RESEARCH ARTICLE

"After COVID, *Inshallah*"
Investigating lags, challenges and opportunities of the WPS Agenda implementation in Morocco

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Abstract

This article aims at describing the main causes which contribute to explaining to what extent the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda does not represent a national priority for Moroccan decision makers and why the adoption of a National Action Plan (NAP) in 2022 has proceeded very slowly in the North African Kingdom. Constructed from a gender-based analysis of the Moroccan political context and drawn from 15 semi-structured interviews targeting Moroccan institutional actors, academics and civil society representatives, the study explores lags, challenges and opportunities for the WPS Agenda implementation in Morocco. Following up on new and critical approaches to the WPS agenda that expands its understanding, beyond the dichotomy of peace and security, the article brings out relevant strategic axes that the implementation of the WPS agenda could potentially imply in the country. In conclusion, the article explores the urgent need, expressed by several Moroccan scholars and activists, to reconsider the concepts of peace and security, by emancipating it from purely military issues and redirecting it to a more social and human oriented dimension. This is mainly relevant now since the COVID pandemic has made inequalities more visible and corrective measures to eliminate them more necessary, especially from a gender point of view.

Keywords: WPS agenda; Morocco; Civil society; Transformative agency; Human security

Introduction

Particularly since the 2011 uprisings, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries have experienced many political crisis, armed conflicts and extremism which have provoked displacement and humanitarian crises resulting in the worsening of women's, and the most vulnerable people's condition (UN Women, undated). Compared to other regions, MENA has the highest prevalence rates for different types of Gender based Violence (GbV): women of these countries, in fact, suffer some of the worst forms of GbV, from intimate partner violence, femicides and so-called "honour crimes", to child and early marriages, female genital mutilations, as well as sexual harassment or enslavement of young girls under the so called Islamic state (The World Bank, 2021). The recent combination of political instability, the Covid pandemic and climate change have exacerbated gender discriminations and the violation of women's rights by worsening economic marginalization and violence and by limiting women's access to education, property, wealth and to adequate healthcare services (Fellin, 2018). Moreover, legal and policy gaps, weak institutional capacity, inadequate protection services, and access to justice represent major obstacles, especially when combined with discriminatory social norms and practices (The World Bank, 2021).

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In Morocco, despite some recent political and legal improvements, women are affected in a range of gender-specific ways by multiple discriminations (Belarbi 2012; Sadiqi et al., 2016). Moreover, although Moroccan women actively participated in the 2011 uprisings, by claiming justice, freedom, dignity and equality (Borrillo, 2016), since that mobilisation they have suffered a conservative setback, with increasing levels of socio-economic marginalization and GbV in the private-public continuum (OECD, 2017). Despite the backdrop of regional "chronic insecurity" (Kamrava, 2019), the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, which was originally "intended to mainstream gender in peace and security policy making" (Davies, True, 2019: 8), is not at the political core of all of the MENA countries, where the understanding of the Agenda varies and the importance of its principles are not considered to be a priority by society, including women themselves (Rayman, Izen, Parker, 2016). As an example, only in 2014, was Iraq the first country to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP), the instrument that UN member states are called upon to adopt in order to fulfil their commitments and detail their strategies to implement the UNSCR1325 (WILPF, undated).

Neither in Morocco, does the WPS Agenda seem to be a national priority. This article aims at exploring the lags, challenges and opportunities of the WPS Agenda's implementation in Morocco by investigating the rationale of its political de-prioritization. The main goal of the study is to understand whether the slow development of the NAP occurred because of the general security situation, the lack of political will, the scarcity of financial resources, or the lack of a sufficient awareness about the WPS Agenda within society as a whole (Fellin, 2018). Based on the WPS literature analysis in the MENA region and in Morocco, combined with qualitative interviews realised with ethnographic methodologies, this study observes that the combination of all these four possibilities occur in Morocco, by producing what we can define as a WPS Agenda's "delayed" momentum in the North African Kingdom. This article aims at demonstrating why, and through which dynamics, the WPS Agenda's implementation could be understood to be a "delayed reaction" to UNSCR1325. This delayed reaction seems connected to both practical and conceptual factors, which are inherent to two main misperceptions - widespread among the participants interviewed for this study - about, firstly, the apparent stable security situation of the country and, secondly, the importance of the WPS Agenda mainly for war-torn or unstable contexts.

Firstly, the general idea of Morocco's apparent political stability does not place the WPS Agenda among the national political priorities and also has a significant impact on the magnitude of assistance from international organizations in the realm of security, which generally prioritise other countries with large-scale conflicts and most urgent needs, according to a "conservative" interpretation of the WPS Agenda (Maphalala, Maphalala, 2021). Secondly, the widespread idea that the WPS agenda focuses more on war-torn or unstable contexts and pays less attention to more stable countries neglects other dimensions of insecurity which particularly affect women, such as GbV in the domestic sphere which however have a relevant impact on the social equilibrium. In addition to contributing to the deconstruction of these false ideas and in shedding light on the existing gaps that prevented a full implementation of the WPS Agenda in the country, the article aims at showing, firstly, how, in contrast to its internal political de-prioritization, Moroccan diplomacy is active on the regional level - both Mediterranean and African - in harmony with specific geopolitical interests.

Based on these premises, the article, secondly, aims at exploring how civil society organizations contribute to the implementation of the WPS Agenda in the country by investigating the efforts made by some local NGOs in order to raise WPS awareness in a population largely unaware or uninterested in the topic and to push institutions towards the fulfilment of the WPS Agenda. This study also demonstrates how Morocco, as many other contexts, reveals itself to be characterised by what Rajagopalan (2016) has defined as a

disconnection between institutions and civil society and how such disconnection, combined with a lack of awareness about the WPS Agenda within society, limits what Meger calls the "potential" of the WPS Agenda itself, which may concern the whole of society - and not just women - and which can be applied not only in contexts characterised by armed conflicts (Meger, 2019). Thirdly, following up on new approaches that expand the understanding of the "conflict" category and the application of the WPS Agenda (Newby, O'Malley, 2021; Maphalala, Maphalala 2021; Shepherd, 2020) beyond the mere dichotomy of peace and security, the analysis of the interviews for this study reveals six relevant strategic axes and opportunities that a full implementation of the WPS Agenda in accordance with the concept of "human security" could potentially imply with reference to some of the "conflict lines" existing in the country (Strachan, 2014).

In this perspective, this study aims at demonstrating that the implementation of the WPS Agenda can be understood as being at the core of a complex political framework where women's empowerment and women's protection intertwine with relevant complex internal, regional and international political issues.

In terms of internal politics, the article empirically demonstrates that the implementation of the WPS Agenda could entail important advancements for the fight against GbV, in preventing social conflicts and radicalization, and in the enactment of the national transitional justice process. In terms of regional and international relations, this study sheds light on the entanglements of crucial geo-political issues which are related to the peace process between Morocco and Western Sahara as well as with Algeria, while at the same time it reveals Moroccan political interests in the Mediterranean and pan-African context, which are also characterised by the fight against jihadi terrorism in the Sahel.

