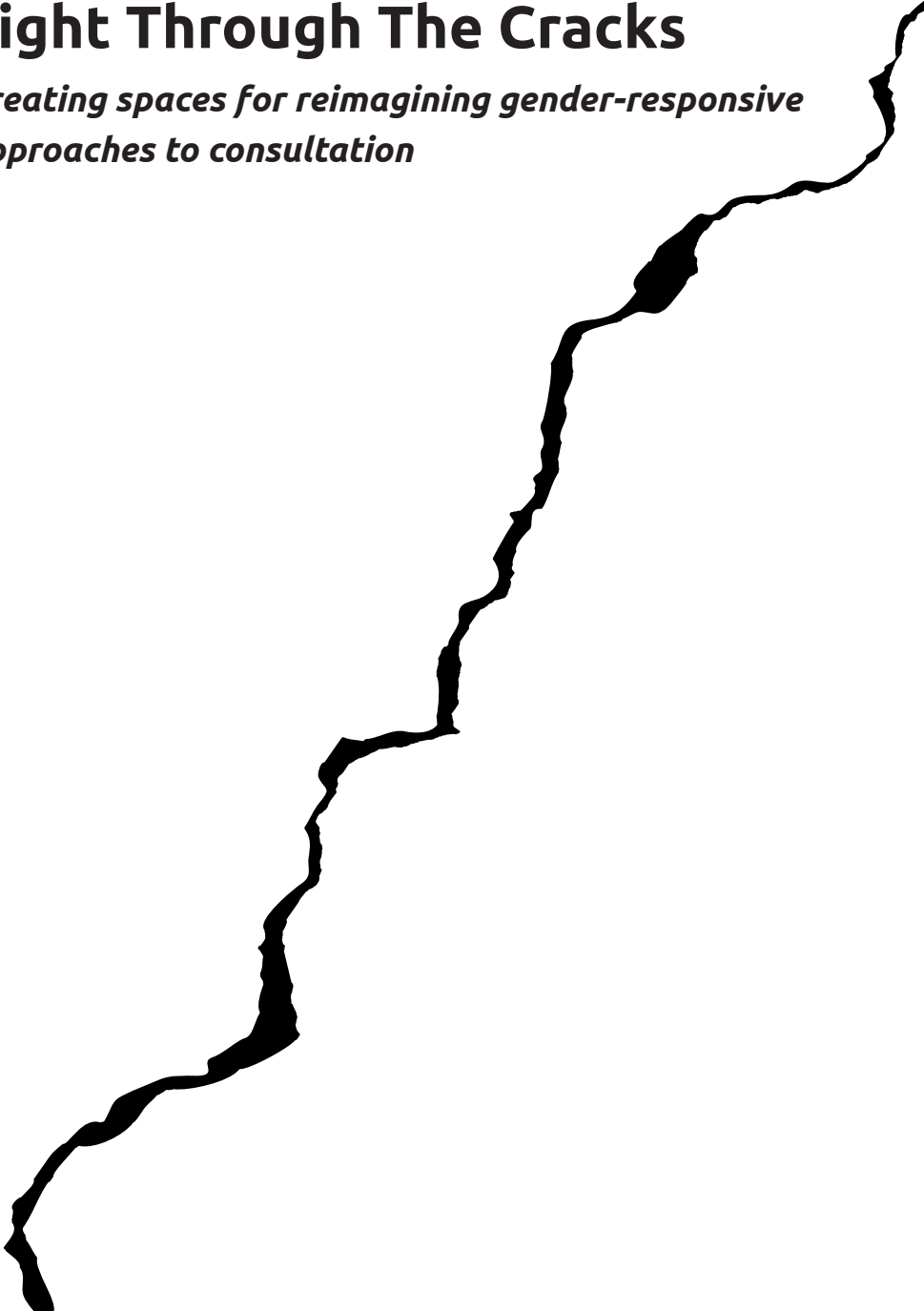


Light Through The Cracks

Creating spaces for reimagining gender-responsive approaches to consultation



Authors: Laura Davis and Ola Saleh

Graphic Design: Ali Mustafa

© Badael 2023 Berlin, Germany. All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be printed, reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means without prior written permission from Badael.

Badael is a rights-based organisation founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the basis of a genuine and sustainable peace in Syria. Championing locally-owned alternatives, we endeavour to buttress the scope and impact of inclusive grassroots civic action and foment the development of holistic truth and understanding within and around the Syrian context.

