



PA-X SPOTLIGHT: GENDER



# Local Peace Processes: Opportunities and Challenges for Women's Engagement

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This research draws on the PA-X Peace Agreement Database ([www.peaceagreements.org](http://www.peaceagreements.org)), a database of all peace agreements at any stage of the peace process from 1990 to 2016. The database is fully searchable and supports both qualitative and quantitative examination of peace agreements.

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## PA-X Spotlight Series

The PA-X Spotlight Series addresses questions regarding comparative peace processes, asked by those seeking to influence peace and transition processes to be more inclusive. Each Spotlight provides brief comparative material regarding a key issue, sometimes with reference to the specific context from which the question originated, and sometimes framed more generally. This Gender Series deals with questions posed by a range of actors in the MENA region, with reference to women's meaningful participation as well as gender-sensitive and responsive approaches.

This Spotlight addresses the questions:

When and how do local peace processes and agreements address conflict?  
What are the opportunities and challenges for women and gender-equality advocates seeking to meaningfully engage with local peace processes?

## Introduction

Although peace processes occur most visibly at the national level, usually involving high-level government, military and international figures, this is not the only forum in which peace processes take place. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), notably in Yemen, Syria and Libya, despite international efforts, national level peace and transition processes have had little traction in ending conflict. In situations where national level peace processes become stalled, local peace processes may present an alternative opportunity to address violence in the interim, although whether and how they do so is an underexplored question.

We use the term local peace processes in this Spotlight to mean: negotiation processes involving locally-based actors, which address local conflict dynamics within a part of the wider conflict-affected area. Agreements resulting from local peace processes vary in content, but common approaches include addressing the grievances driving inter-communal conflict such as access to water and pasture, cattle-rustling, and community feuds or tit-for-tat killings, as well as efforts aimed at managing or ending the conflict and reversing its impact, such as ceasefires, opening routes, and returning abductees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to conflict affected areas.

This Spotlight outlines briefly the relationship between women and local peace processes, drawing out and focussing on a number of examples from the MENA region, and Sub-Saharan Africa. We do so in order to provide comparative information to support women's meaningful participation and gender-sensitive approaches in local peace processes and agreements. It is sometimes suggested that women may have greater access to these local-level negotiations than to formal national peace negotiations, because they take place through mechanisms such as civil society organisations and local peace committees, rather than internationalised high level political diplomacy. However, a review of agreement texts reveals few provisions referring to women, girls, and gender specifically. Moreover, 'institutional, economic, cultural and social obstacles' to women's participation prevalent at the national level are also evident in local processes.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, women are often very active at local levels of governance, and there are some striking examples of where they have been central to mobilizing, supporting, and implementing local peace initiatives.

In Part I of this Spotlight, we discuss what we mean by peace processes and agreements that are 'local', as opposed to 'national' in character. In Part II, we explore the potential opportunities for women's participation in processes initiated or facilitated by armed groups, civil society and religious organisations, state actors, and international actors. In the Conclusion we present questions intended to assist with framing the issues which women and gender equality advocates might usefully consider when engaging with local processes on addressing the inclusion of women.

## I. When are Peace Processes and Peace Agreements Local?

There is often no hard and fast line between national conflict and peace process and local conflict and peace process.<sup>2</sup> Conflicts depicted as being 'national' in nature are often nested in complex conflict systems which include both local conflicts and international conflicts. Multi-level conflict dynamics often result in negotiations being held at the local, national, and international levels. While the links between national and local level conflict dynamics may be multiple, local peace processes and agreements can be understood to have some of the following distinctive characteristics:

