CORDOBA RESEARCH PAPERS

Mediating the Space: Women and Religion in Morocco

May 2020

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Acknowledgement

1. Introduction

The Constitution of Switzerland declares that the Confederation shall "[…] promote respect for human rights and democracy, the peaceful co-existence of peoples as well as the conservation of natural resources."[1] Within this context, the Human Security Division of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has created a program working on peace promotion with religiously motivated political actors. As part of the Swiss political culture,[2] Switzerland has developed mechanisms to constructively address conflicts between religious communities throughout its history.

Since the uprisings in 2011, the FDFA and its partner, Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI), have worked in several contexts in North Africa and the Middle East to alleviate tensions that had arisen from worldview differences. This engagement is based on the analysis that tensions between so called "Islamists" and "Secularists" are obstacles to inclusive and peaceful societies in the region. In this paper, the simplifying terms "Islamists" and "Secularists"[i] are used with regard to the worldview references used by the actors themselves to describe their political aspirations and demands. This terminology does not point to their religious identity or faith.

Based on that analysis and at the request of local actors, the FDFA and CPI organized and facilitated a dialogue process in Morocco from 2015 to 2017. This project was formulated based on the observation that at the intersection of religion and politics, the status, role and condition of women is an incubator of tensions in society. These tensions have two direct consequences: they represent an obstacle to the advancement of women's status and condition and further hinder the constructive cooperation between actors with different references.

The objectives of the dialogue process were: 1) to bring together actors of different references concerned with women's issues in Morocco in order to reduce the obstacles arising from the polarization between secularists and Islamists in Morocco and 2) to identify and work on concrete initiatives in order to improve the status of women in Morocco.

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[i] Due to the lack of better words the term "secularists" is used to describe those who refer to secular institutional frameworks, such as CEDAW for their political aspirations. This does not refer to their faith, nor to the French process of localization of the religious in the private sphere.

The methodology used was the "Safe Mediation Space" (SMS) with the aim of bringing together people representing influential currents present in Moroccan society for a non-ideological dialogue that would enable them to engage jointly in concrete initiatives for the benefit of addressing women's issues.

The aim of this paper is to present a concrete application of the SMS methodology, as very few concrete cases have been documented so far. As the methodology has been described in the literature, the main focus here is on reflection of the process itself.

The paper[3] is structured into four sections: The first section gives a historical background of the issues at stake. In the second section, a brief overview of the theoretical background of the SMS methodology is presented. Conflicts with religious incompatibilities are provably more difficult to solve than other conflicts and the SMS is one methodology that can help to transform such conflicts. The third section of the paper illustrates a few elements of the conflict analysis, criteria for participation, the definition of the "ground rules", the formulation of the common vision and the "safety lines", negotiated intensively with the interlocutors, as well as the negotiated results of the implementation of the SMS. The fourth section of the paper presents a reflection on the lessons learnt and open questions.

2. Historical background

> *« Rabat, Casablanca…une marche féministe, une contre-marche sexiste, une action, une réaction... Inévitablement, une bataille de chiffres. Inévitablement, une bataille médiatique. Indices d'une bataille politique dans laquelle le bon sens se perd… » Abdessamad Dialmy[4]*

On 12 March 2000, to mark International Women's Day, hundreds of thousands of men and women protested in the streets of the two main cities of Morocco[5]. In Rabat and Casablanca, men and women of all ages showed their support or their opposition to the Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development. The Plan of Action was formulated in the context of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and focused on the empowerment of women in education, health and development among other issues.

Already in the first half of the last century, the Moroccan reformist agenda highlighted the need to strengthen women's role in society. In the 1950s, the first women's political sections were created[6]. In the 1960s, the Mudawana (the personal status code) was instated by the government of Morocco and was described as the "second most important action" of the newly independent government[7]. The codification of the law was meant to be modernist and worked as a strong nationalist symbol. It codified traditional Maliki jurisprudence and defined the regulations of marriage, inheritance or child custody among other issues. After many calls for reform, it was only in the 1990s, when women's rights were linked to human rights, that the call for reform received new impetus.[8] Women's role and rights has proved to be a recurring source of tensions within Moroccan society. The monarchy has intervened repeatedly on this issue, giving the impression that it tries to impose itself as an arbiter between the different positions (relating to its dual role as head of state and Commander of the Faithful). The current laws can therefore be understood as an "imposed consensus", and some might imply that there is no real commitment to implement these laws.

