



POLICY BRIEF

ACROSS DIVIDES TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS THROUGH DIALOGUE: EXPERIENCES FROM THE GROUND



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There is a large diversity of views and backgrounds within the women's movement across the Middle East and North Africa. The needs and perspectives may differ between youth and older generations, elite and grassroots activists, and across the ideological spectrum. Divides can hinder the collaboration and momentum needed to enable activists to advance their agendas and empower all women in their societies.

Over the course of 2016, Search for Common Ground facilitated national and regional inclusive dialogue processes and initiatives to overcome those divides. This initiative included regional conferences, national-level women's dialogue processes in Lebanon,

Morocco, and Palestine, and in-depth study on women's collaboration, and joint advocacy campaigns.

Passionate women leaders from across the region have come together despite their differences to explore how they can advance women's rights and contribute to social peace.

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INTRODUCTION

While huge advances in women's rights and equality have been made since the beginning of the millennium, women in many Middle-Eastern and North African countries still face social, economic, and cultural challenges. Fluid transition processes across the MENA region have led to increased polarization within societies, dividing those who are trying to advance women's empowerment. Ideological, socio-economic, intergenerational, and other geographic divides hinder the collaboration needed to empower women's rights activists to advance their agendas. Historically men have mostly been absent in conversations and advocacy to promote gender equality.

Acknowledging these difficulties, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) launched an initiative to advance women's rights through innovative, inclusive dialogues among women's civil society organizations (CSOs) from different ideological, socioeconomic, and generational backgrounds across the MENA region. This programme was implemented under the auspices of UN Women's Regional Programme Men and Women for Gender Equality, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and partially by the European Union (ERMES).

SFCG kicked off this initiative in May 2016 with a regional seminar in Tunis, which brought together representatives of women's CSOs from Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia to explore the divisions that inhibit CSOs' collaboration in each country. The participants shared their experiences advocating for women's rights and women's empowerment from within national movements and explored the ways in which collaboration could strengthen the impact of their work. The regional seminar generated **policy recommendations** on how to advance women's empowerment. The outcomes of the first regional conference also informed national-level dialogue processes in Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine, which focused on understanding country-specific divides among women's groups, developing strategies to overcome them, and launching initiatives

to promote collaboration. In Lebanon, the women's dialogue group produced a report offering policy recommendations to overcome ideological divides between the CSOs. In Morocco, a collaborative **advocacy campaign** raised awareness for girls' literacy. In Palestine, youth CSOs partnered with women's CSOs to hold a **series of roundtables** examining the generational gap in Palestine's women's movement and how young women and men can become more engaged to advance the women's empowerment agenda.

The initiative concluded with a second regional seminar in Tunis in December 2016, which celebrated the dialogue processes in Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine (as well as SFCG's previous successful women's dialogue experience in Tunisia), provided inspiration for the future institutionalization of women's collaboration and networks, and resulted in more policy recommendations.

Based on the women and men's experiences throughout the region, this report discusses how deeply-rooted divides may influence women's status in the region by jeopardizing the ability of groups to work together on areas of common concern. The report further identifies conditions for successful collaboration and dialogue and makes recommendations for building mutual trust to strengthen the impact of women's collective action.

I. ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MENA REGION IN A CONTEXT OF DIVIDES

Throughout the world, women continue to face cultural, political, economic, and legal barriers that prevent them from fully exercising their rights. However, women in the MENA region face heightened challenges due to their complex environments that include armed conflict, violent extremism, humanitarian disasters, conservative cultural norms, and unstable political transitions. As a result, the Arab region ranks as the lowest region in the Gender Gap Index¹. Even in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon where substantial progress has been made in advancing women's status, rights granted to women are always subject to the risk of regressing. Civil society organizations have become an increasingly important player in the public arena of these countries but, at the same

time, as they represent a microcosm of their society's dynamics, they have become carriers of the divides that exist in society due to the volatile political and social context. As a result, natural tensions among women's organizations have prevented collaboration at a time when it is needed more than ever to advance women's rights.

SFCG identified five key divides that currently challenge collaboration among women's organizations in the MENA region. While these divides are shared by all countries in the region, some of them are more relevant than others in each context (see Box 1).

¹ "A long way to go," Niswa, UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, Issue 1, January 2016, p.4.



BOX 1

Five main divides preventing women's organizations from collaborating

SFCG identified five divides that hinder the advancement of women's rights in the region. While these divides are found to some extent in each of the countries represented, the forms they take and the degree to which participants acknowledge them as barriers to collaboration are shaped by specific historic and political conditions relevant to each country.

Ideological divide: The ideological divide encompasses the divide between secular on the one hand and conservative, religious, or Islamist women's organizations on the other. In some national contexts, such as Tunisia, this divide is prevalent and widely acknowledged within civil society. In others, such as Morocco, Lebanon, and Palestine, Islamist ideologies may not be readily represented in civil society itself, but rather through charity organizations or politically-affiliated movements. In this sense, the definition of the ideological divide among women's organizations in the MENA region can be expanded to include politically marked divisions, which ultimately contribute to and shape ideology.

Socioeconomic divide: The socioeconomic divide represents the divide between women's organizations that are influential among more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and those that resonate more at the grassroots level. The former may be characterized by greater financial resources and support by political or urban elites, while the latter may be lacking in financial resources and be very locally affiliated with specific cultural or tribal constituents. In some contexts, this divide could be manifested primarily as the division between organizations that serve urban and rural constituents, reflecting broader inequalities in socioeconomic development between cities, villages, and even camps.

