



# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL MEDIATION:

Lessons from Iraq, Libya,  
Syria and Yemen



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Cover photo:

*Haniya Salem Abukhira, member of the Libyan Women’s Network for Peacebuilding, standing amid the rubble of Sirte after the liberation of the city from the Islamic State (ISIS). Photo: Courtesy of BENDALLA.*

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## ACRONYMS

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<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
<b>LPDF</b>	Libyan Political Dialogue Forum
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>OSESGY</b>	Office for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen
<b>TAG</b>	Technical Advisory Group (Yemen)
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WAB</b>	Women's Advisory Board (Syria)
<b>WSN</b>	Women's Solidarity Network (Yemen)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to illuminate the numerous and diverse ways that women mediate local conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa region. Drawing on case studies from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, it maps entry points, techniques and outcomes of women's local mediation efforts. It asks: What type of conflicts do women usually mediate? Who are the mediators? How have women mediators negotiated local conflicts? It also discusses key themes: the relationship between local mediation and national peace processes; the role of social norms; what happens outside of negotiations; and the impact of digitalization on local mediation. In doing so, the report aims to better support the role of women in mediation and thereby strengthen prospects for peace.

## Key findings of the study include the following:

**Women operate as “insider mediators”:** Women mediators in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen held diverse profiles. Unlike male mediators, who could more often rely on their formal status (such as tribal leader or local authority) to mediate disputes, most women mediators operated as insider mediators, meaning they had some type of connection to the dispute and were trusted and perceived as credible by the disputing parties. Women demonstrated two consistent traits as insider mediators: their ability to build or leverage relationships; and detailed knowledge of the conflict and conflict parties.

**Women mediators negotiate a wide range of local conflicts:** This included matters concerning security and conflict (such as ceasefires, war-time violations and inter-tribal disputes); displacement and return of internally displaced persons; and personal or family issues (such as conflict over land, divorce and gender-based violence).

**Women mediators play diverse roles in mediation:** Sometimes women engaged in mediation as the negotiator, and sometimes they acted in less visible roles by initiating dialogue, bringing parties to the table or rebuilding relationships. Across the four countries, conflict often changed socially ascribed gender roles and enabled women to take a more visible role in local mediation, particularly in certain locations where men face movement restrictions and risk of arrest. Women were often required to navigate complex social norms and political sensitivities in order to take on this role.

**Women mediators navigate a wide range of risks to their well-being:** Women mediators often experienced harassment and intimidation, as well as strict social control. In order to mitigate these risks, women built partnerships with strategic male allies (such as tribal leaders or police), strengthened community trust in their role as mediator, and worked within gendered social norms while drawing attention to the history of women's involvement in conflict resolution.

**Women mediators reject the overuse of “tradition” or “social norms” as a means of limiting their agency:** While gendered social norms do shape and restrict women's involvement in mediation, the sweeping blame placed on tradition or social norms often distorts the nuances present in each culture and ignores the historical contributions women have made to peace.

**Women help to connect the different “tracks” of peace processes, but more remains to be done:** Women's local mediation efforts have addressed issues that the Track I processes could not, such as the release of political detainees and prisoners of war; and women mediators have raised issues drawn from their own local mediation experiences at the Track I negotiation table, such as transitional justice and accountability for human rights violations. Despite these achievements, local women mediators consistently perceived Track I actors as fixated on narrow security issues while giving insufficient attention to the daily issues communities face. They also pointed to a lack of financial and logistical resources to enable them to access Track I and II processes.

**Women mediators benefit from technology, but also need tailored online protection:** Technology has expanded women’s access to higher-level spaces and has strengthened networks among women mediators in the same country, on different “sides”, and across different countries. At the same time, technology removes the in-person opportunity to build personal relationships and advance advocacy goals, and may contribute to decision makers not taking meetings seriously. While technology presents significant opportunities, it also creates new risks and can have unintended consequences for women. It is possible – and vital – to mitigate the risks that women face in online spaces and ensure that their safety

and rights are protected without limiting their access to online spaces.

The report concludes with recommendations to strengthen the efforts of local women mediators. Five strategic areas for support are identified: (1) strengthening networks and knowledge sharing; (2) providing resources that enable inclusion of a diverse range of women; (3) improving protection for women mediators; (4) encouraging local ownership and context-specific support; and (5) continuing to raise public awareness through advocacy and research.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Following United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognized the role of women as equal actors in the prevention and resolution of conflict, there has been an increased focus on engaging women in peace processes and conflict mediation globally. There is robust evidence that women’s active participation in peace negotiations has a positive impact on the durability and quality of peace,<sup>1</sup> and contributes both to the likelihood of reaching a peace agreement and to its successful implementation.<sup>2</sup> Women have also long played a key role in mediating conflicts within families, tribes and local communities, and this continues during and after conflict. Yemeni women, for instance, have engaged in cross-line negotiations at the local level that produced ceasefires and resource management deals;<sup>3</sup> Syrian

women have negotiated with armed actors to achieve prisoner releases;<sup>4</sup> Libyan women brought the issue of displacement to the forefront of peace negotiations;<sup>5</sup> and women in Iraq mediated important post-conflict and reconciliation issues. Yet despite their track record, women’s contributions to conflict resolution often go unrecognized by high-level actors and the wider public.<sup>6</sup> The invisibility and marginalization of women’s efforts – including due to security and protection concerns – also means their work is less documented and not as well understood, posing a challenge for those who wish to offer them strategic support.<sup>7</sup>

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1 J. Krause, W. Krause and P. Bränfors (2018). “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace”. *International Interactions*, 44:6, 985-1016, DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386.

2 M. O’Reilly, A. Súlleabháin and T. Paffenholz (2015). Re-Imagining Peacemaking: *Women’s Roles in Peace Processes*. International Peace Institute.

3 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen* – A Discussion Paper. UN Women, pp. 12–16. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>; see also: M. Heinze and M. Baabbad (2017). “*Women Nowadays Do Anything*”: *Women’s Role in Conflict, Peace and Security in Yemen*. London: Saferworld. Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1125-awomen-nowadays-do-anything-womenas-role-in-conflict-peace-and-security-in-yemen>.

4 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen* – A Discussion Paper. UN Women, pp. 7–11. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>.

5 UN Women (March 2021). “Libya Women at the Forefront”. Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>.

6 C. Turner (2018). “Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations”. *Global Policy* 9(2), 244–253; C. Turner (2017). “Time to Celebrate the Unsung Women of Peace”. *News Deeply*. 22 August. Available at: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/peacebuilding/articles/2017/08/22/time-to-celebrate-the-unsungwomen-heroes-of-peace-mediation>.

7 S. Hayward (2015). “Women, Religion and Peacebuilding”. In A. R. Omer, S. Appleby and D. Little (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, pp. 300–315.

This report aims to illuminate the numerous and diverse ways that women mediate local conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa region. Drawing on case studies from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, it maps entry points, techniques and outcomes of women's local mediation efforts, and identifies common themes and key conceptual issues. Crediting women for their existing achievements is an important first step towards enhancing the role of women in mediation. By documenting women's mediation efforts, the report intends to build greater understanding of and confidence in women's abilities, and identify strategic ways to support women's efforts. Supporting women to take a stronger role in local mediation will have a positive impact on peace efforts since – as this report seeks to demonstrate – women play a vital role in addressing and resolving local conflicts and connecting local and national peace processes.

The focus of this report is mediation at the local level. This refers to instances where women from the community attempt to resolve disputes that affect their community, such as access to resources or wartime treatment of civilians. This type of mediation is increasingly vital in the context of modern warfare. Until the mid-twentieth century, wars were generally fought by state military forces and concluded either by military victory or elite political negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary armed struggles, by contrast, are highly fragmented and localized.<sup>9</sup> They often involve multiple non-state actors such as tribes, militias and armed criminal gangs, and are driven by local dynamics that are resistant to national solutions. In this changed context, “bottom-up” methods of peacebuilding – that is, efforts that take place at the community level and address local concerns – play a vital role alongside

“top-down” peacemaking efforts led by national actors. The relationship between local and national peace efforts is complex, and there are many different ways they can interact: sometimes local and national efforts work in a complementary way, sharing information and priorities and building consensus around common issues of concerns. At other times, the highly fragmented and local nature of conflict means that local mediators operate independently of national processes and may avoid any form of integration lest it politicize and undermine opportunity for local peace. Whether local mediation efforts are complementary to, integrated with or independent from national peace processes, they play a vital role in addressing local drivers of conflict that are frequently beyond the interest, scope and capability of national processes to address.<sup>10</sup>

This report examines how women have mediated local conflict and how these efforts relate to broader peace processes and conflict dynamics. It is structured in four sections. The first section explains the methodology and some key terms. The second section provides an overview of women as mediators, asking: What type of conflicts do women usually mediate? Who are the mediators? How have women mediators negotiated local conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen? For each question, the report draws attention to commonalities and differences between the four case study countries. Section three discusses some key themes and conceptual issues, namely: the relationship between local mediation and national peace processes; the role of social norms; what happens outside of negotiations; and the impact of digitalization on local mediation. The report concludes with a summary of key findings and recommendations.

## 1.2 METHODOLOGY

The UN Women Regional Office for Arab States commissioned this research to address the knowledge gap around women's participation in local mediation and inform further programming on this issue. The research was undertaken by a lead consultant who conducted interviews in English and was responsible for drafting the

report, together with a second consultant who conducted interviews in Arabic and helped to contextualize the interview tools. The study took place across four countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen) in order to demonstrate how different environments produce different opportunities and challenges for women mediators.

8 M. Kaldor (1999). *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity.

9 UN General Assembly (19 August 2015). “Cooperation between the United Nations and Regional and Subregional Organizations on Mediation – Report of the Secretary-General”. UN Doc. A/70/328.

10 A. Boutellis, D. Mechoulan and M. Zahar (December 2020). *Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation and Peace Processes*. International Peace Institute.

The findings in this report were reached on the basis of a detailed literature review and key informant interviews. A total of 30 interviews were completed between November 2021 and February 2022. This included 6 interviews related to Iraq, 7 to Libya, 12 to Syria and 5 to Yemen. Key informants in each country were identified with the support of the UN Women country offices, on the basis of their expert knowledge of, or personal experience in, conducting mediation at the local level. All interviews were conducted on an individual basis, and due to the sensitivity of the topic not all were for attribution. Interviews were conducted in either English or Arabic based on the preference of each interviewee, and Arabic interviews were transcribed and translated to English. All interviews were coded and analysed for thematic commonalities and differences. Interviews were also conducted with each of the UN Women offices engaged in the study.

One key limitation of the study was the difficulty in obtaining detailed information about specific mediation efforts due to the sensitivity of the topic. Many women appeared to believe that talking about their role in detail would undermine their position as local mediators or even put them in jeopardy. The consultants took several mitigating measures to address this: interviews were not recorded; all interviewees were assured anonymity; and

interview questions were framed in a way that enabled the respondent to give an account in general terms rather than reporting their own personal actions, if they preferred. Despite these measures, some respondents who were known to have engaged in local mediation remained unwilling to describe their involvement in detail during interviews – this was particularly the case in Syria on matters pertaining to security (such as ceasefires) and negotiations with armed actors. This indicates the precarious position many women mediators occupy and the personal risks they often take in order to negotiate local conflicts, an issue the report addresses in later sections. A second, related limitation was the difficulty in connecting with women mediators who are less familiar with international organizations and who typically reside in more rural and/or conservative communities. While efforts were made to identify and interview women with diverse backgrounds, those coming from more traditional or isolated areas remain underrepresented in the study. As such, while the study identifies many instances where women have engaged in mediation at the local level, it cannot offer a comprehensive account of women's efforts. Additional research focusing on these less accessible aspects of women's mediation efforts would be valuable, and may benefit from utilizing researchers with direct access to those areas and who have pre-existing trust built with respondents.

## 1.3 KEY TERMS

This section sets out the way key terms are understood in this report – an important consideration since the way we talk about mediation determines how visible women are and how their contributions are valued. The first key term is **mediation**. Mediation in its narrowest sense is a process by which a third party assists two or more disputing parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve conflict.<sup>11</sup> However, as this report demonstrates, if we restrict ourselves to the conventional understanding of mediation – that is, a set of negotiations led by an appointed mediator – we may overlook the valuable work of women in resolving local conflicts. A broader understanding of mediation is even more important given that women themselves may not use the term mediation to describe what they do: in interviews for this report, for example, women often described their

work as “meetings” or “discussions”, even when they engaged disputing parties to resolve a conflict. In order to capture and credit the work women do, therefore, it is vital to use flexible and inclusive definitions of key terms such as mediation and to focus on the substance of their intervention rather than what they (or others) call it.

The crux of any mediation process is the period of negotiation between the disputing parties, but what happens before and after this period can be equally vital to resolving the dispute and fulfilling any agreement. Negotiations often require extensive and sustained engagement outside or alongside negotiations, including dialogue, third-party facilitation or – particularly when part of a multitrack peace process – reconciliation

11 J. Baumann and G. Clayton (2017). “Mediation in Violent Conflict”. Center for Security Studies.

efforts and confidence-building measures.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, for an agreement to be sustainable, it often requires community buy-in and engagement before and after negotiations take place. In order to capture the breadth of women's contributions, this report considers all elements of the conflict resolution process, including negotiations, dialogue and facilitation; efforts before negotiations start and after an agreement is reached; and women-led initiatives related to reconciliation and conflict management. It also recognizes that the dynamics of a conflict setting can alter the formality of mediation. This means that disputing parties may not formally consent to a mediator's assistance, but rather the mediator may directly approach one party and compel them to address a community grievance.

A second key term to define is **mediator**. The conventional use of the term implies a formal title and usually refers to people – typically men – who engage in high-level diplomacy. The use of this narrow and formal definition creates the (false) impression that women are rarely, if ever, mediators, since they are not equally represented in official mediation roles.<sup>13</sup> This narrow approach is not well suited to local settings. As this report will demonstrate, women who mediate local conflicts often describe themselves in other ways, such as peacebuilders who engage in community work, even when they initiate dialogue or lead negotiations. Moreover, while the term mediator creates an image of someone who facilitates negotiations, we also know that women contribute to mediation in other important ways, such as initiating dialogue between disputing parties, facilitating initial meetings between conflict parties, leading monitoring and accountability efforts once an agreement is reached, and initiating and leading reconciliation efforts that enhance the sustainability of mediation processes. In order to understand the diverse contributions that women make to local mediation, the report maps the full spectrum of women's efforts, not only as lead mediator, but also more broadly throughout the different stages of the mediation process. As such, it takes an inclusive approach to the term mediator and focuses on how

women influence the mediation process rather than any (appointed or perceived) title.

Finally, the report uses the term **local mediation** to refer to community-level mediation efforts that have limited territorial scope, are mediated by someone from that community, and address disputes that concern that community.<sup>14</sup> Examples drawn from this report include local peace agreements in Iraq that established the means by which internally displaced persons (IDPs) could return to specific areas; mediation efforts in Yemen that resulted in agreement for communities to access water resources; negotiations in Syria that led to returned refugees obtaining services; and dialogue in Libya that encouraged the return of IDPs displaced by local conflict. Local mediation initiatives can take different degrees of formality and can vary in their longevity: some are *ad hoc* measures intended to resolve a single issue, whereas others exist long term, continuing for months or even years. These efforts may address intra- or inter-community disputes, tribal conflicts, disputes with armed actors, or even domestic disputes that occur at the family level but reflect wider conflict dynamics such as women's right to inheritance or the response to gender-based violence.

In general terms, local mediation initiatives can be categorized along two dimensions. The first dimension is their primary objective – namely, whether they intend to prevent, manage or resolve local conflict. The next section of the report offers a detailed typology of disputes women in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have mediated, and demonstrates that these efforts span the full conflict cycle from preventing violence to addressing issues of reconciliation. The second dimension of local mediation is the relationship between local mediation and national peace processes. It is common for peace efforts to take place across different “tracks”, a term that refers to the different societal levels of a peace process. Track III is the grass-roots mediation work that occurs within and between communities to address local conflicts (and is the focus of this report); Track II is diplomacy that involves conflict resolution specialists, non-governmental organizations or civil society representatives; and Track I

12 Dialogue is understood to mean conversations aimed at fostering relationships and identifying common points before or during negotiations, while facilitation refers to when a third party enables the conversations to take place. See: A. Boutellis, D. Mechoulan and M. Zahar (December 2020). *Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation and Peace Processes*. International Peace Institute.

13 C. Turner (2018). “Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations”. *Global Policy* 9(2), 244–253.

14 This definition draws from the definition and analysis provided by PA-X in its study on local peace processes. See: L. Wise, R. Forster and C. Bell (2019). “Local Peace Processes: Opportunities and Challenges for Women's Engagement”. PA-X Spotlight: Gender.

