**A seat at the table:**

**A youth exchange between youth activists from the SWANA region and Denmark**

1. **Objective and relevance (the world around us)**

This intervention is the Women’s Council Denmark’s (WCD) and our partners' contribution to a 6 days exchange visit called ‘A seat at the table – a youth exchange between the youth activists from the SWANA[[1]](#footnote-1) region and Denmark’. The exchange visit is organised by ActionAid Denmark, OxfamIBIS, Danish Youth Council (DUF), NASIM (Netværk af Akademikere, Studerende og Interesserede i Mellemøsten) and WCD. The purpose of the exchange visit is to share experiences and learning between the youth groups. Young activists and change agents from Denmark and the SWANA region will have the opportunity to participate in workshops and exchange experiences from their work to bring about change in their society through civic engagement. At the same time, the visit is an opportunity to inform and engage Danish youth about the challenges and opportunities in terms of participation, civic engagement, gender equality, and employment in the SWANA region. All participating organisations work closely with youth organisations, youth and feminist movements and committed young people in the region.

WCD and our partners in North Africa have been invited to participate in the exchange visit, with the role of ensuring a gender focus throughout the visit – and with particular focus on feminist activism in the region. WCD will invite young activists that are engaged in our partner organisations either as volunteers or as staff. WCD’s partner organisations, Tadwein in Egypt and LDDF-INJAD in Morocco, are both civil society organisations with a key position in the feminist movements in the two countries. Their activism and advocacy have led to political changes regarding gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV), and youth are actively engaged in their work as well as an important target group in their interventions.

The money applied for in this specific CISU intervention is funding for coordination and planning from WCD’s side, and funds to ensure that youth representatives from WCD’s partners can participate in the visit, as well as funding for two events at WCD’s annual festival, Talk Town, as an integrated part of the program for the exchange the visit. The overall purpose is to provide a focus on gender equality and feminism as a cross-cutting theme, addressed within the three overall targets for the youth exchange visit, which are:

*1) To promote synergy, disseminate knowledge and share understanding on political activism and civic engagement to promote inclusion and participation of youth in public and economic life both for youth from the SWANA region and Denmark.*

*2) To interact and engage the Danish public on how and why youth in the SWANA region exert influence in their societies and bring about change.*

*3) To create spaces for the exchange of experience between young activists and civil society leaders in Denmark and from the SWANA region with a view to learn about organising, involvement, and influence.*

WCD and our partners will contribute to these targets by including perspectives from concrete youth feminist activism in the SWANA region. For example, the so-called Egyptian “#MeToo movement” or “digital feminist revolution” which started in late 2020 and resulted in wide public and political debate around sexual harassment and assault. A concrete result of this activism was several amendments of the penal code, regarding sexual harassment and assault, for example to protect the identities of victims of harassment, rape, and assault during court cases. The movement was initiated and run by young female activists, primarily through online platforms such as AssaultPolice and Speak Up. They were fed up with the impunity and taboo surrounding sexual harassment and assault, with consequently high levels of impunity and victim blaming. Tadwein, WCD’s Egyptian partner, works closely with these networks and activists. WCD will also ensure perspectives from the feminist movement in Morocco. For example, our partner LDDF-INJAD will share perspectives on their advocacy and activism to end gender-based violence (GBV) and how they engage duty bearers to ensure the rights, protection and proper treatment of women victims of GBV, as well as their work on challenging stereotypical gender norms through youth outreach and activism.

WCD will also contribute to the visit with several international events at our festival, Talk Town, which takes place on May 25-27 during the exchange visit. [***Talk Town***](https://www.talktown.dk/welcome) is an annual festival in Copenhagen, which combines talks, debates, workshops, performances and activism around feminism, gender, equality, and justice. The festival is a non-profit, open space, with free access for all. It serves the purpose of fostering and qualifying the general debate about these themes in Denmark and internationally. The exchange visit includes a full day participation in the international program at Talk Town, which includes one or two workshops by one of the activist behind the online sex education initiative “The Sex Talk بالعربي”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Sex Talk is a SoMe platform set out to bringing positive and inclusive sex education to Arab speaking people, in an effort to challenge taboos and bring sex and gender education to young people in a participatory manner, based on their own questions and concerns. The Sex Talk was initiated four years ago and is driven by feminist activists from different Arab speaking countries. They have over 52.000 followers that interact with their different platforms, which ensures that posts reflect the needs and knowledge gaps of the users. In this intervention we will invite Fatma Ibrahim, the founder and executive director of The Sex Talk, to host a workshop and a talk about her activism and the initiative for all the participants in the exchange visit, as well as other Talk Town participants. This will foster exchange of experiences between young activists and civil society leaders from the SWANA region and Denmark.

