

Patching holes in Peace Mediation

Weaving Feminist Political Action II

Accountability and Legitimacy



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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 understanding within and around the Syrian context.

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1. Background

At a time when current approaches to inclusivity in international peace mediation remain incapable of delivering meaningful participation and influence for 'traditionally' excluded groups, financing and supporting non-prescriptive and independent think spaces is imperative for those groups to articulate their thinking and visions beyond the hegemony of patriarchal and state-centric spaces. This both improves the quality of their participation and, over time, allows new thinking to emerge. Usually, urgency is understood as a situation that requires short-term or quick responses to alleviate an immediate need. While this is true in humanitarian and life-saving scenarios, peace mediation, more often than not, is taking place over an extended period of time, sometimes decades; therefore, responding to the urgency of addressing persistent challenges in peace mediation requires patient investment in transformative approaches. [WPHF](#)'s recognition of the urgency to support women's 'think spaces' as a transformative force for driving lasting peace in Syria is an important example for other donor agencies and philanthropists to follow in enabling much-needed new thinking on building and sustaining peace to emerge.

Holding forums to reimagine feminist political actions in Syria started in 2022, when Badael reacted to the urgency of responding to the frozen political imagination (nationally and internationally) regarding Syria by creating a thinking and reimagining space for Syrian women political and feminist actors to break the repetitive approaches to peace and political processes in this context.

'Reimagining' is neither new nor unique to the peacebuilding sector. However, our approach puts emphasis on challenging pre-existing patriarchal and colonial constraints that have shaped the way we think about, do, and conceptualise political action and peace mediation. The premise is to hold a carefully designed intentional, non-prescriptive, and iterative space liberated from the pressure of producing the quick outcomes that are often produced at the expense of the transformative quality of the space. In doing so, the forum does not merely pursue to inject (more) women into dysfunctional processes but it rather problematises those processes and offers new thinking for conceptualising inclusive peace mediation from a feminist perspective. The forums, also identify new questions as well as find answers to persistent challenges to inclusive peace mediation capable of delivering sustainable pluralistic peace in Syria.

Each forum invites the whole person to the space by employing a mix of analysis, somatic and/or artistic practices. The first forum focused on unpacking *inclusivity* and *influence* within feminist political spaces and peace mediation processes in Syria. It addressed the challenges associated with legitimacy and elaborated a vision for radical reform that enables building and sustaining feminist peace in Syria.

Inspired by the outcomes of the first forum, this iteration focuses on *legitimacy* and *accountability* as unavoidable peace mediation process questions. The forum explores legitimacy and accountability in the EU concept of peace mediation and the UN guidance for effective mediation, given the key role both institutions play in Syria¹ and in peace mediation generally. This report captures the participants' visions for accountable and legitimate peace mediation in Syria and identifies questions to consider for enhancing legitimacy and accountability in peace mediation more broadly.

1 [The UN OSES](#), and the EU's support to the [CSSR](#) and [Syrian Women Platform](#) to name a few examples.

2. Accountability and legitimacy in EU and UN peace mediation

2.1 EU Peace Mediation

The EU's engagement in peace mediation is framed by its [Concept on EU Mediation](#), adopted by the Council of the EU in 2020 (and therefore 'hard law'). It also has [EU Peace Mediation Guidelines](#), also from 2020, an internal document for the European External Action Service (EEAS). The Concept can therefore be understood as the legal framework within which EU mediation is conceived and implemented, and the guidelines more like an internal handbook.

The purpose of the Mediation Concept is to boost the role of the EU as a leading peace mediation, conflict prevention and peacebuilding actor, within the multilateral system (with UN at the core of that system). The EU does not generally engage in mediation without the UN, or other regional body.

The EU considers itself a value-based actor, although it notes that 'principled pragmatism' may be necessary. Although the Concept states that EU interests are complementary to conflict prevention and mediation, most commentators are more sceptical.

The EU supports multi-track mediation as preference, although more attention is given to Track I/high-level diplomacy in practice within the EEAS. The European Commission gives extensive (financial) support to Track II-III initiatives.

The EU is committed to inclusivity in mediation, both as a norm to guide its broader engagement and as a mediation objective. It sees itself as playing a connector role between the tracks, and it certainly has the potential to do so, even if this is not fully realised. It also states commitment to people-centred approaches, psychosocial support, and opening up and protecting

space for civil society. Notably, gender-inclusion is not mentioned in this section and is only mentioned in the ninth 'mediation principle' suggesting that, for the EU, gender-inclusion is different from and less important than 'inclusion'.

