Now *is* the Time: Research on Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in the Middle East and North Africa

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

OXFAM

international alert

Acknowledgements

Contents

Abbreviations

CEDAW   Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO   Civil society organisation
EFM   Early and forced marriage
FCO   Foreign Commonwealth Office
FGD   Focus group discussion
FGM   Female genital mutilation
GBV   Gender-based violence
GONGO   Government-organised non-governmental organisation
GPC   General People's Congress
IDP   Internally displaced person
INGO   International non-governmental organisation
ISIS   Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KII   Key informant interview
KRG   Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI   Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MB   Muslim Brotherhood
MENA   Middle East and North Africa
MoWA   Ministry of Women's Affairs
MP   Member of parliament
NAP   National Action Plan
NCW   National Council for Women
NDC   National Dialogue Conference
NGO   Non-governmental organisation
NSVAW   National Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women
OPT   Occupied Palestinian Territory
PA   Palestinian Authority
PIE   Person-in-environment
PMF   Popular Mobilization Forces
SGBV   Sexual and gender-based violence
UN   United Nations
UNSC   United Nations Security Council
WPS   Women, peace and security
WRO   Women's rights organisation

Executive Summary

"No matter where you are everyone says that now is not

the time to talk about these issues. There is no such thing

as women's rights. We are in a war now, there is a massive

humanitarian crisis. They say now is not the time".[1]

[1] Female research respondent, Yemen

In January 2017, Oxfam Great Britain commissioned International Alert to undertake a study that examines the impact of fragility and conflict on gender justice and women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The research was part of a larger Oxfam project entitled 'Promoting the Needs of Women in Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa', funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). In collaboration with the Oxfam technical committee, Alert designed and implemented a research methodology aimed at understanding how conflict and fragility in four different contexts – Egypt, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Yemen – has affected the path towards the realisation of gender equality and gender justice in the past several years of political and social change – for better or for worse.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Inform and influence discourse and programmes on gender justice in fragile and conflict-affected settings, considering the United Nations (UN) women, peace and security (WPS) agenda;
- Inform policy recommendations to national governments and regional bodies in relation to the implementation of commitments on gender equality and WPS in conflict-affected states; and
- Provide policy and programmatic recommendations to international development actors on mitigating the negative effects of conflict and advancing gender justice in fragile and conflict-affected settings in the MENA region.

The research explores the following questions:

1. Who is filling the gaps left by the state in the four project countries? What positions, discourses and actions do these actors and the state adopt towards gender justice and women's rights? How have these positions changed over time?

2. What are the consequences of the above on the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) and women's rights organisations (WROs) to drive a gender justice agenda?

3. What are the strategies developed by national and regional WROs and CSOs to counter this reduction in space and push the women's rights agenda forward?

4. What role do international development actors (donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)) have to play in countering the negative effects of conflict and fragility on the realisation of women and girls' rights?

While women and girls form a specific focus of this project, we acknowledge that gender issues are not limited to women and girls. Dominant gender attitudes held by men and women alike can be obstacles to gender equality. Indeed, we urge for an approach to understanding gender in a holistic, 'broader and deeper', manner, taking into account women, girls, men and boys as well as other gender identities, and being alert to how these identities interact with other societal markers such as age, urban/rural location, ethnicity, religion and disability. These factors play a key role in defining individual needs and vulnerabilities as well as the degree of agency of individuals in contexts of social and economic transformation, including violent conflict. However, they are also both shaped by development and conflict dynamics and in turn themselves shape these processes.

Key findings

The following key findings were elucidated from the research:

❋ 1. The wider political and human rights environment is having a significant impact on gender equality and justice. Failure to deal with the broader contextual drivers of exclusion and oppression will undermine the effectiveness of and ability to deliver gender-specific programmes. It may also unfairly raise expectations among WROs about the scope for real change.

❋ 2. Ending armed conflicts through diplomatic means that are shaped by women's leadership and meaningful participation will be critical to ensuring success in the achievement of gender justice and combatting violence against women. The participants of this research consider that the international community must exercise its influence on parties to end conflicts by using its position of relative strength compared to WROs that do not possess the political protection to make forceful criticisms of incumbent governments.

❋ 3. Across the board, gender equality ranks low on the agenda of local and state governance actors, especially in comparison to issues such as maintaining or increasing political power and control of resources. This serves to keep gender justice on the back-burner and limits progress. In contexts where state actors appear to be progressing the gender justice agenda, many respondents cynically perceive this to be a gesture designed to win favour and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

❋ 4. Despite some variation in structure, behaviour and resources between contexts, state systems lack the political will and legitimacy to progress gender equality; in some cases they are even tarnishing the cause of gender equality.

❋ 5. Both state and non-state actors have an interest in obstructing gender equality and justice, as maintaining inequalities anchors models of oppression and control. Civil society and WROs have attempted to provide services for women and girls, and lobby for improved representation when institutions cannot meet these citizens' needs. Yet, they are increasingly constrained by surrounding conflict, donor priorities and, in some cases, their own social environment.

❋ 6. There is an ongoing constriction of civil society space in all contexts studied, which serves to undermine any progress that WROs and others working on the gender justice agenda have made in the last few years.

❋ 7. There is a gap between the rhetoric and action of the international community concerning government violations of human rights and justice in MENA. International actors are failing to address the structural issues that keep progress towards gender justice at bay. High-level pressure and diplomacy efforts that include the leadership and meaningful participation of women to end conflict and stop blatant human rights violations are just as needed as additional funds for humanitarian or development work.

❋ 8. Donors and INGOs[2] are inadvertently hindering the gender justice agenda by exerting a disproportionate influence on the priorities, type of work and opportunities of WROs in the four contexts. Most WROs that were interviewed find it difficult to pursue their own agendas and strategies if these do not line up with donor priorities.

❋ 9. The recent intensification of violence in Iraq, the Gaza Strip and Yemen have led donor priorities to overwhelmingly shift towards providing funds for humanitarian aid. While this is justified, it also overtakes or completely obscures the longer-term gender development agenda. As a result, many WROs in Iraq, Yemen and even the OPT have transitioned to humanitarian programming, putting their strategic gender justice work on pause. The unintended consequence is the near disappearance of the gender justice agenda.

❋ 10. There is a lack of recognition of the linkages between women's meaningful participation in humanitarian response and improved outcomes for delivering relief and conflict resolution. There is also a lack of recognition of the interaction between humanitarian efforts and the wider social and political context in which it is

[2] Donors and INGOs were at times conflated in interviews with WROs: this is likely due to the fact that INGOs often play a donor role (rather than a partnership role) in their dealings with local WROs and CSOs.

delivered, underlining the importance of gender and conflict-sensitive approaches to humanitarian aid, which are based on and respond to a strong gender and context analysis.

✳ **11. In all four contexts, women and girls are highly concerned with the decline in economic opportunities and the rise in the cost of living – a cross-cutting concern that impacts women and men and rural and urban residents, albeit in different ways.**

✳ **12. Religious leaders and discourses are influential in people's lives and ideas about gender roles and rights, but there are mixed opinions among women's rights activists on the utility of working with religious leaders.**

Background on gender equality and justice in OPT, Yemen, Egypt and Iraq

Many countries in MENA are fragile contexts characterised by unresponsive and weak institutions, low political will and stark gender inequality. Countries in the MENA region have historically performed poorly on gender equality indicators[3], which has been linked to the region's high levels of authoritarianism, low levels of democracy and poor governance.[4]

Women's groups have often championed global movements for democracy, which indicates that women's participation and positive democratic outcomes go hand in hand.[5] Arab countries that have made advances in women's participation and rights (such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) seemed more likely to achieve successful democratic transitions following the Arab uprisings that begun in 2010. The Arab uprisings ushered in a period of change and uncertainty, which led to significant obstacles in the realisation of peaceful and democratic societies – and gender justice – in Yemen, Egypt, the OPT and Iraq.

In **Egypt**, the January 25 revolution of 2011 was characterised by the robust participation of women and men, yet this positive development was marred by highly publicised attacks, especially on female protesters, and the deliberate sidelining of women from engaging in the political process.[6] Egypt has continued to slip into deeper authoritarianism and fragility amidst an economic crisis, with the state severely cracking down on civil society.

There has been a strong tradition of women's self-organisation in the **OPT** dating back to the time of the British mandate (1920–1948). Women's groups – such as the Arab Women Society in Nablus, Arab Women's Union in Jerusalem and Arab Women's Association of Palestine – first formed across the Palestinian territory in the 1920s. These groups had divergent objectives and participated in a wide range of activities including charitable giving, educational work, and both violent and non-violent direct political action against the British mandate.[7] Some contemporary WROs have their origins in these groups, while others were formed in response to the negative gendered impacts of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Despite the long history of women's self-organisation, Palestinian society still remains deeply patriarchal and is strongly marked by traditional gender roles. In times of conflict, however, these gender roles have been forced to be more flexible, driving Palestinian women to take on the tasks that were the traditional preserve of men.

In **Iraq**, WROs have played a prominent role in the country's history, although their influence has at times been affected by various conflicts. The 2003 Iraq War and subsequent civil war had a devastating impact on women including an increase in human trafficking and forced prostitution, assassination of female activists, domestic violence, family violence and honour killings, discriminatory legislation and higher poverty rates. The predominant conflict in Iraq is between the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) armed group and a coalition of the Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). In 2013-2014, ISIS captured large parts of western and northern Iraq, and there has been constant conflict ever since. This conflict has had a destructive impact on women and contributed to the internal displacement of around three million Iraqis to other parts of the country, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Yemeni women have seen dramatic highs and lows in the past six years: women effectively led the 2011 revolution but now bear the weight of a brutal armed conflict. This mirrors the duality of the two predominant depictions of women in Yemen society. On the one hand, they are seen as emotionally weak and in need of protection, while on the other, the "egalitarian ethic" affords women roles in the economy and informal decision-making. Yet Yemeni women have been and continue to act as first responders and informal peacemakers at the community level, providing representation to women in front of community leaders and solving everyday problems.[8]

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[3] For example, Yemen was ranked last out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index prior to the breakout of the armed conflict in 2015. See: World Economic Forum, The global gender gap report 2014, Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014, http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/
[4] R. Inglehart and P. Norris, Rising tide: Gender equality and cultural change around the world, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003; L.J. Benstead, Barrier or opportunity: Political Islam and support for women's political participation in Morocco, Al-Raida, Issue 135–136, 2011–2012, p.20
[5] V. Moghadam, Modernising women and democratisation after the Arab Spring, The Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, p.139

[6] S. Hafez, The revolution will not pass through women's bodies: Egypt, uprising and gender politics, The Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, p.173
[7] E. Fleischmann, The nation and 'its' new women: The Palestinian women's movement, 1920–1948, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003
[8] M-C. Heinze, Women's role in peace and security in Yemen: Literature review, London: Saferworld/Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, 2016 citing N. Adra, Tribal mediation and empowered women: Potential contributions of heritage to national development in Yemen, International Journal of Islamic Architecture, 5(2), 2016, pp.301–337

The advent of women's movements in the Arab world was intertwined with Arab struggles for independence from colonial governments in the 19th and 20th centuries.[9] It is then only logical that the push for good governance, democratisation and development in the MENA region has been inseparable from women's rights and gender justice. These linkages between governance and women's rights and gender equality were a recurring theme of consultations with WROs and local women and girls conducted in the scope of this research.

Research approach and methodology

Alert implemented a multi-pronged qualitative approach to seek out multiple perspectives and sources of information. The approach accounted for some of the gaps in access to respondents and to information, as well as the potential partiality of respondents. The researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four categories of respondents:

❈ national WROs and CSOs carrying out gender programming;

❈ key informants and activists;

❈ academics and researchers specialised in gender issues; and

❈ individuals from INGOs and UN bodies involved in gender programming.

Local researchers also conducted focus group discussions (FGD) in each of the localities. A total of 58 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 13 FGDs were conducted across the four contexts. A literature review preceded the field research and desk research was also employed throughout the period of the study to supplement the findings from the field research.

Challenges included the short duration of the study that limited the number of respondents, and security constraints that hindered access to prospective respondents. In addition to this report, four country case studies have been produced. These provide a snapshot of the key conflict issues in each country and summarise key research findings according to each specific location.

9 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), The Arab women's movement: Struggles and experiences, in UNDP RBAS, Arab human development report 2005: Towards the rise of women in the Arab world, New York: UNDP, 2006, pp.123–140, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/rbas_ahdr2005_en.pdf

Recommendations

Some of the following recommendations are reinforced by previous research in the region, underlining their continued importance. With previous research indicating that times of conflict sometimes represent opportunities to break away from the status quo and redefine gender norms, this research underscores the immense challenges brought about by conflict and fragility and therefore lend more urgency to these recommended actions. The opportunities that can manifest during conflict in the form of shifts in gender roles and norms in response to changed social and economic conditions reinforce the need for action now, rather than later. The changes that must take place for the realization of gender equality will not happen in a short period of time, and long-term, strategic engagement is necessary to realize this objective. Now is the time to step up our commitments to gender equality and gender justice in MENA. The recommendations are converged to cover all four contexts with country or context specific recommendations being given where appropriate.
The recommendations are converged to cover all four contexts.

1. Donor support to states in conflict and recovery stages should **ensure that gender machineries have the resources and technical capacity to deliver their mandate**, and should establish clear and transparent monitoring frameworks to ensure progress and transparency.

    a. In **Egypt**, donors should provide funding to the relevant ministries to implement the National Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women (NSVAW). Funding should be given in tranches, with a clear monitoring framework that attaches concrete benchmarks that must be met before new tranches of funding are disbursed.

    b. In **Iraq**, donors, UN agencies and INGOs should urge the government to allocate funding for the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 Initiative. They should compel or require the government to work with a wider range of CSOs. All funding provided to the Iraqi government should be accompanied by transparent monitoring frameworks.

    c. In the **OPT**, donors should hold the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) accountable to implement their obligations around UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325.

2. Donors and INGOs should **revive and increase funding for long-term strategic work in gender equality and justice** – including programmes centred on women's political participation and economic empowerment – alongside humanitarian response.

    a. In **Iraq**, programmes on topics such as legal awareness training and SGBV advocacy programmes have been defunded in favour of trauma and psycho-social programming.

Donors and INGOs should revive funding for these topics in parallel with funding for the much-needed emergency psycho-social support and trauma care.

b. In **Yemen**, continue to support partner WROs that are already carrying out small-scale projects in women's economic empowerment and political participation. Advocate with donors to widen these projects to include more geographical locations and a larger number of beneficiaries. At the same time, continue to fund gender-responsive humanitarian programmes and ensure that there are resources available for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and mitigation, as well as women's access to justice and economic empowerment.

3. Principles of conflict-sensitivity and early recovery need to be more fully integrated within the humanitarian response.

4. **International actors (including governments, the European Union, UN actors and INGOs) should aim to be more assertive in applying the principles of the UNSC resolution 1325 on all parties at Track I and Track II peace negotiations, and/ or communicate where they have done this and to what effect.** Ensuring women's leadership and meaningful participation in peace talks and negotiations demands a significant amount of pressure from UN bodies, donors, INGOs and local CSOs. All parties should follow the recommendations laid out in UN Women's 2015 global study on UNSC resolution 1325.[10] This also means not backing down when parties refuse to accept women in the process. International actors should also make efforts to bring Track III work closer to Tracks I and II so that local efforts are closer to high-level efforts[11].

a. In **Yemen**, the UN should ensure that at least 30% of participants in peace talks are women, including women members of conflict parties, and WROs and CSOs.

5. It is essential for international actors to undertake more assertive advocacy and follow-through on gender justice and equality with states characterised by non-democratic and poor human rights practices, and/or communicate where they have done this and to what effect. The broader political and human rights environment has a significant impact on progress towards gender justice and the operational space for WROs. Failure to address the political drivers of exclusion and oppression will undermine the effectiveness of efforts to strengthen

gender justice and equality. International actors can build a 'critical mass' of advocates through regional and global partnerships that can apply concerted pressure on states as well as have unified messaging and monitoring. This will help ensure the survival of WROs in the region amidst growing threats to space for civil society.

a. In **Egypt**, INGOs, donor governments and UN agencies should jointly pressure the state to immediately cease its crackdown on civil society using all means of leverage available. Any funding provided to the state in support of women's rights should: be given in periodic tranches, be attached to conditions that require cooperation with civil society and contain clear monitoring frameworks and benchmarks that must be met to receive future funding.

b. In **federal Iraq,** donor governments, INGOs and UN agencies should apply any influence that they have on the government in Baghdad to be more cooperative with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and WROs, including easing bureaucratic requirements for registration and permits to work. In the KRI, donors, INGOs and UN agencies should pressure the government to work with CSOs that are not affiliated with political parties.

c. In the **OPT, donors, governments, UN agencies and INGOs should not ignore the pivotal role that the occupation and blockade has played in repressing the rights of women and girls.** Support to WROs should include long-term funding and capacity-building for advocacy, with support for risk analysis and mitigation.

d. In **Yemen**, State and non-State actors and the UN should expend all possible efforts to find a political solution to the conflict, continuing to push for the inclusion of women at all levels.

6. International actors should **improve practices around transparency and measuring outcomes and progress of funds provided to states, government bodies and semi-state institutions to improve women's rights. Funding to states and** government-organised non-governmental organisations **(GONGOs)[12] should always necessitate clear benchmarks for progress** that are regularly communicated with the public in the local language, in order for citizens to understand how and for what purpose their governments are using the money. When possible, WROs should be engaged in supporting the state and monitoring the progress.

a. In **Egypt**, advocate for a clear monitoring framework that ensures that the steps outlined in the NSVAW are carried out as stipulated. Urge the National Council for Women (NCW) and the other involved ministries to publicise the content and objectives of the strategy in

[10] Coomaraswamy, Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, UN Women, 2015, pp.394–396, http://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf
[11] Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental diplomacy, while Track II diplomacy refers to non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals sometimes called 'non-state actors'. D. Snodderly, Peace terms: Glossary of terms for conflict management and peacebuilding, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp.50–51, http://www.usip.org/publications/usip-peace-terms-glossary/

[12] A GONGO is an organization that is set up to mimic a civic organizations but is sponsored by a government to support its political interests

Egyptian media and online.

b. In **OPT**, impel the PA and the MoWA to fully implement the action plans, and provide funding and technical support for them to do this.

7. UN bodies, INGOs and other international actors tend to repeatedly engage with the same pool of organisations and activists. They should **aim to reach further afield in their relationships and partnerships**, diversifying along geographic, socio-economic and generational lines. This should be done by developing and expanding partnerships with organisations outside of central urban centres, and by identifying, developing and supporting young activists to promote the gender justice agenda. This should be done in tandem with actions outlined in recommendations 5 and 8, which relate to protecting and expanding the operating space for CSOs.

a. In **Yemen**, continue programmes that reach beyond the immediate pool of activists; ensure that there is equal geographic coverage and representation of activists and organisations in the south and in the north.

8. **Increase donors and INGOs' appetite for financial and, when appropriate, security risks.** When possible, INGOs and donors should simplify/streamline complex funding and reporting requirements to enable a wider diversity of organisations to access funds, and should allow for a greater margin of risk in their own programming and advocacy. INGOs and donors have been accused of being risk-averse in their programmes, which prevents them from trying novel approaches, engaging with new partners or entering into new locations. One way to address this could be to make more explicit the link between appetite for risk and progress on gender justice objectives, the latter being difficult to achieve without the former.

a. In **Egypt**, encourage national partners to expand their networks of women's organisations throughout the country, and to report areas where the NCW is not cooperating with national and local NGOs.

b. In **Iraq**, donors should make efforts to fund more national NGOs instead of INGOs, including those in remote areas that do not currently receive international funding and those that are not affiliated with political parties.

c. In the **OPT**, donors and INGOs should fund projects in the neglected East Jerusalem area, where there is a significant need for programmes in SGBV response.

d. In **Yemen**, make an effort to reach out to prospective partners that are based outside the capital, Sana'a, and when possible work with partners in low security areas that have low donor coverage.

9. Donors and INGOs are inadvertently creating competition among local organisations that depend on international funding. Donors should improve their mutual coordination to ensure a

fair distribution of funds across partners and geographical areas.

a. In **Iraq**, national and local organisations have experienced a brain drain as their staff members – often attracted by the higher salaries on offer – have moved onto INGOs, and also find themselves competing with INGOs for funding. Direct and earmarked funding should be provided to national NGOs working on women's rights as a priority. Donors should prioritise national NGOs over INGOs when allocating funding, and both INGOs and donors should strengthen the capacity of national and local organisations to implement projects to ensure long-term sustainability.

10. Donor governments and INGOs should **urge (and when possible require) state actors to allocate and disburse funding to WROs** through mechanisms with transparent application and selection criteria, in order to expand the cooperation between the state and wider pools of WROs and to decrease WRO dependency on international donors.

a. In Egypt, donors, UN bodies and INGOs that work with the NCW and other ministries involved in the NSVAW should urge, and when possible require, these actors to involve WROs fully in the implementation and monitoring of the NSVAW.

11. WROs struggle to accomplish their work with funding paradigms based on short-term projects. Provide multi-year core funding to WROs so that they can implement long-term initiatives in support of gender equality and gender justice. **Grant-making mechanisms and reporting requirements should likewise be more user-friendly and simple** to avoid administrative burden of WROs and those with limited English abilities.

12. Economic struggles are an overarching concern of men and women across all four contexts. Support for economic empowerment programmes is desperately needed, particularly for women in conflict zones who are most adversely impacted. **Economic empowerment work should be tailored to the contexts and the different possibilities of men and women, and expand beyond the current models that tend to be small-scale and short-term**, to make way for long-term recovery and improved stability.

13. **Humanitarian responses should embed the WPS** agenda, as foreseen by the relief and recovery pillar of resolution 1325[13], **at the core of the humanitarian response. Humanitarian actors should substantively engage women and meet their needs at all stages of programmes and at all levels.** Women from affected communities should co-lead the design, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian programming, in addition to being meaningfully consulted, to ensure better representation of the needs of all segments of society.

[13] What is U.N. Security Council resolution 1325 and why is it so critical today?, United States Institute of Peace, https://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325, accessed April 2017

Donors, UN agencies and INGOs should enact and implement a quota of 40% women in leadership and staff positions in national and international humanitarian organisations. Donors should also ensure that there is adequate funding for purposeful gender mainstreaming and SGBV response and coordination mechanisms.

a. In **Yemen**, current INGO- and UN-led efforts to build the capacity of Yemeni NGO staff and local authorities in gender and in SGBV risk mitigation and response should receive continued funding, and should be expanded to improve the gender responsiveness of the humanitarian response. They should also give more planning responsibilities to WROs and activate Arabic as an official language of humanitarian coordination systems and responses.

14. In contexts that have seen positive developments at the level of policy and legislation, **more resources are needed to support national partners with raising awareness among women and men, and dealing with informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices.**

a. In **Egypt**, donors and INGOs should continue to (or increase) support to local partners to carry out programmes intended to raise consciousness with the aim of changing men's behaviour towards women's rights; this includes building on the work done in sexual harassment and capitalising on greater awareness of this issue by positively influencing attitudes that will change behaviour. Programmes should also seek to positively change consciousness around other forms of SGBV such as domestic violence, and should raise awareness on the benefits of women's economic and political participation.

15. Recognising that gender justice and equality cannot be divorced from broader governance issues, **national and international actors must shape existing and future governance programmes with a gender lens.** Such programmes should seek to strengthen the involvement of women from diverse backgrounds in advocating for, delivering and monitoring improved governance, and seek to understand and address incentives related to power and resources that stand in the way of progress on gender equality and justice.

1. Introduction

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the Arab woman who is equal to the man in duties and obligations will not accept, in the twentieth century, the distinctions between the sexes that the advanced countries have done away with ... The woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights..."[14]

- Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi's opening speech at the 1944 Arab Feminist Conference

This study examines the impact of fragility and conflict on gender justice and women's rights in the MENA, as a part of an Oxfam project entitled 'Promoting the Needs of Women in Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa' funded through the UK FCO. It specifically aims to understand how conflict and fragility in four different contexts – Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen – have impacted the realisation of gender equality and gender justice in the past several years of political and social upheaval.

To begin with, this report provides an overview of the research objectives, questions and methodology (section 2). It then goes on to present a short literature review on gender justice in the MENA (section 3). From there, it summarises the assumptions and hypotheses pertaining to the research (section 4), before outlining the main findings of the study, broken down into eight sections, as summarised below:

Section 5 looks at how state and non-state governance actors in each context contend with gender issues and how their policies and practices support and/or undermine gender equality and justice, and the protection of women and girls. It discusses how these actors vary in their legitimacy, policies and discourse towards women's rights, and how this issue ranks in comparison to maintaining or increasing political power and control of resources.

