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Menaal Munshey

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Corresponding author: Menaal Munshey

Author contact: menaal@icloud.com

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Localized Forms of Mediation, Conflict Resolution, and Peacebuilding in Lebanon

Menaal Munshey

Introduction

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) and subsequent resolutions signaled a major shift in global policy because it recognized women as a specific population group affected by conflict in unique and complex ways due to their gender (PeaceWomen, 2022). It also recognized that they have an inherent right to participate in peace negotiations and reconstruction efforts that directly affect their lives (Hamilton et al., 2020). Subsequently, National Action Plans (NAPs) were proposed as “a strategic tool for policymakers to operationalize and translate the international mandates of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into the domestic context” (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 1). Accordingly, Lebanon adopted its first NAP in 2019 for the period 2019-2022. The NAP contextualizes the WPS agenda by grounding the discussion in Lebanon’s national legal and strategic frameworks as well as the persistent challenges of advancing women’s rights in the personal, political, and legal realms. The NAP also connects these discussions to the international human rights framework and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (PeaceWomen, 2022). Lebanon’s NAP includes broad provisions on women’s mediation and conflict resolution efforts, which are being operationalized on a local level in various ways.

This article analyzes women’s peacebuilding initiatives in Lebanon focusing on conflict resolution and mediation at a local level. Based on semi-structured interviews with participants, this article highlights the University of Saint Joseph’s (USJ) program on community mediation in Lebanon¹ to better understand the program’s structure and impact, the various activities being conducted under this program, contextual challenges, and the way forward for community

mediation. Drawing from interview data, localized definitions of conflict, mediation, peacebuilding, and women's roles within these frameworks emerge.

Definitions: What is Conflict and Mediation?

Definitions and concepts in the field of conflict resolution are broad and diverse with a lack of consensus on basic definitions (Comair, 2022). Per the USJ Course Guide, "conflict means perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously" (Pruitt & Rubin, 2004, as quoted in USJ & UN Women, 2020, p. 22). Mediation "is a voluntary, confidential process to prevent and resolve tensions, disputes, conflicts, and crises" (USJ & UN Women, 2020, p. 46). Mediation is "defined as the contract under which the parties agree to appoint an intermediary to facilitate an agreement to end the dispute, with the help of a third person, the mediator...The mediator has no power to pronounce a decision but facilitates communication among the concerned parties" (USJ & UN Women, 2020, p. 46).

However, Parry (2022) advocates for a broader understanding of mediation to encompass the local initiatives taking place in Lebanon:

The crux of any mediation process is the period of negotiation between the disputing parties, but what happens before and after this period can be equally vital to resolving the dispute and fulfilling any agreement. Negotiations often require extensive and sustained engagement outside or alongside negotiations, including dialogue, third-party facilitation or—particularly when part of a multitrack peace process—reconciliation efforts and confidence-building measures. (Parry, 2022, p. 7)

Parry (2022) also advocates for a broader understanding of the term "mediator" to reflect on-the-ground realities: "Women who mediate local conflicts often describe themselves in other ways, such as peacebuilders who engage in community work, even when they initiate dialogue or lead negotiations" (Parry, 2022, p. 8). Apart from the period of negotiation, women's roles may be to initiate dialogue, facilitate initial meetings, and/or influence the process.

Local mediation refers to community-level mediation efforts that have limited territorial scope, are mediated by someone from that community, and address disputes that concern that community (Parry, 2022). Their primary objective is to "prevent, manage or resolve local conflict" (Parry, 2022, p. 8). These efforts also further the localization agenda, which donors and organizations committed to during the 2016 Humanitarian Summit (ACCORD, 2021).

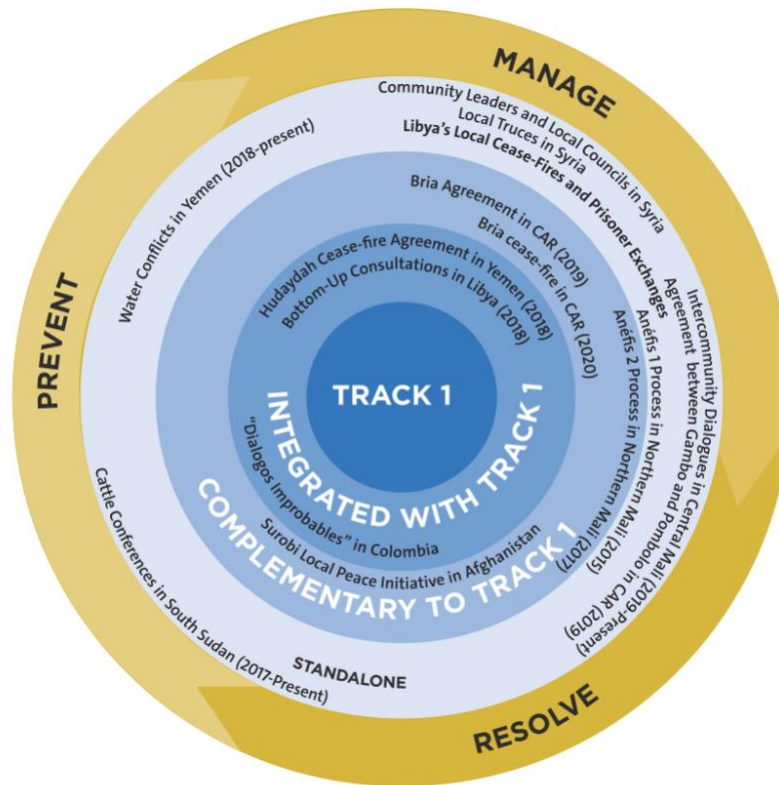
Based on the above literature, this study adopts a broader conceptual approach to mediation, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding to encompass the range of work taking place at a local level in Lebanon within the context of the WPS agenda.

