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Identifying platforms for women in the MENA region

An analysis of the structural inequalities in Morocco, Egypt and Qatar

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1. Introduction

Research shows that countries with higher levels of gender equality, which allow for women's political participation, are generally more likely to see durable peace¹ and because women and men experience conflict differently², taking gender into consideration makes conflict prevention more effective because it allows for addressing underlying root causes of conflict that would otherwise not be dealt with³. Moreover, using a gender lens when analysing conflict and when planning and executing post-conflict reconstruction initiatives promotes gender equality and leads to more effective peacebuilding⁴. Despite this, gender continues to be overlooked⁵, women are systematically missing from mediation processes and negotiation tables⁶ and women and girls continue to suffer from discrimination and violence in every part of the world⁷.

In 2017, the gap between women and men across health, education, politics and economics even widened⁸, and recent events of the effective ban of or drastically restricting abortion access⁹ highlight a negative development. Looking specifically at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region it ranks last globally on the overall 2018 Global Gender Gap Index¹⁰ even though the region as a whole has continued its progress since the last measurements in 2017¹¹. Morocco has increased its wage equality and gender parity in secondary education; Egypt has decreased its gender gaps in literacy and tertiary education and have made progress on gender parity in professional and technical workers; and Qatar has increased the number of women in parliament from no women to nearly 10% women and also narrowed the gender gap in labour force participation¹². However, if the region as a whole maintains these current rates it will take 153 years to close the gender gap¹³, which is problematic since these inequalities prevent women from getting the same access to health, education and equal pay.

Recognising that there is a gap between legislation and the everyday life of citizens, looking at women specifically and also seeing to the role of religion, this report will address structural inequalities in the MENA region focusing on Morocco, Egypt and Qatar. The main objective is to provide a set of recommendations on how to bridge this gap, by identifying relevant actors, recognising already existing platforms and suggesting new platforms and spaces for women.

¹ Krause, J. et al. (2018). Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace. *International Interactions*, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 985-1016. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.2

² Alvarado, J. et al. (2018). Assessing gender perspectives in peace processes with application to the cases of Colombia and Mindanao. *SIPRI*, no 6. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.5

³ OSCE. (2009). Gender and early warning systems. [Accessed 16 July 2019].

⁴ Tielemans, S. (2015). Gender and conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders. *Conciliation Resources*. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.12; Watson, C. et al. (2018). Gender analysis of conflict. *Saferworld*. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.1

⁵ Christelle, R. (2018). Rethinking the ontology of peacebuilding. Gender, spaces and the limits of the local turn. *Peacebuilding*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 144-169. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.148

⁶ Haastrup, T. (2018). Creating Cinderella? The unintended consequences of the Women Peace and Security Agenda for the EU's mediation architecture. *International Negotiation*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 218-237. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.223

⁷ UN. (2019). Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. [Accessed 16 July 2019]

⁸ World Economic Forum. (2017). What is the gender gap (and why is it getting wider)? [Accessed 16 July 2019]

⁹ Amnesty International. (2019). Abortion laws in the US – 10 things you need to know. [Accessed 17 July 2019]; Brigida, A.C. (2018). *Washington Post*. [Accessed 17 July 2019]

¹⁰ Acknowledging that performance across the region is somewhat more divergent than in other regions

¹¹ World Economic Forum. (2018). The global gender gap report. [Accessed 19 July 2019], p.24

¹² World Economic Forum. (2018). The global gender gap report. [Accessed 19 July 2019], p.24

¹³ World Economic Forum. (2018). The global gender gap report. [Accessed 19 July 2019], p.16

1.1. Limitations

The authors of this report are part of the Europe and North America (EUNA) cohort of the 2019 United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Fellowship Programme which this year is focusing on the theme “The role of women in peacemaking and conflict prevention”. Between 26 June 2019 and 10 July 2019, the cohort travelled to Casablanca and Rabat, Morocco, Cairo, Egypt, and Doha, Qatar and met with stakeholders working on different levels in their respective countries on issues relating to the theme of the Programme. Therefore, it is not in the scope of this report to present the MENA region as a whole or to discuss all issues in great depth. Instead, the report is limited to depart from the meetings and discussions held during the trips to Morocco, Egypt and Qatar aiming to highlight both best practices and areas for improvement relating to gender equality and women’s role in peacemaking and conflict prevention.

1.2. Definitions of key concepts

Gender is socially constructed roles as ascribed to women and men¹⁴, seeing *gender stereotypes* as preconceived ideas whereby men and women are assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender which in turn affects their opportunities, rights, relationships and access to resources.

A shift towards *gender equality* is the transformation of existing power structures to equal opportunities for women and men¹⁵ and an end to discrimination and structural inequalities¹⁶. *Intersectionality* refers to the different femininities and masculinities that are produced and developed in relation to other power systems such as class, race, age, sexuality, all of which interact with each other.

The *gender gap* refers to the difference between women and men relating to health, education, political empowerment and economic empowerment and *gender parity* refers to the relative access to resources for women and men¹⁷. Finally, rooted in gender inequality, *gender-based violence* is violence directed against a person because of their gender¹⁸.

2. Gender stereotypes and creating spaces for women

2.1. Focus on female representation

Before presenting some examples of women’s role in Morocco, Egypt and Qatar, the report will briefly touch upon a common theme throughout the majority of the meetings held during the trip: female representation. In general, there was a positive focus on female representation

¹⁴ Including other gender identities

¹⁵ Including other gender identities

¹⁶ [Elroy, G. \(2016\)](#). A gender perspective in CSDP: Training manual. *Folke Bernadotte Academy*. [Accessed 16 July 2019], ^{p.101}

¹⁷ [Peace Corps. \(2019\)](#). Global Issues: Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment [Accessed 17 July 2019]

¹⁸ [European Institute for Gender Equality. \(2019\)](#). What is gender-based violence? [Accessed 16 July 2019]

in different spheres of society, either by highlighting that women hold high-level positions, that girls and women are performing well in education or by acknowledging that more women are needed in different areas and that they are working to increase their representation. Something that was missing, however, from most discussions was the problematization about the fact that having women in various positions do not automatically mean that the agenda becomes more inclusive¹⁹. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated, the issue of representation continues to be crucial for pushing the idea of women having the right to occupy both spaces and positions in society.

2.2. Engaging men and boys

Also missing from most discussions was the issue of masculinity and the role that patriarchal gender norms, which lie at the heart of gender inequality, play²⁰. This is problematic since gender issues is not exclusive to women alone and without the actions and change of attitudes of men and boys it will be difficult, if not impossible, to tackle deep-rooted gender norms to improve gender equality²¹.

Working with positive masculinity

The Arab Women Organization in Egypt work with young men to **challenge perceptions about masculinity**, for example in terms of providing for the family. For inspiration and in driving the work forward, they use Morocco's 2004 Moudawana, Family Code, which say that both women and men can provide for their family

2.3. Legislation to protect women and change structures

In both Morocco and Egypt, representatives talked about a gap between legislation and what is happening on the ground and the everyday lives of women. Specifically in Morocco, legislation was talked about as being progressive but not able to bring about change because of a conservative government. When meeting with the # ZankaDialna momentum²², which will be described more in detail below, they compared their lives to the lives of their mothers and talked about a shift towards increased traditionalism and more conservative ways of living that has limited women, seeing a change in terms of women covering up more and experiencing an inability to move in public spaces. They emphasised that women are not safe when walking the streets and exemplified using the new harassment law which was passed in 2018 to protect women, saying that this law has had no true impact on the ground also seeing concrete problems with the law concerning for example where women can go a file complains.

¹⁹ [Haastrup, T. \(2018\)](#). Creating Cinderella? The unintended consequences of the Women Peace and Security Agenda for the EU's mediation architecture. *International Negotiation*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 218-237. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.331

²⁰ [Saferworld. \(2014\)](#). Gender and conflict early warning. [Accessed 16 July 2019], p.5

²¹ [Peace Corps. \(2019\)](#). Global Issues: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment [Accessed 17 July 2019]

²² Meaning: the street is ours, both men and women

2.4. Women in education

When meeting with representatives in Qatar, women's role was discussed with great emphasis on women being active in society, education and labour force, and that they are represented also on higher positions including director roles. However, what was brought forward when meeting with the Qatar National Library in Doha was that women are active in education, community and family while men are occupying fields of engineering, oil and banking, demonstrating clear gender stereotypes. Women in education was an important topic in general in Qatar and that women in education has become more accepted. There has been a change from thinking that a woman needs to be taught by a woman, to accepting that a woman who has been taught by a man in university can work with men when entering the labour force, indicating a clear link also to representation.

2.5. Female role models to bring about change

Women are limited by gender roles which determine them to not hold certain positions or to be limited to a certain field. 2M TV Channel, in Morocco, work with female role models to inspire young girls to go against gender stereotypes in terms of for example their profession of choice. Something that was brought forward by many organisations, individuals and government representatives in all three countries was the importance to work with youth and to work with gender equality from a very young age, but not many had concrete suggestions on what that should look like.

Female role models

2M TV Channel, Committee for Parity and Diversity, in Morocco, work actively with **female role models to inspire and empower women**, for example cooperating with female entrepreneurs to increase the number of young women in believing that they can become entrepreneurs. **Her Highness Sheika Moza bint Nasser** is an important female role model in Qatar because of her appearance in the media without covering her face and because she has endorsed many projects and initiatives for women and girls. Also **H.E. Lolwah R M Al-Khater**, Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, was brought forward in different meetings as an important role model for young girls in Qatar

2.6. Women and Islam – creating opportunities for change

An area where women are active but not always acknowledged or seen is within the religious sphere. Throughout the meetings in all three countries, women and men of different ages and within different fields of work made clear that women and men are equal according to Islam and that women in the past have played a very important role within Islam. However, what also became clear was that women today do not play that same role and that other developments in

society in terms of influence from other countries, politics etc. affect the perception of women. Ms Asma Lamrabet, who is a leading female (Muslim) feminist said that gender equality is a problem of traditions, norms and structures of society, not of Islam. Equally, a woman working in the National Library of Qatar said that gender inequality has nothing to do with Islam, instead, she said that it is the patriarchal society that is holding women back.

2.7. Using religion for positive change

There are a number of initiatives working with women in Islam. For example, the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA) in Egypt work to positively engage religion by targeting both female and male religious leaders, on the grassroots level, to be able to counter religious arguments and be the first line of defence in their communities as an immediate response in preventing extremism. The Mohammed VI Institute Training for Imams in Morocco work to teach women and men from Morocco, West Africa and Europe about Islam to prevent self-declared Imams to start their own Mosques without training, effectively working to prevent extremism around the world. However, despite initiatives like these, who also give women a space within the field of conflict prevention, women's role in religion was not talked about as being of great important in today's Morocco, Egypt or Qatar and when meeting with religious representatives the number of women were close to non-existent.

Despite a recent survey showing that there is a rise of people identifying as non-religious across the region, including Morocco and Egypt²³ religion continues to be important, and it can be used to create spaces for women in their societies. Besides involving women in various training, which has already been mentioned, a way of doing this is to support new interpretations and readings of the Quran which is something that the different training centers could work more actively with. Ms Lamrabet, who the EUNA cohort met with in Morocco, said that reading the sacred text from a new perspective²⁴ is a way of bringing women back to the spaces that are occupied by men, and that it gives women, and men, religious arguments relating to gender equality. In turn, increasing gender equality in this aspect could help influence societies positively potentially also bridging the gap that has already been mentioned about legislation and life on the ground.

