

Women's Meaningful Participation in a Changing Mediation Landscape

Amy Dwyer-Neigenfind

Abstract

This article explores a broad range of barriers faced by women mediators across the world, including structural and practical challenges as well as implications for women's participation in a changing mediation landscape, where demands on peace-making are growing (including, for example, the increasing role of technology and diversification of mediation spaces with new actors and agendas). Finally, it outlines emerging best practice approaches to strengthen women's roles in mediation, including through alternative mediation models, networks of women mediators and feminist foreign policy.

Author Profile

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Women's Participation in Mediation

Value of Women-led Mediation

A wealth of evidence demonstrates how women's participation positively influences the focus, dynamic and outcome of mediation efforts. Studies find that, where women are included in negotiating parties, there is a 35 per cent greater likelihood of sustaining peace for more than 15 years and an increased possibility of reaching a more inclusive agreement (UN Women 2015; Paffenholtz et al. 2016, in Riley and Murphy 2021; Branfors, Krause and Krause 2018).

Women mediators self-identify a range of unique skills which benefit them in their work, including being able to understand complex conflict dynamics based on gender, ethnicity, race, class and other social markers (drawing on their own experiences with discrimination); facilitating challenging conversations and building consensus in ways that their male counterparts have been unable to do when pressured to 'save face' in power struggles (leveraging perceptions that they are less threatening and more neutral); prioritizing bigger picture outcomes and non-assigned pathways to peace; and preventing relapses into violence through addressing the root causes of conflict (Lenhardt 2021). While these attributes and perceptions stem from socially constructed gender roles and are not essential to all women, they make them logical contenders for leadership in mediation, who bring complementary approaches to their male counterparts (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015). Research in Northern Ireland found that, despite a commitment to impartiality in their role as mediators, women also bring significant gender sensitivity to their work. Deriving from their own experience of gendered inequalities, they were better able to read silences and observe exclusion, and spot opportunities to engage marginal voices earlier on in mediation processes and in culturally sensitive ways, for example, by consulting young women in community center bathrooms, which were often the only safe spaces they had access to (Turner 2019b).

Women's contributions help to bring mediation beyond zero-sum questions of territory, sovereignty and power and open up 'blind spots' on intersectional issues and priorities (De Langis 2011). Above all, women mediators understand the cyclical nature of conflict and strengthen implementation of peace agreements long beyond official efforts through reconciliation and reconstruction in their communities.

Descriptive Versus Substantive Representation

Despite being one of the most visible concerns of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, some scholars argue that implementation of the Participation pillar—focused on enhancing women's equal representation and leadership in all stages of peace processes—has been its most stalled (Newby and O'Malley 2021).

Turner (2019b) highlights two seemingly distinct, but often interlinked, aspects of women's underrepresentation in the mediation field: firstly, their physical (or 'descriptive') participation, centered on the belief that including women is the right thing to do, and secondly, their meaningful (or 'substantive') participation, centered on the belief that including women is also the smart thing to do. While descriptive participation focuses on the symbolic importance of women being visible politically, substantive participation requires women's inputs to be included in the agenda and outcome of talks to have real impact.

Since the passing of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, efforts have disproportionately focused on increasing the descriptive participation of women in peace and mediation processes and building their capacities to contribute (despite their work, in many cases, predating the formal WPS agenda itself). Evidence on women's participation subsequently tends to focus on a small range of measurable outcomes related to their formal representation rather than the extent to which their contributions are taken on board (Lenhardt 2021).

This approach has arguably not led to significant change, even seeing a reversal of progress in recent years: Only two peace agreements in 2020 included any reference to signatories on behalf of women; none of the three ceasefire or peace agreements reached in UN- or co-led processes in 2018 included gender-specific provisions; and just four out of 30 signed peace agreements in Africa between 2012 and 2016 involved a lead female mediator (Lenhardt 2021; UN Women 2021).