The Global WPS Agenda and Approach

Twenty years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda, women remain underrepresented in peace processes (ACCORD, 2021). Within the WPS agenda, arguments in favor of the increased representation of women in mediation tend to hinge on the ability of women to play the role of peacemaker and a functionalist argument of advancing women's interests. It is argued that the participation of women leads to greater recognition of gendered aspects of conflict in a peace process and gender-sensitive peace agreements are more likely to be sustainable (Turner, 2020).

Previous studies do appear to support the suggestion that women bring "soft" skills and a more caring approach to the role of mediator, highlighting the skills of listening, reading silences, and observing exclusion and gender dynamics (Turner, 2020). However, some participants in Turner's study were less comfortable with attributing their skills to their gender. Instead, they reflected on the intersections of their identities and how they were able to draw on different characteristics at different times to build up trust and confidence with parties (Turner, 2020).

UNSCR 1325 introduced the idea of establishing active women's networks in conflict management and prevention (USJ & UN Women, 2020). Women mediators negotiate a wide range of local conflicts including matters concerning security and conflict, displacement, and personal or family issues. They face a wide range of gendered risks—online and offline—while engaging in this work and have limited resources (Parry, 2022). Examples of local mediation efforts relating to Track 1 in the Arab region are provided below (Parry, 2022, p. 9):



Mediation is classified as Track I (high-level, official diplomacy), Track II (diplomacy that involves conflict resolution specialists, non-governmental organizations or civil society representatives), and Track III (local level) processes. It is generally acknowledged that women are active mediators at the grassroots community level; they are over-represented as a category at the Track III level (Turner, 2020). This study relates to Track III processes, or local grassroots mediation, that occurs within and between communities to address local conflicts.

The Lebanese Context and Local Efforts

Lebanon scores 91.3 in the Fragile States Index with a classification of “alert” due to its deepening economic and political crises, with a rise in protests and violence (Fund for Peace, 2022). In terms of gender inequality, Lebanon ranks 119th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report with particularly low scores for economic participation, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2022). Since the endorsement of Lebanon’s NAP on WPS in September 2019, there has been some limited and hard-won progress in terms of increasing women’s engagement and participation, including efforts relating to women’s mediation, conflict

resolution, and peacebuilding (Simpson & Assaad, 2022).² Prominent examples of such efforts are discussed below.

In 2021, International Alert, with the support of UN Women, found that unresolved issues from the past, and particularly the Lebanese Civil War, are compromising current peace and reconciliation processes and limiting women's central role in these processes. Additional analysis found that women, young women, and young men coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and peripheral areas are distinctly disenfranchised from meaningful participation in peace and security. Furthermore, gender, class, age, and nationality continue to be points of division and tension among communities in Lebanon that are often triggered by memories of the Civil War. This is hindering cross-community and intergenerational dialogue exchanges and the capacity of women to lead community groups to build bridges across divides and work towards a collective peace memory (Simpson & Assaad, 2022).

Based on this, the Creating Space for Women Peacebuilders project, implemented by International Alert in partnership with UN Women, brought together 85 women from Tripoli and Bekaa in a series of training and coaching sessions, and facilitated dialogue to build dynamic networks of women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to lead conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts in their communities (Simpson & Assaad, 2022). The women's networks led several peacebuilding initiatives including, for example, setting up a WhatsApp group to share and combat misinformation to mitigate tensions in their areas. In Baalbek, in the Bekaa governorate, the initiatives took the form of engaging women and men in activities focused on breaking down gendered stereotypes and events with women ex-fighters. In Tripoli, the initiatives involved awareness sessions on topics of concern for women, a cleaning campaign, and drawing graffiti and artwork on the walls with positive messages. Interviews in both Tripoli and Bekaa revealed that women were perceived to have a role in mitigating conflicts through dialogue and converging views within their immediate communities/tribes, but the analysis also revealed diverging views and misconceptions around the role of women in mediating disputes across conflict actors, echoing limiting gender narratives (Simpson & Assaad, 2022).