New interpretations

Calling to **reread and redefine Quranic concepts regarding women** to rediscover the egalitarian spirit that motivates the spiritual message of Islam, in order to analyse and understand questions about women and men in our contemporary context

- Asma Lamrabet²⁵

²³ [BBC News. \(2019\)](#). [Accessed 18 July 2019]

²⁴ Which can be carried out by women and men

²⁵ [Asma Lamrabet. \(2019\)](#)

If institutions such as the Mohammed VI Institute Training for Imams and the Al-Azhar Islamic Institution would support the idea of new readings and perspectives, this could change the perceived role of women across borders since they train individuals from different countries and doing so could open up Islam as a platform for women. These institutions should of course continue their important work on preventing extremism, but they could also look into training and sending out Islamic mediators, which are already used in other parts of the world²⁶. This could enable women within religion to play an active role as mediators, making use of the fact also that it is widely acknowledged that more women are needed within mediation. Moreover, the Al-Azhar Islamic Institution is to some extent already active within mediation and the Mohammed VI Institute Training for Imams already have cooperation with many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa which could open up for mediation also outside of the MENA region.

3. Gender-based violence as a barrier to peace and security

“There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: **violence against women is never acceptable**, never excusable, never tolerable”

- United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon (2008) ²⁷

Global estimates published by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that about one in three (35%) women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime²⁸. World Bank data shows that women between 15 – 44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria²⁹. Moreover, the UN Charter³⁰ established the three founding pillars of the UN system: Peace and Security, Human Rights, and Development. However, a big problem is that these pillars do not always connect to one another. In this case, if we want to involve more women to actively participate in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and sustaining peace, we need to simultaneously work on women’s rights and eradication of all forms of violence against woman.

Woman can play different roles in conflict both as perpetrators and as victims, although, during internal and external conflicts in a country, women are the ones that suffer the most from sexual violence, forced marriages and human trafficking. Women pay the highest price in conflict, but they are also the ones that know their communities the most, which make women perfect candidates for conflict resolution and sustaining peace. However, seeing how women are

²⁶ [The Islamic Council. \(2019\)](#)

²⁷ Secretary-General says violence against women never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable, as he launches global campaign on issue. New York, United Nations Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, 2008 (SG/ SM/11437 WOM/1665)

²⁸ Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, World Health Organization, 2013 [Accessed, 22th July, 2019]

²⁹ [Violence Against Women The Hidden Health Burden](#), World Bank Discussion Papers [Accessed, 22th, July, 2019]

³⁰ [The Charter of the United Nations](#) was signed on 26 June 1945, in San Francisco, at the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on International Organization and came into force on 24 October 1945

subjected to different forms of gender-based violence (GBV) occurring outside the home and from their intimate partners, this limits their abilities to do so.

3.1. Gender-based violence outside home/non – partner violence

GBV can negatively affect women’s physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health creating barriers for women to feel safe and sustain peace in their communities, i.e. it affects the roles that women play in the society. A young student in the Mohammed VI Institute Training for Imams in Morocco who is training to become a religious leader said that one of the reasons women could not be an Imam³¹ and lead prayer³² is because while leading the prayer she must place her back to the people in the Mosque, which could potentially attract unwanted attention and sexual harassment. This means that women cannot hold certain leadership positions not only due to religious practice, but due to structural inequalities, one of which is violence against women. Having said that, this student also shared that after her graduation she will go back to Nigeria and become a leader in her community and interpret the Quran for women groups in the Mosque as well as talk with them on domestic violence and other pressing issues.

Phenomenon of sexual violence is widely spread worldwide, as well as in the three countries visited by the EUNA fellows. The 2015 UNICEF report found a sharp contrast between boys and girls: in Cairo, for example, 56% of girls experience verbal harassment compared to only 9% of boys³³ and it became clear from the meetings during the trip that young boys are encouraged to harass women and girls in the street to show they are “real men” according to gender stereotypes prevailed in their society.

3.2. Examples of good practice initiatives of tackling GBV

During their two weeks of travels, the EUNA fellows noticed some good practice initiatives of tackling problems of GBV, in particularly sexual harassment. There is for example the #ZankaDialna momentum in Morocco, a spontaneous citizen initiative that was born in June 2018 out of despair of the situation of women in Moroccan society following the worrying increase of harassment cases, rape and violence towards the women, that demand relocation of the public space for women. This movement was created by three women activists: Maya, a doctor that claims that street belong to all citizens, men and women, Lemya – architect and ecologist that love women and think they already suffered too much, and Zaina – representative of the corporate world, survivor of street harassment.

“I am a 50-year-old accomplished woman that has to **keep her head down** and be as discreet as possible not to attract cat calling from boys as young as 9-year-old to senior men. I feel safer walking with my own son that is 20 years old. Do you think that is normal?”
– One of the founders of #ZankaDialna momentum³⁴

³¹ Imam - Imam (/iˈmɑːm/; Arabic: إمام imām; plural: أئمة a’immah) is an Islamic leadership position

³² Unless in a group of just women

³³ UNICEF (2015), National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, “Violence against Children in Egypt Report.”

³⁴ #ZankaDialna momentum (2019)

By exploring the public space, you can feel what is going wrong in the society. Gender-pay gap and gender stereotypes lead to phenomenon commonly referred to as "the feminization of poverty", leaving women earning much less than men. Therefore, women spend more time in the streets walking and using public transportation. They are the ones who accompany children to school, to sports, to shopping, to work, to laundry, and who take care of their parents. But they do not feel safe, and more women than men experience sexual harassment and sexual violence in the streets. Rather than advocating for separate spaces for women to feel safe (which does not solve the problem), the #ZankaDialna movement tackle this issue by creating safe spaces for women and men to share their stories of sexual harassment online in a Facebook group followed by 10 000 active members. They have also initiated infamous silent walks and performances in front of the Parliament in Rabat, Morocco, where groups of women in silence have made statements to reclaim the streets.

This movement is a great example of how women and men in the society could be involved in ending sexual violence and creating safe space for women in the streets. However, it is important that after awareness raising, women, who disclose their experiences of sexual harassment get professional legal, psychological support which is now in some cases is provided by sporadic private initiatives that remain widely unknown for the public.

Another great example to tackle street harassment is an initiative of the Moroccan Parity and Diversity Committee³⁵ of the 2M TV channel. They reward the most respectful TV commercial of the image of women with the Tilila Trophy, which is an initiative that contributes to promoting a healthy image of women and the ending of sexualization and objectification of women in media. The Committee also attract women to share their stories of sexual harassment and feature them in the media to show the magnitude of the phenomenon.

"If women are being portrayed as strong, they are viewed as "crazy" women, so we wanted to **raise awareness** by introducing this award"

- Khadija Boujanoui director of The Parity and Diversity Committee³⁶

3.3. Intimate/domestic partner violence

"My son, 23 years old, with his friends called me and asked: if I am in bed with my girlfriend and **she says she doesn't want to have sex, what should I do?** I said: NO is NO. Even after 26 years in bed with my own husband if he would require sex and I say NO, it is still a NO"

- Women rights activist in Morocco

³⁵The Parity and Diversity Committee was created in 2013 with the mission of fighting stereotypes and clichés in the media of the 2M group. Clichés that are reproduced and broadcast totally unconsciously and automatically in television programs and commercials

³⁶The Parity and Diversity Committee, 2M TV, Morocco

During some of the meetings, perceptions unravelled that Islam is being used as an excuse for intimate partner violence, derived from different (usually personal) interpretations of the Quran. Also, for many years there was a problem of women being illiterate (especially in the rural areas), so they relied on interpretations of made by men. This issue of misinterpretation is tackled in all three respective countries visited by the EUNA fellows: Morocco, Egypt and Qatar, where religious institutions such as the Mohammed VI Institute Training for Imams in Morocco, the Al-Azhar Islamic Institution in Egypt are working with future male and female religious leaders, training them on how to properly interpret the Holy text to avoid wrong presumptions and dangerous interpretations. However, as has already been mentioned, there are still improvements to be made in terms of women's role in those interpretations.

3.4. The role of legislation and the importance of implementation

Legislation play an important role in eliminating intimate partner violence and laying the grounds for development of infrastructure of support for survivors of GBV. When meeting with the representative of the League of Arab States (LAS), Women and Child Department, it was mentioned that 17 out of the 22 members of LAS are in the Women Committee, and therefore women rights issues are high on the agenda. The Cairo Declaration and strategic plan (adopted by the Arab summit), which is similar to an action plan to any Arab country, has four main pillars and violence against women is one of them. Egypt is now working on an action plan against violence against women and one of the reference for creation of this document is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence³⁷ that is based on the understanding that violence against women is a form of GBV that is committed against women because they are women.

The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 explicitly guarantees the equality of men and women in all spheres of life: Article 11 declares that "*<...>The state commits to the protection of women against all forms of violence, and ensures women empowerment to reconcile the duties of a woman toward her family and her work requirements<...>*"³⁸. However, due to lack of infrastructure, legal protection measures, social norms and victim blaming in the society, victims are still not protected.

The Moroccan Family Code stating that "As long as husband is providing, wife should obey him" was abolished in 2004 and this is a great example of advocacy measures taken by numerous women rights organisations and activists in Morocco. The 2004 Family Code now states that men and women are equal in rights and responsibility as well as that the minimum age to get married is 18 years old. This significant amendment was very important. Nevertheless, as already been mentioned in this report, women rights activists argue that having laws are not enough. In a survey, more than 54% of Moroccans acknowledged the equality between men and women, but when asked if wife and husband should have the same rights in marriage, in the same survey, 50 % said no. So, there is a need to tackle gender stereotypes and challenge traditional roles of women and men in society to be able to implement passed laws.

³⁷ [The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Istanbul, 11.V.2011](#)

³⁸ [Article 11, Egypt's Constitution, 2014](#) [Accessed 22th of July 2019]

There is still a huge stigma existing around intimate partner violence in the societies of all three countries, and women are reluctant to talk about the violence to their friends and to report it to law enforcement authorities. There is a lack of institutional support for organisations providing support for survivors of intimate partner violence and victims do not have sufficient funds to go to therapist, and in addition, GBV is still perceived as a fault of a victim. This social context of GBV prevail in the different societies, and in turn this prevents governments from taking an active role and actions ensuring protection of victims by adopting necessary laws and creating infrastructure.

Women also lack information on services for survivors of intimate partner violence as these services are sporadic, unknown, and supported by private initiatives and funds rather than the government. There are good practice initiatives to inform women on their rights, e.g. National Union Of Moroccan Women³⁹ that works towards eradication of poverty of women by empowering them to build their own economic wellbeing as well as tackle illiteracy and train women on how to access their rights as well as talk about GBV.

3.5. Women in decision making roles: why women need more than just a seat at the table

As already mentioned, women are to a high degree subjected to the consequences of conflict and they are also the ones that know their community and its problems best: therefore, women are the missing remedy to conflict resolution, prevention and sustaining peace worldwide. Because of stereotypical roles in the society, women have and are still not given a chance to use their power to lead their nations and their communities. When asking about women in leadership positions during the different meetings the answers were “We have a lot of women in education” and “You see a lot of women in schools and in the streets”, which is problematic since it, on the one hand, sees representation as equal to gender equality which is not always the case and on the other, because it neglects all the women who are not able to get leader positions, or regular with equal pay, because they are women.

This report has already touched upon the importance of role models, and the fellows met a lot of influential women leaders, who indeed are true role models in their society that young girls and boys follow. These women are the voice of human rights, they work to bring peace to their communities, and they need to be trusted and placed in power positions where they can actively participate in peace processes within and outside their respective countries.

On competence of women in politics

“They always use a card that **competence is important**. I say that look at our country, community’s world, we struggle with economy, hunger, situation is bad. Who is in power? Men are, so who is responsible? Men are. If the situation is so bad for years and years, maybe let’s give the floor to women and see how they do. Women are driven by love to their communities and societies. Also, women are more educated and there is no base for that”

³⁹ [National Union of Moroccan Women](#)

On how to encourage women to vote for women

“When my mum was 15 her husband died, she was left with a bunch of small children, with no money, so **she empowered them to seek for education**, children became doctors, pilots and etc. Is it bad management? It is not. That is the management our country need!”

