

# TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT: INCREASING WOMEN'S VOICES IN PEACE TALKS



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# Training Needs Assessment: Increasing Women's Voices in Peace Talks

How can capacity building increase the effectiveness of women's groups in peace talks?<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade, the Clingendael Institute has trained women's groups that are active in peace processes, with a goal to increase their effectiveness in negotiation and mediation. Though our training has consistently received positive evaluations, at times we have observed that the long-term impact of these women's groups is limited or does not match the ambitions set out by the group. This training needs assessment therefore began with the notion that women's voices in peace talks *should* and, more importantly, *can* have more impact. This impression is not just held by us, but has since been confirmed by many of the partner organizations contacted for this analysis.

In order to assess *how* the impact of women's groups might be increased, we need to learn more about the factors that hinder (or contribute to) their impact. However, evaluation data that measures the impact of women's initiatives in peace processes is scarce. Such evaluations are often qualitative and descriptive in nature, and do not systematically measure – or set targets to measure – impact. Due to this lack of evaluation data, the pertinence of this needs assessment was further confirmed to us. Hence, through this needs assessment, we aim to reach a greater understanding of the factors that cause the difference between women's groups' ambitions and their achievements on the ground, and explore innovative ways to close this gap.

In much of the available literature, as well as in the many interviews we held with experts, explanations for this difference rightfully tend to focus on *external* factors that stand in the way of women's groups' optimal effectiveness. Examples include a lack of knowledge among high-level mediators on the value of bringing in women, a lack of political willingness to include women, and a lack of funding to support women's representation. Although these are very valid points, and external factors should indeed be addressed to ensure women's right to participate on the same terms as men, in this needs assessment we aim to emphasize factors that are *internal* to the women's groups. Our reason for doing so is that solely seeking explanations in existing structural problems that are largely beyond our direct sphere of influence – and thereby failing to recognize possible internal factors – could lead us to miss opportunities for making women's initiatives more effective through capacity strengthening measures that *are* within reach.

By no means should this assessment be seen as a criticism of women's engagement thus far, nor are the factors discussed in it exclusively applicable to women. Rather, it is meant to encourage support organizations – including Clingendael Academy – to think creatively about how to address these challenges, and how to provide women with a broader set of tools to overcome the structural barriers they face and effectively engage in peace processes wherever possible.

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The findings presented in this needs assessment are based on Clingendael trainers' extensive experience of working with women's groups, the evaluation results of our training programs, literature research, and two sets of interviews: thirteen interviews with international mediation support officers, and nine interviews with women participating in or supporting initiatives on the ground (in Syria, Yemen, Nigeria, and the Philippines). Preliminary findings were further validated through three focus group discussions with key partners in the field. The feedback and input received during these discussions was incorporated into this final assessment. Ultimately, we have formulated five pressing factors that hinder the effectiveness of women's groups in peace talks:

1. Lack of clear objectives, mandate and strategy
2. Lack of clear selection procedures
3. Framing of issues
4. Formal versus informal influence
5. Internal group dynamics

Many more factors were of course identified, but our interviewees and partners repeatedly highlighted these five factors as key priority areas – where capacity strengthening is most needed. Accounts of each of these factors will be followed by suggestions for capacity strengthening in that respective area. For a complete list of the internal and external factors identified in our assessment, please consult Annex 1.



## 1. Lack of clear objectives, mandate and strategy

While existing literature emphasizes the importance of having a common strategy as a women's group in peace talks, it hardly sheds light on how this plays out in practice. The interviews showed us that women's groups sometimes actually lack a clear objective, mandate or strategy regarding what they wish to achieve. Such women's groups often unite simply on the basis of 'being women'. They are expected to speak with one voice, despite their wide variety of backgrounds and political ideas. This results in very basic, broad mandates such as "*being women's representatives*" or "*women's inclusion in decision-making positions*", which lack specificity and direction when it comes to goals and how they are to be achieved. Without such specificity with regards to what you want to see changed, it is practically impossible to formulate a realistic and executable plan.

