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**Enhancing the role of institutions in achieving gender equality
in the Arab region****The role of institutions in times of peace and war****Summary**

The present document examines the role of institutions in responding to the women, peace and security agenda across the Arab region. It considers the agenda in the light of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), subsequent resolutions and other international instruments to identify the stipulations of the agenda.

The document also examines the roles of four categories of institutions in relation to those stipulations, namely national women's machineries, national human rights institutions, security sector institutions, and civil society organizations in times of peace and of war and instability. It concludes with recommendations on strengthening the roles of those institutions in responding to the women, peace and security agenda.



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Introduction

1. In recent years, the Arab region has experienced unprecedented shocks affecting all population groups to varying degrees. Women and girls, in particular, have been increasingly subjected to systematic discrimination and violence. This is an issue of grave concern to policymakers and other stakeholders across the region, resulting in increased attention to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda as a framework for guiding efforts to prevent and mitigate the effects of instability and conflict on women and girls.
2. The WPS agenda refers to the body of international instruments related to gender justice, on the one hand, and peace and security, on the other. At the heart of those instruments is Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. It is the result of extensive consultations and recognition by the United Nations Security Council of the need for a framework to guide efforts on women, peace and security issues.
3. The WPS agenda is also informed by a number of subsequent Security Council resolutions on the subject, including thematic and country-specific resolutions referencing the agenda within the context of the global peace and security framework. The agenda is also grounded in international law, particularly in international human rights law, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the CEDAW Committee's general recommendation No. 30. The agenda also draws upon internationally-agreed development frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The figure below illustrates the international instruments informing the women, peace and security agenda.
4. The agenda can be described as a range of measures to strengthen the foundations of gender justice,¹ peace and security in times of peace and of instability and war. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) proposes a three-dimensional response framework to the agenda that includes gender justice, peace and security, as well as an operational dimension that focuses on implementation instruments.
5. In the Arab region, the response to the agenda takes several forms. Countries such as Iraq and Palestine have developed dedicated national action plans to respond to national priorities that mirror the agenda, making particular references to resolution 1325. Some countries have responded to the agenda by mainstreaming its key provisions within national policies and action programmes on gender justice and the protection of women from violence. Other countries have applied the agenda through general provisions within policies and frameworks on peace and security, the rule of law, and national development, among other.
6. As part of the response, Arab countries have mandated various institutions to address the agenda at the national level, by implementing relevant legislation, policies and programmes. There is growing recognition by member States that achieving the agenda's goals depends on numerous factors, including the choice of thematic responses, the degree of engagement, available resources, and operating environment adaptation.

I. ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN TIMES OF PEACE

7. Institutional responses to the women, peace and security agenda largely reflect countries' national policy frameworks. These can include dedicated national action plans, policies and strategies focusing on gender equality; a thematic issue such as the elimination of violence against women; or broader national development policies. Such frameworks assign implementation responsibilities to respective institutions, reflected in the institutional set-up.

¹ ESCWA adopted a definition of gender justice at the seventh session of the Committee on Women consisting of two principal components: ensuring accountability by determining effective national accountability mechanisms that limit discriminatory measures; and achieving equality by eliminating all forms of discrimination between men and women. See https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/report_7th_session_-_final_css_en.pdf (p. 4).

8. Regarding the agenda's four pillars of action, namely prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery, there is a tendency to focus more on violence prevention and its consequences for women and girls in times of peace, and on empowering them to play bigger roles in public life by enhancing their participation. By virtue of this thematic focus, national women's machineries are specifically mandated to play leading roles in advancing the agenda.

9. Other institutions, such as national human rights machineries, security sector institutions and civil society organizations, play complementary roles based on other identified priorities, policy frameworks, and assigned mandates.

A. NATIONAL WOMEN'S MACHINERIES

10. National women's machineries often advocate a whole-of-State response to the agenda. The ministries of women's affairs in Iraq and Palestine are responsible for coordinating national efforts to support the development of national action plans, in close collaboration with civil society organizations. National women's machineries are leading the development of national action plans in other countries, such as Jordan and Tunisia.

