Grassroots Participation in Peace Processes

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**Background**

Peace processes that accommodate for women’s meaningful participation are more likely to produce durable and sustainable peace.¹ Such outcomes are also more realistically attainable where grassroots peacebuilding initiatives—more inclusive avenues for peacebuilding than the official channels—are effectively incorporated into the peace process.² However, both general and context-specific factors often impede women and other historically marginalised groups from exerting substantial influence over the formal peace process.³ The inherent bias towards elite and armed group inclusion generally entails side-lining women and other historically underrepresented groups during all stages of the peace process, including pre-negotiations, official talks, peace agreements, the transition phase, and post-conflict reconstruction.⁴

¹ See e.g., PRIO Centre on GPS Gender and Mediation Backgrounders 1 and 8: Ahmad, Neven & Pinar Tank (2020) ‘Women’s Participation in Peace Processes’ and Smith, Carina Strøm & Pinar Tank (2021) ‘Models of Women’s Inclusion’.
⁴ Community and grassroots organisations often remain at the periphery of formal peace processes due to factors such as containing priorities among civil society groups, geographical distance from the formal peace process, the formalised language used during negotiations, and implicit issues of hierarchy and privilege. See Caparini and Cóbar, op. cit.
Multitrack approaches that link up official and unofficial actors and organisations are chief among the remedial pathways devised by scholars to allow Track II/III actors to play a more substantive role in peace processes, alongside general pressure to increase women’s numeric presence in Track I. Yet some scholars critique the ‘add women and stir’ approach to peacebuilding, arguing that it does not go far enough in accounting for women’s multifaceted roles in peace and armed conflict. Furthermore, the notion that women participate in peacebuilding first and foremost as representatives of women’s interests portrays women as a homogenous group whose contributions and needs are of secondary consequence to the main objectives of the peace process. Formal channels for peacebuilding and mediation are often gendered in a manner that creates unresponsiveness to the real challenges that confront women in conflict-affected societies. Informal peacebuilding may provide a solution by providing alternative avenues for participation and influence on the peace process that is more reflective of women’s diversity of needs. This backgrounder presents a concise selection of cases that illustrate how peace may be built from the grassroots. It gathers observations from four recent peace processes—in Colombia, Liberia, Libya, and the Philippines—to illustrate how women-led grassroots engagement can impact the form of mediation and the trajectories, content, and outcome of peace processes.

**Colombia**

The Colombian peace process is broadly recognised as the most inclusive example of women’s participation to date. Experiences from Colombia illustrate how including grassroots organisations at an early stage can provide important benefits to peace negotiations. Peacebuilding initiatives at the grassroots level preceded the formal Colombian peace process by decades. Thus, the nation’s already-strong women’s movement played a key role in pushing for a differential and inclusive approach to achieving peace.

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5 See Smith & Tank (2021), op. cit.
7 Palmiano, ibid.
9 Koopman, Ibid.
• Colombian women’s groups linked up to the formal process hosted a series of informal summits and forums aimed at including important issues highlighted by grassroots actors as discussion points during official negotiations.\(^\text{12}\)

• Grassroots actors were invited to submit testimonies during the negotiation phase, allowing individuals directly affected by hostilities to detail their experiences and provide their own narrative of the conflict.\(^\text{13}\) These testimonies were in turn translated into objectives for consideration during official dialogues.\(^\text{14}\)

• Women were critical leaders in the establishment of peace communities, delineated areas that were declared neutral and free from armed conflict. The Association of Organized Women of Eastern Antioquia (AMOR) negotiated with armed factions directly in order to prevent recruitment from these communities and were able to secure a temporary humanitarian accord enabling freedom of movement for community members.\(^\text{15}\)

Important work was done in Colombia to ensure that grassroots voices made it to Track I. However, existing hierarchies between grassroots and civil society actors may have been both emphasised and reinforced by allowing the former to represent the latter.\(^\text{16}\) The positive effects of grassroots inclusion are likely limited when that inclusion depends on the goodwill of more influential Track I/II actors. In addition, while grassroots perspectives were included in negotiations, the perspectives of marginalised groups within grassroots communities, such as indigenous women, remained absent.\(^\text{17}\) Unless specific provisions for women’s inclusion are incorporated at all levels of participation, grassroots women risk continued marginalisation due to existing social hierarchies in their communities.

**Liberia**

The Liberian case provides an example of how women can utilise grassroots peacebuilding to form and access the official peace process while simultaneously challenging and redressing sociocultural assumptions of women’s social roles more generally.\(^\text{18}\) Women initially struggled to gain access to the formal peace process in Liberia, not least due to the conflict parties’ and international community’s failure to make provisions for their

\(^\text{12}\) Caparini & Cóbar (2021) op. cit.

\(^\text{13}\) As conflicts are ‘experienced at the grassroots and waged within communities’, initiatives to resolve them must open up for ‘social inclusion and citizen participation at the community level’ in order achieve durable peace. See Delgado (2004) ‘Compelled to Act: Grassroots Peace Initiatives’.

