

ACADEMIC PAPER

WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES  
OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION  
AND NEGOTIATION:  
COMMUNITY VOICES FROM  
SYRIA, IRAQ AND YEMEN



JUNE 2018  
UN WOMEN

**About this study**

This study was commissioned by the UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, with research undertaken in mid-2017, and is part of a series of reports on issues of peace and security in the Middle East and North Africa.

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This report was generously funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

**Suggested Citation:**

Tabbara, H., and Rubin, G, (2018), Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – a discussion paper; UN Women.

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ISBN: 978-1-63214-124-8

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**UN WOMEN**

June 2018

**HANAN TABBARA AND GARRETT RUBIN**





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# ACRONYMS

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CSO	Civil society organization
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
GCC	Gulf Cooperative Council
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IILHR	Institute for International Law and Human Rights
INAP	Iraqi National Action Plan
IQCM	Iraqi Center for Negotiation Skills and Conflict Management
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LAC	Local Administrative Councils
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NDC	National Dialogue Conference
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSESGY	Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen
PNPA	Peace and National Partnership Agreement
SWIPD	Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
USIP	United States Institute for Peace
US CSWG	U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security
WAB	Women's Advisory Board
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

# SUMMARY

*“It is these different efforts, the constant putting out of fires that has kept [our community] from being pulled into the fighting... Women are central here. We are constantly extinguishing fire”*

- Female Community Mediator, Yemen

In recent decades, the international community has made significant progress in addressing women’s experiences in conflict and security contexts. Following policy breakthroughs in the 1980s and 90s, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) marked a global turning point in addressing the inordinate and differentiated impact of conflict on women. Since then, eight UN Security Council Resolutions and three General Assembly resolutions on women in war and peace have been passed, including those aimed at expanding women’s participation in negotiations, political processes and formal peacebuilding activities during times of conflict and recovery.

Yet parallel to widening recognition, and in some cases inclusion in formal peace agreements and activities, there is growing acknowledgment that national-level peace processes often fall short of representing or supporting women’s diverse contributions to peace in everyday life. In the MENA region, this fissure is evident from the spirited debates taking place in countries such as Syria and Yemen, where female activists have highlighted the need for stronger linkages between international, national and local efforts to bring about peace. In part, this disjuncture represents gendered forms of discrimination that marginalize women’s voices, and dismiss their skills, experiences and expertise in conflict resolution at the local level as inadequate for, or irrelevant to, formal activities in the national and international arena. To this end, the Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 contends that acknowledging women’s informal contributions requires that

*“we must also look at ‘politics’ and ‘peacemaking’ differently – not only as a set of actors around a negotiation table, but as a comprehensive process within a society that is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the interests of the whole society...”*

(UN Women, 2015).

This means including women’s participation across the range of processes and mechanisms that address, mediate and resolve local grievances and build understanding, collaboration, trust and resilience.

With this in mind, the purpose of this report is to amplify the voices and experiences of Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi women who make significant contributions to the stability and security of their communities through resolving and managing local conflict, yet whose efforts are often marginalized, dismissed and misrepresented as insignificant. Presented as a series of case studies, the report examines how women in the region engage, influence and shape local processes for conflict and dispute resolution. Based on more than 40 remote interviews with women from the respective country contexts, particular attention is paid to illuminating the strategies, tools and tactics underlying their efforts and experiences to build peace from the bottom up.

From the Syrian context, the report features a women’s peacebuilding organization that, despite grave conditions and impossible odds, exhausted all the resources and opportunities within its reach to halt hostilities and prevent further loss of life in their community. This included orchestrating a high-stakes, interest-based bargaining deal around a civilian safe zone in the area, which resulted in a rare, yet ultimately unsustainable, level of mutual buy-in from both sides of the conflict. Then, in an equally impressive showing of strategic prowess and influence, the group went on to engage state and non-state security actors to refute allegations and charges made against

local women. Through these and other efforts, the organization earned influence and credibility in the area, so much so that its effort to bring about a cease-fire agreement between government and opposition groups was endorsed by more than 400 women.

In Yemen, limited but powerful evidence from Ibb and Shabwa Governorates points to the important contributions that women are making to local security through the tribal system and its traditional channels of dispute resolution. While often criticized by external observers as detrimental to national development and nation building, the Yemeni tribal system has proved to be a critical source of stability, even during times of conflict. However, years of political upheaval and war have also taken their toll on tribal structures, diminishing their capacity to resolve and de-escalate conflict. To this end, women are both directing and directly engaging in efforts to support and re-activate certain tribal processes intended to contain violence and, in many cases, steer local communities away from a downward spiral into armed conflict. In the process, they are also articulating and exercising, at times conflicting, understanding of meaningful engagement of women in mediating, negotiating and arbitrating disputes.

Fallout from armed conflict and weak state performance also frames the contributions of female mediators in Iraq, where women are working to mitigate conflicts that arise from vacuums left behind by formal institutions. In some cases, formal channels are limited, and at times give rise to conflict with conflict. For others, access to protective services is non-existent, a common challenge for marginalized communities generally. Here female mediators in Kurdish Iraq are working to support displaced minority groups, including Yazidi women uprooted by ISIS, to claim basic entitlements, such as identification cards and other key legal documents.

Taken together, these provide a dynamic image of women's engagement in conflict and dispute resolution across the region. In this light, the claim that the work of such women is inadequate or insufficient to inform more 'formal' peacebuilding activities is clearly false. On the contrary, the interventions of women who manage, de-escalate and resolve conflict at the local level outward and upward in important ways. In doing so, women defy patriarchal boundaries and gender roles, overcoming significant social and structural barriers to bolster local stability and security. Women are thus undeniably at the forefront of resolving conflict and seeking peace, and as such their voices must be acknowledged, and their expertise harnessed.



# KEY FINDINGS

## **Gendered experiences of conflict both inform and motivate women’s interventions in dispute resolution.**

Informants emphasized that women’s experiences with conflict differ from men in ways that make female negotiators more effective in resolving disputes. Here women pointed to the disproportionately negative impact of armed conflict and/or community disputes on women, who often shoulder the greatest burden during times of strife. As such, informants believed that women are more willing to negotiate and, by extension, better able to reach sustainable solutions with opposing parties.

## **Informants frequently rely on interest-based bargaining tactics to resolve conflict.**

Women engage with a broad spectrum of tools to negotiate or resolve conflict, including approaches that can be described as rights-, power- and interest-based bargaining. Overall, however, this study found that female mediators tend to emphasize interest-based tactics or approaches to finding mutually agreeable solutions that build relationships and satisfy the interests of parties to a dispute.

## **Women face gender-based discrimination when attempting to mediate or resolve conflicts, including from other women.**

Women describe strenuous efforts to prove themselves capable of resolving community conflicts in the face of gendered claims that they are inexperienced or ill-suited to mediation and negotiation. Informants also encountered such criticisms from other women, whose own experiences with discrimination and exclusion undermine their confidence in the potential of female mediators to succeed. In turn, building trust and credibility through both experience and social status were seen as crucial to overcoming these challenges.

## **In fragile security contexts, women often rely on anonymity and secrecy as a modus operandi to protect themselves and their work.**

Despite the highly visible forms of engagement presented in the following case studies, numerous other women and women’s groups had to be left out of the report due to the secret and sensitive nature of their work. Here, security concerns and social norms often mean that women who mediate, manage, or resolve conflict do so anonymously or “under the radar”. This is not surprising considering the well-documented increase in violence against women in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, especially from extremist forces. An example of this is evident from the commonly used slogan, “the kitchen or death”, which represents sentiments held by various armed extremist groups that see a “woman’s place” as confined to the private and domestic spheres.

## **Personal connections and social status are a critical source of legitimacy that many informants use as a tool – rather than as a crutch – for building trust, credibility and access.**

Informants spoke frankly about the importance of personal connections and social status for females seeking to intervene in disputes at the community level, consistently noting that credibility is based on a woman’s family background and relationships with respected and powerful individuals or groups. Nonetheless, many women also demonstrated strategic prowess in using status and family connections as a tool to build relationships and legitimacy independent of others. While men may use personal connections in similar ways, the significance of female efforts to generate independence should be considered against the background of the social and even legal constraints that result in women’s reliance on men in several areas of their lives.

**Women leverage experience from resolving conflicts within predominantly female fields as a way to gain access to mediation opportunities in male-dominated issue areas.**

Women active in conflict resolution are often relegated to dealing with disputes that are seen as gender-appropriate, including in education, humanitarian aid and issues of violence against women. Several informants noted, however, that women generate skills and credibility through their work in traditionally-female issue areas as a way of gaining community acceptance for intervening in disputes generally reserved for male mediators. This includes women who went on to mediate conflicts over property rights, natural resources, employment contracts and political disputes.