The march in Casablanca, where some 200,000 people participated[9] was organized by two Islamist movements. Men and women marched in separate columns and were essentially protesting against the change of articles within the Mudawana. According to a prominent figure of Al Adl wal Ihsan (an important Moroccan Islamist movement), the purpose of the demonstration was to show that "Moroccan women reject the plans imposed by the West while the Sharia recognizes the rights of Muslim women and protects them"[10].

On the same day, in the capital, the crowds marching in support of the Plan of Action reached similar numbers. Instrumental in the organization of the march were leftist parties and several Human Rights organizations. They too, claimed their religious identity loudly and used the slogan: "we are all Muslims, and we all support the Plan"[11].

These events showed the enormous societal tensions along intra-religious lines over the status and condition of women in Moroccan society. Both marches were held to support Women's rights, but what is understood by "women's rights" was very different for the two crowds.

3. The Methodology

> *"We need to shift our mentality away from mediator as person to mediating as space […] And in that reference what it points toward is that you can have sets of people who connect to different parts but who collaborate, who can find this common space for the benefit of both their particular piece of it and the wider whole […]" John Paul Lederach[12]*

Research has confirmed that conflicts between worldviews are more difficult to solve than other conflicts. Isak Svensson uses quantitative methods within his research on the resolution of conflicts with religious dimensions[13]. He uses the concept of conflicts of religious identity when conflicts between parties are divided along religious lines, and the concept of religious incompatibility when the conflicts are about religious issues and political demands linked to them. Svensson shows how this type of conflict has increased over time and is less likely to end in negotiated settlement compared to other types of conflicts. The Safe Mediation Space can be used as a methodology to transform conflicts of religious incompatibility.

The SMS methodology has been developed since 2004 within the FDFA and with its partners and is based on Jean-Nicolas Bitter's qualitative research[14]. Bitter defines this methodology as a "process of meeting or confrontation of two discourses or two narratives seeking to coordinate their actions [...]."[15] The direct objective of the SMS is to create "safe social spaces where parties can come together to discuss and develop practical joint projects for addressing aspects of the conflict [and this] is an approach of particular relevance to conflicts where parties hold different worldviews."[16] It is a place where the parties can feel safe and secure, particularly in the sense that their worldview will not be threatened or disrespected.

One of the most significant differences between the SMS methodology and the commonly known phase model of mediation[17] is its structure[18]. Whereas the commonly known phase model of mediation is structured along five or six phases, the SMS only uses two of them: the "preparation of the space" and "engagement in the space".

3.1. Preparing the Safe Mediation Space

In the first phase, the SMS is prepared, and the framework is set for the participants to participate safely in the dialogue process. The working hypothesis is tested, and relevant participants are identified.

Participants: Within the SMS, parties or participants of the dialogue are understood as representatives of discourses of their communities and are "guardians, legitimate interpreters and shapers of the discourse of a community"[19]. This should not be confused with their institutional affiliation. The methodology relies on the assumption that having the right participants means first to have credible representatives of the different worldviews in the conflict and second, that they have the (moral) power to navigate within the narratives of their communities and to propose actions that will be acceptable to them.

Common Vision: Establishing a basic common vision is one of the first steps in creating a Safe Mediation Space[20]. Its formulation can be very simple with the condition that all parties should agree to it. It can be useful to formulate it practically. Concepts that might mean different things to the different parties, such as "peace" or "justice" are to be avoided. The common vision is developed during the "preparation of the space" and the formulation needs to be tested with the different potential participants.