Between 2019 and 2020, UN Women Lebanon, in partnership with the Centre for Professional Mediation (CPM) at USJ, established three women's mediation networks: two in

communities in South Lebanon and another in the Palestinian refugee camp Ein El Helweh, also located in the Southern governorate. This work was part of the project “Fostering Stabilization and Social Cohesion in Lebanon through Women’s Engagement in Conflict Prevention and Management,” which sought to increase women’s roles in preventing renewed conflict and managing local disputes and tensions, in addition to promoting more effective dialogue communities in Lebanon. This project was carried out in collaboration with the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and funded with the support of the Government of Finland and the Rebecca Dykes Foundation.

The aim was to create and support networks of local women mediators through skills and knowledge development. Training modules included: positive interactions, conflict analysis and management, the art of negotiation, and mediation for conflict prevention and resolution. The second part of the program focused on practical initiatives that would promote a culture of mediation and address sensitive topics and causes of tension in their communities (USJ & UN Women, 2020). This highlights the impact of USJ’s program on the women to draw wider lessons about women’s roles in local mediation, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding in Lebanon.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three women who had participated in USJ’s program on community mediation, and one woman who is a coordinator for the program. Questions were asked relating to the content and impact of the program, as well as what conflict, mediation, and peacebuilding mean to them.

Table 1

Interviewee Profiles

Study Participants	Profession	Other Characteristics	Location
Chour Interviewee	School Principal—Enrolled in a PhD program on educational leadership	Lived in Dubai and the US for many years and began volunteering upon return to Lebanon	Chouf

Hasbaiya Interviewee	Director of the Social Development Center, Ministry Employee	Ministry employee for 24 years	South Lebanon
Sour Interviewee	Journalist and community organizer	Did not work for 13–14 years after marriage, before getting involved in community activities	South Lebanon
USJ Interviewee	Program Coordinator of USJ program, trainer by profession	Communication expert	Beirut

Fieldwork was conducted in December 2022. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated from Arabic to English (where required). Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts, leading to the identification of the themes discussed below.

Analysis and Findings

While the WPS agenda has been adopted globally, its implementation, localized understanding and contextualized adaptation is explored here using interview data. Findings center around the following themes:

- The program’s structure and impact, including examples of women-led, local, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives
- Sustainability and institutionalization of women’s mediation efforts, including contextual challenges
- Localized understanding of conflict, mediation, peacebuilding, and women’s roles in the above

The importance of women’s role in community mediation, conflict prevention and peacebuilding has been analyzed extensively. This article adds to the literature by highlighting local activities under the WPS agenda in Lebanon.

The Program: Structure and Impact

All participants joined the course as part of their commitment to continuing personal and professional development. In addition, the Sour Interviewee said she “was also interested in women’s rights and peace.” This is in contrast to a previous study in Northern Ireland that found

that “all of the women (participants) had a frame of reference for talking about mediation with reference to women’s political organization and activism” (Turner, 2020, p. 391).

The program impacted these women immensely: “The mediation course is one of the best and most magnificent courses that we have ever participated in” (Hasbaiya Interviewee). She also felt supported institutionally by UN Women, USJ, UNIFIL, and the network she was now a part of. The Chouf Interviewee felt that “the coaching part was amazing. The support part was amazing. And it opened something for me...The seed was there. They put the soil, the rich soil, and they watered it and it opened.” Similarly, the interviewee from Sour noted:

Initially, this program had a goal, which is to build a network of effective women to manage and to avoid conflict. This newly found network became popular within the local community. People now come to us (for mediation) through the municipality. The certificate that we have validates us...It is one of the most important programs because it makes an actual, radical difference in the lives of women who train.

The program’s goal was not limited to training but that the program should culminate in women taking a central role in the community, which is part of their role in security and peacebuilding (USJ & UN Women, 2020). Thus, the coaching and institutional model provide the skills, knowledge, support, and confidence for women to extend their zone of influence to impact their communities.

Currently, there is a short program focusing on community mediation and a longer program that leads to a certificate in professional mediation. The content of the program on community mediation emerged over time. The initial cohorts during the pilot phase in 2017 were taught modules on conflict analysis and management, as well as positive communication. “There was no mediation at that point because we wanted to test the waters to see how the women would respond to such topics and how willing they are to such an approach,” the USJ Interviewee noted. They then moved on to topics like “collaborative problem solving, negotiation, and mediation. We kept conflict analysis and management. We kept positive communication. We established a coaching phase” (USJ Interviewee). Thus, the program was tailored to the needs and responses of the participants, rather than relying on pre-existing courses or materials.

