



Voices from Syria, Libya and Nigeria on Redesigning the Peace Table

Creating Conversation, Building the Movement

Cross-movement solidarity is an integral part of feminist movement building that serves to foster knowledge-sharing, mutual support and the importance of drawing on our collective power in the journey towards feminist peace.

In March 2023, feminist activists from all over the world gathered in New York City to attend the **67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67)**. WILPF leveraged this opportunity to facilitate a space for activists from Syria, Libya and Nigeria to engage in a meaningful discussion about the need to redesign the peace table — the literal and figurative spaces where governments, stakeholders and activists come together to negotiate the path to peace in conflict-affected areas. Here, we're sharing a summary of the insights that emerged from these conversations.

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What does the peace table look like now? Who is missing, and why? What progress has been made and what risks of regression exist? Who is funding the peace table and what are the consequences of this for peace processes? What do feminists want to achieve? What steps are needed to achieve our vision?

These questions were at the heart of a recent conversation between women activists from Libya (Together We Build It), Syria (**Syrian Women's Political Movement** and **Badael**) and Nigeria (**WILPF Nigeria**). Working within unique geopolitical contexts, these inspirational feminist activists gathered in New York in March 2023 to discuss the persisting challenges and limits related to the participation of women in their countries' peace processes, and the need to redesign the peace table. The primary objective of this conversation was to explore feminist transformative discourses and visions of peace and security, and to lay the foundation for future conversations on reimagining the peace table, which

includes strategies and practical steps towards redesigning it to become inclusive, representative and, therefore, meaningful, paving the way for sustainable peace.

Central talking points included the continued failure to include women in peace processes, tokenism, women's distrust and disgust in politics and funding restrictions preventing women from engaging in politics.¹

Inclusion and engagement do not necessarily mean influence

Amidst the turbulent terrain of conflict and diplomacy, women have increasingly assumed pivotal roles, championing the cause of peace and advocating for their rightful positions in shaping their nations' destinies. Nevertheless, the challenges confronting women and feminists are both collective and distinct, shedding a glaring light on the urgency of reimagining peace and reconsidering the concepts of "inclusion" and "engagement."

In a unique discussion that delved into the intricate landscapes of Libya, Syria and Nigeria, the conversation prominently featured the modalities of "inclusion," the quest for genuine influence, the evolving roles of women in peace negotiations and the dynamics of interaction between women seated at the negotiation tables and their broader communities.



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At the heart of the conversation was a resounding call to move beyond the mere presence of women in peace processes and toward a substantive transformation marked by authentic influence. Oula Ramadan, a Syrian activist working with Badael, succinctly encapsulated this paradigm shift, declaring, “It's time to move from inclusion to influence. It's not about who is sitting [at] the table but about what infrastructures and grassroots movements can be supported to have more inclusive peace processes.”

However, the discussion also unveiled harsh realities, particularly within the Syrian context, where despite years of efforts since the UN-led talks in 2012, women have remained notably underrepresented. Mariam Jalabi, a prominent Syrian activist from the Syrian Women's Political Movement, poignantly remarked, “The Syrian peace process is the only process that had so many inclusion modalities that led to no inclusion.”

1. Due to their lack of confidence in the people running the political and peace processes, and their lack of belief in the righteousness of these political institutions.

The Women Advisory Boards (WABs) as an “inclusion model” came under scrutiny as well, criticised for their lack of representation and decried as a failed attempt at inclusivity. Concerns arose over the opaque UN selection process for women representatives, with women expected to reach a consensus on their views, allowing those representing the regime to wield veto power. But beyond their flawed set up, Jalabi noted, “The advisory board is not bad in itself. But it is because we live in a very patriarchal society; they used it as an excuse to exclude women.”



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Similar challenges were noted in the Nigerian context, where ambiguity over which women should participate allowed men to exploit the narrative, effectively excluding women and perpetuating tokenism. Joy Onyesoh, a Nigerian activist and President of WILPF Nigeria, succinctly articulated the issue, stating, “We don’t work as one, we don’t have one demand as women.”

