



Advancing Women's Leadership in Conflict Resolution

Tactics to Influence Peace
Processes

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Cover Photo: Isadora Zubillaga, co-founder of 'Women for Democracy in Venezuela' at the platform's launch in Geneva in October 2021. Photo Credit: Independent Diplomat.

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About Independent Diplomat

Independent Diplomat (ID) is a non-profit diplomatic advisory group that strives to create more inclusive, just, effective and lasting peace processes by building the diplomatic capacity of marginalized groups and democratic governments. Our work follows a simple premise: we help those most affected by crises and conflict to access the high-level political discussions about them. We work inside the diplomatic system to help these groups advocate for the legitimate interests of those they represent, leading to more durable and sustainable solutions.

Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	01
--------------------------	----

<i>Introduction</i>	03
---------------------	----

<i>Tactics and Strategies to Influence Peace Processes</i>	04
--	----

<i>Recommendations</i>	18
------------------------	----

<i>Conclusion</i>	22
-------------------	----



Photo: Members of the Syrian Women's Political Movement meet in Paris. Photo Credit: Syrian Women's Political Movement.

Executive Summary

Inclusive peace processes are widely acknowledged to increase the prospect of achieving durable political settlements to armed conflicts.¹ This is particularly true for gender inclusive peace processes, where women's participation has been associated both with higher chances of attaining peace and longer lasting peace agreements.² Women's contributions are made despite the many challenges that threaten to impede their full, equal and meaningful participation. But while much attention has (rightfully) rested on the under-representation of women in peace processes, less attention has been paid to the creative ways in which women have succeeded in overcoming such challenges to exert influence on conflict dynamics and shape the trajectory of high-level peace processes, whether through formal seats at the negotiating table or through less formal roles.

This brief examines how women break down barriers to participation, drawing on Independent Diplomat's³ work with female (and male) party leaders, delegates, negotiators, and civil society leaders seeking to influence formal peace processes.⁴ In so doing, the brief explores how women successfully exert influence, using their networks, access, and expertise to affect policy outcomes and drive forward agenda items. The brief thus focuses not on the many blockages to women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace processes, but rather, on the strategies and tactics

[1] See for example: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/pb222-inclusive-peace-processes-are-key-to-ending-violent-conflict.pdf>.
[2] See for example: <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes>.
[3] Over the past decade, Independent Diplomat's work to advance women's participation in diplomacy and peace processes has been supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Global Affairs Canada, Folke Bernadotte Academy, and the Network for Social Change. Independent Diplomat and UN Women embarked on a partnership agreement in 2020 to support women's diplomacy and advocacy in peace processes, with the generous support of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), in cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Working in close coordination with UN Women's Regional Office for the Arab States, four UN Women country programs/offices, and expert partners, ID has supported UN Women's Peace and Security Section implementation of the program entitled 'Enhancing Women's Leadership for Sustainable Peace in Fragile Contexts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region', more on which can be found here: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/What%20We%20Do/Peace-security/WPS-Brief-Womens-meaningful-participation-in-peace-and-political-processes-in-fragile-contexts-en.pdf>.
[4] The insights of this paper are largely drawn from Independent Diplomat's work on what is frequently referred to as 'Track 1' peace processes. Track 1 processes refer to high-level negotiations that are often led by the UN, multilateral regional organizations, or eminent persons. They tend to engage governments and representatives of opposing movements. While much of this brief focuses on Track 1, many of the lessons garnered also have a bearing on Track 2 and Track 1.5 processes. Women's meaningful participation within those tracks also offers important opportunities to influence and shape the framing of key substantive issues in a peace process.

that women can deploy to influence the trajectory of political negotiations, create more inclusive outcomes, and achieve their political objectives.

The author argues that a combination of the following tactics help women wield greater influence over peace processes: (i) developing a clear view on the goals and objectives, which can form the basis of a targeted diplomatic strategy; (ii) building and sustaining strategic coalitions committed to advancing those goals; (iii) leading in the formulation and promotion of policy proposals; (iv) opening lines of communication across parties; (v) engaging male allies and skeptics; (vi) securing the buy-in of domestic stakeholders; (vii) directing the international community to provide necessary political support and resources; (viii) securing independent, long-term financing; (ix) focusing on tangible impact that makes a difference to the lives of communities on the ground; (x) combining a mix of insider and outsider tactics; and (xi) maintaining a long-term vision and persisting, despite the challenges.