Section 6 explores the steps that WROs in the region are taking and the setbacks they encounter. This section looks at how the Arab uprisings created both openings for many WROs to advance their agendas and also the difficulties that could potentially compromise their existence.

Section 7 looks at women's political participation and the impact of the UNSC resolution 1325. It highlights the underrepresentation of women in substantive roles in government and examines how quota systems for parliamentary representation have not resulted in robust and meaningful women's political participation.

Section 8 examines the role of the international community in promoting and hindering gender equality in the MENA. It offers a critique of interventions by international actors, including donors and international NGOs, which were often considered by research respondents as being inconsistent with or contradictory to the objectives of gender equality in the region.

Section 9 looks at the impact of religion, religious leaders and religious institutions on gender equality. It explores the many different perspectives that research participants have on the utility of addressing gender equality through a religious lens and on engaging religious leaders in gender programmes.

Section 10 focuses on the lived experiences of the women and girls who participated in this study to understand how they – as the imagined beneficiaries of WROs, INGOs, governance actors and government officials responsible for shaping policy on women's rights and gender justice – have fared in the past several years. Their experiences are reflected upon in light of the economic crises in all four contexts, which have both precipitated greater acceptance of women in the workplace but also disempowered them through the disruption of traditional gender roles and by placing unwanted burdens on their shoulders.

Sections 11 and 12 provide conclusions and recommendations for practitioners, donors and policy-makers.

2. Objectives and methodology

2.1 Objectives and research questions

The objectives of this study are to:

- inform and influence discourse and programmes on gender justice in fragile and conflict-affected settings, considering the UN WPS agenda;
- inform policy recommendations to national governments and regional bodies in relation to the implementation of commitments on gender equality and WPS in conflict-affected states; and
- provide policy and programmatic recommendations to international development actors on mitigating the negative effects of conflict and advancing gender justice in fragile and conflict-affected settings in the MENA region.

The study was guided by the following questions:

- Who is filling the gaps left by the state in the four project countries? What positions, discourses and actions do these actors and the state adopt towards gender justice and women's rights? In what ways have the positions, discourses and actions of these actors changed over time?

- What are the consequences of the above on the ability of CSOs and WROs to drive a gender justice agenda? That is, how is the women's rights and gender justice agenda being prioritised by state actors and/or other governance actors, compared to [national] security agendas and other competing agendas (e.g. humanitarian response imperatives, donor pledges and priorities), and the need to contend with ongoing economic crises?

- What are the strategies developed by national and regional WROs and CSOs to counter this reduction in space and push the women's rights agenda forward? What are they striving for and what are the commonalities? What gendered role and influence, if any, do women's Islamic or other faith-based civil society actors exert, and do such groups complement or compete with non-religious WROs and CSOs in advocating for women's rights and participation? Have any CSOs or WROs operating in regions that are controlled by non-state actors found it easier to push forward their agenda in comparison to those operating exclusively in government-controlled areas?

- What role do international development actors (donors, INGOs) have to play in countering the negative effects of conflict and fragility on the realisation of women and girls' rights? What can be done at the national, regional and international level? How does the role and scope that international development actors could play differ, depending on the area in which they are trying to operate (state/non-state governed areas)? How can INGOs support WROs/CSOs and gender-sensitive programming, while mitigating for political, security and reputational risks to national partners and to beneficiaries?

While women and girls form a specific focus of this project, we acknowledge that gender issues are not limited to women and girls. Dominant gender attitudes held by men and women alike can be obstacles to gender equality. Indeed, we urge for an approach to understanding gender in a holistic, broader and deeper manner, taking into account women, girls, men and boys, as well as other gender identities, and being alert to how these identities interact with other societal markers such as age, urban/rural location, ethnicity, religion and dis-/ability. These factors play a key role in defining individual needs and vulnerabilities, as well as degree of agency, in contexts of social and economic transformation, including violent conflict. However, they are also shaped by development and conflict dynamics and in turn themselves shape these processes.

2.2 Methodology[15]

Alert's researchers used a multi-pronged qualitative approach to gather multiple perspectives and sources of information from a wide variety of respondents, and to mitigate the potential partiality of respondents. The field researchers were nationals of the countries in which the work was conducted. Female and male field researchers were employed in each context.

Two qualitative research tools were utilised to gather data: semi-structured interviews with target respondents and FGDs with local women and girls. The tools were developed by Alert in consultation with Oxfam. A literature review preceded the field research and desk research was employed throughout the entire period of the study to supplement the field research findings. A steering committee of senior Oxfam staff with expertise in gender and the Middle East provided review and guidance during the report writing process. The findings of the research will be shared with research participants for validation and critique.

Before collecting data, Alert's researchers consulted with the respective Oxfam country team contacts to inform them of the approach and receive specific guidance and instruction regarding the positioning of the study and Oxfam's role in regards to prospective respondents. All respondents were provided with a written consent form (in English or Arabic, according to their preference), and were verbally briefed on the objectives of the study and terms of participation. Prevalent security concerns and logistical barriers prevented many respondents from signing their names on the formal consent forms, and they opted to provide verbal consent instead.

Researchers also refrained from gathering detailed social profiling data of the respondents and did not take down their names. Rather, respondents were assigned a code in all shared transcripts. Identifying details were removed from the transcripts, unless the respondent

[15] The methodology is discussed in more detail in Appendix 2.

explicitly stated otherwise during the formal consent process. Interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, or in a combination of both, depending on the preference and proficiency of respondents. During data collection, researchers took detailed notes, as much as possible. When they had access to a secure location, the researchers typed transcripts – removing identifying details of respondents and interviews – and uploaded notes onto a spreadsheet located on Alert's secure server, noting the respondent by their code. Interviews and FGDs were transcribed in the language in which they were conducted. Interviews conducted in Arabic were translated into English.

The researchers utilised narrative analysis to interpret qualitative data from the KIIs and FGDs. Findings from the FGDs were informed by the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, which considers the attitudes and behaviours of the individual within the social, political, economic and physical context in which they live.[16] When used in qualitative data analysis, the PIE perspective can be helpful in situating the experiences and viewpoints of individuals within their broader context, and thus enable the researcher to identify patterns and draw conclusions about both people and their environment.[17] Finally, as this study was conducted in contexts where gaps in knowledge and information was expected, the analysis emphasised triangulation of different data sources available to account for missing information and to contextualise the findings.

Interviews were conducted with the following groups:[18]

- **National and local WROs and CSOs engaged in gender programming or activities:** Organisations working in some capacity related to gender (including but not limited to the delivery of SGBV response/programming, advocacy, lobbying, political empowerment, awareness-raising, humanitarian relief directed at women) were the most sought-after target group of this study.

- **Key informant activists and consultants:** Individuals who have been engaged in gender equality or justice issues. These individuals were either residing in-country, were in displacement or living abroad. The activists interviewed often held multiple roles (including researchers, members of organisations, consultants for INGOs), and many are currently or have been involved with CSOs, WROS, INGOs, UN bodies and the donor community more broadly.

- **Academics and researchers specialised in gender issues in the target geographies:** The research team also pursued academics from regional or local universities and research centres, whose work encompasses gender issues.

- **Female residents of target geographies:** Women and adolescent girls residing in the four contexts were engaged through FGDs. It is important to note that Alert did not aim to obtain a representative sampling of women given the time and geographical constraints of the study.

- **INGOs involved in gender programming and relevant UN staff:** INGOs and UN bodies that directly implement or work with local partners to implement gender programming were sought out to provide a perspective on gender work in these contexts and identify gaps and challenges.

- **Other relevant key informants:** State and governance actors did not form a primary target of this study due to well-founded concerns over researchers' safety and reputation. However, the research team engaged with a small handful of key informants that do not fit into the aforementioned categories. This included individuals previously involved in state or governance bodies related to women.

It is important to note that sometimes respondent categories overlap: for example, employees in WROs may also be activists or academics, or have experience cycling in and out of national NGOs, INGOs and UN bodies.

A total of 58 KIIs and 13 FGDs were conducted across the four contexts. Efforts were made to reach WROs and conduct FGDs across the major geographical areas of each country, as well as to reach individuals of different ideological backgrounds and religious affiliations when possible. Inevitably, there are limits to the geographic spread of research respondents due to the size of the countries and the small research team, time constraints and security restrictions.

Table 1: Number of KIIs and FGDs conducted in each country

Country	WROs/CSOs	Activists/academics/ key informants	Donors, UN and INGOs	FGDs with women and girls
Egypt	7	2	1	3
Yemen	16	9	3	2
OPT	13	1	1	1
Iraq	11	3	1	7

[16] The PIE method is borrowed from social work, where it is used in case management to conduct an assessment of a beneficiary. It analytically frames individuals and their experiences as mutually influential; that is, they are impacted by their surroundings, while their own experiences, viewpoints and relationships in turn impact upon their environment.
[17] The PIE perspective has been used in research examining drivers of radicalisation. See: R. Hutson, T. Long and M. Page, Pathways to violent radicalisation in the Middle East: A model for future studies of transnational jihad, The RUSI Journal, 154(2), 2009, pp.18–26
[18] The names and locations of research respondents are not provided to protect their anonymity, as well as that of their organisations.

In **Egypt**, interviews were carried out with seven WROs (three based in Cairo, one in a coastal city, two in a city in upper Egypt, and one now located outside the country), as well as with one member of a UN bodies and two activists. Three FGDs with Egyptian women were carried out: one with seven women in the city of Al Minya, one in a village in rural Suhag, both in Upper Egypt with eight women, and one in Cairo with seven respondents. All FGDs were carried out with women aged 16-40.

In **Iraq**, interviews were conducted with two WROs in Baghdad, one in Basra and eight in the KRI (two in the Dohuk governorate, two in Erbil and four in Sulaymaniyah). In addition, interviews were carried out with one activist in Erbil, two academics in Baghdad and one INGO headquartered in Erbil. Seven FGDs, involving 33 women aged 16–55 residing in Erbil and Dohuk, were also conducted.

In the **OPT**, interviews were conducted with eight WROs in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and five WROs in the Gaza Strip. In addition, interviews were carried out with one academic in East Jerusalem and an INGO headquartered in the West Bank. A FGD involving 15 women aged 18–40 who reside in the Gaza Strip was also conducted.

In **Yemen**, Key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with representatives from six women's rights organisations (WROs); nine key informants (including activists, former WRO/INGO employees and academics); and three individuals involved in UN bodies and in INGOs. Two FGDs were conducted with women and girls aged 17-43, including with participants in Sana'a and 12 participants in Aden. Due to the centralisation of WROs in the north of the country, it can be assumed that the position of WROs in the south is not as well represented in this study.

2.3 Limitations

Despite best efforts, there are gaps in the research – both geographical and ideological. A greater number of secular WROs based in principal urban areas were interviewed than religious ones and those based in rural areas. Therefore, WROs that hold faith-based views are not as well represented in the study, particularly in the OPT and Yemen. Despite this limitation, however, the amount of consensus around certain themes suggests that particular perspectives bridge different ideological and geographical backgrounds. The analysis has focused on these shared themes, while teasing out certain details specific to context and ideology.

2.4 Terminology

Armed conflict: This term refers to elements such as the use of armed force, a minimum number of battle-related deaths and different parties at war, often between state actors and armed groups.[19] International humanitarian law distinguishes between two primary types of armed conflict: international conflicts between two or more states, and non-international conflicts between the government and non-governmental armed groups.[20] An additional facet of armed conflict, particularly relevant to the case of the OPT, is that of occupation. Although formally forming part of international armed conflict, the law of belligerent occupation differs from that regulating the conduct of hostilities.[21] The WPS agenda positions gender within the framework of armed conflict (including both the prevention and resolution of armed conflict), which some scholars have pointed out obscures contexts that do not neatly conform to the definitions of armed conflict.[22]

Fragility: There is no standard definition of 'fragility' in the literature, however, it is most often implicated with institutions that are unable or unwilling to provide protection, essential services and uphold essential rights of citizens. Fragility can therefore be used to describe countries that are both affected and unaffected by armed conflict.[23] Fragility is not just about weak institutions, but also encompasses political and social will to protect the rights of women and men equally. [24]

[19] See, for example, Definition of armed conflict, The University of Uppsala, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/definition_of_armed_conflict/, accessed February 2017
[20] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), How is the term 'armed conflict' defined in international humanitarian law?, Opinion Paper, ICRC, March 2008, http://www.refworld.org/docid/47e24eda2.html
[21] The reason for this is that rather than signifying a situation of active combat between the parties of the armed conflict, an occupation occurs when one party achieves effective military control over territory belonging to or previously controlled by the other party or parties, thereby bringing the protected civilian population of the occupied territory under its authority. See: Occupation and international humanitarian law: Questions and answers, ICRC, https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/634kfc.htm, accessed February 2017
[22] As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin points out: "This narrow definition has excluded a number of conflict-affected locations and contexts where women have been shut out from conflict resolution and where the harms they experience are rendered almost entirely invisible to the WPS agenda." See: F. Ní Aoláin, The 'war on terror' and extremism: Assessing the relevance of the women, peace and security agenda, International Affairs, 92(2), 2016, p.276, https://www.asil.org/sites/default/files/documents/INTA92_2_03_NiAolain.pdf
[23] Caroline Sweetman and Jo Rowlands advocate for scholars to look at 'fragile contexts' as a more expansive alternative to the more traditional 'fragile state', in that it "allows us to understand how the state operates together with the other institutions – including the market, community and household – which together provide a context for human life." See: C. Sweetman and J. Rowlands, Introduction: Working on gender equality in fragile contexts, Gender & Development, 24(3), 2016, p.337
[24] O.M. Gonzalez, Refugees and 'host communities' facing gender-based violence: Developing an area-based approach to gender-based violence around Mbera camp, Mauritania, Gender & Development, 2016, 24(3), p.377

Fragile contexts: The four countries in this study are referred to as 'contexts', the term best suited to reflect the complexities of each country and its sub-geographies. The term is also framed by the understanding of a fragile context as "a feature of a continuum from stability to crisis, and vice versa."[25] All four contexts fall on this continuum. In each country, different sub-geographies also fall on various places along the continuum.

Gender equality, gender justice and women's rights: These are related but not interchangeable terms. We focus on 'women's rights' as a logical first step that contributes to the broader goal of gender equality. 'Gender justice' comprises the efforts and process towards righting gender inequalities: As UNIFEM has stated, "Gender justice entails ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community, the market and the state. It also requires that mainstream institutions – from justice to economic policymaking – are accountable for tackling the injustice and discrimination that keep too many women poor and excluded."[26]

3. Background on gender justice in the MENA

[25] Ibid.
[26] United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Gender justice: Key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, New York: UNIFEM, 2010, p.3, http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/media/publications/unifem/unifemmdgbrief2010.pdf?vs=1024

Adhering to the definition of a 'fragile context' as one characterised by unresponsive and non-inclusive institutions, low political will and stark gender inequality, the MENA stands as a highly fragile context that has been consistently affected by armed conflict. Countries in the MENA have historically performed poorly on gender equality indicators,[27] which is often linked to the region's high levels of authoritarianism, low levels of democracy and poor governance.[28] However, it is difficult to disaggregate cause from effect in what appears to be a cycle of persistent bad governance practices and gender inequality and fragility in the MENA. The interplay between these factors suggests that gender relations cannot be divorced analytically or programmatically from conflict and fragility in this region. Indeed, it is important to understand gendered struggles and the ways in which they have flowed through past conflicts to appreciate the current realities unfolding in Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen. Questions of gender cannot be separated from debates on oppression, democratisation, citizenship, identity, religion and violence, and any approach to understanding fragility and conflict in these contexts must consider gendered impacts and inequalities.

3.1 Gender, the state and women's activism in the MENA: A brief historical background

An examination of the national machineries of gender in the MENA reveals the embattled and sometimes contradictory ways in which governments view and (attempt to) address women's rights and gender equality.[29] A World Bank report noted that effective gender machineries tend to be "statutory, centralized, complex and well-funded, a form that withstands changes in political leadership"[30] – although it must be stated that they do tend to receive less funding than other government ministries. The effectiveness of national machineries is entwined with the strength and legitimacy of state institutions that enact these rights and uphold the rule of law. Therefore, if overall state institutions are weak, then so will be gender machineries.

However, many countries in the MENA provide case studies of state machineries that are fragile, nominal or serve a top-down purpose that dovetails with non-democratic regime

interests.[31] Indeed, historically, women's movements were entangled with nationalistic movements and with projects of statebuilding,[32] and in several contexts there is a long record of national machineries that enshrine women's rights, but lack the effectiveness, political will or legitimacy to enact and uphold these rights. Egypt, for example, has a tradition of women's activism dating back to the 19th century.[33] The women's movement has both been subsumed and led by political imperatives and various iterations of Egyptian state feminism, a force that has at times wrested women's issues from civil society and women's organisations. The state has tended to co-opt the cause of women's rights through its own machineries and discourses, which served to "governmentalize" women's rights. The formation of the NCW, a government body accused of "cover[ing] up problems" and nepotism, essentially served to capture the women's movement and made women activists who chose to participate or cooperate with the system appear to be complicit with the state.[34]

Iraq is another example in which state machineries mediate narratives and actions related to gender justice and women's rights. WROs have played a prominent role in Iraqi history, although their influence has at times been affected by the country's various conflicts. During the Ba'athist regime, women's rights were extended in areas of education, voting and the ability to hold public office. Iraq was also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) under Saddam Hussein. Yet these amounted to nominal gestures: women were denied the right to organise, and to implement and monitor the enactment of their legal rights. The lone women's organisation at the time, the General Federation of Iraqi Women, fell under the strict purview of the Ba'ath party and rather than "focusing on the fight for women's advancement and equality", it was instead repurposed as a party tool[35] through which women were mobilised against "imperialism, Zionism, reactionary trends, and backwardness".[36] As in Egypt, women activists became complicit with the regime and were denied the opportunity to address the underlying patriarchal beliefs that prevented their advancement.

The interaction of national machineries with civil society in the region – and with the machineries of international aid that have their own agenda(s) around gender justice and women's rights – can both advance and harm the cause of women in the MENA. The issue of 'elite capture' must be acknowledged in any discussion of women's rights movements

[27] For example, Yemen was ranked last out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index prior to the breakout of the armed conflict in 2015. See: World Economic Forum, 2014, Op. cit.
[28] R. Inglehart and P. Norris, 2003, Op. cit.; L.J. Benstead, 2011–2012, Op. cit.
[29] National machineries can be defined as "a set of coordinated structures within and outside government, which aim to achieve equality in all spheres of life for both women and men." See D. Tsikata, National machineries for the advancement of women in Africa: Are they transforming gender relations?, Social Watch, 2011, http://old.socialwatch.org/en/informesTematicos/29.html
[30] D. McBride and A. Mazur, Gender machineries worldwide, World Development Report 2012, Gender Equality and Development, Background Paper, Washington DC: World Bank, 2011, p.4, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2012/Resources/7778105-1299699968583/7786210-1322671773271/McBride-Mazur-Background-Paper-Final.pdf

[31] E. Johansson-Nogués, Gendering the Arab Spring? Rights and (in)security of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan Women, Security Dialogue, 44(5–6), 2013, pp.393–409
[32] UNDP RBAS, 2006, Op. cit.
[33] Ibid.
[34] L. Abu-Lughod, The active social life of 'Muslim women's rights': A plea for ethnography, not polemic, with cases from Egypt and Palestine, Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 6(1), 2010, pp.5–6
[35] L. Brown and D. Romano, Women in post-Saddam Iraq: One step forward or two steps back?, NWSA Journal, 18(3), 2006, pp.52–53
[36] Ibid, p.54

in the Arab world, in the sense that the label 'elite' can apply to the state, the international community, and the menagerie of activists, NGOs and other bodies that may look to both of these for funds, priorities and other forms of support. This phenomenon is what Lila Abu-Lughod has referred to as the "internationalization of Muslim women's rights", in which a small group of elites speak on behalf of all women in a language of international rights and obtain funds for projects to target and "empower" women beneficiaries.[37]

In the OPT, women have played an active role in the resistance movement since the time of the British mandate and there is a strong tradition of women's self-organisation.[38] The establishment of the PA and its collaboration with a vast following of NGOs that receive international funding had the unintended effect of disempowering Palestinian grassroots feminists through redirecting activism into formal civil society. The Palestinian statebuilding project begun in 1993, with the subsequent "NGO-ization" transforming "a mass-based, living social movement, which engaged women from grassroots organizations throughout Palestine in working for a combined feminist-nationalist agenda" into interlocutors for the international community. In turn, this reduced their activism to a mere series of projects on democratisation, peacebuilding and women's rights, and disrupted their grassroots patterns of resistance activism. Islamist women's groups have proliferated in this context where NGOs have co-opted the leaders of the secular mass movement. This effect is also visible in other countries in the MENA, "where weakened states, under the pressure of international agencies and some local constituencies, are pushing for more 'gender-equitable legislation'."[39]

3.2 Implications of gender, fragility and conflict in the MENA following the Arab uprisings

The years leading up to and following the Arab uprisings have seen much scholarship around gender and fragility in this region. Gender-focused forms of activism as a counter to gendered forms of oppression and the linkages between gender-specific concerns and concepts of democracy and citizenship have been of specific interest. Loubna Hanna Skalli demonstrates how younger generations of activists in North Africa see sexual harassment as inherently entwined with concerns related to democracy and political systems.[40] Acts of defiance against

sexual harassment – or even breaking discursive taboos that have enforced silence – thus become inextricably political acts. Skalli notes that this kind of gendered activism represents a turning point in older, more traditional ways of regional gender activism characterised by women's groups lobbying the state for policy changes.

Scholars have also argued that Arab countries that have made advances in women's participation and rights were more likely to achieve successful democratic transitions following the Arab Spring. Linking the democratic progress seen in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia with their women's movements, Valentine Moghadam notes how, globally, movements for democracy have often been championed by women's groups, concluding that women's participation and positive democratic outcomes go hand in hand.[41] She notes that, "[i]f the long-standing exclusion of women from political processes and decision-making in the Arab region is a key factor in explaining why the region was a laggard, compared with other regions, in democratisation's third wave, then women's participation and rights could not only speed up the democratic transition in the region but also enhance its quality and durability."[42]

This has not been the case in Egypt, where women were deliberately sidelined from political participation and have been the targets of sexual violence during protests.[43] Sherine Hafez observes how Egyptian women's bodies have become sites of "contestations over which battles over authenticity, cultural dominance and political control are fought." Through systematic sexual violence, they have been forced out of participation in masculine spaces: "The long history of feminist activism in Egypt attests to the central role women's bodies have occupied in the pursuit of freedom, independence and statebuilding. Yet, despite a history that is well recognized for its illustrious accomplishments, women activists and their bodies remained predominantly constituted from within power processes that determined the terms and outcomes of political participation."[44] This forced marginalisation of women from political processes through the threat of violence bears haunting relevance given Egypt's spiralling fragility in the years since the Arab Spring.

Yemeni women have seen dramatic highs and lows in the past six years: women effectively led the 2011 revolution and were active in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), but now bear the weight of a brutal armed conflict. This mirrors the duality of the two predominant depictions of women in Yemeni society: that of emotionally weak beings in need of protection,

[37] L. Abu-Lughod, 2010, Op. cit., p.7
[38] For historical background on the Palestinian women's movement, see L. Alsaafin, The role of Palestinian women in resistance, Open Democracy, 17 April 2014, https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/linah-alsaafin/role-of-palestinian-women-in-resistance
[39] I. Jad, The demobilization of women's movements: The case of Palestine, From Changing Their World 1st Edition, Toronto: Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2008, p.2, https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/changing_their_world_-_demobilization_of_womens_movements_-_palestine.pdf
[40] L. Hanna Skalli, Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa, Journal of North African Studies, (19)2, 2014, pp.244–258

[41] V.M. Moghadam, 2014, Op. cit., p.139
[42] Ibid, p.142
[43] S. Hafez, 2014, Op. cit.
[44] Ibid, p.183

and an "egalitarian ethic" that accords women roles in the economy and informal decision-making.[45] In early 2017, Oxfam and Saferworld found that despite a dismal pattern of marginalisation in formal negotiations, women in Yemen have been and continue to act as first responders and "informal peacemakers" at community levels, providing representation to women in front of community leaders and solving everyday problems.[46]

The advent of women's movements in the Arab world was intertwined with Arab struggles for independence from colonial governments in the 19th and 20th centuries.[47] It is then only logical that the push for good governance, democratisation and development in the MENA has been inseparable from women's rights and gender equality. These linkages between governance and women's rights and gender equality are a recurring theme of consultations that were conducted with WROs and women and girls in the scope of this study.