EU mediation takes place in the context of EU foreign policy and it is important to note that the extent to which the EU has a common foreign policy can vary greatly between different contexts. Foreign policy is created with the agreement of Member States. Where there is no agreement, common foreign policy is often reduced to statements of values. The EU per se has little to no authority over Member State foreign policy, and in some contexts, the most that the EU can aspire to is a form of coordination between Member States. Coherence with foreign policy objectives is, therefore, an ambition that is hard to realise in some places.

EU mediation also takes places within the EU's integrated approach to conflict and crises, meaning that in principle at least, there should be coordination and coherence between the different EU instruments available in a given context (e.g. development aid, common security and defence policy missions, etc...) so that peace outcomes can be quickly supported with relevant aid and other support (for example).

There are a whole range of EU actors that may be engaged in conflict-affected situation, for example:

- Special Envoys, Special Representatives, Ambassadors etc.
- Mediation Support Team (MST) in the EEAS
- EEAS Pool of Mediators
- EU Delegation and HQ staff
- EU Member States, civil society
- [European Resources for Mediation Support](#) (ERMES) project / EU Mediation Community of Practice

In keeping with the EU's commitment to multilateralism, it places a lot of emphasis on its partnerships with the UN, OSCE and other regional bodies, as well as with civil society (although the quality of these partnerships is markedly different).

The EU also commits to conflict sensitivity in mediation, including assessing whether non-engagement is appropriate, and bases its approach to mediation on commitment to international human rights norms and standards, including for transitional justice.

The ninth 'mediation principle' listed in the Concept is gender equality and women's empowerment. Although there are many relevant policies on these questions (e.g. [EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security](#) (2018) and the [Gender Action Plan III](#) (GAP III)), gender equality is not placed as central to, or a transversal theme of the Mediation Concept.

The Concept also commits to addressing climate and natural resources and cultural heritage in mediation.

Finally, it also states a commitment to an evidence-based approach, including feedback loops, debriefs and evaluations (these are not public), which will lead to accountability quality and effectiveness in EU mediation actions.

Accountability and legitimacy

Process accountability is referenced briefly in the Concept. The guidelines provide a little more detail:

Monitoring and evaluation (assessing impact) aims at enhancing accountability and learning. When assessing mediation, quantifiable measurements are not sufficient. The focus should be on context-specific assessments and in capturing the process. This is because the complexity of most contemporary conflicts makes it increasingly difficult to establish a link between a specific mediation initiative and the evolution of the situation. (p.11)

The Concept recognises therefore a limited notion of accountability, In the context of monitoring and evaluation. While there are few public and systematic evaluations of EU mediation (i.e. limited infrastructure), there may be other opportunities for actors, including civil society, to ask questions of the EU actors about the process, thus beginning to hold the EU accountable for its engagement in processes and also reflecting on how it could improve the accountability of other actors.

Introducing questions about the process as well as the issues at stake to broader consultations, including informal discussions, may contribute to a behavioural shift towards EU actors reflecting on their own engagement and explaining it to stakeholders, such as women-led civil society.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Concept is a legally binding framework. However, there are no obvious mechanisms for external stakeholders to hold EU officials to account for non-compliance. In reality, advocacy has to rely on persuasion.

Legitimacy, on the other hand, is not mentioned in the Concept. In the guidelines, it appears in two places. First, in discussing inclusion and the preference for multi-track mediation:

Mediation strategies that manage to integrate the diverse perspectives of conflict parties and other stakeholders help to

generate broad national ownership, improving legitimacy and the prospects of a more sustainable peace. (p.12)

This is elaborated 'in practice': Furthermore, traditional and religious leaders are potentially important allies as they can play a critical role in increasing the legitimacy of a peace process. (p.13)

Legitimacy also appears in the section on WPS: Inclusion of women furthermore can enhance public perception of the legitimacy and credibility of a peace process (p.15). Note how the inclusion of women may increase the perception of legitimacy, while the inclusion of (predominantly patriarchal) traditional and religious leaders can increase the legitimacy of a process.

In addition to this problematic positioning of (all) women as less legitimate actors, particularly than traditional and religious leaders, it is important to note that the guidelines only consider the legitimacy of 'a peace process' vis à vis the population. It does not consider the (different) legitimacy (or not) of the international, regional, national actors, nor the proposals under discussion, nor the legitimacy of a process or specific outcomes in relation to international laws, norms and standards.