Generational divide: The generational divide describes the distinction between new and old wave feminist organizations, which could by extension encompass the division between young and older women's approaches to collaboration and advocacy. Although generational divides are not as entrenched as ideological or socioeconomic divides, they are widely identified as a significant barrier to collaboration by both young and older women alike.

Approach (adversarial v. non-adversarial advocacy): While some divides among women's organizations impact how they might interpret a common goal, other dividing factors affect the approach an organization might take to achieve that goal. Some organizations may take a non-adversarial and inclusive approach to their work, such as negotiations requiring necessary compromises, including possibly with the government. Others may use more adversarial tactics, such as protests, and may be unwilling to engage with sectors of society, including government, authorities, or other civil society organizations, whose goal may not necessarily align with theirs. While an adversarial approach might be indicative of an underlying ideological, socioeconomic, political or generational divide, such methodology could also be driven by intense competition among women's organizations for funding or visibility.

Sector-based: The sector-based divide encompasses the distinction between women's organizations that are part of civil society, those that are within the women units of the political parties, and those that are structurally associated directly or indirectly to the state. Organizations operating as part of civil society may sometimes be suspicious of or unwilling to work with these state or party-affiliated organizations, as they may doubt their independence or view their agenda as being state or party-led. Different sources of institutional funding (calls for proposals by international agencies) might also prohibit organizations across those sectors from collaborating with one another, especially with the party-affiliated women's groups. To this end, the sector-based divide can impact the potential for collaboration in very practical ways.

Watch this SFCG-produced video featuring dialogue participants in the MENA Regional Inclusive Women's Dialogue Initiative : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urK63YA8gyc&feature=youtu.be>

The **ideological divide** between secular and non-secular/Islamist women's organizations is perhaps the most prominent divide in the MENA countries. For instance, in **Tunisia's** post revolution years (2011-2014), the ideological divide was mostly characterized by the opposition between secular and Islamist-leaning women's organizations. The former had been long-standing rights advocates while the latter have emerged as a stronger force in civil society more recently, following the 2011 revolution, which expanded the freedom for diverse actors to engage in civic life. This divide resulted in competition for influence and nourished mistrust and suspicions, as both sides accused the other of servicing a political agenda. The confrontation along the ideological typically divide leads to mutual accusations and a refusal to collaborate, exacerbated by the political tensions that frequently emerge during the democratic transition period. In this regard, the drafting of the new constitution in Tunisia was particularly challenging, as testified by extremely high tension in the dialogue among parties at the time especially among the women's movement in Tunisia.

In **Lebanon**, the ideological divide is also very deeply rooted, as it reflects the fragmentation of society and the influence of religious-led communitarianism. Mistrust and misconception prevail and prevent effective collaboration among women's organizations. There have been sporadic attempts to overcome this divide through low-profile collaboration, but these efforts have proved to be mostly unsustainable. An additional divide in Lebanon opposes "elitist" women's organizations with strong leadership and management to those with fewer funds and with low organizational skills. This seems to be another key factor in deepening disparities among women's organizations in Lebanon.

Women's organizations in **Palestine** operate in a highly politicized context, where opposition to occupation dominates all other issues. Although women's organizations have somewhat succeeded in advancing women's rights, a complex mix of ideological and political divides undermines their efforts and prevents them from collaborating further with each other.

The **socio-economic divide** is particularly relevant in **Morocco**, where women's organizations are faced with a combination of class, geographical and educational divisions that result in a bifurcated women's movement. Urban-based, well-funded, and strongly structured and connected women's organizations are considered elitist. In comparison, smaller or less-developed women's organizations operating in rural or remote areas often lack networking opportunities and policy experience. Despite being firmly anchored and with a good reputation within local communities, the divide between these smaller organizations and more elitist groups pushes them towards greater marginalization.

In **Palestine**, a challenging **generational divide** appears to also separate an older generation of activists from a younger generation, born and raised under occupation, which nurtures high ambitions but is not necessarily given the chance to fulfil them. As a consequence, while older women tend to be more sceptical of the ability of youth to advance women's rights, young women and men generally feel neglected when they strive to promote women's causes.

The intersection of these divides makes advancing women's empowerment particularly complex in the MENA region.

BOX 2**“The 6th divide”: Addressing the women/men collaboration**

Promundo, a leading organization in promoting gender equality and preventing violence, engages men and boys in partnership with women and girls, as both men and women are both negatively affected by patriarchal social norms that shape their behaviors towards each other. The organisation works to transform harmful gender norms and change the way boys and girls are socialized to become men and women. They promote a gender transformative approach that goes beyond just educating men and puts forward a positive concept of masculinity, such as participation in caregiving and domestic activities and equitable household decision-making by parents. Evidence-based research conducted by Promundo in different countries shows that a father’s involvement in child rearing is a key factor in reducing children’s exposure to violence, and it contributes to positive life satisfaction for both men and women. Last but not least, gender-equal societies show higher GDPs, lower violence and lower conflict.

Although men’s engagement as a necessary means to address inequalities between women and men is not a new idea, it has not been fully adopted within women’s rights movements in the MENA region. Changing negative masculinity norms means changing power balances within society. Previous efforts were scattered and too short-term to succeed, and tensions with women’s movements as well as with conservative men’s rights groups have prevented the concept from spreading and becoming institutionalized.

