kidnapping. How can we report this crime, since we do not trust the ones to report to?"<sup>45</sup> Similarly, women consulted in Libya discussed instances of kidnapping that were not reported to the police over concerns for women's and families' honour and reputation. In Qena, a city in more conservative Upper Egypt, focus groups also discussed instances of sexual violence including rape of minors, mass rape, and murders that went unreported "to avoid scandal". Most participants believed that a woman who reports sexual violence is likely to be blamed for being harassed and would face serious pressure, threats, violence, and even death from their families and communities.<sup>46</sup>

It is important, however, to highlight that it is not just a question of social stigma that creates barriers for women to access the security provision that does exist, but that it is also the behaviour of the police themselves that reduces women's ability and willingness to report crimes. Mistreatment, pressure to give bribes, and expectations that police will not take effective action all undermine women's willingness to engage with the police.<sup>47</sup>

In Egypt women in focus groups reported being harassed, mocked, and ignored by policemen when they attempted to report an incident at a police station. More than 93 per cent of Egyptian women would not turn to members of the security forces when harassed or robbed.<sup>48</sup> In Yemen similar numbers of women appear unwilling to turn to the police,<sup>49</sup> while a woman in Sebha, Libya, testified, "We can't do anything, because there's no system. There is no way to report; no one to call. The only option is to contact families to work something out."

## Alternative security providers

In the absence of effective and responsive state security provision, women reported that they often turn to alternative security providers who have played an important role in providing a minimum of safety in the spaces abandoned by state security forces. Ad hoc bodies and social ties within communities and neighbourhoods have cushioned women from some insecurity in urban areas, while, more systematically, tribal security provision and conflict-mediation have been essential to women's security in rural areas and cities where tribal affiliation remains important, although these alternative and supplementary security providers generate their own problems.

In terms of ad hoc responses, some women in Egyptian cities discussed popular committees, which formed during the '18 days' when the police disappeared to fill the security vacuum, as contributing to maintaining safety in their neighbourhood, while others saw them as highly problematic manifestations of 'mob rule'. More commonly, women discussed strategies of self-defence for themselves, carrying weapons or other tools to protect themselves,<sup>50</sup> or relying on going out in groups of friends or with male relatives.<sup>51</sup>

More systematically, in Yemen, Libya, and in rural locations in Egypt, religious and tribal authorities are stepping in to provide a modicum of security. In Qena in Upper Egypt, women reported that threats to individual women are rare because they are protected by their tribe. According to a woman in Derna, Libya, "tribalism is actually helping, not hindering. In the absence of a real justice system it's what's keeping the

<sup>45</sup> Similarly, a community leader in Aden, Yemen, reported: "A girl was found cut into pieces, and her family did not report that out of fear for their reputation."

<sup>46</sup> In this way sexual and gender based violence was acknowledged once the issue was raised, even as harassment was often at least initially described as something rare and external. In addition, women expressed concern that prosecution was unlikely, pointing to broader issues within the criminal justice system beyond the police that are not explored further in this report.

<sup>47</sup> In addition broader services responding to violence against women (such as specifically targeted medical care and psychosocial support) are underdeveloped in Egypt and absent in Yemen and Libya. See UNICEF (2011a), 'Egypt: MENA Gender Equality Profile', UNICEF (2011b), 'Libya: MENA Gender Equality Profile', and UNICEF (2011c), 'Yemen: MENA Gender Equality Profile'.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013).

<sup>49</sup> Heinze M C, Ahmed S (2013), 'Integrating Women's Security Interests into Police Reform in Yemen: some suggestions for Structural Reform'.

<sup>50</sup> See also: *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013).

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. el-Tablawy T, el-Wardany S (2013), 'Egyptians turn to vigilante justice as economy worsens'.

peace, it ties us together and provides a sense of social responsibility in the absence of law and order.”<sup>52</sup> Many of the armed groups in Libya and important armed actors in Yemen are organised along tribal lines.

#### **Box 5: Armed groups in Libya**

The violence surrounding the ousting of Qadhafi provided new opportunities for settling inter-communal scores, but also created new grievances and antagonistic relations between ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ revolutionary communities, and between entrenched and newly empowered elites as well as those who remain excluded. In almost all areas, local armed groups have formed. Many of those that actively fought during the revolution nominally come under the authority of the Supreme Security Committee (SCC) or Libya Shield umbrellas, but appear de facto to maintain a great deal of autonomy.

During the consultations, women expressed respect for the work that local brigades or militias have done during the revolution in maintaining stability. However, it is evident that the brigades are only succeeding in providing pockets of security: while some women felt safe in ‘their’ area, none felt comfortable travelling to other areas, meaning that their mobility was severely restricted. Conflicts between local armed groups and between neighbouring tribes are generating insecurities.

Due to these concerns, women across all focus groups agreed that the creation of a unified Libyan army and police force was a top priority. However, at the same time, women’s attitudes towards the police in its present form ranged from concerns that they were ineffectual and irrelevant to profound distrust, emphasising that a unified army and police needs to be built on a legal framework and with checks and balances that ensure accountability.

Women argued that alternative security providers generate their own host of problems. In Mareb, Yemen, several women pointed out that tribal security forces can be a blunt instrument, citing tribal road blocks as a threat to their mobility and ability to access medical care and other essential services. A woman from Abyan, Yemen, criticised the fluidity of tribal institutions: attacking the rapid changes in who they serve and the laws they apply in her area, stating that “many of those who were members of Ansar al-Sharia yesterday became members of the [government sponsored] Popular Committees today!” Similarly, as described in Box 5, armed groups in Libya, including tribal groups, are generating insecurity in aggregate when they come into conflict with neighbouring groups or security forces claiming to act in the name of the central government.

Women were also concerned about their ability to access and influence tribal security provision (discussed in more detail in chapter 2) and pointed out that where tribal security provision dominates, it means that women who are not members of large tribes – and thus already face a degree of marginalisation – are left without protection. Women in all three countries therefore expressed a preference for reformed state security providers over the current alternatives. Until then, however, many women turn to their families, local councils, or ad hoc bodies, as well as tribal and religious authorities.

<sup>52</sup> Elaborating on the importance of alternative security providers, a woman from Derna criticised government action against armed groups in Eastern Libya, saying “the militia wasn’t the best, but it offered more protection than we now have without them,” illustrating the need to combine disarmament of armed groups with significant improvements in police service provision and community oversight. Experience from a range of other contexts suggests that any organisation which ‘provides security’, if it is not regulated and open to oversight and accountability, will tend to turn to abuses.

# 2

## Effects on participation

**THE VARIOUS SECURITY CONCERNS WOMEN IDENTIFIED** – from violent conflict and criminality to more specific concerns around harassment and slander – limit their ability to participate in public life and decision-making. While some female activists choose to carry on their activities, security concerns both increase the costs of activism and reduce opportunities to be involved. Fear of violence and crime reduces women’s mobility and presence in public spaces, while harassment and slander deters activism. Moreover, these security concerns have long-term knock-on effects, as ambitious young women are forced to forego opportunities for development that could make them more effective community and political activists in the future.<sup>53</sup>

The chapter looks at how the security concerns outlined above limit the ability of women to access avenues for decision-making within political parties and formal and informal governance structures at the local level. It concludes with a look at some of the divisions between women activists, particularly along class and rural-urban divides. In many locations where consultations took place, local security providers and the bodies they are responsible to exhibit alarming levels of ignorance of women’s safety concerns. However, the security risks facing politically active women are not just an inadvertent effect of a political environment in transition but also an intentional political tool used to sideline women.

### 2.1 Engagement in political parties

When women seek to access institutions and places where decisions are being made, they face a range of barriers directly related to safety concerns. Women reported facing threats when running for office and local and national government positions, political parties continue to marginalise women, and traditional political leaders often do not have a clear understanding of the serious security issues women face, and do not take them into consideration when making decisions. This worsens the difficulties that already exist in all three countries because of a general lack of mechanisms that link civil society to government policy-making.

*“The local council set up meetings with women, but they arranged it at night, when they know women can’t show up.”*

**Woman from Derna, Libya, December 2012**

<sup>53</sup> A young woman from Misrata, for instance, relayed her frustration that “outside of Misrata there are a lot of conferences, workshops, and trainings I wish I could go to.” In Yemen, a young woman from Aden described a similar experience where “we travelled to attend a workshop abroad and when we came back they said [this travel made us] rude, disrespectful and embarrassing for our families.” As a result, she was no longer allowed to travel.

Political party meetings and government consultations, when they occur, often take place at times and locations that women find increasingly difficult to access due to rising insecurity, especially at night and in male-dominated spaces. In Yemen women discussed their inability to attend gatherings and qat chews,<sup>54</sup> where they felt most political decisions are made. This was due both to social norms – these qat chews are largely ‘men only’ – but also related to security concerns because they often take place in the late afternoon or evening, when women’s mobility is more restricted. Similarly in Libya, when government meetings and consultations do take place, they are generally held in the evenings and in male-dominated spaces such as cafés. Consultations in all three countries painted a picture of such meetings taking account of men’s schedules and responsibilities in order to ensure their input, while ignoring the scheduling constraints of women.

*“I used to attend many of the party’s meetings and conferences at night. Now I cannot.”*

Female party activist from Cairo, Egypt, January 2013

For the most part consulted women felt that political parties were not effective vehicles for their political participation. In Yemen, for instance, political parties and elections came at the very bottom of respondents’ lists of effective ways to influence politics and decision-making. More specifically, women expressed frustration that parties have been unable, and in many cases unwilling, to provide conduits to access power, represent women’s concerns, or include women within their structures. In many cases, they perceived political parties women’s wings to be a way to keep women out of decision-making and many women felt that their participation was often decorative rather than substantive. As a female member of Yemen’s Islah party explained: “Many political parties, including my own, practice a policy of exclusion and marginalisation of women within the party.”

Women perceived their influence within parties as being consistently undermined by established players and felt that parties had instrumentalised women’s participation in protests in 2011 to suit their own agendas and to increase party representation in political bodies, a claim levied in particular against Yemen’s Islah party. Once their participation was no longer useful, or was deemed a threat, women were physically attacked or threatened with violence or slander, a pattern repeated in the ‘Change Squares’ across the country.<sup>55</sup> In Egypt, consulted women highlighted that parties rhetorically committed to women’s rights did no better and often worse than Islamist parties in terms of actually including women prominently in party lists.

*“Both the government and the opposition parties played a part in discrediting the image of women.”*

Female activist in Taiz, Yemen, December 2012

In Libya only one of the women consulted in focus groups was active in a political party, and on the whole women did not see political parties as avenues of participation that were open to them. Instead, women have focused much of their engagement on the voluntary sector. This engagement has generated some influence and revolutionary organisations have sometimes transformed themselves into mouthpieces for women’s concerns. For example, a woman in Derna, Libya, related how many of the women active in Derna were “working with the 17th February Union until we sort of morphed into the women’s union.” However, marginalisation in political parties risks women engaging in a narrow range of acceptable charitable pursuits, while the ‘serious’ negotiations occur elsewhere. This is also reflected in research that found both men and women highly sceptical about women’s ability to represent their concerns and succeed in achieving political demands.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Social gatherings where the mild narcotic plant qat is consumed.

<sup>55</sup> Compare also Shakir W, Marzouk M, Haddad S (2012), *Strong voices: Yemeni women’s political participation from protest to transition*, esp. p 11.

<sup>56</sup> Doherty M (2012), ‘Give us change we can see’.