4. Research assumptions and hypotheses

[45] M-C. Heinze, 2016, Op. cit. The concept of "egalitarian ethic" comes from N. Adra, Tribal mediation and empowered women: Potential contributions of heritage to national development in Yemen, International Journal of Islamic Architecture, 5(2), 2016, pp.301–337
[46] A. Al Naami and S. Moodley, We won't wait: As war ravages Yemen, its women strive to build peace, Briefing Paper, Oxford: Oxfam/Saferworld, January 2017, p.2,7, https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-yemen-women-in-peacebuilding-300117-en_0.pdf
[47] UNDP RBAS, 2006, Op. cit.

The body of evidence on gender, conflict and fragility indicates that gender relations and inequalities are both impacted by and have an impact on contexts characterised by conflict and fragility. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to disaggregate cause from effect in situations of fragility and gender inequality. This is true of the MENA region more broadly, and specifically the four contexts in this study. In these contexts, gendered inequality is inbuilt in all aspects of fragility – weak institutions, low political will, and full-scale armed conflict and humanitarian crises.

4.1 Assumptions

The following assumptions regarding gendered impacts in the target geographies were made:

1. The meaningful representation and participation of women in high-level political processes and institutions, where these exist, has become limited. In settings of widespread violence and humanitarian crises, participation is likely to be further constrained, yet women may be represented in decision-making around and delivery of humanitarian response.

2. In all four contexts, the participation of women is more prominent at local – and often less visible – levels.

3. In contexts of militarisation and armed conflict, men and boys face gendered risks such as recruitment into armed groups or being targets of direct violence. The resulting changes in male roles and responsibilities at familial and community levels can overturn traditional gender roles and related expectations.

4. The fragility of the contexts means that gender justice and equality have likely been demoted and subsumed by other issues that are considered more 'urgent' by international and local actors.

These assumptions were conveyed in the findings. In light of the gap in representation of women's voices and priorities in existing narratives, the findings focus on women and girls. The findings on men and boys primarily address how the gendered impacts they face change gender roles and relate to the position of women and girls.

4.2 Hypotheses

Proceeding from these assumptions and building on the existing knowledge base, the fieldwork examined the following hypotheses:

1. Women face gendered constraints to meaningful participation and representation in these fragile contexts: for example, they may face increased responsibilities and burdens in the home that consume their time and energy, they may lack agency, or they may face environmental barriers to their physical safety that prevent active participation. Their diminishing role stokes a vicious cycle of fragility in the region characterised by a lack of pluralistic participation. This contributes to further breakdown in institutional functioning and therefore exacerbates the existing fragility.

2. Women in particular states – and different sub-geographies within states – face different struggles and gendered risks depending on intersectional social, economic and geographic factors. Women's status, wellbeing and activism are best understood within their specific environments and these factors do not play out uniformly within single states or neatly defined geographical units – although patterns may certainly be identified across different geographical contexts.

3. Women's participation continues but falls on a continuum of varying intensity, influence and visibility, further dictated by the risks and opportunities inherent in the different sub-geographies of the four contexts. In some areas, governance actors (including, but not limited to, the state) co-opt women's participation and women's issues, in others they create unexpected opportunities for gender activism, and in others they exclude women's participation entirely. Any action around gender justice should be sensitive to these different and fluid geographies and agendas.

4. CSOs and groups carrying out gender or rights-focused work in areas controlled by violent extremist groups are highly circumscribed in – or barred from – advancing a gender justice agenda unless it aligns with and fosters the ideologies and viewpoints of the extremist actors towards gender.

5. With increasing fragility and constrained space, some women's groups have sought out (or continued) alternative avenues of participation, activism and resistance, and often in ways that are not evidently visible, particularly to international or non-local actors. This may including representation and participation in humanitarian aid or faith-based activism.

6. International actors (including INGOs, donor governments and regional governments) exert influence over the priorities and activities of local organisations and sometimes national state or governance actors through the provision of funding for humanitarian activities. In contexts of remote implementation, however, international actors may have less influence at the grassroots level when working through local partners, which shoulder greater risk and decision-making responsibility in challenging environments.

Hypotheses were mostly vindicated by the findings. It is important to note that no data were collected in areas controlled by non-state armed groups. Therefore, not enough information is available to validate hypothesis 4, even if anecdotal information demonstrates that traditional activism is highly circumscribed in areas controlled by extremists.

5. Women, men and the powers that be: How state and non-state governance actors contend with gender issues

5.1 Lean, mean machineries: The state systems of Egypt, federal Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Palestinian Authority, and Yemen

In many countries in the MENA, women's rights have been tied to – and occasionally bound with – projects of statebuilding and modernisation. Consequently, the issues of women's rights and gender equality flow through the discourses, practices and institutions of state (and non-state) actors. While it is important to be conscious of the complexity of state policies, discourses and interactions with civil society, this research identified patterns in the way that states contend with (or ignore) gender issues across the four contexts, albeit with some characteristics specific to each country.

Generally, state discourses and practices in Egypt, Iraq and the OPT are nominally progressive and tend to serve to forward state values and promote their good standing before the international community. State actors are primarily concerned with maintaining or increasing political power and control of resources, and contending with economic and security crises. Systemic gender inequality is pervasive across the four contexts and gender equality ranks low in comparison to other priorities.

Egypt, federal Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the PA maintain state systems that notionally uphold, but do not fully institutionalise, women's rights and gender equality through policies, ministries and GONGOs, often with considerable financial assistance from international actors. In these systems, gender is often a byword for 'women's issues', a fact that is reflected in terminology, which only mentions women: for example, the NCW in Egypt and the MoWAs in the PA and federal Iraq. In contrast, in Yemen, neither the Hadi-led state nor the Houthi/General People's Congress (GPC) de facto authority shows a strong policy or institutional architecture to support women's rights and gender equality. Yemeni interviewees were clear that the main concerns of both parties were winning the war, and consolidating resources and legitimacy.

Despite some variations in the structure, behaviours and resources between these contexts, their state systems overall lack the political will and legitimacy to progress the cause of gender equality. WROs in Egypt, federal Iraq, the KRG and the OPT often expressed criticism and distrust of state systems and questioned their sincerity. There was consensus among the participants that state systems primarily address gender issues as a strategic political decision or as way to gain legitimacy with the international community, rather than out of a deliberate intention to improve the lives of women and girls. For example, an INGO representative based in the KRI stated:

"The KRG spends a large amount of time presenting itself as progressive with regards to gender rights. It likes to attract financial investment from INGOs, and in order to do so it needs to show that it is open to the gender justice agenda. However, much of this is just superficial."

The PA in the West Bank was also described as following a 'checking off boxes' approach to gender equality. Most WROs interviewed considered the PA to have a generally progressive discourse on women's rights, especially in comparison to the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. However, there is a large degree of scepticism among WROs whether this is legitimate or is merely an effort to enhance the PA's reputation with international donors.

Who governs Yemen?

Yemen is split between the internationally recognised government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Houthi rebels, who allied with the GPC political party of ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh and formed a self-proclaimed government in late 2016 in defiance of the UN and the international community. Hadi is based in the southern city of Aden, while the Houthis/GPC currently control the capital Sana'a and territory in the north. There are pockets of the country in which al-Qaeda and ISIS have governance projects or a high level of influence. Tribes also serve as de facto governance actors, particularly in rural areas.

In Yemen, the Houthis are known for their non-progressive stance towards women's rights and participation. They have made no efforts to change the discriminatory architecture left over from the Saleh regime and did not support the Yemen constitution drafted after the NDC, which contained specific articles protecting women's rights. A key informant in Yemen explained the Houthis' traditional stance:

"Houthis ... are a strict, faith-based group. So they have all the extreme positions on women, on women's participation. But they had to do something to show that they can become a government ... 'They have women in political councils but no progressive things on the ground. They do cosmetic things that they have to do.'

Within the party itself, Houthi women activists (and indeed women in all political parties) have a limited role in decision-making. One activist explained:

"I also know a female Houthi activist and she is always saying how they don't give them [women] the chance. They use them when they need them, but they don't have that impact, they are not involved in decision-making."

A Yemeni WRO representative disclosed that the government in the south is struggling to consolidate territory and enact rule of law, and during this time the justice system has collapsed. She explained that there are only nominal differences between the regimes in their treatment of women's rights and gender issues:

"No matter where you are everyone says that now is not the time to talk about these issues. There is no such thing as women's rights. We are in a war now, there is a massive humanitarian crisis. They say now is not the time."

Respondents also accused the government in federal Iraq of parading its gender machineries before the international community and of poor cooperation with civil society. The Shia-dominated federal Iraqi government has established several institutions and initiatives, including the MoWA, the 1325 NAP Initiative and a 25% quota for the representation of women in parliament. Yet WROs interviewed considered these to be superficial and inadequate. For example, the 1325 NAP for 2014–2018, which was jointly endorsed by the KRG and federal Iraq government, was launched amidst considerable international fanfare. But it has several shortcomings:
- The drafting process only considered the views of a small group of local WROs with the support of international actors such as the European Feminist Initiative, the Norwegian Embassy in Amman and UN Women in Iraq.
- It does not address some of the core principles of resolution 1325, including the prevention of violence against women and girls, protection of women's rights, participation in conflict resolution, and the specific humanitarian priorities and requirements of women and girls.
- It does not name sources of funding for implementation or specify activities in its budget, meaning in effect that the plan cannot be implemented.[48]

WROs in federal Iraq also pointed to the poor relationship between themselves and the state as evidence of the government's hostility towards women's rights. They reported encountering resistance from the state, which makes it difficult for them to positively influence policy and monitor the implementation of gender legislation. One WRO explained:

[48] Z.N. Kaya, Women, peace and security in Iraq: Iraq's National Action Plan to implement resolution 1325, London: London School of Economics Middle East Centre, 2016, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67347/1/WPSIraq.pdf

"The Iraqi government has ratified a NAP for 1325 and in the KRI there is the High Council of Women that is supposed to be in charge of gender mainstreaming of all the KRG's activities. But it does not have much influence on the real authorities. [We] have given a lot of suggestions to the High Council but it hasn't followed through on any of these suggestions. One of the reasons for this lack of success is that all the appointees to the High Council are made by political parties ... they cannot decide anything without referring to [the political parties] and they are not qualified to talk about gender."

Who governs Iraq?

The **federal Iraqi** government based in Baghdad is defined by the 2005 constitution as an Islamic, democratic, federal parliamentary republic. The state has struggled to establish security and rule of law, and has increasingly relied on the political backing of influential religions leaders and tribes. There are multiple actors that attempt to fulfil the gap left by the state including ISIS, which in 2014 captured large parts of western and northern Iraq, and the PMF militia, an umbrella organisation comprising more than 40 fighting units that effectively control former ISIS-held territories and parts of Baghdad and Basra governorates.

In the **KRI**, the predominant governing authority is the KRG, whose cabinet is composed of representatives from the two largest political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

The case of Egypt may well be the most embattled case of state gender systems. Participants in Egypt viewed the state gender machineries and policies with a mix of scepticism, frustration and fear: the state has in effect co-opted the cause of women's rights as it simultaneously exerts a merciless crackdown on civil society. Sisi's regime implements its own version of state feminism, characterised by modestly progressive if incomplete legislation and conciliatory discourse towards women. The state also excludes independent civil society in the drafting, implementation and monitoring of legislation, often preferring to channel work through its own apparatuses – including the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice, which are implicated in violations against women –and through semi-state bodies such as the NCW.

There is concern that the Egyptian state's unilateral engagement with the NCW and its own apparatuses as the sole instruments for gender equality allows it to 'check boxes' regarding gender equality on the one hand, while strangling its civil society on the other. The NCW and other government ministries receive substantial international funds and technical support for projects supporting gender equality.[49] Yet WROs doubt the sincerity of the state and note its lack of transparency in following through on its commitments. For example, one WRO representative pointed out that the NSVAW still lacks an official website in Arabic,[50]

and that there are no clear efforts to publicise the strategy to the public or to monitor its implementation.[51] WROs also revealed that the NCW is not a substitute for WROs, without whose technical expertise and experience the strategy cannot be realised. One small WRO located in a provincial city described how the scene there is dominated by the NCW, although the NCW does not carry out any substantive work:

"Here you'll find that the NCW has a religious character … they don't know anything about feminist history or women's rights and they don't recognise the importance of these. They just give a few conferences to raise awareness about health concerns."

The NCW's conspicuous silence on the violence committed by the state and its failure to lodge an assertive criticism of the state's clampdown on civil society gives weight to the perception of the insincerity and limited effectiveness of Egyptian state feminism.

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[49] See, for example, Strategic interventions to combat violence against women, UNDP Egypt, http://www.eg.undp.org/content/egypt/en/home/operations/projects/gender-equality/strategic-interventions-to-combat-violence-against-women.html, accessed February 2017

[50] The strategy is mentioned on several English websites of international actors – including the UNDP, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and USAID implementer Chemonics - that have previously or are currently supporting the NCW and the Ministries of the Interior and Justice in implementing efforts to fight violence against women.

5.2 Baby steps: Positive impacts of state gender polices and actions

Despite these significant misgivings, many WROs acknowledged the importance of state systems and policies that uphold women's rights and provide protection to women and girls, and attributed some modest positive developments related to gender to the state. For example, some WROs in the KRI and the OPT have found leeway within state systems to progress their own agendas and collaborate with them. In the KRI, many WROs actively work with the government, judiciary and local governorate authorities. WROs are regularly consulted by the government and have provided training to state employees on SGBV, specifically on female genital mutilation (FGM). Some WROs also enjoy regular access to members of parliament (MPs), governors and ministers, increasing the success of their lobbying campaigns, for example the 2011 Law Against Domestic Violence and the 2011 Law Against FGM.

The PA in the West Bank has also given space to WROs and has shown a collaborative attitude despite lacking the requisite political capital or support to implement effective changes. This is evidenced by the MoWA's failure to push the president of the PA to enact several draft laws prepared by WROs that would amend the PA's discriminatory legislation,[52] which is in violation of CEDAW. WROs in the Gaza Strip showed less willingness to work with the de facto authority Hamas than their counterparts in the West Bank. The ongoing constraint within this context is the subordinate position of the PA to the Israeli government, as the occupation prevents the former from passing and enforcing substantive legislation to improve the lives of women. As a Palestinian academic explained:

"The [PA] government is very restricted by the Israeli government. So it cannot pursue a lot of politics that would benefit women. The PA can't do economic planning so therefore [it] can't integrate policies that would benefit women."

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[51] A paper published by Nazra for Feminist Studies notes that despite positive steps such as the development of a medical protocol for dealing with GBV survivors and some training of doctors, there was no systematic mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the NSVAW, which is a substantial barrier to realising its objectives. The paper also notes that some of the strategy's state partners, such as the Ministry of the Interior, are complicit in violence against women, and the state crackdown on CSOs "hampers the work of groups that are already active in combatting violence against women and responding to the needs of violence survivors." See: Nazra for Feminist Studies, One year after its launch, the National Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women still lacking monitoring mechanism, Cairo: Nazra for Feminist Studies, Research Paper, 2016, http://nazra.org/sites/nazra/files/attachments/national-strategy-after-one-year.pdf
[52] This includes the absence of laws protecting women against domestic and sexual violence, as well as discriminatory provisions related to sexual violence, as women have to provide evidence of "force", "threats" or "deception" in reporting rape claims. Women who do not provide such evidence can face criminal charges for adultery. See: Facts and figures: Ending violence against women, UN Women Palestine, http://palestine.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures, accessed February 2017

In Egypt, despite abundant grievances with the state, WROs acknowledged that the Sisi regime has made modest progress in the legislation around gender issues, including the adoption of anti-sexual harassment legislation in the Penal Code in 2014,[53] the establishment of the Unit on Monitoring Crimes of Violence Against Women in 2013 and departments for combatting violence against women at security directorates, and the ratification of the NSVAW. These are not insignificant steps forward, yet these measures do come up against significant criticism. For example, the anti-sexual harassment legislation, which was prompted in part by a series of violations of Egyptian women that generated global consternation,[54] has been criticised for its incomplete definition of sexual harassment and punishments so harsh they potentially deter survivors from reporting. The real value of Sisi's brand of state feminism may be how the state's highly public discourse serves to mainstream gender issues that were formerly taboo. A WRO representative elaborated on this:

"The positive rhetoric from the state, even if it is insincere or there is no implementation, is that it is helping people to be engaged more, helping the media to tackle women's issues more. Even if the state is not cooperative, but you still have a state that is saying that they are pro-women, which is that they like women, that they don't want women to be exposed to violence. For example, Sisi visited the survivor [of the mass attacks] and [this] made the issue more mainstream."

Yet the disparity between Sisi's discourse and state behaviour towards civil society was widely cited by WROs and even the Egyptian public. For example, when Sisi declared 2017 the 'Year of the Woman', it was met with scepticism and even derision.[55] Commenting on Sisi's pro-woman discourse, a WRO representative and MB activist asserted that:

"The priorities of this regime are to control Egypt completely. They do not care about the wellbeing of women or men, they care about having control of Egypt. This whole business of declaring 2017 the 'Year of the Woman' is an effort to distract people from the terrible situation that Egyptian women are living in."

Several interviewees pointed to the historical continuity of state feminism and how it has trodden the line between progressive discourse and legislation, and traditional patriarchal views that anchor state control and domination. A key informant with many years of experience in development programming explained that "the rhetoric [of state feminism] is still the same as it was 30 years ago: the woman is the mother, the sister, the daughter, but she is never just the woman." Meanwhile, a WRO linked the long tradition of Egyptian state feminism with the popular backlash against women's activism and participation that flared up in the years following 2011. Years of seeing Egypt's first ladies at the helm of women's issues led the public to associate these issues with oppressive regimes: "The feminist movement and women's empowerment in general was linked to Suzanne Mubarak and the NCW and Jehan Sadat ... they thought all feminists were like them."

In such contexts where efforts towards gender equality are linked with poor governance practices, state systems may hinder grassroots feminism, even if they are capable of actualising positive measures.

5.3 Unstable ground: Non-state governance actors

The ideologies and practices of non-state governance actors and their positions on women's rights are ambiguous and fluid, particularly in conflict zones where territory changes hands and priorities shift rapidly. Overall, however, this research found that non-state governance actors are failing to provide protection and services to citizens – and, in some instances, police gender norms in extreme ways.[56] Such actors have an interest in obstructing gender equality and justice to bolster their models of control.

Non-state governance actors often present alternative models of governance to citizens, which impact gender equality or women's rights even if these actors lack specific policies and frameworks for addressing gender inequality. Non-state actors proliferate when the state is fragile or absent, and they often obstruct or overtake state agendas, including those on women's rights. In the four contexts, this includes tribal systems that are highly influential in pockets of Iraq and Yemen, the armed militias in Iraq known as the PMF, armed groups such as al-Qaeda in Yemen and ISIS in Iraq, and the Islamic political organisation Hamas that governs the Gaza Strip.

[53] Laws against sexual harassment in Egypt, HarassMap, http://harassmap.org/en/resource-center/laws-against-sexual-harassment-in-egypt/, accessed February 2017

[54] See, for example, Sisi visits sexually assaulted survivor, apologizes to Egyptian women, Aswat Masriya, 11 June 2014, http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/details/9578.

[55] For examples of satirical comments posted on social media, see al-Sisi: 2017 'am al-mar'a...wa mufridin: ana arakkib da'an, Kalamty, 2 January 2017, http://klmty.net/638096-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A__2017_%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9___%D9%88%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86__%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%91%D8%A8_%D8%AF%D9%82%D9%86___%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A8%D9%8A_%D8%AD%D8%B8%D9%83_%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%8A__.html (in Arabic).

[56] A prominent example of this is ISIS's brutal persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and/or queer (LGBTIQ) individuals. See, for example, I. Tharoor, The Islamic State's shocking war on gays, Washington Post, 13 June 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/the-islamic-states-shocking-war-on-homosexuals/?utm_term=.a8efc88b6ef3.

Respondents in Iraq, the OPT and Yemen largely expressed negative views of non-state governance actors' treatment of gender, noting that their models of governance often fail to provide security and protection to citizens, including women and girls. In addition, non-state actors that govern through an extremist Islamic frame of reference such as Hamas, al-Qaeda or ISIS are generally seen by WROs as being antagonistic towards women's rights.

WROs in the OPT indicated that Hamas's attitude towards women's rights is heavily influenced by conservative Islamist ideology and, accordingly, issues such as divorce, early and forced marriage (EFM), polygamy and marital rape are not taken seriously by the Hamas government or Fatah in the West Bank. Hamas has also used morality police and so-called 'anti-corruption' units to publicly monitor women and ensure that they comply with their religious edicts. Indeed, most WROs believe that there is a significant difference between the West Bank – with its secular, if weak, government and its wealth of WROs – and the Gaza Strip in terms of protection for women's rights, due to certain legislation being implemented in the former but not the latter. However, academics interviewed cautioned that this picture can be too simplistic and that Hamas does provide certain rights to women through its faith-based laws, including inheritance and divorce rights, which are not recognised as legitimate by secular and feminist WROs.

ISIS in Iraq is unambiguously loathing and has consistently held a primordial attitude towards women's rights and gender justice: it has subjected women and girls to extrajudicial killing, mass torture, forced detention, EFM, rape and sexual slavery. ISIS has effectively foreclosed on the traditional WRO activism, and this study did not identify any WROs that continue to operate in ISIS-held territory. WROs and INGOs in the KRG and in federal Iraq are preoccupied with responding to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing ISIS, including survivors of its abuses.

Meanwhile, tribal systems and the alliance known as the PMF represent a more complicated case. PMF units effectively exert control over large parts of Iraq, including former ISIS-held territories and parts of Baghdad and Basra governorates. It is difficult to ascertain its discourse on women rights, as it is an umbrella organisation of more than 40 different fighting units and its exact role in the Iraqi conflict is kept deliberately concealed. However, certain PMF units have been accused of human rights violations against civilians and WROs have been prevented from working in PMF areas.

Tribal norms in Iraq and Yemen around gender roles are difficult to generalise. A WRO in Iraq offered the following:

"Tribes are a first and foremost [influential actor in people's lives]. Tribes' conception of gender equality is all based on honour. The woman is the keeper of honour in the family. It is not important if the son has sex before marriage. But if the daughter does it, then the honour of the entire family has been shamed. Often a young girl who has had her honour questioned will kill herself rather than face killing by her family. These cases are not made known to the INGOs, as they are not in contact with the local organisations. It is very much under the radar and people like to pretend that it doesn't happen. It is shameful for progressives that it actually happens. People just say that honour killing is outlawed and therefore people ignore the fact that it actually goes on."

In this view, tribal norms around dealing with perceived transgressions are particularly punishing towards women, girls and non-conforming gender identities, and are practised with impunity even where related laws exist. This highlights not only the weak reach of the state but also that in some contexts priorities do not align with laws or resources, which leads to an implementation gap. Yet tribal norms and customs were not depicted as being unambiguously contrary to women's participation and women's rights – in some cases, for example tribes in Yemen, a lot of space is given to women in informal leadership. Contrary to their patriarchal reputation, tribes allow women to hold important informal leadership or consultative roles. For example, a WRO respondent explained that in the tribal area of Al Jawf governorate women are armed, can drive cars and have a role in decision-making despite the fact that they are subject to other "conservative" norms such as wearing the niqab. Interestingly, this is a seemingly more progressive stance towards women's political participation than has been employed by the Hadi government or the Houthi/GPC de facto authority.

5.4 Commonalities between state and non-state actors

A shared characteristic of both state and non-state governance actors is their failure to provide protection and services to citizens, let alone enshrine gender equality and women's rights in their governance systems in meaningful ways. In a sense, both state and non-state actors have an interest in obstructing gender equality and justice, as maintaining inequalities anchors models of oppression and control. It is in this space that civil society and WROs have entered to attempt to provide services for women and girls and to lobby for improved representation. However, CSOs are increasingly constrained by surrounding conflict, donor priorities and, in some cases, their very own environment. This has implications for the survival of the gender equality and justice agenda, and thus for the stability of governance institutions themselves.