Given that legitimacy is understood in both an abstract and narrow way, it is difficult to imagine concrete entry points for discussing i) the different forms of legitimacy and work and ii) how different actors / issues may be more or less legitimate in the views of different stakeholders.

However, as legitimacy is clearly framed (within the guidelines at least) as something that the EU aspires to in the processes in which it is engaged, consultation opportunities, including debriefs with EUSRs and informal conversations as well as formal advocacy and consultation opportunities, could be useful opportunities to raise these questions.

Further, the WPS agenda may also provide (limited) opportunities for opening up discussion of legitimacy.

2.2 UN Guidance for Effective Peace Mediation

The General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to develop guidance for more effective mediation in consultation with Member States and other relevant actors. Adopted by consensus, the General Assembly resolution 65/283, June 2012, entitled “Strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution” called on key actors to develop their mediation capacities. Therefore, the guidance aims to inform the design and management of mediation processes. It serves as a non-exhaustive resource for mediators, States and other actors supporting mediation efforts including civil society. As such, the guidance acknowledges its limitations and seeks to address major issues through eight mediation fundamentals: Preparedness, Consent, Impartiality, Inclusivity, National Ownership, International Law and Normative Frameworks, Coherence Coordination and Complementarity of the mediation effort, and Quality Peace Agreements.

The guidance defines mediation as “Mediation is a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements. Mediation is a voluntary endeavour in which the consent of the parties is critical for a viable process and a durable outcome.” The guidance is clear on the need to take into account the causes and dynamics of the conflict as well as the needs of the broader society and the regional and international environments. The guidance further recognises the impacts generated on the power balance and political calculations within and between different groups by the very existence of a mediation process.

All in all, women are mentioned 9 times in the guidance. Two times in the framing of two fundamentals (Inclusivity, and International Law and Normative Frameworks), and seven times in the guidance of the aforementioned fundamentals as well as Preparedness, Consent, and Quality Peace Agreements.

Under **inclusivity**, women leaders and women groups are recognised for their 'effectiveness' in peacemaking at the community level. Mediators are encouraged to link those efforts to the 'high-level' mediation process and to conduct structured and systematic consultations with women's groups. The guidance indicates this will allow women's meaningful participation and encourage mediators to exert specific efforts to include women in the mediation process, and to encourage conflict parties to include women in their delegations. One could argue that this signals women and their inclusion are presented as an afterthought in the design logic of a mediation process rather than a key actor for whom peace mediation is designed and conceptualised.

Under **preparedness**, there is one reference to women encouraging the mediator to include women in the mediation team to lead by example, albeit with no reference to rank balance at the senior levels² (P5 to D2), and another reference to the need for all team members to understand the gender dimensions of their area of expertise.

Consent includes a shy reference to women under engaging with local and community based actors and organisations.

The **International Law and Normative Frameworks** fundamental makes a reference to normative expectations on the empowerment and participation of women in mediation processes, with no explicit citation of the Women Peace and Security agenda (WPS) or the Youth Peace and Security agenda (YPS), albeit implied. This fundamental spells out the boundaries for the mediator who should not endorse peace agreements with amnesties for those who committed human rights violations such as sexual and gender-based violence.

Finally, the **Quality Peace Agreements** fundamental reiterates that gender dimensions of all issues should be articulated because gender neutral agreements are detrimental to the wellbeing, security, and needs of women.

2 Parity remains low at mid-senior to senior levels, especially at non-HQ locations according to the [UNSG report A/78/206](#)

The guidance does not touch upon process accountability. It includes a few references to monitoring and evaluation or internal assessments with the purpose to “enhance the chances for success and minimise the mediator error” only.

Legitimacy, on the other hand, is mentioned 4 times. One time, cautioning against assuming conflict parties have legitimacy with or represent the wider public. Three times in relation to what could increase the legitimacy of peace processes and agreements, namely that civil society can play a critical role in increasing the legitimacy of a peace process, consistency with internal law and norms contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy of a process and that inclusivity increase the legitimacy of peace agreements. While presenting this point, forum participants also raised concerns about the current low level of trust in international instruments as a challenge, given the selective use and application of those instruments along the geopolitical interest lines of the UNSC P5 and their allies.

