

‘Our Voice, Our Strength’

Recommendations and lessons learned from a networking meeting on 25-28 March 2013 in Cairo, Egypt

Introduction

In March 2013 Saferworld held a meeting to facilitate networking between women activists across the Arab world on the issue of women, peace and security. The meeting was held to provide these activists with opportunities to exchange experiences and lessons learned, as well as begin engaging more with policy makers to influence policy outcomes. The meeting formed part of a Saferworld project entitled: ‘Strengthening women’s public voice in Egypt, Libya and Yemen’, which aims to identify and help address the security and safety barriers that women activists face in these transitional countries. This is a summary of the discussions that took place.

Purpose of the network

Security and justice are difficult issues for civil society to engage on and are often perceived to be ‘male’ issues. However, this network is based on the belief that women’s contributions to these issues are critical. It seeks to bring together women’s organisations that are beginning to engage on these issues and to encourage them to form coalitions with other similar national and regional organisations, to exchange experiences and benefit from successes and failures in other transitional contexts.

Discussion of problems and solutions

In the summary reports prepared for the meeting and in discussions during the meeting, the following security issues were identified:

Sexual harassment and assault

Problem

The daily threat of sexual harassment represents a serious obstacle to women’s participation in public life. It is also a ‘political weapon’ that is increasingly used by those who do not want women to attend

demonstrations. The threat is most pronounced in Egypt, but is an issue in Yemen, too. Disagreements persisted over the extent to which sexual violence presents a problem in Libya, though several Libyan participants reported an increased fear of sexual assault on the streets and on university campuses, which particularly affects young women and girls.

In addition to physical and verbal harassment, rumours and slander came out as key concerns. As a woman’s visibility increases in public life, she faces rumours and allegations that are damaging to her, her family, and her life prospects.

Solutions

Positive work is being done by anti-harassment initiatives that have been set up to respond to the growing threat of sexual violence. In Cairo, Tahrir Bodyguard and Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment focus their efforts on assaults that take place during large demonstrations, while an online platform known as ‘HarassMap’ collates reported incidents of harassment, submitted via SMS. These initiatives are driven by the efforts of both men and women. More broadly, participants identified a mix of direct action to protect women and awareness raising including through the media and possibly through work with religious authorities as the most promising avenue for action.

Crime and weapons

Problem

Participants discussed a general increase in the number of weapons in their communities since the revolutions in all three countries, making the police less inclined to challenge criminals. A corresponding rise in crime, including bag snatching, assaults and drug-selling, was perceived to have occurred as a result. Libyan participants were particularly concerned about a lack of security along the southern border. They argued that this makes it easy for weapons and drugs to be smuggled into the country.

Solutions

Women can play an important role in encouraging disarmament and encouraging and enforcing

‘weapons-free zones’. However, the issue of crime and weapons is also closely related to a lack of faith in the police.

Grassroots engagement and awareness of rights

Problem

A lack of awareness surrounding the rights of women is seen as a key barrier to increasing female participation in public life.

Particularly in the rural areas of Egypt, Libya and Yemen, many women assume that they cannot vote or hold political office. Rural communities tend to be more economically deprived than their urban counterparts, presenting further obstacles to political participation for women in these areas. It is easier for women to dedicate time to political activism if they do not have immediate short-term concerns over how to provide food or other services for their families.

Solutions

Suggestions for meaningful engagement include citizenship and human rights education programmes, vocational training, and support with feasibility studies that will allow women to start small businesses. It is important not to focus these efforts solely on women, however: genuine attitude shifts cannot be achieved without engaging both men and women.

International approaches and adherence to international conventions

Problem

While participants acknowledged the role of international donors in supporting civil society and helping to provide space and resources for organisations to survive in difficult contexts, they were also highly critical of international approaches. In particular, they criticised the tendency of international development actors to focus on a small number of ‘donor darlings’ and their perceived reluctance to support organisations outside of the capital. They also criticised the use of expensive external experts and supplies rather than drawing on—and building if necessary—the resources of national or local actors.

Although Egypt, Libya and Yemen are signatories to international conventions, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, these conventions’ provisions often go unimplemented.

Solutions

Participants spoke in favour of awareness initiatives that will educate populations as to the specific rights that are protected under international law. Since the conventions do not include mechanisms for

implementation, participants also favoured civil society lobbying efforts to ensure that rights are protected, preferably through the constitution, national action plans, and the establishment of bodies that will monitor adherence to the treaties.