When women were successful in Egypt and Libya standing for elections on party lists or as independents, they reported facing aggressive, often slanderous, and sometimes violent campaigns against them. In Qena, Egypt, an activist related the story of a local woman who ran for election in the People's Assembly: "People started throwing stones at her house, and attacking her reputation as a bad woman. They said that she is using her candidacy as cover for immoral behaviour and received money from suspect sources."<sup>57</sup>

While all parties came in for criticism on the counts raised above, women in Egypt and Yemen often singled out the dominant Islamist parties<sup>58</sup> for being particularly aggressive in attacking women from other parties, independents standing against them, or women trying to influence their policies in local and national government. In particular, participants criticised Islamist parties' claims to determine what constitutes correct Islamic practice. As highlighted in the section on harassment above, much of the language and references used to attack women's activism as immoral and inappropriate are religiously coloured. Many women in focus groups contended that Islamist parties purposefully shaped this discourse to discredit women's participation, turning themselves, in the words of an activist from Taiz, into "godfathers of religion, women and their behaviour. They hide under religion and twist it to serve their interests." Similarly, a male tribal leader in Mareb contended that the Yemeni Islah party turned religion into a political tool to serve its interest and used it to discredit women who were challenging its decisions at a local level.

Similar concerns were raised in Egypt. One participant in Qena described fears held by some women about the Muslim Brotherhood: "Generally speaking the threats don't target individual [women]. They target rights of women as a whole. Many are afraid that if the coming parliament<sup>59</sup> will be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, much legislation will be against women's rights." In Cairo consulted women claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood trained and backed many of the individuals and groups who carried out harassment of women protesters, while in Alexandria several women singled out the Muslim Brotherhood for attacks on marches, disturbances of public meetings, and the use of Facebook and social media to spread rumours about women's rights organisations.

However, it is important to highlight that in all three countries Islamist parties are some of the most important practical avenues for women to be active in charitable and political activities and discussions in focus groups were coloured by political polarisation. Islamist parties have made it easier than many others for women affiliated to the party to participate within their structures and there is strong intra-party negotiation on the role of women, with a multitude of perspectives ranging from liberal to ultra-conservative.<sup>60</sup> Within Yemen's Islah party, for example, the leadership seems split on the issue of women's inclusion and there are competing views on whether the hardliners or liberals have the upper hand at present. In Manufiya, in Egypt, women active in political parties conceded that the majority of women locally voted for the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and that the FJP has been very successful in recruiting women who are active at the local level to become members of their party. Women have also continued to be visible and active within the pro-Morsi protests, despite high levels of violence against them.

<sup>57</sup> In the same focus group, participants discussed the case of another woman from the community who was successfully elected. They argued that because she comes from an old, well-respected family and was well-known locally for her charitable work, she was beyond reproach and no one dared speak out against her, highlighting the class dynamics within the women's movement.

<sup>58</sup> At the time of the consultations (December 2012 and January 2013), Islamist parties were ascendant in the political decision-making process in Egypt and Yemen. The Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt was in power, and in Yemen, the GCC initiative cemented Islah as a key actor in local and national-level politics. Criticisms of the marginalising tactics of these actors should therefore be placed in the context of their roles as dominant forces in the political processes of both countries at the time.

<sup>59</sup> Elections were scheduled for spring 2013 at the time of consultations.

<sup>60</sup> Outlining the dynamics of women's participation within Islamist parties is complex and not the subject of this report. Refer to: Abdellatif O, Ottaway M (2007), 'Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist model of women's activism'; Mahmoud S (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*; and Wickham, C R (2013), *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*.

## 2.2 Engagement in local government

In light of the security vacuum discussed in chapter 1, in many locations in Yemen, Libya, and rural locations in Egypt, religious and tribal authorities are stepping in to provide a minimum level of security. While these informal systems provide much needed services, their existence and functioning is fraught with its own range of problems, not least of which is the host of challenges they present for women attempting to be involved in local decision-making and tackling the insecurities they face.

*“Politics in Qena is in the hands of the tribes and the families. Big families have their male candidates whom they support and as a result they win, but these same families don’t support their women candidates.”*

Woman in Qena, Egypt, December 2012

Local leaders can define acceptable and ‘off-limits’ issues for women to work on and may threaten women perceived to challenge them. In Yemen, where international aid is an important source of local revenue, threats can stem from powerful community figures that politicise aid and seek to divert it towards their own ends. A woman from Abyan who founded a charity to help internally displaced people like herself in Aden reported: “I was filmed without my knowledge, had my ID stolen, had my daughter’s photos downloaded from Facebook, and faced phone harassment threatening me to stop my charity work or they would kidnap my daughters. [...] We faced threats from powerful and well-known figures, and once we stopped activities due to the intimidation, they took over the project.”

In Libya women’s political activism or human rights work that is seen as potentially beneficial to ‘counter-revolutionary’ groups, likewise brings threats. One woman in the sample was effectively exiled from her community for advocating for the human rights of Tawergha displaced people.<sup>61</sup>

Despite these direct threats, most women consulted in all three countries expressed a degree of acceptance of the role of tribes and local community leaders. As one woman in Sebha explained, “there is nothing we can do about this, it’s our only option [for security provision].” Similarly a woman in Zawiyah insisted that “people only revert to relying on their families and tribes to solve issues because there is no police or army, it’s the only avenue.” In much the same way, Yemenis in many rural areas resort to customary law in part because it may be the only mechanism of dispute resolution available in their area, particularly as women are almost completely barred from official courts in rural areas due to social restrictions on their movement, notions of honour, and high rates of illiteracy.<sup>62</sup> In fact, in some locations, women in consultations rated local mechanisms highly as a way in which women could be actively involved in making decisions. For instance, a young teacher in Sebha, Libya, predicted: “I can’t do anything unless I am in the local council, but I could change a lot of things if I was elected.”

However, in these informal institutions women’s access and that of other marginalised groups is at best uneven, and women’s safety issues are often poorly understood. Women have few opportunities to access informal security governance and many highlighted the ways in which they felt side-lined from decisions made by informal local governance structures.<sup>63</sup>

Consultations with community leaders revealed a deep disconnect between women’s concerns and what local authority figures believed women’s concerns to be. For example, in a focus group discussion held in Egypt, the chairman of a community development

<sup>61</sup> Tawergha was a town of about 30,000 inhabitants, seen as a pro-Qadhafi stronghold. Many of Tawergha’s inhabitants socio-economic standing increased under Qadhafi’s rule. The town was a base for Qadhafi’s forces during the siege of Misrata and its inhabitants were forced to flee when the regime fell. Armed groups from Misrata continue to enforce the displacement of Tawergha’s former inhabitants.

<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.* al-Zwaini L (2012).

<sup>63</sup> See e.g. Bahdi R (2007), ‘Background Paper on Women’s Access to Justice in the MENA Region’. On Yemen, see also: Amnesty International (2009), ‘Yemen’s dark side: Discrimination and violence against women and girls’. In addition, the reliance on disputing parties themselves to implement decisions in the context of an absence of state security provision means that local mediators face strong pressures from the stronger party. See: International Crisis Group (2013), ‘Trial by Error: Justice in Post-Qadhafi Libya’.

organisation continued to argue, throughout the discussion and despite contrary claims by the women in the group, that women do not face any sort of violence.

Similarly in Yemen, community leaders asked to assess threats to women's security were not able to identify most of the issues women saw as major concerns (discussed in chapter 1). While some merely made wrong assumptions about the issues women faced, most downplayed the security risks for women altogether, claiming that they faced minimal threats or were spared from insecurity because of the protection of their gender under traditions and customs. "Women are respected in our society and have not been exposed to any security risks. No one can shoot or even aim a gun at a woman," argued a community leader in Mareb.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, while attacks on 'honour and reputation' were mentioned as a safety concern over 30 times by female activists in the focus group discussion in Taiz, it was only mentioned three times during the focus group discussion conducted with male community leaders there.

In Libya these differences in priorities were not explored, but disconnects emerged all the same (see Box 6). In several locations, women complained that community leaders were not willing to engage with them. For instance, in Yefren, a woman who headed a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) deplored that "we send invitations to the local council members to come to our events, but they do not engage with us." In several locations in Libya women cited the low representation of women in elected or unelected local councils of 'wise men' as well as exclusion from consultations as concerns.<sup>65</sup>

Such attitudes are likely to perpetuate women's safety concerns and reinforce the challenges they face. Where community leaders are unwilling even to acknowledge that women face serious threats, the formal and informal mechanisms they head are unlikely to address women's concerns.

#### **Box 6: Male dominated local government, female dominated civil society in Libya**

Women have eagerly embraced the new space that opened for civil society following the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, and several Libyan and international activists interviewed for this research estimated that women make up more than half of those active in civil society in Libya at the moment. Women appear well-represented in civil society, but weak in national and local government institutions, despite the positive decision to use alternating male-female lists in the election to the General National Congress (GNC). There is a risk that as the government resumes services to citizens, women will be further marginalised.

As a result, there is particular concern among women's groups that funding for and interest in civil society initiatives has stalled. Consulted women recognise that some activities currently undertaken by civil society and women's groups are probably best handled eventually by the Libyan government, particularly in Eastern Libya, where investment was low throughout Qadhafi's rule. In Derna, for instance, a woman observed, "we feel like we have to take all the responsibility because the government doesn't." However, consultations with women also make clear that replacing the women-friendly and gender-sensitive service-provision and opportunities for engagement offered by civil society should be approached cautiously and with a view to supporting and incorporating these initiatives in a participatory model of local governance, rather than replacing them.

<sup>64</sup> Female community leaders displayed similar attitudes. For example, the head of a branch of the Women's National Committee in one governorate claimed that "women were not subjected to any assault or damage because society respects women."

<sup>65</sup> Due to delays in elections and the passing of an election law for local councils, the large majority of these bodies are informal and made up of unelected groups of 'wise men' and local notables.

## 2.3 Class and generational divides within the women's movements

Disconnects exist not only between women and male community leaders but also between women's groups along socio-economic and generational divides, between women living in rural and urban areas, between those working at the local and national levels, and between more secular and more Islamist women activists. These divides, while natural reflections of the diversity of women's experiences, can entrench women's vulnerabilities and complicate access to power and decision-making for the women most heavily affected by security concerns outlined. Thus, there is a need for a more multi-dimensional view of the way different women perceive safety, security, and participation, in order to ensure that responses are not targeting a minority of women.

Differences in perceptions of problems and solutions between urban centres and smaller towns and rural areas were particularly evident in all three countries, closely linked to differences between elite and grassroots activists. For instance, in all three countries, crime was a bigger concern in cities, while armed conflict between communities or between armed groups and government security forces loomed large in rural areas. Similarly, in terms of responses, Yemeni women in the urban centres of Taiz, Aden, and Sanaa saw the media, demonstrations, civil society, and economic independence as ways to influence politics. By contrast, women in more rural, conservative, or tribal areas, as well as those from urban areas with a lower socio-economic background, tended to focus on the importance of community and familial relations as the primary method to influence decisions, changing opinions of family members, mosque preachers, and other locally influential individuals.<sup>66</sup> "One must start with the family by raising awareness amongst family members, then friends and neighbours. The stronger the ability to convince, the more influential [a woman] can be," said a woman from Abyan.

Because of disconnects between rural and urban women, avenues for influence and change identified by women from rural areas often remain neglected, and women from these locations are not leveraged as active participants in improving local conditions nor are their voices heard at the centre, including by women active at a national level. The security and safety concerns that limit women's mobility also limit the ability of women with different experiences to connect to each other, share experiences, and plan joint actions.