To address these issues, the article explores the need for a rethinking, expressed by several scholars (Newby, O'Malley, 2021; Shepherd, 2020) and also by Moroccan fieldwork participants, of the concept of "security", by expanding its sense and application perimeters, by emancipating it from purely military issues and by redirecting it towards a more social and human oriented dimension in harmony with the local context. "Human security" concept is especially relevant since the COVID pandemic has made inequalities more visible and corrective measures to eliminate them more necessary, particularly from a gender point of view. In this regard, the article converges in considering the WPS Agenda as a "common language" (Rayman, Izen, Parker, 2016), which can be useful to include areas outside traditional conceptions of security, and to embrace the full remit of evolving security threats and structural obstacles which prevent women's empowerment in all sectors (Newby, O'Malley, 2021). Moreover, this study illustrates that far from only being "victims", women could be considered in a participative way as active social actors, who are capable of driving, achieving and sustaining security and peace by playing multiple roles (UN Women, undated).

The structure of the article and its methodology

The article is articulated in three parts: the first part details a general overview of gender politics, and of women's condition in Morocco, by focusing on the articulation of the patriarchal social contract according to the three main dimensions of the WPS Index, which are inclusion, justice and security. The second part focuses on the causes of the slow process of adoption of a NAP (National Action Plan) and of the scarce national debate on WPS, while shedding light on the Moroccan diplomatic strategy of peace and security at multi-regional levels. The third part explores the main potentialities, opportunities and challenges of an expanded understanding of the WPS Agenda in Morocco. In conclusion, the qualitative analysis of the interviews offers recommendations that place special emphasis on the connections between advancing gender mainstreaming in the entire political infrastructure and building a sustainable peace in Morocco. In this latter part, empirically, the article goes

as far as to underline to what extent certain specific policies are pivotal in making the four pillars of the UNSCR 1325 (participation, conflict prevention, protection, recovery and relief) operational, in order to reframe the concept of security through the incorporation of the "human security dimension". Moreover, the article attempts to shed light on the several policies which, particularly after the 2011 uprisings and the pandemic, seem to be crucial in encouraging women to have a greater role within the process of building a society based on peace, equality and social justice.

The article is based on the analysis of documents regarding WPS in Morocco, within the context of WPS implementation in the MENA region and in Mediterranean and African context.[1] To understand the specific challenges facing the WPS Agenda implementation in Morocco, a series of interviews was conducted as a key part of the research: 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out in 2020 and 2022 with different stakeholders such as Moroccan and international male and female institutional actors, Moroccan academics and experts in WPS, female activists of local NGOs and international organisations' representatives. The research interlocutors represent a good portion of the WPS community in Morocco, i.e., those who take an interest – because of their work or activism - in the issue. The WPS community in Morocco, as it will be demonstrated in this paper, is not large and it has been difficult to find experts in the topic. The interviews were conducted remotely in French and English, then recorded and transcribed. Each one lasted a minimum of one hour, and some interviews were conducted more than once, to delve into certain aspects. The analysis of the interviews basically followed an inductive process to highlight the level of social awareness about the national debate on WPS Agenda, the causes of the delay in the adoption of National Action Plan (NAP), possible fields of application of WPS Agenda in local governance and on the regional and international level.[2]

Inclusion, Justice and Security: how the WPS Index unveils the patriarchal social contract in Morocco

Morocco is placed 138th for 2021/2022 in the *WPS Index* ranking elaborated by the *Georgetown Institute for WPS* (GIWPS) in collaboration with the *Peace Research Institute of Oslo* (PRIO) (GIWPS, 2019; 2021).[3] The North African kingdom was placed 133rd for the

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[1] During the peer-review process, Morocco adopted a NAP in March 2022. The article, which initially included an analysis of the causes of the failure to adopt a NAP in Morocco, was then rewritten after the NAP's adoption. As we will see in the last paragraph (devoted to the analysis of the NAP and added after the reviewers' first reading), the adoption of the NAP, although representing a significant step forward towards the full implementation of the WPS Agenda, does not substantially change the core of the results of this study.

[2] Research was carried out as part of the 2020 project "Enhancing Women's Participation in Peace and Security – WEPPS", implemented by a team of researcher based at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa (Italy) under the scientific coordination of Professor Francesco Strazzari, in partnership with Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) in Bologna (Italy). Funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the WEPPS project developed around three main axes: a) research on WPS implementation in Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo through qualitative methods (literature review, desk analysis and interviews); b) a dialogue and training program, called "The Women Peace and Security Agenda in the pandemic", involving professionals in the field of WPS (women activists, representatives of local institutions and CSOs, international agencies and NGOs) in the four target-countries, aimed at facilitating the exchange of expertise and creation of transnational networks; and c) collecting and publishing articles to foster critical analysis of the challenges in WPS implementation.

[3] The WPS *Index* aims at assessing the performance of 170 countries in terms of WPS and in order to identify challenges and opportunities offered to the international community by the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, also in relation to the global priorities of the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 and with particular reference to its Objective 5, dedicated to female empowerment. The index results from 11 indicators aggregated on the performance of each state in terms of WPS.

2019/2020 and 138th for the 2020/2021. Morocco is at "0.624", below the world average, which is calculated on a maximum of 0.922 for Norway and a minimum of 0.278 for Afghanistan, on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represents the worst possible and 1 the best. Although slight, we observe a decline in such ranking from 133rd to 138th in the last three years. The WPS index helps in understanding women's living conditions in Morocco, according to three interrelated dimensions: "inclusion" which comprises political participation and representation, economic and financial inclusion, employment and education rates, the use of mobile phones and social inclusion; "justice" refers to legal and informal discrimination; and "security" (at a family, community and society levels) includes: violence by the partner, community security, and structural violence.

In terms of inclusion, Morocco is among the countries most affected by a decline in public participation by women after the 2011 uprisings. After the political elections following the protests, for example, only one single woman was appointed as Minister in the new government led by the Islamist Party for Justice and Development and she was at the head of the Ministry of Women, Solidarity and Family. Although women ministers rose to 7 in 2021, and despite the pre-existing electoral quota which was launched in the 2002 electoral reform, female political participation is still low and women are rarely perceived as leaders in the public sphere (IDEA, 2020; Sobhani, 2021). In terms of financial inclusion, despite some efforts in the financial sector - such as the adoption of a financial law, which since 2006 has a government report drawn up according to gender indicators (The World Bank, 2008) -, women have scarce access to credit, to land and property ownership and the feminization of poverty is persistent. In terms of female employment, Morocco is among the 10 countries (including 8 in the MENA region) with the worst performance (GIWPS, 2019: 15) with a rate of 19.9%, compared with the 70.4% of male employment (HCPM, 2021). Despite that, in 2005, the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of gender was included in the Labour Code, the gender gap still concerns salary, career prospects, trade union's protection and working conditions (Bourayet, 2010), while in the family organization, women traditionally suffer the double burden of work (ILO, 2017). There is also a persistent gender gap in the field of education, as women are more affected then men by illiteracy: in 2020 more than half of all adult women (52,9%) were illiterate (HCP, 2021). The GIWPS Report notes that in recent years the schooling rate and the participation of women in economic and financial activity have decreased, while the female perception of living in an unsafe society has increased (GIWPS, 2019, 2022). In this regard, although Morocco adopted a "National Strategy for Combating Violence against Women" in 2005 and an important law against violence in 2018, GbV remains a deeply rooted phenomenon in the country: in 2019, 57.1% of women suffered at least one act of violence (HCP, 2021). According to UNFPA, the prevalence of GbV is 62,8% and child marriages are still very widespread: the percentage of women married under 18 years of age is 11,47% (UNFPA, 2017).