The think space was supported by Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)



Table of Contents

Background.....	4
1. Current Consultation practices.....	6
a) What doesn't work	8
b) What works	10
2. Reflections on this co-thinking Process.....	12
a) Power equalising design	12
3. Imagining future spaces	15
Recommendations	19

Background

Consultative spaces and processes can offer unique opportunities to advance creative solutions and ideas for gender responsive outcomes. EU consultations (open and closed, formal and informal) are well established avenues for broader participation by national experts and people affected by conflict to express their priorities and views on EU action for new initiatives or giving input to existing policies and processes. Nonetheless, challenges remain, particularly in generating transformative gender responsive outcomes in EU policy and practice in conflict contexts.

Consultations between the EU and civil society can sometimes seem stale and pro forma. This fatigue contributes to frustration from civil society experts, who see little or no meaningful change in EU policies and approaches, and from EU officials, who feel there is little useful input from civil society whether due to the nature of consultation events or insufficient EU system literacy. This can be particularly acute when it comes to women's participation in consultations.

The civil society relationship with the EU institutions is asymmetrical. This asymmetry is understandable in terms of institutional capacities and mandate. However, the relational power asymmetry invites a deep reflection on the implications on the quality and value given to civil society input, as well as their role as partners in solutions development rather than implementers.

Badael, a national feminist civil society organisation from Syria who has been operating inside and outside the country for the past decade, invited EU officials and Syrian national experts for a reflective think space in Brussels – Belgium to consider how to reimagine consultative spaces in a such a way that enables EU officials and national experts to advance gender responsive outcomes together, in stressful and often time-deprived operational environments.

The invitation was motivated by a sense of failure of inclusion modalities and consultative spaces with Syrian civil society, including but not limited to the Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region conference, to deliver gender responsive outcomes. Therefore, Badael created a space for co-thinking and learning with EU officials as partners and allies with whom they share a commitment towards making the existing instruments and avenues gender responsive to their best potential.

This space was designed for a selected expert group of 10 participants comprising EU officials with experiences from diverse contexts and WPS/ Gender Equality in contexts other than Syria, and WPS National Context Experts from Syria. The objective was to create a human centred space for exchange and co-thinking which lifts the pressure off those involved from the product-delivery mindset and the constraints of notions related to professional success or failure, which often neglect the ecosystem in which actions or interventions occurred. The co-thinking space focused on improving processes and capitalising on entry points by jointly reflecting on practical ways to enhance the effectiveness of EU / national expert consultations to further gender responsive outcomes.

This learning paper weaves participants' insights together with that of the authors on content and process.

1. Current Consultation practices

Consultation 'events' are understood as part of much longer consultation processes, which involve a set of interwoven long-term relationships and information exchange, between the formal parties to the consultation and a larger group of stakeholders outside formal consultation events.

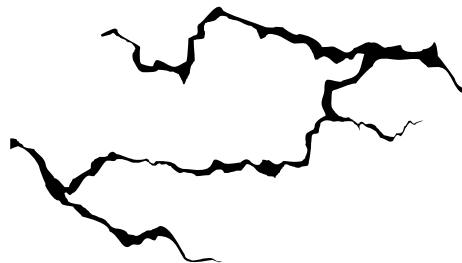
Consultation happens between national experts and the EU institutions, and between the national experts and their stakeholders.

We recognise that those calling for consultation hold power over those being consulted, and that there is a strict hierarchy controlling the design of the process, which questions may be asked/addressed, which information is sought/shared. The power of the consulter carries with it significant responsibility, which should be acknowledged. At the very least, this includes a duty of care to protect consultees from backlash. Non recognition of this power may Do Harm. There are rarely feedback loops, so people who have been consulted do not know whether and how the expertise they have provided has been used, or not.

We also note that the power of the consulted (civil society experts) may be overlooked both by the EU and the consulted parties themselves: the experts have expertise and knowledge the EU seeks as input to its process. Their participation may also serve as a way of legitimising EU approaches. Participants recognised different reasons for engaging in consultation, either/both as consulter and consulted:

- **To inform our decision-making**, recognising that we are all decision-makers, by engaging in a genuine listening process, to listen to people not usually heard and to invite them to share expertise, and shed light on their situation/needs/demands, to provide evidence, and to push the agenda forward on issues that are important.