Overall, the references made to women and their roles are utilitarian, protectionist, or at best consultative. The guidance falls short of recognising women’s political agency and role in shaping the mediation process.

That said, the upcoming Summit of the Future offers a new chance to recentre the conversation around women’s leadership and meaningful participation in peace mediation at all levels. Draft 0 of the Pact for the Future reaffirms commitments to the WPS agenda, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 agenda, and gender equality writ large. The draft underscores that without “the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in decisions on peace and security, and the realization of women’s rights in their indivisible entirety, peace cannot be achieved and sustained.” P.9

2.3 Questions to consider for enhancing accountability and legitimacy in EU and UN mediation

“Process design shouldn’t be about me, it should be with me”
Oula Ramadan, Badael’s director

Transparency, accountability and legitimacy are seen as mutually reinforcing by the forum participants. One key question that emerged from discussions is:

What is sufficient transparency, accountability and legitimacy and who gets to decide that?

Building on the forum discussions, below are two sets of questions to consider for enhancing accountability and legitimacy in peace mediation.

Accountability

Mediation entities and teams are encouraged to consider the following the questions:

- Is the mediation team tolerant of divergent views, including on the design and proceedings of the process from women and civil society actors?
- Are key process accountability issues identified and communicated to the mediation team and broader process participants?
- Are there inbuilt mechanisms for the protection of women and civil society actors against ‘disciplinary’ exclusion?
- Is public information about the process and its inclusion mechanisms easily accessible to the wider public? [a dedicated website, newsletter, social media presence, etc]

- Are process accountability entry points known to the process participants and those concerned have the capacity to raise process accountability questions without fear?
- Are there mechanisms to receive feedback, respond to it, and take action upon it?

Legitimacy

“The legitimacy of a process starts from participating in its design” forum participant

Mediation entities and teams are encouraged to consider the following questions:

- To what extent did the actors named in the EU concept and UN guidance participate in the design of the process and perceive themselves to have done so, whether through consultations or design workshops?
- Does the process document and communicate its evolution internally and to the appropriate extent externally?
- Does the process have a mechanism for capturing institutional memory?
- While actors participating in peace mediation can enjoy variable levels of legitimacy, the process itself needs to be legitimate in the public view. Are sources of legitimacy for a given mediation process clear to the mediation team and does the team have the resources to address challenges to process legitimacy?
- How does the process design respond to ‘legitimacy’ claims used to

exclude certain groups (women, youth, victim groups, etc)?

- Do changes in the conflict context give way to new legitimate actors?
How does the process enable their participation or involvement?



3. Bringing the whole self – engaging creative selves

Creative methods are a productive way to bring our whole selves to the forum. Unlike in other parts of the process, the aim with the patchwork was not to represent reality (including participants' aspirations) faithfully, but to broaden and deepen our thinking by bringing existing elements together in new ways to generate deeper meaning. Creative methods are particularly powerful for capturing the social and political realities that evade unambiguous representation, particularly the emotive, embodied, and sensory version of these. Creative methods – like textile art – are a way of enabling the feminist practice of bringing the whole self to a feminist space.

Textile art – long dismissed as 'craft' rather than 'art' – has a long history crossing many cultures of storytelling. Textile can be very intimate, we wear textile next to our skin every day. The act of doing something with our hands – doodling, for example – is known to help focus the mind, and women have a long history of creating spaces for discussing news while working individually or collectively with textiles. More recently, textile art has become a means for subversive expression by marginalised people across the world.

Textile art and the textile industry has a complex relationship to liberation, however. Embroidery, for example, was seen as a way of keeping women meek and submissive for centuries – embroidery would change and constrain the embroiderer in a way that painting would not for painters. For some women, the connection of sewing, in particular, with problematic stereotypes around gender and class present a challenge. The textile industry is deeply connected to colonialism and neo-colonialism and the exploitation of textile workers – who are predominantly women – continues to this day. Textiles fill landfill and throw-away fashion is another major contributor to the climate crisis.

While creative processes in the context of peacemaking and peacebuilding are often dismissed as marginal, there is a growing practice of integrating textile art into peacebuilding. In contrast to the grand, dominating memorials to conflict and to peace, textile offers a more flexible, more tangible and more portable medium, one that is open to ambiguity, diversity in a more inclusive, and perhaps also subversive, narrative.

The process

The participants were each asked to bring a small piece of fabric that held some meaning for her, recycled clothes or domestic textiles for example. The exercise was introduced and the participants asked to express their women's agency or power, using paint, thread, pens – any form of marks on their individual patch.

