WEAVING

حياكة

الفعل

السياسي

النسوي

FEMINIST

POLITICAL

ACTION

''feminism is an especially political act''
forum participant

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Badael is a right based organization, founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the foundation for real and sustainable peace in Syria, by supporting organic civil society development and promoting discourses and narratives within and around the Syrian context that are rights-based, pluralistic, inclusive and that facilitate holistic truth and understanding.

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Introduction

International peace efforts for Syria are stagnant, and any outlook for a political process is obstructed by competing regional interests. Russia's war on Ukraine has diverted international attention from protracted conflicts, including that continuing for more than eleven years in Syria. In fact, there is a prevalent sense of abandonment and loss of faith in international actors among Syrians.

The timelines of events in Syria from the revolutionary rupture in 2011 to conflict fatigue over the past 10 years that followed inform us that knowledge about the development of events, processes and influential figures manifests in snapshots of time rather than a continuum. The heterogeneous narratives around singular events, as a result, are overwhelming.

This bleak picture makes engaging in and facilitating rethinking and reimagining spaces more urgent than ever. Therefore, Badael held two days dialogue forum between 27 Syrian women political and feminist actors active in track I, II, and III. The forum "Weaving Feminist Political Action" in Berlin 21-22 Oct 2022. The rationale of the forum was to create a thinking and reimagining space for Syrian women political and feminist actors to reimagine peace and political processes in Syria. The paper weaves in discussions and questions raised at the forum as well as the author's own reflections.

Feminist political Action for Pluralistic peace outcomes

This section touches upon the international community's approach to inclusion in the Syria peace and political processes. It sets out how Syrian women political and feminist actors reflect on how they include others in their movements and how they view their inclusion in various political processes. It also situates inclusion beyond access and presence and presents it as a tactic anchored in influence and agency, which are critical preconditions to meaningful participation. This section further offers an understanding of inclusion as a tactic which facilitates spaces for feminist political actions and thoughts as an integral step to produce pluralistic peace outcomes.

The semiology of inclusion and influence

Beyond who is included, inclusion is an issue of what is included. This entails the quality of the inclusion space and what can be raised in it, whether due to power dynamics or the lack of intentionality to go beyond set agendas. It also refers to what knowledge is deemed worthy of including and the filtering process assigned to this exercise. As such, for women's participation to be influential, Syrian women's priorities and interests should be included across the political agenda.

Syrian women's access and presence in the Syrian and international political spaces do not necessarily result in the inclusion of women's interests and priorities for many reasons. For example, women can be taken less seriously when they speak to their so-called 'gender priorities' in the male-dominated environment of the Syria-related political space. On the other hand, they may only be invited to talk about so-called 'women's issues' to dilute their political influence.

Furthermore, influence requires a change in the visual and editorial narratives. Syrian women in the political sphere are portrayed as an interchangeable homogenous group with few exceptions on track 1. The semiology of how women are portrayed in public/official or private/informal narratives is closely linked to influence. Here, the media plays a central role in constructing women's image and place in society and the popular imagination. From street signs to political news coverage, Syrian women are primarily portrayed as the 'object' of protection, maternal figures, or in care roles. Little if any coverage of women local community leaders or political actors makes it to the mainstream media or widely read and viewed outlets. Such coverage is often limited to specialised audio-visual or editorial outlets such as women's community radios, podcasts, women's rights organisations' communication outlets, etc.).

Treating Syrian women as homogenous and replaceable renders their leadership faceless and reflects a lack of serious recognition of their political agency and standing. If you were to recall the image of a Syrian woman, what image jumps to mind first?

Or, if you were to think now of the names of 3 Syrian women political leaders in track I, could you list them? What about track II and III?

If our narratives reflect our understanding and beliefs, then the question of semiology affects how we understand pluralism in the Syrian context.