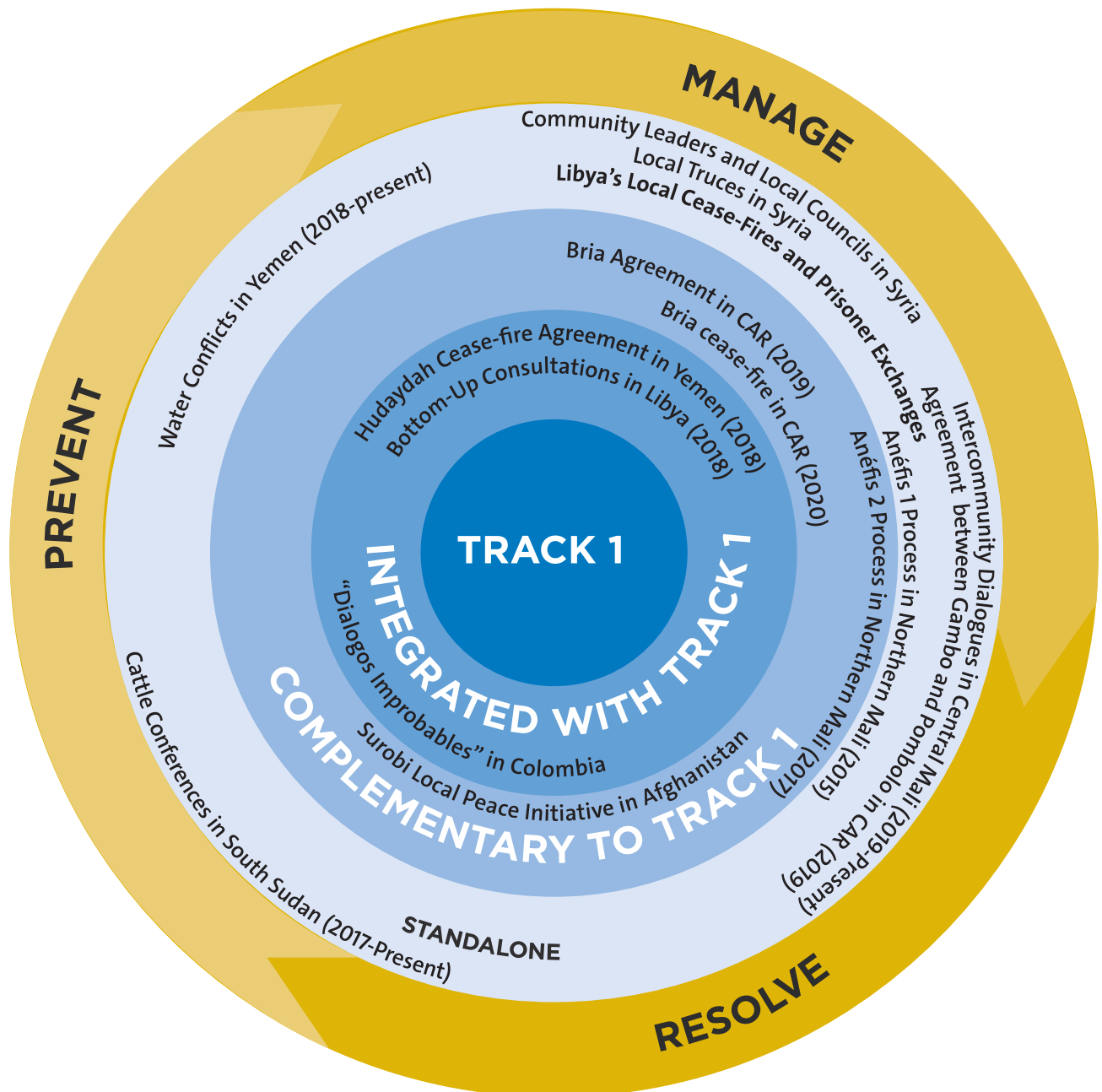


refers to high-level, official diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> Local mediation may complement Track I processes (either informally or by being formally integrated into the Track I process) or may operate in a parallel or standalone way.

Drawing on a recent study that examined the relationship between local mediation and UN peace processes, Figure 1 captures these two dimensions of local mediation efforts: concentric circles indicate the relationship to Track I processes, while the quadrants of each circle indicate the purpose.<sup>16</sup>

**FIGURE 1**

**Typology of local mediation efforts**



15 For a discussion of mediation and negotiation tracks, see: John Paul Lederach (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace.

16 A. Boutellis, D. Mechoulam and M. Zahar (December 2020). *Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces? UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation and Peace Processes*. International Peace Institute.

## 2. WOMEN AS LOCAL MEDIATORS

This section offers a picture of what it means for women to participate in local mediation. It asks: Who are the mediators? What type of conflicts do women mediate? How do women mediate? It focuses on women’s involvement in negotiations; that is, the period when the mediator engages the disputing parties to reach an agreement. Later in the report, Section 3.3 explores the role women play in the equally vital post-negotiation phase.

### 2.1 WHO ARE WOMEN MEDIATORS?

This section maps the profiles of women mediators in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. While it is possible to map common attributes, it is clear that there is no quintessential profile of a woman mediator. Unlike the formalities of Track I negotiations, which create some degree of uniformity at the official “peace table” – that is, women typically hold a high level of education, social status and professional standing – the diverse settings of local mediation enable more varied mediator profiles. Numerous interviewees insisted that local women mediators are foremost those who are “really passionate, very strong-willed, confident”<sup>17</sup> and that characteristics beyond this are highly varied. It was clear that in some settings, women mediators draw legitimacy from their advanced education<sup>18</sup> and social class (such as those who were descendants of influential tribal families, discussed in more detail below).<sup>19</sup> However, as the profiles below demonstrate, education and social status are not obligatory attributes of women mediators – a vital point since these traits are typically available only to women from wealthier families.<sup>20</sup>

The most crucial attribute for most women mediators was their position as an “insider mediator”. An insider mediator is someone who has a connection or proximity to the disputing parties and derives their legitimacy, credibility and influence from sociocultural, religious or personal characteristics that create bonds of trust with the disputants. Due to this legitimacy and trust, the insider mediator is then able to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the conflict parties.<sup>21</sup> As one Syrian interviewee noted, the profile of insider mediators is incredibly diverse and can include “anyone who shows leadership in the society” since “they gain legitimacy and trust because of their position, their standing”, and then “people come to them to solve their disputes because they respect their views”.<sup>22</sup> Insider mediators can have vividly different profiles and yet, due to their proximity to and trust with the conflict parties, be uniquely positioned to mediate a specific conflict. This also means that the profiles set out below are not exhaustive; insider mediator profiles are as vast as their settings.

Women demonstrated two consistent traits as insider mediators. The first was an ability to build or leverage relationships in order to mediate a conflict. Personal connections and social status were a consistent and vital source of legitimacy that many mediators used as a tool – rather than as a crutch – for building trust, credibility

17 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

18 Norwegian Refugee Council (2019). “Repairing Fractured Landscapes: Challenges and Opportunities for Resolving Disputes over Land, Housing, Water and Other Natural Resources in Yemen”. Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>.

19 N. Al Dawsair (2014). “Case studies on women and conflict in Tribal Yemen, Al-Jawf”. Yemen Tribal Voices Blogspot.

20 Norwegian Refugee Council (2019). “Repairing Fractured Landscapes: Challenges and Opportunities for Resolving Disputes over Land, Housing, Water and Other Natural Resources in Yemen”. Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>.

21 UNDP (2020). “Engaging with Insider Mediators: Sustaining Peace in an Age of Turbulence”. Guidance Note. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/library/engaging-insider-mediators-sustaining-peace-age-turbulence>.

22 Interview #6, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

and access.<sup>23</sup> How they did this is discussed in Sections 2.3 and 2.4; here, we simply recognize this trait as central to the mediator profile. Second, women mediators had detailed knowledge of the conflict and of the conflict parties – they have “good information about the case”<sup>24</sup> as one interviewee put it – which enables them to act as a mediator. One interviewee compared this with the formal appointment of an outside mediator: “When

mediators are formally appointed, their role can be ineffective because they are not aware of the situation. But women mediators get involved on their personal initiative, and they know the conflict and its parties very well.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the independence of women mediators was often paramount for their legitimacy and for disputing parties’ acceptance of their intervention.<sup>26</sup>

Common profiles of women mediators are set out below.

**TABLE 1:**

**Typology of Women Mediators**

**Women with Professional Status**

Women mediators are often those who hold professional status: as doctors, educators or part of local government. Often their role as a mediator is a natural extension of their professional responsibilities: in Yemen, for example, a teacher who spent years settling disputes between students, families and colleagues slowly became involved in solving larger and more complex disputes, including disputes about natural resources and development projects.<sup>27</sup> Holding a formal position may also give women a mandate to mediate disputes: a woman who was elected to a community committee in Yemen’s Taiz governorate, for instance, took responsibility for mediating disputes related to women’s access to resources and inheritance since she could connect with female disputants more easily than her male colleagues.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, another female mediator in Taiz noted that since 2015, local committees were formed in order to resolve disputes (in the absence of effective authorities), and through her position on one such council she was able to contribute to the opening of the Taiz border crossing located at the frontline.<sup>29</sup>

**Humanitarian or Civil Society Actors**

Women or women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in providing humanitarian assistance are often present in conflict-affected areas, and their role as humanitarian workers can enable them to build trust and social standing with political and security actors, which in turn can facilitate their access to the mediation of disputes. For example, in Libya a nurse who had served both sides of a conflict leveraged the trust she had developed as an impartial service provider to negotiate the end of hostilities between two tribes. In another example (discussed in depth later in the report), a female Iraqi mediator who worked for an Iraqi NGO used her position to expand tribal negotiations on the return of IDPs to include displaced women.<sup>30</sup>

23 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – A Discussion Paper*. UN Women. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>.

24 Interview #15, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

25 Interview #17, Syria, Women’s Advisory Board member.

26 Interview #15, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

27 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – A Discussion Paper*. UN Women. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>.

28 Norwegian Refugee Council (2019). “Repairing Fractured Landscapes: Challenges and Opportunities for Resolving Disputes over Land, Housing, Water and Other Natural Resources in Yemen.” Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>.

29 Interview #16, Yemen, national NGO.

30 Interview #10, Iraq, peacebuilding practitioner

## Religious Women Actors

Female religious representatives include not only appointed religious leaders (who remain overwhelmingly men), but also those who are influential in shaping religious attitudes and behaviours.<sup>31</sup> It is important to take a broad view of who constitutes a religious actor since the majority of influential religious women do not hold formal credentials and may be overlooked by initiatives looking for religious leaders.<sup>32</sup> Some examples include the position of mullaya (female mullah) among the Shia Muslim community, particularly in Iraq; the mullaya is responsible for hosting women-only funerals and mourning rituals, and can play a valuable role in mediating disputes or encouraging reconciliation.<sup>33</sup> In parts of Syria, too, women who preach or encourage women to follow Islamic rules and values are often called on to mediate disputes due to their influential and respected position in the community.<sup>34</sup> The creation of bureaucratic positions of religious leadership can also create opportunities for women: in Iraq, the government introduced an agency to represent minority faiths, and the (female) head of this agency plays an important role in local mediation.<sup>35</sup>

## Women from Influential Families

Some women mediators “inherit” their connections and initial legitimacy due to their family status (typically received via the husband or father). This includes women who are wives or daughters of tribal leaders, security actors or local authorities. However, being a mediator requires more than simple inheritance: interviewees stressed that these women developed their own mediation skills, often by watching family members as role models. An Iraqi mediator noted, “Women whose father or husband is a tribal leader often watch them and see how they mediate disputes, and then they use the same techniques themselves in a skilful way, even though they don’t have any formal training.”<sup>36</sup> In Libya, one interviewee explained that the presence of women who do not hold an official position but are the daughters or wives of elders is particularly valuable “because it makes it easier to build synergies between the different tracks of the peace process, since these women connect the [community] leadership and the community members.”<sup>37</sup>

## Women of Advanced Age

Respected older women also play a key role as local mediators. While some do not possess credentials other than their advanced age, others have family lineage or professional status that complement their age as a form of legitimacy.<sup>38</sup> Older women are in a unique social position, as they are sometimes able to transgress gender-segregated spaces and raise their voices on the basis of their perceived wisdom and experience.<sup>39</sup> They are also responsible for the resolution of disputes among younger members of households.<sup>40</sup> This profile may be difficult

31 A. Wainscott (2019). *Engaging the Post-ISIS Iraqi Religious Landscape for Peace and Reconciliation*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/engaging-post-isis-iraqi-religious-landscape-peace-and-reconciliation>.

32 K. Marshall and S. Hayward with C. Zambra, E. Breger and S. Jackson (2011). *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/05/women-religious-peacebuilding>.

33 A. Wainscott (2019). *Engaging the Post-ISIS Iraqi Religious Landscape for Peace and Reconciliation*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/engaging-post-isis-iraqi-religious-landscape-peace-and-reconciliation>.

34 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

35 K. Marshall and S. Hayward with C. Zambra, E. Breger and S. Jackson (2011). *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/05/women-religious-peacebuilding>.

36 Interview #10, Iraq, national NGO.

37 Interview #2, Libya, international NGO.

38 UN Women (March 2021). “Libya Women at the Forefront”. Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>; M. Awadh and N. Shuja’adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

39 S. Weir (2007). “A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen”. University of Texas Press, p. 46; M. Awadh and N. Shuja’adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

40 Triangle Consulting (2021). “Gender Analysis of the Syrian conflict”. UN Women. Unpublished report.

for international organizations to recognize, since these women do not fit the criteria usually used to identify community leaders. For example, one interviewee noted in Iraq that a prominent female mediator was excluded from a training opportunity as she didn't possess any formal qualifications, social status or tribal lineage to affirm her role as mediator, although community members reiterated that she routinely resolved community disputes due to her credibility as a wise (older) woman.<sup>41</sup>

## Women Affected by Conflict

Some women were pushed to mediate disputes that personally affected their family or wider community, although they themselves had no formal standing. In Syria's Zabadani District, for example, women were at the forefront of negotiations to end the siege against their area; most did not have a prominent role in the community prior to this (and were mostly homemakers), but wanted to protect their husbands.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Al Kiswah District, Syrian women negotiated with political actors to obtain access to essential services after the siege ended; they were pushed to take this role since men in the community could not travel or have a public profile given the high risk of arrest.<sup>43</sup>

## Women Affected by Displacement

Female-headed households often make up a large component of displaced or returnee populations. In Syria, for instance, about 22 per cent of households are now headed by women, up from only 4 per cent prior to the conflict.<sup>44</sup> The experience of displacement may compel women to mediate local conflicts, particularly when there is a gap in community leadership. Sometimes women may take on that role formally: in Iraq, for instance, Al-Amal Association trained IDP women in Laylan Camp as mediators, following which 60 women were elected via camp elections to become local mediators (and thereby part of the camp leadership).<sup>45</sup> In other cases, women may take on this role without appointment in order to navigate issues that affect their family: in Syria, for example, many female returning refugees are required – as the head of household – to negotiate complex housing-, land- and property-related disputes in their area of origin.<sup>46</sup> The experience of displacement may also compel conflict parties to recognize women as mediators; in Murzuq, Libya, for instance, one interviewee explained: “Because the conflict is no longer active, it opened a door for women’s engagement: now women can speak for the displaced and the challenges they are facing better than men because women are most affected.”<sup>47</sup>

## Survivors of Violence

Sometimes women became involved in mediation due to their recognition as survivors. For example, Yazidi women were invited to mediation sessions in Iraq because they were survivors of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) kidnapping and violence. While this gave women an opportunity to express their views, their categorization as survivors was also limiting; as one interviewee noted: “It gave women an opportunity, but we shouldn't keep them in the box as survivors. It is vital to encourage them to talk about issues beyond their own

41 Interview #10, Iraq, national NGO.

42 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

43 Ibid.

44 United Nations Population Fund (November 2020). “Regional Situation Report for the Syria Crisis, #99”. Available at: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA\\_Regional\\_Situation\\_Report\\_for\\_the\\_Syria\\_Crisis\\_-\\_November\\_2020\\_-\\_FA.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA_Regional_Situation_Report_for_the_Syria_Crisis_-_November_2020_-_FA.pdf).

45 Cordaid (2017). “Women and Youth against Violence: Narrative Report 2016, 2nd Dutch National Action Plan 1325 MENA”. Quoted in D. O'Driscoll (2017). *Women's Participation in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Iraq*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

46 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

47 Interview #2, Libya, international NGO.

victimhood and enable them to show their capability as mediators or active community members more broadly.”<sup>48</sup> Some women mediators also draw attention to their shared experience of violence when mediating with survivors, as a means of strengthening their legitimacy. In Iraq, women who mediated the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation often stressed that they understood the perspective of “victim families” since they themselves had also lost family members in the conflict.<sup>49</sup> In Yemen, meanwhile, the mediator who represented families at the National Dialogue Conference acknowledged that her father had been forcibly disappeared during an earlier period of the war.<sup>50</sup>

The practice of relying on women who are insider mediators may narrow, in some respects, who can intervene in a specific context. Although the profiles of women mediators are diverse, this diversity is more apparent when the spectrum of profiles is viewed collectively: at the community level, and for each specific dispute, power dynamics or social expectations may restrict the opportunities available to women and the type of women who can act as mediator. That is to say, opportunities that exist for certain women in one area will not necessarily exist in another. While men may be able to rely on their official status to mediate a local dispute with which they have no direct connection (as a tribal leader, community leader or elder, for example) women typically gain their status through their proximity to disputing parties and their perceived credibility and legitimacy. On the one hand, this creates diversity in the profiles of women mediators, but on the other, it means that most women mediators will be unable to intervene unless they have some connection to the disputants.

The above typology reveals a number of ways that the same category of mediator profile may differ between men and women. Religious actors and tribal figures are common profiles among both male and female mediators, yet women typically occupy a less visible role and lack the official credentials of their male counterparts, even though their influence among those in their community remains high. This reinforces the need to develop a nuanced and inclusive understanding of who constitutes a local mediator, based on their substantive role in the community rather than any official title.

48 Interview #8, Iraq, international NGO.

49 Interview #10, Iraq, peacebuilding practitioner.

50 W. Shakir (2015). “Women and Peacemaking in Yemen: Mapping the Realities”. Crisis Management Initiative. Available at: [https://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Women\\_and\\_Peacemaking\\_in\\_Yemen\\_EN.pdf](https://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Women_and_Peacemaking_in_Yemen_EN.pdf).

The typology also identifies a number of unique profiles associated with women mediators. Conflict often transforms gender roles, and the typology indicates that in situations where conflict or threat of arrest restricts the movement of men, or where the number of female-headed households is high due to death, arrest or combat duties of men, new opportunities will open for women to engage in local mediation (often out of necessity rather than choice). Women in these settings are often recognized by disputing parties (including armed actors) as having the “standing” to negotiate issues such as service provision, ceasefires, civilian protection or humanitarian aid due to their position as wives, mothers or sisters of affected men; due to their position as head of household; or on account of their displacement or vulnerability in conflict. Equally, survivors of violence may also be recognized as legitimate actors to play a role in mediation in post-conflict settings due to their status as victims or survivors. However, while these profiles can open up new opportunities for women to negotiate or influence negotiations that affect their lives, disputing parties may limit them to discussing issues that are perceived to fit their status as survivors or conflict-affected women. For example, women may be expected to focus on issues related to humanitarian assistance or service provision, but would not be entitled to raise issues related to political structures or military action. In the event that women in these categories wish to engage in broader negotiations with disputants, they may need to expand the grounds on which they are recognized as insider mediators to enable them to cover the gamut of issues they wish to address.

The case study below offers one example of how women in Syria have used their status as insider mediators – as wives of male combatants or men at risk of detention – to negotiate local ceasefires.

