Building Peace based on Ownership of Women and Youth:
Understanding and Documenting Local Experiences in Libya

Background

The protracted conflict in Libya has significantly hindered the advancement of women and youth in peacebuilding efforts. The Women Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth Peace and Security (YPS) agendas continue to face marginalization and barriers to sustainable peace and post-conflict reconstruction because they are not sufficiently mainstreamed. Despite the existence of a constitutional quota designed to represent women in parliament according to the thirteenth constitutional amendment and the existence of a quota for women's representation of 30% of leadership positions in the government according to the roadmap for the preliminary phase of the comprehensive solution, there are no guarantees to protect them from retaliation as the lack of Security Sector Reform (SSR) further impairs meaningful youth, especially young women's engagement in political conversation.

The importance of youth involvement is also underappreciated, as numerous studies on peacebuilding in Libya express critical concern about the lack of data, including sex-and age-disaggregated data on conflict and violence, among other categories, provide a partial picture of the struggles that Libyan women and youth face. However, their participation was tokenistic and their ability to contend in decision-making processes was not taken into consideration.

Based on the review of the literature and the consultations with the Libya Coalition on YPS, there are several critical challenges to documenting the experiences of young women across Libya:

- Local women peacebuilders (especially, young women) are engaged in decision-making only to a limited extent;

- Local women peacebuilders do not have the capacity and resources to meaningfully and systematically collect data to inform peacebuilding and conflict prevention actions;

- Local women peacebuilders do not have enough awareness of legal and policy frameworks that they can engage with to advance their own peace and security;

- Local women peacebuilders do not find the current peacebuilding efforts to be reflective or embody their experiences;

- Local women peacebuilders no longer see the value in engaging in political life and decision-making.

Purpose and Objectives

To bridge this chasm, together, the UN Women Libya and Tunisia Office and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and GPPAC MENA (MENAPPAC) Secretariat have conducted a survey with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the extent to which the experiences of local peacebuilders (of all ages, sex, and social class) are known, documented, and understood by policymakers. Based on general findings, the comparative takeaways for young women can be drawn.

Through the data collected, this paper documents the lived experiences of Libyans within peacebuilding processes and activities, while also consulting them on their perspectives, challenges, and ideas for ways to enhance their inclusion and leadership moving forward.

Methodology

A survey consisting of a total of twenty (20) questions was designed that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey was designed in Arabic, and the questions were carefully tailored to the target audience during the translation process. To complement the survey, a closed soft launch event (Experts Roundtable) was convened in Tripoli by UN Women Libya and GPPAC/MENAPPAC. This event involved relevant UN entities from the UNCT Libya, along with national experts and activists from women-led and youth-led organizations working on peacebuilding in Libya, as well as academics and researchers.

Limitations

This paper is based on the data collected in 2021 and the analysis done in 2022, however, the issues, challenges, and key findings are still relevant in 2024.

Data Collection, Distribution and Analysis

In order to adequately measure the level of documentation of local experiences, the Libyan Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security distributed the survey both online through Google Forms, and in print during the community meetings, through its wide network of over 180 members. The data was collected between August and October 2021, and the analysis was in 2022.

For the analysis phase, the data was then aggregated and transferred into Google Sheets, where statistical averages, frequencies, patterns, and correlations were drawn out for all participants, as well as disaggregated by sex and age group. Additionally, qualitative data collected through the open-ended questions was summarized and coded based on the predetermined themes of the survey and analyzed by a couple of independent consultants.

Key Findings

1. Documenting Participants' Lived Experiences

The survey included 160 participants (62.5% women, 37.5% men), representing various age groups, regions, and including persons with disabilities. Key findings include high interest in peacebuilding, with notable participation in INGO and local programs. However, many participants are unsure how to engage directly. To meaningfully understand and triangulate the spaces and mechanisms through which they are able to participate in peace-building processes, participants were asked to select which actors most enable or facilitate their engagement. Key enablers identified by the research team and ranked by participants as for the level of engagements were UN agencies, INGOs, local coalitions, and government entities, though comfort levels varied significantly.

There was no significant difference between enablers for men and women respondents, and overall were ranked the same. Furthermore, peacebuilders appear to have higher levels of participation through local civil society, INGOs, and UN actors, whereas government and security forces consistently rank the lowest in terms of comfort levels across all participants, including men, women, and age groups.

a) Sex and Age Disaggregation

The data revealed that women and youth face unique challenges in peacebuilding. Women, particularly young women, reported feeling excluded from formal peace processes, often due to cultural norms and lack of support from their community. In addition, the travel restrictions imposed on women and girls - their travel alone faced administrative restrictions for a while and is still viewed as culturally unacceptable. Conversely, young men cited economic instability and political exclusion as primary barriers.

b) Geographical Differences

Participants from different areas reported varied experiences. Those from urban areas had more access to peacebuilding initiatives compared to their rural counterparts, who often faced logistical challenges such as transportation and internet access. Internal conflict dynamics also influenced participation levels, with high-conflict areas reporting lower engagement due to safety concerns.