The author also offers a set of policy recommendations to the international community to support women's assertive engagement in peace processes, arguing that governments, multilateral institutions, and nongovernmental organizations committed to advancing the women, peace and security agenda should work to:

1. Empower women to engage beyond matters of representation and gender within peace processes;
2. Put less emphasis on the need for full unity from women's groups;
3. Expand the types of support provided to women beyond trainings and conventional capacity-building projects;
4. Provide long-term, flexible funding that allows women's groups to plan for the future;
5. Create opportunities that target women in political positions, not just women who identify as civil society representatives;
6. Move beyond rhetorical and financial support for the women, peace and security agenda to ensure political weight is thrown behind gender inclusive peace processes;
7. Set benchmarks for gender inclusion, including conditioning mediation roles on inclusive delegations; and
8. Mirror inclusion within their own ranks.

While these steps will not counteract all the barriers to women's meaningful participation in peace processes, they can help to create an enabling environment that creates more opportunities for genuinely inclusive negotiations.

Introduction

Since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the importance of women's meaningful participation and protection in peace processes has gained growing recognition.⁵ Despite such recognition, however, women have continued to comprise a minority of negotiators, mediators, and signatories to Track I peace processes. In some cases, like Yemen or Afghanistan, women have been all but absent from the formal peace table. In others, such as Syria or Libya, women have maintained a more constant (albeit still under-represented, and too often, precarious) presence at the formal negotiating table, serving as delegates to peace talks, as well as advisers to mediators and parties.

The lack of women's consistent representation at the peace table should not be confused with a lack of impact or influence. Across conflicts, women have succeeded not only in claiming spaces previously denied to them, but they have also exerted a direct impact on conflict dynamics that has shaped the context within which peace processes take place – whether it is securing detainee access and prisoner swaps, facilitating local ceasefires, monitoring and collecting evidence of war crimes, advocating for civilian protection, or engaging in high-level diplomacy to set out policy recommendations for the international community. Over the past decade, Independent Diplomat has had the privilege of working closely with women who have assumed each of those roles.

In our capacity as diplomatic advisors to parties in conflict-affected areas, we have worked side-by-side with female and male negotiators, political and civil society leaders, and delegates to peace talks in Libya, Mali, Syria, Western Sahara, Yemen, Venezuela, and elsewhere. We have provided strategic and tactical advice, capacity building, training, administrative support, and access to resources, all designed to support women's strategic engagement within diplomatic processes and to bolster women's efforts to level the playing field with their male counterparts. In the process of working closely with women and men involved in Track I peace processes, we have seen directly how women have overcome obstacles to generate meaningful political outcomes, secure greater representation, and lead political movements. Below are some of the lessons learned throughout our work in conflict zones, building on the reflections of women who have sought direct engagement within Track I processes, whether as negotiators at the table or civil society activists operating from the margins.

[5] To date, the Security Council has adopted ten resolutions on women, peace and security, and close to 100 countries have launched national action plans outlining their own nation's commitments to the agenda.

Tactics and Strategies to Influence Peace Processes

Women seeking to meaningfully participate and influence peace processes face a number of challenges, from outright exclusion by political parties to tokenization and pandering both by parties and the international community. Yet across conflicts, women have exerted influence over peace processes in spite of such challenges. In Colombia, women pushed for one of the most inclusive peace agreements in history—with specific chapters dedicated to women’s inclusion, transitional justice, and minorities. In Syria, women championed the need for justice and the release of arbitrarily held detainees, while achieving representation close to 30 percent within Syria’s Constitutional Committee. In Myanmar, women remain at the forefront of creative, nonviolent resistance following the military coup, while also spearheading high-level diplomacy aimed at exerting pressure on the Junta and creating a pathway for the reinstatement of the civilian government. And in Mali, women continue to push for the implementation of the Mali peace agreement and have secured seats within all delegations. While the conflicts in question vary, many of the tactics and strategies women have deployed to influence peace processes share similarities. Through our work with female leaders in many of the world's most challenging conflicts, Independent Diplomat has seen our partners make the greatest advances through the practices set out below.

Clear Goals and Outcomes

Without question, those most effective in influencing peace processes and using diplomacy to advance their interests start with a clear vision of what they want to achieve. By identifying their overarching goal, individuals and groups—irrespective of their gender—are able to isolate the outcomes they seek to achieve and the policy decisions that need to be made in order to realize their goals. This, in turn, allows them to identify who makes those decisions and thus forms the basis through which to develop a coherent action plan, setting out a clear strategy and the roadmap needed to implement it.

