



IMPACT STORY



REBUILDING FOR PEACE: STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LIBYA

Photo: Courtesy of BENDALLA

Haniya Salem Abukhirais is a member of the city of Sirte's Libyan Women's Network for Peacebuilding, a UN Women-supported group representing a broad social, political, generational and geographic range of women working to achieve peace in conflict-afflicted Libya. The network was launched in 2019 under the WPS Programme in Libya, which is part of the UN Women Flagship Programme Initiative on Women, Peace and Security. Since Sirte's liberation from ISIS occupation in 2016, Abukhirais has been leading reconstruction efforts in the city.

"One of the political novelties in Libya after the 2011 revolution was the introduction of municipal elections, marking the first major attempt to make a clear break from the past in local governance and a step towards democracy. For the first time ever, the Local Administration Law allocated at least one out of seven municipal seats to women and one to people with disabilities. On the ground, it was commonly interpreted that all other five seats were reserved for men. Although still grossly unfair, at least now there is a quota guarantying one seat for women," said Abukhirais, deciding to run for that seat in 2014. Though she was elected to the Municipal Council, it would be three years until she took on the role due to ISIS occupation.

Photo above: After years of conflict and ISIS occupation, Sirte's infrastructure has been heavily damaged. As a member of the Municipal Council, Haniya Salem Abukhirais has been leading reconstruction efforts in the city.

Abukhirais explained that during her campaign, other women candidates ran rather timid media campaigns because the public was not used to seeing posters of women candidates in the streets, noting that "none of us dared to put up billboards with our faces." In contrast to the other candidates' radio and social media campaigns, Abukhirais visited schools and spoke to the teachers and students to understand their demands and concerns and gather votes.

After a three-year period under ISIS occupation during which women were unable to leave their homes without a male relative, Abukhirais was ready to work for her city. "I was full of enthusiasm but also felt a huge responsibility

PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

The **WPS Programme** in Libya is part of the **UN Women Flagship Programme Initiative on Women Peace and Security**. It is supported by the Governments of **Finland, Japan, Germany, Italy** and the **UN Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs**.

During COVID-19, the **WPS Programme** partnered with the **Network of Elected Women Municipal Councillors** and **Doctors Without Borders** to deliver training on preventative measures for women municipal councillors, civil society activists and leaders from across Libya.

[...] we needed to bring life back to the city and its people. We needed to revive the city's institutions and services," said Abukhirais, who since 2017 has been working on several municipal projects, including on health, public safety, labour and social affairs.

In addition, Abukhirais has held dialogues to discuss women's needs and how to achieve their demands through the municipal council. She is also responsible for the portfolio on architecture and reconstruction, which has been meaningful to her. "After the 2011 revolution and ISIS occupation, much of the city's public infrastructure was destroyed. Libyans were adamant about rebuilding and reviving the city in a way that reflected the needs of all its inhabitants, including women and youth," she noted.

"Women's participation in social, economic and political life is the best way to challenge stereotypical views that negate their ability to lead."

—HANIYA SALEM ABUKHIRAIS, *Member of the Municipal Council of Sirte*

This job, however, did not come without the barriers set by gender stereotypes about women's role in politics. "Several religious organizations rejected me simply because I am a woman. [I had] to learn how to show the male members of the municipal committee that I have the same status as them," said Abukhirais, adding that, "the hardest challenge I faced was when the five [other] council members created a petition to undermine my appointment to the reconstruction portfolio. But, with the law on my side, I continued to work on the project."

To achieve peace and transition towards democracy, enhancing women's participation in all aspects of peacebuilding and governance is critical. To this end, UN Women has been supporting the capacity of women civil groups such as the Libyan Women's Network for Peacebuilding and providing training on negotiation. "The work of elected women at the municipal level is clearly unique. They provide a different perspective and prioritize population groups left behind. More so, their local peacebuilding initiatives provide a foundation for national peacebuilding efforts to develop in the long term," said Maria Begoña Lasabagaster, UN Women Country Representative in Libya.

As Abukhirais demonstrates, with women's leadership and the support to affirm and promote their rights, this



WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY PROGRAMME IN LIBYA

Key highlights from 2020 include:

- Holding a five-week intensive online training on conflict negotiation for the **Libyan Women's Network for Peacebuilding** in partnership with **Clingendael - the Netherlands Institute for International Relations**.
- Supporting **20** civil society organizations across Libya working with women, youth and migrants through capacity-building workshops in partnership with **UNDP**. Twelve organizations received a grant of **USD 15,000**.
- Launching the pilot cross-border project **Women Influence the News Fellowship Programme** in Libya and Tunisia with the **UN Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs**, with training provided by **UNFPA**.
- Supporting a gender-sensitive response to COVID-19 by conducting a rapid survey with **290** women from across Libya—the results and the recommendations of the survey are outlined in a policy brief *Gender-Sensitive Prevention, Response and Management of COVID-19 in Libya*.

is possible: "Women's participation in social, economic and political life is the best way to challenge stereotypical views that negate their ability to lead. Through my work, I want to show that Libyan women are capable of leading and effectively participating in decision-making."

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