Many participants pinned the success of the program not at the community or societal level, but rather at the psychological level. The Hasbaiya Interviewee found it to be “an opportunity

for regulating emotions, managing non-violent communication, and examining one's needs." The Sour interviewee noted that:

This program taught me to take a breath and think calmly. The program truly changed me on a personal level. My colleagues often tell me that I am innately a mediator and that I've always possessed certain skills, but I just needed a nudge to release them...The program taught me to respect other people's points of view. The values I gained help me stay stable and keep me from giving out negative reactions.

The USJ Interviewee also recognized this, saying "[the program] really raised their self-awareness. It was a turning point in their lives." She said they used the training to affect their communities gradually: "Down the line they (course participants) said, okay, now we're going to do some work in the field. But we feel we need more empowerment. We need to be able to speak" (USJ Interviewee). Similarly, Simpson and Assaad (2022) suggest that women may require further support and encouragement to take up opportunities to engage in new initiatives due to a lack of confidence. While the psychological aspect is important to creating wider impact, it is also important that the program's effect should be felt at the community or societal level.

The program also provides these women with support and useful skills. When they tested their skills within their communities, the USJ Interviewee noted that:

They're able to have the upper hand in the conversation. Not because they're stronger in their argument, but because they're softer in their approach. They know how to listen. They know how to rephrase. They know how to ask the right questions. They know how to identify what's the real interest or need behind that. And once they hear the need and they echo it back to whoever is their interlocutor, could be a husband, a child, a neighbor, a colleague at work, a supervisor, or a subordinate...when they use that technique and they're successful and they feel at ease. They're super happy and proud. They feel the power of the tools they've been given. And I think this is what makes them transform their lives.

While it is an important observation that women are better equipped with skills to transform the way they interact in a range of situations, it is also important that they are equipped to deal with hard political issues in order to holistically realize the aims of the WPS agenda.

Women-led Local Community-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives

The participants mentioned initiatives they had participated in, which they classified as examples of peacebuilding and mediation. As the Chouf Interviewee admitted, "we did not get to

use mediation in real life a lot. The area we worked in the most was spreading awareness.” Participants also highlighted that mediation and related awareness-raising activities are a form of addressing intergenerational trauma, learning from past conflicts, and creating safe spaces to address mental health concerns, which are all factors that may perpetuate violence in Lebanon. The examples they provided of women-led local community-based peacebuilding initiatives can be classified as focusing on youth, educational institutions, women, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other examples (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Examples of Women-led Community-Based Peacebuilding Initiatives

Focus	Examples
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational mediation in schools (Chouf Interviewee) • Workshops for parents in schools on positive communication and positive parenting (Chouf Interviewee) • Implementing mediation and conflict resolution in schools (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Supporting children to participate in sports activities, as they are unable to do this due to rising financial costs (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Spread the concept of non-violence among children in schools (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Bridging the communication gap between youth in diverse neighborhoods through awareness-raising sessions or workshops (USJ Interviewee)
Educational Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness-raising on the role of mediation and positive non-violent communication between school principals in the area (Chouf Interviewee) • Developing mediation skills for school directors (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Awareness sessions were held on mediation, conflict and how to approach conflict with a different perspective with school directors (USJ Interviewee)
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sewing workshops for women aimed at income generation and skills building (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Soap-making workshops for women aimed at income generation and skills building (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Awareness sessions were held on mediation, conflict and how to approach conflict with a different perspective with women’s committees (USJ Interviewee)

NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness-raising on the role of mediation and positive non-violent communication with heads of NGOs and associations (Chouf Interviewee) • Awareness sessions on mediation, conflict and how to approach conflict with a different perspective with heads of NGOs (USJ Interviewee)
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural activities such as cinema and theatre as the nearest location is otherwise 1.5 hours away (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Workshops on effective listening, positive communication, emotional intelligence, and emotion management to “spread the concept of mediation among the community” (Hasbaiya Interviewee) • Conducting a study on including mediation in Ja’afari courts (Sour Interviewee) • Community discussions on the increase in conflict and ways to create change (Sour Interviewee) • Participatory theatre for and with the community (USJ Interviewee) • Awareness sessions were held on mediation, conflict and how to approach conflict with a different perspective with heads of municipalities (USJ Interviewee)

Based on the above classification, the majority of activities focus on youth, whereas a minority focus on women and NGOs. Initiatives within the ‘other’ category include those focusing on cultural activities and wider dialogue, as well as dialogue with community power-holders. Therefore, while the focus of activities on youth and educational institutions is positive, increased efforts could also be made in engaging with other local stakeholders.

