

What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes? The Example of Turkey

by Ayşe Betül Çelik



MWMN
MEDITERRANEAN
WOMEN MEDIATORS
NETWORK

The term “peace process” entered the political discussions in Turkey through the talks conducted between the state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* – PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan from 2009 onwards, and more so after 2013, when the process became more transparent. However, the process failed after the Turkish general elections in June 2015 and the following increased armed clashes between the state forces and the PKK in several Kurdish provinces.¹

¹ For an analysis of the failed process, see Cuma Çiçek, “The Failed Resolution Process and the Transformation of Kurdish Politics”, in *Middle East Report*, No. 288 (Fall 2018), p. 19-24, <https://merip.org/?p=52572>; Cuma Çiçek and Vahap Coşkun, *The Peace Process from Dolmabahçe to*

Since then, peace attempts have remained weak in the country, which has been struggling with many other problems due to the conflict and “rising competitive authoritarianism”.² While formal talks are the backbone of peace processes, they are not their sole component; nor should they be. The crucial question remains as to what can be done when peace processes stall. Looking at the role that women can play

Present-Day: Understanding Failure and Finding New Paths, Istanbul, Peace Foundation, April 2016, <http://barisvakfi.org/eng/?p=393>.

² Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey”, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 9 (February 2016), p. 1581-1606, <http://hdl.handle.net/11693/36632>.

Ayşe Betül Çelik is a professor of political science at Sabancı University, Istanbul and a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network. This commentary is published with the support of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), an initiative launched by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and implemented by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy. The views expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Network or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

may help highlight often unexplored possibilities for rejuvenating peace processes.

A long path to peace

It is commonly argued that when peace processes stall, they can only be rejuvenated through leaders' good will and commitment. While this may be true, many steps can also be taken by others, notably by civil society actors to prepare the society for peace and pressure the leaders to initiate peace talks. Research shows that civil society plays a complementary role in peace processes by de-escalating violence and supporting peace processes.³ It also continues to build peace from below when leaders stop talking. Just as peace can be built from above by leaders instilling peace in society, it can also be achieved by bringing communities closer, making the Other's suffering and demands heard, and creating spaces where people can work together for peace. Peace must involve a *change* in feelings, attitudes and behaviours among the people, institutions and groups who are parties to the conflict or who are seen as Others. Peace means developing a new way of interacting with the group seen as Other. In addition, this new more egalitarian relationship should be institutionally protected, and the political culture should create a new inclusive and non-discriminatory language. These are the necessary elements of every peace process.

³ Thania Paffenholz (ed.), *Civil Society and Peacebuilding. A Critical Assessment*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2010.

Far too often peace processes cannot be initiated or sustained because the actors do not understand the conflict dynamics, fail to build trust between conflicting parties and do not understand the need for reconciliation.⁴ Working towards peace involves talking civilly to the people you have demonised for years. This requires the development of a new language that humanises the very people previously referred to as "traitor, enemy, terrorist" and those who have been Otherised in society. In Turkey, the slogan "mothers shall not cry anymore" used during the peace process was a manifestation of that language since it was seen as the most compatible with Turkish social norms, the easiest to understand and the most humanistic. Although it reduces the role of women to motherhood, and it does not refer to the role of men, the slogan was very effective in conveying the message that both sides share the same pain due to the long-lasting armed conflict. However, women play a wide range of roles not only during the peace processes but also in times when the hope of peace is lost. Especially women who have been socialised in civil society possess skills that can be utilised for peace. Civil society roles that they have served equip them with skills in listening, understanding and reciprocating. Such are the skills needed not only to work for peace during times of trouble but also bearing the potential to push for official dialogues when the time comes. However, research shows that while women are active and effective in grassroots-level peacebuilding activities, they are rarely

⁴ Vicenç Fisas, *Dünyada Barış Süreçleri. Kürt Sorunu İçin İpuçları*, İstanbul, Agora, 2011.

recognised in formal peace processes.⁵ They undertake the hardest task of diminishing direct and structural violence as peacebuilders, but their roles as peacemakers are underestimated, blocked and discouraged. During times of conflict, women peacebuilders continue their peace activism ranging from pressuring leaders to return to the peace table to developing preventive measures against violent attacks, as the example of Turkey suggests.

The invisible role of women peacebuilders in Turkey

According to Jonathan Powell, a prominent figure in the Northern Ireland peace process, peace processes are like cycling, and one should keep cycling even at times of deadlock.⁶ In Turkey, many civil society groups, especially those of women, keep cycling by continuing to talk about peace in the shadow of increasing authoritarianism, decline in democratic values and increase in violence. However, such efforts remain invisible during both peace and re-escalation periods.

