

Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts and violence all over the world exacerbate social and gender inequalities, with a negative impact on the lives of many women and girls. Moreover, a concentration of power in the hands of men has often prevented women from being structurally included in government policies, with their rights threatened. Yet, there is a strong presence of women peacebuilders who contribute to promoting solutions that can ensure lasting peace, thus opposing extremist tendencies. Against this backdrop, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), together with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy, in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, promoted the event “Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?”, which took place on 1 December 2022. The event aimed to analyse the initiatives of the MWMN to develop a long-term strategy that could support implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Women | Conflict mediation

keywords

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Introduction

The meeting “Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?” took place on Thursday, 1 December 2022,¹ and was promoted by the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN),² together with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy, in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation. The event aimed to analyse the initiatives of the MWMN to develop a long-term strategy that could support implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.³

Furthermore, the meeting was also conceived with the idea that the world is experiencing troubled times due to increasingly violent conflicts, coups, displacement and hunger. These conflicts affect not only human rights, but also exacerbate social and gender inequalities, with a negative impact on the lives of many women and girls. Moreover, in numerous conflict-affected countries, there has been a concentration of power in the hands of men. This has prevented women from being structurally included in government policies, with their rights threatened, especially in the MENA region. Yet, there is a strong presence

¹ For more information about this initiative see IAI website: <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16276>.

² The Mediterranean Women Mediators Network was launched in 2017 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in collaboration with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy among the initiatives of Italy’s third National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security. For more information on MWMN see the network website: <https://womenmediators.net>.

³ For more information on the Women, Peace and Security agenda see, UN Women, *In Focus: Women, Peace and Security*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/174658>.

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Report of the meeting “Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?” organised in Rome on 1 December 2022 by the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), together with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy.

of women peacebuilders who contribute to promoting solutions that can ensure lasting peace, thus opposing extremist tendencies. Given these considerations and based on the experience of the MWMN's work, the panel discussion focused on the following question: What can regional women's networks do to protect and build women's resilience during war and in post-conflict recovery contexts?

Opening remarks

Dr. **Loredana Teodorescu**, Head of the MWMN, opened the event by highlighting the essential role that women can play in achieving peace and security in the Mediterranean region, and how networks can help to create fertile ground for women's inclusion. She urged the necessity to pursue three objectives: inclusivity, increasing the participation of women in peace making and recognition of the contribution they are already bringing to the table; the cohesion of the various networks and the need to value their achievements and further develop their potentialities; and the importance of cooperation, partnerships and synergies. All these objectives rely first of all on the political will to consider the WPS agenda as a cross-cutting political agenda and a real priority to achieve peace and security.



Loredana Teodorescu, Head of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN)

Panel discussion

The panel discussion was moderated by **María Solanas**, Director of Programmes at the Elcano Royal Institute and MWMN member from Spain, and started with the intervention of **Rida Al Tubuly**, co-founder and director of Together We Build It (TWBI)⁴ and member of MWMN from Libya. She emphasised the severe effects of the war in Libya on women since 2011.⁵ Among the serious human rights violations and challenges women are facing in Libya, Al Tubuly warned about the enormous masculine militarisation of society. She suggested, first, the necessity to listen to women's voices in order to learn how to build resilience and peace at the community level; and second, the importance of implementing advocacy policies

⁴ Together We Built It (TWBI) is an inter-generational non-profit organisation working to promote peace and security in Libya. For more information on TWBI and its initiatives see the official website: <https://togetherwebuildit.org>.

⁵ For more information see, UN Women Libya, *The Economic and Social Impact of Conflict on Libyan Women. Recommendations for Economic Recovery, Legal Reform and Governance for Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding*, January 2020, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/node/7025>.

at the international level to promote an agenda that does not concern women just as women but as part of the whole society.

The floor was then given to **Anna Cervi**, an international trained mediator and humanitarian expert and MWMN member from Italy, who explained that women in Syria are extremely vulnerable.⁶ Firstly, women and girls are missing years of school, which worsens the gender gap in the country. Secondly, many women are at the frontline, changing the dynamics of these conflicts. Hence, Cervi stressed the necessity to make women more visible and acknowledge the relevance of women's actions. Moreover, spaces of exchange should be created, including both men and women, which is very important, especially when you are in the middle of a conflict.



Rida Al Tubuly, MWMN member from Libya (online)

Then, **Magda Zenon**, peace and human rights activist, podcaster and MWMN member from Cyprus, recalled the different phases of the frozen conflict in her country, emphasising some of the latest challenges, such as entry into the European Union and the Covid-19 emergency. Based on these experiences, it is clear to the whole community how important it is to create an efficient network and inclusive communication for more extensive participation. Networks should be cross-cutting and include people from different areas with different perspectives.⁷ In addition, women, but also men, mediators must be adequately trained to create and use inclusive communication.