- **The stakes (for national experts) are too high not to engage**
National experts may engage in formal consultations mechanisms that are not satisfactory because there is a lack of other, more appropriate mechanisms, and through the existing mechanisms, we may be able to identify entry points and potential allies - a crack in the system where we can create space. We engage for the network, for access to these (limited) invited spaces, to build relationships and systemic understanding more than for the formal objective of the process. The formalisation of EU consultation practice is good because it guarantees a space, however this is lost when the process becomes a tick-box exercise. National experts have much more at stake in any consultation than EU officials do, the choice not to engage even in processes that seem to offer little input to EU approaches is therefore a hard choice to make.
- **Other uses for consultations:** Consultation can be used as a tool to diffuse opposition/resistance to certain policy or decision. It can also be used to legitimise a finalised idea rather than to hear expert opinion or advice. Consultation is frequently used as a conflict management tool, that is to say to make selected civil society/ women's organisations feel included, but not actually be included: be consulted instead of participating in decision-making.



a) What doesn't work

The lack of knowledge management means that there are lost opportunities for consultations to build knowledge and change over time.

There is little EU system literacy amongst civil society due to the complex architecture of the system, which is a structural challenge to engaging most effectively.

Women's participation may be limited to so-called 'women's issues' (SGBV, childcare, education...) and not about addressing broader conflict dynamics, and social, political and economic issues. Women are therefore often pushed into an important but limited, closed space connected to so-called "women's issues" and then confined to that space.

The consultation process used may enable some dissenting women's voices to be dismissed as 'immature' or 'unrealistic'. Women who are pro-active in trying to expand the scope of an invited space may be dismissed as 'disruptive' and excluded from further iterations. When a group gains traction within a consultation mechanism, that mechanism may be deliberately weakened in the future. Depending on the process consultation may be isolating or an opportunity for solidarity.

There is a lack of conflict-sensitivity and gender-responsiveness in designing consultation processes, which limits the civic space around EU-centred processes. This may be due to a generalised prejudice that women are more naturally peacebuilders than men, and are less invested in and engaged on sensitive political issues and therefore conflict sensitivity is implicitly understood as less important. The selection of participants may privilege certain groups/outlooks, and (further) marginalise specific population groups and less familiar civil society actors.

Extremely broad consultations, particularly surveys with generic questions at the macro policy level, and one-off consultations are too generalised to be useful.

Participants may be engaged in multiple consultation processes which may be in tension with each other, and repeated consultation which give no indication that the findings of previous consultations have been considered demonstrate a lack of respect for civil society and mean that officials are likely to reinvent the wheel.

In institutions with a higher turnover than civil society organisations, adequate knowledge management is a structural challenge that is difficult for individuals to overcome without clear support and mainstreaming meaningful consultation by senior management.

Fatigue sets in with multiple consultation processes, particularly when these lack clear objectives and feedback loops.

a) What works

Three key areas when done correctly prove to have enabled gender responsive spaces and outcomes in consultative processes.

i) Design and content

- Consultations designed with gender responsive conflict sensitivity in focus create a more conducive space for sharing and trust.
- Knowledge of the context and how gender norms and power play out in it increase the relevance of consultations to civil society actors and helps bridge the gap between downstream and upstream approaches
- Women only spaces ensure women have sufficient space to speak away from the judgement of mainstream patriarchal narratives.
- Thematic consultations with women offer a space for women to engage with conflict issues beyond what is stereotypically considered “women’s issues”

ii) Access and accessibility

- Individual accessibility: Awareness of the one’s behavioural norms and how they make an official accessible or not, enabled EU officials to adjust behaviours where relevant to enhance the sense of accessibility towards them.
- Venue accessibility: ensuring that conditions hindering women’s participation are alleviated when possible by, for example, providing for accompaniment or child care.
- To other national actors

iii) Personal leadership and System literacy

- EU officials who build credibility with their civil society interlocutors are able to create a meaningful consultative space
- EU officials who demonstrate conflict sensitivity and contextual

knowledge are more capable of creating conducive spaces for exchange and engage with content in a transformative manner.

- EU officials who, regardless of rank, show leadership in escalating input through the EU system channels, use informal networks, and help civil society interlocutors navigate the EU system, often achieve more sustainable results
- EU staff are trained on gender responsiveness before deployment

2. Reflections on this co-thinking Process

a) Power equalising design

Design is key for creating a space in which national experts and EU officials can discuss challenges and generate potential solutions together. Noting the power imbalance in most existing consultation processes, the co-facilitators sought to address real and perceived power imbalances throughout the process.