Lack of communication between urban and more rural activists, overlaid with regional fragmentation, also came out as a clear concern for women in Libya. There, the fall of Qadhafi saw a proliferation of local women's unions. Women's attempts to link up these local unions are in their early stages and frustrated by restrictions to mobility because of security concerns and persistent communication difficulties. This fragmentation was underscored by the fact that focus group participants in different cities did not agree on which women (if any) were important at a national level, being able to cite only women who they believed to be important locally. Combined with limited mobility and the lack of public space for discussions, this translates into low levels of knowledge about other women's concerns and means that the few women who do have relatively good access to power are poorly informed about the most pressing priorities for more grassroots activists.

This may also explain why many women consulted in Libya felt that women involved in national politics, and in particular those in the Libyan General National Congress (GNC), are not representative, effective, and do not speak about issues that other women are concerned about. Talking about women in national politics and the GNC, an older activist in Zuwara criticised, "why don't [the women] talk? They don't do their job! At least speak about the issues, name them."

<sup>66</sup> For Yemeni women in tribal and more conservative areas, women's decision-making activities in the private sphere are often the most effective way to influence decisions in the public domain. For example, though restricted by rigid customs and traditions compared to women in urban areas, women in Mareb continue to play an important role in preventing conflict between and within tribes. Well-respected older women may intervene in a conflict by unveiling or cutting their hair or tying a knot in their face covering and sending it to the warring parties. Some women will also refuse to shake hands with a man until he renounces violence. Such nuances are often not visible to urban activists and international donors working in less conservative parts of the country.

The second main disconnect between women that emerged in consultations was generational. Older women with more extensive networks and better access to decision-making tended not to be aware of some of the serious security concerns disproportionately affecting younger women and in some instances expressed a great deal of complacency about threats such as harassment, sexual assault, and slander, unless convinced by younger women of their devastating impact. This generational divide came out strongly in Libya and Yemen, but was clearest in Egypt, where it underwrote clear differences in how women approached short-term priorities. While younger women most strongly affected by insecurity and politically motivated violence placed an emphasis on the need for immediate reforms in the police, intelligence services, and more inclusive politics, older women felt more concerned about instability in its own right, tending to focus on increasing punishment for criminals, 'activating' the police, and ensuring the legal foundations for women's political rights and economic opportunities were in place. They tended to be less directly affected by harassment and street violence and saw insecurity primarily as a problem of increased crime.

This highlights a broader generational struggle: the search for immediate stability by the older generation versus arguments put forth by younger activists that long-term stability can only be achieved by working through a period of disorder to acquire rights and freedoms. While there was a great deal of mutual goodwill and respect – for older activists' experience and younger activists' new approaches and ideas – these opposing opinions generated conflicting analyses of what needed to be done and made coordinated approaches between generations difficult.

*"Women in Qena never vote for other women. Many believe that men are more capable of serving all needs in the community."*

Woman in Qena, Egypt, January 2013

Finally, political divisions make coordination around women's issues more difficult. In Yemen focus groups highlighted that women from opposing political parties were often violent against one another, with members of one faction beating and intimidating women from another. "Political parties encouraged a policy of women confronting women from opposing parties. The GPC [the ruling General People's Congress party] often did this through smear campaigns in the media, while Islah [an Islamist opposition party] utilised fatwas and religion," said a woman from Taiz. Because of social taboos about male violence against women in public, women's violence against women was sometimes encouraged by parties as a form of intimidation. In all three countries focus group participants identified a tendency of women to play an important role in criticising other women for 'inappropriate' political activism. Ultimately for most women, according to an activist in Qena, "men come first in their assessment," and women have greater trust that men will deliver electoral promises and defend the interests of their constituents.

# 3

## Women's responses

**AS A RESULT OF THE RISKS WOMEN FACE** when they become directly involved in politics, both in formal institutions at the national level and in more informal local decision-making, activism is a high risk pursuit for women. Moreover, there are a range of security-related barriers that make it difficult for women to access institutions, influence decision-making, and participate in public life more broadly. There are elements of a vicious circle here: the barriers posed by insecurity coupled with gender insensitive and at times intentionally exclusionary institutions, political parties, and security providers mean that women's safety concerns are not taken into consideration or addressed by the political process, perpetuating the barriers they face. Insecurity creates strong pressures pushing women to be passive and retreat from public space and to see themselves and be portrayed as victims. However, many women have been meeting these challenges head-on, and the current increase in insecurity has seen a concomitant rise in activism.

Egypt has a strong women's movement with a century-long history. Yemen likewise has a strong established women's movement, and in Libya there has been a flowering of women's groups since the revolution, with several cities developing high-profile local women's unions and a strong presence of women in civil society.

Since 2011 a small number of these groups have begun working specifically on women's security issues. Groups focusing on women's political participation are beginning to pick up on the growing importance of safety and security concerns as barriers to women's visibility and participation in public politics. Other initiatives have begun taking direct action to protect women's rights to peaceful protest and public space, while the transitions in the three countries opened up new opportunities for citizens to scrutinise and take part in government policy-making. Civil society as a whole, including women's groups, is increasingly looking to influence decision-making about security issues and ensure that security providers are responsive and accountable to the needs of citizens, particularly women.

This chapter presents what women activists are doing to address some of the security problems facing women and politically active women in particular. It covers direct responses to address violence and insecurity, efforts to influence policy on key security-related issues, and attempts to increase women's role in providing security for communities. Although drawing a full picture of the ways in which hundreds of civil society-led initiatives have reacted to the challenges discussed above would go beyond the scope of this report, sketching out the broad outlines of responses and emerging strategies is essential to complement the discussion of barriers and challenges so far.

### 3.1 Grassroots responses

In the face of growing insecurity – as power continues to be renegotiated throughout the Middle East and North Africa – women activists in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have established a wide variety of grassroots initiatives to protect themselves and others against threats. Such initiatives have been coupled with powerful outreach and media campaigns at the local, national, and regional level to raise awareness of women's security concerns.

In Egypt and Yemen a number of initiatives were formed to document accounts of sexual assaults and violence targeting women. Egyptian initiatives such as 'Harassmap' and 'Shoft Taharosh' ('I Witnessed Harassment') are based on the idea that documenting harassment through online and mobile technologies can help raise awareness.<sup>67</sup> Using detailed maps of local incidents of harassment, volunteers talk to people on the streets about sexual harassment, challenge stereotypes and myths, and try to convince communities and the public generally to speak up and act against sexual harassment. In Yemen several similar initiatives have developed, some of them explicitly modelled on Egyptian approaches, others reacting independently to similar problems (see Box 7 for a more detailed look at one Yemeni initiative).

Such initiatives have combined with 'citizen journalist' footage of individual instances of harassment and assault. Through film-making and journalistic initiatives they make harassment, sexual violence, and other forms of violence against both men and women visible in novel ways. Mosireen, a video collective, for instance, are documenting violence against male and female protestors on video, acting as an archive and repository for such footage and producing short documentaries.<sup>68</sup> The combination of visual representations and awareness-raising around the prevalence of harassment with video footage of particularly shocking instances has begun to break down the prevailing attitudes of denial and excuses of harassment as harmless or natural and has been central to raising the profile of this issue and encouraging public debates about it.

#### Box 7: The Safe Streets Campaign in Yemen<sup>69</sup>

The Safe Streets Campaign was founded in 2011 to address the issue of sexual harassment. "People were in a state of denial about sexual harassment in Yemen," says campaign founder Ghidaa al-Absi, who believes that encouraging women to speak up about their experiences will put pressure on decisionmakers to pay more attention to this issue.

According to the Yemeni Athar Foundation for Development, about 95 per cent of Yemeni women have been exposed to harassment in different phases of their lives. Although this number has been criticised as being exaggerated, the Safe Streets Campaign is helping to reveal that harassment is much more widespread than many in Yemen believe. Women are encouraged to share their stories of sexual harassment anonymously through a Facebook page and a blog.

"After publishing these stories, those who initially denied that women are undergoing harassment, who argued that women are safe because we are a Muslim country, started to believe that this was a serious issue and got a glimpse of the reality," emphasises al-Absi. Most recently, Safe Streets has posted videos on YouTube to raise awareness and developed a 'harass map' tool for women to anonymously report where harassment occurs and illustrate its prevalence in different areas.

The campaign has further ambitions: "So far we have reached women in the urban cities, where there is easy access to the internet. However we need more funds and people to reach the women in remote and rural areas, to be able to convey the voices of more women."

In addition, human rights groups in Egypt, such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, and others are working to hold security forces and groups affiliated with political parties to account, including for

<sup>67</sup> For more information on Harassmap, see <http://harassmap.org>. Other organisations active in this area include Banat Masr Khat A7mar (Egypt's Women are a Red Line), Welad El Balad (The Country's Son) Estargel (Behave like a Man). See e.g. *Op. cit.* Samir D (2012) for an overview.

<sup>68</sup> See e.g. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2kMzrFHT-Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2kMzrFHT-Y)

<sup>69</sup> Information from interview conducted by Saferworld in Sanaa, June 2013. For more information on Safe Streets Campaign, refer to: Jadaliyya Reports (2012), 'Safe Streets Campaign in Yemen' and Safe Streets Campaign (2013), <http://thesafestreeets.org>.

violence against women. They are documenting abuses and supporting victims through access to medical and psychological services and by bringing individual and class-action lawsuits against specific practices and policies. This 'classical' human rights work is important in helping victims pursue justice for their individual case, while connecting it to the broader phenomena of systematic harassment and neglect and abuse by security forces. As highlighted in the section on harassment, 1.2, many women activists see themselves as being targeted primarily as activists, not as women, and human rights, rather than women's rights, can provide a more universal language and an easier ground for joint struggle with their male colleagues who are also affected by politically motivated violence.<sup>70</sup>

This is also the underlying approach to initiatives such as 'No to Military Trials,' a campaign against the Egyptian military's systematic practice to try civilians in military courts.<sup>71</sup> Though women play a prominent role within the initiative, and one of the most high-profile cases it contested was that of Samira Ibrahim (see Box 2), it is not focused only on women and does not express opposition to trials in terms of women's rights. This is not to say that such initiatives are gender blind or that they should be, but that they draw strength for women's struggles in part by situating the specific violence against them in the context of broader political struggles.

In Libya, and to an extent in Yemen, awareness raising has been less directly focused on making individual instances of harassment visible. According to women in the focus groups, the absence of such initiatives in Libya is partly due to harassment being less present and less visible, but it may also reflect the particular challenges of tackling this issue in an environment where local militias enforce notions of honour. Instead, there are a number of campaigns under way in Libya to challenge general social expectations that violence against women is acceptable and that women should refrain from political activism.

Three among a substantial number of groups that have emerged to raise awareness around this issue are the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace, Libyan Women's Forum, and the Voice of Libyan Women. While the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace has focused on raising awareness on and providing support to women victims of gender-based violence, including the highly charged issue of rape during the conflict, the Voice of Libyan Women has focused more on domestic violence. In addition to a broad range of activities for 'international purple hijab day', a recently launched, Muslim-initiated international event against domestic violence, the organisation launched a campaign in July 2013, in cooperation with the religious authorities in Libya's Dar al-Ifta. The campaign uses billboards and TV and radio ads to present religious injunctions against violence against women. In Yemen Saferworld is working with the 'My Community Initiative' to raise awareness of violence against women in Aden and the 'Hadja Election Project' to raise awareness among women and policymakers in Hadja province on the safety and security issues women face when they want to run for local elections.

While awareness raising is thus a shared strategy across the three countries, in Egypt groups have also developed direct interventions to stop violence against women, aiming to stop or prevent sexual harassment and assaults directly when they occur: at demonstrations and at particular areas identified as high risk, through patrols made up of both women and men. Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntiSH) and Tahrir Bodyguard are two such initiatives,<sup>72</sup> which also offer support to survivors. OpAntiSH, which first appeared in Tahrir Square in November 2012, also conducts outreach activities, manages a hotline where people can report sexual assaults, and

<sup>70</sup> See also: Haddad S (2011), 'Tawakkul Karman – Yemen's Reluctant Women's Rights Activist'.

