SparkBlue online consultation summary

Gender-inclusive peace processes: Strengthening women's meaningful participation through constituency building

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CONTEXT

Between 7-27 July 2021, UN Women organized the global conference "Gender-Inclusive Peace Processes: Strengthening Women's Meaningful Participation through Constituency Building," in partnership with CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and with financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in cooperation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

The following summary offers an overview on the views and recommendations shared by participants in the course of this conference, with a focus on the discussions that took place online on **SparkBlue**, the community engagement platform powered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

SparkBlue served as a complement to the various conference sessions hosted live on Zoom (*synchronous component*) and provided a **private space for conference invitees to continue the conversation beyond the live convening events** (*asynchronous engagement*).

The private engagement space on SparkBlue was divided into two discussion rooms, moderated by Independent Diplomat and Inclusive Peace and by civil society actors. The discussion rooms are as follows:

1. **DISCUSSION ROOM 1: How to build and nurture a constituency?**
2. **DISCUSSION ROOM 2: Dynamics between constituency building and formal peace processes**

DISCUSSION ROOM 1

Themes

The discussion room included contributions from participants spanning Palestine, Syria, Nigeria, Iraq, Sudan, Uganda, Tunisia, Cameroon, and Western Sahara. Discussions focused on the topic of building and nurturing constituencies to foster inclusive peace and support women's meaningful inclusion in peace processes.

Main discussion points

Participants highlighted the following:

- **Building and nurturing constituencies requires a deliberate effort** that enables the inclusion, relevance and resilience of women.

- **Safety and security of women activists and peacebuilders on the ground**. The retaliation against and the targeting of women by governments and political groups remains a key concern for activists and organizations when carrying out in-country operations across multiple contexts. The backing of international organizations and UN agencies can help provide protection and give further legitmacy to these efforts.

- **Engagement of women in political and civil society spaces**. Participants flagged the importance of building new and strengthening existing links between women in political groups and those working in civil society to exchange views and to enable civil society voices to feed into peace processes. Accusations of elitism may arise when civil society actors cross over into the political space. Additional resources to support women civil society actors in this transition into peace fora are needed to ensure they remain effective and can maintain the support of their constituencies.

- **Supporting women in conflict prevention and peace processes**. In the early stages of conflict, women can play a role in identifying warning signs and imminent crises. In addition to supporting women's participation in peace processes, the international community must support women involved in peacebuilding before the outbreak of conflict as a priority to enable conflict prevention.

- **Role of technology and digital tools**. Participants praised the opportunities afforded by digital tools to amplify women's voices and establish links with different actors. However, lack of access (including lack of internet infrastructure or connectivity issues due to ongoing crises), sometimes paired with scarce technological literacy, can limit some women's ability to influence processes and decisions. Efforts must be made to address the de-facto marginalization of these voices. Furthermore, the issue of online harassment against women was stressed as an issue frequently faced by women online when speaking up about various challenges.

- **Women's involvement in the security sector**. Security spaces are dominated by men, with limited participation of women. Participants highlighted the need for women to serve in strategic leadership positions in order to influence peace processes and inform more gender-sensitive operations that effectively protect women and children.

- **Amplifying the voices of women and women-led organizations**. Participants highlighted the need for caution when raising awareness and amplifying women's voices, in order to mitigate retaliation. They also flagged the importance for women peace actors to use the right terminology in order to be understood by their constituencies and wider communities.

Further discussion and working group engagement

On 14 July, participants had the opportunity to participate in online working group session 1 on "**How to build and nurture a constituency?**" hosted on Zoom. During the session, participants had the chance to choose among one of four breakout rooms covering different aspects of constituency building and discuss in small groups with their peers. These rooms covered:

1. **Opportunities and challenges of digital methods in constituency-building**. This room explored the use of social media for building constituencies and sharing information. A key challenge identified was the unequal access to information. Additionally, the use of social media tools is not without risk, as revealing one's identity can result in women getting targeted through hate speech and online harassment. In terms of solutions, the breakout room pointed to complementary approaches such as radio messages that do not require data and explicit efforts to include grassroots communities.