In Yemen, for example, many women asked for gender quotas in government. However, it often remained unclear what *type* of quota they want (e.g. reserved seats, gender neutral quotas, candidate quotas, voluntary quotas, etc.), at which *level* (e.g. only at the national level or also at the lower levels of government), in which *branch* (e.g. legislative, executive, judiciary), and *how* it is to be achieved (e.g. constitutionally, or through changing electoral laws, advocacy with political parties, awareness raising, etc.). Hence, although women's groups involved in peace processes can have a strong, common voice about a core issue – such as gender-based violence or women's representation in key decision-making institutions – it seems challenging for them to break this common voice down into specific, achievable goals and actions that are feasible within their specific context. Some groups also tend to concentrate on short-term strategies, but lack a more long-term focus.

*An interviewee about the problem of overly generic objectives: "It's like saying: 'Please stop climate change.' Then decision-makers will be like: 'Yes, we know, thanks.' But what specifically can we do right now to get there?"*

In general, several interviewees noted that it is challenging for women – as it is for any other group – to formulate joint positions or recommendations, and to then transfer them to the negotiating parties and supporting actors. At the same time, other interviewees explained that when women's groups do hold a dialogue session or conduct consultations that generate recommendations, these recommendations are then often simply communicated to the international community, under the assumption that the international community will take them forward. However, it was noted that, after collecting those recommendations, that is where the work truly begins: women need to think strategically about how they can push their recommendations forward and take ownership of the process. Not only within the international community, but also in their communication with the key conflict parties, other political parties, like-minded civil society organizations, and their constituencies. Women's groups therefore need to combine 'insider' tactics – submitting position papers directly to negotiators, for example, and meeting with mediators, negotiators, or technical advisors – with 'outsider' tactics: issuing public reports, lobbying with international actors, conducting media outreach, and so on.

### *What can support organizations do to contribute to a solution?*

Firstly, ample time should be spent on strategic planning. Capacity strengthening in this area can help women to better understand what makes an effective strategy: what policies need to be formulated, who do you need to engage with to reach that goal, and how do you develop long-term relationships of influence? Secondly, in order to be able to identify which actors you can engage with, it is also important to enhance knowledge on political decision-making, policy cycles, and the role and functioning of the international community. Thirdly, women can benefit from training on advocacy and lobbying, specifically through learning how to identify their specific priorities, how to articulate these advocacy priorities in a way that resonates with relevant decision-makers, and how to identify entry-points for engagement. Another way in which capacity strengthening can support this is by creating long-term platforms of interaction. Capacity strengthening should not be a one-off engagement but a long-term investment that brings these women together and enables them to interact constructively on a regular basis.

*Interviewee: "Women need to think more strategically about 'which actors make the decisions that I want to change'."*

At the same time, capacity strengthening support needs to be flexible. Mandates and strategies of women's groups may change as the negotiation process progresses. For instance, informal engagement might become more formalized as it gains traction, causing women's roles and their capacity strengthening needs to shift over time. At the same time, as one of our partners pointed out, some peace talks are convened at lightning speed, meaning women's groups need the capacity to deal with short time frames and adjust their strategy accordingly. In such cases, capacity strengthening support also needs to shift its focus in order to match the dynamics of the negotiations.



## 2. Lack of clear selection procedures

Both existing literature and the interviews emphasized the need for clear and transparent selection procedures, to ensure that the women who are included *are* – and are *perceived to be* – credible and legitimate representatives. While selection is often based on women’s expertise, embeddedness in national and local organizations, and their linkage with constituencies, we also found examples where the selection for participation was conducted without any clear criteria and without making proper assessments. For instance, some interviewees noted that donors tend to sponsor the ‘loudest’ voices – often elite women who live or have lived abroad, speak good English, and are very active on social media – without doing a proper analysis of who these women are and who they are connected to, i.e. who are they representing.

This can lead to tensions between different women’s initiatives, both inside and outside the country in question. Too much engagement of women based outside the country can lead to structures where women inside the country do not feel represented or supported. However, women inside the country are key to the eventual implementation of a peace agreement, because it is they who have connections with civil society and at the community level. Similar dynamics can be observed between women that are seen as elite, or that have a higher status hierarchically, and for instance female youth or women peacebuilders in remote areas.