## Case Study 1: Women Negotiating Ceasefires in Syria

Women in Syria have been involved in a number of low-profile mediation efforts related to sieges and ceasefires.<sup>51</sup> Early in the civil war, a district called Zabadani – located north-west of Damascus and falling under the control of opposition forces – was besieged by government forces. The government demanded that men hand over weapons and surrender, which meant that it was only possible for women to move safely across the lines of control. Although Zabadani was an area where women were usually expected to focus on responsibilities inside the home, the restrictions and risks towards men altered these dynamics and made it acceptable – and even necessary – for women to involve themselves in negotiations with government forces. A group of women in Zabadani gathered together and initiated a mediation process with the besieging forces in order to negotiate an end (or at least a break) to the siege, as well as a potential ceasefire. Prior to the siege, these women were not prominent figures in the community, but rather:

*“Most of these women became involved because their husbands were implicated with the opposition forces and were wanted by the government. The women themselves were mostly housewives and did not have any formal role in the community, but they gained their significance because they wanted to protect their husbands.”<sup>52</sup>*

Women engaged in negotiating a ceasefire, which in its early iteration was successful, although later the political context changed and saw the collapse of the ceasefire agreement. Yet for a period of time, “women were successful in ensuring civilians were protected and evacuated, and in negotiating a temporary ceasefire of sorts.”<sup>53</sup>

Syrian women have also led mediation efforts related to security issues in areas formerly under the control of opposition forces, after their areas were returned to government control. As the peacebuilding expert explained:

*“The government insisted that men needed to ‘settle down their status with the government’ as they say in Arabic [meaning among other things that they should complete military service], and this made many young men afraid to emerge in the public sphere for fear of being arrested... So women were involved in going out and exploring to what extent the discussions with the new authorities in the area were possible. During these negotiations, they discussed early recovery to their areas...and they were involved in the gradual normalization between their regions and the hub of the state.”<sup>54</sup>*

One example of this type of mediation occurred in the district of Al-Kiswah, located south of Damascus. After Al-Kiswah was returned to the control of the government, women came to engage very discreetly in mediation with the local authorities. As with Zabadani, many men could not venture out of their homes without risking arrest, which pushed women into this negotiator role:

*“These women didn’t have a lot of access to resources, and they worked independently. On behalf of their communities, women reached out to political actors to create an entry point to get services, and then they took on the role of negotiating service provision, purchase of harvest, fertilizers to be used during the next harvest, opening the local school, and repairing the local medicine dispensary.”<sup>55</sup>*

51 It was extremely difficult to obtain details on these efforts during interviews conducted for this study due to an apparent fear by interviewees that if they revealed identifiable details, it would create security risks for them and also undermine their role as mediators. The examples below are taken from interviews with a Syrian peacebuilding expert who, while not directly involved in these negotiations, is familiar with how they unfolded.

52 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

53 Discussion by WhatsApp with peacebuilding expert, Syria.

54 Ibid.

55 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

These efforts by women were particularly vital since areas such as Al-Kiswah initially received very little external support. Humanitarian assistance was extremely limited, and there were no government services available. In such a context:

*“Women played an important role in normalizing life in these areas – this was a civil society space that was not ‘NGO-ized’ or funded by donors, it was driven by survival. These actors emerged out of necessity because they wanted their communities to survive.”<sup>56</sup>*

## 2.2 WHAT TYPES OF CONFLICTS DO WOMEN MEDIATE?

Women in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have mediated a wide array of disputes at the local level. Set out below are some of the most common subjects of these mediations. There is overlap between some of the categories, and the list is not exhaustive; rather, the typology aims to give a sense of the diversity of conflicts women mediate in the case study countries.

TABLE 2:

### Typology of Conflicts Mediated by Women

#### Security and Conflict

- **Ceasefires:** Women in Syria have mediated ceasefires and situations of siege.<sup>57</sup> For example, as discussed in Case Study 1, during the siege of Zabadani when men were either fighting or at risk of arrest, a group of women initiated and led negotiations with the government regarding civilian protection, evacuation and a temporary ceasefire.<sup>58</sup> In other towns, Syrian women have also deescalated fighting so aid could pass through.<sup>59</sup>
- **War-time violations:** Women have negotiated a halt to a variety of violations against civilians during wartime. Women in Syria negotiated with armed groups to end the recruitment of child soldiers and brokered the release of political prisoners.<sup>60</sup>
- **Confidence-building measures:** War-time violations are often addressed via confidence-building measures, which are introduced during peace agreements to facilitate trust between conflict parties. They include issues such as missing persons; prisoner release; refugee assistance; a lifting of sieges; and freedom of movement. In Yemen, women have negotiated the release of political detainees and prisoners of war, and mediated the reopening of roads around Taiz city, actions that have in fact become central UN confidencebuilding measures.<sup>61</sup>
- **Intertribal disputes:** In Yemen, women have played important roles in preventing and resolving conflicts between the government and tribes and averting conflict between influential tribes.<sup>62</sup> For example, a dispute

56 Ibid.

57 UN Women (2018). “Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen”.

58 Discussion by WhatsApp with peacebuilding expert, Syria.

59 R. Jouejati (2017). “Women Are Invisible at the Syria Peace Talks”. PassBlue. Available at: <https://www.passblue.com/2017/02/23/whos-missing-at-the-syria-peace-talks-women/>.

60 UN Women (2018). “Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen”.

61 International Crisis Group (18 March 2021). “The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen”. *Middle East Report No. 221*.

62 N. Al Dawsair (2014). “Case Studies on Women and Conflict in Tribal Yemen, Al-Jawf”. Yemen Tribal Voices Blogspot.



- erupted between members of two different tribes in Hajjah over a land claim and escalated into a full armed battle between their tribes, leading to over 60 deaths. A woman mediator was able to convince the tribal leaders to gather a group of men who would camp out on the contested land until a resolution was found.<sup>63</sup>
- **Post-conflict representation:** In north-east Syria, women were involved in negotiations to increase the representation of women in local administrations.<sup>64</sup>
- **Access to resources:** In Yemen, women have engaged in cross-line negotiations that produced resource management deals,<sup>65</sup> including access to water.<sup>66</sup> In Libya, a dispute over an oil field was resolved by a Libyan activist who wished to avoid violence escalating in her community.<sup>67</sup>

## Displacement and Return

- **Displacement:** In Libya, women played a key role in bringing the issue of displacement to the forefront of peace negotiations, demonstrating a strong understanding of local grievances and layers of social marginalization.<sup>68</sup>
- **Access to property and services post-return:** Many military-age Syrian men had concerns of being conscripted upon return to areas under government control. As a result, women are more likely to return than men, and women and children often return first to settle housing, land and property and civil documentation claims, and to assess conditions and available services in the intended area of return. Upon return, they often have to negotiate complex property claims as well as access to services.<sup>69</sup>
- **Post-war reconciliation:** In Iraq and Libya, women have been involved in mediation to address the return of displaced families and reconciliation.

## Personal or Family Issues

Across the region, women play an important role in solving family disputes or personal matters.<sup>70</sup> These disputes involve issues such as conflict over land, divorce, custody, early marriage, gender-based violence, inheritance and other social issues, issues that are often exacerbated by conflict and vulnerable financial status. For some sensitive social issues, such as gender-based violence or early marriage, a woman can negotiate more easily than a man because she has better access to families and can more easily engage female family members.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, women can often situate the mediation of such conflicts within their socially ascribed role of caregivers, in that by mediating conflict they prevent others from being harmed.<sup>72</sup>

63 Norwegian Refugee Council (2019). "Repairing Fractured Landscapes: Challenges and Opportunities for Resolving Disputes over Land, Housing, Water and Other Natural Resources in Yemen", p. 39. Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>.

64 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

65 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – A Discussion Paper*. UN Women. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>.

66 K. Walker (27 April 2020). "On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace". *Equal Times*.

67 Interview #18, Libya, national NGO.

68 UN Women (March 2021). "Libya Women at the Forefront". Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>.

69 Sawa for Development and Aid (2019). "Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns".

70 N. Al Dawsair (2014). "Case Studies on Women and Conflict in Tribal Yemen, Al-Jawf". Yemen Tribal Voices Blogspot.

71 M. Awadh and N. Shuja'adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

72 Ibid.

The case study below offers an example from Syria, describing how a women-led CSO mediated a myriad of disputes that can arise during war – these are associated with service provision, IDPs and local violence.

## Case Study 2: Everyday Mediation in Damascus and Tartus

Several years after the start of the conflict, a women-led CSO in Damascus noted the increase in localized violence stemming from fractured social relations and resentment towards IDPs who had arrived in the capital. In order to start to address this violence, the CSO formed local committees made up of men and women from the local community, including local community leaders (*mukhtars*), other influential community members (such as teachers), civil society activists and ordinary residents. They established neutral spaces where people could meet and discuss issues affecting their neighbourhoods, and aimed to build their confidence and skills so that they could take steps to address the conflict issues. Initially:

*“Committee members focused on the issues of municipal services, economic opportunities and education, since these were easier to raise and solve with local authorities compared to more politically charged issues such as the disappearance and detention of their sons or husbands.”<sup>73</sup>*

After some time, the women-led CSO expanded its work to the city of Tartus in western Syria. Here, the CSO partnered with another women-led CSO with strong community ties and presence in the area. The approach of the partner CSO changed somewhat:

*“They focused their efforts on some neighbourhoods that had received very high rates of IDPs from other governorates due to the war, and where the relationship between the IDP and host population was tense and fractured. Because of the war and the influx of IDPs, there were no services or not enough services. Local youth accused the IDPs of responsibility for the war because they originated from areas under opposition control, and they carried out violent attacks against IDPs in nearby camps.”*

The female director of the Tartus CSO decided to address the violence against IDPs, as it was creating substantial instability in the area. The director herself had standing in the community, linked not only to her professional position, but also since she came from an influential Tartus family and was known for using her CSO to do work that benefited the community. She commenced an initiative aimed at improving relations between the host community and IDPs and stopping violent attacks against the camp residents. In order to do this:

*“She met with influential community members and local business actors to convince them that the IDP camp should be integrated as part of the community so that IDPs could participate in the local economy. She also initiated regular social meetings between women IDPs and women from the host community around issues like cooking, in order to build trust between the two sides. This was a long process that continued for several years, negotiating slowly with all [the] different elements of the community who could influence the issue.”*

Through these daily forms of negotiations with community leaders, with business actors, and between women from the IDP and host communities, attitudes slowly changed, and the targeted neighbourhoods in Tartus reportedly witnessed notable differences in the treatment of IDPs: IDPs faced less harassment and violence from host community members, children were more accepted in schools, and economic opportunities for IDPs increased. In addition, there was a softening of the policy and perception that IDPs should remain isolated in camps.

73 The information in this case study is drawn from Interview #27, Syria, national NGO.

## 2.3 WOMEN AS MEDIATORS

Women sometimes assume the role of mediator, meaning that they take the lead in facilitating discussions between the disputing parties; and sometimes they take less visible roles and influence the shape of negotiations or the behaviour of the conflict parties in other ways. The line between women's roles as mediators and other influential and supporting roles throughout the mediation process is often blurred, and women may play different roles at different points of a mediation process. For example, women may start by mediating a dispute themselves and then engage a local elder as mediator in order to leverage the elder's influence, or they may use their own status as insider mediators to bring disputing families together and then transition into a less visible role during formal negotiations. This section considers the role of women as lead mediators and aims to identify key strategies or techniques that women use during negotiations.

A first grounding point is that women mediators in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen do not necessarily meet Western expectations in terms of visibility or formality. This relates in part to the gendered expectations around social behaviour and roles within the family, discussed in more detail in Section 3.2. As one interviewee noted:

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*“In Western standards you might have to mediate in a certain way – overt, seen by everyone; you need a formal position in the community in order to be considered as a leader or changemaker. But in our communities, it can be less visible; there is a lot of tacit power involved and a lot of indirect ways for women to mediate, particularly within the family.”<sup>74</sup>*

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Women mediators also use different techniques when mediating disputes at the local level than the formal (Western) model might expect. As other researchers have pointed out, they frequently rely on their ability to build and maintain relationships of trust with the disputing parties, and use relationships and connections as a tool in negotiations.<sup>75</sup> They draw on skills such as empathy and active listening to establish trust with conflict parties

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74 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

75 Interview #15, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

and wider communities,<sup>76</sup> and their mediation work is characterized by “an inclination towards engagement, towards listening and struggling to establish positive relationships”.<sup>77</sup> This means that women typically devote more time to dialogue and to building relationships than male mediators, and that a long-term approach is critical, since women must work hard to establish these relationships of trust as well as their credibility. In fact, it is often only after a sustained period of engagement that women are accepted in the role of mediator and that elders and religious leaders will agree to work with them.<sup>78</sup> A woman mediator in Syria noted:

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*“It took years to build trust with different activists across Syria so they would agree to work with us [on cross-line dialogue]. It was vital that people know we don't have any hidden agenda; we work with everyone, no matter who is in charge of the territory – but it took time for us to demonstrate that.”<sup>79</sup>*

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To give one example from Iraq – discussed in more detail in Case Study 4 – a woman mediator explained that she met with women from “both sides” of a community involved in a dispute over how to manage the return of families whose (missing or deceased) family member(s) were accused of supporting ISIL during the war. Describing her approach to the negotiations, the female mediator explained: “You need to go to their level, sit on the floor with them, eat the food they usually eat, get to know them. Only then can you raise the issues [related to the mediation].”<sup>80</sup> This indicates the importance for a mediator to understand the cultural context thoroughly in order to conduct effective negotiations: in this instance in Iraq, it also meant that a female (not male) mediator was the right person to engage a group of (only) women in the mediation process.

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76 C. Turner (2020). *Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap*. Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/women-mediators-bridging-peace-gap>.

77 D. D'Souza (2003). “Creating Spaces: Interreligious Initiatives for Peace”. In Coward and Smith, *Religion and Peacebuilding*, p. 172.

78 C. Turner (2020). *Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap*. Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/women-mediators-bridging-peace-gap>.

79 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

80 Interview #4, Iraq, national NGO.

Partnerships also play a key role. Women mediators interviewed for this study reported that community leaders (such as tribal sheikhs or *mukhtars*) with whom the mediator had already built credibility and trust, and who were familiar with the mediator's skillset, would sometimes refer disputing parties to her for mediation, or invite the woman mediator to take the lead in negotiations hosted under the community leader's facilitation. In addition, in settings where women did not (yet) hold sufficient legitimacy and trust, they often built alliances or collaborated with other actors who had a clearer mandate in terms of mediation or were better connected to, or already accepted by, the conflict parties. These allies or collaborators play a critical role in making mediation possible: they might facilitate initial discussions, strengthen the legitimacy of the woman mediator, or convince the parties to try mediation. For example, when an intertribal land dispute in Yemen led to over 60 deaths in her community, a woman mediator persuaded members of the local councils and parliament to put pressure on the conflict parties to accept her mediation services. The pressure by political actors was successful, and the respective tribal leaders agreed to participate in a mediation process led by the female mediator. Ultimately, this resulted in a halt in violence between the two communities.<sup>81</sup>

Women mediators also sometimes build alliances with professionals with technical knowledge of the source of the conflict. For instance, in response to a dispute over access to water in Yemen,<sup>82</sup> a peace activist and head of a local NGO sent in a team of engineers to try to prevent the conflict from escalating. Following the initial visit by the water engineers, she launched a mediation process that resulted in a local peace agreement signed by sixteen community representatives, as well as the formation of a new council to prevent future water conflicts. After the

agreement was signed, the mediator's organization was also able to repair the local water station.<sup>83</sup>

Women mediators also build informal coalitions with other women as a strategic way of strengthening their voice in negotiations. For example, after hearing a rumour that armed factions were planning to kill a group of detainees in Idlib, Syria, a contingent of female teachers worked to convince a wider group of women, including the detainees' mothers, to go to the headquarters of the battalion leader. The encounter ended with the faction leader telling them that he would speak with the military council, and a month later the detainees were released as part of an exchange deal.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes an informal coalition of women may partner with specialist actors for the common objective of resolving local conflicts. For instance, an organization in Iraq brought together the Kirkuk police force, several judges and 50 female activists in order to align their efforts in mediation and peacebuilding.<sup>85</sup>

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83 K. Walker (27 April 2020). "On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace". Equal Times.

84 Swisspeace, Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net (2016). "Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace", pp. 18–19.

85 Cordaid (2017). "Women and Youth against Violence: Narrative Report 2016, 2nd Dutch National Action Plan 1325 MENA." Quoted in O'Driscoll, D. (2017). *Women's Participation in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Iraq*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

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81 Norwegian Refugee Council (2019). "Repairing Fractured Landscapes: Challenges and Opportunities for Resolving Disputes over Land, Housing, Water and Other Natural Resources in Yemen", p. 39. Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/repairing-fractures-landscapes/repairing-fractured-landscapes---challenges-and-opportunities-for-resolving-disputes-over-land-housing-water-and-other-natural-resources-in-yemen.pdf>.

82 The dispute took place in Al-Haymatin, a remote area of Yemen's Taiz governorate. Taiz is a strategic governorate in the ongoing conflict between the Government of Yemen, supported by a Saudi-led coalition, and the Houthi rebels. While the conflict over water was not directly related to the larger political struggle, the aim of the mediation was to prevent further violent dynamics from tearing apart a region and communities already affected by war.

A case study from Taiz in Yemen shows a combination of these techniques in action.

### Case Study 3: Access to Water in Taiz

For seven years, active conflict in Taiz and the blockage of main roads in and out of the city deprived residents of an adequate water supply. In addition, inside the city nine water tanks came under the control of Yemeni government allied forces, who would sell the water and use the revenues for administrative costs. Unable to confront the military, the Taiz Water Authority cut the water supply, which meant that residents in three districts were without water. Women, girls and boys would travel long distances on unsafe roads to fetch water, which sometimes put them at risk of sexual abuse and sniper attack.<sup>86</sup>

A female humanitarian worker from Taiz, who also heads a local NGO and is a member of the Technical Advisory Group that advises the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, contacted influential local figures and political party leaders in Taiz and asked them to join a local alliance to mediate with the allied forces for civilian access to the water tanks. She was able to obtain their buy-in due to the track record of humanitarian work by her organization, which was well known to the community leaders. She explained:

*“We called the governor to ask for his support, and he agreed because he said that [the organization I established] had worked very hard in the city to improve the life for residents. So my existing reputation and relationships were really important, because people could trust me and my organization; they knew that we were neutral and that we were working for the community.”<sup>87</sup>*

In addition to obtaining the governor’s support, the female mediator convinced a group of community leaders to join a mediation committee, each chosen for their status and influence. This included a prominent tribal leader, a representative from the local authority, a representative from the Chamber of Commerce, a local female mediator and lawyer, and a highly respected local caricaturist.<sup>88</sup> They gathered at a workshop organized by the female mediator’s organization in order to design a joint negotiation strategy.