**Women define meaningful participation in conflict resolution in diverse ways, including many who view private or indirect engagement as of equal value and importance to more public or direct forms of participation.**

While women are active in directly mediating or negotiating disputes, others describe playing indirect roles to facilitate conflict resolution in their communities. This includes influencing or persuading parties in a dispute “behind the scenes”, as well as providing direction or support to male colleagues. Though some women described these experiences in terms of exclusion, others spoke about indirect channels of meaningful engagement and with a sense of ownership over the broader process and outcomes.

**Women’s engagement in resolving tribal conflicts varies widely across country contexts.**

Although the topic did not feature prominently in discussions with Syrian informants, interviewees from Yemen and Iraq highlighted contrasting roles for women in resolving tribal conflict. In Yemen, for example, women were identified as critical and active participants in aspects of the tribal dispute resolution process, whereas female negotiators in Iraq saw limited, or non-existent, opportunities for women in the same arena. In part, this contrast may reflect the strong history of female participation in certain aspects of Yemeni tribal systems.

**Informants emphasize the importance of training and capacity building to develop technical skills in mediation and negotiation, and at times they support one-another in learning.**

While social status, personal connections and reputation are all seen as critical for success, informants underlined that these factors are not a replacement for the requisite technical mediation and negotiating skills. To this end, many informants undertook training in topics such as persuasion, consensus building, tribal customary law and/or drafting agreements. In the absence of professional support, women often sought help and guidance from their networks, and taught one another new technical skills.

**Women sometimes use gendered stereotypes to their advantage, especially when dealing with armed actors.**

Women in Syria and Yemen have played critical roles in smuggling lifesaving goods and resources across checkpoints and conflict frontlines to reach communities in need. In such cases, women are often able to circumvent security screenings due to the perception that they are passive and apolitical during times of conflict. Additionally, the protected status that some women hold in society can be used to their advantage, such as in Yemen, where women are able to take political positions and make statements that men would not be able to.

**Women’s experiences in conflict resolution at the local and community levels cannot be divorced from their broader political contexts.**

While many women stressed the importance of neutrality (whether actual or perceived) as a tactic for resolving disputes and conflicts, they also demonstrated an acute awareness of seemingly apolitical disputes at local level and their linkages to the broader political environment. For example, while disputes over water access may not be dealt with in political terms, informants understand resource scarcity as a challenge that is inextricably linked to political factors, often fuelling mistrust and further conflict in fragile security contexts.

# METHODOLOGY

Commissioned by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the research for this report was conducted between June and October of 2017. Relying on an iterative, two-part process, the research involved both a thorough review of the literature and key informant interviews with individuals from Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

As a part of the literature review phase, the researchers gathered and analysed academic research, news articles and grey literature in both Arabic and English from a wide variety of national and international sources. Remote research interviews were then conducted with a total of 45 informants, including community activists, lawyers, journalists, aid workers, CSO leaders, educators, medical professionals, academics and women in local and governorate-level politics. The vast majority of informants were women selected through non-probability snowball sampling, used to ensure the ethnic, religious, geographical, socioeconomic and educational diversity of the sample.

The safety and security of informants was considered at all stages of the research process, including in

the collection, analysis, storage and presentation of data. Findings included here have been anonymized to protect the identities of informants, and a significant portion of the data collected has been excluded from the report, due to the sensitive nature of the security contexts and areas where the informants are working.

In addition to security-related constraints, three additional challenges hampered the research process: (1) poor telecommunication infrastructure in all three countries made communicating with informants difficult, and at times impossible; (2) working remotely and without access to the informants' broader communities significantly limited opportunities for verifying claims and findings, especially with regard to local events or developments not widely covered by media or other sources; and (3) while a considerable number of interviews were conducted, various informants did not fit the target profile, limiting the ability to generalize the data overall. In the light of these and other constraints, the findings presented in this report should be taken as suggestive of themes that require further study and research.

## Profile of research sample

Country	Sample size	Geographical reach
Syria	15	Damascus, Rif Damascus, Idlib, Daraa, Homs, and Aleppo
Yemen	18	Sanaa, Aden, Ibb, Taiz, Shabwa, and Al-Baydha
Iraq	12	Nineveh, Baghdad, Qadisiya, Sulaimaniyah, and Duhok

1.

# CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN PEACEMAKING AND PEACEBUILDING

1.1

## 'At the table': Women in peacemaking processes

The international community has only recently begun taking serious note of women's experiences in conflict and security contexts. Driven in large part by grassroots feminist and civil society activism and advocacy, changes in international relations theory, and new realities in the post-Cold War era, the discourse on women, peace and security has changed significantly over the last four decades (Cockburn, 2007; Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011; Harrington, 2011). This includes significant policy breakthroughs in the 1980 and 90s (Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011), ultimately leading the United Nations Security Council to adopt Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000. Composed of eighteen points, the Resolution establishes a global framework to examine and address the inordinate and differentiated impact of conflict on women. Its content can be clustered into four key pillars, which span protection, participation, prevention, and relief and recovery.

Since then, eight UN Security Council Resolutions and three General Assembly resolutions on women in war and peace have been passed. For almost a decade after the passage of UNSCR 1325, policy and practice increasingly addressed the protection of women and girls, but the issue of women's participation and inclusion in negotiations and political processes remained largely ignored (Krause

and Enloe, 2015). Resolutions 1889 (2009) and 2122 (2013) addressed this omission, underscoring with concern that "women and women's perspectives will continue to be underrepresented in conflict prevention, resolution, protection and peacebuilding for the foreseeable future" without a significant shift in implementation, and calling on Member states to empower women in peacebuilding.<sup>1</sup>

Extensive qualitative and quantitative research has underscored the importance and positive impact of women in peace processes (Anderlini, 2000, 2007; O'Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015; O'Reilly, 2015; Paffenholz et al, 2016; Bell, 2015). Evidence suggests that when women's inclusion is prioritized, peace is more likely, especially when this inclusion is substantive and not tokenistic. Statistical research suggests that peace agreements are 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years if women participate in their creation, and that strengthening women's political and social participation diminishes the chances of a relapse into conflict after war has ended (O'Reilly, 2015). Here too, belligerents often perceive women as honest brokers in peace processes because they are usually outside the formal power structures underpinning the conflict (O'Reilly, 2015; Bigio and Vogelstein,

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<sup>1</sup> (Krause and Enloe, 2015)

2016). This may grant them access to parties to the conflict denied to male leaders, allowing opportunities to promote dialogue, generate trust and build coalitions (O'Reilly, 2015).

That said, categorical distinctions cannot be made about the interests and actions of all women in peace talks, as women do not represent a homogenous category (Anderlini, 2007). On the contrary, recognizing the diversity of women's roles, backgrounds, and perspectives is critical to dismantling essentialist positions that view women as "peaceable" or "natural bridge builders", especially in the light of women's increased participation in government military forces, rebel groups and even terrorist organizations across the globe (Human Security Report, 2005).

Nevertheless, as the literature highlights, women's experiences and gendered roles in societies enable them to bring different perspectives to peace negotiations (O'Reilly, 2015; Anderlini, 2007). Having borne the brunt of war and conflict and suffered its debilitating effects, women are important actors in exposing the divisive "underbelly" of war that is a critical first step toward peace (Anderlini, 2000). Furthermore, the stark realities faced by many women caught in the midst of conflict shape their articulations of peace in terms of meeting basic human security needs. Here, their visions may be based on a combination of the political, economic, personal, and even environmental issues that arise from their daily life experiences (Ibid).

Despite the evidence, however, women's participation in formal peace processes has remained conspicuously low. In fact, between 1992 and 2011, only 4 per cent of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, and 9 per cent of negotiators in formal peace processes were women (UN Women, 2012). Another study, which examined 33 peace negotiations, also revealed that only 4 per cent of participants – 11 out of 280 – were female (Ibid). The absence of women from peace processes reflects the lack of effort invested in integrating them into formal activities (UN Women, 2010, 2012) as well as the failure of international actors to pay due attention to important preconditions for the effective exercise of women's agency in peacebuilding (Goetz and Jenkins 2016). Along with persistent patriarchy, a source of these systemic failures is "the lack

of credible mechanisms for holding states and international entities accountable for the degree to which they use their unique forms of institutional leverage to 'open doors' – to peace talks, national dialogues, donor conferences, and constituent assemblies" (Ibid).

Similar barriers to inclusion characterize women's involvement in peacemaking in all three country contexts explored in this report. At the international level, Syrian women's participation in peace negotiations has been limited (Swisspeace et al, 2016; Kapur 2017). During the first three years of the conflict, women activists and civil society organizers were entirely shut out of formal negotiations. Sponsored by UN Women in 2014, the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD) was launched as a response, calling for women's involvement in the peace process and for their inclusion at the negotiating table. Later, a Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy was formed, bringing women's engagement to the international stage.