On the legal front, according to the *Georgetown Institute for WPS* (GIWPS) Report, the Middle East and North Africa is the worst performing region and although Morocco adopted many reforms for the advancement of women's rights, however discrimination against women is still grave. Starting from the 1990s, Morocco adopted a wider set of policies for women's empowerment. The 1993 first reform of the *Mudawwana*, the Family Code which was approved after independence (1956), represented a crucial step towards the "liberalization" of gender relations in the post-colonial phase (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2011). The Family Code has been - and still is - functional for maintaining the stability of both the patriarchy and political power (Charrad, 2001) through the Islamic 'sanctification of family' (Joseph 2000), which creates 'imperfect' women's citizenship (Kandiyoti, 1997). In the 90's, the promotion of women's rights became a symbol of the opening up of the country to development policies, in the whole framework of the opening of the regime to the universal

narrative of human rights and to a multi-party system. Hence, from the beginning of the 2000s, after King Muhammad VI ascended the throne in 1999, gender mainstreaming began to permeate public policies in an even more systematic way (Belarbi, 2012; Mchichi, 2010). From then on, gender issues have gradually been incorporated into national policies, and have become a pivotal issue in all international cooperation projects. In this process, the regime aimed at incorporating some of the local secular feminist movements' claims in the wake of the so-called "democratic transition" - a process that is anyway incomplete according to Moroccan feminist scholars (Belarbi, 2012) - and at presenting a gender friendly attitude according to the neoliberal narrative promoted by its Western partners (mainly US and EU). As an example, in 2004, the second Family Code reform abolished the obedience of the wife to her husband, placing the family under the responsibility of both spouses, it recognized the right of women to initiate a divorce and raised the legal minimum age for marriage to 18 years (even though judges can still authorize child marriages with the both families' consent). Moreover, since 2005 the Ministry of Justice is equipped with a section dedicated to gender issues aimed at eliminating gender discriminations in legal texts. In 2007, the new Nationality Code recognized the mother's right to transfer her nationality to a child born from a marriage with a foreigner (Perrine, 2007). In 2011, following the protests animated by the February 20 Movement, the new Constitution provides the principle of gender equality (article 19) in the fields of civil, political, social, economic and environmental rights (Borrillo, 2019). Moreover, the Constitution, declares the commitment to 'creating the conditions that would generalise the effectiveness of freedom and equality between citizens, their participation in political, economic and social life' (Article 6); to mobilizing all available instruments to facilitate equal access of women and men to elective offices (Article 30), to offices of the Superior Judiciary Council (Article 115), or the territorial Councils (regions and communities) (Article 146). In order to reinforce the concept of the effectiveness of rights, the Constitution also introduces the principle of parity (*munassafa*), based on the principle of equity (*insāf*), as an operational mechanism (Borrillo, 2019).

Despite this normative infrastructure, women are under-represented in all sectors, and the patriarchal social contract (Moghadam, 1998; Pateman, 1988) persists in the country due to the combination of a hegemonic misogynist culture and the political use of Islam as a dispositive of power (Darif, 2010).

Against this backdrop, this article aims at analysing the lags, challenges and opportunities of the WPS Agenda implementation in Morocco in order to broaden the horizons of what needs to be done in terms of women's empowerment and women's protection in a broader framework of domestic, regional and international politics, where women can play a strategic role in enhancing the security of their own society and in building a sustainable peace in key fields, from the fight against GbV to promoting equity, social inclusion and political participation, and from conflict prevention to mediation.

A multilevel WPS Agenda implementation in Morocco: national level, civil society, diplomacy

The slow institutional process towards NAP adoption

Although Morocco signed up to UNSCR 1325, only in 2022 has it adopted a NAP, the National Action Plan is envisaged as a strategic document needed to implement the four pillars of the resolution (participation, prevention, protection, relief and recovery). From the combination of the analysis of documents with the interviews carried out in autumn 2020 and 2022 involving players from civil society, institutions and WPS experts, this part reconstructs the reasons for this lag and explores to what extent the WPS Agenda does not appear to be a national priority, from a legal and political standpoint.

On the legislative level, the 2011 Constitution establishes some principles which allow a rapid adaptation of domestic laws to international conventions, including the recognition of their higher rank, as well as the commitment to harmonize national legislation with their provisions. Moreover, the Constitution includes other axes that can contribute to the implementation of UNSCR 1325, such as: the fight against all forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin or religious affiliation; the commitment to provide for legal provisions to encourage the equal participation of women and men in the elected functions, as well as in the judiciary and in the higher council of the judiciary, where the presence of women is traditionally scarce (WILPF-UAF, 2012). But - also in this regard - constitutional provisions seem insufficient to produce concrete implications and, in terms of the implementation of the WPS Agenda, this study demonstrates that in the last decade there have been more official statements than a concrete efficacy.[4]

Several examples help in demonstrating such political tendency. In 2010, the representative of the Moroccan permanent mission to the UN, Lotfi Bouchaara, declared the full commitment of Morocco in supporting the implementation of UNRSC 1325, indicating among the main factors of this process: "the central role played by civil society in raising awareness on the contents of the resolution and in putting in place adequate efforts to achieve its objectives". To this end, Morocco committed itself to "a better representation of women in regional, national and international institutions and in particular in conflict prevention, [...]to a better coordination between national and international actors, and to a greater support from the UN in terms of cooperation and technical assistance" (Security Council Open Debate on WPS, 2010). Moreover, in 2019, during the debate on the adoption of UNSCR 2493 - aimed at inviting states to make greater efforts to apply UNRSC 1325 in view of its 20th anniversary in 2020 - the Moroccan ambassador Omar Hilale recalled the importance of "integrating the gender approach in peace processes, promoting equality between men and women and ensuring the rights for women defined as 'essential' for international peace and security" (UN PRESS, 2019). Hence, he evoked the importance of fighting impunity and of strengthening the access to justice for the victims of sexual violence; he also stated that the Moroccan government "has launched many initiatives and participates in many of them, such as the *Réseau des points focaux* on WPS" and that "Morocco was preparing its NAP 2020-2022 throughout an inclusive process that includes all the ministerial departments, representatives of civil society and UN agencies, including UN Women" (UN PRESS, 2019).

This study notes the absence of a concrete efficacy of these statements, in particular with regard to the participatory approach in the NAP's adoption, as we will see in the last paragraph. In addition to this, the analysis of several interviews with officials from UN agencies (such as UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA) and with representatives of various Moroccan ministries, shows that the NAP adoption process suffered a further setback in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic: the meetings scheduled for 2020 were postponed to 2021, while the whole process has been secondary to what the interviewees have defined as "other political priorities".[5]

However, the WPS Agenda implementation process was de-prioritized from the political agenda even before the pandemic, despite the fact that a bureaucratic infrastructure had been put in place for its implementation. In fact, at the institutional level, in order to adopt

[4] Interviews by the author with a female Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), and with a female Moroccan former ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6).