"Safety lines": For the participants to feel safe to join the space and to agree to the dialogue, it is essential to establish safety measures, so called "safety lines". These "safety lines" represent an agreement among parties and organizers that enables them to join the dialogue. They are mostly formulated negatively and set limits to statements and behaviours that should be avoided. However, these "safety lines" are not imposed and need to be agreed upon by all participating parties.

3.2. Engaging in the Safe Mediation Space

> *"Because meaning (understood as the concrete effects of utterances) may be constructed differently, dialog towards problem-solving in mediation spaces should be constructed methodologically as 'dialog through practice' […] The objective of this process is to produce projects providing pilot experiences that serve as blueprints for wider solutions required by the conflict context." Jean-Nicolas Bitter[21]*

The second phase, "engaging in the space" puts trust building and joint initiatives in the centre. As Flucher and Schneider describe it, "it is not the task of the mediators to approximate or change the interests and values of the parties. At the end of the mediation, the parties should be able to walk out of the "mediation room" with the same values they had before, but with a concrete solution to their conflict."[22] Similarly to the commonly known phase model of mediation, the content is not determined at the onset of the process, but is gradually generated as part of a creative, interactive process. "Due to the parties speaking from within different worldviews, it is often hard for the actors or third party to understand each other right away. Through the process, content and solutions are developed by each party in a different way, using the resources of their worldview."[23] By definition, a conflict of worldview happens at two levels: at the behavioural and at the value level. The SMS aims at a transformation on the behavioural level. This means that the participants should find a common ground in their actions (collaborations, joint initiatives), while the narratives that are behind these actions might stay contradictory. The rationale is that actions should not harm each other, even if the values and worldviews on which they are based are very different.

4. The Safe Mediation Space Process

4.1. Preparing the space

The theory of change for the process was formulated as: "*If* actors interested in gender issues with different references come together with the will to look for ground where they can agree practically and develop a common discourse that is oriented towards practice, *then* they can work together for the betterment of women's situation in Morocco". A mixed convener team (co-facilitators) was set up, with representatives of CPI and the FDFA. CPI is a non-governmental organization based in Geneva that works on conflicts that involve Muslim political actors. It has a unique expertise in Islam and conflict transformation and a broad network among religious and political leaders in the Muslim world, particularly in North Africa. An independent researcher with affinities to the "Al Adl wal Ihsan" movement and expert on questions of the status of women within Islamic movements in North Africa acted as third co-facilitator throughout the entire process.

In the preparation phase, the objective of the three co-facilitators was to better understand the context of a possible dialogue and set its frame. With the help of the local researcher, a conflict analysis was carried out. During two visits, "pre-talks" with various parties helped to identify potential participants, to build trust between participants and third parties, and to address the fears of the participants. The co-facilitators spoke with over fifty interlocutors including journalists, researchers, opinion leaders and religious institutions. The discussions fostered understanding of the situation, refined the analysis, enabled testing of the hypothesis and explained the methodology to potential participants. Within the discussions, different formulations of a common vision that would work for all and "safety lines" were tested and set. This process made it possible for the "space" to happen.

4.1.1. Tensions

> *"So, conflicts between worlds, including conflicts between incommensurable worlds, which some decades ago mainly involved people living in separate territories, also involve today parties living in the same place." Oscar Nudler[24]*

The process in Morocco was built on the hypothesis that the polarization between "secularists" and "Islamists" is an important obstacle to nonviolent and constructive dialogue on improving the situation of women in Morocco.[25] The minimal consensus among the interlocutors was that the situation of women in Morocco needs to be improved *in practice.*

On one hand, actors of different Islamist tendencies considered that the "real" problems of women related to schooling, health, housing, poverty, or socio-economic injustice. On the other hand, those related to secularist tendencies considered that the "real" problems of women were inheritance, abortion, polygamy, or the marriage of minors. The polarization is often exploited by the parties on different levels[i]. Civil society parties who refer to international conventions have influence on the reforms and formulations of existing laws and codes. On the other hand, parties with strong religious influence have more influence in

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[i] An aspect repeatedly formulated by the interlocutors and that would need further research was the linkages of the discourses with financial and technical support either from Western or from Middle Eastern actors.

society and, since a member of the *Parti de la justice et du développement* (PJD) was appointed head of government in 2011, it also has influence on the implementation of these laws.

