

Insights from the Inside: Women's Mediation Networks as a Tool for Influencing Peace Processes



Civil society-led networks of women have for decades worked hard to promote peace in conflict areas around the world, and lately, a new wave of women's mediation networks (WMNs) are being established that are led by states or regional organizations. All these networks share a collective aim: To promote women's inclusion and influence in mediated peace processes.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) manages the Swedish Women's Mediation Network. It was launched by the Swedish government in 2015 and is part of the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) ¹, which is a network of women mediators, convened by the Ministries for Foreign Affairs of the five Nordic countries. It aims to promote the participation of women in all phases of peace processes. After nearly five years since its establishment, FBA teamed up with Uppsala University and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) to collect and reflect on our lessons learned from managing the Swedish WMN with the help of interviews with our coordinator colleagues in other women's mediation networks. ² By collecting critical insights from the inside, this brief reflects on what it means to create and manage a WMN effectively. What are these networks' key achievements and challenges? We conclude by reflecting on how to advance the WMNs beyond 2020 – the 20th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS) – as an effective tool for strengthening women's inclusion in peace processes.

What does it mean to create and manage a network effectively?

The coordinators highlight three reasons for why their WMNs were created: a) to get access into a specific process, b) create links and share experiences, and c) make women's competence more visible and strengthen their role as mediators.

Firstly, involving civil society-created networks was needed to address the lack of women's access to a specific national peace process in order to contribute to peace. For instance, in Liberia, several women's networks advocated to secure a role for women in the peace talks in Accra in 2003. The second reason, again being most common within civil society, was to create links and exchange experiences between women mediators in different regions in a conflict country. Reflecting the need for flexibility, many of these networks' have adjusted their aims and focus over time to respond to changing conflict dynamics. The third reason, primarily behind the formation of state-led networks or those organized by regional organizations – many of which operate at a regional and/or global level – was to make women's competence in the field of conflict mediation more visible and to strengthen the role of women mediators in line with one of the key objectives of the UNSCR 1325. For example, the Swedish WMN was established by the Swedish Government as a response to the fact that women remain systematically underrepresented in peace processes. Interestingly, while women's inclusion in peace processes is a core theme of the WPS agenda, the WMNs vary in terms of whether they consider their work as being a direct part of the realization of WPS or not. For some, the need for a localized process was more important.

1. For the NWM Mission Statement, 2017; see bit.ly/2GjDsVn

2. The brief draws on interviews with coordinators from 18 networks which fulfil the definition of a WMN were active in December 2018. The material presented in this brief should not be considered as a full representation of all existing networks, but rather that the insights from coordinators are used to enable in-depth reflection.

What is a Women's Mediation Network?

In this brief, it is defined as networks of women members that support women's inclusion and influence in mediated peace processes. They may have a narrow or broad approach to 'mediation'. In the narrow sense, the WMNs can either seek to engage in third-party facilitation of a peace negotiation or be involved in trying to influence such an ongoing process directly. In the broader sense, the networks refer to mediation as a wide range of efforts to support or influence conflict parties in mediated peace processes in a broad perspective.

Formation and formalization

For the Swedish and the Nordic WMN, the formative processes have taken substantial time. Many of the other coordinators also reflected on shared difficulties to decide on how to best set up the network. A common question was how to decide on the level of formalization. For example, should a shared vision, mission statement and a joint strategy be formulated? And if so, what kind of internal decision-making process should be used to make decisions effective and legitimate? A common trade-off is that a high degree of formalization can assist in effectively achieving the aims, but requires much more resources to be sustainable. These issues are usually raised in the early development stages and could be considered a natural part of the process of establishing a network. However, in due time, to avoid uncertainty and create more clarity on roles and responsibilities, a general lesson learned raised by the coordinators is that some sort of agreed-upon working procedure and decision-making structure are necessary.

Membership

Deciding on the nature of membership is a central part of the working procedure, including membership criteria, the number of members, and how to select them. Existing WMNs differ substantially in terms of number of members, which range from seven to over 2000. While most WMN consist of individuals, others gather organizations, and some networks are a mixture of both. The members' background also varies considerably between the networks; many have substantial experience from different kinds of fields such as peacebuilding, mediation, diplomacy and women's rights.

How then are members selected? For many of the state-led networks, the members are nominated and then chosen formally by a ministry. Some of the civil society-led networks use their existing contacts and networks to identify and select members. Both of these approaches may require having formal and informal contacts to gain membership. If transparency is low it could potentially be more difficult, and in a worst-case scenario, reinforce existing elite- and power structures.

There are however examples of when the selection process is more open; FemWise-Africa launched an open call for membership applications for women from the African continent. At the same time, this highlights another trade-off; ambitious selection processes require a lot of time and resources. Deciding on the size of membership also depends on available financial- and human resources as a network with a large number of members may be more challenging to manage.

Ideally, the strategy and aim of the network should serve as the guiding principle for deciding on the number of members and what membership criteria to use. For instance, if the main purpose of the WMN is to support women leaders from conflict-affected states, then it may warrant a smaller group of members who can be deployed in different capacities as advisors and mentors. If the purpose is to launch a large-scale nation-wide campaign to advocate for women's inclusion in a specific peace process, then it might require a large number of members to increase the chances of success.

What are the WMNs' key achievements and challenges?

When discussing achievements, the original aim is central as a starting point. With regard to the aim of improved direct access to a specific process, many of the civil society-led networks connected their advocacy efforts to concrete achievements at the political level. Prominent examples include influencing the Accra peace accord in Liberia, contributing to amendments and drafts of new gender-sensitive laws in Libya, supporting the inclusion of women in South Sudan's peace process and women negotiators to the Colombian governmental delegation during the peace talks with the FARC.