<sup>71</sup> See: <http://nomiltrials.com/>. The campaign was launched in February 2011 when within days of Mubarak's ouster, the military began systematically using court martials against civilians. In 2011 more than 11,500 civilians faced trials in military courts. Continued ad hoc at a reduced pace under President Morsi, the use of military trials against civilians has picked up again since 3 July 2013.

<sup>72</sup> For more initiatives on sexual harassment in Egypt, refer to: Talal O (2013), 'Egyptian initiatives rally against sexual harassment'.



offers medical, legal, and psychological support for survivors. Women play a key role in all parts of the organisation; as OpAntiSH activist Reem Labib argues, "The solution is not just for men to defend us. We, too, have to participate. I believe it's a women's fight."<sup>73</sup> OpAntiSH has also documented attacks on women through videos posted on YouTube and uses social and traditional media to raise awareness of the problem and campaign against victim-blaming. As discussed in chapter 1.2, sexual violence in Cairo and in Tahrir Square in particular is unique in its intensity and appears more systematic and overtly political than in the other locations surveyed. It is perhaps fitting that it has generated the most robust responses by activists to reestablish women's safety in public space.

Women's shelters were not mentioned by many of the women consulted as options for protection, in part because, as discussed above, the women consulted for this study may not have seen domestic violence and other forms of 'private' abuse as relevant to the issue of political participation.<sup>74</sup> However, local and international NGOs have raised concern that there is a lack of shelters to host and assist women victims of violence. This would appear to be an important avenue for response as, particularly in more rural and more conservative areas, much of the pressure and violence against women activists comes from communities and their families and providing spaces for women to escape such pressure if necessary, is important. Ideally, shelters combine their function as safe spaces with opportunities for empowerment and independence for women. For example, in Yemen, organisations such as the German Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), alongside local NGOs, provide access to businesses and microfinance services for disadvantaged women in shelters and prisons. Such projects serve an integral function to support women to escape dependence and reintegrate into economic and social life.

### 3.2 Influence on public policy

In Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as in most other countries, security is not perceived as a 'women's issue'. However, the consulted women felt strongly that they could and should play a greater role in security discussions in the future.

The women interviewed in all three countries saw a two-way relationship between women's security and their influence on decision-making. As detailed in chapter 2, respondents identified threats to women's security as barriers to their participation in public life, including their ability to vote, run for office, and participate in demonstrations and political meetings. In addition, they identified the absence of women in decision-making positions as a barrier to addressing women's security concerns. They therefore supported greater participation of women in decision-making as one means of improving women's security. Additionally, research suggests that women's participation in making security policy contributes to ensuring that decisions address women's security concerns and protect women's rights and thus help to build and maintain more inclusive and sustainable peace.<sup>75</sup>

#### Quotas and formal participation

Despite the growing appreciation of the value of ensuring women's perspectives on security matters are heard, this is only possible if women are able to access political decision-making. Therefore, women in all three countries were strongly supportive of a quota for women in parliament and other elected office as one important step to ensuring security policies are informed by women's voices. However, some women

<sup>73</sup> el-Sirgany S (2012)'In Egypt, women lead fight against mob sexual assaults'.

<sup>74</sup> Although, as discussed in chapter 1, the link was made in the other direction, connecting women's political activism in demonstrations to 'private' concerns such as divorce.

<sup>75</sup> See: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2012), 'Women, gender and peacebuilding : Do contributions add up?'; Naraghi Anderlini S (2005), 'Women's contributions to peace processes: What does the new Research tell us?'; and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (2011), 'UNSCR 1325: The participation promise'.

cautioned that this approach could contribute to a ‘decorative’ role for women in public office and insisted on the need to support women to “grow into policy-making,” in the words of an Egyptian activist from Alexandria.

In Egypt most participants favoured the reinstatement of an electoral quota – abolished in 2011 – for female candidates in the national parliament. While they stressed that a quota needs to be coupled with real competition for places on party lists and between parties – unlike under Hosni Mubarak – they felt that guaranteeing women’s participation through a quota was one way to ensure women had a say on crucial issues, including on those related to their security. However, women in Egypt also stressed that there are more preconditions for women’s influence than simply their presence in national-level legislative bodies. They stressed the importance of women gaining experience in local and mid-level government and underscored that technical support to women candidates, such as that offered by the Alliance for Arab Women, Nazra for Feminist Studies, and other civil society organisations, is necessary for effective participation.

In Yemen the dynamics of women’s participation in political life appears to have changed since the revolution.<sup>76</sup> Women stressed the success of their struggle for greater presence in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), the fact that women in urban areas are for the first time able to meet with, discuss, and organise with men in a small number of semi-public spaces such as upmarket coffee shops, and the visibility, attention, and importance accorded to women protesters throughout the uprising as positive achievements. Although the number of women in senior political positions has not increased, the National Women’s Conference in March 2012 called for a 30 per cent quota for women in all state agencies and in all committees related to the NDC,<sup>77</sup> and this quota is currently being respected for the NDC, bringing many more women in contact with institutionalised politics than previously. The NDC now looks likely to pass a quota for women in parliament. Most women in focus groups<sup>78</sup> thought that this was a good thing, although some cautioned that women were not involved enough on security issues, especially security sector reform.<sup>79</sup> As a female NGO worker and member of a women’s rights initiative argued: “Women’s groups in Yemen are focusing only on political participation, without thinking about safety and security and how these issues are linked. But even being allowed to vote isn’t much use when women can’t leave the house because of insecurity or are too worried about threats to make use of their rights.”

In Libya many of the consulted women felt that general attitudes towards women’s participation were changing for the better. According to a woman from Misrata, Libya, “society has changed, become more open.” This increase in the possibility of political participation is evident even in areas seen to be particularly conservative, such as Derna, where a woman highlighted that women going out and participating in discussions and events “was a shameful thing before – but now we’re being pushed to do it!” Women believed that this was reflected in the fact that alternating male-female lists were used for the last parliamentary elections, leading to 32 women getting elected for party seats and one woman successfully contending the seats reserved for independents. Although sceptical about the performance of women in parliament, their silence on security issues, and their ability to represent women’s concerns (see discussion in section 2.3), most participants in focus group discussions nonetheless welcomed this development as a positive step.

<sup>76</sup> On this point more generally, see Shakir W, Marzouk M, Haddad S (2012), *Op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> There is one female Member of Parliament out of 300, two women in the upper house out of 111, and one ambassador alongside 56 men. In addition, the Women’s National Committee is sometimes seen as being overly dependent on personalities. There are no women in senior leadership positions in the major political parties. See Hurst M (2012), ‘Beyond Change Square: Expanding Yemeni Women’s Participation in Public Life’.

<sup>78</sup> Beyond the focus groups, a 2010 public opinion survey found that 45 per cent of men and 59 per cent of women supported the introduction of a quota of parliamentary seats for women. Yemen Polling Center (2010), *What do Yemenis know about the Parliament? Public knowledge and awareness.*

<sup>79</sup> This is evident for example in the recommendations developed by the NDC sub-committee for safety and defence. The only mention of women in their recommendations to the plenary is to increase the capacity of prisons for women.

Across all three countries, there remains a challenge of 'ghettoisation' of women's participation, as women are pushed towards issues considered to be 'women's issues', such as health and education, or become active in institutions designed specifically to address women's issues, such as women's ministries or the national women's machineries of Egypt and Yemen. Although these machineries are now beginning to think more about women's security concerns, with Egypt's National Women's Council behind work on a new law on combating violence against women, Yemen's National Women's Committee adopting policies on women's safety and security at its annual conference, and the Yemeni Women's Union working with women prisoners and police officers, so far these are small tentative steps and political space for them may again be closing.

## Advocacy

Women across all three countries in focus groups insisted on a role for civil society and ensuring that interested women (and men) from within civil society are able to influence decisions on these issues. Indeed, research has shown that the existence of a strong, independent women's movement is perhaps the most important factor influencing whether governments adopt progressive policies to tackle violence against women and girls.<sup>80</sup>

In the absence of a quota, women have sought innovative ways to make their voices heard in formal politics. *Fouada Watch* and *Baheya ya Masr* are two initiatives which were established in 2012 to monitor the performance of the government on women's rights. *Fouada Watch* included a shadow parliament to develop alternative policies. Similarly, consulted women in Alexandria established a 'women's parliament' where women gathered in advance of local parliamentary sessions, discussed the issues on the agenda, and submitted their conclusions and recommendations to the parliament.<sup>81</sup> This is one innovative way in which women are addressing the lack of public and semi-public spaces where women can go to discuss concerns, talk about politics, share ideas, and crucially, feed these conversations back into the political process.

In addition, Egyptian women's organisations are seeking ways to influence policies through building alliances, advocacy, and policy development. In June 2011, for instance, 500 Egyptian NGOs adopted the Egyptian Women's Charter, summarising social and political demands of Egyptian women. Despite gathering over half a million signatures, it was ignored by the SCAF and later the FJP-led government, prompting the formation of new umbrella organisations, such as the Egyptian Feminist Union, which unites more than 100 women's NGOs.<sup>82</sup> Seeking influence through numbers, these new umbrella groups have combined mass petitions with advocacy and lobbying. Other groups are seeking to make women's safety concerns visible and build an evidence base. Nazra for Feminist Studies, for example, is conducting a series of research projects on women's security concerns, raising awareness, and encouraging more women's groups to recognise the importance of security issues to women's political participation.

In Libya advocacy and lobbying towards the GNC is likewise an important part of women's response to security challenges. In addition to providing briefings to parliamentarians, groups such as the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace are working to change laws to "ensure the protection of vulnerable groups of children, women and men."<sup>83</sup> By contrast, the inclusion of prominent figures from civil society within Yemen's NDC has meant that in Yemen most activism is currently channelled directly through official channels and the dialogue process itself.

<sup>80</sup> Htun M, Weldon S L (2012), 'The civic origins of progressive policy change: Combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005'.

<sup>81</sup> Information from focus groups and interviews with women's rights activists in Cairo, July 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Belhaj R M, Wiersinga A (2013) 'Wishes, Demands and Priorities of National and Regional Women's Organisations in the MENA Region'.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

One tool for advocacy that is increasingly important in Yemen and Libya, though less so at the moment in Egypt, is the use of international policy frameworks which specifically address women's security and participation in public life. In Egypt, and to a lesser extent in the two other countries, women's groups have had to carefully navigate the way domestic political actors have sought to paint these international instruments as being anti-Islamic.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, using such conventions can be confusing for people at the local level as they may not be aware of their provisions, may not feel that their concerns translate readily into the categories of such agreements, and often feel that prioritising changes in national legislation to bring them formally into line with international commitments has only limited impact on the actual functioning of institutions and their day-to-day reality.