4.1.2. Participants

During two pre-visits, the co-facilitators met and discussed with actors representing different inspirations and references within Moroccan society. They met active civil society members in several areas: activists and members of associations involved in women's and family rights, in charity work, in couple mediation, or fighting for the rights of Amazigh women. They also met women's associations affiliated to Islamist movements, researchers, academics, journalists, religious leaders who worked outside the mainstream (such as Salafi Ulema) and those who were part of official religious institutions (the League of Ulema)[26]. The idea of dialogue elicited different reactions from the interlocutors: Some refused any dialogue; others said that they had never considered it but said were open to the idea.

As criteria for participants, the co-facilitators chose men and women with strong and orthodox ideas (not moderate in their positions), but ready to engage in constructive dialogue, meaning that they were not only participating in order to debate. They had to be committed to the cause of "betterment of the condition of women" in one way or another. The participants were invited in a personal capacity (*ad personam*). This means that the participants were not talking from an institutional point of view, and not referring to each other as representatives of institutions. This allowed for more flexibility, enabling them to deviate from the positions of their communities and constituencies, and avoided institutional confrontations or party politics.

At the end, the participants who committed to the process represented a wide spectrum of opinion: old and young, women and men, academics (e.g. professors in Islamic law or gender) religious discourse-shapers (e.g. an atheist and three Salafis[i], including a woman

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[i] All movements within Salafism have claimed or were qualified as being reformists (for further information read Abbas Aroua, 'The Salafiscape in the Wake of the "Arab Spring"', Cordoba Research Papers (Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, 2014). Salafism advocates for a return to the Qur'anic texts and to "authentic Islam" with the endeavour to purify it from "heretical innovations". The current emphasizes the rationality of Islamic thought. This also includes the reform of the governance and economic system of societies. In Morocco, this movement was instrumental in the society's fight for independence (for further information read

wearing the niqab), members of political parties (leftist to nationalist and anarchist, active in the government or not), social movements (e.g. Al Adl wa Al Ihsan), advocacy groups (e.g. for women's rights, for Amazigh rights), associations (e.g. engaged in family mediation, Islamic associations)[i]. Their positions towards the matter in question can be thought of along the lines of the following typological continuum:

1) Of "French-style" secular (laicist) inspiration, with a framework relating exclusively to human rights and international conventions: Those for whom their actions for women's rights are independent of religion.

2) Secular in inspiration referring mainly to human rights and international conventions, arguing that Islam has contributed to these international standards and that the purpose of Sharia law and these standards is similar: Those for whom their actions for women's rights are compatible with their religion.

3) Of Islamic and reformist religious inspiration, relating to religious texts through the practice of ijtihad ("the effort of interpretation that a Muslim must undertake to give religious meaning and guidance to a new context"[27]) and the re-reading of texts from a female perspective. Some of these actors propose a "third way": Those for whom women's rights and religion are intimately linked.

Khalid Zekri, 'Aux sources de la modernité marocaine', Itinéraires. Littérature, textes, cultures, no. 2009).

Salafi movements have been targeted especially after 9/11 and have been associated with violence and terrorism because Al Qaeda and Islamic State embrace the teachings of some Salafi writers. We tend to forget that there are many different kinds of Salafi groups and that Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia is not lived in the same way as Wahhabism in Indonesia. Assumptions that see all Salafis as inherently exclusivist, intolerant and violent are factually incorrect. History is full of examples from across all religious traditions of both violent and non-violent movements for social change. For further reading also see: Inayah Rohmaniyah and Mark Woodward, 'Wahhabi Perspectives on Pluralism and Gender: A Saudi – Indonesian Contrast', Center for Strategic Communication. Arizona State University, 21 May 2012. See also: Abbas Aroua. Four Criteria for Differentiating Religious Entities. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva, 2020.