The mediation committee approached the military commanders of the allied forces and requested civilian access to the nine water tanks so that Taiz residents (and not only armed actors) could benefit from the water. She explained:

*“On first reception, they wouldn’t accept me negotiating as a woman, but when they saw all the local leaders in the city in the alliance, all the religious men and local authorities from the city, they agreed to talk. After some resistance, by the end of the negotiations they agreed to hand over all nine wells. We prepared a written agreement for each well, which everyone signed, the military commanders and committee members.”<sup>89</sup>*

The military commanders agreed to hand the nine water tanks to the Ministry of Water and Environment in Taiz city. At the time of writing, agreements had been signed for six (of the nine) water wells, one of which is now officially under the control of the Ministry of Water and Environment.<sup>90</sup>

86 Sheba Youth Foundation for Development (December 2021). “Demilitarizing Water Sources in Taiz”. Available at: <https://www.shebayouth.org/en/demilitarizing-water-sources-in-taiz/>.

87 Interview #24, Yemen, national NGO.

88 Sheba Youth Foundation for Development (December 2021). “Demilitarizing Water Sources in Taiz”. Available at: <https://www.shebayouth.org/en/demilitarizing-water-sources-in-taiz/>.

89 Interview #24, Yemen, national NGO.

90 Sheba Youth Foundation for Development (December 2021). “Demilitarizing Water Sources in Taiz”. Available at: <https://www.shebayouth.org/en/demilitarizing-water-sources-in-taiz/>.

## 2.4 WOMEN'S ROLES THROUGHOUT THE MEDIATION PROCESS

This section recognizes that the negotiation table is neither the only modality for participating in mediation, nor should it be seen as the sole entry point for women's engagement. Rather, the formal "negotiation table" itself may be comprised of multiple entry points.<sup>91</sup> There are many reasons why women may play a less visible role in mediation processes compared with that of the lead mediator. Women are often restricted by social or cultural norms that consider mediation a male responsibility and space,<sup>92</sup> and in fragile security contexts rely on anonymity and secrecy as a *modus operandi* to protect themselves and their work.<sup>93</sup> In this section, we canvass the diverse ways that women influence or contribute to mediation in ways other than as lead mediators.

Women often play a valuable role in the pre-negotiation phase.<sup>94</sup> Convincing the different sides of a dispute to talk is often difficult and may require sustained engagement. Women are often well-placed to carry out this work, as they are often perceived as non-threatening and can use this perceived neutrality strategically to approach conflict parties in a way that is impossible for men.<sup>95</sup> This is seen in the way women are called upon to "calm" the situation so that formal negotiations can take place. An interviewee in Libya noted that (male) mediators "look for women to calm the situation in tribal and social problems"<sup>96</sup> prior to initiating negotiations, while a

female respondent in Libya noted that "women are often invited by both parties to participate to calm down the situation, although they don't have any direct role in the negotiations".<sup>97</sup> It is also seen in the way that women bring disputing families together: in Sanaa, for example, a dispute over a piece of land led to an armed conflict and many deaths between two large families, and the wives of the family leaders organized a meeting to resolve the problem.<sup>98</sup> Women may also support the mediator to gather information prior to negotiations so that they are well informed when negotiations take place. In Yemen, for instance, the wives of *aqils* (local administrators) and *sheikhs* (religious leaders) often played a complementary role to their husbands, conducting initial interviews and investigations for cases involving women.<sup>99</sup>

Women also play an indirect role in negotiations by influencing their sons, husbands and fathers who are parties to a dispute. A social science researcher stressed that in Syria, across local dispute mechanisms, women (and especially wives) are not only seen to, but are also expected to, influence the male members of their families behind closed doors.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, a female interlocutor in Benghazi, Libya, emphasized that while women are not typically at the forefront of mediation, they have an important function in reporting to their husbands, tribal leaders and elders the situation on the ground and sharing their "female" point of view with them.<sup>101</sup> In Yemen, too, women organize their own discussions pertaining to active disputes, and both men and women rely on children to pass verbatim messages between the

91 C. Bell and C. Turner (2020). *Models for Women's Inclusion in Track One Mediation in Peace and Transition Processes*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/models-for-womens-inclusion-in-track-one-mediation>.

92 In Libya, for instance, women have been largely excluded from formal assemblies that deal with mediation and reconciliation since male elders who lead the meetings would not agree to their participation. See: J. M. Selimovic and D. K. Larsson (2014). "Gender and Transition in Libya: Mapping Women's Participation in Post-Conflict Reconstruction". Available at: <https://www.ui.se/butiken/uis-publikationer/ui-papper/2014/gender-and-transition-in-libya/>.

93 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – A Discussion Paper*. UN Women. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>.

94 T. De Langis (2013). "Across Conflict Lines: Women Mediating for Peace". 12th Annual Colloquium Findings. Institute for Inclusive Security.

95 Ibid.

96 Interview #19, Libya, peacebuilding practitioner.

97 Interview #22, Libya, peacebuilding practitioner.

98 M. Awadh and N. Shuja'adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

99 N. Al Dawsari (2014). "Informal Actors, Community and the State: An Assessment of Informal Support Structures and the Social Contract in Western Yemen". Available at: <https://yemenlg.org/resources/informal-actors-community-and-the-state-an-assessment-of-informal-support-structures-and-the-social-contract-in-western-yemen/>.

100 Triangle Consulting (2021). "Gender Analysis of the Syrian Conflict". UN Women. Unpublished report.

101 A. Alunni, M. Calder and S. Kappler (2017). *Enduring Social Institutions and Civil Society Peacebuilding in Libya and Syria*. British Council. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/enduring-social-institutions-civil-society-peacebuilding-libya-syria>.

separate gatherings; in the evening the families discuss the case, and the next day men bring the opinions of their wives, mothers and sisters with them to the discussion.<sup>102</sup>

A case study from Iraq demonstrates how some of these methods intertwine.

#### Case Study 4: Women and Local Peace Agreements in Iraq

Between 2015 and 2020, in response to deep grievances associated with the occupation by and subsequent war with ISIL, numerous communities across Iraq signed local peace agreements aimed at setting the foundations for peaceful future relations between IDPs accused by some community members and security actors of siding with ISIL, and their home communities, members of which include those who rejected, fought against or were victimized by ISIL.<sup>103</sup> A key component of each peace agreement was to facilitate the return of IDP populations accused of ISIL affiliation from IDP camps to their communities of origin. This accusation of ISIL affiliation is not based on a legal process, but draws upon community understandings of people who held certain roles under ISIL (such as senior leadership) or committed serious crimes on behalf of the group. Typically, the perception of affiliation attaches to first- or second-degree relatives, although it sometimes reaches up to fourth-degree relatives.<sup>104</sup>

The official peace agreement negotiation process was almost exclusively a male enterprise. Yet simultaneous to the official negotiations, a woman mediator met with women from both sides – that is, women from families accused of supporting ISIL and women from families victimized by ISIL – to negotiate the terms on which IDPs accused of ISIL affiliation would be permitted to return. This gave women from opposing sides the opportunity to air their grievances, engage in dialogue and develop better-informed positions. As a result of these negotiations, women often developed more empathetic positions and could see avenues to reach an agreement. This engagement was vital, because – even though the formal negotiations only involved men – if women rejected the agreement, it would not be feasible to implement its terms. As the female mediator explained:

*“Often women who are involved in these negotiations on the ‘victim’ side are fixated on revenge. They feel very strongly since it was their husband or father or sons who were killed by ISIL. So it is vital to really understand them, and they see that you understand them, before you can move to discuss about what the agreement is trying to do. The peace agreement is negotiated by tribal leaders, but it is the women who are really for it or against it, and the agreement will only be meaningful if they are willing to accept it.”<sup>105</sup>*

The Iraqi mediator also noted that it was equally important to influence the attitudes and behaviour of women during negotiations, since reaching a successful agreement depends on “how people act every day while they negotiate, not just what happens at the negotiation table”.<sup>106</sup> She explained:

*“Women often try to change attitudes and behaviours while the negotiations take place, because if someone keeps a bad attitude then it will be impossible to reach a solution. For example, there was a powerful woman in Qayarra who was involved in mediation [for the peace agreement], and whenever she heard women talking badly about families with ISIL affiliation, she would tell them to stop... Conflict is more personal, multilayered, and peace also requires multiple layers. Not just the high-level drafting and signing [of] peace agreements, but also engaging with women from both sides to get their buy-in and acceptance.”<sup>107</sup>*

102 N. Adra (2011). “Tribal Mediation in Yemen and Its Implications to Development”. AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology, Volume 19. Austrian Academy of Sciences, p. 2.

103 J. Parry and O. Aymerich (2021). *Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq*. Policy Research Working Paper, No. WPS 9916. World Bank Group. Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/505801643290927050/Local-Peace-Agreements-and-the-Return-of-IDPs-with-Perceived-ISIL-Affiliation-in-Iraq>.

104 Ibid.

105 Interview #4, Iraq, national NGO.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

# 3. LOCAL MEDIATION IN CONTEXT

The study identified several key issues that deepen our understanding of women’s involvement in local mediation, discussed in this section. They include: the connection between local mediation and national peace processes; how women mediators navigate social norms; what happens after an agreement is reached; and the impact of digitalization on local mediation.

## 3.1 CONNECTING LOCAL MEDIATION AND NATIONAL PROCESSES

Peace processes are often conceived as different tracks, representing the different levels of society that contribute to peace efforts. To recap, Track I refers to official discussions between high-level governmental and military leaders focusing on ceasefires, peace talks, treaties and other agreements; Track II refers to unofficial dialogue and problem-solving activities aimed at building relationships between civil society leaders and influential individuals who have the ability to impact the official-level dynamics through lobbying, advocacy or consultation channels; and Track III involves inter- or intra-community dialogue activities at the grass-roots level to encourage mutual interaction and understanding.<sup>108</sup> The relationship between the different tracks of a peace process is often complex. Sometimes the three tracks operate holistically: they transmit information, build consensus and see strong connections between national- and community-level priorities.<sup>109</sup> Other times they operate as pillars, with each track engaging different stakeholders, priorities and methods of working. For women mediators there are pros and cons to each model: if the tracks are well-connected, then local mediators can share their priorities and influence

the outcome of the official peace process;<sup>110</sup> however, the same degree of connectedness may politicize local issues and turn them into bargaining chips at the expense of finding a solution.<sup>111</sup>

A wide array of obstacles inhibit the connection between Track II and Track I processes, as a recent study by Inclusive Peace demonstrates. These obstacles include the stagnation of Track I peace processes, a lack of coordination among Track II initiatives, a lack of receptivity to Track II initiatives, the protracted nature of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and structural exclusion of women and marginalized groups.<sup>112</sup> Although women tend to be represented in greater numbers within Track II efforts, they face more substantial barriers than men in connecting to Track I. These barriers include an unwillingness by conflict parties to listen to the views and priorities of Syrian and Yemeni women, and the fact that women often face intimidation and threats for their participation.<sup>113</sup> While the Inclusive Peace study did

108 V. Dudouet et al. (2018). “From Policy to Action: Assessing the European Union’s Approach to Inclusive Mediation and Dialogue Support in Georgia and Yemen”. *Peacebuilding* 6:3, p. 190.

109 J. Palmiano Federer, J. Pickhardt, P. Lustenberger, C. Altpeter and K. Abatis (2019). *Beyond the Tracks? Reflections on Multitrack Approaches to Peace Processes*. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and swisspeace. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/beyond-tracks-reflections-multitrack-approaches-peace-processes>.

110 GIZ (2012). *Promoting Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and Peace Processes*. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/features/features-working-women/working-with-women/docs/2014-05-08\\_toolkit\\_promoting-womens-participation-peace-neg\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/features/features-working-women/working-with-women/docs/2014-05-08_toolkit_promoting-womens-participation-peace-neg_en.pdf).

111 International Civil Society Action Network and Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (2020). *Recognizing Women Peacebuilders: Operational Framework to Guarantee the Participation of Women Peacebuilders in Track One Peace Processes*. Available at: <https://icanpeacework.org/2020/10/06/recognizing-women-peacebuilders-critical-actors-in-effective-peacemaking/>.

112 S. Clowry (2022). “Transfer from Track II Peacebuilding to Track I Peacemaking: A Focus on the Syrian and Yemeni Conflicts.” Inclusive Peace.

113 Ibid.



not extend its analysis to Track III, it appears likely that many of these same obstacles inhibit Track III actors from connecting with Track I: first, because a multitrack approach establishes an expectation that not all societal voices will be directly represented at Track I but should instead convey information via successive tracks, meaning that Track III actors are expected to communicate with Track I via Track II;<sup>114</sup> and second, because issues such as poor coordination and an unwillingness to listen to voices of women are relevant across tracks. This section builds on these findings to highlight some additional barriers to connecting Track III to national (Track I and II) processes.

Women mediators in Syria and Yemen explained that a disconnect arises between Track I and Track III because actors hold different understandings of peace. Track I actors, who are typically politicians and military leaders, usually emphasize peace as a matter of “ending the war”, whereas local communities, and women in particular, often define a more complex peace that encompasses interpersonal relations, meeting basic needs, and accessing stable and secure livelihoods.<sup>115</sup> Women mediators interviewed for this study noted that Track I actors typically see the peace process through the singular lens of war, rather than recognizing equally pressing economic, development or social inequalities that also require national attention. They perceived Track I actors as fixated on narrow security issues while giving insufficient attention to the daily issues faced by communities and the way that these issues differed between governorates. As one interviewee in Yemen noted:

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*“Track I focuses on the conflict, but in reality the problems differ by governorate. Some governorates are affected more by war, but others – like the one I live in – are not affected by bombing or armed conflict, but we still have many other local conflicts related to resources, land disputes, tribal issues, and these are just as important for*

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114 Dudouet et al. (2018). “From Policy to Action: Assessing the European Union’s Approach to Inclusive Mediation and Dialogue Support in Georgia and Yemen”, p. 191.

115 S. Anderlini, S. Naraghi and J. Tirman (2010). “What the Women Say: Participation and UNSCR1325”. Cambridge, MA: International Civil Society Action Network and MIT Center for International Studies, p. 11; J. El-Bushra (2000). “Transforming Conflict: Some Thoughts on a Gendered Understanding of Conflict Processes”. In S. Jacobs, R. Jacobson and J. Marchbank (eds), *States of Conflict: Gender Violence and Resistance*, pp. 66–86; Y. B. Yablon (2009). “Gender Differences in the Consistency of Attitudes towards Peace”. *Women’s Studies International Forum* 32(4): 305–10.

*the peace process; it is not only about stopping the war but about addressing all sources of conflict.”<sup>116</sup>*

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The local conflicts that women mediate were often absent from the Track I negotiation table, even those that address issues directly connected to the peace process, such as the return of refugees or the rights of citizens. One interviewee explained (and is worth quoting at length):

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*“Track I actors think these issues aren’t political enough, but politics is the politics of the day-to-day. Women often negotiate disputes between family members who belong to different ideologies or groups, or with local councils in order to get services... These issues are highly political – these are the issues that are very important for any solution in Syria: who can return to their home, who can vote, what rights do women have, etc. If there is an agreement at Track I on these issues, it will trickle down and affect the lives of individuals. And these issues are the ones that derail peace processes post-signature and send a country back to war if you ignore them. Yet you don’t see men carrying these issues forward, because they are daily issues, they are seen as ‘soft’ issues. The Track I conversation is detached from the everyday.”<sup>117</sup>*

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Women have played a vital role in connecting the different tracks in national peace processes. As earlier sections demonstrated, women’s local mediation efforts have addressed issues that the Track I process has not. In Yemen, for instance, women negotiated the release of political detainees and prisoners of war and opened roads around Taiz city;<sup>118</sup> in Syria, women negotiated local ceasefires and deescalated fighting so aid could pass through;<sup>119</sup> and in Libya, women negotiated the reopening of the road between Misurata and Tawerga and the return of displaced persons.<sup>120</sup>

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116 Interview #1, Yemen, peacebuilding practitioner.

117 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

118 International Crisis Group (18 March 2021). “The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen”. *Middle East Report* No. 221.

119 R. Jouejati (2017). “Women Are Invisible at the Syria Peace Talks”. PassBlue. Available at: <https://www.passblue.com/2017/02/23/whos-missing-at-the-syria-peace-talks-women/>.

120 Interview #13, Libya, academic.

Women have also made a vital contribution to raising issues drawn from their own local mediation experiences at the Track I negotiation table, based on the varying levels of connection they have to their own communities. In Libya in 2020, following a campaign for inclusion, 17 of the 75 negotiators (23 percent) in the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) were women, marking a significant improvement in women's representation in the official Libyan peace process.<sup>121</sup> Women were credited with bringing community voices and demands to the LPDF, and placing community needs and perspectives on the dialogue's agenda.<sup>122</sup> Their efforts broadened the agenda of the LPDF to include issues that would otherwise have been sidelined due to an unwillingness by (male) interlocutors to address them, including rule of law, transitional justice and accountability for human rights violations. One outcome of these efforts was that the road map produced by the LPDF included transitional justice as a principle for the national reconciliation process.<sup>123</sup> Women also played a critical role in ensuring the integrity and accountability of the LPDF process and outcomes by insisting on broadcasting the LPDF to promote transparency and build community buy-in. During the LPDF negotiations, women demanded a minimum of 30 per cent female representation in the new Government of National Unity. However, only 18 per cent representation was achieved when the government was appointed, indicating that champions of equality have a long way ahead towards women's meaningful political inclusion.<sup>124</sup>

Yemen offers one example of connecting local and national mediation processes. To date, Track I has been disappointing in terms of representation and engagement of Yemeni women,<sup>125</sup> since parties to the

conflict have been very resistant to including women in formal delegations and negotiations. In order to strengthen women's inclusion at Track I and better represent the experiences of grass-roots women to the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY), the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (known as Tawafuq, the Arabic word for Pact), the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the Women's Solidarity Network (WSN) were created.<sup>126</sup> Tawafuq was formed in October 2015 by some 45 Yemeni women from different political affiliations, facilitated by UN Women and the OSESGY. Between 2016 and 2018, UN Women assisted Tawafuq to organize consultations on topics including demilitarization, confidence-building measures, a ceasefire, and negotiation priorities and challenges, as a means of introducing community concerns to the OSESGY and Track I processes; however, the outcome of these submissions is unclear.<sup>127</sup> The women who comprise Tawafuq are drawn from a variety of educational and political backgrounds and connected in varying degrees to their communities, with a number of members active at the community level in local peacebuilding efforts. However, members also report that the community-level initiatives by individual Tawafuq members need more financial assistance and technical support to be sustainable, since they currently are largely self-reliant.<sup>128</sup> There is also a perception among some people that the membership selection criteria for Tawafuq is not clear and that most members are older, elite women who do not have a formal constituency and are sometimes distant from the grass roots.<sup>129</sup> This perception reiterates the need for additional and sufficient support to Tawafuq members so they can better engage women at the community level in grass-roots peacebuilding activities.