Within the context of armed conflict, it can be incredibly difficult to identify clear goals—particularly shared goals. This is as true for women as it is for men. When it

[6] These challenges can take the more pronounced form of outright exclusion, with women denied any roles within political delegations and decision-making functions. But it can also take more subtle forms, with women in political delegations tokenized, sidelined, awarded limited decision-making roles, or assigned administrative rather than decision-making functions. Women can also face backlash in response to their participation, with some confronting violent retribution, stigmatization, intimidation and / or online attacks.

comes to conflict resolution, not all women share the same desired outcomes. Female political leaders may have different objectives from female civil society leaders, and within those categories, diverse perspectives and priorities will be found. Not all women will, for example, prioritize the issue of women’s participation, nor will they necessarily prioritize the realization of a gender inclusive peace agreement over other outcomes, such as: basic security and the cessation of violence against civilians, an end to human rights abuses, justice for victims, protection from indiscriminate attacks, the dismantling of dictatorship, etc.

Recognizing how different desired outcomes relate to one another, where there is common ground, and where there is not, is vital to the development of an effective advocacy strategy—particularly when women are working in coalitions. If the shared goal is to secure gender inclusion, this means agreeing on platforms that move beyond the basic agreement of serving as “women’s representatives” or pushing for “women’s inclusion” to define the menu of outcomes that can lead to the development of strategic plans. For example, if a group is working to achieve a gender inclusive peace agreement, they might identify the need for a gender inclusive peace process. To achieve that process, they might push for: the application of a 30 percent quota for female negotiators within each party’s delegation; the appointment of gender advisors to each delegation and the mediator’s team; the formation of a civil society consultation mechanism to inform the peace process; a reporting mechanism through which a mediator must report back to international stakeholders and domestic constituents on the progress on gender inclusion; etc. Once the desired outcome is clear, it is possible to define diplomatic targets for advocacy, for example, the parties themselves, the convenors of negotiations, mediation teams, etc. This provides the building blocks to develop a strategy and action plan (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Process To Develop Effective Diplomatic Strategy



Coalition Building

A key tactic that women have successfully deployed in numerous conflicts is to join forces with other women, either across party lines or across the divide between civil society and political society. By working collectively on the issues where they can find common ground, women—both in civil society and politics—have exerted pressure to advance inclusion and have successfully drawn attention to the issues they prioritize.

In Libya, for example, during the negotiations around the development of the 2020 Libyan roadmap, female members of the Libya Political Dialogue Forum united across party lines and across political and civil society to demand that the roadmap include a quota of 30 percent representation of women in leadership positions—including the position of Vice President Lamees Bensaad, who was part of those negotiations. She explains that by “working together, we were able to apply pressure as a group and campaign for the 30 percent inclusion. This pressure forced the Envoy and parties to adopt the 30 percent marker. The more vocal, loud, and determined we were, the more gains we achieved.”

In addition to providing a safe space for women to share their common challenges, aspirations, and goals, collective action offers the ability to demonstrate strength in numbers (thus dispelling the perception of marginalization or isolation), present coherent objectives, and establish key targets, both in terms of participation and specific policies. These alliances can be particularly helpful in pushing parties—and international stakeholders—to commit to quotas and key policies.

Mariela Magallanes—one of two Venezuelan women representing the National Unity Platform during political negotiations in the Norway-mediated Mexico City process—recalls a similar dynamic playing out in Venezuela in 2021. Ahead of two rounds of talks in which Venezuelan women would be present within the opposition’s delegation for the first time, women in the Venezuelan democratic opposition mobilized behind the scenes to insist that women be appointed to the National Unity Platform’s delegation and nominated women for specific roles. “The unconditional support of women political leaders was crucial in securing seats for women. Women





Photo: Venezuelan Interim Government diplomat, Estefania Melendez. Photo Credit: Independent Diplomat.

across the opposition wrote a letter of support requesting that I represent them at the table. This letter was key to ensuring that I emerged as a political representative not of a specific political party, but of the women politicians representing Venezuela’s democratic forces.”

Collective action can be an effective tool to drive forward big ideas and demonstrate solidarity. But it is not a panacea. Working in large groups invariably brings competing priorities, perspectives, personalities, and egos to the fore. Particularly where such groups bring women from a broad spectrum of political views together, it can be difficult to identify common goals that can be translated into policy outcomes and action plans. In such a context, it is all the more important that women work strategically to define clear goals and desired outcomes, and also to recognize when and where it might be necessary to work in smaller groups.

Lead on Policy Solutions

Every peace process involves a multitude of political, economic, and humanitarian issues. To exert influence, women must be involved in decision-making around each of these issues. This means developing detailed thinking not just about how to secure representation, but also, the full spectrum of issues raised throughout a peace process. It is thus critical for women seeking influence over Track I processes to develop and disseminate solid policy proposals on issues like confidence building measures, security, humanitarian access, arbitrarily-held detainees, justice and accountability, etc. The advancement of credible policy recommendations positions individuals looking to influence a peace process as constructive leaders and interlocutors—both for parties and mediators.



Photo: Syrian Women's Political Movement. Photo Credit: Syrian Women's Political Movement.