[i] The following "Islamist" tendencies participated: The Unification and Reform Movement (MUR), Al Adl wal Ihsan (AWI), Salafists, the Movement for the Nation and the Civilizational Alternative. On the side of the "Secularists", the following trends participated: The Democratic Association for Women's Rights (ADFM), the Union for Women's Action (UAF), the Federation of the League for Women's Rights (FLDDF).

4) Of Islamist religious inspiration relating to religious texts with a certain ambivalence in its relationship to international conventions ("with reservations on certain points").

5) Of Islamist religious inspiration and with a reference system relating exclusively to religious texts in their literalist reading out of context.

4.1.3. A common vision

As common ground, all interlocutors had agreed that the conditions for women in Morocco need to be improved *empirically* (not talking about rights), even if they did not at all agree on what to change and how to change it. Asked how they would formulate the tensions, the actors referred to dichotomies such as modernist vs. conservative, using international vs. national reference, leftist vs. conservative, leftist vs. Islamist, secularist vs. Islamist, feminist vs. extremist, etc. After having tested different formulations of the common vision, it was decided to formulate the common vision as *a process:* "Actors with different inspirations and references come together with the will to look for ground where they can agree practically, and develop a common discourse or narrative that is oriented towards practice for the betterment of the condition of women".

4.1.4. "Safety lines"

Three "safety lines" defined safety measures for the space, organizers and participants. This is in line with the reality that "Religions as 'worlds' or matrices of social construction of reality are intimately related to the security of the community that inhabits them"[28]. The safety measures protected the participants from what they perceived as verbal violence from "the other" and addressed profound fears that they had expressed during the pre-talks. The following three "safety lines" were defined:

1) No statements against the state and the *makhzen*;
2) No statements calling for disrespect of the laws in place;
3) No statements attacking each other's references (CEDAW, Islamic references, etc.) and no *takfirism* (excommunication).

The first "safety line" was set to protect the presence of members of Al Adl wal Ihsan. The Association does not accept the monarchy as the Commander of the Faithful and is tolerated as a social movement but not as a political force. The second "safety line" protected the organizers

and the space itself, as the co-facilitators had been warned that official circles might not agree with the process. Finally, the third "safety line" was strongly voiced by some of the leftist participants, as some of them had experienced "*takfir*" in the past (i.e. excommunication, denunciation as a non-believer) and were profoundly hurt by what they felt as attacks on their personal integrity.

Additionally, a few ground rules were defined to protect the space, such as the request not to take pictures. A few participants had expressed discomfort in being photographed with some of the other participants. This also related to what they said was their credibility towards their own constituency. Participants (and organizers) were asked not to divulge information in the media, including social media. Finally, the meetings were held under the Chatham House Rule[i]. These "safety lines" and ground rules were included in the invitation letters and repeated during the first meeting.

4.2. Engaging in the Space

4.2.1. Progress of the process

Four dialogue rounds took place in 2016 and 2017. Methodologically, the content and agenda were gradually generated based on the continuous feedback and evaluation by the participants. Held in Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakesh, all four meetings were attended by 12-15 participants and lasted 2-4 days. The first meeting focused on a good understanding of the methodology and ground rules of the SMS. It was an opportunity to present the general framework of the meeting, summarizing the two pre-visits and confirming the various observations and hypotheses. The organizers made clear that the objective of the dialogue was not to increase women's rights (irrespective of the understanding of what they are) but to dismantle stereotypes and to increase relationship building and dialogue. They explained the criteria adopted for the selection of participants, the logic of the programme and the methodology chosen.

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[i] "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." 'Chatham House Rule', Chatham House, accessed 22 November 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org//node/44.