In the initial session, the participants were tasked with working on their own patch. Although they were not explicitly asked to stay in the room, no-one left; the group worked collectively on individual pieces. The participants were also told that they could continue working on their patches during the other parts of the programme, which many of them did (so much so, that for some speed writing exercises, they were asked to put the patches away).

Towards the end of the Forum, the participants were invited to hang their patches on a plain recycled cotton sheet, the canvas for the project and pin it into place. The only constraint was that no one piece could cover another one. The participants were then asked to talk about the process and the result.

Reflections on the process

All of the participants engaged with the exercise, even those who said they did not enjoy it. Participants continued with the work over breaks and through other sessions to an unexpected degree.

When the participants reflected on their experience, the following themes emerged:

- For many, it helped them focus. (Some participants brought additional textile work, e.g. crochet, to the next session). After getting over the difficulty of starting, the element of play in the exercise released emotion and the inspiration to depict these. Some participants were very figurative in their depictions, others more abstract.
- Some found it powerful to reclaim the dismissive instruction to 'go and sew.' It reinforced how daily practice is politics and decision-making, that decision-making is not limited to elite spheres
- There were many connections with memory – for some, the exercise brought back (childhood) memories, sometimes connected to mother/daughter relationships.
- The textile work was in itself memorable, so it will act as a kind of memory prompt / aide mémoire for the broader discussions at this Forum.
- It was a good icebreaker, and helped build a sense of community between the participants. Many of the participants said they thought they knew nothing about sewing, and found the creative outlet very satisfying. Others had not brought fabric, and instinctively the participants helped each other out, with sewing and with sharing fabric.
- Some participants worked collectively on individual patches, others expanded the prompt and initiated a traditional practice of wrapping wishes in fabric and draped them across the patchwork.

Reflections on the patchwork

Some of the pieces the participants brought pieces of textile such as the Palestinian Koufeyieh, and the Kurdish textile that were connected to political struggles, and others brought textile that had profound meaning for them (a scarf worn in exile, first bedsheet bought in Germany). The coexistence of these pieces, and the stories behind them, had a strong emotional impact, highlighting the connection between people, and feeling each other's pain.

The variety of the patchwork brings the diversity of Syrians to mind, perspectives and aspirations as well as traditions.

Beyond metaphor

Patchwork offers an obvious metaphor, that the collective endeavour includes and transcends the individual contributions. Beyond the output, the exercise also offered important insights.

The participants worked together instinctively, either helping each other with technique, or finding fabric, and, in some cases choosing a collaborative approach to creating a patch. Not all participants produced



a patch, either individually or collectively – demonstrating that in creative expression there are many ways to contribute to the process, not everyone has to do the same thing.

Each person interpreted the original instruction (bring a piece fabric that holds some meaning) differently, most choosing something they had a personal and intimate relationship with (scarf, bedsheet) and transformed this in the company of the other participants and framed by discussions on accountability and legitimacy into an expression of their woman's power/agency. Some participants included traditional amulets (triangle hijab) with hopes for the future of Syria in the patchwork. These particular expressions cannot be re-created and the same participants would produce different outputs in another setting. Although the patchwork can be photographed, it cannot be reproduced.

The inclusion of Palestinian Koufeyieh and Kurdish scarf spoke to the interconnectedness of different (political) movements. The intimacy of the majority of the pieces reinforced how the everyday is political and that everyday decision-making is political. The combination of symbolic and domestic (intimate) cloth, and the inclusion of a specific traditional (spiritual) practice within a broader, more generalised practice (patchwork) place each of these spheres of (political) action on the same plane: none is hierarchically superior to the others and all are connected.

The exercise enabled participants to express their aspirations in non-verbal, non-linear and non-chronological ways, and also to combine these aspirations in a non-hierarchical whole that spoke to – and to a certain extent, for – the group. Some participants may also have expressed themselves through the art and chosen not to explain this to the group, keeping particular meanings private while still forming part of the greater whole.

The exercise reminds us that women's agency is not limited to a particular sphere, that women have power in multiple fora simultaneously, and do not necessarily play the same roles or exercise similar power in each.

4. Reimagining more accountable and legitimate peace mediation in Syria

The reimagining exercise is the culmination of the two-day discussion. It builds on the conceptual unpacking of key themes and approaches to peace mediation, the outcome of a utopia visioning exercise and bringing elements of the utopian puzzle into the realm of the possible, including immediate actions that can be taken by feminists from their current positions.

