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IN BRIEF

WOMEN BUILDING PEACE IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Report of the Women Mediator Networks Retreat

Greentree Estate, New York | 17-19 July 2024



Photo: Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations/
Schluchter, Anna-Lena

Abstract

This report summarizes the key points raised during a retreat of women mediators from regional mediator networks supported by the Government of Switzerland and UN Women from 17-19 July 2024.

In light of evolving geopolitics around international peace and security, participants called for a much-needed rethink of common approaches to advancing women's participation in formal peace processes, and how these processes are designed, in order to achieve a more inclusive, sustainable and transformative peace. A multi-track approach with mechanisms for linking peace processes along different tracks remains essential. While important to bring visibility and support to women's role in peacebuilding at the Track 2 and Track 3 levels, women's

participation must be prioritized at the Track 1 level where they continue to be marginalized. This requires thorough and robust preparation ahead of any peace process, including providing gender expertise to mediation actors and concrete measures to support women's civil society, peacebuilders and networks, such as thematic capacity-building for both women and men relevant to the specific peace process. Digital technologies were highlighted for their immense potential to strengthen the inclusivity of the mediation practice, and provide tools for women peacebuilders to create and disseminate their own narratives. At the same time, the international community must take measures to mitigate the risks of digital technology, such as tech-facilitated gender-based violence, or the design of parallel virtual formats without influence to sideline women from Track 1 processes.

Ahead of the October 2024 Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the Summit of the Future, and the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), Switzerland in partnership with UN Women held a retreat of women mediators from regional mediator and Swiss mediator networks¹ to discuss current and emerging challenges, and develop recommendations to increase women's meaningful participation in peace processes within the current global context. The retreat took place with support from the UN Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding. Held under Chatham House rules, discussions covered analysis of the current mediation landscape, gender-responsive process design, and the potential of digital technologies to improve inclusivity in mediation practices. The retreat culminated in an informal dialogue between participants and Security Council members, hosted by the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations.

Geopolitical dynamics, conflict trends and a changing mediation landscape

The retreat provided opportunities to exchange perspectives on current geopolitical dynamics, global conflict trends, and changing mediation environments, and how these impact women's participation in peace processes. There was sobering agreement that the onslaught, complexity and multiplicity of threats to global peace and security today was unprecedented. From the surge in the number of armed conflicts and conflict-related deaths in recent years to the intertwining challenges of climate-related disasters, economic crisis, mass displacement, and rising inequalities between and within states; from the weaponization of technology and the threat of its diverse applications to do massive damage, to the surge in sexual and gender-based violence and backlash against advances in women's rights globally – communities across many countries, and particularly in conflict-affected areas, are facing enormous instability and life-threatening disruptions to daily existence.

Simultaneously, the world is witnessing a rise in authoritarianism. This is eroding democratic governance across continents, contesting the rules-based international order, and further spurring the backlash against women's rights and gender equality. These emerging threats are amplifying the considerable challenges women already face in trying to participate meaningfully and safely in formal peace processes, as evidenced by the persistently low representation of women negotiators, mediators, and signatories.²

Women remain absent, grossly under-represented, or tokenistic in Track 1 processes. This is despite the nearly



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“All key stakeholders have an important role to play in promoting gender equality in peace processes. Robust monitoring mechanisms and transparent reporting are crucial to tracking progress and holding stakeholders accountable.”

Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Horn of Africa.

quarter of a century of efforts by the WPS community since the passage of Security Council resolution 1325 to bring visibility and recognition to women's peacemaking at the grassroots and Track 2 levels, and to support their meaningful participation in formal peace processes.

Contemporary armed conflicts have become increasingly complex and fragmented. There tends to be a proliferation of armed actors in a fluid state of alliance-building and splintering, often reflecting an entanglement of local,

1 Included were the Arab Women Mediators Network; FemWise-Africa; Ibero-American Network of Women Mediators; Mediterranean Women Mediators Network; Nordic Women Mediators; Pacific Women Mediators Network; Regional Network of Mediators of the Southern Cone; Southeast Asian Network of Women Negotiators and Mediators; Swiss Women in Peace Processes; Women Mediators across the Commonwealth.

2 United Nations, Women, Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General, 2023, [S/2023/725](#).

national, and transnational forces and a blurred interplay between political conflict and organized crime at local, national and regional levels. The involvement of external actors including third-party governments in state-based conflicts through financial support, weaponry or combat personnel, further complicates conflict dynamics.