121 Council on Foreign Relations. "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Libya Cases Study". Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/libya-4>.

122 UN Women (March 2021). "Libya Women at the Forefront". Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arab-states.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>.

123 Council on Foreign Relations. "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Libya Cases Study". Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/libya-4>.

124 UN Women (March 2021). "Libya Women at the Forefront". Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arab-states.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>.

125 S. Marwah (2018). "Q&A: Women and Yemen's Peace Process". Project Ploughshares. Available at: <https://ploughshares.ca/2018/10/qa-women-and-yemens-peace-process/>.

126 A. Nasser (2019). "Yemeni Women Confront Their Marginalization". *Middle East Report* 282.

127 J. Buringa (2021). *Strategizing beyond the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Yemen: The Importance of CEDAW*. Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies. Available at: <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14915>.

128 Interview #7, Yemen, member of the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (Tawafuq).

129 Social Development Direct and CARE (2020). "Overcoming the Barriers to an Interlinked Three-Track Peace Process in Yemen". Available at: [https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/2151/overcoming-the-barriers-to-an-interlinked-three-track-peace-process-in-yemen-final\\_revised.pdf](https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/2151/overcoming-the-barriers-to-an-interlinked-three-track-peace-process-in-yemen-final_revised.pdf).

A second mechanism that exists in Yemen to connect the voices of Yemeni women to the Track I peace process is the TAG. The TAG was created by the OSESGY in August 2018 with the full support of UN Women and Tawafuq, in order to strengthen women's representation in Track I events and negotiations, since parties to the conflict had been (and continue to be) very resistant to the meaningful inclusion of women in formal delegations. The TAG is designed to provide advice to the Special Envoy and his office, in particular when negotiations or consultations are occurring, and has had some limited success in participating in Track I events and negotiations:<sup>130</sup> for example, at the 2018 Stockholm peace talks, women participated via both Tawafuq and the TAG.<sup>131</sup> The TAG is comprised of eight Yemeni women, six of whom are also members of Tawafuq, highlighting the relationship between the two initiatives.<sup>132</sup>

Finally, in Yemen the WSN was established in 2013 to support women's rights in the constitution, with 70 women leaders. It resumed work in 2016 to advocate for women's rights, contribute to peacebuilding, and complement the work of Tawafuq by maintaining a stronger connection to the grass roots. As at November 2021, the WSN was comprised of more than 300 members from different political backgrounds, both inside Yemen and within the diaspora.<sup>133</sup> The WSN has reportedly succeeded in relaying Yemeni women's voices to the UN Security Council, as well as raising awareness about the detention and abduction of women by the Houthi movement. It has also contributed to preparing

a national "Women in Peace and Security" agenda via a National Action Plan, and implemented peacebuilding initiatives in Hudaydah, Marib, Taiz and Aden.<sup>134</sup> Many WSN members are involved in peacebuilding activities at the local level, although these efforts are not as strong as they could be, in part because members usually work on a voluntary basis and receive only temporary and project-based support that is insufficient to cover the costs of managing an organization.<sup>135</sup> While the WSN has a large grass-roots membership, it has also faced criticism from within and outside the organization that it is led by an unelected group of older, elite women from the diaspora who do not meaningfully engage with their members or conduct capacity building that could empower them to represent themselves at Track I or II.<sup>136</sup> This criticism could be addressed by providing additional and sufficient support for WSN members to engage with community members or conduct capacity-building initiatives, since at present they largely rely on their own individual resources to do so.

In addition to Yemen, a second example of connecting local and national mediation processes is found in Syria. The Women's Advisory Board (WAB) was established by the Office of the Special Envoy in January 2016, in partnership with UN Women, with the aim of ensuring diverse women's perspectives throughout the political process. It offers some lessons in connecting local mediation efforts to high-level negotiation processes, as discussed in the case study below.

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130 A. Nasser (2019). "Yemeni Women Confront Their Marginalization". *Middle East Report* 282.

131 A. Nasser (2019). "Making the Most of the Space Available". Goethe Institute. Available at: <https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/en/fra/21549306.html>.

132 UN Women (2018). "Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace Processes: Modalities and Strategies across Tracks". Meeting report: 29–30 November 2018, Switzerland. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Proceedings-Womens-meaningful-participation-in-peace-processes-en.pdf>.

133 F. Mutaher (2021). "Yemen's New Networks in Women's Peacebuilding". Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies. Available at: <https://sanaacenter.org/ypf/new-networks-in-womens-peacebuilding/>.

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.

136 Social Development Direct and CARE (2020). "Overcoming the Barriers to an Interlinked Three-Track Peace Process in Yemen". Available at: [https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/2151/overcoming-the-barriers-to-an-interlinked-three-track-peace-process-in-yemen-final\\_revised.pdf](https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/2151/overcoming-the-barriers-to-an-interlinked-three-track-peace-process-in-yemen-final_revised.pdf).

## Case Study 5: Syrian Women’s Advisory Board

The WAB serves as the first formal women’s advisory group to a UN Special Envoy and was created following demands made by a coalition of Syrian women leaders at the beginning of the UN-led political process. It is mandated to provide advice to the Special Envoy on all aspects of the political process, including those related to gender equality and women’s rights. The WAB meets in parallel during official talks and aims to channel voices from the grass-roots level to the formal political process, although the WAB itself does not participate in peace talks and there is no guarantee that its recommendations will be implemented.

The WAB is the only structure in the political process that brings together voices from the government, the opposition and Kurdish-led areas, and has been successful in convening women of diverse backgrounds, including women from more traditional religious back-grounds and others who are not represented in other parts of the political process. While the WAB is still missing some key constituencies in terms of inclusion – which the Special Envoy attempted to address by expanding membership from 12 to 17 members in 2018, with greater representation from grass-roots actors and different geographies – it offers a useful lesson in the value and challenges of bringing women who are influential in their communities closer to Track I negotiations.

One interviewee noted that when the WAB first formed there were a lot of internal divisions: women who identified as feminist (in a way that aligned with the liberal Western tradition of feminism) felt uncomfortable sharing a platform with women who held more conservative views, for instance.<sup>137</sup> Despite these differences, another WAB interviewee noted:

*“All the women believe in women’s participation and leadership, although some differed on the issue of equality. We focused on what brings them together: first, how to strengthen women’s leadership; and second, what they could – and later did – achieve together, because that was really motivating.”<sup>138</sup>*

Working together provided an opportunity to “demystify one for the other”, and the members came to understand that as a coalition they had the ability to help make sense of the complex dynamics that were emerging across the country.<sup>139</sup> Members would discuss key issues on the agenda of the Special Envoy, based on insights from their own diverse networks, and prepare scenarios and textual proposals for how different parties might respond to proposed steps. They also presented ideas to the Special Envoy on how to bridge differences among diverse parties and how to diffuse tensions ahead of negotiations, based on their knowledge of diverse parties<sup>140</sup> and local communities, given their role as “insider mediators”. This made a valuable contribution to understanding and negotiating with the various parties at that time and helped to guide the Special Envoy’s outreach and engagement with diverse parties and diffuse potential tension between actors that were not previously willing to participate in dialogue or consider common positions. Members of the WAB were able to play this role due to their knowledge of and connection to local communities and parties. Since its formation, members of the WAB – in their individual capacities – have arbitrated among armed factions and mediated intracommunity problems in north-east and north-west Syria.<sup>141</sup>

In addition, WAB members have put critical issues stemming from women’s Track III mediation efforts onto the Track I agenda, such as detainees, abductees and missing persons.<sup>142</sup> WAB members held advocacy meetings with high-level representatives of the European Union and key member states, in which members were able to raise awareness about the importance of reflecting the concerns of Syrian women in all aspects

137 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

138 Interview #6, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

139 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

140 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

141 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

142 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

of negotiations. The WAB also increased the ability of civil society to engage on women's rights concerns and Syrian women leaders involved in official tracks. In addition, the WAB has consistently advocated for women's direct participation in all decision-making bodies within the political process at a minimum level of 30 per cent. The WAB thereby contributed to the near-30 per cent representation of women in the Syrian Constitutional Committee, and some members of the WAB are members of the committee.<sup>143</sup>

While the WAB has expanded its membership to better represent Track III actors and has become stronger at reaching communities and discussing information related to the national peace process with them, activists maintain that additional measures are still needed to strengthen the meaningful inclusion of local women's voices in the Track I process. One critique relates to the selection process for WAB members, who are critiqued as elite, sometimes not well connected to local communities, and not representative of Syria's diversity. The selection process is also criticized for its lack of transparency and local buy-in from women.<sup>144</sup> Another critique is the lack of a comprehensive feedback mechanism to report to and inform local communities about the WAB's engagement.<sup>145</sup> These shortcomings are important to recognize and address in order to strengthen the role the WAB plays in connecting local women's concerns and voices to the national negotiation tracks.

## 3.2 NAVIGATING SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms shape women's involvement in local mediation in important ways. The persistence of harmful cultural and social norms and patriarchal values often discourages women's participation in political decision making<sup>146</sup> and hinders women's role in mediation.<sup>147</sup> In order to navigate these barriers, women emphasize the importance of being sensitive to context and working with cultural and religious norms if they are to establish trust with communities and work effectively as mediators.<sup>148</sup>

Sometimes this means drawing on aspects of their own identities – such as their faith or shared cultural values – that connect them to the parties, and other times it means emphasizing their role as an impartial party without a stake in the outcome.<sup>149</sup> We see this dynamic in the way women talk about their mediation work in socially acceptable ways, down-playing negotiations as “discussions”; in the assertion that they do not engage in politics, only “local issues” that affect their community; and in the role they sometimes play behind the scenes to facilitate mediation (rather than acting in the more visible role of mediator). One interviewee in Iraq explained:

*“People here understand that politics means a struggle for power between high-level figures, and that struggle usually involves corruption. So women don't want to associate themselves with that. But they do talk about education, urban planning, access to services – which are in fact political issues, but they describe their work as focusing only on daily issues.”<sup>150</sup>*

Women mediators have called attention to the over-use of “tradition” or “social norms” as a means of limiting their agency. While gendered social norms do shape and restrict women's involvement in mediation, the sweeping blame placed on tradition or social norms often distorts the nuances present in each culture and ignores the

143 C. Bell and C. Turner (2020). *Models for Women's Inclusion in Track One Mediation in Peace and Transition Processes*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/models-for-womens-inclusion-in-track-one-mediation>.

144 Ibid.

145 M. Al Abdeh (2017). “Lessons from Syria on Women's Empowerment during Conflict”. Open Democracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/lessons-from-syria-on-womens-empowerment-during-conflict/>.

146 R. Strickland and N. Duvvury (2003). *Gender Equity and Peacebuilding. From Rhetoric to Reality: Finding the Way*. International Center for Research on Women; P. Justino, R. Mitchell and C. Muller (2018). “Women and Peace Building: Local Perspectives on Opportunities and Barriers”. *Development and Change* 49(4): 911–929 DOI: 10.1111/dech.12391; E. Porter (2003). “Women, Political Decision-making and Peace-building”. *Global Change, Peace & Security* 15(3): 245–62.

147 UN Women (September 2020). “Deepening Stabilization in Libya: Overcoming Challenges to Young Women's Participation in Peacebuilding”; The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation (2017). “Syrian Women in Political Processes”. Available at: <https://kvinnaillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/1-Syrian-women-in-political-processes.pdf>.

148 C. Turner (2020). *Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap*. Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/women-mediators-bridging-peace-gap>.

149 C. Turner (2020). “Soft Ways of Doing Hard Things: Women Mediators and the Question of Gender in Mediation”. *Journal of Peacebuilding* [online].

150 Interview #8, Iraq, international NGO.

historical contributions women have made to peace. The poor visibility and limited credit given to women enables powerholders to assert that tradition forbids women from brokering peace, a claim that is sometimes parroted by international actors: an international study on mediation in Libya, for instance, relied on a claim that women's mediation in local reconciliation "does not feature in [Libyan] customs" and that the international community "must respect [Libyan] tradition, be realistic and deal with actual stakeholders".<sup>151</sup> This sweeping generalization was rejected by a female Libyan activist, who noted that "the Libyan tradition is filled with stories of women mediators" but that "experts" fail to unearth these experiences and instead "reproduce stereotypical propaganda" about local women.<sup>152</sup>

Related to this, women often face an assumption (from national and international actors) that they need training in order to prove their competence in mediation, whereas men's skills are taken for granted.<sup>153</sup> One Syrian interviewee noted that:

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*"Women always face doubts from other people that they are capable. So this means on the one hand that they are always expected to undergo training, whereas men can simply show up. In addition, women have to show that they know more than their male counterparts to justify why they are in that position, and when they speak they are expected to share information that is totally new. This is not the same for men; we expect that men are part of the process no matter what."*<sup>154</sup>

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As other researchers have pointed out, often women do not lack skills in mediation; rather, this is used as a convenient justification by (male) powerbrokers to ignore women's voices. In fact, what is needed is training and awareness raising of these (mostly male) gatekeepers,

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151 J. S. Vericat and M. Hobrara (2018). *From the Ground Up: UN Support to Local Mediation in Libya*. International Peace Institute.

152 Z. Langhi (2018). "Charting the Way Forward for Local Women Mediators in Libya". ECDPM *Great Insights magazine*, Volume 7, Issue 4.

153 UN Women (2021). "Strengthening Women's Participation in Peace Processes – What Roles and Responsibility for States?" High-level seminar. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/08/strengthening-womens-participation-in-peace-processes>.

154 Interview #6, Syria, peacebuilding practitioner.

particularly on the importance of women's engagement in mediation.<sup>155</sup>

Instead of using tradition as a scapegoat to limit women's agency, interviewees emphasized the need to understand why social norms exist and how they are affected by conflict – in particular, who are the key actors enforcing social norms and what enables them to do so? While a full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, a pivotal issue affecting Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen is the impact of militarization, an issue that women mediators regularly contend with. Militarization is the process by which military and civilian spaces become blurred and, at its most extreme, causes civilian spaces to disappear and militaristic ways of thinking to capture the very definition of what is "normal" in everyday life.<sup>156</sup> For women mediators, militarization has exacerbated restrictive social norms (which pre-dated the conflict) and introduced new risks for both men and women. A Syrian interviewee explained that the public space for women has shrunk in many areas due to the proliferation of armed groups,<sup>157</sup> and secondary sources also note that armed actors control and monitor women's movements and thereby limit their activities.<sup>158</sup> In Yemen, women struggle to participate in an environment saturated with armed men and where those who control the government are also associated with the military; one female NGO worker noted that important meetings that should take place in formal settings actually occur in men-only social gatherings such as qat chews, which makes it impossible for women to participate.<sup>159</sup>

Women are sometimes able to use social norms to their advantage when dealing with armed actors.<sup>160</sup> This is not to downplay the severity of restrictions, but rather

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155 This was repeated in the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations. See: High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (16 June 2015). "Uniting Our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership and People". UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446.

156 C. Enloe (2000). *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*.

157 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

158 swisspeace, Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net (2016). *Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace*, p. 8.

159 International Crisis Group (18 March 2021). "The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen". *Middle East Report* No. 221.

160 H. Tabbara and G. Rubin (2018). *Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – A Discussion Paper*. UN Women. Available at: <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution>

to recognize the agency of women in navigating these norms and also to recognize the nuanced way that norms are practiced. In many militarized communities, the risk of arrest or detention is much higher for military-aged men than women, which can provide women with the ability to move somewhat more freely. This can enable women to be more responsive to their communities and engage in mediation roles that previously would not have been open to them. One interviewee explained:

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*“In Syria now, many communities are women led because men are away due to the conflict. Women have increased mobility in certain contexts, and they are allowed to enter spaces that men are not allowed or that are forbidden to men because men are considered terrorists or they are afraid of being conscripted for compulsory military service, whereas women can move more easily because they don’t have this risk.”<sup>161</sup>*

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Some women are able to use the privileges associated with social customs when they mediate local conflicts. In Yemen, for instance, tribal principles such as respect for and protection of women and the unarmed population are values that remain strong throughout the country.<sup>162</sup> According to these norms, women are categorized as *du’afa*, meaning defenceless or unarmed, a cultural stereotype which accords them protections. It is a great dishonour for a tribesman to harm someone with protected status, and this enables women to more easily move in and out of conflict zones without being targeted,<sup>163</sup> and also facilitates the role of women in community mediation and in providing humanitarian aid or medical assistance.<sup>164</sup> One activist recounted how she negotiated with government troops not to launch an attack against Houthi fighters in the village where she and her children were living. She explained that she was able to do this thanks to the tribal customary rules followed by the community, which expect armed actors to protect women and children from harm.<sup>165</sup> While

there are increasing reports of such protective norms being violated, in general such traditions continue to be observed in many parts of Yemen, particularly in more tribal areas.<sup>166</sup>

In Marib, Yemen, several stories emerged of women publicly shaming armed men to demand that they stop fighting and fulfil their protective responsibilities, in some cases using highly symbolic public actions such as shaving their hair. In one case, a group of trained women mediators negotiated a ceasefire between two tribes by “staying under the sunlight refusing hospitality invitations from the tribal leaders until their call for a ceasefire was accepted”.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, women in Yemen’s Arhab District utilized protective tribal norms to prevent Ansar Allah forces from burning valuable construction equipment and tractors belonging to officials from the Al-Islah political party: they climbed onto the equipment and announced that the equipment provided income for their families and therefore could not be destroyed, a demand that was respected.<sup>168</sup>

Two clear recommendations arose from key informant interviews regarding social norms. The first was the need to take a holistic approach: it is not possible to tackle a single thematic issue such as mediation when women’s rights exist in a complex and integral ecosystem.<sup>169</sup> One Syrian mediator noted that “the problem with international organizations is that they look at mediation in isolation, without looking at how women can strengthen their broader legitimacy across society generally... We cannot ignore the position of women in society and simply talk about mediation, we need to consider the whole ecosystem that affects gender.”<sup>170</sup> Another Yemeni activist and academic concurred, explaining: “The more women are involved in all issues in a society, the more they can be involved in mediation.

