Gender in the Security Sector:
a Cultural and a Political Challenge
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Security sector reform means transforming the security sector/system, which includes all the actors, with their roles, responsibilities and actions, working together to manage and operate the system in a manner that is more consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of good governance and thus contributes to a well-functioning security framework[1]. Security Sector Reform (SSR) working definitions must be comprehensive and must include: intelligence agencies, military intelligence, police forces, the army in its domestic role and praetorian guards (republican, royal or presidential)[2] .

Implementing any reform in any field on the ground can be confronted by severe resistance factors. This paper will focus particularly on cultural and political challenges as the main obstacles to gender diversification in the security sector in the Arab world.

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[1]Yezid Sayigh, "Security Sector Reform in the Arab World: Challenges of Developing an Indigenous Agenda", Arab Reform Initiative Thematic Studies, December 2007, available at http://arab-reform.net/spip.php?article1476.
[2] Bassma Kodmani and May Chartouni-Dubarry, "The Security Sector in Arab Countries: Can it be Reformed?" IDS Bulletin Volume 40, No 2, March 2009, Transforming Security and Development in an Unequal World.

The definition of gender in this paper refers to the roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviors and values that society ascribes to men and women. 'Gender' therefore refers to learned differences between men and women, which is different from 'sex' that refers to the biological differences between males and females and will not be part of this paper. Integrating a gender perspective into security sector oversight does not simply mean including more women. Though full and equal representation of women is an essential step towards gender equality, it does not ensure that gender perspectives are taken into account. Instead, the integration of gender issues, known as gender mainstreaming is: "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated"[3]. In fact, gender roles vary widely within and across cultures and can change over time[4].

Some might think of culture in terms of language, religion or food, and even though these elements might be part of a certain cultural setting, they are not culture as such. It is here where the confusion begins: culture is hard to define. Others see it as a patterned way of thinking, feeling and reacting, while a third party can define it as a set of shared meaning systems or as a set of standards of perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating and acting. To Talcott Parsons, culture is a patterned system of symbols that can direct the orientation of action[5]. According to Edgar Schein, culture is a pattern of basic assumptions that help one to cope with problems. In fact, all these definitions will be put into consideration while addressing culture as one of the main obstacles to gender diversification in security sector reform in the Arab world. This papers attempts to discuss security sector reforms in the Arab region from the perspective of the role that women can play in this reform, as the main actor in society who suffers from an insecure environment and who can have a significant role in strengthening security. The paper will look at how and to what extent cultural and political challenges stand in the way of such a reform.

Security Challenges for Women in the Arab Region

Prior to discussing women's role in the security sector reforms in the Arab world, it is worth investigating the conditions of women in the region. The status of women differs from country to country, but is commonly controlled by the *shari'a* law, except for Tunisia. Currently 17 out of 22 Arab nations have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979). However, a general overview of the conditions of women in different countries still shows a high degree of women subordination. For instance, in Syria, almost 14 % of families still identified their daughters' future husbands in recent years[6]. Similarly, 76 % of Iraqi's respondents to a UNDP survey said that girls in their families were forbidden from attending school after 2003[7]. Women are also more vulnerable to insecurity and suffer from several women-specific security hazards:

1. Honor murders are usually perpetrated by male relatives acting to restore "family honor". This is one form of gender-based violence that still exists in Upper Egypt, Jordan and Palestine and has increased dramatically in Iraq since 2003.

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[3] Eden Cole, Kerstin Eppert and Katrin Kinzelbach, *Public Oversight of the Security Sector*, UNDP, 2008.
[4] Bastick, Megan and Kristin Valasek, *Security Sector Reform and Gender*, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW 2008
[5] Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, *Toward a general theory of action*, New York, Harper and Row, 1951.

[6] See Gihan Abou Zeid, *Arab youth strategizing*, UNDP, 2006.
[7] Ibid.

2. Female genital mutilation (FGM) has been a tradition in some Arab countries like Egypt, Sudan and Yemen. WHO estimates that between 100 and 140 million girls and women in the world have undergone some form of FGM. Every year, approximately 3 million girls and women are subjected to FGM[8].

3. Domestic and intimate partner violence includes physical and sexual attacks against women at home, within the family or within an intimate relationship. Statistics show that 61.7 % of married women in the Palestinian Territory were exposed to psychological violence, 23.3 % exposed to physical violence and 10.9 % exposed to sexual violence at least once by their husbands during the year 2005[9].

4. Gender-specific community violence is manifested in sexual harassment in the street, harassment in the transportations and recently harassment in schools.

5. Human trafficking is also a phenomenon that concerns girls and women in particular. Every year, 500,000 to 700,000 women and girls are trafficked across international borders globally. Reports have identified Egypt as a transit zone for human trafficking.