In parallel, the mediation space has become increasingly crowded and at times, convoluted, with the emergence of new mediation actors engaged at different levels, including regional, state and private actors driven by divergent priorities and objectives. The multiplicity of mediation initiatives sometimes confounds a clear distinction between Track 1, Track 2 and Track 3 processes. Furthermore, the multiplicity of ‘peace tables,’ both formal and informal, does not negate the persistence of the hierarchical nature of these processes. In fact, there often exists a ‘main table’ where the real power is being brokered. The practice of forging elite bargains and political deals between a few powerbrokers, increasingly focused on a narrow set of security parameters, such as cessation of hostilities or ceasefire arrangements, is tenacious.

This fragmentation in the mediation space requires stronger efforts by the international community to link up different tracks, and mutually reinforce a shared commitment to norms and standards as well as a common understanding of end-goals. It also compels a gender-responsive political analysis to identify entry points for supporting women’s access to information about these various processes, and strategies for inclusion and influence across all tracks, and in particular to the ‘main table’. Perhaps most importantly, while pursuing a multi-track approach to supporting women’s meaningful participation, and supporting women to create their own, alternative spaces for building peace, what must be prioritized is women’s participation and influence in Track 1 processes in particular.

The complexity of armed conflicts and fragmentation of in the mediation space have contributed to reduced space for the UN’s leadership in resolving conflicts. While the array of new mediation initiatives and approaches could complement each other and sometimes do, they often compete with and undermine one another, creating avenues for conflict parties to ‘forum-shop’ while perpetuating conflict. Furthermore, while multilateral institutions still play a role in leading or co-leading mediation efforts, their influence has been weakened by a growing deficit of trust across North-South and East-West lines, stemming from perceptions of double standards, violations of international

law and structural inequalities within the multilateral system. The diminishing role of multilateral institutions as the organizational context for addressing threats to peace and security is of serious concern. It potentially undermines the commitment to norms-based peace processes that is grounded in the discipline of mediation and embodied in the WPS framework. In addition, it threatens to exacerbate the challenges to women’s meaningful participation in peace processes – this is especially pronounced when mediation forums fail to recognize the specific rights and needs of women, uphold WPS standards in process design, and place accountability for WPS commitments on the conflict parties.

Rethinking mediation approaches for advancing the WPS agenda

It was widely agreed that a critical rethinking of current strategies and tools to advance the WPS agenda in peace efforts and implementation on the ground was necessary. Importantly, the broader issue of how contemporary conflicts are being addressed by mediation actors must be challenged. This relates especially to how ‘peace tables’ are based on an increasingly narrow, issues-based, and piece-meal approach negotiated between ‘a few men’, and often focused exclusively on short-term fixes to ceasefire and security arrangements or humanitarian access. The failure of this approach to end violence permanently, let alone reach a sustainable peace, makes clear the need for a different strategy, namely political processes designed for inclusivity, based on international norms and principles, and aspiring to achieve transformative peace.

The UN and other multilateral institutions, even if not leading mediation efforts in a given conflict context, have a role to play in engaging states and other mediation actors as duty-bearers, applying diplomatic pressure and other incentives to mobilize support for the building of comprehensive peace processes that integrate gender equality priorities from the start. However, while it is critical that the international community continues to press for the full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation of women in Track 1 peace processes, it must also seek to transform these processes from the start. While women have been at the forefront of advocating for women’s rights and inclusion, the onus is on *everyone* – governments, institutions, and society as a whole – to create an enabling environment that supports this goal.



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Preparing for peace processes and gender-responsive process design

Preparing for any peace process needs to happen before such a process has been deemed necessary. This requires stronger gender-responsive conflict analysis and a continuously updated mapping of conflict parties, influential regional and international powers, women peace actors and civic initiatives centering on peace and dialogue. Preparatory work must also identify women political actors and experts with contextual knowledge and expertise across disciplines relevant to the peace process, such as natural resource management, land disputes, constitutional law, electoral processes and the economy. Enough time and resources should be dedicated to this preparatory work to avoid last-minute, tokenistic inclusion and divisiveness. The nature of contemporary conflicts, often characterized by ‘conflicts within conflicts,’ necessitate a diverse range of expertise beyond senior diplomats. It is important that mediation teams draw from local expertise and include women experts from the community in their teams, which avails the process of on-the-ground know-how, supports local ownership, and ensures linkages between peace tracks.

There is significant value in preparing women’s groups and women peace leaders for when, not if, a peace process may be initiated. From Sudan to Colombia to the Pacific Islands, numerous perspectives were shared about efforts to bring women’s groups together to exchange analysis of the geopolitical situation, build strategic alliances, share political tools, and arrive at joint positions or collective action. This work requires sustained funding to women’s civil society, peacebuilders and networks to strengthen

their organizing, with the dual effect of not just supporting the pro-democracy women’s movement over a longer term, but also laying the foundation for women’s effective engagement in any future peace process. Women’s groups and women positioned to participate in peace talks may also benefit from capacity-building, although what this would entail should be based on an assessment of specific needs and technical knowledge required relevant to a specific process rather than a more generic approach.