In Syria, for example, Syrian opposition delegate, Alise Mofrej, effectively led the file related to detainees and arbitrary detention. A former detainee herself, she worked closely with members of Syrian civil society to develop policy recommendations that were informed by a broad spectrum of society. And she independently engaged diplomats to raise the profile of detention issues. Through these efforts, Mofrej emerged as a decisive voice during the Geneva peace talks, who wielded real influence within her own party and delegation. Mofrej demonstrated her expertise not just at the formal negotiating table, but beyond formal peace talks—proactively engaging mediators, their diplomatic teams, stakeholder governments, and civil society.

In some conflicts, party leaders and stakeholders attribute women's exclusion to a lack of female experts. In such instances, women have preempted these arguments by identifying individuals with expertise across a range of issues, and ensuring that both members of the international community, and parties themselves, are aware that such experts exist and are ready to lend their expertise to a peace process.

Open Lines of Communication

Collective action can be an important asset in advancing women's participation. But in the context of protracted conflicts, it can be difficult—if not impossible—to find common ground on issues that extend beyond representation. For women that emerge as party leaders or party members in heavily polarized contexts, it can be incredibly contentious to meaningfully engage other women from across party lines. The same fissures and disagreements that cause breakdowns in negotiations between men also affect women and make it difficult for women in political



positions to find common ground that extends beyond the importance of women’s participation.

For some women, however, the benefits of maintaining lines of communication with men and women across the political spectrum outweigh the political risks. Libya’s Bensaad explains that even while serving as a member of Libya’s Peace and Prosperity Party, she makes it a point to “communicate with everyone, regardless of their background, political views or ideology. I strive to maintain good relations with influential groups, irrespective of what political party they belong to. I make clear that my priority is to work for my country, and I am able to gain people’s trust because of that.”

Engage Male Allies and Skeptics

Despite its potential benefits, collective action by women is not a substitute for outreach to and collaboration with men. While women-centered advocacy can be an important tool in highlighting the importance of women’s participation and in pushing for the implementation of quotas, confining engagement to one gender alone risks compounding women’s marginalization and isolation from high-level decision-making, particularly on issues that extend beyond representation and inclusion.

“Working with women alone does not help achieve gender equality. Rather, it is necessary to work in a field that includes both men and women... working with men helps demonstrate the ability of women on the ground.”

Fatma Mehdi, a representative of the Frente Polisario at UN-mediated peace talks on Western Sahara in 2018.

Photo: Fatma Mehdi, a member of the Frente Polisario's Delegation to UN-mediated peace talks. Photo Credit: Independent Diplomat.

Given that Track I peace processes remain heavily dominated by men—and it is generally men who lead the parties that participate in peace talks—it is not sufficient for women’s engagement to be confined to members of their gender. Changing the behavior of party leaders necessitates the engagement of male allies and even (and arguably, especially) skeptics. Across conflicts, women have long recognized this, and have in many instances successfully built ties with male colleagues with political influence—keeping them informed of their activities and outreach, sharing their messages, including them in meetings and advocacy, seeking their input, etc.

In Venezuela, Isadora Zubillaga, the acting Foreign Minister of the Venezuelan Interim Government and founder of Women for Democracy in Venezuela, notes that working closely with male allies who understand the importance of women’s participation has been critical to her achievements. “Every step that I’ve taken to empower women in Venezuela’s political life, I have deliberately made sure that my male colleagues were aware. I went to extra lengths to ensure that they understood the importance of women’s inclusion and empowerment and that they could understand how it fits into our larger goals for Venezuela’s democratic future. I have always believed that if women are going to lead change, we must be part of the change and work together.”

Summer Ahmed, the Representative of the Southern Transitional Council to the United States, notes that “Women in Southern Yemen have been most effective when we focus on building good working relationships and coalitions with the male members of our community. It takes a lot of time and effort but communicating with tribal leaders, military and political leaders can build a lot of bridges for women.” Ahmed notes that to build such relationships, she often needs to emphasize issues other than gender—particularly at the onset. “From my experience, and from what I’ve seen from other women that have assumed roles in decision-making, we need to think strategically about when to use feminist terms or push for inclusion on the basis of our gender. It can’t be a one-size-fits-all approach, we need to tailor our tactics to the individuals we are seeking to influence.”

At the same time, it is important to recognize that securing representation for some women does not necessarily translate into gains for all women, nor does it necessarily translate into meaningful participation. To change gendered power dynamics and achieve more equitable gender norms and peaceful outcomes, a long-term effort is needed to address masculinities in a transformative manner. Mobilizing alliances with men should ultimately strive to create equal, mutually beneficial partnerships rather than recreating new forms of patriarchal dominance.

