Women's voices in the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security Summary Report April 2017

1. Introduction

In November 2016 the UK Government partnered with the UK Gender Action for Peace and Security network (GAPS) to consult with women's civil society organisations and activists on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) priorities in their contexts. The information gathered will be used *inter alia* to inform the development of the UK's 2018-2021 National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS. This collaborative project builds on previous consultations organised by GAPS members in 2011 and 2014 which informed respectively the 2010-2013 and 2014-2017 UK NAPs.

These (2017) consultations were conducted in four of the UK's WPS focus countries/contexts: Myanmar, Somalia, Afghanistan, and in Turkey and Lebanon for the Syria Response.[1] The consultations took place between February and April 2017, in line with the NAP development timeline and context-specific factors.[2] In each country, consultations took place in two locations and were a combination of workshops, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. This allowed partners to ensure diversity in the voices heard, and to understand WPS priorities from a range of sectoral perspectives.

This summary report highlights the key findings from the consultations, setting out the many common priorities that women working for peace and security face in such challenging circumstances, as well as some of the more specific concerns faced by women and civil society organisations in each context. Our intention is to ensure that the next, fourth UK NAP on WPS is firmly grounded in the realities that women face so that objectives and activities taken forward by the UK Government respond directly to their needs and support their initiatives. By highlighting some of the key differences, we reiterate the importance of having context-specific gender and conflict analyses to inform UK priorities and activities at country level.

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[1] GAPS members Amnesty International UK and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom supplemented funds from the Government to run the Syria Response consultations.

[2] At the time of submission, the consultations in Myanmar had only recently been completed, having been delayed from the initial dates due to the organisation of a national peace conference which could not overlap with the WPS consultations.

Based on the collective feedback from participants this report makes a series of recommendations to the UK Government on strategic objectives to include in the next NAP, many of which will apply to other contexts not included in this consultation project, but emphasise that more context-specific activities should be included in future country-level implementation plans.

GAPS and partners warmly welcome this consultation process and commitment from the Government to ensuring the next NAP is strategic, realistic and reflects the daily lives and challenges faced by women in conflict-affected contexts. We hope it will be used as evidence of good practice in the development of future peace and security policies, and that the principle and practice of consulting with civil society on WPS is firmly embedded into all future UK NAPs.

2. Partners

Amnesty International UK: is a part of the global movement of 7 over million people campaigning for justice wherever it has been denied. We investigate and expose abuses, educate and mobilise the public, and help transform societies to create a safer, more just world. We received the Nobel Peace Prize for our life-saving work.

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS): is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network. We are a membership organisation of 16 NGOs and experts in the field of development, human rights, humanitarian and peacebuilding. We were founded to progress the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Our role is to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women in conflict areas worldwide.

Medica Afghanistan: is a non-profit, non-governmental Afghan women's organisation working to eliminate violence against women. We seek to improve the quality of women's lives by providing legal aid, psychosocial counselling, and public advocacy, while also raising awareness and building capacity in the fields of health, education, and law. Medica Afghanistan encourages exchange and cooperation among women from different countries, cultures, social backgrounds and conflicting parties and thus contributes to a process of reconciliation and peace.

Saferworld: is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace.

Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC): is a non-governmental and non-profit making organisation that was established in 2000. SWDC is working to improve the situation of women and other vulnerable groups in Somalia. SWDC's guiding vision is the belief that, with support, women can become empowered to make positive changes in their lives and the lives of their communities.

Somalia Women Solidarity Organisation (SWSO): is a non-governmental organisation which was formed in 2006 and subsequently registered with the Somali Federal Government as well as the Department of Administration and Social Services of Jubbaland State. SWSO is a non-profit making organisation that supplements the Somali Federal Government and Jubbaland State humanitarian efforts in development.

Women for Women International UK: In countries affected by conflict and war, Women for Women International supports the most marginalised women to earn and save money, improve health and well-being, influence decisions in their home and community, and connect to networks for support. By utilising skills, knowledge, and resources, she is able to create sustainable change for herself, her family, and community.

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF): is an international non-governmental organisation with national sections covering every continent, an international

secretariat based in Geneva, and a New York office focused on the work of the United Nations. Since its creation in 1915, WILPF has brought together women from around the world, united in working for peace, to promote political, economic and social justice for all.