11. In general, national women's machineries play a consultative role, focusing on developing policy proposals, undertaking research, reporting on the status of women and girls, providing general technical support to other government entities, and liaising with civil society on relevant issues. A common priority for all women's machineries is mainstreaming a gender perspective in national policymaking and in all government institutions, and the advancement of gender equality and non-discrimination.

12. Such work often employs a dual approach. Under the leadership of national women's machineries, government agencies develop and implement dedicated policies for gender equality and non-discrimination. In parallel, women's machineries lead in mainstreaming a gender perspective in national and sectoral policies managed by other government agencies.

13. Examples of this two-pronged approach include work by women's machineries in formulating national legislation, strategies and programmes for addressing discrimination against women, domestic violence, and women's low political participation. Efforts led by other institutions include developing gender-sensitive policies on social protection, strengthening the rule of law and access to justice, and promoting economic growth.

14. Concerning thematic priorities relevant to the women, peace and security agenda, national women's machineries tend to focus their efforts in two areas. The first is legislative and policy reform to address discrimination and violence against women, which is relevant to the prevention, protection and relief pillars of resolution 1325. The second area focuses on the women's advancement, especially in accessing education, health and employment opportunities, and their participation in public life. Both areas overlap and are inextricably linked.

15. The work of national women's machineries on peace and security is rather sparse in the Arab region. It focuses mainly on women's access to justice and the role of the security sector in handling violence against women. Lebanon and Tunisia have developed a comprehensive system for reporting violence against women to the police. In other countries, women's machineries engage with law enforcement only to ensure the unencumbered implementation of relevant laws.

B. OTHER INSTITUTIONS

16. The present section discusses three other types of institutions: national human rights institutions, security sector institutions, and civil society organizations.

17. Where they exist, national human rights institutions are independent, state-financed bodies mandated by a constitutional or legislative act to protect and promote human rights, including women's rights. Many

national human rights institutions comprise divisions or units dedicated to women's rights, guided by international law and other frameworks that overlap with the women, peace and security agenda. On gender equality and women's rights, those institutions are instrumental in preventing and deterring human rights violations through legislative reform. They provide expertise to promote the adoption of laws against domestic and family violence, sexual assault and all other forms of gender-based violence, in accordance with international human rights standards,² which are central to the women, peace and security agenda.

18. National human rights institutions also assist women and girl survivors of violence in accessing remedies, including compensation, especially through their own complaint mechanisms. In some countries, such institutions have quasi-judicial powers, exercised to provide relief to women and girl survivors and to hold perpetrators accountable. Public inquiries, research and data collection are used to compile evidence, investigate and raise awareness of violations of women and girls' human rights. Those institutions also play an active role in public education, awareness raising, training and capacity development; and bring together various government and non-government actors to discuss the situation of human rights and possible violations.

19. Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security identify security sector institutions as central to the agenda's advancement, and call on them to be gender responsive given their important role in delivering rule of law services, particularly in cases of domestic violence, rape, human trafficking, and similar crimes. These calls have been gaining traction in the region, particularly through increased collaboration with national women's machineries on specific issues, such as disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control in Bahrain,³ and women in peacekeeping in Jordan. Accountability for results is therefore key in enabling security sector institutions to advance the agenda.

20. Civil society organizations make significant contributions to the agenda, particularly at the grassroots level. Three key areas are most visible in this regard: policy advocacy and research, service delivery, and community mobilization. The work of civil society organizations often includes research and legal analyses to provide proposals for legislative reform and policy development. They are also active in documenting human rights violations, corruption, abuse of authority, and other governance-related issues to identify trends and issues of relevance to the agenda. This research allows civil society organizations to organize and form coalitions to prevent political violence and social tension, and support peace and reconciliation efforts.

21. In terms of service delivery, civil society organizations provide a wide range of legal, social, economic and humanitarian services to individuals and communities, including health aid and legal counsel to women survivors of violence, humanitarian relief, educational and social services, microcredit and skills development. These services are often vital for beneficiary populations to address their needs and overcome their vulnerabilities, thereby reducing their exposure to harm.