- Moroccan politician Nouzha Skalli

4. Ways forward – making use of UNAOC partnerships

The UNAOC Alumni network represents community leaders from different countries in the EUNA and MENA regions, and this is a great resource for sharing good practices regarding the creation of safe places and opportunities to actively engage women in peace processes. In turn, the Alumni network could work together with different actors identified throughout the fellowship (NGO’s, government organisations, interfaith organisations etc.), through intercultural dialogue, to support local initiatives for women empowerment. For example, via the creation of online platforms for youth trainers from the EUNA and MENA regions, sharing piloted training materials for youth on tackling gender stereotypes in schools. This online network could also work as a platform for facilitating online training for trainers, and it could be created with minimal resources, gathering and utilizing contacts that the fellows gathered from their fellowship, making an online form of selection of trainers, utilizing available platforms for facilitation of a first meeting/workshop. This cooperation could potentially develop a training guide based on intercultural cooperation and dialogue that could be used to train women leaders on peacebuilding in both the MENA and the EUNA region.

5. Conclusion

This report effectively departs from meetings and discussions held in Morocco, Egypt and Qatar as part of the 2019 UNAOC Fellowship Programme. It has described how women are limited when it comes to participating in the field of peace and security because they are negatively affected by gender stereotypes and because they are victims of GBV. It has also highlighted a gap that exists between legislation and implementation, seeing how new legislation which is supposed to protect women fail because of the structural inequalities that exists in society. The report also presented some good initiatives for change, like the use of female role models and the creation of safe spaces to talk about issues such as harassment in order to work with changing the mind sets of both women and men, including providing suggestions for how to utilize the UNAOC Alumni network. Finally, to overcome some of these challenges and effectively create spaces for women, this report will conclude with a set of recommendations.

6. Recommendations

- To work actively with fighting gender-based violence against women:

⇒ Establish government funded services for victims of GBV run by non-governmental organisations. Making these services sustainable requires institutional funding rather than project funding or funding via public procurement activities.

- ⇒ Establish national 24/7 free helpline to women victims of all forms of GBV, run by women consultants trained on dynamics of GBV.
 - ⇒ Establish specialized police departments for women victims of GBV with pre-trial investigators that would be trained on dynamics of GBV.
- ⇒ To work actively with schools aiming to change the mind sets of young girls and boys:
- ⇒ Train male and female school staff in gender equality and how gender equality relates to other issues in society such as religion and traditions.
 - ⇒ Integrate the subject of gender equality into official curriculum in schools, focusing on combatting gender stereotypes in the society from an early age.
 - ⇒ Identify and work with actors such as the Qatar National Library, that is an established and respected institution in society, with access to the citizens, from toddlers to the older population that also has the opportunity to run different projects.
- ⇒ To support training initiatives, to actively create spaces for women within religion:
- ⇒ Develop and also identify already existing initiatives and institutions where training can take place, to train women community leaders and women within religion on how to interpret the Quran in order to train other women on the true meaning of the Quran and their gender equality rights in society.
 - ⇒ Push for the inclusion of women to interpret and teach within these initiatives to allow for more inclusivity and a move away from only men interpreting the Quran.
 - ⇒ Explore the idea of cooperation between religious institutions to train and send out female Islamic mediators.
- To leave no one behind:
 - ⇒ When creating new spaces for women and improving women's role it is crucial to take the issue of intersectionality into consideration, to be inclusive of all women.
 - ⇒ Men too are affected by (violent) masculinities and patriarchal norms, and they too need, not only initiatives to work for improving gender equality, but also safe spaces to talk about changes in society and what these changes mean for them and their role as men.

Being Young AND Female – The Role of Young Women in Peacemaking in the MENA region

Mirna Aho (Finland)

In the summer 2019 I participated in the Fellowship Programme organized by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. Together with twelve young people from Europe and North America we travelled to Morocco, Egypt and Qatar and learned more about *the role of women in peacemaking and conflict resolution* in the MENA region. I chose to focus especially on the role young women have in peacebuilding. During the Fellowship we met with government officials, civil society organizations, research institutions and private people. We asked questions, learned more, challenged some views and, most importantly, established a dialogue between different cultures and religions. This report was written in order to highlight the learnings of the trip, discuss some interesting observations and to give recommendations for the future.

Women still remain significantly underrepresented in peace processes

The UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was adopted in 2000 and it reaffirms “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building”. The UNSCR 1325 has been followed by eight subsequent resolutions. Together all these resolutions make up the women, peace and security agenda and stress the importance of women’s equal participation in the promotion of peace and security. The resolution consists of four pillars: (1) The role of women in conflict **prevention**, (2) their participation in **peacebuilding**, (3) the **protection** of their rights during and after conflict, and (4) their specific needs during repatriation, resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction (**relief and recovery**).

Women’s participation in peace negotiations increases the durability and the quality of peace.

Significant efforts have been made before and after the adoption of the UNSCR 1325 to engage more women in peacemaking, for more women to have a seat at the table. However, it should be noted that women constituted only 3 per cent of mediators, 9 per cent of negotiators, and 3 per cent of witnesses and signatories in major peace process between 1992 and 2017⁴⁰. It is clear to say that women still, almost twenty years after the adoption of the resolution, remain significantly underrepresented in peace processes.

The evidence for why more women should be involved is clear: Women’s participation in peace negotiations increases the durability and the quality of peace. A study investigating 82 peace agreements in 42 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2011 found that peace agreements with female signatories are associated with durable peace⁴¹.

In recent years researchers have also pointed out that the direct inclusion of women does not per se increase the likelihood that more peace agreements are signed and implemented. What

⁴⁰ Data from: Women’s Participation in Peace Processes. Available from <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes>.

⁴¹ Krause, J. Krause, W. & Bränfors, P. 2018. Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace, *International Interactions*, 44:6, 985-1016. Available from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>.

makes a difference is the true influence women actually have on a process. Thus, making women's participation count is more important than merely counting the number of women included in peace processes⁴².

One way for a state to promote the participation of women in peacemaking is to create a National Action Plan (NAP), which is a tool for governments to implement UN Security Council resolutions at a national level. Only four countries in the MENA region currently have a NAP on UNSCR 1325 (Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Tunisia). According to Shaza Abdel-Latif, the representative of the League of Arab States working at the Women, Family & Childhood Department, Lebanon and Egypt are currently in the process creating NAPs for the implementation of 1325.

Young people as positive agents of change

The UN Security Council resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security was adopted in 2015 after years of pushing and lobbying from youth organizations and civil society movements. The resolution builds on five key pillars, which urge the UN member states to (1) take youth's **participation** and views into account in decision-making processes, (2) ensure the **protection** of young civilians' lives and human rights, (3) support young people in **preventing** violence, (4) engage young people during and after conflict when developing peacebuilding strategies (**partnerships**), and (5) invest in youth affected by armed conflict through employment opportunities, inclusive labour policies and education (**disengagement and reintegration**). In 2018 a subsequent resolution 2419 was adopted demanding on increasing the role of youth in negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

The UNSCR 2250 is historical since it recognizes "the important and positive contribution of youth in efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security". It acknowledges the fact that today there are about 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 living in the world and that "today's generation of youth is the largest the world has ever known and that young people often form the majority of the population of countries affected by armed conflict".

The UNSCR 2250 provides a highly relevant normative framework for the MENA region. From the uprisings of the Arab Spring to the rise of violent extremist groups, young leaders can play crucial roles in the growing demand for change. Policymakers and practitioners have a chance to build on this momentum by encouraging youth participation that is constructive by partnering with young people to reduce violence and create sustainable peace. Unfortunately, according to my experiences during the Fellowship the resolution is still relatively unknown among decision-makers and practitioners in the region.

⁴² Paffenholz, T., Ross, N., Dixon, S., Schluchter, A.-L. & True, J. 2016. Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations. UN Women. Available from http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/making_women_count-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5712.

At the intersection of the UNSCR 1325 and the UNSCR 2250

In 2018 UN Women released a report discussing the intersection of the UNSCR 1325 and the UNSCR 2250⁴³. The report provides an overview of the various roles young women play in conflict situations and peace processes as well as the different ways they are affected by armed conflict.

According to the report, despite that there is limited research available on the experiences of young women in conflicts, it is already clear that gender and age inequalities tend to worsen during and after conflict, thus, impacting young women in particular. Simultaneously, most peace and security interventions targeting young people tend to prioritize young men, who are seen as violent risk factors, and consider young women mostly as victims of conflict⁴⁴.

“During adolescence, the world expands for boys and contracts for girls”.

The traditional and harmful gender stereotypes tend to have major impacts on the lives of young women. As it can be described “during adolescence, the world expands for boys and contracts for girls”⁴⁵. These gender stereotypes are also one of the reasons why highlighting the active role young women already have in peacebuilding and community development is important. Examples are many: In Morocco we met with the founders of the Zanka Dialna movement (focusing on creating safe public spaces for women) and the Committee for Parity and Diversity at the 2M TV Channel (doing remarkable job by increasing the number of Moroccan female professionals in the media). Yet, the work young women are doing in the field of peace and security often remains under-recognized, under-studied, and under-financed.

Recommendations for the future

Based on my experiences during the Fellowship and the research that I’ve done, I’m providing three recommendations. These are directed to the policy makers and practitioners in the MENA region.

Firstly, **the creation of National Action Plans (NAPs)** for implementing the UNSCR 1325 and the UNSCR 2250 in all the states in the MENA region is crucial. The NAPs should be created through inclusive processes especially ensuring the true and meaningful participation of young women. The NAPs should also contain cross cutting references to both youth and women and make explicit references to young women recognizing them as positive agents of change and not only as victims of conflicts. While NAPs are not the only way to promote change on local, national and international level they can provide a useful opportunity to amplify young women’s role in peace and security issues.

⁴³ UN Women, 2018. Young Women in Peace and Security: At the Intersection of YPS and WPS Agendas. Available from <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/research-paper-young-women-in-peace-and-security-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2849>.

⁴⁴ United Network of Young Peacebuilders and Search for Common Ground, 2016. Translating Youth, Peace & Security Policy into Practice: Guide to kick-starting UNSCR 2250 Locally and Nationally. Available from <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2016-11/2016.11.22%20-%20Translating%20Youth%2C%20Peace%20%26%20Security%20Policy%20into%20Practice%20-%20Guide%20to%20kick-starting%20UNSCR%202250%20Locally%20and%20Nationally.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Mensch, B.S., Bruce, J. & Greene, M.E. 1998. The Uncharted Passage: Girls’ Adolescence in the Developing World, Population Council, New York, 1998. Available from <https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/passage/passage.pdf>.

Secondly, **education** should be used as a tool for changing gender stereotypes during armed conflicts but also in societies in general. The importance of education was highlighted by women (and men) across all three countries we visited. The positive impacts of more equal societies are clear: gender equality contributes to peace⁴⁶ and speeds up the economy⁴⁷.

Thirdly, states should provide **safe platforms for young women** to enable them to even more actively take part in decision-making and peacebuilding and to acknowledge and recognize the results and accomplishments. Providing safe platforms can mean anything from supporting inclusive community spaces to creating laws, which regulate harassment against women in social media.

⁴⁶ Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Does Gender Equality Lead to Peace? Fact Sheet Building on the Global Study on 1325. Available from <https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet%20Gender%20Equality.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Data from UN Women. Available from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Fellowship Program 2019
The Role of Women in Peacemaking and Conflict Prevention

Final Report: Religion, Gender, and Conflict Prevention

Cora Alder, Anastasia Baskina, Brody C. McDonald

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Overview

The relationship between gender and conflict prevention is complex and understudied. One of the most challenging and important aspects of gender and conflict prevention remains the role of religion and traditional religious authorities. Some conservative religious representatives deny women access to peacebuilding efforts. Others refuse to talk about gender at all, claiming it to be a Western construct. In addition, many Western actors have their own prejudices towards religious actors, believing them to be against gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment entirely, and therefore do not attempt to work with religious actors on gender and conflict prevention.