This section is an invitation to actors engaged in Syria to reimagine approaches to peace mediation in Syria inspired by the expertise of Syrian feminist political actors.

A puzzle of horizontal processes

Forum participants reimagined more accountable and legitimate peace mediation in Syria to be a puzzle of horizontal processes in the form of complimentary multi-track process whereby each space and process are a piece of a puzzle rather than a hierarchy of tracks.

A team of mediators

This vision, participants emphasise, requires a group of mediators working in collaboration rather than a one mediator (or mediator's office) "show". This group of mediators would have different backgrounds and expertise relevant to the conflict issues and context. They would complement each other and build different relationships with parties towards finding a common purpose or common ground. The group of mediators should have their own discussion space to see how the different processes complement each other. The group of mediators include international and insider mediators who hold different mediation and consultative processes with the conflict parties and broader interest groups. This ensures that no one

central process can hamper other efforts; there is no central piece in the puzzle, but rather a starting point.

The mediation entity

While recognizing the many challenges with the current UN-LAS mediated process and its inclusion modalities, participants still viewed the UN to be the most suitable body in the multilateral system with a potentially sufficient level of impartiality.

The mediation entity is required to ensure the following:

- Enhance civil society's preparedness and capacity to develop a national plan for peace and conflict transformation in Syria.
- A greater role for Syrian insider mediators, particularly women
- In depth and meaningful consultations on conflict transformation priorities in Syria
- Recognising and connecting with informal processes
- Creating inclusive spaces for excluded groups (such as, the Kurdish people, victim groups, independent women political blocs, etc)
- Creating monitoring and communication mechanisms between the different 'pieces of the puzzle' / processes
- Recognising feminist leadership and creating a conducive environment for feminist leadership in peace mediation processes
- Creating a culture of accountability by modelling accountable behaviours (ensure feedback loops in connection to consultations, respond to questions posed by the civil society, ensure the agreed level of transparency is communicated to the wider public, etc)
- Ongoing assessment of negotiations priorities in a rapidly changing military and political landscape

As for ensuring the accountability of the process, the vision encourages setting up an independent oversight body that monitors the accountability of peace mediation efforts in Syria. It also calls for collective action by the civil society and their local allies to ensure the accountability of peace mediation, that of the friends of Syria group, and the EU on commitments to inclusivity.

The legitimacy of peace mediation comes from the mandate, delegation of authority, and ensuring that process outcomes serve the public good. A point of caution was made to ensure process participants do not fall into the trap of legitimising processes and an invitation to suspend or withdraw from participation in such processes as a pressure action to increase the legitimacy of the process was made.

From vision to reality: What will feminists do?

While recognising this is a collective responsibility for national and international actors. The Forum participants reflected on the most immediate actions they can take to translate the above vision or parts of it into a reality.

A home-grown culture of accountability and inclusivity

Together with other feminists, participants intend to create a culture of accountability in their spaces of action and towards their constituencies to build a public practice of accountable behaviour, where constituents ask and those in positions of responsibility proactively communicate. They will also seek to engage youth who distanced themselves from politics due to violence and oppression and use current consultative spaces in civil society to prepare women and youth to articulate their priorities and demands.

“if I don’t have enough knowledge, I will not be able to monitor evaluate or reject or accept in an informed manner.” Forum participant

Bridging the trust deficiency

Recognising the trust deficiency in current political and governance bodies, participants believe that, together women at the grassroots level, they have a chance to start a conversation about a national project. One that can mobilise the population in an environment where institutions and political structures, even some civil society actors, are not seen (or experienced) to be independent or carry a national project.

Connected inclusive spaces are the norm

It is evident from the Utopian visioning that there is a need to multiply inclusive spaces and enhance dialogue between those spaces. This is an action participants sensed can start from emergent spaces like this Forum and connecting with other spaces they are tapped into. Feminists can be norm breakers and new norm setters. Making inclusive spaces the norm is a model worthy of feminists to set in the spaces they organise and participate in.