Gender expertise is a crucial element at every stage of the peace process, particularly during the process design phase, and experts need to have direct access to decision-makers overseeing the peace process as well as political advisors and technical leads. This would help ensure that inclusivity is built into the process and maintained throughout, not solely in terms of women’s participation but also to enable the linkages and integration of women’s peacemaking efforts at different levels.

A circular flow of information-sharing and dialogue needs to be intentionally devised and systematically implemented. Elevating women’s peace work at the Track 2 and Track 3 levels to the ‘main table’ of negotiations is important but not sufficient. The interaction between different tracks must also be directed from the ‘main table’ to the other tracks.

One important perspective put forward was the building in of ‘hooks’ in mediation texts, preliminary agreements, and ceasefire agreements – provisions embedded early on which would guarantee women’s participation and enable greater inclusivity at later stages of the peace process.

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Women Mediator Networks informal exchange with Security Council members

In an informal exchange between members of the Women Mediator Networks (WMN) and Security Council members hosted by the Permanent Mission of Switzerland on 19 July 2024, the Council was called on to scale up support for the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women throughout **all** stages of peace processes, and reminded of the importance of concrete and operational language in related WPS resolutions and mandates. Women mediators also pressed the Council to take steps to ensure accountability for implementation of WPS commitments, including the proper safeguarding of hard-fought human rights and gender norms, which was particularly urgent given the changing geopolitical dynamics and pushback against democratic governance. They stressed the need to continue prioritizing women briefers to the Security Council and measures to ensure their safety. Finally, the Council was called to focus on the role of digital technologies in promoting inclusive peace processes, while also addressing its harmful potential to undermine peace efforts and women's safe and meaningful participation within these spaces.

Harnessing the potential of digital technologies to promote women's participation

Digital technologies emerged as a priority area, with a call for in-depth understanding of its diverse applications in mediation, given digital technologies' pervasiveness in civilian and military domains and its specific implications for peace processes and women peace actors. Many views were expressed about how mediation actors have used social media for instance, for analysis and communication, to seek inputs from a broad range of society, and to engage with conflict parties, women's groups and civil society. Examples include virtual consultations and digital dialogues with civil society by the UN mediation teams for Yemen, Syria, and Libya and the gathering of thousands of submissions during the Colombian peace process.

Digital tools hold immense potential to enhance the ability of women peace actors and mediators to create narratives of themselves and of the peace process, to drive discourse, counter mis- and disinformation, and avoid a vacuum that spoilers could fill. Specialized tools to address mis- and disinformation have been developed and are already being applied in various contexts, including the International Fact-Checking Network and Tech4Peace³ which was used to address the circulation of falsehoods in Iraq. Digital tools can also be helpful for real-time updates about a peace process – as was the case during the Colombian peace process, when the mediation team and international backers used a strong communications strategy from the earliest stages to raise awareness of the process and its participatory nature.

At the same time, there was a clear need for further examination and capacity-building among mediation actors, women's rights defenders and international supporters on the inequalities and potential risks inherent in the use of digital technologies and how to address and mitigate this.

Inequalities experienced in the digital space featured prominently. The unequal distribution of technology, lack of access to digital infrastructure of marginalized communities, low digital literacy and security concerns, all disproportionately affect women. This digital gender divide is further widened by the high cost of technology-related

3 See <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/about-ifcn/> and <https://t4p.co/about/about-us?lang=en>.

training, since many women are unable to afford it. In addition, the emerging use of virtual spaces for women's inclusion warrants attention, particularly those cast as parallel processes just for women, often justified on the basis of security considerations. These risk tokenizing women or having the adverse effect of further sidelining them from the 'main table'.

The lack of norms and regulations policing the technology industry fuels distrust among many women's rights defenders and women peacebuilders who have witnessed rampant abuse of digital tools in conflict contexts. The prevalence of tech-facilitated gender-based violence across conflict contexts is alarming, spanning cyber harassment, doxing and violent threats against women's rights defenders, women peacebuilders and women political figures. In addition to advocating for protective legislation, it will be important to engage with social media platforms to solicit their cooperation in curbing the harmful effects of digital technology and to explore avenues for partnership on pro-peace applications.

Next Steps

Several areas for follow up emerged with implications for the international community, mediation actors, the UN and other multilateral institutions. It was noted that while several proposals raised during the retreat were not new, they were worth reinforcing given their continued relevance and the lack of implementation to date. Additionally, several issues were identified that require further investigation and for some topics, evidence-based research more specifically.