* **Why is the intervention important?**

One of the key messages from feminist and women’s rights organisations around the world, especially in contexts with restricted and closed civic space, is that they need networks and collaboration with other CSOs to ensure protection, resilience as well as inclusion and influence in decision making.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is also echoed by WCD’s partners. They are very dependent on solidarity from other CSOs in their respective contexts. Therefore, having these perspectives and representatives at this exchange visit, will both provide awareness of this to the other participants, and it will be a concrete means for WCD’s partners to further build networks and relations with the other participants from the region.

Our partners will contribute to the youth exchange visit with a gender approach and make sure that the participating youth will include exchanges regarding feminist activism, gender equality and women’s rights. It is crucial to include a gender approach when talking about youth civic engagement and youth participation in economic and public life, as there are a number of gender specific barriers and challenges to consider. In the SWANA region, as well as elsewhere, young women have been on the forefront in youth-led movements, but they are often not included in decision making processes for social and political change. Women are also victims of GBV, e.g. in the digital sphere, which often impedes their participation in public debates. It is important to address these gender specific barriers to make sure that women also have a seat at the table.

* **Describe the context of the intervention:**

Youth political activism has been challenging political systems in the SWANA region frequently and forcefully over the last decade. There is an increased number of youth-led activist movements fighting for equality and social, economic, and political rights. The sites of social, civic, and political youth mobilizations and contentious actions, bolstered by both agency and strategic choices, have increasingly encountered various barriers and highly restricted civic space. Nevertheless, there is much to learn from the youth led movements and CSOs in the SWANA region who work under difficult conditions and yet manage to bring about change in their communities.

The participating youth from the SWANA region come from countries where the civic space is defined by CIVICUS as is either obstructed, repressed, or closed.[[4]](#footnote-4) Unfortunately there is a tendency in the discourse on closing space for civil society, analyses, and discussions to not consistently incorporate a gendered lens. WCD’s and our partner’s contribution to this project will ensure that this will not be the case during the exchange visit. For instance, there is a tendency to forget that traditional binary gender identity and roles are promoted as part of nationalist rhetoric in repressive regimes, such as Morocco and Egypt. Women’s bodies and behaviours are expected to function as repositories of the culture and morality of society. This is nothing new, but there is a clear correlation between the shift during the last decade in state repression of civil society, and the increase in state-sponsored rhetoric which prescribes and enforces narrow patriarchal and heteronormative gendered behaviour and sexual identity.

Therefore, it is by the very act of speaking out and challenging the status quo that women, girls, and LGBT+ people become the targets of conservative forces. Also, groups led by women and LGBT+ people do not only experience intimidation and harassment from state agents, but also from the broader society. In contexts of discriminatory state rhetoric and where violence is used with impunity, activists are experiencing an increase in tolerance of repressive, conservative political agendas which allow for the normalisation and legitimisation of GBV and impunity. For example, Egyptian activists, as women-run groups not conforming to ‘modest’ dress codes, have faced verbal attacks and physical threats at their offices from members of the public, forcing them to relocate.[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, most feminist and women-led groups have deep experience of having been pushed to the margins in their communities. This history provides them with vital experience and expertise in navigating restrictions and political marginalisation. In the current, challenging context, feminist activists continue to employ creative solutions to new challenges and hone their strategies to mitigate risks. They engage in strategic advocacy, national and international collaboration and networking, targeted use of international legal norms and frameworks, and inventive use of social media, such as Assault Police and The Sex Talk.

* **Describe how this intervention can contribute to supporting collaboration, public engagement and civil organising and how this in time will contribute to social justice**

The youth exchange between young activists from the SWANA region and young Danish activists will promote synergy, interest, disseminate knowledge and share understanding on different ways to promote civic engagement and participation in decisions in two different political contexts. Many theories explore the impact of youth civic engagement on their inclusion and participation in economic and public life. It is believed that participation in civic activities affects the political voice of youth and increases their non-violent engagement in political life. At the employability front, the theories of change posit that if young people are civically engaged, they will gain important skills and experiences that will facilitate their employment and integration into the labour market. The youth exchange visit will be an opportunity for strengthening the network and collaboration between youth activists from five countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Denmark. The visit will provide a space for exchange of experiences and capacity building regarding youth civic engagement. Despite the difficult conditions for civil society activism, we are witnessing that a lot of young people are engaged in social movements. They have hope for a better future and are actively engaged in changing the conditions for marginalised groups in their country. By gathering a group of young activists from different backgrounds we will create a space for learning, inspiration, and international solidarity.

