



## **Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting**

# **EU support to Women Mediators: Moving beyond Stereotypes**

**Friday 29 March 2019**

**Brussels**

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

### **Background**

The EU has made strong commitments to supporting women mediators, from the grassroots and community level to the highest diplomatic circles, through its funding instruments and most recently through the Council Conclusions and EU Strategic Approach to Women Peace and Security (2018). The High Representative/Vice President is the EU's most senior mediator.

The overall aim of this meeting was to gather analysis and recommendations on how to strengthen EU mediation by working more effectively with women mediators. It brought together 15 women mediators involved in different forms of mediation, from grassroots to Track 1/1.5, civil society experts and EU officials. Its specific objectives were:

- To reflect on the common practical and technical challenges different women mediators from grassroots/Track 3 to Track 1-1.5 processes face in engaging with peace processes; and
- To generate concrete recommendations on how EU support to women mediators from different Tracks could be strengthened.

This report summarises key input and recommendations shared by participating women mediators. The meeting was held within the framework of the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) and under the Chatham House Rule. The views expressed may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation nor do they necessarily represent the views of all of the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the European institutions.

Women actively engage in violent conflict in various ways, including as combatants or perpetrators of gender-based violence. Women can do substantial harm in conflict and therefore cannot be seen as the 'natural peacemaker' stereotype. While many participants believed women have social skills which are an added value in mediation (e.g. patience, perseverance, flexibility, perceptive, listening, etc.), others argued it is more important to promote the role of women and push for their full access to political processes on matters of principle, professional skills and equality. This tension is typical of debates on women's participation in society overall and should lead to nuanced and context-specific approaches - beyond stereotypes.

## Findings

### *Women's mediation work is not recognised publicly*

- Women's work in mediation is privately appreciated and seen as successful but **not publically acknowledged**. Most mediation work carried out by women takes place outside official processes, at Track 3 / grassroots levels, which are often not acknowledged as important. Overall, very few women mediators are active in official talks at Track 1/1.5. The roles of women in peace processes are often overlooked when processes lead to an agreement. Several participants mentioned it was important to publicly acknowledge and recognise the roles of women mediators in negotiations at different Tracks so as to give them visibility.
- The nature of conflict is changing, but mediation is too frequently understood within **narrow and outdated definitions that exclude a lot of the mediation work women are engaged with**. Many women mediate in complex contexts without calling themselves mediators or their work mediation. This means that their contributions are sometimes not documented or included in understandings of (more formal) mediation processes.
- More women will not be involved in formal level mediation/negotiation until more **women are leaders in public life**, including in politics. It is important for women to participate everywhere in the public and political spheres if they are to have significant roles in all stages of mediation processes. Education, media and societal norms are central to increasing women's participation in public life.

### *Gender roles in society shape opportunities and constraints for women mediators*

- **Women mediators frequently have responsibilities** to their families, children, employers and communities which makes it difficult for them to participate in talks that are not adapted to their specific needs. This demonstrates the importance of pushing back against gender roles and providing the kind of support that allows women mediators not to be trapped by gendered assumptions.
- Women mediators can be **strong in their weakness**: gender stereotypes make it difficult for men in conflict to seek entry points to talk with adversaries. Strong gender stereotypes mean that women may come to be trusted by the parties as 'another' or 'aunt' looking out for the welfare of the parties rather than the interests of one.
- It can be easier for women to start negotiations than it is for men because gender stereotypes make it difficult for men to initiate or receive communications from an adversary for fear of losing face or being seen as weak, or a coward. One participant mentioned that women are particularly effective in initiating ceasefire agreements because men will be less likely to shoot women. However, once talks are underway, **'conflict talk' and security matters are deemed man's business**.
- Women mediators can bring more human-security oriented understandings of security to talks because of their reach in society, leading to **outcomes that are more likely to address the different needs of the population**, not just the interests of the combatants. Some participants mentioned that women know in greater detail what is at stake in mediation processes because they are directly connected to a wide range of people who are affected by the conflict (notably children, men and other women). Women can bring up issues relating to men, women and children while men only tend to bring up issues relating to men. While many processes focus on distributing power, some participants highlighted that women tend to focus on solving the issues affecting the populations, which increases chances that the agreements are sustainable. Women often know well the dangers of not reaching an agreement, and they are sometimes able

to articulate and put forward issues that men would have overlooked (e.g. in relation to child soldiers, education, health, etc.). This also means that **women can play effective roles in the implementation of a peace agreement.**

