UN Women

Expert Group Meeting

Sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 64)

'Beijing +25: Current context, emerging issues and prospects for gender equality and women's rights'

New York, New York

25-26 September 2019

"What Invisibility Reveals: Reflections on Women's Participation in Peace, Security, and Humanitarian Action in West Asia"

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DRAFT: Not for citation or circulation

INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, the Middle East and North Africa region has experienced significant social and political changes. From Tunisia to Bahrain, millions took to the streets demanding justice, dignity, and socio-economic and political reforms. From the onset, women were front and center in these mobilizations. Across the region, counter-revolutionary violence and further downward spiral into war have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, rolled back hard won victories, and unleashed unprecedented humanitarian crises, mass forced displacements, and brutal starvation and siege campaigns as well as rampant use of rape as a weapon of war. Today, and despite only constituting 5 per cent of the world's population, the region accounts for nearly fifty per cent of the global humanitarian funding and is home to one third of the United Nations political and peacekeeping missions (ESCWA, 2017).

The transitions and unrest the region has experienced have had significant implications for women's security, bodily integrity, and socio-economic and political rights as well as their meaningful participation in public life and in decision-making processes. From food insecurity and starvation, to limited access to essential services, including health and education, to increasing maternal mortality rates, women and girls are bearing the brunt of the violence. This is in addition to the staggering prevalence of violence against women, including sexual violence. Increased militarization and securitization have also had detrimental impacts on women and girls' mobility and public presence, as they have also diminished the scope of action for civil society actors and women's role within them.

While this has meant greater restrictions on women's rights and opportunities, women have persisted in challenging the death and destruction around them, often at great cost to their lives (Naciri and Tabbara, 2018). Women have also demonstrated resilience against efforts to curb their rights and marginalize their public participation, including in peace, security, and humanitarian action. Across the region, women's rights activists, civil society, and national women's machineries were instrumental in propelling momentum around UNSCR 1325 and in the adoption of National Action Plans (ESCWA, 2017). To date, Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon have all drafted and endorsed 1325 National Action Plans, while in 2015, the League of Arab States adopted a Regional Action Plan.

In this paper, I draw on experiences in Syria, Yemen and Iraq to examine women's participation in peace, security, and humanitarian action. The paper highlights women's engagement at the local levels, where they have contributed to building "islands of temporary stability" (Swisspace et al, 2016). It also focuses attention on key challenges in promoting their meaningful participation at higher levels.[1] I argue that women's invisibility in formal processes cannot be explained by their alleged limited experience. Rather, there are significant barriers, including structural and institutional challenges, which curtail their meaningful[2] participation.

'PRESEVERENCE IN SPITE OF THE BOMBS': WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AT THE LOCAL LEVELS

There is a sizable body of research highlighting women's varied contributions to peace, security and humanitarian action across the MENA region (Ghazzawi, 2015; Ghazzaoui, 2016; Ali, 2017; Heinze, 2017; Kapur, 2017; *Anderlini et al, 2018*). This also includes a research paper I co-authored with my colleague Garrett Rubin, which examines women's community level contributions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Commissioned by the UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, "Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution, Negotiation and Mediation: Community Voices from Syria, Yemen and Iraq" involved both an extensive literature review and 45 key informant interviews[3].

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[1] The emphasis here is on 'formal' political, peace, security, and humanitarian processes at the national, regional, and international levels
[2] For participation to be meaningful a number of preconditions must exist. Among other things, this includes the ability to be present and to exercise influence and agency facilitated by knowledge, agenda setting opportunities, and adequate resourcing. For more, see Goetz and Jenkins (2016) and UN Women (2018).
[3] Remote research interviews were completed with a total of 45 informants. These were mostly women, selected through non-probability snowball sampling. They included a wide range of community activists, lawyers, journalists, aid workers (national, regional and international), mediators, and CSO leaders, educators, medical professionals, academics and women in local and governorate-level politics.

The findings elucidate the tactics, strategies, and the significance of women's contributions to conflict resolution and negotiation. Taking the form of country case studies, the paper foregrounds a Syrian women's peacebuilding organization's determination to broker a local seize fire and to establish a civilian safe zone on the outskirts of Damascus. It also highlights Yemeni women mediators' efforts to prevent escalation and downward spiral into conflict, through reactivating tribal conflict resolution practices and resolving disputes over land, natural resources, and acts of interpersonal violence. The third case study focuses on local level mediations led by Iraqi women in different governorates to resolve disputes arising from the absence of protective state institutions.