- ▶ **Limited territorial scope in relation to the wider conflict zone.** National peace agreements deal with national level conflict sometimes by addressing the territory as a whole, or where national conflict concerns a sub-state entity, by addressing that entity as a whole. In contrast, local peace agreements do not try to encompass the entire conflict region, instead focusing on a smaller geography within the conflict zone limited to a town, district, or even a military zone that may only encompass a few square kilometres. For example, a 2015 ceasefire signed in Hudaydah, Yemen, limited the terms of the agreement to an area between two buildings.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **Role of local leadership.** Local peace processes are regularly facilitated by local leaders including politicians, (sub-)state officials, tribal elites, community elders, civil society organizations and/or religious figures, with limited political/military influence beyond the territory to which an agreement pertains. Local leaders may, however, broker agreements on behalf of smaller branches of national level organisations, such as tribal chiefs within ethnic groups, or battalion commanders within the military.
- ▶ **Focus on issues that are linked to the territory in question.** Local peace processes focus on issues relating to local conflict dynamics that may be ignored by national level processes. Common themes in local processes relate to addressing local conflict-drivers, such as access to water and pasture, cattle-rustling, and family feuds, as well as issues which attempt to end the conflict and address its impact, such as opening of roads and returning abductees and IDPs. At times, local conflict drivers reflect national level conflict dynamics or act as pretexts for escalating conflict in ways that connect to the national conflict. Local processes may also deal with pressing local issues, such as the need for humanitarian relief or resolution of inter-group violent clashes.

There are many reasons why local level peace processes and agreements emerge in conflict-affected states. In some cases, the state may have limited influence on local conflict dynamics and therefore must address them in conjunction with local actors. Alternatively, a limited national political will or provision of resources by state actors may spur local nodes of governance, including communities, civil society organisations, religious or kinship groups, to take on peacemaking responsibilities in their own communities, in order to fill the vacuum. Local actors may be best suited to address issues related to their communities, or better located to provide a rapid response in stemming cycles of violence. Local actors may also hold higher degrees of trust with conflict parties, as well as the ability to bypass political deadlocks or difficult personalities that may be causing a national level process to stall.

Local peace processes and agreements can have a positive impact on a national level process, but can also carry risks for that process.

Among the positive attributes of local peace processes are their potential ability to:

- ▶ reduce violence on the ground in often devastating conflict, potentially improving conditions for humanitarian assistance and return of IDPs;
- ▶ address local conflicts that may undermine national peacemaking efforts;
- ▶ mitigate risks of ceasefire violations and conflict flare-up in the lead up and immediate aftermath of a national level agreement, by addressing the possible incentives for parties to make 'last minute' military gains.

Potential risks to national peacemaking processes include:

- ▶ eliminating elements of conflict but keeping others in place, for example sustaining a 'no peace, no war' situation, or even one side's domination, in ways that can dis-incentivize national conflict resolution processes;<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ creating or strengthening local autonomy in ways that the national peace process must adapt to and accommodate, or that even threaten national peace accords, for example by creating warlord fiefdoms;
- ▶ creating new alliances between fractured armed groups that strengthen their capacity for armed conflict, rather than addressing it.

## II. Opportunities and Challenges for Women's Engagement with Local Processes

Local processes may contain opportunities and structures which allow for the participation of women, whom may have more success in accessing local processes and bring their local expertise, than they do to access national level talks. Local peace processes can also directly address the consequences of conflict which affect their daily lives, and offer an opportunity for local conflict actors to commit to tackling sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), such as in examples of local agreements in Kenya and South Sudan (see Box 1).<sup>5</sup> However, there are also challenges for gender equality: local agreements can enshrine cultural practices, which potentially conflict with international human rights law, such as arranged marriages which are organised as part of the peace deal, as seen in local agreements from Somalia (see Box 1).<sup>6</sup> Local peace processes may also be susceptible to a similar set of barriers that women face when advocating for greater inclusion in national level talks, such as discrimination and gatekeeping by armed actors or local 'strongmen'.

### Box 1

#### South Sudan, Nuer-Dinka Loki Accord, 10 June 1998

After 15 years of conflict, we the joint committee of chiefs and church leaders demand: -

...

