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Protection of Women Peacebuilders in Conflict and Fragile Settings in the MENA Region

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Report

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Executive Summary

The United Nations (UN) has increasingly come to acknowledge the important role that women peacebuilders play in peace processes where they transmit the concerns, experiences, and needs of communities to the negotiating table. UN Security Council Resolution 2493, passed in 2019, strongly encourages member states to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including women peacebuilders. The 2022 report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security (WPS) puts a special emphasis on the protection of women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders.¹

Despite explicit mentions of the need to protect women peacebuilders in several UN Security Council resolutions, researchers, policymakers, and international actors have neglected the situation of women peacebuilders until recently. Anecdotal evidence indicates that women peacebuilders encounter significant threats and risks on a regular basis; however, there is little systematic knowledge about what these threats look like and what strategies are most effective in protecting women peacebuilders.

The objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to promote a better understanding of the threats and risks that women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen frequently encounter. Based on this analysis and a review of existing protection measures for women peacebuilders, the paper secondly aims to sketch support strategies that could be used in the future to enhance the protection of women peacebuilders. To this end, the paper uses information extracted from a review of secondary literature as well as primary data gathered through an online consultation and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists from Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The paper finds that women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are frequent targets of threats, physical and emotional abuse, killings, rape, arrests, intimidation, defamation, slander, and smear campaigns, both offline and online. The security situation for women peacebuilders has deteriorated over recent years, with an upward trend in attacks and harassment. This applies particularly to the online space. There exist a variety of actors who seek to interfere with the work of women peacebuilders, including non-state armed groups, government authorities, and religious actors but also family members. A culture of dominance by men, discriminatory laws against women, and impunity for perpetrators of violence against women peacebuilders and women more generally has perpetuated a hostile working environment for women peacebuilders in the Middle East and North Africa, thus impeding their effective contribution to peacebuilding processes.

1 "Resolution 2493," UN Security Council (S/RES/2493) (2019), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/339/37/PDF/N1933937.pdf> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Security Council (2022), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2022-740.pdf> [last accessed: 30 October 2022].

Limited funding and collaboration among women peacebuilders as well as state repression of civil society in the four countries examined in this paper reduce the capacity of women peacebuilders to protect themselves. The evaluation of the online consultation and the interviews nevertheless reveals various entry points that local, national, and international actors could use to enhance the protection of women peacebuilders through a joint effort, namely:

- operating country offices on the ground, although challenging in some country contexts, to understand the needs of local women peacebuilders and develop tailor-made interventions thereafter (for international actors);
- reviewing and reforming laws that discriminate against women in the private and public spheres, and ensuring their full implementation;
- organising awareness-raising campaigns that highlight the dangerous situation of women peacebuilders in order to increase the pressure on national and international decision-makers to develop meaningful protection mechanisms;
- building the capacity of women peacebuilders and providing them with the necessary tools to address context-specific risks and enhance their safety, both online and offline;
- fostering collaboration between state governments, international organisations, and social media companies to counteract smear campaigns against women peacebuilders;
- providing psychosocial support for women peacebuilders;
- training media companies in reporting on the threats and risks that women peacebuilders encounter in their daily work in a gender-sensitive way;
- working with moderate religious actors to counter religious hate speech and defamation of women peacebuilders;
- establishing a dense network of mutual assistance, knowledge sharing, and solidarity among women peacebuilders within and across country borders;
- fostering collaboration among women peacebuilders, civil society organisations, moderate government agencies, and international organisations to mitigate threats against women peacebuilders in a coordinated and joint effort;

- establishing direct communication lines between women peacebuilders networks and international actors to increase women peacebuilders' ownership of any initiative to enhance their protection;
- setting up a monitoring system in every country that tracks and highlights the threats that women peacebuilders encounter on the ground.

Finally, the analysis suggests that relevant UN entities are better able to protect women peacebuilders where they operate a country office on the ground. This is mainly because local presence allows relevant UN entities and other international actors to better understand the context-specific protection needs of women peacebuilders and develop corresponding protection mechanisms accordingly. In Syria, where many international actors have abandoned their in-country presence, there has been a reported mismatch between the scope and goals of international interventions to protect women peacebuilders and the actual needs of beneficiaries. More generally, the interviewees and online consultation participants consulted for this study urged the need to counter the threats against women peacebuilders more quickly and decisively moving forward. Increasing the pressure on member states to commit to the protection of women peacebuilders and the implementation of the WPS agenda is one way to achieve this objective.

1 Introduction

Women peacebuilders advocate for measures to address the concerns, experiences, and needs of conflict-affected communities in peace processes. Their work therefore helps to pave the way for the sustainable resolution of armed conflict on the ground. However, women peacebuilders operate in an increasingly hostile environment that undermines their capacity to meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding activities. Women peacebuilders encounter a range of threats including harassment, discrimination, and criminalisation, both online and offline. Much of the violence and intimidation that women peacebuilders experience is gendered, involving sexual harassment, rape, and defamation. Patriarchal stereotypes and the systematic marginalisation of women more generally perpetuate these risks and complicate efforts to mitigate the hazards for women peacebuilders.

The United Nations (UN) recognises both the importance of women peacebuilders in peace processes and the risks they face from day to day: UNSCR 2493 and the 2022 and 2021 reports of the Secretary-General on women, peace, and security (WPS) urge member states to commit to the protection of women peacebuilders in order to ensure that they can meaningfully participate in peace processes.² However, in spite of this recent acknowledgement of the need to protect women peacebuilders, there have been few efforts to systematically develop effective protection mechanisms for them.³ This is particularly true for women peacebuilders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to better understand the core dynamics, trends, and associated threats and risks that women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen frequently experience. Secondly, it aims to use the analysis of risks and threats to identify effective protection support mechanisms that can guide local, national, and international interventions to protect women peacebuilders in the future.