The WAB is composed of 12 independent Syrian civil society leaders from various backgrounds, whose task is to "raise important matters missing from the agenda, provide options, form consensus positions and make recommendations to assist peace talks, address key points of contention and offer creative solutions, propose gender-responsive perspectives and channel relevant civil society expertise" (UN Women 2016). However, although the WAB is a welcome initiative, its model has not been without criticism. Some women's rights activists suggested that its advisory nature has meant that women's participation is "limited to the corridors". Others suggest that the inclusion of women within the WAB is constrained "to a certain category of elite women", resulting in a gap between women's needs on the ground and those vocalized by the advisory board (Al-Abdeh, 2017). Others argue that the lack of a comprehensive feedback mechanism to report to and inform local communities about the WAB's engagement have alienated the advisory board and undermined its efforts (Leimbach, 2013; SCP, 2016; Butler 2014; WILPF, 2016; Williams, 2014). While UN Women has supported initiatives to address some of these issues, activists maintain that additional measures are needed to strengthen the meaningful engagement of women in formal processes.

In Yemen, organizing and mobilizing efforts to increase female political participation enabled women to earn a seat at the table on numerous occasions (Heinze, 2016; Jarhum, 2016). For example, during the political transition process launched under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative in 2011, the then Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, Amat Al-Razak Hummad, was among the signatories to the agreement (Jarhum, 2016). Culminating in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), the GCC-brokered deal called for greater women's participation in political and peace processes, including a 30 per cent gendered quota for all seats in government.

While women faced numerous barriers and challenges at the NDC, especially when advocating for women's rights (ibid), women's contributions at the conference marked what some have called the most advanced version of rights and freedoms that Yemen has ever witnessed. Once a country with less than one per cent of women in parliament, the NDC was 28 per cent female, with women leading three of the nine working group sessions and demonstrating a strong presence on technical and constitutional drafting committees (Jarhum, 2016; CMI, 2015).

Nevertheless, the new constitutional draft was undermined, forcing the situation in Yemen into a downward spiral. With the exception of the NDC, Yemeni women have been largely excluded from the negotiations in mediated national processes, including from the 2014 Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which was signed between the Government and the Ansar Allah movement in September 2014 (CMI 2015). Following the collapse into full blown civil war, subsequent negotiations between Hadi and Ansar Allah-Saleh forces have actively excluded women and women's issues, including preventing them from acting as observers (Jarhum, 2016).

In October 2015, some 45 Yemeni women from different political affiliations convened in Cyprus, forming the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security (also known as *Tawafaq*). Facilitated by UN Women and the UN Special Envoy's Office, the Pact brought together a diverse group of women with the goal of improving

women's inclusion in the formal peace processes in accordance with UNSCR 1325 (UN Women 2015). The Pact remains the only UN-facilitated process for women's inclusion in Yemen. However, as with the Syrian WAB, Yemeni and other women's rights activists contend that the current model of engagement is not sufficiently meaningful, and that limiting women's participation to side discussions in Kuwait and Cyprus is a concession, setting back the hard-earned advances that Yemeni women achieved at the NDCs (WILPF, 2016; Anderlini et al, 2017).

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq, women's political participation in leadership and decision-making positions has deteriorated, reflecting a disjuncture between political rhetoric and political will as well as the fragility of democratic processes (INAP, 2014). In an atmosphere marked by violence, political and economic instability, issues such as corruption, sectarianism, and social and religious conservatism have had a detrimental impact on meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction activities. Many hard-earned advances prior to the invasion were lost (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008). In the first transitional government, a 25 per cent women's quota was introduced to the Iraqi Parliament in 2005. While the quota was an important step towards greater inclusion, women's voices and needs remain marginalized (INAP, 2014; Khodary, 2016; Kaya, 2016).

In fact, a year later, women were shut out of the legislative and provincial councils. With the formation of the National Reconciliation Commission in 2006, tasked with promoting the rule of law and bridging sectarian gaps, women were excluded from the main commission and were instead assigned to a weak and sidelined Office for Women in the National Commission (INAP, 2014; Khodary, 2016). In the 2010 Iraq agreement, women were entirely absent from mediation, signatures or witnessing (Ghazzaoui, 2016). However, despite the obstacles and constrained political space, in 2014, civil society efforts and a relentless women's movement paved the way for the launching of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP), making Iraq the first country in the MENA to have a national action plan in accordance with UNSCR 1325.

## 1.2

### ‘Beyond the table’: Peacebuilding at the local level

Women’s engagement in peacemaking activities is only part of the story, and it does not account for how most women contribute to peace. In addition to their formal contributions as mediators, negotiators, expert witnesses, and signatories on peace treaties, women also contribute to peace at the local level in diverse ways. There is extensive literature on women in peacebuilding, which highlights women’s contributions as peace activists, humanitarian workers, educators, life-saving health professionals, academics, facilitators and trainers (UN ESCWA, 2017; ActionAid et al, 2012). As Moosa, Rahmani and Webster (2013) also contend, “the peace-building work that women do in the private sphere...has impact on the private as well as the public sphere”.

A study carried out by ActionAid, the Institute of Development Studies, and Womankind Worldwide (2012) underscores women’s contributions to local peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone. The research examined women’s engagement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes at the community level, highlighting their valuable contributions and providing qualitative evidence on the roles they play in local peacebuilding in the respective countries. Here too, the study emphasizes how peace has specific local meanings to women and men, and that across continents, women have served as peace educators, mediators, and negotiators in their families and societies. The research also underscores how women and women-led initiatives have displayed masterful skills in mediating and resolving conflicts within their homes and their communities.

This study also brings to light the significant challenges that women face; namely, how patriarchal traditions and restrictive social norms and attitudes inhibit women’s safe and meaningful participation in peacebuilding efforts. Poverty, inequality, and violence against women also present additional challenges. Furthermore, women undervalue or talk down their work, often not recognizing the impact it has on the

community. Indeed, “where women are able to freely associate and work collectively, many initiatives to build and maintain peace, or mitigate the worst effects of conflict on women, have been developed at local level. These are not always what is traditionally understood by peace-building, but are important contributions to a ‘positive’ peace that will meet the needs of both women and men” (Moosa et al, 2013).

In the MENA region, a significant body of research on women, peace, and security has similarly highlighted the contributions of women in war and peace, the different and specific local conceptualizations of peace, as well as key challenges that they face. In Syria, the literature highlights a plethora of areas where women and women’s initiatives have focused, notably the devastating impacts of the war, but also transitional justice and, less frequently ceasefires, mediations and negotiations (CUNY, MADRE and WILPF, 2014; Kapur, 2017). Women and local peace actors have played instrumental roles, building “small islands of temporary stability” (Swisspeace et al, 2016). Their efforts, which sit within a “spectrum of political and peace processes” (Kapur, 2017), have included leading and coordinating humanitarian and relief initiatives, building educational systems, activating and strengthening civil society initiatives, participating in local governance, raising societal awareness, and providing livelihood opportunities to women and those who have been displaced by conflict (CCSDS et al, 2014; Ghazzawi et al, 2015; Krause and Eloë, 2015; Turkumani et al, 2015). Such contributions are especially significant considering the limitations placed on Syrian women’s public and community participation due to the severity of the violence, political and social constraints, and the rising threat of violent extremism.

In Yemen, respect for the leading roles that women have played throughout history, including a strong tradition of female queens in earlier periods, colours social and cultural attitudes towards women in contemporary society (Colburn 2002). The tribal

system, in particular, places significant importance on women's social and economic safety nets, contrary to assumptions about rural traditions and conservative tribal societies (Adra, 2016). As such, women have played prominent roles in community affairs, including in leading and supporting dispute resolution (Al-Dawsari, 2012; Heinz, 2017). Historically marginalized from political processes, however, women took on a central role in the 2011 uprising, mobilizing and leading demonstrations that ultimately led to the deposing of the Ali Abdulla Saleh regime. In the years of political instability and violent conflict that have ensued, respondents highlighted that women are often the "lifeline" to cities and areas under siege, braving actual and metaphoric mountains to smuggle humanitarian aid and essential goods across frontlines. Here too, women are active in mediating local conflict around aid distribution. Furthermore, women continue to play crucial roles in efforts to fight violent extremism, combat child recruitment, and contribute to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) efforts and much more (Saferworld, 2017; ToBe Foundation, 2016; Anderlini et al, 2017).

Similarly, in Iraq women have endured staggering adversity resulting from decades of political instability, war, sanctions, economic disintegration, discrimination and both indiscriminate and targeted violence against them. Women have borne the brunt of much of this devastation, yet have persisted in the struggle to establish order, ensure stability, and fight for their rights, often paying the heaviest possible price. Women have fought sectarianism and intolerance (Ali, 2017), supported marginalized and victimized communities, advanced social cohesion, fought violence against women in its various manifestations, and provided relief and assistance among other things (INAP, 2014; Khodary, 2016; Kaya, 2016). Despite political, security and social barriers, such activities show the invaluable roles women have played in forwarding the development and reconstruction processes in Iraq (INAP 2014).