[5] Interviews by the author with a female Moroccan former ambassador, Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6), the Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme*, CNDH) (9), an Official of UN Women – Morocco (12), two Officials of the Ministry of Woman, Family, Solidarity and Social Development (14, 15).

a NAP, an inter-ministerial task force was created, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But, only on June 26, 2019 did this Ministry launch an inter-ministerial Steering Committee also composed of the Ministry of the Interior, Justice, Defence, Health, Islamic Affairs, Economy and Women, Family, Solidarity and Social Development (Kingdom of Morocco, NAP 2021-2024, p. 27). With the support of UN Women, this Committee was supposed to elaborate a NAP to be presented during the UN General Assembly 2020.[6] In addition, in order to include civil society, UN Women and the Ministry of Women, Family, Solidarity and Social Development were supposed to identify the associations to be involved in the process, but this process - according to a representative of a feminist NGO, interviewed for this study - was not completed.[7]

In this scenario, among the rare official diplomatic actions organized at the national level, the international conference entitled *Women, Peace, Security and Development* was organized under the aegis of UN Women in Rabat on 7 September 2016, with the co-presidency of Sweden. This conference relaunched the role of UN Women to foster the application of the WPS agenda especially for the necessary economic support in three fields of intervention: post-conflict planning, economic reconstruction and governance. But, on that occasion, the call of the UN Women representative for Morocco, Leila Rihwi, to Moroccan institutions in order to allocate increased national investment in the implementation of the WPS agenda demonstrated the economic limitations to relaunching it at the national level (UN Women, 2016b). Moreover, on that occasion, government representatives announced the creation in Rabat of an independent study centre dedicated to the enhancement of women's roles in peacekeeping and security operations (Le 360, 2017), which, however, has not yet been created.[8] Not even the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), the advisory Council for Parliament which among other issues works on the adaptation of Moroccan laws to the constitutional principle of gender equality (CNDH, 2015) and which, together with the Ministry for Human Rights, works on the National Plan for Democracy and Human Rights (*Plan national pour la démocratie et les droits de l'homme*) - which includes women's rights and the adaptation of national laws to international standards - has still to be activated on the WPS agenda.[9]

Such institutional inaction legitimises exploring the rationale of this political de-prioritization of the WPS agenda. Does it occur because of the general security situation, the scarcity of financial resources, the lack of political will or the lack of awareness about the agenda within the whole of society? The literature analysis and the interviews demonstrate that the combination of these four reasons could explain the WPS Agenda "delayed process" situation in Morocco.

In terms of the general security situation, the absence of a large-scale armed conflict in Morocco and its - apparent - political stability seem to be the main reasons which explain, according to all the interviewees, the de-prioritization of the WPS Agenda. This also seems to be the main reason why the WPS agenda is almost completely unknown in Morocco and almost totally absent from the public debate. Such widespread ideas coincide with a "conservative understanding of conflict and of WPS" (Maphalala, Maphalala, 2021), which focuses more on war-torn or unstable contexts, therefore neglecting more stable countries,

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[6] Interviews by the author with a female Moroccan former ambassador, Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6) and with an Official of UN Women – Morocco (12).

[7] Interview by the author with a female Moroccan former ambassador, Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6).

[8] Interviews by the author with an Expert and Founder, Africa Women's Forum (4), and with a female Moroccan former ambassador, Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6).

[9] Interview by the author with the Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme,* CNDH) (9).

which are however characterised by several "conflict lines", as is the case of Morocco (Strachan, 2014).

A civil society "non ciblé" debate.

In such a context, in continuity with the definition of WPS as a "discrete object of analysis" (Basu, Kirby, Shepherd, 2020:2), the debate on WPS in Morocco seems to be an issue for a few experts and social actors interested in it.

One of the rare academic initiatives in the WPS field to date appears to be the conference organized on 19 October 2016 at the University of Fes by the Gender and Development Research Group, aimed at examining the gap between political decision-makers and civil society in the WPS field. This conference explored some topics of interest to the WPS agenda behind the mere "peace and conflict" dichotomy, such as GbV and the role of women in maintaining peace and security, in peace-keeping missions, in diplomacy, as well as in the religious professions considered crucial to the containment of violent extremism.[10]

On the civil society side, in Morocco there are no associations specialized in conflict mediation with a gender focus, although the creation of a *Fem-Wise Africa* national focal point is planned.[11] Moreover, the Moroccan WPS focal point has not yet been created, and the web page of this initiative, when selecting Morocco, says "information coming soon".[12]

A research participant for this study, an academic in Gender studies, has defined the debate on WPS in Morocco as "an unfocused debate" for the civil society: a "débat non-ciblé" (in French).[13]

According to the Founder of Africa Women's Forum, Moroccan women's rights associations only began to be interested in the WPS agenda after the 2011 outbreak of chaos in Syria and Libya (UAF-WILPF: 16) and when violent radicalism became a regional and national problem.[14] The association that deals most with WPS is the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (UAF), founded in the 1980s among the main associations of Moroccan secular feminism (Daoud, 1993), although *Joussur* and the feminist coalition *Parity now* (in Moroccan Arabic: *Munassafa Daba*) - aimed at claiming an equal participation for women in the electoral lists - are attentive to the issue, as well.[15] In 2012, UAF organized the national consultations "Abolishing discrimination and strengthening peace and security for women in the Middle East and North Africa" (*Abolir les discriminations et renforcer la paix et la sécurité des femmes au Moyen Orient et en Afrique du Nord*) in collaboration with Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and with the support of Norway and of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. There, 37 members of associations for human rights, women's rights and of a trade union discussed WPS with the aim of bridging the gap between the large participation of women in the Arab uprising and their scarce presence in decision-making processes in the post-2011 political phase (UAF-WILPF, 2012). The result was a set of recommendations in a policy document addressed to the government in order to integrate the gender dimension in security governance, allocating a significant budget to promote women's role in conflict prevention, mediation and management, as well as to encourage the role of women in decision making in all sectors (*Recommendations* UAF, 2012, non-published document). Since then, according to some of its members interviewed for this study, UAF has been

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[10] Interview by the author with an Expert in Gender and Development, Professor, Fes University (7).

[11] Interview by the author with an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5).

[12] https://wpsfocalpointsnetwork.org/morocco/ (last access 2nd June 2022).

[13] Interview by the author with an Expert in Gender issues and Professor, Director of Gender, Education, Literature and Media Centre, Casablanca University (8).

[14] Interviews by the author with an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4, 4a).

[15] Interview by the author with Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme*, CNDH) (9).

involved in raising awareness and training about UNRSC 1325 and has requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to participate in the process for the elaboration of the NAP. In 2020 UAF also proposed working with UN Women to put coordination mechanisms in place between international organizations and civil society associations; it also proposed to implement mechanisms of monitoring and impact evaluations, but this did not receive significant feedback.[16] While other MENA region countries already take the WPS agenda into account (della Valle, 2022), for Morocco in 2020 it was still too early to talk about the NAP, as one of the main Founders of the *Union de l'Action Féminine* declared.[17]

Among the reasons for the absence of the WPS Agenda from both national politics and social debate, both in terms of knowledge production and in terms of civil society advocacy for WPS, once again the most widespread notion among the social actors interviewed for this study refers to (apparent) political stability and the absence of conflict in the country.[18]

This hegemonic idea reflects the quietly widespread belief in the country that the WPS Agenda is oriented to be adapted to security policy-making in armed conflict or war contexts, while - according to feminist scholarship in International Relations - peace has to be conceptualised and framed not only in terms of militarized security but, also, it is necessary to shed light on the WPS potential for reviving all of the elements of permanent peace based on the respect of human rights and dignity (Otto, 2016). Moreover, the lack of coordination between institutions and civil society organisations such as UAF, demonstrates what Rajagopalan (2016) has defined as a disconnection between policy makers and civil society, which represents a significant obstacle to the implementation of the WPS Agenda. However, in contrast to the political inaction at a national level and in contrast to the lack of a participatory collaboration with those associations more engaged in the debate, this study finds a dynamic diplomatic activity at a regional level, which suggests other political interests to be investigated.

Diplomatic regional activity

Notwithstanding that in terms of national politics, progress has been slow, at the regional level Morocco is involved in three main initiatives.