- 2 "Resolution 2493," UN Security Council (S/RES/2493) (2019), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/339/37/PDF/N1933937.pdf> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary General," UN Security Council (2021), www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_827.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022]. "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Security Council (2022), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2022-740.pdf> [last accessed: 30 October 2022].
- 3 S. N. Anderlini, "Recognising Women Peacebuilders: Critical Actors in Effective Peacemaking," International Civil Society Action Network (2020), https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ICAN_RecognizingWomenPeacebuilders.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022], pp. 4 and 7. There have been only two studies: "Building Peace from the Grassroots: Learning from Women Peacebuilders to Advance the WPS Agenda," Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2020), www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/ourrolepolicies/peaceandsecurity/Building-peace-from-the-grassroots-Oct-2020.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; M. Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders: The Front Lines of Sustainable Peace," International Civil Society Action Network (2020), https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ICAN_ProtectingWomenPeacebuilders.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

For its methodology, the paper is based on a qualitative analysis that included three sources of information. Firstly, a thorough review of the secondary academic and policy literature was conducted to identify trends and dynamics in the threats and risks that women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders encounter on a regular basis. In terms of its effort to identify protection mechanisms, the literature review placed equally strong emphasis on women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders. Secondly, in order to learn about the specific threats, risks, and protection mechanisms that matter for women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders in the MENA region, Inclusive Peace and UN Women, in partnership with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, organised an online consultation on 20 January 2022. This online consultation engaged a total of nine women peacebuilders and activists from Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and they were invited to join a closed discussion about the most pressing security concerns of women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders in the region as well as potential protection strategies and needs for external support to implement them. Finally, a total of nine semi-structured interviews with participants in the online consultation helped to substantiate and supplement the insights gathered during the literature review and online consultation. The interviews lasted for about 60 minutes each and were conducted online; eight were held in Arabic and one in English.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the threats and risks, and associated core dynamics and trends, that women peacebuilders in general, but specifically those from Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, face on a regular basis. The discussion sheds light on the varieties of and recent trends in threats against women peacebuilders, and it identifies various actors that seek to interfere with the work of women peacebuilders. Section 3 takes stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing protection mechanisms for women peacebuilders. Section 4 builds on the insights gained in Sections 2 and 3 to develop guiding posts for how to achieve effective protection for women peacebuilders. Section 5 provides a wrap-up of the most important insights gained.

An improved grasp of the current protection regime for women peacebuilders in the countries mentioned above will empower civil society, local authorities, and international actors to develop more effective and impactful protection strategies for women peacebuilders moving forward. Creating a safe working environment for women peacebuilders will be key to enhancing women's participation in peace processes in the MENA region and beyond. The effective protection of women peacebuilders will therefore contribute to the effective implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the broader WPS agenda.⁴ It will equally enhance the prospects of containing armed conflicts in the long run: Effective protection mechanisms are a key prerequisite for women's effective

4 "Resolution 1325," UN Security Council (S/RES/1325) (2000), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1325> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

contribution to and influence over peacebuilding activities and peace processes. Comparative evidence suggests that an increase in women's participation in and their influence over peace processes is conducive for enduring peace.⁵

Before delving into the analysis, it is important to distinguish between women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders.⁶ Women human rights defenders aim to identify and prosecute perpetrators of violence against human rights.⁷ Women peacebuilders work across divides, cleavages, and conflict lines to pave the way for inclusive negotiations, the end of violence, and efforts to build peace. This implies that some women peacebuilders seek to constructively engage with perpetrators of violence, such as the Taliban or the Myanmar junta. In contrast, women human rights defenders normally reject direct interaction with perpetrators of human rights violations.⁸

5 For women's increased participation in peace processes see M. Adjei, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Peace Education* 16:2 (2019), pp. 133-154. For women's increased influence over peace processes see: T. Paffenholz et al., "Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations," Geneva: Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (The Graduate Institution of International and Development Studies) and UN Women (2016), <https://www.inclusivepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/report-making-women-count-en.pdf> [last accessed: 15 September 2022].

6 Academic research and international organisations have dedicated considerably more attention to the security situation of women human rights defenders as compared to women peacebuilders since the passing of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. The Secretary-General's 2019 report on WPS explicitly stressed that protecting women human rights defenders is one of six priorities for all UN entities, member states, and organisations. Powerful intergovernmental organisations including the UN, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe have published extensive protection manuals that focus on human rights defenders and women human rights defenders accordingly (see Anderlini, "Recognising Women Peacebuilders," p. 7). Moreover, various reports have assessed the situation of women human rights defenders and provided continuous updates on their protection needs; see e.g. "Front Line Defenders: Global Analysis 2018," Front Line (2019), www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/global_analysis_2018.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; M. Forst, "Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders," UN General Assembly (2019), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1663970?ln=en> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

7 Anderlini, "Recognising Women Peacebuilders," p. 10.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

2 Threats and Risks Encountered by Women Peacebuilders

2.1 Key Threats and Risks

Researchers have identified a range of threats and risks that women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders encounter on a regular basis.⁹ Defending human rights and contributing to peacebuilding are inherently risky undertakings, but particularly so for women as they work to overcome the patriarchal status quo that exists in many conflict-affected societies. This reformative agenda provokes resistance among various state and non-state actors, who try to defend their power, influence, and traditional values against aspirations for women's empowerment.¹⁰ The threats and risks that women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders experience are gendered—that is, they include threats of sexual violence and rape. Such threats and smear campaigns, which depict women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders as “prostitutes”, “terrorists”, “witches”, “garbage”, or “foreign agents”, aim to destroy the reputation of women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders and delegitimise their work.¹¹

Women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders experience a range of risks and threats.¹² Personal attacks against women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders have encompassed arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, assassination, rape, abduction, acid attacks, surveillance, threats against family members, and travel bans.¹³ Interview partners and online consultation participants reported similar experiences of women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya,

9 Parts of the insights gleaned on the threats and risks that women human rights defenders are exposed to are transferable to women peacebuilders. Both women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders work to end oppression and violence against women, which commonly provokes resistance and backlash by conservative forces.

10 Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”, p. 6.

11 Anderlini, “Recognising Women Peacebuilders,” p. 7; I. Barcia, “Our Right to Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders’ Holistic Approach to Protection,” Association for Women’s Rights in Development (2014), www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Our%20Right%20To%20Safety_FINAL.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022], pp. 8–10; J. Barry, “Women Human Rights Defenders’ Security Strategies,” Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, Front Line, and Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2008), www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/kvinna_insisteresistepersisteexiste_2008.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022], p. 22; Forst, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders,” p. 7.

12 See e.g., “Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General,” UN Security Council (2022), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2022-740.pdf> [last accessed: 30 October 2022]; or the UN Security Council’s Open Debate on “Protecting participation: addressing violence targeting women in peace and security processes” in January 2022 (“Prospects for Women Peacebuilders Vastly Worse than before Pandemic as Spoilers Ramp Up Action Aimed at Silencing Their Voices, Human Rights Chief Warns Security Council,” *UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases* (18 January 2022), <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14768.doc.htm> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]).

13 Forst, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders,” p. 8; Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”, p. 9.

Syria, and Yemen.¹⁴ The various forms of physical attacks as well as threats and insults have caused deep traumas among women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders. Rampant impunity that allows perpetrators of violence against women peacebuilders to avoid prosecution¹⁵ exacerbates these traumas and further undermines the mental health of women peacebuilders.