Ten years since the 2012 Geneva communique and the adoption of several inclusion modalities[1] for women and the broader civil society in track 1, 1.5, and 2 with no inclusive outcomes to speak of so far whether in the process that hasn't been concluded (The Intra Syrian Peace Talks in its constitutional committees format) or the ones which have (Astana and Sochi). Those modalities are perceived by the majority of the forum participants as an afterthought to the processes rather than intentional mechanisms built in their rationale and design from the outset. Given their nature, some of those modalities (The Women Advisory Body to the UN Special Envoy for Syria), have survived the test of time due to the international support, their placement as part of the architecture of the Office of the Special Envoy to Syria coupled with consistent funding. Other, similar, modalities were eradicated with waning international interest and resourcing, such as the Women Advisory Committee to the Syrian Opposition. The third case is one where women took control over how to organise. Syrian women political actors came together and intentionally approached feminist donors for support to meet and launch a women's political movement which soon grew to be a feminist movement including Syrian men and women. To date, the movement did not receive international political

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1   The civil society support room of the OSE, the women advisory board to the UNOSE, the women advisory committee to the Syrian opposition, and the EAAS supported Gaziantep platform, to name a few.

support or recognition of its political status. Why support and recognition were sustained for mechanisms hosted in international structures while inconsistent and limited for locally grown ones, remains unanswered.

Furthermore, the challenge of inclusion approaches and modalities in the Syria peace and political processes is attributed to a sense of push for "imposed" consensus by external actors which waters down the diversity of input into those mechanisms and inadvertently distances those involved from the interests and priorities of the broader society. In effect, this undermines the ability of those processes to produce pluralistic peace outcomes.

That said, acknowledging the heterogeneity of experiences based on women's gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic background should not reduce women to identity-based participation but rather aim to create intersectional perspectives and spaces for women's participation. Meaningful inclusion requires an equity perspective through which women's power is enhanced in a responsive manner enabling them to develop their own tools to participate in all issues of interest beyond their assigned identities.

In praise of disobedient women

> "The challenge with women quotas without a transformative approach to institutional governance is that it renders those positions to the 'obedient women' who follow the male lead". Forum participant

'Disobedient women' in this paper, refers to women carving out civic and political engagement spaces of their own within traditional established structures or in separatist bodies. Those thought leaders find themselves at the heart of attacks, slander, and exclusion. Therefore, creating safe spaces is a precursor to producing original outputs in peace and political processes.

Since 2012, there is an increasing sense of shrinking space for non-conforming conflict and peace narratives. A space that is lost to the hegemonic narratives of dominant groups with costly backlash and defamation for those who "deviate". One participant stated:

> "Power holders in all their forms are committing violations against women leaders and women's rights narratives of variable degrees. However, the level of disappointment women inside Syria feel is only matched by their resistance to the daily realities."

Supporting this resistance requires:

1. Identifying the different ways in which women can say No;

2. Breaking the monopoly of participation;

3. Combating the stigma against women who reject the status quo and problematise the performance of their own political side as 'subversive'. Especially in a context where women face stigma simply for seeking a political career or course of action.

Attention should be given to secret, confidential, and off the record work of women, not least those under de facto authorities. This means recognising, resourcing, and enabling the spaces designed by women according to their safety and security needs. This tactic is essential for creating safe civic spaces in closing environments.

Furthermore, an inward-looking exercise of creating spaces to unlearn practices rooted in patriarchal power relations and mainstream political or conflict narratives is also pivotal to women's thought leadership. Such spaces require different access to knowledge, data, and information. Further inquiries are needed as to the following:

1. What are the tools, practices, and mechanisms women currently use to navigate the current systems? To what extent are some of those practices tainted by the patriarchal hangover?

2. What information is inaccessible to women, or what knowledge do women have little access to?

3. Why is this the case? What is needed to change that?

Ultimately, to access women's independent thoughts and thought leadership, we need to focus on the conditions surrounding Syrian women's civic and political activism. Accessing Syrian women's thought leadership ensures that the authentic voices of different women have an impact on shaping pluralistic peace outcomes.

Why do we need to be inclusive?

First and foremost, inclusivity and, in particular the meaningful participation of different women in public life is part and parcel of democracy building. A forum participant raised the gender blindness of democracy-building efforts in Syria, where women's participation in the public space is seen as an 'add on' rather than an essential building block of democracy building, particularly at the local level. In this context, women are often faced with an ultimatum of either having a family or a political career in an environment which demonises political work for women or makes it extremely difficult for women who carry out unpaid care work to participate in crucial political spaces.

Local to National

It was noted that women's participation increases when there is increased pressure from formal and informal political and economic power holders. Women were more represented at the parliamentary level than at local councils' levels even before the uprising and subsequent conflict. Including women in local councils is a feminist necessity due to the proximity of local councils' duties to highly gendered issues, particularly in the private space, such as basic services, civic registration documentation, and land and property deeds.