The first one is the *Med-Med Mediation initiative in the Mediterranean* promoted in 2012 by Morocco and Spain, with a memorandum in 2013 that promoted a generation of women mediators to be trained in peace and conflicts. The initiative, which for Morocco involves the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mbarka Bouaida, has produced several multilateral workshops with various Mediterranean countries. The *Centre marocain des études et recherches en sciences sociales* (CERSS) and the *Centro internacional de Toledo para la paz* (Citpax) have been commissioned to carry out training for the role of women in mediation in the Mediterranean (CERSS, 2019). According to a Moroccan WPS expert interviewed for this study, it would seem to be an important step in the direction of the

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[16] Interviews by the author with one of the main Founders of the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (1), and with an activist, founder and former president, *Union de l'Action Féminine* (2).

[17] Interview by the author with the Founder of the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (1).

[18] Interviews by the author with the Founder of the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (1), an activist, founder and former president, *Union de l'Action Féminine* (2), the Former president and coordinator, *Réseau Anaruz-Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc* (3), an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4), an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), a female Moroccan former ambassador , Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6), an Expert in Gender and Development, Professor, Fes University (7), Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme*, CNDH) (9), a Former coordinator, Amnesty International MENA regional Office (11).

implementation of the WPS Agenda, but these mediators will only have a formal role and the initiative risks to fail in the short, medium and long term without a concrete NAP.[19]

The second regional initiative is the *Enhancing the civic and social engagement of women and youth in preventing violence and extremism* project, launched by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) for Morocco and Tunisia (2018-2021), aimed at increasing the participation of women and of young people in the prevention of violence and extremism. Presenting itself as a strategic actor in the fight against gender discriminations and in the inclusion of women in the human and economic development of the region, the UfM also launched twenty indicators to assess the progress made in the field of gender equality in the Euro-med region. These indicators cover four main axes: women's access to leadership and decision making, female participation in economic life, the fight against violence towards women and any other gender discrimination.

The third initiative is the regional conference *Women4Mediterranean* (16th-20th November 2020) organized by UfM in Barcelona with the focus *Accelerating equality between women and men in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic.*

Similar initiatives highlight the importance of the WPS Agenda for Morocco's foreign policy, especially since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004) and the recognition of the country's advanced status in the EU (2008). Beyond the Moroccan interest in the Euro-med area and the UfM, what seems even more significant, however, is the strategic diplomatic use of the WPS Agenda in the framework of Morocco's recent pan-African politics, which has been activated with the reintegration of the kingdom into the African Union (AU) and with the request for membership, which has not yet been processed in a positive sense, in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Thanks to the reintegration into the AU (January 31, 2017), Morocco has activated a political roadmap characterised by huge investments in economic, financial and religious cooperation (Echkhundi - Hafid, 2019). Although geostrategic interests prevail, Morocco's new foreign policy in Africa is characterised by a pervasive religious diplomacy which is combined with economic and security interests and which is achieved through the promotion of a tolerant and moderate Islam by training imams and ulamas, characterised by an anti-jihadist discourse (Borrillo, 2017; Bruce, 2019).

It's also within this framework that the Moroccan diplomatic promotion of women's roles in peace processes should be understood. In July 2017, on the occasion of an audit of women's and youth associations during a mission to the Central African Republic, the Moroccan Ambassador Omar Hilale at the UN and president of the Configuration of the Central African Republic of the UN peace-building mission, stated the importance of strengthening women's participation in peace processes (Minusca, 2017). Moreover, he repeatedly stressed Morocco's commitment to economically supporting socio-economic development processes for African countries, underlining the kingdom's commitment to preserving the cultural and religious tradition of the continent, through coordination activities by ulama trained in the field of moderate Islam (Hespress, 2020).

This clear geopolitical interest, however, seems scarcely related to any support for the concrete promotion of the WPS Agenda and for the involvement of women in all the necessary steps for its full implementation. Indeed, if we look at the regional *Réseaux of women mediators* - the Nordic Réseau (2015), the Arab Réseau (supported by the Arab League), the Mediterranean Réseau, coordinated by Italy (2017), the Réseau FemWise-Africa (2017) and the Réseaux Global Alliance created in 2019, in New York (Jaidi, 2019) aimed at encouraging the role of women in mediation and facilitating training, expertise and

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[19] Interview by the author with an Expert in Gender issues and Professor, Director of Gender, Education, Literature and Media Centre, Casablanca University (8).

awareness on peace and conflict (Women mediators, 2017) - only two Moroccan women are involved: the former ambassador Farida Jaidi, in the Mediterranean Reseau, and Khadija Elmadad, professor of law and expert in WPS, in the Réseau FemWise. Also in this case, the impact of these actions only seems to reach the diplomatic levels, without any relevant involvement of civil society.[20]

Reframing "peace" and "security" towards a locally-oriented "human security".

> "Almost 20 years since the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 1325, we don't just need to be at the peace table. It's time to redesign the table".
> Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls, Pacific women's rights activist and Chair of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (UN, 2020).

The WPS agenda has been mainly understood to be articulated in the fields of women's participation in peace and security governance, gendered violence in times of war and conflict and women's roles in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes (Shepherd 2020). Newby and O'Malley note that in recent years the field of investigation of women as "security actors" has grown considerably, and the WPS agenda is also articulated today in topics such as the responsibility to protect, protection of civilians, countering violent extremism and counterterrorism, transitional justice, climate change, disaster risk reduction and recovery, internally displaced persons and indigenous rights (Newby, O'Malley 2021). These approaches - as the words by Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls at the beginning of this paragraph - are very useful in order to analyse the Moroccan case through a new lens which is capable of expanding the perimeters of sense and applications of peace and security in order to make the application of the WPS agenda more inclusive and participatory. This study underlines how the key-concept of "human security" could help in expanding the borders of WPS (Shepherd 2021).

For an inclusive and participative implementation of the WPS agenda in Morocco, the qualitative research highlights the importance of critical rethinking the concepts of peace and security and in particular of rethinking the very diffuse idea that peace and security is only of concern in contexts of armed conflict from which Morocco would be unscathed. This latter assumption, which has been declared by almost all the interviewees of this study, can be deconstructed by the evident lines of geopolitical fractures such as the problematic relationship with Algeria and the contested issue of Western Sahara, which also includes the harsh living conditions of women in the refugee camps (Boulay, Correale, 2018). As these issues represent a taboo for many interviewees, it seems that they have "externalized" the internal conflict resolution problem, by referring to other urgent needs, such as the Sahel, and Mali in particular, with its illicit trafficking of migrants, weapons and drugs, as well as to the Libyan chaos and the international threat represented by jihadists.[21]

Nonetheless, the interviews show different axes for reconceptualising peace and security according to a multilevel integrated approach which includes social, economic and psychological aspects beyond the "sectarian paradigm", demonstrating "the importance of centring the 'local' as a site of knowledge production in the WPS agenda" (Shepherd, 2000).

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[20] Interviews by the author with an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4), an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), and with a Moroccan female former ambassador (6).
[21] Interviews by the author with two activists from the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (1, 2), an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4), an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), a former Moroccan woman ambassador (6), and with an Expert in Gender and Development, Fes University (7).

Firstly, as in the International Relations studies, international peace and security studies are perceived as profoundly masculinist (Basu, Kirby, Shepherd, 2020), on the grounds that security, international humanitarian law, and conflict mediation are topics connected with violence and therefore considered to be stereotypically valid as exclusively male, dangerous and anti-family prerogatives.[22]

While fulfilment of the WPS Agenda is surely concerned with encouraging the role of women in peacekeeping or military measures, it is also concerned with preventing conflicts, fighting gender-based violence and discrimination, promoting female participation in decision-making processes, in the access to education, employment, natural and economic resources in peacetime (UAF, 2012).