In this section, the ways in which WROs in Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen have coped since the beginning of the Arab uprisings – which both gave rise to opportunities for WROs to forward their agendas and make their work more known globally, but also resulted in disappointing setbacks – will be examined.

6.1 One step forward, two steps back

Reflecting on the events of the past six years, many WROs described mixed feelings of hope, disappointment, fear and resolve. In Egypt and Yemen in particular, the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011 created openings for many WROs to progress their cause, as women who had never before been engaged in the political process took to the streets. In Egypt, the revolution helped to reignite a feminist movement that had become weighed down by the regime elite as one research participant explained:

"The 2011 revolution helped to revive the movement again … [with] people trying to change Egypt … One of the problems of the feminist movement in Egypt was that the state co-opted the cause of women; the revolution helped counter this. It involved younger people, and we have younger people calling themselves feminists or women's rights advocates so it was not the same situation as before the revolution."

Greater international media and donor attention was placed on WROs in the region, creating more opportunities for regional and international networking, and funds for those WROs that had access to donor audiences. Smaller, community-based WROs that fall outside of the donor attention purview were able to take advantage of the openings for activism and civic exchange.

Although some of these benefits and accomplishments still hold, WROs also face many setbacks. Limits to physical security are of prevalent concern to WROs operating in contexts affected by active conflict. Shelling, fighting and rising conservatism in certain areas of Iraq and Yemen in particular prevent staff from freely moving from one area to another. These limitations often disproportionately affect women. In Yemen, for example, WRO female staff have been stopped at checkpoints and have more difficulty moving about than their male counterparts, even if they are often perceived as being less 'political' than men. WROs in Iraq and Yemen that continue their work in unstable areas described receiving death threats and even being attacked. For example, one WRO recounted a troubling incident that occurred in late 2016: after the WRO reported a rape case, it was threatened by extremists and had to hibernate its activities for a month. Similarly, in Iraq, the rise of ISIS has forced WROs to stop their work in areas that have been taken over by the group or to move to safer areas.

WROs, and CSOs more generally, working in unstable areas also face considerable logistic difficulties such as lack of liquidity and difficulty obtaining and getting cash into challenging

6. Setbacks and small steps forward: How WROs are faring in difficult times

areas, obstacles in transporting goods from urban areas to more remote areas where they are unavailable, and expending a large amount of time and effort collecting copious amount of project-related data that is requested by INGOs and donors.

Although most of Egypt is not engulfed by active armed conflict, the case of its WROs stands out, as independent CSOs are struggling to continue their work amidst the state crackdown. The space for activism has become ever more constricted to the point of endangerment. While this affects all CSOs, the state appears to reserve a particular discrimination for WROs and women's activism for reasons that are unclear. In fact, when asked to comment on the priorities of the state, a WRO representative quipped: "[it is] destroying us". Another WRO attributed the targeting of civil society to the state's insecurity and fear of diminishment before the international community and its consequent need for domination:

"But why are they doing this? It is because they want no opposition. The civil society narratives are the most logical at a certain point, the most appealing from one point or another in a sense of real-life issues. When people go to a mosque or a church, usually if you have a problem, they say just be patient and God will reward you. We propose real-life solutions. This is a problem for the state because when you raise awareness about rights, people will start to ask about their rights."

This suppression is felt by CSOs and WROs across all geographical contexts in Egypt, although WROs outside the capital or in peripheral cities were described as being more vulnerable than in Cairo. For example, a small WRO remarked that the security environment inhibits it even more because it is located in a coastal city. Conversely, another WRO elucidated that its activities were easier to conduct in smaller communities where people know each other and the level of trust is higher. Regardless of their location, Egyptian WROs operate with a high degree of uncertainty and stress.

6.2 The civil society free market: The disproportionate influence of donors and INGOs on WROs

There was a consensus among WROs, activists and academics interviewed regarding the disproportionate influence that international donors and INGOs[57] exert on the agenda, priorities, type of work and opportunities of WROs in the four contexts. Most WROs are highly sensitive to donor priorities to the extent that they may find it difficult to pursue their

core mandates or projects in gender equality and women's rights if these do not line up neatly with donor priorities and funding streams. In this sense, donors and INGOs are inadvertently hindering the gender justice agenda of WROs.

Many WROs and CSOs lack reliable, independent sources of funding and are thus dependent on international donors and INGOs for funds and, to a lesser extent, technical support and leverage with the government. WROs are compelled to apply for funding with increasingly complex management and reporting requirements amidst a context where spiralling regional crises have made funds scarcer. The inevitable consequence of this is increased competition among local NGOs, in what one research participant referred to as "the CSO-free market". This has, for example, caused a paradigm shift in how CSOs (including WROs) in the OPT relate to one another and has resulted in a lack of unification and solidarity among WROs: "Historically there was a lot more coordination between the CSOs. But over time, the donor aspect has led to a free market situation where everybody is vying for the same money ... this makes it a lot harder for there to be real strategic organisation. You are competing against each other."

The downsides of this 'free market' are pervasive. In Yemen, it has caused WROs to become more secretive and averse to coordinating and sharing information with other organisations. In the OPT, WROs complained that the shift from core funding to project funding has prevented them from retaining staff and sustaining their activities over the period of time that is necessary to bring about meaningful changes. In the KRI, national NGOs compete not only with each other but also with the coterie of INGOs that have set up shop in the KRI since the ISIS crisis. Across all contexts, this reflects the larger phenomenon of "NGO-ization" that has overtaken the region. By reducing activism into distinct units of 'projects' of limited time and funding, donor and INGO models prove reductive to the indigenous forms of activism that are actually able to precipitate long-term positive change.[58] This impacts negatively upon the realisation of gender equality and other related long-term development objectives.

6.3 "We know what is best": Donor and INGO priorities versus reality

WROs across the four contexts were grateful for the financial and technical support they had received from international donors or INGOs (if they had received funds from international actors). Some, however, voiced grievances with INGO and donor practices around determining

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[57] Donors and INGOs were at times were considered to be the same when they were in interviews with WROs. This is likely due to the fact that INGOs often play a donor – rather than a partnership – role in their dealings with local WROs and CSOs.

[58] For an in-depth discussion of the impacts of "NGO-ization" on Palestinian civil society, see I. Jad, 2008, Op. cit.

needs, setting programmatic priorities and responding to unexpected setbacks. In short, donors and INGOs are largely perceived as inflexible and out of tune with local realities. WROs are thus subject to the vagaries of donor priorities and may in turn be derailed from pursuing their own objectives, even if they manage to secure funds.

WROs and key informants (many of whom have themselves cycled in and out of national and international organisations) stated that donors and INGOs arrive with assumptions and impose their priorities based on an incomplete understanding, rather than soliciting the perspectives of local organisations or conducting proper situational analyses. A female Yemeni activist likened this to a trickle-down pattern of international 'trends', whereby certain issues become important at the highest donor echelons and are passed down to lower levels such as INGOs and, lastly, to local NGOs. She gave the example of EFM in Yemen, which in 2009 had become a 'trendy' issue (pushed, among other things, by the UK and other donor governments) that incidentally brought with it funding opportunities. As a result, Yemeni organisations with no experience in EFM shifted to working on this as they could obtain funding for it. The top-down model of priority setting translates to the relevance of programmes themselves – for example, a Yemeni CSO representative noted that the SGBV response paradigms were not at all appropriate to the context and some activities could be seen as a cop-out: "Please don't distribute dignity kits[59] and call that a SGBV intervention."

INGOs and donors were also accused of delegating work to local organisations without being sensitive to the risks and difficulties that they face. An academic in the KRI explained:

"A lot of donors do not do enough to help navigate the difficulties of conducting work with CSOs. A lot of INGOs demand that CSOs put their name on the door and make their activities and collaboration more public. This puts them at risk."

A representative from an Egyptian WRO also mentioned that some INGOs do not take their well-founded concerns about their security and mistrust of the state seriously: "Some INGOs, not all of them ... don't understand the risks we face here regardless of how many times we tell them." She gave the example of meetings in which GONGOS and local NGOs are brought together in a so-called 'safe space', despite the fact that national NGOs do not feel safe sharing information in the presence of those affiliated with the state that is cracking down on civil society.

6.4 Same old faces, same old places

INGOs and donors were also described as being risk-averse and not diligent about engaging with new constituencies or trying new approaches. In this sense, face time and physical access to donors has become essential for obtaining funds for WROs, which unfairly disadvantages WROs based in more remote areas. A WRO located in Port Said noted that the INGO and donor "centralisation on Cairo and Alexandria" prevented the WRO from accessing training and funding, and networking opportunities. In Yemen, respondents called attention to a north-south divide in organisational opportunities and funding. One activist pointed out that:

"Although Sana'a is under Houthi rule, there are still organisations that receive funding from INGOs based in Sana'a. So they have that logistic luxury of meeting them. This is not available in the south."

In the KRI, WROs pointed out that many international funds go to CSOs directly affiliated with the dominant political parties, restricting the funds available to independent WROs.

Similarly, donors and INGOs' aversion to risk hinders them from engaging with new partners or trying different methods. One Yemeni participant said that "the problem with donors is that they keep themselves with like-minded people, which is a very small fraction of the elite". Donors may also avoid certain geographies due to what they perceive to be an intolerable security or political risk to themselves (for example, some donor policies around terrorism may deter them from working in areas with a high presence of extremist non-state actors such as al-Qaeda). This issue was mentioned by a representative of a WRO in the south of Yemen, who believes that the security threat – the excuse cited by several donors that declined to fund activities there – was over-exaggerated and based on donor perceptions of safety and security, rather than on the perspectives of national NGOs that understand the context more intimately. A woman experienced in working with INGOs in Yemen believes that INGOs and other international actors are overcautious:

"You need to take risks. [International UN and INGO staff] are paid higher because they are in conflict areas. You can't just keep safe all the time; you are here to accomplish something. They can delegate [to local NGOs], but only after sufficiently building the capacity of national partners."

A similar issue can be seen in the OPT, where WROs mentioned that international donors that were deafeningly silent on violations associated with the occupation had withdrawn funds from WROs that criticised Israeli violations against women.

The handful of INGO and UN individuals interviewed for this project had a different opinion, explaining that they made deliberate efforts to consult with local WROs and to offer funding

based on needs. Several WROs, for their part, recognise the constraints that INGOs and donors face and advocate for their own priorities and agenda; some even reported turning down funding that did not fit within their priorities or strategy. It is important to acknowledge that international stakeholders do encounter obstacles in meeting needs and may be aware of the limitations of the system. What is certain, however, is that further efforts should be made to align priorities and ensure WROs have space to voice their concerns and, in turn, influence what is funded, where and with what modalities.

6.5 Coping strategies of WROs

WROs that have survived the stresses of the past several years have adapted – both negatively and positively – to contend with decreased security, vacillating donor demands and priorities, and a shrinking … civil space. Adjusting to donor priorities, as discussed above, was a shared characteristic of WROs in Iraq, the OPT and Yemen. Sometimes this has meant implementing activities that donors wanted or changing geographical areas of focus. A representative from a prominent Cairo-based WRO explained that the WRO's strategy is to avoid stirring unwanted attention or controversy:

"We are not confrontational, we try to be peaceful and to keep a low profile. If [a certain type of intervention is not achieving its objective and is attracting negative attention or pushback in the community] we just stop doing it for the time being because we don't want to compromise our message."

WROs working in areas of Iraq and Yemen under the control of non-state actors such as tribes and militias have managed to keep programmes open by relying on personal relationships with influential individuals. While this can be effective, it is not a sustainable strategy as territory can change hands quickly and the organisation may be beholden to those that hold power.

6.6 The humanitarian imperative: When the strategic gender justice agenda disappears

"Whenever you make progress in one area, you are then thrown back to the most basic needs." – Palestinian academic

Following the latest eruptions of fighting in the Gaza Strip, Iraq and Yemen, donor priorities have overwhelmingly shifted towards providing funds for humanitarian aid. While this focus

is justified, it does take over or completely obscures the longer-term gender justice and equality agenda. Again, this is an area in which WROs are highly sensitive to the fluctuations of donor funds, and **many WROs in Iraq, Yemen and even the OPT have transitioned to humanitarian programming, putting their strategic gender justice work on an indefinite hiatus.** The unintended consequence is the near disappearance of the gender justice and equality agenda.

The staggering shift from development to humanitarian work has had a particularly harmful effect in Yemen, where the momentum achieved in gender development following the 2011 uprisings and the NDC has been severely hindered by the war. A former Yemeni INGO employee painted a picture of what it was like at the beginning of the armed conflict in 2015:

"[Strategic work in gender justice and gender equality] was halted, everything was ceased and it was gone all of the sudden. But also there was a huge sense of being lost … there is a sense of destruction, there is no solid ground on which [WROs could] start their work. [WROs] used to know their kind of work, but there is a sense of a loss of direction among these organisations … WROs and organisations that had a gender pillar shifted [to humanitarian programming] in order to secure funding, which diverted them from their original mandate. It will be difficult to get them back on track, because money for humanitarian work is disbursed quickly and in large amounts. While gender work is political, it does not pay off the same way as humanitarian [work does]."

While no one doubts the need for humanitarian work, WRO representatives affirm that **working on gender justice and equality in parallel to humanitarian programming is critical to the resolution of the conflict and the long-term stability of Yemen.** A WRO representative mentioned that the onset of the war had set Yemeni women back "100 years" for many reasons, including the lack of work in gender equality. She has struggled to gain donor support for proposals for gender justice programmes and has adapted by attempting to integrate aspects of early recovery in economic empowerment programmes for women. But she feels pessimistic about the lack of funds and priorities for development work and keeps hearing that "now is not the time" for strategic gender programmes amidst a massive humanitarian crisis – an expression that has become very familiar to WROs and activists pushing for projects in gender development and for women's involvement in the political process. In response to the "now is not the time" argument, a representative from a prominent Yemeni WRO stated:

"We need to increase the amount of aid for Yemen, not just humanitarian aid but also development aid. I think the time has come for us to move from relief to development. Humanitarian aid is a first priority … but I think that development is important for the long-term stability of Yemen."

6.7 The future of WROs: Diminishing gender equality?

Many WROs have shut down or ended their activities in response to the pressures outlined above. This is especially prevalent in Yemen, where organisations struggle to abide by donor withdrawal and an inhospitable security environment, and in Egypt where the crackdown restricts CSOs to the point of suffocation. But in both cases, there is a sense of perseverance and determination. In Yemen, the head of a prominent WRO stated that, "we are working and we see our work as necessary, even amidst difficult circumstances ... Women's voices never disappear and we must continue to demand the rights of women."

In Egypt, some organisations and activists are pressing on despite the difficult circumstances there. For example, one WRO proudly described the almost defiant endurance of some activists:

"Feminist organisations, they are trying. One of the things I like about our movement is that people are still trying to find ways to work. But I think it is a strong movement which still exists and continues to work by using [different] techniques."

Considering that several prominent WROs have come under draconian governmental actions (such as having assets frozen or being placed under travel bans), one wonders how much longer they can realistically function if the environment does not change. Participants were unanimous that the constriction of independent civil society and WROs curtails the realisation of gender equality in the legislative, social and discursive spheres in Egypt. In other words, gender equality in Egypt cannot be fully realised if the current situation continues. The effect on Egyptian society was summed up by a representative of a prominent WRO: "If we [independent civil society] are not there, then women and men are left only to the extremists and to the state." In such a scenario, the progress made since the revolution would cease or go back in time.

This final point is not limited to Egyptian NGOs: because the Egyptian women's movement is the oldest in the region, it serves as a signpost for women's civil society movements in the MENA in general. WROs can continue to cope with the current situation and align their priorities with those of donors to obtain funds, but the ongoing uncertainty and strain will weigh heavily on their work and on the achievement of gender equality. WROs recognise that their work in gender equality is inherently linked to better outcomes in conflict resolution and post-conflict outcomes: if they are derailed from their core mandate, the result will be more war and fragility.

7. "Now is *not* the time": Women's political participation and issues around resolution 1325

"Do you think [those men] are talking about issues that are related to women? I doubt it. They are talking about how to divide powers, how to divide treasures." – Yemeni key informant speaking about the peace negotiations in Yemen

Overtures contrasting women's visible participation in the Arab uprisings with the subsequent descent into violence and marginalisation have become clichéd in the past several years. Yet, it is important not to forget that women's participation in the political process and in the efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts in this region have been fought for long before the Arab uprisings, and in fact underlie the recalcitrant fragility in the region. Simultaneously, alternative venues of participation at community levels and in humanitarian systems and responses remain an outlet for women's participation. Now, as always, challenges to women's substantive participation are hindering the actualisation of conflict resolution and gender justice.

This section considers the different dimensions of women's participation in the four contexts, looking at their representation – and absence – at higher levels in government and Track I and Track II negotiations. It also considers some of the barriers to women's participation and the alternative ways that women can and do influence their communities. The implications of poor representation of women in government will be examined in all four contexts, but with a particular focus on Yemen, where women's participation in higher-level peace negotiations and at community-level areas of governance has been an uphill battle.

7.1 Quotas and quick fixes: Women's representation in government

A shared trait of Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen is the underrepresentation of women in government. Quota systems for parliamentary representation in Egypt, the KRI and federal Iraq, and Yemen have not resulted in robust and meaningful women's political participation. An Egyptian respondent with extensive experience in the political process described the shortcomings of the quota system:

"One of the indicators [of Egyptian state feminism] is quota systems in elections ... It seems there is a disconnect between the two, where the state thinks if we do that, then we can bypass all the other stops we need to take. The problem is that those in power think that there are easy fixes. But the issue is that we have structural problems that need structural solutions. If you look at the three branches of government, there is an incredible lack of women's representation in all of them ... 10–15% of the executive branch is women, which is very low. If you look at the judiciary, that is a big problem, because in the judiciary we have almost 0% women, we have no female judges."

An impact of this poor representation of women in decision-making roles translates to policy. The policy architecture for women in Egypt, despite some modest improvements, is largely inadequate and there are conspicuous gaps: for example, there is no law that criminalises violence against women in private spaces.[60] There is a lack of representation in the justice system and in the Egyptian security apparatus at all levels. When women do reach positions in government, it is often only as a means of appearing progressive before international donors. One Yemeni activist described the situation before the war, saying: "Of course women would not reach a real empowered position where they actually make the decisions. They would be given something not considered 'serious' in Yemen, like the Human Rights Ministry." The current situation is no different: the few women in both the Houthi/Saleh de facto authority and the Hadi government do not hold influential positions.

Many participants described how governments 'use' women to garner international legitimacy. A similar dynamic is visible in the KRI, where the KRG has included women in a bid to appear attractive in front of international donors, as part of its strategic decision to embrace international demands and therefore funds. In federal Iraq, there is a 25% quota for female MPs, yet the influence of women is weak and the parliament is itself fragile and highly vulnerable to external influence. A WRO representative explained:

"All of the political parties have a quota for women, which is a good idea, but it is a lot more superficial. There is no interaction between the CSOs and the political parties because the space is very limited. The CSOs have encouraged parties to have women on the electoral list."

Still, it is notable that in the 2014 parliamentary elections, 22 out of 83 female MPs won their seats without being dependent on the quota system.[61]

7.2 1325 blowback: Limits to women's participation in negotiations and the political process

"Have you seen the negotiating teams for both sides? That answers your question for how much they value women. Women are always being used." – Yemeni key informant

[60] Article 60 of the Penal Code stipulates: "The provisions of the Penal Code shall not apply to any deed committed in good faith, pursuant to a right determined by virtue of Sharia law." This clause is often referenced to justify spousal abuse. See: P. Magid, Fight the man: Laws that help women and laws that hurt them, Mada Masr, 9 March 2015, http://www.madamasr.com/en/2015/03/09/feature/society/fight-the-man-laws-that-help-women-and-laws-that-hurt-them/
[61] R. Nader, Iraqi women make gains in parliamentary elections, Al-Monitor, 12 June 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/iraq-parliamentary-elections-women-gains.html

Although Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen have faced different struggles in the past decades, a reality linking these is a failure to recognise the connection between the aims of women's rights, leadership and meaningful participation, which forms the basis of the UNSC resolution 1325. **Women in contexts beset by uncertainty and conflict have become accustomed to hearing the words "now is not the time" when they have asserted their right to participation.** The current situation in these four contexts is no different: when many of the WROs and activists interviewed tried to make their voices heard in conflict negotiations, constitution drafting sessions and humanitarian planning sessions, they were told those words.

In Yemen, the escalation of violence reversed the accomplishments that activists and WROs had made during and following the 2011 revolution. One activist called this period a "golden time for women's participation" – and with good reason. Women and youth played a strong leadership role in the uprisings and prominent women leaders such as Nobel laureate Tawakkol Karman were instrumental in mobilising protesters and enjoyed a high level of international recognition.[62] This momentum continued during the transitional period, when women achieved a representation of 28% in the NDC. Several women leaders were influential in setting the agenda of the NDC, despite having to lobby for women's representation against considerable opposition. A WRO representative and activist who participated in the NDC recalled the process:

"During the NDC, all political parties were required to nominate at least 30% of women to their delegations, but most of the political parties did not nominate women, with the exception of the Yemeni Socialist Party. The UN Envoy pressured the political parties and women were eventually accepted at the 30% quota. Women were also excluded from leading some of the sessions; they were excluded from many things. But the women carried out protests until [they] were able to lead sessions."

This momentum, however, was halted with the start of the conflict, as a Yemeni activist recounted:

"The moment that violence was used to reach power, that stopped everything. The use of violence gives the idea that those who use their weapons will reach their goals. So we ended up with the ... parties that use violence [being] the ones who are heard and included to make decisions. They are the ones that the international community engages with. As women are not part of this mechanism using violence, it means automatically that women are not heard and are not a part of the process."

Yemen stands out for the repeated exclusion of women in high-level peace talks. The Yemeni women interviewed described facing obstacles from the negotiating parties themselves, from UN bodies and even internally from Yemeni women. Of the three tracks of peacebuilding, women have prominent roles only at Track III, the level of community initiatives, but are largely excluded at Tracks I and II[63]. In 2015, UN Women initiated the Yemeni Women Pact in an effort to address the absence of women at the Track II level. The pact has since grown to around 120 women and shows promise. But according to a UN representative, it proved difficult getting it off the ground as women were in many ways more focused on their own political divisions and struggled to find common ground and form a unified message. It has been difficult to achieve a 50/50 representation of women activists from the south in the pact.

The 2016 negotiations in Kuwait are an example of women being excluded at the Track I level. One WRO representative, who is also a prominent activist, described her experience:

"The UN selected seven women ... to come to the negotiations in Kuwait several months ago. One of the objectives of us going was for us to send a message to the international community that Yemeni women must be participants in this process. There was considerable opposition ... and there was a threat directed towards the [UN] Envoy. They were saying 'we will not participate if women are there'.[64]Their reason was that 'now is not the time for women. When there is peace then we will include them.' After much effort and back and forth, they met with us."

One activist lamented how the women who were brought to the Kuwait talks were subject to a shaming campaign on social media, which trivialised their involvement: "They were saying they are opportunist, who cares about women's rights right now, the country is in a dire situation." Some Yemeni interviewees expressed particular disappointment in the UN and the international community for failing to apply the necessary pressure on the negotiating parties to cooperate. One WRO representative and activist faulted the UN for not taking a more assertive stance:

"They should have more mechanisms and more tools. You cannot just say that the parties refused and then just stop. The UN can impose on them ... You are imposing everything, why not impose your gender commitments as well?!"

[62] For a more in-depth exploration of the roles that Yemeni women played at all levels during the 2011 revolution, see W. Shakir, M. Marzouk and S. Haddad, Strong voices: Yemeni women's political participation from protest to transition, London: Saferworld, 2012, http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/666-strong-voices.

[63] Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental diplomacy, while Track II diplomacy refers to non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals sometimes called 'non-state actors'. D. Snodderly, Peace terms: Glossary of terms for conflict management and peacebuilding, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp.50–51, http://www.usip.org/publications/usip-peace-terms-glossary/
[64] The Houthi delegation refused to meet with women, while delegations from the Hadi side and the GPC demonstrated more cooperation with the women's delegation.

Yemen has now entered a paradigm where women's participation in high-level talks is mostly symbolic – younger women activists and youth who led the revolution have no voice in these processes and even the elite gender activists have been marginalised. The long-term effect of women's exclusion from the Track I and Track II arenas will have a devastating impact on women's participation. A WRO representative summed up this situation:

"We see women's participation decreasing, we are afraid that will be the model taken after the conflict ... Now there is a fear that women's participation will go back to zero after the conflict. You have noticed that there are very few women on the official levels. There [is no] participation from civil society. So there is a belief that those peace treaties would neglect, if not exclude, women until peace [is achieved]. Women will be absent, or their concerns will not be represented. And all those achievements – participation in the NDC and the draft constitution – these are not yet implemented. Here is a fear that they will lose these achievements."

