Women's Organisations in the West Asia Region

A Needs Assessment

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Executive Summary

This needs assessment, conducted over the period of July-November 2013, outlines the capacity needs of women's organisations and activists in the West Asia region in the face of continuing conflict following the revolutionary upheavals of 2011. Based on both primary and secondary research, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) presents here some of the obstacles to the development of women's organisations in ten countries in this region, as identified by participants in this study, and presents recommendations as to how it can help address these deficits in future programmes.

As one of the leading transnational feminist networks operating in the Global South, WLUML is expertly placed to undertake such an assessment, and was able to garner information from our vast network of women's rights activists working within their local contexts. Here, we discuss the changes the region has been experiencing over the past nearly three years, looking specifically at the ten countries under assessment, and how these changes have affected women's rights activists and activism. We also give a background to the work of various women's organisations and new-comer initiatives within these contexts; those who participated in this study.

Through a discussion of our objectives, methodology and challenges, this assessment puts forward not only the specific goals and how we sought to achieve them, but also the inherent obstacles to collecting data during this transitional period. These sections are followed by a brief background to all the countries under assessment, what they have specifically gone through during the so-called 'Arab Revolutions', and what is the landscape of women's rights organisations in that context. Following on, we go into a detailed analysis of the data collected during the interview phase, and present recommendations based on the findings.

Prior to undertaking this needs assessment, WLUML undertook a scoping study of the region, which identified the main actors in women's rights activism in the ten countries, the international conventions each country is a party to, and the main trends impeding women's rights across the region. This was a crucial step to understanding our starting point, and formed the first phase of this three-phase project; the third of which will be to propose activities based on the recommendations of this assessment.

Introduction

Since 2011, the West Asia region has gone through unprecedented changes and upheavals: longstanding governments have been overthrown in domino effect; nascent and fragile new governments have emerged amidst revolutionary fervour; and wars have erupted and become entrenched, threatening the delicate stability of the region. Throughout this time, women and women's rights activists have been at the frontline, fighting for their place as citizens to ensure their demands are not bargained away or lost in the turmoil. Knowing that women's rights are often a bargaining chip used to draw compromise at times of political uncertainty, women's rights activists in the region are aware that now is a crucial time for their work.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), a longstanding feminist solidarity network working in Muslim-majority contexts since 1986, has been active throughout this crucial time trying to help assist local women's organisations in their push for recognition and equality in their given contexts. As a continuation of its work on West Asia, WLUML undertook this needs assessment as a way to understand where the gaps in capacity (or needs) are for women's organisations in this region so as to be able to more effectively target the core issues and adequately assist women's organisations in advocating for their demands.

The following assessment is broken down into six sections:

1. **Background** – a context section on the current situation in West Asia today, which also speaks broadly to women's organisatons in the region;
2. **Objectives and Methodology** – an outline of the key goals of this needs assessment and explanation of the methods of and criteria for data collection;
3. **Challenges/Limitations** – a discussion about what was the original plan for this assessment, what was actually achieved and why, in some circumstances, there were challenges meeting the criteria;
4. **Countries Assessed** – a description of which countries were selected for this assessment and why, as well as the specific organisations within those countries interviewed as part of the data collection phase;
5. **Needs Assessment** – the body of this report, which is a presentation and analysis of the data collected;
6. **Recommendations** – overall recommendations based on the data and analysis of the report;

This needs assessment forms the second phase of a two phase project. The first phase involved background research and the production of a scoping study as the baseline for embarking on this assessment. Through the information and analysis presented here, WLUML hopes to identify the key issues, gaps and needs of women's organisations already working in their local contexts, which will then form the basis and rationale for future projects in the region.

Background

Before embarking on this needs assessment, WLUML undertook a scoping study based primarily on desktop research and interviews to clearly identify the political climate and its relation to and impact on women's movements in the ten countries under discussion here. This scoping study also identified and presented baseline information about key organisations in each country, as well as the status of each country with regards to international conventions. The information presented in this background section is drawn primarily from the scoping study, as well as additional research.

As mentioned in the introduction, since 2011 the West Asia region has been going through profound political upheavals (since 2009, for Iran). The 'Arab Revolutions' swept across the region, affecting not only those countries who successfully deposed their long-time dictators (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya), but also those who have thus far been unsuccessful (e.g. Yemen, Bahrain, Syria), did not experience popular unrest on the same scale (e.g. Jordan and Iraq), or whose movements called more for reform rather than revolution (e.g. Morocco).

Whether dictators were deposed or not, most countries in the region are experiencing variable levels of political instability – from the relatively stable Morocco to the full-blown civil war that has enveloped Syria. Although all the countries of this region have their own specificities, common themes do exist across the region relating to women's issues, women's rights activism and the upswing in political Islam. Here, we briefly describe and define these trends, but will explore in more detail the specificities of each country in Section 4 of this report.

State Feminism

One recurring theme in the nine Arab countries under assessment, as it does not apply to Iran, is State Feminism. In these ten countries, the state plays and has played a crucial role in defining and redefining gender norms through modernisation techniques; oftentimes with members of the leader's family taken as the example and proponent of the 'modern woman' in that country. Susan Mubarak, Egypt's former first lady, is a prime example of this. State feminism not only helps the state to co-opt the discourse on women's rights within that country, but also helps to 'clean' that country's image within the international community and, in some cases, assists in fights against the rise of political Islam through the adoption of so-called progressive policies.

Morocco is a clear example of this phenomenon. In Morocco, the advancement in women's rights – such as the passing of the new *Moudawana*[1] in February 2004 - has been used by the state not only to promote an image of itself as progressive and Western-friendly within

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[1] The *Moudawana* is the Moroccan Family Code or Personal Status Code, which defines rights within the family. Such laws have often been the target of women's activism within the region, as they legislate issues such as: divorce, inheritance, custody, guardianship, etc. The 2004 change to the *Moudawana* was instigated by a profound push from the women's movement that forced King Mohammed VI's hand, but has since also been instrumentalised by him as proof of his progressive stance.

the international arena, but also as a tool to pit itself as the progressive force in contrast to Islamists within the country itself. Morocco, along with the rest of the Arab countries to be assessed here, is ruled by civil law and only claims to draw from the *Shari'a* (the Maliki school in this case) in regulating rights within the family.

'Revolutions'

All the countries under assessment, with the exception of Iran, have gone through some type of uprising since 2011 – from the full-blown revolutions of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, to the attempted revolutions in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, to the more muted uprisings of Morocco, Iraq and Jordan. Iran also had its own uprising in 2009, which preceded the onslaught of the so-called Arab Spring; however, as Iran's uprising was successfully and brutally put down, ushering in an era of tighter state control and surveillance, it – again – stands in a category somewhat on its own.

Although the circumstances and outcomes of the resistance movements in the region were all specific unto themselves, amongst one of the noticeable similarities was the front-line participation of women. In Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Iran, women's presence in demonstrations and loudly voicing their demands was touted as evidence of their progressive and inclusive nature.   During the demonstrations, women's strength and vitality was celebrated alongside men. However, when it now comes to the periods of transition, it seems that hard-fought space that women occupied during the uprisings is quickly closing in on them.

Generational gaps

As these tectonic political shifts have occurred, tensions are growing between young women activists – so called 'new comers' – in the region and those who have worked for years in the women's movement. These tensions stem from, among other issues, the position taken by the established feminist movement towards revolutionary movements and younger, informal organisations.

Younger activists have become increasingly frustrated with the 'traditional' women's rights movement's lack of support for the revolutionary movements. Morocco and Bahrain exemplify this point, where the older generation of women's rights activists has been very cautious in dealing with the protest movement due to the large presence of Islamists and criticise the movement for not adopting a progressive gender agenda.

A further characteristic of these post-revolution transitions is the mushrooming of initiatives and informal groups that want to break away from old structures and establish a new way of organising and operating. This has also created tensions as some of the more established women's rights activists feel they are being sidelined. In Egypt, there are ongoing attempts

to incorporate informal groups into bigger civil society organisations in order to 'help' younger groups.[2]

Political Islam

Although nowhere in the region were Islamists the chief instigators or principal components of revolutionary movements or uprisings, they have emerged in many cases as the primary 'winners' of the transition periods. Following the settling of dust across the region, Islamists were elected to run the governments of Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia; have taken a leading role in the opposition to Bashar al-Assad in Syria; and occupy a powerful position in the deteriorating situation in Libya. Although by no means do the actors in these countries espouse an identical ideology, they do all share a very conservative attitude towards women.

