Libya’s Women: Their role in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building
About this Report

Libyan women will always be known for their strength and determination. Women were key initiators during the February 17th revolution and were active all around Libya, and have continued their work within the community post-revolution. However, due to various security concerns across the country, women have felt limited in their capacity to continue their work.

This report examines women’s current roles in the rule of law, peace building, post conflict reconstruction, and political development in Libya. In 2012, The Voice of Libyan Women (VLW), a Libyan Women’s organization dedicated to providing women with political and economic empowerment, partnered with Saferworld, an independent international organization working to support nations in conflict prevention. The purpose of this partnership was to consult Libyan women and discover how the current security concerns in Libya are affecting their role in the public sphere.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD’s) were conducted in a total of eight cities across Libya, including: Derna, Jamil, Misrata, Sebha, Zawiya, Tripoli, Yefren, and Zwara. Members of civil society, students, teachers, housewives and women with no civic or political activism, joined to share opinions, experiences and recommendations on the role of women in the current security situation, how security influences women's ability to effect positive change in Libya, and how to potentially increase this role in their respective communities. This preliminary report has been produced by VLW in an effort to ensure that those who represent leadership in Libya can encourage the implementation of these recommendations.
Summary

• In order for peace to be truly sustainable it requires the full participation of the whole of Libyan society. Without the active role of women in their local communities and on a national level it is difficult to sustain peace.

• While 33 women were elected to parliament, and women have a more respectable public space than prior to the February 17th Revolution they still remain underrepresented in public office.

• A continuing lack of physical security and the existence of significant legal constraints in post conflict societies hamper women’s integration into political life and leadership.

• In communities which are currently experiencing conflict, the needs and perspectives of women are being overlooked, particularly in regards to disarmament and the rule of law.

• Recommendations to increase women’s participation include gender mainstreaming in a whole government approach to justice and security sector reform. Women identified a lack of general education as well as political will to implements the law and weak (or nonexistent) institutions that have resulted in a lack of faith in the system as major impediments to gender mainstreaming, which have lead to a lack of input of women at the community level on priorities for national budgets and international programs.

Women’s Participation in the Libyan Revolution

Libyan women demonstrated the need for change in Libya through their active role during the revolution. They participated in the revolution by providing food and medicine to revolutionary fighters to sewing flags and raising money, to fundraising and raising morale, to delivering secret messages. Not all women in Libya were able to participate fully in the revolution or since, including cities like Jmail. “It was heated at the time,” said one woman from Jmail, referring to the tensions that existed between her town for being known as pro Ghaddafi and neighboring “revolutionary” towns.

“However much I gave to my country, it will never be enough.”
- Woman from Sebha

Participation and Security in Post – Revolution Libya

The revolution in Libya opened doors to many new opportunities as well as insecurity. More women became more active in the public sphere by creating or joining organizations to attending national and international workshops and trainings. However, following the revolution there have been security threats that have put limits on women’s safety in the public sphere.

“The two months following the revolution were the safest in Libya.”
- Woman from Tripoli.
Key Priorities to Ensuring Security in Libya

The most prominent threat to women’s security in Libya is the lack of protection by national security forces. Many women respect the work that local military brigades have done during the revolution in maintaining stability; however it is evident that with increased security threats there needs to be a unified security force. There is a general agreement among Libyan women that a central security force (army) under the government, must be established first, followed by an activation of the judicial system that can combat security issues, the priority being border control.

Social ties have been essential to women’s security within their community. If incidents do occur, most women would agree that their families would be their first choice to provide security. Women are looking to their local councils to step in to take a bigger leadership role, with help and support provided by the already well-respected tribal and religious leaders in their communities, and to provide a platform of communication between the community and the central government.

Tribal Leaders in Action:

In Tobruk, tribal leaders came together and decided that every celebratory gunshot would result in a fining of 5,000 Libyan Dinars. It worked; celebratory gunshots have stopped in the city.

Key Security Threats in Libya

Borders

All women were concerned by the overall lack of border security. Women, especially in the South were concerned about the open borders. It was a woman from the Western city of Zwara who termed the southern border as, “the gate of hell in Libya.”

There is a widespread understanding amongst all women in Libya that the open borders provide a lack of security and an increase in illegal immigration, drugs and alcohol, and weapons.

Physical Threats – kidnapping, sexual harassment, and banditry

Kidnapping – When asked about their personal security, many women addressed a fear of being kidnapped. The reasons for these kidnappings ranged from random occurrences by criminals to revenge from rival tribes or cities.

Sexual Harassment – Age or level of political activism does not prevent sexual harassment towards Libyan women. “It has gotten worse since the revolution,” said a woman from Tripoli.

Banditry – The majority of women believe that their home city is the safest. While there were stories of criminals doing crimes within their city, most of the fear was looked beyond the city borders and on the journey between cities, where there was a vacuum of security.

Verbal & Societal Issues: Slander, Mistrust in Media, and Lack of Ethics in Government and Civil Society

Slander – As women become more visible, there is a cultural reaction of slander. “People’s talk, it won’t affect her physically, but emotionally it will and it will affect her family, which in turn will affect
her ability to work," said one young woman.

Mistrust in Media – Libya’s history of media under Gaddafi, combined with the current lack of journalism and reporting news has placed mistrust in the media. Women are especially upset that the news is targeted towards men, and does not follow up on reporting issues pertaining to women.

Ethics in Government and Civil Society – The women of Libya want to see “more action, and less talk,” by members of the Libyan government. Politicians are viewed as being corrupt and isolated from the people. Women would like to see their elected members working for the people and engaging the public. Some women have mentioned that members of civil society have become selfish and focused on their own interests, and emphasize the need to work together in order to progress.

Conclusion

“The first step to building the country is through women. She is not the hero, but she is the action!”
Woman from Zawia

Libyan women are proud of their country and have done amazing work in their communities. Given the lack of security, the work of women in the public sphere has lost momentum. It is essential that security measures be put in place in order to provide a safe environment for women and the country to flourish, and that Libyan women be instrumental in the establishment of these security measures.

This is a brief summary of a study done by The Voice of Libyan Women. An official report “Libya’s Women: Their role in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building” will be published in cooperation with Saferworld in the coming months. Publication will be available on www.vlwlibya.org

For more information on this, and other initiatives visit www.vlwlibya.org or contact us at info@vlwlibya.org