Moreover, the mere presence of a select number of women is not enough to ensure their voices are reflected in peace processes and subsequent outcomes, and cannot guarantee that the interests of a broad section of women are considered (Alam 2022). When women do participate in mediation efforts, their presence is still too often used to tick a box in relation to international commitments or legitimate decisions taken by others, rather than affording them a real opportunity to shape decisions based on their lived experiences. For example, in the Somali peace process, women were allocated a quota in all six reconciliation committees but any decisions required the authorization of a committee of male clan elders (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015). Evidence shows that those in positions of power in peace and mediation processes continue to actively gatekeep spaces and undermine inclusion (UN Security Council 2022).

This descriptive approach, then—focused on adding women to peace and mediation processes which are flawed to begin with—fails to address the underlying factors which perpetuate inequalities in the first place, and fails to deliver the WPS agenda's founding vision of a more transformative, gendered peace and security (Turner 2017; Newby and O'Malley 2021; Swaine and Turner 2021).

As we approach the 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, a change in approach is necessary and, indeed, increasingly acknowledged. UNSCR 2493 (2019) encourages the creation of safer and more enabling environments for women peacebuilders to carry out their work. The UN Secretary-General (2020) called for a shift to locally-led peacebuilding solutions that address the root causes of conflict. A review of 44 OSCE-region National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS demonstrate widespread commitments to eradicate the structural drivers of inequality and conflict (Myrntinen, Shepherd and Wright 2020). Yet there is a lack of concrete evidence and tools and strategies for how to address these structural challenges in practice (Alam 2022; Lenhardt 2021; Newby and O'Malley 2022; Myrntinen, Shepherd and Wright 2020). To identify and test effective strategies, we first need to deepen our understanding of the underlying barriers to women's substantive participation and assess emerging lessons in this area.

Challenges to Women's Participation in Mediation

The following section explores some of the prevalent barriers to women's substantive participation in mediation efforts, many of which are overlapping and mutually reinforcing.

Structural Barriers

Gender Stereotypes: Creating Limiting and Unrealistic Expectations for Women Mediators

Narratives used to advocate women's participation in mediation processes can unintentionally reinforce essentialist stereotypes that they represent one homogenous group with a shared agenda, irrespective of political beliefs, educational backgrounds, economic opportunities, age, ethnicity and other identities. Indeed, a lack of unity among women mediators in South Sudan, including a split in the country's Women's Bloc, resulted in counter-productive competition over who best represented women's interests (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023). As well as undermining women's political agency and diverse identities, such narratives create limiting expectations and unfair standards for women's roles in mediation processes, often resulting in them having to shoulder competing demands for thematic expertise, gender mainstreaming skills and constituency representation. Their ability to bridge this gap is restricted by resource constraints, political will and confidentiality requirements which often leave them unable to consult parties outside of a process, leaving them open to accusations—rarely applied to other stakeholders—that they have prioritized their own concerns over broader constituencies (Poutanen and Turner 2021).

Such narratives are often reinforced by women's assumed characteristics of inherent peacefulness or feminism (which can in turn de-professionalize their involvement in community-level mediation

as ‘just something that women do’) or tendencies to include women under the broader ‘civil society’ heading in mediation processes, which creates exclusion when competing agendas or values emerge (Poutanen and Turner 2021; Riley and Murphy 2021; Charlesworth 2008). Turner (2021) warns that equating women mediators with women’s rights advocacy pushes them into a potentially adversarial role whereby their presence can challenge traditional actors and structures and make their acceptance less likely. In South Sudan, higher-level women mediators refrained from suggesting gender-specific reforms out of fear of losing their position, instead relying on women outside of government to be the voices for change (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023). This of course contributes to frustration that those chosen to represent women are not authorized to do so, and are often far removed from where conflict is happening.

Poutanen and Turner (2021) highlight the need to expand understanding of the diverse ways in which women seek to make meaningful contributions to mediation to breakdown stereotypes. Studies by Turner (2018, 2019b) highlight that only 11 per cent of women mediators identify as gender experts, instead bringing expertise in areas of constitutional design and transitional justice. In Northern Ireland, several women felt their primary focus was reaching a conflict settlement and that advancing the women’s rights ‘agenda’ could affect their integrity as mediators (mirroring a recurrent difficulty in WPS whereby women distance themselves from gender due to the risk of being perceived as too radical) while other women have highlighted that men do not have to contribute ‘as a man’ and therefore women should not be characterized or limited by their womanhood (Sargsyan and Moller-Loswick 2021).