The coming to power of Islamists in the region in the wake of overthrown governments should not have been a surprise. The years since decolonisation of the region have been marked by dictators who espouse secularist ideology and whose main, if not only, organised opposition were Islamists. Such Islamists bore a huge brunt of the brutal apparatus of these regimes: spending long years in prison and undergoing torture and forced exile, among many other things. Despite the persecution they faced, Islamists were one of the few groups who remained organised and in touch with the grassroots, providing vital services to communities that the state neglected – such as Hamas in Gaza and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. So, after detested governments were overthrown in 2011, Islamists were among the quickest to organise to stand in elections, and had the 'credentials' of standing against the newly deposed state for many years.

Taking all this into consideration, the rise of political Islam in the region is not a surprise; however, their conservative attitude toward women, and attempts to rollback rights that took years of struggle to achieve, is the concern. The Al-Nahda party that is in power in Tunisia, and the short-lived spell of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, led women to fear that their rights will be compromised, especially that women's rights activists may be discredited as being supporters of the former regime. Nevertheless, a new profile of young revolutionary feminist activists is emerging calling for their rights through a framework that is not necessarily state sponsored.

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[2] This was noted in Sally Zohney's interview (2013), in which she bemoaned the 'formalisation' of new initiatives, which she fears will take away their edge.

Objectives and Methodology

This needs assessment is looking at the capacity of women's rights organisations in the West Asia region. Our study focuses on the state of women's rights activism in 10 countries – Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen – in order to get an 'across the board' idea of how WLUML could best support and enhance the work of women's rights organisations/initiatives in the region at this crucial moment, as well as help to better link organisations across the region and transnationally.

As mentioned above, and reiterated again and again by our interviewees, putting your finger on where the region is going is getting more and more difficult by the day. The situation is so fluid and in constant flux that even as we prepared this report the situation on the ground in several countries changed dramatically – e.g. the deposing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt by the military.

Keeping the fluidity of the situation in mind, the specific objectives of this needs assessment was to identify the following:

- Spaces where capacity (resources, knowledge, skills, access to and use of technology and information) is lacking;
- Areas where WLUML can assist in building capacity and networking capabilities; and
- Potential for building sustainable activism for national women's rights organisations across the region.

Methodology

In order to address these objectives, WLUML employed a three-fold methodology: desk research, networking and interviews. Extensive desk research was used to develop the scoping study and mapping of organisations in the region as a first step to develop the criteria and questions for interview. The scoping study presented a general overview of the main themes that cut across the region in relation to women's rights and women's rights activism (some of which was presented in the background to this assessment), as well as laying out the international conventions that countries have signed up to. The mapping of organisations gave a brief background on each of the countries under assessment, then followed with an annotated list of women's rights organisations in that country.

From this list of organisations, WLUML worked to develop criteria for the organisations to be approached for interview, as approaching all of them was beyond the scope of this assessment. We selected criteria with an eye towards approaching organisations that could speak about the situation both before and after revolutions, had in-depth knowledge of the landscape of women's rights in the country, and worked on a range of issues. This way, although we could not survey the entire landscape, we could gain a deeper understanding of the broader issues women's rights organisations are facing across the region.

It was decided that addressing two organisations from each country was within our scope, and from each context one newly founded initiative/organisation and one established

organisation would be included, which gave us the ability to tackle the differences between these strands.

Organisations we approached for interview also needed to meet the following criteria:

- They had to be based in a country in the West Asia region;
- They had to be independent, not affiliated to governments;
- They could not be single issue organisations;
- And, from within the same country, the organisation selected needed to contrast in focus, size and outputs.

An exception to the two organisation criteria was made only for Bahrain, as there is only one organisation – The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) – that is actually independent of the government. As independence was a key criteria of this assessment, it was decided that we would only speak with the BCHR in this case.

Based on the above criteria, we narrowed down our mapping list and sought interviews from representatives of the two selected organisations in each country. Interviews were carried out via Skype, telephone and (when possible) in person. The interview questions were written throughout the period of mapping, based on the findings of secondary research and networking with local activists throughout our extensive network. The interview questions addressed issues in five broad themes: organisational, networking, technology, capacity, and future prospects. Throughout the interview phase of this research, interviews were conducted lasting between thirty minutes to one hour, with tailored questions falling into these themes. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Arabic, by WLUML's West Asia Officer based in Cairo, and then translated for the writing up phase. Four interviews were conducted in English by WLUML staff based in London.

Challenges/Limitations

As described above in the methodology section, the initial plan was to garner interviews from two organisations from each country that fit our criteria, which would have amounted to nineteen interviews. However, throughout the research phase of this needs assessment, there were a number of challenges that limited our ability to fully reach that aim. The challenges we faced were three fold, and in some cases interconnected: ongoing political instability, lack of responsiveness of interviewees, and connectivity issues.

Political Instability

As previously described, the countries of this region are still experiencing ongoing political instability and insecurity. In such cases, even when activists had agreed to interviews, it happened on numerous occasions that they either would not show up to interview or cancelled appointments to deal with urgent issues on the ground. This situation happened both with Egyptian and Tunisian activists that we attempted to interview. Therefore, we had to cast our net wider in these countries in order to obtain the two interviews. However, even when we began approaching more organisations, we kept coming up against the same problem with regards to Egypt. As much time was spent endeavouring to connect with organisations- in November 2013 we decided to continue ahead with one interview for Egypt, as we were able to eventually obtain two from Tunisia.

In the case of Iran, the harsh security environment that had engulfed the country since the disputed 2009 presidential elections also forced us to make alternative arrangements. We had to discount the criteria that the organisation be based in Iran, as there are no such independent organisations operating in Iran. Even prior to the 2009 elections and its aftermath, there were very few organisations that would have fit our criteria that were allowed to persist; but the crackdown in 2009 shuttered the doors of even these remaining few. So in lieu of any alternative, we chose to speak with long-time women's rights activist and a founding member of the One Million Signatures Campaign[3] Sussan Tahmasebi, who is now based in the United States and works as the Director of the MENA programme at the International Civil Society Action Network.

Lack of Responsiveness

There was also the problem in some cases, of a complete lack of responsiveness on the part of those we approached for interview. This was particularly the case with regards to Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia (when attempting to make alternative interviews in response to the above-stated situation). In the case of Morocco, we were forced to seek alternative organisations for interview, as those outlined in our scoping were completely unresponsive. In Jordan and Yemen, not only did we have to seek alternative interviewees,

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[3] The One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality is a grassroots effort that promotes broad awareness on women's rights and collects signatures of Iranians in support of ending gender-discriminatory legislation in the country.

but also had to settle with one organisation, as too much time had been lost chasing people who would not respond. Egypt and Tunisia have been described above, but lack of responsiveness also contributed to our need to settle for one interview from Egypt and the need to seek alternative organisations for interview from Tunisia.

Connectivity

Another issue that forced delays or amendments to our research were issues with connectivity. These were particular issues when it came to Syria and Yemen. For Syria, WLUML's West Asia Officer was eventually able to hold both interviews, but she encountered numerous problems with connectivity when trying to hold interviews over skype, as the internet was tenuous, and even when switching to the telephone there were issues with connectivity. This only sought to delay the research, even though the issues were overcome.

With regards to Yemen, our West Asia officer conducted this interview over the phone. However, there were constant issues with the mobile connection. The interview had to be conducted over multiple conversations, as sustaining one continuous connection for long enough was impossible.

Despite all the challenges listed above, and although resourceful alternatives had to be found in some instances, WLUML did manage to successfully carry out its research for this needs assessment. When dealing with numerous countries in political flux, it was expected that we would run into some of these problems and have to change tack. The challenges encountered only speak further for the need for such an assessment.

Countries Assessed

This section will provide an outline of the organisations and countries assessed for this study. It will provide a brief background to what each country has experienced throughout the revolutions and then provide a description of the organisation interviewed for the assessment.

Bahrain

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy and often viewed as the most progressive country in the Gulf region. Compared to its neighbours, Bahrain has granted women a wider range of rights, but has a terrible track record as it pertains to religious inclusion (as the government is Sunni-led, but the population is Shi'a majority) and minority rights. Furthermore, the government often instrumentalises women's rights to prove its 'progressive' nature as opposed to its main opposition, the 'Wafak' (Shi'a). Bahrain is also a staunch ally of the West.

On February 14th 2011, protests erupted in the small Gulf nation and the government responded with an immediate, heavy-handed crackdown. Protestors were arrested and tortured, many of whom were women activists, doctors, nurses, and journalists; this included prominent activists Zeinab and Maryam Al Khawaja, the daughters of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, the co-founder the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights who is serving a life sentence in prison for his activism. Shi'a women were also the targets of a campaign of harassment by security personnel.[4] Furthermore, as opposed to many of the other countries involved in the Arab revolutions, there was (and is) an international media blackout on the uprising (and occasional continued demonstrations) in Bahrain, which many attribute to the government's close relationship with Western countries.

