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Inclusion of Women in Negotiations: The Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group

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Abstract

Women's political inclusion rates in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are some of the lowest in the world. Ongoing conflict worsens these low rates, as is the case in both Syria and Yemen. Importantly, this has resulted in the lack of women's inclusion in peacebuilding and negotiating conferences and meetings. To address this gap, international organizations led by the United Nations established the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) and the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG). This policy paper aims to study the reasons why both the WAB and the TAG have been unsuccessful in their attempts to mainstream women's participation in peacebuilding and negotiating process. The paper concludes with several proposals concerning how to strengthen women's inclusion and representation in peacebuilding processes.

Keywords: women; conflict; Yemen; Syria; women in peacebuilding

Introduction

Historically, gender norms and expectations have created serious barriers to women's political participation. Instead, the field of politics has been largely dominated by men who continue to propose policies that in many cases are gender blind. While hundreds of initiatives

have emerged over the past several decades with the objective of increasing women's political participation, these have had limited success in the Arab region. Today, the Arab region has the lowest rate of women's political participation globally, with only 15.2% of the region's parliaments containing women members. Women are also underrepresented in political parties around the region, with some parties even refusing to field a single female candidate (UN Women, n.d.). This lack of women's political participation is heightened during conflict, as women are often sidelined in peacebuilding and negotiating processes. This is particularly problematic as women are disproportionately affected by conflict. And yet, an important variable that affects a peace agreement's sustainability and durability is the presence and participation of women. For example, 64% of peace agreements are less likely to fail if women participate in their creation and, similarly, peace agreements are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years with the presence of women at the negotiating table (Barsa et al., 2016).

In attempt to increase the involvement of women in politics and to have inclusive negotiation processes, the offices of the Special Envoy of Syria and Yemen have each partnered with UN Women to establish the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) and the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG), respectively. This paper briefly reviews each of these organizations, including their successes and failures, and discusses strategies for strengthening women's political inclusion in peacebuilding and negotiating processes in the future.

The Syrian Women's Advisory Board

Syrian women, both prior to the war and today, are often discouraged from working in politics for several reasons. One of these reasons is the sexist mentality that deems such work as "inappropriate" for women. Another reason includes the gender discriminatory laws that are

imposed on women as well as the lack of education and skills that discourage them from running for leadership positions (Ghazzawi et al., 2015). A third reason is the fear of being harmed due to the lack of security in the country.

Although Syrian women face many barriers to entering the political arena, they have made valuable contributions that have helped to secure peace in certain communities over the past 11 years of the war. Syrian women have helped to broaden the agenda of various peacebuilding processes by bringing attention to critical issues that, prior to their involvement, had been ignored or dismissed. Syrian women have also participated in work related to the release of prisoners and they have brought added attention to forced disappearances. For example, in Baniyas, a group of 2,000 women and children who blocked a highway left the government no choice but to release hundreds of men who had been illegally detained. Syrian women have also helped to ensure safe passage for humanitarian aid by negotiating ceasefires in local areas. Syrian women have also aided in the distribution of medical supplies, they have organized peaceful protests, and they continue to work in various sectors such as education and healthcare in order to ensure that their communities have access to their everyday needs.

Political interventions in Syria formally began in 2012 with Geneva I, where women were notably absent. As a result, Syrian women began to pressure the UN to address this gender gap and to help them create a network of women to participate in these peacebuilding processes. While Syrian women were consequently present at the second round of political negotiations, which took place in January 2014, they were still underrepresented. These peace talks ultimately failed due to several factors including geopolitical manipulation, regional instability, contrasting global interests, and constant obstruction caused by the different parties to the negotiations

taking place, as well as the absence of women. At the very same moment, the UN held its first high-visibility women's conference in the Netherlands to give Syrian women a platform to address their concerns and to make recommendations to the Joint Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. This conference resulted in the launch of a group of diverse women civil society activists, the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD).

Finally, in February 2016, after three years of Syrian women's hard work, Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura formed the Women's Advisory Board (WAB). The WAB includes 12 Syrian women from different backgrounds and affiliations, who were appointed to ensure the inclusion of women and to represent women's different perspectives. However, the WAB does not directly participate in political negotiations; rather, they advise the mediators in the Geneva peace talks.

Syrian Women's Thoughts on WAB

As soon as WAB was created, some Syrian women felt that they were being pushed by the UN, along with other international actors, to put their political differences aside. This resulted in a backlash from the members of the WAB; while a very political war was happening in Syria, the WAB was using politically neutral language and remained silent on crucial issues such as a call for cease-fire (Asad, 2022). This depoliticization of the WAB reinforced gender norms about women as "peaceful" rather than "political," challenging their legitimacy as decision-making actors. As Marcell Shehwaro, a Syrian activist, pointed out, the situation in Syria is extremely political and yet, Syrian women were only offered an advisory position instead of a political one (Mahmoud, 2016).

This depoliticization of the WAB has been met with serious critiques from Syrian women and feminists. For example, when the WAB came out with a statement blaming the lack of food and aid in many parts of Syria on international sanctions, many Syrian women categorized the statement as politicized and fallacious because the inability was due to the military's intention to starve and control these opposition-dominated towns, not because of international sanctions. As Oula Ramada, a Syrian women's rights activist noted on Facebook in response to the statement, "I am a Syrian feminist, and this advisory board does not represent me in the slightest." Other groups of women have critiqued the WAB selection process and have argued that the included women do not represent the women of Syria. For example, veiled women felt they were not adequately represented in the WAB, given that most women in Syria are veiled while only a few of the 12 members of the WAB are (Asad, 2022). Shehwaro, like many Syrian women, expresses another concern by saying that the WAB members do not live like regular Syrian women and thus, they do not know their struggle (Mahmoud, 2016).