The current state of local councils is fragmented, challenged by multiple displacements and the hegemony of de facto authorities. According to the forum participants, the operational set-up of local councils is siloed and closed. Each council has their own work rhythm with little coordination between the councils of the same governorate, lack of public meetings, lack of transparency, and interference from de facto authorities which pushes women and civic agendas to the background. With serious reforms, local councils can be a vehicle for bottom-up practices of inclusivity and feminist political action.

Power and inclusion

The gaze on power in the Syrian context, and other contexts for that matter, is still primarily that of the land-owning white male[2]. Therefore, it is not surprising to see how inclusivity is viewed and practised even within civil society and the national, subnational and local political architecture. This entails a view of inclusivity along the lines where the subject of inclusivity is "inferior" and in need of capacity building and awareness raising by the dominant group(s), with little or no reflection on privilege and historical inequalities. Often, the nervous elite who strive to strike an illusionary balance between keeping their fragile positions within male-dominated structures in thin-skinned international settings and sourcing other women for inclusion modalities renders this inclusion to mirroring the system rather than creating genuine access for influence to their peers. Those elite groups inadvertently (or not) serve as gatekeepers.

Here nuancing our understanding of 'access' is pivotal:

1. Access in terms of women's mobility, whether visa regimes or digital setups where physical presence is not possible. Digital setups require attention to women's digital literacy and affordability of digital access infrastructure (internet connection, smart device or laptop, electricity, time adjacent to care roles[3]).

2. Access to information, which by design ensures communication leaves elite groups and reaches women's grassroots groups .

3. The accessibility of language, making information available in Arabic and Kurdish, and ensuring plain language is used about technical issues concerning the public.

4. The accessibility of spaces ensuring women with disability can access venues, and those venues provide child support for single mothers.

2   Robtel Neajai Pailey, De-centring the 'White Gaze' of Development (2019)

3   When women participate from home, they often do so with the added care work, unlike when they participate in the physical space where they are inaccessible for care demands from their families.

A distinct way in which women are using their access is by using the marginal leverage of access they have in refugee host countries in Europe and North America to put their advocacy messages about Syria forward. Driven by a conviction in the influence of collective work, they also connect policymakers and donors to women's political groups and women's rights organisations.

Further to this, discussions about inclusivity in the forum focused on the responsibility of dominant groups, including within women groups, to expose and make knowledge about social, political, and economic rights accessible to women in the larger community where women have competing survival priorities, and little time to reflect upon their rights or seek them. Making such knowledge accessible catalyses women's ability to form a critical will to demand and exercise their rights. Such efforts addressing inequalities in a transformative moment are feminist political acts in essence.

The inward-looking question of inclusion necessitates a profound reflection on who is included, how women are included within movements, and who is left out. These are questions we need to answer both as outside and inside actors.

The trouble of legitimacy

The concept of legitimacy is a heterogenous and highly contextual one. Power holders often dictate the narrative about what is legitimate and what is not in repressive contexts. They frequently use the term 'against' women's political participation, claiming that women lack legitimacy in the political arena. Creating a shared understanding of 'legitimacy' expressions in the Syrian context, what is perceived as positive and negative legitimacy, and where various actors derive legitimacy from is a form of understanding those manifestations of power. It is also an invitation to develop a feminist narrative of political legitimacy and claim it in this context.

Women derive their legitimacy in the Syrian context primarily from the following:

1. The rightfulness of demands.

2. Responding to needs.

3. International frameworks and conventions.

4. The result of local democratic elections in small committees or local councils.[4]

5. Societal backing .

6. Grassroots backing and enjoying a popular base.

Discussions revealed a steady trend of receding societal backing and popular base for Syrian women due to the closing democratic civic space, intimidation and hegemony of narratives propagated by de facto authorities against women's participation in the public sphere and women's rights writ large.

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4   The reference to local councils is time sensitive and primarily refers to the first five years of their formation

Discussions highlighted the utilitarian claims of legitimacy where Syrian women are invited in a tokenistic way to legitimise processes or groups, with no real leverage or operating space for women. This goes to track 1, 1.5 level, where women are either depoliticised or pushed to form a superficial consensus. Similar dynamics apply to women in local political formations where women are expected to echo rather than shape the voice of the groups they belong to. There is a general sense of an invisible ceiling above what women can or cannot say, and those who don't comply are excluded.

The international acceptance of and silence toward de facto authority or power holders bestowed legitimacy gives primacy to this form over other nonviolent legitimate groups and overlooks accountability. There is a recognition of a deficit in the local accountability architecture, which is limited mainly to social accountability measures. Holding the space for failures while ensuring a commitment to act differently can be an engaging method to address political actors' reluctance to scrutiny and fear of being "cancelled". Accountability, in this sense, must move from words to actions and from vertical to horizontal accountability on the joint commitments to women's meaningful participation in peace and political processes in Syria.

