

**Peace Brigades International - NL**

**Women for Peace**



## **Report symposium**

### ***Strong Women: Enabling Action through Protection***

**3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016**



**Written by Anne Kesteloo**

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## ***Strong Women: Enabling Action through Protection***

### ***Prologue***

Peace Brigades International - Netherlands and Women for Peace organized a symposium on national governmental support and civil society protection for Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in the Arab world. This event called ***Strong women: Enabling Action through Protection***, took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016 in Utrecht. Several WHRDs from distinct (post)conflict states from the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region and representatives of organizations and the Dutch government participated in this symposium. We thank all of them for their valuable contributions.

Thanks to the variety of speakers and group sessions, we feel that we have managed to reach the symposium's main goal: raising awareness on the dangerous work of WHRDs in the Arab region, and fueling inspiration among Dutch civil society and governmental institutions to enhance joint action to support these women. A heartfelt thank you to the (W)HRDs from Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Libya, who contributed to the Joint Initiative research by sharing their brave stories in the online survey and interviews.

We are also grateful to all partners that helped us in sponsoring this event: Oxfam Novib and Cordaid.

Furthermore, we want to thank the following persons for their valuable contributions to the introductory speeches, moderation of case sessions, and lively debates: Rosien Herweijer, Tiny Hannink, Joke Oranje, Emma Jansen, Annemieke Burmeister, Leonie Grit, Eline Wijnen, Anne Kesteloo, Mekka Abdelgabar, Radio Dabanga, Rana Noman, Marjolijn Verhoog, Frank Huisingh and Manon Olsthoorn.

In addition, a special mention for all the interns and volunteers of PBI Netherlands for their indispensable collaboration in logistics, interpreting and minute taking. We were also pleased by the excellent service provided by Het Huis, the festive live music of Calamity Jazz and the touching exhibition of Women of Syria. Froukje Klop has provided beautiful photos of the event which can be seen in this report. And lastly, the event would not have been complete without the binding charms of our hostess Elisabeth van der Hoogen.

## ***Introduction***

Joint Initiative for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Arab World is a cooperation between Peace Brigades International and Women for Peace with the purpose to improve the safety of Women Leaders in Human Rights organizations in the Arab world as far as possible.

Women leaders in the Arab world are increasingly active as human rights defenders in the public sphere. Challenging their society to stand up for women's rights and human rights in general and participating in peace building activities such as mediation and peace agreements. We assume that there is a need for strategies and policies to better protect them as these are risky activities, especially in cases where women are not accepted to act in the public sphere. While protection programmes for Latin American women human rights defenders have been developed, there are no initiatives known that fit to the situation in Arab speaking countries.

The Joint Initiative started with a consultation among some women human rights defenders themselves, to map what they consider to be a necessary contribution for their safety in action.

### *Steps in the project:*

Joint Initiative started in September 2015, as a follow up on the symposium *Strong Women: Who protects them?* in May 2014 and the drafting of a comprehensive guide on WHRD's protection in English, French, Spanish and Arabic after that. The steps that were taken in the project after that were:

1. Gathering around 24 reliable and well informed contacts in the Arab World through our network
2. Drafting an online survey among WHRD's in the Arab world (in Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Libya)
3. Opening a website page in Arabic at [www.vrouwenvoorvrede.nl](http://www.vrouwenvoorvrede.nl)
4. Conducting depth interviews with some WHRD's in Egypt and Sudan to know how they define safety for themselves, how they assess the risks that affect them and their work, whatever strategies they apply to keep going and what they would expect from us
5. Organizing symposium *Strong Women: Enabling Action through Protection* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016

The results of the project are published in the final report, which can be found on the [www.strong-women.org](http://www.strong-women.org) website.

***Summary symposium***

On Thursday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016 in Utrecht, a symposium organized by Peace Brigades International and Women for Peace took place, called: "Strong Women: Enabling Action through Protection".

The event was centred around the work that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from the Arab region do in their countries for justice and peace. The occasion for this was the Joint Initiative project of the two organizations, in which a research was conducted on the security risks and protection mechanisms of these women by an online survey and a consult to Egypt and Sudan. You can find the report on [www.strong-women.org](http://www.strong-women.org).

Attention was also given on how Dutch civil society and governmental institutions can support the actions of these WHRDs by providing them with better protection. Aiming at spreading, deepening and sharing knowledge and expertise among the participants, the symposium also had a goal to raise awareness about the importance of the dangerous work of these women, and the necessity to protect them.