Jeta Krasniqi, consultant and expert advisor to the Kosovo Government on the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, and MWMN member from Kosovo, explained how war could have different meanings. Indeed, even if there are no current military actions between Kosovo and Serbia, the two countries are still in an unfinished conflict. In the past, three peace processes were put in place, all of them sponsored by the UN. However, despite the presence of UN Security Council resolution 1325, these processes were all gender-blind. Furthermore, Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations and is not recognised by the whole international community. These two elements affect the ability of the country itself to join some international spaces and promote its agenda, also in terms of women's inclusion

⁶ For a deeper analysis of women's situation in Syria see, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), *Voices from Syria 2022. Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 23 December 2021, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/node/273597>.

⁷ With this respect, the MWMN decided to launch its first antenna in Cyprus in May 2019. For more information about it see MWMN website: *Launch of the Cyprus Antenna of the MWMN*, <https://womenmediators.net/?p=28720>.

in peace processes.⁸

Finally, **Lea Baroudi** joined the debate as an MWMN member from Lebanon and founding member and Director since 2012 of MARCH, a Lebanese non-profit organisation focusing on sectarian conflict resolution, promoting diversity and equality and sustainable peacebuilding, including the WPS agenda.⁹ She presented the causes of the current situation in Lebanon, highlighting the lack of social ties and the social contract between the different communities living in the country since its foundation. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to create opportunities for dialogue, build fertile ground to continue networks discussing peace and security issues and pay attention to the correct terminologies to use when mediating conflicts. Training and shared experiences are two essential tools for these goals.



MWMN members **Lea Baroudi**, **Jeta Krasniqi**, **Anna Cervi** and **María Solanas**

A rich debate followed the panel discussion, where some MWMN mediators from the public joined the discussion. Among them, **Ouided Bouchmaoui**, Nobel Peace Prize 2015 (co-laureate) and MWMN member from Tunisia; **Dalal Iriqat**, Vice President for International Relations and Assistant Professor at the Arab American University in Palestine, and MWMN member from Palestine; and **Ayşe Betül Çelik**, full professor, teaching conflict analysis and resolution, and political science at Sabancı University in Istanbul, and MWMN member from Turkey. They highlighted some keywords to support the Mediterranean countries with a long-term perspective, with women and youth empowerment among the most urgent priorities. The importance was then underscored of creating inclusive networks and dialogues at the local and international levels to raise awareness of the WPS agenda. Indeed, this agenda does not only concern women, but is for the security of the whole community. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the different aspects of WPS to find functional tools to promote women's rights and advocate for women's inclusion at all levels. Inclusive language education is necessary to create this shared awareness: changing the language and being more conscious of the proper terminology is essential.

⁸ In November 2020, the MWMN decided to launch its Antenna in Kosovo. For more information about it see MWMN website: *MWMN Kosovo Antenna*, <https://womenmediators.net/?p=31696>.

⁹ For more information on MARCH see the official website: <https://www.marchlebanon.org>.

Closing remarks

Minister Plenipotentiary **Valeria Biagiotti**, Coordinator for UN Reform and Women, Peace, and Security Focal Point (WPS) at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, joined for the closing remarks. She highlighted how Italy is at its fourth National Action Plan (NAP)¹⁰ and is using Parliament funding to finance initiatives that expand opportunities and help the implementation of WPS, such as the MWMN. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation is proud of the MWMN's work and commitment to the promotion of the WPS agenda in the Mediterranean region, and its participation in the creation of the Global Alliance.¹¹



Minister Plenipotentiary **Valeria Biagiotti**, Coordinator for UN Reform and Women, Peace, and Security Focal Point (WPS) at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Finally, **Francesca Caruso**, member of the MWMN Secretariat, concluded the conference highlighting some key takeaways: i) despite difficulties, many women and girls are working extensively on the ground in conflict-affected countries; ii) women's networks can help them, making their voices heard. These networks can advocate for women's inclusion at all levels and in different fields ranging from humanitarian organisations to research institutes; iii) women's networks can also train women mediators with follow-up sessions and create employment opportunities for them. Recognising women's work in peacebuilding processes also means changing the language frequently used to talk about women. Finally, promoting the importance of women's networks means recognising the importance of creating a network of sisterhood and support for women.



Francesca Caruso, member of the MWMN Secretariat

¹⁰ The Italian fourth National Action Plan (NAP) text is available here: https://cidu.esteri.it/comitatodirittiumani/it/informazione_formazione/piano_nazionale_donne_pace_sicurezza.

¹¹ The Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks was created in 2019 and the MWMN was one of its founding members. For more information see the dedicated website: <https://www.globalwomenmediators.org>.

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