Women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders have increasingly come under attack in the digital space too. While modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) have enhanced the outreach and networking capacities of women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders,¹⁶ they also render these groups more vulnerable to surveillance, censorship, cyberstalking, and threats.¹⁷ State and non-state actors have used ICTs to launch smear campaigns against and monitor women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders, as well as exert pressure on them to halt their activities. Online consultation and interview participants confirmed that increasing numbers of defamatory pictures and videos showing hate speech against women peacebuilders are now circulating online. Interviewees reported that this footage has been used to defame, bully, blackmail, and slander women peacebuilders.¹⁸

Several interviewees noted that online and offline threats are mutually reinforcing.¹⁹ This dynamic suggests that the observed increase in online harassment may be having serious repercussions for women peacebuilders in real life—that is, an increase in online attacks and threats may precede an increase in physical attacks against women peacebuilders.

2.2 Sources of Threats and Risks

The threats and risks that women peacebuilders face on a regular basis stem from various sources. Interview partners repeatedly alluded to violent attacks committed by men. Gender discriminatory legal frameworks that marginalise women facilitate those attacks. In Syria, for example, the penal code makes no

14 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists.

15 Interview with W.

16 A. Chitando, "From Victims to the Vaunted: Young Women and Peace Building in Mashonaland East, Zimbabwe," *African Security Review* 28:2 (2019), pp. 110–23; S. Hankey and D. O'Clunaigh, "Rethinking Risk and Security of Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Age," *Journal of Human Rights* 5:3 (2013), pp. 535–47.

17 Barcia, "Our Right to Safety," p. 20; A.-M. Buzatu et al., "Women, Peace, and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Risks to Advance Women's Meaningful Participation and Protect Their Rights," Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2021), https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/DIL-GNWP-Research-Report_WPS-and-Human-Rights-in-Digital-Age_2021.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

18 Interviews with Q, T, V, and W.

19 Interviews with R, V, and W.

mention of the punishment of marital rape.²⁰ The discriminatory legal framework perpetuates women's marginalisation and guarantees impunity to perpetrators of violence and harassment against women, including women peacebuilders.²¹

Another main driver of threats and violence against women peacebuilders comes from repressive government authorities and bodies that curtail the activities of women peacebuilders despite their mandate to protect women peacebuilders and women's human rights. The Civil Society Commission in Libya is a case in point. This body closely monitors the activities of women peacebuilders and forces them to report about their activities. If individual women peacebuilders are regarded as being too active, in the interpretation of the government, the commission passes the information it has collected to the security authorities, which then arrest the women.²² Women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders therefore often deliberately refrain from reporting their suffering and experiences to state actors as they fear they will attract the attention of the repressive state machinery, including the police and the judicial system.²³

The media has been another key facilitator of attacks against women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders and has orchestrated smear campaigns against such women in countries including Iraq and Yemen.²⁴ Large media outlets in Yemen have published numerous articles that portray women as cooks and cleaners and that fiercely reject any public engagement of women as peacebuilders, volunteers, or entrepreneurs.²⁵

Women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders have also experienced strong resistance against their activities from inside their own conservative communities or even their families, which often reject the idea of women's empowerment.²⁶ Several interviewees spoke about men family members who regarded women peacebuilders as a disgrace and employed violence to prevent

20 D. Mousa, "Syrian Personal Status Laws," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2018), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/14969.pdf> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

21 Interviews with Q, X, and Y.

22 Interview with R.

23 M. O. Amir, "A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders in Eleven Egyptian Governorates," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5:3 (2013), pp. 460–77; Barcia, "Our Right to Safety," p. 5.

24 I. al-Gawfi et al., "The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen," Carpo Brief 14:27 (2020), pp. 1–16; D. O'Driscoll, "Women's Participation in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Iraq," K4D (2017), <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13437/239%20Women's%20Participation%20in%20Peacebuilding%20Iraq.pdf?sequence=1> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

25 Al-Gawfi et al., "The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen," pp. 13–15; F. Saleh et al., "The Role of the Media in Peacebuilding in Yemen," Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (2020), https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/carpo_brief_16_printerfriendly.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022], p. 12.

26 Amir, "A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders"; Barcia, "Our Right to Safety," p. 8; Barry, "Women Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies," p. 49; Forst, "Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders," p. 6.

their daughters and wives from taking up these roles.²⁷ In Syria, several women peacebuilders have been killed by their family members.²⁸ These incidents of “honour killings” illustrate the risks that women peacebuilders may encounter in their immediate environment.

Finally, participants in both the online consultation and the interviews noted that prominent religious actors tend to treat women as second-class subjects who should remain invisible in public.²⁹ This attitude offers non-state actors, government authorities, and men legitimate grounds for intimidating and threatening women peacebuilders.

2.3 Variation in Threats and Risks for Different Women Peacebuilders

Two important determinants of the threats that women peacebuilders face are the regional implementation of discriminatory laws and the extent of men’s dominance in the local culture. One interview partner from Syria reported an incomplete implementation of national discriminatory laws against women in the northeastern part of the country.³⁰ The resulting public acceptance of women assuming various roles in public mitigates the risks for women peacebuilders in these regions.

Previous contributions indicate that the risks for women peacebuilders operating in Egypt and Yemen vary between rural and urban areas.³¹ However, it is not necessarily the case that rural women are at higher risk of experiencing attacks than their urban counterparts. For example, in some parts of rural Yemen, women have utilised the protective effect of tribal law to serve as peacebuilders and mediators.³² Core pillars of women’s peacebuilding activities in these tribal contexts are the conveying messages between antagonists and providing aid to conflict-affected communities on the ground. Their work is limited to the grassroots level, however, and does not grant women peacebuilders the option to participate in regional or even national peacebuilding efforts.

In other parts of rural Egypt and Yemen, but also Colombia and the Philippines, women peacebuilders face significant risks as a result of their work. An underdeveloped technical infrastructure and language barriers impede rural women peacebuilders’ access to the few channels available to them to report

27 Interviews with R, V, W, and X.

28 Interview with X.

29 Interviews with R, W, and X.

30 Interview with X.

31 Amir, “A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders”; Forst, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders.”

32 M. Awadh and N. Suhja’adeen, “Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen,” UN Women (2019), <https://yemen.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/WomenInConflictResolutionAndPeacebuildingInYemenFIN.PDF> [last accessed: 26 July 2022], pp. 2 and 43.

incidents of harassment or attacks on them or their family members.³³ The combination of these circumstances makes it easier for non-state actors and state authorities to conceal acts of violence against women peacebuilders in rural areas.