Male-dominated Spaces: Rewarding ‘Masculine’ Performances of Power and Politicizing Soft, ‘Feminine’ Skills.

Common assumptions that war is a ‘man’s game’ can close mediation spaces and privilege male political leaders or leaders of warring parties, overlooking the fact that negotiating peace affects the whole of society (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002, in Riley and Murphy 2021).

Women face several challenges in male-dominated mediation spaces, including unwanted sexual advances and subtle techniques of exclusion (such as men avoiding direct eye contact with them, tasking them with note-taking or tea-making and inviting them to speak last) which can result in them self-censoring or withdrawing from key spaces (Turner 2019a, 2020). Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth (WMC) network members describe a ‘cowboy’s club’ culture in mediation spaces across the world, characterized by male mediators trying to ‘one-up’ each other. In Northern Ireland, women mediators report being made to feel self-conscious and aware of being different to men, with implicit biases even embedded among men presenting as ‘liberal’ (Turner 2019a).

Masculine norms and standards arising from such spaces can be used to discredit and justify women’s exclusion. WMC members referred to a ‘male mediation model’, whereby travel

symbolizes being in demand and is used as the main measure of competency, automatically excluding women mediators who cannot travel to certain locations due to resources, safety concerns or childcare commitments. Others referred to the 'hardness of male spaces' and 'big man mediation approaches' in which mediation issues are analyzed with a 'remoteness' from those who are suffering. Within these spaces, women's understandings of peace and security can often be at odds with dominant concepts historically formulated by men, and which continue to underpin predominantly male-led mediation efforts (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015). For example, WMC members referred to the rewarding of 'macho' performances focused on achieving temporary cessation of violence over more empathetic approaches. Women's experience of conflict is often based on a continuum of violence extending from the household and wider society, and they are therefore more likely to bring concepts of positive peace and human security to the table which can easily become politicized as 'soft' and disconnected from harder security issues in Track I, power-based mediation spaces (De Langis 2011). Women mediators have referred to a 'lose-lose' situation in navigating these gendered power dynamics, whereby they are classed as 'overbearing' if they challenge soft portrayals, which is then used to make their future participation more difficult (Riley and Murphy 2021).

In some cases, expectations and practices around masculinity can work to women mediators' advantage. Because they were not expected to fit into the 'pecking order' of hierarchical male environments, women in Northern Ireland were able to employ a 'feminine' approach, or 'soft way of doing hard things', to confront gendered conflict dynamics and hostility as part of mediation processes. In the Philippines, because women are rarely targeted in clan disputes or revenge killings, they are more openly accepted than men as mediators between rival clans (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015). Nevertheless, in other cases women highlight an unavoidable dependence on male colleagues to gain access to certain parties in mediation, relying on their credentials when not taken seriously in their own right (Turner 2019a).

Patriarchal values of hierarchy and competition can also be evident among women in mediation spaces. WMC members described encountering gatekeeping from senior female mediators who they felt were reluctant to share their expertise and have learnt that being taken seriously in formal institutions requires 'keeping quiet' on gender issues (Porter and Riley 2021). In other cases, young women mediators faced resistance from older women in terms of cultural conceptions of womanhood and competing claims for relevance (Poutanen and Turner 2021). Women mediators themselves have noted how the pressure to prove themselves as strong and competent sometimes means they inadvertently emulate power-driven styles of negotiating and mirror male colleagues' behavior, such as dominating dialogue and making fast decisions (Sargsyan and Moller-Loswick 2021).

Design and Implementation of Mediation Processes: Gendered Hierarchies of Multi-Track Models.

