



Mobilizing women in the
MENA region:

Roadmaps for peace in Iraq, Syria and Yemen

June 2018



I. Meeting Aims and Objectives



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UN Women, with financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and in partnership with the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI) at the Graduate School Geneva, organized a three-day meeting entitled Mobilizing women in the MENA region: Roadmaps for peace in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The meeting was held in Beirut, Lebanon from 19 - 21 June 2018. The aim of the meeting was to provide a space for women's rights actors from conflict affected countries to engage in closed-door strategic planning around building momentum for inclusive peace. The meeting also offered a platform to share global examples of effective social movement building and mobilization, and to exchange lessons learned and experiences across the focus countries (Syria, Iraq and Yemen). The space was convened with the purpose of sharing and stimulating ideas, for actors to take back to their constituencies. Country groups were not required or asked to reach

consensus on strategies for peacebuilding, or to develop a common 'outcome' document.

With these objectives in mind, the meeting brought together a group of 26 peace activists (25 women and one man) from different strands of society and politics from Iraq (8 participants), Syria (7 participants) and Yemen (10 participants) and sought to build on and support the ongoing work of women's rights organisations and movements for inclusive peacemaking. The participants were supported through technical assistance from three lead experts, and 7 country specific experts¹.

¹ The three lead experts were: Randa Slim (MEI), Thania Paffenholz (IPTI), and Cate Buchanan (UN DPA Mediation Support Unit); and 2 experts/facilitators for Iraq and Yemen and 3 for Syria. For the Iraqi group: Dr. Nussaibah Younis and Hafsa Halawa, for the Syrian group Amel Gorani, Zedoun Alzoubi and Farah Hwijeh, and for the Yemeni group Sonja Neuweiler and Lorenza Rossi.

While the overall aims are articulated above, the specific country group aims shifted country by country:

- **Iraq:** The objective was to examine how women's rights actors can influence and participate to shaping national reconciliation and inclusive reconstruction efforts.
- **Syria:** The objective was to discuss what a peaceful Syria could look like: in terms of governance structures, human rights, security, and to explore ideas on how to get there, in line with UNSCR 2254.
- **Yemen:** The proposed objective was to discuss strategies of influence for different scenarios

for peace: (i) in the absence of talks, (ii) peace talks.

Two working papers were prepared for this meeting, "Unsticking Peace Processes: What can Women's Groups and Networks Do When Peace Processes Are Stalled" by Thania Paffenholz and Molly Kellogg (2018), and "'Unsticking' Stuck Peace Processes: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Inclusion" by Robert Forster, co-authored with Christine Bell (2018). While the former focus on women's groups as agents of change when peace processes get stuck, the latter consider what international mediators do to unstick them and what are the challenges and opportunities for women.

II. Strategies

The meeting opened with plenary in which Randa Slim (Middle East Institute) spoke to strategies for track 1.5 and track II engagement in peacemaking, and Thania Paffenholz (IPTI) presented inclusion modalities and mobilization strategies² employed by women peacemakers to influence peace processes.

Throughout the discussion, participants raised the issue of the need to focus on linking track I to track II and track III processes, as well as mobilizing with youth and broader civil society movement. It was emphasized that alliances can be a powerful mechanism to bring constituencies together to stop violence, and that in these alliances consensus on all issues is not a pre-requisite. Alliances (formal and informal) can come together around one key issues, while groups within these alliances can continue to have different and divergent views on a range of other issues.

Strategies for mobilization were presented under three broad objectives:

a) Violence reduction

The reduction of violence can create windows of opportunities to pressure conflict parties

to move forward with negotiations³. Several possible strategies were presented with examples: mobilizing to provide protection to citizens through local networks and NGOs, negotiating local security arrangements and ceasefires, and monitoring and reporting human rights violations.

- Women and broader civil society have demonstrated success in mobilizing across groups to provide protection at the community level, which can contribute to violence reduction. In Northern Ireland, for example, civil society provided protection to civilians through neighbourhood watch networks.
- Negotiating local security arrangements: In the Philippines, civil society negotiated zones of peace, or declared nonviolent spaces where no weapons were allowed. In El Salvador, in the early 90s, the Catholic Church asked for days of tranquility to have children vaccinated, which generated an awareness amongst the population that parties could stop fighting and resulted in elevated calls for ceasefire.

2 See annex 1

3 Thania Paffenholz and Molly Kellogg, "Unsticking Peace Processes: What can Women's Groups and Networks Do When Peace Processes Are Stalled" (UN Women, 2018; Working Paper).