Besides the urban–rural divide, there is evidence that women peacebuilders are more at risk in conflict zones and in areas that are controlled by non-state armed groups, given the absence of any state authorities.³⁴ The online consultation and interviews revealed that the strength and type of an armed group determine the extent to which it represents a danger to women peacebuilders operating on the ground. For example, in Yemen, the Houthis restrict any kind of civil society activities, including those of women peacebuilders, in the territory they control.³⁵ In the western part of Libya, conservative armed groups are more active than in the eastern part of the country, so it follows that the situation for women peacebuilders is worse in the west than in the east.³⁶ Militias in Iraq, on the other hand, are concentrated in Baghdad, which is therefore a dangerous place for Iraqi women peacebuilders.³⁷

Interviewees from Iraq and Libya both reported that young women peacebuilders are exposed to particularly severe risks as they are not allowed to do anything outside their home without the permission of a man relative.³⁸ This corroborates the findings of previous studies concluding that young women peacebuilders often encounter family and community resistance against their activities but lack the support and experience necessary to protect themselves effectively from various forms of harassment.³⁹

33 Barcia, “Our Right to Safety,” p. 10; Buzatu et al., “Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age,” pp. 24–8; J. Hitchen and J. Kasoma, “Making the Transition: Engaging Communities in Uganda with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5:3 (2013), pp. 512–21.

34 Al-Gawfi et al., “The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen”; “Building Peace from the Grassroots”.

35 Interview with Z; see also A. Qassim et al., “The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in Yemen,” CARPO (Brief 18) (2020), https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/carpo_brief_18_04-05-20_EN.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022], p. 5; “Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses Since September 2014,” Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, A/HRC/48/20 (2021), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/09/un-group-eminent-international-and-regional-experts-yemen-presents-its?LangID=E&NewsID=27458> [last accessed: 26 July 2022], p. 12; “Letter dated 25 January 2022 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council,” Panel of Experts on Yemen, S/2022/50 (2021), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_50.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

36 Interview with R.

37 Interview with W.

38 Interviews with R and W.

39 Amir, “A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders,” p. 475; R. Iszák-Ndiaye, “‘If I Disappear’: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space,” UN Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth (2021), <https://unoy.org/downloads/if-i-disappear-global-report-on-protecting-young-people-in-civic-space> [last accessed: 26 July 2022], p. 43.

2.4 Global and Regional Escalating Factors

The 2022 UNSG report on WPS indicates that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) counted 29 killings of women human rights defenders, journalists, and trade unionists in eight conflict-affected countries where data collection was possible.⁴⁰ The true number, however, is projected to be much higher.

The globally shrinking civic space has driven the deterioration of women peacebuilders' and women human rights defenders' situation.⁴¹ The electoral successes of populist and nationalist leaders, coup d'états, and a rise in xenophobic attitudes have nurtured polarisation and reduced actors' willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise. Autocratic state leaders have also used vaguely formulated anti-terrorism and anti-money-laundering laws as excuses to further curtail civil liberties and cut civil society organisations off from international funding streams.⁴² The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the crackdown on civil society and political opposition.⁴³ Moreover, non-state armed groups have taken advantage of the distraction of state authorities during the pandemic to further expand their territorial control⁴⁴ and reinforce misogynistic values and attitudes on the ground.⁴⁵

40 "Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Security Council (2022); see also "Prospects for Women Peacebuilders Vastly Worse than before Pandemic as Spoilers Ramp Up Action Aimed at Silencing Their Voices, Human Rights Chief Warns Security Council," *UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases* (2022).

41 "Are Peace and Security Possible without Women Human Rights Defenders? And Why This Question Matters to the United Nations Security Council," International Service for Human Rights (2019), https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ishr_whrd_report_2019_web_2.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; L. E. Fletcher et al., "Rights Eroded: A Briefing on the Effects of Closing Space on Women Human Rights Defenders" International Human Rights Law Clinic and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (2019), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3108683 [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, autocracies outnumbered democracies for the first time since 2004 in 2022. See "Trend toward Authoritarian Governance Continues: Democracy under Pressure Worldwide," Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022), www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/latest-news/2022/february/democracy-under-pressure-worldwide [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

42 L. Baydas and S. N. Green (eds), "Counterterrorism Measures and Civil Society," Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180322_CounterterrorismMeasures.pdf [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; K. Bennett et al., "Critical Perspectives on the Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders," *International Journal of Human Rights* 19:7 (2015), pp. 883–95; Fletcher et al., "Rights Eroded."

43 "Building Peace from the Grassroots"; M. Rahmaty and J. Jaghab, "Peacebuilding During a Pandemic: Keeping the Focus on Women's Inclusion," International Peace Institute (2020), www.ipinst.org/2020/09/peacebuilding-during-a-pandemic-keeping-the-focus-on-womens-inclusion [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

44 T. Ide, "COVID-19 and Armed Conflict," *World Development* 140 (2021), art. 105355.

45 Rahmaty and Jaghab, "Peacebuilding During a Pandemic"; S. Schamber, "How Women Peacebuilders Are Balancing Work on Covid-19 and Violent Extremism," International Civil Society Action Network (2020), <https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/How-Women-Peacebuilders-Are-Balancing-Work-on-COVID-19-and-Violent-Extremism.pdf> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; C. Varin, *Global Security in Times of COVID-19: Brave New World?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Interview partners confirmed an upward trend in the risks and threats faced by women peacebuilders in the MENA region, particularly online.⁴⁶ At the same time, they also touched upon two factors that may trigger an upsurge in threats and violence against women peacebuilders. Firstly, the situations in post-2011 Syria and the Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen exemplify that chaos and impunity in times of armed conflict drive up violence against women peacebuilders and civil society actors more generally.⁴⁷ Secondly, elections and peace negotiations have prompted armed non-state groups in Libya and Syria to intensify their activities against women peacebuilders.⁴⁸ This is due to the fact that the armed groups want the fighting to continue and hence derail any peace initiative, particularly those that involve women peacebuilders.⁴⁹

These persistent threats and risks have caused various reactions among women peacebuilders. Some have fled their home country or relocated internally.⁵⁰ Others have stayed at home but stopped their peacebuilding activities or gone into social isolation.⁵¹

46 Interview with W.

47 Interviews with X and Z.

48 Interviews with R and X.

49 Ibid.

50 Interviews with R, X, and Z.

51 Interview with R and online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

3 Existing Protection Strategies and Their Shortcomings

There exist few institutionalised protection mechanisms for women peacebuilders.⁵² Research on effective protection of women peacebuilders is equally nascent.⁵³ Recent work by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and the International Civil Society Action Network has identified two important exceptions.⁵⁴ Both of these contributions conclude that protection measures are most effective when they are tailored to the individual circumstances in which women peacebuilders operate.