Trust is central to equalising power imbalances. The invited participants had to trust the convenors and facilitators as well as the process and the co-facilitators had to trust the participants would engage meaningfully.

i) Identities and roles of the co-facilitators/co-convenors

The co-facilitators, Ola Saleh and Laura Davis were co-convenors with Badael. They have established professional relationships with the participants: each participant knew and trusted at least one of the co-facilitators.

ii) The participants

Each participant was invited on the basis of their professional function and relationship with at least one co-facilitator. The facilitators chose to invite EU officials with no professional engagement in or with Syria and also chose to have a small number of participants, with equal numbers from Syria and the institutions. The equal number created a sense of a co-creation relationship, where the national experts did not need to mobilise numbers to be heard, their professional expertise was enough and valued as is. Neither were the EU officials expected to justify the specific ways in which EU succeeded or failed in including the Syrian civil society, but

rather engage from a systemic institutional perspective on what could be done differently, or better to promote gender responsive outcomes of EU engagement in conflict contexts.

iii) Names and language

All participants used their (chosen) first names, and the meeting was held in English, without interpretation. The power of exclusion language carries is fully recognised, and the hope is to be able to hold such co-thinking spaces in more languages. However, for the first iteration, the fact that the group across the table had fairly similar command of the working language, allowed for a more meaningful interaction during the informal time of the meeting (coffee breaks, and lunch).

iv) The nature of exercises

The initial exercise was designed to invite each participant to bring their whole self to the space, and to leave job descriptions outside. Recognising that national experts and EU officials bring the richness and multitude of their personal and professional identities opened up different levels to relate to one another and set the tone for future discussions.

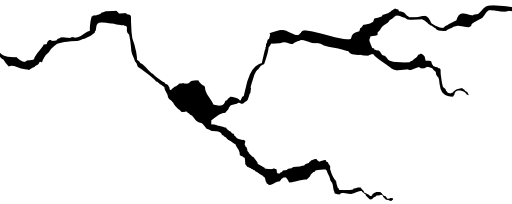
v) Small group divisions

For exercises that required participants to reflect on their personal experience, the group split into two groups with the Syrian national experts in one group and the EU officials in the other. This was to recognise that neither group is homogenous, but each has a certain shared points of reference and experience.

Exercises that generated forward-looking ideas were mixed so that participants could draw on the different experiences and tools at the disposal of all participants.

vi) Convenor and donor

The convenor (Badael) and the resourcing partner (WILPF) participated in the meeting, and moved between these roles seamlessly. The added value of this behaviour on the quality of the space was notable. This has truly enabled all participants to feel ownership of the space and that the space is there to serve them and their joint agenda to advance gender responsiveness not any other externally steered agenda.



3. Imagining future spaces

We need to step back from consultation ‘events’ and consider the broader processes within which the events take place both through in real time learning and advocating improvements to the process design and methodology of the consultations themselves.

The bureaucracy of the EU is complicated to navigate formally from within, and difficult to navigate from outside. Alongside the formal decision-making systems, there are informal systems and informal decision-making spaces. Insiders as well as outsiders may need external support in identifying key entry-points (the ‘cracks’) where it is possible to open up space for an open and meaningful exchange.

Within the consultation processes, we can identify cracks in the system that enable creating spaces for co-thinking where allies from inside and outside the institutions can co-create strategies to bring about incremental change to generate better gender responsive policy outcomes. We acknowledge the demand for these spaces from inside and outside the institution, and also recognise external facilitation-convening as key for their success.

In designing co-thinking spaces, it is important to allow space for intra-institutional reflection. The EU is not a monolith, nor is civil society. There needs to be space for the individuals within each institution to understand the roles and positions of their colleagues, as well as to engage with the people participating from the ‘other’ institution.

Consultations should move towards an intentional development of relationships of trust between officials and civil society and move towards

strategic co-thinking. As an approach, co-thinking privileges shared knowledge production in ways that current consultation processes cannot, yet to be successful, co-thinking requires higher degrees of engagement and trust from all participants.

Engaging women's organisations and inclusive civil society meaningfully in the design of co-thinking spaces is a prerequisite for a successful process.

We recognise that in any consultation processes there are points of tension between all parties. Acknowledging these tensions may be helpful in creating space and trust to allow for creative co-thinking.

Recurrent points of tension can include:

- **Habitual approaches.** This is particularly strong in long-term consultation processes, and it may manifest in different ways. Where consultation is formalised, there becomes an assumption to repeat the process without reflecting on how the underlying assumptions of the process and the external contexts may have changed. Systematised consultation has value, as it provides a platform for exchange and networking that may not otherwise be available, but the process may not be responsive enough to the contexts for meaningful consultation (for all parties) and the parties become habituated to certain attitudes and behaviours. This makes the consultation performative, and increases dissatisfaction from all parties, who become disillusioned not only with this particular process, but with the possibility of 'consultation' more broadly.
- **Unresponsive institutions/ poor system literacy** linked to the challenge of habitual approaches -- individuals within institutions may feel unable to act and constrained by their actual and perceived/ learned institutions' practices. Acknowledging this challenge and working with trusted allies from outside the institution can help identify cracks and/or unexpected third parties that can help create

the space needed for progress.