- A stop to all killing, and abduction of women and children
- To return recently abducted women and children to their homes

#### Kenya, Modogashe Declaration (III), 8 April 2011

On the Role of Peace Structures, Institutions and Mechanisms:

We further resolve to collaboratively address the six (6) under-listed emerging issues for conflict dynamics within the target Counties and neighbouring Countries:...

v. Gender-based violence

#### Somalia/Puntland, Ramada Peace Agreement, 4 December 2005

2. In the second case of killings, the committee ordered the sub-clan of Reer Mahad should pay diya for the two deceased, 100 camels and an additional 20 camels as reverence, and 5,000,000 Somali Shillings for funeral expenses plus the two firearms, and offer two Godobtir (girls for marriage) to heal the aggrieved party.

Based on a review of local agreements from 1990 to date, we briefly consider different types of local process, organised in terms of which actors initiated or facilitated the process. This is because the consequences for women's inclusion can vary depending on the nature of the agreement and who negotiated it.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to note that the roles of actors often change over time, and locally-influential individuals can sometimes hold multiple memberships in organisations or institutions, meaning that agreements cannot always be neatly sorted by which actor initiated the process.<sup>8</sup>

## 1. Local Peace Processes Initiated by Armed Groups

Despite the essential role that women regularly occupy as combatants and members of armed groups, local peace negotiations initiated by, and negotiated directly between armed groups, appear to be the most limited in terms both of evidence of women's inclusion in negotiation and the prevalence of provisions that reference women, girls and gender in the resulting agreement texts. Most often when agreements are reached between formal armed groups including militias, battalions, and insurgent groups, their terms cover a fairly narrow agenda. Among the items negotiated are: suspending hostilities; demarcating areas of control; opening roads; exchanging prisoners; and agreeing upon conflict resolution mechanisms.

For example, the Instrument of Agreement signed in December 2015 between the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Fatah Operations Room in Aleppo, Syria, illustrates the realist and limited agenda of such agreements. This dynamic is also reflected in other agreements from Libya, Syria and Yemen.<sup>9</sup> The Aleppo<sup>10</sup> agreement provides for a mutual ceasefire, opening and closing of checkpoints for civilian and military crossings, and establishes a joint military commission to implement the agreement; so focusses overwhelmingly on security-related issues.<sup>11</sup> Some agreements between armed groups include provisions for the protection of women, prohibiting sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and prioritising the release of women prisoners, especially those whom are pregnant or lactating – but these instances are rare.

Ideally, even militarised agreements between armed groups should note and address the gendered components of conflict and address their effects on women. Women often have a personal stake in provisions that agree to release or exchange prisoners, open roads in order to access essential services, or contribute to ceasing hostilities. In addition, given that women regularly become heads of households during conflict, and often take on greater roles in economic activities, ongoing harassment and petty crime can discourage women's economic activity.<sup>12</sup> The prohibition of harassment as included in a 2015 agreement in Sheikh Maqsoud, Aleppo, Syria, between the Operations Room 'Libtik ya Ukhtah' of the Free Syrian Army, and the People's Protection Units, provides an example of how local agreements place such issues on the agenda (see Box 2).<sup>13</sup>

### Box 2

Syria, Agreement between People's Protection Units (YPG) and Operations Room 'Libtik ya Ukhtah' on status of Sheikh Maqsoud, 3 May 2015

... 5. The harassment of women is forbidden, and this applies to all factions inside the neighbourhood, as in any other neighbourhood in liberated Aleppo.

## 2. Local Peace Processes Initiated by non-Armed Organisations

Local peace processes can also be initiated by non-militarised groups and individuals such as civil or religious organisations or traditional leaders or institutions. These individuals and groups may have a degree of influence over conflict parties and be able to engage them, even where they do not necessarily have any direct connection to the parties. Examples of such non-armed involvement in local peace processes include:

- ▶ In SouthSudan, the New Sudan Council of Churches is active in mitigating conflicts between the Dinka and Nuer;<sup>14</sup>
- ▶ In August 2014, the Lebanese Institute for Democracy and Human Rights and the Muslim Scholars Association negotiated and implemented a limited ceasefire between the Lebanese Army, Hezbollah and Syrian insurgents in Aarsal, Lebanon;<sup>15</sup>