Another common issue highlighted during the conversation is the lack of communication between the women who are physically present at the peace table or in these inclusion mechanisms, and those who are not but are part of the same coalitions, as well as the lack of interaction with other actors in the multi-track approach.

In Syria, for example, women advisors on the WAB could not share any information on the discussions they were having with different parties and on the topics that they were being asked to advise on, creating a disconnect in communication, flow of information and strategies for action. In Libya, the track which focuses on women’s issues is a completely separate track from all the others, while in Nigeria there are simply no dialogues between women and the government or key stakeholders.

When addressing the question of women’s roles in peace talks, however, the conversation revealed stark differences across various contexts. For instance, in the Syrian context, women on the negotiating delegations are expected to negotiate for political aims, rather than for principles of women’s rights. In the Libyan context, on the other hand, women who are invited to be part of formal peace processes are often expected to have a say on matters related only to women’s rights, and not as much on issues related to broader peace and security.

Collectively, the challenges faced by women in conflict contexts, coupled with shared and distinct experiences, illuminate the urgent need to reimagine peace processes. While inclusion serves as a critical initial step toward bolstering representation, the true catalyst for empowerment and meaningful transformation lies in the capacity to exert authentic influence within peace processes.

Persisting and resisting: women's strategies to influence negotiations

Amidst the challenges they face, women have transformed from being mere observers to dynamic agents of change, thanks to their adept strategies in influencing conflict contexts. Across Syria, Libya, and beyond, their multifaceted approaches and innovative tactics underscore the resilience and resourcefulness of women who steadfastly reject marginalisation, striving to become architects of enduring peace.

In both Syria and Libya, women have refused to be confined to the sidelines, responding to exclusion with innovation and determination to reshape the landscape of peace negotiations. In Syria, the WABs and similar committees, ostensibly created to “engage” women, have, in practice, contributed to their systematic exclusion. In response, a group of determined activists established the Syrian Women's Political Movement, a groundbreaking initiative committed to expanding women's roles beyond the confines of mere “advisors.”

Meanwhile, in Libya, women activists have demonstrated a great ability to infiltrate and actively negotiate at the peace table. Hajer Sharief, Libyan activist and cofounder of Together We Build It, shared an inspiring testament to their resourcefulness, stating, “Women managed to impose themselves, negotiated on the side, in the informal negotiations which, maybe, are the real ones. This is a success as they were not invited, but still ended up having a role in signing the agreement.”

Nevertheless, as feminist activists contemplate the opportunities for women to engage in such informal venues, concerns have arisen that women could still be excluded in practice, particularly as more informal discussions among men unfold in private hotel rooms or shisha bars, for example.

Intriguingly, there was some progress made in the number of women participating in peace processes from the first to the second UN processes in Libya, where the number rose from a mere two out of 17 to an impressive 17 out of 75. Yet, a persistent issue is still seen across both the Syrian and the Libyan contexts: the substantial disconnect between human rights discussions and concrete action. Despite the tireless efforts of women activists and civil society to promote an action-oriented agenda, human rights issues often remain confined to the realm of conversation, with practical implementation proving elusive.



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Redefining perceptions: women in politics and grassroots activism

In the intricate landscape of women's involvement in political and grassroots initiatives, perceptions often play a pivotal role in shaping their choices and roles. From Nigeria's concerns about political risks to Libya's romanticised view of grassroots work, the feminist exchange revealed a delicate interplay between perception and reality.

A prevalent theme echoed by the participants and seen across all contexts is the observation that many women activists tend to perceive politics as “dirty” work, especially when compared to grassroots civil society work. In the Nigerian context, for example, qualified women frequently don't want to take the risk of engaging in politics due to the association of politics with violence and deceit.