3.1 Existing Protection Strategies

Recent guidelines developed by organisations such as Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and the International Civil Society Action Network on protecting women peacebuilders promote an “integrated security” approach that goes beyond the physical well-being of women peacebuilders and also provides them with psychological support and economic opportunities.⁵⁵ Physical protection measures remain an important component of any protection regime. However, following the “do no harm” principle, it is important to enter into discussions with local women peacebuilders to ensure that the intended security measures are culturally sensitive.⁵⁶ For example, previous research has found that some women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders refuse to have armed bodyguards, arguing that this form of protection exacerbates women’s dependence on men and may become a source of threat if bodyguards reject the work of women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders. Some women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders have therefore relied on women police officers, unarmed bodyguards, or unarmed representatives of international organisations as a less militarised form of physical protection.⁵⁷

Women peacebuilders in the MENA region have also developed their own protection strategies. Participants in the online consultation reported that networks and organisations of women peacebuilders try to conceal their activities in order to avoid reprisal attacks.⁵⁸ Iman al-Gawfi and Masa Osama Amir have

52 Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”, p. 13.

53 Bennett et al., “Critical Perspectives,” p. 888.

54 “Building Peace from the Grassroots”; Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”.

55 “Building Peace from the Grassroots”; Amir, “A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders,” p. 472; Barcia, “Our Right to Safety,” pp. 6, 10–13, and 28; Bennett et al., “Critical Perspectives”; Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”.

56 Holmes et al., “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”, p. 13; online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

57 Barcia, “Our Right to Safety”; A. M. Nah et al., “A Research Agenda for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5:3 (2013), p. 412.

58 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

observed similar protection strategies for some women peacebuilders in Yemen and Egypt, respectively.⁵⁹ Interview partners indicated that simple measures such as avoiding carrying sensitive documents, taking care of their mental health, changing their personal phone number on a regular basis, and building knowledge about potential protection tools can amplify the protective impact of undertaking activities in a clandestine manner.⁶⁰

UN Women has contributed to the protection of women peacebuilders in two of the country settings discussed here: Iraq and Libya. In Iraq, the authority and presence of UN Women on the ground have protected women peacebuilders from maltreatment by the national authorities, who fear upsetting the international community.⁶¹ This insight aligns with findings from Jane Barry, who notes that some women human rights defenders publicly partner with international actors to increase the political costs for all state and non-state actors who try to silence them.⁶² An interviewee in Iraq also indicated that UN Women's and other international organisations' presence and initiatives to build their capacity have enhanced the protection of women peacebuilders.⁶³ In Libya, UN Women has connected women peacebuilders with the international community. These networks, according to a Libyan interviewee, support persecuted women peacebuilders who seek to flee the country but also increase the pressure on Libyan authorities to release women peacebuilders from arrest.⁶⁴

Shifting the focus to very recent developments, the Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund set up a new funding scheme for women human rights defenders in December 2021, i.e. the WPHF Funding Window for Women Human Rights Defenders.⁶⁵ A core aim of this new scheme is to enhance the protection of women human rights defenders. To this end, the WPHF Funding Window offers women human rights defenders financial support for up to USD 10,000 to cover urgent expenses related to legal assistance, self-care, or the procurement of useful protection equipment such as security cameras.

3.2 Shortcomings of Existing Protection Strategies

While Section 3.1 presents some robust protection strategies available to women peacebuilders, online consultation and interview participants stressed that the existing initiatives to mitigate threats against women peacebuilders are often

59 Al-Gawfi et al., "The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen," p. 5; Amir, "A Study of the Experience of Women Human Rights Defenders," p. 472; see also Forst, "Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders."

60 Interviews with Q, R, T, and X.

61 Interviews with T and W.

62 Barry, "Women Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies," pp. 51–8.

63 Interviews with T and W.

64 Interview with R.

65 "The WPHF Funding Window for Women Human Rights Defenders," Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund (2021), <https://wphfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/WHRD-Funding-Window-Brief-01-June-2022.pdf> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

patchy and underfunded, lacking clear strategic goals and struggling to connect women peacebuilders with each other.⁶⁶ One major shortcoming of past protection approaches concerns their strong focus on the physical protection of women peacebuilders. Most women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and beyond lack access to psychosocial support, which forces them to cope with the traumas caused by the threats and violent attacks they experience all alone. There are similarly few opportunities for women peacebuilders to grow their capacity to protect themselves from harassment, slander, and defamation in the online space.⁶⁷

One interview partner from Syria also touched upon the difficulty of assessing the level of suffering of women peacebuilders given the lack of mechanisms that can be used to systematically monitor the situation of women on the ground.⁶⁸ In fact, neither the relevant government authorities nor international organisations systematically collect data on the number or nature of attacks against women peacebuilders in the countries examined in this study.⁶⁹

Finally, interview partners from Syria indicated that international organisations including UN Women are less able to play a protective role in countries where they do not run a country office. This is mainly because external interventions in Syria are not sensitive to the needs of women peacebuilders.⁷⁰ A Syrian interviewee also mentioned that the selection process for receiving UN funding can be cumbersome and highly restrictive. This isolates Syrian women peacebuilders from international funding streams.⁷¹ Participants in the online consultation corroborated this narrative of international support struggling to address the needs of women peacebuilders. For example, citing the absence of the rule of law in her country, a Libyan contributor described international offers to pay lawyers' fees for women peacebuilders who had been attacked or harassed as pointless.⁷²

66 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists.

67 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

68 Interview with Y.

69 Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders", p. 15.

70 Interviews with X and Y.

71 Interview with X.

72 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

4 Building Future Strategies to Enhance Women Peacebuilders' Protection

This section begins by presenting six potential elements of an effective protection regime for women peacebuilders. To this end, it draws on the insights gained in the previous sections and discusses opportunities to alleviate the identified shortcomings of existing protection strategies. Recent strategies employed to protect environmental defenders are incorporated to enrich the arguments presented below. The section closes with a discussion of the most pressing obstacles to enhancing the protection of women peacebuilders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Most importantly, several online consultation participants stressed the importance of future protection strategies also addressing the security needs of women peacebuilders' family members.⁷³ Violent backlash against the activities of women peacebuilders has also targeted their relatives in the past.⁷⁴ It would therefore be important for any protection initiative to work towards minimising the risks and threats that family members of women peacebuilders encounter in their daily lives.