Likewise, a well-publicised crescendo in violence against female protesters during the January 25 revolution in Egypt – a favourite tactic of the Mubarak regime – tainted women's participation in protests throughout the transitional period and during the Morsi and Sisi regimes.[65] The conflation of women's rights and political participation with the elite of the overthrown state was one of the factors that inflamed a post-Arab Spring blowback against women's activism. A WRO representative described how the media idealised the wife of Jamal Nasser, contrasting her with the vocal Suzanne Mubarak and her involvement with the NCW, thus posing a counter-image of a docile and quiet female who did not interfere in her husband's political domain. It is perhaps not surprising then that Egyptian women were increasingly excluded from the higher levels of the political process during the transition period. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces appointed no women to the constitution drafting committee,[66] and in the post-Morsi period concerns about women were often overshadowed by other priorities.[67]

Women in the OPT have fared a little better. There is a disagreement between women activists and WROs and the PA over the causes of women's rights and of Palestinian liberation. WROs

[65] Sexual violence against female protests – and Egyptian women in general – has been explored by scholars. See, for example, S. Hollmeyer Taylor, A. Tan, P. Sloane, M. Tiernan and F. Mahmood, "When she stands among men": Sexual harassment of women at political protests in Cairo, January 2011 – August 2013, Al Nakhlah, 10 June 2014, https://alnakhlah.org/2014/06/10/when-she-stands-among-men-sexual-harassment-of-women-at-political-protests-in-cairo-january-2011-august-2013/.
[66] M. Kato, Women of Egypt: Why empowerment requires changes in social norms as well as laws, The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, winter 2017, https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/women-of-egypt/
[67] Nazra for Feminist Studies, Exclusion of women in the political process and the constitutional declaration should be treated immediately ... Political forces and those leading the transitional period need to integrate women in a fair and equitable manner within the Roadmap of June 30, Cairo: Nazra for Feminist Studies, Position Paper, 2013, http://nazra.org/en/2013/07/exclusion-women-political-process-and-constitutional-declaration-should-be-treated

mentioned that PA officials had directly informed them that all gender issues will be solved when the Israeli occupation is over; there seems to be little consideration that improving the status of women and engaging them in the liberation project as equals may in fact be beneficial for the Palestinian independence movement. Ignoring the gender equality agenda was part of a larger pattern of the PA's behaviour: "Everything is subsumed under the goal of liberation, although this is just an excuse used by the PA to justify its shortcomings." Although the PA shows a pattern of cooperation with WROs, the resistance to mainstream women participating in the pursuit of its most essential objective – the end of occupation – deeply hinders this objective.

7.3 Women as first responders in humanitarian response

The shrinking presence of women at higher levels has not entirely foreclosed women's participation. Women in Iraq, the OPT and Yemen have found an avenue for participation as first responders to humanitarian crises. Many WROs and CSOs have been diverted from their strategic agendas to responding to humanitarian emergencies and aid provides a clear contribution for women to have an influence in their communities. In Iraq, for example, national WROs and CSOs (many with the financial and technical support of international funders and INGO partners) are leading the response on the ground to the displacement crisis brought about by ISIS and the Syrian conflict.

The humanitarian response, however, does not offer a perfect model of women's participation. In Yemen, in particular, there are considerable deficits in the way that the humanitarian system consults with women, delivers services, and engages Yemeni women and youth in substantive positions in the response. International actors have not been doing an adequate job of including women in strategic decision-making or larger response plans, which tend to profess commitment to gender that is more symbolic rather than concrete. Several Yemeni respondents noted how women are still excluded from higher circles of decision-making in humanitarian aid, although they are often active at the lower levels. One Yemeni WRO noted how women would be silent in coordination meetings and ceded the floor to their male colleagues because they lack confidence and experience in asserting their own ideas and opinions. Yemeni NGOs overall felt that they had a disproportionately small amount of influence in meetings compared with INGOs and UN bodies.

There is also a shortage in basic knowledge on the concepts of gender in local NGOs and in government. A Yemeni CSO representative recounted a meeting with civil servants working in the de facto authority in Sana'a:

"I attended a session once with the Ministry of Education and they were talking about gender. One said that gender is haram, it is against Islam. I said how? He said that gender

encourages women marrying women and men marrying men. I told him that it is about addressing not just the needs of women but also the needs of men. He was not convinced."

The prioritisation of gender and the commitment to embedding WPS in humanitarian response is a challenge in Yemen and in other contexts. Humanitarian actors are preoccupied with providing basic needs for a monumental – and underfunded – humanitarian crisis and gender does not sit high on the list of priorities. **This appears to be symptomatic of a general lack of recognition of the linkages between women's involvement in response and improved outcomes for relief and conflict resolution – and a lack of recognition of the interaction between humanitarian efforts and the wider social and political context in which it is delivered, underlining the importance of conflict-sensitive approaches that are based on and respond to a strong context analysis.** SGBV interventions in Yemen in particular are inadequately funded and do not cover what is needed, which is part of the larger problem of failing to diligently consult women on their specific, unique relief needs, or to ensure their protection and rights – some of the core concepts of the WPS agenda.

The implication of this cycle of women's exclusion in peace talks, governance bodies and other arenas of decision-making is that women's continued marginalisation will lead to poor outcomes both for gender equality and for post-conflict recovery and stability overall, echoing one of the primary findings of literature on resolution 1325 that has emerged in the past 25 years. Commenting on the dire situation of Yemen, a female activist remarked that, "if you had already had a healthy society in which women were active and engaged, then [Yemen] would be better able to cope with these stresses".

8. Mixed messages: The broader role of the international community in promoting (and hindering) gender equality in the MENA

This section takes a critical look at how the actions, policies and messages of the international community impact the realisation of women and girls' rights in the four contexts. How international actors such as donors and INGOs affect the work of WROs has already been examined so here the focus will turn to international policy and aid regimes, and how the rhetoric and action taken at these levels travels down to civil society and to women, girls, men, and boys themselves. The international community here encompasses governments, prominent leaders, implementing agencies of the UN, INGOs and donor organisations that together develop policy, distribute funds, set discursive trends, and play direct and indirect roles in conflict. The actions and discourse of the international community are often seen as inconsistent to the objectives of gender equality. While certainly many of these contradictions and complexities do not have easy solutions, research participants identified concrete ways that international actors can attempt to advance women's rights.

8.1 Making the jump from rhetoric to action

One of the most commonly voiced critiques of the international community is the gap between rhetorical commitments and concrete actions taken – an issue that applies not just to women's rights, but also to democratisation and conflict resolution. In an era where abundant strategy documents, statements and reports issued by INGOs, UN bodies and governments heartily endorse the importance of gender equality and gender mainstreaming, these commitments are seldom translated into positive impacts for their intended beneficiaries. A UN employee formerly engaged in gender work in Yemen succinctly summed up the major problem:

"Follow-through. That is what comes to my mind immediately. You would find documents that try to say this, but even if we implemented just half of what we have written down, then we [would] see something."

This proved especially salient in this context. An international gender adviser working in Yemen remarked that national WROs have been more conscientious in incorporating gender equality in their response, far more than any of the UN agencies with their myriad of strategy documents. She also noted that the challenge of employing female staff in insecure areas impedes the WPS agenda.

8.2 The elephant in the room: Contradictory actions of the international community

"The least you can do is to stop giving weapons to a government that uses them to destroy us." – Egyptian key informant

Many WROs and other key informants identified ways in which the same international governments that provide funding for gender equality can be non-constructive or inconsistent in promoting the cause of gender justice in their policies towards and interactions with states. Most prevalent among these is to hold states with poor records of human rights policies accountable for their actions, and to impose conditions and monitoring mechanisms on the provision of financial support to governments and GONGOs. This is a concern that is especially common in Egypt. A representative from a WRO there stated that the international community "plays a positive role in terms of putting forth ideas and building the capacity and human rights organisations, [which is] a step forward for human rights and women's rights. But supporting governmental organisations anchors the same kind of thinking and practices of the state."

This is not to say that Egyptian participants recommend disengagement with the state or do not recognise the importance of diplomacy and supporting state capacity. Rather, several respondents pointed out that funds provided to the state are often not monitored or tied to concrete outcomes that the state is held accountable to. One WRO representative clarified this:

"The bad part is that many of these organisations that give the state funding, they are not pushing the right way for implementation. For example, I think giving the state money to implement the NSVAW is a good thing. But without a plan, without the integration of civil society in this strategy, just giving the money is not helping. The state can say 'yes we are doing something right' [without actually accomplishing anything]."

Feedback from respondents in general on this issue indicates the need to combine direct support to states with support to WROs and other relevant entities. Egyptian WROs also noted the conspicuous silence of the international community towards the government's treatment of CSOs.

In the OPT, WROs pointed out the irony of supporting Palestinian civil society to promote gender equality without holding Israel accountable for copious violations that disadvantage women and have a devastating impact on Palestinian society overall. One WRO urged:

"The international community hasn't been very brave in confronting Israel and has actually withdrawn funding from CSOs that have brought attention to the issue. The international community needs to pressure the PA on implementing its obligations, especially in regards to the implementation of [resolution] 1325."

In Yemen, where the Saudi-led coalition has carried out devastating attacks on civilian targets, the UK came under scrutiny in late 2016 for failing to halt the sales of arms to Saudi Arabia, even after the US (which itself has a strong record of drone strikes in Yemen that have harmed civilians)[68] stopped a sale of munitions to Saudi Arabia due to "systemic, endemic problems in [its] targeting."[69] In all cases, the failure to speak out assertively against these acts does little to enhance the credibility of international actors that aim to support principles of good governance and gender equality. Certainly, this study is not the first to point out the paradox of large donor pledges in humanitarian aid to countries besieged by conflict in which those donor countries find themselves entangled.

This gives rise to a crucial reality that emerged in the findings: ending armed conflicts through diplomatic means will go much further in reducing violence against women and girls than any humanitarian project. Participants often perceived that the international community is obligated to exercise its influence on parties to end conflicts. Speaking about the war in Yemen, a Yemeni academic pointed out that the larger political questions are unavoidable and cannot be satisfactorily answered by any amount of humanitarian funds:

"It is very important to talk about the highly contagious political issues before we talk about what DFID, FCO or any other agency can do for women. They need to stop this war while the possibility is still there. We cannot speak about women and girls' rights in a vacuum."

Many WROs indicated that international actors at high levels are in the privileged position of being assertive in their advocacy and engagement with states and with non-state actors, unlike WROs that do not possess the clout or the political protection to lodge forceful criticism. These high-level acts are just as – if not more – needed as additional funds for humanitarian or development work.

9. Religion: Friend or foe of gender equality?

[68] S. Oakford, The UN says US drone strikes in Yemen have killed more civilians than al Qaeda, Vice News, 15 September 2015, https://news.vice.com/article/the-un-says-us-drone-strikes-in-yemen-have-killed-more-civilians-than-al-qaeda
[69] P. Motaparthy, Theresa May should come clean on UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, Human Rights Watch, 28 December 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/28/theresa-may-should-come-clean-uk-arms-sales-saudi-arabia

"Where the state has less control, others have more control, either the mosque or the church." – Egyptian key informant

This section explores perspectives on religion and gender in the four contexts and attempts to answer the question: What role does religion play in people's lives and how do predominant religious views and discourses impact women and girls for better or for worse? There are some commonalities across respondents and geographies, and some differences of opinion over whether religion can positively influence gender equality, as well as tensions around whether and how engaging religious actors in efforts to advance women's rights is beneficial. The section ends with a discussion of the rise of non-state actors that both seek and claim to govern territory with a religious frame of reference, linking this to broader patterns of fragility that tend to disproportionately impact women and girls.

9.1 A rightwards shift in religious discourse

Respondents in the four contexts agreed that conservative religious rhetoric has gained momentum in the past several years. While this is true of state-controlled areas, it is also highly prevalent in areas that fall outside of state control, where religious leaders and armed groups with a religious frame of reference have come to fill governance gaps. Religious leaders hold a high level of influence on the daily lives of 'ordinary' people. Many representatives of WROs regarded religious leaders negatively for their punishing stance towards women's rights and participation. For example, a representative from an Iraqi WRO stated:

"Religion influences all aspects of life within the areas that we work. It has a positive influence in the sense [that it encourages] caring for IDPs and meeting their needs. But conversely some religious leaders make our work difficult. For example, we wanted to do a campaign in support of passing the law against domestic violence, but some religious leaders made things difficult for us and interfered in logistic and legal matters that are not their area of expertise."

In Yemen, Islamist parties have at times pushed back on women's participation during the revolution and during the NDC. A WRO representative and prominent activist described the impact of conservative religious parties on the work of feminist organisations:

"The conflict between feminist activists and religious leaders is still going on, or let us say that [the conflict] between secular organisations and Islamic organisations is still going on. The conflict in Yemen is a political conflict with a religious covering. For example, 2011 was the first time that women came to the streets or to public spaces, and this amount of women going out resulted in many challenges. Women faced attacks and threats and they were even sometimes beaten on the streets, simply because they were not wearing a niqab

or a hijab ... During the NDC, there was conflict between feminist activists and the Islamist parties about two articles in the constitution related to women: the age of marriage and the 30% quota for higher level positions for women. Even the women in the Islamist parties were against these. And during the NDC, some women were declared to be Kaffirs by Islamist actors, that they were transgressing Islam."

In a FGD conducted in the Gaza Strip, women described how religion is used to justify gendered power relations that disadvantage them. One woman explained that these notions are increasing in society, as religion has become a coping mechanism to deal with the stresses of constant conflict:

"The role of religion has increased in people's lives with the rise ... of crises and problems that society suffers from. Being in a state of waiting and patience and tolerance has become one of the most important characteristics of Palestinian society, as a result of [the] powerlessness and weakness that has struck our society. Unfortunately our society's structure and culture is masculine and is going in the direction of ... interpretations of religion that favour men. One of the effective tools of oppressing women and their rights is a poor misunderstanding of religion that serves the dominance of masculine ideology. We see this in the violations of Sharia and religion in issues of inheritance or in EFM, for example. Often feminists are depicted as being against religion and Sharia. Unfortunately, boys are brought up with these concepts of masculinity that depict women as incomplete beings intellectually [and] emotionally, who are not capable of taking their own decisions, all in the framework of maintaining their hegemony on the masculine culture."

Religion and religious leaders, however, were not unanimously viewed as adverse to women's rights or participation. A female Egyptian activist associated with the MB asserted that women are valued and are active participants:

"The Brotherhood, we have been pro-woman, we have women who hold important positions in our party. We saw that women in Egypt were in a bad condition and we were happy to participate in the revolution. We wanted women to achieve their rights from the state and within the family. We were happy to see women on the left and the liberal participate with us. After the election of Morsi, there was female representation in parliament."

Some FGD participants viewed religion as a beneficial source of support that has the unfortunate tendency to be misinterpreted or exploited. A FGD participant in KRI said: "Religion always has a positive role, but the problem is that people misunderstand it and misuse it, and this is not religion. Islam is a religion of tolerance and love but there are powers that work to tarnish the image of Islam." Another Iraqi woman commented that Islam fairly distributes attributes and responsibilities to each gender and prescribes good behaviour

and morality: "We are a Muslim society, but with the condition that we have a moderate understanding of Islam. Islam has helped us to awaken our strengths as women and to accept the natural role that God has chosen for us in the holy Quran."

In the OPT, an academic cautioned against simplistic depictions of religion, noting that Hamas provides certain rights to women through its faith-based laws, including inheritance and divorce rights, which are not recognised as legitimate by secular and feminist WROs. She also pointed out that an increase in outward religiosity such as the veil did not necessarily correspond with decreased women's rights:

"It is a lot more complex than that as the community has become superficially more conservative. There has been a change in the way that people dress – but this is not an indicator of content ... There is a lot more support for women in higher education and a lot more women in higher education. There is also a greater demand for women to be in the workplace. There has been a revolution among young women over the past 10 to 15 years. People who are saying that Palestine has become more conservative are living in a green zone. There are more people attending the mosque and wearing niqab, but there is actually a lot more rights for women living in the West Bank."

9.2 Mixing religion and gender equality: Different perspectives on religion and programming

Participants had very different perspectives on the utility of addressing gender equality through a religious lens and on engaging religious leaders in gender programmes. Many organisations had tried this approach to varying effects. It is a common approach in the PA-governed areas of the OPT and in the KRI, and many organisations felt they reaped positive benefits of working with religious leaders through training and campaigns, even if they themselves disapproved of the influence of certain religious interpretations. A CSO representative in the KRI believes that people misinterpret the Quran and other Islamic principles and thus engage with religious leaders to mobilise their considerable influence:

"If we want to have an influence, then we need to engage with the religious community as it has a large amount of influence on people. It is essential to improve people's understanding of religion. For example, Kurdish people always thought that FGM was permitted in Islam, so [our organisation] went to some of the local mullahs and appeared on TV shows in order to speak about the actual role of FGM in religion."

Several WROs and activists noted that religion can be interpreted in multiple ways according to personal views, and therefore combining women's rights and religion can be unpredictable:

"Religion has not affected us positively or negatively", explained a representative from a WRO in Egypt. "Because it is selective, people apply whatever they want to believe; they interpret in their own way." For example, people can offer the principle of modesty as prescribed by Islam as a solution to sexual harassment, which is an unsatisfying answer to a complex social problem. Another Egyptian WRO sees the potential for flexibility of different religious interpretations as an opportunity to open debates and influence thinking on gender and religion:

"It's necessary to work with religious leaders because society listens to religious leaders. We can't just push them aside. And also it is useful and necessary to show people that within the same religion people do not agree on certain things."

Initiating critical thinking about gender and religion was seen as a first step in changing perceptions. Religion could also be used to teach concepts of gender equality; for example, framing the principles of CEDAW through concepts of women's rights in Islam would ensure greater acceptance in Egyptian communities.

Religious leaders can also play a positive role in supporting marginalised women and survivors of violence. For example, a religious community was cited by one WRO representative in the KRI as being useful to women in the Yazidi community:

"Religious groups are very influential, especially among the Yazidi women. Whether the influence of the religious groups is good or bad does depend on the personality of the group. Some religious groups are very good for the empowerment of women, especially the religious community among the Yazidi women, which are very open to the protection and empowerment of women."

Religious leaders have been mobilised to influence norms that stigmatise survivors of violence. When Yazidi leaders in Iraq broke with tradition by welcoming Yazidi female survivors of ISIS abuses – including forced conversion to Islam – the move was viewed by civil society and the UN as a positive and critical step in helping to reintegrate the survivors back into their communities.[70] It is important to note, however, that WROs and CSOs that had worked with religious leaders to positive effect often emphasised the importance of handpicking religious leaders with sympathetic views towards gender equality.

Several respondents took adamant stances against mixing religion and gender equality programming. A Yemeni CSO reported negative experiences in which religious leaders and imams agreed to participate in projects solely because they were paid:

[70] S. George, Yazidi women welcomed back to the faith, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Tracks, 15 June 2015, http://tracks.unhcr.org/2015/06/yazidi-women-welcomed-back-to-the-faith/

"This is something that I know, even INGOs or local NGOs, when they offer funding [religious leaders] say yes and they agree to do the project. Sometimes they do a contract with a religious leader, one of the activities of this proposal is to encourage religious men to support gender. So they will contract them, they will pay them, but there is no impact … Even if they say they are raising awareness, they will go for the money. But the impact is not there because the will is not there. They only do it for the money."

An Egyptian key informant with many years of experience in development was unconvinced of the utility of such approaches:

"This is what we have been doing for years and years, and it shows no results. Show me something good that comes out of working with religious leaders. At the end of the day, they are conservative old men."

9.3 Religion, gender and governance

The high level of influence that religious leaders and discourses have over people's lives and ways of thinking about gender roles and rights and practices more broadly is no doubt why governance actors make strategic use of them. In state systems such as Egypt, religious institutions, including al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, can become entangled in state policies. An Egyptian respondent illustrated this point:

"[Al-Azhar and the Church], they are pro-government. Our pope is one of the president's men. If we insist on working with religious leaders, it must come from a direct order from Sisi's office. I trust neither al-Azhar nor Sisi to change anything."

Indeed, the grand imam of al-Azhar and the Coptic pope very publically threw their support behind Sisi when he overthrew Morsi in 2013. Another Egyptian respondent stated that al-Azhar and the Church were cooperative with the regime in matters of converging interests, but sometimes clashed over gendered issues such as divorce laws. For example, Sisi came up against al-Azhar when he called for the banning of verbal divorce – a practice that WROs affirm disadvantages women – and was met with a square refusal to cooperate.[71]

In federal Iraq, Shia clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani are credited with great influence over politics, including issues around women's rights and political participation. For example, Sistani did not object to the quota system for women's political participation

proclaimed under the Transitional Administrative Law in 2003[72] and he issued a fatwa requiring Shia women to vote as a religious obligation during the January 2005 elections.[73] A representative of a WRO in the KRI attributed a large amount of influence to clerics among Shia and Sunni residents of both the KRI and federal Iraq, but felt that Shia clerics have disproportionately wider-reaching influence in federal Iraq than in the KRI.

This study does not aim to determine the sincerity or authenticity of the institutions of faith that are influential in these contexts, or of groups that use religion as a frame of reference for governance projects. But when the state fails to not only meet the basic needs of citizens but also to model values of transparency, respect towards human rights and equality, then people tend to turn elsewhere. In these fragile spaces, gender equality and women's rights become ever more tenuous and vulnerable to the whims of those who take control. Thus, any discussion about gender and religion in these contexts inevitably redirects us back to questions of governance and fragility. This reifies the central importance of accountable and responsive governance in mitigating the rise of actors and discourses that run contrary to the objectives of gender equality and gender justice.

[71] M. al-A'sar, Sisi, al-Azhar at loggerheads over verbal divorce, The Arab Weekly, 12 February 2017, http://www.thearabweekly.com/News-&-Analysis/7806/Sisi,-al-Azhar-at-loggerheads-over-verbal-divorce

[72] M. Al Moumin, Constitutional and legal rights of Iraqi women, Policy Brief, Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2007, p.4, http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Al%20Moumin%20PB_1.pdf
[73] A.H. Al-Rahim, The Sistani factor, Journal of Democracy, 16(3), 2005, pp.50–53

10. "We began to know each other": Gendered experiences and perspectives of the past five years

In this section, the experiences of the individuals who are the intended (or unintended) recipients of the words and actions of WROs, INGOs, governance actors and government officials responsible for gender programming are analysed. It explores the perspectives shared by women and girls in the FGDs, with the aim of understanding how they have fared in the past several years and to consider the ways in which the actions and discourses of stakeholders are trickling down into daily life. The basis of this section is the data obtained from FGDs conducted in the four contexts, although it also weaves in some information collected from WROs and activists to contextualise these data. Finally, although this section takes a special interest in women and girls as the interlocutors of the FGDs, it will also address some gendered experiences of men and boys as reported by FGD participants.

10.1 Economic concerns are paramount

Women and girls are highly preoccupied with the decline in economic opportunities and the rise in the cost of living – a cross-cutting concern that impacts men and women, and rural and urban residents, albeit in different ways. Economic issues have propelled more women to engage in income-generating work, a change that has implications for traditional gender roles in certain contexts. Although economic stresses are not new phenomena in these countries, women are increasingly affected by the economic difficulties that have followed political conflicts in the past several years. A FGD participant in Sana'a stated that, "the economic crisis has had an even bigger influence [on people's lives] than the war". Both women and men are adopting often stressful and negative strategies to cope with the situation. Specific coping mechanisms take gendered forms and impact children as well. In Egypt, many young men resort to legal and illegal migration (a coping mechanism also mentioned by FGD participants in Iraq but not in the OPT or Yemen), while women are more likely to resort to undocumented marriage, or agree to unwanted marriages with older men or to be a second or third wife.

Work, however, remains the most common coping mechanism. Both women and men take on additional jobs in informal labour markets or accept work in unfulfilling positions that are far below their education levels. For example, a participant in Al Minya mentioned that educated young women take jobs in call centres when they could not find more satisfying professional opportunities. A young woman participating in a Cairo FGD described the situation:

"Without a doubt, the economic situation forced everyone to work, not just men and women but also children. The quality of the jobs available has gone down too; for example, people with Masters degrees are wandering around the metro selling little products. Nowadays everyone dreams of migrating."