Interviewees highlighted successful initiatives aimed at initiating dialogue. As the USJ Interviewee highlighted in relation to the youth of two diverse neighborhoods, the program:

Developed four different sessions. We brought the youth from these different areas, and it was a beautiful success story...we did not get an umbrella template that was dropped off. We made sure that the people who have witnessed the challenges and the failures before are the same people who are developing the sessions. So, it was very organic. It was local. So, these people they know these youth and they are in contact with them on different occasions. So, they know them, they know their needs, they know the fears, they know the concerns. They know who will be an obstacle in the organization, who will facilitate, who will commit, who will not. So, they developed something taking into

consideration these sensitivities. Because some topics, and we have seen this even in our training, you cannot start with, you need to create a space of safety for people. In her view, the sessions had a large impact on the participants in terms of self-awareness, open communication, talking about sensitive topics such as bullying, relationships with parents, and building an understanding of the “other.” She pins the success of the initiative on the localized design and contextual knowledge.

In Tripoli, participants set up a participatory theatre in the community. The USJ Interviewee explained:

They did a forum theatre about family. So, this was also beautiful. So, they asked the audience to come up (and act). They showed them a typical Tripoli household where you have more than one family living in the same household. So, you have the in-laws...you had the two ladies, like two women married to two brothers. And then you had the mother of the brothers. And then you have a brother who was abroad and came to visit, which is a typical Tripoli household, which is not the case in Beirut. Again, here's the importance of making it organic and of making it a mirror of the community, because even in Lebanon, you have different communities.

She highlighted the importance of building initiatives that are from, about, and reflective of the communities where they are situated. She said the initiative had an impact on the community in terms of building communication on difficult topics, such as the intergenerational gap.

Sustainability and Institutionalization

In Lebanon, participants stressed the network-building aspect of the program as creating a sustainable impact. As the Sour Interviewee noted, it “creates an on-ground network to carry on the mission” of peacebuilding. Similarly, the USJ Interviewee confirmed that “the point of the program is to create a network of active women for the prevention and management of conflict.” There are currently nine networks in Lebanon, all of which “share one of the main principles of mediation, they have to be independent, and they have to take ownership,” the USJ Interviewee noted. Building human capacity and connecting and leveraging wider partnerships and networks is crucial to ensure sustainability and grow impact (Simpson & Assaad, 2022).

Local networks serve as effective and central meeting points for women who are active in their community. “It is a continuum of activities like even if there is no funding...because they

(participants) lived it so truly and authentically...they're able to really infuse that into the community," noted the USJ Interviewee. The Sour Interviewee concurred:

What's really nice is that I keep coming across women who've been through the same journey as myself; they are coming through a change, becoming able to solve their own issues, being influencers in their own communities.

This approach emphasizes building on and strengthening existing local capacities and building a network to enhance women's roles in conflict prevention, which is also how to ensure the sustainability of women's peacebuilding initiatives in Lebanon.

Participants spoke of wanting to institutionalize their efforts from ad-hoc initiatives towards a more structured approach. In the Chouf, for example, the USJ Interviewee recalled that participants "decided that they want to take things further and create a unit of mediation for the Chouf. So, a network will be established and institutionalized. They are in the process of registering it." The unit aims to spread awareness of mediation, receive mediation cases, and "develop activities and programs aimed at promoting positive communication and conflict resolution," she continued. This can be seen as a form of bridging peacebuilding theory and local practice.

Examples were cited of participants using their professional positions and positions in their community to institutionalize mediation processes. "Currently, we are seeking something of higher importance. Operating from inside the municipalities in Sour, in the union of municipalities, we're seeking to establish a mediation room in the municipality of Qana," noted the Sour Interviewee. Another participant had set up a committee in a municipality in South Lebanon, which the USJ Interviewee described as "a local social committee for stability, and it was made of like 20 people between 25 and 40. And the women again organized a special session on self-regulation and specifically managing emotions and strong emotions."

Women's participation in political processes is also an avenue to be explored. Some women are aspiring to become diplomatic mediators and engage in political mediation. Thus, according to the USJ Interviewee, through this "network of women, of active women in conflict management and prevention" steps are being taken to "engage in mediation, next thing they're doing local dialogue, next thing they're doing full-fledged national dialogue." She continued, noting that "I mean, with time and the right practice, they will be definitely ready. And I can see

many of them sitting in the next 3 to 4 years on a top negotiation table and negotiating with ease and fluency.” Increased participation of women in politics goes hand-in-hand with these efforts as increasing women’s representation across the public or political sector more broadly will also increase opportunities for women to act as mediators (Parry, 2022).

The legal system is also a space where mediation could be instituted. A participant conducted a study on the Ja’afari courts’ receptiveness to mediation and was motivated by a recognition of the need for mediation in this environment. As the Sour Interviewee explained:

Courts think that conflicts have risen in number. Additionally, the courts do not mind the intervention of mediators, as long as they abide by a set of conditions. With regards to the conditions, the top condition was that all Sharia courts whether they were Ja’afari, Sunni, or Druze must have mediators...It would be a civil mediator of course...The president of the Jaa’afari courts asked us not to bring in any foreign values to the court, but to bring in community-approved ones.