Yet despite these instrumental contributions, the skills, experiences and expertise of women as mediators, negotiators and decision makers in their families

and communities are often dismissed as "irrelevant" or too inadequate to be tapped into by national governments, the international community, and even by women themselves (ActionAid et al, 2015). To this end, the Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2015) contends that acknowledging women's informal contributions means that "we must also look at 'politics' and 'peacemaking' differently – not only as a set of actors around a negotiation table, but as a comprehensive process within a society that is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the interests of the whole society..." (UN Women, 2015). It means including women's participation across the range of processes and mechanisms that address, mediate, and resolve local grievances and build understanding, collaboration, trust and resilience".

With this in mind, the purpose of this report is to amplify the voices and experiences of women who make significant contributions to the stability and security of their communities through resolving and managing local conflict, yet whose efforts are often marginalized, dismissed, and misrepresented as insignificant. To this end, the research asks, how do women engage, influence or shape formal or informal efforts to mediate, negotiate, or resolve disputes and conflict at the community level? It also asks, what are the strategies, tools, tactics, resources, assets, and connections that women use to resolve conflict in specific issues and areas? How are these women perceived and received by others? And, what are some of the barriers and limitations to women's involvement in mediating, negotiating, managing, or resolving disputes and conflicts, and how can these be overcome?

Presented as a series of profiles, the following country chapters feature the stories of women working to address political and armed conflicts in Syria; tribal disputes over land, natural resources and acts of interpersonal violence in Yemen; and community level disputes arising from the absence of protective state institutions in Iraq. When taken together, they provide, albeit in a small way, a picture of women's experiences in expertly building peace from the bottom up.



2.

## SYRIA: WOMEN AND LOCAL CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS

After six years of relentless armed conflict, the war in Syria has displaced 11.3 million people and claimed the lives of around 500,000 more. Yet while widely considered to be the gravest humanitarian catastrophe in recent history, the Syrian conflict began peacefully. In 2011, non-violent demonstrations erupted across the country as a showing of support for anti-government protests in the province of Dara'a, where widespread civil unrest was ignited following the detention and torture of a group of schoolchildren. Emboldened by the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere, protests in Syria spread rapidly throughout the country, with demonstrators calling for economic and political reforms that included the resignation of president Bashar al-Assad (Laub, 2017).

While not specifically a movement for women's empowerment, the Syrian uprising catalysed the role of women in society. Flooding into the streets alongside men in their communities, women were critical to early demonstrations, sit-ins and vigils. They organized and led marches, crafted banner slogans and chants and, in numerous instances, put themselves between protest crowds and security forces to protect fellow demonstrators from attack (Asad and Hassan, 2013; Ghazzawi, 2014; MADRE and WILPF, 2014). Here too women were highly visible in media and advocacy efforts, including participation in local coordination committees, or the activist groups formed to engage with international news outlets to raise awareness about the situation in Syria abroad (Asad and Hassan, 2013).

Before long, rebel brigades formed throughout Syria, thereby cementing a downward spiral into civil war.

This created a power vacuum that extremist and terrorist groups used to establish and strengthen their foothold in the country (Laub, 2017). The intensification of armed conflict had the effect of diminishing women's public presence and participation in the civil uprising, creating what some termed "male hegemonic spaces" (Ghazzawi, 2014; see also Swisspeace et al, 2016). As a result, women were forced to take a 'step back' and find 'roles behind the front lines', including home-based efforts in online advocacy, fundraising and organizing, as well as those activities that aligned with more traditional notions of women as carers, such as looking after the injured and displaced (Asad and Hassan, 2013).

During this same period, early negotiations between opposition groups and government forces began in newly formed opposition enclaves. Initially, these talks focused on reaching temporary ceasefires and arranging the return or exchange of detainees. Here, civil society played a significant role in coordinating and facilitating negotiation processes, often pressuring armed actors to take up seats at the table through protest and informal lobbying (Adel and Favier, 2017). Relegated to the sidelines of political and community life, however, women's voices were often shut out of civil society efforts to halt hostilities. This is particularly true of women's exclusion from local administrative councils (LACs), or the community governance bodies that were initially established to serve as intermediaries between the government and armed groups during local talks (IWPR, 2014; Swisspeace, 2016; Darwish, 2016; Arabi and Halal, 2016).

The exclusion of women aside, local negotiations in Syria quickly proved to be a dead-end as an avenue for peace. Once considered as a “glimmer of hope” for war-weary civilians eager to halt the loss of life and improve humanitarian conditions, local negotiations are now largely viewed as a tactic to bring about forced surrenders (Adel and Favier, 2017, Integrity, 2014). Here, many point to the intensification of military campaigns, the tightening of siege lines and the hampering of aid access as exploitative measures used to gain the upper hand in negotiations (Integrity, 2014, Charney, 2014). Exacerbated by outside intervention in 2015, the terms of local truces, or ‘reconciliation agreements’, have become even more severe (Adel and Favier 2017). In some areas, these double as facade for re-establishing government control through an ultimatum to community members of submission or expulsion (Hinnebusch and Imady, 2017; Ezzi, 2017).

Forty miles northwest of Damascus, the people of Zabadani experienced the harsh trajectory of local negotiations, from a source of hope during the initial stages of the conflict to a matter of capitulation in recent years. Yet prior to a reconciliation agreement that would drain the city of nearly all civilian life, Zabadani was home to a spirited civil society deeply engaged in working towards a cessation of hostilities in the area (Darwish, 2016). This included Damma, or ‘embrace’, a women’s organization that negotiated plea deals for female detainees, organized a civilian safe zone and brokered an area ceasefire. Beyond offering insight into the experiences of Syrian women who sought to directly resolve and negotiate violent conflict, the arc of the organization’s history reflects a larger narrative about the triumphs and tribulations faced by civil society – and women’s place within it – over the course of the war.

## 2.1

### High-stakes interest-based bargaining: Women negotiating a civilian safe zone

Formed in the aftermath of the uprising, Damma came about as a response to women leading and participating in a number of civil society initiatives where, despite tremendous efforts on their part, they were sidelined or not given credit. As a result, the organization was established with a mission to improve women’s visibility, to amplify women’s voices and to empower women in peacebuilding, mitigating violent conflict, and providing humanitarian aid, education, and relief services.

In 2012, after the armed opposition claimed control of the city, the Zabadani LAC made the first of several unsuccessful attempts to bring about an agreement between the warring parties (Araabi and Hilal, 2016; Darwish, 2016). Already active at the community level, providing food baskets, psychosocial support, and support to children whose education had been interrupted by the growing instability, Damma mobilized women displaced by the violence in Zabadani to take to the streets to demand an end to the conflict:

*“We reached out to women throughout the area, and marched as a big group [...] demanding a ceasefire, despite threats from both the regime and armed opposition. The regime army threatened that if we were to march, they’d bomb us. And the militarized uprising also threatened that if we marched, they would not allow it... We did not listen. We marched. We told them that we are women, civilians, we told them that this area is not an armed area, an area for fighting.”*

While Damma’s protests fell short of their intended objective, the demonstration helped to raise the profile of the group, opening avenues for women’s engagement in peacebuilding. From this point forward, Damma became known as “the women working on de-escalation”, an informal remit that grew to include negotiating the creation of a civilian safe zone in the hills overlooking the city.

Once a popular tourist destination for wealthy families from around Syria and throughout the region,

the Zabadani hills are home to summer estates that include a large, government-owned villa complex. With the escalating violence, tourism dwindled, and the estates remained empty, presenting what the Damma women believed to be a potentially life-saving opportunity: *“We had the idea of trying to house people in the empty homes around the villa because we knew the area would be safe from bombardment”*. They also thought that it was in the interest of fighters to make sure that their families remained safe, away from bombardment and snipers strategically located on hilltops aiming at the valley where they had set up their outposts.

In the coming months, Damma’s leadership worked across frontlines to negotiate arrangements for a civilian safe zone in the area surrounding the empty villa complex. With government officials, the women

stressed the strategic benefit of their plan, emphasizing that the armed opposition was less likely to attack the area if local women and children - their families - were housed there. They also relied on contacts with opposition groups to solicit support, noting that many fighters were once fellow activists inclined to trust Damma: *“a lot of the guys who turned and joined the fighting were at one point civilians who were active in the civil uprisings”*.

Working alongside local officials, the women of Damma were successful in opening homes around the villa complex for use as civilian shelters, while also ensuring that the area remained free of armed fighters. Before long, however, civilians relocated to the hills came up against abuse by parties to the conflict, undermining the safety of women and children and, ultimately, the safe zone initiative all together.