In Yemen and Libya a number of women's groups are using instruments such as UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (see Annex A for an overview of relevant international policy documents and frameworks) to put pressure on their governments and international organisations to respect their responsibilities. For instance, youth initiatives and women's groups such as 'Wojood Organisation for Human Safety' used UNSCR 1325 and its sister resolutions to argue for women's involvement in the transition process in Yemen, insisting that Jamal Ben Omar, the UN Special Representative, meet with women's groups and organisations, that there be a women's quota in the NDC, and arguing that the Yemeni government and United Nations Development Programme, the European Union, and other donors supporting Yemen's security sector reform process need to consult with women. Similarly, groups like *Maan Nabneeha* (Together We Build Her) and *al-Nur* (Light) Organisation in Libya have used the provisions of UNSCR 1325 to push the United Nations Support Mission in Libya to include women's perspectives on security and the transition more broadly and to encourage the Libyan government to engage more systematically with women as well.<sup>85</sup>

In many countries outside the MENA region, women have successfully advocated for the development of national action plans on women, peace and security, which provide a mechanism for transparency and accountability which activists can use to push for faster, more effective implementation of the relevant UNSCRs; such an approach could be adopted in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.<sup>86</sup> Framing activism in terms of such agreements can provide opportunities for reminding international organisations, bilateral donors, and national governments of their responsibilities, particularly in political negotiations and security sector reform. However, when not used carefully, international instruments can exacerbate disconnects between elite activists and more grassroots initiatives.

Western governments' approaches to addressing women's safety and security concerns were not referenced in consultations. However, conversations with activists underscore that there is a tendency by donors to treat initiatives and programming to combat violence against women as separate from broader support to the security sector and both as unrelated to bilateral security and counter-terrorism cooperation. This is problematic insofar as it encourages donors and implementing partners to separate women's security concerns from the broader political context and allows interventions on security sector reform that are not gender sensitive and that do not prioritise gender mainstreaming. Moreover, there is a tension between programming aimed at supporting processes of reform of the security services and bilateral cooperation at the operational level that relies on avoiding any disruption to established bilateral working relations.

<sup>84</sup> Kingsley P (2013a), 'Muslim Brotherhood backlash against UN declaration on women rights' and Libya Herald (2013), 'Grand Mufti condemns UN report on violence against women'.

<sup>85</sup> Examples from interviews conducted in June 2013. This use of 1325 is also apparent in other women's activism, see: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (2012), 'Outcome report from national consultations'.

<sup>86</sup> At the time of writing there were 42 national action plans in existence. For an up to date list, visit: [www.peacewomen.org/naps/list-of-naps](http://www.peacewomen.org/naps/list-of-naps).

**Box 8: The 'Our Voice, Our Strength' network**

This report forms part of a broader Saferworld project to strengthen women's public voice in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. One important aspect of this is the 'Our Voice, Our Strength' network, which brings together women's organisations active at the national and local levels in all three countries, to support them in forming coalitions, to exchange experiences, and benefit from sharing lessons on successes and failures.<sup>87</sup>

Initial participants for the network were selected to represent a broad range of organisations from different governorates and especially across different generations, mostly from outside the capital cities, who are beginning to engage on security issues. The network serves to facilitate regional sharing of ideas and experiences and as an impetus for cooperation on the safety and security issues facing women in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. It thus aims to contribute to overcoming some of the disconnects within the women's movement (see 2.3). The network is open to anyone.

New initiatives and cooperation within the network include joint work by Libyan organisations Maan Nabneeha and al-Nur on UNSCR 1325 and a video-based advocacy campaign against sexual harassment initiated jointly by a Yemeni and an Egyptian activist. Network member Voice of Libyan Women has begun a major campaign against violence against women, while Egypt partner, the Alliance of Arab Women, has been instrumental in advocacy for a new draft law against sexual harassment and an initiative by the Egyptian Ministry of Interior to establish a task force within the police to address sexual violence against women.

### 3.3 Women in security provision

Majorities of respondents in all three countries felt that directly involving women in security provision and increasing the number of women police officers and women in the army would help in addressing women's security concerns, although they also stressed the importance of root and branch reform of the security sector.

*"We need women in both the army and police ... We need women in police stations to ask for help and women in the army as soldiers, doctors, and nurses. Women can be in any position."*

Female teacher in Sebha, Libya, December 2012

Many of the women believed that they would feel more comfortable reporting crimes to female police officers, particularly when it comes to sexual violence and harassment, and that female police officers may be more likely to take their concerns seriously.

In Yemen research suggests that less than 6 per cent of women would be willing to go alone to a police station to report a crime at the moment, but that 44 per cent would do so if they knew there was a women's unit in the closest police station.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in Egypt, fears over reputation, and linked fears over how the police would respond to reported abuse are among the biggest reasons why women do not report harassment.<sup>89</sup> As a young woman in a Manufiya, Egypt, focus group explained: "How can I stand in front of the policeman and say that this man did so and so to me and touched this part of my body? How will my family take it?" Her concern about relating such crimes to a male police officer also arose elsewhere and consulted women argued that this barrier could be reduced through more female police officers. Overall, most participants in all three countries saw increasing women's role in security provision as one important part of any solution. As one woman in Yefren, Libya, declared, in order to be able to report sexual harassment and assault and to circumvent restrictions on women speaking to men alone, "there should always be a woman to go to!"<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> See the summaries of the regional-level meetings Saferworld convened to date: Saferworld (2013), 'Our voice, our strength: Recommendations and lessons learned from a networking meeting on 25–28 March 2013 in Cairo, Egypt' and Saferworld (2013), 'Women, security and participation: Meeting summary from a policy roundtable held on 27 March 2013 in Cairo, Egypt'.

<sup>88</sup> *Op. cit.* Yemen Polling Center (2013), p 67. See also general research that suggests women are much more likely to report cases of sexual violence to the police in countries where there are more women police officers. See: UN Women (2011), *Progress of the World's Women 2011–2012: In Pursuit of Justice*, p 59.

<sup>89</sup> *Op. cit.* el-Deeb B (2013): Women respondents cited the following reasons for not asking for help from the police force following harassment: fears over reputation (34.6%); low awareness of laws penalising harassment (23.2%); fears that they would not believe the claims of harassment (10.2%); and fears over facing similar harassment by the police themselves (8.7%)

<sup>90</sup> Views of the appropriate roles for women within the police varied. Some women believed that women should be limited to specific roles, such as dealing with gender-based violence or searching women in airports, while others argued that their potential contribution was much broader.

In Egypt, following lobbying by civil society organisations working on women's rights, the Ministry of Interior recently established a special all-female police unit to tackle sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women.<sup>91</sup> Speaking to the Egyptian press, a high ranking Egyptian police woman explained the rationale along lines very similar to those expressed in the focus group discussions: "Many young girls refuse to report harassment and there are young girls and women who face family resistance when seeking their rights... we help the victim in facing her challenging psychological condition, and we try to let her know that she is not at fault and that she should engage with society as someone who was a victim of a crime, not a shamed person."<sup>92</sup>

Yet increasing the numbers of female police officers is not a panacea. Specialist units for tackling violence against women and girls can be effective, but there is a risk that other parts of the police relinquish responsibility for addressing these problems, and special units often are not given adequate staff, resources, and referral systems, including for medical and psychosocial support services.<sup>93</sup> In Egypt, for instance, the new unit is currently limited to 10 officers operating in Cairo and was notable for its absence during recent instances of violence against women, including during the 30 June 2013 protests, where OpAntiSH reported over forty-six cases of mass harassment in Tahrir Square.<sup>94</sup> There is also the risk that setting up specialised units will not be complemented by efforts to increase women's recruitment, retention, and promotion throughout the police force as well as challenges to the broader social acceptance of female police officers.

Moreover, while women may be more likely to report crimes to the police if there is a female officer they can speak to, this does not necessarily mean the case will be dealt with effectively. Training and expertise on recording and investigating violence against women and girls and treating women reporting cases with sensitivity and confidentiality is vital. Younger activists in Egypt emphasised that women's preference for reporting to female police officers reflects the level of stigma surrounding these issues, and that part of a long-term solution should be to break down this taboo so that women would feel more comfortable reporting to both women and men.

Recent perception studies in Yemen have shown that police men continue to believe that violence against women and girls is a family matter and not for official security providers to become involved with.<sup>95</sup> This echoes experiences of women in Egypt who have raised matters of domestic and sexual violence at police stations, only for them not to be taken seriously and accused of bringing about the situation themselves. Consequently, as a human rights lawyer in the Cairo focus group argued: "Police men and women should be trained to report sexual violence and harassment properly, asking the right questions and covering all aspects, otherwise no one will get caught or punished and the whole process will remain a joke." In addition, as highlighted throughout, ensuring adequate levels of accountability would also likely encourage more consistent police responses and responses beyond the police services, such as training frontline medical services to be sensitive to signs of sexual violence when treating seemingly routine injuries or pregnancies, needs to be part of any solution.

<sup>91</sup> Egypt Independent (2013a), 'Special female police unit to combat violence against women'.

<sup>92</sup> Quote taken from interview with Captain MD Rehab Abdel Latif available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8vXuqzBa5I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8vXuqzBa5I).

<sup>93</sup> DFID (forthcoming), 'Theory of change for tackling violence against women and girls through security and justice programming'. There is also the issue that when women have been recruited into the security forces, they have faced opposition from their families and the wider society. On Yemen see: *Op. cit.* Yemen Polling Center (2013), p 69–72. See also: BBC News (2007), 'Yemen Women sign up to fight terror', 2 April. In Libya, opposition to women in the security forces is also sometimes framed as a reaction to a Qadhafi-era policy of recruiting more women into the security forces, and setting up female-only police and military colleges, which has been tainted by association. Walker-Cousins J (2012), 'Security sector transformation in arab transitions: Working for change – Background paper on Libya', p 8.

<sup>94</sup> Operation Anti Sexual Harassment (2013), 'Press release on mob sexual assaults reported to OPANTISH during June 30th demonstrations'.

<sup>95</sup> For more information, refer to *Op. cit.* Heinze M C, Ahmed S (2013).

**Box 9: Women and disarmament in Libya**

Women's role in security provision is not just about women police officers. Women can and should play a role at all levels, including in community-level initiatives. In Libya women have played an important role in encouraging disarmament.

*"My husband had an RPG, I told him: 'if you don't hand it over to the police or army, I will do it myself.' The next day he handed it in."*

**Woman from Misrata, Libya, December 2012**

Most of the consulted women across Libya agreed that the most important thing the government could do to improve their security would be to collect weapons, disarm the militias, and bring them under a common command, with only a few voices in favour of keeping weapons in private hands.

Women led protests in Benghazi calling for disarmament of armed groups in the city after the killing of four US citizens, including the American ambassador, and helped build momentum for the 21 September 2012 mass demonstrations that led to the retreat of large Islamist militias from Benghazi.<sup>96</sup> Focus groups in Libya also revealed that some women have played a key role in influencing the men in their families to disarm, with several stories emerging like the one above of women successfully urging family members to hand in weapons to the army. In most focus group discussions, one or several participants insisted, like a young teacher in Yefren, that "we women need to talk to people about giving up their weapons."

These findings suggest that disarmament initiatives would do well to harness women's opposition to uncontrolled weapons proliferation and their ability to influence the men in their families to disarm. Given that women in Egypt and Yemen also expressed concern about the spread of small arms, this may also provide opportunities to support women as agents of change.

Moreover, as the consulted women in all three countries were quick to point out, given the high levels of distrust against the police in general, women might trust a female officer more than a male officer, but they still would not trust the police. As a young female activist in Cairo explained, "policewomen can be more violent than men because it's not seen as harassment. Women in security institutions are also complicit in systematised abuse. I have no hope in the state to deal with these problems. There should be restructuring of the police, which would include looking at how to deal with harassment."

In cases where the security forces are highly politicised, are under orders from political leaders to commit or ignore human rights violations, or are simply unaccountable to the law or the population they are intended to serve, simply increasing the number of female recruits will have a limited impact. Efforts to increase the numbers of women in the security sector should be part of broader security sector reform in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, which should also aim to increase civilian oversight and promote democratic values and human rights as well as the representativeness of the security forces more broadly.<sup>97</sup> As one Egyptian activist in Alexandria put it, "we need to restructure the security bodies, not just recruit policewomen. We need to prepare the whole security system to work with another vision."