2. **Consultative processes as a tool for constituency building**. This breakout room explored the design processes and mechanisms that help ensure women's protection. Suggestions included the development of strategic communications plans and platforms to ensure messages are

communicated both ways, expectations are managed and mediators communicate their role clearly. Participants suggested that the international community should ensure research and prep material is available to support consultations, allow sufficient time for consultations and constituency building, donor flexibility to operate in complex contexts, develop systems to enhance security, and recognize that constituencies are not only political or regional but also intersectional.

3. **Representing political movements in peace processes: who and how**. This room discussed the challenges women face as a result of their engagement in politics and the need for the international community to ensure women who engage in high-level politics receive the support required to engage effectively. Participants emphasized that a rethink of the traditional assistance to women in politics was needed, that moved beyond traditional forms of capacity building or 'empowerment' to concrete technical support and facilitation of high-level access. The group looked at how parties could be encouraged to increase women's ranks within peace processes, as well as how to move the conversation beyond representation. This included an honest assessment of the pros and cons of instruments like quotas.

4. **Representing civil society actors in peace processes: how to build and nurture a constituency**. This breakout room examined the diverse perspectives of women within civil society and the challenges they face when engaging in peace processes. Participants noted that women are often perceived as being too qualified (elitist) or not qualified enough, and they can be stereotyped and constrained by social norms. Women in civil society can also face security threats and harassment, which has become more pronounced in the digital sphere. Issues of security can be a deterrent to women in entering and remaining in the peace process, especially at local levels. Different stakeholders must work together to introduce a discussion around gender at the community level to address the exclusion of women and highlight women as stakeholders.

DISCUSSION ROOM 2

Themes

The second discussion room on **Dynamics between constituency building and formal peace processes** examined the ways in which choices made when shaping a peace process affect the dynamics between peace actors and their constituencies. It included interventions from participants from various regional backgrounds, including Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Nigeria, Finland, and the USA.

Main discussion points

The following themes were raised by participants:

1. **Advisory Structures and Parallel Mechanisms in formal peace processes.** Participants discussed the effects of participation in advisory structures and mechanisms like the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the Yemeni women's Technical Advisory Group, and how these mechanisms help to build and maintain a constituency. These are important mechanisms among the constellation of parallel,

mutually reinforcing tracks to promote women's direct and meaningful participation in talks. Yet, to ensure the effectiveness of parallel mechanisms, UN or other mediators should invest more in these mechanisms and utilize them as a true resource. Advisory bodies, outside the context of active negotiations, are often limited to providing policy input without a clear link to the agenda of negotiations or consultations between the parties. The communication also tends to be ad hoc and unidirectional (from women members of the mechanism). The relationship between UN/other mediators and advisory mechanisms needs to be reframed to become a genuine conversation and a continuous two-way engagement.

2. **Track II/Track I transfer.** Participants flagged the many ways in which the ideas and outcomes of parallel mechanisms can be 'transferred' to formal negotiation processes, but also that peacemaking/peacebuilding initiatives in certain contexts – notably Syria and Yemen – are struggling to connect with and shape the Track I level. There are several barriers to 'transfer' in these two contexts, which are often more acute for women-led initiatives.

3. **Overlap and differences between representation and participation.** The discussion underlined that not all participation is meaningful, and that the best way of ensuring women's meaningful participation is to ensure that women hold leadership and decision-making roles. Moreover, it was noted that not all women who take part in peace and political transition processes are automatically gender champions, along with the importance of ensuring that men are also committed to the gender equality/women's rights agenda, which can often be supported with knowledge production on gender equality and women's rights that is contextualized to specific negotiation processes.

4. **Role of the media in constituency building.** Participants highlighted the key role of the media and of information sharing in constituency building, including in terms of trust building. Particularly in the MENA region, many social movements today are based on sharing information and advocating through social media. Relatedly, participants touched on how the interaction of peace practitioners involved in formal peace processes with their constituencies shapes the constituencies' perception of the peace process.

5. **Temporary Special Measures.** The discussion examined how best to conceptualize and employ temporary special measures (TSMs) in peacemaking processes, looking at who initiated strategies and who were the key actors implementing them; the timing of TSMs; and the factors that impacted on their effectiveness. There was a focus on how the use of TSMs in peacemaking processes can lay the groundwork for strengthening women's social, economic, and political rights and participation more broadly. The discussion also looked at how thinking about TSMs in peace processes can both reflect and also further an understanding of peace processes that situates these processes as one part of a broader and long-term societal transition or transformation.