This is similar to other legal jurisdictions globally, where alternative forms of dispute resolution have been considered and implemented to the benefit of litigants.

The Sour Interviewee was relatively successful in her efforts as she took a step-by-step approach. She approached the decision-maker as she was pre-acquainted with him and had worked with him before. She then organized awareness-raising sessions on mediation, and then worked together on reform ideas. “One reform was the launching of the ‘Marriage Conditions’ register. This exists in Islam, but it is obscured from women. And indeed, he told us that the register will be launched in the span of six months, and it indeed was” she noted. In a broader sense, she felt that initiating open dialogue with decisionmakers was also a success. “It was an unprecedented event in Lebanon; someone of a high rank sat and talked face-to-face with distressed people, feminist organizations, and with local executives.” Thus, the Sour Interviewee combined her newly acquired skills with her pre-existing network to access a space of power and create reform.

Contextual Challenges

There are challenges to institutionalizing community mediation that reflect Lebanon’s wider political and economic context. For example, “In the institutionalizing process...it's the first steps that could raise suspicions, who are you? Why do you want to do that? What's your agenda?

So, this is important” (USJ Interviewee). Politics was cited as a challenge by multiple participants. “We’ve had local stakeholders casting a lot of doubt on the work...a lot of suspicion...the local stakeholders' susceptibility and responsiveness is a key factor in those women being able to really take the space” (USJ Interviewee). Without political will, it will be difficult for women mediators to take on a larger role.

The financial crisis in Lebanon has been reported as a main hindrance to women’s participation in dialogues and community peacebuilding (Simpson & Assaad, 2022). According to participants, “conflicts grew in number due to the economic situation” (Sour Interviewee). From an organizational perspective, the USJ Interviewee said that:

The financial aspect is a killer. I'll give you a very simple example. When we started in the South, we did not have these soaring prices. A few women came. No problem. They didn't have to cook because they can order delivery for their kids. No problem. They put the kids with the nanny, and they had no problem. [They had] full commitment. Post-crisis, no more nanny, no more delivery...The pressure of the crisis is huge on these women. Care work is crazy. It's just torture. Doubled. Tripled. And plus, they don't have electricity all the time. They don't have Internet.

Like recent studies (Simpson & Assaad, 2022), this study also finds that women continue to bear the brunt of deepening economic strain, increasing social tensions and the associated alarming rise in unpaid care work.

Despite the growing need for initiatives of this kind, the economic crisis was cited as a major challenge to the implementation of peacebuilding and/or mediation activities overall, as the Hasbaiya Interviewee noted:

Three years ago, I'd have said that we needed to work on the individuals...Now we have priorities. When an unemployed person comes to me needing \$2500 to afford an appendectomy for his son, I prioritize that. I can't prioritize preaching about the positive outlook in life, or nonviolent behavior, or how to healthily interact with your kids. People don't need this. Once you provide the basic and essential services, you will then have the space to talk about other programs.

She also provided her own example and said:

There's no productivity anymore...I used to get stuff for my kids in the mornings— now we don't even have the chocolate that they like! It's out of the market. And that's a very minor inconvenience. Before, I used to fulfil all the needs of the center. I used to pay all the bills

with no problem, because I could afford it. Now if I want to buy a barrel of oil, I'd need five to six salaries to afford it.

Limited resources continue to be a challenge on a group and individual level, and also form the impetus for a re-prioritization of activities within the peacebuilding space.

Localized Definitions of Conflict, Mediation, and Peacebuilding

Localized definitions of conflict, mediation, and peacebuilding also emerged. When describing conflict, many participants reverted to individual or small-scale conflict stressing "awareness of emotions is important...accepting difference (is important). Like the difference is not conflict. Difference is a fact" (Chouf Interviewee). Other participants stressed the psychological aspect of their work: "now we have a better understanding as to why someone acts in a certain way...if someone offends me, I shouldn't hesitate to respond, I should think clearly. I imagine that when mediation spreads, it will decrease conflicts" (Hasbaiya Interviewee). In their words, the focus was on conflict prevention and, as the USJ Interviewee relayed, to "spread awareness that conflict is not negative...through dialogue you can address any conflict...any conflict could be transformed into a nonviolent conversation where everybody wins."

When asked what peacebuilding means to them, participants again reverted to the individual, psychological level: "It's about building a very powerful person with an emotional, psychological, cognitive, [and] physical stability to be a successful person and a peaceful person... it is happiness, it is satisfaction, it's joy, it's positivity" (Hasbaiya Interviewee). The Chouf Interviewee noted that:

It's a basic need...Peacebuilding starts from within, by reconciliation with oneself. When you have inner peace, it would be easy to transmit it to your family members, your friends, your colleagues at work.