In terms of the aim of strengthening experience sharing and creating links, the coordinators often brought up the mere establishment of a network as an achievement in itself. This enabled the women to share experiences, enhance skills and provide solidarity and empowerment among members. The network meetings provide an important space for women to come together to work for common aims and helps strengthen the voice and role of individual members. This is central if the network also serves as a professional platform for women working in mediation, such as the Norwegian WMN.

In addition, the establishment of a network makes women mediators more visible, the third aim for which they were created. The existence of a network makes it difficult to claim that there are no competent women mediators available. For instance, five regional networks – the Nordic Women Mediators, Women Mediators across the Commonwealth, FemWise-Africa, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network and the Arab Women Mediators Network – have joined forces over the past year to connect with relevant UN institutions. This effort has led to some initial results. For instance, the UN Secretary-General has expressed an interest in working together to increase the number of women in peace processes.³ To further strengthen effects, these four networks have now established a Global Alliance of Women Mediator Networks, launched in September 2019.⁴ In addition to such concrete measures, the members of the WMNs can serve as knowledgeable speakers and experts at events and workshops on mediation or WPS issues.

Many of the networks share the aim to strengthen the role of women mediators. For most, the WMNs' achievements in this regard primarily include capacity building through training or advising on dialogue and mediation. Some of the networks primarily focus on strengthening their own members' skills, whereas others engage their members to provide expertise in mediation and dialogue to other women leaders involved in peace processes. For instance, members from the Swedish WMN have served as mentors and advisors to peace talks, and have provided technical and strategic advice to women peacebuilders from various conflict-affected and post-conflict countries to support their engagement in peace processes.

3. Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security (2017) (See: www.securitycouncil-report.org/attf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2017_861.pdf)

4. A Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks: www.globalwomenmediators.org

Challenges in reaching aims and managing a network

A fundamental challenge faced by many networks is practical as well as strategic: How should they gain access to ongoing mediated peace processes? These tend to be exclusive processes where access is determined by political power, connections and opportunities; i.e. processes where donors and networks might have to join forces to be successful. Furthermore, the problem of access was often not directly recognized by donors or political actors. Instead of receiving the necessary support to gain access, WMNs continue to be offered capacity building. Several coordinators pointed to a general assumption that women equipped with necessary skills automatically would be able to participate. As expressed by one coordinator, it is important to work against the risk that "men get opportunities and women get training". The strong focus and attention on capacity building may remove attention from the real problem, which is lack of access to the spaces where decisions are made.

Two commonly mentioned challenges to effectively manage WMNs were the lack of sufficient funding and time pressure. Whereas some WMNs receive annual funding from the governments that established them, others need to continuously apply for funding from external sources, such as donors. Many of the network coordinators therefore highlighted limited resources as an obstacle for strengthening relations among network members and for conducting activities. With regard to time pressure, a sustainable network requires active members, which in turn demands time from individuals – both coordinators and members – who are often heavily burdened with day-to-day activities in their respective roles and responsibilities. Many of them have full-time jobs and only engage in the WMNs on a voluntary basis.

Conclusion: How can we advance WMNs beyond 2020?

As demonstrated in this brief, the WMNs vary in terms of their aims, their level of formalization, and the nature of their membership. They have contributed to different forms of achievements but they also face common challenges. We believe the upcoming 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325 provides a good opportunity to have a strategic discussion on how to best learn from these experiences. We therefore conclude by identifying a number of strategic points for advancing the WMNs beyond 2020.

Sufficient time for strategic planning is critical

In order for a WMN to succeed, it is important to invest time in strategic planning. This could include identifying key priority areas to work on, being clear on the added value of the WMN, and mapping what other actors are doing and coordinate with them in order to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication of efforts. For example, the discussions with the network coordinators suggest that it is critical to strategically link members' expertise to ongoing peace processes. It would then be important to establish and maintain connections with relevant actors, such as mediation support units within the UN, the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Resources are required for effective WMNs

Ample time, dedicated efforts and long-term and predictable human and financial resources are critical to ensure sustainability of the WMNs. Without these, the WMNs will struggle to maintain basic functions and will likely be unable to have the largest possible impact. At the 15th year anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in 2015, funding was identified as critical to improve women's participation in peace processes. The coordinators' experiences raised in this brief further underline that this issue needs to be given priority in the coming years.

Strengthening influence by supporting access

The basis for inclusive peace processes is *access*. While WMNs can add much value, most mediated peace processes continue to be exclusive and male-dominated at all levels. This underlines that while WMNs have a responsibility to maximize its planning and connections, it is absolutely critical that states, the international community, and local power-holders provide the necessary political, technical and logistical support to ensure access.

Need for enhanced exchange and awareness

The growing number of WMNs signals a much-needed focus on promoting women's influence in mediated peace processes. That being said, there are many overlaps between existing WMNs. Some operate in the same countries and regions, and some individuals are members of more than one network. If increased awareness and exchange between WMNs can be achieved, opportunities for shared learning may also open up, a trend we currently see developing and was highlighted by many coordinators.

It is important to recognize the existence of both state-led and civil society-led WMNs and their exchange. Many of the civil society-led networks have worked to promote women's role in specific peace processes for many years, and have built up significant mediation expertise and 'know-how'. In the words of one coordinator from a civil society-led WMN: "To what extent do they (i.e. state-led networks) know the individual mediators who have been doing this work in the last 10-20 years before the term 'mediators' became fashionable?" As WMNs led by states or regional organizations often have more access to funding, political support, resources and connections than civil society-led, such differences are central to consider but also utilize as each form of network have their comparative advantages. This will be especially important going forward with the Global Alliance of Women Mediator Networks.

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