The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), created by Promundo and the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) conducts household surveys to provide evidence on men’s attitudes and practices along with women’s opinions of men’s practice. UN Women’s Regional Programme Men and Women for Gender Equality is currently supporting the IMAGES research (both quantitative and qualitative research) carried out by Promundo and local research partners in the MENA region. The results of that research will inform future efforts to collaborate across gender lines to advance women’s rights, recognizing that gender equity is beneficial for both women and men.

Read more about the IMAGES Survey on this website: <http://imagesmena.org/en/>

II. ENSURING WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS' EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION: DIALOGUE ACROSS DIVIDES

2.1 Overcoming ideological barriers

Context and challenges

Ideological barriers are largely acknowledged to be a major hindrance to collaboration among women's organizations. Although country-specific circumstances – largely fuelled by historical divergences between conservative and progressive forces – differ on how much these divides may impact collaboration among women's right activists on the ground, the ideological divide remains an overarching barrier throughout the region. Indeed, unspoken distrust, misconceptions, and stigma across ideological lines – driven by lack of mutual knowledge, empathy and cooperation – are main factors that dialogue processes must typically tackle. But recent dialogue initiatives also demonstrate that non-adversarial approaches focused on enhancing mutual knowledge as well as on building issue-based collaboration across divides are effective ways to advance trust and joint effort. This contributes to reducing tensions, dissipating biased ideas of each other, and identifying issues of common interest where collaboration can overcome contrasting ideological stances.

In **Tunisia**, the first country where SFCCG implemented a women's inclusive dialogue initiative in 2013 for a two-year programme, the ideological divide, though deeply rooted in the Tunisian society, had been silenced for a long time and has been allowed to

emerge only recently as the political environment has become more open. Tunisian representatives emphasized how newly-gained freedom of speech in the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution allowed activists to discuss social inequalities, economic disparities, regional underdevelopment, and human rights violations which had been largely ignored by the public. At the same time, while left-wing and secular-oriented organizations had previously dominated the civil society sector and wielded influence on policy-making, a new strand of women's organizations perceived as more conservative or religious-inspired began to emerge.

Long-established Tunisian women's rights organizations acknowledge, not without pride, the historic progress the country has made in promoting and defending women's rights in both public and private spheres. Some of these groups consider the newly-emerged conservative-oriented organizations as a risk to women's status and achievements, however generally both sides accused each other of serving past or recent hidden political agendas. Thus, the political tensions experienced by the country from 2011 to 2014 not only reflected deep social divisions but were also largely echoed, and sometimes initiated, by the civil society organizations themselves.

In other countries, the ideological divide among women's organizations has been prominent for a longer period of time and also remains subject to

other countries, the ideological divide among women's organizations has been prominent for a longer period of time and also remains subject to influences from the political context beyond the civil society sphere.

The ideological divide in **Lebanon** is widely shaped by the demographic, religious and sectarian fragmentation of the population. Such a situation pushed women's rights organizations to adopt different forms of action, leading to a two-tiered system of activism on women issues. On the one hand, secular-oriented organizations have historically been more effective in promoting women's rights politically. They believe the State is the central authority to legislate on and guarantee women's rights. On the other hand, religious and sectarian organizations that mostly operate through charity associations tend to address women's issues on a communitarian basis rather than via political or legislative means. Moreover, the existence of different viewpoints regarding women's rights within the same religious community makes collaboration among women activists even more elusive, and dialogue is therefore less likely to succeed.

These two different ideological strands of Lebanese women's civil society evolved almost independently,

with very few opportunities to stand together on common issues, and suspicion and misconceptions still prevail. While many consider the lack of collaboration across ideological affiliations as particularly harmful to women's rights, others believe that there remain profound and insurmountable divisions in perspectives on several women's issues. For example, despite mobilization of most secular-oriented women's rights organizations, various proposed legislation on women's rights related to adultery, abortion, domestic or sexual violence has failed to pass because of strong conservative ideological opposition.

Divisions along ideological lines are also acknowledged by civil society activists in **Morocco** and **Palestine** as one of the factors that prevent women's civil society in these countries from collaborating. However, ideological divides are given less consideration in these locations, because social issues are strongly shaped by specific political conditions. In Palestine, the resistance against occupation acts as a common denominator among women's organizations, and ideological divides were observed to be less prominent within the West Bank.

BOX 3

Ra'edat network

The Arab Women Parliamentarians' Network for Equality "Ra'edat", in Arabic, or "Pioneers", is a regional parliamentary network that advocates for gender equality and the fair participation of women in policymaking in the Arab States region. The Network unites the efforts of present and former parliamentarians to achieve parity in decision-making positions by 2030. The Network aims to change the legislation that regulates the political environment, in particular election laws for parliament, municipal councils and local governments, and the laws for political parties. The Network operates as a pressure group on governments to adopt strategic and gender sensitive agendas, policies and plans. It also seeks to activate funds and programmes dedicated to the economic, political and social empowerment of women. The Ra'edat Network is supported by Spring Forward for Women, a regional joint programme of the European Union and UN Women, funded by the European Union.

The Ra'edat Network emphasizes the value of fighting ambitiously for positive societal change and increased women's representation in the Arab world. Research shows that states in transition benefit from full political representation of their population, which must include women. Ra'edat's organizational model is built on the belief that collective action can more effectively promote social change. By promoting women's representation on a regional basis, the Ra'edat Network has been able to cross ideological divides.