For WCD, it is important to bring young people engaged in the feminist activism in the SWANA region to participate in the youth exchange. The past years, we have witnessed how the #MeToo movement had a huge impact globally – also in the SWANA region where feminists mobilised against GBV and discrimination. In Egypt, the movement against sexual harassment has been growing with young activists mobilising online. Studies also reveal that the most important and consistent factor driving policy change for combating violence against women is feminist activism.[[6]](#footnote-6)

* **What climate- and environmental conditions do the partnership and/or the intervention need to respond to?**

This intervention does not address climate and environmental conditions directly. However, we expect that the theme will be covered as part of the exchange visit. For example, we expect to have a strong climate focus at the international program at Talk Town. This year’s theme at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW66) will be “Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes”. Therefore, we plan to have events covering that at the international program at Talk Town, during the exchange visit. Also, the exchange visit will include discussions of youth climate activism, as this is one of the primary concerns of most youth in Denmark and abroad. For instance, Krogerup Højskole has a strong focus on the climate crisis in the “Verden Brænder” program, which the youth will visit as part of the exchange visit.

1. **The partnership/collaborators (our starting point)**

WCD have been partners with LDDF-INJAD and Tadwein since 2013 and 2014 respectively, and we are currently implementing projects financed by the Danish Arab Partnership Program (DAPP), which focuses on combating GBV through outreach, advocacy, and gender education targeting youth, civil society and duty bearers. WCD and LDDF-INJAD have recently initiated a CISU financed project called “Combating GBV in Morocco”. Tadwein and LDDF-INJAD are important sparring partners for WCD in relation to knowledge about GBV and feminist activism in an international context, and they have both previously been involved in workshops and events at WCD's annual festival Talk Town. This intervention will contribute to our partner’s network and bring important gender perspectives to the other participants. This will be the primary role of our two partners. WCD’s role in the intervention is to plan, coordinate and facilitate together with the other Danish organisers. As well as coordinating the specific Talk Town event with The Sex Talk during the visit.

**LDDF-INJAD** is a network organisation composed of 10 counselling centres spread over Morocco and a women’s shelter. LDDF-INJAD has developed working tools to offer quality services to women victims of GBV, many of whom are young women, and to strengthen the advocacy for women's rights to be realised in society and in the law. They have produced and distributed various policy papers for the promotion of gender equality and ensuring the safety and rights of women victims of GBV. LDDF-INJAD also coordinates a network called “Femmes Solidaires” composed of 26 women’s CSOs spread throughout Morocco who carry out work to support women victims of GBV. LDDF-INJAD has significant experiences in capacity building for the benefit of the member organisations of Femmes Solidaires. During the past four years, LDDF-INJAD's efforts with Femmes Solidaires have been focused on collecting data on GBV for evidence-based advocacy. LDDF-INJAD will have one of their young activists represented in the exchange visit, who will be in charge of bringing in a feminist and gender perspective during the talks, debates and visits.

**Tadwein** was founded in 2014 to fulfil the needs for a more evidence-based approach to combating GBV in Egypt. Tadwein’s vision is to implement change and create long lasting solutions for gender equality and social injustice. To achieve this, Tadwein focuses on gender empowerment and improving the status of women in all its programmes. Tadwein produces evidence-based research to inform advocacy and policy recommendations related to GBV. They document and analyse stories and testimonies of women on sexual violence and assault in both the public and private space - in close collaboration with young feminist movements such as Assault Police and Speak Up. They use information, communication, and technology (ICT) in designing media and awareness campaigns to reach out to different segments of the community with focus on the young population. They foster collaboration between different national NGOs/initiatives working on similar issues to ensure solidarity and sustainability. Tadwein has been involved with several partners implementing different initiatives/programmes on domestic violence, sexual violence, and sexual harassment as well as other initiatives to empower women’s lives in Egypt and has demonstrated skills in navigating, maintaining good relations and advocate towards key governmental institutions and other NGOs. Tadwein will be represented by two young activists as part of the youth exchange visit and be an important voice representing a feminist organisation in Egypt, which has a highly restricted civic space.