Most women's rights organisations in Bahrain have links to the government, as the government of Bahrain has done its utmost to limit the independence of organisations. This effort is legislated both through the 1989 Law on Association, which pretty much allows the government to take over or dissolve organisations at will, and the 2012 draft Law on Civil Organizations and Institutions, which if implemented would even further constrict the space available for non-government affiliated organisations.[5]

The **Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)** – the organisation that participated in this assessment – was founded in 2002 and is the only non-government affiliated organisation in Bahrain. In fact, in 2004 it was ordered that the BCHR be 'dissolved' for openly criticising the government and exposing human rights abuses. Although it had its license revoked and is not recognised by the government, the BHCR remains very active. Its stated objectives are:

- *Promoting freedoms and basic rights (Civil, Political and Economic)*

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[4] Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2011), "Fractured walls…New horizons, Human Rights in the Arab Region", Annual Report 2011.

[5] Human Rights Watch (2013), "Interference, Restrict, Control: Restraints on Freedom of Association in Bahrain", < http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/bahrain0613webwcover.pdf>.

- *Combating racial and religious discrimination*
- *Human rights education*
- *Providing support and protection to victims of human rights abuses and the vulnerable*
- *Local and international advocacy in support of human rights[6]*

The BCHR has carried out many projects, including advocacy, training, workshops, seminars, media campaigns and reporting to UN mechanisms and international NGOs. It documents abuses on its website and compiles an archive of violations as well as presenting summaries of Bahraini laws to raise awareness. The BCHR has also participated in many regional an international conferences and workshops. Although not an exclusively women-focused organisation, many of the activists who work with the BHCR are young women and it works on women's rights as human rights. Its funding comes from membership fees and small individuals donations.

The BCHR was one of the only organisations that spoke out against government violations during and after the uprising. Abdulhadi Al Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab, both former heads of the BCHR, are currently serving long prison sentences for their activism; Zainab Al Khawaja is also currently serving a prison sentence, although classified by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience[7].

For this assessment, we interview Maryam Al Khawaja, the acting president of the BHCR since Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to prison in 2012, who is currently based outside the Kingdom.

Egypt

On 11 February 2011, Hosni Mubarak was deposed as the president of Egypt after 18 days of intense street protest calling for his ouster. Women were on the front lines of this historic turn of events, and a major component of the push for change. What has since followed has seen the rise and fall of Egypt's first democratically elected government – with its oldest opposition, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, taking the reins of power – followed by the reassertion of the army's dominance, when it deposed Mohammed Morsi (the President, and Muslim Brotherhood member) with popular support in June 2013. Needless to say, the situation in Egypt is somewhat unpredictable, and teeters on the brink of instability.

It was later discovered that at the same time as women's presence on the front lines was being lauded, the army had been conducting forced virginity tests on detained female protestors and there was endemic sexual assault and harassment taking place in Tahrir Square and beyond.[8] Only a month after the overthrow of Mubarak, when the revolutionary fervour was still thick in the air, demonstrations on International Women's Day were marred

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[6] http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/about-us
[7] http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/015/2013/en/57ac205e-8ab9-4d2c-bc53-37b1d87cfabc/mde110152013en.html
[8] Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2011).

by hostility and violence from opposing crowds. It portended the fear that women might be the ultimate losers of the revolution, despite their undeniable importance to its success.

Under the stewardship of Morsi, a constitution was pushed through parliament that failed to protect women's rights and there was a far lower level of female participation in key national institutions, such as the constitutional committee, the government and the parliament.[9] The constitution has since been suspended with the army's take-over, but as this institution was the perpetrator of so much violence against women and they have done very little to stem this tide, it is unlikely that they will be the protector of women's rights.

In the wake of all these events, many women's initiatives sprung up; **Baheya Ya Masr**, founded in 2012, is one such example. Baheya Ya Masr focuses on spreading human and national values that promote dignity and respect for women and girls, and allowing every citizen to have a life of equal opportunities and freedom of expression and belief. It is an independent movement that is small, but expanding. They have hosted high level discussion with legal and constitutional experts; produced a documentary film series on state violations of women's rights and the status of Egyptian women in the constitution; held protest demonstrations, such as on the first anniversary of virginity testing; and used innovative techniques, such as a national graffiti campaign, to raise awareness and get their message across.

Bahya Ya Masr is composed of mainly young women activists, and they are self-funded. For this assessment, WLUML interviewed Sally Zohney, one of Bahya Ya Masr's founders.

Iraq

As opposed to other countries under discussion here, Iraq is a country currently still in the midst of externally induced instability, with an active and deadly insurgency raging. As noted in the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Study's Annual Report in 2011, "Iraq remained at the stage of grave human rights abuses, the immensity of which differed little from the patterns detailed in reports of recent years."[10]

Although Iraq was not completely immune from the spread of the revolutions, as it did see several peaceful protests during this time invoking demands similar to those across the region – which included sexual harassment of female protestors in Baghdad by so called 'thugs'[11] – such demonstrations did not sweep the country or cause the political dislodgement witnessed in other contexts.

Under Saddam Hussein, state feminism was roundly practiced, and transforming women's roles in public life was a feature of his reign. Despite this, the war in 2003 was legitimised in large part on the basis of women's rights, but since the invasion women's situation in Iraq has deteriorated greatly, along with that of most Iraqis. From being the first country in the

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

region to have a female prime minister and female judge (1959), Iraq has become a place where huge numbers of widows struggle to survive and girl child marriage is on the rise.[12]

The two organisations interviewed for this assessment were the **Baghdad Women's Association (BWA)** and **Iraqi Al Amal Association**. BWA, established in 2004, works to reduce violence against women and girls by providing support services to survivors of violence, advocating for the implementation of appropriate laws and policies, as well as working to increase women's political participation through leadership development and capacity building. Among their varied activities are two listening, counselling, and legal centres that provide women with legal and psychological support; conducting workshops to enhance women's access to legal support; holding courses on conflict resolution for youth; as well as projects that cater to widows in Iraq. For this assessment, we interviewed Liza Hido, the president of BWA.

The Iraqi Al Amal Association, established in 1992, works to develop civil society, enhance the democratic process, the inclusion of women and youth in influencing the policy-making process, and capacity building for women and youth. Their programmes are aimed at combating all forms of violence and discrimination; the promotion of the culture of human rights, human security, gender and social peace; as well as providing psychosocial and legal assistance and training courses for women, children and youth so that they can participate in public life. Al-Amal also advocates law reform, along with the rehabilitation of workers in police and judicial fields, with the aim of securing the supremacy of law and justice in society. Al Amal is a very active and prominent organisation. One of its founding members, Hanaa Edwar, was also instrumental in forming the Iraqi Women's Network, which is composed of 80 organisations working in the country. For this assessment, we interviewed Jamal Jawahiri, a founding member and member of the General Committee.

Iran

In 2009, Iran experienced the largest, sustained demonstrations since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Following the disputed presidential election, which secured Ahmadinejad's second term amid widespread accusations of rigging, Iranians took to the street en masse to voice their discontent. The government cracked down with all its might, successfully suppressing these dramatic protests; many have pointed to the Iranian uprising, although ultimately unsuccessful, as the precursor to the revolutions. Since the end of these demonstrations in early 2010, the security situation in Iran was taken to a new level of restrictedness. From then, until the most recent election of Hassan Rouhani, who has made overtures towards a relative opening – releasing some prominent rights activists imprisoned throughout the prior four years and the most recent preliminary deal with world powers in relation to its nuclear programme – the situation of activists on the ground was dire.

2009 marked the latest wave of exile migration from Iran, with droves of activists of various stripes exiting the country due to the pressure and surveillance they were under. Numerous others were arrested, tried and imprisoned for long sentences on charges such a

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[12] http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/01/iraqi-women-seek-a-new-liberation/

'propaganda against the state' or even *Moharebeh* (waging war against God). Many among those persecuted by the state in this way were women's rights activists, as the government has long held the women's rights movement with particular enmity.