- Dynamics are different from one process to another and that **it is paramount to be context-specific when promoting the participation of women in peace processes.** Several contrasting examples were raised during the meeting:
  - In the tribal areas in Yemen, older women have more weight in the community and in mediation than in modern Yemen; **adapting traditional forms of mediation** may provide solutions to conflicts, and engage women mediators
  - In Ukraine, **mediators are poorly paid and therefore are mainly women**, and are not valued in society.
- **Age can have an impact on how women mediators are perceived by the parties.** It can be easier for older women, like older men, to be taken seriously (in some contexts, elders are particularly respected). It is harder to build trust when a younger mediator is not seen as experienced or as having lived through difficult periods. A particular challenge faced by younger women is patronising and infantilising attitudes from the parties and process supporters, i.e. being treated as fragile beings that need to be kept away from conflict and violence. Age may be less of a concern if representatives of the conflicting parties are also young and when the mediation is done in teams. Youth can be an advantage when mediation is specifically between young people or when it brings ease with certain skills (e.g. in recent rounds of negotiations in Yemen, young mediators supported older mediators with their computer, social media and communications skills).
- In some cases, **being a foreign/outsider women mediator** can be an advantage as outsiders do not fit into the local social and political power structures, so they can be perceived as less threatening by parties. This means that foreign women can be accepted as mediators where local counterparts are not. In some cases, the intervention of foreign women mediators can be helpful for local women's role in peace-making, especially if the former take time to engage with various groups and local communities. However, foreign/outsider women mediator can draw scepticism about their understanding of the local conflict and their foreignness may emphasise difference from local women, and reinforce their exclusion.
- Religious and traditional leaders may reject women mediators, but participants explained how by **showing respect for these men and their beliefs, even if they do not share their beliefs and customs, women mediators can be accepted by even the most 'conservative' leaders.**
- Gender stereotypes are widely circulated through traditional and new media and by social structures. **The media have a key role to play in getting women accepted as mediators by acknowledging women's mediation.** It is important to be careful in engaging with the media: they can have an essential role to play in connecting different Tracks and maximising the positive impact of processes and they can have a devastating impact on mediation efforts.

*Women mediators ≠ Gender expertise (and both are important)*

- Both gender expertise and women's participation are necessary in peace mediation. **Promoting the role of women mediators does not equal promoting a gender-sensitive process.** Gender expertise is crucial to conflict analysis, technical negotiations and sustainable agreements. However, gender expertise is not always understood as a technical or necessary expertise and can be rejected by parties and mediators. Women mediators are sometimes expected to bring a gender lens in a process and to mediate on women's issues, which they are not necessarily able or willing to do.

- **Gender expertise, mediation skills and patriarchy have no gender.** While all mediators should have a gender training, gender expertise should be brought in the process separately from women's participation in mediation processes. Male as well as female mediators should be trained on the importance of integrating technical gender expertise into processes, from design through to implementation . and external supporters, such as the EU, should provide the necessary diplomatic, financial and technical support to ensure this happens.
- The term 'gender' is not always recognised or understood, and can even be triggering. In some cases it may be necessary to use other, more context-appropriate, terms or use an equality and rights-based approach.

#### *Women mediators as partners*

- Where parties are negotiating power-sharing agreements, **women, particularly local women, are likely to be seen as yet more competitors for positions post-agreement** which will increase resistance to their participation.
- It is important to **build strong partnerships with men** in the process. Being an outsider mediator can be advantage, as parties will not think that she is looking to gain local power out of the negotiation.
- **Women mediators should be connected to opportunities** to work, network and grow. A lack of opportunities can make women mediators feel that they are in competition with each other. Younger women mediators can feel dismissed or overwhelmed by more experienced women mediators. Many participants in this workshop advocated for **a culture of (intergenerational) cooperation between women in mediation**, whereby they open doors for each other and share experiences, contacts and good practices. Networks of women mediators and women's organisations can also be platforms for such cooperation, including when it comes to strategies to gender, peace and security (including with regard to the implementation of UNSCR 1325).