22. At the grassroots level, civil society organizations play an important role in community mobilization and organization, to strengthen social cohesion and address community needs. However, they face many challenges such as restrictive civil space, especially for independent civil society organizations, unfavourable laws and legislations, limited funding avenues, prevalence of the charitable business model, dysfunctional coordination and cooperation modalities, and specific political interests. These challenges vary from one context to another, but they are evident in most Arab countries and limit the growth of civil society organizations, including in advancing the women, peace and security agenda.

² See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Handbook for National Human Rights Institutions on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, 2012. Available from <http://www.osce.org/odihr/97756>.

³ See the part concerning Bahrain in the report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly on "Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control". Available from [A/71/137](#).

C. INSTITUTIONAL GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PEACETIME

23. A key limitation for institutions in responding to the agenda lies in their own mandates, given the lack of overarching policies and programming frameworks on women, peace and security in most Arab countries. For instance, legislative provisions linking gender justice to peace and security are scarce, and only Iraq and Palestine have operational national action plans. The low number of national action plans is often attributed to a perception that the agenda challenges traditional male-dominated concepts of peace and security, and as such receives resistance similar to that encountered when integrating a gender perspective into peace and security policies.⁴

24. Responses to the agenda across the Arab region similarly reflect the misperception of the agenda as a women's issue, rather than one related to peace and security, which undermines the agenda's essence and ultimate goals. This is also evident in the response to the regional action plan on women, peace and security and its strategic framework, adopted by the League of Arab States to guide the efforts of its members on women, peace and security issues.⁵

25. The lack of clear, comprehensive and balanced mandates and policies on women, peace and security limits institutions' capacity to play a role in advancing the agenda. National women's machineries face significant obstacles in achieving meaningful progress in that regard, reflecting the institutional limitations that more generally prevent them from fulfilling their functions. The CEDAW Committee has repeatedly expressed concern over this issue and emphasized the importance of giving urgent priority to strengthening the institutional capacities of national women's machineries, which are critical to the formulation, design and implementation of public policies.⁶

26. Other government agencies and civil society organizations with important roles in advancing the agenda are also affected by this institutional capacity deficit. Mandate gaps curtail the ability of national human rights institutions in implementing preventative measures, as human rights guardians and whistle-blowers on issues that challenge the foundations of peace and security. Civil society organizations operate many exemplary programmes across the region in response to human rights violations, including legal aid, counselling, and service provision for survivors. However, the breadth of some of these programmes is often significantly reduced, especially in locations experiencing unrest and violence where support is most needed, owing to security concerns and limited financial resources and access, among other challenges.

27. Creating and mandating strong, capable, responsible, accountable and resourced institutions is essential to reinforcing and maintaining peace and security, advancing the status of women, and guaranteeing justice and equality for all and universal respect for human rights. Such institutions exist in almost all Arab countries, in one form or another. To improve their efficiency, member States must expand institutions' mandates, build their capacity and enhance their collaboration frameworks, particularly with civil society organizations. Institutions should be provided with the knowledge and resources required, and be held accountable for their results.

28. Ongoing transitions across the region and renewed interest from all Arab countries in the agenda present opportunities for reform, and for an accelerated build-up of knowledge. Such attributes could potentially enable the region to leapfrog in reinforcing the foundations of gender justice, peace and security, by creating well-

⁴ See Independent Commission on Multilateralism, "Women, Peace and Security", discussion paper, October 2015. Available from http://www.icm2016.org/IMG/pdf/151001_discussion_paper-wps.pdf.

⁵ See League of Arab States, Arab Women Organization and UN Women, *Regional Strategy-Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security*, 2012. Available from <http://www.arabwomenorg.org/Content/Publications/strpeceng.pdf>.