6. In the Arab world, women are also frequently confronted with harassment and targeting by security sector forces as part of a strategy to destabilize opposition movements.

7. Last but not least women are the main target and the largest victim group in civil wars and military conflicts[10]. For

instance, in Darfur, while men and boys risk death and forced recruitment if they leave the confines of the refugee camp, women risk rape and sexual violence since they are charged to collect firewood for cooking, due to traditional gender roles[11].

Hence integrating a gender perspective into security sector oversight does not simply mean including more women for the sake of full and equal representation of women: it also includes ensuring that gender perspectives are taken into account in order to find lasting solutions to the security challenges women are confronted with. In fact, because of the different roles women and men play in society, largely based on gender, they have different security needs. These can be better assessed by integrating gender diversification in the security sector.

Why Gender Diversification is Important to Security Sector Reform

There is strong recognition that security sector reform (SSR) should meet the different security needs of men, women, boys and girls. The integration of gender issues is also crucial to the effectiveness and accountability of the security sector and to local ownership and legitimacy of SSR processes[12].

At national level, the integration of gender issues into SSR processes is not only necessary to comply with international and regional laws, but also to enhance local ownership, effective service delivery and oversight and accountability.

Women can play an effective role in the security sector through security management

[8] Ibid.
[9] Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
[10] Gihan Abou Zeid, "Violence Against Women in the Arab World", presentation delivered during the week of November 9-13, 2008, available at http://www.devtechsys.com/gender_integration_workshop/presentations/gender_based_violence.pdf.
[11] Human Rights Watch, "No Protection: Rape and Sexual Violence Following Displacement", available at http://hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/darfur0505/3.htm.
[12] Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek, *Security Sector Reform and Gender*, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, 2008.

and oversight bodies, such as parliaments and their relevant legislative committees. However women in the Arab world are underrepresented in the legislature. The same applies to their representation in civil society. Although civil society actors are still weak in the Arab world, there have been a few exemplary success stories of including women, such as in the "kefayah[13]" movement in Egypt, in the media, including private TV channels, in academia through curriculums and teaching methodology and through NGOs that empower women and monitor the security system.

At international level, integrating gender into security sector reform is necessary to comply with international and regional laws, instruments and norms regarding security and gender. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) demands that women participate in the formulation and implementation of government policies; that women hold public office at all levels of government; that the rights of women are legally protected; that public authorities and institutions refrain from any act or practice of discrimination against women; and that all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women are repealed[14]. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) aims to achieve a gender balance in international judicial bodies; training in gender issues for judges, prosecutors and other officials; reducing excessive military spending and controlling the availability of armaments; and gender-sensitive training for peacekeeping forces[15]. In addition, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (2000) encourages the equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance of peace and security and the integration of gender issues into peacekeeping, peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction[16]. The Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Plan of Action (2000) call for the integration of gender and full participation of women in all aspects of peace processes and peacekeeping[17].

Women also have a vital role to play in the security sector in post-conflict countries. The Brahimi report on reforming peacekeeping published in 2000 stresses the importance of gender diversification in peacekeeping forces[18]. Female soldiers will be more trusted by women at home or in refugee camps, which is especially important in case these women are traumatized. Such a reform is essentially needed in the Arab world, where civil conflicts have highly threatened women's security, like in Iraq, Sudan, Somalia or Yemen.

Impediments for the Inclusion of Women in the Security Sector in the Arab Region

The obstacles hindering women's ability to become effective actors in the security sector vary from political to cultural ones. First, all countries of the region without exception have a culture of chauvinism that dominates the security sector. This is an inseparable component of authoritarianism. A conscious effort at engendering the process of reform from the outset is a prior condition to challenge this culture. Linked to chauvinism are stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, which can stand in the way of gender mainstreaming and women's participation in the security sector and can also contribute to the perpetuation of insecurity. Women in the Arab region are often stereotyped as weak, dependent and innocent victims while men are seen as strong, independent providers of security or perpetrators of violence[19]. This

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[13] Kefayah: a civil society institution in Egypt, attempting to monitor and lobby against all forms of security sector and political abuses. Kefayah in the Arabic language means 'enough'.
[14] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/
[15] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/

[16] http://www.peacewomen.org/themes_theme.php?id=15&subtheme=true.
[17] www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/windhoek_declaration.pdf.
[18] Brahimi report:
www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/
[19] Ibid: Eden Cole, Kerstin Eppert, Katrin Kinzelbach

picture is amplified by the media, traditions and norms.

A second impediment is military-specific masculinity. In many countries, for instance in Egypt, the institutional culture of the armed forces enforces certain 'masculinized' values and behaviors, which in turn impact on how the whole society views masculinity. Military training, or 'boot camp', is often a tightly choreographed process aimed at breaking down individuality and building official military conduct and group loyalty. This process of socialization is intimately gendered, in the sense that being a soldier is purposefully linked to being a 'real' man.

