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RECOGNISING WOMEN'S POLITICAL AGENCY: Beyond advocacy to inclusion

To ensure that women's political agency and roles in peace processes and political transformation are fully recognised, the European Union (EU) and the international community need to move beyond advocating for the inclusion of women, to better supporting their political agency in formal and informal processes. There is a need for more holistic approaches, including attention to women's political participation, diverse representation, protection and funding, both in online and offline spaces.

Women are actively engaged in defining the future of their societies before, during and after formal peace agreements, in roles that range from being national-level political figures to community mobilisers. Yet, women's agency in, and their contribution to, peace processes and political transformation continues to be overlooked. While women are not completely absent from formal peace and political processes, they are more commonly left to carve out their own the space for participation in roles that are often informal and less visible.

Women in formal peace processes and political transformations are often faced with the unrealistic expectation of representing "all women". Their legitimacy is often questioned, especially if they are not nominated by the conflict parties themselves. They are only able to address a limited range of issues, with a trade-off of either "playing by the rules" or losing their seat at the negotiating table. CMI's long-term work in Libya, Yemen and Palestine, as well as its more recent activity in Sudan and Afghanistan, aims to support women's agency to shape peace and transition processes, both in formal and informal processes, which include protest movements where younger women in particular have an active role.

Women's political agency is not limited to formal peace processes. Many current peace processes are

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Participation means more than mere presence at the negotiating table; it needs to be understood and supported on a continuum and across levels, settings and groups.
- Informal processes and protest movements are challenging traditional forms of political participation.
- Limited access to funding prevents women from influencing political processes in conflict and post-conflict settings.
- Digital tools provide new means for women to organise and coordinate themselves.
- Online and offline violence and threats undermine women's participation.

characterised by hybrid modalities, prolonged transitions and increasing repression, with women playing increasingly important roles in protest movements and mass mobilisations, both online and offline. In Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen and Palestine, women are taking to the streets. Although peacemaking increasingly acknowledges the importance of informal processes, there is a need to better understand these actors, including the motives, needs and contributions of grassroots level politics and digital campaigning that push for broader participation. Failing to do so risks losing an opportunity to enhance gender equality and recognise women's political agency in peace processes and political and

societal transformation.

Digital tools and social media are challenging traditional forms of participation in political and peace processes. These can enable decentralised leadership and allow for new actors to be active in the political space. Online spaces have made it easier for women to organise, coordinate, discuss and strategise, and to find new allies and supporters. Social media is a source of inspiration, allowing women to connect across borders, share information and draw national and global attention to issues and events irrespective of their location. However, while digital tools provide opportunities for participation, they also come with challenges.

Verbal, mental and physical threats against women also happen online, restricting women's participation and ultimately excluding them from these spaces in the absence of online protection and accountability mechanisms, both in formal and informal settings.

In recent decades, the EU has demonstrated its commitment to gender equality and the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda across policies and fora. Its ambition to play a "leading role as a gender equality catalyst" and to "lead by example" is confirmed by the EU Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025) and the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025), as well as by several resolutions on women's participation adopted by the European Parliament. The same ambition is reflected in the current efforts led by the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity for more gender-responsive EU leadership, the launch of an Agenda to Promote Diversity and Inclusion, and the most recent EU Council Conclusions on WPS, adopted on 14 November 2022. The latter highlighted the protests in Iran and that the rights of women and girls must be respected and safeguarded, and that their equal and meaningful participation in public life, including in decision-making, must be ensured.

These are all very important initiatives. But to overcome obstacles to women's participation in peace processes, the EU, its member states and the international community can and should do more. First, there is a need to look beyond numbers. The presence of women at the negotiating table does not automatically denote more gender responsive politics and policies. Meaningful participation takes place in a continuum. It starts before inclusion in a particular process and continues during and after that process. Greater transparency about the selection process could increase the understanding of why certain individuals are selected to certain positions, which in turn could lead to the increased legitimisation of women's involvement and the process as a whole.

Second, the EU should not only focus on outcomes but also con-

sider the design of peace and political processes. It is important to pay more attention to the process in order to move beyond advocacy to agency. A gender responsive approach to mediation must be applied from the outset, allowing women to shape the course of peace processes. These outcomes should result in legislative changes in the countries concerned to enable, empower and ensure women's participation in political processes, and to insist on accountability when commitments on women's inclusion are not realised.

Third, the protection of women in political positions has to be taken seriously in both offline and online environments to provide proactive protection mechanisms for women in political positions. The EU works with the ProtectDefenders.eu programme but more needs to be done to ensure accountability, both by international organisations and the platforms on which threats are carried out. Meeting women leaders and organisations is a way to show support and help substantiate the recognition of women as stakeholders, whether at the negotiating table or in less formal processes. However, international actors should make sure to meet with all sides and avoid exposing them to additional risk in their respective countries.

Fourth, the digital dimension cannot be overlooked. There is a general need for capacity-building and to strengthen the digital infrastructure to overcome gender gaps in connectivity. Digital literacy programmes and other skills development should be included in programmes and included in budgets.

Fifth, there is a need for flexible funding mechanisms that are accessible and less time-consuming, to provide support to smaller organisations often led by women, especially in urgent situations.

This article and recommendations are based on contributions at a high-level panel discussion on Women as Political Agents in Peace Processes organised by CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation in cooperation with the Permanent Representations to the EU of Finland and Denmark on 10 January 2023 in Brussels, involving key EU stakeholders including EU, EU member states, NGOs, NATO and UN representatives. A keynote speech by Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, was delivered by Lora Borissoca, Senior Expert, Cabinet of Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen, and women from Libya, Sudan, Palestine and Afghanistan shared their experiences of working for peace in their respective countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should more consistently insist on women's participation across formal and informal political processes.
- The EU should focus more on process design to enable gender inclusive outcomes, including legislative changes and accountability mechanisms.
- The EU should reinforce protection mechanisms to prevent and hold people accountable for online and offline threats.
- EU programming to support gender equality should include digital literacy and other online skills development.
- EU funding needs to be accessible for smaller organisations and for actions that require small scale funding.