They also emphasized the connection between peacebuilding and communication: "Peacebuilding, it's definitely, it's far from violent communication" (Chouf Interviewee). Their responses focused on the individual and community or local level, rather than the political level.

Women mediators play diverse roles in mediation. Examples of informal mediations include: "in Tripoli, we have one woman who also took over a conflict in a big building where everybody is renting, and they have a committee of owners. She was able to mediate that. So, they are mediating, but on an informal basis, they are facilitating dialogue between conflicting

parties” (USJ Interviewee). In an educational context, “we have one lady in Tripoli who is in an educational institution responsible for the youth. And in Tripoli, there's a lot of violence there. So, it's very easy in any, for example, technical college to have a violent event of somebody using a knife and stabbing a kid. So, again, she mediated informally among the youth. So, we have a lot of informal mediation instances” (USJ Interviewee). Many of these acts of initiating dialogue or bringing parties to the table are less visible than formal mediation, however, they are important in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The Sour interviewee had acted as a mediator on a few occasions, she said, “Nearly around 10 conflicts had a good outcome. Around five or six conflicts had a futile outcome.” She explained her approach:

We try to achieve win-win solutions...When people reach out to us for mediation, we first lay out some conditions that they must abide by. Both parties must accept the conditions. Both parties must be receptive to mediation. No one should be forced to come. For maximum objectiveness, I, as a mediator, must not be pre-acquainted with the people seeking mediation.

While this may be true, the findings also suggest that women are often limited to mediating situations where they are familiar with the conflict and parties involved.

Across the region, women play an important role in solving family disputes or personal matters. For some sensitive social issues, such as gender-based violence or early marriage, a woman may have better access to families, specifically female family members (Parry, 2022). Similar to trends in the literature, participants demonstrated the strengths of their ‘insider’ status. For example, the Hasbaiya Interviewee had pre-existing connections with the directors of schools who she reached out to in order to set up a mediation program. Women, therefore, operate as “insider mediators” as they demonstrated their ability to build or leverage relationships; and have detailed knowledge of the conflict and conflict parties (Parry, 2022). A constraint is that women will typically be unable to intervene if they do not have any connection to the disputants (Parry, 2022).

The Sour Interviewee had been active in her community and had received requests relating to family disputes.

People would often come to us—to me, about conflicts that they have with someone. I'd sit with both of them and let them communicate with each other. I'll give you a familial example. Someone had a conflict with her family over a sensitive matter in our community—she took off her hijab. There was quite a big dispute between the girl and her family. Using our ways and methods, we succeeded in making the two parties sit and communicate with each other. Her family heard her out and accepted her as she is ...We also worked on a land conflict between two brothers. At one point, these two brothers had intended to take it to court. They'd also pointed guns at each other. We succeeded in making them solve the issue peacefully. They wrote down an agreement and had it verified at the notary.

Family-related conflicts are therefore common, and due to their insider status, this is a form of mediation that women mediators could engage in.

Women's definition of conflict, mediation and peacebuilding focused on the personal or psychological level. They are often involved in mediation or related activities with parties that are already known to them and therefore they largely operate as "insider mediators." While this has advantages for the community, it may limit women's roles in mediating at the political level.

Women's Role in Local Mediation and Peacebuilding

Turner (2020) suggests that there are three approaches to women's role in mediation. The first is that women should be visibly present, on the basis of equality. The second is that women can bring gendered perspectives to mediation that are necessary to address gendered structures of inequality that perpetuate violence against women. The third is the influence of the impartial female mediator who can reach out to all parties. This section focusses on women's understanding of their role in local mediation and peacebuilding.

Participants felt that women's role in peacebuilding stemmed from the fact that "women are part of society at the human level. This is de facto, this is by convention, there is no doubt about it, and there is no discussion about it" (Chouf Interviewee). The Hasbaiya Interviewee referenced the gendered impact of conflict and linked this to the need for women to be involved in peacebuilding:

Women are crucial and essential when it comes to conflict resolution, because matters always affect them, even if they didn't take part in the conflict. Even if they don't participate in wars or in the decision-making related to wars, they are always the ones who pay the consequences. Thus, women are a key part of the conflict resolution conversation.

Participants did not reference wider spheres of influence that impartial female mediators could have.

Only one participant mentioned UNSCR 1325. The Hasbaiya Interviewee said the mediation activities stemmed from a recognition of the effect of conflict on women: “when it became apparent that women always bore the consequences of conflicts, we made it a priority to engage women through UN resolution 1325.” It appears that interviewees largely did not find the WPS agenda to be of immense relevance to their local efforts and, like Parry’s findings (2022), perhaps viewed it as a detached framework.