## 2.2

### Aiming high to halt hostilities

Lasting for about a year, the challenges of the safe zone initiative underscore the highly complex trade-offs inherent in most deals and arrangements made with the regime (Araabi and Hilal, 2016; see also Turkumani et al, 2014). A media activist, who is familiar with the processes of local ceasefire negotiations, explained that civilian groups pursue talks out of desperation to end violence, access humanitarian relief, and save lives: *“when you’re living under war, and you are being starved, when you’re hungry and you’ve lost everything, you try to preserve what is left. You put aside a lot of things to try and preserve your limited gains and more so to avoid further loss”*.

A similar sense of desperation led the Damma women to pursue their most ambitious ceasefire initiative beginning in 2014 amid growing frustration over a flurry of partially successful or unsuccessful negotiations brokered by regime-coordinated committees, local councils, elders, civil society and other groups (see Araabi and Hilal, 2016; Turkumani, 2014; Integrity, 2014): *“There were many ceasefires, many negotiations, everyday there was something... there were so many initiatives and so many sides, each trying to be the*

*one that brings about a lasting agreement. Everyone wanted to be credited with this success”*. Yet in nearly all instances, Damma members argue, negotiations failed to identify genuine mutual grievances or inspire a real commitment to compromise – barriers they believed women were uniquely situated to address and overcome.

On several occasions, the collective’s early organizing efforts brought Damma into contact with security and military personnel. Some had been detained previously for their civil activism, but the most formative of these experiences took place in the process of searching for disappeared loved ones. The women met numerous intermediaries - powerful businessmen and others - who, in exchange for a fee would help locate or find information on family members. Such experiences eventually opened windows of opportunity previously closed to them. Described by the members as genuine, some of the intermediaries had heard about Damma; they indicated that they would be able to arrange meetings with military personnel to see if their de-escalation work could be catalysed into a local ceasefire.

Self-taught, but not without a support network, the women of Damma were meticulous. They drew on their wide network in Syria and in neighbouring countries, reaching out to professional mediators to help them study the potential pitfalls and possibilities of such direct engagement. After careful deliberation, they decided to go ahead and agreed on a meeting and, as a first step, came up with a plan to turn this initial visit into a series of negotiations to clear the group's records, as well as the records of over 40 women wanted for protesting and other anti-government activities. Here Damma acted as an intermediary between local women and security personnel, brokering agreements to resolve outstanding cases.

Though the success of these efforts was encouraging, their broader objective to bring about an end to violence and siege in the area remained stagnant. Unwilling to give up, however, Damma formed a women's committee to facilitate a ceasefire agreement between government troops and opposition fighters. Hoping to generate support, the committee drafted a petition and gathered the signatures of more than 450 women in the community (Hood, 2015; Conroy, 2015). The document outlined the basic terms to be met by both sides, and it included demands for a long-term ceasefire, the evacuation of the injured, unconditional and complete access to humanitarian aid to Zabadani, international protection, the commitment of all parties to engage in good faith to agree on a permanent solution for the crisis, and the meaningful participation of women in such efforts (Conroy,

2015). *"Many of us signed this document with our real names to show our commitment and seriousness and our trust in the committee"*, said a woman from the community.

The goal was to secure government buy-in for a new round of negotiations, and to use this commitment as a pressure point to cement civil society and armed opposition engagement as well. In all cases, the women from Zabadani relied on a female-centred platform of issues to generate actor support: *"We ... spoke with them directly as women. We told them that as women we are suffering ... we told them that our children's education is suffering. We have to feed our families and care for our children"*. Similarly with opposition groups, the committee stressed the disproportionate impact of the conflict on women, discussing *"how women are being persecuted by the regime... having to deal with the abuse by the authorities"*.

While the women were able to persuade key figures to recognize the committee and move forward with negotiations, the group faced resistance from the local council, which was concerned that the Damma committee lacked the experience and clout needed to influence the Government. Undermining the work of the women, the council chose instead to establish a group of all male community elders to act in their place. Sidelined by the council's decision, the women watched as the elders' committee struggled and ultimately failed to reach a successful agreement with government officials and opposition leaders.

## 2.3

### A worsening outcome: Forced displacement and fragmentation

In late 2015, intensified fighting and a change of tactics in Zabadani led to the forced displacement of nearly all remaining civilians in the city to nearby Madaya, where a siege was later imposed as the conflict in the Qalamoun Plateau continued to escalate. Once in Madaya, the women were among more than 40,000 people trapped under such dire conditions that many ate grass and leaves to stay alive (UNICEF, 2016). Determined as the women were to continue their work, the gruesome realities of the siege demanded a shift in priorities: *“When people were dying of hunger, we needed to do something... when de-escalation did not work, when the violence got worse... we had to save lives, provide food, medicine, water”*.

Suspending their negotiation and ceasefire efforts, the group focused on finding ways to deliver humanitarian aid across Madaya’s seemingly impenetrable siege lines. The women utilized online media platforms and reached out to international journalists to highlight the gravity of the suffering in the besieged area. They also navigated a complex web of actors to facilitate the entry of life-saving medicine and food. Some Damma members recall the group’s humanitarian aid efforts in Madaya as among the organization’s most important undertakings: *“During this period, the*

*tinest grain of rice, wheat or sugar that we were able to bring in, I feel proud of that. All the work that we did as Damma before does not compare”*.

After the siege of Madaya was lifted in 2017 by the UN brokered ‘four towns agreement’, all of the Damma women were forcibly displaced yet again, with the majority fleeing abroad, where they continue efforts in relief provision, education and youth engagement. Echoing the sentiments that drove the group to open schools in Madaya and Zabadani, the women insist that life must triumph in the face of so much death, and seeds must be planted for the future, no matter how grave the conditions or challenges may be: *“there’s a whole generation that no one is thinking about... What’s happening and what will happen to this generation is an unimaginable catastrophe”*. Yet the incredible perseverance of the Damma women is sobered by their recognition of the challenges and disempowerment that most Syrians face in bringing about an end to the war. While Damma stands out as an extraordinary example of Syrian women’s contributions to civilian-led deescalation efforts and the pursuit of peace, their belief in localized efforts to mediate and negotiate conflict has understandably been diminished.

### 3.

# YEMEN: WOMEN AND TRIBAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

For nearly three years, Yemen has been locked into a devastating conflict between its internationally-recognized government, Ansar Allah, and foreign actors. Compounded by an externally-imposed blockade, the conflict has killed or injured almost 60,000 people and displaced 3 million more (UN OCHA, 2017). As a result, women are struggling to provide for and protect themselves and others, facing indiscriminate armed attacks, an increase in gender-based violence, a severe cholera outbreak and the looming threat of famine (Safer World, 2017).

Yet despite these and other grave risks, Yemeni women are also playing an active role in supporting peace and stability within their communities. While a small minority have taken up weapons or aided armed groups, others are leading humanitarian and conflict resolution activities at local level to address the harsh impacts of fighting and prevent further violence (Ibid). In so doing, they are building upon the strong tradition of female leadership in Yemen, which spans the country's religious, civic and political history (Colburn, 2002; CMI, 2015). This includes women in tribal areas of the country, who have long been critical to mitigating and resolving conflict in and around tribes (Dawsari, 2012; Adra, 2016).

Despite claims that Yemen's tribal system is counter-productive to national development, Yemeni tribes have provided a source of stability during recent periods of unrest. Historically, the tribes have been understood as indigenous, territorially-defined groups in rural areas, which are held together by customary laws that govern both intra- and inter-community affairs. Here, dispute resolution constitutes a core component of customary laws as well as prescribed practices for arbitrating

and mediating conflicts within and between groups, including with non-tribal actors such as private companies and even the state (Ibid).

Broadly speaking, though some tribal social systems are patriarchal in nature, women in tribal communities are afforded important social status, and in turn, access and influence in dispute resolution processes (CMI, 2015; Adra, 2016). In some parts of Yemen's tribal highlands, for example, community disputes are discussed publicly by men and women in separate groups, before families reach a mutual decision at home which is then delivered back to a central community forum. Elsewhere, the literature notes examples of both mixed-gender and female-led tribal mediations, while also emphasizing the important role that most women play in influencing community dispute processes through lobbying male family members at home or in private (Adra, 2011).

In recent years, however, tribal customs throughout Yemen have been weakened by widespread armed conflict, the politicization of tribal leaders, and the disengagement of younger generations. This has partially eroded the protective social contract inherent in the tribal systems – especially for women – and undermined the capacity to de-escalate and resolve conflicts (Dawsari, 2012). Nonetheless, women in tribal areas continue to engage in customary dispute and conflict resolution practices. This includes women who are pushing and re-shaping boundaries around commonly accepted notions of female participation in tribal dispute processes. Two such women are Sabreen and Kawthar, who are working to enhance local and regional stability through contrasting approaches to use traditional channels for managing and resolving conflict.