We have realized this by holding three case sessions, on Egypt, Sudan and Yemen. This way the audience was split in smaller groups to speak to each other about the issues of those conflicts, to engage in a discussion and to formulate recommendations.

The recommendations of the Egypt group focused on finding solutions for dealing with the challenging and unsafe circumstances Egyptian human rights organizations work in, in terms of applying for funds from INGO's, travel restrictions, organizing trainings and cyber security. The key words were 'flexibility' and 'coordination'.

The recommendations of the Sudan group focused on creating a global network which should connect international and Sudanese (W)HRDs, organizations and journalists, so that international support to their work could be given, but also to put pressure on the Sudanese government and UNAMID. A follow-up meeting was organized and facilitated by PBI to make this idea a reality.

The recommendations of the Yemen group focused on increasing the publicity of the conflict in the Netherlands and the need for support for Yemeni (diaspora) youth and WHRDs by the Dutch government and civil society in order to ensure their voices are heard in the peace process.

After the group sessions a panel discussion followed and the formulated recommendations were presented to the plenary. The panel consisted of Mekka Abdelgabar (director Foundation VOND), Annemieke Burmeister (country director Egypt of Oxfam Novib), Rana Noman (Yemeni freelance journalist) and Frank Huisingh (policy officer on human rights defenders of Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Manon Olsthoorn, cluster coordinator on human rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held a speech to conclude this symposium.

*"Real change can only be realized from the inside. We really need to support the local HRDs within the communities to achieve sustainable progress."*

The symposium ended with drinks, live music by the band "Calamity Jazz" and the exhibition "Women of Syria" with drawings and stories of Syrian women (<http://womenofsyria.com/>).

**Full Report****Symposium “Strong Women: Enabling Action through Protection”**

Thursday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March from 14.00 till 17.00

Het Huis, Boorstraat 107, Utrecht

**Programme of the symposium:**

Chairwoman of the day: *Elisabeth van der Hoogen*

13.30 – 14.00	Coffee and tea
14.00 – 14.10	Welcome speech by <i>Rosien Herweijer</i> (chairwoman PBI Netherlands) and <i>Tiny Hannink</i> (chairwoman Women for Peace)
14.10 – 14.30	Presentation Joint Initiative research results by <i>Joke Oranje</i> (consultant)
14.30 – 15.45	Case sessions: <u>1. Case session Egypt (studio 3)</u> On the role of civil society and protecting local organizations with <i>Annemieke Burmeister</i> (country director Egypt of Oxfam Novib) and <i>Leonie Grit</i> (program officer Women on the Frontline at Hivos) <u>2. Case session Sudan (studio 2)</u> On the role of the UN Security Council and their mandate to protect women from sexual violence with <i>Mekka Abdelgabar</i> (director of Foundation VOND) and a representative of <i>Radio Dabanga</i> <u>3. Case session Yemen (studio 1)</u> On the role of the Dutch government and its implementation of UNSCR 1325 with <i>Rana Noman</i> (freelance Yemeni journalist) and <i>Marjolijn Verhoog</i> (programme coordinator 1325 in the MENA-region of Oxfam Novib)
15.45 – 16.00	Short break
16.00 – 16.45	Panel discussion with <i>Mekka Abdelgabar</i> (VOND), <i>Rana Noman</i> (journalist), <i>Annemieke Burmeister</i> (Oxfam Novib) and <i>Frank Huisinigh</i> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
16.45 – 17.00	Closing speech by <i>Manon Olsthoorn</i> (coordinator human rights team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
17.00 – 17.10	Conclusions and acknowledgements
17.10 – 18.00	Networking in the lobby with live band Calamity Jazz and exposition Women of Syria

**Kick-off**

After some coffee and tea, the day was kicked off by hostess *Elisabeth van der Hoogen*.

The event was centred around the work that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from the Arab region do in their countries for justice and peace. The occasion for this was the Joint Initiative project of the two organizations, in which a research was conducted on the security risks and protection mechanisms of these women by an online survey and a consult to Egypt and Sudan. You can find the report on [www.strong-women.org](http://www.strong-women.org).