⁶ See for example CEDAW Concluding Observations, Lebanon (2015), para. 24 (a). Available from http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fLBN%2fCO%2f4-5&Lang=en; and Iraq (2014), para. 20. Available from http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fIRQ%2fCO%2f4-6&Lang=en.

resourced and accountable systems to improve Arab countries' response to the agenda, and enable them to better face emerging issues, particularly during times of tension or escalating conflict.

II. ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN TIMES OF WAR

29. Institutions mandated to advance the women, peace and security agenda play a central role in ensuring peace and stability and in advancing gender equality, particularly in times of crisis. Undermining these institutions, either directly by limiting their mandates and cutting their resources, or indirectly by not providing them with the support needed, hinders their ability to advance the agenda and counter the consequences of war and conflict on women and society.

30. The agenda stipulates a range of obligations regarding gender justice, peace and security across the peace-war continuum (see table), rooted in its measures and interventions that contribute to strengthening the foundations of peace and to reinstating stability along the continuum.

PEACE-WAR CONTINUUM

Stage	Description
Full-scale war	All-out sustained fighting among organized armed groups and/or the State(s).
Armed clashes	Fighting among organized armed groups and/or the State, limited by the number of parties involved or by geography.
Crisis and political violence	Confrontation among mobilized political and social groups, including regular protests and heavy policing. Institutions are often paralysed or involved in the political violence.
Tensions	Visible popular grievances and limited cooperation among government, political, and social groups. Usually associated with institutions' failure to address structural political, economic and social grievances.
Relative stability	Absence of systemic organized violence. Institutions are concerned with maintaining the status quo.
Fragile peace (negative peace)	Absence of all forms of violence. Institutions are able to respond to emerging grievances as they appear.
Durable peace (positive peace)	Peace with justice for all. Institutions are proactive in addressing the needs of all population groups, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy in a virtuous cycle while promoting a culture of inclusion and togetherness.

Note: The categories are based on those used in USAID, Preventing and Mitigating Violent Conflicts: An Abridged Practitioners Guide (2007), p. 6.

31. Wars and conflict increase the fragility of many institutions in conflict-affected countries across the region. Such institutions include government agencies, legislative bodies and other structures, including organizations mandated to protect women and girls from violence. This fragility is compounded by challenges to the authority of those institutions, diminished resources allocated to their functions, and divergence of political attention and support to other issues that arise with instability and conflict.

32. In several conflict-affected Arab countries, wartime institutions are peacetime institutions that have been given temporary mandates to play a particular role in a conflict, such as initiating and/or contributing to it, or mitigating and/or resolving it. Furthermore, institutions that had a weak role prior to a conflict, for instance owing to a lack of mandate or resources, might contribute negatively to the agenda by becoming perpetrators of violence, rather than custodians of order and peace. War and conflict have a tremendous ability to segment space and geography, and create divisions that limit the scope of institutions' operations and capacity to take action. Furthermore, institutions respond and cope with shocks differently, based on their role in a conflict and how segmentation, among other factors, affects them.

33. Three recurrent themes emerge in this context. The first is that civilian State agencies, particularly those relating to human rights and the advancement of women, are often abolished, downsized or starved of resources under the pretext of an ‘emergency situation’, or as part of austerity measures induced by the conflict. The second is the expansion of the security sector, including the creation of auxiliary forces. The third is a shift in civil society’s focus towards humanitarian support.

34. One key element relates to how populations identify with institutions socially. For instance, populations can view themselves as citizens of a State where institutions play a key role. However, they can also perceive themselves primarily as members of a subnational identity, such as a sect, community or tribal group, seen as more important and legitimate. Conflict-related segmentation allows those subidentities to dominate. Faced with such challenges, State institutions are unable to exercise their mandates to advance the agenda unless they also identify with the subnational identities of their target populations.

35. Across the region, emerging priorities within the agenda in response to shocks tend to focus on immediate physical protection and life-saving humanitarian support for vulnerable populations. Such responsibilities fall upon security sector institutions and civil society organizations, among other partners, with varying results contingent upon the degree of violence, operating space, access to affected populations, and available resources.