Women Now for Development (SFD): is a Syrian non-profit organisation dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in Syrian and host communities by enhancing their political, social, economic and cultural participation. Established in June 2012 and led by Syrian women for Syrian women, Women Now works from the ground up, remaining responsive to the situation of women on the ground.

3. Summary of findings

3.1 Violence against women and girls

"Woman are tortured, raped, sexual violence is used as a tactic in Syrian prisons, which makes any women who is (sic) growing up…want to drop out from the political sphere and from the activism."[3]

Many forms of violence are committed by a range of perpetrators

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) was raised in all of the consultations as a serious and widespread problem. The Syrian participants pointed to the forms of violence that women are subjected to, many of which were prevalent before the conflict, including: domestic violence, so-called "honour" killings, forced and child marriage, sexual violence, trafficking, and other forms of abuse committed by male partners, relatives, and community members, as well as conflict-related violence committed by the regime forces and its allies, ISIS and armed opposition groups. Participants in Afghanistan also raised prevalence of VAWG and the increased number of recorded incidents in recent years; despite difficulties in collecting data on prevalence, domestic violence in particular seemed to be increasing. High prevalence of intimate partner violence was also noted in Myanmar. In Somalia, participants supported the findings from the Syria Response in that the perpetrators of VAWG were men in the home and community as well as armed groups such as the army and militias. They all reiterated the importance of preventing all forms of VAWG in conflict-affected contexts, recognising that they also occur in times of peace and in post-conflict settings. As the consultations indicate, it is also vital that attention is not focused on one type of actor, such as crimes perpetrated only by armed militias, when the evidence given by civil society and activists suggests non-armed actors are also perpetrating VAWG.

Different circumstances affect women and girls' vulnerability to violence

The consultations shed light on the different ways in which women become more vulnerable to VAWG. In Afghanistan, women without familial support or other support networks tend to be more vulnerable to violence both in the home and in shared public spaces. Being an internally displaced woman or girl in Somalia increases the chance of being subjected to violence and exploitation. Participants spoke of internally displaced women and girls crossing check points to collect water or go to school or working in host communities as examples of when VAWG is more likely to occur. Syrian women, whether in Syria or in neighbouring countries, are less able to seek help if they are displaced, living in poverty, in single headed households, or in adolescence. Targeted violence against Syrian women human rights defenders (WHRDs) was also raised in the consultations as means to stop women's rights activism and force women to go underground or into exile for fear of their lives. Therefore understanding the different kinds of vulnerabilities and specific risks faced by different women and girls is essential when considering their ability to safely access services, work, public spaces as well as their ability to safely participate in political processes and activism.

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[3] Workshop participant, Gaziantep (Syria Response consultation)

International responses to VAWG have been limited

> "*The majority of cases of violence against women reported to police and prosecution offices is solved outside the formal justice system— through mediation because of pressure for withdrawal of complaints - by elders with traditional dispute resolution mechanisms.*"[4]

The consultations included discussions on shortcomings in the international community's response to VAWG in their contexts. In Afghanistan and Somalia, participants spoke of women's reliance on informal security and justice mechanisms for reporting VAWG (e.g. family or community mechanisms) and their reluctance or inability to access state services or formal mechanisms. Understanding the specific barriers and challenges women face in accessing security and justice mechanisms is essential before international donors for instance invest in building institutions that are already failing to reach women. The Syrian activists raised serious concerns about politicising efforts to prevent sexual violence. It has led to a narrow and selective focus on types of perpetrators, as referenced above. They also pointed to the international community's emphasis on documenting VAWG crimes; the practice so far has left women who offer testimony without a clear understanding of what happens with their reports. While they recognise and support the importance of gathering such evidence, the provision of survivor services must not be premised on the collection of data and research missions should only go ahead if they are properly resourced, followed up, conducted by Syrians, and have a clear objective on access to justice for survivors. Participants in Myanmar made clear the urgent need for services for survivors, recognising that trauma can limit women's ability to take action and lobby for change.

3.2 Women's participation

Each context has different levels of women's participation in different areas of political, social and economic life, though all consultations told of limited women's participation across the board. Some of the key reasons that prevent women from being able to participate equally and safely in all spheres of life include: patriarchal attitudes; behaviours and traditional norms; violence against women; and structural barriers such as access to resources and closing civil society space.