Poor Policing

Problem

Many women do not trust the police. This affects their willingness to report problems, including sexual harassment and other forms of violence. It also affects their faith in the justice system and their perceptions of the likelihood that they could bring a successful case against attackers. In addition, social pressures and expectations make it difficult for women to engage directly with police officers.

Participants agreed that police are often unable or unwilling to protect them in the streets, and in some cases are participating in the violence against women. Police who witness assaults on women are often reluctant to get involved, and women struggle to convince station officers to take complaints, especially those related to harassment, seriously. Participants noted that women who are attacked at demonstrations or on public transport are often criticised for in some way having ‘invited’ their fate.

Solutions

Participants believed that women’s security cannot be separated from root and branch reform of the police and Ministries of Interior. Suggestions ranged from the introduction of a new police academy curriculum that will educate recruits on particular challenges faced by women in public spaces, to the introduction of effective oversight mechanisms to tackle issues of police abuse. They also discussed increasing the number of female police. While this would be a positive element of a broader reform, women stressed that on its own this was unlikely to have any effect. Political consensus from governments and opposition parties will be vital in translating civil society efforts into practice.

Public discourse

Problem

Negative media portrayals of women are affecting attitudes towards their participation in politics. Coverage of violence against women tends to portray women solely as victims, or even as irresponsible individuals who bring violence or abuse upon themselves. In addition, the media does not provide positive role models for women. This has a significant impact upon the attitudes of families and peer groups towards the political activities of their female relatives or friends.

Similarly, negative portrayals of women that are religiously framed are a concern. Statements made

by Islamist parties and the portrayal of women on ultra-conservative TV shows make restrictive claims on women's 'true' role in an Islamic society.

Solutions

Some sections of the media have started to focus more on the security challenges facing women and how these can be overcome. Discussion of sexual harassment in Egypt was cited as a constructive development, and one that has implications for societal perceptions of the issue more generally. Non-governmental organisations can do more to use the media to tell alternative stories of women's empowerment and highlight real social issues and their causes. Similarly, civil society can do more to work with religious moderates and support the popularising of ways to present women's rights within an Islamic framework.

Improving data collection

Problem

Shortcomings in data relating to women's issues can make the work of women's rights advocates particularly difficult. Research often appears tailored to the agenda of its authors, with implications for its credibility or perceived independence. This allows the existence of statistics themselves to be politicised. Good research is crucial for more effective advocacy.

Solutions

Participants emphasised the need for clear, independent research to be undertaken on issues relating to the safety and security risks that women face. A constructive role for civil society would be to offer training in methodology, such as statistical methods.

Feedback and lessons learned

Participants felt the meeting provided a very valuable opportunity for networking, and an excellent chance to learn lessons and exchange experiences. They felt that the **صوتنا قوتنا** (Our voice, our strength) umbrella could facilitate further sharing of ideas and experiences, and strengthen the ability of individual national movements to tackle the problems they face. The meeting provided the impetus for future cooperation on the safety and security issues facing women in Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Participants made a number of suggestions. Saferworld could provide invitees with a more comprehensive briefing prior to their arrival. A number of activists believed they would have been in a stronger position to discuss issues with policymakers if they had been better prepared, including through explicit support in advocacy and message development. It was also suggested that the sessions could have benefited from the inclusion

of further outside expertise, for example with further high-level analysts or think tank representatives. Several participants expressed an interest in additional information on 1325 and tools to encourage its implementation.

Saferworld was encouraged to support the formation of a regional women's alliance that could include representatives from Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. This would act as a forum for shared ideas and experiences as women in each country seek to establish both national and regional approaches to tackling the obstacles that prevent widespread participation in political life. Saferworld can provide tools and fora for communication among members, for example, by setting up email lists and committing to organising more region-based meetings in the future. However, its role should remain facilitative, rather than organisational.

Next steps

Saferworld will:

- **share a contact list, research findings, and meeting summaries with all participants**
- **create logo and Facebook and e-mail groups to keep in touch**
- **provide technical advice on how to find funding and how to structure meetings or reach out to policymakers in response to requests from the network**
- **organise one further regional meeting and one meeting in each participating country to facilitate deeper networking. Saferworld will include participants from Tunisia in the next regional event and ensure the incorporation of advocacy training in national-level events**
- **publish a thematic report on the security barriers facing women's political participation in the three participating countries.**

Participants will:

- **send an e-mail outlining any follow-up activities they have undertaken or plan to undertake as well as an overview of the activities their organisation is engaged in to the mailgroup**
- **send suggestions for working groups to Randa. These should identify possible working groups at the national and the regional level. Suggestions include a working group on security sector reform, mainstreaming peace and security issues into existing work, and one on engaging with the media.**

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

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