With regards to independent organisations, even prior to the 2009 elections and its aftermath, there were very few independent organisations that that were allowed to persist; but the crackdown in 2009 shuttered the doors of even these remaining few. According to Sussan Tahmasebi, the women's rights activist interviewed for this assessment, the intense and sustained pressure forced the women's movement into a somewhat muted state:

> In the last four years really most activities were informal. The work of networks, campaigns, unregistered groups, all pretty much stopped; well, not that they stopped completely but they were very minimal. Part of the reason for this was the serious repression, and I think a sense of hopelessness after the 2009 election. Having such a protest and then it being crushed... It's not just the women's movement, it's all movements. There's a sense of hopelessness, a sense of not being able to plan for the future, because you don't know if there's going to be war, and there are such economic hardships, sanctions. All of these really contributed to civil society pretty much dying out during the last four years. Not that nothing was going on, people did do some things: held some workshops on sexuality, had reading groups, and things like that. But they have consistently failed to take a strong position on most issues raised during this time. They took a few positions, such as on access to education and the passport law, but these four years have been some of the worst for Iranian women in terms of the policies that have been suggested and approved; but the women's movement, due to all the pressures, hasn't been in a state to respond as strongly as they would in the past.[13]

The situation Sussan describes here is why there are no real women's change-maker organisations operating in Iran today, and why we chose to speak with her. She is long-time women's rights activist and a founding member of the One Million Signatures Campaign. From her extensive experience working in the Iranian women's movement, she is well placed to comment on where the needs are, should the situation open up enough for organisations to begin operating. She is hopeful that it will.

Jordan

As mentioned in the background section, the experience of Jordan during the revolutions, was relatively muted compared with other countries under assessment here. With a primary focus on rising food prices and aimed at particularly hated individuals within King Abdullah's cabinet, these were largely reform-oriented protests.[14] While the situation in Jordan per se did not throw the country into a state of chaos, the overflow of the crisis in Syria is having a

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[13] Tahmasebi, Sussan (2013), Personal interview.
[14] There were calls in 2011 for the abdication of King Abdullah, but this was not the overwhelming aim of the protests.

dramatic effect. The UNHCR's official number of Syrian refugees in Jordan stands at over 560,000[15], but it is likely that the actual number is higher, as there are many unregistered Syrian refugees in the country. This has stretched the already limited resources of Jordan to the limit, and has also affected the ability of civil society, including women's organisations, to go about their pre-existing work. As Afaf Jabiri[16] of the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) noted when speaking about what is affecting JWU's ability to operate:

> Mainly the political situation in Jordan and the region, because right now you have to put some stuff on hold, as we have to put every effort towards the Syrian refugees. We are not a relief organisation, we have never done relief work, so now we have to mobilise whatever resources we have to do work with refugee women, Syrian refugee women. So, this means that every time you need to shift your work and re-prioritise your work according to how the political situation is going and sometimes you have to put some things on hold. For instance, we postponed different training courses on trafficking women, because there's not time.[17]

Most organisations in Jordan are affiliated to the government or the royal family. As such, the de-politicisation of women's issues and their disassociation from wider political and social struggles is evident. Civil society is co-opted to a great extent and women's organisations are no exception. Afaf Jabiri also spoke to the tightrope that independent organisations must walk in order to operate within this context:

> In Jordan, for instance, if you want to work in woman's rights you cannot address it in a narrow way. What I mean by this is when you have the monarchy and you have the tribal allegiances and you have Islam, and all of these are taboos, you cannot talk about any of them in advocacy; therefore, you are not actually allowed to discuss the roots of the problem. The king is the father of the nation and he is the one who rules and he holds the five powers in his hands; the tribes are the ones beside him in every social aspect, including creating women's rights; and Islamic groups are trying to also influence all of these things. You are working within this context, trying to get some rights for women, but you cannot achieve it unless these issues are addressed very clearly, the structural issues are the main problems of inequality and injustice as a whole, not just for women but in the country. One of the main problems for us is that that we cannot move on with women's rights and equality issues unless these issues are addressed within the overall structure of the country; but, if you do so, particularly when it comes to the royal family, by law you will be in prison.[18]

The organisation interviewed for this assessment is the **Jordanian Women's Union**. Established in 1945, and having gone through many transitions in its work in the many

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[15] UNHCR (2013), "Syrian Refugee Response: Jordan",
<https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>
[16] Our interviewee from Jordan, who has held multiple roles in the Union since the 80s, and is currently a member of the central council.
[17] Jabiri, Afaf (2013), Personal Interview.
[18] Ibid.

decades, the current focus of the Jordanian Women's Union is providing services for women survivors of violence, running shelters and a legal, psychological and social centre, programmes for trafficked women, and running advocacy campaigns around legal reforms. It has ten branches spread across the north, south and central Jordan, all of which had relative autonomy at the administrative level until the most recent changes to the NGO law three years ago prohibited such an arrangement.[19] Thereby, the Union had to centralise its work to adhere to the law.

Libya

In 2011, Libya also erupted into widespread protests and successfully overthrew its autocrat of several decades, although with the intervention of NATO's no-fly zone as Qaddafi had responded to demonstrations with a brute force not shown elsewhere at that point. State feminism had been an important part of Gaddafi's political vision: women's legal status, education and public presence were integral to his marking the difference between his 'revolutionary' government and what had proceeded. Furthermore, as Kathryn Spellman-Poots points out:

> In keeping with the "first lady" syndrome, in women's rights advocacy in the rest of the Arab world, the women's rights agenda was entirely appropriated by Gaddafi and his inner circle – particularly his daughter, Aisha, who was the main spokesperson for Libya's gender regime.[20]

In the aftermath of Qaddafi's overthrow, the transitional government, which is facing many challenges, also decided to make their first mark in the realm of women's rights: Mustafa Abdel Jalil, the leader of the transitional government, declared that polygamy was no longer illegal at the celebration of national independence.

> The National Transition Council chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil's comment on removing restrictions on polygamy demonstrates how gender issues are already being used to advance (or appease) ideologies and to stake out the political boundaries of the new Libya.[21]

Although Jalil has since altered his rhetoric on women, the Libyan government has made no progress on this issue.[22] As Libya's revolution was one that erupted into violent conflict, including the creation of civilian militias, there is the fundamental problem of an armed population in a context of weak government and a state in transition. The ways in which the

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[19] Jabiri, Afaf (2013), Personal Interview.
[20] Spellman-Poots, Kathryn (2011), "Women in the New Libya: Challenges Ahead", *openDemocracy.net*, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/kathryn-spellman-poots/women-in-new-libya-challenges-ahead>.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Aon, Maha (2012), "Scoping Paper: The Arab Spring and Women's Rights – Implications for Care International", Care International.

new Libyan state chooses to adopt or do away with Qaddafi's gender regime still remain to be seen.

In Qaddafi's Libya, NGOs were completely outlawed, so the burgeoning civil society in Libya is starting from scratch. The two organisations we interviewed for this assessment were the **Voice of Libyan Women (VLW)** and **Women 4 Libya (W4L)**. VLW, founded in August 2011, is a youth-led organisation that focuses on improving the political participation and economic empowerment of women, and advocates against gender-based violence in Libya. They run English and computer training courses, advocate against religious extremism using the framework of Islam, conduct a campaign on women's security in Libya, and run political participation workshops. For this assessment, we interviewed Ahmed Shaibi, who is the head of the Women's Empowerment Centre in Zawia.

W4L is an initiative of the Libyan Civil Society Organization, which is an umbrella organisation for civil society initiatives. W4L focuses on ensuring the inclusion of women in the reconciliation process and within the political, social and economic sectors of society. Their objectives include: the promotion of Libyan women in decision-making, politics and government; supporting women activists to promote sustainable civic participation and facilitate their contribution to stability and transition to democracy; and create spaces and forums for women's empowerment and leadership. For this assessment, we interviewed Intissar Rajabany, a volunteer with W4L.

Morocco

Morocco also experienced unrest during the 'Arab Spring', although nowhere near on the scale seen elsewhere. With more of a push towards reform rather than revolution, the 20th of February movement demanded that the King relent some of his powers. In March of 2011, King Mohammed VI announced a constitutional review process, and the developments that ensued led to the election of the Justice and Development Party's (PJD) – Islamists who had previously stood in firm opposition - plurality in parliament and their leader taking up the post of Prime Minister.

As described earlier, the state feminism that had been adopted in Morocco was part and parcel of the government representing itself as a progressive force in the face of Islamist opposition. However, while many women's organisations in the country did have state association under these policies of state feminism, it is important to note that there are also many independent organisations that were also allowed to flourish. As Laurie Brand noted:

> The state . . . has an interest in the proliferation of organizations: the more organizations there are, the more difficult coordination is likely to be and therefore the more limited their political impact; and by allowing such organizations to operate, the state can more easily monitor grassroots activism.[23]

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[23] Brand, Laurie A. (1998), *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences*, New York: Columbia University Press.