36. Another emerging thematic area of interest is the role of women in peacebuilding processes, particularly in Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen where such processes are ongoing. A number of mechanisms were established to facilitate women’s participation in these processes, including by promoting women’s inclusion in the formal negotiating delegations and in structures and consultations supporting peacemaking, and through the work of civil society organizations active in conflict mitigation and peacebuilding. Women’s participation in such efforts has resulted in vital contributions to the quality, durability and impact of peace agreements.⁷

III. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

37. Institutions mandated to work on issues related to women, peace and security often lack clear and specific mandates allowing them to focus their efforts on implementing the agenda. This is particularly true in the absence of a holistic framework to guide their efforts, such as national action plans. Mandates are equally important in times of peace and of war and conflict, to reinforce the foundations of peace and support conflict mitigation and peace building efforts.

38. Four categories of institutions play a central role in advancing the agenda in times of peace: national women’s machineries, national human rights institutions, security sector institutions, and civil society organizations. Collaboration among those institutions, and with other institutions and stakeholders, is essential to implementing the women, peace and security agenda. Effective cooperation in peacetime mitigates future shocks and their impact, and strengthens national resilience in the face of adversity, such as conflict or instability.

39. Security sector institutions should feature centrally in national responses to advance the agenda in peacetime and in times of conflict and instability, given the essential role those institutions play in restoring peace. Similarly, continued engagement and dialogue between civil society organizations and State institutions is critical to accelerating responses to the agenda and emerging issues of relevance.

40. Consequently, it is necessary to ensure that the above institutions receive solid mandates and support in times of peace and of war to advance the agenda. A new paradigm on women, peace and security is needed to guide national institutions’ work in times of peace and of war.

⁷ ESCWA, Peace-Builders: Role of Women in Peace Building Processes, Policy Brief (forthcoming).

41. Based on the above, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

(a) With regard to mandates:

- Revise relevant legal and policy frameworks to bridge mandate gaps, and strengthen the legal basis of institutions' work on women, peace and security;
- Develop dedicated national action plans on women, peace and security that respond to established and emerging priorities. The implementation of national action plans should be supported with the necessary human and financial resources, technical knowhow, and monitoring and evaluation tools;
- Mandate and encourage collaboration between relevant institutions expected to play a role in addressing women, peace and security issues, including policies on gender justice and peace and security.

(b) With regard to thematic responses:

- Develop thematic responses grounded in the women, peace and security agenda at the national level in times of peace and of war and conflict. Thematic priorities should reflect national priorities and be sensitive to the local exigencies of target populations; their implementation should be assigned to relevant institutions;
- Develop specialized programmes and services to fulfil key women, peace and security goals, such as advocacy, awareness raising, inclusive participation in peace processes, and humanitarian response.

(c) With regard to institutional strengthening:

- Reinforce institutions' capacities to address the potential impact of conflict on their functioning, by acknowledging their work in times of peace and of instability and conflict. This includes taking measures to reinforce institutional resilience, response capacity, and community engagement;
- Promote collaboration between national women's machineries, national human rights institutions, civils society organizations and security sector institutions to implement the agenda, including through the creation of inter-agency structures for coordination at the highest levels;
- Increase the capacity of relevant institutions in monitoring and following up on the women, peace and security response. This includes monitoring progress and revisiting programming to ensure that emerging priorities are addressed.

(d) Possible projects and technical assistance:

- In an effort to translate the findings of this research into concrete action leading to policy reform, ESCWA is considering developing a regional project to expand knowledge and understanding on the agenda and thematic issues relevant to member States. The project could also build on such knowledge to provide direct technical assistance and capacity development support to member States to strengthen the institutional response;
- ESCWA will continue to work closely with national women's machineries to provide one-on-one technical assistance to support their efforts in developing national action plans that take into consideration strengthening national institutions. Other areas of technical assistance

include support in legislative reform, policy formulation, programme design and implementation, and inter-institutional collaboration;

- ESCWA will expand its technical assistance in the area of women, peace and security to include a range of civil society organizations, to reinforce their current role and strengthen their advocacy and engagement at the grassroots level.