### 3.1

## “Re-activating” tribal dispute resolution practices: A female mediator in Shabwa

An educator and civil society leader in Yemen’s Shabwa Governorate, Sabreen views her engagement in local mediation as a natural extension of her work in the area’s public schools. Having spent years settling disputes between students, families and colleagues, Sabreen slowly became involved in larger and more complex cases, including disputes about natural resources and development projects. Eventually joining the organization Partners Yemen, she describes a five-year process of intensive training and relationship building that shifted her focus to tribal mediation or, more specifically, to supporting and reviving the use of certain customary practices as a means to address instability in communities throughout the governorate: *“We work to activate the positive aspects of tribal customs, especially when we find that [tribal leaders] are ...not showing good will to negotiate and resolve disputes. We target the elders. We sit with them and discuss with them in a way to activate their willingness to negotiate, and to think about the impact of disputes on the community”*.

Sabreen points to a case involving a multi-million-dollar water project as an example of the potential for “re-activating” tribal dispute mechanisms in Shabwa, as well as illustrating the challenges and opportunities facing women’s participation in such efforts. Obstructed by interpersonal conflict and land disputes, the water infrastructure project was stalled for several years after officials struggled to find alternative routes forward. Intent on finding a solution, Sabreen and her colleagues intervened by conducting a mapping of the key drivers and primary stakeholders of the dispute. This was followed by identifying and engaging “influencers,” or notable community members, to persuade relevant parties to compromise: *“We would bring these influencers, and help show them the bigger picture - that this dispute is not merely about this person’s dispute with the other person... to show that others are suffering the consequences”*.

In instances where “influencers” were unsuccessful in initiating dialogue or compromise, Sabreen and her team turned to the wider community, encouraging members to apply social pressure in order to force their leaders to negotiate or resolve the dispute. This tactic relies on a core dimension of tribal relations, recognizing that tribal leaders do not inherit their status but rather accrue power and influence by demonstrating their ability to protect and promote community interests (Dawsari, 2012). As Sabreen noted, *“when they do not respond to us, we would try to create pressure on them – telling people to talk to them... When people see that there is potential ... to lose their reputation or people’s acceptance, they compromise”*.

Sabreen’s role in helping to orchestrate tribal mediations is a significant example of female participation in customary practices, largely because it is uncommon for women to engage with tribes and tribal leaders regarding conflicts in which they or their families are not directly involved. This may account, in part, for the gendered resistance that Sabreen has faced in her work, which she overcomes by demonstrating both respect for and understanding of tribal customs: *“When women display knowledge of and engage on the level of traditions and positive tribal customs, it breaks some of these barriers, and makes you more agreeable to community leaders and elders”*, she says.

This is not to say, however, that Sabreen’s expertise gains her unrestricted access or participation. Gendered limitations on her mobility and freedom of association, due to both the safety concerns stemming from the current conflict as well as pre-existing social and cultural norms (Adra, 2016; Safer World, 2017) often mean that she works from “*behind the scenes*” to influence and shape the mediation process. This includes cases that would otherwise require her to be alone with unfamiliar men, or instances where security conditions are deemed too unsafe for her

to travel. Yet while some women describe similar limitations as matters of exclusion, Sabreen views her position as of equal value to men who carry out more direct or visible roles and responsibilities. To this end, she describes the influence and ownership that she wields in even the most complex of conflicts, including a truce agreement between her community and armed rebel groups that took place in 2015.

When fighters advanced into Shabwa, Sabreen recalls that the general reaction among her neighbours was to retreat into their homes or flee the area, with people claiming they had no part in Yemen's war. Sabreen felt differently, however, pointing out that the presence of armed actors in close proximity to their homes meant the community was embroiled in the conflict whether they actively participated in the war efforts or not. She stressed that any form of retaliation or bombardment would almost certainly harm civilians.

Concerned by this development, Sabreen along with a group of community women organized men in the community to push fighters away from residential areas. She started by visiting the local mosque, imploring the imam to organize a meeting after Friday prayer, for which she then called as many families as possible, urging them to get involved: *"Of course, I worked behind the scenes because of sensitivities of being a woman...I would make phone calls to pressure so and so to speak up. These calls helped lay the vision for the action – 'speak up. Go after prayer and speak up'"*.

## 3.2

### From directing to direct engagement: Women and tribal dispute resolution in Ibb

Apart from orchestrating mediation from 'behind the scenes', numerous examples exist of Yemeni women who play direct and highly visible roles in customary dispute resolution practices (Dawsari, 2014; see also Al-Arabiya, 2017). In Ibb, a governorate located in the southern inlands of the country, women are making life saving contributions to their families

The meeting Sabreen helped to organize resulted in several visits to the fighters' outpost by a committee of local men, who attempted to persuade the armed group to retreat from densely populated civilian areas. Sabreen continued to support the committee before and after each visit, providing input on messaging and negotiation strategies to sway the rebel forces. Here too, when the committee lost momentum after an unsuccessful first visit, Sabreen and other women rallied even more men to join the group, while also applying pressure to this ad hoc committee by reminding them of their responsibility to act and protect; *"We made phone calls and gathered a bigger group of men to make another visit. I threatened that I and the women would go to meet with the militia, when I saw that the men were hesitating or acting slowly. 'If you don't speak up, the women will speak up,' we told them"*.

In subsequent visits, local men were able to initiate dialogue with rebel leaders by relying on a communication strategy partly developed by Sabreen. Here the men emphasized the apolitical character of civilians in the area, explaining that the vast majority were neither against the Ansar Allah nor with the internationally recognised Government, but rather innocent bystanders to the conflict. Ultimately convinced the committee could be trusted, the fighters left the area subject to the agreement that key infrastructural assets in the community would be kept in civilian control, an outcome of which Sabreen felt considerable collective ownership, despite the limitations of working from behind the scenes.

and communities through involvement in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and by providing healthcare, food and humanitarian aid to those in need (Safer World, 2017). Less widely documented are the experiences of women working alongside tribal leaders to stave off further violence or conflict despite the presence of warring armed groups in the area.



Appointed to a local committee on legal issues in Ibb's prison system, Kawthar is one such woman. A legal activist and journalist, she worked with a team of lawyers, politicians and tribal leaders to address the severe backlog of prisoners awaiting sentencing or trial by identifying cases that could be transferred to tribal channels for processing. In the committee's first several months, Kawthar and her colleagues completed monitoring visits to both the central and reserve prisons in Ibb, recording nearly 2,000 cases that were stuck or stalled, often with prisoners incarcerated on the mere suspicion of minor legal infractions, for upwards of three to four years.

The committee's findings corroborate reports from around the country about the harsh conditions in Yemeni prisons. In addition to the near absence of due process, state prisons have also been characterized by a lack of basic security measures, the inhumane treatment of prisoners and severe overcrowding, all of which make detention facilities particularly prone to recruitment and radicalization efforts by terrorist organizations (United States Institute of Peace, 2015). Here too, incarceration for being poor and unable to pay debts is also a frequent problem, and adds to the number of prisoners being held on insufficient or unjust grounds. While these issues pre-date the current conflict in Yemen, the use of detention and enforced disappearances as tactics of war by parties to the conflict has further exacerbated an already dire situation (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

As an extension of their visits, Kawthar and several female committee members were assigned to a murder case involving two local tribes in which a woman died after being struck by a ricochet bullet. Remanded in jail for more than eight years, the man responsible for firing the gun claimed the incident was an accident, and that the bullet was shot into the air during a verbal dispute. Sentenced to death, the outcome of his case caused relations between the two tribes to deteriorate, with tensions inching towards violent conflict the longer he spent awaiting execution.

In endeavouring to de-escalate tensions exacerbated by the prisoner's looming execution, Kawthar and her

colleagues engaged tribal leaders in both areas to undertake a *Sulh*. In customary law, a *Sulh* or *Sulha* is a multi-staged mediation process meant to repair relations within or between parties following disputes. Traditionally initiated by the offending party, the *Sulh* generally begins with the formation of a community council tasked with establishing a truce and ensuring a cessation of hostilities. This truce is guaranteed by a mutually-agreed sum of money to be paid should the peace be broken. The council then undertake a series of consultations with both parties until an agreement is reached, at which point a public reconciliation ceremony is held to mark the resolution of the dispute (Saxon, 2017).

The efforts of Kawthar and her colleagues to initiate a *Sulh* between the villages, which were located hours from their homes in Ibb, resembles aspects of Sabreen's work in Shabwa, in that it is relatively uncommon for women to involve themselves in the disputes or affairs of unfamiliar tribes. Yet while Sabreen was working somewhat behind the scenes of the actual dispute process, Kawthar and her female colleagues embedded themselves directly in the council alongside local male leaders, something she recalls as "*the first of its kind*". This may explain, in part, the intense criticism that Kawthar described in the initial phases, where she and her female colleagues struggled to convince the relevant parties to participate in the mediation process.