Participants agreed that the economic crises have led to increased acceptance of women's participation in work outside the home, although here it is important to point out that acceptance does not necessarily translate to liberalisation of gender roles in the workplace or at home. In Egypt, FGD participants explained that women tend to be engaged in the informal sector, for example, working as housemaids, where they are more likely to be exploited. Women in Al Minya said that while there are more women working, there is still a 'glass ceiling' between women and high positions in government, politics, the private sector and education.

The economic crises have, however, also disempowered women by disrupting traditional gender roles. Women often acutely feel the weight of being economic providers and caregivers at home. FGD participants in rural Suhag said that, "women do all of the household chores. Even a woman who works still has to bear the burden of the house in addition to her productive role as a working woman." The burden of care is especially high for women in active conflict situations. In Aden, a FGD participant explained that, "women bear greater responsibility than men because there are more job opportunities for women to work in the private sector and in shops ... but salaries have gone down." In Yemen, women must work while also tending to the emotional needs of children and other family members, often in the absence of their husband.

Findings from FGDs conducted in Sana'a and Aden touch upon changes in gender roles brought about by women working. In Aden, a woman explained:

"Men used to take care of women so they could stay in the home. But now a husband has no objection to his wife going out to work because she is contributing to the household. Sometimes he will even say 'go out and get this or that'."

Although it appears that the conflict has precipitated greater acceptability of women working and leaving the home, this does not necessarily transcribe in greater freedom for women, as men still hold onto their dominance in the household and women have a large unpaid workload at home. One Yemeni female key informant explained how men have come to revert to gendered power relations to justify their wives and female relatives working:

"In the past women were not allowed to go to work or to join any organisations, but due to the needs in society and [because] men are without jobs, they send their daughters and wives to work. It's good that women are getting more chances and are so much involved and are financially independent, but the negative thing is that most of the girls or women are responsible for feeding their children, for paying the bills, for buying the khat for the husband to chew. So she should also fulfil the needs and be nice to him even though she is exhausted, to buy him cigarettes ... so he can go out with his friends. The man thinks that he is giving her something that she never dreamed of. They look at it as something luxurious, that 'I give you the permission' to go out and work. So you should first do the work in the house, and then go to work."

In this sense, women's work exacerbates gendered divisions of labour within the household. This not to say that work is seen as disempowering: as Iraqi participants noted, education and paid work enable women to break free of financial dependence on men, which is a rare instance in which women can enjoy the same advantages that men can. In all contexts, women overwhelmingly requested support for economic empowerment programmes for themselves as well as for men to ease this burden.

10.2 Gendered perspectives on the Arab uprisings and their aftermath

"We saw death in the streets during the demonstrations. What is there for us to fear that is worse than death?" – FGD participant in Cairo

Women and girls in urban areas of Egypt spoke of the positive and negative changes in their lives and in society in general brought about by the revolution. Women in Cairo described the uprising as the moment in which the "barrier of fear" was broken – although in the last two years, fear and insecurity has returned to Egypt with a vengeance. Urban women described a rise in awareness and an openness to discussing issues that were previously cloaked in silence. Women and girls in Al Minya and Cairo noted that there was greater awareness around sexual harassment due to campaigns and the discursive opening post-revolution. Increased awareness and acceptability of speaking about harassment has empowered women and girls to report incidents to the police, something that was almost unheard of before.

Women in Al Minya also referred to state efforts towards addressing sexual harassment, which they saw as a step forward: "There are now anti-sexual harassment offices in Egyptian universities, which makes it clear that the state is meeting the demands of women, even if it is in a superficial way." Interestingly, women in FGDs conducted in rural Suhag did not mention the revolution when asked to name the events that had recently greatly influenced their lives – they instead focused on the economic and security difficulties brought about by political events in the past several years, rather than the events themselves. Sexual harassment, they explained, was not a problem in their small village and thus the improved awareness and initiatives did not affect them.[74]

The discursive space that opened after the 2011 uprising gave rise to darker aspects of society's views towards women to come out into the open. A WRO activist explained:

[74] It is interesting that women note developments in the fight against sexual harassment in such a short time. This suggests that when civil society, the state and the media focus considerable attention on a gender issue (even if not in coordination), a surprising amount of progress can be made.

"After the revolution, we began to know each other. Before the revolution, there were many sexual assaults but women were silent about these and if we spoke about them, we were accused of being liars. After the revolution, women started to speak about this and the ugly face of Egypt came up."

In this sense, the uprising exposed the currents of hatred and misogyny in society to be voiced alongside more progressive views. These debates have continued to play out, but the net effect is positive. The same WRO activist pointed out: "The most important factor is that after the revolution, women started to know their rights and to ask for changes. When they spoke up about harassment, at the beginning there were huge backlashes but now we have a law against it."

Many of the Yemeni women activists and WRO members interviewed spoke of the uprising and the NDC as a watershed experience for Yemeni women, who for the first time participated organically in a political system from which they had been excluded. The protests of 2011, however, seemed like a distant memory to participants in FGDs conducted in Sana'a and Aden, where they were much more concerned with economic struggles, the salaries that were not being paid, the destruction of schools, the breakdown in health infrastructure, electricity and water cuts, and gas shortages. It is possible that the fond remembrance of revolutionary goals bespeaks a certain amount of privilege, since most women and girls spend all their time and energy coping with daily life rather than reflecting on questions of women's liberation and political participation. However, women in Yemen depicted themselves as more patient, hardworking and adaptable than men, which suggests that they attribute to themselves an inner strength that they have accessed amidst the conflict.

10.3 The more things change, the more they stay the same

"Women don't enjoy any special privileges in society other than a few rights that they have eked out following much struggle ... A man is privileged from the beginning for the very fact of being born a man." – FGD participant in Cairo

Despite the many changes in the past several years, the gap between men and women is still wide. Women have fewer rights, are less safe and have less of a voice than men, while men enjoy more mobility and ability to travel, and face fewer threats to their security when walking down the street. Women in Cairo complained that political representation of women in high, meaningful positions in government is very poor. In most cases where changes are occurring, they appear to be out of obligation and a collective preoccupation with other concerns than by intent. Women and girls are for the most part not fully experiencing the rights they have fought for, and they and those around them are in many ways consumed by the business of surviving daily life. In this sense, challenging norms of male privilege is crucial, as it underpins these

obstacles to women's participation, protection, and relief and recovery.

Despite their burdens, women are in many ways well aware of the gendered struggles they face, and they are also aware of what their rights should be and are asking for these rights and for opportunities to exercise them. In a FGD conducted in Aden, women summed up the positive strengths of their sex:

"In advanced societies, there is no difference between the sexes but there is a difference here in Yemen. Women are oppressed, but if a woman has money and she can work, then she becomes strong. Women are by their nature patient, unlike men, and they are able to work both in and outside the house, as seamstresses or selling incense and other things like that. A woman can work as a human rights defender but she needs to be trained. If a woman is trained and supported, she can raise awareness and knowledge among women."

Women are mired in the daily struggles of living in highly compromised situations, but they have found ways to cope and they have concrete ideas for improving their lives. What many women feel they lack, however, are mechanisms to exercise these rights and realise their potential.

11. Conclusion

As has been illustrated, gender equality and gender justice cannot be divorced from broader questions of governance. This fact must not be ignored in the region with the highest gender gap in the world[75] and that appears to be suspended in a painful cycle of fragility, authoritarianism and suffering. The message of this study is not new and it is not going to go away: When governance systems fail to respond to the needs of men and women in accountable ways and when a majority of the population is excluded from spheres of decision-making, the only logical result is that it will remain locked in these cycles of fragility and conflict.

The gains in participation that women in Egypt, Iraq, the OPT and Yemen have fought for in the last 5, 50 and 100 years are now, as always, fragile. CSOs dedicated to women's rights and services and gender equality are contending with reduced funding, reduced independence and reduced security – and in more extreme cases are facing a constriction of their workspace that threatens their very existence. These barriers come from their governments, their communities and the international actors that intend to support them and forward their agenda. Many WROs have not survived these difficulties and those that have are often operating with an unsustainable level of uncertainty. Yet gender equality cannot be achieved without the robust participation of WROs; the setbacks felt by WROs and civil society more broadly will hold back the achievement of gender equality in all aspects of society – political, economic, and social.

At the same time, international actors and regional governments are failing to follow through on their commitments towards gender equality and embedding the principles of resolution 1325 in humanitarian response paradigms, and in mid- and high-level political processes. In parallel, the momentum that WROs and activists gained in strategic programming in gender justice and equality following the Arab uprisings is evaporating in the fog of humanitarian, political and economic crises. The result has in many ways been devastating towards gender equality in these four contexts: Women and girls, despite seeing some advances through engagement in the labour market or increased awareness, still come up against harsh gendered inequalities at work and at home. In some cases, they are holding their families and communities together as the war flares around them and they are on the frontlines.

All this depicts an uncomfortable reality: The paradigms employed by international actors at various levels – starting from the highest spheres of policy decision-making and trickling down to local NGOs – are failing to meet their mark, in spite of valiant efforts, good intentions, and millions and millions of dollars. With the region seemingly growing more and more unstable by the day, international actors have the opportunity to reflect on their actions and consider new paradigms towards advancing the gender equality and justice agenda in this region. Questions of gender equality and justice are central to the imperatives of providing humanitarian response, ending conflicts, and establishing secure and prosperous societies in the MENA. It is not acceptable to tell women and girls that "now is not the time" for ensuring their agency, protection and meaningful participation in their future and society. Now *is* the time.

[75] L. Abirafeh, What's holding Arab women back from achieving equality?, The Conversation, 8 March 2017, https://theconversation.com/whats-holding-arab-women-back-from-achieving-equality-74221

12. Recommendations

Some of the following recommendations are reinforced by previous research in the region, underlining their continued importance. With previous research indicating that times of conflict sometimes represent opportunities to break away from the status quo and redefine gender norms, this research underscores the immense challenges brought about by conflict and fragility and therefore lend more urgency to these recommended actions the opportunities that can manifest during conflict in the form of shifts in gender roles and norms in response to changed social and economic conditions reinforce the need for action now, rather than later. The changes that must take place for the realization of gender equality will not happen in a short period of time, and long-term, strategic engagement is necessary to realize this objective. Now is the time to step up our commitments to gender equality and gender justice in MENA.

The recommendations are converged to cover all four contexts with country or context specific recommendations being given where appropriate.

1. Donor support to states in conflict and recovery stages should **ensure that gender machineries have the resources and technical capacity to deliver their mandate**, and should establish clear and transparent monitoring frameworks to ensure progress and transparency.

   a. In **Egypt**, donors should provide funding to the relevant ministries to implement the National Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women (NSVAW). Funding should be given in tranches, with a clear monitoring framework that attaches concrete benchmarks that must be met before new tranches of funding are disbursed.

   b. In **Iraq**, donors, UN agencies and INGOs should urge the government to allocate funding for the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 Initiative. They should compel or require the government to work with a wider range of CSOs. All funding provided to the Iraqi government should be accompanied by transparent monitoring frameworks.

   c. In the **OPT**, donors should hold the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) accountable to implement their obligations around UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325.

2. Donors and INGOs should **revive and increase funding for long-term strategic work in gender equality and justice** – including programmes centred on women's political participation and economic empowerment – alongside humanitarian response.

   a. In **Iraq**, programmes on topics such as legal awareness training and SGBV advocacy programmes have been defunded in favour of trauma and psycho-social programming. Donors and INGOs should revive funding for these topics in parallel with funding for the much-needed emergency psycho-social support and trauma care.

b. In **Yemen**, continue to support partner WROs that are already carrying out small-scale projects in women's economic empowerment and political participation. Advocate with donors to widen these projects to include more geographical locations and a larger number of beneficiaries. At the same time, continue to fund gender-responsive humanitarian programmes and ensure that there are resources available for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and mitigation, as well as women's access to justice and economic empowerment.

3. Principles of conflict-sensitivity and early recovery need to be more fully integrated within the humanitarian response.

4. **International actors (including governments, the European Union, UN actors and INGOs) should aim to be more assertive in applying the principles of the UNSC resolution 1325 on all parties at Track I and Track II peace negotiations, and/ or communicate where they have done this and to what effect.** Ensuring women's leadership and meaningful participation in peace talks and negotiations demands a significant amount of pressure from UN bodies, donors, INGOs and local CSOs. All parties should follow the recommendations laid out in UN Women's 2015 global study on UNSC resolution 1325.[76] This also means not backing down when parties refuse to accept women in the process. International actors should also make efforts to bring Track III work closer to Tracks I and II so that local efforts are closer to high-level efforts[77].

    a. In **Yemen**, the UN should ensure that at least 30% of participants in peace talks are women, including women members of conflict parties, and WROs and CSOs.

5. It is essential for international actors to undertake more assertive advocacy and follow-through on gender justice and equality with states characterised by non-democratic and poor human rights practices, and/or communicate where they have done this and to what effect. The broader political and human rights environment has a significant impact on progress towards gender justice and the operational space for WROs. Failure to address the political drivers of exclusion and oppression will undermine the effectiveness of efforts to strengthen gender justice and equality. International actors can build a 'critical mass' of advocates through regional and global partnerships that can apply concerted pressure on states as well as have unified messaging and monitoring. This will help ensure the survival of WROs in the region amidst growing threats to space for civil society.

[76] R. Coomaraswamy, Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, UN Women, 2015, pp.394–396, http://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf
[77] Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental diplomacy, while Track II diplomacy refers to non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals sometimes called 'non-state actors'. D. Snodderly, Peace terms: Glossary of terms for conflict management and peacebuilding, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp.50–51, http://www.usip.org/publications/usip-peace-terms-glossary/

a. In **Egypt**, INGOs, donor governments and UN agencies should jointly pressure the state to immediately cease its crackdown on civil society using all means of leverage available. Any funding provided to the state in support of women's rights should: be given in periodic tranches, be attached to conditions that require cooperation with civil society and contain clear monitoring frameworks and benchmarks that must be met to receive future funding.

b. In **federal Iraq,** donor governments, INGOs and UN agencies should apply any influence that they have on the government in Baghdad to be more cooperative with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and WROs, including easing bureaucratic requirements for registration and permits to work. In the KRI, donors, INGOs and UN agencies should pressure the government to work with CSOs that are not affiliated with political parties.

c. In the **OPT, donors, governments, UN agencies and INGOs should not ignore the pivotal role that the occupation and blockade has played in repressing the rights of women and girls.** Support to WROs should include long-term funding and capacity-building for advocacy, with support for risk analysis and mitigation.

d. In **Yemen**, governments and the UN should expend all possible efforts to find a political solution to the conflict, continuing to push for the inclusion of women at all levels.

6. International actors should **improve practices around transparency and measuring outcomes and progress of funds provided to states, government bodies and semi-state institutions to improve women's rights. Funding to states and** government-organised non-governmental organisations **(GONGOs)[78] should always necessitate clear benchmarks for progress** that are regularly communicated with the public in the local language, in order for citizens to understand how and for what purpose their governments are using the money. When possible, WROs should be engaged in supporting the state and monitoring the progress.

    a. In **Egypt**, advocate for a clear monitoring framework that ensures that the steps outlined in the NSVAW are carried out as stipulated. Urge the National Council for Women (NCW) and the other involved ministries to publicise the content and objectives of the strategy in Egyptian media and online.

    b. In the **OPT**, impel the PA and the MoWA to fully implement the action plans, and provide funding and technical support for them to do this.

[78] A GONGO is an organization that is set up to mimic a civic organizations but is sponsored by a government to support its political interests

7. UN bodies, INGOs and other international actors tend to repeatedly engage with the same pool of organisations and activists. They should **aim to reach further afield in their relationships and partnerships**, diversifying along geographic, socio-economic and generational lines. This should be done by developing and expanding partnerships with organisations outside of central urban centres, and by identifying, developing and supporting young activists to promote the gender justice agenda. This should be done in tandem with actions outlined in recommendations 5 and 8, which relate to protecting and expanding the operating space for CSOs.

   a. In **Yemen**, continue programmes that reach beyond the immediate pool of activists; ensure that there is equal geographic coverage and representation of activists and organisations in the south and in the north.

8. **Increase donors and INGOs' appetite for financial and, when appropriate, security risks.** When possible, INGOs and donors should simplify/streamline complex funding and reporting requirements to enable a wider diversity of organisations to access funds, and should allow for a greater margin of risk in their own programming and advocacy. INGOs and donors have been accused of being risk-averse in their programmes, which prevents them from trying novel approaches, engaging with new partners or entering into new locations. One way to address this could be to make more explicit the link between appetite for risk and progress on gender justice objectives, the latter being difficult to achieve without the former.

   a. In **Egypt**, encourage national partners to expand their networks of women's organisations throughout the country, and to report areas where the NCW is not cooperating with national and local NGOs.

   b. In **Iraq**, donors should make efforts to fund more national NGOs instead of INGOs, including those in remote areas that do not currently receive international funding and those that are not affiliated with political parties.

   c. In the **OPT**, donors and INGOs should fund projects in the neglected East Jerusalem area, where there is a significant need for programmes in SGBV response.

   d. In **Yemen**, make an effort to reach out to prospective partners that are based outside the capital, Sana'a, and when possible work with partners in low security areas that have low donor coverage.

9. Donors and INGOs are inadvertently creating competition among local organisations that depend on international funding. Donors should improve their mutual coordination to ensure a fair distribution of funds across partners and geographical areas.

   a. In **Iraq**, national and local organisations have experienced a brain drain as their staff members – often attracted by the higher salaries on offer - have moved onto INGOs, and also find themselves competing with INGOs for funding. Direct and earmarked funding should be provided to national NGOs working on women's rights as a priority.

Donors should prioritise national NGOs over INGOs when allocating funding, and both INGOs and donors should strengthen the capacity of national and local organisations to implement projects to ensure long-term sustainability.

10. Donor governments and INGOs should **urge (and when possible require) state actors to allocate and disburse funding to WROs** through mechanisms with transparent application and selection criteria, in order to expand the cooperation between the state and wider pools of WROs and to decrease WRO dependency on international donors.

   a. In Egypt, donors, UN bodies and INGOs that work with the NCW and other ministries involved in the NSVAW should urge, and when possible require, these actors to involve WROs fully in the implementation and monitoring of the NSVAW.

11. WROs struggle to accomplish their work with funding paradigms based on short-term projects. Provide multi-year core funding to WROs so that they can implement long-term initiatives in support of gender equality and gender justice. **Grant-making mechanisms and reporting requirements should likewise be more user-friendly and simple** to avoid administrative burden of WROs and those with limited English abilities.

12. Economic struggles are an overarching concern of men and women across all four contexts. Support for economic empowerment programmes is desperately needed, particularly for women in conflict zones who are most adversely impacted. **Economic empowerment work should be tailored to the contexts and the different possibilities of men and women, and expand beyond the current models that tend to be small-scale and short-term**, to make way for long-term recovery and improved stability.

13. **Humanitarian responses should embed the WPS** agenda, as foreseen by the relief and recovery pillar of resolution 1325[79], **at the core of the humanitarian response. Humanitarian actors should substantively engage women and meet their needs at all stages of programmes and at all levels.** Women from affected communities should co-lead the design, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian programming, in addition to being meaningfully consulted, to ensure better representation of the needs of all segments of society. Donors, UN agencies and INGOs should enact and implement a quota of 40% women in leadership and staff positions in national and international humanitarian organisations. Donors should also ensure that there is adequate funding for purposeful gender mainstreaming and SGBV response and coordination mechanisms.

   a. In **Yemen**, current INGO- and UN-led efforts to build the capacity of Yemeni NGO staff and local authorities in gender and in SGBV risk mitigation and response should receive continued funding, and should be expanded to improve the gender responsiveness of the humanitarian response. They should also give more planning responsibilities to WROs and activate Arabic as an official language of humanitarian coordination systems and responses.

[79] What is U.N. Security Council resolution 1325 and why is it so critical today?, United States Institute of Peace, https://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325, accessed April 2017

14. In contexts that have seen positive developments at the level
of policy and legislation, **more resources are needed to support national partners with raising awareness among women
and men, and dealing with informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices.**

    a. In **Egypt**, donors and INGOs should continue to (or increase) support to local partners to carry out programmes intended to raise consciousness with the aim of changing men's behaviour towards women's rights; this includes building on the work done in sexual harassment and capitalising on greater awareness of this issue by positively influencing attitudes that will change behaviour. Programmes should also seek to positively change consciousness around other forms of SGBV such as domestic violence, and should raise awareness on the benefits of women's economic and political participation.

15. Recognising that gender justice and equality cannot be divorced from broader governance issues, **national and international actors must shape existing and future governance programmes with a gender lens.** Such programmes should seek to strengthen the involvement of women from diverse backgrounds in advocating for, delivering and monitoring improved governance, and seek to understand and address incentives related to power and resources that stand in the way of progress on gender equality and justice.

Annex 1: Literature review

Gender, conflict and fragility: An introduction

This literature review offers a conceptual framework of gender, conflict and fragility. It does this by first reviewing the core concepts of the gendered impacts of conflict and fragility on women, girls, men and boys, and people who identify as other gender identities, and then moves onto the growing body of work on gendered drivers of conflict and fragility. Next, the review considers some of the prominent debates around gender, conflict and fragility that arise in the literature, discusses the role of national machineries and institutions in the MENA, and finishes with a review of major themes around gender, conflict and fragility in the MENA, particularly since the popular pro-democracy uprisings that affected several countries in the region, often referred to as the 'Arab Spring'.[1]

The last two decades of scholarship around conflict and fragile situations have seen increasing interest in gender, both conceptually and in practice. Scholarly attention towards gender gained momentum from a rising recognition of the role of women in conflict and fragile situations, culminating in the landmark United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS), in the year 2000. The resolution affirms the disproportionate impacts of armed conflict on women and reifies women's roles in humanitarian response, conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.[2] Since its establishment, there have been a series of sister UNSC resolutions, regional treaties, and national and regional action plans on WPS, together creating a strong policy architecture.

While considerable attention has been paid to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during armed conflict, scholars and practitioners have also begun to cultivate a more expansive knowledge base around gender, conflict and fragility, showing how the gendered impacts of conflict extend far beyond SGBV to economic, political and social realms during conflict. More recently, scholars have been examining the reverse, specifically the impact of gender norms, relations and inequality on conflict and fragility. It is also important to approach gender in an intersectional manner, that is, recognising that it interacts with categories such as age, class, ethno-religious background, location, disability, marital status and sexual orientation. Gender categories such as women, girls, men and boys are thus not homogenous in terms of their positions of societal power, possibilities for agency or vulnerabilities.

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[1] The term 'Arab Spring' has been contested by some as an inadequate or inaccurate label to describe the series of uprisings that began in 2010 in Tunisia, and spread to Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Bahrain in 2011. See, for example, M. Alhassen, Please reconsider the term 'Arab Spring', Huffington Post, 10 February 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maytha-alhassen/please-reconsider-arab-sp_b_1268971.html.
[2] For a background on the normative framework behind the UNSC resolution 1325, see R. Coomaraswamy, Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, UN Women, 2015, pp.26–35, http://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf.

Before delving into the literature, it is useful to briefly reflect on definitions of the concepts of 'conflict' and 'fragility' as they relate to gender. Although 'conflict' lacks a precise definition, the concept of 'armed conflict' is more explicitly defined by various international actors; with some variations in wording, definitions commonly refer to elements such as the use of armed force, a minimum number of battle-related deaths and different parties at war, often including state actors and armed groups.[3] According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), international humanitarian law distinguishes between two primary types of armed conflict: international conflicts between two or more states, and non-international conflicts between the government and non-governmental armed groups.[4] The WPS agenda positions gender within the framework of armed conflict, including both the prevention and resolution of armed conflict, which some scholars have pointed out marginalises the gendered impacts of contexts that do not neatly conform to the definitions of armed conflict. As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin says, "[t]his narrow definition has excluded a number of conflict-affected locations and contexts where women have been shut out from conflict resolution and where the harms they experience are rendered almost entirely invisible to the WPS agenda."[5] At the same time, others have argued that the WPS focus on women and girls marginalises men, boys and other gender identities, and the homogenised label of 'women' obfuscates effective empowerment.[6]

Conscious of the limitations of 'armed conflicts', the idea of fragility has also gained momentum among scholars and practitioners. There is no standard definition of 'fragility' in literature and it is a term that can be applied to states or contexts more broadly; however, it is most often implicated with institutions that are unable or unwilling to provide protection and essential services as well as to uphold essential rights of citizens. Sweetman and Rowlands advocate for scholars to look at 'fragile contexts' as a more expansive alternative to the more traditional 'fragile state', in that it "allows us to understand how the state operates together with the other institutions – including the market, community and household – which together provide a context for human life."[7]

Similarly, Olga Martin Gonzalez defines 'fragility' as "a feature of a continuum from stability to crisis, and vice versa."[8] Writing on refugees and host communities in Mauritania, she points out that policies and laws enshrining gender equality and women's rights may be in place in fragile settings, but how low political will to enforce such laws and social norms that stigmatise reporting gender-based violence (GBV) continue to drive violence and thus further ingrain gender inequality. Fragility in this sense is not just about weak institutions but also political and broader social will to protect the rights of women and men equally. Due to these wide-ranging definitions of fragility, any context can be understood as fragile regardless of whether it fits neatly into the frameworks of what is meant by an armed conflict, including contexts affected by violence. These concepts of 'gender' and 'fragility', therefore, are intimately connected to fundamental questions of governance.