Therefore, the following measures are proposed to ensure legitimacy is neither coerced nor a one-off endorsement:

1. Encouraging political actors and bodies to develop effective monitoring and evaluation practices.

2. Ensuring local and international political actors and bodies have consistent feedback loops with their constituencies and rights holders.

3. Resourcing and supporting rethinking exercises of the local accountability architecture and acting upon their outcomes.

Radical Reform

After a decade of top-down international experiments in Syria, it is time to listen with the intention to change and act based on tactical and strategic feminist visions developed 'by Syrians for Syrians'.

Ten years call for a pause to rethink and reform the national and international political bodies involved in Syria's peace and political processes and recognise the bodies and groups systematically excluded by substitutability. This exclusion has considerably affected Syrian women's political organising. It is therefore urgently needed to recognise and acknowledge the faces of Syrian women's political organising.

The forum participants engaged in a reimagining exercise which dealt with inquiries about building, making and sustaining feminist peace in Syria. This section reflects the ingredients proposed for radical reforms as envisaged by Syrian women participating in the forum.

First and foremost, this approach requires a long-term commitment and inbuilt sustainability safeguards. Transformative processes require long-term commitments with gradual progression and a deep understanding from the donor community that each stage has its requirements, blockages, and risks. More courage is required on the donor community side to share risks genuinely, resist short timelines, and partner in detangling blockages.

This vision should be from Syrians for Syrians, piloted in such a way that builds on good practices and lessons learned while ensuring space for innovation.

General principles of radical reform:

1. Participatory, pluralistic, and horizontal opens spaces for co-creation.

2. Starts and springs from the grassroots and responds to locally grown solutions.

3. Transparent.

4. Includes accountability bodies and oversight mechanisms.

5. Proposes tactical and strategic solutions to identified problems. The grassroots offer legitimacy and a broader buy-in for those solutions.

6. Flexible and reflective.

7. Contextual relevant.

8. Builds on previous experiences and learns from them.

Issues of priority and mechanisms for radical reform

• Disarmament and the control of small arms proliferation.

• Identifying and showing courage in addressing controversial topics.

• Acknowledging challenges, the roots of which precede 2011.

• Better exploited tech and virtual spaces beyond communication, particularly in data-related work and enhancing women's digital empowerment.

Target actors:

• Religious institutions.

• Youth, especially those who grew up post-2011.

• International community: to interact and put the Syrian issues back under the spotlight.

Vision Narrative

This vision starts with reforming the political structures produced over the past ten years by ensuring the independence of national institutions and building partnerships with people who enjoy credibility and trust within those institutions.

Simultaneously, benefiting from the conflict fatigue, efforts to recreate collective values and "national identity" should commence through building grassroots-level bridges across the various localities. Those collective values should be developed in such a way that is hard to deny by any actor, irrespective of their ideological or political standing.

This requires:

1. Recognising and resourcing the broad spectrum of civil society beyond NGOs, such as grassroots movements, local initiatives, unions and syndicates and reaching women in all the spaces in which they organise, including and beyond women's rights organisations, is paramount to getting a networked critical mass of women across society.

2. Creating dialogue spaces with meaningful inclusion which ensures the participation of all stakeholders in each area to "elect" a representative body.

3. Building issue-based spaces where people can meet from various walks.

4. Practising democratic values without falling into labels, building on effective local practices.

To guarantee women's meaningful participation, political spaces should be rehabilitated from a gender-responsive perspective, whereby those spaces are fit for women in how they respond to power disparity and dominant groups' conformist push by reflecting women's visions and experiences. This further requires creating spaces for specialised and expert women according to issues of expertise and linking those spaces to the relevant institutions and the general public.

Recognising the intertwined nature of struggles, whereby the absence of senior feminist women from international spaces related to Syria reflects on Syrian women's ability to access those spaces. This calls for moving beyond the headcount of women in the international arena to promote feminist approaches to peacemaking.

The above ingredients for radical reform are a conversation starter and an invitation to expand the reimagining spaces for Syrian women to develop their authentic political thought leadership and power.