All these axes have to be conceived according to the "human security" approach, aimed at protecting human dignity as a whole and at considering women not only as victims to be paternalistically protected (Sjoberg, Peet, 2011), but also as subjects with transformative agency, capable of contributing to social change (WILPF-UAF, 2012).

The human security approach - which includes seven main dimensions, namely economic, health, personal, political, food, environmental, and community - was introduced in the 1994 Human Development Report (UNDP, 1994) in order to call upon member States to identify and address "widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity for their people" (UNTFHS), and to target reductions in military spending as an opportunity to move from investments in arms to investments in sustainable development, by making the link between reduced military spending and increased social investment explicit (GNWP, 2020).

What appears relevant for the case of Morocco is that the notion of human security acknowledges the need for coordinated efforts to prevent conflicts and crises and to promote sustainable peace and also requires accounting for the different ways in which diverse groups of people are impacted not only by militarization but also by the intersecting effects of racism, sexism, classism and other forms of discrimination. This includes using intersectional, gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive analyses to inform crisis response and ensure equitable and inclusive outcomes for all (GNWP, 2020). It is exactly within this perspective that some actors of Moroccan civil society, who were interviewed for this study, are committed to for adapting the priorities of the WPS Agenda to locally oriented needs. At the same time, according to them, it is crucial to apply gender equality to all aspects of political, economic, civil and religious life to favour local peacekeeping as well as a more democratic regime, where the participative, transparent and democratic involvement of the civil society - including women - in all the steps of WPS implementation. On the contrary, reality demonstrates that the opposite occurred: the period that followed the 2011 uprisings can be assimilated to a post-conflict reconstruction between civil society and the state. Women participated in the protests in Morocco but they were then mostly excluded from the subsequent negotiations, while their role should be strengthened for a more inclusive society.

In this scenario, the study sheds light on six concrete dimensions which, according to the majority of the interviewees, could help in expanding the understanding and the inclusive application of the WPS Agenda in Morocco, in accordance with the transversal concept of human security: 1) the construction of a true peace culture, based on social justice and equality; 2) the fight against GbV at the national level and 3) within the framework of the migration policy; 4) the strengthening of women's roles in the transitional justice process and 5) in the democratization of the defence sector; 6) the enhancement of women's roles in security and mediation forces, as well as for the prevention of violent extremism.

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[22] Ibidem.

1)The Construction of a Peace Culture, based on social justice and equality should be promoted by a "community of practices" (Davies, True, 2019), a constructive partnership composed of civil society, experts, academics, politicians, the education system and the media.[23] Campaigns to vulgarize laws, to raise awareness of the WPS Agenda and combat gender stereotypes should be encouraged for the purpose of implementing the whole WPS Agenda, which should also be disseminated thanks to the efforts of the education system in order to encourage the interest of young people and new generations in the matter.

2) According to all the interviewees, the fight against gender-based violence is crucial for building a peaceful society, whereas in Morocco 57% of women suffer multiple forms of violence (HCPM, 2019). Most of this violence takes place within the home and is exercised by male members of the family (HRW, 2018). The strict gender division of labour implies the male imposition of domestic work obligations and also the obedience of the wife to her husband is still widespread, although the Family Code of 2004 abolished it. Although this Code raised the minimum age for marriage to 18, forced and early marriages are still possible, with the agreement of a judge and the families. Social normativity exerts considerable pressure on women, who are still considered the pivot of family honour - especially in more marginalised contexts. The 103.13 law against GbV of 2018 is the first legal text dedicated to criminalizing political, economic, verbal, sexual and psychological violence and represents an important advance, even though it does not consider abuses committed within marriage, which are still widespread. Another obstacle is the lack of awareness and training on gender equality among officials and police forces (Noury, 2015).[24] Despite the 2008 and 2011 government efforts to remove the reservations to CEDAW, civil society associations need more support in order to implement their campaigns, such as "Zero tolerance to Violence against Women and Girls", launched in 2019 by UAF within the Euro-med Feminist initiative, which aims to visibilize GbV in order to accelerate legal steps and spread training for officials (in juridical, health, and social sectors) (UAF, 2019).

Following a global trend, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated GbV in Morocco, as did the scarcity of listening and care services for the victims and the difficulty of reaching the toll-free numbers in this period which were clogged due to reduced human resources. Despite that there are no official statistics, domestic violence against women increased during the pandemic (EuroMed Rights, 2020). The pandemic has also exacerbated poverty and social marginalization, with particularly negative effects on the most fragile sectors of the population, where once again a high percentage of unemployed, informal and / or underemployed workers are women. Military responses, which were implemented according to a "crisis securitization" approach - with the declaration of the state of emergency and by imposing strict curfews - were not successful in staving off the deadly pandemic (Laaroussi, 2020). Therefore, building a peaceful society means more than the absence of war, it means promoting equal access to social services, economic dignity, protective equipment, quality healthcare, including mental health services, and a safe place to turn to if one faces violence (GNWP, 2020a). According to the interviewees from civil society organizations, policy-making regarding the issue of human security should include measures to prevent violence which should be capable of protecting the most vulnerable women, even including forms of economic support, but also to involve society as a whole in the construction of a true peace culture, based on social justice and equality.

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[23] Interviews by the author with an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4), a former Moroccan woman ambassador (6), and a former coordinator of Amnesty International MENA regional Office (11).
[24] Interviews by the author with an Expert in Gender issues and Professor, Casablanca University (8) and with the Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme*, CNDH) (9).

3) According to the interviewees, the Fight against GbV within the Migration Policy, could also be pivotal for the WPS Agenda implementation, since the mobility of migrants and refugees is crucial in Morocco due to its geopolitical role as a bridge between Africa and Europe. Morocco's new migration policy regularized around 50,000 migrants in 2014, within the framework of the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (*Stratégie Nationale Immigration et Asile*, SNIA), while a second phase was launched in December 2016. In August 2016, the Law 27-14 was also adopted against the trafficking of humans, for the protection of human security and dignity for migrants and especially for women.[25] A concrete implementation of this law could improve the WPS Agenda in discontinuity with the traditional role of Morocco as "gendarme" of Europe.[26] Moreover, migration could represent a WPS pillar in terms of economy, human rights and education, as well as in the promotion of a culture of peace which needs to be based on acceptance, tolerance, cohabitation and respect.[27]

4) Another crucial axis for the implementation of the WPS Agenda is the relaunch of the gender approach and the strengthening of women's roles in the context of *Transitional justice*, a process initiated to repair the massive violations of human rights committed by Moroccan authorities against political opponents in the period of the so-called "years of lead", which lasted from independence until the death of King Hassan II (1956-1999) (ICTJ, 2011). The combination of human rights and women's rights within such domestic security policy had already been included by the government in 2005, in accordance with the recommendations of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (*Instance Équité et Réconciliation*, IER), the Committee aimed at restoring truth, moral reparations and material compensation for the victims of state abuses and human rights violations. The IER called upon the state to provide a security policy that respected human rights and fundamental freedoms and to put measures in place to control the disproportionate use of force, arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances (FILDH-OMDH, 2011:9). In order to realize a full strategy to fight against impunity in the implementation of transitional justice, gender approach appears as a crucial dimension to promote mechanisms of individual and collective reparation, as well as to denounce the political violence suffered especially by women during the "years of lead".