Three unique aspects of the complicated relationship between religion, gender, and conflict prevention are explored in the following paper. In the preceding chapter, Cora Alder explores existing secular biases towards the relationship between religion and gender and discusses how these biases have hindered culturally sensitive work on gender issues. The report goes on to discuss how Western governmental actors can best work on religion and support religious actors with regards to gender. Two of the mentioned areas of persisting assumptions on gender and religion in peacebuilding and conflict prevention are further developed in chapter 3 and 4.

In the third chapter, Anastasia Baskina considers the role of religion and gender beyond the high-level conference table. She discusses and evaluates the roles that women, as well as youth, have played in fostering interfaith dialogue and religious reconciliation. Drawing from meetings across the UNAOC Fellowship Programme, the report focusses on the actions of local, often non-elite, actors who are creating change in their own communities by using religion and interfaith dialogue as a vehicle for progress.

In the fourth chapter, Brody C. McDonald explores the role of women in both participating in and helping to prevent violent extremism through interfaith dialogue and development. The chapter begins by exploring the traditional religious interpretations about the role of women in extremist organizations and before contrasting this with more recent developments in gender and extremism. The report concludes by highlighting the best practices being used by international female leaders in preventing conflict and violent extremism through interfaith dialogue and development.

Each of these three parts draws extensively from first-hand meetings and discussions which took place during the 2019 UNAOC Fellowship Programme. Though secondary sources are included, many of the approaches analyzed come directly from interactions with activists and organizations based in Morocco, Egypt, and Qatar. As Morocco, Egypt, and Qatar were all predominantly Muslim countries, it remains to be seen how easily the approaches can be adapted to other religious contexts. Moreover, neither the mentioned areas of overlap between religion, gender, and conflict prevention, nor the proposed recommendations are exhaustive.

Overcoming Biases: Western Governments Working on Religion and Gender

Cora Alder – Program Officer, Culture and Religion in Mediation Program (CARIM), Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich

In international peacemaking and conflict prevention efforts, Western governments, secular non-governmental and intergovernmental institutions often hesitate to address religion.⁴⁸ Either they play down the religious dimensions of conflict, referring to the seemingly more important political dimensions of a conflict. Alternatively, they are afraid to engage with the religious dimensions as many international actors have become religiously illiterate and do not know how to analyze and work on religious aspects of conflict. As a result, the religious dimension of and religious actors in conflict are sidelined.⁴⁹ Western actors who do engage with religion often face particular problems when it comes to the topic of gender – their own secular biases towards the relationship between religion and gender.⁵⁰

The following pages aim to discuss how Western governments and intergovernmental institutions can work on religion or with religious actors regarding gender in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, while simultaneously questioning and working towards overcoming their own biases. The paper highlights four problematic assumptions on the relationship between religion and gender. Projects and initiatives that the EUNA fellows encountered during their two week-long trip in the MENA region are illustratively drawn upon as exemplary good practices. The chapter concludes with what can be learnt from the projects and initiatives encountered during the UNAOC fellowship.

Religious Exegesis and Reinterpretation

In the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda and Western thinking on gender in conflict more generally, surprisingly little attention is paid to the nexus of religion and gender in

⁴⁸For this report, “Western” is understood not necessarily in a geographical sense, but as a specific way of living and thinking that is connected with contemporary, democratic, secular, and late-capitalist concepts (Höpflinger 2015, 19). When using adjectives such as “secular”, not the state’s neutrality in matters of religion is stressed, but rather the thereof often-resulting religious illiteracy, lack of knowledge, and sometimes ignorance towards religion is highlighted.

⁴⁹ Fox 2001.

⁵⁰ Gender distinguishes historically and culturally constructed notions of what it means to be a man or a woman in different societies and cultures. The word “gender” does not imply why these relationships between notions of masculinities and femininities are constructed as they are, how they work, or how they change (Scott 2009, 61). The mentioned historical and social constructions can and often are influenced by dominant religious teachings (King 2005, 3296).

conflict. Feminist theory, which saw religion as a powerful ideological tool underpinning the patriarchal normative views of gender and sexuality, has contributed to the perception that religion is hindering gender equality and women's empowerment.⁵¹ The assumption that "religious women"⁵² are passive victims of religious ideologies discarded and sometimes still discredits non-Western feminist attempts which push for gender equality.

One woman who fights gendered injustices by questioning existing religious teachings and customs within her respective religion is [Asma Lamrabet](#). Lamrabet, whom we met in Morocco, formerly headed the Center for Women's Studies in Islam (CERFI) in Rabat and focuses on the reinterpretation of the Quran and the Ḥadīth (reports of statement or actions of Mohammed). She assigns the current status of women in Moroccan Islam to the misinterpretation of religious texts. Her feminist interpretations of the holy texts have been published as several books, inter alia "Women in the Qur'ān: An Emancipatory Reading", "Women and Men in the Qur'ān" (all available in English) and many more. Working within Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas (Mohammadia League of Scholars), a recognized religious institution, has not only helped her to stimulate discussions on gender and women's rights inside the association, the institution's recognition have given her publications and initiatives a certain standing, to the point that they are now widely read and known outside of Morocco.

Secular actors should invest time in genuinely exploring alternative (feminist) narratives, which might shed a different light on the challenges of working on gender issues. This work of reinterpretation and exegesis of religious texts should be done by the members of the respective religious community. Secular governmental and intergovernmental institutions lack religious legitimacy and should therefore refrain from claiming entitlement for interpretation. Nevertheless, they can support unheard voices and give a platform to newcomers and established religious scholars with views considered moderate.

⁵¹ Woodhead 2016, 350.

⁵² The term itself has been criticized as it shows a persisting dualistic framework; contrasting the "secular woman" with the "religious woman", which is often framed as oppressed, victimized, and in need of liberation (Hawthorne 2009, 142). In lack of a better term, the expression was used here.

Context-Specific Solutions

Secular actors in conflict sometimes refrain from involving religious actors in peacebuilding efforts as they see religion as inherently opposed to women's progress. Some Western actors tend to primarily work with secular women due to their assumed advocacy position for human rights and gender equality, and their apparent similarity to the actor's own backgrounds. This leaves little room for cultural-specific work on gender in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

One Islamic institution, which has created a unique response to a context-specific problem, is the women's section in the [Al-Azhar Center for Electronic Fatwa](#). Their call center enables women to speak to female muftis, schooled in Islamic thought, about topics they might not feel comfortable discussing with a man. As the female muftis told us, most questions they receive center around the purity after menstruation, sanitation, and birth. Women, particularly in rural areas, no longer need to rely on the knowledge of their local imam when it comes to issues they might be concerned with (whether that's on feminine hygiene or a completely different topic), but can simply pick up the phone and get advice on their own.

While excusing opposition to women's inclusion by referring to cultural customs and norms is unsatisfactory, efforts of gender equality and women's empowerment will look different in every context. Dismissing offers like the one of Al-Azhar, thinking that it encourages further taboo-ization and isolation of so-called "women's issues", does not do it proper justice. Thus, Western governments should invest more time in assessing how culture and local traditions affect women in various ways and support context-specific projects working towards addressing local women's needs.

Preventing Violent Extremism and Counter-Narratives

When working on deradicalization and preventing violent extremism (PVE), Western governments often refrain from engaging with so-called "radicals" and retrieve to those with low-risk profiles. However, this strategy bears the risk of further isolating and unintendedly reinforcing the radicalization process. In PVE, it is therefore important to also target those considered extreme. Another persisting trend is to see women's engagement in radical extremist groups as solely passive; as housewives and mother, essentially denying them agency.

To counter terrorist narratives, the [Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding \(CCCPA\)](#) has developed a training program for local community leaders and other local influential actors with a large constituency. These can be local religious, traditional, and tribal leaders. While the former are often men, CCCPA's program also specifically addresses women leaders, acknowledging that women can be perpetrators of violence, are active, inter alia, in recruitment and information gathering for extremist groups and need to be included in PVE efforts. CCCPA starts their trainings with a simple conflict analysis, allowing participants to add their conflict narrative to the analysis, building trust within the group. Further into the training, participants start discussing different religious concepts and essentially "reclaim" concepts like Ḥākimiyya (governorship) and Šarī'a (religious and secular duties).

As Ashraf Swelam, CCCPA's Director General, said, it is important not only to select "moderates", but specifically target "traditionalists" to poke a hole in their argument. Thus, the group of participants is diverse in terms of their ideological positioning, but comes from the same religious tradition and geographical region. This is why CCCPA works with at least one person who knows the local, religious context well to avert that discourses are misinterpreted or side-conversations go unnoticed.

Including religious actors that are considered moderate are usually quick wins because their values and views are more aligned with those of liberal democracies. However, Western governments should also engage with religious actors considered extreme. Engagement with

groups viewed as extreme costs time and effort but is nonetheless invaluable to ensure that they do not isolate themselves further. Further, governmental actors need to recognize the role of women in violent extremism, otherwise they risk ignoring and overlooking a major and growing base of support for terrorism and extremism (see [chapter 0](#) in this report). Acknowledging women's agency in violent extremist movements is the precondition to include them meaningfully in PVE efforts.

Local Religious Representatives in Dialogue Projects

When secular actors decide to approach religion, it is often in the form of interfaith dialogue. Indeed, interfaith dialogue has become somewhat of a universal remedy for all conflicts with religious dimensions. Often, no conflict analysis precedes the engagement to determine whether formal interfaith dialogue is the best tool to address the conflict. Further, interfaith dialogue projects, while founded with good intentions, often degenerate to mere photographed handshakes and empty phrases. When looking for religious actors to work with, many organizations ask either publicly known (and often contested) individuals or representatives of formal religious hierarchies to participate. As formal spaces of power are frequently occupied by men, particularly the latter target group often precludes influential but informal religious actors from involvement, e.g. women of faith, youth, and local religious leaders.

Recognizing this problematic, the [Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue \(DICID\)](#)'s organization team asks Qatari Embassies and former participants around the world to nominate participants for their annual conference to ensure that they have a diverse portfolio of participants. Moreover, each conference has a central theme and participants are selected with regards to their expertise in the topic. DICID explicitly looks for female participants. At said annual conference, they also award a prize for innovative interreligious projects enhancing dialogue and give particularly young peacebuilders a platform. While there is still room for improvement, going the extra mile to ensure a diverse group of discussants in terms of gender, age, experience, geographic and religious background as well as professional expertise is admirable.

There is a need to overcome the focus on formal religious hierarchies to determine influential key person. In their projects, Western governments should therefore push for greater inclusion of local religious leaders, particularly of women (see [chapter 0](#) in this report). In context-specific dialogue projects, analyzing the role religious women play in conflict and then strategically engaging those with a considerable constituency will make the entire project more sustainable.

Widening Participation: Women and Youth in Fostering Interfaith Dialogue

Anastasia Baskina – Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Analyst, Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Cambodia

According to the United States Institute of Peace factsheet published in July 2019, 84 percent of people worldwide identify with a religion.⁵³ While violent extremist narratives are often expressed in religious terms, people of faith, religious organizations and community leaders have also been actively engaged in peace, mediation and reconciliation efforts. Positions of traditional religious leaders are still mostly confined to men. Nevertheless, we see more and more women and young people getting involved in interfaith and intercultural dialogues as practitioners, researchers, advisors, facilitators and participants. These dialogue initiatives, often started informally or on a grassroots level, take different forms and formats. They all, however, aim to build bridges between divided communities and societies in order to prevent further alienation, exclusion and violent radicalization. This chapter, based on the UNAOC fellows' first-hand experiences in Morocco, Egypt and Qatar, presents selected dialogue initiatives from the MENA region.

