BERLIN (IDN) – While warning UN Secretary-General António Guterres of a growing lack of trust in the Security Council throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a group of Women Civil Society Organisations has proposed far-reaching measures "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."

In an open letter, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and 25 MENA Women Civil Society Organisations state that popular feeling in the Middle East and North Africa "is one characterised by a lack of faith in the United Nations' ability to implement its mandate in line with the principles of the Charter."

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.
Besides, trust in the UN has been lost because of the actions of some UN agencies, funds and programmes in the region and "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."

CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, is an international treaty adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. Described as an international bill of rights for women, it was instituted on September 3, 1981 and has been ratified by 189 states.

The open letter notes that women are playing an important role in bringing about positive change in the MENA region, often at considerable personal risk to themselves and their family. Thus, 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.

In Morocco they 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, says the letter. "Despite these gains however, women in the region continue to face grave threats."

The set of measures Women Civil Society Organisations urge Gutерres to consider are:

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, UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), Department of Peacekeeping Operations (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 (i) his commitment to reach gender parity across the Secretariat, and Agencies, Funds and Programmes.
A group of Women Civil Society Organisations that have signed the open latter stands ready to work together with the UN Secretary-General "to move from a culture of fear of one another to trust in each other, and to work with him to build a world defined by the values enshrined in the UN Charter, and to restore trust in the United Nations."