Harness Domestic Support

Every sustainable solution requires the buy-in of domestic stakeholders. No matter

how much international attention is given to a conflict, lasting peace cannot be imposed from the outside. Thus, as critical as it is for women seeking to influence peace processes to engage the international community to secure their desired policy outcomes, international outreach will never be a viable substitute for domestic support. As women seek to exert influence over peace processes, it is thus critical that they continue to consult closely with their local constituencies and communities, and meaningfully engage local parties.

Omeima Abdel-Salam, the Representative of the Frente Polisario to Switzerland, says “my work in Geneva is nothing if we do not have strong links to the ground. We need to maintain constant lines of communication with people on the ground, who provide reliable information, including human rights violations, so we have a full sense of the reality.” It is essential that those lines of communication travel both ways. Just as parties to conflicts must be informed by local communities, it is equally important for parties to inform those communities of developments on the political track, and ensure they feel invested in, and consequential to, the high-level negotiations taking place regarding their future.

Yemen’s Dr. Amira Augustin notes that building this domestic support is key to resolving conflicts in the long term. “The entire peace process wouldn’t make sense if we do not interact with local communities who suffer the most from the conflict. We need to strongly interact with those inside the country to know their needs and aspirations. The peace process itself needs to be designed in the interest of these local communities. Lasting peace is not possible when local communities do not see their claims and aims represented and addressed as part of the process. A lack of representation can deepen the fault-lines of the parties in conflict.”

Direct the International Community

Building domestic support for women’s empowerment is key for lasting change. But securing international support for women’s participation has also been instrumental to many of the advances women have made in expanding participation in peace processes.



Photo: Alaa Murabit, founder of the Voice of Libyan Women, addresses the Security Council. Photo Credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

Speaking of the negotiations on Venezuela in Mexico City in 2021, Mariella Magallanes notes that women's presence at peace talks "was largely due to the international pressure to increase the high-level participation of women in Venezuela, which helped raise awareness among different actors to expand and open paths for the meaningful participation of women." Indeed, across conflicts, women have found that their calls for inclusion are more likely to succeed when foreign governments reinforce their demands around participation and protection, both by amplifying their messaging and by setting conditions for support and engagement.

In many conflicts, women have worked publicly and privately to encourage international allies to incentivize and pressure parties to prioritize gender equity. This means pushing governments not merely to issue public statements on the importance of women's participation, but to follow through on their rhetorical commitments to the women, peace and security agenda by directly linking women's participation to the political process, and working behind closed doors to push parties (and other stakeholder governments with the capacity to exert leverage over the parties) to prioritize women's inclusion.

In the run-up to intra-opposition meetings on Syria, for example, female members of the Syrian opposition mobilized advocates of the women, peace and security agenda—including states like Sweden, Norway, Canada, etc.—to press their male colleagues to allot more seats to female delegates. According to Mariam Jalabi, the co-founder of the Syrian Women's Political Movement, this international pressure—generated by Syrian women themselves—was an important enabler in getting her male colleagues to take women's representation more seriously. "International pressure ultimately came because of the pressure we, Syrian women and women's groups, exerted on the international community. The international community's pressure, in turn, helped push the parties to take our demands more seriously."

In such cases, rather than wait for the international community to highlight the importance of women's inclusion, it is women themselves who set out their expectations of the international community, and the steps governments should take to reinforce their demands. Jalabi continues, "International pressure helps, but it cannot replace what we Syrian women did internally within our own parties. It felt more, at the time, like Syrian women were helping the international community understand and recognize the importance of including women."

Mobilizing governments to push parties to make gains towards gender parity can be critical to advancing women's participation. But it is no less critical to secure the active support of Envoys and Mediators who facilitate Track I negotiations. Libya's Bensaad notes that the UN Envoy Stephanie Williams' commitment to inclusion "ensured we [women] were not sidelined from the process and she paved the path for women's inclusion in politics," after years of women feeling "cut off." Having an

active Envoy who assigns priority to the issue of inclusion can go a long way in establishing a process with more equitable participation—and the opposite is also true.

In cases where Envoys do not assign priority to women’s inclusion—or see it as more of a tick-the-box exercise—ensuring women’s full, equal and meaningful participation at the official negotiating table can be an immense struggle.

“It is very important for an Envoy to prioritize the inclusion of women. If inclusive peace processes are not treated as a priority, women will not have a seat at the table. An Envoy’s vision for an inclusive peace process provides the foundation for women’s full, equal and meaningful participation.”

Ola Alaghbari, CEO of the Sheba Youth Foundation and a member of Yemen’s Technical Advisory Group (TAG), who advised the UN Envoy for Yemen throughout various stages of Yemen’s peace process.