Interfaith Dialogue and Youth Empowerment

In Morocco, the UNAOC fellows had a chance to visit [Neighborhoods Association IDMAJ](#) and Sidi Moumen cultural center. In 2003, the suicide bombers behind the Casablanca attacks, which claimed lives of 45 people, came from Sidi Moumen shanty towns. Three years later, Boubker Mazoz, who strongly believes in the power of education and dialogue, transformed a local garbage dump into Association Des Quartiers IDMAJ. Today, this cultural center offers diverse educational activities for women, children and adolescents from the entire Sidi Moumen neighborhood. Boubker Mazoz is assisted by a small and dedicated team of young female staff and most activities are run by volunteers and students. One of IDMAJ projects is a training of trainers on prevention of violent extremism and exclusion. IDMAJ also takes part in several cross-cultural dialogue projects with schools in the United States. Through virtual classroom-to-classroom exchanges Moroccan and American students learn about each other's cultures, religions, values and every-day life, dismantling prejudices and stereotypes they might have about Western and Muslim societies. Young people also improve their intercultural communication and collaboration skills by completing joint projects. In Casablanca, the UNAOC fellows got an opportunity to talk to current and former dialogue participants. These young people, many of them young women and girls, came across as confident and open-minded global citizens, eager to continue their education and engage with the world.

IDMAJ online dialogues are supported by the Stevens Initiative. The Stevens Initiative is a living memorial to the legacy of US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens, who studied abroad in Europe, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco and later became a US diplomat. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed in the militants' attack on the U.S. Special Mission in Benghazi in 2012. Launched in 2015, the Stevens Initiative sponsors an open competition for qualified NGOs and educational institutions to submit proposals to administer virtual exchange programs between young people in the USA and in the MENA region. Besides IDMAJ, one of their grantees is [Soliya](#), an international non-profit organization working at the intersection of peacebuilding, global education, and technology. Soliya's flagship Connect Program is organized in a form of regular virtual dialogues on religion, culture and world politics between university students from Western and predominantly Muslim societies. It equips young people with cross-cultural competences necessary to engage

⁵³ United States Institute of Peace Factsheet. "Religious Engagement in Peacebuilding", 12 July, 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2019/07/religious-engagement-peacebuilding>

with difference constructively. Since 2009, Soliya has also been one of UNAOC global partners.

Cairo-based enterprise [Misriyati](#), in its turn, works in the domain of face-to-face interfaith dialogues and trainings. Misriyati envisions a society that knows about principles of peaceful living and nonviolent ways of dealing with conflicts and applies those principles in its daily life. It was founded by a group of young Egyptian activists and educators, concerned by the growing intolerance in the Egyptian society, which “manifested itself in the increasing incidents of religious tension, growing sectarian isolation, and the difficult communication between the different economic classes and subcultures”.⁵⁴ Using non-formal and peace education methods as well as theoretical underpinnings of Marshall Rosenberg’s non-violent communication and Johan Galtung’s works, Misriyati shares the knowledge through awareness-raising and peer education. The UNAOC fellows informally talked to Misriyati’s facilitators and trainers who help Egyptian youth to build bridges in divided communities. In a safe space, their participants are encouraged to share, exchange and reflect on their personal experiences with peace, conflict, segregation and exclusion. Misriyati social enterprise is a part of wider Selmiyah (*peacefully*) movement. Selmiyah is a decentralized network promoting a culture of peace, diversity and inclusion across Egypt. It was founded in 2012 by a group of like-minded grassroots activists, including a UNAOC alumni Khalil El-Masry. Khalil works with Catholic Relief Services for the "Advancing Inter-religious Peacebuilding" project in Minya, one of the Egyptian governorates with most religious tensions. The project aims to train Muslim and Christian men and women to emerge as cooperative leaders and to facilitate more safe spaces for their peers to celebrate peace.

These examples prove that women and youth constructively complement traditional interfaith dialogues, often limited to high-level conferences, by making them more accessible and inclusive.

Interfaith Dialogue and Academia

Similar to Boubker Mazoz, who gathered liked-minded people around him and founded IDMAJ, Asma Lamrabet, Moroccan doctor, Islamic feminist and author, organized a group of Muslim women interested in reflecting on intercultural dialogue and the role of women in Islam. In 2008, she became president and board member of the International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women in Islam, based in Barcelona. This group gathered feminists from 8 different countries, among them Morocco, France, the UK and the United States. Three years later, she headed the Center for Women’s Studies in Islam (CERFI) in Rabat. CERFI is a research center established in affiliation to the official religious institution Rabita Mohammadia of Ulema. It aims at contributing to academic research and discourse on current women’s studies from an Islamic perspective. In her research, writings and lectures Asma Lamrabet seeks to open a dialogue on the difference between the religious texts and their human, mainly male-dominated, interpretation in different contexts.

Another institution working in the intersection of academia and interfaith dialogue is Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID). Every two years DICID organizes an international interfaith conference tackling such topical issues as hate speech or religion and human rights. DICID conferences and events bring together leaders from various religious denominations, researchers, and youth. Nadia Al-Ashqar, Conference Affairs Coordinating Officer, shared with the UNAOC fellows her personal journey of quitting a successful career in a different field and taking on a new challenge in DICID. Women like as Asma Lamrabet and Nadia Al-Ashqar are at the forefront of reshaping the field of religious studies, expanding traditional academic spaces and welcoming newcomers.

⁵⁴ Misriyati. “Our Story”, Accessed at: <https://misriyati.weebly.com>

Presented MENA initiatives show that interfaith and intercultural dialogue is no longer restricted to elites or religious authorities who are predominantly men. Women and young people reclaim their role as facilitators, scholars, mediators and, ultimately, peacebuilders and peacemakers.

The Changing Role of Women: Preventing and Participating in Violent Extremism

Brody C. McDonald – Founder, Disrupting Extremism

Introduction

As governments and civil society organizations alike grapple with the multifaceted challenge of preventing violent extremism, new approaches are needed to better understand the role of gender. Despite the growing role that female actors have played in contemporary extremist organizations — including ISIS/Daesh, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab — the relationship between gender and extremism remains under-researched. This report narrows the gap by focussing on the cultural, political, and religious dynamics which have encouraged women to join Salafi-Jihadist organizations in recent years. Drawing from discussions and meetings during the course of the UNAOC Fellowship, this paper begins by exploring the broader relationship between women and violent extremist organizations and then making several key policy recommendations. While the report highlights the risks associated with ignoring the role of women within Salafi-Jihadist extremist organizations, it is noted that gender plays an increasingly important role in all forms of extremism (including Far Right/Far Left). The final part of this document places special emphasis on the important work and best practices of international female leaders who are working to prevent conflict and violent extremism in their own communities.

Background

The participation of women in Islamist extremist organizations may appear paradoxical at first, especially given that many Salafist thinkers imagine a limited social and public role for women in society. In reality however, Islamist extremist groups have been debating the permissibility of women taking active combat and organizational roles since the early 1980s.⁵⁵ While differing interpretations abound, prominent jihadist thinkers such as Abdullah Azzam have concluded that women are only permitted to fight under specific conditions (e.g., when directly defending *dar al-Islam* or Muslim lands from outsiders).⁵⁶ Though technically permitted to fight under strict conditions, women rarely took part in jihadist combat operations during the 1980s and 1990s. It wasn't until the 2000s that female suicide bombers started to become more prominent amongst al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) — the predecessor of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In 2005, AQI's leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi further opened the door to women undertaking 'martyrdom operations' during the Second Gulf War, which he described in exceptional and defensive terms. Though this provoked fierce debates on the role of women in combat amongst Salafi-Jihadists, AQI continued to conduct dozens of female missions between 2005 and 2010.⁵⁷

AQI's successor, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), initially discouraged active combat roles for women until 2015. The all-female al-Khansaa Brigade, tasked with both enforcing religious law and occasionally fighting in frontline positions, is prominent example of the prominent public role women played in ISIS. The widening role of women in

⁵⁵ Winter, Charlie. "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention" *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* (2018): 1-3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

ISIS was for logistical reasons (the organization experienced a downfall in the number of male combatants) as much as it was ideologically presented (as the group shifted from an expansionist to defensive stance, female participation was seen more clearly as permissible). While the highly public role of al-Khansa Brigade is striking, it should not distract from the even more extensive role that female ISIS members have played in recruitment and propaganda, as well as education, domestic support, and child care.⁵⁸ In our meeting with the Director General Ashraf Swelam of the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCPA) we discussed the increasing prominence of women in al-Shabaab, particularly in the context of its intelligence wing, Amniyat. The CCCPA has also begun a larger research project aimed at tracking the changing roles of women in extremist groups, beginning with Afghanistan in the 1980s and up to the present day.

Women and Violent Extremism in Media

Following the territorial collapse of ISIS by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in early 2019, thousands of female ISIS members were detained and transferred to the sprawling Al-Hawl camp in northeastern Syria.⁵⁹ Despite many of these captured women publicly pledging their continued bay'ah (oath of allegiance) to ISIS' leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi on camera, many media outlets referred to these women as 'Jihadi Brides', often presenting them as helpless actors who had been tricked by their husbands into emigrating to Syria.⁶⁰ While some women are forced into such roles, these kinds of portrayals reinforce the outdated and inaccurate narrative that women must lack either the agency or initiative to join extremist groups on the basis of their own assessments and beliefs. Whether discussing ISIS, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, or even white nationalist groups, there is myriad evidence of women not only joining on their own initiative, but also of going on to become some of the most committed members of these organizations.⁶¹

Rather than portraying such individuals as 'Jihadi Brides', they should be identified and recognized as female ISIS members who are similarly capable of supporting the terrorist group which they have joined. This is not merely a debate over terminology. If media actors continue to downplay the role of women in violent extremist organizations, there is greater risk of policy-makers ignoring and remaining blind to a crucial and growing base of support for extremist organizations. The Arab Women Organization (AWO) in Cairo shared our concern with media portrayals and confirmed that many of the female ISIS members being held in prisons and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Iraq and Syria remain strongly committed to the terror group. The risks associated with ignoring the role of women in violent extremist are difficult to overstate. The women held in Al-Hawl and other Syrian camps continue to have chances to teach and share their values with the thousands of young children who were born to ISIS members over the past several years. In a particularly concerning moment, the CCCPA's Director General Ashraf Swelam warned us that if we do not grapple with the role of female ISIS members in raising the next generation then "we will be talking about terrorist nations, not terrorist groups, in the future".

Understanding the role of women who participate in violent extremism is critical to scholars and policy-makers, but it is even more important to highlight the work that many

⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that the enhanced role of female jihadist actors in recent years has not only been confined to the Levant or even the wider MENA region. Salafi-Jihadist groups as far away as Indonesia and the Philippines have also made the recruitment and deployment of female operatives a priority over the past decade. Cf. Jones, Sidney. How ISIS Has Changed Terrorism in Indonesia. *The New York Times*, 22 May 2018.

⁵⁹ Loveluck, Louise. "Thousands of women and children fleeing ISIS stronghold flood into Syrian camp" *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2019.

⁶⁰ Aldersley, Miranda. "Defiant jihadi bride refugees vow revenge as last outpost of their Syrian caliphate faces defeat" *The Daily Mail*, 9 March 2019.