*Interviewee: “Donors are funding strong women who are not always representative.”*

Tensions can arise between women who are selected to take part in the formal peace process and those who are not. While these two groups should be able to reinforce each other’s work, we see examples of ‘class clashes’ due to a lack of communication and understanding between them (and in some cases even competition). A specific increase in the perceived or genuine lack of representation of some women’s groups occurs when the selection procedures are not consultative or transparent, when no proper assessments were done, or where civil society was not engaged in or even aware of the process.

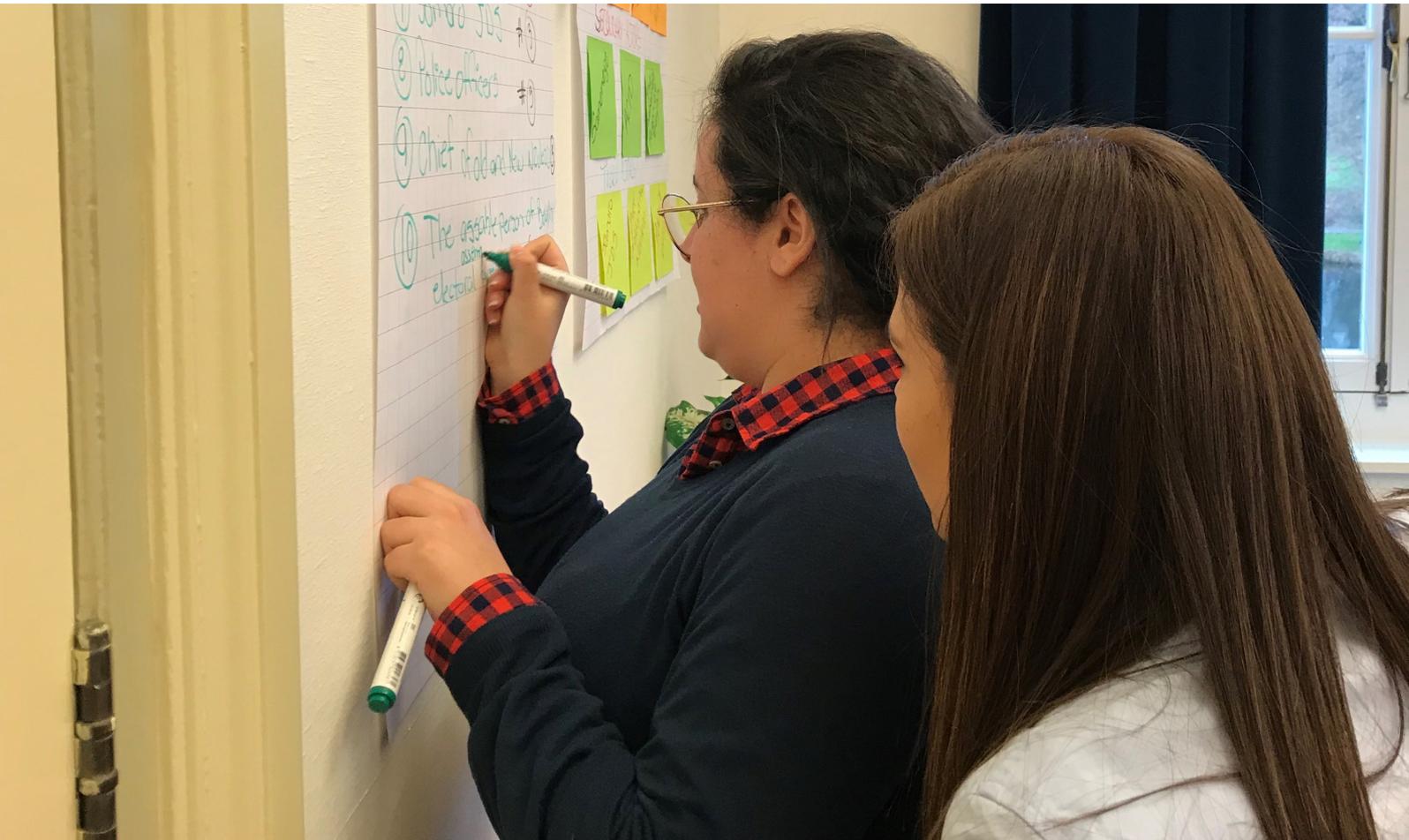
While conducting an ideal selection process takes time – and time is not always available, like in the case of the Syrian Women Advisory Board that had to be established in just two weeks – regular consultations are urgently needed to gain and maintain legitimacy and to create a feedback loop between women ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the formal peace process. Clear communication around the selection process – and concerning the role and functioning of the women’s group – is key, not only to increase legitimacy but also to build and maintain strong relationships with relevant civil society groups and broader constituencies.