#### *Security and health of women mediators*

- **Women mediators can be threatened and intimidated by the parties**, including by women members of the parties. These attacks are often gender-based and circulated via traditional and social media to bring shame . and therefore danger - on the woman mediator, her family and community. It is important that the process identifies specific risks for women mediators and takes the necessary steps to keep women mediators safe.
- Like many people on the frontlines of conflict, **mediation work can have a significant psychological impact.** In addition to the pressure on the process and the content of discussions they mediate, women mediators face gendered attacks and can suffer from burnout. Peer support and recovery retreats for mediators can help women mediators heal from burnout and get rid of second-hand trauma.

#### *Strategies of women mediators*

- Building trust at local level helps **building the buy-in of communities** and thus legitimises the work of a woman mediator in the process. To convince parties operating at the highest Tracks, some participants insisted it is important to **make the case for the participation of women by using evidence and logic**, which involves demonstrating their efficiency and effectiveness in mediation processes at lower Tracks.
- Some participants expressed that it is even more important for women mediators to be seen as **impartial and confident.** This requires speaking with confidence, not showing hesitation or lack of knowledge. This also means paying attention to engagement with social media and avoiding inadvertent association with any conflict actor through posts

and photos. If actors try to intimidate them, women mediators should remain calm, avoid getting aggressive and remain assertive about the process and how it is going to unfold.

- Appearing **respectful of the preferences and beliefs of the conflict actors**, and having an interpersonal, humane approach to the discussions (e.g. by being mindful of dress if necessary or by asking them about how they are and how their family is doing) contributes to creating a conducive environment for dialogue and show that dialogue is beneficial.
- **Setting clear rules governing the process** protect conflict parties at the table, but can also help prevent women mediators from getting pushed aside.
- To a certain extent, women mediators can **adapt to the way they are perceived by parties** for the process to continue; for example, by playing facilitating and accommodating role when they are not accepted as an authority figure. Being flexible and innovative overall can be useful to a successful mediation process.
- **Teamwork helps**: experienced mediators can support younger mediators and women help men and vice versa. Male members of the mediation team can also help addressing reluctance of parties to accept a women as a mediator.
- Other strategies are raised in the meeting are not specific to women mediators but have helped them be accepted by parties: **prove that they are reliable and trustworthy** by listening and trying to help and give parties the assurance that what they share with you will stay with you; **being extremely well-prepared** through extensive research, including identifying movers and shakers behind the scene, and honing preparation skills through trainings and exchanges of good and bad practices over time; **keeping a distance from external support** to reassure people in the process who are worried that donors are interfering with their work; **managing expectations** and avoid generating fatigue and suspicion among local actors and communities with excessive engagement, especially where there are numerous researchers and INGOs engaging simultaneously in peace process.

## Recommendations

The international community, including the EU, has critical roles to play by:

- **Modelling inclusion** by ensuring that EU mediation and support teams include a significant proportion of women . at least 30% women, to be credible
- **Insisting that the UN quota of 30% women participants in talks is met** by all parties in all processes the EU supports.
- Pushing governments and conflict parties to **include women in mediation processes, including on the whole range of security, political, economic and developmental issues at stake** and not only on so-called %women's issues+. Initiatives supporting women mediators should be context-specific and should take into account the cultural particularities of any given situation.
- Supporting training and networking of women and men mediators to **professionalise mediation practice in general** and to connect women mediators to opportunities.
- Providing **opportunities for women mediators working at different Tracks to meet, exchange good and bad practices and support each other.**
- Integrating **gender analysis as a key component of all conflict/context analysis** so that mediation outcomes are based on understanding how power works in the society and so are likely to have better results.
- Supporting **recovery retreats** for mediators with burnout, similar to those offered to human rights activists

- **Ensuring that women mediators' specific needs can be met** throughout the mediation process, including women mediators with children.
- **Supporting projects that portray different roles that women play in conflict and in peace** to help change stereotypes that portray women as only victims in conflict and not agents.
- **Connecting different (women's) constituencies**, including by providing women mediators with information, gender-sensitive analysis and data that will allow them to build links between communities; supporting initiatives that connect groups across boundaries, and *within* societies.

### **The Civil Society Dialogue Network**

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The third phase of the CSDN will last from 2017 to 2020. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).