With the rise to power of the Islamist PJD party – granted the King still retains unparalleled power in the country – the balancing act between state feminism and Islamism has become more delicate. As Souad Eddouada and Renata Pepicelli noted:

> The Moroccan state's reorientation in the direction of gender equality and the advent of a discussion of women's rights has had to be adapted to in response to Islamist demands for a legislative system that is more rigidly based on the shari'a. In order to simultaneously satisfy the demands of feminists and those of the Islamists, the government has been obliged to rapidly develop an "Islamic state feminism".[24]

Although the country lifted its reservations to CEDAW in April 2011, the forced marriage of Amina Filali[25] to her rapist and her subsequent suicide show that in the protection of women's rights in the country, there is still a long way to go. As Fatima Sadiqi noted:

> (W)hen you ask specific questions about rights, it's not easy [to work in Morocco]. Some people get really irritated and sometimes there is bureaucracy, especially if research is about sensitive topic like abortion. Sometimes there are administrative problems. It is not easy to research deep gender issues in societies, people are reluctant about that. We have to be very careful and diplomatic and sensitive to cultural norms.[26]

The organisations interviewed for this study were: **ISIS Center for Women and Development (ICWAD)** and **Nation Union of Women's Organisations (Union)**. ICWAD was founded in 2006 and focuses on bridging the gap between university and civil society – between activism and academia. They work with women in having access to social media, publish resources on women and development, as well as spread awareness on family laws, in accessible and local languages (Moroccan Arabic and Berber), work on women's literacy, and established MA and PhD programmes in gender studies in Morocco. For this assessment, we interviewed Dr. Fatima Sadiqi, the founder and current head.

The National Union of Women's Organisations, established in 2010, is an association of women's organisations from across the country, who come together to discuss women's rights with the aim of promoting and raising women's awareness. They also do advocacy work, applying pressure on the government to change discriminatory laws. The Union's main activities are organising conferences, study days, seminars and campaigns; campaigns to raise women's awareness on early marriages, the laws related to rape, and other development related issues in general. For this assessment, we spoke with Souad Slaoui, who is an activist in the organisation as well as its current treasurer.

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[24] Eddouada, Souad and Renata Pepicelli (2013), "Morocco: Towards an 'Islamic State Feminism'", SciencesPo. <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/ci_feminism_iran_se_rp.pdf>.

[25] In 2012, Amina Filali swallowed rat poison after being forced to marry her rapist; she was 16 years old. This was due to controversial legislation, Article 475, which allows a rapist to marry his victim to escape prosecution.

[26] Sadiqi, Fatima (2013), Personal Interview.

Syria's uprising began similar to the other countries in the region in March 2011, marked by peaceful protests demanding justice and the transition of power. However, these protests were quickly met with the might of the Syrian army and, after months of military sieges, descended into a full-blown armed conflict that persists to this day. This conflict has become the scene of the battlefront for fundamentalist Islamists, who have rallied from around the world to fight against the Assad regime in Syria. Although initially Assad's claims to be fighting Al-Qaeda in his attempt to quell protests were little more than a façade, the Syrian conflict is progressively more characterised by such militants fighting alongside (as well as in conflict with) the original forces of this uprising.

There is no way to hypothesise what will be the end of this. As the conflict persists and the refugee crisis become even more acute, stories of young Syrian women being sold into marriage to support their families in neighbouring countries, rape, and domestic violence becomes more frequent.[27] These are not problems that had existed anywhere near on the same scale prior to the conflict; the situation of Syrian women, along with the majority of the Syrian population as a whole, is deteriorating rapidly. How Syrian society will recover when this conflict reaches its conclusion is impossible to predict, but there is no doubt that as society has unravelled during this crisis, many Syrian women have been reduced to a far worse position.

Prior to the conflict, the state of Syrian civil society, including women's organisations, was incredibly constricted. Relatively few independent organisations were allowed to operate, with most being associated with the state or ruling party.[28] Decree 121 specifically forbid organisations from working on women's rights, so any organisations trying to operate had to do so 'underground'. Since the conflict began, however, civil society organisations, especially women's organisations, began to mushroom. Many of these organisations, understandably, are focused on the intersection between the ongoing conflict and women's rights.

The two organisations interviewed for this assessment are the **Syrian Women's Forum for Peace (SWFP)** and the **Women and Democracy Forum (WDF)**. The SWFP was founded in 2012 and focuses on women's active role in decision and peace-making, as well as women's security in the context of the ongoing conflict. They work on communication, networking, training and empowerment of women in local communities. Taking a bottom-up approach, SWFP focuses on the importance of networking to build the widest coalition in Syria striving for peace, the realities of women from all sectors of society and addressing the suffering of displaced Syrians and refugees. We interviewed Mouna Ghanem, the founder and head of SWFP, for this assessment.

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[27] International Rescue Committee (2013), "Syria: A Regional Crisis", <http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf>; Human Rights Watch (2013), "Syrian Refugees Struggle to Protect Daughters from Exploitation", <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/07/syrian-refugees-struggle-protect-daughters-exploitation>
[28] Gubser, Peter (2002), "The Impact of NGOs on State and Non-State Relations in the Middle East", *Middle East Policy* vol. IX No. 1: 139-148.

The Women and Democracy Forum was established in 2011, and focuses on women's political participation, empowerment, and participation in democratic transition. They do awareness raising activities for women on politics and political culture; do legal research, hold training courses, and provide psychological support. For this assessment, we interviewed Amera Malek, the deputy and representative in Nabek for WDF.

Tunisia

In comparison to the rest of the region, under Ben Ali Tunisian women enjoyed more rights – including access to education and employment – and a relatively progressive personal status code. State feminism was a prominent feature of Ben Ali's regime, and Habib Bourguiba before him, as he instrumentalised women's rights to prove his 'progressiveness' and detract attention from the truly repressive nature of his system. In December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi set himself alight in protest to systematic oppression in Tunisia, beginning what would become the Tunisian revolution of 2011, which snowballed across the region into the 'Arab Spring'. Women participated in the Tunisian revolution en masse.

Following the overthrow of Ben Ali and the harkening of the first democratic elections in Tunisia, the once-illegal Islamist organisation, Al Nahda, swept the elections to take control of the government. There is warranted fear of the direction that Al Nahda will take/is taking the country, as it has been very slow to take action against extremist forces who have conducted acts of violence – such as bombing a cinema and televisions station, occupying a university, and attacking bars. However, as a recent Care International study noted:

> Despite this criticism, the Tunisian government took several positive steps by ratifying several international human rights conventions, amending articles in its penal code to combat torture, and amending publication and media laws. In addition, Tunisia passed a new NGO law turning the page on the highly restrictive NGO law of the Ben Ali era. The new NGO law grants NGOs more freedoms, prohibiting authorities from obstructing their work, facilitating NGO access to information, and giving them the right to receive funds from domestic and foreign sources. Consequently, a significant number of new NGOs have emerged in Tunisia representing different ideologies and direction, and the press has become more vibrant tackling subjects that were previously taboo.[29]

Women are also representing a higher percentage in the transitional government than elsewhere, as the government has stipulated that women must have equal representation on electoral lists, and they now make up 27% of the parliament.[30] However, under the Islamist-led government, there is a fear that Tunisian women's rights will be compromised,

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[29] Aon, Maha (2012), "Scoping Paper: The Arab Spring and Women's Rights – Implications for Care International", Care International.
[30] Ibid.

and especially that women's rights activists may be discredited as being supporters of the former regime.

As the Care study above noted, there has been a relaxation on the laws that govern independent organisations, thereby allowing for the proliferation of new women's initiatives to flourish. The first initiative we interviewed for this assessment, The **Voice of Women (VOW) Initiative**, falls into this category. Established in late 2012, the VOW Initiative aims to support the development of girls and women on issues that affect their lives, such as poverty, education, and entrepreneurship; skills that empower girls to be self-reliant and agents of change; and train and develop a new breed of journalists with a focus on women and development issues. They work in advocacy and campaigning, training and capacity building, and community engagement. For this assessment, we interviewed Aya Chebbi, a co-founder of this Initiative.

The second organisation interviewed for this assessment is the youth organisation **I Watch – Tunisia**. Founded in March 2011, I Watch focuses on issues of transparency and corruption, and includes activities related to election monitoring, voter education, facilitating access to information, and the launch of a whistle-blowers award. I Watch was recently also named the local contact point in Tunisia for Transparency International. Although I Watch is not particularly focused on women's rights, the majority of its volunteers are women. For this assessment, we interviewed Emna Mouelhi, who is I Watch's current treasurer.

Yemen

Demonstrations erupted in Yemen following the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia in January 2011. Although originally protesting proposed changes to the constitution, the poor economy and high unemployment, the demonstrations quickly took on a more pointed criticism of Yemen's 33-year 'president', Ali Abdullah Saleh, and began openly calling for his ouster. Women played a vital role in the uprising, and their involvement was widely recognised and celebrated.[31]

In April, the Gulf Cooperation Council attempted to broker a transition of power deal, which was only agreed to in late November by the government and the Joint Meeting Parties – an umbrella group representing many members of the opposition. However, the deal was denounced by many protestors, as it just transferred power from Ali Abdullah Saleh – the 33-year 'president' of Yemen – to his vice president.