Dialogue strategies

Regardless of the particular mix of characteristics that shapes the ideological divide in the MENA region –ranging from latent but recognized, in Palestine (West Bank) and Morocco, to partially ignored then disruptive in Tunisia, and an important driving force in every day social and political life in Lebanon – it is generally agreed that religious or political beliefs should ultimately not interfere or prevent women supporting joint initiatives. A consensus seems to emerge within the women’s civil society that the ideological divide prevents organizations and individuals from getting to know each other, respect each other, and, most importantly, work together. However, it is not unmanageable to overcome these divisions, and, with goodwill on all sides, ideological differences may cease to be an obstacle to the promotion and advancement of women’s rights.

In terms of strategies for implementing dialogue among women’s organizations from opposite ideologies, the approach must consider dialogue to be a process of discovery that promotes mutual understanding, empathy and reduces prejudice. To achieve this goal, discussion sessions can be held on non-confrontational issues relating to women’s rights and women’s empowerment. This enables parties to discover the life paths and personal stories of their peers, discover each other’s points of view, unpack the past, envision the future, look for similarities rather than differences, and focus on what brings them together.

In Tunisia, where dialogue parties spoke of the deep prejudice across the ideological divide, this approach proved to be particularly beneficial. Women’s rights activists who had the opportunity to speak with their colleagues of different affiliations were able to identify commonalities. They could grasp the extent to which erroneous personal appraisals fuelled by stereotypes in society may damage their understanding of others and limit opportunities for collaboration. Beyond the polarized political context that tended to entrench views, the process of mutual discovery initiated by dialogue served as a catalyst for bringing points of view together through the creation of a “safe space”

in which participants felt free to express themselves without any fear of prejudice.

This approach opened up the debate on a number of issues relating to women’s rights – women’s place in public life, their socio-economic status, their right to inheritance and abortion, and measures to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – on which consensus is sometimes far from being reached. When reference was made to “sensitive” topics, the debate made everyone’s position clear, but it also

BOX 4

Tunisia’s Women Dialogue Initiative²

Women’s rights in Tunisia are a major source of political conflict, drawing passionate responses from religious conservatives, hardliners, and secularists alike. Because of these tensions, organizations that work for women’s rights rarely interact, despite similar goals and broad areas of common ground. When these groups do interact, they often fail to cooperate.

SFCG’s Women’s Dialogue Project aimed to bring together Tunisians across ideological lines to reduce divisions among women’s rights organizations. From 2013 to 2015, women’s organizations from across the ideological spectrum engaged in a dialogue that has improved personal relationships across deep divides. This effort increases mutual understanding of and respect for different positions and beliefs, and it has led to decreased tensions and stereotypes, and to the recognition of the common ground between participants on various issues. Among others, Tunisian women activists from all walks of life were able to advocate to amend a Law to guarantee gender parity in decision-making jobs within the Tunisian public administration.

Watch this SFCG-produced video on the Tunisia Women’s Dialogue Initiative:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPgQQpKg7zc>

² The Tunisia’s Women Dialogue Initiative was discussed at the UNWomen MENA Regional Conference on Women’s Inclusive Dialogue in December 2017 in Tunis, Tunisia. The Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) sponsored the Tunisia’s Women’s Dialogue Initiative.

showed that participants could reach some common ground. For this to happen, it is important, according to dialogue participants, to leave aside personal motivations influenced by ideologies and act as citizens who share a common space and a common fate. This

mutual understanding process not only led to the identification of commonalities, but it also served as a prerequisite for collaborative initiatives that subsequently materialized between the organizations participating in this dialogue.

BOX 5

Key divides in Lebanon: Insights from the study on “Women’s and feminist movements in Lebanon: A contextual analysis on collaboration”

The study was carried out by SFCG’s office in Lebanon and aimed to provide a deeper understanding of collaboration among women organizations in Lebanon through a contextual analysis of the dynamics that govern current interactions between them, including challenges and opportunities for better collaboration. It included a broad review of the literature on the development of the women’s movements in Lebanon, their activities, and areas of collaboration. It draws on first-hand data collection through interviews with 26 women’s organizations across the country and across ideologies.

The study reveals that, generally, collaboration across divides is considered crucial in the Lebanese context although several profound obstacles to effective and genuine collaboration remain.

Why do people collaborate?

- Increase pressure on policymakers through collaborative advocacy
- Avoid duplication
- Expand their popular base
- Break stereotypes
- Receive funding
- Advance the purpose of the mission (women’s rights, women’s empowerment, gender equality)
- Complementarity in: service provisions, specialization, geographic scope

What would impede collaboration?

- Differences in the approaches adopted (notably in relation to the political & religious authorities)
- Ideological differences
- Sectarian affiliation
- Political affiliation

Moreover, the division between traditional/conservative movements that tend to focus on service provision, and liberal/secular movements that focus on advocacy and awareness, is only one among several other divides within Lebanon’s women’s empowerment movement. According to interviews, **women’s organizations and movements can be divided according to the following factors:**

- Ideology divides:
 1. the schism between a feminist movement and a women’s movement;
 2. including or not including a focus on the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and bodily rights;
 3. ideological affiliation with political parties
- The governance of personal status (secular/religious)
- Priorities and forms of action
- Organizational structure and sources of funding
- The approach to advocacy on human rights: “pragmatism” or a focus on indivisibility?
- Relation with authorities: cooperation or inevitable confrontation
- Generational gap

The design of the women’s dialogue initiative in Lebanon also followed local contextual considerations. There are indeed examples of collaboration in Lebanon among women’s organizations of different ideological affiliations, mostly related to advocacy campaigns. Yet this collaboration remains generally isolated and limited and is not the result of any deliberate consensus building or attempt to reconcile different points of view over the long-term. Moreover, such collaboration is generally based on personal relations, which tends to limit the scope of joint initiatives. This was further evidenced by the participants in the Lebanese women’s dialogue process, who took part in the dialogue process in their personal capacities and did not represent their respective organizations.