Or as *Rosien Herweijer*, chairwoman of PBI Netherlands, stated in her welcoming speech:

*"If we know more on how these brave, strong women in the Arab region protect themselves and their loved ones, while fighting for their rights, then we can better support them in their work for a good cause."*

*Tiny Hannink*, chairwomen of Women for Peace, added to this in her introductory speech:

*"In time of war, women are victim and prey. But with the help of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, we try hard to achieve that women can use their force."*



***Presenting the Joint Initiative research***

The occasion of the symposium was to present the results of the Joint Initiative research on the safety risks and protection mechanisms of women human rights defenders (WHRD's) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Therefore, the researcher and writer of the report, consultant *Joke Oranje*, presented this part of the symposium and discusses her findings and concerns.

She started off with the urgent statement:

*"These are difficult times, especially the MENA-region is in turmoil, and it is important to give it our attention. But not only on the negative aspects like the bombing or the killing, because they do not offer sustainable solutions. We believe the issues are more profound than that. There are deep patterns in society of problematic relations that underlie these conflicts. And I am convinced that one of these patterns is the relationship between men and women."*

She moreover discussed her consultation in Egypt and Sudan and contemplated on the concepts of protection and security. For example, the WHRDs she met there, told her they had enough, or even too much, protection by either male family members or military soldiers, that hindered their physical mobility and space to do their work. This is mainly due to threats like sexual harassment, intimidation and assault because of their unusual public actions in relation to their supposed gender role. Which resulted in isolation is for these

women; a great risk in itself. Joke urged that we need to know more about how sexual violence is used to limit the actions of WHRDs and how to combat it consistently.

On the other hand, WHRDs thought that in some occasions foreign involvement would further endanger them, since contact with Western actors is seen as treason. However, these women had many strategies and methods to protect themselves and their families on an individual level. These women stated themselves, what they need from the international community, is that their organizations are protected from governmental interference and intimidation, and to minimize obstacles in applying for funds and visa's.

Joke urged the audience to join their expertise and forces during the case sessions and come up with plans to support these women in reality.

**Case sessions**

In order to put these intentions into action, we organized three case sessions after this plenary meeting, to enhance the knowledge on specific conflicts and issues and to encourage discussion among the participants. The visitors could pick a case session of their own interest, leading to diverse groups of people with different backgrounds.

We chose to focus on Egypt, Sudan and Yemen, because the Joint Initiative report also discusses these contexts in-depth and because of their representation of the diverse of issues in the MENA-region. Also per session, various roles of Dutch and international actors could be discussed in these (post)conflict countries while focussing on a specific theme.

The case of Egypt focused on the role of the local civil society and how to protect these organizations from abroad. The case of Sudan focused on the role of the UN Security Council in protecting women of sexual violence and how to increase women's political participation in the peace processes. The case in Yemen focused on the role of the Dutch government and its attempts to protect WHRD's whom are still in the conflict area or are displaced and hereby implement UNSCR 1325.

The goal of the case sessions was to formulate one general recommendation per case, including an action plan to put this recommendation into practice. In

order to have a large impact on improving the protection of WHRD's in the MENA-region and enable their actions, we needed to come up with concrete requests. As always, this was a challenge in the limited time we had.

## **Egypt**



Facilitating this case session was *Emma Jansen*, coordinator of PBI Netherlands.

The country expert who introduced this case session was *Annemieke Burmeister*, Egypt country specialist of Oxfam Novib. During her presentation she reacted to the Joint Initiative report, stating that it contains interesting observations on the situation of WHRDs in Egypt. She spoke about how Oxfam Novib is not active in the country anymore, since of the strict control of NGO's and human rights activist work there. Because of the corrupt and militant regime, HRDs have a difficult time in practicing their work, which is seen as an opposition to the government. As a result, WHRDs especially, are oppressed by these parties and are threatened with gender based violence.

The second speaker of this case session was *Leonie Grit*, program officer of Women on the Frontline at Hivos. She spoke about how human rights activist work in the whole MENA-region has many risks. Although women's organizations could still exist, they need help with their physical and mental safety, and protection against oppression and organizational freedom.



Especially getting funds from international institutions is nearly impossible because of the state's strict monitoring and requires manoeuvring of naming and/or categorizing the organizations activities differently, for example such as charity. The development of knowledge on how to safely operate in an activist organization should also be deepened (such as cyber security) by international NGO's, but is hard to organize trainings due to visa issues or travel restrictions.

## ***Sudan***



Facilitating this case session was *Anne Kesteloo*, intern for project Strong Women/Joint Initiative at PBI Netherlands.