In cases where mediators have awarded less centrality to the issue of women’s participation, it is imperative that women engage both with Envoy offices and their teams, as well as with Member States (and in cases of UN-mediated conflicts, members of the UN Security Council and the UN Secretary-General) to link women’s participation to the political track, and ensure that women’s inclusion is not treated as a dispensable add-on, but rather, as essential to the facilitation of a lasting peace agreement.



Secure Independent Financing

Funding can be a major determining factor in individuals' ability to exert influence over a political process—determining everything from who gets to attend peace talks to who engages directly with international decision-makers. Unlike male parties to the conflict, who often receive financing from local or regional stakeholders, women often lack direct access to funding streams. A lack of independent funding can make women dependent on their parties and male colleagues, making it difficult to carry out the activities necessary to achieve their objectives. Independent funding—in particular, long-term, flexible funding—can be a major asset for women looking to influence political processes.

“When you are dealing with a conflict like Syria’s, it is money and access that decide who is represented at the table—and women often cannot compete.”

Mariam Jalabi, the co-founder of the Syrian Women’s Political Movement.

Financing for women’s participation in peace processes comes primarily from a mix of governments, foundations, and UN agencies. Depending on its source, such funding can be shorter or longer in duration, cover more or fewer political activities, and be more or less earmarked for specific activities and outputs. Funding tends to be more effective when it is more flexible, and when it is multi-year in duration. Funding for women, peace and security also tends to favor registered civil society organizations, rather than movements that lack designated registrations or women in the political sphere, who do not identify as activists. This means that female political leaders who seek formal participation in a peace process and members of movements that are not officially registered can struggle to tap into the international funding streams designed to enhance women’s participation in peace processes. One long-term option to strengthen the availability of such funding is to expand women’s access to the primary pool of funds supporting peace processes, rather than earmarking women’s participation funds to a separate pool of funding. Such an option would provide continuity in funding throughout a peace process’ life-cycle.

Focus on Real-World Impact

In addition to showcasing technical expertise, women also exert influence by focusing on on-the-ground dynamics and the tangible realities of warfare. Ola Alaghbary of Yemen’s Technical Advisory Group, who has worked with mediators and the parties to break the siege of Taiz, notes that “As someone directly involved at the



Photo: Yemeni women meet with UN Special Envoy to Yemen. Photo Credit: OESGY.

grassroots, my overarching goal is to bring the voice of Yemenis from the ground to the Track I process. As someone who has experienced war directly, and seen the suffering of my people firsthand, my approach is to speak directly to the needs of my people, to be clear about what is causing their suffering and what must be done to address their needs.”

Fatma Mehdi, a delegate to the Western Sahara peace talks, adopted a similar approach. During peace talks, she chose “to talk about the real situation, and be less focused on abstract legalities or formalities.” She notes that while the men at the table tended to emphasize historical points, Security Council resolutions, or legal decisions, “I chose to talk clearly about the situation of human rights on the ground, to make clear the difficulties that Sahrawi men and women are facing in real-life terms. I used my time to explain the humanity of those affected by a lifetime under occupation.”

When Mehdi finished speaking, she says the UN Envoy approached her personally and promised to talk clearly about the need to address human rights abuses in Western Sahara. “My intervention was a departure from my male colleagues. And I think it is an approach that women often take. We speak directly to the heart of the issue, we address what is happening in clear terms, and we give details that paint a clear picture.” This approach of cutting through diplomatic niceties, and speaking directly to the matters at hand, can be a very effective tool in negotiations that get bogged down in rhetoric or pre-established positions.

Combine ‘Insider’ and ‘Outsider’ Tactics

Expanding women’s participation in peace processes requires tenacity. Women who have succeeded in securing a meaningful role for themselves and other women have done so not by waiting (or asking) for permission to be granted, but rather, by seizing the initiative and claiming spaces traditionally denied to them.

“Throughout my career, I choose fieldwork and focused on the areas that were associated in people’s minds as being led only by men. I participated and was directly involved in settling disputes. I did not wait for anyone to assign me those roles, but as I overcame challenges, a great trust was formed between me and many parties and they began to see my role as a constructive one.”

Rabia Aburas, a member of Libya’s House of Representatives and a long-time civil society activist.

Across conflicts, this has meant creatively carrying out the activities needed to achieve women’s objectives—including combining the more ‘inside’ approach of setting out policy recommendations to Envoys, submitting policy papers to parties, participating in diplomatic meetings, and directly attending peace talks, with a more ‘outsider’ approach by speaking on-the-record to the media, leaking information strategically, releasing public statements, or issuing public reports. This is true even—and arguably, particularly—when women lack a formal role in a peace process.