6. **Use of quotas.** Participants provided interesting and slightly contrasting insights on specific TSMs, particularly the use of quotas. These insights have underlined both the transformative potential of quotas and the potential danger that they may unintentionally serve as a ceiling that restricts greater women's participation or that they may be perceived by conflict parties as a relatively low-cost way to appear inclusive, while making little progress in advancing meaningful political inclusion.

7. **Empowering women and bringing learning back to communities**. Empowering women and bringing learning back to communities was cited as being key to strengthening links between women involved

in Tracks I and II and to maintaining constituencies. It was suggested that this kind of support from the international community needs to be continuous and include mentorship and training of trainers to amplify the impact of individual interventions. Such support should not only be tied to active rounds of UN negotiations as peace and political processes often stall for lengthy periods, as numerous examples have shown.

Further discussion and working group engagement

On 15 July, participants had the opportunity to participate in in online working group session 2 on **"Dynamics between constituency building and formal peace processes**," hosted on Zoom. During the session, participants had the chance to choose among one of three breakout rooms addressing different sub-themes related to constituency building and formal peace processes in smaller groups. These covered:

1. **How can process design enhance participants' representativeness?** This breakout room addressed how process design elements can enable or hinder participants' ability to represent and liaise with their constituencies. The challenges highlighted include funding, venue choice and access, process agenda and schedule to allow for time for participants to contact their constituencies. A further consideration is the mediator's mandate to address gender issues and knowledge of gender considerations. The key solutions to address or mitigate these challenges include infusing proper **gender analysis in process design** from the outset. An aspect of this is the importance of gender advisors being viewed as allies and complementary to the peace process. **Digital tools** were also highlighted as a valuable enabler of consultations with constituencies. The importance of involving **local women** from the ground to ensure integrated gender analysis of the conflict was likewise a point raised by attendees, as was the need for **funding** to specifically enable women representatives to engage with their constituencies.

2. **Temporary Special Measures in formal peace processes and constituency building**. The breakout session set out various examples of TSMs including **quotas** and **advisory bodies** to UN mediators. Some of the challenges to enforcing and enabling TSMs include resistance from parties and mediators; the lack of prioritization for women's issues in favor of other themes; and the limitations of TSMs themselves to achieve gender equality and to challenge cultural norms. The discussion highlighted best practices from various contexts such as Syria where women achieved 28-30% participation in the three blocs of the Constitutional Committee. In addition to quotas, capacity strengthening and campaigns for a victim/survivor centered approach was highlighted particularly in terms of linking the peace process to the realities on the ground. The session also included a thorough discussion of concrete actions for mediators and the international community to empower quotas and advisory mechanisms in peace processes.

3. **How to sequence steps in peace and transition processes in view of constituency-building.** The discussion covered the steps relevant for constituency building at different stages of the peace process design. Participants highlighted the importance of women's inclusion at the local level, including understanding and addressing challenges for the most vulnerable segments of society. Participants set out several solutions to the frameworks that hinder women's access to and participation in peace processes. Building alliances at the global and regional levels and securing the buy-in of international actors to solidify women networks and actors for more inclusive peace processes are key in this regard.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conference participants provided recommendations throughout the discussion. Among others, they highlighted the following:

1.   Leverage constituency building to foster inclusive peace
Use and expand the practice of constituency building to increase women's meaningful participation in peace processes, enhance their relevance and strengthen their resilience.

2.   Build connections among women peace practitioners
Create opportunities for women in WPS with different expertise and across different country contexts to connect and exchange lessons learned, including through creating a database of women actors.

3.   Strengthen alliances with local and global actors
Consolidate women's networks through building alliances at the global and regional levels and through securing the buy-in of international actors for more inclusive peace.

4.   Act on commitments to foster progress of the WPS agenda
Move past the 'talking for the sake of talking' attitude and translate existing commitments and recommendations into action to further the WPS agenda.

5.   Allocate gender-responsive budgeting and core civil society funding
Earmark funding to specifically enable women representatives to engage with their constituencies.