4.1 Elements of a strong protection regime for women peacebuilders

4.1.1 International Presence

The interview partners and online consultation participants all echoed the need for UN Women and other international organisations that are occupied with the protection of women peacebuilders to establish and maintain country offices on the ground. An in-country presence, according to them, nurtures a better understanding of the needs of local women peacebuilders and empowers the international community to develop long-term, tailor-made strategies to effectively address them.⁷⁵ One interviewee from Iraq added that running in-country offices would also allow UN Women to provide direct moral support to women peacebuilders.⁷⁶

4.1.2 Legal Measures

Interview partners and participants in the online consultations agreed that enhancing the protection of women peacebuilders should not be a standalone exercise. Rather, protecting women peacebuilders is one element in the broader

73 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

74 Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders", pp. 8, 28.

75 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists.

76 Interview with W.

struggle to overcome a culture of men's dominance and inequitable treatment of women, which is the root cause of violence against women peacebuilders.⁷⁷ To this end, interviewees and researchers alike identified states as the key actors in initiating a transformation process by revising and implementing laws that protect women from discrimination and violence both at home and in public.⁷⁸ Online consultation participants urged the UN to exercise more pressure on member states to implement UNSCRs 1325 and subsequent resolutions on WPS and to use women's quotas to guarantee women's participation in political talks.⁷⁹ Such pressure would ideally be resolved in a legally binding treaty that obliged states to protect women peacebuilders. The drafting process for such a treaty could use the 2001 Aarhus Convention and the 2021 Escazú Agreement as sources of inspiration. Both of these agreements oblige signatory parties to protect environmental defenders, who face similar threats and risks to women peacebuilders.⁸⁰

4.1.3 Awareness Campaigns and Capacity-Building Campaigns

Legal changes alone will not suffice to enhance the protection of women peacebuilders. Interview partners and online consultation participants highlighted the need to launch awareness-raising and capacity-building campaigns.⁸¹ The former would be key to educating the broad masses about the work of women peacebuilders and increasing public pressure for there to be better protection of women peacebuilders. Integrating the subject of women's rights and the protection of women peacebuilders into school curricula was equally mentioned as a promising strategy to create a broad public support base for women peacebuilders.⁸² Advocacy activities around the protection of environmental defenders could serve as a model for women peacebuilders in this regard. For example, in 2020, the ninth iteration of the World Forum for Democracy focused on environmental defenders under the thematic umbrella "Defending the

77 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with R, T, X, and Y.

78 Interviews with R, T, X, and Y.

79 "Resolution 1325"; "Resolution 1825," UN Security Council (S/RES/1825) (2008), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/632501?ln=en> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

80 "'Landmark Decision' Gives Legal Teeth to Protect Environmental Defenders," UN News (22 October 2021), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103792> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; "Rapid Response Mechanism to Protect Environmental Defenders Established under the Aarhus Convention," UN Economic Commission for Europe (2021), <https://unece.org/climate-change/press/rapid-response-mechanism-protect-environmental-defenders-established-under> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; J. Ghazoul and F. Kleinschroth, "A Global Perspective Is Needed to Protect Environmental Defenders," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 2 (2018), pp. 1340–2; J. Verweijen et al., "Environmental Defenders': The Power/Disempowerment of a Loaded Term," in M. Menton and P. Le Billon (eds), *Environmental Defenders: Deadly Struggles for Life and Territory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 37–50.

81 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists; see also Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders".

82 Interview with T.

Defenders.”⁸³ Moreover, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) is currently planning to kick off a campaign to discuss environmental rights in schools, politics, and other public realms.⁸⁴

It is important to comprehend that the personal risks for women peacebuilders who share their experiences in the public sphere seem to be context dependent. Anecdotal evidence from Colombia, Nepal, and Tunisia indicates that women human rights defenders with strong international partners improved their security situation by publicly speaking about their work.⁸⁵ However, in contrast, an interviewee from Iraq mentioned that prominent women peacebuilders are particularly exposed to threats and attacks.⁸⁶ A thorough assessment of the potential repercussions of individual women peacebuilders or others publicly speaking out about this work would therefore help by enabling the development of measures to protect the participants of advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns.

Capacity-building campaigns could also nurture awareness among women peacebuilders about the present and, once they come into existence, future rights to protection they enjoy.⁸⁷ Introducing women peacebuilders to self-protection strategies is another promising pathway towards a robust protection regime.⁸⁸ This also concerns the capacity of women peacebuilders to use social media and online platforms to report about their activities and promote their work.⁸⁹ An in-depth collaboration between the UN and social media companies would amplify the impact of these efforts to mitigate online hatred against women peacebuilders.⁹⁰

Capacity-building programmes would ideally also concentrate on assisting women peacebuilders in enhancing their mental health. Permanent access to professional psychological support programmes would be conducive in this regard and increase women peacebuilders’ resilience to the threats and risks to which they are exposed. The online consultation and interviews conducted for this study revealed that there are very few opportunities for women peacebuilders to benefit from psychological consulting.⁹¹ It would therefore be important for

83 “Let Us Make Europe a Safe Place for Environmental Human Rights Defenders,” Commissioner for Human Rights (2021), www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/let-us-make-europe-a-safe-place-for-environmental-human-rights-defenders [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

84 “Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders: Policy,” UN Environment Programme (2018), <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/22769> [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

85 Barry, “Women Human Rights Defenders’ Security Strategies,” pp. 54–6.

86 Interview with W.

87 It would be important for any education campaign on this topic to distinguish between rights that women peacebuilders enjoy on paper and rights that are actually implemented. Just informing women peacebuilders about protective measures that solely exist on paper will give them a false sense of security, which could make them careless and put them in even greater danger.

88 Interviews with X and Y.

89 Interview with W.

90 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022.

91 Online consultation with women peacebuilders and activists in January 2022 and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists.

national and international actors to realise that the mental well-being of women peacebuilders determines their ability to do their work, and then design appropriate support programmes.

4.1.4 Working with or Creating Awareness among Religious Actors

Religious actors enjoy high levels of legitimacy and moral authority in the four countries examined in this study, which gives them leverage to initiate or accelerate transformations in society.⁹² Initiatives to enhance the protection of women peacebuilders would ideally incorporate religious actors directly or raise their awareness about the protection of women.

There exist extreme religious actors who reject women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders.⁹³ At the same time, both moderate clerics and religious women peacebuilders regard establishing peace as their duty and work to protect women in conflict-affected settings.⁹⁴ This indicates that religion and promoting and protecting women peacebuilders are not mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, their moral authority usually grants religious women peacebuilders natural protection from attacks.⁹⁵ Partnering with moderate religious actors, including religious women peacebuilders, would therefore help secular women peacebuilders to counter common feelings of mistrust towards their work within society. Trust-building exercises between religious and secular women peacebuilders would pave the way towards an impactful collaboration between secular and religious women peacebuilders and between secular women peacebuilders and moderate clerics.

