



OPEN LETTER
WILPF International
Geneva, Switzerland
30 March 2017

Open letter to Mr António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General

Letter from a group of Women Civil Society Organisations in MENA

Dear Mr Secretary-General,

We congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary-General of our United Nations and, recalling your swearing-in ceremony where you called on leaders to listen to the needs of their people in the interest of the global stability upon which we all depend, we call on you to heed the recommendations set out herein in your mission to serve our common humanity.

As women activists from the Middle East and North Africa, we have witnessed the important role women are playing in bringing about positive change in the region, often at considerable personal risk to themselves and their family. Following a 10-year campaign by women's organizations in Yemen, the Yemeni National Dialogue fixed the age of consent to marriage at 18 years for both sexes in the draft constitution. Meanwhile in Morocco we drafted legislation to combat people trafficking, working in alliance with parliamentary blocs to ensure the draft was considered and approved. From Libya through to Iraq, women have provided essential medical, legal, psychosocial and financial support to victims of war and conflict – often without prior experience of rights-based community activism.

Despite these gains however, women in the region continue to face grave threats. We refer first, to the **deepening of violence perpetrated against women** before, during and after conflict. Women are increasingly impacted by the spread of small and light weapons, Similarly, the extensive use of explosive weapons in highly populated areas, and the systematic destruction of infrastructure and health facilities affected women in Syria and Yemen gravely and disproportionately. Conflict-affected countries have also experienced steep rises in people trafficking, principally women and girls, who are often forced into domestic and sex work and slavery. In Palestine, women are at the receiving end of increased domestic and



other forms of social violence associated with the effects of a protracted military occupation. Similarly in Egypt, incidences of sexual harassment and assault on women have multiplied exponentially since 2011.

Second, the **failure of mechanisms to support meaningful participation** of women activists and women's organizations in political processes both at the domestic and international levels means that that women's experiences and perspectives have been largely absent from dialogue and decision making to resolve conflicts. In Syria, we have been unable to influence negotiating parties to agree to a 30 per cent quota for women's representation, whilst in Yemen the participation of women in UN-sponsored peace last summer was abysmal with two (2) women representing the government, one (1) woman representing the General People's Congress, and zero (0) women representing the Houthis.

Third, the **increasingly repressive measures against civil society**, including restrictions on NGO registration, scope of work and funding, as well as freedom of movement through the imposition of travel bans on activists by individual regimes and more recently by the USA, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, against seven Muslim-majority countries, mostly in the MENA region, represent attempts to silence the rarely heard voices of civil and political activists working to secure and safeguard human rights and equality for all in the face of extreme adversity. Ultra conservative and reactionary elements in political currents across the MENA region, and globally, have made advocacy on women's rights issues near impossible, with women human rights defenders becoming victims of murder and enforced disappearance.

You will be aware that popular feeling towards the United Nations throughout the Middle East and North Africa is one characterised by a lack of faith in the Organization's ability to implement its mandate in line with the principles of the Charter. You will know that this is because the Security Council has repeatedly been unwilling to responsibly discuss the situation in numerous countries of the region, including Syria and Palestine, let alone enforce its own resolutions. You will know that trust has been lost because of the actions of some UN agencies, funds and programmes in the region.

But you may not know that our trust has also been lost because of the lack of action on the part of some UN envoys and mediators in the region to implement Security Council resolutions and other provisions of international law which call for the meaningful inclusion of women in their delegations and negotiating parties. Indeed, some envoys have publicly questioned the relevance of CEDAW in the region.



We welcome your acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the United Nations today and your commitment to reform the way it works. As part of your road map to advance women's rights and set the UN back on track as an Organization that works for the common interests of our shared humanity, we set out below 10 points which we urge you to consider:

1. Include the candidate's track record in advancing women's rights as a central criteria in making senior appointments, including envoys, mediators and representatives, as well as the head of the departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations. Such appointments should also be gender-balanced and culturally diverse.
2. Ensure that senior staff, including envoys and mediators to conflict countries in the MENA region, as well as representatives and heads of the departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations, comply with international law. In particular, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and its associated resolutions, and CEDAW, including through robustly advocating with negotiating parties to meaningfully include women in their delegations, including through quotas, and to integrate women's experiences, rights and perspectives through the work of the delegations.
3. Ensure sustained, high level gender expertise to the UN Secretary General including through an ongoing Senior Gender Advisor to the Executive Office of the Secretary General with core support and a high level of influence, in order to ensure that women's rights and gender issues are integrated across all analysis, planning, policies and activities.
4. Strongly encourage the Security Council to integrate women's rights and gender throughout its work, including by reporting on the 2015 Global Study on Women, Peace and Security in thematic and country-level work both in and outside of New York.
5. Ensure reliable, accessible, and flexible UN funding to women's organizations and efforts in support of women's rights at the grassroots level is prioritised and increased by advocating for other multilateral and bilateral donors to increase their support; encouraging substantial increase in development assistance allocated to women-led civil society for gender equality (CRS code 15170); calling for strengthening of civil society-inclusive UN funds (such as the Global Acceleration Instrument, Peacebuilding Fund WPS Initiative); developing strategies to enhance participation of women led civil society in donor conferences, and; calling for the lifting of restrictions on the work of women's organisations and human rights defenders due to domestic 'counter-terrorism measures', in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Lebanon especially.



6. Take concrete actions to address the shrinking civil society space in the MENA region as well as the systematic targeting of women human rights defenders.
7. Ensure that UN Women works collaboratively with and in support of women's grassroots associations, including by adequately investing in gender and peace budgets of UN Women, DPA, DPKO and other entities; providing training and support and; ensuring monitoring and accountability mechanisms to evaluate such initiatives that enable women to contribute to cycles of learning and improvement for peace.
8. Condemn the proliferation of explosives, small firearms and light weapons in the region, which have immediate and long-lasting effects that include the destruction of civilian infrastructure and increased gender based violence.
9. Strengthen UN support for fragile and conflict affected states to realise the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5 and 16 on gender equality and peace. This should include: addressing gender equality and peace data gaps including on arms transfers, which directly impact gender based violence (SDG 16.4); taking action to increase the number of UN funds that include civil society in the leadership and financial allocation of the funds (such as with the Global Acceleration Instrument); building mechanisms with international financial institutions to strengthen women's meaningful inclusion, and evaluating and improving the impact on women's human rights in conflict settings of IFIs in post-conflict reconstruction.
10. Establish a women's civil society board to regularly advise him and his team on issues relating to the advancement of women's rights. This board should be comprised of representatives of women's organizations, including youth movements, from across the globe as well as New York-based organizations.
11. The Secretary-General should report yearly to the General Assembly on progress made on (i) the integration of women's rights and gender issues across the three pillars of the Organization, human rights, peace and security and development and (ii) your commitment to reach gender parity across the Secretariat, and Agencies, Funds and Programmes.

We stand ready to work together to move from a culture of fear of one another to trust in each other, and to work with you, Secretary-General, to build a world defined by the values enshrined in the UN Charter, and to restore trust in the United Nations.



Yours, in respect and solidarity,

ABAAD - Resource Centre for Gender Equality – Lebanon
Adaleh for Rights and Freedoms – Yemen
Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development – Egypt
ASUDA - Kurdistan Region, Iraq
Atwar for Research and Community Development – Libya
Awan Organization – Iraq
Badael – Syria
Baghdad Women Association – Iraq
Basmat for Development – Syria
Bihar Relief Organisation – Syria
Dawlaty – Syria
Fondation NISSA pour la Culture et la Démocratie – Tunisia
House of Ideas – Yemen
Iraqi 1325 Network – Iraq
Iraq Foundation – Iraq
Kesh Malek – Syria
Musawa-Women's Studies Center for Equality – Syria
Palestinian Women Development Society – Palestine
Sawa for Development and Aid – Lebanon
Sawa Foundation – UK
Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF) – Yemen
Syrian Female Journalists Network – Syria
Syrian Feminist Lobby – Syria
Syrian League for Citizenship – Syria
Syrian Women League – Syria
To Be for Rights and Freedoms - Yemen
Together We Build it – Libya
Union for Women's Action – Morocco
Urnammu – Syria
Woman Leadership Institute – Iraq
Women Now for Development – Syria
Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling – Palestine
1325 Network - Libya