- ▶ In Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, Bishop Paul Yugusuk brokered an [agreement](#) in November 2015 between Mundri Battalion (Brigade 16 of Division 6 of the Sudan People's Liberation Army) and the local community, following abuses by soldiers from the brigade.<sup>16</sup>

Civil society and women's organisations mobilizing at the city or district level, can also issue unilateral or joint 'calls' or 'declarations'.<sup>17</sup> These declarations may be helpful in gathering momentum in a nascent peace process and may even involve a level of behind the scenes 'brokering' that begins to unite conflict parties around the imperative to end the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Civil society groups are one of the more prevalent means through which women participate in local peace processes. During periods of conflict, women regularly emerge with greater roles in the public sphere,<sup>19</sup> although this often also carries an enhanced risk of being subjected to targeted violence. Women in different governorates across Yemen have brokered ceasefires, prisoner exchanges, and resource management deals, by using their pre-existing relationships and roles within communities.<sup>20</sup> In Syria, women from the organisation Damma negotiated with armed actors in Zabadani to establish prisoner releases, a civilian safe zone, and a ceasefire initiative, although their efforts were ultimately undermined by a local council that established a male negotiating team to replace them.<sup>21</sup> Cultural barriers, both pre-existing and newly formed, such as those produced through a radicalisation of religious rhetoric, or the difficulties of finding the chaperone sometimes socially required for women to participate in processes,<sup>22</sup> remain an obstacle to participation in local negotiations processes. Despite this, organisations that lobby for peace often open-up spaces for women to establish themselves as effective agents of change; however, these initiatives are not always connected to women's meaningful participation in negotiations or post-agreement implementation mechanisms.

In addition to their role in civil society organisations, women often also are at the forefront in mobilising informal civil resistance efforts against violence. These efforts can become institutionalised over time through the creation of new organisations and initiatives focused on brokering peace. Reflecting on the process that negotiated the 1993 [Al Fatah Declaration](#) in Wajir County, Kenya, women peace activists from Wajir have highlighted the mobilization of women from opposing clans to hold informal meetings as a key factor in gaining momentum towards a more formalised process.<sup>23</sup> In several locales in South-Central Somalia, women formed pressure groups to instigate and support local peace processes in response to inter-clan violence, both in tandem to, and sometimes within, the formal structures of mediation processes. Their methods included issuing pre-conference communiques, intervening in meetings with their reflections on the impact of conflict, and 'sitting at the doors of the venues... [in order to] prevent anyone leaving [the meetings] until an accord was reached.'<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Local Peace Processes Initiated by State Actors

State actors may initiate local peace processes in response to increased violence, for example, central governments can rely on local representatives of the state to resolve conflicts in their respective municipalities. Functioning as either a conflict party, guarantor or witness, state actors can include: commissioners, governors, and in some cases even high-level officials such as ministers or members of parliament. The prevalence of local conflicts can also lead to national level efforts to provide institutional support for local peacemaking efforts. For example, in Kenya, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) was given a mandate by the 2008 National Cohesion and Integration Act No.12 to seek conflict resolution on the district level, and has been active in negotiating numerous peace agreements in pastoral and borderland conflicts.<sup>25</sup> In South Sudan, the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation was created in 2011 by presidential decree to 'provide a framework for the implementation of reconciliation activities.'<sup>26</sup> In contrast, due to the limited reach of the central government in Libya since 2015, local municipalities have become the main nodes of governance and service providers, and have negotiated several agreements between different cities and municipalities in an attempt to end local cycles of violence.<sup>27</sup>