In addition to the case studies featured in the published report, our research also identified a plethora of initiatives that were formed or lead by women. I would like to take a moment to bring to light a few of these. Given the volatility of the security contexts in which many of these operate, I have anonymized the data heavily.

As highlighted in the paper, women are critical frontline actors, leading the provision of life sustaining assistance. This is particularly striking in communities under siege and in areas, where international and national level actors have had limited or no success in securing humanitarian access. Local women and civil society efforts, as such, are critical lifelines, negotiating with different stakeholders, including armed actors, to facilitate humanitarian access. One such initiative is led by a women's collective, who for years have led the provision of essential food items for families caught in the crossfire and those "so poor they cannot leave their homes". In discussing their tactics, the collective highlighted the difficulties and the ingenuity of their approaches to penetrating siege lines and to securing and delivering basic assistance. Discretion on the ground as well as trust are critical components.

The collective also spoke about how due to the dangers posed, they have often had to have food dropped off at the closest point possible to the 'red zones', where they 'wait behind trees' sometimes for hours until active fighting stops. The collective has a history negotiating with a wide range of stakeholders to reach the most vulnerable families. In the process, they have shored up an extensive network and social backing. The collective's founder explained that through their humanitarian work, they have become known to different armed actors; 'we have convinced them on many occasions to help get us through to reach these families. Now, they know who we are… they give us pointers on how best to cross the area. Which areas to avoid. What time to do the runs. I carry the oil and my friend carries the flour while others carry the rice and … we walk in single file. Waiting for queues to reach safely… we run." However, they do not always reach safely. The collective has borne heavy tolls, including the death and maiming of multiple members as they carried out humanitarian deliveries.

Women across the three country contexts have also demonstrated acuity in mitigating and resolving aid-related conflicts. This, again, is most acutely felt in communities hardest hit by fighting and those under siege. As has been highlighted elsewhere, aid distributions have accentuated conflict (*Heinze and Stevens 2018*). This is in part due to the severity of needs, limited humanitarian access, mismanagement of distributions, as well as discrepancies in coverage (Ibid). One informant explains, "If one neighborhood receives food baskets and another neighborhood is not given assistance, that is a problem. This is what is happening. What is it anyway that people are getting – 5 kgs of rice and 5 kgs of flour and some oil and sugar? …How's this enough? Rumors are also spreading fast about how much food was entered and where and how distributions took place and that aid was stolen..."

In addition to being lifelines negotiating critical humanitarian access, women are also leading efforts to tackle perhaps one of the most sensitive issues – detention and forced disappearances. There are numerous women led initiatives across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen dedicating attention to this issue, including some who have directly negotiated detainee release (Heinze, 2016; *Anderlini et al, 2018;* Tabbara and Rubin, 2018). One such initiative started out as an informal 'support group' amongst female relatives of detainees, as they struggled to locate forcibly disappeared or detained loved ones. Overtime, their efforts formalized into an association that works across governorates. "The same women kept meeting one another while looking for their sons and husbands at prisons and in police stations, so we began discussing the challenges we were facing, exchanging tips on where to go, what

documents to bring, who to speak to and who to avoid". Beyond being an important peer support, the association utilizes direct action and human rights advocacy to call attention to the plight of the forcibly disappeared and arbitrarily detained. The association also actively documents and monitors prison conditions, organizes protests outside prisons, and directly negotiates the release of detainees.

These efforts are particularly striking examples of women's public leadership in the context of ongoing conflict, especially considering the volatility of the contexts in which they operate. These are just a few of the examples; there are many more, demonstrating the varied contributions, expertise, and experiences of women in peacebuilding, including in negotiating, mediating, and resolving conflict at the local and governorate levels. These are also a testament that women's invisibility within formal and higher level processes in the three country contexts cannot be explained away by their presumed limited expertise. Rather, there are significant barriers, including structural and institutional challenges, which must be addressed if we are truly concerned about women's participation in line with the UNSCR 1325.

KEY CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL PROCESSES IN SYRIA, IRAQ AND YEMEN

This overview highlights four key challenges to women's participation in formal processes in striking contrast to their dynamic engagement and leadership of peace, security, and humanitarian interventions at the local and governorate levels.