Forward looking recommendations

From inclusion to influence

The donor community and actors in charge of process design must recognise that women's meaningful participation goes beyond inclusion which often is reduced to access and presence, with little to no influence. Two prerequisites to exercise influence are: a conducive environment (the design of and conduct in spaces in which women are included) and unlocking the agency of diverse women by recognising and bridging the intersecting disparities in access to information, language (including technical language), policy and decision-making know-how. This further requires resourcing 'reimagining andco-creation spaces' for women to conceptualise their unique visions on all issues of importance in spaces where dominant powerholders' worldviews do not prescribe the narratives.

Digital disparity

There is a growing focus on digital means for peacebuilding primarily directed at international organisations. Direct resources should be made available to local (and women) civil society organisations for the 'hardware' and infrastructure of digital peacebuilding tools as well as the 'software' and specialised expertise to build tech and digital literacy with a focus on the gendered aspects of cyber security and recognising the disparity in digital access between men and women. This includes taking digital peacebuilding beyond communication platforms to the use of data and AI in sampling the opinions of large segments of society.

Cross-Regional Solidarity with local dividends

The donor community need to understand and resource solidarity and knowledge exchange efforts in a continuum. This is crucial for resourcing transboundary movement building. The donor community inadvertently creates silos among women's struggle when there is minimal funding available to feminist actors to initiate regional co-creation and reimagining spaces on issues of joint priority, particularly concerning feminist political action in peace processes. Exposing the common regional challenges to women's political participation in formal processes can have national and local dividends.

Courage and women's political thought leadership

Member states and multilateral actors should exercise courage in introducing radical gender-responsive reforms to international peace and political institutions and spaces and dare to challenge conventional notions of inclusion and women's participation, where women enter pre-designed spaces. More importantly, there is a need to prioritise, resource, and acknowledge Syrian women's political thought leadership by eliminating structural barriers faced by Syrian women nationally and internationally.

Concluding Remarks

The mushrooming of including modalities of various engagement lengths and resourcing appetite has yet to work. This has largely restricted women to non-binding advisory functions and cemented their participation on the margins of Syria's peace and political processes.

Over the past decade, Syrian women protested the reduction of their roles in peace and political processes to depoliticised peace tokens. A protest that does not come from a rejection of peace but instead rejects the peace that is devoid of justice. It is an expression of their struggle to claim their political agency in national and international political and peacemaking spaces reluctant to listen to women's political visions.

Narratives matter, spoken and visual narratives within international and national bodies. A special envoy of one of the countries represented in the Intra-Syrian Peace Talks once said[5]: "To be honest, we had minimal credibility going to the Syrian representatives lecturing them about women's inclusion when the entire envoys delegation except for one were men." The absence of female envoys also constituted a narrative to local actors about international commitments to women's representation in high-level political positions.

Furthermore, conceptual narratives should move from the Global North to those most affected by conflict to develop and shape their and Global North's understanding of technical and conceptual terms we use with high levels of assumptions of what they entail and how they are broadly understood. (Re)constructing the meaning of terminology such as 'legitimacy, accountability, justice, and sustainability to name a few' in a

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5   With permission to use the anonymous quote from its owner.

gender and peace-responsive manner should be a local effort which can nuance our traditional understanding and even contest it.

Today, we need moral courage to acknowledge what has not worked in the efforts to meaningfully include Syrian women in the peace process and political bodies representing the various conflict blocs. Since 2012, a dozen of mediation and negotiation formats have been attempted, while only one approach to inclusion with different iterations was implemented: a periphery inclusion of homogenised groups to a central process between power holders.

It is time we also recognise the urgency for international and national feminist political actions. Those actions create patronage-free and collaborative spaces, which are at the heart of producing pluralistic peace outcomes. In fact, it was Sweden's feminist foreign policy together with other feminist donors who resourced to the birth of the Syrian Women's Political Movement. Consistent engagement and facilitation of 'airtime' for issues of priority to building feminist peace in Syria should therefore be at the top of the peace agenda.

The above requires patience, unlearning, and contextually relevant and consistent resourcing. Many participants shared the woes of funding policies and agendas which render their struggles devoid of transformative ambitions, reinforce de facto authorities and put a cap on their level of aspiration. Such funding tendencies should be identified, halted, and replaced with the body of practice in feminist resourcing developed by feminist organisations across the globe.

Finally, this paper is an invitation for radical courage extended to all actors involved in the international and national peace and political architecture for Syria to dare to face what we do not know. To dare to facilitate and resource open-ended spaces for women's political thought leadership, to dare to pause, reflect, and co-create, and above all, to listen greatly to Syrian women's feminist political wisdom.