1. **Target groups, objectives, and expected results (our intervention)**

***The primary target group*** for this intervention is 15-20 young people up to 35 years old from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. WCD will be in charge of inviting 3 of these participants from Egypt and Morocco, as part of this intervention. The others are hosted by ActionAid Denmark, OxfamIBIS, DUF and NASIM. These young people are activists, volunteers, dialogue ambassadors or representatives from various CSOs and groups in the region engaged in political activism and civic engagement. They will benefit from the visit by networking with each other and thereby building solidarity and exchange across borders. They will also exchange and learn from the Danish youth and institutions they will meet during the visit. For WCD’s partners, being feminist women’s rights organisations, networking with other civil society groups in the SWANA region is key to ensuring their protection and inclusion in decision making and influence.

***The secondary target group*** is Danish youth who will interact with the primary target group during the exchange visit. These are Danish youth from educational institutions; universities, high schools and folk high schools as well as Danish participants and audience at the Talk Town festival. They will benefit from the intervention by being presented to a better contextual understanding of how youth activism plays out in the different countries represented, and thereby be inspired and be introduced to the nuances and differences across the region, which contributes to challenging the stereotypical portrayal of the SWANA region in Danish mainstream media and politics.

* **Describe how the intervention will be implemented: what activities will be carried out? With whom? And when?**

The youth exchange visit will take place in Copenhagen and will be hosted by WCD, OxfamIBIS, ActionAid Denmark, DUF, and NASIM. The visit will last 6 days including 2 travel days. The program revolves around the themes of civic engagement to promote youth inclusion into economic and public life and support social movements and activism as well as gender equality. WCD will mainly be in charge of the parts of the program focusing on gender equality; the youth’s participation in the Talk Town festival and in a workshop and talk about gender and sex education.

Each participating Danish organisation will cover expenses for the participation of youth from their partner organisations and expenses for the parts of the programme they are main organisers of. WCD will thus be in charge of organising travel and participation of youth from Tadwein and LDDF-INJAD as well as the facilitator of a workshop during the Talk Town festival.

**Suggested dates:** 23rd May – 28th May including 2 travel days.

**Preliminary program:**

**Day 1:** Arrival and social activity: Name games and other games in Action Aid Denmark’s yard + board games in Mellemrummet café.

**Day 1:** Two workshops with Danish youth associations on activism, civic engagement, employment, and participation. Panel debate and discussions with “experts and key speakers” in the afternoon/evening.

**Day 3:** Visit to Krogerup Højskole: Each group/participant presents their work/activism and engages in a conversation with the Danish students from the “Verden Brænder”course who have prepared questions and in turn present their own work.

Visit to social housing areas where youth work in promoting local democracy with whom many share similar challenges as well as ethnic background. This creates an engaging platform for interaction.

Public film screening of a relevant film (either on Danish or SWANA-situated activism/youth organising) with a talk/discussion at Cinemateket.

**Day 4:** All participants join the Talk Town festival for a full day of events, talks and workshops with focus on feminism and gender equality - mainly the international events which are relevant for youths from SWANA.

WCD has invited Fatma Ibrahim, the founder and executive director of The Sex Talk, to host a talk and a workshop at the Talk Town festival for the participants in the exchange visit. The workshop and talk will provide a presentation on the need for feminist sex education that is positive and inclusive to empower women and young people and the type of knowledge on sex and sexualities that every person should be equipped with, from an early age.

The workshop will also include group work and question and answer sessions. Fatma Ibrahim will also talk about the platform, its visions, ways of working and of course about the content itself. She will also share important perspectives on what barriers the activists behind The Sex Talk encounter in their work, i.e. social media platforms’ biased community standards, which is one of their biggest challenges. It is also a testament to the global patriarchal structure that other feminist activists from around the world, also in Denmark, encounter in their online activism.

One of the participating youths from Tadwein will participate in the talk to present perspectives from Tadwein’s work on gender and sex education in Egypt. WCD and Tadwein have cooperated around this topic in two former CISU funded projects and Tadwein continues their work on gender equality and sexual health and rights in Egypt, e.g. around combating female genital mutilation (FGM).

**Day 5:** Day off - social activities and farewell dinner at ActionAid Denmark.

**Day 6:** Farewell and departure.

1. SWANA stands for South West Asia and North Africa. It is a less colonial way to address the region commonly known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For more information see:<https://www.riverroseremembrance.com/swanaproject> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.instagram.com/the_sextalk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/mc_closing_space_report_def.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Map - CIVICUS - Tracking conditions for citizen action](https://monitor.civicus.org/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/mc_closing_space_report_def.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women: Gender & Development: Vol 21, No 2 (tandfonline.com)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13552074.2013.802158) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)