5) A significant obstacle to the implementation of the WPS Agenda concerns the fact that the security field remains under the King's direct authority and this centralization actually seems to slow down many procedures in this field. The new Constitution (2011), in addition to preserving the powers of the King for the promulgation of royal decrees (Article 42), in addressing messages to the nation and parliament "which cannot be the subject of any debate" (art.52) and to dissolve parliament (art.51), also recognizes his control over diplomatic representation abroad, and of defence and security. The Sovereign is in fact the "supreme head of the armed forces", has the exclusive monopoly on the appointment of military officials (Art. 53) and ambassadors (Art. 55), and chairs the new Highest Security Council (Art. 54), in addition to numerous other councils, such as that of the judiciary (Art. 56), and of the Higher Islamic Knowledge (Echkoundi, Hafid, 2019: 89). According to a WPS expert, a certain "lack of freedom of expression combined with the fear of taking responsibility in ruling on sensitive dossiers"[28] would probably also be linked to this articulated set of powers, which would partly explain the low response rate by institutional

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[25] Interview by the author with an Activist, *Fédération de la Ligue Démocratiques des droits des femmes* (13).
[26] Interview by the author with the National coordinator Oxfam Morocco (10).
[27] Interview by the author with the Head of Human Rights Department (*Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme*, CNDH) (9).
[28] Interview by the author with an Expert and Founder, Africa Women's Forum (4).

actors with respect to the invitations to participate in the interviews for this study. The management of the budget for the WPS agenda is problematic as well, because some of the national budget funds, such as those for defence, are not the object of public transparency and therefore are still taboo.[29] Although gender approach is applied in these funds according to gender mainstreaming [i.e., the gender sensitive funding allocated for training and capacity building at the *Institut de la Gendarmerie Royale*], these measures risk to remain cosmetic operations until women reach executive posts in the security forces (UAF:24). Therefore, strengthening female roles in the security field could contribute to its democratization.

  6) The scarce presence of women in executive roles in the armed and security forces represents a further obstacle to be removed for the implementation of the WPS agenda.[30] Women are present in the diplomatic corps and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (about 30%), although only 13% of the ambassadors are women (UAF-WILPF, 2012). They are in the judiciary (about 20%), in the armed forces, in the *Gendarmerie Royale* and in peacekeeping missions in which Morocco is involved - i.e. the *UN Mission in Sud Sudan* (UNMISS), in the *UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in The Central African Republic* (MINUSCA) and in the *UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (MONUSCO) (UN Peace-keeping, 2019) - but always with secondary functions and no power.[31] Among the troops of the latest mission in 2019, out of 1300 members, there were 25 women (Kasraoui, 2019). This picture confirms the existence of a gender gap in Morocco among peace mediators and peacekeepers (Anderlini 2007) as well as within global diplomacy as a whole which reveals its gendered nature (Aggestam, Svensson, 2018). In terms of mediation, some interviewees[32] suggest that, similarly to Tunisia - where some women have been involved in the reconstruction of social peace after jihadists attacks through specific training for peace mediators, especially in marginalized neighbourhoods where there is greater temptation for radicalization (Un Women, 2016) - in Morocco this role could be played by the official female preachers of Islam, established by the reform of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2004 (Borrillo, 2019 a). Equipped with religious authority combined with "pedagogy of persuasion" (Mahmood, 2005), they could reach a female audience that is difficult to reach by male imams and ulama and, in a context in which Islam has crucial social and political roles, they represent a strategic "peaceful" resource for a regime that bases its stability on internal religious homogeneity. But, in addition to promoting the role of women in the prevention of violence and jihadist radicalism, which the country experienced with the terrorist attacks in 2003 (Casablanca) and 2011 (Marrakech), some of these study participants underline that WPS Agenda implementation would benefit from awareness campaigns on gender equality, on the importance of women in maintaining peace and security, and from enhancing the role of women negotiators and mediators in peace agreement negotiations, in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions as well as in all the security forces. And for this to happen, political will and budget are needed. [33]

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[29] Interview by the author with an Expert in Gender and Development, Professor, Fes University (7).

[30] Interviews by the author with an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), a former Moroccan woman ambassador (6).

[31] Ibidem.

[32] Interview by the author with an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4).

[33] Interviews by the author with one of the main Founders of the *Union de l'Action Féminine* (1), an Expert and Founder of Africa Women's Forum (4), an Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University (5), a woman former ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6), Expert in Gender issues and Professor, Director of Gender, Education, Literature and Media Centre, Casablanca University (8).

The Adoption of a NAP: "After Covid, Inshallah"[34]

As most of Moroccan officials declared in the interviews realised for this study during 2020, a NAP would have been adopted in Morocco "after Covid, *Inshallah* [If God wants, n.d.t]". And so it was: on 23 march 2022 Morocco launched a NAP for the 2021-2024 period.

The document has been presented by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs "not as an exercise in formalism, but as an implementation of the Resolution 1325" and it is aimed at testifying "the country's commitment to promoting gender equality and in particular the WPS agenda, conceived as an essential instrument for maintaining international peace and security".[35] It seems a good premise that the Moroccan NAP proposes, what the Minister has called, a "paradigm shift" in order to conceive "women as agents of change and equal partners in the decision making processes".[36] Moreover, the recognition of the "transformational potential of the WPS Agenda" seems a relevant step in order to achieve peace, which is defined not only as "a mere absence of conflict" and which includes the resolution of the most important global crises, namely – according to the Minister's discourse – "terrorism, climate change and health emergences".[37] Three major principles are conveyed in the NAP for WPS Agenda implementation: inclusion, innovation and a holistic approach. In this line, the NAP is defined as a roadmap which paves the way to practical steps, aimed at strengthening regional and international efforts to train women as peacekeepers and mediators, to combat international terrorism, and to create synergy between the WPS Agenda, the Human Rights Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, among which the economic empowerment of women is crucial for conflict prevention.[38]

Despite these official premises, the NAP text appears to be a framework document, which, after a long introduction on the international context and on the national juridical architecture, comes into its own when, in the fifth paragraph, entitled "Priority axes of the Moroccan National Action Plan 1325", it addresses three main strategic pillars: "preventive diplomacy, mediation, and peacekeeping"; "promotion of a culture of peace and equality"; and "economic participation of women" (Moroccan NAP, 2022: 28-31). These axes actually correspond to some of the dimensions that also emerged from this study. The first corresponds to the need to prevent conflict escalation, especially with regard to the Sahara issue, where it is crucial to maintain good relations with neighbouring Algeria and Spain, as well as in the African context, where Morocco aims at being a political leader. For the second axis, the NAP also states that it has carried out and intends to carry out several actions aimed at involving women in the WPS implementation process: a central role, as also emerged from this study, seems to be for the official women preachers of Islam (*murshidat*) for the prevention of violent extremism (Moroccan NAP:20-21; Borrillo, 2019a), together with the strengthening of women's participation in political leadership and education. For the third axis, the NAP proposes to increase the results already achieved by some policies in the field of the economic empowerment of women. In terms of practical realization and financing, the NAP indicates budgetary allocation of the general state budget, co-financing, donor contributions, donor loans, and an unspecified "others" (Moroccan NAP:31). In terms of the subjects of NAP drafting and action, the NAP mentions that a consultation between ministries and civil society was carried out in June 2021, with the technical support of UN Women (New York and Rabat). But when looking at the entities involved in the implementation of the activities of each pillar (Moroccan NAP:34-41) there are no ONGs –

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[34] This paragraph was added during the peer-review process, after the first reading by the reviewers.
[35] Diplomacy of Morocco, "Launch of Morocco's First Action Plan of Women, Peace and Security", 23th March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5y9OjSpdrLw (last access 2nd June 2022).
[36] Ibidem.
[37] Ibidem.
[38] Diplomacy of Morocco, "Launch of Morocco's First Action Plan of Women, Peace and Security".

civil society is mentioned only once in a very general way in the third pillar - but only Ministers or the Royal Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Royales*, FAR) or other institutions. In particular, the responsible entities for Pillar 1 are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans living abroad; the responsible entities for Pillar 2 are the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the prevention of violent extremism (Outcome 1), while The Ministry of Justice, The Ministry of the Interior and The Ministry of Solidarity, Social development, Equality and Family are involved in the protection of women and girls from all forms of discrimination and violence (Outcome 2). For Pillar 3, the responsible entities are the Ministry of Solidarity, Social development, Equality and Family and other departments of the Ministry of Economics and others.