⁶¹ Winter, Charlie. "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention" *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* (2018): 1-5.

women are doing to prevent conflict. At the Idmaj Association in Casablanca, UNAOC Fellows had the chance to see how the female staff and students are actively preventing violent extremism through supplementary education and after-school opportunities, which are provided without cost to all students. Most importantly, the Idmaj Association's social and educational model for preventing women and men from being recruited to extremist groups is local and community-focussed. Since its founding, Idmaj has been based in Casablanca's Sidi Moumen arrondissement, an underdeveloped neighbourhood which was home to many of the attackers in both the 2003 and 2007 Casablanca bombings. While in Morocco, the UNAOC also had the chance to spend time at the *Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams*, learning first-hand how more extensive and organized religious training can allow for more organized interpretations. Before leaving the institute, a young female student from Nigeria took time away from final exam revision to meet with us and describe her own experience challenging the overly-narrow, and sometimes uninformed, religious attitudes of self-appointed religious leaders in her home city. She is now training at the Mohammed VI Institute to learn Arabic and to continue her religious training so that when she returns to Nigeria she will be equipped to check and challenge established narratives in her own community.

While religious training is important, political and economic factors are equally critical in understanding why women end up participating in extremist organizations. In Qatar, we met with Silatech, a non-profit organization which recognizes that the lack of jobs and economic opportunities can be the final push for young women and men who are already interested in joining extremist groups. Silatech's model for reaching young women is particularly interesting to policy-makers and peace-builders because it deals with both gender and economic development in an intentional way. By recognizing that economic opportunities must be specifically designed to address the needs of different women the organization is working to reach young Somali women and provide them with better opportunities than those available through extremist groups. Through grants and micro-financing for specific sectors and industries, Silatech is working on its way to create more than five million jobs by 2022.⁶² While the role of women in extremist organizations has evolved significantly over the past decade, we can help address this challenge by focussing on approaches that female leaders are already using to prevent conflict. Without recognizing the role that gender plays in extremism, policy-makers and practitioners will struggle to keep pace with violent extremist organizations.

⁶² Kabbani, Nadder. "Youth Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge". *Brookings Institution*, 26 February 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/youth-employment-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-revisiting-and-reframing-the-challenge/>

Conclusions and Recommendations

The two-weeks spent in the MENA region as part of the 2019 UNAOC Fellowship brought forth four main areas where religion and religious actors played a role in the field of peacebuilding and conflict prevention: (re)shaping of religious ideas and customs, religion-inspired solutions to context-specific demands, prevention of violent extremism, and interfaith dialogue.

While secular biases persist and affect the work on religion and gender in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, self-reflecting helps to become aware and eventually overcome inherent biases. By being culturally, religiously and gender sensitive, and understanding the local context, it will become clearer how religion and gender interact in a specific society and culturally sustainable options to work on the topic will become apparent.

Presented MENA initiatives show that actors are creating change in their own communities by using religion and interfaith dialogue as a vehicle for progress. Women and young people reclaim their role as activists, facilitators, mediators and, ultimately, peacebuilders and peacemakers. Their interfaith and intercultural dialogue efforts help transcend boundaries of religion, culture, social class and even geography with new technologies making interfaith and cross-cultural exchanges accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and desire to constructively engage with difference.

Other MENA initiatives pointed at the key operational roles women can play in violent extremist organizations. Conversation partners shared the concern regarding women's portrayal in media and highlighted the importance of adequately portraying female extremists as committed participants of violent extremist movements. Furthermore, religious education was singled out as an important tool to challenge existing "radical" narratives and discourses. Developing context-specific, tailor-made economic opportunities proved to be a helpful tool in preventing young men and women from joining violent extremist movements.

Policy Recommendations

- *Western governments should leave space for cultural- and context-specific solutions:* While excusing opposition to women's inclusion by referring to cultural customs and norms is unsatisfactory, efforts of gender equality and women's empowerment will look different in every context. Secular governments should invest more time in assessing how culture and local traditions affect women in various ways and support context-specific projects working towards addressing local women's needs.
- *Secular governments should also engage with the religious actors considered radical or extreme:* Including religious actors which that are considered moderate are usually quick-wins because their values and views are more aligned with those of liberal democracies. Engagement with groups viewed as extreme costs time and effort, but effort but is nonetheless invaluable to ensure that they do not isolate themselves further.
- *Governments and governmental agencies need to prioritize gendered analysis of policies aimed at preventing violent extremism:* Enhanced study of the relationship between women and violent extremism is needed more than ever now. Female and male participants are motivated by similar, but still distinct ideas and circumstances. Until governmental actors recognize the role of women in violent extremism, they risk ignoring and overlooking a major and growing base of support for terrorism and extremism. Acknowledging the agency of women in violent extremist movements is the precondition to include them meaningfully in PVE efforts.

- *Credible experts, not governmental actors, should lead efforts to challenge and change religious narratives:* Secular governmental and intergovernmental institutions lack religious legitimacy and should therefore refrain from claiming entitlement for interpretation. Reinterpretation and exegesis of religious texts should be done by the members of the respective religious community. Nevertheless, governments can support unheard voices of a respective religion and give a platform to newcomers and established religious scholars with views considered moderate.
- *Expand range of actors and create new spaces of interfaith dialogue:* Only engaging representative of formal religious hierarchies leads to mere photographed handshakes and empty phrases. Particularly in context-specific dialogue projects, analyzing the role religious women play in conflict and then strategically engaging those with a considerable constituency will make the entire project more sustainable. Further, recognizing constructive role and positive contribution of community-based organizations, cultural centers, schools, youth centers, private entities and grassroots activists to the interfaith and intercultural dialogue will ensure greater diversity of voices in the room.
- *Support and facilitate meaningful participation of women and youth from all religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds in interfaith and intercultural dialogue:* Governments, decision makers and traditional religious figures should promote and advance active participation of women and youth in interfaith dialogue and related public debate and policy-making, guaranteeing their seat at the decision-making table. Additionally, raising visibility of women and youth-led interfaith dialogue initiatives and their success stories will have a ripple effect and create positive role models for others.
- *Introduce and promote ICT-based solutions for interfaith dialogue:* Integrating new IT, media and communication technologies into traditional interfaith dialogue formats will allow for innovative, interactive and non-partisan ways of fostering positive personal connections across religions, geographical, political and social borders. It can also help reach out to non-organized youth.

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Navigating Duality and Women's Empowerment: Inclusivity, Dialogue, and Education
By: William Lindsay, United States of America

Introduction

Over the course of two weeks, the EUNA cohort traveled to Morocco, Egypt, and Qatar where we met with groups and organizations to discuss women's role in conflict prevention and peacemaking. My knowledge and experience with the regions of Middle East and North Africa was, prior to this fellowship, somewhat limited in scope. The entirety of my work as a young professional has thus far been defined by working with newcomers (refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants) in both Europe and the United States. The majority of newcomers with whom I have worked are from a broad range of Arab and African countries such as Syria, the Congo, Iraq, and Eritrea. As such, my perspective of the worldviews held by people from these regions of the world is informed by individuals in a post-resettlement Western setting. At the time of this fellowship I was an AmeriCorps VISTA member serving at Women of the World in Salt Lake City, Utah as their Program Manager. This is a non-profit organization that serves refugee and immigrant women by helping them achieve self-sufficiency and a voice in their community. One of the largest accomplishments for the women we serve is to become gainfully employed; meaning helping a woman identify a career path and secure a livable wage for her and her family. Broadly speaking, this kind of advocacy is considered to be "Economic Empowerment." At my organization, we help women via a highly personalized system of post-resettlement case management. While our Founder and Executive Director is an Iraqi woman, our case managers have historically been white American women. Their approach is entirely secular, and doesn't adhere to any specific religion's beliefs or customs. In fact, we actively dissuade both volunteers and clients from bringing religion into their mentoring relationship with women. This irreligious approach to our organization's services can sometimes conflict with the norms of traditional Muslim families.

By visiting countries where Islam is the prevailing religious hegemony, I aimed to understand how to engage different stakeholders in pursuit of women's empowerment while navigating the duality of secularism and Islam as worldviews. More specifically, I will focus on the perspectives of stakeholders we encountered during the fellowship and how they can inform culturally-specific strategies to collectively empower the women we serve at my organization.

Unlike more secular countries in the West, Islam is a cultural system that is inseparable from all spheres of life in the MENA region. At this point, I want to demarcate what I came to know as *religious Islam* and *political Islam*. For the sake of this essay, Religious Islam will be defined as the Holy Quran and the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Political Islam will be defined as the sociopolitical and cultural norms that are influenced by Islam, such as gender parity in government, gender roles, and pre-marital relationship guidelines for men and women.

The Role of Men in Women's Economic Empowerment

Determined to better understand barriers to encouraging economic independence, I posed my primary question to one of the organizations we met with in Rabat called *National Union of Women in Morocco*. I asked the speaker "How do you encourage economic independence from women if they are more traditional Muslim?" Their response was to include men in the center's activities; specifically, young men. "Teach them that if they want a better world, engage women as much as men." I pressed further to ask about situations where men discourage their wives from working, and they responded that it's best to approach the conversation from an economic perspective. It's important to insist that economic empowerment plays a vital role in every household, and both men *and* women must be equipped in this capacity.

In another meeting in Rabat with Mrs. Asma Lamrabet of the *Center for Women's Studies in Islam*, we discussed men's involvement in this issue. Men should be involved in the conversation and pursuit of women's empowerment because of their implicit role as both victim and perpetrator of systems in political Islam that perpetuate inequality. We must focus on Islamic social identity that impacts every form of life. The challenge is to do so in a way that benefits the women involved while mutually respecting their Islamic identity. A means to do so would be to build a new dynamic of how Quranic texts are interpreted, and deconstruct patriarchal interpretations by looking at Islam from a human rights perspective. According to Mrs. Lamrabet, women in Morocco are in two worlds: A secular world where people refuse the issue of religion, and a traditionalist world where they refuse any kind of religious reform. We also discussed a system of hypocrisy that exists between religious Islam and political Islam. This system is defined by cultural norms that contradict (or are at least inconsistent with) sacred texts. This isn't an issue endemic to Morocco. Other parts of the Muslim world are likely similarly divided in this way; where some women want to be emancipated and modern, and others desire to be religious and traditionalist.

Conflict Prevention and Women as Stakeholders

In Cairo, we engaged primarily with the topic of conflict resolution and extremism prevention. The *Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism* employs interfaith and intercultural dialogue both in Egypt and internationally as a means to combating extremism. They believe that their institution "reflects the true spirit of Islam" by striving for tolerance and moderation. The observatory believes that misinterpretation of Quranic texts is caused in-part by a lack of linguistic understanding of readers. To address this, the organization monitors the online and media presence of terrorist groups and quickly responds to radical messages of Islam with a moderate Quranic interpretation of the same issue and widely disseminates the moderate interpretation. Using this reactionary method, they seek to engage in the broader conversation of Islamic interpretation. The purpose is to show different perspectives, and accept that there often isn't one single answer to an issue. This way of operating demonstrates the importance of dialogue and education; as means to not only deepen understanding of differences, but also to address extremism.

At the *Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding*, the Director General stated that the West is missing a tool to positively engage with Islam and other religions. He warned that it is often ineffective when outside development actors come to address

issues in Muslim countries. Instead, he encourages community-driven messages. To him, people living in villages do not operationalize their solutions based on international law; and the alternative should be seeking community and religious leaders and co-generating solutions that are embedded in the local customs. In a Western secular context, we can similarly engage with the customs and religions of the individuals assisted in post-resettlement life.

At the Arab Women Organization, we gained an understanding of the disproportionate burden that women carry both during armed conflicts and in post-conflict settings. Post-conflict, they suffer from poor living conditions, malnutrition, sexual disease, and pregnancy-related diseases and death. They are subject to gender-based sexual violence and exploitation, and often shoulder the burden to care for others. Women have the role of the central caretaker in many cultures, and if they have a voice in conflict resolution, they will be better positioned to be heavily involved in post-conflict processes such as peace talks and electoral processes. We know that women should play a central role in conflict resolution, but challenges persist. Therefore, we must build the capacity of programs to include women in decision-making processes both during and post-conflict by increasing awareness and advocating for their participation.

