

## Mena Day: A Space For Feminist Leaders From The Middle East And North Africa To Redefine Meaningful Participation

### [WILPF](#)

On the day before the [WILPF convening](#) on reclaiming the United Nations as a peace organization, WILPF brought feminist leaders and social and political activists from 8 countries in the Middle East and North Africa together in Geneva, providing them with a space to share information and exchange experiences on Women, Peace and Security at the regional level through lessons learned and best practices as part of the project “Ending discrimination and enforcing women’s peace and security in the MENA region, funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).

The day also provided much-needed opportunities for self-care and psychosocial support to partners, many of whom live and work in highly challenging conflict situations where they undertake vital life-saving work to address the immediate needs of women – often facing considerable risks to their security and well being and that of their families for doing so.

The MENA Day formed an intrinsic part of the WILPF convening, which was called for after many women activists were prevented from attending the annual session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York as a result of the US Administration’s new policy initiatives on migration. However, several of WILPF’s MENA partners were still unable to obtain visas to attend the convening, while others had to travel to another country to apply for a visa to Switzerland.

Over the course of the day, partner organisations and activists from Libya, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt tackled the questions ‘participation for whom?’, ‘in what?’ and ‘for which ends?’, to reflect on previous experiences of participation, as well as to analyse obstacles women in the region face in this regard and to strategise an effective response to re-envision their meaningful participation. Discussions have also created the space for activists and partners to effectively exchange expertise and lessons learned at the regional level not only on participation but also on human rights and disarmament.



MENA Day participants from Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen © WILPF

The Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ms Margot Wallstrom, who is championing the world’s first ‘feminist foreign policy’, also attended the MENA Day. Participants embraced the opportunity to meet with her, delivering key messages and raising pertinent questions in

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relation to Swedish foreign policy and its interaction with women in countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, in turn, called on participants to write to her and pledged to exert efforts to raise their concerns at the United Nations Security Council.

In addition to restrictions on movement, access and expression posed by the policies of the US Administration, the most serious obstacles to women's meaningful participation included the continued instrumentalisation of women's participation for political point scoring by both national and international parties. This has led to a situation where women are participating in agendas that they did not set, for purposes they are not aware of and without proper follow up.



MENA Day participants with the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ms Margot Wallstrom © WILPF

Participants also highlighted the problem of seeing women's participation as an end in itself, without concern for the substance of that participation and without mechanisms in place to guarantee that their participation is producing results that positively impact the daily lives of women in their countries.

In this light, they demonstrated how the gains of women-led civil society in the political sphere are being jeopardised by the larger systems in which they are embedded, explaining that the women's quota is ineffective without mechanisms for women's fair and meaningful participation in the electoral system.

Problematic funding regulations including donor-led, project-based funding, the division of funding for developmental and humanitarian purposes, and anti-terror regulations have led to women being excluded from accessing services, the decreased legitimacy of NGOs among the communities they seek to serve and a situation where the very survival of organisations with a feminist vision is under threat due to depleted resources in a situation where feminist work is seen as a luxury and not a necessity.

The current narrow scope for participation in international mechanisms and the implications this has for different structures of power was likewise flagged as a challenge to women's meaningful participation. Activists spoke of a need to widen the scope of participation, providing tools for women from affected populations in the MENA region to represent themselves.

Partners proposed setting up a mentoring programme to engage more activists in international advocacy on Women, Peace and Security. In a similar light, women from Yemen and Libya demonstrated how they are already engaging in new forms of advocacy and organising

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through using open source platforms regionally, and engaging with women on the ground to gain their views of women, peace and security by using a language that is accessible to all women, regardless of their background.

Reflecting on Sweden's time residing over the presidency of the UN Security Council earlier this year, Wallstrom advised on the need for clear rules about what women's participation means and commented that while Sweden supports the women's advisory council for Syria and while the UN Envoy for Syria, de Mistura, proclaims that the women's advisory body is the most important advisory body, women's participation around the negotiating table is still meaningless.



MENA Day participants from Syria © WILPF

Feminist leaders and social and political activists from the MENA region agreed that whilst the monopoly of the Security Council permanent members represents an on-going obstacle to reclaiming the UN as a peace organisation, ways must be found to work with the UN to genuinely improve reality for women and their families in the MENA region, and that this must be done without compromising the feminist vision and voice in all its variation.

As a means to ensure that women's authentic voices are heard in spite of efforts to silence them, participants in the MENA Day determined to reclaim their voice, defending against the instrumentalisation and appropriation of their participation by expedient agendas. In an effort to embolden the MENA feminist movements internationally, participants called on the support of allies to follow the example of Sweden to ensure that women from the MENA region not only have a say but actually write the rules of their engagement, as effective actors producing tangible results on the ground for women in conflict situations across the region. Partners and participants have also stressed the importance of capitalising on and duplicating the spaces such as those that WILPF creates for regional exchange of expertise among activists from the MENA region.