In each dialogue round, participants were asked to discuss the latest political developments on the questions and to provide inputs prepared by the participants on different polarizing topics ("hot issues"). The differing positions on topics such as complementarity and equality, the relationship to the West and to the Middle East, the issue of identity, inheritance or individual freedoms became apparent and openly shared. One objective of these recurring discussions on "hot issues" was to have discussions on "content", while another was to allow the participants to acknowledge each other's positions. These substantive discussions made similarities and differences apparent and revealed clearly the different positions of participants with "secularist" and "Islamist" references, but it also opened the space for positive surprises[i]. The atmosphere was mostly defined by mutual respect but did not lack tensions.

After each dialogue round, extensive oral and written feedback was requested from the participants. Methodologically, it was crucial to transparently talk about the feedback provided by the participants. After the last dialogue round, the participants officially lifted the Chatham House rule and the request not to publicise the process on social networks.

4.2.2. Outcome of the process

The objectives of the process (to bring together actors of different references concerned with the women's issue in Morocco in order to reduce the obstacles due to the polarization between secularists and Islamists in Morocco and to identify and work on concrete initiatives in order to improve the status of women in Morocco) were partially achieved. The process also showed that the subject touched on questions as diverse as colonization, the relationship to the West and to the Middle East, the relationship to religion, political systems, definition of freedoms, trade unions, or the Mudawana. Whereas the process exceeded the hopes of the co-facilitators regarding the decreasing of stereotypes and improvement of the quality of relationships, the work on common initiatives was less successful than expected.

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[i] To a remark from a participant who pointed out that it had been the feminist movements that had liberated women in Morocco, a participant replied that reformist intellectuals (i.e. Salafist) had dealt with the liberation of women in Morocco long before, citing examples. To hear this from a Salafi was felt as a "pleasant surprise" by a women's rights activist.

From a methodological point of view, the absence of an institutional framework for the participants and the freedom to speak in a protected space were key factors for the success of the meetings. Indeed, several participants attested that this was the first time they could speak directly and openly with the "other", without worrying about the institutional policy they were supposed to adhere to. Some people expressed relief and enthusiasm for this new way of meeting.

Regarding the sustainability of the process, it would be interesting to hear today, more than two years later, if contact among the participants is still continuing. During the meetings, the facilitators had asked how the mediation space affected the work of the participants outside the space and if there were any spill-over effects. One participant testified to the rejection of her (feminist) association to engage in dialogue with people "from the other side". But she had acquired some tools and examples to show that dialogue was possible and that it was not accurate to judge "whole currents" (meaning the Salafis).

A university professor pointed out that in her university environment such a project was considered utopian by her colleagues and that the fact of it happening was in itself a success. The idea to replicate this experience at the university level by creating a student club for dialogue between students and teachers from different backgrounds was shared as well.

A Salafi described that within his constituency, the predominant perception of feminist movements was that of betrayal and alienation. Another Salafi added that his participation in the space had been severely criticized by his own community, as the people involved in this type of space were perceived as "traitors". Both participants testified that after a while, they were able to partly deconstruct these prejudices and opinions. Thanks to this mediation space, they were able to cite concrete examples to their colleagues testifying to the inaccuracy of their perception.

When connecting to the march of 12 March 2000, it is questionable whether the dialogue process would have made a difference. But the hope remains that the relationships built would have favoured a tempered tone by some of the actors.

5. Lessons Learnt

5.1. Common language

During the process, the organizers had invited several external resource persons. CPI gave training in conflict transformation and conducted a conflict analysis with the group. During the second meeting, two Tunisian women were invited by the organizers[i] to testify from their experience in the "Dialogue for Women", a project implemented by Search for Common Ground."[29] A Sudanese faith based mediator based in the UK was invited to train the group in faith based family mediation during the third meeting[30]. Quite introductory in substance, both trainings and the Tunisian example were thought to establish a common language that could provide a basis for discussion.

The trainings and cases discussed proved to be excellent methodological means to allow for discussions. It enabled the participants to have a common language on the issues, with formulations and terms that were defined together. This logic followed the methodological aspect of the SMS to "speak practically" and to "act together" (common training being understood as common action). The increasingly relaxed atmosphere of the dialogue rounds was partly due to the trainings and the exercises.