*"We thought that it would be paramount for us to directly communicate with the victim's family. Of course, there are certain barriers that women in Ibb face in such instances – women are seen as incapable of participating in such processes, and these barriers make it difficult for women to play a direct part in this sulh. Nevertheless, we went to find out more from the victim's family, and we expected that we will be shut out and would have to return empty-handed. That happened. We tried numerous times and finally came to an agreement to meet on a specific date".*

Initial barriers behind her, Kawthar went on to earn the respect of villagers by showing a nuanced understanding of and respect for the *sulh* process.

This included following protocol about how to conduct consultations with parties to the dispute as well as how to speak with community elders. Here, too, Kawthar underscored the importance of working as a part of a team to generate legitimacy both for the mediators and the outcomes they reach. *“As a woman, it helps to work as part of a team. The consequences, good or bad, are taken on by a bigger group. You won’t be chastised... If you worked as part of a diverse group, it protects the outcome. People cannot undermine the resolution, accusing you of affiliations or secret agendas or what have you because there were different sides that worked on this...”*

By the time Kawthar and her colleagues left the village, a full settlement had been reached: the victim’s

family dropped the charges, and the incarcerated man was released from prison with the understanding that he would compensate the victim’s family and relocate to a village further away from their home. In addition to preventing his execution, Kawthar takes pride in knowing that their efforts resolved tensions between the two villages at a time when violence seemed otherwise inevitable. This is especially significant, she explains, because it is these acts to quell instability at local level that have helped to keep Ibb from becoming more deeply embroiled in the country’s ongoing war: *“It is these different efforts, the constant putting out of fires that has kept the governorate from being pulled into the fighting... Women are central here. We are constantly extinguishing fire”.*

### 3.3

## Women’s diverse roles and perspectives in ensuring community stability and conflict resolution

Sabreen and Kawthar’s experiences in tribal dispute resolution offer noticeably different interpretations of what constitutes women’s participation in resolving conflict at local level. On the one hand, Sabreen sees important and rewarding opportunities for influencing and persuading male intermediaries to lead or preside over direct aspects of mediations and negotiations. Understood in terms of broad communal action, Sabreen’s perspective may reflect principles central to the functioning of the tribal system, including notions of trust, collectivity and mutuality. For Kawthar, however, working “behind the scenes” is often a matter of women’s exclusion, a sentiment that can be equally understood in terms of tribal principles and beliefs. To this end, Adra (2017) writes that Yemeni women

*“expect equal rights and treatment”* precisely because of *“tribal egalitarianism”* and the status it has historically afforded women throughout Yemen.

Yet underlying their differences in perspective, Sabreen and Kawthar’s experiences are similar in that they demonstrate the role that women play in reinvigorating conflict resolution processes stalled by intense social and political factors. In this way, the women’s leadership in shoring up the stability of Yemeni communities threatened by conflict is neither rare nor isolated. On the contrary, women throughout Yemen are taking on new roles to bring about peace and stability in the face of the country’s complex conflict and its dire humanitarian fallout.

## 4.

# IRAQ: WOMEN COMMUNITY MEDIATORS FILLING THE GAPS

Iraqi state institutions have been dramatically weakened in recent decades by three wars, the harshest sanctions regime in diplomatic history, and an exogenously imposed democracy (Dodge, 2013). Compounded by sectarian politics and rampant corruption, there now exists a deep gulf between people and the Government (Ibid). This is evident from ongoing protests throughout the country, including in Basra, Iraq's wealthiest governorate, where people have repeatedly taken to the streets demanding a solution for persistent electricity and water outages (Guardian, 2015).

Exacerbated by the violent and destructive rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in many parts of the country, issues of scarcity of resources, weak service provision, and the near-absence of protective institutions are driving conflicts at local and community level (Mansour, 2017). In recognizing the limited

capacity of the State to respond, the Iraqi Center for Negotiation Skills and Conflict Management (IQCM) was founded in 2010 with the objective of creating a country-wide network of mediators and negotiators to de-escalate, manage, and resolve conflicts and disputes. Over the past seven years, IQCM's network has grown to include nearly 360 members, a group that consists of civil society, community, religious, tribal and political leaders, around 30 per cent of whom are women.

Two such women are Razan and Nada, IQCM community mediators who are working to quell local conflicts in the absence of, state institutions. For Razan, this involves integrating holistic mediation tools into her work at the Ministry of Education, while Nada works throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to resolve conflicts that arise due to the lack of formal institutions or mechanisms to support the needs of displaced and minority women.

### 4.1

## From punitive to holistic: Education mediation in south central Iraq

As a civil society leader and educational administrator in South Central Iraq, Razan is responsible for conducting formal inquiries into educational disputes in primary and secondary schools throughout her governorate. This includes incidents ranging from the abusive treatment of students to labour disputes filed by teachers and staff, of which Razan handles upwards of 40 cases each month.

Razan was also among the first group of community leaders selected to join the IQCM network, undergoing a year of theoretical and practical training with the Center that included modules on negotiation, decision-making, coalition building, persuasion, agreement drafting, and multi-party dispute processes. For Razan, this training had a significant impact on her immediate work as an educational

investigator, helping to shift her approach from a reliance on punitive measures to a holistic process driven by a desire to find more constructive solutions: *“In my work previously, punishment was the first resort. Those in violation of certain rules, I thought, needed to be punished. However, in the aftermath of these courses, I learned something different – to negotiate and try to come up with solutions first. Punishment is a last resort now”*.

Razan points to cases involving the use of forged documents by young or first-time job applicants as an example of how her approach has changed overtime. Previously, she would refer such cases to the criminal court, a decision that would tarnish the individual’s personal reputation and future professional prospects. Now she relies on a range of technical dispute resolution tools to find solutions that are corrective and constructive. To this end, when directorate personnel are intent on bringing a case before the court, Razan facilitates initial discussions to explore alternative corrective disciplinary measures:

*“I discuss that the life of this person will be stopped forever if the case is tried in criminal court; that person won’t be a productive member of society afterwards. The young person is bright and has a lot to give... if we give them an alternative, this young person... will now have learned a very strong lesson and most likely won’t repeat the same mistake. That the person will now work twice as hard, knowing that they will be caught, and they will continue to be productive members of society. Yes, that person has been disciplined in this scenario and they lost their appointment, but we haven’t destroyed their future. We’ve given them a chance to fix their wrongdoing”*.

Razan’s efforts to cultivate greater fairness in her work at the Directorate is especially significant when framed by the pervasive issues of misconduct that have eroded Iraqi trust in state institutions. This includes the mishandling of money allocated for educational reconstruction since 2003, which partly accounts for the widespread school shortages faced throughout the country. Here too, patronage politics plays a role in dictating the flow of money for new school development, at times benefiting communities due to political favour

or connections, rather than those with the greatest educational needs (Bassem, 2016).

In this regard, the case of forged credentials is a particularly delicate topic, and one that underscores the complexity of dispute management within institutions already crippled by issues of impunity. For many Iraqis, the prevalence of fraudulent certificates is a prime example of widespread corruption, with an estimated 20,000 civil servants believed to have gained employment using fake diplomas. This in turn has generated significant resentment, and resulted in calls for stricter punitive measures against offenders (Abdul-Kadir and Yacoub, 2011, PRI 2010).

Acknowledging these challenges, Razan believes that a more human-centered approach to resolving conflict within government is key. She emphasizes that some political conflicts in Iraq are often rooted in personal disputes. Ministerial appointments, she says, can be hampered by personal disagreements between existing officials, who may obstruct the appointment process to undercut candidates allied with personal enemies. As a result, key positions go unfilled for long periods of time and have a substantial ‘trickle down’ effect on the ability to provide services or carry out important responsibilities.

*“This impacts the way government functions, and the work that gets done or doesn’t get done. Conflicts that begin at the individual level translate all the way down, impacting services, and those receiving or not receiving the services... In the education sector, it undermines the quality of education and ultimately harms the students... so intervening on the personal level to resolve these disputes... is beneficial to those at the other end of the equation”*.

Beyond education, Razan points to the disruptive impact of similar disputes across other service sectors in the governorate. While she finds the prevalence of these issues deeply troubling, her experience in dispute resolution also serves as a source of hope: equipped with a more nuanced understanding of conflict management, Razan sees potential for mediation to address interpersonal causes of disputes before they become seemingly unmanageable political issues.

## 4.2

# Conflict resolution and minority communities: Supporting displaced Yazidi women

Invited to join the IQCM network for her background in minority women's issues, Nada is a civil society leader based in the Kurdistan region in Iraq, where she works to support Christian, Turkman, Shobak, and Yazidi women, among others. According to Nada, minority women are among the most vulnerable groups in the country due to compounding factors of discrimination regarding their gender, religion and/or ethnicity. Here, a substantial body of literature confirms that they often face "disproportionate risks to [their] lives, cultural traditions, and property" (IILHR, 2013:6; Salloum, 2016), including forms of discrimination and persecution from religious and political groups. Despite recent legal reforms by the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nada explains that gaps in the implementation of the law leave these women doubly-disadvantaged when seeking to exercise their basic rights.