Framework and Outcomes of Education and Policy

The first organization we visited in Rabat was the *Mohammed VI Institute*. They train imams from Morocco, France, and other parts of Africa to ensure a complete education in Islam. The institute posits that inconsistent education of Islam is a key contributor to religious extremism throughout the world, and these teachings can come from self-proclaimed imams. Their framework to address extremism was through the powerful tools of education and interfaith dialogue. A less visible, but equally important, stakeholder is youth. The *Idmaj Association* is a school that revitalized an infamous slum neighborhood in Rabat. The founder Bobker Mamouz saw a lot of youth violence in the neighborhood and saw the culturally-sanctioned capital punishment administered by parents. He posed a question to parents who were frustrated by violence in their neighborhood: “How are you surprised when youth and adults are violent when they are brought up in an environment of violence?” To address this, *Idmaj* establishes international partnerships with schools and educators around the world using a STEM based curriculum. The *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* office in Doha, Qatar stated that all the change in their country toward inclusivity and empowerment of women is top-down and entirely government-led. Both the abdicated HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his son and current Emir HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani are widely credited with progressive, forward-looking visions of Qatar. Under these two leaders, the country of Qatar drafted a new constitution, held elections, and encouraged education for women. While their ideas were at first resisted by Qataris, the progressive outcomes prevailed. In Qatar, the UN Secretary General Humanitarian Envoy strives for a new approach in their strategic objectives, which includes identifying less-represented stakeholders, creating local partnerships, and bridging the gap between regional and global leadership. For example, when discussing solutions to problems faced in refugee camps, the envoy engaged with asylum seekers at the camps themselves. This inclusive way of operating restores agency to the groups receiving aid, and helps lessen the power imbalance between local actors and international aid.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To reiterate, many issues related to political Islam involve men as both perpetrators and victims. This can be addressed in-part by more consistent religious education from a human rights perspective and by expanding (not replacing) the horizons of Quranic interpretation. The way to facilitate consistent religious education is by involving religious leaders like imams, an example demonstrated by the *Mohammed VI Institute*. Interfaith dialogue and education are primary vehicles of preventing extremism by spreading a tolerant and moderate interpretation of Islam. The shared conclusions of the examples outlined in this essay are both education and intercultural/interfaith dialogue in a way that engages stakeholders with less visibility, such as women and youth, while maintaining the inclusivity of men. We have explored the importance of why these demographics should be involved, and have seen frameworks that hold education and youth as priority from organizations like the *Idmaj Association* in Casablanca. We learned from organizations in Cairo the utmost importance of dialogue and education as a vehicle for peace and collaborative problem solving. Lastly, we garnered the perspective of the UN Secretary General Humanitarian Envoy in Doha for connecting the global and local stakeholders to cogenerate solutions for shared issues.

Back at Women of the World, we can apply these lessons of education, dialogue, and inclusivity when we engage with women and their families. To best serve our women, we must collaboratively establish their goals in a way that doesn't counter their religious or cultural customs. To take it a step further, we can expand the perspective of women's empowerment to an economic perspective and a central means to advocate for women as leaders in their households. By bringing in their husbands into the shared goal of economic empowerment, we hope to likewise create a step-by-step plan that is culturally relevant and consistent with the women we serve. I will end with the same words of encouragement I left the children with at the *Idmaj Association*: "The conclusion of many our meetings with grassroots movements, civil society groups, and intergovernmental entities concluded three priorities: Education, Dialogue, and Intercultural/Interfaith communication. You are in a special position to receive an education, be involved with people from other cultures, and communicate new ideas to your community. The futures of your countries lie in your hands, and we are all cheering for your success."

**Contextualizing International Frameworks:
From Polarization to Inclusive Implementation**
Alicia Kuin and Sif Heide-Ottosen

Introduction

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) explores the roots of polarization within and between societies and cultures. The annual UNAOC Fellowship Program focused the 2019 topic on the Role of Women in Peacemaking and Conflict Prevention. During the program, European Union and North American (EUNA) fellows visited the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and met with actors from national, regional and local contexts to discuss areas of polarization and make recommendations to the UNAOC.

This report will focus on the polarization of international frameworks, specifically UN Resolution 1325 and its' subsequent resolutions, and their failure to consider inclusive design principles on supporting and empowering local actors in context specific implementation through the National Action Plans (NAPs). Limited attention has been paid to whether and how implementation might be ensured in different national and regional contexts. The UNAOC recognizes and celebrates diversity in cultures and religions through dialogues, which are pertinent factors to take in to consideration when operationalizing any international human rights framework in diverse national contexts. Further, it will explore how inclusive process design can operationalize international frameworks by transcending silos and overlapping the roles of national, regional and local actors.

Despite the passing UNSCR 1325, hailed as a breakthrough resolution on women, peace and security, little progress has been made in increase in women's participation and influence in peace talks has been made. This is not just an issue in the MENA region, but an international and systemic issue; a woman has never been selected as the head of a peace mediation team in any peace talk sponsored by the United Nations (UN). While 1325 has been used as an advocacy tool for women's organizations in different countries to lobby for gender inclusive peace-processes⁶³, structural issues such as patriarchy are universal with gender inequalities manifesting themselves in diverse ways in different societies.

While tackling structural issues is beyond the mandate of UNSCR 1325, who gets a say in what peace looks like is inherently political. Recognizing that 1325, the follow-up resolutions, and especially, designing of NAPs, are political processes would demand a different approach, built on understanding the context before engaging, especially around how harmful gendered social norms can be fueling conflict, and how these interact with other forms of discrimination. This would in turn help foster a more positive peace, inclusive of the voices of women and marginalized groups.

International Frameworks: 1325, 1889, 2242, 2467 and NAPs

United Nations Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security is a landmark resolution that affirms the critical role of women in conflict prevention, resolution and peace-building as

⁶³ Somalia International Rehabilitation Centre (SIRC) and Lund Horn of African Forum (LUHAF), 2011. The Role of Women in Promoting Peace and Development. Proceedings of the 10th Annual Conference on the Horn of Africa, Lund, Sweden, September 23-34 2011.

agents of peace. It stresses the importance of women as full participants in conflict resolution and decision-making processes and calls on actors to adopt a gender perspective when implementing peace agreements. It advises actors to consider both measures and mechanisms that will empower and support local community voices.⁶⁴

Subsequent Resolution 1889 (2009) stresses the need of actors to ensure that local perspectives and needs are included in the design and implementation of post-conflict strategies. It requests the Secretary General to operationalize women's involvement in decision making processes.⁶⁵

In 2015, Resolution 2242 highlighted the nexus between women's meaningful involvement and the long-term sustainability of resolutions. This Resolution points to a polarization between the theory of international frameworks and their application on the ground as a result of a lack of country specific political will, resources, accountability, and cultural nuances.⁶⁶

The most recent Resolution 2467 (2019) emphasizes that these barriers can be dismantled through a commitment to the protection of human rights, as "women's protection and participation are inextricably linked and mutually-reinforcing as reflected by all previous resolutions on women, peace and security".⁶⁷ The resolution encourages member states and entities to support women led organizations in meaningfully engaging community voices and groups in conflict prevention.

The implementation of 1325 is up to member states, who are encouraged to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) to determine context-specific priorities, responsibilities and government commitments. In 2017, Inclusive Security published a guideline on creating NAPs with a focus on local context priorities, partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs), clearly identified responsibilities and monitoring and evaluation plans.⁶⁸ Out of the 185 member states who adopted 1325, 79 have adopted NAPs, with Iraq and Palestine being the only countries in the MENA region to do so.⁶⁹ During the UNAOC Fellowship program, we heard about challenges related to

⁶⁴ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security]*, 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), available from undocs.org/S/RES/1325.

⁶⁵ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 1889 (2009) [on women and peace and security]*, 5 October 2009, S/RES/1889 (2009), available from undocs.org/S/RES/1889.

⁶⁶ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2242 (2015) [on women and peace and security]*, 13 October 2015, S/RES/2242 (2015), available from undocs.org/S/RES/2242.

⁶⁷ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 2467 (2019) [on women and peace and security]*, 23 April 2019, S/RES/2467 (2019), available from undocs.org/S/RES/2467.

⁶⁸ Young, Angelic and Zsuzsanna Lippai (2017). *Creating National Action Plans: A Guide to Implementing Resolution 1325*. Inclusive Security, available from <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/creating-national-action-plans-a-guide-to-implementing-resolution-1325/>.

⁶⁹ Peace Women: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. *National Action Plans for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*. April 2019, available from <https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states>.

implementing international frameworks and explored the need to go beyond an intragovernmental focus, to define how communities will be consulted, to consider whose voices, and how input can be funneled from the bottom up and applied cyclically.

Observations on the Polarization of International Frameworks

In the MENA region, we met with national, regional and local actors from Morocco, Egypt and Qatar, who are all member states without NAPs on UN Resolution 1325. In each country, we asked questions about country-specific areas of polarization and the role of women in peacemaking and conflict prevention.

Morocco

In Morocco, we met with Nouzha Skalli, former Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development. She stated that the biggest issue in Morocco has been implementing international and national laws against political Islam. National Feminist Islam scholar Asma Lamrabet, Center for Women's Study in Islam, agreed that implementation is what is most difficult, as people fear losing their Moroccan Islam identity if there is societal change. She said that the main barrier to women's issues is deconstructing the societal religious patriarchy. She emphasized that the confusion is between international principles of dignity, autonomy and access to justice and how those translate nationally and into regional and local contexts.

The Director of the Moroccan Association for Women's Rights advised that persistent patriarchal structural and social obstacles, have prevented Moroccan women from reaching economic parity both horizontally and vertically. The organization is trying to combat this by practicing an inclusive bottom-up approach by organizing meetings with ministers and parliamentarians and then bringing local women and empowering them to do the talking during the meetings. The Union Nationale des Femme du Maroc is also working on applying inclusive design practices. They have diverse representation in leadership which allows programs to be adapted and redesigned to take into account the specifications of each region by respecting the unique aspects of their culture, religions and traditions.

When engaging local actors in Morocco on policy reform, governments and organizations benefit from the input of grassroots organizations such as the IDMAJ Association, which works with local children and parents to provide education, conflict resolution workshops and to foster a space for community empowerment and knowledge exchange. Grassroots organizations know the struggles of the community and region best, as they interact with local actors on a daily basis.

Egypt

In Egypt, we met with the League of Arab States who spoke about the Sustainable Development Goals and 1325's peace and security agenda. One of the biggest challenges they have faced is that when following up with countries on how to develop NAPs, some countries respond by saying that 1325 is not a priority because they do not have conflict. The League is trying to work with this response by focusing on creating an Arab Women's Mediation Network in order to respond to 1325 by increasing women's involvement in peace and security across Arab states.

During a meeting with Mahmoud Karin, the Chairman of the National Council for Human Rights, he emphasized how challenging it is for governments to interpret International treaties and

conventions, as you have to consider how they will fit with national laws and social norms. When inquiring about how local actors are empowered to voice their opinions, he noted that the onus is on CSOs. The Council, for example, has regional offices, an ombuds office, a mobile unit, holds an annual conference with local organizations, a national dialogue with unions and NGO's, publishes an annual complaints report which informs their action plan, and sends a summary report of concerns to the local ministries. Karin acknowledged that although the government and CSOs have a strict division of labour, they can synchronize joint ventures in order to share information and open the lines of communication between leaders to inform and support effective implementation.

Ashraf Swelam, Director General of the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding advised that women, peace and security is mainstreamed through all of their programming as well as being a program of its own. He emphasized that there is a nexus between SDG's and 1325, but that the nexus needs to be operationalized. A challenge to this is that the UN and governments operate in silos. He is working on developing a high impact resource to ensure that a NAP with a monitoring and evaluation plan involves government and all stakeholders in order to tackle the entire continuum. Swelam believes the conversation around implementation needs to be liberated so there is cross-fertilization between the silos and pillars within the international, national, regional and local contexts. A key message was that you cannot shrink the complexities of conflict into frameworks, as conflict prevention and planning needs to be context specific and driven by local contexts. An idea he has to support this is utilizing the Women's Mediation Networks, such as FEMWISE, who connect women across countries, silos and tracks to inform a holistic bottom-up approach.