### *What could support organizations do to contribute to a solution?*

In several cases, we observed a lack of understanding of how to represent, who to represent, and how to build a base of followers. Moreover, many questions were focused around why certain women were selected, what exactly they are going to do (and not going to do), and how other actors can get in touch with them. Capacity strengthening support can help women to find answers to these questions by offering communication training (including training in crisis communication).

In addition, with the aim of moving beyond the elite status that women's groups often have, capacity strengthening support can focus on how to be a good representative, how to conduct consultations, how to build alliances and coalitions with other civil society actors (e.g. strengthening linkages with track II and III), and how to engage your constituency. Regarding the latter, it is not only key to get a clear idea of who your constituency is, but also to understand how to organize your constituency.

Target groups for this kind of training should not be limited to members of (semi-)official women's groups. Instead, they should include women who form or will form part of their constituencies – and who could use support when it comes to understanding what to expect from a representative, as well as 'how to be a good constituency' – as well as women civil society leaders in remote areas, with a goal to deepen the understanding of wider issues in conflict-affected societies and create a broader participation from all layers of society.



### 3. Framing issues

Several interviewees noted that 'gender issues' are still highly stigmatized. Our case study on the Philippines illustrates this point: as soon as 'women's issues' were put on the table, or when issues were perceived as a 'women's issue', actors resisted to move forward. Surprisingly, this was true to a much lesser degree when the women in the room were addressed by their title or as experts in their fields. Needless to say, there is a clear need to break with existing structures in which women are being denied representation and full, meaningful participation in peace processes. Nevertheless, in order to make women's initiatives more effective when engaging in a peace process and having to deal with existing patriarchal and male-dominated structures, interviewees highlighted that it can help to avoid an overly feminist communication strategy.

*Interviewee: "In the professional setting they started respecting me as a security expert, outside the room they still addressed me as 'Mum'."*

In attempts to make processes more inclusive, a strong focus on 'gender issues' may not help to get actors on board. Key to overcoming these challenges is the way in which the issue is framed; i.e. the language that is used. This is even the case within women's groups themselves, for instance when highly conservative or religious voices clash with more progressive or secular voices. One interviewee mentioned that, in cases where talking about 'women's rights' was problematic, they could talk about 'human rights' instead. Another example comes from a Syrian women's network that started lobbying for the idea that women should be included in the negotiation process, but in doing so spoke mainly about 'civil society' (and women's place within it). In this example, the thought was that civil society's inclusion is a more acceptable idea than the inclusion of women.

At the same time, interviewees and partners also highlighted that it is key to use gender-inclusive language around issues that are not traditionally labeled as 'women's issues'. Women are not present in these spaces solely to advance women's rights, but also to talk about how issues such as ceasefire agreements, security sector reform and agrarian reform impact them. In these discussions, gender is transversal and women ought to be able to weigh in on these issues. Hence, it is of equal importance to avoid using the term 'gender' incorrectly. Gender inclusiveness is often confused with women's representation, though they clearly stand for two very distinct goals.

#### *What could support organizations do to contribute to a solution?*

Capacity strengthening support can focus on strategic communication for women, including effective influencing techniques and the analysis of possible sources of resistance. Simply raising women's self-confidence through training can also strongly contribute to making them more assertive in their communication (and negotiation). What can also be helpful is to strengthen women's capacity to engage in technical issues (e.g. through a better understanding of ceasefire negotiations, or negotiations around security sector reform) and to explore different ways in which gender perspectives can be framed.

## 4. Formal versus informal influence

While existing literature and some interviewees ascribe high importance to the need for inclusive process design, in which women are either directly or indirectly included in the formal peace architecture, the interviews also made it clear that inclusive process design does not always guarantee that these women can participate in a meaningful way.

