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The Reality of Women and Girls' Peacemaking, Peacebuilding, and Mediation Efforts in the Arab Region

Stephanie Chaban and Menaal Munshey

The present issue explores the contextual realities of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) in the Arab Region. There is no doubt that the WPS agenda is impacted by the context in which it is enacted. While the agenda serves as a useful framework for understanding the roles that women and girls could and should play in peacemaking, peacebuilding, and mediation processes, both formal and informal, how the WPS agenda translates and is adapted to on-the-ground realities differ. The themes presented in this special edition are diverse, intertwined, and somewhat contradictory, not unlike the lives of women and girls in the region.

The Arab region continues to have the lowest formal political participation and representation rates of women globally, coupled with a substantially high youth population, that continues to be impacted by conflict, occupation, climate change, natural disasters, and financial crises, which result in increasing inequalities. Within this regional context, women and girls often bear the brunt of harms. This is especially true when peace and security continues to be viewed as State-centric rather than as a human rights concern. And yet, women and girls remain resilient and active as peace builders, peacemakers, and mediators at the local and municipal levels, working as civic activists and community leaders. They are survivors, advocates, and service providers; they are also fighters and supporters of conflict.

With this in mind, this special edition of *Al-Raida* on "Women and Peacebuilding in the Arab Region: Intersectional Frameworks and Experiences" has brought together several essays that challenge the narrow ways in which women and girls from the Arab region are viewed within the context of conflict, occupation, and transition. Women's engagement in peacemaking, peacebuilding, and mediation can take on many nuanced forms, formal and informal, pacifist and antagonistic, individual and collective.

Analysis of formal WPS processes is provided in papers by Pournik, Despain and Rauch, and Chaban, respectively. Pournik reflects on research he conducted eight years ago on National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS, noting the increase in NAPs in the region as a positive development. While recognizing that much work remains to make them fully actionable and impactful, Pournik offers recommendations on WPS implementation in the Region through the lens/framework of NAPs. In terms of engagement with formal processes like NAPs, Despain and Rauch's paper argues that Lebanon's WPS NAP did not adequately consult with or mainstream the needs and concerns of refugee women and girls, specifically those from Syria. According to their research, they see not only a marginalization of refugee Syrian women, but also their mislabeling as "displaced," in line with the Government's policy of calling into question their legal status and rights. Chaban's paper also reveals how, despite calls from the WPS agenda for the Security Council to directly consult with civil society, including women's organizations, such engagement has proven to be restricted and elitist. Furthermore, the limits of the WPS agenda have become more and more evident, with it serving as one tool among many to elicit change on the ground. However, it is acknowledged that engagement with the Security Council still serves as a means to "speak directly to power."

In contrast, papers by Diab, and Leclerc, Stoumen, Despain and Zabihi, respectively, highlight the realities of feminists and youth working towards peace and security on the ground. Diab looks toward diverse movements at the grassroots level that highlight participatory and unifying feminist peacebuilding and anti-racism movements in Lebanon, particularly in the post-2019 era, that are unifying intersectional causes and organically implementing the WPS agenda at the local level. Leclerc, Stoumen, Despain, and Zabihi examine the marginalization of youth, particularly female youth, in the region (specifically Iraq/the Kurdish Region of Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia) from national-level policymaking on security and peacebuilding, despite the formal links between the Youth, Peace and Security agenda and the WPS agenda. Though they are at risk of "slipping through the cracks," the youth provide insightful analysis and critiques of their political contexts, highlighting their skepticism of policy makers and the difficulties in accessing spaces of power.

Munshey and Eggert, respectively, demonstrate the diverse roles that women play in peace and security, with a spotlight on Lebanon. Eggert takes a historical view and delves into

women's multi-faceted participation in the Lebanese Civil War. Through interviews, Eggert is able to assert that women played active roles as militants in all of the militias, including armed combat, in significant contrast to how they have been consistently locked out of Lebanese politics. As such, she not only challenges the stereotype of women's pacifism but also the larger Lebanese narrative of the past, which has been obfuscated for some time. Lebanon's past continues to echo in today's contemporary conflict and environment. Munshey's paper, based on qualitative data, analyzes women's peacebuilding, mediation, and conflict resolution initiatives in Lebanon at a local level. Interviews with graduates of the University of Saint Joseph's program on social mediation in Lebanon illustrate localized understandings of core WPS concepts, as well as ongoing challenges of sustainability and institutionalization of their efforts.

Lastly, this special issue includes a poem by Pia Kmeid entitled *The Drought*, which articulates the gender-climate nexus. The impact of climate change is a serious and chronic, yet under-addressed and under-resourced, issue in the Arab region, which has knock-on effects on the WPS agenda in terms of increases in gender-based insecurities and inequalities in the region.

It is evident that there are many contextual challenges to implementing the WPS agenda in the region. It is also clear that women across the region are, and historically have been, tackling these challenges in diverse ways to make feminist forms of peace possible. This special issue aims to contribute to growing research in the region on this issue, with the intention of highlighting the importance of a contextualized, intersectional feminist approach to the WPS agenda. Through this special issue, we hope to provide a wider platform to voices from the region who may not traditionally be represented within WPS mechanisms, but are tirelessly working towards the actualization of the WPS agenda on the ground.