> "*There are many sexist norms that perpetuate violence in the country, for example people - especially men - don't accept women as political competitors and in general women's presence in social activities.*"[5]

Social and structural barriers limit women's participation

In Afghanistan, participants explained that women are asked to demonstrate their skills and experience to legitimise their participation in decision-making processes, whereas men do not face such hurdles. Even where women are qualified for positions, they are unable to overcome levels of corruption that prevent them from accessing opportunities. Furthermore, where women are involved in local and national politics, including at ministry level, participants felt their roles lacked decision-making powers and they pointed to the need for more women in leadership roles.

Women in Somalia, Myanmar and Afghanistan must overcome strong patriarchal norms and attitudes to work outside of the home in roles traditionally deemed appropriate only for men. In doing so, women are at risk of backlash for defying restrictive social norms. For example, participants in Somalia spoke of religious groups issuing statements against women's participation in politics and women receiving threats from Al Shabaab. Furthermore, clan alliances dominate government structures and are considered to be men's domain; women within clans who are seen as capable leaders become targets for threats and assassinations primarily by armed groups. Women in Myanmar spoke of the absence of basic services such as health and education which perpetuates

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[4] Workshop participant, Kabul (Afghanistan consultation)
[5] Workshop participant, Herat (Afghanistan consultation)

a focus on daily survival and restricts their ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.

> *"During elections, a woman was participating in campaigning for the 30% reservations for women. One of the male clan members in the high position in government, saw her as a threat to his position and accused her of supporting the terrorist group Al Shabaab. Security agencies started checking her profile. She was finally let go once they found the accusation was untrue. Imputing women as belonging to the spoiler groups was one of the ways used to prevent women's political participation."[6]*

Women's political participation in Syria is limited by some of the same reasons as in other contexts. For instance, participants also reported that women are required to prove experience and qualifications to a much greater degree than men. A number of women spoke about Local Councils in Syria; when they had attempted to attend meetings they too had been excluded or subjected to 'shame campaigns' for having been 'allowed' to attend, which reinforces male privilege and control of local services and decision-making. Donors have invested significant resources in the Local Councils and, using examples of good practice, have a responsibility to ensure that women participate in these meetings, occupy leadership positions in Local Councils and to improve the rights of women to participate in meetings and leadership.

> *"When I put forward my vision on gender equality to be incorporated into the political solution, I was dismissed from both my local committee and my political block."[7]*

International efforts to support participation are not always comprehensive

The consultations also provided insights into the ways the international community supports women's participation in peacebuilding, particularly in international processes. For the Syrian participants, a significant proportion of support is dedicated to helping women participate in the Geneva talks and other international conferences; participants welcomed this but stressed that it should not undermine grassroots women's movements. For example, the creation of the Women's Advisory Body to the UN Special Envoy to Syria did not have a transparent process and lacks an accountability mechanism to women's rights activists. Moreover, efforts to bring Syrian women and WHRDs to conferences, such as the London Donor Conference (February 2016), is positive but remains too rushed and last-minute which directly, negatively affects their ability to have influence over the agenda and outcomes.

Findings from Afghanistan similarly recognised the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to women's participation in peacebuilding so that there are links between high-level peace processes and grassroots movements. In the Afghanistan context, women's peacebuilding activities are commonly restricted to the home and family unit; even where women have formed women peace councils or established women-only spaces outside of the domestic space, there remain significant challenges in influencing male-dominated peace processes at all levels. In Afghanistan, women's and girls' education still lags behind men's and boys' and so needs further investment but participants here and in Syria spoke strongly about support for women's rights organisations to improve women's participation.

3.3 Women's rights organisations and movements

Women's activism is vital but under-recognised for peace and security

A fundamental issue that was raised in the consultations is the shortfall in support for women's rights organisations, particularly from the donor community. The Syrian participants emphasised that

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[6] Key informant interview, Mogadishu (Somalia consultation)
[7] Workshop participant, Beirut (Syria Response consultation)

women's struggles for justice and human rights and their humanitarian activities are not only done on very limited budgets but also remain invisible to the international community. They reported that it is difficult to have traction on women's rights issues in Syrian civil society organisations given the scepticism of their male colleagues about the importance of women's participation work, for instance, which is often relegated to being less pressing than other issues. In Somalia, women's participation and leadership in civil society has been vital to achieving more inclusive peacebuilding as women are less able to occupy political space to influence such processes. The participants stressed that women's leadership and activism allows them to be active at the community level and challenge gender norms and other injustices that contribute to and perpetuate conflict and insecurity. In Afghanistan, women's rights organisations and WHRDs have been fundamental to the gains and protections on women's rights. Across all contexts, women's civil society organisations are also important for the delivery of services, particularly those aimed at women and girls such as VAWG services, in addition to their peacebuilding and conflict prevention work.