1. ***Armed conflict, increasing militarization, and social and economic deterioration have had detrimental impacts on women's participation.*** Combined with difficulties in meeting basic survival needs, the collapse of protective institutions, increased securitization and militarization, as well as mass forced displacements have all severely constrained women's influence and their meaningful inclusion at all levels (Kapur, 2017; Anderlini et al 2017; Al-Tamimi, 2018; Ali, 2019). In Iraq, for example, the lack of security and the threats posed by the rise of the Islamic State left the Women's Coalition on UNSCR 1325 with limited participants and without safe spaces to hold meetings (ESCWA, 2017). One informant aptly asked, "When the basics…are not in place, how is participation possible?"

   Women's and civil society organizations have also highlighted that the nature and severity of the conflicts have necessitated a change in focus to life sustaining humanitarian interventions away from, for example, political participation or peacebuilding. Increasingly, they have also become "conduits for humanitarian distributions," in part by international actors whose access has been constrained, inadvertently diverting their rights-based agendas (Heinze and Stevens, 2018). Additionally, expanding socio-religious conservatism has also impacted perceptions and acceptability of certain types and levels of women's participation; local level and humanitarian interventions are seen as more acceptable than women's participation in politics and in higher-level processes. Indeed, "caught between the hammer and the anvil," women have to insistently "fight for both their *formal de jure rights* that are under constant threat… and for their *substantive rights* to security and human dignity…" (Kandiyoti, 2007). In the process, gains made in one area might not always translate to gains in the other.

2. ***Gender inequalities structure and inform women's access to and participation in formal processes, and it remains that gender based discrimination is an presistent barrier to women's meaningful participation.*** Not surprisingly, gender inequalities embedded and reproduced in social attitudes and practices, legal norms, national, regional, and international institutions, as well as within humanitarian systems present a critical challenge. As such, women's exclusion from formal processes cannot be divorced from their wider political and social exclusions (*Goetz and Jenkins, 2016*). In this vein, women are likely targets by "defamation campaigns" (Scott and Saifi 2018) and "outright misogynistic attacks" (Gambale, 2016). They are also held to a higher

standard of scrutiny, persistently having to prove themselves in ways that their male counterparts do not. As an Iraqi mediator emphasized, the standard operating assumption is that women are "inexperienced until proven otherwise".

The Global Study confirms this, suggesting that the salient expectations for women is that they should not only be technical experts or leaders, but they should also be a whole host of other things at the same time (Coomaraswamy et al, 2015; Pafenholz et al, 2016). These gendered forms of exclusion operate at multiple levels, with increasing deteriorating security and rising conservatisms compounding them. Further, these are not only reinforced by men, but internalized patriarchy amongst women is also of concern (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). In this regard, it is critical to confront these inequalities and "deeper ideological resistance to women's full participation" (Pafenholz et al, 2016) head-on.

3. ***Women's participation is not adequately prioritized and resourced.*** Despite the WPS Agenda gaining recognition and a National Action Plan being endorsed in Iraq, for example, it remains that more needs to be done to materially realize and operationalize commitments made under the remit of the agenda. In fact, activists point to lack of resources and acknowledgement of women's demands as having all but invalidated work on UNSCR 1325 (ESCWA, 2017). This is also compounded by the escalation in fighting and deteriorating security, and notable the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq ad Syria and other militant groups. Similarly, under the remit of political factions, Yemeni and Syrian women's participation continues to be sidelined, as secondary issues that will come later. *This has intensified "public and feminist distrust in the seriousness of proposed solutions" (SWPM, 2019)*

This is made worse by exogenous actors, such as donors, UN, INGOs, and others, who have sizable leverage to 'open doors' in the context of peace and humanitarian action have themselves not adequately prioritized or resourced women's participation. They have also disregarded local women's rights stakeholders' repeated calls in this regard. In some instances, they have also exercised exaggerated reverence to what is viewed as local cultural mores. Women's rights stakeholders point out the selective nature of this approach (Kapur, 2017), and as a Syrian lawyer put it, "when it's something…like this, they tell us, 'oh …we do not want to impose...' But no, you impose all the time; you [just] do not want to when it comes to this".

In part, this selectiveness is due to conflicting factors. On the one hand, policy agendas and programme priorities are largely set in non-participatory manners, and within that, women's issues are marginal. On the other hand, there are some concerns about appearing insensitive (Kapur, 2017). This is also combined with a tendency to revert to unexamined assumptions and "a world of unchanging tradition and cultural stasis" when it comes to discussions of women's rights (Kandiyoti 2007).