<sup>96</sup> el-Mangoush N, Ginet P Y (2013), 'La Lutte des Libyennes d'un printemps à l'autre,' p 18.

<sup>97</sup> For example, in Libya, the women consulted also saw inclusivity along ethnic lines as key to building trust in the security services. They were willing to include as broad a range as possible of Libyan society in security services, including minorities and those accused of pro-Qadhafi sympathies, as long as they "do not have blood on their hands." The main exception to this was in Misrata, where some women were not willing to accept Tawergha in the armed forces, a view shared by several women in other cities. Overall, women felt that minorities in the army, particularly those that were pro-Qadhafi, would strengthen the army by making it an integrating and broadly trusted organisation.

---

# Conclusion

**IN EGYPT, LIBYA, AND YEMEN** women were at the forefront of the protests that ultimately overthrew their long-serving presidents. Now, although women face increased security threats, they remain politically active and many are carving out new spaces.

Women feel insecure due to crime, weapons, and violent local power struggles and particularly politically active women experience concerted campaigns of threats and slander. At the same time, social understandings of their appropriate role are becoming more diverse and women are being targeted in part because they are more present, more demanding, and are seeking to access new fields of decision-making, including on security issues.

Grassroots initiatives have sprung-up to directly protect women against harassment and violence. There are now more women's groups working specifically on women's security issues, and women's groups more broadly have picked up on the growing importance of safety and security concerns as barriers to participation in public life.

To build on the important initiatives women are already undertaking and to confront the challenges and difficulties identified, the report outlines ways in which governments and civil society can make progress in five key areas: creating a more responsive security sector, involving women in security provision, increasing opportunities for women to influence decision-making, backing women's networks and local initiatives, and changing messages spread about women.

## Creating a more responsive security sector

Women's reservations about current security provision and abuses of power by security forces come out strongly in the report. Consulted women distrust state security providers and have little faith in their ability to address their security concerns. Poor and abusive security provision is one of the main reasons underlying the increased insecurity citizens experience in their day-to-day lives – a point underscored by growing evidence internationally that stability and security are best ensured by security systems which are transparent and accountable to all social groups within the populations they serve, including women.<sup>98</sup>

Women took a strong stance on the need for fundamental changes to the way security forces in all three countries operate. Beyond deep-seated deficits in accountability of these forces generally, women face particular barriers to access security services, relating to social norms which discourage women from engaging directly with the

---

<sup>98</sup> An overview of six evidence-based policy frameworks for addressing conflict and instability indicates that access to capable, accountable, and responsive security and justice services has been found to be a key requirement for building security and stability. See Saferworld (2012), 'Approaching post-2015 from a peace perspective'.



police, as well as the negative attitudes and behaviour towards women of security providers themselves.

Key to ensuring that security providers respond to women's needs is increasing accountability and opportunities for women activists to organise and demand better security services at all levels. Globally, there is mounting evidence that the existence of a strong, independent women's movement is perhaps the most important factor influencing whether governments adopt effective policies to tackle violence against women and girls.<sup>99</sup> However, across the three countries, there remains distrust and little political will on the part of governments and the security forces themselves to allow women's groups and other civil society actors to have a say in policy-making on security policy.

### **Involving women in security provision**

One recommendation repeatedly put forward by women in focus groups across all three countries was to increase the number of women police officers. This would give women the option of reporting to, being searched by, and engaging with female police officers in situations where they would prefer to do so. The evidence suggests that in some cases this would make the difference between whether women choose to report crimes to the police at all.

Consultations also made clear, however, that in the absence of more ambitious police reform such measures will have limited effect. Due to a deeply ingrained culture of abuse and impunity within the police there is a need across the board for male and female officers to be alert to the specific issues women face, to be approachable, and to be trained in dealing with victims of violent crime, including sexual violence against women. A multi-sectoral approach should be encouraged: progress within the police needs to be matched by parallel strengthening of health services, psychosocial support, legal support, and economic assistance for survivors of violence.

Women also have an untapped potential to contribute to security within their communities. They can play an important role in bridging divides between communities and security providers and in helping security forces identify and tackle the issues most heavily affecting families – though this can happen only if the police regain citizens' trust. Women also have a role to play in supporting disarmament programmes by generating community buy-in and influencing others to reduce small arms proliferation in all three countries.

### **Increasing opportunities for women to influence decision-making**

Women's participation in public life, from community activism to running for elected office, is closely linked to their safety and security. The security concerns identified in this report both increase risks for activists and reduce opportunities for women to be involved: fear of violence and crime reduces women's mobility and presence in public spaces, while harassment, slander, and threats deter activism. These barriers create a vicious circle in which insecurity reduces public participation, and low participation in turn perpetuates insecurity because it means that women's safety concerns are not taken into consideration or addressed by the political process or by security providers.

Addressing or reducing the political effects of insecurity is therefore necessary in order to break this vicious circle, improve women's safety, and increase their public voice. This is in part about making public space safer for women, but also about taking barriers and difficulties into consideration to provide women access to formal and informal institutions despite the identified obstacles. For example, the tendency to schedule political party meetings and government consultations at times and locations that women find particularly difficult to access needs to be directly addressed and

<sup>99</sup> Htun M, Weldon S L (2012), 'The civic origins of progressive policy change: Combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005'.

political parties and local leaders must take steps to ensure women's voices are heard and taken into account.

### **Backing women's networks and local initiatives**

Since 2011 some groups focusing on women's political participation have picked up on the growing importance of safety and security concerns as barriers to women's visibility and participation in public life, while others have established grassroots initiatives to protect women against growing insecurity and particularly sexual harassment and assault. In addition, the on-going transitions in the three countries have opened up new opportunities for citizens to scrutinise and take part in government policy-making, particularly on security issues, and women have been part of this trend, demanding a voice on security sector reform and the rule of law. However, the fact that community leaders who were asked to assess threats to women's security were not able to identify most of the issues women themselves identified suggests that there is much that remains to be done.

Much like the uprisings in 2011, women's initiatives in one country have inspired others to follow suit elsewhere. Strengthening existing networks for exchanging ideas, approaches, and expressing support and solidarity are an important way to build on existing initiatives and support a strong, effective, and independent women's movement. Many of the consulted women spoke out strongly in favour of establishing regional women's alliances that can act as channels for sharing expertise and best practice and facilitate stronger advocacy efforts. Although regional networks existed prior to the uprisings of 2011, these were often disparaged in consultations as 'first lady' networks that had not been particularly legitimate or representative.

### **Changing the message**

Women who are politically active, challenge conservative mores, or become visible in public risk their reputations and sometimes their lives. Much of this insecurity derives from the way powerful political and social actors use social and religious norms to claim women are engaging in inappropriate activities, building on the provisions of personal status laws. It is important that women's groups continue to challenge unequal laws, dispute discriminatory religious interpretations, and promote long-term changes to them.

In addition to long-term efforts to change attitudes and mentalities, limiting the ability of all actors to threaten women or incite violence against them or any other group must be an immediate concern for governments. Similarly, the media cannot sidestep its responsibility to fact-check stories, exercise due diligence, and refrain from libel and defamation by reference to socially sanctioned gender norms. It has an important role to play in balanced reporting of stories and for challenging rumours and slander against women. Civil society likewise has a role to play in changing the message, by building links to the media and religious authorities and providing a platform for women's voices to be heard.

---

# Recommendations

**BASED ON THE FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT** and the suggestions put forward by women in the focus groups, Saferworld makes the following recommendations.

## To national governments in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen

- **Continue (Libya and Yemen) or begin (Egypt) comprehensive police reform processes** with special regard for the following:
  - **Ensure integration of women's concerns into reform initiatives.** Consult with and incorporate the perspectives of women from a range of different regional, ethnic, religious, political and socioeconomic backgrounds, recognising their important contribution to conversations about what security provision should look like and what its priorities should be.
  - **Raise awareness within the police that violence against women and girls is a serious security issue** and a crime and provide guidance and training on treating women reporting cases with sensitivity and confidentiality, and recording and investigating violence against women and girls. Ensure police officers refer victims to appropriate medical care.
  - **Improve police accountability at all levels**, including by ensuring security policy is reviewed by elected representatives, operational decisions are reviewed by an independent specialised body, local police practices are discussed with and evaluated by women and men in the local communities, and civil society organisations have regular access to suspects in detention to monitor their treatment.
  - **Devote policing resources to issues women identify as drivers of insecurity**, particularly sexual violence, crimes against persons such as kidnapping and robbery, and the proliferation of weapons and drugs, and incorporate women's views into police priorities at the local level. This means working with women and other community members to identify the times and areas where they report feeling unsafe, increasing police presence on the street in such areas, and prioritising police patrols over large-scale military-style operations. It also means acknowledging the important role of local and informal institutions and working closely with them.
  - **Take steps to increase the number of women police officers**, including by proactively encouraging women to apply for roles and training opportunities; reviewing recruitment policies to ensure they are conducive to recruiting more women; putting in place policies and mechanisms to address workplace discrimination and harassment; and taking concrete measures to ensure retention and promotion.
- **Review existing legislation on civilian ownership of small arms and light weapons**, enforce existing rules to reduce the number of illicit weapons in circulation, and involve women in measures to reverse the proliferation and misuse of weapons.

Women and women's organisations could play an important role in raising awareness of the dangers of weapons to communities and influence family members with weapons to give them up. Where disarmament programmes are possible, governments should include women's organisations in the design and implementation of such programmes and provide support to grassroots women's disarmament efforts.

- **Investigate alleged police abuses, as well as those of other security providers, through independent bodies** and hold accountable officers found to be responsible for the most serious abuses of men and women's rights during the transition.
- **Review existing laws on personal status and violence against women.** Ensure legal definitions of violence against women are in-line with international standards and obligations and provide a solid basis for legal action against perpetrators. This should go hand-in-hand with a review of personal status laws to ensure they are fully consistent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination and in line with responsibilities Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have signed up to under international agreements such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and broadly accepted additions such as the Beijing Platform for Action (see Annex B).
- **Consider expanding or reinstating special measures such as quotas** for female electoral candidates to increase women's representation in politics at all levels.
- **Review laws on defamation and libel** to ensure they cannot be misused to censor the press and develop and consistently apply libel laws that protect citizens against personal attacks and balance citizens' privacy with the public's need to know.
- **Develop a National Action Plan (NAP) for implementation of UNSCR 1325** and sister resolutions. A NAP would provide a framework to coordinate policies and actions across government departments and provides transparency on planned interventions.

## To international actors

- **Add their voice and influence to the need for fundamental reform of the security sector** and ensure internationally supported security sector reform processes work in favour of both gender sensitivity and accountability of the security sector to elected representatives and to local communities.
- **Consult with women activists and civil society organisations** on the formulation of priorities for bilateral cooperation and ensure integration of women's concerns into policy and programme design. Consult with and incorporate the perspectives of women from a range of different regional, ethnic, religious, political, and socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Extend relevant programming beyond capitals** to enable the participation in development projects and programme activities of women from diverse geographical locations and minimise the problems caused by limited mobility.
- **Rethink current counterterrorism cooperation** that supports unaccountable and abusive security providers. Support to security sector reform is a political process for donors as much as for partner countries: it requires donors to subordinate short term national security and economic interests such as arms sales and established counterterrorism relations to the longer term objectives of durable peace and an inclusive political settlement, recognising that 'hard' security approaches to social and governance problems do harm.
- **Support elected representatives**, and particularly women, to gain the necessary skills, expertise, and confidence to effectively oversee the work of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, and police and army and to review policies put forward by them.
- **Support civil society to likewise play a stronger role in this area**, providing capacity building to women's civil society organisations to effectively hold security providers to account and participate in security sector reform. This could include supporting the

exchange of experience between female activists and leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds across the 'Arab Spring' countries.