> *"As the need is immense and the number of activists - even if growing – is still small. The activists tend to operate day and night [and] that often results in women harming their own health. Activists can be psychologically and physically stranded. If they are successful, the tension increases as many girls/women (and men) place their hope on them - from the clients they support to the politicians and other stakeholders, who want to change the society and increase gender justice."*[8]

Women's civil society organisations and activists need more support and investment

The consultations in all contexts identified many common challenges and shortcomings in the ways the international community supports their work. The participants in the Syria Response workshop spoke of the difficulties encountered when the donor community has tended to only fund big international NGOs with big budgets who can implement large-scale programmes, with little consideration of potential partnerships with local organisations and WHRDs. This directly puts at risk the ability of Syrian organisations and WHRDs, who do vital and successful work, to continue their work or be more than service delivery partners. The participants stressed that this should be the time at which the international community invests in the work and resilience of local civil society, especially women's rights groups and WHRDs, for the future rebuilding of Syria. This is especially important given that where women are not present, their rights in peace processes are more at risk and more likely to be traded away.[9]

Donors should adapt to support more women's organisations and movements

The participants in Afghanistan raised the challenge of short-term and project-based funding, which undermines the ability of women's rights organisations to sustain their growth and capacity, as well as their ability to work flexibly and respond to changing contexts. The barriers to accessing financial support in Afghanistan are compounded by the significant decrease in donor support for gender equality work, which leads to increased competition between NGOs for resources and, according to the workshop findings, poorer quality of work delivered by organisations not committed to the achievement of women's human rights. Recommendations from Somalia echoed the calls for prioritising funding to women-led organisations and movements so that they may scale up and become more of a critical mass with greater influence in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.

Some suggestions made to make funding more accessible to women's organisations include: allowing organisations to make applications in their native national language (i.e. not only in English); UK missions clearly communicating the prioritisation of WPS in all relevant funds when making calls for submissions; allowing government funding to include core costs to support the vital work that women's organisations do beyond programme or service delivery; and introducing stand-alone WPS

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[8] Key informant interview (Afghanistan consultation)
[9] Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence, UN Women, 2012
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/03AWomenPeaceNeg.pdf

funding so that the UK is implementing its commitment to put women and girls at the centre of all efforts to build peace and stability. There were also suggestions that the UK could make a concerted effort to fund programmes that support the participation of young women, recognising that their participation is vital for the building of more peaceful and inclusive societies, and that funding should be available to improve the protection and security of human rights defenders who risk their lives working to improve the rights of women and girls in their countries.

3.4 Institutions, security, justice and legal frameworks

The consultations shed light on an interesting range of considerations related to security, justice and legal institutions and frameworks. In Somalia, there was significant reluctance from some participants to engage in discussions on the police and justice system for fear of their safety given the prevalence of nepotism within these institutions. The Syrian participants noted that the complete collapse of the rule of law made this discussion challenging, particularly as recommendations were difficult to formulate while the conflict continues; it was stressed that peace is an essential precondition for the achievement of security and justice for women and girls and that protracted war, militarisation and systemic human rights violations by the regime will limit the most ambitious National Action Plan. In Afghanistan, however, more specific recommendations were given as there are a number of frameworks, plans, laws and agreements in writing that commit to delivering security and justice for women, but there remain multiple challenges in implementing these.

Women's access to security and justice is linked to their participation

The findings from the Afghanistan, Somalia and Myanmar consultations, nonetheless, told of women's inability to access security and justice. Women's access to formal justice relies heavily on the presence of women in the formal security and justice sectors which are male-dominated. This was especially important for addressing women's specific security concerns; women for instance are less likely to report sexual violence crimes directly to men. Some of the reasons for limited women's employment in the security and justice sectors include: traditional gender-based inequalities and social norms which restrict women to the home; the use of Sharia law (in Afghanistan and Somalia); insecurity and danger in the workplace; lack of appropriate facilities and uniform; reliance on informal mechanisms; and biased application processes which favour men.