In the transitional period, it is arguable that things have actually gotten worse in Yemen. In 2013, the World Bank reported that youth unemployment could be as high as 40%[32] and the IMF reported[33] that nearly half of Yemen's population live below the poverty line. The

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[31] Most notably, Tawakkol Karman, who would later receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. However, it should be noted that, internally, there is much criticism of Karman for involvement in Al Islah, the political party associated with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood.

[32] World Bank (2013), "World Bank Grant Supports Employment Creation for Yemen's Neediest Youth and Women", <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/04/02/world-bank-grant-supports-employment-creation-yemens-neediest-youth-women>

[33] International Monetary Fund (2013), "Yemen: Reorienting Public Spending Would Create Jobs, Fight Poverty", <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2013/car073013a.htm>

situation is particularly difficult for and on women, with the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* for 2013 ranking Yemen last in the Gender Gap Index among 136 countries.[34] Furthermore, endemic illiteracy and early/forced marriages continue to blight the situation of women in the country.

Despite all this, organisations have proliferated in the transition period, including increased participation by women and women-focused organisations.[35] The organisation interviewed for this assessment is **Etar for Social Development**. A newly established organisation, Etar works on supporting other new women and youth groups to work better with the local communities on issues related to poverty and social security. They focus on providing trainings and capacity building. We interviewed Wameedh Shakir, the founder of the organisation, for this assessment.

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[34] World Economic Forum (2013), "The Global Gender Gap Report", <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf>

[35] World Bank (2013), "Yemen Civil Society Organizations in Transition: A Mapping and Capacity Assessment of Development-Oriented Civil Society Organizations in Five Governorates", <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2013/09/18/000356161_20130918164243/Rendered/PDF/810950WP0ENGLI0Box0379828B00PUBLIC0.pdf>

Needs Assessment

The interviews conducted by WLUML were based on our scoping and mapping of the various contexts and issues within the region more generally, as well as the specific countries under discussion. Divided into six thematic sections, in these interviews we asked about the main focus and current work of each organisation; the organisational structures, as well as any systems in place such as assessment, wellness programmes for staff, and emergency procedures; current and/or desired networking capabilities; technological abilities and needs; general capacity building needs, as well as details on types of trainings to emulate or avoid; and, the future prospects and plans for each organisation.

All interviewees who spoke with WLUML were enthusiastic about their desire for trainings in specific areas. Below is a delineation of the needs expressed to us throughout this research.

Lack of Funds/Resources/Fundraising

Lack of funds, resources and issues with fundraising was a major issue addressed by so many of the activists we spoke to for this assessment. Interviewees from Iraq, Bahrain, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia all expressed a true need to understand better how to engage with funding, and a desire to build their organisational capacity in this respect.

The Baghdad Women's Association stated that even after 10 years of operation, they still struggle with financial and human resources. Liza Hido pointed to the fact that their sometimes tenuous financial situation leads to a problem retaining staff. She said, even so, that there is really nobody on staff who is good at writing proposals, so the problem is cyclical. Furthermore, Hido also identified the issue of language as it pertains to fundraising, in that most applications must be submitted in English, which is an impediment for BWA. [36]

When asked a general question about capacity gaps at the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Maryam Al Khawaja pointed directly to the issue of obtaining funds. She stated:

> We have lack of financial support, that's one of our biggest issues. If there is a training, this might be very beneficial for my organisation, because even covering the cost of attending a training might be too much for us. Everybody in BCHR are volunteers and most of them have been fired because of their work with us. Lack financial support is causing many problems.[37]

Fatima Sadiqi, of ISIS Center for Women and Development in Morocco, echoed these sentiments, saying that ISIS has a problem obtaining secure funding, and is mostly operating

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[36] Hido, Liza (2013), Personal Interview.
[37] Al Khawaja, Maryam (2013), Personal Interview.

on a project to project basis. They have no staff who are specialised in sourcing funds, and so help building their capacity in this regard would be incredibly useful.[38]

Lack of funding and its relation to staff was also highlighted by Women 4 Libya, as they pointed out that their lack of stable, consistent funding really affected their work. They have not been able hire dedicated staff, and remain very reliant on volunteers. While volunteers are of course essential to this line of work, not having enough staff who are responsible and accountable to the organization is not a sustainable way to work.[39]

Syrian Women's Forum for Peace, a relatively new initiative, highlighted how lack of financial resources affects their advocacy:

> [We are in need of] financial resources, because advocacy needs a lot of money and resources are very limited. For example, advocacy needs material that can be distributed; often we don't have the money to print posters so we only have posters on Facebook which is not enough because this way we don't reach the grassroots.[40]

Aya Chebbi, from the Voice of Women Initiative in Tunisia, related to the need to have a bigger team composed of competent staff, and the associated financial constraints, as well as how lack of funding affects their ability to advocate and campaign. She said:

> The main issue is human and financial resources, and that includes having a bigger team to get more stuff done, a skilled team, and also the financial resources to be able to advocate and campaign and really be able to do all this work.[41]

Wameedh Shakir, from Etar for Social Development in Yemen, also described how in need of funding support they are, as a new organisation they also have all the costs associated with start-up. As they are not associated with a political party, and wish to remain independent, for Etar to develop the capacity to source funds would be essential to their sustainability.[42]

From this consistent discussion on lack of funds, resources, and fundraising capacity that consistently reappeared throughout many of our interviews, it seems clear that support in helping staff of women's organisations and initiatives in this region to develop skills in fundraising and developing human resources would greatly assist their organisations, and thereby missions. To work without dedicated staff and to have advocacy and campaigning efforts hampered by lack of resources are seriously impediments to sustainability of the work. Furthermore, for women's organisations to be able to remain independent, as highlighted by Shakir, concrete capacity building in fundraising skills are essential.

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[38] Sadiqi, Fatima (2013), Personal Interview.
[39] Rajabany, Intissar (2013), Personal Interview.
[40] Ghanem, Mouna (2013), Personal Interview.
[41] Chebbi, Aya (2013), Personal Interview.
[42] Shakir, Wameedh (2013), Personal Interview.

Outreach/Advocacy/Communications

The issues of alliance building, campaigning, and engagement with the media were touched on by participants from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Iran. As all of these themes have to do with a type of outreach, WLUML decided to group them, given that all could be engaged with in one training.

Baheya Ya Masr identified that one of their weaknesses is figuring out how to make a campaign reach people outside of the centre. How to effectively mobilise people and work with the grassroots. Sally Zohney stated:

> Mobilising people is difficult. How to make your campaign reach the people especially outside of Cairo…. We still can't reach governorates and work with the grassroots.[43]

ISIS expressed their strong desire for training in outreach, and alliance building across the region. While already sustaining informal links to NGOs within Morocco and a few international networks, Sadiqi pointed to the desire to engage more with youth, spread regionally, and possibly internationally, extending their work. Issues of how to engage with youth and regional alliance building were of particular interest to ISIS. As Sadiqi re-iterated:

> We want to reach more people. We have a generational problem, and we want young people to take over. I want to see the organisation have more youth and to expand more nationally and internationally.[44]

Souad Slaoui of the Union of Women's Organisations in Morocco also echoed her compatriot's remarks:

> I would like my organisation to have more networking with international associations and networks, because really it helps a lot … so more networking with international associations to help us go further i*nshallah* in the future.[45]

Iraqi Al Amal, one of the most established organisations we spoke to throughout the course of this research, expressed their need to learn how to better engage with the media, as well as emphasising the importance of alliance building. Jamal Jawahiri spoke to the fact that many organisations in Iraq see networks only through the lens of aid: that donor agencies create networks of their grantees as part of their oversight. So, there is a lack of knowledge/understanding about the importance of regional alliances and networks. He further spoke to the fact that better engagement with the media is fundamental to their operations. The media needs to be seen as a partner in their work, and activists need more understanding of how to engage effectively with the media.[46]

Sussan Tahmasebi spoke passionately about the importance of building regional alliances for Iranian women's rights activists, and how now more than ever Iranians are trying to seek

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[43] Zohney, Sally (2013), Personal Interview.
[44] Sadiqi, Fatima (2013), Personal Interview.
[45] Slaoui, Souad (2013), Personal Interview.
[46] Jawajiri, Jamal (2013), Personal Interview.

out such alliances, but have been so isolated that there is a dearth of knowledge on how to do that.