\(^\text{14}\) Caparini & Cobár (2021) op. cit.


\(^\text{16}\) Caparini & Cobár (2021) op. cit.

\(^\text{17}\) Caparini & Cobár, Ibid.

\(^\text{18}\) Women on the outside of the formal peace process may be able to strengthen their informal power and gradually build new societal structures that pave the way for more visible power over time. See Selimovic; Brandt & Jacobson (2012) ‘Equal Power – Lasting Peace: Obstacles for Women’s Participation in Peace Processes’.
inclusion. Nevertheless, Liberian women’s organisations played an active role in advocating for peace from the early onset of the civil war (1989). From 2003, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace brought together women from across ethnic and religious communities and effectively utilised non-violent action to make their voices heard. They were able to manipulate outdated gender norms and stereotypes about women to their advantage as part of their push for a long overdue peace settlement. Factors such as early involvement of women from all tracks; coalition-building between women’s groups; strong women’s groups and networks; mediators’ and conflict parties’ receptiveness towards women stakeholders; inclusive selection criteria for participation in the peace process; and high public buy-in and international support for the peace process allowed Liberian women to gradually access the formal peace process through a wide array of modalities.

- Grassroots peacebuilders understood the value of overcoming ethnic and religious boundaries in order to effectively push for a ceasefire. By focusing on their shared interest in bringing an end to the conflict rather than on their differences, women were able to organise in great numbers from the bottom-up under a shared set of objectives.
- Once a ceasefire had been achieved, grassroots women employed daily, non-violent sit-ins and backchannel mediation to ensure that women were given a place at the negotiating table.
- Organising all-women mass rallies with protesters dressed in white, activists provided a strong visual message both in Monrovia and at the negotiations in Accra. Beyond banners and chants, the activists used gender roles and stereotypes to their advantage by threatening a sex strike, mobilising cultural norms by threatening to undress in public, and physically barring participants at an Accra plenary session of the official peace talks from leaving until progress had been made.

However, the movement for greater inclusion of women in the Liberian peace process also met with some hurdles. Women’s influence over the latter stages of the peace process was

19 ‘Little thought was given to the role of women. They were perceived as marginal actors. It was assumed that women had no influence or power, and they were not considered credible’. Gbowee (2019) ‘When Women Stand Together as One: The Power of Women’s Grassroots Peace Movements’.
20 Some central women’s organisations included the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI), the Mano River Union Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET), and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET).
21 Including sit-ins, marches, and press conferences. See Pedersen (2016) ‘In the Rain and in the Sun: Peace Activism in Liberia’.
23 Including mass action, observer status, unofficial consultations, direct representation in the transitional government, and inclusive commissions. See Zanker, ibid.
24 Their first goal was to shift the global narrative on the war towards the human impact. The second was ‘to press the government to agree to a ceasefire, the deployment of an intervention force, and a negotiated settlement’. See Gbowee (2019) op. cit.
25 Gbowee, ibid.
26 Zanker (2018) op. cit.
constrained by factors such as funding obstacles, limited decision-making power, divisions among women’s groups, and the co-optation of important women activists into the transitional government.27 Furthermore, failure to make use of the momentum of the women’s movement to strengthen grassroots ownership of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding meant that an important opportunity to improve Liberian women’s influence overall was lost.28

**Libya**

A decade after playing an active role in toppling the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Libyan women are still struggling to make their concerns a part of peace mediation. The collapse of the Libyan state after 2014, the absence of the security, basic services and infrastructure it once provided, and the profusion of arms have all disproportionately affected women.29 However, resolving these issues has remained a secondary concern to the reintroduction of state stability.30 Simultaneously, the patriarchal culture, militarist focus and fundamentalist ideologies that undermine the agendas of central parties to the peace process, alongside broader legislative, societal, cultural, military and political-level factors, have played a pivotal role in systematically and structurally excluding women from the negotiating table.31 Consequently, Libya illustrates a case where women’s mediation and peacebuilding work has almost exclusively taken place through Track III mediation at the community level.

- Grassroots dialogue has been at the centre of international organisations’ approach to broadening the scope for local-level participation in the Libyan peace process. By organising inclusive forums and conferences across the country, their aim has been to allow normal Libyans to express their needs and grievances, and thus interact with the formal peace process.32
- Women have stood behind innovative solutions to building momentum in peacebuilding activities through the use of new technologies, online spaces, and new media.33

27 Zanker, ibid.
30 Perhaps foreshadowed in the absence of any mention of gender in the UNSCR that mandated the Libyan intervention. See Selimovic et al. (2012) op. cit.
32 See Wilson (2020) ‘Libya: Peace Talks Advance, But Will Need Local Support’: ‘When the international community supports local dialogue, working from the bottom up, that helps those with power—both nationally and internationally—take into account the deep mix of viewpoints, recommendations and grievances across a conflict zone.’
• Organisations such as *Together we Build It* launched a campaign in September 2018 to advocate Libyan women’s inclusion in the Palermo Conference to discuss the UN’s peace plan. Although their campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, they emphasised the fact that they were already engaged in inclusive regional consultations with grassroots organisations.³⁴

