



BRIEFING PAPER

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL PEACE PROCESSES IN ETHIOPIA

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Women in Ethiopia face a variety of political, security, economic and socio-cultural barriers. As is the case elsewhere, in Ethiopia violent conflict tends to result in women suffering disproportionate victimization and human rights violations. This underlines the importance of peace when it comes to ensuring the safety—and beyond that realizing the rights—of women and girls. At the same time, [the meaningful participation of women is vital](#) to ensuring the sustainability and enduring legitimacy of peace processes. Currently, however, women's contributions to peace-making is woefully undervalued, despite the fact that they have repeatedly proven to be fully [capable peacemakers at various levels](#). Using the examples of Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission (NDC), and the peace processes in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, this paper demonstrates how the inclusion (or otherwise) of women in these two process has had a profound impact on the outcomes seen thus far.

THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

In 2018, Ethiopia was rocked by a series of mass anti-government protests, with large sections of the public demanding meaningful political change and representation. The protests ultimately led to calls for armed groups to lay down their weapons and pursue peaceful political engagement, as well as the resolution of various longstanding grievances that continued to provoke violence. Towards this end, high-profile regional- and national-level peace and reconciliation efforts were launched.

The resultant 2018 national reform process raised hopes of nationwide 'reconciliation and forgiveness'. In the absence of sound mechanisms for settling political differences, however, the process soon saw increasing politicization across both these spaces. Many began to question the authenticity of the proposed reforms, especially considering their perceived failure to uphold the inherent rights of all citizens (especially women), and amidst the wide-ranging human rights violations that continued to be perpetrated across the country.¹

These shortcomings gave momentum to civil society organization (CSO)-led calls for a national dialogue to accompany the reform process.² In 2019, *Destiny Ethiopia* introduced a CSO-led national dialogue initiative that aimed to bring together antagonistic political and non-political actors, promoting a culture

1 Ryan Lenora Brown, 'Autocrats' push for women in government: Window dressing, or real change?', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 5 February 2019, www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2019/0205/Autocrats-push-for-women-in-government-Win-dow-dressing-or-real-change; Andinet Adinew Tesfaye and Endalkachew Abera Mekuriya, 'Conditions of Human Rights in Ethiopia in the Aftermath of Political Reform', *North Western Journal of Human Rights*, 19/1 (2020): 31–34.

2 Tegbaru Yared, 'Ethiopia's national dialogue: Reconciling competing approaches', Institute for Security Studies, 12–13, 2022.

of dialogue in a political context where violence is often resorted to in pursuit of particular agendas. As part of this, a ‘multi-criteria assessment’ was conducted to determine who should participate in the process, leading to the formation of the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND-Ethiopia) in October 2020.³ MIND-Ethiopia proceeded to facilitate a national consultative forum that ensured the participation of local women-led organizations by treating them as a distinct constituency. In 2021, MIND-Ethiopia’s initiative was overtaken by the NDC and in February 2022 the proclamation establishing the NDC was approved by the House of People’s Representatives with 11 commissioners appointed to lead the national dialogue process.⁴

While this could be seen as a positive move from the perspective of consolidating peace efforts under a duly mandated institution, it was regarded by some as over-encroachment by the political sphere, riding roughshod over what was turning out to be a gender-sensitive, research- and community-based peace process.⁵

Women and the NDC: A mixed bag

While the NDC has enjoyed some successes in terms of gender inclusion, it has also been subject to criticism. On the positive side, the principle of inclusion attested to in the NDC proclamation has been proactively taken up by the commissioners: women are not only recognized as a distinct constituency (among nine others) but have been granted a minimum 20 per cent quota in all other constituencies. Alongside this, efforts have been made by the Joint Council for Women Political Party Members to design a workable sub-national mechanism enabling the inclusion of women across political lines. The NDC has also worked with the Berghof Foundation to facilitate capacity-building among high-level female executives (in the hope of such work cascading down to grassroots levels) and is receiving relevant technical support from the *MIND-Ethiopia* initiative.

However, criticisms have been made regarding the lack of synchronization between the national peace process and corresponding sub-national processes, particularly concerning enforcement of the inclusion principle and politicization of the quota system in participant selection. In the latter case, it has been argued that the NDC’s sub-national public engagement strategies are inhibiting localized processes from gaining legitimacy.⁶ These shortcomings stem partly from the fact that the women’s inclusion formula was introduced without any concerted attempt to tackle the socio-cultural and systemic barriers to women’s participation prevalent at sub-national levels. Moreover, informants indicated that in most cases women had been selected primarily on the basis of their political affiliation to the ruling party, rather than on what they could usefully contribute to the role or the wider peace process. At the same time, many women who could have meaningfully contributed remain largely unaware of the initiative, particularly in rural areas. Thus, the NDC-led process has resulted in sub-national participation becoming a competitive process between opposing political parties (thereby shifting the focus from local communities), while excluding women capable of contributing to local systems that could foster peace and human rights.

As the above implies, a lack of clarity over peace plans made at a national level and their subsequent enforcement at a sub-national level can have profound, often unforeseen implications for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the overall process. In this case, politicization over the type and number of

3 The consortium included the Joint Council of Political Parties, the Ministry of Peace, Destiny, and other ‘like-minded CSOs’, such as Justice for All, Ethiopians for Inclusive Dialogue, Initiative for Change, and *Ye’hasab Mead*.

4 ‘A Proclamation to Establish the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission’, Proclamation No. 1265/2021, *Federal Negarit Gazette*, 2 January 2022. Eleven principles were set down to guide the NDC’s work, with ‘inclusivity’ constituting the first of these.