Women's exclusion embeds the cycle of violence

Other barriers include the lack of information available to women about what services are available to them. This is compounded for women and girls who are displaced or from minority communities. There are also major disparities in services available between rural and urban areas. Participants in Somalia said that women feel resigned to the fact they cannot access security or justice, further normalising the violence that they are subjected to, which contributes to a cycle of violence, abuse, silence and impunity. This impunity is worsened by the lack of accountability and oversight in the fragmented security sector in Somalia. This was echoed in findings from Myanmar, where village administrators or community elders may simply impose a fine on a man guilty of rape; weak rule of law and no accountability perpetuates the cycle of impunity.

> 'Men feel that they can rape three women for 300,000MMK'[10]

Existing laws need to be implemented

Even with relatively strong legal frameworks in Afghanistan, women still have limited access to justice as these laws and policies are poorly implemented, if they have implementation mechanisms at all. The legal frameworks are also not consistent or comprehensive. The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, for instance, is undermined by the fact women can be charged with

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[10] Workshop participant, Kachin State (Myanmar consultation). 300,000 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) is roughly equivalent to GBP 180.

committing '*zina*' or '*moral crimes*' which is not technically recognised by Afghan law. The EVAW law may also soon reopen for debate in Parliament and civil society is concerned about the risk of Parliament choosing to decriminalise child marriage, forced marriage and polygamy; this demonstrates that even with legal frameworks in place, equal access to justice is fragile for women and girls.

Findings from the Syria Response echo some of the challenges of fragmented security and justice sectors. Unconstitutional special courts, civilians tried in military courts, passing terrorism laws (which predominantly target peaceful activists), and immunity for security forces were all reported as abuses committed by the regime and ways in which accountability under a legal system is near impossible. In areas held by ISIS and other extremist groups, the security and justice sectors are equally strictly controlled by armed men who do not recognise women's fundamental human rights.

4. Summary of recommendations

The following section summarises many of the common recommendations that came out of the consultations. This is not an exhaustive list of recommendations and each individual report contains a comprehensive list of recommended actions for the UK Government which the summary below intends to support, not replace.

Violence against women and girls:

- Adopt a comprehensive approach when preventing, responding to and raising awareness of all forms of VAWG committed by all types of perpetrators. Link the UK's efforts to prevent VAWG with the broader spectrum of work on women's rights, including promoting women's political participation, economic empowerment, education and sexual and reproductive health.
- Support long-term normative change to prevent VAWG, including: changing social and gender norms, increasing women's participation in security and justice sectors and removing structural barriers to women accessing security and justice services.
- Fund a comprehensive approach to service provision including: quality shelters, sexual reproductive health and psycho-social support, and recognising the role of state and non-state VAWG services.
- Increase public knowledge and awareness of women's rights, VAWG as a human rights violation, and VAWG services available.

Women's participation:

- Scale up programming for building the capacity of activists and WHRDs on peacebuilding, and conflict prevention, mediation and resolution.
- Support ongoing women-led local initiatives to politically mobilise women in influencing peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.
- Ensure that women from all backgrounds and political spheres are integrated into peace processes as negotiators and mediators at all levels, and their needs, concerns and suggestions are reflected in all peace agreements.
- Invest in education opportunities for women and girls in professional jobs such as police and lawyers and in higher education through scholarship opportunities.
- Go beyond gender sensitive to gender transformative approaches to improving women's participation by supporting programmes that challenge gender norms that perpetuate violence, gender inequality and women's exclusion.
- Practice meaningful dialogue and inclusion of women in UK-hosted conferences, and advocate with other governments and international organisations to do the same. Speak out against spaces and/or processes, which exclude them.

Women's rights organisations and movements:

- Focus on building civil society resilience and provide direct funding to women's rights groups, which is long term, flexible, and support core costs.
- Fund women-led peacebuilding initiatives at the local level, recognising this should complement national-level processes.
- Allow funding applications to be made in official languages of conflict-affected countries.
- Introduce specific funding streams for Women, Peace and Security and minimum targets for all other peacebuilding funds that go directly to women's rights organisations.
- Fund programmes that support the work of women human rights defenders, recognising that they are targets of violence because of their activism.

Institutions, security, justice and legal frameworks:

- Ensure all gender and conflict analyses include mappings of formal and informal security and justice mechanisms in order to understand how women and girls are able to access or are excluded from them.
- Ensure all UK-supported security sector reform (SSR) processes have clear objectives on women's recruitment and equal access, and that women as well as men are involved in SSR programme design and delivery to improve gender sensitivity in formal and informal security and justice institutions.
- Use diplomatic influence and development support to ensure women's rights legislation and policies are being implemented at the national and local levels.