The Syrian case showed us that while a women advisory board is a relatively weak modality of inclusion, its influence in the Syrian process was not hindered by this indirect modality per se, but instead due to many other factors (e.g. the extent to which a gender lens was applied, disagreement between women regarding a common position, unclear selection process, the wider context). The Philippine case showed how ad hoc inclusion can work rather effectively, as any formal participation had been blocked by decision-makers in this case study. The Yemeni case also highlighted that, although the women advisory group may not (yet) be able to have much direct influence, other related women's groups can in fact – informally – exert a lot of influence on the process.

In other words, though being part of a formal structure provides recognition, it can also form a trap that leads to institutional rigidity. Sometimes the institutional structure itself becomes more important than the substance the women's groups are working on. Hence, some interviewees argued, there are cases where it is better to remain unstructured and attempt to influence the process on a more ad hoc basis, through issue-based coalitions (such as the coalition formed in Colombia).

More generally, people (including donors) tend to focus primarily on the formal talks, while formal negotiations could *never* work without informality. In some cases, optimizing this informal space may even be preferable to the formalizing of such initiatives. Bringing the role of women to a more formal and institutional level is not always possible and also carries risks with it, as it might be seen in and of itself as a challenge to existing power structures.

Of course, despite the fact that informal, ad hoc engagement can be very effective, it must not lead to further stigmatization of women when it comes to their role as important and powerful negotiators. The main conclusions here are that inclusive process design is not a guarantee for meaningful participation, and that both direct and indirect modes of inclusion still require women to make use of informal negotiation tactics and informal diplomacy through personal connections, as opposed to waiting for formal recognition.

*An interviewee about women's value through informal negotiations: "Even though they have a very indirect role, they have been there since the beginning. They know all the official delegates and engage in a lot of informal diplomacy."*

### *What could support organizations do to contribute to a solution?*

Capacity strengthening support could help women's groups to strike a balance between engaging in the formal process and having fallback options when formal participation is not possible or effective. Part of such capacity strengthening should focus on how to connect with different mediation and dialogue initiatives – at national and/or community level – and how to build coalitions. Comparative case studies, illustrating what worked in other contexts and what did not, can be very useful here.

Moreover, the effectiveness of negotiating in the informal sphere is generally underestimated. Capacity strengthening support should focus on how to make optimal use of informal moments, that is, how to engage in informal diplomacy. At the same time, it is important to include how these informal negotiation skills can also be translated into meaningful participation in the formal sphere.

## **5. Internal group dynamics**

Whereas the existing literature hardly mentions anything regarding the internal dynamics of women's groups and how it can form a hindrance to the achievement of their goals, this factor stood out in most of the interviews. Issues to do with internal group dynamics such as competition or discord are often sensitive to articulate, because women are often implicitly expected to speak with a united women's voice. Yet women's groups are diverse by nature. Women – just as men – have different political ideas and opinions, and have strongly varying views on matters that concern them. Importantly, not all women bring a gender lens to their work. Hence, there is understandably strong disagreement amongst the women in several cases, and it is not always easy for them to formulate common positions. In many cases it takes time to find common ground that the majority of women can support, or to identify ways forward and ways to improve cooperation across different fault lines. In some cases the importance of 'bonding' – i.e. exploring each other's positions and interests, coalition-building and trust-building – is marginalized, whereas these continuous processes are key for group harmony.

In cases where it is impossible to reach a consensus on certain issues or to formulate joint positions, we see two possible solutions. First, the women could (re)organize themselves within existing political factions, rather than aiming to form an umbrella group that represents all voices. Within these factions, women can form (more) influential advocacy groups. The female leaders of different factions could then organize an informal dialogue amongst themselves. Second, a comprehensive communication strategy might be adopted, where women's groups focus on understanding diverse positions and presenting different options. While it is recognized that formulating joint positions can increase women's influence, in highly sensitive conflict environments it may be necessary to shift to more comprehensive strategies, in which deepening the understanding of diverse positions and maintaining trust are key.