> I think it's good for them to see the different models, and at some point we have to move beyond the model we've been using, and I think if they see the other models, such as the model in Iraq, it would be helpful. … I think it's good for them to see these different models, to be aware of the different issues. … Iranians are interested, more than ever before, in what's going on in the region. I held a workshop in 2004 and the Iranians were interested, but the level of interest now doesn't even compare to the level of interest then. In 2004 we had activists from 10 countries who came to Iran for the workshop, people were interested, but I think if I did that now people would kill themselves to be there! It's a completely different level of interest.[47]

Tahmasebi also pointed out that she is aware that, regionally, people are interested in having Iranians more in attendance. In workshops she has been a part of, activists from across the region have specifically spoke to the need to include Iranians in such efforts.

> Iran has been so isolated, so they [activists from other countries in the region] don't know much about Iran. But I think Iran has a lot to offer, and I think if they [Iranians] know they have a lot to offer it might reinvigorate the movement. Also, I think the region has a lot to offer for Iran as well. If people are taking up these difficult conversations, they have to look at the other models, especially if their model is no longer working. What are the other models? Do you work on the state? Do you not work with the state? I think it's really critical to include them in regional efforts.[48]

Emna Mouelhi of I Watch Tunisia, spoke specifically to the need for stronger communications skills. She said:

> What we may need, what we may always be needing, is training in communications. Everyone is doing his best to explain himself and to communicate the knowledge he has, but it is not that easy. So we will be needing more communication skills.[49]

Building strong regional alliances is clearly essential according to our interviewees. Building capacity in terms of networking and reaching out, identifying organisations/movements outside of one particular locale with which an alliance can be built, and identifying key issues upon which to mobilise with such allies is desired by many in the region. Furthermore, assistance with campaigning techniques, outreach to the media and communications, come hand in hand with outreach to networks and national organisations working elsewhere. Capacity building as it pertains to these issues is desired and needed.

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[47] Tahmasebi, Sussan (2013), Personal Interview.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Mouelhi, Emna (2013), Personal Interview.

Internet tools/ security

More technological savvy, using the internet effectively for advocacy, and internet/ technological security were issues stressed by many of the organisations interviewed for this assessment. As the internet becomes more and more essential to human rights work, alongside the increased ability for governments to monitor, technological know-how is more important than ever. Of the organisations we spoke to, nine – from Iraq, Bahrain, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia and Jordan – pointed to this issue as a key area of need for them. One of the key issues, which cut across the answers from all participants, was the lack of internet security policies for their respective organisations.

The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights spoke about how essential technology in general, and the internet specifically, is to their work. Maryam Al Khawaja discussed their use of social media, as well as government interventions to block communications. She was very emphatic that activists with the BCHR needed further training on internet security, circumvention and anonymisation techniques[50]

From Morocco, both ISIS and the Union of Women's Organisations pointed to both their need for security training, as well as on up-to-date usage of internet technologies to help with their work. Dr. Slaoui spoke to the fact that the Union has no security at the level of the internet, and went on to state:

> I think if we had some training days about how to use technology, how to use internet, with some international networks interested in the MENA region, this would be very useful. We need training both for women and also for us as members of the Union. I think this is very important because it facilitates the use of a lot of techniques which may be new for some of us.[51]

The Syrian Women's Forum for Peace and Etar for Social Development in Yemen, when asked about trainings they would want to attend, also echoed the above responses. They both specifically requested IT training, with Etar further noting their interest in e-awareness.[52]

Aya Chebbi from Tunisia, spoke about previous training she had attended on this subject, and her disappointment in their follow-up, which led to the VOW Initiative not implementing the policies. She emphasised the importance of internet security for the Initiative, and her desire for their whole team to attend such trainings:

> I had problems accessing technology, sometimes because of the network, and sometimes due to whatever procedures the government is taking to slow down the internet… I actually attended a few security trainings for internet, but I didn't think I learned much from them because we didn't practice at the end what we were

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[50] Al Khawaja, Maryam (2013), Personal Interview.
[51] Slaoui, Souad (2013), Personal Interview.
[52] Ghanem, Mouna (2013), Personal Interview; Shakir, Wameedh (2013), Personal Interview.

saying. I would love to have the whole team, since our organisation is based on the internet, to have more training on the security of using the internet.[53]

While speaking to the fact that, at the moment, Jordan is a relatively good place for internet access, Afaf Jabiri noted that things could quickly change and it is important for the Jordanian Women's Union to have more capacity as it relates to internet security and tools.

> The internet and social media, how to use these tools effectively, this is one of the weak points for the Union, we don't use it very much. In terms of security, at the minute although I'm very optimistic, the situation in Jordan could quickly change. I'm sure things won't stay as they are. So we should start thinking about having a security policy in place, at this moment we have nothing.[54]

As is clear from the above comments, internet security is increasingly becoming an issue of concern for women's activists across the region. Coupled with the need to stay up-to-date with new e-technologies for campaigning and advocacy, internet skills appear to be a gap for many organisations working in this region. As the internet is only becoming more central to human rights work in general, it is imperative that women's organisations also are able to safely utilise the medium.

Organisational processes/NGO management

Especially for the young organisations and initiatives, another recurrent theme in our interviews was the need to better learn organisational processes and NGO management skills. With a lot of informal work taking place and new-comer activists joining movements across the region, there is a greater risk of not putting structures in place to support both the work being done, as well as the staff. For sustainability of movements and organisations, supporting structures are essential to their goals.

When we asked questions related to processes and structures, such as emergency procedures, support or wellness systems for staff, networking policies, and planning procedures, nearly all the representatives we spoke to said that they had no such systems in place. Some people did not even understand what we were talking about with these types of questions. This speaks to the dearth of knowledge about such types of institution building and sustainable activism.

Etar for Social Development in Yemen outlined specifically the types of capacity building they required in this respect:

> How can we develop strategies and build internal structures. We need to learn institution building and management, as well as NGO management skills. We also need conceptual thought and capacity building. Trainings of trainers are important. They need to learn how to work on research and to have a plan. They have to learn how to plan.[55]

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[53] Chebbi, Aya (2013), Personal Interview.
[54] Jabiri, Afaf (2013), Personal Interview.
[55] Shakir, Wameedh (2013), Personal Interview.

Syrian Women's Forum for Peace spoke to the issue of being a new organisation, and the steps they need to go through in order to formalise themselves as they are currently unregistered.. With the ultimate goal to have branches all across Syria, and to be an active player in the rebuilding of Syria when this crisis ends, the Forum is aware of their need to learn sound internal structures and management in order to sustain.[56]

From Iraq, the Baghdad Women's Association also touch on this issue, expressing a desire to have international standards in place in their organisation,[57] while from Tunisia, Aya Chebbi pointed out that the VOW Initiative is currently trying to build structures and assessment procedures, but as a young initiative they are only at the beginning phases.[58]
It seems clear that there is a need to build institutional knowledge so that all of these new organisations that mushroomed out of these momentous movements to overturn dictatorial governments, whether so far successful or not, are able to sustain. Having systems and internal processes in place to enable, assess, and support the work they are doing is vital, as well as ensuring the sustainability of their staff and volunteers.

Concepts and Methods

Another issue that arose throughout our interviews with activists from across the region was a desire to have a better grounding in concepts – such as gender, leadership and human rights mechanisms – and in research methods. It was expressed to us several times that while people get involved in activism on women's issues due completely to experiential and visceral knowledge, there is a need for people to be better informed on gender concepts and theories, as well as how to understand and engage with human rights mechanisms and documentation.

Baheya Ya Masr plainly expressed these desires, with Zohney stating: "We have a knowledge gap. The group needs to be trained in gender."[59] Afaf Jabiri from the Jordanian Women's Union also echoed this need in relation to gender and feminism concepts.

> We need more people, in terms of those who are feminist advocates, with very clear vision about what feminism is...The knowledge base, we need a lot actually. We tried but the organisation is very big and you cannot do it for everyone. We've done several courses on feminism and feminist approaches, very political courses and that was important. We do some kinds of general discussion with staff, but I think still the knowledge base [in relation to feminism], we need to have some kind of capacity building.[60]

Maryam Al Khawaja spoke specifically to the issue of wanting more capacity in terms of knowing and using human rights mechanisms, expressing that not knowing how to properly

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[56] Ghanem, Mouna (2013), Personal Interview.
[57] Hido, Liza (2013), Personal Interview.
[58] Chebbi, Aya (2013), Personal Interview.
[59] Zohney, Sally (2013), Personal Interview.
[60] Jabiri, Afaf (2013), Personal Interview.

navigate and use such mechanisms makes it difficult for the BCHR to address many important issues, such as violence against women.[61]

Both Wameedh Shakir of Etar for Social Development in Yemen and Amera Malek of the Women and Democracy Forum in Syria expressed the need for support in conceptual thought and leadership. Shakir stated: "We also need conceptual thought and capacity building. Trainings-of-trainers are important. They need to learn how to work on research, and how to plan."[62] Shakir explained further: "I am looking for a training on women and peace-building, women and reconciliation, women and state building; from concepts to resolutions and experiences."[63]

Malek spoke to issue of leadership:

> Trainings are very important because we need knowledge to be able to work, especially because in Syria civil society is very young. ... Also, [we need] leadership trainings... women need to be encouraged to be leaders.[64]

Intissar Rajabany from Women 4 Libya concurred on the need for leadership training for women.