### To civil society organisations

- **Encourage partner governments to fully implement the provisions of UNSCR 1325 and sister resolutions**, particularly the commitments on women's participation in decision-making on peace and security and on gender-sensitive security and justice reform.
- **Review agreed and future exports of conventional arms and security equipment** in light of the widespread proliferation of weapons in the region. Any decision to transfer arms must be taken in line with domestic, regional, and international commitments and should include sustained consultation with the recipient government to establish that the equipment is necessary and proportionate to meet a legitimate security need.
- **Monitor and provide input to ongoing security sector and police reform processes** to ensure civil society's perspectives are included and to try to increase gender sensitivity, inclusiveness and responsiveness to people's needs. This could include developing concrete civil society reform proposals, reviewing government reform plans, participating in consultations, and connecting with other organisations, academics, experts and activists to form security-sector focused civil society networks.
- **Build linkages between civil society initiatives and organisations** working at regional, national, and grassroots levels. Exchange between activists working to combat harassment, working on women's rights, and those working on security sector reform will support mutual learning, could lead to more effective joint advocacy, and will also promote connections between urban and rural women and between older and younger generations of activists. The creation of safe spaces for women to gather and discuss issues of importance to them could support such exchange at a local level.
- **Raise awareness of women's security and safety concerns** amongst community leaders, local and national officials, security providers, and international actors and support awareness-raising activities about the importance of the inclusion of women in the police force to reduce social stigma within the security sector and wider society.<sup>100</sup>
- **Build the understanding of national and local authorities on UNSCR 1325** and related resolutions and increase domestic pressure on those authorities to implement their provisions.
- **Work with religious leaders** to counter messages which seek to use religious precepts to promote discrimination and violence against women.
- **Work with journalists and the media to spread more positive messages** about women's role in society, and improve standards of reporting and fact checking. Sensitise media representatives to the need for balanced reporting of stories and for challenging rumours and slander against women in light of the damage it does to their security and social standing. Work to ensure equal representation of women's voices and perspectives in reporting, and actively counter negative stereotypes.
- **Work with political parties to ensure women can participate** in party meetings and consultations, for example by encouraging them to hold meetings at a time of day when women can participate, make arrangements for childcare, and underscore the importance of female participation to their members.
- **Encourage political parties to put female candidates higher up on their electoral lists** and to consider implementing internal quotas for female candidates. Advocate for cross-party cooperation between women in political parties through a women's caucus, shared pledges and platforms, and by building support for women candidates for prominent roles within parties outside of dedicated women's wings.

<sup>100</sup> *Op. cit.* OECD (2009), p 15. As OECD guidelines on security sector reform highlight, "though it is essential to adapt initiatives to local cultural realities and present them in a culturally sensitive way, it is important to keep in mind that cultures change and they are not monolithic."

---

# References

- Abaida M (2012), 'Women in Libya are in a state of denial regarding women's rights in Libya,' *Libya Herald* 13 December.
- Abdellatif O, Ottaway M (2007), 'Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist model of women's activism,' Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Abul-Ahad G (2012), 'Al-Qaida's wretched utopia and the battle for hearts and minds,' *The Guardian* 30 April.
- Al Ahram Online (2013), 'Sexual torture still rife under Morsi: Egyptian rights groups,' 24 June.
- al-Muraqab A (2013), 'Yemeni women subject to frequent sexual harassment,' *Yemen Times*, 3 January.
- al-Zanaty F, Way A (2006), *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 2005* (Cairo: Ministry of Health and Population).
- al-Zwaini L (2012), 'The Rule of Law in Yemen: Prospects and challenges,' The Hague Institute for the Internationalisation of Law.
- Amin S (2011), 'Egyptian general admits "virginity checks" conducted on protesters,' CNN, 31 May.
- Amnesty International (2013), 'Egypt: Gender-based violence against women around Tahrir Square,' February.
- (2009), 'Yemen's dark side: Discrimination and violence against women and girls,' November.
- Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture (2013), 'Failed promises... and torture continues,' 26 June.
- Bahdi R (2007), 'Background paper on women's access to justice in the MENA region,' International Development Research Centre.
- Ba-Obaid M, Buleveld C J H (2002), 'Violence against women in Yemen: Official statistics and exploratory survey' in: *International Review of Victimology* 9 pp 331–347.
- BBC News (2007), 'Yemen women sign up to fight terror,' 2 April.
- Belhaj R M, Wiersinga A (2013) 'Wishes, demands and priorities of national and regional women's organisations in the MENA region,' International Alliance of Women, January.
- Cole P (2012), 'Borderline chaos? Stabilizing Libya's periphery,' Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Council of Europe (1950), *European Convention on Human Rights*.
- CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2012), 'Women, gender and peacebuilding: Do contributions add up?'
- Daragahi B (2013), 'Egyptians become victims of soaring crime rate,' *The Financial Times* 1 May.
- Denham T (2008), 'Police reform and gender' in: Bastick M and Valasek K, *Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit* (Geneva: DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR and UN INSTRAW).
- DFID (forthcoming), 'Theory of change for tackling violence against women and girls through security and justice programming.'

- Doherty M (2012), "Give us change we can see": Citizen views of Libya's political process. Findings from focus groups in Libya conducted October 28–November 10, 2012, National Democratic Institute.
- Egypt Independent (2013a), 'Special female police unit to combat violence against women,' 22 May.
- (2013b), 'Shura Council committee says female protesters should take responsibility, if harassed,' 11 February.
- Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (2012), *Report on Egyptian Women Conditions in 2012: Women Get Out to the Streets*. (Cairo).
- el-Deeb B (2013), 'Study on ways and methods to eliminate sexual harassment in Egypt,' UN Women.
- el-Mangoush N, Ginet P Y (2013), 'La Lutte des Libyennes d'un printemps à l'autre,' *La revue Nouvelle* 1–2.
- el-Sirgany S (2012), 'In Egypt, women lead fight against mob sexual assaults,' *Al Monitor* 7 December.
- el-Tablawy T, el-Wardany S (2013), 'Egyptians turn to vigilante justice as economy worsens,' *Bloomberg* 18 March.
- Essam el-Din G (2013), 'Shura MPs fault protesters for Tahrir Square rapes, sexual harassment,' *Al Ahrām Online* 11 February.
- Financial Times (2013), 'Egyptians become victims of soaring crime rate,' 1 May.
- Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (2011), 'UNSCR 1325: The Participation promise.'
- Haddad S (2011), 'Tawakkul Karman – Yemen's reluctant women's rights activist,' *Muftah.org* 13 December.
- Harassmap (2013), 'Laws against sexual harassment in Egypt.'
- Hassan R M, Shoukry A, Abul Komsan N (2008), *Clouds in Egypt's Sky – Sexual Harassment: from Verbal Harassment to Rape* (Cairo: European Union, UNFPA and Egyptian Center for Women's Rights).
- Hellyer H A (2012), 'Fewer feel safe in several Arab Spring countries,' Gallup 23 February.
- Heinze M C, Ahmed S (2013), 'Integrating women's security interests into police reform in Yemen: some suggestions for structural reform,' Yemen Polling Center.
- Hill G (2010), 'Yemen: Fear of failure,' Chatham House Briefing paper, January.
- Htun M, Weldon S L (2012), 'The civic origins of progressive policy change: combating violence against women,' in: *American Political Science Review* 106 pp. 548–569.
- Human Rights Watch (2013), 'Egypt: Security forces used excessive lethal force,' 19 August.
- Hurst M (2012), 'Beyond Change Square: Expanding Yemeni women's participation in public life,' Oxford Brooks University.
- International Crisis Group (2013), 'Trial by error: Justice in post-Qadhafi Libya,' Middle East and North Africa Report No 140.
- (2012), 'Divided we stand: Libya's enduring conflicts,' Middle East/North Africa Report No 13014, Sep 2012.
- Jadaliyya Reports (2012), 'Safe Streets Campaign in Yemen,' *Jadaliyya*, 20 August.
- Kingsley P (2013a), 'Muslim Brotherhood backlash against UN declaration on women rights,' *The Guardian* 15 March.
- (2013b), 'Tahrir Square sexual assaults reported during anniversary clashes,' *The Guardian* 28 January.
- (2013c), '80 sexual assaults in one day – the other story of Tahrir Square,' *The Guardian* 5 July.
- Libya Herald (2013), 'Grand Mufti condemns UN report on violence against women,' 11 March.
- Mahmoud S (2005), *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Mattes H (2013), Politische Transformation und Gewalt in Tunesien, Ägypten und Libyen seit 2011: Ein Forschungsauftritt, German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Working Paper No. 219.
- Naraghi Anderlini S (2005), 'Women's contributions to peace processes: What does the new research tell us?' The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights.
- National Post (2011), 'Police beating of "girl in the blue bra" becomes new rallying call for Egyptians,' 20 December 2011.

- OECD (2009), *OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform*, (Paris: OECD).
- Operation Anti Sexual Harassment (2013), 'Press release on mob sexual assaults reported to OpAntiSH during June 30th demonstrations', OpAntiSH Facebook Page.
- Saferworld (2013a), 'Lessons from MENA: Appraising EU transfers of military and security equipment to the Middle East and North Africa.'
- (2013b), 'Our Voice, Our Strength: Recommendations and lessons learned from a networking meeting on 25-28 March 2013 in Cairo, Egypt.'
- (2013c), 'Women, Security and Participation: Meeting summary from a policy roundtable held on 27 March 2013 in Cairo, Egypt.'
- (2012d), 'Approaching post-2015 from a peace perspective.'
- Samir D (2012), 'Fighting the good fight against sexual harassment: New, effective initiatives', 8 Sep 2012.
- Shakir W, Marzouk M, Haddad S (2012), 'Strong voices: Yemeni women's political participation from protest to transition', Saferworld.
- Talal O (2013), 'Egyptian initiatives rally against sexual harassment', *Aswat Masriya* 23 May.
- Tamir M (2012), 'The rule of law in Egypt: Prospects and challenges', The Hague Institute for the Internationalisation of Law.
- UNICEF (2011a), 'Egypt: MENA gender equality profile', October.
- UNICEF (2011b), 'Libya: MENA gender equality profile', October.
- UNICEF (2011c), 'Yemen: MENA gender equality profile', October.
- United Nations (2013), 'Final report of the Panel of Experts to the Libya 1970 Sanctions Committee', UN Document No.: S/2013/99.
- (1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
- UN Women (2011), 'Progress of the World's Women 2011–2012: In Pursuit of Justice'.
- Walker-Cousins J (2012), 'Security sector transformation in Arab transitions: Working for change – background paper on Libya'.
- Wehrey F (2012), 'The struggle for security in eastern Libya', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Wehrey F, Cole P (2013), 'Building Libya's security sector', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Welchman L (2007), 'Women and Muslim family laws in Arab states: a comparative overview of textual development and advocacy', ISIM Series on Contemporary Muslim Societies.
- Wickham, C R (2013), *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Winter L (2013), 'The Ansar of Yemen: The Huthis and al-Qaeda', *Small Wars Journal* May.
- Wood D (2012), 'Understanding the relationship between communities and armed groups', Peaceful Change Initiative and AFAQ Libya.
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (2012), 'Outcome report from national consultations', MENA Agenda 1325.
- Yemen Armed Violence Assessment (2010), 'Under pressure: Social violence over land and water in Yemen', Issue Brief Number 2.
- Yemen Polling Center (2013), *Public Perceptions of the Security Sector and Police Work in Yemen: Major Survey Findings* (Sanaa: YPC).
- (2010), *What do Yemenis know about the Parliament? Public knowledge and awareness* (Sanaa: YPC).
- Yemen Post (2013), 'Women of Yemen – the taboo of sexual harassment', 27 February.