In her "Writing against culture" (1991), Laila Abu-Lughod warns that speaking about 'culture' in homogenizing ways effaces the fact that culture is not singular nor is it stagnant; rather 'cultures' are dynamic and are always being shaped and reshaped by a host of intersecting factors. Indeed, this homogenizing approach also effaces decades – even centuries - of struggles and victories by Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni feminist and social movements and others across the region.

4. **Existing modalities are not conducive for facilitating women's meaningful participation.** *Despite valuable efforts being made to advance women's participation in formal processes, within the context of existing*

modalities, it is clear that these have had limited success in facilitating the meaningful *inclusion of women in formal processes. This is in part due to the fact that existing modalities have not articulated mechanisms for women to shape or adequately influence political, peace, and humanitarian agendas. Instead, they have largely confined women to advisory, consultative, numerical, and even tokenistic participation (Kapur, 2017; Scott and Saifi 2018).* While it's important to acknowledge that these modalities have in fact enabled women's access to formal processes, nevertheless, access alone is insufficient. It is the *meaningfulness* of participation that is critical, and in this regard, it necessitates the ability to influence and shape respective agendas.

Absent that*, current modalities have come under sizable criticism, namely because they have enabled what a Yemeni lawyer referred to as* 'watered down participation'. They have also been criticized for *limiting women to 'side rooms' and 'corridors,' rather than facilitating their presence and voice in the negotiating room (Kapur, 2017; ICAN, 2016). This is further compounded by the fact that* women's participation is often 'rushed and last minute' (*Kapur, 2017*), leading one informant to suggest that women's participation is truly 'an afterthought' subject to instrumentalist agendas.

In places where women have secured a place at the table, e.g. in Parliament in Iraq or under the umbrellas of political factions and delegations in the Yemen and Syria peace processes, concerns are raised about the marginalization of women within these spaces and their substantive participation. With limited exceptions, women are "not being given an opportunity to intervene" (Gambale 2016) and issues they raise are "being put on the side" (Scott and Saifi, 2018; Al-Tamimi, 2018).

For Yemeni women in particular, these modalities have been a cause of much debate. They are viewed as a roll back of gains women and civil society actors achieved during the National Dialogue processes in 2011-2014 (ICAN, 2016; Jarhum, 2016; Anderlini et al, 2018), all under the auspices of internationally mediated processes. It was then that women's leadership carved out critical agenda-shaping space and succeed in accessing 28 per cent of the seats at the table, including on technical and constitutional drafting committees (Heinze 2016; Jarhum 2016).

In addition to the above, the selection processes and criteria for participation within existing modalities remain opaque, despite some efforts to create greater transparency (Kapur, 2017). This has contributed to a climate where by the credibility and legitimacy of some of these the bodies have been called in to question (Haid, 2016).

Lastly, while acknowledging various efforts to address this challenge, it remains that within the context of existing modalities linkages and feedback with the grassroots are limited and inconsistent (Kapur, 2017). As highlighted previously, women are making valuable contributions within peace, security and humanitarian action at the grassroots levels and within civil society. However, ongoing formal processes have not adequately addressed the disjuncture between the negotiation table and the grassroots. This requires deeper reflection, and it ultimately necessitates a different way of working.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WAYS FORWARD

Prioritize and resource gender equality across the spectrum of peace, security and humanitarian action. Measures must also be taken to address the interconnected barriers to women's meaningful participation, which operate at multiple levels. International stakeholders have a unique role to play here, and their approaches should be long-term focused and informed by gender equality stakeholders on the ground.

Leverage the localization agenda to harness women's and civil society leadership. Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi women are active within the civil society space, and they are leading on a diverse range of issues. They are also vocal advocates at both local and international stages – as journalists, activists, bloggers, lawyers, and human rights defenders. The diversity of their experiences must be harnessed, and their voices heard. This should also include elevating their contributions and concerns and sharing knowledge, bearing in mind the principle of Do No Harm, especially relating to risks around increased visibility.

Promote 'bottom-up' approaches, as these are strategic imperatives. People across the region took to the streets in the millions, demanding dignity, justice, and reforms. Modalities that are being put forth to address the instability that has ensued since must be attuned these calls. As such, they should address concerns around credibility of processes, transparency of selection criteria, and importantly, the substantive-ness of participation. Here too, creating stronger linkages between local, national, regional and international processes is critical to mitigate these concerns.

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