From the above comments, there seems to be consensus among many organisations in the region that a dearth of conceptual knowledge on issues of gender, peace-building, research, and leadership exists. Especially in cases of young organisations, or new-comer activists, solid conceptual foundations are needed to further their work.

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[61] Al Khawaja, Maryam (2013), Personal Interview.
[62] Shakir, Wameedh (2013), Personal Interview.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Malek, Amera (2013), Personal Interview.

Recommendations

In this section, we present the services that can be provided by WLUML and recommendations to donors based on the analysis of interviews provided above, as well as from our networking and extensive experience in working with national women's organisations. From the previous discussion, it is clear that women's organisations across the region not only acknowledge that they have gaps in capacity, but are also eager to take advantage of opportunities to close such gaps. All were eager for opportunities to build their skills, knowledge, and capacity in many areas, but the main overarching themes are what we extracted as potential sites of intervention for the future.

Trainings

From the discussion in the previous section, trainings were clearly identified as important avenues by which to transfer and build skills. Although varying opinions were expressed about some previously attended trainings[65], it is clear that all participants were interested in attending trainings, granted that they address relevant and useful topics or themes.

The recommended themes to address, as outlined above, are:

- Lack of funds and/or resources;
- Outreach, advocacy and communications;
- Internet tools and security;
- NGO processes and management; and
- Concepts and methods

To address issues in relation to lack of funding and/or resources, it is recommended to hold a training focused on fundraising and how to build human resources in this area. It is possible to couple this theme with the recommendation for training on NGO processes and management, as these can be seen as interconnected or interrelated areas. The training should also include modules on assessment and planning of work, as nearly all participants interviewed here stated that they had very little in terms of formal planning and assessment processes.

Outreach, advocacy and communications can also be compiled into one workshop, focusing on network-building (nationally and regionally), identifying common points of struggle, the sharing and building upon of advocacy techniques and strategies, and the building of strong external and internal communications. This can be quite a broad theme, so in order for such a training be useful, it is imperative that participants are on the relatively same level in these areas so that there is not the problem of people's time being wasted with information they already know or is too high level.

Internet tools and security is a theme being addressed by many organisations at this time, and WLUML is not expert in this area. So that WLUML does not simply duplicate the work of

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[65] Such as Aya Chebbi, who pointed out that very few of the trainings she had attended had actually been useful for her, as hours and hours of presentations without an interactive approach was not a useful method.

other organisations tackling this same issue, it is recommended that WLUML partner with an expert organisation for such a training – such as the Association for Progressive Communications – building in both the technical aspect and the targeting of issues specifically faced by women human rights defenders.

Concepts and methods is an area where WLUML is incredibly proficient and has a wealth of human resources, knowledge and experience. Such a training would also build upon WLUML's previous Feminist Leadership Trainings and the Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democracy Programme's[66] leadership trainings. Helping to build conceptual understandings in terms of gender, feminism, and leadership is an important underpinning for women's organisations in the region. Furthermore, building skills in terms of research methods, planning and actualisation is important for women's organisations to be able to properly document the situation in their own contexts.

Aside from the themes of trainings, it is imperative to also have an emphasis in any workshop on the transference of knowledge. All trainings should benefit more than just those who attend, meaning organisations should have a system of transferring skills gained in training also to those who did not attend. We asked all interviewees who participated in this assessment whether they had such a system. While most participants answered that there were informal[67] ways in which they were trying to do this, follow-up and assessment should be included as a formal part of any training workshop. Ensuring that knowledge and skills are being transferred, ensuring a kind of ripple-effect, is essential to impact of workshop.

Furthermore, it was also noted on a number of occasions – e.g. Etar for Social Development (Yemen) and the Voice of Women Initiative (Tunisia) – that trainings presented in a more interactive way, rather than in purely presentation style, would be more beneficial to participants. More involvement of participants in the training helps to solidify the knowledge/skills being presented. Finding more interactive and participatory ways to approach trainings, is highly recommended. As Wameedh Shakir stated: "We want to work with non-traditional trainings that can deliver the information better."[68]

Translation

Although not covered in the general body of this needs assessment, due to the fact that the majority of interviewees indicated that their organisations had proficient language skills to access resources, it was also noted by several participants that putting funds towards translation into Arabic (especially for training materials) would be useful to them. Souad Slaoui of the Union of Women's Organisations (Morocco) stated that,

> It is supposed to be much more successful when people are addressed in their own
> language, their own native language, for example Moroccan Arabic and Berber, because this

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[66] This is one of the programme's WLUML is currently working on, in consortium with the Institute for Women's Empowerment and Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.
[67] Such as sharing information with colleagues, holding mini presentations, writing a report, etc.
[68] Shakir, Wameedh (2013), Personal Interview.

allows us to reach large segments of women from different parts of society…
(C)ommunication in the language of the audience is very helpful to achieve ones goals.[69]

As publishing in a variety of languages and emphasis on translation has always been one of the core principles of WLUML, it is recommended that the effort to bring more resources into Arabic and Farsi is reinforced, especially as it pertains to the themes listed above. To present information in trainings in more local languages will help further the participants understanding, and help in the process of transferring knowledge beyond the trainings.

Informal Capacity Building

Given WLUML has an extensive network and provides regular support to its networkers and sister organisations, it has the ability to provide ongoing informal capacity building to WRs organisations. Over its lifetime, the WLUML staff and Board members have provided advice when required in various forms – email, Skype or in person. WLUML also supports network organisations by informing them of fundraising, training and skills building opportunities. This type of support should continue in a more informed way, given the areas of need highlighted by this assessment.

Exposure/advocacy of partners work

Through WLUML's extensive and highly regarded publications programme, networkers are given the opportunity to present their work to a wider audience. In terms of the organisations that participated in this assessment, they will be encouraged to increase their visibility to an international audience via WLUML publications. Furthermore, WLUML's new Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratisation web portal (currently under development), will also host a space for networkers to publish blogs, think pieces, or other information relevant to their contexts and organisations. Through these two mediums, print and web, WLUML will continue to bring attention to the work of its local partners and networkers.

Urgent Actions and other services to support WHRD security

Regarding the concerns raised about security, WLUML has a long history of providing support via urgent actions, as well as concrete support in terms of small emergency grants (often via the Urgent Action Fund) and advocacy. WLUML also has experience providing expert reports and legal trial observers. These actions should be continued, furthered depending on need, and enhanced by relevant trainings for both local and international activists.

Recommendations for HIVOS

1. Create more training opportunities for women's rights organisations based on the expressed needs presented here;
2. Identify more fundraising opportunities for local/national organizations and communicate this to WR's organisations;
3. Arrange gatherings and/or events and conferences where WHRDs and women's rights organizations can meet and exchange ideas and information on how best to operate in the current climate (addressing the themes of security, fundraising, NGO management and other issues raised in the assessment;
4. Provide more regular informal capacity building of WRs organizations in line with those suggested above by WLUML;
5. Providing additional funds to women's rights organisations to address the issues raised in this needs assessment; and

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[69] Slaoui, Souad (2013), Personal Interview.

6. Provide support for further research into the ongoing needs of women's rights organisations in this region, in order to continue funding relevant capacity building endeavours.

Appendix: Organisations' Websites

Bahrain Centre for Human Rights – http://www.bahrainrights.org/

Bahya Ya Masr – https://www.facebook.com/BaheyaYaMasr; https://twitter.com/BaheyaYaMasr

Baghdad Women's Association – http://www.bwa-iraq.org/

Iraqi Al Amal Association – http://www.iraqi-alamal.org/

One Million Signatures Campaign – http://www.we-change.org/

Jordanian Women's Union - http://www.jwu.itgo.com/bg.htm

Voice of Libyan Women – http://www.vlwlibya.org/en/

Women 4 Libya – http://www.women4libya.org/

ISIS Center for Women and Development – http://www.isiscenter.com/

Nation Union of Women's Organisations – No website

Syrian Women's Forum for Peace – http://syrianwomenforumforpeace.com/; https://www.facebook.com/syrianwomenplatforumforpeace

Women and Democracy Forum – No website

Voice of Women (VOW) Initiative – http://vowinitiative.org/

I Watch – Tunisia – http://www.iwatch-organisation.org/

Etar for Social Development – No website