Consequently, and given the widespread perceived distrust and misconceptions among the representatives of the diverse women’s organizations, the first challenge of the dialogue was to dissipate the misunderstandings and analyse the current collaboration mechanisms in order to find out ways of working together at institutional level. A qualitative study aiming to identify the challenges and obstacles preventing women’s rights organizations from collaborating has informed the dialogue process (see Box 4). The study provides guidelines on the areas where positions on diverse sides can come together for common actions and concludes with practical recommendations on how to enable effective collaboration across ideological divides in the future.

Stories from Tunisia and Lebanon show that the dialogue process is not a long, tranquil river. It involves the risk of failure from the start. It is threatened when contentious topics are addressed, strong positions are taken on the basis of principles, and accusations are levelled on either side. While it may take some time to mature and become effective on the ground, its importance is recognized as crucial in reducing misunderstandings, stereotypes, and stigmatization of opposite sides. Dialogue participants acknowledged that talking to each other does not mean denying or renouncing their principles. The dialogue is rather based on an exploration of the other in search of commonalities rather than division. The whole process reveals shared awareness among women’s organizations’ representatives that collaboration is not only

possible, but it also enhances civil society’s power of advocacy for positive change on women’s rights.

2.2 Bridging the gap between generations

Context and challenges³

In the MENA countries, youth (aged 15-29) represent more than 30% of the population. Young men and women played a key role in the recent political and civil uprisings. The newly drafted constitutions in Egypt (2014), Tunisia (2014), and Morocco (2011) recognize youth rights and freedoms. These constitutional changes can be attributed to youth’s unprecedented visibility in public debate. Yet youth still faces huge obstacles in becoming a key driving force for social and economic development of their countries.

Higher unemployment levels than in any other region in the world threaten MENA youth economic inclusion. Unemployment rates are especially high in Palestine, reaching 63% for young women and 40% for young men⁴. Inactivity levels (those outside the labour force and also not in education or training) for youth aged 15-24 are as high as 25% for young men and 38% for young women, far behind OECD countries, where only 15% of young people are identified as inactive. While there is an urgent need to provide youth with decent work opportunities and life aspirations, it remains crucial to ensure young men’s and young women’s participation in public life. Indeed, young people, and especially young women, seldom have spaces and opportunities to make their voices heard and influence policy-making. While young men and women remain subject to a highly volatile political environment and may be even used as an instrument for extremism and violence, they appear, depending on the context, less attracted by traditional forms of political engagement – mostly dominated by older people who tend to discourage youth from engaging in politics.⁵

3 Figures in this section come from “Youth in the MENA Region: How to bring them in”, MENA-OECD, 2015.

4 “The situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories,” International Labour Conference, 2015 (link).

5 Ibid

“I have learned that cooperation between the two generations is possible, enjoyable, engaging, and enriching.” - *Dialogue participant*

The inter-generational divide is especially poignant in Palestine. Today’s Palestinian youth are born and raised under the occupation. This context presents challenges and hinders aspirations in a way that differs from those of their parents’ generation.

One particular challenge is to engage young women (and young men) in civil society and specifically in the movements on the defence of women’s rights.

“Bringing youth in”, however, requires a shift in youth priorities in Palestine. Indeed, political affiliation, rather than civic engagement, is historically considered the path to follow to support national aspirations in Palestine.

While young men and women are becoming more interested and active in advancing their causes through civil society activities, there remain several obstacles for youth to engage. The issue of youth membership of associations remains problematic in the absence of a developed spirit of volunteerism among young people. Youth are keener on the financial stability provided by paid work rather than serving as volunteers. Moreover, the difficulty of accessing funding makes work rather precarious for some associations and therefore unattractive for young people.

Another challenge to overcome is the relative reluctance of several older activists, as well as politicians, to listen to the opinions of young women and young men and generally consider their viewpoints. The older generation seems to have little trust in youth, dismissing them as lacking not only experience but also skills and vision. Suspicion of one generation towards the other, the reciprocal lack of trust and absence of effective communication are indicative of an attitude that is widely encountered in several countries of the region. Cross-country examples suggest that while the elders have experience and know-how, some tend to act in a rather authoritarian way towards young people and are reluctant to change. The generational

divide can indeed be confrontational. For example, older generations within women’s organizations may not want to give young people (men and women) the opportunity to gain access to leadership positions. Young people are thus confined to implementation, which is likely to demotivate them.

Dialogue strategies

Attitudes of mistrust between generations can lead to conflicts between and within organizations, with older generations typically being blamed for preventing young people from achieving their potential. The result is a feeling of exclusion and distrust on the part of young people. It is no surprise, therefore, that in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, youth-led organizations have soared during the political transformations experienced in those two countries. Youth organizations have indeed earned their credentials as they turned to be successful watchdogs with their governments while offering new channels for young women and men to make themselves heard.

The example of Palestine shows how constructive dialogue can help bring points of view closer to each other and alleviate the generational divide as well as foster civic engagement in the field of women’s rights.

In order to promote youth volunteering in the field of women’s rights in Palestine, it is essential to raise awareness among young women and young men about the value of embracing the cause of women’s rights.