- *Monitoring of the conflict and human rights violations* can help draw national, regional and international attention to a situation to prevent the further deterioration of armed conflict and compel warring parties to come to the table. In Nepal, for example, human rights local monitoring systems contributed to pushing parties to the table. About 20 organizations undertaking human rights monitoring from different perspectives brought their data to Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International to be shared at the international level. This data was then submitted to the OHCHR who pushed for a human rights monitoring mission. A back-channel mediation between Governments at the UN took place to enable approval for the monitoring mission, which in turn applied pressure to parties to engage in talks (through highlighting their violations). A similar strategy has been tried and failed in Syria.
- *Coalition building*: In Tunisia, central to the success of the peace process was the buy in and commitment of all actors. When faced with disagreement, the process would stop and side discussion would begin until consensus could be found to move forward. Women did a huge work in bringing people together, working publicly and behind the scenes to build trust across the population.
- *Elite consultations/backdoor talks*: In addition to public pressure, women can be influential though more discreet, informal, unofficial backdoor talks used to put pressure on political elites, using personal high-level networks and contacts. In Liberia, for example, women used their personal networks to influence and convince President Taylor and part of the armed opposition to attend the peace talks. Elite talks were combined with successful coalition-building and mass mobilization. The importance of mapping out points, spaces and people of influence was emphasised.

b) Strategies to rejuvenate stalled peace processes

Strategies to rejuvenate stalled peace processes were provided, drawing on comparative past examples of success and failure. Strategies highlighted included: mass mobilization, coalition building, elite consultations/backdoor talks, and national, regional, and international lobbying.

- *Mass mobilization* (people and media) has proven to be one of the most effective strategies for moving a peace process forward. In developing strategies, one must consider how political leaders react when facing mass mobilization. In some countries military intervention has been deployed quickly to stop mass mobilization where specific contexts, including size and geography, has enabled protest movements to be easily quelled. In other contexts, while mass mobilization may not have been initially effective, its impact has remained with societies and generated change in the longer term. For example, in Guatemala civil society mobilization led to peace process that was inclusive, 10 years after the initial mobilization. This is an important reminder that when/if one process fails, the energy related to it doesn't have to fail, but can be shifted into other entry points for mobilizing again.

- *International Lobbying*: Women have lobbied at national, regional, and international levels to pressure political or military elites to restart peace processes and increase women's inclusion⁴. Lobbying needs an extremely reality-based approach. Women should consider that while the international communication has many restrictions, civil society is a freer arena for informal talks.

c) Rebuilding societies

Concepts of reconstruction and reconciliation were unpacked, as well as some of the strategies that have been employed to achieve social reconciliation in post-war periods. In the discussion, it was highlighted that working on reconciliation in areas where violence had reduced, but a nationwide peace agreement has not yet been achieved or implemented, was a useful strategy for peace. Moreover, inclusive reconstruction can be an entry point for reconciliation. In the case of Iraq, water management in former IS-controlled areas was used as an entry point for dialogue and reconciliation.

4 Thania Paffenholz and Molly Kellogg, "Unsticking Peace Processes: What can Women's Groups and Networks Do When Peace Processes Are Stalled" (UN Women, 2018; Working Paper).

III. Group Outcomes



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Syria: Participants raised a number of issues important for a future inclusive Syria. These included: the constitution drafting process, economic support and capacity building for women and youth; prioritizing civil registration to enable all Syrians to have identity, citizenship documents and property deeds. The perceived disconnect between the Geneva process and the situation on the ground was noted. Participants discussed the need to rebuild the social contract and to address divisive rhetoric around the current conflict.

Primarily, the group stressed the necessity for an inclusive Constitutional Committee, in which all segments of Syrian society are included, and the importance of having a 30% at least quota for women in the CC. The group agreed on the importance of mobilizing around the constitution drafting process. They spoke of developing a time bound initiative with the sole purpose of influencing

the constitution making structures and ensuring that certain basic conditions on equality and human rights were present. They agreed on the need to advocate for having a gender focused legal team monitoring the constitution drafting process and agreeing on informal modalities of communication to keep each other informed of movements in the process and opportunities for influence.

Iraq: During the group sessions participants raised questions on how to reach decision-makers and how to use mass mobilization to rebuild peace, devastated areas and build social cohesion.

The group identified two goals and strategies to reach these goals. Their agreed goals were:

- To use Article 49 of the Iraqi constitution which refers to the quota of 25 percent of women in parliament, to lobby for an increase in women's

participation in all positions (including the judicial and executive branches) by 25 percent during the government formation process;

- To lobby for the re-introduction of a Minister of Women Affairs and not only part of a Ministerial portfolio.