• Following further conflict in 2019, Stephanie Williams, the UN Secretary-General’s Acting Special Representative for Libya and deputy head of UNSMIL, launched the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in late 2020. The LPDF negotiators consisted of 75 Libyans, with 17 women members. The female participants called for greater involvement of women in leadership positions and executive authority to eliminate gender-based discrimination, illustrating that regional governments and international organisations can facilitate women’s representation in formal political processes to ensure that their security needs are being voiced.³⁵

Despite the work done by women in building the foundations of a more sustainable peace, Libyan women’s organisations were side-lined completely at the Palermo Conference for Libya in 2018. This reflects the structural issues often inherent in mediation processes where warring parties sit at the table with mediators who have political agendas to fulfil, often seen as ‘higher order’ issues.³⁶ Women’s absence from Track I/II further reflects the broader tendency of women’s absence from leadership positions in government and armed groups,³⁷ as well as women’s lack of political and economic representation overall.³⁸ While women have shown great perseverance in pursuing alternative pathways and parallel routes to peace, their efforts are likely to remain limited to the grassroots level unless the parties in power pursue a politics of greater inclusion and display the political will to accommodate for women’s meaningful participation.³⁹

**The Philippines**

The Mindanao peace process in the Philippines where women actively contributed to the peace process represents an outlier in terms of women’s participation in the formal process.⁴⁰ Women provided leadership in peace panels, the facilitating team, and civil

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³⁶ In the Libyan case, these were concerns over terrorism and migration due to state instability.
³⁸ UN Women and UNFPA (2020) ‘Deepening Stabilization in Libya: Overcoming Challenges to Young Women’s Participation in Peace Building’.
⁴⁰ 50% of the Filipino government’s negotiating team and 25% of the signatories to the peace agreement were women. The Mindanao process in addition remains the first and only major peace process to see a female chief negotiator sign a major peace accord. See e.g., O’Reilly et al. (2015) ‘Reimagining
society organisations. Consequently, they were able to broaden the agenda of the mediation process through acting as honest brokers at the negotiating table, building public support as the grassroots level, and staging peaceful mass action when a renewal in violence threatened to derail the process. Crucially, through the establishment of strategic links between Tracks I and III, and by fostering both top-down and bottom-up communication, the Mindanao process effectively included women from all diplomatic tracks.

- Civil society women acted as a conduit of information from local communities to negotiation panels, pushing for set issues identified as important by parties at all levels, and passing information back down to local communities by establishing strategic links between diplomatic tracks.
- Several Mindanao-based organisations partook in forming the association Women Engaged in Action (We Act 1325), which brought together women from 36 civil society and grassroots organisations to ensure the comprehensive inclusion of gendered provisions in the peace agreement. Alongside the Mindanao Commission on Women, they were able to use ‘their personal and professional relationships to serve as links between different parties, networking between the two sides of the negotiation, as well as with local communities’, and ‘leverage their relationships with key members of the negotiation panels to push its agenda’.
- An association formed by local-level women’s organisations, the Women’s Organization Movement in the Bangsamoro (WOMB), effectively advocated for peace through a series of workshops and training sessions aimed at imparting policy advocacy strategies to women’s organisations and peace advocates and changing conflict-affected Bangsamoro and Filipino people’s mindsets, beliefs, and attitudes by educating them in Bangsamoro history.
- Women’s organisations garnered trust and support at the community level by providing aid and assistance to war evacuees. They furthermore used their position at the forefront of the civilian response to provide protection to evacuate women and children at risk of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, offer psychosocial support to evacuees, and serve as translators for non-local humanitarian workers.


41 Conciliation Resources (2018) ‘Women Mediating Conflict from the Grassroots to the Negotiating Table’.
42 Council on Foreign Relations (2020) op. cit.
44 Chang et al., ibid.
46 Chang et al. (2015) op. cit.
47 Trajano (2020) op. cit.
48 Ibid.
The high proportion of women in leadership positions in the Mindanao process played a decisive part in determining the level of grassroots influence over negotiations. Affiliations between negotiation team panels and civil society, as well as women leaders’ openness towards including civil society women in the process, made it possible for grassroots actors to consolidate their positions and bring them to the attention of Track I actors.49

**Key factors for success**

Although the cases described above display varying successes in the incorporation of grassroots women’s movements and are often context dependent, there are a few common points worth highlighting.

1. Countries who already have strong women’s movements are more likely to adopt a more differential and inclusive approach to mediation. Often, women are already engaged in civil society peace initiatives at the local level. Increasing the visibility of pre-existing efforts is important to ‘earning’ women a place in formal peace talks.
2. Early involvement of women from all tracks is important.
3. Building trust and support in local communities gives civil society movements legitimacy and a platform for access to the formal peace process.
4. Promoting women in leadership positions at the national and international level opens the possibility for greater engagement by women from the grassroots over negotiations.

**Bibliography**


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49 Chang et al., op.cit., 2015.