Turner and Bell (2021) argue that mediation policy and practice has defined 'mediator' in narrow terms, largely in relation to Envoys occupied by a small political elite and almost entirely excluding women. Riley and Murphy (2021) expand on this, arguing that the United Nations' Guidance for Effective Mediation tends to be interpreted in relation to formal negotiations, despite studies finding that out of 63 peace processes, 60 per cent had parallel Track II processes with clear involvement of women (Dayal and Christien 2019). This disregards the broader 'mediative practice' utilized by grassroots women, such as facilitating negotiatory activities between contentious groups in communities, working in prisons during and after conflict, using arts to bring communities together and dispelling misinformation as a means of conflict prevention (Riley and Murphy 2021; Turner 2017; Marchetti and Tocci 2009; Paffenholz, 2014). Such practice goes unrecognized at the Track I level and is used to justify claims that women lack appropriate qualifications, contributing to a lack of institutional and self-recognition which make it difficult for women to 'climb the ladder' into political mediation. They conclude that this creates a vicious cycle in which public officials decry the shortage of women in mediation while reinforcing the very barriers to their entry into the field.

The Global Study on the Implementation of UN SCR 1325 (2015) found that women's absence in high-level peace processes can be explained by a lack of efforts to integrate them. Turner and Bell (2021) refer to a 'culture of secrecy' in the mediation field which lacks transparency as to who is doing what and where women are present. Institutional practices in the recruitment of UN mediators, including a lack of public advertisement, raise questions over equal opportunities and accountability for women's mediation. Turner (2017, 2019) raises concerns over the political complexity of UN DPA Envoy recruitment processes in particular, which require female candidates to demonstrate high-profile diplomatic track records which many with significant mediation experience may not have. This contributes to a 'double invisibility' whereby women are underrepresented as leader mediators and have their Track II and III contributions—which enable peace talks to be possible in the first place—obscured.

Despite research finding that when women are involved in the early stages of mediation processes, a precedent is set for their more substantive contributions throughout negotiation, implementation and post-agreement (Paffenholz et al. 2016), there is still absence of clear mechanisms to ensure they are brought in at the early stages. Women mediators have highlighted common obstacles, including a lack of evidence documenting their impact on mediation outcomes and their participation being seen as a delaying factor rather than positive element for the urgent resolution of conflicts, often exacerbated by short timelines imposed by the UN Security Council (UN Women 2020, 2021; O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015).

Socio-cultural Norms and Resistance: Closing Spaces for Grassroots Women.

Prescriptive expectations for how women should behave in households and broader society can also restrict their participation in mediation. Patriarchal values of male family members in particular, can serve to actively discourage or block women from accessing mediation spaces, or require them to gain permission before joining (Lenhardt 2021). Research in Northern Ireland highlights the dilemma many women mediators face in ensuring their work does not interfere with parenting responsibilities (Turner 2019a). Fundamentalist interpretation of religious scripture can also limit women's roles; for example, in Cameroon women mediators reported that churches and faith communities see female members' purpose as dedicating their life to God and serving with humility, in contrast to public mediation roles. In Iraq, women mediators have recalled their mediation work being challenged and even banned through direct reference to Quranic verses referring to women's limitations (Schraml and Vimalarajah 2023). In Libya, extremist discourse has argued that women's mediation does not feature in traditional customs, despite their contribution being underpinned by the country's rich legacy in amicable dispute resolution and rebuilding of nationhood (Langhi 2018).

A lack of compliance with local cultural norms and values can also serve as a barrier to women mediators. Basu (in Newby and O'Malley, 2021) argues that a perception that principles deriving from UNSCR 1325 are Western has limited the potential of the agenda to strengthen women's mediation efforts because it can be seen as incompatible with local norms and cultural values. Kezie-Nwoha (2020) further highlights that the gender and racial positionality of leading male figures in mediation processes reinforces neo-colonial power dynamics and means approaches often fail to account for deeply ingrained cultural nuances. Indeed, WMC members have highlighted how use of non-indigenous Western mediation practices in First Nation communities have contributed to a distorted community view on mediation, risking closing doors for women mediators who strive to use traditional language and methods and adhere to religious and cultural norms (Porter and Riley 2021; Turner 2020).