In order to motivate the largest audience of young people, women’s associations in Palestine have diversified their modes of action, so that they:

- Organize summer camps for youth to facilitate cross-generational discussions around civic engagement;
- Target university students (both young women and young men) to disseminate information about women’s rights among them;
- Organize workshops as another opportunity for inter-generational encounters with the aim of enhancing mutual understanding.

These activities have succeeded to show young people the importance of civil society work on women's rights as a complementary commitment to the national cause.

A related objective of the engagement with women and youth groups was to elevate youth's voices in advocacy vis-à-vis politicians. This has helped to decrease political leaders' doubts about the ability of young people to serve as a key element of positive change in society in general, and more specifically as advocates for women's rights. Youth meetings with representatives of political parties offer young women and young men the opportunity to formulate their demands and to propose solutions to political decision-makers, as well as to establish positive working relationships with them.

The inclusion of young women and young men in the promotion of women's empowerment is all relevant across the region. More generally, if greater involvement of young people in community life is desirable, and is pursued, generational cleavages should be avoided, because the cause of women's rights affects all classes and all age categories in society.

2.3 Addressing socioeconomic divides

Context and challenges

Despite undeniable progress in the MENA region to achieve greater socio-economic empowerment of women, such as educational gains and decreased legal restriction of women's participation in public life, women's economic and public participation in MENA remains among the lowest in the world. Persistent gender inequalities represent a high cost for the region and severely limit the countries' capacity for further development. Gender inequalities are complex to address, as they are mostly based in deep cultural, institutional, and economic roots. These challenges run deep and socio-economic divides can be seen among women's organizations, whose common practices may further entrench the marginalization of some women.

On one side of the spectrum, feminist organizations

considered as more elitist often present strong leadership and an effective internal organization. They generally have professional teams with strong fund-raising capabilities. Thanks to a rich network of relations, they manage to get close to policymakers and donors, which reinforces their status. These women's organizations tend to focus on legislative change in favour of women and on the outreach of awareness-raising campaigns on topics of universal concern such as violence against women, political representation of women, women's access to services (maternity leave, health services, social security, kindergarten, etc.).

On the other side of the spectrum, smaller women's organizations are often less structured, have less experience, operate on a small-scale level in local communities, and focus on very specific women's issues related to local development in rural areas, such as girls' education, women's living conditions, and domestic violence. These organizations have limited access to funds because they are not equipped with the required capacities to raise them (management, human resources, networking). However, they are considered by local communities as more sensitive to their everyday concerns and capable of offering suitable solutions.

The socioeconomic divide may also relate to wealth-based class difference and geography. The geographical divide separates women's organizations operating in well-educated, urban areas with significant economic opportunities and good access to basic services from those women's organizations working in disadvantaged rural areas, where women face acute marginalization and communities are deprived of basic public services.

Associations working in rural areas often face problems of financing that greatly limit their capacity to operate effectively. Consequently, their actions remain sporadic rather than sustained, even though they tend to have a good reputation, support and trust among local communities, and enjoy their goodwill.

In terms of fundraising, small associations struggle to compete with the large, urban organizations that have reached maturity and enjoy good reputation.

Indeed, donors are more inclined to favour those with proven experience in project management. This requires small associations to network with others, but this needs a great deal of effort and resources.

Opportunities for collaboration between these categories of women's organizations are rather sporadic, and yet, it is clear that everyone would be more effective if they worked together, as this would allow them to take advantage of the strengths of each, mainly the technical capacities and networks of the large, urban groups and the smaller, rural associations' first-hand knowledge of local communities.

Dialogue strategies

In order to bridge the socio-economic gap, the issue-

based dialogue process proved to be a very effective tool. Such an approach seeks to invite different stakeholders around the table and allows them to focus on a particular issue of common concern, rather than dwelling on differences.

This approach shows promise in leading to the development of a charter of shared values, and acts as a catalyst for future collaboration. This has been the case in Morocco, Lebanon and Tunisia, where women's organizations involved in dialogue process have together developed collaborative advocacy campaigns, such as girls' literacy in Morocco, the quota of women in the public administration in Tunisia and the gender-sensitive reform of social security in Lebanon.

BOX 6

Everyone Gains: Promoting Women's Empowerment in Lebanon⁶

Morocco and Lebanon face many challenges to women's rights – progressive laws do not trickle down to most women, and inequality remains the norm. **SFCG's programme "Everyone Gains"** created new opportunities for dialogue to break down socio-economic barriers for women in Morocco and Lebanon. "Everyone Gains" enabled women and women's organizations to form a network of support for women's empowerment and to engage with other community leaders, religious leaders, and journalists on this issue. Recognizing that gender equality is more than just a women's issue, this programme also worked with male allies to develop support for policy change around equal rights and equal opportunities.

In Morocco, the programme was broken down into **four areas** that build support for women's empowerment:

1. **Training workshops:** By bringing together both urban and rural local women's rights organizations, customized training sessions allowed female participants to work on problems ranging from access to higher incomes to greater decision-making power for women within their homes and communities.
2. **Media Engagement:** SFCG encouraged women's rights groups to engage with the media by fostering direct relationships with local journalists. SFCG also trained journalists on how to write about women's socio-economic issues and to form sustainable relationships with women's rights organizations.
3. **Media campaign:** Working alongside its partner Réseau des Femmes pour le Mentoring/Networking (RFMN), SFCG sponsored a media campaign by local women's groups to raise awareness about issues affecting the socio-economic empowerment of women.
4. **Networking:** The project fostered the creation and development of an informal network of women's rights organizations providing further opportunities to collaborate and share information and best practices.