Core concepts of gendered impacts in conflict and fragility

A considerable body of work has examined the differential impacts of armed conflict on women and girls, whose high level of vulnerability is attributed to inferior social status pre-conflict, and assumed and innate characteristics of biological sex.[9] This focus on women and girls is justified: the UNSC resolution 1325 states that women and children "account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons".[10] Buvinic and colleagues distinguish between "first-round gender impacts" of conflict on women and girls, including increased morbidity, mortality, displacement, widowhood, domestic violence and SGBV, that in turn exert "second-round gender impacts" including household coping strategies that bring about a change in women's economic roles, function in the home and fertility practices.[11] These second-round impacts can both exacerbate existing inequalities and incite increased GBV,[12] but also open new opportunities for women to break inequalities through political and civic participation.[13]

Women are more likely to be affected by gendered divisions of labour, which place more responsibilities on their shoulders and can lead to food insecurity and illness.[14] Impacts on

[3] See, for example, Definition of armed conflict, The University of Uppsala, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/definition_of_armed_conflict/, accessed Janaury 2017
[4] ICRC, How is the term 'armed conflict' defined in international humanitarian law?, Opinion Paper, ICRC, March 2008, http://www.refworld.org/docid/47e24eda2.html
[5] F. Ní Aoláin, The 'war on terror' and extremism: Assessing the relevance of the women, peace and security agenda, International Affairs, 92(2), 2016, p.276, https://www.asil.org/sites/default/files/documents/INTA92_2_03_NiAolain.pdf
[6] See, for example, M. Cano Vinas, Gender audit of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the region, London: International Alert/Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2015, http://kvinnatillkvinna.se/wp-content/uploads/qbank/6eb887126d24e8f1cd8ad5033482c781.pdf; P. Debusscher and M.M. de Almagro, Post-conflict women's movements in turmoil: The challenges of success in Liberia in the 2005–aftermath, The Journal of Modern African Studies, 54(2), pp.293–316.
[7] C. Sweetman and J. Rowlands, Introduction: Working on gender equality in fragile contexts, Gender & Development, 24(3), 2016, p.337

[8] O.M. Gonzalez, Refugees and 'host communities' facing gender-based violence: Developing an area-based approach to gender-based violence around Mbera camp, Mauritania, Gender & Development, 24(3), 2016, p.377
[9] UN Women, Women and armed conflict, Fact Sheet No. 5, UN Women, 2000, http://Www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs5.htm
[10] UNSC, Resolution 1325, S/RES/1325, UNSC, 31 October 2000, p.1, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1325(2000)
[11] M. Buvinic, M. Das Gupta, U. Casabonne and P. Verwimp, Violent conflict and gender inequality: An overview, Policy Research Working Paper No. 6371, Washington DC: World Bank, 2012, p.3, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/270811468327340654/pdf/wps6371.pdf
[12] R. El-Masri, C. Harvey and R. Garwood, Shifting sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon, Beirut: Abaad – Resource Centre for Gender Equality/Oxfam, 2013, http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/shifting-sands-changing-gender-roles-among-refugees-in-lebanon-300408
[13] M. Buvinic, M. Das Gupta, U. Casabonne and P. Verwimp, 2013, Op. cit., p.20
[14] C. Sweetman and J. Rowlands, 2016, Op. cit., pp.337–338

women inevitably transfer to children: as Susan McKay points out, women hold the primary role of caring for children in most societies and therefore bear disproportionate responsibility for their physical and psycho-social wellbeing during times of conflict. Women are crucial in holding families together and meeting the needs of their children who might suffer from trauma, while often not having the resources or time to tend to their own physical and emotional health.[15] Women often find themselves maintaining the continuity of communities in the absence of men during armed or violent conflict; they may serve as first responders and humanitarian workers, a natural extension of their roles as caregivers.[16] Women and children also tend to suffer more from indirect impacts resulting from ithe breakdown of infrastructure and health systems,[17] and also have a higher risk of contracting HIV due to displacement and SGBV.[18] A disintegration of maternal care systems also creates complications for pregnant women and nursing mothers.

The impact on female children is no less grave: girls are the first to be pulled out of school and adolescent girls are vulnerable to early forced marriage (EFM), leading to pregnancy and birth complications that their young bodies are ill equipped to handle. They are also subject to the forms of gendered violence that affect adult women, including forced recruitment, SGBV and abduction, and may face negative economic coping strategies such as increased labour and roles of caring for siblings and children, or survival sex.[19] In MENA countries where EFM is practised under peacetime conditions, there is often a dramatic rise in child marriage during violent conflict, as has been evident in Yemen[20] and Syria, as well as neighbouring countries such as Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.[21]

The differential impacts of conflict on men and boys have also garnered more interest in recent years. Adult men are most likely to be targeted and killed during armed conflict, and men and boys of combat age are assumed to be threats by armed forces whether they are engaged in combat or not, rendering them as subjects of political violence.[22] Men and boys are also vulnerable to SGBV, but are less likely than women or girls to report incidents and obtain recovery services.[23] Writing on how literature and interventions in SGBV have often focused on women and girls (reflecting that women and girls are indeed more likely to experience violence based on their gender), Carpenter advocates for defining acts of violence predominantly directed at men and boys – such as sex-selective massacre, forced recruitment and male-directed sexual violence – as forms of GBV because men are more likely to suffer these acts due to their gender. [24] Research conducted in humanitarian settings has also shown how men and adolescent boys are less likely to be recognised as being vulnerable in comparison to other demographic cohorts such as women and children, which can hinder their access to humanitarian services.[25]

Social norms globally and in the MENA region have tended to link masculinity and male status with the role of the family breadwinner and protector, the latter often including the control of female household members in the name of 'honour'. In MENA, as in other regions of the world, changing social and, above all, economic conditions, often exacerbated by war and displacement, have made living up to these idealised expectations increasingly difficult. While for some men this has resulted in frustration and the urge to reassert male control that is seemingly under threat and stress, others adapt pragmatically to the changes (e.g. by sharing household chores or supporting economic activities of female household members). A third group of men embraces the changing gender roles wholeheartedly.[26]

In recent years, there has been a slow but steady growth in research examining the gendered impacts of fragility, conflict and displacement on individuals that do not conform to traditional gender identities. However, the impacts of conflict on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or intersex. (LGBTI) persons remains a largely neglected area of study, including in the MENA

[15] S. McKay, The effects of armed conflict on girls and women, Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 4(4), 1998, pp. 381–392
[16] M-C. Heinze, Women's role in peace and security in Yemen: Literature review, London: Saferworld/Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, 2016, p.4
[17] H. Adam Ghobarah, P. Huth and B. Russett, Civil wars kill and maim people – long after the shooting stops, American Political Science Review, 97(2), 2003, pp.189–202
[18] M. Buvinic, M. Das Gupta, U. Casabonne and P. Verwimp, 2013, Op. cit., p.10
[19] See, for example, D. Mazurana and K. Carlson, The girl child and armed conflict: Recognizing and addressing grave violations of girls' human rights, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, EGM/DVGC/2006/EP.12, September 2006, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/ExpertPapers/EP.12%20Mazurana.pdf.
[20] A 2013 survey conducted in Yemen found that 32% of the respondents were married prior to the age of 18 and 9% before the age of 15. These percentages have increased since the onset of the conflict. Families increasingly resort to child marriage as Yemen's conflict grinds on, United Nations Populations Fund, 16 November 2016, http://www.unfpa.org/news/families-increasingly-resort-child-marriage-yemen's-conflict-grinds
[21] See, for example, D. Spencer, "To protect her honour": Child marriage in emergencies – The fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence, London: CARE International UK, 2015, http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Child-marriage-in-emergencies_2015.pdf; Child marriage and the Syrian conflict: 7 things you need to know, Girls Not Brides, 3 February 2016, http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage-and-the-syrian-conflict-7-things-you-need-to-know/.

[22] R. Charli Carpenter, Recognizing gender-based violence against civilian men and boys in conflict situations, Security Dialogue, 37(1), 2006, p.88
[23] Ibid; M. Buvinic, M. Das Gupta, U. Casabonne and P. Verwimp, 2013, Op. cit., p.14
[24] R. Charli Carpenter, 2006, Op. cit.
[25] L. Turner, Are Syrian men vulnerable too? Gendering the Syria refugee response, Middle East Institute, 29 November 2016, http://www.mei.edu/content/map/are-syrian-men-vulnerable-too-gendering-syria-refugee-response
[26] See, for example, M.C. Inhorn, The new Arab man: Emergent masculinities, technologies, and Islam in the Middle East, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012; P. Amar, 2016; Bateson et al., 2016.
[27] J. Rumbach and K. Knight, Sexual and gender minorities in humanitarian emergencies, in L.W. Roeder (ed.), Issues of gender and sexual orientation in humanitarian emergencies, Humanitarian Solutions in the 21st Century, Cham: Springer, 2014, pp.33–74; Hagen, 2016.

region, and policy frameworks as well as programming responses, including humanitarian aid, are often wholly blind to the needs of this demographic.[27] LGBTI persons often face stigmatisation, discrimination and harassment under non-conflict contexts,[28] which often continue or even worsen during periods of conflict and displacement when discriminatory social norms may intensify.[29] This stigmatisation may also make it difficult to access basic services and aid. Those identifying as or being rightly or wrongly identified by others as not conforming to dominant heterosexual norms face not only discrimination and violence from state and non-state actors, but often also from other community members, including family members.[30]

Gendered aspects and outcomes of peace negotiations and peacekeeping

A body of literature has developed around the UNSC resolution 1325, considering the gendered aspects of conflict negotiation, resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. Several studies have compared the involvement of women in peace negotiations, identifying more positive outcomes in negotiations that involved the meaningful participation of women's groups. Statistical and qualitative analyses of conflict datasets have demonstrated a positive correlation between the involvement of women in peace processes and their more positive outcomes.[31] The positive influence of meaningful women's participation is due largely to women's "particular quality of consensus building to public debate",[32] meaning that women are likely to lobby for their own concerns and needs as well as those of other parties traditionally excluded from negotiations. This positive impact of women's participation in discussions about agreements translates to post-conflict and peacekeeping contexts, where women's involvement is associated with increased stability.

The strong evidence for women's participation notwithstanding, women remain underrepresented in peacebuilding dialogues and negotiations in the countries of the MENA countries as elsewhere, even if they are active at lower, less visible levels. In 2017, Oxfam and Saferworld found that despite a dismal pattern of marginalisation at formal levels of negotiation, women in Yemen have been and continue to act as "informal peacemakers and

peacekeepers" at community levels, providing representation to women in front of men in the family or community leaders, and solving everyday problems.[33] Contrary to perception, women in tribal areas in the country have often been directly or indirectly engaged in tribal conflict mediation.[34]

It is important, however, not to whitewash women's participation in peace agreements as a guarantee for success, as it is also critical to take into account the gendered barriers that women face in meaningful representation during formal peace talks. Writing on the Bangsamoro peace process in the Philippines – hailed as a landmark event in gender equality due to the participation of women on both sides – Davies, True and Tanyag point out that despite its laurels as a gender-inclusive process, the most vulnerable groups of marginalised, low-status women were not represented at the negotiations table. Despite the fact that these lower-status women were more impacted by SGBV and equally if not more subject to systematic gender inequality, their concerns were not discussed during formal discussion.[35] Thus, a truly gender-inclusive model of participation would take into account diversity among gender groups and address the different layers of gendered vulnerabilities. Women's participation should only be granted on the basis of its contribution to positive outcomes: as members of society and persons impacted by armed conflict, women have a normative right to participate in peace processes.

The very gendered impacts of conflict in and of themselves prevent women from participating in conflict negotiations. Women's participation in conflict negotiations must be meaningful and non-tokenistic to yield positive and long-lasting outcomes, which is often the consequence of intense lobbying of women's groups.[36] Indeed, women's activism and influence tends to be higher at sub-national and local levels – the levels at which the quotidian aspects of peace agreements unfold –than at the Track I and Track II levels of diplomacy[37] that are dominated by the predominantly political and military elite. Consequently, the UN should broaden the parameters of the traditional mechanisms of peace agreements to account for gendered hierarchies implicit in these political systems.

The onset of violence or armed conflict can also reverse gains in women's participation and derail their role in political transitions, a reality that has been a troubling feature of a number of countries marked by the Arab Spring. Elisabeth Johansson-Nogues contrasts the agency

[28] H. Myrttinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, "Trust no one, beware of everyone": Vulnerabilities of LGBTI refugees in Lebanon, in J. Freedman, Z. Kivilcim and N. Özgür Baklacıolu (eds.), A gendered approach to the Syrian refugee crisis, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017
[29] H. Myrttinen and M. Daigle, When merely existing is a risk: Sexual and gender minorities in conflict, displacement and peacebuilding, London: International Alert, 2017
[30] Ibid.
[31] T. Paffenholz, N. Ross, S. Dixon, A-L. Schluchter and J. True, Making women count – not just counting women: Assessing women's inclusion and influence on peace negotiations, Geneva: UN Women/Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, 2016, http://www.inclusivepeace.org/sites/default/files/IPTI-UN-Women-Report-Making-Women-Count-60-Pages.pdf; L. Stone, Quantitative analysis of women's participation in peace processes, in M. O'Reilly, A. Ó Súilleabháin and T. Paffenholz, Reimagining peacemaking: Women's poles in peace processes, New York: International Peace Institute, 2015
[32] R. Coomaraswamy, 2015, Op. cit., p.42
[33] A. Al Naami and S. Moodley, We won't wait: As war ravages Yemen, its women strive to build peace, Briefing Paper, Oxford: Oxfam/Saferworld, January 2017, p.2,7, https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-yemen-women-in-peacebuilding-300117-en_0.pdf

[34] M-C. Heinze, 2016, Op. cit.
[35] S.E. Davies, J. True and M. Tanyag, How women's silence secures the peace: Analysing sexual and gender-based violence in a low-intensity conflict, Gender & Development, 24(3), 2016, p.463
[36] R. Coomaraswamy, 2015, Op. cit., p.45–47; T. Paffenholz, N. Ross, S. Dixon, A-L. Schluchter and J. True, 2016, Op. cit.
[37] Track I diplomacy refers to official governmental diplomacy, while Track II diplomacy refers to non-governmental, informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals sometimes called 'non-state actors'. D. Snodderly, Peace terms: Glossary of terms for conflict management and peacebuilding, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp.50–51, http://www.usip.org/publications/usip-peace-terms-glossary/

and elation of women participants in the initial protests in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – in which "men and women of the Arab Spring seemed to act in such unison, even when faced with the authoritarian regimes' violent repression, that generations of ingrained social taboos about unrelated men and women mixing in public places appeared to be temporarily forgotten and gender roles suspended" – with the degradation of the sexual violence that was later deployed against female protesters by security forces in Egypt and Tunisia, and amidst full-out armed conflict in Libya. In all these countries, women were highly active in the demonstrations that overthrew the authoritarian regimes, but sidelined in the political transition processes that followed.[38] Yemen stands as another example in which women played a robust role in the uprisings that ousted Ali Abdullah Saleh[39] and enjoyed active participation in the 10-month National Dialogue, where they raised issues such as the age of marriage, paid maternity leave and issues of SGBV.[40]

The reverse equation: How gender impacts on conflict and fragility

While research has often focused on the gendered impacts of conflict, scholars are increasingly exploring the reverse, or the linkages between gender justice and equality, and conflict and fragile contexts. A number of studies revolve around gendered drivers of conflict ranging from underlying structural inequalities to gendered identities that glorify the violent enactment of gender roles. Much discussion on gendered drivers of conflict has centred on masculinities. Feminist scholars have considered how hegemonic masculinities – or dominant forms of masculinity that are rooted in patriarchy – can drive militarism and violent responses to conflict.[41] Myrttinen and colleagues point out how in practice and policy, theories of hegemonic masculinities have often been reductive and obscure the other roles that masculinity plays. For example, the WPS framework largely omits men and boys except when they are represented as perpetrators of violence or, more infrequently, as allies for positive change.[42] While there is a clear need to examine the links between masculinities and violence, given the vast preponderance of men and boys as perpetrators of violence, non-violent masculinities have largely been neglected in gendered research of conflict.[43]

Some studies on hegemonic masculinities have also considered how traditional feminine roles uphold or glorify these violent masculinities. For example, a Small Arms Survey study from 2010 pointed out how feminine rituals in South Sudan glorified men who had returned victoriously

from cattle raids and castigated men who had returned empty handed or not gone at all.[44] Also writing on conflict drivers in South Sudan, Lacey points to gendered economic systems and norms that view women as property as being the drivers of violent conflict, inciting young men to raid cattle to be able to pay bride prices when they are unable to do this through traditional economic means. In the MENA region, similar dynamics are at play through which women exert political, social and emotional pressure on men to use violence – be it to fight for their community or in the personal sphere, for example, mothers urging their sons to 'control' the behaviour of their wives.

For men, participation in what is seen as an act of legitimate resistance or defence can lead to an increase in social status, in part overturning pre-existing hierarchies based on age or class. Having participated in 'the struggle' can give young men who are usually expected to be deferential to elders a similar – or even higher – position in the community than those traditionally in power.[46] Participation in armed groups can, however, also be due to mundane reasons, such as the need to make a living in a situation where there are few other options. However, the same dynamics and expectations that are placed on men to be a protector and breadwinner for the family and community more broadly can both lead to men participating in or to escaping from violent conflict.[47]

Scholars have also examined the linkages between structural gender inequalities in societies and the nature of violence that unfolds during conflict. Writing on the importance of gender analysis in understanding the occurrence of SGBV during conflict, Davies and True compare the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) gender equality scores of a number of contexts affected by conflicts between 2012 and 2015. They conclude that gender discrimination in these conflict-affected countries tends to be higher than the global average of the SIGI scores, suggesting a link between high levels of gender inequality pre-conflict to a higher risk of SGBV during conflict. Importantly, their analysis also suggests that high levels of SGBV in a non-conflict context represent a risk factor for conflict in those contexts, or a return to violent conflict.[48] The linkage between high SGBV risks and limited access to the public space reinforces gendered systems of political domination. Peace itself is fragile – as Davies, True and Tanyag

[38] E. Johansson-Nogues, Gendering the Arab Spring? Rights and (in)security of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan women, Security Dialogue, 44(5–6), 2013, pp.393–409
[39] See, for example, M-C. Heinze, 2016, Op. cit.; W. Shakir, Women and peacemaking in Yemen: Mapping the realities, Helsinki: Crisis Management Initiative, 2015.
[40] R. Coomaraswamy, 2015, Op. cit., p.53
[41] H. Wright, Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: Perspectives on men through a gender lens, London: Saferworld, 2014, p.6, http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/862-masculinities-conflict-and-peacebuilding-perspectives-on-men-through-a-gender-lens

[42] H. Myrttinen, L. Khattab and J. Naujoks, Re-thinking hegemonic masculinities in conflict-affected contexts, Critical Military Studies, 2016, p.3
[43] M.H. Moran, Gender, militarism, and peace-building: Projects of the postconflict moment, Annual Review of Anthropology, 39, 2010, pp.261–274
[44] Small Arms Survey, Symptoms and causes: Insecurity and underdevelopment in Eastern Equatoria, Sudan Issue Brief, No. 16, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2010, p.5, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/114935/HSBA-SIB-16-symptoms-causes.pdf
[45] L. Lacey, Women for cows: An analysis of abductions of women in South Sudan, Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity, 27(4), 2013, pp.91–108
[46] J. Peteet, Gender in crisis: Women and the Palestinian resistance movement, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992
[47] H. Myrttinen, L. Khattab and C. Maydaa, 2017, Op. cit.
[48] S.E. Davies and J. True, Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: Bringing gender analysis back in, Security Dialogue, 46(6), 2015, p.505

remind us – when it is sustained through gendered inequalities that enforce the continued "silence" of the marginalised women whose interests are not represented during negotiations and who continue to suffer invisibly, thus perpetuating gendered drivers of fragility in an apparently 'peaceful' context.[49]

The relationship between women's meaningful participation in political and economic spheres also comes to light in debates on gendered drivers of conflict and fragility. As discussed above, multiple studies have demonstrated positive correlations between women's participation and representation in conflict negotiations and outcomes for peace and stability, but limited research draws clear lines between narrow women's participation and conflict and the rather more elusive concept of fragility, indicating a gap in the knowledge. Buvinic and colleagues demonstrate that women's political representation tends to be lower in pre-conflict contexts, and that increased involvement in civil and political life post-conflict has proven to be a positive outcome of violent conflicts.[50]

When considering the impact of gender equality and relations on conflict, it is important to reflect on the original rationale behind resolution 1325 regarding the prevention of – and not simply finding an end to – conflict as well as "the prevention of gender-based harms that precede and result from political violence."[51] Women's participation and gender equality is again central to prevention. As Davies and True's analysis of the SIGI points out, high levels of gender inequality and GBV appear to be a risk factor and a consequence for domestic violence and conflict.[52] UN Women's report on the implementation of the 1325 indicates that domestic inequality for women is also linked to belligerent foreign policies towards other states. It notes that, "what is certain is that pre-conflict social, political and economic systems are not gender-neutral, and the potential for the eruption of political violence is infused with a common gendered dynamic. Prevention strategies necessarily require stronger recognition and understanding of the depth of the influence of gender norms, gender relations and gender inequalities on the potential for the eruption of conflict."[53]

Returning to the interconnectedness between fragility, gender inequality and governance, it is important to consider the potential links between authoritarianism and low levels of democracy and gender inequality. Writing on changes in gender equality globally, Inglehart and Norris attribute the gender gap in political leadership and participation in the MENA region to its

low levels of democracy.[54] Similarly, Benstead's survey research in the Arab world identified a positive link between authoritarianism and higher levels of patriarchal values, which she attributes to the failure of political institutions in MENA to carry out the fundamental role of upholding gender equality.[55] However, reflecting on the wider body of literature, it is difficult to disaggregate cause and effect in what appears to be a cycle of bad governance practices and gender inequality – the persistence of both and the snowballing fragility in MENA suggest that gender relations cannot be divorced from conflict and fragility in this region.