The adoption of the NAP is undoubtedly a decisive step towards the implementation of the WPS, but some observations can be made at both the methodological and content levels.

In terms of methodology, centralisation of the NAP adoption process seems to have been favoured to the detriment of the inclusive approach. The participatory approach and the involvement of civil society, both as a focus of the debate in the drafting process and in the implementation of NAP's activities, seems to have been neglected. Indeed, "civil society" appears only 5 times in the whole document. The category of "human security" is never mentioned either.

In terms of contents, according to one of the representatives of a civil society organization, the NAP does not appear to be inclusive or representative of local women's perspectives and expectations; an intersectional point of view is lacking, which would also take into account and be inclusive of different gender identities in a progressive gender perspective; the use of language aimed at protecting women seems to victimise them rather than contribute to their empowerment. [39]

Moreover, NAP focuses on the three pillars of the WPS agenda (participation, conflict prevention and protection) but does not mention "recovery and relief". Instead, we argue that this fourth pillar could be dedicated to economic, social and educational support for the country's most vulnerable women. In the NAP, there is no mention of the centre-periphery divide concerning the existing disparities between urban and rural areas of the country. Probably a focus on strengthening women's rights and equal access to livelihoods to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas could be an additional effort useful to fully meet the implementation of the WPS agenda.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the WPS Agenda in Morocco is not recognized by a large part of civil society and has been deprioritized by political decision makers until 2022, as the slow process of the NAP's adoption demonstrates. The pandemic has certainly slowed down the implementation of the WPS Agenda at the institutional level, but it has also triggered negative effects on socio-economic security for women in terms of unemployment, especially for those employed in informal work, and in terms of domestic violence, which has significantly increased with containment measures and worsening economic conditions and which should be resolved, also under the WPS Agenda umbrella.

The article has noted a widespread tendency among institutional and civil society actors to "externalize" the perception of existing conflict lines, according to the very diffuse idea that peace and security only concern contexts of armed conflict from which Morocco would be unscathed, while - as this article demonstrates - conflict concerns Morocco in many fields. The top-down nature of the regime's political power setting, and the fact that security is the King's prerogative, makes the subject particularly sensitive to public debate, when not

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[39] Conversation with an activist and founder of *Union de l'Action Féminine*, 2nd June 2022.

secondary to other politics considered more urgent. This aspect contributes in sharpening the disconnection between state and civil society on WPS issues.

Nevertheless, this article demonstrated that the implementation of the WPS Agenda is at the core of a complex political framework where women's empowerment, women's protection and the fight against GbV intertwine with relevant regional and international political issues, such as the contested issue of Western Sahara, the complex relationship with Algeria, the fight against jihadism and the emerging crucial role of Morocco in the pan-African context. Moreover, the 2011 uprisings phase evidenced the importance of enhancing women's roles in all sectors in order to build a peaceful and more equal society. The post 2011 uprisings period can be assimilated to a post-conflict reconstruction between civil society and the state. Women participated in all the phases of the protests animated by the 20th February Movement in 2011 and they also participated in the second cycle of protest - harshly repressed by the state - in the Rif region in 2016 (Borrillo, 2017a). However, they were then mostly excluded from the subsequent negotiations, while their role should be strengthened for a more equal society.

Thanks to the reconstruction of what has been done in recent years, both on the civil society side and on the institutional side, the article empirically sheds light on several potentialities offered by the historical conjuncture of post 2011 which implies the relevance of six strategical axes for the WPS agenda implementation, both in domestic and in foreign Moroccan politics. These six axes, which emerged from the analysis of the interviews, are: 1) the construction of a true culture of peace, based on social justice and equality; 2) the fight against GbV at the national level and 3) within the framework of the migration policy; 4) the strengthening of women's roles in transitional justice process; 5) in the democratization of the defence sector; 6) the enhancement of women's roles in security and mediation forces, as well as for the prevention of violent extremism.

It is exactly in this scenario that this article argues that reframing "security" beyond a static application of the WPS Agenda according to a locally oriented "human security" approach seems necessary to politically relaunch a fully participative implementation of the WPS Agenda in Morocco.

Despite the encouraging premises of the Moroccan NAP, the topic remains to be investigated further in the future in order to observe its empirical implications. However, beyond its statements of principle regarding inclusion, innovation and holistic approach, to fully implement the WPS agenda, both the design and implementation of the policies envisaged by the NAP should include a fully participatory approach for a greater involvement of civil society. In this perspective, a constant action of monitoring by civil society, international organizations such as the United Nations and the main donors, on the state of progress of work on the WPS agenda countries, could help. If WPS could be understood as a "common language" (Rayman, Izen, Parker, 2016) it would be useful to strengthen women's empowerment in all sectors, women have to be considered not as victims, but as transformative social actors within a whole "community of practices" where civil society and the state work together for the implementation of the WPS Agenda through a transparent, participative and transformative process aimed to promote gender equality and social justice.

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List of Interviews

Interview 1. Founder, *Union de l'Action Féminine*, 14th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 2. Activist, founder and former president, *Union de l'Action Féminine*, 24th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 3. Former president and coordinator, *Reseau Anaruz-Association Démocratique des femmes du Maroc*, 19th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 4. Expert and Founder, Africa Women's Forum, 22th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 4 a. Expert and Founder, Africa Women's Forum, 18th May 2020, remotely.

Interview 5. Expert in Gender, Law and WPS, Casablanca University, 29th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 6. Former ambassador, Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 7. Expert in Gender and Development, Professor, Fes University Sidi Abdellah, 20th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 8. Expert in Gender issues and Professor, Director of Gender, Education, Literature and Media Centre, Casablanca University, 22th September, remotely.

Interview 9. Head of Human Rights Department, *Conseil National pour les Droits de l'Homme* (CNDH), 21th September 2020, remotely.

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Interview 11. Former coordinator, Amnesty International MENA regional Office, 25th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 12. Official Un Women – Morocco, 18th May 2020, remotely.

Interview 13. Activist, *Fédération de la Ligue Démocratique des droits des femmes*, 18th May 2020, remotely.

Interview 14. Official 1, Ministry of Woman, Family, Solidarity and Social Development, remotely.

Interview 15. Official 2, Ministry of Woman, Family, Solidarity and Social Development, remotely.

Conversation with an Activist and Founder of *Union de l'Action Féminine*, 2nd June 2022, remotely.

Interview 17. Assembly of People's Representatives, parliamentarian, 9th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 18. CAWTAR, member of the Technical Committee, 9th September 2020, remotely.

Interview 19. African Women's Forum, regional representative, 15th September 2020, remotely.