Research reveals that such trust-building and networking exercises are most effective at the local level, where there is much more room for negotiation and transformation.⁹⁶ John D. Brewer et al. and Vladimir Kmec and Gladys Ganiel also found that minority religious leaders and religious actors who are engaged in social processes at the national or grassroots level are open to contributing to

92 J. Bercovitch and A. S. Kadayifci-Orellana, "Religion and Mediation: The Role of Faith-Based Actors in International Conflict Resolution," *International Negotiation* 14:1 (2009), pp. 175–204; N. Johnstone and I. Svensson, "Belligerents and Believers: Exploring Faith-Based Mediation in Internal Armed Conflict Politics," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14:4 (2013), pp. 557–79; A. Kadayifci-Orellana, "Religion and Mediation: Strange Bedfellows or Natural Allies?" in A. Georgakopoulos (ed.), *The Mediation Handbook: Research, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 369–78.

93 Fletcher et al., "Rights Eroded"; Forst, "Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders," p. 7.

94 J. Fabra-Mata and M. Jalal, "Female Religious Actors as Peace Agents in Afghanistan," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13:2 (2018), pp. 76–90; interview with a representative of the United States Institute of Peace on 1 September 2022.

95 Interview with a religious scholar on 8 September 2022.

96 P. L. Kakar, "Engaging Afghan Religious Leaders for Women's Rights," United States Institute of Peace (2014), www.usip.org/publications/2014/06/engaging-afghan-religious-leaders-womens-rights [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

social and political transformation processes.⁹⁷ Initiatives to enhance the protection of women peacebuilders should therefore ideally try to identify room for exchange between secular women peacebuilders and religious actors at the local level.

In-depth collaboration between secular women peacebuilders and moderate religious actors will not end all forms of religious resistance to the former's work. Creating platforms that foster exchange between religious scholars and women peacebuilders could help the latter to directly respond to religious extremism on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, such platforms would allow religious scholars to advise women peacebuilders on how to integrate religious sensitivities into their work in a systematic manner. This would be particularly helpful for secular women peacebuilders. It would also be important for initiatives that seek to connect religious scholars with women peacebuilders to respect the former's neutrality. Most religious scholars will only be willing to protect women peacebuilders from religious hate speech and defamation campaigns if they are not forced to take political sides. Granting religious scholars a high level of freedom in mitigating hatred against women peacebuilders would therefore maximise the protective impact of the platforms described above.

4.1.5 Coalition-Building

The literature review and interviews conducted for this study indicate that fostering collaboration among women peacebuilders is another promising strategy to create a safe working environment for them in the MENA region. Intra-state and cross-border networks for exchange and solidarity allow women peacebuilders to join forces, become more professional in their work, and provide moral and logistical support to each other.⁹⁸ Alliance- and coalition-building exercises would ideally also target additional actors operating alongside women peacebuilders, including civil society organisations, the media, moderate government agencies, and international organisations. UNEP has recently announced plans to orchestrate the creation of a platform where various UN agencies and programmes, governments, intergovernmental agencies, the private sector, and faith-based organisations can unite and collaboratively work on protecting environmental defenders.⁹⁹ Such a coordinated effort would capitalise on the different strengths of local, national, and international actors in protecting women peacebuilders too. For example, UN Women is well positioned to foster collaboration among women peacebuilders, strengthen their networks, and build their capacity and knowledge to protect themselves.

97 J. D. Brewer et al., "Religion and Peacemaking: A Conceptualisation," *Sociology* 44 (2010), pp. 1019–37; V. Kmec and G. Ganiel, "The Strengths and Limitations of the Inclusion of Religious Actors in Peace Processes in Northern Ireland and Bosnia Herzegovina," *International Negotiation* 24 (2019), pp. 136–63.

98 Interview with W.

99 "Promoting Greater Protection for Environmental Defenders".

4.1.6 Monitoring

Strengthening monitoring is also key. The establishment of more coherent monitoring systems to track human rights violations, threats, and other attacks against women peacebuilders would be a step in that direction. More specifically, local actors can be empowered to set up systems and can be supported in these endeavours to permanently monitor the situation of women peacebuilders on the ground and collect data on threats and attacks against them.¹⁰⁰ For example, organisations such as Global Witness have conducted thorough investigations in the field to make noise about the difficult security situation of environmental defenders.¹⁰¹ Similar initiatives would represent important ways to protect women peacebuilders as well.

Establishing a strong monitoring system to compile reliable information on threats and attacks against women peacebuilders would be challenging and would require input from state authorities. Melinda Holmes et al. call on state governments to create a legal and political safety net for women peacebuilders consisting of national laws to provide specific protection measures for women peacebuilders and (digital) channels to enable these women to report attacks and harassment they experience.¹⁰² The Ushahidi platform, which has been used in over 160 countries to report attacks against human rights defenders, could serve as a point of reference here.¹⁰³ Moreover, it would be important to explore what role different UN entities and UN peacekeeping operations could play in monitoring the situation of women peacebuilders on the ground.

Overall, the analysis provided in Section 4.1 points to twelve entry points for enhancing women peacebuilders' protection (see Infographic 1):