In recent years, the plight of minority women in Iraq swept international headlines after reports emerged about the Islamic State's treatment of Yazidi women. An ethnic and religious minority group that has faced a history of persecution, hundreds of thousands of Yazidis were forcibly displaced by the 2014 ISIL offensive in the Sinjar Mountains, including nearly 5,000 Yazidis who were taken as slaves. At the hands of ISIL, enslaved Yazidi women endured heinous acts of sexual exploitation and abuse, and they were often sold or traded as sex slaves upwards of ten times over (Callimachi, 2015, 2017; Otten, 2017).

While hundreds of Yazidis taken by ISIL remain missing, Nada and her IQCM colleagues are supporting female survivors displaced in Kurdish Iraq who have escaped captivity. In addition to threats of rejection and violence from family members who view the women as sexually shamed and dishonoured, Nada points to the issue of missing personal documents as a problem that severely adds to the vulnerability of these women. This includes lost, damaged, or confiscated

identity cards, which are critical for accessing services or engaging with authorities, yet can be impossible for IDP women to replace on their own.

Broadly speaking, constraints on accessing official documentation affect IDPs and refugees from all backgrounds, not just minority communities in Iraq. Earlier this year, for example, queries about the retrieval of confiscated ID cards ranked among the most commonly asked questions by IDPs and refugees seeking support from UNHCR call centres (UNHCR, 2017). Similarly, women of all backgrounds – and not just those affected by displacement – experience challenges in applying for state documents. Despite some legal rights meant to protect their independence, it is not uncommon for government institutions to deny women's requests for documents when unaccompanied by a male relative. This is especially problematic for single women and widows, who, without access to ID cards or birth certificates, can be left in a legal limbo (IILHR, 2013).

Historically, minority communities have also faced considerable obstacles in securing state documents, beginning in the 1970s when Ba'athist Arabization policies required minority groups to register as Arab Muslims. The implications of this policy are still felt today, as many have been unable to change their religious designation with the state (PAX, 2015; IILHR, 2013). In the Kurdish region of Iraq, the politicization of ethnicity and its implications for legal documentation are also shaped by a rise in KRG patronage politics and resultant pressures on Yazidis in particular, to identify them as ethnically Kurdish in exchange for protection, recognition, and access to employment opportunities (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

For displaced minority women, however, these factors can compound and coalesce to create seemingly impenetrable barriers. To this end, Nada has been working to help female Yazidi IDPs with document

retrieval, efforts that include mediation with IDP camp authorities. In outlining her approach, she underscores that the first step in any case is building trust and buy-in from those involved: *“Trust is key... without it, I can’t do anything. I need to be trusted by the different parties ... because if they don’t trust me, they won’t share information with me that I need to support the intervention. If there’s no trust, I can’t work”*. Yet, she also makes clear the difficulties of gaining the confidence of minority women, who can be especially hesitant to share personal or private information with unknown persons. For many Yazidi women, this hesitation is partly rooted in an “endemic mistrust” of majority groups (IILHR, 2013), a dynamic that Nada indirectly acknowledges when mentioning the added challenge of wearing a hijab while working with non-Muslim minorities.

Nada uses several tactics to build trust that include ‘not coming empty handed’, meaning that she brings essential goods or a gift as a token of good will and generosity. She also adapts how she introduces herself based on the context or audience: *“Of course, it all depends on where I am. Every place, I introduce myself as something else,”* she notes, explaining that her affiliation to IQCM often garners trust in ways her political titles or NGO affiliations may not: *“I think people are tired of NGOs and research – they’re fatigued. They know that I am here not to document cases or gather information. Most NGOs just do this, and they leave. But when I say that I work with a conflict resolution centre, they know that I am there to give something back, to resolve their problem, not just collect information”*.

Once Nada has secured permission from individuals to intervene in a dispute, she begins the process of

reaching out to all other relevant parties. In the case of Yazidi women seeking new documents, this includes the government ministries responsible for issuing state IDs, as well as camp and local authorities that may restrict the women’s freedom of movement to access relevant offices and agencies. She stresses that engaging stakeholders of this kind requires strong technical mediation skills, including knowledge of conflict resolution tools and tactics around communication, persuasion, and consensus building.

Yet Nada also speaks frankly about the need for personal connections and social capital when aiming to influence government and community stakeholders: *“If you do not have contacts in the community, it is almost impossible for negotiations to take place. You need to know influential people and to be able to bring them on your side. If you do not have such connections, I doubt that one would be able to even gather the necessary information about the dispute at hand, and certainly not resolve such a dispute”*. This includes local government officials, business people and community leaders who are able to lend legitimacy and credibility to her work, often by providing introductions to others in positions of power, or by helping to facilitate her requests for documents, permissions and approvals.

Ultimately, however, Nada demonstrates strategic prowess in using her social connections to build new relationships, rather than depend too heavily on others to facilitate her work: *“I use the contacts essentially as a way to get through the door, if you will. I don’t always take influencers with me... I go with them once, and when I am there, I try to improve my own relationships. I build these relationships, so next time, I won’t need to take said person with me”*.

### 4.3

## Building legitimacy through experience

Despite differences in context and professional background, Nada and Razan describe facing similar challenges in their work as community mediators, including largely gendered claims about their experience, temperament, and ability. Here too, both mediators emphasize that other women are often quick to raise such criticisms against them. In addition to representing women's internalization of discriminatory and patriarchal attitudes, Nada notes that women's sentiments can reflect personal experience and rational judgment: *"Some women who have gone through traumatic experiences, they feel like 'if I wasn't able to protect myself, how will you be able to protect me?'"*

In most cases, Nada and Razan point to the value of gaining experience and building a reputation as the primary tools for overcoming gender-based discrimination from men and women alike. With each

successful case, the women describe a process of 'proving' themselves, first within their existing professional circles or networks, and later to the wider community: *"Your record helps you do more. Once people hear that you've accomplished such and such in this area, and you've negotiated these cases, they themselves tell you, 'come help us'"*.

In this way, the women's reach and influence as community mediators ultimately depends on the same elements that have inversely undermined community opinion of state channels for dispute resolution: trust, legitimacy, and a proven track record for fairness. In the absence of formal institutions that elicit such sentiments, community-recognized mechanisms that manage and overcome conflict have proven valuable. And, as Razan and Nada's experiences show, so too is the inclusion of women in filling this gap.

## 5.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

### **Utilize in-country and in-depth methodologies for further and more comprehensive research into women who manage, negotiate, and resolve conflict**

Cultivating a nuanced understanding of women's roles in resolving conflict requires significant on-the-ground research, and should include the use of methodologies that were beyond the scope of the current project. Primary interviews with women mediators or negotiators should be complemented by secondary interviews with their peers and colleagues, as well as focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders.

### **Frame research with a nuanced conceptualization of participation to adequately capture the spectrum of contributions that women make to local conflict and dispute resolution**

Further research will benefit from utilizing a nuanced definition of participation when seeking to understand how women shape and influence the resolution of local conflict. Doing so moves away from the dominant focus on direct and/or highly visible forms of engagement found in much of the existing research, policy, and practice regarding women in peacebuilding, which unintentionally excludes the diverse roles that account for how most women participate in or impact on the resolution of conflict or pursuit of peace during times of war or in its aftermath.

### **Ensure that research participants constitute a diverse sample in terms of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds**

Challenges regarding the identification of informants for this report indicate that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in dictating women's access to and participation in local dispute resolution practices,

affording higher levels of visibility, recognition, and participation to wealthy, educated, and socially-prominent women. Greater attention, time and networking is needed to identify women from more diverse backgrounds, and to understand how they engage and contribute in processes for managing and resolving conflicts in their communities.

### **Pay greater attention to the relationship between training and women's effectiveness or capacity in managing, negotiating, and mediating conflict**

Additional research should examine training and capacity building for women involved in mediating and negotiating local conflict. While nearly all informants emphasized the importance of formal or informal training, meaningful analysis of such claims was limited by methodological constraints. Future research efforts should consider incorporating training needs assessments and the collection of best practices around capacity development to identify entry points for donors and organizations to directly support female mediators and negotiators.

### **Anchor further research on women mediators and negotiators to their specific local social and political contexts**

Research on women's contributions to community mediation and negotiation must account for the social and political dimensions of local conflict, as well as the socio-economic and security-related realities that shape women's life experiences, opportunities, and constraints more broadly. A thorough understanding of the local context would better illuminate the similarities and differences in tactics and tools utilized, as well as the limitations encountered.



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