Qatar

In Qatar, we met with Dr. Ahmed Al-Meraikhi, the UN Secretary General's Humanitarian Envoy, who has experienced the challenge that the UN and countries face in regards to implementation. He sees how the UN, for example, treats all of the Gulf countries the same when they are all different and require different resources. He believes in the need to understand specific contexts instead of bombarding them with requirements. He also sees donors working in silo's and thinks engaging traditional and non-traditional donors in conversation together and with the UN would be beneficial. He critiqued the UN for focusing on projects, fulfilling timelines and budgets, and forgetting about the people. He noted his active engagement as the UN Humanitarian Envoy in listening to the voices of the people on the ground, so the UN can be informed by local, regional and government ideas on issues.

Lolwah Rashid Al-Khater, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mentioned that change in Qatar is a top down process, with limited CSOs, non-profit organizations and grassroots actors. She believes that policy wise there is no discrimination in Qatar however there is a social glass ceiling. It was admitted that creating a NAP for 1325 was not on Qatar's agenda as there has been no push for it in society. From what was observed while in Qatar, there are few independent organizations or women's rights groups. It was clear that gender discrimination persists with women's free choice being dictated by patriarchal societal standards. As a key player in the Arab world, it was surprising to see the countries laws and societal norms so polarized regarding the advancement of women.

When meeting with one of the few CSOs in Qatar Silatech (who work internationally), we heard that local actors have a lot of hesitation when the UN or government agencies enter their communities. It is therefore imperative to have relationships established with local partners who know the people, issues, needs and difficulties. There are also internal systems that restrict implementation plans due to local policies. This is where local partners can help provide feedback, inform and shape plans to meet local policies. Customization allows you to create links between programming and operationalization. You need to empower knowledge and information within communities as they are the change makers and they have the knowledge needed to effectively operationalize implementation plans to ensure change and sustainability.

1325: Defining the ‘How’ for Inclusive Implementation

Globally, there is a lack of meaningful engagement with women on the policies and processes that affected them, such as UNSCR 1325. While 1325 and follow-up resolution 1889 outline the need for meaningful engagement, when consultations have occurred, these have been deemed extractive and tokenistic by women’s organizations⁷⁰. At best, there will be no buy-in, but at worst, consultations can exacerbate inter-communal tensions and be disempowering to women. Moving beyond consultation to dialogues ensuring that the voices of all women and marginalized groups are heard and their contributions are taken in to account when designing NAPs. We propose three main solutions to ensuring more sustainable, and inclusive implementation of the NAPs: embracing complexity, ensuring full participation and contextualization.

Embracing complexity: understanding before engaging

Frameworks tend to oversimplify diverse groups by narrowly defining them. UNSCR 1325 mentions both ‘women’ and ‘civil society’ which are not uniform and will vary greatly depending on the context.

By definition, ‘women’ are seen as agents of peace, outlining only the positive roles which they can and do play, but failing to understand how women can be perpetrators of violence and active in sustaining conflicts. Recent research⁷¹ has shown that women play an active role in violent extremist organizations and navigate conflicts in divergent and complex ways in conflict-affected states; a topic of discussion throughout the UNAOC Fellowship. An oversimplification of ‘women’ purely agents of peace misses the complexity in conflict systems, where actors continually mold and change their positionality to ensure survival⁷².

In the same vein, labelling ‘civil society’ as a homogenous group does disservice to an often complex situation. In most conflict-affected countries, the balance of power has been shifted by war and ongoing violence, empowering certain communities at the expense of others, civil society will tend to reflect the voice of the dominant group. In an authoritarian setting, there may be a lack of civil society all together, and a repressive state-dominated narrative will prevail. While

⁷⁰ Women for Women International (2019). Beyond Consultation: A tool for meaningfully engaging with women in fragile and conflict-affected states. <https://www.beyondconsultations.org/>.

⁷¹ United States Institute of Peace (2015). Charting a New Course: Thought For Action Kit. Women Preventing Violent Extremism.

⁷² David Kilcullen (2015). Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla. Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (July 1, 2015)

respecting the sovereignty of each country, it is important to be aware of which narrative is being empowered at the expense of others.

To be inclusive of all voices there is a need to understand diversity between and within groups before engaging. To combat this and avoid falling in to stereotypes, it is recommended to conduct a gender sensitive conflict analysis, including a stakeholder assessment as well as an intersectional gendered analysis which seeks to understand what a peaceful and secure society would look like to different actors, including accounting for differences between women in terms of class, race, ethnicity, ages and religion. This would ideally consult a broad and diverse group of women and marginalized groups on what definitions around ‘peace’, ‘security’ and ‘inclusivity’ means to them.

Ensuring full participation: going beyond the usual suspects

Participation is grounded in the inclusion of a diverse range of stakeholders in all stages of the process. Typically, a balance can be struck between ‘broad’ participation (consulting a wide range of stakeholders) and ‘deep’ participation (choosing to elicit fewer observations from key participants)⁷³. Choosing between these two will inevitably depend on budget and time restrictions, but broadly ensuring that a range of stakeholders are consulted by including more marginalized voices will be important for ensuring full representation when designing a NAP.

As a rule of thumb, engaging formally registered groups, such as non-governmental organizations, as well as grassroots, unregistered groups, across different parts of the country, would be preferable⁷⁴. As part of the UNAOC Fellowship, we met with a diversity of actors, it was clear all of these approached problems in different ways. Ensuring diverse representation, based on the conflict analysis, and not falling in to generalist labels perpetuated by humanitarian actors – such as internally displaced persons, or refugees, will go further to ensure that all voices and experiences are heard and accounted for.

An example of good practice in ensuring full participation comes from the MENA region, designing the NAP for Jordan, in which a series of dialogues around the country was held to elicit local perspectives on priorities⁷⁵. The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), together with UN Women, held two national level dialogues, seven local dialogues and one dialogue aimed at refugees, in early 2016, to consult ahead of designing the NAP. To take this a step beyond consultation would be disseminating the findings in the communities in which information was gathered, and verify and receive feedback on the outcomes decided for the NAP.

Contextualization: ensuring alignment for ownership of process

To contextualize each NAP, there is a need to align with existing policies and structures in the given country. First and foremost, gender and security sector policies should guide the implementation of NAPs. If these are not progressive, or in place, practitioners should ensure they are empowering women’s activists, while still ensuring their security for participation in the

⁷³ Inclusive Security (2017). Creating National Action Plans: A Guide to Implementing Resolution 1325, p.6.

⁷⁴ Women for Women International (2019). Beyond Consultation: A tool for meaningfully engaging with women in fragile and conflict-affected states. <https://www.beyondconsultations.org/>.

⁷⁵ Inclusive Security (2017). Creating National Action Plans: A Guide to Implementing Resolution 1325.

process. Implementation of NAPs in fragile and conflict-affected countries will need to be aligned with attempts at fostering peace, post-transitional justice and social reconciliation processes.

To ensure political buy-in at the national level, identifying champions is a useful strategy. These would typically be stakeholders wielding power in communities, such as politicians, business persons, or community leaders. Having champions has been a useful strategy in furthering outcomes for women's political participation in decision-making⁷⁶.

Recommendations and Meeting Objectives

This report has highlighted the importance of international frameworks mitigating polarization through a consideration of inclusive design principles that support context specific implementation. Specifically, frameworks need to embrace complexity by conducting conflict analysis and stakeholder assessments, ensure the full participation of a diverse range of stakeholders, and align the implementation of frameworks with country specific policies and structures. The following recommendations identify actors and actions that can support meeting the above objectives.

Global Alliance of Women Mediators Networks

In response to UN Resolution 1325, a Global Alliance of networks - FemWise Africa, Mediterranean Women Mediators, Nordic Women Mediators, and the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth (WMC) – are working to enhance collaboration on strengthening the meaningful participation of women in peace processes at all levels. We recommend that every person, organization and government department we met with during the Fellowship Program tap into the Global Alliance to fulfill one or more of the following needs:

- ✚ The members within each network include track 1, 2 and 3 mediators and therefore support cross-fertilization between the international, national, regional and local contexts.
- ✚ Members are well-connected and can facilitate communication between UN silos and government pillars in order to overlap the roles of national, regional and local actors.
- ✚ Members are focused on, and driven by, gender and security sector policies and can provide guidance on how these can be utilized to inform NAPs.
- ✚ Members can inform and support the creation of an Arab Women's Mediation Network, which can be a vehicle to empower grassroots peacebuilders and bring attention to the importance of 1325 and the creation of NAPs.
- ✚ Many members of FemWise and the WMC understand the role that political Islam plays in operationalizing frameworks and they can support the creation and implementation of NAPs with consideration being given to religious nuances.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

UNAOC aims to reduce polarization at global and local levels by celebrating diversity in cultures and religions through dialogues on understanding and cooperation. In line with the new pillar on Women as Peace Mediators, we recommend that UNAOC respond to one or more of the following needs:

⁷⁶ Social Development Direct (2017). Somali Women's Political Participation and Leadership. East Africa Research Fund.

- ✚ Invite members of the Global Alliance to participate in programming, specifically the UNAOC's Young Peacebuilders Initiative, in order to engage young men and women in dialogue on how to effectively consult and collaborate with grassroots and community level organizations.
- ✚ Focus a future UNAOC Fellowship Program on the topic of *The Role of Consultation in Inclusive Peace Process Design*.
- ✚ Host a webinar series on the Intercultural Leaders and Alumni Engagement Platform on the topic of Contextualizing International Frameworks. The series can include webinars focused on the topics of Implementing Frameworks via NAPs, Inclusive Design Principles, Conflict Analysis with an Intersectional Lens, Diversity in Stakeholder Engagement, and Aligning Frameworks with Country-Specific Policies. The webinars can be hosted by guest experts from the national, regional and local levels who specialize in each area.
- ✚ Create a new Gender Dialogue Program to give women and men a platform to discuss and address issues related to gender and to provide an opportunity to build cross-cultural partnerships.

UN Women, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and Inclusive Security

UN Women and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations are the two main UN branches implementing 1325, while Inclusive Security is the organization that published the guide on *Creating National Actions Plans: A Guide to Implementing Resolution 1325*. We recommend that these departments/organizations respond to one or more of the following needs:

- ✚ Hold national and local level dialogues, including a broad range of women and marginalized groups to inform the development of inclusive NAPS. Be participatory in this approach, by going beyond consultation at the beginning of the process by going back to communities to verify the outcomes of the process and disseminate findings before finalizing implementation. Ensure all NAPs have been translated, and are easily accessible to communities which have participated in their design, and marginalized groups in general.
- ✚ Build a platform for partnerships among organizations working on peace-building and conflict prevention at all levels to share lessons learnt and best practices on implementing an inclusive 1325, as well as increasing women and marginalized groups voices in decision-making processes, most notably peace-building and conflict prevention. This would include local voices, such as women's organizations, and international gender specialists.
- ✚ Develop procedures to ensure all participants in the process are safe in implementation of design of NAPs, for example Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity, especially when engaging women's groups and marginalized groups in fragile and conflict-affected countries.
- ✚ Design creative monitoring and evaluation strategies. Inclusive Security mentions using outcomes and impacts in their publication, instead of inputs to the process, yet this could be taken a step further by using Participatory Research Methods, such as Most Significant Change to capture impact, or, as part of the consultation process, get communities to define desired outcomes and impacts for measuring implementation of the NAP.
- ✚ Identify champions of the NAPs in each country, as part of stakeholder assessment, to ensure full implementation. Ensure that the NAP is aligned with gender and security policies, and political buy-in from all stakeholders.