6 SFCG's programme "Everyone Gain" in Morocco and Lebanon was discussed at the UNWomen MENA Regional Conference on Women's Inclusive Dialogue in December 2017 in Tunis, Tunisia. The US State Department (Middle East Partnership Initiative) sponsored the Everyone Gains Programme.

BOX 6 (cont'd)

Everyone Gains: Promoting Women's Empowerment in Lebanon

In Lebanon, nine civil society organizations launched the national campaign “**Hakkik Daman Ayltek**” (حقوق ضمان عيالتك) in November 2015, under the patronage of the Ministry of Health. The campaign raised awareness on the unequal status and rights of Lebanese women in the National Social Security Fund Law (NSSF) and advocated for amending the law. **The campaign supported these law revisions:**

- Salaried women should have the right to insure their husband for social security if he does not benefit from any other coverage. They should have the right to benefit from the same family allowance as men do when their partner is out of work;
- Employed women should have the right to benefit from maternity indemnity three months after their subscription to the NSSF;
- The NSSF must cover the entire salary of working women during the 10 weeks of maternity leave;
- Parents should be given the choice to decide which of them is the beneficiary for their children's family allowance.

The partner organizations included Amel Association International, Nahar Ash-Shabab, Caritas Lebanon-Migrant Center, Committee for the Follow-Up on Women's Issues, Committee of Employee Women Union in the North, the Lebanese Organization of Studies and Training, Institute of Progressive Women, Smart Center for Media and Advocacy, and ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality.

BOX 7

Women's dialogues to advance girls' education in Morocco

A similar women's dialogue initiative took place in Morocco. In 2016, SFCG convened a diverse and influential group of women's organizations to reflect on divides within the women's movement in Morocco and to explore opportunities for collaboration and joint work. Following several trust-building sessions that included the development of a charter of common values, dialogue participants agreed to come together and to advocate jointly to advance girls' education especially in rural areas in Morocco. Over a period of several months, the diverse women's organizations designed and ran a national advocacy campaign that included field visits in rural areas, community and school workshops, outreach to families and local authorities, production of children-designed postcards reflecting their educational needs, production of audiovisual material illustrating the common problems faced by young girls trying to attend school, and a national policy conference in Casablanca bringing together policy makers, human rights and education experts, Ministry of Education representatives and parliamentarians, national media as well as women's organizations, which discussed a policy Memorandum on promoting girls' education in Morocco.

Watch this SFCG-produced video featuring the common advocacy campaign on girls' education in Morocco: NEJMA VIDEO, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knuLVzRlw7c>

III. PAVING THE WAY FOR EMPOWERED WOMEN IN MENA: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Dialogue Assessment of recent women’s dialogue initiatives enable us to analyse the nature of divides within women’s movements, the way those divides prevent activists from advancing women’s empowerment, and the potential for working across those differences. Dialogue has proven to be an effective tool in bridging divides within countries across the region. Key factors that led women’s organizations to reach common ground and build cooperation include focusing on common concerns rather than on diverging opinions, looking for commonalities instead of underscoring differences, and remaining committed to one’s own values while being open to understanding others.

While dialogue is crucial, it must be supported by sustained processes of collaboration. Furthermore, while women’s organizations remain at the frontline of the struggle to expand rights, other stakeholders – such as public authorities and donors – play a key role in bringing together the most divergent points of view. Based on women’s organizations’ representatives, the key recommendations below offer advice on how to ensure effective dialogue to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment.

3.1 Ensuring sustainable, collaborative actions across divides: Recommendations for women’s organizations

Dialogue is a necessary and positive approach to deal with differences, yet in order for this **dialogue process**

to be ongoing and successful, women’s organizations should:

- **Acknowledge and accept** that socio-cultural and political differences (ideological, generational/ age, gender, sector-based, approaches to advocacy, socio-economic) are inherent in a diverse society and that those differences need not constitute a barrier to understanding each other. One way to formalize this recognition is through the establishment of **a charter of values** shared by multiple women’s organizations from different backgrounds. The examples of charters in Morocco and Tunisia show that such initiatives are a first step towards the establishment of mutual recognition and the identification of shared values.
- **Improve communication** with other women’s organizations from different backgrounds. This helps forge links among associations, exchange information, reduce stereotypes and explore potential avenues for cooperation. Holding teambuilding activities among organizations is also a powerful strategy to build mutual trust.
- **Dialogue** can be achieved by creating a **safe space** for discussion and networking among women’s organizations. Impartial organizations or individuals need to be able to play the role of facilitators, conveners, and to manage some space for dialogue.
- **Pinpoint specific issues** on which people can easily agree on for an entry-level issue-based dialogue. This can be achieved through extensive research, as in Lebanon, which helped identify key topics of common concern among women’s organizations across divides.

- **Political instability** can threaten dialogue efforts, but building a strong foundation for collaboration makes that collaboration resilient. For example, in Tunisia, when women’s organizations decided to advocate for women’s quotas in leadership positions in the civil service, the challenging political context put at risk the cohesion of the group of associations engaged in the dialogue. These women’s groups were able to maintain their trust and relationships and continue their advocacy thanks to the long relationship and trust built up over time through dialogue.