One type of state-initiated local peace process that demonstrates opportunity for women's participation is that of peace councils or committees. Peace councils are sometimes formed as part of local peace processes in order to monitor, verify, and implement geographically limited and/or nationwide peace agreements, for example, in Nicaragua and Nepal.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, peace councils may also have the mandate to resolve disputes between warring parties. The composition of peace councils regularly consists of an amalgam of various stakeholders including state actors, traditional and religious leaders, and civil society leaders, with consideration for ethnic, kinship, and other relevant identities – including gender. Sometimes groups are given specific places on the council to ensure equitable participation of various groups from within the community, including positions for women. As part of the 2006 Marsabit-Moyale Peace Process in Kenya organised by the National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management (NSC),<sup>29</sup> participants suggested that local District Peace Committees should be formed at multiple levels in the Marsabit and Moyale districts in northern Kenya, where there has been sporadic conflict between pastoralist communities. The composition of Councils included three positions (20 per cent) to go to women: that of vice chairperson, treasurer and committee member.<sup>30</sup> The 2007 [agreement](#) resulting from the Marsabit/ Moyale District Peace Committees' Civic Dialogue lists several women as representing various parties, including the government, facilitators, and communities in the Marsarbit and Moyale districts.<sup>31</sup>

### Box 3

#### Resolutions of the Marsabit/ Moyale District Peace Committees' Civic Dialogue held at the Marsabit Pastoral Centre on 17th November, 2007

We the members of Marsabit and Moyale District Peace Committees participating in the Marsabit Peace Meeting held at the Marsabit Pastoral Centre (in Marsabit) on November 16, 2006 and reaffirming our commitment to peaceful coexistence among communities living in the two districts have resolved today, that:...

4. Communication between District Peace Committee (DPC) and the government should be improved.
5. The DPCs should have their own independent office. [...]
7. A special Inter-District Peace Committee should be formed in the two districts.

As with mechanisms for supporting women's inclusion in national peace processes, local peace agreement provisions or more general commitments to including women in peace committees or councils are not always implemented fully. A study on the effectiveness of local peace committees at village and district levels in Nepal suggested that although the agreed Terms of Reference specifically outlined the composition of district-level peace committees, which were to include 33 per cent representation of females, in practice female committee members were consistently under-represented in meetings. This under-representation led to female committee members relying 'on support from a significant number of males for any given issue to receive committee approval', although in some cases they were able to push through issues relating to reparations for conflict-affected women.<sup>32</sup> In northern Kenya, women have reported mixed experiences of being involved in peace committees, with some suggesting that they were intentionally excluded from processes by not being told the correct time of meetings, or only included 'when the committee needs to demonstrate [to donors] that they integrate women',<sup>33</sup> whilst others claimed that 'their male counterparts support them and respect their opinion.'<sup>34</sup> These examples are illustrative of the need for in-depth monitoring of local peace agreement implementation, and accurate reporting of the internal dynamics of local peace council and committee meetings, even of processes that have seemingly provided for women's inclusion.

#### 4. Local Peace Processes Facilitated by International Actors

In lieu of weak governance, a lack of political will from the national level to support a peace or transition process, or as an attempt to circumvent stalled national peace negotiations, local peace processes may emerge and therefore become a primary focus for the peacebuilding activities of international organisations. International organisations involved in supporting localised peace processes include a wide range of groups such as [USAID](#), [Saferworld](#), [Swisspeace](#), [ACCORD](#), [Cordaid International](#), [Sant'Egidio](#), and the [Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue](#) in Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan, among other locations. UN missions and the UNDP sometimes also play important roles in facilitating local agreements.<sup>35</sup> As third parties and mediators, international governmental and non-governmental organisations have access to considerable expertise and donor funds, and are therefore often in a position to support local peace processes.

Conflict resolution programmes supported by international actors may include mediators or donors who are supported by governments that have feminist foreign policy commitments. Women and their allies can use these commitments to push for training, funding, and other resources to support women's engagement in local processes, by calling on international facilitators to uphold normative commitments to gender equality. Moreover, norms of gender inclusion may be invoked in such programmes to ensure women's participation, for example, through the use of reserved places in delegations. In the Nigerian states of Plateau and South Kaduna, almost all of the delegations had a women's representative in local reconciliation processes which were facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.<sup>36</sup> Not only were women signatories to the 2016 Kafachan Peace Declaration that dealt with conflict between farmers and pastoral grazers, but the agreement also contains multiple provisions calling for women's meaningful inclusion in all peace processes, and to prevent and protect women from violence (see Box 4).