The country expert who introduced this case session was *Mekka Abdelgabar*, founder and director of Foundation VOND, an organization for solidarity among women from Darfur, and is a Sudanese WHRD. As a response to the NAPII, where Sudan was a focus country, VOND started the LEAP program: Women Leadership for Peace Building. LEAP started in 2013 with a pilot in Khartoum, is still running and is training Darfuri women and coaching women on resolution 1325 during workshops. A big part of LEAP is training women to be mediators, an unusual role for women in Sudan, but a necessary one to become "agents for peace" according to Mekka. The project has been successful so far: VOND is getting very positive feedback from the people who participate in mediation. The role of women as mediators is highly appreciated by the community, the national

government and INGO's. Mekka her recommendation was that the knowledge and experiences of WHRDs and organizations in Sudan should be shared and to build a stronger network between these groups.

The second speaker of this case session as *a representative of Radio Dabanga*, an radio station that spreads independent news on Darfur from Free Press Unlimited, based in Amsterdam. Besides news that the correspondents, based in Darfur bring, Radio Dabanga also speaks with listeners themselves: they often call in with news about what is happening in the area. Something that happens a lot is that family members of rape victims call in to report the crime. Sexual violence still has a big social stigma in Darfur. Most rape cases will not be filed and trailed in court. Family members call the radio as a way, sometimes their only way, to report the incident. News reports are important because they can be used during official investigation into incidents that the Sudanese government tries to cover up: for example the mass rape case in Tabit. Radio Dabanga helps to get the news into the world so it can be verified. The representative shared Mekka's recommendation on the exchange of information and building bridges, in this case; between news and HRDs and organizations.

During the discussion, *Fenna ten Berge*, a freelance researcher, writer and expert on gender and Islam, also mentioned her recommendations for Sudan. She stated that religious leaders should be involved in women's rights and talk about these topics publicly, which can have a huge impact on the community. She also addresses the need for an organization that could help smaller Sudanese organizations with regulations, security matters and applying for funds.

## **Yemen**



Facilitating this case session was *Rosien Herweijer*, chairperson of PBI Netherlands.

The country expert who introduced this case session was *Rana Noman*, a Yemeni freelance journalist and anthropologist who also did research for the Joint Initiative report. During her presentation, she first gave a clear overview of the situation in Yemen, namely; mass scale poverty, (sexual) violence, the lack of access to education, employment and health care. There is an overall lacking of human rights and especially youth and women are disproportionately affected by this. On top of that, it is even more dangerous for women to raise criticism about their country or to engage in activist work. Rana demonstrates this by naming several WHRDs, journalists and artists who have been threatened, forced to leave the country or killed because of their work. In conclusion, Rana states a few urgent requirements for the youth residing in Yemen or diaspora youth, namely; psychological rehabilitation, moral support, job opportunities, scholarships and overall safety. Furthermore, Rana also has suggestions on how the Dutch government can assist Yemeni WHRDs and a call for more cooperation between these parties, including Dutch civil society and NGO's.

The send speaker of this case session was *Marjolijn Verhoog*, programme coordinator 1325 in the MENA-region of Oxfam Novib. She is involved in two projects on Yemen, but due to the conflict its execution is outside of the country. The projects focus on women, peace and security by either collaborating with Yemeni diaspora women or engagement with social media to make the struggles of the women of Yemen more known. The challenges Marjolijn mentioned during her work are difficulties is acquiring visa for Yemeni HRDs, getting into the country and visiting organizations. Finally, she stated that flexibility in programmes is important for NGO's to do relevant work in a conflict area and that moral support for Yemeni diaspora is crucial.

*Job Maarleveld*, country officer on Yemen of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also spoke briefly on his professional experiences on the country and WHRDs. He shared Marjolijn her concerns and challenges; almost no embassy personnel was active in Yemen, but had to work in neighbouring countries, and programmes had to be adjusted to the conflict situation.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations were presented to the whole audience after the case sessions by country experts *Annemieke Burmeister*, *Mekka Abdelgabar* and *Rana Noman*.