The role plays in family mediation for example allowed for participants to discuss topics that were considered too sensitive in a normal discussion setting. Being in a role play (with sometimes funny moments such as a young Salafist playing the role of a mother with a lot of humour) allowed for discussing very sensitive issues in the context of the role play (e.g. freedom of religion). In a similar manner, the Tunisian experience allowed participants to discuss "how it is in Tunisia" and to project the discussion about polarizing issues of Morocco onto Tunisia. Our case showed that within SMS, trainings allowing for a common new

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[i] The purpose of presenting such an experience was not to make a comparison between two contexts that are certainly different. It was a "resource" presentation to stimulate reflection based on the experiences of others and help the reflection to go further. The two women represented an Islamist and a secular association respectively. For additional information on the project, a report and a video are available on the website of "Search for Common Ground". The Tunisian dialogue among eighteen secular and Islamist Tunisian women's associations had resulted in the common drafting of a law on parity in decision-making positions in the public service. Unfortunately, due to a change in project strategy the Tunisian dialogue did not come to a result.

vocabulary and experiencing together practical speaking can be a central component for its success.

5.2. Joint initiatives

During the second dialogue round participants were given the opportunity to suggest ideas for concrete initiatives that would take place outside of the SMS. The co-facilitators encouraged the participants to seek ways to carry out the proposed activities by mobilizing the various networks to which they had access, paying attention to the inclusive aspect of the implementation of the project. The participants pledged to see each other within the predefined groups to work on the common initiatives agreed together.

Before the third meeting, the participants had not met to work on concrete collaboration, which was a challenge. However, beyond the official meetings, some had met in a friendly atmosphere to break the fast during Ramadan, whereas others remained in contact via the groups established on WhatsApp. It was only after the third meeting that one common action took place. A group had organized a conference on "the ethics of public space and coexistence". It seemed, however, to the co-facilitators that the group was mainly of the "secularist" tendency, and Salafists were lacking completely at the event.

The co-facilitators discussed the disappointments linked with this aspect of the process with the participants. They mentioned lack of time or resources as the main reason for not working on joint initiatives outside of the space. For mediators of a SMS two lessons can be drawn: (financial) resources need to be attributed by the organizers for such joint initiatives, and external convening by third parties or inside mediators is also crucial for the joint initiatives at this stage of the SMS.

5.3. Interests and positions

During the first dialogue round, a short theatre scene was presented by two co-facilitators representing the various prejudices and tensions identified during the two pre-visit missions from an external perspective. The participants were then asked to work in groups and to identify the interests and positions that could be identified from the scene.

The exercise following the theatre scene showed how difficult it was to distinguish between positions and interests. Retrospectively, the use of the distinction of "positions" and "interests" in the exercise was a

methodological error. The differentiation of positions and interests used in classical mediation is not applicable in conflicts with a so-called religious incompatibility without adaptations. Within classical mediation, interests and values are openly presented in their diversity. This is supposed to facilitate the development of a consensus between the parties.[31] This assumption does not apply to worldview conflicts as values themselves might be rooted in different worldviews (e.g. democracy vs. *shura*[i] or the status of international conventions). Digging into interests or values brought tensions regarding their differences and incompatibilities. Worldview differences created ambiguities. This became very visible during the theatre exercise, where the questions on interests became intrinsically linked with the core references of the participants: international human rights vs. religious interpretation of the concept of "women's rights". Within worldview conflicts, mediators might need to refrain from this substantial step of classical mediation.

5.4. Relationship building

During the whole process, a special focus was also placed on group work and team building in order to improve the relationship level among the participants, in line with Lederach: "A key to constructive social change lies in that which makes social fabric, relationships, and relational spaces"[32]. Except for the first meeting, the organizers chose meeting rooms in hotels, and asked participants to stay on-site for the entire period of the meeting. Following the advice of the local consultants, the organizers paid special attention to the tea breaks and the setup of the meals.

