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Contextualising support for women's political agency in peace processes: learning from Yemen

Over the past decade, Yemen's continuing civil war has fragmented civilian political life and marginalized political parties, despite the country's historically strong tradition of democratic politics. CMI's efforts in Yemen focus on restoring political agency among civilian actors, with a special focus on female politicians and activists by promoting cross-party collaboration, supporting women's departments in political parties, and increasing women's capacities and networks.

Yemen's political landscape, which is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation, militarisation and destabilisation as a result of Yemen's ongoing civil war, is a highly challenging space to navigate for female Yemeni politicians. The key issues related to women's involvement in political and public life include cultural, structural and social barriers, and relate to the general marginalisation of civilian political actors as well as the lack of progress in implementing previously agreed commitments, including a 30 per cent quota agreed as a result of Yemen's National Dialogue Conference in 2014.

These challenges help explain why Yemeni women have had so few opportunities to participate in national-level peace processes and efforts. Only a small percentage of participants in the overall formal peace process have been women, with often no female delegates present at all. The same is true for female representation in current governing institutions across the country. At the moment, the lack of a viable peace process further limits women's opportunities to influence decision-making concerning peace and security. These negative developments are in sharp contrast to the political empowerment that Yemeni women experienced during the 2011-12 Arab Spring movement, when female political activists played a major role in the political mobilization and

demonstrations that toppled the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Recognising these challenges, CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation's (CMI) support for women's political agency in Yemen has focused on finding entry points through political parties, their women's departments and cross-party collaboration. These efforts have relied on the historical legitimacy that political parties have enjoyed in Yemen, and their continued relevance even amid the ongoing conflict. Specifically, the efforts have focused on increasing female Yemeni politicians' personal capacities and connectivity within their political parties, improving inter-party dialogue channels as well as strengthening linkages with the UN's Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY).

The premise of CMI's support has been that Yemeni women politicians themselves conceptualise the courses of action that are best suited to their specific cultural, social, religious and political environments. The dialogue process has paid significant attention to involving women from different Yemeni governorates and localities, making sure that their specific challenges and issues are taken into account.

The implementation of CMI's efforts has underscored several lessons learnt about advancing women's political agency in Yemen through a contextualised approach. Firstly, pursuing women's greater inclusion in national- or international-level peace processes cannot take place in isolation from progress at the local and governorate levels. These different

Key takeaways

- Pursuing Yemeni women's greater inclusion in national or international peace processes cannot take place in isolation from progress at the local and governorate levels.
- Involving the entire political spectrum from the most conservative to the most progressive end is essential for generating genuine inclusivity and legitimacy.
- Mixed female-male spaces can prompt perceptual and behavioural changes that can help normalise women's political participation.

tracks are interconnected – for women to gain credibility and legitimacy as political actors at the national level or beyond, there needs to be efforts to support women's greater participation in public and political life in Yemen's governorates and local-level politics.

This whole-of-society approach ensures that there are no gaps and contradictions in how women are perceived in these different contexts. Ensuring that progress is made at different levels in the same direction, even if at different paces and through varied approaches, generates ownership and engenders buy-in across Yemeni society.

This geographically inclusive approach has also prompted several self-initiated efforts among participants, including stakeholder-led advocacy campaigns that were not initially part of the planned activities. These endeavors were precipitated by the positive rapport and trust that was built during CMI-facilitated activities, as well as practical opportunities for participants to meet stakeholders from their respective governorates and jointly develop advocacy efforts focused on the challenges most relevant to their regions.

The second key lesson from CMI's work with Yemeni women active in public life is understanding the importance of engaging with the entire political spectrum, not only the more progressive or reformist ends of it. Speaking to all sides of the debate regarding women's roles in society is key to keeping the dialogue rooted in the context, and will result in more sustainable long-term results. Especially the involvement of more conservative-leaning actors is critical for legitimizing the efforts in the eyes of all relevant societal actors. Backlash and opposition to reform arise precisely when key constituencies feel ostracized or alienated, creating fears of being sidelined from decision-making or resource-sharing processes.

One of the key components of CMI's efforts in Yemen has been to bring Yemeni female and male political stakeholders together in mixed spaces, which has helped promote mutual respect and has begun to bridge the perceptual gaps that have for long limited women's political participation in Yemen. This has led to observable differences in stakeholder interactions, including opening up the debate and enabling women to challenge their male peers. Stakeholder feedback highlighted this dimension as an impactful experience for women and men alike,

especially as the workshops included representatives from all segments of Yemen's political space.

Another component of this approach is to bring together political actors from different hierarchical levels, particularly connecting senior political actors and leaders with mid-level party members. Establishing these vertical interconnections is key to expanding ownership, mutual trust and reciprocal understanding, especially considering that many leaders of Yemen's political parties are geographically scattered. An important benefit from these vertically mixed spaces has been that party leaders have understood the positive benefits of international support activities for the mid-level constituencies and the potential wider benefits for their parties. Based on stakeholder feedback, this has been a key factor enabling female participants to increase their recognition within their political parties, including by becoming more connected with party leadership, attaining positions of responsibility and other new roles as trusted party leaders. These efforts have also contributed to making gender equality a topic of discussion within local branches of parties as well as in central committees or other national-level entities.

The third lesson is that contextualising support for women's agency does not rule out learning lessons and pursuing international experience sharing, but that this needs to be carefully calibrated. The dialogue process that CMI has supported in Yemen has greatly benefited from the exchange of experiences between Yemeni women and their Jordanian, Tunisian and Omani counterparts. Making these efforts successful has relied on emphasizing that the objective is comparative exchange, rather than importing modalities from other places.

Additionally, an important dimension of experience sharing became intra-Yemeni exchanges, where lessons learnt and best practices were shared among female party members from different governorates. These discussions created a sense of solidarity and recognition among stakeholders of their shared challenges, while providing them with a chance to consider more deeply their own context and the opportunities available to pursue progress.

Overall, CMI's dialogue efforts in Yemen have highlighted important insights about designing locally owned approaches for advancing women's political agency in Yemen. The key success factors have included a geographically diverse network of participants; continuity that has enabled engaging the same participants over an extended period of time; and ensuring that women from all segments of Yemeni society could participate by providing necessary arrangements, such as being able to travel with their mahram (male companion). Demonstrating concrete commitment to, and respect for, cultural norms and boundaries has been critical to making CMI's support appropriately contextualised, and to generating genuine local ownership.

Sources

- 1) <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/yemen?vm=modal>
- 2) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/09/yemens-women-out-shadows>

Recommendations

- Support actors should develop genuinely representative stakeholder networks that include actors across geographies, urban and rural spaces, and the entire political spectrum.
- Donor communities need to be willing to invest in arrangements that enable the participation of women across the entire political spectrum.
- Process design choices should combine stakeholder groups creatively, including using mixed gender and hierarchically diverse spaces, to motivate joint problem solving.