Many interviewees also identified qualities that they felt women possessed which made them suitable for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and referred to women’s “natural” abilities to become peacemakers based on their gendered attributes. The Sour Interviewee said:

I’ve always felt that God made women capable of making people compassionate with each other. Maybe it is because women are sensitive in their nature. Besides, women carry a social responsibility more than men do. And they are more peacemakers than men are. In terms of mediation as well, it is apparent that women have more direction in that regard; it is like they search for peace.

The Hasbaiya Interviewee expanded on this, claiming that “as a mediator, this comes from within, and it expands on a bigger scale to reach her children and family. Women naturally possess these skills. Women have a big role (in mediation) due to their position, their families, their work, or their societies.”

The USJ Interviewee pointed directly toward women’s roles as mothers as something that positioned them to influence society: “we raise the children. So, there's anybody who could teach about violence or nonviolence that would be a woman.” She shared a specific example:

I remember in Ain el-Helweh camp when there was fighting, and we had women participating also in this program and those young women told us we took our children to the streets, and we just sat there. We are the wives, the daughters, mothers, and we suddenly said, okay, keep on shooting. Go right ahead but we will sit here. So, they stopped. Their presence made them stop...So, in our communities, these are Middle Eastern-oriented communities. There's a very strong value for motherhood, and women in the family. So, it's like you could be the president of the republic, but your mother has this power. you know, it's incredible. It's a very strong social value. We see fighters before leaving for the war coming to their mothers and kissing their hands.

She also felt that women's rights and increased awareness contributed to women's influence and value in society. "It was taken for granted. You're a woman. You're supposed to serve. And then there was awareness. No, I'm not supposed to. I'm choosing not to. I'm giving a gift to you. It's not my duty." Therefore, in diverse ways, women have played and continue to play a role in leading local conflict mitigation.

While participants highlighted the importance of women's roles in local mediation and peacebuilding, they did so within a gendered framework. If a woman's legitimacy as a mediator is derived from her perceived social status she may be restricted to "feminized" issues such as humanitarian assistance that are seen as fitting her status, but she may not be entitled to raise issues related to political structures (Parry, 2022). This limits women's active roles in conflict mediation, peacebuilding, and wider society. Similar to Simpson and Assaad (2022), a barrier to women realizing their full participation and leadership in conflict prevention may be a limited understanding of gender roles within their contexts. Local mediation efforts must be careful not to reinforce harmful power dynamics or discriminatory social norms. All those involved in mediation initiatives should ensure that they do not reinforce limiting perceptions, to gain wider access in the long term.

Conclusion

The local level is a critical entry point for meaningful peacebuilding. This article highlights localized forms of women's peacebuilding, mediation, and conflict prevention in Lebanon. Women, equipped with skills, support and confidence through USJ's program on social mediation, are engaging in a range of initiatives within their communities aimed at awareness-building and creating wider dialogue. This article finds that the majority of activities are aimed at the youth and educational institutions, while there are still challenges in engaging with local stakeholders such as at the municipal, political, or judicial level.

The program builds networks and strengthens local capacity as a form of sustainability. However, institutionalizing these efforts and bridging theory and local practice is challenging due to the political landscape and financial crisis in Lebanon. Women's representation in the political and public sector is low, and despite the growing need for peacebuilding initiatives of this kind, limited resources and political support continue to be a challenge to institutionalizing women's

efforts. In addition, participants largely did not reference the WPS agenda, which may indicate that it is a detached normative framework that requires further localization in order to be fully operationalized.

A localized understanding of conflict, mediation and peacebuilding focuses on the individual, community and psychological levels, rather than State-centered or military style definitions of peace and security. Women engaging in mediation also play diverse, less visible, roles including initiating dialogue, using their insider status to mediate family conflicts, and bringing gendered perspectives to conflict, peace, and security. However, participants did not reference wider spheres of influence where they did not have pre-existing access. Participants also highlighted the importance of women's roles in local mediation and peacebuilding within a gendered framework, where women are seen as inherently peaceful within their social roles primarily as mothers. Within a limited understanding of gender roles, local mediators may be restricted to working on initiatives that focus on the social, rather than the political.

With regards to peace and security, and especially with trends of increasing intra-state and localized conflict, women mediators will need to gain proficiency and influence at the national and sub-national levels (ACCORD, 2021). More strategic investment is required in increasing understanding, familiarity and/or local adaptation of normative frameworks specifically the WPS agenda, increasing women's representation in political and peace processes, and tackling challenges to institutionalization of pre-existing efforts on local mediation and conflict prevention in Lebanon.

Notes

¹ More here: <https://www.usj.edu.lb/cpm/mediation-sociale.php>

² For background on Lebanon's first NAP please see:
<http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/lebanon-2/>

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