The recommendations that came from the case session of Egypt were targeted at Dutch NGOs and touched upon several issues, namely:

- Find a way to organize safe trainings for WHRDs, whether in or out of the country, and thus to deal with travel restrictions
- Find a way to deal with the unsafety for Egyptian organizations to work on human rights in relation to INGO's supporting them, for instance better coordination and flexibility of funding
- Engage in partnerships with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other INGO's
- Every programme should include an emergency fund
- Offer qualitative strategies for cyber security for Egyptian organizations
- Change the public view in Egypt of WHRDs and the understanding of their work

The recommendation that came from the case session of Sudan focused on the notion that the group should come together again in a meeting facilitated by PBI and touched upon several issues, namely:

*"To unite the expertise of the participants of the case session, a platform must be established to help Sudanese (women) human rights defenders and organizations, assisting in rules and regulations, harassment issues and social security. It should enhance a global network, connecting Sudanese and international organizations, journalists and human rights defenders. Their combined efforts should result in putting pressure on the Sudanese government, the UNAMID and the UNSC."*

The recommendations that came from the case session of Yemen also touched upon several issues, namely:

- More attention is needed for the Yemeni conflict in the Dutch press and public discussions
- The Dutch government and NGO's need to show support to Yemeni youth, women and activist organizations, bring them together, encourage knowledge exchange and learning to ensure their voices are heard in the peace process
- Attend however possible to humanitarian needs and link humanitarian support to other types of support like peacebuilding
- Come up with solutions for constraints derived from the war context, like travel risks, obtaining visa and organizational funding



**Panel discussion**

The panel members were: *Annemieke Burmeister*, *Mekka Abdelgabar*, *Rana Noman* and *Frank Huisingh* (programme officer Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). After presenting the recommendations, hostess Elisabeth van der Hoogen stirred up the discussion between the panel members, completed with questions and remarks from the audience.

After the recommendations of Egypt were explained, *Emma Jansen*, facilitator of the group and coordinator of PBI Netherlands, added that since being aligned or receiving money from international entities parties can be counterproductive for local organizations, funding strategies should be better coordinated and more flexible. *Frank Huisingh* responded that the Dutch government are in contact with Egyptian NGO's and HRDs through the embassy, but that these contacts could be strengthened when necessary.

*Mekka Abdelgabar* explained that the recommendations of Sudan are formed under the precondition that the case session group should meet again for put words into actions. She mentions that the women as mediators in the conflict area has proven to be successful and that a united global platform and network will help with the coordination with Sudanese WHRDs. *Annemieke Burmeister* responds that the collaboration between WHRDs in Sudan are quite powerful and a learning example for other countries that are facing restricting civil society laws and regulations. *Stella Ismael*, director of African Sky, adds that Sudanese

diaspora women should be involved with the global network, so that international links can be made.

*Rana Noman* states that according to her, more media attention on the situation in Yemen is needed, and as a consequence, more support for people there. Also, more women need to be included in the peace negotiations in order to achieve sustainable solutions. *Job Maarleveld*, Yemen country officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reacts that it is difficult for national parties to understand this need, but that his department works parallel with the UN office and UN Women to get women to be part of the peace process. *Marjolijn Verhoog*, 1325 coordinator in the MENA-region of Oxfam Novib, adds that political participation of women in the peace process is also hindered by the continuing war situation.

***Closing speech***

*Manon Olsthoorn*, cluster coordinator Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had the honour to conclude this symposium. In her speech she reacted to the recommendations that were made and the work her department does on WHRDs in the MENA-region.

She began by stating that the subject matter is extremely difficult to tackle, but highly necessary to revise and that this symposium was a rich get together to create ideas and initiatives. She continued that she appreciated the title and aim of the symposium; how we can create safe spaces for HRDs to act.

*"Because real change can only be realized from the inside. We really need to support the local HRDs within the communities to achieve sustainable progress."*

She told that her department mainly does this via embassies, whom are in contact with HRDs and organizations, and following trials. Furthermore, coordination with the EU and UN in the countries can be positive forces in terms of silent diplomacy and public statements. But at the same time, she mentioned the difficulty of deciding when visibility is effective and when it becomes dangerous. She shared that she and her colleagues are struggling with this issue on a daily basis.

But she hoped with the launch of the third National Action Plan of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the need to work closer with women and local groups in conflict transformation and peace process is underlined and acted upon.





At the end of the afternoon there was an occasion to discuss the findings of the symposium with drinks, snacks, live music of the band "Calamity Jazz" and the exposition "Women of Syria" with drawings and stories of Syrian women in the midst of the conflict (<http://womenofsyria.com/>).



***Follow-up***

With the recommendations formed and (new) connections made, the symposium hopefully helped moving forward in the protection of WHRDs in the MENA region.

The Sudan case session group already decided to meet again after the symposium to discuss how to make the plan of creating a global network and platform for connecting international and Sudanese WHRDs, organizations and journalists a reality. The meeting will be organized and facilitated by PBI Netherlands and Foundation VOND.

We hope that the Egypt and Yemen group will follow.