Strategies and tactics for collaboration include suggestions for women’s organizations to:

- **Seek to actively involve diverse women’s organizations** in joint actions. Doing so powerfully demonstrates that promotion of women’s rights transcends differences within civil society.
- **Diversify the target audience** of public awareness campaigns about issues related to women’s rights abuses. For example, in Palestine and Bahrain, women’s organizations constructively involved young people and university students in their actions in order to increase understanding on subjects such as gender-based violence and domestic violence.
- Ensure that the activities of women’s organizations are not confined to a female audience but **mobilize men** as allies for women’s empowerment. Gender equality cannot be achieved without addressing the male-female divide and including men and boys. In Lebanon, a campaign by ABAAD against gender based violence has effectively involved men. Cross-country evidence shows that working with men and boys has a profound impact on women’s equality and empowerment, by challenging patriarchal norms in society, including transforming family dynamics to be more equitable.
- **Leverage media and the social media to spread a culture of acceptance**, tolerance, and citizen engagement to raise awareness among young women and young men on citizenship and encourage their participation in the women’s movement.
- **Make efforts through media campaigns to advocate women’s rights at grassroots level** and depart from

the widespread belief that promoting women’s rights is the prerogative of an elite.

Women’s organizations can be more inclusive, both within their own organizations and by building bridges with other stakeholders, by following these recommendations:

- Reconsider the structure of their organization in order to **give young women, and young men, a more prominent role**. Young women should be encouraged to advance and be allowed to reach decision-making positions within women’s organizations. Current practices and norms make it difficult for young people to move up the ladder and become leaders within groups. Consult with young women and young men on what changes could be made within women’s organisations to attract more youth.
- Put in place mechanisms to **encourage volunteering in organizations**. Recruiting volunteers not only develops the sense of citizen engagement, but also helps to encourage different generations and ideologies to mix together and promote mutual dialogue.
- Establish a work strategy with government and civil society in order to **promote cooperation with diverse stakeholders**.
- **Set up a representative committee on women’s organizations at government level**. This committee acts as an intermediary between these organizations and government, as well as a networking facilitator among those organizations.
- **Develop constructive relationships with political party representatives** in order to advocate for legislative change in favour of women’s rights. The example of the Ra’edat, Network of Women Parliamentarians,” which comprises 160 parliamentarian members across many Arab countries with different political affiliations, ideological backgrounds and generations, shows the power of networking. Although politically affiliated women often have strong loyalty to their political parties, they still do engage in advocacy on shared concerns, like promoting awareness on gender-based discrimination, and they can help bring about changes in national legislation (women’s caucus).

- Consider the intersectionality of discrimination (e.g., due to gender, age, social-economic backgrounds, disability, etc.), which makes some women more vulnerable than others. An intersectional approach takes into account the historical, social, and political context and recognizes the unique experience of the individual based on the intersection of all relevant factors.

3.2 Translate women's aspirations into political change: Recommendations for policy-makers

Policymakers can indeed facilitate collaboration and decrease divides among the women's movement. Recommendations include the following:

- Enhance the functioning of democratic institutions that create conditions for [freedom of speech](#), and allow women to have their voices heard. Without basic freedom of expression, it is difficult to engage in constructive dialogue.
- Acknowledge and champion the fact that [women are an enabling factor for dialogue and peacebuilding](#). Evidence-based research⁷ shows that negotiated agreements between conflicting parties backed by women are more likely to be respected and followed. The time is ripe in the MENA countries for women to be fully considered and involved in reconciliation processes.
- Develop gender-sensitive [school programmes on elimination of gender stereotypes and gender-based violence](#) that introduce children to ideas of gender equality and women's rights. Governments have to ensure that children receive proper education based on respect for diversity and differences, such as peace education programmes. This education should teach skills for promoting informed and engaged citizens.
- Ensure that [young women and young men](#), as well as other under-represented groups, [have the space and means to participate in public life](#). Consider the adoption of gender-sensitive national youth policies.

- Similarly, governments should ensure [full participation of diverse women in public life, including in governmental bodies](#). Strategies for this include but are not limited to a quota system. Men should also be sensitized and engaged to promote women's political participation.
- Reinforce the rule of law that respects and upholds gender equality and women's rights. All women are equal in rights and the national law must guarantee that all women enjoy equal rights and treatment.

3.3 Supporting dialogue initiatives beyond divides: Recommendations for donors

The international donor community has an important role to play in supporting collaboration at local level. Donors can play a proactive role in facilitating dialogue to advance women's rights in the MENA region through the following measures:

- Directly support collaborative efforts of [women's organizations](#) working across all appropriate divides per the country context. This will avoid exacerbation of those tensions, decrease competition, and instead incentivize the breakdown of divides.
- Experience from the case studies show that dialogue processes require a lot of energy and facilitation to continue and build momentum before they can become entrenched. Assistance should be provided over a longer-term to women's organizations to [further advance and sustain their dialogue outcomes](#).
- Dialogue can be used as a means of building peace in the region. Donors should [support cross-country exchange, networking and advocacy initiatives](#) in order to enable women in the MENA region to support and inspire each other. Regional initiatives allow activists to become more ambitious and part of a much larger empowerment objective.
- Support [women's dialogue initiatives](#) in other countries in the region, such as Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Bahrain, Yemen or Syria.
- Support advocacy to [ensure that public authorities provide an enabling environment](#) for successful dialogue and that this is guaranteed by the rule of law and freedom of speech.

7 Statistical analysis by Laurel Stone, as featured in O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin, and Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking," 12-13" <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Why-Women-Brief-10.12.15.pdf>

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