- **Managing expectations** rather than considering that every consultation should have tangible outputs (often in the form of 'actionable results') there are occasions when creating a space safe enough for an open and honest exchange is a major achievement - and a central component of creating that space is understanding how different participants assess 'safe'.
- **Power imbalance** the power of the consulter over consultee is discussed above and there is an assumption of power lying with the international organisation over (national) civil society. Creating co-thinking spaces requires addressing perceptions of power imbalance directly.

Elements to include are :

- numbers -- co-thinking spaces should be small, and should have equal numbers of participants from institutions and civil society;
- facilitation: co-facilitation is likely to be most beneficial, by individuals trusted by both parties;
- location: the space should be on 'neutral' ground, and in a place where all participants have the same experience arriving there (e.g. security at the building);
- form of address: the use of names/titles/'you' form must be the same for all participants;
- each person participates as their whole self, not only their professional function/representative of an institution
- confidentiality
- **Representativity** the 'representativity' of consultation processes is a highly politicised and sensitive challenge that is difficult to deal with. International organisations (including INGOs) do not have the context expertise or networks to identify diverse constituencies for consultation processes and are likely to be biased towards the dominant educated elite. National staff may act as gatekeepers and/or perpetuate systemic bias (unconsciously or not) in favour of the dominant civil society groupings. Gatekeeping is in part

due to the perception of institutional appetite towards diversity and creativity. Coupled with assumptions from Northern 'cultural sensitivity', this may perpetuate patterns of exclusion, particularly for 'sensitive issues', women's participation and for consideration of gender-responsive approaches. Moving from an 'event' based approach to consultation towards a process/dialogue co-thinking oriented process and explicitly avoiding consensus may help address this challenge, and build a better process in the longer term. Moving away from an implicit (or otherwise) desire for consensus amongst civil society will also require building additional appropriate space for intra-civil society dialogue -- to build trust, not consensus

- **Restriction of women's input to so-called 'women's issues'.** The necessity for women-only spaces in which women's organisations can address issues connected to SGBV, childcare and education with officials from international organisations have been shown to be important. However, consultations with men must also address these issues in order not to enforce care work and victimhood norms and stereotypes.

Women's associations must also be consulted on the full range of 'women's issues', including security arrangements, economic development plans, recovery and infrastructure plans, as well as governance issues, at international, regional, national and sub-national/community levels.



Recommendations

- **National experts and EU officials can create co-thinking spaces within existing consultation frameworks** by considering the whole consultation process and not focussing only on the event. By engaging with allies to identify the 'cracks' national experts and officials can create spaces to sharpen the (formal) consultation process and/or generate gender-responsive outcomes to feed into the process upstream. Participating in consultations can move beyond advocating policy makers for better decisions and policies to joint solution development. This requires the EU and civil society to consider consultations like policy solutions labs, where the funding responsibility lies on the EU and other institutional donor entities and the design on both the EU and civil society.
- Southern civil society organisations can lead South to South exchange on improved spaces for gender responsive EU policy outcomes with women from other conflict contexts in MENA and beyond to recognise and capitalise on the power of the civil society.
- Within the EU institutions, Senior **Management** should define:
 - A clear consultation strategy and set of principles that outline how consultations should be designed and implemented by officials with clear indicators for the consultation 'events' that link them to the overall process objective.
 - A clear strategy and practice for managing knowledge within the system, recognising that staff turnover represents a structural challenge to contextual analysis and reinforces path-dependency for officials.

- The need for higher internal system literacy and the need to allocate formal time and resources to build this up institutionally.
- Moving forward it is important to sharpen approaches to gender responsiveness in such a way that recognises the need for separate spaces as well as the need to joint spaces where gender responsiveness is a transformative approach that puts the patriarchy as system of power in focus while attending to its disproportional impact on women, rather than diminishing this structural and systemic power question to alleviating its symptoms on women's participation.
- Building and keeping an informal group of allies within institutions who are able to engage with externally convened spaces will not only help shape future consultations and gender-responsive outcomes, but will also help preserve institutional memory. While participation in the process is confidential, the knowledge generated within is not.
- Donors should invest in a longitudinal study to identify profiles of contexts and predictable patterns of opportunity and impediment that specifically affect women's meaningful participation in consultation and policy dialogue processes, generate responses to these with the aim of improving the gender-responsiveness of consultation and policy dialogue processes.