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161 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

162 N. Adra (2016). “Tribal Mediation and Empowered Women: Potential Contributions of Heritage to National Development in Yemen”. *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5(2), pp. 301–337.

163 N. Al-Dawsari (2014). “Case Studies on Women and Conflict in Tribal Yemen, Al-Jawf”. Yemen Tribal Voices.

164 M. Awadh and N. Shuja’adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

165 C. M. Heinze and S. Stevens (2018). *Women as Peacebuilders in Yemen*. Yemen Polling Center and Social Development Direct. Available at: [https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1571/sdd\\_yemenreport\\_full\\_v5.pdf](https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1571/sdd_yemenreport_full_v5.pdf).

166 M. Colburn (2021). *The Life Phases of a Yemeni Woman*. Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies.

167 C. M. Heinze and S. Stevens (2018). *Women as Peacebuilders in Yemen*. Yemen Polling Center and Social Development Direct, p. 35. Available at: [https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1571/sdd\\_yemenreport\\_full\\_v5.pdf](https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1571/sdd_yemenreport_full_v5.pdf).

168 M. Awadh and N. Shuja’adeen (2019). *Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen*. UN Women. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/01/women-in-conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding-in-yemen>.

169 For a discussion of this ecosystem specific to Syria, see: M. Ramadan, F. Hwijeh, O. A. Hallaj, S. Salahieh and M. Diab (2021). *The Status of Gender Equality and Women’s Rights in Syria: Mapping the Terrain*.

170 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

The important thing is to strengthen women's presence and ensure that they are visible... Seeing women in high positions makes it easier to get acceptance at the local level for similar work."<sup>171</sup>

In taking an ecosystem approach to the role of women in mediation, it may be more effective to challenge norms indirectly. A Yemeni mediator explained:

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*"It's not about challenging specific norms, it's about normalizing different ways of living. We want to normalize seeing women in public roles, normalize women solving issues for their communities. Every time women are seen in public roles, it will slowly build acceptance of their presence and skills, not just for mediation but across the society."*<sup>172</sup>

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A second recommendation was to take steps to protect women who are mediators. As one Syrian woman mediator noted:

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*"Often people forget to talk about this because they are focused on the theme of mediation, not the theme of gender-based violence. But we experience all these issues together; it isn't possible to separate them... We are expecting women to be active as mediators in their communities, but without protection – in Syria, for example, the legal framework is inadequate and cannot protect women. Instead, women mediators protect themselves using their own relationships. But this isn't enough. We cannot just work with women mediators alone, we also need to work with media, religious leaders, other influential actors to ensure women are protected in their own communities when they mediate."*<sup>173</sup>

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## Case Study 6: Gender-Based Violence in Post-War Iraq

The co-founder of a female-led national NGO that works to promote women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan reflected on the organization's experience with mediation in post-war Iraq. The majority of the staff in the organization are female caseworkers who are regularly called on to mediate disputes related to domestic violence, trafficking and other issues connected to gender-based violence. As the co-founder explained:

*"We've had situations where we need to mediate between a survivor of domestic violence and her family, in order to support the survivor to access safety; and similar situations with trafficking, where female migrant workers want to get their belongings back or get what's rightfully theirs. These are small mediations, but they have a huge impact on the individual lives of women. And they often reflect broader conflict dynamics – although the war in Iraq has ended, different forms of conflict and violence continue, and these forms of violence often target or affect women disproportionately."*<sup>174</sup>

In the daily mediation work of this NGO, partnerships play a key role in navigating social norms around gender-based violence. There are times when the social workers are unable to address a dispute safely or effectively – such as in the case of domestic violence where a risk exists not only to the survivor, but also to the social worker. At the same time, if the responsible security actors (usually the police) deal with the case in accordance with prevailing social norms and police methodologies, it may compound the harm to the survivor. In this case:

*"If we're not the right actor to mediate, we have worked hard to build a reliable referral network – so we sometimes work with law enforcement, for example. What matters here is finding a survivor-centred solution. Sometimes, women who are victims of technology-facilitated GBV, for instance, they don't want their family to know about it as that would create additional risk to them [due to conservative social norms], and if she went to the court or police then the details would become public and it could*

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171 Interview #7, Yemen, member of the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security (Tawafuq).

172 Interview #1, Yemen, peacebuilding practitioner.

173 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

174 Interview #25, Iraq, national NGO.



*put her life in danger. So in those cases, we work closely with the security authorities; one way we've developed is for them to directly approach the offender and have him sign an agreement not to do it again, or if there's a warrant they will arrest the offender, but then mediate the issue outside the formal channels so they don't expose the survivor publicly and put her at greater risk."*

Developing a survivor-centred mediation approach to gender-based violence requires a substantial and long-term investment in capacity building and mentorship with security authorities. The NGO provides training that runs for six months and includes work-based mentorship and supervision, including not only the police officers who conduct the mediation, but also their supervisors. This approach has influenced the way security actors approach mediation:

*"In the beginning, there were situations where our caseworkers and the police disagreed about how to handle the mediation. Some officers didn't understand why they can't keep asking a survivor their story, or they would pressure a woman to stay with her abusive husband, or they would put the survivor and perpetrator in the same room and encourage them to reconcile. There was also a poor understanding of confidentiality and why you can't talk openly about a case in public. But over time, this has changed – although of course the police force is large, so there's still much more to do, and this mentorship programme is ongoing. But at least now we can take a partnership approach to mediating gender-based violence, one that takes into account the safety and wishes of the survivor, and we can achieve outcomes that we couldn't on our own."*

This example reiterates the value that partnerships may play for women mediators, including when they navigate social norms related to gender-based violence, and also that knowledge transfer by female mediators to security actors can contribute to more effective and survivor-centred local mediation.

### 3.3 AFTER NEGOTIATIONS

Until now the report has considered the role women play in and around negotiations. However, there is far more to mediation than bargaining and generating options. If an agreement is reached, it often requires dedicated attention to ensure the parties implement its terms. Community buy-in may be necessary to make implementation feasible; and without broader efforts in reconciliation or social cohesion, the agreement may not have the intended impact. In addition, it is rare for peace processes to progress in a linear way, from conflict to negotiation to resolution; instead, processes may stall or falter and require dialogue and facilitation to restart. While these examples may not fit the high-level definition of a structured process with a powerful mediator brokering a deal, they nevertheless fulfil an important mediation function.<sup>175</sup> This also requires taking a broader view of what "peace" means – peace is not simply the absence of violence, but the presence

of broader factors that create a peaceful society, often termed "positive peace". Under this broader definition of positive peace, the scope for looking at women's roles in mediation expands, since it enables us to recognize efforts towards repairing relationships and improving living conditions, rather than only signing an agreement to end violence.

It often falls to women to "sell" the outcome of peace negotiations at the grass-roots level and ensure that agreements reached at the peace table are accepted in local communities.<sup>176</sup> Women's inter-community networks and role in the family are often considered entry points to foster dialogue and peace, which places them

175 C. Turner (2018). "Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations". *Global Policy* 9(2), pp. 244–253.

176 A. M. Nderitu and J. O'Neill (2016). "Getting to the Point of Inclusion: Seven Myths Standing in the Way of Women Waging Peace". In Oslo Forum, *On Peacemaking: A Decade of Reflections 2006–2015*. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

at the forefront of social cohesion activities intended to ensure the feasibility and longevity of local peace agreements.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, armed actors may not have the necessary trust and communication lines with civilian constituencies to do this, and are likely to obtain greater community buy-in if they communicate by leveraging existing networks rather than initiating parallel efforts.<sup>178</sup> As an interviewee from Libya noted:

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*“Since women didn’t participate in the conflict directly, they have different links than the military and opposition; they have more diverse networks within the community, and it can be easier for women to meet across lines due to these social networks, so this creates new opportunities.”<sup>179</sup>*

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Creating buy-in for an agreement involves educating communities about the agreement terms and their rights, a process made easier if the agreement is written with simplified text and relatable language. For women to take on this role, they need to feel ownership over the content of the agreement, a feeling which is more likely cultivated when women and civil society are directly included in the negotiations.<sup>180</sup>

Women can also play a valuable role in building trust in the terms and implementation of an agreement (even if, to date, their skills appear underutilized). In Iraq, after the Ayadhiya Pact of Honour was signed on 9 August 2018 (in relation to the return of IDPs accused of ISIL affiliation, discussed in earlier sections of this report), community members shared information within their

networks about the existence of the agreement and how it was being implemented, which encouraged other displaced residents that safe return was possible.<sup>181</sup> Local authorities recognized that women played a key role in the process of IDP return, since they were often at the centre of communication networks. In a study by Nonviolent Peaceforce, 80 per cent of female respondents (all of whom were returnees in Ayadhiya) stated that they saw a role for themselves in implementing the pact through awareness raising, community engagement and monitoring breaches.<sup>182</sup>

As noted earlier, relationship building often forms an important component of women mediators’ strategy towards local mediation. This approach offers additional value beyond the period of negotiations, given that mediation does not always result in an agreement: sometimes, mediators (whether men or women) cannot facilitate the parties to solve their dispute. Particularly in these situations, the work women do in reducing tensions, avoiding an escalation in conflict, and building relationships is vital and may enable renewed negotiations in the future.<sup>183</sup> One female mediator in Libya, for example, noted that when a dispute arose in Zawiya between people with different political allegiances, “women participated in calming the situation between the disputants... No one managed to resolve the conflict completely...but at least women contributed to pacifying the high tensions.”<sup>184</sup>

Women mediators also appear to recognize the importance of using mediation to build a community’s capacity to manage conflict, rather than simply solve the dispute at hand. When they are involved in local mediation, women typically seek not only to reach an agreement, but also to support community members to empower themselves to use conflict management within their own communities or institutions.<sup>185</sup> Yet, while women deserve recognition for the valuable leadership they show in repairing relationships, this division of labour – whereby social cohesion is perceived as “the playground of youth, women and NGOs”, while elders,

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177 In Libya, conflict between the Tawergha and Misrata communities led UNSMIL to facilitate a mediation process starting in 2015, and the communities adopted a local peace agreement in March 2017. Although overall the role of women in the Misrata-Tawergha mediation was minimal, the (male) leaders who made up the Joint Dialogue Committee recognized women as vital to the implementation of the agreement and in rebuilding trust between the two communities. See: British Council. *Enduring Social Institutions and Civil Society Peacebuilding in Libya and Syria*. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/enduring-social-institutions-civil-society-peacebuilding-libya-syria>.

178 M. Barsa, O. Holt-Ivry and A. Muehlenbeck (2016). “Inclusive Ceasefires: Women, Gender, and a Sustainable End to Violence”. *Inclusive Security*, p. 46. Available at: <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Inclusive-Ceasefires-ISA-paper-Final-3.10.2016.pdf>.

179 Interview #2, Libya, international NGO.

180 M. O’Reilly, A. Súilleabháin and T. Paffenholz (2015). “*Re-Imagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes*”. International Peace Institute, p. 16.

181 H. Johansen (2020). “Al-Ayadhiyah Pact of Honour: A Study”. Nonviolent Peaceforce.

182 Ibid.

183 Interview #14, Libya, academic.

184 Ibid.

185 C. Turner (2020). *Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap*. Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/women-mediators-bridging-peace-gap>.

tribal leaders and local authorities engage in functions of mediation – also risks marginalizing and pigeonholing women, resulting in a loss of human resources and undermining long-term peace.<sup>186</sup>

A case study from Libya demonstrates the role women can play to reinvigorate a peace process and encourage its implementation.

## Case Study 7: Murzuq, Libya

Negotiations that took place in Murzuq, southern Libya, offer a valuable case study of the role of women in negotiations. Following an offensive in early 2019, relations between the Tebu and Ahali tribes became progressively more severe, escalating to armed conflict in August 2019 that displaced the entire Ahali community. On 17 October 2019, tribal representatives from both tribes signed an Agreement of Good Intent that committed both parties to confidence-building measures such as the return of the displaced, and aimed to pave the way to a comprehensive peace agreement.<sup>187</sup> By 2020, little progress had been made, and the Ahali population remained displaced. An interviewee in Murzuq, Libya, noted:

*“There was increasing fatigue of men to address reconciliation... After two years, there were so many stalemates. We thought that by bringing women together it could open new opportunities for mediation, since women didn’t take part in the conflict directly... There was an awareness that women play a powerful role at the family level, and we thought they could help to appease tensions and avoid cycles of revenge.”<sup>188</sup>*

With support from UN Women and implementing partner ProMediation, women delegations from both the Tebu and Ahali were invited to a dialogue activity with the aim of reinvigorating the peace process. This led to relationships developing across lines, and prompted women to advocate with their respective elders to implement the commitments in the Agreement of Good Intent.<sup>189</sup> Each delegation sent a letter to their respective tribal committee to urge the renewal of efforts, and also highlighted to the elders the contribution that women could make to the process.

A final way that women are active in the post-negotiation phase is in documenting violations and alerting the international community of a breach of a peace agreement or mediation process. During the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, for instance, despite facing intimidation, threats and assassinations, women proactively engaged in documenting voter fraud and were among the first to discover and follow up on

this issue. In doing so, they countered corruption and promoted transparency in the dialogue mechanism.<sup>190</sup>

190 UN Women (March 2021). “Libya Women at the Forefront”. Virtual symposium summary report. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/libya-women-at-the-forefront>.

186 British Council. *Enduring Social Institutions and Civil Society Peacebuilding in Libya and Syria*. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/enduring-social-institutions-civil-society-peacebuilding-libya-syria>.

187 F. Gaida (2019). “Agreement of Good Intent Reached between the Aheli and Tebu of Murzuq”. Ara Pacis Initiative. Available at: <https://arapacisinitiative.org/news/agreement-in-principle-reached-between-the-aheli-and-tebu-of-murzuq/>.

188 Interview #2, Libya, international NGO.

189 Interview #20, Libya, peacebuilding practitioner; Interview #22, Libya, peacebuilding practitioner.

## 3.4 DIGITALIZATION

Over the last decade, digital technologies have changed the landscape of conflict and mediation. Peacebuilders and mediators need to better understand the role of digital technologies: both how it fuels conflict and how it can be utilized to catalyse peace.<sup>191</sup> Of course, internet access is far from a given, and the digital gender divide persists.<sup>192</sup> Connectivity remains a particular problem for women in rural and conflict-affected communities, raising the question of whether technology does indeed contribute to greater inclusion or merely replicates patterns of exclusion by privileging those with existing access and know-how. While it was outside the scope of this paper to ascertain to what extent digital technologies expanded inclusion of previously underrepresented and hard-to-reach women, for example from remote rural communities, it assumes that, where available and accessible, technology at least has the potential to make a peace process more inclusive. It can enable Track I actors to engage those who cannot attend meetings or events in person, such as women who, due to insecurity, family responsibilities, cultural expectations or other reasons, may be unable to travel.<sup>193</sup> It can also give Track III mediators access to Track I actors, with one Yemeni interviewee noting that, as a result of the online modality used during the COVID-19 pandemic, “we had meetings with ambassadors, which wasn’t possible before [without technology], and it made it possible for us to connect directly and speak directly with them”.<sup>194</sup>

The experience of the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board during the COVID-19 pandemic offers some insight into the use of digital technology. After transitioning to an

online modality at the start of the pandemic in 2020, WAB members began meeting more frequently than ever before, thanks to the online modality.<sup>195</sup> More frequent meetings between Syrian civil society actors also became possible, since the online modality meant there was no need to pull together the finances, logistics and visas required for in-person meetings.<sup>196</sup> One Syrian interviewee noted that technology also expanded women’s access to higher-level spaces: “Women have been able to access a lot more spaces than before. If you see who briefed the UN Security Council before, it was limited to a certain profile; but now, even people who couldn’t attend before because they couldn’t travel can be present.”<sup>197</sup> Yet at the same time, technology introduced new pressures and challenges. The flexible scheduling associated with online meetings meant that WAB members were expected to join frequent meetings, including outside of work hours, which was difficult to manage alongside family responsibilities; with the deteriorating economic situation in Syria, internet connectivity became increasingly out of reach; online harassment increased; and the digitalization of participation meant that a lot of the regular meetings with key member states lost momentum and resulted in distance between Track I and Track II actors.<sup>198</sup>

Digital platforms can change behavioural dynamics. Since deliberations cannot flow freely because interruptions and discussions are not possible in virtual meetings, they often tend to become more formal. This can have an equalizing effect, particularly for women. In face-to-face meetings, people can exercise and reinforce power with their presence and physical movements, body posture, position in the room and interaction with others – whereas in the virtual world, such power rituals are highly limited, since everyone is reduced to a screen of equal size and random position.<sup>199</sup> This shift in dynamics

191 The move towards digitalization is recognized by the UN as an important shift: the UN Secretary-General highlighted the importance of social media in his Strategy on New Technologies, and reiterated it in his Data Strategy 2020–22. Specific to the area of peace mediation, the Mediation Support Unit of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs launched the Cyber Mediation Initiative in 2018 and published the Digital Technologies and Mediation Toolkit in 2021 to explore the various uses of digital technologies, including social media. Available at: <https://peacemaker.un.org/digitaltoolkit>.

192 Globally, there are 200 million fewer women than men online. See: L. Arimatsu (2019). “Silencing Women in the Digital Age”. *Cambridge International Law Journal* 8, No. 2: 187–217. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4337/cilj.2019.02.02>. See also: A. Hirblinger (2020). “Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking: A Strategic Perspective”. CCDP Working Paper.

193 See also: Hirblinger, A., (2020). ‘Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking: A Strategic Perspective,’ CCDP Working Paper.

194 Interview #1, Yemen, peacebuilding practitioner.

195 I. Bramsen and A. Hagemann (March 2021). “The Missing Sense of Peace: Diplomatic Approachment and Virtualization during the COVID-19 Lockdown”. *International Affairs* 97: 2: 539–560. DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiaa229.

