



## FES GENEVA REPORTS

# ENDING DISCRIMINATION AND REINFORCING WOMEN'S PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE MENA REGION

20 JUNE 2012

IRA SPRIESTERSBACH

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calls for national action to end discrimination against women. Recent UN Security Council Resolutions have emphasized the peace and security focus of CEDAW, highlighting the important role of women in conflict resolution and peace building. One of the major aims of the meeting was to discuss the impact of these global efforts on the Middle East and North Africa region and how women have contributed to the political transformations in the MENA Region.

Speakers:

**H.E. Laura Dupuy Lasserre**, President of the UN Human Rights Council and Permanent Representative of Uruguay to the United Nations in Geneva

**Ms. Mona Rishmawi**, Chief of the Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Dr. Christina Schori Liang**, Co-Director of the New Issue in Security Course at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and Vice-President of Women in International Security - Switzerland

### **Ending Discrimination and Reinforcing Women's Peace and Security**

On Wednesday, 20 June 2012 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung hosted jointly with Women in International Security Switzerland an informal dinner discussion. The theme of the evening was "Ending Discrimination and Reinforcing Women's Peace and Security in the MENA Region". Nineteen women from the MENA region were invited and spoke up for their right to political participation in the processes of peace building, acknowledging the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Women's peace and security is also of great importance for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom who worked with the guests from the MENA region on a civil society resolution addressing this important connection. The dinner contributed a perfect framework for inspiring conversations in a pleasant atmosphere in the course of this work.

Moreover, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Women in International Security Switzerland were honored to present distinguished representatives of the international human rights system, H.E. Ambassador Laura Dupuy Lasserre, President of the UN Human Rights Council and Permanent Representative of Uruguay as well as Mona Rishmawi, Chief of the Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Since Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in order to promote women's peace and security worldwide,

several NGO members who are based in Geneva were invited to join. The dinner thereby provided a unique compound of women's human rights defenders, NGOs and representatives of the international human rights system. As a result, the connection between human rights mechanisms on the international level and work that needs to be done on the ground could be stressed. Since this connection is often missing, ambitious international regulations fail due to the political unwillingness of particular states showing no interest in implementation. Bearing this in mind, the dinner provided a rare opportunity to examine the topic from different angles in a small circle of directly affected people.

Thus, support was expressed for human rights work on the ground, taking into consideration that this work needs to go hand in hand with an internationally coherent legal framework. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) thereby forms a fundamental ground on which further work can be established. Moreover, UN Security Council Resolution 1315 emphasizes the important connection between women, peace and security thereby creating confidence for women human rights defenders. The Resolution reaffirms "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building"<sup>1</sup>.

Alternative mechanisms of the Human Rights Council were also discussed during the event. Attention was drawn to the possibilities of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

---

<sup>1</sup> S/RES/1325 (2000): p. 1

mechanism. Although the UPR is a state-driven process, members of civil society are equally asked to submit information which will be considered during the review.

Besides concrete ways to address the peace and security situation of women in the MENA region, the debate also covered the current political changes in this region. Although the so-called 'Arab Spring' could turn into a spread of democracy and equality, the situation in most countries remains uncertain and violent. Women are mostly excluded from political decision-making processes and hindered to shape their future. Participants agreed that discriminative actions against women in the MENA region are, more than ever, predominant despite the fact that women played a major role in the uprisings.

The discussion also revealed next steps in order to overcome the current discriminative situation for women in the MENA region. It was highlighted that leadership training is central to provide women with necessary knowledge about political decision-making processes, enabling them to take the lead. A higher representation of women in political institutions is also important in order to make sure that the new legal systems adequately address the issue of gender equality and providing women with access to economic resources, thereby strengthening their role in society.

This conclusion is in line with the Security Council Resolution 1325 which stresses that there is a "need to mainstream a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations"<sup>2</sup>. Finally, it became clear that raising awareness

of women's representation in the society is important because the existing role model of women in the MENA region forms a strong cultural obstacle.

After the official part of presentations, discussions continued in smaller circles throughout the evening. The distinguished guests from the MENA region had a rare opportunity to exchange experiences based on the diverse human rights and security situation in their respective countries. The processes of political change vary strongly and confront these women with different challenges. It was therefore important that the civil society community in Geneva expressed their solidarity at this event. Human rights activists in the MENA region need support and the civil society in Geneva can be an important link to the international human rights institutions, raising awareness for this issue and taking a stand for stronger international regulations.

*On the Author:*

*Ira Priestersbach studies Political Science with a focus on International Relations at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz and is currently an intern at FES Geneva.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: p. 2