#### Box 4

##### Nigeria, Kafachan Peace Declaration, 23 March 2013.

##### V. Follow Up Actions

v. Inclusion of women and youths, persons with disability in decision-making and peace processes: On many occasions, reconciliation and dialogue efforts exclude meaningful participation of women and youth. This exclusion causes disenchantment and negative perception of the outcomes of reconciliation efforts.

Many international organisations that support local peace processes have gender equality strategies, policies, or guiding principles. These organisations should, in theory, be amenable to local efforts to include women, and have the resources to support and encourage them. However, this assumption can break down in practice due to the working practices of mediators in the field. International actors can also be dissuaded from pushing for women's inclusion due to a perception that this will be resisted by conservative local actors, and hence threaten the stability of the process, even if this is in fact a misconception.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

National level conflicts are often nested in wider international and local conflict dynamics, and this is particularly true of ongoing conflicts in the MENA region. Where national conflict resolution efforts have stalled, often local processes remain ongoing and may receive more attention and support. It is important that women are included in local peace processes. Women are often powerful community actors, and their ability to initiate and influence local peace processes may lead to a wider benefit for other women in the community and in improving the quality of the peace agreement more generally. However, local peace processes are also arenas of power and legitimacy that link to the national conflict in complicated ways, and are often understood as very contextually determined in ways that international actors should respect. Support for inclusion of women cannot therefore be taken for granted, and any 'standardised' approach to what local agreements include should be avoided.

We set out the following questions as a starting point to assist gender equality advocates involved with local processes, to frame their engagement with a local peace process:

- ▶ Who are the local stakeholders with potential influence over the peace process to champion the role of women; or conversely, who may create barriers for women's engagement?<sup>38</sup>
- ▶ Are there existing local networks and/or relationships that women have used, or could develop, in order to engage with conflict parties or mediators? What donors and international actors might support these networks and/or relationships, without jeopardising them?
- ▶ If women are present in local peace negotiations, are they participating, or simply present? If only present, what are the barriers that are preventing them from participating in a meaningful way?
- ▶ If women are not present in local peace negotiations, despite commitments by conflict parties or mediators to include women, what are the barriers that are preventing their participation?

- ▶ Does a local peace agreement include provisions addressing women, such as using gender-sensitive language, specifically mentioning 'women and men, boys and girls', as well as acknowledging women as agents of change with specific rights? <sup>39</sup>
- ▶ Does a local peace agreement provide for some form of implementation or monitoring mechanisms that can be used to gauge whether any provisions for women's inclusion are effectively being implemented?
- ▶ Is there a demand from women involved in civil society organisations that engage with local conflict actors, for training in technical competencies in human rights monitoring, peacemaking, and mediation? If so, how can this demand be sensitively supported?
- ▶ Is the local peace process supported by an international organisation/s that have publically available gender equality strategies, policies or guiding principles? If so, can these be used to encourage mediators to push for women's inclusion in the process?
- ▶ Do organisations supporting a local peace process need to access or provide additional resources to tackle these barriers, such as funding to support travel costs of female participants' chaperones?

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The Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) is centrally concerned with how political settlements can be made both more stable, and more inclusive of those affected by them beyond political elites. In particular, the programme examines the relationship between stability and inclusion, sometimes understood as a relationship between peace-making and justice.

The programme is addressing three broad research questions relating to political settlements:

1. How do different types of political settlements emerge, and what are the actors, institutions, resources, and practices that shape them?
2. How can political settlements be improved by internally-driven initiatives, including the impact of gender-inclusive processes and the rule of law institutions?
3. How, and with what interventions, can external actors change political settlements?

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