### *What could support organizations do to contribute to a solution?*

Strengthening women's groups capacity to map out different actors' positions, interests and needs might deepen the understanding of conflicting narratives, allowing for creative thinking about various options rather than solely trying to present one way forward. Moreover, it is vital that capacity strengthening support includes elements of how to build trust among the members of a women's group, and for them to know how to establish trust and maintain relationships with other actors. Capacity strengthening could focus on techniques for trust-building and trust repair, as well as consensus-building skills. In itself, joint participation in capacity strengthening activities can also be a tool to reach this.

## **6. What else could be achieved through capacity strengthening support?**

Though not linked to any of the five key factors identified above, several other lessons could be drawn from our analysis when it comes to improving capacity strengthening support. In any case, support could focus on strengthening the following core competencies as identified by our interviewees and partners:

- Ability to think strategically;
- Ability/willingness to work with actors across conflict or political lines;
- Technical expertise on (a sub-theme of) negotiation processes;
- Ability to execute persistent, high-quality, timely research and advocacy;
- Ability to network and cultivate alliances, both with actors within the formal peace architecture and those on the outside;
- Ability to build coalitions across institutional, geographic, and psychological barriers;
- Ability to adopt transfer strategies to reach key decision-makers;
- Ability to be flexible and innovative, and to adapt strategically to a shifting political context.

In general, the interviewees noted that the quality of training programs provided to women's groups by support organizations varies. We would like to conclude this training needs assessment with some more general solutions that could help to improve capacity strengthening support in the field.

First, a common problem is that Women, Peace, and Security training is often **too generic** and that international support organizations hardly make use of **local/regional expertise**. For example, external experts tend to make too much use of generic PowerPoints to share personal stories and specific case studies, while hardly offering room for interaction and contextualization. The result is an overload of training courses that seem to be more supply-driven than demand-driven, and that lack accountability. Again and again, interviewees emphasized that training should be **practical**, should be focused on **skills** training in combination with knowledge transfer, and should always be **contextualized**. In addition, interviewees highlighted that support organizations should make use of

local/regional expertise, both in terms of bringing different groups or networks together and in terms of sharing relevant experiences and know-how. Through these exchanges, women's groups can learn from the experiences of others and apply the lessons learned to their own situation.

Second, when engaging with mixed groups there needs to be more [active facilitation](#). It is known that men tend to establish their voices more quickly than women. Trainers need to make use of early opportunities during training courses to establish women's voices. Several interviewees spoke about the fact that studies show that the more times you call on a woman in a meeting, the more you establish her credibility. Men then become more attuned to input from women. Trainers should actively weave the conversations, trying when possible to link input from men back to ideas brought in by women. It is equally important to [engage men in gender training](#) and sensitize male actors to the importance of the inclusion of women and their meaningful participation. However, the idea of 'male allies' needs to be unpacked in a way that does not undermine the role of women in these processes. Moreover, it was noted that, while it is important to have [mixed training](#), it is also valuable to make use of [smart sequencing](#). For instance, it might be more effective to first engage a cohort of women only, before engaging mixed groups.

Third, it is key to [strengthen the linkages](#) between women's groups and other track I, II or III actors; for example, by conducting training in which both women's groups at grassroots level and track I actors are represented. Indeed, to increase women's voices we need to look at actors that are not hearing those voices. This also requires training that sensitizes decision-makers, mediation teams, and negotiating delegations to this issue. Strengthening the linkages between the tracks may create opportunities for women to be more exposed to other actors who, at the end of the day, decide who sits at the table. Doing so will take time. Continuous engagement is necessary in order to bring about long-term improvements in this area, as well as [long-term investment from donors](#). Too often, capacity strengthening lacks a long-term perspective, and donor priorities sometimes shift on a yearly basis. In some cases, this also causes women's groups to mistrust the organization offering support. Continuity is key to increasing the impact and follow-through of capacity strengthening efforts. Moreover, in order to increase transparency and accountability in this area, it was highlighted several times that support organizations should improve their coordination and communication on similar efforts. Strengthening the linkages between support organizations could help these efforts [come out of the silos](#) and increase opportunities to evaluate and learn from their impact.

Fourth, training needs to focus on [confidence-building](#) and providing women with a broader set of soft skills for formal *and* informal negotiations, including how to build political capital and how to effectively influence negotiations. Women need these soft skills in order to have the confidence to articulate their policy positions. Training can also deal with [resistance towards women representation](#), for example by being based on a convincing set of arguments, vocabulary and statistics.