5. Conclusions

Legitimacy is a foundational assumption for peace mediation. The idea that it is 'the right thing' to do, whatever that means, by the actors involved or supporting a process even if they do not believe that the process is as it should be or that there will be a ('good enough') outcome, is undeniable for anyone who spends time around people involved in mediation. Being the 'right thing to do' becomes a substitute, therefore, for close consideration of what 'legitimacy' might mean. Legitimacy is also commonly retro-fitted when a settlement brings to a certain form of (political) violence to a (temporary) stop: that cessation in hostilities legitimizes everything that went before.

Yet legitimacy is contested in conflict-affected societies, and necessarily so. Conflicts are not monolithic and although this is recognised in the UN and EU's stated support for multitrack mediation processes, the connection between multitrack processes and legitimacy seems to be understood by both organisations as vertical, and one-way: Track II and III legitimize Track I. The connection between legitimacy and the tracks therefore needs to be radically reconsidered. Who and what is 'legitimate,' and to whom, will shift within the tracks, as well as change over time.

It is important to acknowledge that women are routinely excluded from peace processes by national and international actors in the name of 'legitimacy', claiming women lack legitimacy in the political arena. This narrow and partial understanding of legitimacy, linked to the hegemony of track I, is deployed to deny the legitimacy that women's groups in Syria derive from the legitimacy of their demands and their social backing³, remains unchallenged by international actors.

There is also the external aspect to legitimacy and while some attention

3 Saleh, O. [Weaving Feminist Political Action in Syria Badael](#), p 15, Badael (2022).

may be given to how issues are dealt with in relation to international law, norms and standards, there is little reflection on whether or not external actors are legitimate.

In imaging legitimacy in the Syrian context, Forum participants have emphasised the importance of plurality, diversity, and inclusion. This can be understood as a way of acknowledging and managing divergent views of legitimacy and also creating spaces in which common principles of legitimacy can be created as a basis for groups in conflict to manage that conflict non-violently or even constructively. Central to this, participants found, is building trust – which is in turn deeply connected to the notion of accountability.

'Accountability' as a concept is largely understood as integrating justice for human rights violations into peace mediation and peacebuilding. While this is extremely important, the human rights related meaning of accountability tends to eclipse the more internal practice of process accountability, which, at its simplest can be understood as the right to ask questions and receive answers, an account of the process and that specific actor's role. Process accountability – the focus of this Forum – gets little to no attention in the EU and UN guidelines.

Forum participants underlined how vital accountability is for the legitimacy of peace processes, yet there is no infrastructure to enable accountability in any (semi-public) meaningful sense. The EU mediation guidelines link accountability to monitoring and evaluation, but there is no mechanism in place for stakeholders to access these processes, or even to know whether or not they are taking place.

The Forum participants outlined how accountability and legitimacy could be achieved in the Syrian context, in large part through greater engagement by mediation actors with diverse civil society and creating meaningful feedback loops. A common response to this kind of recommendation is to

answer that peace processes require secrecy to be successful. It is likely the case that most processes will require confidential components, but this, too often, is extended into a generalised culture of secrecy even around issues or participants which do not require the protection that confidentiality or secrecy brings to certain discussions. This generalised culture of secrecy for its own sake, which governs many peace processes, is hugely detrimental not least because it suggests that the actions of all the actors involved in Track I, including external actors, are beyond scrutiny.

This culture of excessive secrecy de-legitimizes the actors and the process. It makes connecting the tracks – a stated ambition of UN and EU policy – impossible because the connection is vertical and one-way instead of horizontal, meaning that it cannot acknowledge, manage and accommodate complex and conflicting perceptions of legitimacy. That central conflict – of legitimacy, of trust – will likely be entrenched by the settlement and the post-settlement period, and be entrenched by the division of spoils between the militarily powerful (power-sharing) without taking into account how conflict, and therefore legitimacy, has changed over time.

The absence of infrastructure to enable even modest levels of accountability is a significant challenge to sustainable peace. International actors that intervene as external actors in peace mediation, notably the UN and EU are uniquely placed to further accountability and legitimacy by introducing meaningful feedback loops, as the Forum participants recommend. These recommendations include regular and systematic conversations between inclusive civil society and other actors in the process, in which civil society can ask questions and receive meaningful answers.

To counter the culture of excessive secrecy, UN and EU actors should increase their strategic communications, increasing the amount of information available to the public, except on extraordinary developments that require confidentiality or secrecy, to increase the legitimacy and accountability of ongoing processes. This is particularly important in the context of drafting a new Constitution, for example: engaging the population, in its diversity, will be central to the legitimacy of the new Constitution and accountability in the process leading to its adoption and implementation.