The following are key recommendations put forward by participants at the retreat:

1. Preparing for Peace Talks – Key Points for Mediation Teams and the International Community

Stronger gender-responsive conflict analysis, mapping and documentation

There are numerous gaps in gender-responsive conflict analysis prior to and during the design of peace processes, including mapping of women mediators, peacebuilders and experts across sectors relevant to negotiations. Women peacebuilders on the ground were often aware of indicators pointing to increased tensions within their communities possibly leading to the outbreak of violence. The use of digital technologies and working closely with women peacebuilders active on the ground could contribute to predictive analysis for conflict prevention. This includes the potential for developing early warning mechanisms through channeling on-the-ground information to and from women mediators and their networks. Sustained resourcing is needed for ongoing documentation of the impact of women's peacemaking at the Track 2 and Track 3 levels.

Gender expertise and the inclusion of local peacebuilders and women with technical expertise across topics under negotiation

Gender expertise should be embedded within process design decision-making prior to the start of any peace process, and then should be maintained through to implementation of any future peace agreement. Engaging women with technical expertise across topics under negotiation would be valuable and serve to not restrict women's roles to narrowly defined 'gender concerns.'

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Design of multi-track processes

Process design should reflect a multi-track approach with formal mechanisms for linking peace processes along different tracks, ensuring women's voices from grassroots to high-level negotiations are heard, and that the regular flow of information, expertise and dialogues are built and maintained with reciprocity, from 'top to bottom,' and 'bottom to top.'

Support to women's groups, women mediators, and women political actors to prepare

Sustained, adequate resourcing is critical for women's effective participation in peace talks including initiatives to enable information-sharing with women's groups on specific processes, capacity-building on relevant technical subjects, and creating spaces for women to come together and exchange analysis and strategies for influence.

2. Greater awareness of risks and potential of digital technologies for peacemaking

Despite many instances of the positive application of digital technologies by mediation actors to broaden inclusion, given the context of weak policy frameworks for regulation, this is an area requiring further investigation, awareness-raising and capacity-building to mitigate the risk of harm and disproportionate impacts of digital technologies on women in conflict settings. Proposed actions included supporting mediation actors to better understand the safe and ethical application of digital technologies to strengthen the inclusion of women in peace processes, while also ensuring that virtual formats do not become a substitute for women's real and meaningful participation at the table. Also recommended was the organizing of discussions at the level of the Security Council with key technology actors, on the impact of digital technologies on peace and conflict, the role of social media companies in curbing hate speech and addressing mis- and disinformation, and how to facilitate access to technology and other resources to support peace efforts. Finally, capacity-building for women mediators on the challenges and opportunities of digital tools would be valuable, particularly how to access knowledge and financial resources to leverage technology for peacemaking in safe and effective ways.



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3. Utilizing Women Mediator Networks as a key asset for peace and security

WMNs emphasized their readiness to support and participate actively in mediation processes from process design stages with expertise from within their expansive networks, including practitioners with mediation experience at community, civil society and diplomatic levels. Several members called for formal recognition of WMNs as key partners and the institutionalization of their role in all UN-led peace processes. WMNs could support the development of databases of women experts from their networks, with attention to intersectionality and the diversity of expertise required. WMNs could also play a role in the tracking of implementation of WPS commitments by reviewing periodic reports on WPS and National Action Plans. Members strongly encouraged the Security Council, mediation actors, and broader international community to actively engage with them and the Global Alliance of Regional WMNs.

4. Political and financial support for women-led peacebuilding and alliance-building

The international community should encourage and promote spaces for alliance-building on women's leadership in peacemaking, including by engaging men as allies, creating incentives for gender champions in peace processes, and creating mentorship programmes pairing experienced gender champions with emerging leaders. This support should go hand-in-hand with long-term, sustainable funding to allow for systematic engagement with local peacebuilders, strengthening of the role and work of WMNs, documenting and bringing visibility to the work of women peacebuilders at the grassroots level, and building connections between women peace actors at all levels.

5. Further inquiry and expanding the conversation

While the mediation landscape continues to evolve in terms of the number and type of initiatives, actors and approaches, it does not seem to be trending in the direction of strengthened receptivity and political will to implement WPS commitments. Further investigation and research linked to identifying entry points for women's participation in the context of multiple 'tables' and processes will be invaluable, as will ongoing discussions on issues raised at the retreat between mediation actors, including envoys and special representatives, member states, key regional institutions and the Global Alliance. Participants committed to carrying back insights from the retreat and expanding the conversation within

their respective networks. Salient topics for follow up include:

- concrete measures to build gender inclusivity in the process design of political processes, and ensure accountability for implementation of WPS commitments at each stage of the process;
- harnessing the use of digital technologies to strengthen inclusivity of peace processes while mitigating the risks of harm;
- mediation actors availing themselves of the local expertise of women peacebuilders and the WMNs; and
- ways to strengthen linkages and coordination between mediation initiatives and Tracks 1, 2 and 3.



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