One of the most important of these tasks is to bring together women of different identities to talk about peace. This is an important and a difficult task, especially in the context of re-escalation in Turkey. According to a recent study, the public in Turkey is

highly polarised on what the solution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict should be: securitisation versus democratic reforms. Underlying the securitisation approach are fears which stem from a belief that the country will be divided through "terrorist activities" with the help of foreign powers. In Turkey, this fear is often known as the Sèvres Syndrome, which can be defined as beliefs that there are external powers trying to challenge the Turkish state's territorial integrity and to implement the provisions of the 1920 Sevres Treaty signed between the Allied and the Associated Powers. The study shows that as of January 2020, almost five years after the peace process stalled, these fears were still intensely present in society, especially among Turks. Around 58.68 per cent of the people who self-identify as Turkish believe in the Sèvres Syndrome.⁷

There are many resources that can be mobilised to address such fears. The Turkey Antenna of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network is one of these. In general, women mediators networks (WMNs) provide opportunity structures for women in divided/polarised societies to come under a "women identity" umbrella to discuss the issues that divide them and find grey areas where they can collaborate.⁸

⁵ Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace. A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, UN Women, 2015, <https://wps.unwomen.org/resources>.

⁶ Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists. How to End Armed Conflicts*, London, The Bodley Head, 2014.

⁷ Ayşe Betül Çelik, Evren Balta and Mehmet Gürses, *A Consideration of the Kurdish Issue in Turkey from a Sociocultural Perspective (2010-2022)*, Istanbul, Peace Foundation, April 2022, p. 19, <http://barisvakfi.org/eng/?p=708>.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of what the WMNs do, see Irene Fellin and Catherine Turner, "Women's Mediator Networks: Reflections on an Emerging Global Trend", in Catherine Turner and Martin Wählisch (eds), *Rethinking Peace Mediation. Challenges of Contemporary Peacemaking*

What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes? The Example of Turkey

© 2023 IAI

ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 23 | 19 - APRIL 2023

In doing so, they open up a safe place for those with different fears and needs to talk about their peace imaginations as well their fears and needs. While improving necessary skills to talk about differences in society, such as active listening, reframing, etc., WMNs also act as models for peaceful relations and make women's mediation role more visible. Such bridging activities can also increase the level of trust in the society, a baseline for accepting societal differences. The Turkey Antenna amid the pandemic visited several cities in Turkey and talked to different women's cooperatives. The report that came out of these visits shows that despite their differences, such cooperatives socialise women into the norms of reciprocity, solidarity and empathy⁹ which can be utilised for peace.

Besides keeping cycling, women's groups also use the periods of conflict re-escalation or freeze to increase the peaceful skills of society members and extend these to other areas of violence in the society. Conflict is gendered and violence extends from battlegrounds to homes. Among the OECD countries, Turkey ranks first in violence against women with 38 per cent of women having experienced such violence.¹⁰ On 20 March 2021, with a presidential decree, Turkey has also decided to withdraw from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on preventing and

combating violence against women and domestic violence. The convention ceased to be effective in Turkey on 1 July 2021, following its denunciation. Women mediators in Turkey, working at the grassroots level and having been socialised into civic norms, can and do explore and incorporate an analysis of how various forms of violence affect women's lives into peace activism. Gender relations, and femininity/masculinity, are embedded in interpersonal relationships, culture, social structures and organisations that permeate all aspects of everyday life. To talk about peace requires talking about these relations and their effects on everyday life.

It is common to think about peace as high-level representation at the peace tables, but oftentimes those women who are working with local communities, who are there to provide security, prevent violence, advocate human rights and build bridges between different communities, are not visible although they silently continue to build the road to peace. There is a need to not only make their work more visible, but also for more advocacy to increase their numbers. When the time for peace arrives, the invisible work that women mediators are doing especially with local communities will provide invaluable resources for the society.

5 April 2023

Practice, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2021, p. 285-306.

⁹ MWMN Turkey Antenna, *Research on Women Cooperatives*, 2023 (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Kaan Eroğuz, *Kadına Yönelik Şiddette Dünya Liderliği* [World leadership in violence against women], *Türkiye Raporu*, 25 October 2022, <https://turkiyeraporu.com/?p=11275>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Global Politics and Security* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 23 | 19 Ayşe Betül Çelik, *What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes? The Example of Turkey*
- 23 | 18 Selin Nasi and Mehmet Fatih Ceylan, *EU-Turkey-UK Triangulation: The Key to Euro-Atlantic Security*
- 23 | 17 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *The EU after One Year of War: Widening, Deepening, Rebalancing*
- 23 | 16 Tiziano Breda, *Why El Salvador's Anti-Crime Measures Cannot (and Should Not) Be Exported*
- 23 | 15 Diego Maiorano, *How Democratic Is the "World's Largest Democracy"?*
- 23 | 14 Munqeth Othman Agha, *The Humanitarian Response in Post-Earthquake Syria: An Urgent Need for Depoliticisation*
- 23 | 13 Giulia Sofia Sarno, *Building Climate Resilience in Urban Informal Settlements through Data Co-production*
- 23 | 12 Irene Paviotti and Daniele Fattibene, *Present and Future of Italy's Development Cooperation*
- 23 | 11 Özgür Ünlühisarçıklı, *Turkey vis-à-vis Russia's War against Ukraine*
- 23 | 10 Stephen Blank, *The War against Ukraine and Russia's Position in Europe's Security Order*