While having a seat at the table is an obvious entry point to exert influence, it is by no means the only route for women to do so. Leading diplomatic outreach and engaging directly with international decision-makers and key stakeholders in their respective conflicts positions women to advocate for their policy positions on their own terms and in their own words. By proactively taking steps to influence a Track I process, women can effectively shape the context in which a negotiation takes place. This also includes embracing a multitrack approach to peace processes, ensuring not only that engagement is happening with high-level decision-makers, but that such outreach is supplemented with outreach to mid-level leaders as well as the grassroots.

Persistence

Like conflicts themselves, securing women’s full, equal and meaningful participation is a long-term endeavor. There is no quick fix to ensure women are meaningfully engaged in a peace process. And improvements in participation at one stage may not carry over into improvements at a later stage. The result is that achieving progress in women’s participation requires constant vigilance, or what Mariam Jalabi, calls persistence. “If it was not for Syrian women’s persistence, Syrian parties would not include the women they do now. Any achievements we, Syrian women, have made were because we refused to give up. For the last 11 years, we have insisted day-in

and day-out on our inclusion and we have pushed for progress on the issues that matter to us. We are repeating the same messages over and over, and even when we have a victory, we continue pushing—because nothing we achieve can be taken for granted. We need to stay active and determined every step of the way.”

Persistence applies across conflicts, and it reflects the tenuous nature both of advancements in women’s participation and in the wider progress around the peace process and peace agreement implementation. In Syria, for example, commitments made by the Syrian opposition to agree to a 30 percent quota for women’s representation were not actualized in practice—and the gains that have been made have required constant advocacy by women at every stage of the peace process. Similarly, in Mali, the foundations of the 2015 peace agreement continue to go unimplemented, requiring constant vigilance from women who seek to secure full implementation.

"Advocacy for women's participation must be consistent and permanent so that the conventions and laws on women's rights passed and ratified by Mali, like Security Council resolution 1325 and law 052, are respected. It is essential to continue their application so a greater number of women can benefit from them."

Lalla Moulaye Haidara, a member of the Mali peace agreement’s monitoring committee (CSA) representing Plateforme.



Recommendations

The aforementioned tactics can be key enablers for women seeking to influence peace processes on their own terms. They do not, however, offer a universal roadmap that can be deployed in all instances in precisely the same way. On the contrary, in each context and for each individual, a different set of tactics may prove more or less effective. Despite the mystery within which peace processes often seem to be shrouded, there is no single “right” way to participate in or exert influence over a peace process. And while women must always have a seat at the negotiating table, formal participation in a peace process is by no means the only way to exert influence over a Track I negotiation. On the contrary, women in civil society and political society can—and indeed, have—succeeded in influencing negotiations by creatively and proactively utilizing their networks, access, and expertise beyond the table. Those in the international community, including governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations, seeking to support women’s full, equal and meaningful participation in Track I processes should thus consider the following when working to advance women’s participation:

- 1 Empower Women to Engage Beyond Matters of Representation:** Securing gender parity within a negotiation is a motivating factor for many women involved in peace processes, but it is not the only goal women seek to secure. Individuals are often motivated to get involved in a peace process because they want to secure a specific policy outcome—whether it is a political transition, protection of human rights, accountability, free and fair elections, the cessation of hostilities, the release of detainees, humanitarian access, etc. Often, core objectives are not limited to the achievement of representation, but rather, what their participation will achieve. External support for women’s participation in a peace process should broaden its focus to enable women’s substantive input on all of the areas involved in a peace process, and not confine women to either a subset of gender-specific issues or advocacy on participation.
- 2 Don’t Demand Full Unity:** Too often, women in peace processes are expected to speak with one voice. While men are presumed to hold a variety of political positions that make consensus difficult, there is often an expectation that women—particularly those involved in peace processes—must unify across party lines, and put their political differences behind them, in order to warrant international support. This can lead to pressure on women of varying political

perspectives to issue joint statements, feature in joint press conferences, participate in joint visits, agree on joint policy recommendations, etc. Instead of expecting such unity, international stakeholders should instead focus on providing women with platforms and resources to determine the extent of their own collective action and to cross party lines at their own pace and at their own discretion—when women themselves determine that doing so will add value to their efforts.