From another angle, Libyan counterparts mentioned the fact that “grassroots efforts” to engage women in politics and raise awareness of key issues is often misunderstood, misconstrued and romanticised by decision-makers, including UN and international actors — a reality that discourages women from engaging in more formal political processes.

As Hajer Sharief of Together We Build It in Libya shared, “They ask, ‘Why do you need to go to the UN? Go to the remote areas!’ The [grassroots work] is so romanticised. [...] They should be aware that when we say that women do the work on the ground, we just mean that they do the real work and to do that, they don't have to be in rural areas.”

A recurring consensus emerged throughout the discussion — the imperative to redefine the notions of “politics” and “grassroots work” to appreciate the value of women engaging in political endeavours, regardless of which approach they choose.

Unravelling the funding challenges for women in peace processes

Within the realm of women's participation in peace processes, a crucial but often overlooked facet is the intricate web of funding restrictions and its profound consequences. As we explore this complex terrain, it becomes evident that financial limitations significantly influence the ability of women to engage meaningfully in peace-building efforts.

The discussion unpacked some of the challenges around the funding landscape for peace and its consequences on the participation of women in peace processes.

In Nigeria, for instance, only a few privileged women can afford to engage with and remain in politics. This underscores a clear need for a funding strategy aimed at enhancing women's participation — itself a challenging premise due to high levels of corruption within the government.

In Syria, the landscape differs, yet funding challenges persist. While the official opposition and the Negotiation Commission have funding from stakeholder governments for global advocacy and peace talks, women's participation is not specifically required in granting these funds, nor is there an earmarked portion for their inclusion. This leaves women out of the loop and forces them to seek other sources of funding in order to participate — funding that is often limited in scope and spending flexibility, unlike the funding received by the official opposition. It is therefore crucial that women have access to flexible funding sources that support their presence in peace talks.

In addition to funding limitations, activists have raised concerns over the donor community's push for women's peace work to be neutral or "apolitical." Both the Syrian and Nigerian activists were also concerned about the limited funding, which primarily supports training and capacity building rather than allowing women to engage in lobbying or participate in politics.

Notably, Nigerian activists have underscored the fact that certain donors pre-design the contracts and the outcomes, placing an emphasis on the measurable impact and success stories, which undermines women's long-term efforts and the realities of working within challenged, conflict-affected areas.

This discussion serves as a reminder that traditional modes of funding must give way to long-term, core and flexible funding models, which are the key to the longevity of women's rights organisations and women's activism.

Steps towards re-imagining the peace table: resisting, creating alternatives and forging alliances

Which peace table do we imagine? What are the steps to achieve our vision?

Women activists have passionately stressed the importance of

claiming a seat at every existing table, while challenging the harmful narratives that pit women’s “political work” against “grassroots work” or “activist work,” and emphasising the need to recognise the value in being political women.



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In addition to a presence at established tables, they also highlighted the need to create our own (alternative) spaces to reimagine and redesign the feminist future and political processes together² without any pre-designed or predetermined outcomes from the discussions. Moreover, they underscored the need for alternative actions that can infiltrate the system’s cracks. As Sharief observed, “We keep creating alternatives, we are already doing mediation work, we need to dare to say it. Women are not delusional.”

While reluctant to be in certain unrepresentative existing networks,³ activists showed eagerness to create an (alternative) women mediators network which could potentially lead to a transnational movement and provide inclusive but decentralised spaces for experience sharing and knowledge production. They also emphasised the importance of forming alliances not only with fellow women in civil society but also with individuals who are or have been “in the system.”

Despite grappling with real experiences of exclusion, tokenism and inadequate representation and funding, activists concluded that capturing local issues that underscore the connections between movements, sharing feminist experiences and engaging in transformative dialogues and strategies can contribute to strengthening the feminist movement. These thought-provoking exchanges invite further discussions in alternative spaces dedicated to these important topics.

2. The idea would be to have spaces similar to the Beirut convening in 2014 which planted the seeds of SWPM, created in 2016.

3. Such as the [Arab Women Mediators Network](#)