Dr. Mouna Ghanem, a Syrian activist and previous WAB member, notes that when she joined other Syrian women democrats at the peace talks in Geneva, they were not seen as official participants. Rather, they were considered as bystanders or observers to the process. As a result, she left the WAB; Ghanem felt like these negotiations, which did not even include Syrian women as central negotiators, were leading nowhere. Worse, she felt that the future of Syrians was being put in the hands of people that do not represent them in the slightest.

Despite all the efforts of the WAB, Syrian women remain under-represented in negotiations. At Geneva Peace talks in 2017, for example, Syrian women made up only 15% of

negotiators (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2018). Even when women are included in peace talks, their role remains observatory.

The Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group

As in Syria, women's historically limited political participation in Yemen is in part due to a discriminatory legal and social system that makes it very difficult, if not impossible for women to enter politics. As a result, Yemen's political parties are dominated by men; so too are Yemen's peace talks. As Rana Ghanem, a participant in peace talks, argues, the only way to begin to correct this imbalance is to implement a 30% gender quota across political institutions in the country. However, Yemeni women continue to play an active role in response to the war, with some participating directly in military action (Middle East Monitor, 2017). Others have participated in local initiatives, including the Mothers of Abductees Association, that seeks to raise awareness about forced disappearances in the country because of the conflict (Nasser, 2018).

In October 2015, UN Women and the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General to Yemen (OESGY) established the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, which is known as "Tawafuq." Tawafuq had 45 members, including gender specialists, activists, members of political parties, and businesswomen. The issue with Tawafuq was that although it was established to represent Yemeni women's voices in OESGY's work, the description of how they would do that and what their role would entail was unclear (Gutschke, 2017). In 2016, OESGY appointed a full-time senior gender advisor in the hopes of amplifying women's voices and including them in peace negotiations. Unfortunately, this caused tension between OESGY and

UN Women as the two organizations had competing visions of what Tawafuq's goals and aims should be.

OSESGY then decided to create its own version of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, with a new special envoy in 2018. As a result, the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was established. Resembling the WAB, members of TAG were picked by the OSESGY gender advisor based on certain criteria to ensure diversity within its membership. Surprisingly, however, TAG members were not invited to join meetings organized by the special envoy. Following the failed Geneva peace talks in 2018, several TAG members were told that they would not be invited again, despite the failure of the first convention (ICG, 2021).

Yemeni Women's Thoughts on TAG

During the 2018 Geneva peace talks, members of TAG were invited to present prepared papers. However, they were unclear about what was expected of them at this meeting. Further, they were treated simply as participants, rather than as active negotiators. Once again, TAG members were not really invited to directly participate in peace negotiations (Buringa, 2021). During that same negotiation meeting in Geneva, only one woman was present at the negotiation table, Rana Ghanem, who was there as a member of the Yemeni government's delegation (Domingues, 2022). Without denying the importance of Ghanem's contributions during those meetings as the only woman there, Yemeni women were extremely disappointed with the lack of women's engagement during these peace talks. These techniques are used to include women in an indirect way in formal political processes without creating room for them to participate directly or actively (Domingues, 2022). Women should be given meaningful roles in formal negotiations, like Rana Ghanem.

Recommendations

To increase women's meaningful political participation in peace processes, the UN Special Envoy should enforce a 30% women's quota for all delegations participating in peace negotiations. The UN should also dedicate a certain percentage of the funds allocated to peacebuilding activities to support women's groups and organizations to empower more women to participate in peacebuilding negotiations. As women's roles in Yemen and Syria continue to evolve during the conflicts in each respective country, UN women should work on training Syrian and Yemeni women as leaders and decision-makers and should aim to support these women as peacebuilders and political advocates.

Additionally, groups like WAB and TAG should work on coordinating with other activist women's groups in the country in order to mainstream a common agenda. Working collectively will give these groups a stronger foundation from which to confront and fight back against gender inequality and discrimination, and the ongoing conflict. Further, the inclusion of more women's groups means that national level groups like WAB and TAG can better account for the views and opinions of women from different ethnic, class, and other social categories. It is not enough to have a small group of eight or 12 women members to represent millions of women. This paper suggests expanding the membership of each group to approximately 80 people. These members would not be chosen by the UN but would be elected by other Syrian or Yemeni women, respectively, using creative methods such as digital voting to ensure a democratic election process. These 80 women would represent all Syrian or Yemeni women and would, in return, vote for an advisory group made up of 10 women. That way, the new WAB or TAG

council would better represent Syrian or Yemeni women at peacebuilding and negotiation meetings.

Conclusion

The inclusion of women in peace processes is vital for an inclusive process that can reflect the concerns of society. The inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes more generally ensures the long-term efficacy of such negotiations. An analysis of the Syrian WAB and the Yemeni TAG highlights how some of the formal attempts to mainstream women's participation in peacebuilding talks by the UN have not been as successful as originally hoped. Rather, WAB and TAG appear to be more tokenistic in nature, meaning, the women members of these groups were included only as a nod to gender equality rather than with the intention of allowing these women to directly participate in peacebuilding activities. Relying on women's advisory groups such as WAB and TAG is not enough, as these are indirect methods of inclusion that give women a voice but not a vote to affect change. Toward that end, groups resembling WAB and TAG are important and should exist, but they should be modified so that their members can have a direct role in formal peacebuilding processes.

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