- 3 Support Beyond Training:** Much international support for inclusive peace processes focuses on building women’s capacity through trainings. Trainings can be a useful tool if they are demand-driven, and tailored to the specific needs of individual women or groups of women. But an overabundance of trainings and capacity building exercises take a significant amount of participants’ time, which can leave women with less time to engage in the practice of diplomacy itself. Rather than concentrating primarily on trainings as a means to build women’s capacity to engage in Track I processes, there is value in supporting women’s active engagement in such diplomacy—providing platforms for meetings and events, sharing letters women have issued, amplifying their political messaging, implementing their policy proposals, etc.
- 4 Long-Term, Flexible Funding:** For women to engage assertively in peace processes, it is imperative that they have access to the resources they need, in particular, funding. Engagement in peace processes can be costly—running the gamut from travel and accommodation in high-priced venues like Geneva to venue rentals for public events. For women to engage effectively in these processes, they need to be involved not just in one round of talks, a single event, or one meeting, but across successive rounds of negotiations, events, and meetings. The ability to plan long-term requires long-term funding, and it requires flexibility to adapt to unpredictable changes in a peace process—where talks can resume or stall at a moment’s notice. Having access to long-term, flexible funding enables women to be agile in their engagement in a peace process and to develop a long-term vision for that engagement. This applies both to women in civil society and women in politics—who often are cut out



from the funding opportunities allocated for women, peace and security (see below). One option to address this is to fund women's participation through the primary pool of funds supporting peace processes. This would mean that instead of earmarking women's participation funds to a separate pool of funding, a greater diversity of women—including those who identify as political leaders and party members—could have access to funding throughout a peace process' life-cycle.

- 5 **Support Women in Politics:** Support (and in particular, financing) for women in peace processes tends to concentrate on women in civil society. This leaves a gap in support for women in political society, who are members of political parties and who seek to level the playing field with their male counterparts from within existing political structures. While it can be more politically sensitive to support women who maintain these political roles, it is vital to ensure equal and meaningful participation in a Track I process. Like women in civil society, female political leaders need access to financial and material support, visa assistance, intelligence and information, as well as platforms to advocate for their positions. They also need to be engaged at the same levels as their male counterparts, receiving access not just to experts specialized in the women, peace and security agenda, but to decision-makers and diplomats who are engaged in the full scope of a given peace process.
- 6 **Throw Political Weight Behind Inclusion:** Securing equal participation of women is not only a matter of financing. To ensure more women are at the table in Track I peace processes, governments and mediators overseeing those peace processes need to treat inclusion as essential, not peripheral, to the achievement of a peace agreement. This requires investing more political capital in and setting conditions for bringing women to the table and keeping them there, not just as advisors but as negotiators. In particular, those overseeing peace processes—such as mediators and facilitators—should put more emphasis on setting stronger guidelines on the inclusion of women, including quotas on seat allocation, which can bind parties into making more inclusive appointments, and make more of an effort to connect the women, peace and security agenda directly to political processes (see below).
- 7 **Set Benchmarks for Inclusion—and Stick to Them:** Mediators, in particular, have an important role to play when it comes to securing gender inclusion within the peace processes they mediate. Institutions such as the UN could, for example, set explicit conditions in exchange for their facilitator role, stipulating that UN-mediated peace processes must be gender balanced and that each delegation must include a minimum of 30 percent of women if the UN is to engage as a mediator. Mediators could refuse to engage in peace processes in which such benchmarks were not met. Or, mediators could insist that seats

meant to be designated for women remain empty if parties opt not to fill them with women. There are several options that could be pursued in this vein, which would require mediators to think of gender inclusion as a requirement for a functional peace process.

- 8 Mirror Inclusion:** Gender inclusion is not just a matter for the parties at the table to consider, nor is women's underrepresentation in decision-making a problem limited to parties in conflicts. Women are under-represented in policymaking globally. Hence, gender inclusive peace processes require inclusion on all sides, including on the delegations representing stakeholder governments and mediators on the other side of the negotiating table. International stakeholders strengthen the argument for women's participation in peace processes when they do the same: including women in high-level decision-making roles, including as envoys and senior diplomats; appointing gender advisors to mediation teams and meaningfully integrating their advice into their working methods; etc.



Photo: Women Heads of State and Government meet to discuss the newly created UNGA Platform of Women Leaders. Photo Credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

Conclusion

To date, much of the Women, Peace and Security agenda has focused on the issue of women's participation, often concentrating on the gross under-representation of women within Track I processes. Yet through creativity, tenacity, persistence and political savvy, women have succeeded in influencing peace processes to a far greater extent than their numbers at the table would suggest. Deploying a variety of tactics and strategies, women have not only secured seats in delegations once closed to them, but they have successfully drawn attention to issues facing their constituents, offered practical solutions to address both the consequences and root causes of conflict, and led movements aimed at altering the context in which negotiations take place. This report has outlined some of the methods women have deployed to make these achievements, despite the many challenges they have confronted, both domestically and internationally. This report has furthermore argued that governments and nongovernmental actors seeking to support women's full, equal and meaningful participation in peace processes can play a significant role in supporting women's efforts in conflict zones by following women's lead, acting on their policy recommendations, pressing parties to broaden inclusivity, and providing tangible support and resources for women seeking to engage with and within the political parties that have a seat at the table.



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