---

## **ANNEX A: International policy frameworks on women, peace and security**

### **UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)**

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is sometimes referred to as an ‘international bill of rights for women’. Among other things, CEDAW calls on states to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life, give women the right to vote, hold public office and participate in NGOs. While the original convention contains no provisions on women’s physical security, in 1992 the UN issued a recommendation clarifying that gender-based violence falls within its definition of discrimination, including violence perpetrated by public authorities, and that states are responsible for preventing, investigating and punishing acts of violence by private individuals or organisations. It also states that women have the right to “equal protection according to humanitarian norms in time of international or internal armed conflict”.

Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have all signed and ratified CEDAW, but the governments of Egypt and Libya signed with reservations, declining to implement clauses which they deem to be incompatible with Islamic law.

### **Beijing Platform for Action, (1995)**

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) is an international declaration on women’s rights that was supported by all 189 governments present, including those of Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. It declares that “peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men and development” and makes six recommendations on women and armed conflict, including increasing women’s participation in decision-making on conflict resolution, the protection of women living in armed conflict, and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in all efforts to address conflict (BPfA, paragraph 141).

### **UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 & 1889, (2000, 2009)**

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 represented the first recognition by the UN Security Council of a relationship between gender and conflict. It stresses “the importance of [women’s] equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”. Its provisions, which are legally binding on all UN Member States, include urging states to increase the representation of women in decision-making on the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict, support local women’s initiatives toward conflict resolution, and measures to protect the human rights of women and girls in conflict, including from the threat of rape and other forms of GBV.

UNSCR 1889, passed nine years later, calls for efforts to “[counter] negative societal attitudes about women’s capacity to participate equally” and makes legally binding the call for “gender mainstreaming in all post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery processes and sectors”.

### **UNSCRs 1820, 1888, 1960 & 2106, (2008–2013)**

Following the passage of UNSCR 1325, a number of resolutions have been adopted which focus specifically on addressing sexual violence in armed conflict. These include a wide range of provisions, including the need to develop mechanisms for preventing

---

sexual and gender-based violence in security sector reform processes, including through providing specialist training for security personnel and recruiting more women into the security sector. Importantly, the resolutions also stress women's participation as essential to any prevention and protection response.

---

## ANNEX B: Methodology and description of samples

This report is based on consultations with 411 Libyan, Egyptian, and Yemeni men and women in a total of 18 locations across the three countries. Its approach is qualitative and the consulted men and women are not designed to be a representative sample.

Respondents discussed their thoughts on five key issue areas: In what ways are women influencing decision-making in public life? What are the most important security concerns for women? How do these security concerns influence women's ability to participate in public life? Who is responsible for addressing women's security concerns, and how successful are they? and how else should these problems be addressed?

Initial findings were discussed with women activists in all three countries and at a regional meeting bringing together women and policymakers from all three countries in March 2013. This provided a public forum for government representatives, women activists, and international policymakers to discuss the main issues surrounding the safety and security of women. Discussions at these events are also reflected in the report.

### Egypt

In Egypt, consultations were conducted in January and February 2013 through focus group discussions with Egyptian women and men. In total 120 participants were consulted across 12 focus groups and eight interviews in the following four locations:

**Alexandria:** Egypt's second largest city is located on the Mediterranean Sea, north of Cairo, and is an important commercial and touristic centre. As an important national and regional centre, it has witnessed regular demonstrations since 2011.

**Cairo:** Egypt's capital city and the largest city in the Arab world, with a total population of ca. 16 million people within its wider metropolitan area. It is Egypt's political and economic centre and most of the demonstrations and political conflicts since 2011 have played-out in Cairo.

**Manufiya:** a governorate in the Nile Delta north of Cairo, it is the birthplace of former President Hosni Mubarak, who is perceived to maintain a level of support within Manufiya. Like much of the Delta, Manufiya is a densely populated rural governorate that relies primarily on agriculture.

**Qena:** is a governorate in Upper Egypt, north of Luxor, and an important overland transportation hub connecting Upper Egypt to the Red Sea. Upper Egypt is considered more conservative and tribally organised than other areas in Egypt.

Sites were selected to capture perspectives from Upper Egypt, the Nile Delta, and Egypt's large urban centres and to reflect differences in social structure and socio-economic background, as well as political differences between these areas.

Consultations included 120 participants, broken up into three focus groups and two interviews in each location. One focus group consisted of women's rights activists, one of women and men active in women's NGOs, and one with male and female political party representatives. Approximately three-quarters of focus group participants were female, one-quarter were male. All participants had completed secondary or tertiary education and spanned NGOs and activists active at a local, grassroots level as well as more prominent individuals. Representatives from parties included men and women from more than 10 different political parties, spanning the political spectrum, including parties associated with the Mubarak regime, a range of Islamist parties, and a variety of liberal and left-wing parties.

## Libya

In Libya, consultations were conducted in December 2012 through focus group discussions with Libyan women. In total 146 women were consulted in the following eight locations:

**Derna:** A city in eastern Libya near the Egyptian border, Derna was known as a centre of Islamist resistance to Qadhafi's rule before the revolution. It is currently home to several Islamist armed groups.

**Jamil:** A town in Western Libya near the Tunisian border, perceived as being anti-revolution. Jamil and the nearby towns of Raqdalim and Zeltan are in sometimes open conflict with the nearby city of Zuwara.

**Misrata:** One of the centres of the uprising against Qadhafi, Misrata experienced an extended siege by Qadhafi's forces. Fighters from Misrata played a large role in subsequent battles during the civil war and have continued to play a very influential role in Libyan politics.

**Sebha:** The largest town in southern Libya and historically the capital of the southern Fezzan region. Much of the south's economic activity, including smuggling routes, pass through Sebha. Although people in Sebha see themselves as neutral, they are generally perceived as pro-Qadhafi in much of the rest of the country.

**Tripoli:** Libya's capital, Tripoli is the largest city in Libya and the political centre of the country, though other cities and regions have gained in importance after the overthrow of Qadhafi.

**Yefren:** An Amazigh-majority town in the Nafusa Mountains in western Libya, Yefren is perceived as being a pro-revolution stronghold.

**Zawiya:** A city in the vicinity of Tripoli that was seen as an important pro-revolutionary force during the uprising and emerged as a politically influential city after the revolution.

**Zuwara:** A city in western Libya near the Tunisian border, perceived as being pro-revolution.

Sites were selected to capture geographical and ethnic diversity, to capture opinions across conflict lines, both in terms of capturing attitudes in sites seen as being predominantly pro- or anti-Qadhafi as well as on opposite sides of local conflicts. Due to difficulties of access, planned consultations in Sirte and with Tawergha internally displaced people could not be conducted.

Consultations included 146 women, broken-up into two focus groups in each location. The sample was designed to capture the perceptions and attitudes of women activists. Samples were selected through the help of a local convenor, who was asked to identify one group of women that was locally prominent and known for their political engagement and one group of women who were active in charities or other forms of less overtly political public engagement.

Participants in focus groups almost all had completed or were enrolled in tertiary education and almost all women who participated were employed or in full-time higher education. 45% were teachers, with a further 20% students, with lawyers, civil servants, university professors, and housewives making up the remainder. 30% were under 30, 65% between 30 and 50, with the remaining 5% between 60 and 65. The median age was 39.

## Yemen

In Yemen, consultations were conducted in December 2012 through focus groups and interviews with Yemeni women and community leaders. In total, 145 people were consulted in the following six locations:

**Sanaa:** Yemen's capital and the political centre of the country. It was heavily affected by the protests and ensuing military conflict throughout 2011, when fighting between the leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, Sadiq al-Ahmar, and troops loyal to President Saleh transformed Sanaa into a war zone.

**Taiz:** A large city in central Yemen, the economic centre and largest industrial base. An urban, middle-class city less influenced by tribal politics than Sanaa with a long-established business community, it was a main focal point of anti-regime protests and is a centre of Yemen's women's and youth movements. In 2011–2012, Taiz witnessed significant violence between protestors, local armed groups, and security forces.

**Aden:** The former capital of South Yemen has for the past years been a site of protests calling for secession. Government violence against secessionists has led to persistent insecurity. In part due to South Yemen's more progressive personal status code, Aden remains an important centre of the women's movement.

**Hadja:** The local capital and largest town in Hadja province, a rural and tribally dominated governorate in northwest Yemen. Hadja has been affected by fighting involving the Huthi Movement and a range of tribal conflicts.

**Abyan:** A predominantly rural and tribal governorate in Southern Yemen in which al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula is very active and held territory during 2011. Focus group discussions with participants from Abyan took place in Aden and focused particularly on women displaced from their homes.

**Mareb:** The local capital and largest town in Mareb province, a rural, tribally dominated and socially conservative governorate to the east of Sanaa that is experiencing a range of tribal conflicts.

Sites were selected to capture perspectives from both northern and southern Yemen and from urban and rural perspectives. In addition, they sought to capture a range of different drivers of insecurity including political divisions, tribal conflicts, and religious or sectarian conflicts.

Three focus groups were conducted in each location, one with women aged 18–30, one with women aged 31 to 50, and one with male community leaders, including security providers, political party representatives, local government officials, tribal and religious leaders, and local NGO representatives. Overall, 82 women and 45 men were included in the focus groups.

The sample was designed to capture perceptions and attitudes of Yemeni women activists and non-activists, and included female activists, female community members, male community leaders, and a group of internally displaced people from Abyan. Women and men included in the research included members of civil society, students, teachers, housewives, journalists, and lawyers from a diverse selection of political, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. All participants in the sample had secondary or tertiary education. Politically, 59 participants categorised themselves as independent, 26 belonged to the GPC, 22 belonged to the Islamist Islah Party, 10 were members of one of the other JMP parties, 2 were members of the Southern Movement, and two others.

Interviews were conducted with 8 prominent women activists and 10 government decision-makers based in Sanaa. Eleven of them categorised themselves politically as independents, four belonged to the GPC, two to the Yemeni Socialist Party, and one to the Islah Party.

**Egypt, Libya and Yemen are in the midst of unpredictable political transitions following the 2011 uprisings. While the uprisings have provided new opportunities for women's activism, this has also been accompanied by increased risk and a backlash against women's participation. This report examines the ways in which security concerns associated with this volatile environment impact women's ability to participate, as well as the ways in which women's participation can affect their security, and how women are coming together to respond to these challenges.**

**Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.**

**COVER PHOTOS** LEFT: Wall mural in Cairo by Mirah Shihadeh and El Zeft. © SUZEEINTHECITY.WORDPRESS  
TOP RIGHT: During a rally in Sanaa, a woman protester distributes flowers. © REUTERS  
BOTTOM RIGHT: Wall mural in Libya. © MAHMUD TURKIAR

The title of this report, *"It's dangerous to be the first"*, comes from a woman from Zuwara, Libya, interviewed in December 2012.



The Grayston Centre  
28 Charles Square  
London N1 6HT, UK  
Phone: +44 (0)20 7324 4646  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647  
Email: [general@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:general@saferworld.org.uk)  
Web: [www.saferworld.org.uk](http://www.saferworld.org.uk)

Registered charity no. 1043843  
A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948  
ISBN 978-1-909390-06-5



This report forms part of a broader Saferworld project to strengthen women's public voice in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The 'Our Voice, Our Strength' network brings together women's organisations active at the national and local levels in all three countries, to support them in forming coalitions, to exchange experiences, and benefit from sharing lessons on successes and failures.