2. Key Factors Impacting Participation

Participants identified several barriers to participation, including insufficient resources and support, where males reported having adequate resources at almost double the rate of their female counterparts in the 18-25 and 26-35 age groups. Economic and political challenges were also presented as important areas that influence participation, as a young female participant shared her view.

"Participation in decision-making requires giving your political views clearly while providing the appropriate solution to what you see as wrong. Yet with the lack of security, you are threatened by expressing a different opinion to those who hold power (militias). By doing this, you expose yourself and your family to dangers."

Additionally, participants provided explanations to the accessibility issues they face, including Covid-19 and its economic and health impacts, which was reported by 51% of all participants as a major barrier - and relatively more so for women than men. Moreover, the ongoing political divisions and conflict mean that the security situation impacts economic factors that may correlate to accessing electricity, internet, and transportation. Social and cultural norms also actively affect accessibility in terms of economic resources and the ability to move and travel.

a) Resources and Support

Many respondents highlighted the lack of financial and material resources as a significant barrier. Limited funding for local NGOs, inadequate training opportunities, and scarcity of safe spaces for dialogue were commonly mentioned. Enhancing resource allocation and support for local initiatives was a recurring recommendation.

b) Legal and Political Challenges

Legal barriers, such as restrictive laws on assembly and association, hindered effective participation. Political instability and a lack of trust in governmental institutions further exacerbated these challenges. Participants called for legal reforms and greater political inclusion to facilitate more meaningful engagement in peacebuilding efforts.

c) Social and Cultural Barriers

Social norms and societal standards frequently prevent women and young people from actively participating in peace processes. Traditional roles and a lack of familial support were significant obstacles for women. Youth, on the other hand, faced skepticism regarding their capabilities and contributions. Initiatives aimed at changing societal perceptions and promoting inclusivity were deemed essential.

Key Recommendations

The following key recommendations emerge from the findings, with a focus on enhancing documentation, visibility and inclusion, to fortify the engagement of women and youth in peace processes in Libya:

1. Strengthen Institutional Support
- Increase funding and resources for local ownership peacebuilding initiatives.
- Provide training and capacity-building programs tailored to women and youth.

2. Legal and Policy Reforms
- Advocate for legal reforms that promote inclusivity and protect the rights of women and youth.
- Implement policies that ensure equal representation in decision-making processes.

3. Enhance Accessibility
- Improve infrastructure to ensure reliable access to electricity and internet, particularly in rural areas.
- Create safe spaces for dialogue and collaboration.

4. Promote Social Change
- Launch sensitization campaigns to challenge traditional norms and highlight the significant roles that women and young people can play in promoting peacebuilding.
- Engage community leaders in advocating for more peaceful and inclusive society.

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5. Foster Intra-Country Collaboration
- Encourage partnerships between urban and rural peacebuilding initiatives to share resources and best practices.
- Facilitate cross-city dialogues to address common challenges and build a unified approach to peacebuilding.

Roundtable Recommendations

The paper was discussed with several local youths and women working on peacebuilding to verify the data and relevance of the challenges and recommendations of the survey in May 2024. The roundtable discussion, hosted by UN Women in partnership with GPPAC, reaffirmed the data sample, and discussed new and persisting challenges, in addition to highlighting new solutions. Below are some of their recommendations:

-Youth Engagement: Launch campaigns through grassroots organizations and UN channels to enhance youth involvement in peacebuilding and disarmament efforts in Libya.

-Localization of Efforts: Use Arabic as the official language for outreach and ensure participation is inclusive of individuals from various cities, not just the major ones.

-Formal Documentation: Document and publicize successful examples of women's roles in peacebuilding to ensure their inclusion in future initiatives.

-Collaboration with Institutes: Partner with the Institute for Economy and Peace, leveraging its credibility and established relationships to bolster peacebuilding efforts.

-Government Roles: Open discussions to clarify and enhance the government's role in peacebuilding, including efforts by local affairs offices within municipalities.

-Definition of Peace: Work towards a local understanding of peace that goes beyond the mere absence of violence, promoting a positive peace concept.

-Research Improvements: Adjust the age range of survey participants in future research to enhance the accuracy and relevance of findings.

-Cultural Advocacy: Advocate for the critical role of women in local culture and enhance their access to peacebuilding processes.

-Building National Relationships: Foster relationships with national institutions through women and youth to make peace efforts more impactful.

-Utilization of Resources: Leverage publications by the National Economic Social Development Board on women and youth to inform and guide peacebuilding strategies.

UN Women Libya will continue to partner with local CSOs, academic institutions, international partners, government agencies, and most importantly with the youth to expand their knowledge and support their participation in the socio-economic and political spaces in Libya.