Tensions and debates around gender and conflict

Several scholars have argued that discourses and actions around gender more broadly – whether gender norms, gender relations or GBV – reflect and perpetuate colonial notions and practices of unequal power dynamics between high-income and low-income, and East and West dichotomies that uphold global inequalities, gendered and otherwise. Much of this relates to what Spivak, writing on the subaltern, rather bluntly calls "white men saving brown women from brown men".[56] Lila Abu-Lughod too illustrates how Western discourses around Muslim women have been deployed to obscure exploitative north-south power dynamics and justify colonial practices. She points out that the British and French invoked the cause of saving women to justify colonial presence in Egypt and Algeria in the 19th and 20th centuries,[57] discourses and practices that Leila Ahmed refers to as "colonial feminism". Abu-Lughod adds that imperialist discourses around gender and Islam flourished in post-9/11 US, where the cause of "saving women" has been repeatedly instrumentalised to justify the US invasion and continued occupation of Afghanistan. A 2001 speech by Laura Bush, in which she attributes US military action as having liberated "imprisoned" Afghan women from their homes and asserts that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" delineates Abu-Lughod's point.[58]

While international interventions may indeed be beset with moral ambiguities, the cause of stopping violence against women cannot be viewed categorically in imperialist terms. A case in point is the targeting by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) of Yazidis, including the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women, which in part prompted the international coalition campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria starting in 2014. It bears mentioning that although the operation has been successful in reclaiming territory from ISIS, many Yazidi women, men and children remain under its control.[59]

[49] S.E. Davies, J. True and M. Tanyag, 2016, Op. cit.
[50] M. Buvinic, M. Das Gupta, U. Casabonne and P. Verwimp, 2013, Op. cit., p.21
[51] R. Coomaraswamy, 2015, Op. cit., p.206
[52] S.E. Davies and J. True, 2015, Op. cit.
[53] R. Coomaraswamy, 2015, Op. cit., p.207
[54] R. Inglehart and P. Norris, Rising tide: Gender equality and cultural change around the world, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003
[55] L.J. Benstead, Barrier or opportunity? Political Islam and support for women's political participation in Morocco, Al-Raida, Issue 135–137, 2011–2012, p.20

[56] G.C. Spivak, Can the subaltern speak?, in C. Nelson (ed.), Marxism and the interpretation of culture, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp.271–316, https://www.sfu.ca/iirp/documents/Spival%201988.pdf
[57] L. Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim women need saving?, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, p.31
[58] Ibid, p.32
[59] See, for example, Amnesty International, Escape from hell: Torture and sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq, London: Amnesty International, 2014, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/escape_from_hell_-_torture_and_sexual_slavery_in_islamic_state_captivity_in_iraq_-_english_2.pdf; Iraq: Yezidi survivors of horrific abuse in IS captivity neglected by international community, Amnesty International, 10 October 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/10/iraq-yezidi-survivors-of-horrific-abuse-in-is-captivity-neglected-by-international-community/.

The latter point brings us to debates on gender in discourses, policies and programmes concerned with terrorism, security and violent extremism – issues that have gained significant momentum in the years since the passage of the UNSC resolution 1325 and, in 2015, the UNSC resolution 2242. Scholars have voiced concerns about the international attention and adulation placed on the WPS agenda, pointing out how its preoccupation with SGBV obscures the gender inequalities that underlie the occurrence of SGBV in conflict and peacetime – and how this can place women's issues at risk of being absorbed by issues of international security. Sara Meger, for example, describes how sexual violence in conflict has been co-opted from a feminist issue grounded in unequal power relations to a concern of international securitisation. Divorcing sexual violence from structural and contextual inequalities paves the way for the "fetishization" of sexual violence, a decontextualisation that results in ineffective policies and aid regimes.[61]

Similarly, Ní Aoláin takes a sobering view of the WPS agenda and its treatment of gender and terrorism, arguing that the WPS mandate is not always clear in its definitions of 'peace' and 'conflict', which potentially obscures gendered harms that unfold in fragile contexts. She asserts that attaching the WPS agenda to countering violent extremism (CVE) risks "commodification, agenda hijacking and deepened gendered insecurity in some of the most precarious territories and communities in the world."[62] UNSC resolutions on terrorism and counter-terrorism, she argues, are lodged in the inherent dominance of a "masculine paradigm" and make only passing reference to gendered harms, often by invoking the 1325 in the margins. This augurs poorly for the mainstreaming of gender across global efforts and the mitigation of the attendant risks to women who are co-opted into the global 'war on terror'.

Sahana Dharmapuri has also warned against "essentializing and securitizing" the role of women in CVE, which is a consequence of basing approaches on a "narrow understanding of what it means to be male or female". She gives the example of how the focus on the role of women as mothers in CVE programmes grossly oversimplifies the diverse roles that mothers may hold in private and public life, advocating for a comprehensive gender perspective that is sensitive to the experiences of men, women, boys and girls as they intersect with other socio-political dynamics.[63]

National machineries of women's rights in MENA

Although a World Bank global review of gender machineries found no fixed set of criteria that ensure the effectiveness of national gender machineries, it noted that the more effective machineries tend to be "statutory, centralized, complex and well funded, a form that withstands changes in political leadership."[64] In this sense, the effectiveness of national machineries is entwined with the strength and legitimacy of institutions that enact these rights and uphold the rule of law. This returns us to the centrality of weak and non-responsive institutions in fragile contexts explored above. As Gonzalez's article on SGBV in fragile settings elucidates, institutional rights and processes are of limited value in the absence of political will and implementation mechanisms, and – importantly – the participation of women.[65]

Multiple MENA countries provide case studies of machineries that are fragile, nominal or serve a top-down purpose that dovetails with non-democratic regime interests.[66] Indeed, historically women's movements were entangled with projects of statebuilding and nationalism:[67] In several contexts there is a long record of national machineries that enshrine women's rights, but lack the effectiveness, political will or legitimacy to actually enact and uphold these rights. Tunisia, Egypt and Iraq are all prominent examples of this. Although Tunisian women were granted some of the most advanced legal rights in the Arab world under Habib Bourguiba, Johansson-Nogues remarks that these rights came about "less as a consequence of a genuine desire to further such rights than as a strategy to enable the regime to stay in power. Bourguiba banked on regime stability through economic growth and viewed female labour outside the home as a necessity for fulfilling that objective. Ben Ali used women's rights extensively to co-opt regime critics, as well as to keep foreign donors and investors satisfied."[68]

In Egypt, the state has displayed a troubling pattern of co-opting the cause of women's rights through its own machineries and discourses. Abu-Lughod highlights how women's rights were "governmentalized" in Egypt with the formation of the National Council for Women (NCW), a government body nominally helmed by then first lady Suzanne Mubarak. The NCW ended

[60] Resolution 2242 reiterates the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict negotiations, and stresses the importance of considering gender when working on preventing terrorism and violent extremism. See: Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2242 (2015) to improve implementation of landmark text on women, peace, security agenda, UN, 13 October 2015, https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12076.doc.htm.
[61] S. Meger, The fetishization of sexual violence in international security, International Studies Quarterly, 2016, 60(1), p.151
[62] F. Ní Aoláin, 2016, Op. cit., p.277
[63] S. Dharmapuri, Strategic blindspots: Essentializing, securitizing, and empowering women and men to counter violent extremism, Fletcher Security Review, 2 March 2016, http://www.fletchersecurity.org/dharmapuri

[64] D. McBride and A. Mazur, Gender machineries worldwide, World Development Report 2012, Gender Equality and Development, Background Paper, Washington DC: World Bank, 2011, p.4, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2012/Resources/7778105-1299699968583/7786210-1322671773271/McBride-Mazur-Background-Paper-Final.pdf
[65] O.M. Gonzalez, 2016, Op. cit.
[66] E. Johansson-Nogues, 2013, Op. cit.
[67] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), The Arab women's movement: Struggles and experiences, in UNDP RBAS, Arab human development report 2005: Towards the rise of women in the Arab world, New York: UNDP, 2006, pp.123–140, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/rbas_ahdr2005_en.pdf
[68] E. Johansson-Nogues, 2013, Op. cit., p.367

up being accused of "cover[ing] up problems" and of nepotism, distributing grants to a select handful of organisations. In this sense, the state captured the women's movement and made women activists cooperate with the system.[69] Prior to 2011, however, Egypt had a vibrant, non-state, Islam-inspired but studiously 'apolitical' women's movement, often merging Western, liberal notions with Islam.[70]

Iraq stands as another example in which state machineries mediate gender justice and women's rights. During the Ba'athist regime, women's rights were extended in areas of education, voting rights and the ability to hold public office. Iraq was also a signatory to CEDAW under Saddam Hussein. Yet as Brown and Romano point out, these amounted to nominal gestures: like the rest of society, women were denied the right to organise and to implement and monitor the enactment of their legal rights on the ground. The lone women's organization, the General Federation of Iraqi Women, fell under the strict purview of the Ba'ath party and was repurposed as a party tool.[71] In an astonishing example of how corrupt state machineries can derail priorities of women's rights, the group was actually "designed to mobilize women against 'imperialism, Zionism, reactionary trends, and backwardness'" instead of "focusing on the fight for women's advancement and equality".[72] As in Egypt, women activists became complicit with the regime and were denied the opportunity to address the underlying patriarchal beliefs that prevented their advancement.

The interaction of national machineries with civil society in the region – and with the machineries of international aid with its own agenda(s) around gender justice and women's rights – can both advance and harm the cause of women in MENA. The issue of 'elite capture' cannot be ignored in any discussion of women's rights in the Arab world, in the sense that the label 'elite' can apply to the state, the international community, and the menagerie of activists, NGOs and other groups that may look to both of these for funds, priorities and other forms of support. This phenomenon is what Abu-Lughod has referred to as the "internationalization of Muslim women's rights", in which a small group of elites speak on behalf of all women in a language of international rights and obtain funds for projects to target and "empower" women beneficiaries.[73]

Writing on the impact of the Palestinian Authority (PA) on women's rights in Palestine, Islah Jad points out that the establishment of the PA and its collaboration with a vast following

of NGOs that receive international funding had the unintended effect of disempowering Palestinian grassroots feminists by redirecting activism into formal civil society and its finite projects. The Palestine statebuilding project begun in 1993, with the subsequent "NGO-ization" transforming "a mass-based, living social movement, which engaged women from grassroots organizations throughout Palestine in working for a combined feminist-nationalist agenda" into interlocutors for the international community. In turn, this reduced their activism to a mere series of projects on democratisation, peacebuilding and women's rights, and disrupted their patterns of resistance activism. Islamist women's groups have proliferated in this context where NGOs have co-opted the leaders of the secular mass movement. Jad argues that this is also visible in other MENA countries, "where weakened states, under the pressure of international agencies and some local constituencies, are pushing for more 'gender-equitable legislation'."[74]

Regional implications of gender, fragility and conflict in MENA following the uprisings

Adhering to the definition of a fragile context as one characterised by unresponsive and non-inclusive institutions, low political will and rampant gender inequality, the MENA can be categorised as a highly fragile context – and one that has been affected by levels of armed conflict. Scholars have pointed to historically poor performance on indicators of gender equality in MENA,[75] often linking this to the region's high levels of authoritarianism and poor governance. The years leading up to and following the Arab Spring have seen much scholarship on gender and fragility in this region, particularly around the gendered forms of activism that have sprung forth as a counter to gendered forms of oppression. Women and men activists have challenged gendered power structures and domination through activism around sexual harassment, most prominently in Egypt and North Africa. Paul Amar examines how Egypt's regime wielded systematic sexual harassment as a way to discourage mobilisation, terrorise and delegitimise men and women protesters, and distract from a dysfunctional and non-inclusive state. Sexual harassment became, in short, one of the greatest gendered tools of political oppression for both men and women.[76]

The linkages between gendered concerns and concepts of democracy and citizenship have been of specific interest to scholars. Loubna Hanna Skalli demonstrates how younger generations

[69] L. Abu-Lughod, The active social life of 'Muslim women's rights': A plea for ethnography, not polemic, with cases from Egypt and Palestine, Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 6(1), 2010, pp.5–6
[70] S. Hafez, An Islam of her own: Reconsidering religion and secularism in women's Islamic movements, New York: New York University Press, 2011
[71] L. Brown and D. Romano, Women in post-Saddam Iraq: One step forward or two steps back?, NWSA Journal, 18(3), 2006, pp.52–53
       Ibid, p.54
[72] L. Abu-Lughod, 2010, Op. cit., p.7
[73] I. Jad, The demobilization of women's movements: The case of Palestine, From Changing Their World 1st Edition, Toronto: Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2008, p.2, https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/changing_their_world_-_demobilization_of_womens_movements_-_palestine.pdf

[74] For example, Yemen was 142nd out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index prior to the breakout of the armed conflict in 2015. See World Economic Forum, The global gender gap report 2014, Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014, p.9, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CompleteReport_2014.pdf.
[75] P. Amar, Turning the gendered politics of the security state inside out?: Charging the police with sexual harassment in Egypt, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 13(3), 2011, pp.299–328
[76] L. Hanna Skalli, Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa, Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, pp.244–258

of activists in North Africa see sexual harassment as inherently entwined with democracy and political concerns.[77] Acts of defiance against sexual harassment – or even breaking discursive taboos that have enforced silence – thus become an inextricably political act. Skalli notes that this kind of gendered activism represents a turning point in older, more traditional ways of regional gender activism characterised by women's groups lobbying the state for policy changes. Many activists borrow concepts from these groups' feminist frame of reference but do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists, seeing these categories as elitist. Instead, younger activists espouse a gender inclusive form of activism that brings men and women together online and in public around a traditionally gendered cause.[78]

There is also evidence that Arab countries that have made advances in women's participations and rights are more likely to achieve successful democratic transitions following the Arab Spring. Linking the democratic progress of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia with their women's movements, Valentine Moghadam notes how, globally, movements for democracy have often been championed by women's groups, concluding that women's participation and positive democratic outcomes go hand in hand.[79] She notes that, "[i]f the long-standing exclusion of women from political processes and decision-making in the Arab region is a key factor in explaining why the region was a laggard, compared with other regions, in democratisation's third wave, then women's participation and rights could not only speed up the democratic transition in the region but also enhance its quality and durability."[80]

As Sherine Hafez reveals, this has not been the case in Egypt, where women were deliberately sidelined from political participation and have been the targets of sexual harassment during protests.[81] Hafez notes how Egyptian women's bodies have become sites of "contestations over which battles over authenticity, cultural dominance and political control are fought." Through systematic sexual violence, they have been forced out of participation in masculine spaces: "The long history of feminist activism in Egypt attests to the central role women's bodies have occupied in the pursuit of freedom, independence and nationbuilding. Yet, despite a history that is well recognized for its illustrious accomplishments, women activists and their bodies remained predominantly constituted from within power processes that determined the terms and outcomes of political participation."[82] This forced marginalisation of women from political processes through the threat of violence bears haunting relevance given Egypt's spiralling fragility in the years since the Arab Spring.

The advent of women's movements in the Arab world was intertwined with struggles for independence from colonial governments in the 19th and 20th century.[83] It is only logical then that the push for democratisation in MENA countries is co-occurring with – and in fact has been inseparable from – issues of gender justice and gender equality. Certainly it can be argued that the fight for women's rights and gender equality has taken a violent turn in the years since the Arab Spring, but at the same time women and girls have punctured the veil of silence and shame that has held women and men and their societies in suspension for so long. Gender inequality sits at the heart of these struggles that are aiming for systems of governance that protect female and those who identify as other genders, as well as male citizens, and uphold their dignity and right to justice.

[77] L. Hanna Skalli, Young women and social media against sexual harassment in North Africa, Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, pp.244–258
[78] Ibid.
[79] V.M. Moghadam, Modernising women and democratisation after the Arab Spring, The Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, p.139
[80] Ibid, p.142
[81] S. Hafez, The revolution will not pass through women's bodies: Egypt, uprising and gender politics, The Journal of North African Studies, 19(2), 2014, p.173
[82] Ibid, p.183

[83] UNDP RBAS, 2006, Op. cit.

Annex 2: Detailed methodology

This study was conducted in fragile settings where issues of gender and women's rights are potentially sensitive or not considered a priority. Alert consequently implemented a multi-pronged qualitative approach to seek out multiple perspectives and sources of information in order to account for anticipated gaps in access to information and to respondents, as well as for the potential partiality of respondents. This approach took into account protection concerns for researchers and respondents, meaning that data was in some cases remotely collected and local field researchers were contracted to collect data when international field researchers could not gain access.

Two qualitative research tools were utilised to gather data: semi-structured interviews with target respondents and focus group discussions (FGDs) with local women and girls. Desk research was employed throughout the entire period of the study, from the design and the literature review where it was utilised to establish the theoretical framework underpinning the methodology, to data collection where it was used to fill in information gaps, to data analysis where it served to contextualise the information that was gathered.

Research participants

The study engaged with the groups of target respondents outlined below. It is important to note that sometimes respondent categories overlap: for example, employees in women's rights organisations (WROs) may also be activists or academics, or have experience cycling in and out of national NGOs, INGOs and UN bodies. Respondents were identified through an initial mapping conducted by Alert that was later supplemented by a list of Oxfam partners and other target contacts provided by the respective Oxfam country offices. When fieldwork started, additional contacts were added through participant referrals.

- National and local WROs and civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in gender programming or activities: Organisations working in some capacity related to gender (including but not limited to the delivery of SGBV response/gender programming, advocacy, lobbying, political empowerment, awareness-raising or humanitarian relief directed at women) were the most sought-after target group. We wanted to engage with actors on a wide political spectrum, including centre-left or 'secular' women's organisations, as well as faith-based women's groups that work, on some level, in gender.

- Key informant activists and consultants: These were individuals from the four contexts who have been engaged in gender equality or justice issues in their countries. These individuals were often residing in the country with several living in displacement or abroad (particularly in the case of Yemen). The study tried to engage with activists along the ideological spectrum, including those that hold faith-based views, which proved highly difficult in some contexts. It bears mentioning that activists often occupy multiple roles (including researchers, members of organisations, consultants for INGOs) and many are currently or have been involved with CSOs, WROs, INGOs or UN bodies.

- Academics and researchers specialised in gender issues in the target geographies: The research team also pursued academics from regional or local-level universities and research centres, whose work encompasses gender issues. Female researchers and academics originating from these countries (whether living in the country or abroad) were prioritised and sought out.

- Female beneficiaries/residents of target geographies: Women and adolescent girls residing in the four contexts were engaged through FGDs. It is important to note that Alert did not aim to obtain an extensive sampling of women given the time and geographical constraints of the study.

- INGOs involved in gender programming and relevant UN staff: INGOs and UN bodies that directly implement or work with local partners to implement gender programming (or gender-sensitive programming) in the four contexts were also sought out. They were vital in providing a perspective on gender work in these contexts, which aided in identifying gaps and challenges, as well as advising on a protection strategy for conducting gender work in these contexts.

- Other relevant key informants: State and governance actors did not form a primary target of this study due to well-founded concerns over the safety of researchers and the reputation of Alert. It was also difficult to reach government-affiliated WROs in some of the contexts. However, at the request of Oxfam, the research team engaged with a small handful of key informants that do not fit into the previous categories. This included individuals previously involved in state or governance bodies related to women.

Data gathering, processing and analysis

Before initiating data collection, Alert researchers consulted with the respective Oxfam country team contacts in Egypt, Iraq, OPT and Yemen, to inform them of the approach and receive specific guidance and instruction regarding the positioning of the study and Oxfam's role in regards to prospective respondents. All respondents were provided with a written consent form (in English or Arabic, according to their preference), and were briefed verbally on the objectives of the study and terms of participation. Prevalent security concerns and logistical barriers prevented many respondents from signing names on formal consent forms. In such cases, respondents provided verbal consent instead.

Researchers also refrained from gathering detailed social profiling data of respondents and did not take down the names of respondents. Rather, respondents were assigned a code in all shared transcripts. Personally identifying details were removed from transcripts, unless the respondent explicitly provided permission for this during the formal consent process. Interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, or in a combination of both, depending on the preference and proficiency of respondents. During data collection, researchers took detailed notes, as much as possible. When they had access to a secure location, the researchers typed transcripts – removing identifying details of respondents and interviews – and uploaded notes onto a spreadsheet located on Alert's secure server, noting the respondent by their code. Interviews and FGDs were transcribed in the language in which they were conducted.

The researchers utilised narrative analysis to interpret qualitative data from the KIIs and FGDs. Findings from the FGDs were informed by the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, which considers the attitudes and behaviours of the individual within the social, political, economic and physical context in which they live.[1] When used in qualitative data analysis, the PIE perspective can be helpful in situating the experiences and viewpoints of individuals within their broader context, and thus enable the researcher to identify patterns and draw conclusions about both people and their environment.[2] Finally, as this study was conducted in contexts where gaps in knowledge and information was expected, the analysis emphasised triangulation of different data sources available to account for missing information and to contextualise findings of certain interviews. Following analysis and the writing of the first draft, the report underwent several rounds of review by the Oxfam technical committee.

Fieldwork methods used and challenges encountered in each study country

A total of 58 KIIs and 13 FGDs were conducted across the four contexts. In each country, efforts were made to reach WROs and conduct FGDs across the major geographical areas of the country, as well as to reach individuals and organisations of different ideological backgrounds and religious affiliations when possible.

[1] The PIE method is borrowed from social work, where it is used in case management to conduct an assessment of a beneficiary. It analytically frames individuals and their experiences as mutually influential; that is, they are simultaneously impacted by their surroundings while their own experiences, viewpoints and relationships in turn impact upon their environment.
[2] The PIE perspective has been used in research examining drivers of radicalisation. See: R. Hutson, T. Long and M. Page, Pathways to violent radicalisation in the Middle East: A model for future studies of transnational jihad, The RUSI Journal, 154(2), 2009, pp.18–26

Table 1: Number of KIIs and FGDs conducted in each country

Country	WROs/CSOs	Activists/academics/ key informants	Donors, UN and INGOs	FGDs with women and girls
Egypt	7	2	1	3
Yemen	16	9	3	2
OPT	13	1	1	1
Iraq	11	3	1	7

In **Egypt**, a total of seven WROs were interviewed, with three based in Cairo (and holding offices in other areas of the country), one in the coastal city of Port Said, two based in urban Suhag, and one based outside of the country. Alert's international researcher was unable to travel to the country for security reasons and thus conducted interviews remotely via Skype or WhatsApp. A local female field researcher conducted FGDs with young women in the city of Al Minya, in rural Suhag in Upper Egypt and in Cairo. It proved highly difficult to engage the participation of WROs due to the risks associated with collaborating with an international INGO. It was also difficult to engage Islamist women's organisations as organisations affiliated with the MB are now outlawed, or operate clandestinely or abroad. The team did manage to speak with a WRO that is founded by a MB female supporter but professes an inclusive ideology of women who are apposed to the Sisi regime.

In **Palestine**, interviews were conducted with five WROs in the West Bank (three of which also have offices in Jerusalem), three in Jerusalem and five in the Gaza Strip. Interviews were also carried out with one academic in East Jerusalem and an INGO headquartered in the West Bank. A local field researcher conducted one FGD with 15 women, aged 18–40, who reside in the Gaza Strip. Alert's researcher was able to easily access respondents in the West Bank and Jerusalem but security constraints prevented access to the Gaza Strip. Reaching faith-based and Hamas-affiliated WROs/CSOs proved highly problematic, as these organisations were sceptical about the motives and benefits of the research and speaking to foreign researchers. It was also challenging to reach organisations affiliated with political parties.

In **Yemen**, Alert's field researcher spoke with six WROs, five of which are based in Sana'a and one in Aden. Interviews were also conducted with one local academic from Sana'a but currently living abroad, and with nine key informants who included activists, media figures and individuals previously engaged in work with INGOs and local WROs. Additionally, FGDs were conducted with local women, aged 17–40, in Sana'a and Aden. It proved challenging to reach a large number of WROs and in particular those based outside of Sana'a, in part due to security and infrastructure difficulties. The minor deficit in WROs was balanced through interviews with

additional key informants, all of whom were Yemeni women, including many who had cycled in and out of INGO and local NGO projects, and thus held informed views of gender work in Yemen in the past 10 years. Due to the centralisation of WROs in the north, it can be assumed that the position of WROs in the south is not as well represented.

In **Iraq**, Alert's researcher conducted in-person interviews with eight WROs based in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG): two based in the Dohuk governorate, two in Erbil and four in Sulaimaniya. A local field researcher interviewed three CSOs in federal Iraq where the international researcher could not safely access: two in Baghdad and one in Basra. Local researchers also conducted seven FGDs, reaching a total of 33 women, aged 16–55, residing in Erbil and Dohuk. A prevalent challenge was reaching organisations with a religious frame of reference or those affiliated with political parties in KRG and federal Iraq, due to a general suspicion towards the motives of the study.

Limitations

The short duration of the study (a total of one month was allotted to fieldwork) limited the number of respondents that could be included. Establishing contact with WROs and CSOs and allowing time to build trust was often time-consuming, and new contacts sometimes requested further information and needed time to mull over their decision to participate in the study or to obtain permission from their organisation. It was also difficult to reach one of the Oxfam partner organisations in Yemen, even with the assistance of the Oxfam country team. Additional time for data collection would have allowed the team to secure a larger sample with perhaps greater ideological and geographical representation. As we have mentioned, security challenges hindered access to prospective respondents in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and the Gaza Strip. The gaps in certain perspectives – whether geographical or ideological – lends a partiality to the findings that favours secular WROs based in principal urban areas. For example, WROs that hold faith-based views are not as well represented in the study, particularly in Yemen and OPT. The analysis takes into account gaps in information and mentions these in the analysis. While we are conscious of these limitations, the amount of consensus around certain themes explored in this report would suggest that certain perspectives bridge different ideological or geographical backgrounds. The analysis has focused on these shared themes, while teasing out certain details specific to context and ideology.