# Annex 1: Overview of internal and external factors contributing to the impact gap

The following internal and external factors were identified through our own experience, literature research, and interviews. Clearly, several of these factors are strongly connected and there is not one single factor that can be identified as the most important when it comes to contributing to the impact gap.

INTERNAL FACTORS	EXTERNAL FACTORS / CONTEXT FACTORS
Limited constituency engagement / consultations / community outreach constituencies (if not possible through the women's group, outreach through their own networks could be considered)	Lack of resources (material and financial), insufficient assistance
Lack of coalition-building and/or coordination among women's organizations, as well as between women's groups and other actors (in some cases due to strong competition and self-interested behavior)	Insufficient assistance, guidance or support from external actors / (international) support organizations (lacking support structure for women prior to and during negotiations, as well as during the implementation process)
Difficulty to reach consensus, find common ground, or formulate joint positions due to positional prioritization of issues (need to consider a more comprehensive communication strategy to present options or create understanding for diverse positions)	Highly fragmented and competitive civil society
Lack of or ineffective transfer strategies to allow women's voices to reach the negotiation table and push forward recommendations	Cultural, religious and/or societal norms and perceptions of women (including societal constructs and stereotypes about gender roles)
Difficulty to identify sources of power from which women's groups can draw support and legitimacy (e.g. religious and other leaders, but also civil society)	Security risks that hinder women's groups to come out publicly and voice their positions
Difficulty in mapping out the conflict actors and key decision-makers, understanding their positions, and strategically sequencing their engagement (i.e. who do you need to engage to get the change you want to achieve)	Structural exclusion from pre-negotiations (no early involvement of women in the negotiating process)
Lack of a clear mandate, strategy or road map, or internal disagreement about the mandate, strategy or road map, and the division of tasks	Limited recognition for women's groups' expertise
Lack of or limited informal diplomacy with track I actors (including members of the delegation, the formal mediator, and member states)	Lack of a strong women's movement due to limited civic space / organizing space
Lack of strategic linkages between tracks I, II and III	Legal obstacles / decision-making procedures that disenable women and women's groups' involvement
Ineffective or incomplete advocacy/lobby strategies (e.g. problem-focused vs. options for action, constructive vs. naming and shaming)	Lack of political will and leadership
Lack of preparation to enable effective engagement (also limited understanding of the phases of negotiations and how to engage in each phase)	Patriarchal, male-dominated structures and networks (no conflict parties and mediators that are open to the inclusion of women)
Limited political experience / understanding of how to navigate political decision-making processes and institutions	Limited awareness of SCR 1325 amongst women themselves, decision-makers, armed groups and political parties
Lack of ownership / dependence on international actors to take things forward	Nature of conflict, centralized vs. fragmented; the more actors involved, the easier it seems for women's groups to be influential
Balancing the rigidity of institutionalization/structure and the flexibility of more informal, issue-based coalitions	Lack of needs assessments, gender analysis, competencies mapping, and systematic evaluations by support organizations
Lack of self-confidence and limited tools to confidently articulate policy positions	Variable quality of training, lack of contextualized training and oversupply of generic WPS and 1325 training without practical application; too often, training is focused on knowledge transfer and lacks skills training or practical examples/simulations (e.g. action planning and strategizing)
Lack of outreach/communication about the selection, role and purpose of the women's group; who they are and what they do	Lack of active facilitation by trainers, smart sequencing, and front-loading exercises; trainers also often fail to bring tracks I and II together, unpack the idea of male allies in a way that does not undermine the role of women, or make use of early opportunities to establish a woman's voice
Lack of bonding/trust-building (e.g. within the women's group, between female and male members of the delegation, or between women initiatives and the negotiating parties)	Lack of clear, well-formulated selection criteria and procedures that include gender assessment and competencies mapping
Limited awareness of possible entry points of engagement	International support organizations, donors and mediators setting unrealistic objectives and expectations; in addition, there is a lot of focus on women's need for certain competencies and skills to be part of a peace process, something that is never directed at men
Understanding the different phases of negotiations and how to engage	Donors sponsoring the loudest voices without mapping their networks and competencies (i.e. unrepresentative, elite women)