

# LIBYA AT RISK: EVERYDAY THREATS FACED BY CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The continued absence of an effective government and the collapse of internal security structures in Libya have jeopardized human security. Fragmentation, lawlessness, violence, and criminality have provoked a humanitarian, economic and migration crisis. In the absence of functioning state institutions, Libyan Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have taken up the important role of advocating for and advancing the development of an inclusive and stable society. This policy brief highlights the most common obstacles faced by partners in the *Women and Youth as Bridge Builders: Strengthening Resilience in Libya* programme funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in support of the National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. The aim of this policy brief is to inform policymakers of the need for greater support to civil society efforts for the protection and promotion of women's rights and human security.

Prior to the 2011 uprising, independent civil society did not exist in Libya, due to the many restrictions imposed under the four-decade dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi. Since the end of Gaddafi's rule, CSOs have proliferated in Libya. This is a positive development as an active civil society is an indispensable component of a functioning democracy. Today, CSOs play a key role in advocating for and advancing the development of an inclusive and stable society in the absence of functioning state institutions in Libya. However, the ever-changing security situation on the ground constrains the work of CSOs and impedes their ability to reach communities in need and mobilize citizens. The security situation has now degraded to the point where the dominance of military and para-military groups leave little to no space, especially for women, to participate in economic, political, social, reconciliation and peace processes. This situation has negatively impacted women's freedom of movement, freedom of association and freedom of public and political engagement.

*“Peace and Security is not just about stopping bullets but about an inclusive society, in which both men and women have the same opportunities and voice.”*

## **Libyan women's rights activist**

The risks identified in this policy brief are based on an assessment carried out in 2018 by the two main programme partners, Cordaid and Human Security Collective, with the input of eight local Libyan partners. Based on their local

expertise and experiences, Libyan partners described the main operational challenges they encounter while implementing initiatives at the local and national levels. Recommendations for policymakers were developed in response, in collaboration with Libyan activists and partner CSOs.



*Women Human Rights Defenders prominently supporting female candidates in the first election just after the four-decade dictatorship of Gaddafi*

## **KEY OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR CSOs**

- **Interference by military and armed groups:** In the West and South of Libya, armed groups control vast territories and operate with impunity, posing a great risk to those working on civil society projects in general and women's rights in particular. CSOs in areas controlled by armed groups face the threat of being shut down and/or their members detained. CSOs that monitor and report on the situation in the country are often perceived as 'spies' for foreign organizations. This is particularly problematic in the

East, where women-led organizations reporting on human rights violations are now facing a travel ban and severe restrictions to their political activities.

- **Barriers to mobility:** War-damaged and crumbling infrastructure as well as the constant harassment at roadblocks and (illegal) checkpoints restrict the ability of CSOs to move freely and access communities in need. In addition, the smuggling of fuel has left many cities and towns with severe fuel shortages. Armed clashes also occur on a regular basis and obstruct access to neighborhoods and roads. Civilians and CSO members can be caught in the crossfire or displaced if they live near the sites of clashes. Since public transportation is underdeveloped, CSOs activists face constant uncertainty regarding their ability to travel.

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*“ Since 2014, many CSOs and activists have been targeted because of their work and what they stand for. Impunity in Libya remains a grave problem. Hardly any of these violations have been brought to justice.”*

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- **Threats of being kidnapped, tortured and/or injured:** This is a consistent risk when carrying any civic engagement, particularly when working on human and women’s rights issues. Since 2014, many CSOs and activists have been targeted because of their work and what they stand for.
- **Targeting project participants:** Under the pretext of violating ‘Islamic code’, some events have been raided and participants forcibly detained. This can be the case when activities bring men and women together, or sensitive issues such as gender equality and women’s rights are being discussed. Such actions are arbitrary, forgo due process and are aimed at discouraging civil participation.
- **Cyber threats:** Activists and CSOs who work on political and women’s rights issues are generally considered to be secular in outlook. As a result, they often face cyber-attacks on their social media accounts and online harassment. Civil society activists have been disappeared after posting opinions against a certain armed group, or on a sensitive women’s rights issue.
- **Lack of sustainable funding:** Due to the ongoing armed conflict and the resulting migration crisis, aid funding in Libya is directed mostly to humanitarian actions led by international organizations. This has resulted in a decline in long-term funding for civic projects run by local CSOs. Funds are often awarded to larger, established, English-speaking international organizations, leaving most grassroots organizations underfunded and unsupported.
- **Constraints resulting from Libya’s disarray and isolation:** The collapse of state institutions and economic

crisis affects all Libyans, including members of CSOs, placing intense stress on families and communities. Some aspects of the current context are especially problematic for CSOs. For example, the targeting of power plants by armed groups, especially in the South, often result in long paralyzing blackouts that can last for days and severely affect CSOs operations. Planning for activities and work can be tremendously difficult. Likewise, Libya’s isolation by the sanctions regime hits CSOs hard. No international money-transfers to Libya are currently possible and hardly any transfers occur from the national to the local level. A lack of liquidity means that CSO personnel must queue to withdraw cash for operations and are often exposed to criminal violence as a result.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Provide more and longer-term structural funding for CSOs working on women’s rights and human security, in addition to humanitarian assistance.
- Invest in training for CSOs to strengthen organizational capacity and security, including digital security.
- Support human and women’s rights activists by making women’s rights and gender equality a priority for diplomatic action. We ask Embassy personnel and the international community to create safe havens for women’s organizations, to conduct regular meetings with women’s organizations, to actively support their work, to push for implementation of supportive legislation, and to follow public investigations against women human rights defenders.
- Defend the defenders, that is, protect the activists whose work will ultimately help to change the situation on the ground.
- Conduct regular public monitoring of the situation in Libya, for example through visits by the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador.
- Contribute to creating an enabling environment for civil society action, for example by the development of accessible financing mechanisms to CSOs as well as small grants to small and medium enterprises, that will boost the employment and livelihood for Libyan women and youth.

*This policy brief has been developed as part of the ‘Women and Youth as Bridge Builders: Strengthening Resilience in Libya’ programme. This programme falls under the Dutch NAP 1325 and is implemented by Cordaid and Human Security Collective in partnership with a diverse network of Libyan CSOs.*

### **For more info:**

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