196 Ibid.

197 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

198 Inputs from key informant and expert on the Syrian political process.

199 I. Bramsen and A. Hagemann (March 2021). “The Missing Sense of Peace: Diplomatic Approachment and Virtualization during the COVID-19 Lockdown”. *International Affairs* 97: 2: 539–560. DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiaa229.

may also make women feel more comfortable to present their views, as one interviewee noted: “When a meeting is online, if I have to say something to a high-profile stakeholder, I am here in my comfort zone and I can deliver my message in the way I want; I have my place so I feel more confident.”<sup>200</sup>

The lack of physical presence does also have downsides, however. It can contribute to women feeling that they are not taken seriously by decision makers, since online meetings do not carry the weight of those in person. It also removes the space “around” the negotiating room in which to build personal relationships, advance advocacy goals and influence peacebuilding outcomes over time.<sup>201</sup> One facilitator of the Syrian Civil Society Support Room, a platform for dialogue tied to the peace process, explained:

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*“The online platform (established during the pandemic) has really helped us to engage more women. But at the same time, we don’t want it to become the only modality, or ticking the box that ‘we’re involving women because they’re attending more’. You still need the face to face. Whether meetings occur (online or offline) shouldn’t be the only indicator – what matters is the interactions that emerge.”<sup>202</sup>*

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Women mediators affirm the use of technology to strengthen social networks among women mediators, particularly when they could not easily travel to meet together due to security, cost or cultural or family expectations. In Yemen, technology allowed women living in the northern part of the country (controlled by Ansar Allah) to connect with women living in the south (under government control) and share advocacy strategies, develop common messages and prepare joint proposals.<sup>203</sup> Cross-border and intergenerational women’s networks have also benefited from the use of technology, which has increased the ability of women mediators to

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200 Interview #1, Yemen, peacebuilding practitioner.

201 Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and ICT4Peace Foundation (2021). “Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Risks to Advance Women’s Meaningful Participation and Protect Their Rights”. Available at: <https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/PolicyBriefGNWP-2021c.pdf>.

202 Interview #3, Syria, national NGO.

203 Interview #7, Yemen, member of the Yemeni Women’s Pact for Peace and Security (Tawafuq).

build international solidarity.<sup>204</sup> Interviewees repeatedly noted that technology can bring women mediators together to share their experiences and learn from each other.<sup>205</sup> Women mediators interviewed for this study often used technology to build coalitions or peer-learning networks. A mediator from Libya, for instance, noted that:

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*“I am part of a WhatsApp group with other women who are doing this type of work, and it helps us to share our ideas so we can develop an inclusive vision towards community peace and plan for mediation.”<sup>206</sup>*

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Pointing to the benefit of international networks, a Yemeni woman mediator described the following:

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*“When we started mediating local issues here in Yemen, we didn’t have any training, so we called Syrian and Libyan mediators to ask how they worked and what techniques they used; technology can help you to do this, to educate yourself on different techniques local mediators are using.”<sup>207</sup>*

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Technology is useful not only for people on the same “side”, but also as a tool to build relationships between different sides. Over time, technology can provide a platform for communities to interact and share information in a way that transforms their relationships.<sup>208</sup> One interviewee who facilitated an online platform for dialogue in Yemen described the way that dialogue changed over time:

“Originally guests in our dialogue sessions would insist that the session is closed because they were afraid that whatever they said, they would get attacked. We could post their quotes on social media, but there would often be negative comments. We discovered that when we posted the whole recorded session, we received much

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204 Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and ICT4Peace Foundation (2021). “Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Risks to Advance Women’s Meaningful Participation and Protect their Rights”. Available at: <https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/PolicyBriefGNWP-2021c.pdf>.

205 Interview #16, Yemen, national NGO.

206 Interview #20, Libya, peacebuilding practitioner.

207 Interview #24, Yemen, national NGO.

208 These include trends in narratives about a conflict event, perceptions of key issues among different groups, an overview of influential stakeholders and connections between them, insights into power dynamics, and information about campaigns to spread rumours and disinformation, in particular defamation and hate speech targeting women.

fewer attacks on the person, maybe because the audience can understand the person better or maybe over time our audience matured...so now guests are more open to the idea of sharing the session online, and this has been really important for improving the quality of dialogue.”<sup>209</sup>

Digital technology can also play a key role in documenting violations and alerting the international community of a breach of a peace agreement or mediation process. Improving capacities for monitoring, documenting and reporting violent incidents and human rights violations through the use of digital technologies has proven crucial for accountability mechanisms, while in the field of reconciliation, digital platforms and various forms of digital media have provided new ways of preserving memories and sharing experiences.<sup>210</sup> While this does not relate directly to a mediation process, one experience in Yemen provides an example of how digital documentation may be used to monitor and encourage the accountability of an agreement. In 2018, Yemeni Archive began compiling a database of videos and photos documenting human rights abuses by conflict parties in Yemen. The platform was founded by Mnemonic, a non-profit organization made up of human rights advocates, archivists, technologists and open-source investigators. The goal of the platform is to preserve, enhance and memorialize documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed by all parties to the conflict in Yemen for use in advocacy, justice and accountability.<sup>211</sup> While the archive has not to date been utilized formally for this purpose, it demonstrates the utility of digitalization. The gathered content includes submissions from journalists and civilians, as well as open-source videos from social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, which are verified and preserved with blockchain technology to protect the data from being tampered with. The organization also built open-source tools to automatically download material and to automate the object recognition in videos and images, which was essential for processing the vast amount of crowdsourced material.<sup>212</sup>

While the opportunities presented by technology are significant, technology also creates new risks and

can have unintended consequences. Conflict parties sometimes use social media to leak information, spread disinformation or promote divisiveness, hate and violence,<sup>213</sup> and female activists have been the subject of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV), not only by conflict parties, but also by community members who oppose women’s activism,<sup>214</sup> with few avenues of support available.<sup>215</sup> The harm of technology-facilitated GBV is significant, and is felt both at the individual and the systemic level.<sup>216</sup> A thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but is well addressed elsewhere,<sup>217</sup> and remains a key area of concern for women mediators.<sup>218</sup>

Women must be able to benefit from the opportunities technology presents without compromising their safety and rights. It is possible to mitigate the risks that women face in online spaces without limiting their access to those spaces. As women’s organizations point out, there is a need to address technology-facilitated GBV without reverting to policies that are paternalistic and frame

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213 K. Wittig and S. Ghosheh (2020). “The Role of Social Media in Early Peacemaking: Help or Hindrance?” In *Accord*, issue 29, *Pioneering Peace Pathways: Making Connections to End Violent Conflict*. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/accord/pioneering-peace-pathways/role-social-media-early-peacemaking-help-or-hindrance>.

214 Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a modern form of gender-based violence that utilizes digital technologies to cause harm and, like other forms of gender-based violence, is rooted in discriminatory beliefs and institutions that reinforce sexist gender norms.

215 When it released its annual Web Index for 2014–2015, the World Wide Web Foundation (2014) reported that of the 86 countries it surveyed, 74 per cent of their legal systems were not appropriately responding to technology-facilitated GBV. In 10 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Women’s Rights Online (2016) network found that there were few mechanisms available for women to report this abuse. Where there were some mechanisms, the police and judicial systems lacked the ability to effectively respond to technology-facilitated GBV. For details, see: S. Dunn (2020). “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview”. Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 1. Centre for International Governance Innovation.

216 Jane Bailey and Carissima Mathen (2019). “Technology-Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls: Assessing the Canadian Criminal Law Response”. *Canadian Bar Review* 97 (3): 664–96.

217 For example, see: Plan International (2020). “Free to Be Online? Girls’ and Young Women’s Experiences of Online Harassment”. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline>.

218 For example, see: UN Women (2021). *Violence against Women in the Online Space: Insights from a Multi-Country Study in the Arab States*. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/11/violence-against-women-in-the-online-space>.

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209 Interview #1, Yemen, peacebuilding practitioner.

210 J. Hofstetter (2021). *Digital Technologies, Peacebuilding and Civil Society: Addressing Digital Conflict Drivers and Moving the Digital Peacebuilding Agenda Forward*. INEF Report 114/2021. Institute for Development and Peace. Available at: [https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico\\_mods\\_00074328](https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00074328).

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid.

women's use of technology as requiring "protection".<sup>219</sup> Content moderation strategies can include peace messaging,<sup>220</sup> the reporting of dangerous content to social media platforms, fact-checking online content, and supporting the spread of verified information.<sup>221</sup> Technology itself can be utilized as a form of protection, by allowing anonymous comments and establishing clear codes of conduct enforced by an active moderator.<sup>222</sup>

One example of a commitment to counter hate speech is contained in the 2020 Agreement for a Complete and Permanent Ceasefire in Libya, which contains a clause in which the parties commit to combatting hate speech, with a particular focus on social media.<sup>223</sup> In a related example, the female facilitators of the Civil Society

Support Room in Syria noted how they intentionally created a safe online space for women:

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*"Although cyberspace is not safe for women, we can take clear steps to protect them: the key is methodology. As facilitators we write down all the safe measures that women and men can take to protect their privacy, and then during the session we are strict and clear – nobody is allowed to interrupt, nobody is allowed to bully, and it's on us as facilitators to make sure this space is safe... Perhaps because the facilitators of the CSSR are women and we have good relationships with activists and people know us on a personal level, it makes it easier for them to reach out to us with their concerns."*<sup>224</sup>

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## Case Study 8: A Holistic Approach to Mitigating Risks to Women in Digital Spaces

In Idlib, the activities of a women-led CSO demonstrated the value of taking a holistic approach to empowering women through technology, by focusing not only on the risks associated with online platforms, but also on the physical tools of technology and access to information.

The province of Idlib is situated in north-west Syria, where society is governed by conservative norms that expect women to focus on family responsibilities rather than activities in the public sphere. As the war progressed, women started to play a more active role as activists and in local mediation efforts, particularly given that men faced restrictions on their movement due to harassment at checkpoints and the threat of compulsory military service. One women-led CSO identified a key protection risk for women active in the public sphere linked to their mobile phones, as described by an activist familiar with their work:

*"All the repair shops were run by men. This put women in a risky position if their mobile was broken, as it would require their personal data and photos to be shared with male strangers during the repair process. This breached the community norms in the area that insisted on women's privacy, and could also reveal actions (such as civil society activism) that might cause risk to the woman if it was known by the wider community."*

219 S. Dharmapuri and J. Shoemaker (Winter 2021). "Women, Peace and Security, and the Digital Ecosystem". Policy brief. Our Secure Future. Available at: <https://oursecurefuture.org/sites/default/files/WPS%20Digital%20Ecosystem.pdf>.

220 Peace Direct (2020). *Digital Pathways for Peace*, p. 24. Available at: <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PD-LVP-Tech-Report.pdf>.

221 L. Schirch (2020). "Social Media Impacts on Conflict Dynamics". Policy Brief No. 73. Toda Peace Institute. Available at: [https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-73\\_lisa-schirch\\_san-diego-reportsocial-media-impacts-on-conflict-dynamics.pdf](https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-73_lisa-schirch_san-diego-reportsocial-media-impacts-on-conflict-dynamics.pdf).

222 One example of technology supporting identity protection is found in a global virtual event on protecting youth in civic space, where organizers utilized a visual character – an avatar called Nova – to relay sensitive messages that might put young people at risk if they presented these messages themselves. For more information, see: <https://globalvirtual.solutions/youthprotection/>.

223 In Article 5 of Section II of the agreement, the parties made the following commitment: "Halt the currently rampant media escalation and hate speech by audio-visual broadcasting channels and websites. The judicial and competent authorities shall be called upon to take the necessary measures to ensure serious and deterrent prosecution of these channels and websites. [The UN Support Mission in Libya] also calls for necessary measures to be taken to ensure that the administrations of social media applications shall take the necessary action regarding these platforms. To this end, the Joint Military Committee (JMC) decided to establish a sub-committee to follow up on hate speech and pursue the necessary actions. The JMC also decided to address a direct message to all audio-visual broadcasting channels not to broadcast any media material that includes such type of rhetoric."

224 Interview #23, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

Therefore, the CSO planned to establish phone repair shops staffed entirely by women, who were also committed to protecting the privacy of female activists. The idea of women providing phone repair services was unheard of in Idlib, and when the CSO began to discuss the idea, they received significant community pushback. To address this:

*“Women from the CSO met with the Chamber of Commerce and male shop owners in the proposed areas to explain the project to them. They tried to negotiate with them to get their buy-in: they explained that the idea upheld traditional values by protecting the privacy of women. This community acceptance was vital, because if people [particularly influential men in the community] opposed the idea, women would be unable to run the business safely and effectively. Eventually these negotiations were successful, and the CSO managed to get permission from the Chamber of Commerce and support from local (male) business owners.”*

After working for some time on fixing mobile phones, the women who worked in these shops (and who generally had a background in information technology) began to fix technical issues with laptops as well, since female community members had raised similar concerns regarding their privacy should they take a laptop to an unknown male repair shop owner. The work of the CSO developed even further when the female staff at these shops began to host sessions for women in Idlib on how to access resources online, how to apply for university scholarships, and how to access training or other education resources (such as tools for learning English). This was important in Idlib, because it meant women did not have to approach unknown men to seek advice, but could learn about opportunities and develop their skills in a safer and more supportive environment.

While this experience shows how important it is to think about women’s access to technology in a holistic way, it also reveals the strength of partnership with influential men and male advocates. The activists familiar with the project explained:

*“The ability of the women-led CSO to negotiate, network and create alliances with influential men was vital. The Chamber of Commerce gave the women formal approval, and male family members supported the initiative and advocated on their behalf. After their negotiations, men started to promote the CSO’s work, not only women: in one instance, a number of male community leaders even met with the municipality to urge their support.”*



# 4. CONCLUSIONS

This section summarizes the key findings of the study and reflects on what this means for supporting the work of local women mediators. These conclusions underpin the recommendations in the next section

## WOMEN AS LOCAL MEDIATORS

Women mediators in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen held diverse profiles. Some held recognized social status (such as medical staff or local authorities), while others drew their “standing” to negotiate from their vulnerability to the dispute in question. Crucially, most women mediators operated as “insider mediators”, meaning they had some type of connection to the dispute and were trusted and perceived as credible by the disputing parties, which enabled them to influence their attitudes or behaviour. Insider mediators can have vividly different profiles and yet, due to their proximity to and trust with the conflict parties, be uniquely positioned to mediate a specific dispute. This also means that opportunities that exist for certain women in one area will not necessarily exist in another. While men may be able to rely on their official status to mediate a local dispute with which they have no direct connection (as a tribal leader, community leader or elder, for example) women typically gain their status as local mediators through their proximity to disputing parties and their perceived credibility and legitimacy, and may find it difficult to intervene unless they have some connection to the disputants.

Women demonstrated two consistent traits as insider mediators. The first was an ability to build or leverage relationships, and the second was detailed knowledge of the conflict and of the conflict parties. Perceived independence was also paramount. The study also revealed the breadth of women’s role: sometimes they acted as the mediator, and sometimes they acted in less visible roles by initiating dialogue, bringing parties to the table or rebuilding relationships. All of these roles contributed in valuable ways to the mediation process and deserve credit and support. A key finding, then, is the need to take a broad and inclusive understanding of what mediation means and what it aims to achieve, as well as who constitutes a mediator. Adopting this broader conceptual approach can help open up new spaces for

thinking about how best to promote women’s visibility as mediators and support their work.<sup>225</sup>

Across the four countries, conflict often changed socially ascribed gender roles and enabled women to take a more visible role in local mediation. This was particularly the case in Syria, where restrictions on men’s movements and the risk of arrest created opportunities for women to engage in negotiations about issues ranging from ceasefires to service provision. These new opportunities may benefit from support from external actors; however, the study made clear that any support would need to be defined and led by the women themselves, taking into account prevailing social norms and political sensitivities, and would need to recognize and mitigate the risks that women continue to face. Whether or not this change in gender roles will continue in a post-conflict setting remains to be seen – and experiences in other locations suggests that conservative gender norms are likely to return post-conflict<sup>226</sup> – which makes it vital for any external support to also take a long-term perspective on supporting women mediators, including in the shifting context of a post-conflict transition.

## COMPARING IRAQ, LIBYA, SYRIA, YEMEN

There were many similarities across the four countries: women consistently operated as insider mediators, demonstrated diversity across profiles, and saw a growth in opportunities to mediate local disputes

225 C. Turner (2018). “Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations”. *Global Policy* 9(2), 244–253.

226 P. Justino (2016). “Violent Conflict and Changes in Gender Roles: Implications for Post-Conflict Economic Recovery”. In D. Haynes, F. Ni Aolain, N. Valji and N. Cahn (eds), *Handbook of Gender and Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; J. El-Bushra (2003). *Women Building Peace: Sharing Know-how*. International Alert; J. El-Bushra (2007). “Feminism, Gender, and Women’s Peace Activism”. *Development and Change* 38(1): 131–147.

during wartime. While limitations with the data created some gaps in comparative analysis, some differences can also be identified, which demonstrate the need to take a context-specific approach to understanding and supporting the work of local women mediators. The first was the difference in tools available to women mediators during negotiations:

- o **Tribal principles:** In Yemen, a strong tribal tradition exists that protects women, children and the unarmed population from harm, and women were sometimes able to rely on this tradition to negotiate with armed actors and be protected while they did so. While parts of Libya, Syria and Iraq are also heavily influenced by tribal norms, this did not appear to result in the same type of opportunities for women. While the reason for this is unclear, it may be due to differences in tribal principles or adherence to those principles between countries; a stronger state presence, which weakens the importance of tribal customs; or simply a lack of research and low visibility as to how women are navigating tribal spaces.
- o **Partnerships, including with male leaders:** Allies often played an important role in making mediation possible, by facilitating initial discussions, strengthening the legitimacy of the woman mediator or offering different forms of leverage during the negotiation process. The form of partnership appeared to differ between countries. Iraq's post-conflict setting enabled more formal partnerships with state security actors (such as police), whereas in Syria and Yemen, women were more likely to partner with male community leaders such as mukhtars, or technical specialists such as engineers. Particularly in these two countries, women stressed the importance of forming alliances with male community members – whether family members, influential community leaders or potential (male) spoilers – to navigate the prevailing social norms.
- o **Coalitions and mentorship:** Women mediators sometimes built informal coalitions with other women – both domestically and within the diaspora – as well as mentoring networks with women mediators in other countries as a means of strengthening their voices and capacities. This appeared to be much less common in Iraq, possibly

due to the lack of a common agenda or mechanism. It differed between countries based on experience: when Yemeni women first started mediating local disputes, they reached out to Syrian and Libyan mediators for advice and to learn from their experience.