5 Interview with *Destiny Ethiopia* representative, 17 July 2023.

6 Interview with Joint Council for Women Political Party Members representative, 24 July 2023.

participants, especially at a sub-national level, poses a formidable barrier to the NDC-led process being regarded as genuinely national in terms of engagement. It also calls into question the wisdom and practicality of pursuing a rigid top-down framework over a more integrated, collaborative, and localized approach, especially when it comes to nurturing environments conducive to the meaningful participation of women and other marginalized sections of society.

PEACEMAKING IN BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ

Ethiopia's Benishangul Gumuz region has suffered from an interlinked collection of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies over more than a decade. This has resulted in grave human rights violations taking place against a complex backdrop of competing state and non-state actors, interests, and positions. In line with the national context, the post-2018 period has seen heightened tensions in the region, leading to numerous killings, destruction of property and restrictions on freedom of movement.⁷ As such, alongside the launch of the national dialogue process, 2021/2022 saw concerted efforts to address the conflicts in the region. Central to this have been attempts to marry traditional peace-making endeavours with formal intra-regional dialogue.⁸ These formal efforts ultimately took shape as a series of peace deals agreed between the regional government and different armed groups operating in the region.⁹ Despite a relative reduction in conflict intensity, however, the root causes of violence in the region were not adequately addressed, leading to persistent clashes and human rights violations.¹⁰ All this has been to the detriment of local residents, especially women and girls.¹¹

Throughout, the meaningful participation of women has, due to socio-cultural reasons, largely been restricted to the traditional sphere (as community influencers). By contrast, when it comes to formal efforts, their political engagement has often involved little more than symbolic representation, lacking the genuine inclusion a sustainable peace process requires. As such, the region's women face a double whammy of exclusion: not only are they excluded from participating in formal processes, which contributes to the fragility of the deals struck, but they are persistent victims of the conflict-led human rights violations that are the consequence of this fragility. Moreover, even in the traditional peace-making sphere, the contributions made by the region's women have for the most part gone unrecognized. This situation of women's engagement in formal peace processes being restricted to symbolic representation is reflective of the obstacles outlined in the national NDC-led process. Unless a clear sub-national process is established that takes full account of localized socio-cultural contexts, ensures

7 Fekadu Adugna and Ketema Debale, 'Conflict and displacement in Ethiopia: the case of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State and Konso Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region', EU Trust Fund for Africa (Horn of Africa Window) Research and Evidence Facility, January 2023, 24–25. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/files/2023/01/conflict-and-displacement-in-ethiopia.pdf>; Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 'Metekel Conflict'. Accessed 26 July 2023, <https://epo.acleddata.com/metekel-conflict/>.

8 Fraol Bersissa, 'Analysis: Trials at peace in violence-ravaged Metekel', *Addis Standard*, 12 August 2022. Accessed 19 July 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-trials-at-peace-in-the-violence-ravaged-metekel/>.

9 'News: Benishangul Gumuz regional govt, rebel group sign peace agreement', *Addis Standard*, 19 October 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-benishangul-gumuz-regional-govt-rebel-group-sign-peace-agreement/>; 'News: Benishangul Gumuz region signs peace agreement with second rebel group, deal signed in Sudan', *Addis Standard*, 12 December 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-benishangul-gumuz-region-signs-peace-agreement-with-second-rebel-group-deal-signed-in-sudan/>.

10 ACAPS, 'Ethiopia: Humanitarian situation in Guba woreda, Benishangul Gumuz', Thematic Report, 30 June 2023, 2. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/acaps-thematic-report-ethiopia-humanitarian-situation-guba-woreda-benishangul-gumuz-30-june-2023#:~:text=Humanitarian%20presence%20and%20response%20capacity,of%20restrictions%20in%20the%20woreda.>

11 In July 2023, Ethiopian Human Rights Council reported that amongst 469,609 people displaced within the region, 77,975 are children under five years old, while 20,135 are lactating or pregnant women. See: Ethiopian Human Rights Council, 'Attacks by armed groups must be stopped' [translated from Amharic], Urgent Press Release, 12 July 2023.

the full inclusion of women and other marginalized groups, and avoids over-encroachment by the political sphere, then the continued exclusion of Benishangul Gumuz's women—and, by extension, women across the country—is inevitable. This reduces the likelihood of long-lasting peace deals being agreed.

CONCLUSION

The case studies touched on in this brief demonstrate that the inclusion of women—along with other marginalized groups—is a prerequisite for sustainable intra-state peace processes in Ethiopia. Although the national, NDC-led peace process has made limited progress in certain areas, further efforts are needed to ensure women's meaningful participation at all levels. As events in Benishangul Gumuz region demonstrate, women's participation is often relegated to informal peace processes, with capable individuals overlooked in favour of men who are thought to be best suited to participation in formal processes.

All of this calls for an inclusion-oriented re-design of conflict-to-peace transformation processes, particularly at a sub-national level. Such processes and the social spaces they inhabit should, as far as is possible, be de-politicized and directed towards sustaining inclusive environments. This will require evidence-based, community-centred advocacy strategies that draw on inter- as well as intra-sector coordination to solicit trust, gain public legitimacy and thus achieve successful strategic outcomes. As part of this, women from all walks of life should be supported in mobilization efforts aimed at challenging the socio-cultural norms preventing them from staking a claim as capable peacemakers in formal processes.



ABOUT THE PRF

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