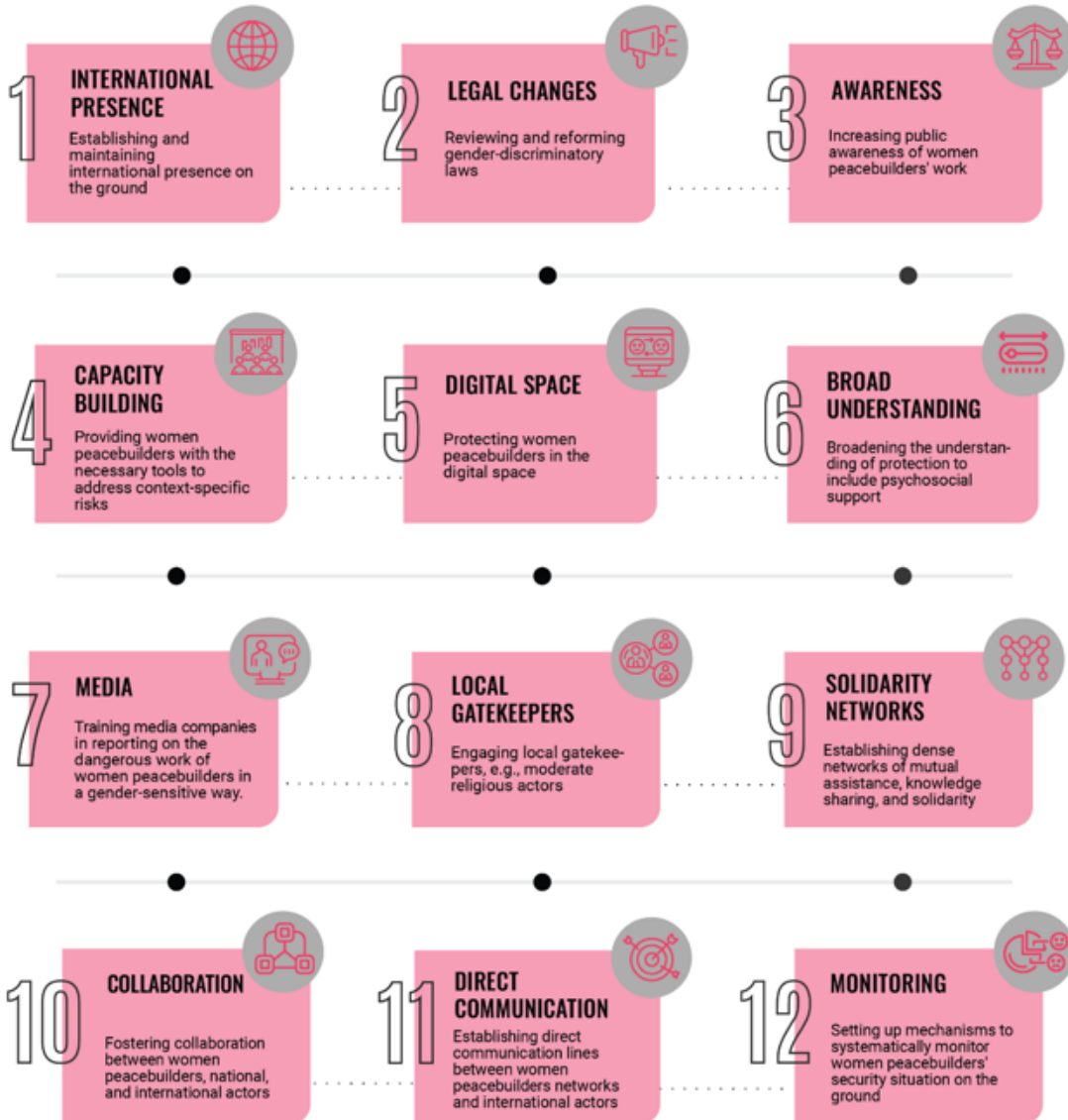
100 Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have formed with the explicit mandate to build the capacity of or protect environmental defenders; see "Defending the Defenders," Center for International Environmental Law (n.d.), www.ciel.org/issue/defending-the-defenders [last accessed: 26 July 2022]; J. Watts and J. Vidal, "Environmental Defenders Being Killed in Record Numbers Globally, New Research Reveals," *Chain Reaction* 130 (2017), <https://search.informit.org/doi/pdf/10.3316/informit.128355297033202> [last accessed: 26 July 2022]. Local NGOs with the clear objective to scale up the protection of women peacebuilders would be equally helpful in creating a safe working environment for women peacebuilders.

101 Ghazoul and Kleinschroth, "A Global Perspective Is Needed"; T. Glazebrook and E. Opoku, "Defending the Defenders: Environmental Protectors, Climate Change and Human Rights," *Ethics & the Environment* 23:2 (2018), pp. 84–5.

102 Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders"; see also Forst, "Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders," p. 16.

103 Buzatu et al., "Women, Peace, and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age," p. 15.

ENHANCING WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS' PROTECTION: 12 ENTRY POINTS



4.2 Obstacles and Risk Management

There exist various obstacles that would complicate the implementation of the protection strategies presented in Section 4.1. Firstly, women peacebuilders' limited financial capacity is a core obstacle that prevents them from scaling up their protection by themselves.¹⁰⁴ Secondly, cultural and political resistance to women peacebuilders taking a more active role in public in the MENA region will probably persist in the future. Conservative groups continue to interfere with the work of women peacebuilders and actively seek to undermine efforts to enhance their protection. The case of conservative Libyan women who orchestrated demonstrations against their government's decision to sign a memorandum of understanding with UN Women on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in 2021 exemplifies this pattern.¹⁰⁵ Past resistance to enhanced protection schemes for women peacebuilders suggests that any effort to improve the security situation of women peacebuilders will come with new risks and threats for both women peacebuilders and their supporters. It would therefore be important to conduct a proper assessment of the risks—to women peacebuilders and their supporters alike—of any initiative to promote women peacebuilders in the MENA region.

Thirdly, generating the necessary level of international political will and courage as well as access to financial resources to scale up the protection of women peacebuilders will be challenging in these times. Global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, droughts and floods, the war in Ukraine, and a looming global recession currently occupy the international community and make it hard to predict donor preferences in the short and medium terms. More awareness-raising work at the international level would help to ensure that women peacebuilders do not remain sidelined. It is encouraging to see that the nascent research on women peacebuilders and their protection needs has recently grown in intensity.¹⁰⁶ More innovative academic and non-academic research and investigation initiatives will be conducive to a stronger presence of women peacebuilders on the international agenda.

104 Ibid., p. 25; Fletcher et al., "Building Peace from the Grassroots", p. 11; "Rights Eroded," pp. 7–9.

105 S. Alharathy, "Protesters Press High Judicial Council to Intervene in MoU Signed with UN Women Department," *Libya Observer* (7 December 2021), www.libyaobserver.ly/news/protesters-press-high-judicial-council-intervene-mou-signed-un-women-department [last accessed: 26 July 2022].

106 "Building Peace from the Grassroots"; Holmes et al., "Protecting Women Peacebuilders".

5 Conclusion

Researchers, policy-makers, and international actors have only recently begun to systematically examine the security situation of women peacebuilders and flesh out strategies to enhance their protection. This paper has used information extracted from a review of secondary literature as well as an online consultation and interviews with women peacebuilders and activists from Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen to promote a better understanding of the risks and threats that women peacebuilders experience in these countries and identify effective risk-mitigation strategies. The analysis has revealed that women peacebuilders operate in a hostile environment and are exposed to various threats from multiple sides. Joint efforts that featured local, national, and international actors would help to enhance the security of women peacebuilders. At the local level, women peacebuilders would ideally join forces and collaborate with moderate religious actors to enhance their own protection. Reviewing and reforming national laws in a way that mitigated women's marginalisation would boost any effort to protect women peacebuilders. The same would be true of the establishment of a monitoring system to track threats and attacks against women peacebuilders on the ground. International funding and networking support would be key facilitators of these efforts.

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