Each dialogue round enabled the participants to become increasingly familiar with each other and with their respective positions. Some of the participants were widely known by others through the media, and the process enabled them to interact on a personal level. Speaking "without an institutional hat" enabled flexibility in their exchanges. The evaluations showed a growing decrease in stereotypes. This is also true for the co-facilitators who needed to reflect on their own prejudice that "secularists are more willing to talk".

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[i] The question of the frame of reference sparked a debate among the participants when one speaker pointed out that the Moroccan Constitution affirmed the superiority of the Islamic frame of reference. This interpretation of the Constitution was not shared by other speakers who saw that the Moroccan Constitution confirmed the superiority of international conventions over national standards.

At one point, both written and oral evaluations focused heavily on the behaviours of some participants who were considered disrespectful or provocative (mocking or destructive criticism). The organizers considered these complaints and addressed them openly, which was greatly appreciated by the ones who had felt hurt.

An example cited repeatedly in the participants' evaluations was a change in attitude towards the woman wearing the full veil: "I never imagined that I would one day put myself at the same table with a woman wearing the niqab and discuss with her […] From now on, I know I can do it." Or: "Before, seeing a woman wearing a niqab provoked me, but today […] I talk to her and I am ready to work with her". One secularist participant pointed out that this was the first time she had communicated with Islamists by telephone and via WhatsApp. Others found that they had "more respect for the other's opinion", that they had "learned a lot from others, especially with regard to commitment and the willingness to move forward together".

5.5. Identities of the Co-Facilitators

The reputation of Switzerland as a neutral actor was key to the process. The positive image of Switzerland is partly due to its lacking a colonial past or military expansionism. The openness of the FDFA to work with non-violent extremists or orthodox groups has been a comparative advantage in regard to its credibility in engaging with religiously inspired political actors such as Salafists[33].

The institutional partnership of the organizers enabled a dual identity of the co-facilitators and both institutions worked as "insider mediators". Initially, the FDFA was trusted among the Associations for women's rights (the embassy financially supported projects of women's rights groups), and CPI was trusted by Islamists. With time, the group's trust towards both institutions had grown.

An "external intervention" was considered necessary by the participants in the current context, even if sometimes with some frustration. Many participants called for a continuation of the process through their recommendations. The neutrality of the institutions that organised this process was considered by the participants in their evaluation as a point of strength. The identity of the co-facilitators, three women under 50, one of them with a headscarf, was assessed as well balanced in reference to the worldviews. However, this neutrality was

not a given. All three co-facilitators had felt the imperative to stay neutral to be challenging at some point or other. The process also opened up questions on the role of the foreign policy of Switzerland. Using the SMS, the approach was to support local conflict transformation processes, motivated by the Constitution's explicit request to work on "the peaceful coexistence of peoples"; however, the Constitution also aims to promote human rights and the equal rights of men and women. A mediator is not supposed to take a position in a conflict, but Switzerland's foreign policy is clearly on the side of the "secularists". How to deal with this dual mandate remains an open question for the future of this kind of peace promotion initiative.

6. Conclusion

The Safe Mediation Space was conducted in Morocco by the FDFA and CPI with a wide variety of actors, from leftist human rights activists to niqab-wearing Salafists around the issue of the Women's status and condition, aiming to reduce the polarization between secularists and Islamists in order to improve the situation of women in the country. This paper presented the two phases of the SMS: preparing the space and engaging in the space. The theoretical requirements of the SMS were defined, and the paper showed how the dialogue process had put the theory into practice – the following questions were dealt with in depth: How were the participants identified? Which formulations were found to harness all forces (e.g. common vision)? How were the (partly existential) fears of the potential participants considered (safety lines)? Theoretical reflections and lessons for the Safe Mediation Space can be drawn from the dialogue process: 1) Training units as an inherent part of the dialogue were of particular importance for the development of a common vocabulary; 2) The implementation of concrete initiatives outside the SMS need to be intentionally addressed by the organizers; 3) The distinction between interests and positions can lead to ambiguities in conflicts with worldview differences; 4) SMS has great potential in creating new and restoring broken relationships; and 5) The (institutional) identities of the facilitators is central to the success of such a process.

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