In doing this the group decided to create a time bound informal alliance to maximise political opportunities in the weeks and months ahead that would bring together key players to try and generate traction against these commitments during the government formation process. They agreed on a common document to be signed by them and a wider group, and on how to engage elite power brokers – in addition to the need for a media campaign calling for these commitments to be made.

Yemen: Participants outlined strategies for calling for women's engagement in peace talks (with the assumptions that talks may begin at the end of this month). The group emphasized the importance of working with the UN Special Envoy to find constructive ways to participate and engage in the talks.

Four strategies were identified to reach this goal. The first was to advocate for all parties, working groups and other decision-making bodies to have at least a 30 percent quota as agreed in the national dialogue. Second, to have a 3rd party women's delegation (using UN resolution 1325 to push for it) around the negotiation table with specific criteria (independent women, women with expertise on gender topics and knowledge for each specific sub-commission, experience in peace negotiations and networking). Third, as a fall back option, the formation of an advisory body to provide women's vision of society to the Special Envoy and to provide opportunities to bridge the disconnect between the Office of the Special Envoy and the local community. Forth, to try and ensure women's representation in subcommittees as technical experts. Geographical distribution, age, sphere of influence, and independence were all cited as important criteria to select members for any type of women's advisory body. The advisory body would not be an alternative option to women's direct participation but would be a parallel body to the participation of women in the negotiation table. In the event the parties would not agree on women's participation in the negotiations, i.e. ignore the outcomes of the national dialogue, the strategy would be to contribute to the process as observers.

IV. Sharing of Successful Experiences and Lessons Learned



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Some participants emphasized to the organisers during the opening of the meeting the importance of carving out space for cross learning across the different contexts. There is great desire to learn more about the successes and challenges women have encountered across the region. It was agreed that half of the third day would be spent on each country group presenting a practice applied to influence a political dialogue, and critically assessing its effectiveness (positive and challenges). The following summarizes the country presentations and discussion.

Syria: The group spoke of the different strategies women's rights actors were and had used to influence the peace process in Syria and reflected on the lessons learned from these. While these forums

had generated many positive results, Syria Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPID) was publicly criticized for not being representative of Syrian society, while the Women's Advisory Board was challenged by miscommunication between the board and grassroots – issues that are being addressed through these forums now.

A successful story provided linked to efforts to influence lawmaking in the Kurdish region. Women created a coalition across the region and lobbied for '40% women, 40% men, and 20% competence'. Under the work of the coalition, polygamy was successfully abolished; though it was noted that however the success remains in paper as men leave the Kurdish region to marry additional wives.

Iraq: Women in Iraq have been regional pioneers in developing a roadmap for UNSCR 1325. Iraq's National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 was a success as the first Middle Eastern country to develop a NAP. It provides specific material women can take from to call for inclusive reconstruction of the country. However, implementation has been limited and there has been almost no financing for the NAP. They have learned from the first phase of the plan (2014-2018) that they should enhance the monitoring mechanisms for NAP implementation, in addition to figuring out ways for increasing financing.

Women also cited the coalition formed to stop the passage of an amendment to the Iraq Personal Status Law as a recent peacebuilding related success.

Yemen: Women's participation in the national dialogue was an internationally recognized success, with women representing just over 30% of the NDC delegates. During the national dialogue, women effectively managed to pressure in the corridors of the meeting room to ensure that their priorities were included in the outcome document.

The group also noted that the Yemen Women's Pact for Peace and Security (Pact) has been a success story for them. It was established in October 2015 in Cyprus under the umbrella of the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen and UN Women and includes 60 members from different geographical areas. Women within the group have communicated with influential people, groups, and party leaders with the aim to introducing them the Pact and find ways to collaborate to help the Yemeni society. It was noted that the Pact did not include representatives of all groups in Yemen.

V. Conclusions



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The meeting, Mobilizing women in the MENA region: Roadmaps for peace in Iraq, Syria and Yemen provided a unique space for women to discuss and debate strategies to influence peace processes. It served as a forum in which participants could share the lessons learned of previous peace-making initiatives in their home-countries.

As next steps, the groups have called for continued forums where a core group can meet to discuss and develop strategies for influencing peace. The Syria group agreed on leveraging the following weeks' UN Women led 'Beirut II' conference as a forum to build trust and networks on trying to influence the constitution drafting process. The Iraqi group will draft a document outlining their requests with potential allies and partners and

take forward concrete advocacy steps. They will coordinate through a WhatsApp group that was created during the meeting. Yemeni women will negotiate to have women at the upcoming peace talks table (minimum 30 percent). They will discuss further within the Pact how to do this, and what they can do to support the Special Envoy's work if negotiations don't move forward.

Annex 1

Mobilizing for Peace