A third obstacle relates to the misinterpretation of religion. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the status of women in the Arab world is determined by *shar'ia* law, except for Tunisia. The majority of the population in the Arab world is Muslim. During Prophet Mohamed's era, women participated in wars and strengthened the Islamic military system. However, the conception of Islam that has prevailed more recently is derived from secondary sources that have contributed to bias the role assigned to women in society, limiting the space they can be active in, especially in the security sector.

The fourth impediment is the image of women working in the security sector that is conveyed by the media. A quick review of most of the Egyptian film industry[20] reveals certain stereotypes: those working in the police are usually working in prisons and are heartless; those working in intelligence are portrayed as persons whose main source of power is their physical appearance and their willingness to engage in sexual relations for professional ends. This image stands in the way of cultural change to encourage gender diversification in SSR.

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[20] Egypt is the main producer to films industry to the whole Arab world.

Education curricula represent another challenge. This is the case in most Arab countries, although some of them have gone through several reviews of their curricula in order to liberalize them. Still, the generation in power was educated on curricula that encouraged women subordination and presented a patriarchal pattern of behavior as an acceptable norm. It is this generation that tries to impose its values and norms over the new generation, thereby influencing their chances to get involved in the security sector. It is this generation also that sets the laws and implements them. In addition, in most Arab countries the illiteracy rate of women exceeds that of men, impacting the level of their participation in the economic productive sector in general and in the security sector in particular. Hence, since the causes behind the impediments of women in the security sector are intricate and interwoven, the solutions need to be multidimensional.

Recommendations

Mainstreaming gender in the security sector must be an integral part of any reform efforts aiming at greater inclusiveness, effectiveness and eventually democratization of the sector. In particular, it would guarantee that the security sector is providing security to men, women, girls and boys equally, and facilitate efforts against internal discrimination and human rights violations.

To achieve the goal of gender diversification in the security sector it is necessary to take a holistic, cross-sectoral approach. Three aspects are especially important. The first is education, which should not be limited to the elimination of sections encouraging women subordination in curricula, but should also include training for teachers so that they are able to lead a "cultural shift". Second, the media should communicate on the vital role women can play in strengthening security and generally portray a positive image of women in the security sector. Third, legislation hindering gender diversification in the security sector should be changed.

Civil society institutions have a vital role in lobbying for integrating gender diversification in the security sector. Many different activities can be undertaken by civil society to ensure that their work is gender-responsive, such as inviting female international security experts to roundtable discussions on security sector oversight, conducting gender-impact assessments of proposed national security policies in collaboration with women's organizations, actively recruiting female staff and interns to work on security issues and encouraging female students to enter the field of security[21]. These efforts will not be highly effective in the short run due to the weakness of civil society institutions in the Arab world and the fact that they are hampered by laws that control their activities. However, efforts will pay off in the long run.

Getting women involved as an important actor in the security sector also requires empowering them[22]. Empowerment is needed at two levels: first, at domestic level within the family/household with regard to gender-based division of resources and labor. Second, at the community level where class biases that are particularly oppressive to women persist. The same holds for social beliefs, norms and practices that are biased against women's reproductive and sexual autonomy. Such empowerment requires political leaders to address those biases against women and seek change. In fact, most Arab regimes are autocratic regimes, and without the top-ranking executives fostering policy changes, the chances of success are limited. In other words, a strong political will is needed to achieve that goal.

To conclude, going beyond lip-service and actually taking gender diversification issues into account in the security sector requires both a committed political will and resources. Those will only be available once decision-makers have realized the importance of gender diversification for enhancing the governance of the sector and improving its achievements. A strategy should be developed to modify the prevailing culture of women subordination and stereotyping that has persisted over the years. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, messages to be communicated have to be developed carefully, with the different target groups in mind and by using gender-sensitive language, symbols and examples. In order to integrate gender diversification in the security sector, the construction of messages to change the culture impeding the accomplishment of the goal is vital. The same holds for the mechanisms that will disseminate these messages[23], bearing in mind the percentage of illiteracy in the Arab world. Last but not least, the fact that think-tanks as well as other civil society institutions started to address the issue of gender diversification in the security sector is the first step towards addressing several taboos attached to security sector reform in the Arab world.

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[21] Ibid: Eden Cole, Kerstin Eppert, Katrin Kinzelbach

[22] Kabeer (2000) defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." This definition implies that empowerment is a process, a change from a condition of disempowerment. It involves the idea of human act and choice because choice necessarily implies available alternatives.

[23] Ibid: Eden Cole, Kerstin Eppert, Katrin Kinzelbach.