Women mediators in Libya, Syria and Yemen raised common concerns regarding their ability to influence or participate in Track I processes. Women consistently perceived Track I actors as fixated on narrow security issues while giving insufficient attention to the daily issues faced by communities. In Syria, women complained that Track I actors do not recognize the disputes and negotiations that ordinary women face every day, particularly when returning as refugees. In Yemen, women complained that Track I actors focused solely on war violence and ignored issues such as tribal violence and lack of services that affected some provinces more than the effects of war. Women in these countries also shared the common concern of strengthening the voice of local women mediators – and local women generally – at the Track I peace table.

The women's technical groups in Syria and Yemen (the WAB in Syria, and Tawafuq and the WSN in Yemen) have received similar critique of being insufficiently connected to grass-roots peace efforts. An observation common to both settings was that in order to connect to the grass roots, women need (financial and logistical) resources; yet currently they are expected to do this voluntarily. Women also pressed international actors to create space for women to discuss these issues – the day-to-day politics of war – at the Track I table, and recognize these issues as central to peace.

At the same time, it is important to recall the complex relationship between local- and national-level mediation efforts highlighted in the introduction. While some local efforts may be closely tied to national processes, others operate in parallel without any linkages. The local issues addressed may reflect national dynamics and in fact may have ripple effects on them, but local processes can also improve local stability without having any tangible impact on the national level. Feeding into the Track I process should therefore not automatically be seen as the overriding objective of local mediation efforts. On the contrary, in some cases, the linking of local- and national-level processes carries distinct risks for local peace efforts.

A study of women's involvement in the peace process in Yemen identified numerous such risks, including politicization of local issues by parties to the national-level process, local groups being frozen out of the debates on these issues, pressure on local organizations to heed to donor demands, local groups being asked to lend their voice and legitimacy to a national process they did not have influence over, and reprisals from armed actors.<sup>227</sup> Similarly, the complex relationship between the local and national levels of mediation poses a range of challenges for international actors (such as the United Nations) seeking to support such efforts while adhering to the principles of conflict sensitivity and “do no harm”.<sup>228</sup>

## LIMITATIONS AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH LOCAL MEDIATION

The study revealed a number of limitations and risks associated with local mediation. The first is the risk that local mediation efforts are exclusionary and reinforce harmful power dynamics. Women mediators in the study emphasized that they needed to work within conservative social norms, which in many cases may not have upheld the equal rights of women. The examples in the study suggest that one way women mediators were able to be more inclusive than male mediators was by connecting directly to female disputants and engaging them directly in negotiations, which would not be possible in conservative environments if the mediator was male. However, beyond this, the study did not interview disputants themselves to understand how inclusive the women-led processes actually were. This topic would benefit from further research.

A second concern with local mediation is derived from partnerships. As the Iraq case demonstrates, while partnerships can play an enabling role for mediators and help to enforce agreements (as in the case of police responding to technology-facilitated GBV), women mediators may need to work extensively with partners (such as the police) to ensure they implement a survivor-centred approach that does not exacerbate risks to

vulnerable disputants. This may require a substantial and long-term investment in capacity building, mentorship and monitoring, particularly in the case of an institutional partner (due to the potential number of staff involved). Depending on the choice of partner, partnerships may also legitimize illegitimate actors by affirming them as facilitators or negotiators.

A third concern is that insider mediators face an inherent limitation to their scope to mediate. As insider mediators, women are well positioned to mediate specific disputes – namely, those where they have built credibility and trust with disputants – but they will typically be unable to intervene if they don't have any connection to the disputants. This means that training women mediators and then asking them to resolve unrelated disputes is unlikely to be successful. While men also face limitations on the type of disputes they can mediate, it is much more likely (in the four countries of this study) for men to hold formal positions (such as *sheikh* or *mukhtar*) that give them the standing to mediate a wide range of local conflicts with which they have no personal connection. Moreover, power dynamics or social expectations may determine the type of disputes specific women are able to mediate: for example, if a woman's legitimacy as a mediator is derived from her perceived status as a victim or a mother of affected children, her political agency may be restricted to “feminized” topics such as humanitarian assistance that are seen as fitting her status as a survivor, but she may not be entitled to raise issues related to political structures or military action. External supporters should in this case ensure that they do not reinforce limiting perceptions, even if those perceptions are initially useful for granting access to mediation.

A fourth concern is how to deal with the tension that can arise between local values (particularly in conservative areas) and the values of liberal feminism. The tendency of international actors in this situation is to focus on international normative frameworks, particularly UN Security Council Resolution 1325, as a means of guiding the work of local mediators or building their knowledge and capacity. A number of interviewees questioned the exclusive reliance on global normative frameworks for women mediators working at the community level, particularly when it was detached from local experiences. While nearly all informants emphasized the importance of training, they urged trainers to build on local knowledge rather than relying exclusively on external normative frameworks. By local knowledge, they meant

227 Crisis Group (March 2021). “The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen”.

228 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Mediation Support Unit (17 November 2020). *UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities*.

working with local women mediators to understand what was driving local conflicts, who were the parties involved and what types of strategies could be used to negotiate the dispute. This view was particularly strong in Syria, perhaps due to the larger volume of external support that civil society actors have received. One peacebuilding expert noted:

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*“From 2018 onwards we’ve started to see more grass-roots advocacy that is not necessarily linked to donor funds or the limelight of NGOs. [External parties who wish to support women mediators] need to tap into this new energy. They need to understand how women are surviving on the ground, and the daily negotiations they carry out in order to survive... [External parties] need to understand local knowledge and not just enforce normative knowledge like [UN Security Council Resolution] 1325. Instead, they should focus on having knowledge exchange workshops and addressing local problems; people know how to survive better themselves.”<sup>229</sup>*

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Another noted:

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*“Sometimes the language used by [external actors such as the UN] excludes women – for example, gender empowerment is not a word that communities use. Instead we should use the language that communities themselves use – they’ll say: ‘You mean how to support us, how to make our lives better’; we need to make it easier, make it understandable.”<sup>230</sup>*

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Local knowledge meant, therefore, collaborating with women mediators to understand the dynamics that exist in their specific location and how they could navigate those dynamics. Examples of the type of training support women mediators requested included how to build effective alliances; knowledge exchange with other mediators negotiating similar disputes; and workshops to discuss how to solve local problems. Peer learning (including from women mediators in the Middle East and North Africa region) was repeatedly mentioned as beneficial.<sup>231</sup> Bearing this in mind, it may be possible to introduce ideas related to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the women, peace and security agenda as a resource to draw on to help build women’s confidence or advocacy regarding their mediation efforts, rather than

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229 Interview #5, Syria, peacebuilding expert.

230 Interview #28, Syria, national NGO.

231 Interview #27, national NGO.

presenting it as a standalone mechanism or a detached normative framework.

Finally, the vast majority of examples examined in this study concerned local mediation that took place independently of other conflict resolution efforts and addressed narrow issues in specific locales. However, one last concern is that local initiatives may fragment wider conflict resolution efforts, especially if different local-level efforts are not linked with each other. This underlines the importance of strengthening the networks and communication between mediators operating at the local level (including both women and men), as well as between local mediation efforts and Track I or Track II processes.

## PROTECTING WOMEN LOCAL MEDIATORS

A common theme throughout the report is the challenges and risks that women mediators face when negotiating local disputes. As highlighted in earlier sections, this includes threats, harassment and strict social control – the life of a woman mediator is often extremely difficult. This is likely compounded by women’s status as insider mediators, since they are typically negotiating disputes within their own communities with people known to them; and while this provides them with legitimacy and influence, it also makes them susceptible to local perceptions of or reactions to their intervention. This makes it imperative that external actors wishing to support women mediators understand the local context and provide assistance in a way that is consistent with the safety of the mediator: for example, one Syrian mediator who ran a community mediation network for women noted that she would refuse any support that required donor visibility, since that would undermine her perceived independence and credibility and increase the risk to her.<sup>232</sup>

Women must be able to benefit from the opportunity to contribute to conflict resolution, and also to utilize all available tools to that end, including technology. It is possible to mitigate the risks that women face in mediating disputes and engaging in online spaces without limiting their access to those spaces. Several

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232 Interview #24, Yemen, peacebuilding expert.

ways to do this emerged throughout the study. The first is to understand why harmful social norms exist and how they are affected by conflict – in particular, who are the key actors enforcing social norms and what enables them to do so? An additional way is to examine how women are navigating these social norms and protecting themselves, including by forming alliances. Second, the poor visibility and limited credit given to women enables powerholders to assert that “tradition” forbids women from brokering peace. Throughout the study, interviewees emphasized the long tradition of women’s engagement in mediation,

even if it is not well known. Third, the protection of women mediators is not a standalone issue. Women’s rights exist in a complex and integral ecosystem: a lack of political representation affects trust in their ability to work as mediators, for instance, and a lack of legislation on GBV creates a significant gap in protection. And finally, there are concrete and immediate steps that women mediators, their allies and external supporters can take to protect them during mediation and in online spaces. These are reflected on in the recommendations.

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## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations stem from the findings of this study. Unless otherwise noted, the recommendations apply across the four countries (but may require adapting for context). Overall, there are five areas where support from UN Women, other international actors and donors could make a significant difference to women mediators: (1) strengthening networks and knowledge sharing; (2) providing resources that enable inclusion of a diverse range of women; (3) improving protection for women mediators; (4) encouraging local ownership and context-specific support; and (5) continuing to raise public awareness through advocacy and research. The recommendations below offer more detail.

### 1. Strengthening networks and knowledge sharing

**Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and mentoring among women mediators.** Across the four countries, women were active in multiple locations, but often struggled to connect to each other due to lack of resources, logistics or limitations on travel. Workshops that engage women working in the same country, or women working across the Middle East and North Africa region, offer a way to build peer support networks, exchange knowledge and learn from each other’s experience. These could be held in-person or online (with sufficient safeguards). Ongoing mentorship (via online platforms such as WhatsApp) would also benefit those with less experience. Agenda ideas for peer learning should be developed in collaboration with the women mediators, but may include topics such as negotiation techniques, how to build effective alliances and navigating conservative social norms.

**Work with women mediators to develop strategies to engage allies, including male leaders.** Partnerships can play an enabling role for mediators and can strengthen their legitimacy and widen the negotiation pathways available. However, partnerships may also legitimize illegitimate actors by affirming their position or allowing them to influence the outcome of negotiations. This means that UN Women and other international actors should carefully consider the role that partnerships play in local mediation when assessing potential programming support. Partners may need extensive, long-term training, mentorship and monitoring to ensure that they implement an approach that upholds human rights values and does not create additional risks for vulnerable disputants. At the same time, it is often vital for women to obtain the support of influential (male) members of the community if the mediation is to be feasible and the outcome enforceable. UN Women and other international partners should work with women mediators to develop strategies to identify and engage these allies in a way that affirms the role of women and the outcome of the mediation.

**Support women to utilize technology in their mediation efforts while recognizing the risks involved in the digitalization of peacebuilding.** Online platforms can be used to strengthen networks between women mediators; set up mentoring relationships between women mediators; document breaches in the implementation of an agreement; and encourage dialogue at the community level related to local conflict issues. To achieve these outcomes, international actors could provide tailored training on digital literacy; online tools (for use or adaptation, with examples from the Middle East and North Africa region); online facilitation skills; and online protection. In doing so, international actors should work with women mediators to identify barriers to their access to technology and how to make online tools more inclusive. This includes addressing issues such as poor internet connectivity; access to technology and hardware; digital literacy; privacy; and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

## 2. Providing resources that enable inclusion of a diverse range of women

**Engage women with more diverse profiles in training or strategic discussions on local mediation,** in recognition of the diverse profiles of insider mediators. While some women mediators have higher socio-economic status and are older, there are many women who fall outside this profile and have become engaged as mediators due to their proximity to the conflict. This requires UN Women or other external supporters to carefully identify women in each community who are positioned as insider mediators, but do not meet the “typical” profile of a mediator.

**Look for opportunities to engage women from conservative, rural and hard-to-reach areas in the above workshops and networks.** Accounts from Syrian interviewees suggest that it is possible to identify common ground between women of different ideological backgrounds related to women’s participation in public life and women’s role in conflict resolution. Engaging women with different profiles in knowledge-sharing workshops could help them to understand different experiences and “demystify” each other. These workshops could also reveal specific ways for UN Women and other international partners to support women mediators in more traditional areas.

**Provide members of Track II or Track I bodies with the resources to strengthen connections with communities** (such as the WAB in Syria, and Tawafuq and the WSN in Yemen). This could include small grants to carry out community activities, funding to travel to communities and host workshops, and resources to establish a reliable internet connection (the latter was strongly requested by Syrian mediators).

## 3. Improving protection for women mediators

**Improve the understanding of how women can be protected and protect themselves online.** It is vital to mitigate the risks that women face in online spaces without limiting their access to those spaces. This requires working with online service providers and facilitators and actors who deal with hardware (e.g. mobile and laptop repair), as well as women who utilize online platforms. Protections can be built into digital platforms by allowing anonymous comments, establishing clear codes of conduct enforced by an active moderator, or utilizing tools such as visual characters that de-identify individuals. In addition, content moderation strategies can include peace messaging, the reporting of dangerous content to social media platforms, fact-checking online content, and supporting the spread of verified information.

**Work with women mediators to develop protection strategies.** When partnering with women mediators to support their work, and ideally before commencing any intervention, work with the mediators to map the risks they face (or may face): identify harmful social norms, the key actors enforcing those norms, and the factors that enable them, and also identify how women are navigating these social norms and protecting themselves already. This can provide the basis for working with the women mediators to develop protection strategies, drawing on their existing knowledge. Protection strategies could also be added to the knowledge-sharing workshops mentioned above.

**Take a holistic approach to protecting women mediators.** The protection of women mediators is not a standalone issue and requires working on the full ecosystem of rights. This includes political representation; equal representation of women in professional positions (such as in local councils and fields such as academia); and

legislation and policy related to gender-based violence. Improvements in gender equality and human rights for women will also have a significant effect on their ability to act as mediators, as well as their protection while conducting mediation.

#### 4. Encouraging local ownership and context-specific support

**When presenting normative frameworks such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, ensure they are relevant to local realities and language.** Normative frameworks such as 1325 lose their relevance for local mediators when presented as a standalone normative framework that is detached from their daily reality. Without adaptation, the concepts and language used in international frameworks appear foreign and disconnected from issues important in the community. These international frameworks may be useful as one component of training, in order to strengthen women's confidence or advocacy regarding their mediation efforts, but the concept should be grounded in local realities and explained using language that is easily understood and familiar to community members.

**Facilitate problem-solving workshops with women active in the community.** Conflict dynamics often vary widely from place to place and change rapidly. Problem-solving workshops would offer a platform for women already involved in mediation (and their allies, including men) as well as women active in the community in other ways (but who may be well placed as insider mediators) to analyse the (changing) drivers of local and emerging conflicts, identify the relevant stakeholders, and discuss potential strategies to solve those conflicts. This could be coupled with training on negotiation skills or similar topics; however, skills building should remain grounded in the realities that women face in each specific area. In order to identify the right participants, active outreach must be conducted targeting insider mediators, including those in more traditional or hard-to-reach areas.

**When undertaking training, draw a clear link between specific disputes and the women who are well positioned to address them.** As insider mediators, women are well positioned to mediate specific disputes – namely, those where they have built credibility and trust with disputants – but they will typically be unable to intervene

if they do not have any connection to the disputants. This means that training women mediators and then asking them to resolve unrelated disputes is unlikely to be successful. Training could address how to use the role of insider mediator to intervene in relevant disputes.

**Support ways of working and forms of funding that leverage local resources and encourage collaboration among women mediators.** Women are highly skilled at leveraging local resources: through partnerships, through knowledge exchange or by utilizing social norms. External funding should aim to support and not replace or undermine this resourcefulness, and should be careful not to create competition among women mediators. Funding models could require mediators to collaborate or strengthen knowledge sharing with other women mediators, for example, or to outline how local resources will be utilized alongside external support. While this recommendation is equally relevant to male mediators, it is particularly important to strengthen collaboration and networks among women mediators, since they share similar challenges and often support each other's efforts.

#### 5. Continuing to raise public awareness through advocacy and research

**Actively challenge stereotypes or simplistic views on tradition that limit women's agency.** This may include documenting and publicizing examples of women's historical involvement in local mediation; profiling women's current engagement in mediation and peace efforts; working with women mediators to identify potential allies in the community and encouraging their support; and advocating (male) community leaders (such as local authorities, religious leaders and other influential individuals) to publicly affirm the role of women in local mediation and peace efforts. This work also involves expanding the definition of mediation to recognize the efforts of women mediators at the local level (before, during and after negotiations), rather than only in formal positions or Track I processes.

**Advocate for greater recognition of local issues and the "politics of the day-to-day" as central to sustainable peace.** Issues such as refugee return; housing, land and property rights; or personal status issues, which are typically absent from the Track I peace table but vital for long-term peace, form the bulk of local mediation

undertaken by women. International actors can advocate or actively create space for women to reflect on how these issues impact the feasibility of long-term peace, and can encourage Track I actors to recognize these issues as central to peace.

**Collaborate with women-led CSOs and women active in the community (such as mediators or activists) to build public awareness of and trust in women’s contributions in the public sphere.** Women mediators are often required to prove that they have the skills needed to participate in negotiations, which leads to an emphasis on capacity-building activities (a bias that men in similar positions do not experience). One way to start to address this is by building greater awareness – over time – of the contributions women make in the public sphere.

**Advocate to increase the number of formal positions available to women in local administrative structures (such as local councils).** Most women mediators operate as insider mediators, which means that opportunities often arise for those who hold formal positions such as local council members. Increasing women’s representation across the public or political sector more broadly will also increase opportunities for women to act as insider mediators.

**Commission further research to strengthen and expand knowledge of women’s role in local mediation.** Research should be conducted in a way that involves women mediators as active participants and does not disturb the ecosystems of local mediation. Potential topics may include the following:

- o Continuing to document the efforts of women mediators at the local level in different contexts, in order to strengthen the role of women in local mediation in diverse settings.
- o Building deeper knowledge of how women mediators in less accessible communities, such as those with restrictive social norms, are navigating complex settings to mediate local conflicts. This should include knowledge on how to safely support women mediators in a context-specific way.
- o Building a stronger evidence base on how women mediators gain the trust, legitimacy and access required to mediate local conflicts. This includes

expanding knowledge about women mediators who are not insider mediators and have limited or no connection to the conflict parties or dispute.

- o Evaluating support provided to women mediators (such as capacity-building or logistical support) to better understand its effectiveness and relevance.



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