

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: ADDRESSING THE GENDERED THREATS TO PEACEBUILDING AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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OVERVIEW

The term ‘shrinking civic space’ refers to formal and informal measures that aim to restrict civil society engagement. Among the most common indicators of shrinking space are limitations on the freedoms of speech, the press and assembly, legislation that limits the activities or financing of civil society organizations (CSOs) or that would classify their staff as terrorists or foreign agents, the detention of civic actors without due process, or slander and intimidation. In recent years, increased levels of militarization, rising nationalism and the growth of populist movements have helped to shrink civic space in countries around the world. While this threatens many types of civic actors, it particularly affects women human rights defenders (WHRDs) by reducing their ability to advocate for or exercise political influence.

Women carry out a large proportion of grassroots peacebuilding and development activities. However, since formal political processes are often inaccessible to them, women primarily engage through the civic space. In countries characterized by pervasive gender inequality, civil society is the only sphere in which women can organize. Because of the crucial role that WHRDs play in peace and development, this session sought to raise awareness about the gendered aspects of shrinking civic space. The most notable among these are the promotion of patriarchal values and binary gender roles in nationalist rhetoric, the physical and verbal abuse of women and gender queer activists and the targeted repression of organizations that promote gender equality and women’s rights. The session also sought to highlight effective means of cooperation between donors and CSOs in contexts of shrinking civic space, discussed regional differences and outlined practical ways in which international donors and implementing organizations can support WHRDs and enable civic engagement in restrictive environments, based on participants’ own experiences.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Montenegro has been portrayed as a leader in European integration but many European institutions overlook the state’s oppression of civil society actors. Violence against women, corruption and human trafficking are widespread but the organizations and individual activists that draw attention to such abuses are routinely vilified by public officials.

Egyptian civil society has been subjected to a systematic crackdown since 2011. Restrictive legislation seeks to silence critical voices that have, for instance, documented the rape and sexual violence that occurred during public demonstrations. Participants representing organizations in Egypt and the Middle East noted that it is becoming increasingly difficult to network and build coalitions as a result of new bureaucratic obstacles.

In Colombia, which participants suggested should be regarded as ‘post-agreement’ rather than ‘post-conflict’, territories previously controlled by the FARC guerrillas are now under the control of other armed groups. Thanks in large part to the efforts of civil society and the women’s movement throughout the peace process, women’s rights have been included in the peace agreement. However, to what extent the peace agreement will be implemented across the country remains to be seen.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the international community distracted by the immediate needs associated with the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, South Sudan and Afghanistan, CSOs in many fragile and conflict-affected contexts are suffering from reduced support for and interest in their work. Although the indicators of shrinking civic space and its impacts on WHRDs vary by country and region, the recommendations set out below are broadly applicable.

First and foremost, women's security needs to be taken seriously. Detention, disappearances, sexual harassment and assault, burglary and even torture have been used to control and intimidate WHRDs and their families. In addition to providing security and risk management training, donors and partners should work with local activists to evaluate what other tools and approaches could further protect them.

Second, while they may seem trivial, demonstrations of solidarity between CSOs and their international partners and public recognition of human rights defenders have the power to effect change. In Montenegro in 2014, a newspaper printed pornographic material modified to portray a WHRD who had recently criticized the public authorities for misuse of state funds. Although the Montenegrin state failed to take legal action against any of those responsible for altering or publishing the images, one individual had his application for EU funding rejected in response to a petition signed by 53 civic organizations and international donors protesting his role in the scandal.

This example illustrates the importance of creating global platforms for civil society engagement. In addition to bringing attention to the mistreatment of WHRDs, global platforms can facilitate exchanges between civic actors and provide funding sources when the national environment becomes dangerous or is paralysed. In Afghanistan, for example, a civil society working committee comprised of 10 CSO representatives provides a forum for experience sharing, advocates for the interests of national civic actors in policy discussions and solicits emergency grants from international donors when needed.

CSOs also need access to flexible, long-term funding that they can apply strategically to address new challenges. Donors should sensitize themselves to the environments in which their partners operate and remove restrictions on funding so that their partners can adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground. Smaller donor organizations can sometimes provide complementary financial support in issue areas not funded by larger donors, which helps CSOs spread their financial risks.

Finally, it is essential that donors respect the expertise, independence and capacities of local actors. Considerable EU funding is channelled through, for example, UN bodies before it is distributed to women's organizations in the field. By using third parties to issue its grants, the EU implies that the former are better equipped to manage the funds than the latter. Although inadvertent, donors undermine the credibility of local actors in this way and perpetuate power structures that undervalue local expertise. Donors should empower local CSOs to manage their own funds, to assess the security of their staff and to determine what activities and communications are safe at any given time.