Practical Barriers

Trauma, Burnout and Imposter Syndrome: Balancing Hidden Psychosocial Effects with Mediation Work

Lenhardt (2021) refers to the unacceptable pressures that women mediators face in shouldering unpaid care responsibilities and confronting the trauma of war with their 'formal' mediation work. Women mediators in South Sudan reported feeling increasingly frustrated as a result of trauma from the conflict and a perceived lack of progress (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023), while women in Northern Ireland described difficulties in accepting their own legitimacy as mediators, which had long-standing psychological impacts (Riley and Murphy 2021). Women faith-based mediators additionally highlight how a lack of debriefing mechanisms makes it difficult to cope with secondary trauma encountered during peace mediation, sometimes resulting in them no longer carrying out their work (Schraml and Vimalarajah 2023).

Skills Gaps: Pressure on Women Mediators to Fit into Flawed Systems

Women mediators are held to a higher standard than men, having to not only navigate gendered egos and infiltrate masculine structures, but carve out niche content expertise to be taken seriously on the same level. Because they are expected to find their place in the same system which privileges elites and has been created to their disadvantage, they note a range of skills gaps which prevent them from accessing mediation spaces. A survey conducted by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders found that women mediators often feel they lack knowledge of relevant processes and terminology around Track I processes (Goldberg 2015), while WMC members highlight the need for training on topics such as conflict analysis, leadership, public office and constitution building (Porter and Riley 2021). Women mediators also highlight how expectations around skills are gendered; for example, they refer to a preoccupation with 'qualified' women but a lack of concern over 'useless' men, and note that qualifications for armed male actors are based on their direct involvement in violence whereas women can face additional pressure to demonstrate academic expertise (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015; Sargsyan and Moller-Loswick 2021). Poutanen and Turner (2021) emphasize the need to first clarify the purpose and form of women's participation in order to provide tailored, role-specific support to them.

Resource Constraints: Stifling Innovation, Strategic Thinking and Scale-up of Mediation Activities

Women's representation at Track II and III levels is often given an 'unofficial status' which means it is typically behind the scenes and unpaid (Riley and Murphy 2021; Turner 2019a). A scarcity of resources mean women mediators are often reliant on short-term projectized funding which limits their ability to plan strategically, makes it more difficult to document their impact and increase their legitimacy and can undermine their credibility when funding abruptly ends. In some cases, competition over funding can also limit cooperation and privilege women in capital cities over rural areas (UN Women 2020).

Women mediators in South Sudan reported having to make difficult decisions regarding where to focus their energies in an increasingly insecure economic context (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023), while WMC members described a lack of consistent funding as stifling their innovation and ability to scale up their work nationally (Turner 2020). Such constraints are perpetuated by a lack of financial commitment to women's mediation at multilateral levels: decreasing UN budgets have led to a 'recycling' of (disproportionately male) staff across missions, while only 0.2 per cent of bilateral aid to conflict contexts focused on women's peacebuilding in 2019 (UN Women 2021, Turner and Bell 2021).

Security: Making Mediation Spaces Safe for Women Without Victimizing Them.

The UN Secretary General's report on WPS (2019) highlights a persistent link between women's continued marginalization and a rise in political violence targeting mediators. In many contexts, 'old boy' networks of power brokers continue backroom dealmaking in spaces and during times that are inaccessible and unsafe for women mediators. In South Sudan, rural women mediators

reported being monitored and arrested, or having to invite national security personnel to sit in on workshops (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023). In Yemen, women faith-based mediators have avoided identifying as such in fear that they will be positioned as non-believer, traitors or terrorists (Schraml and Vimalarajah 2023). Swaine and Turner (2023) argue that the preoccupation of women's participation with high-level international processes has contributed to a multi-tier protection system, whereby protection is extended only to the 'right type of participant', which are usually elite women who can negotiate the system and are platformed within it. On the other hand, positioning women as vulnerable categories requiring enhanced duty of care can encourage paternalistic protection and be used to restrict their agency in mediation processes (Smith and Stavreska 2022, Turner 2019b).

Emerging Barriers

There are also a number of emerging barriers—as well as potential opportunities—for women's participation in a changing mediation landscape, where demands on peacemaking are growing and becoming more complex.

Digital Spaces: Circumventing Gender Barriers and Performances of Power?

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in peace processes, as mediators sought to maintain momentum in a number of peace talks. This has presented an alternative to traditional shuttle diplomacy, with video-conferencing platforms being used in contexts ranging from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan (Hirblinger 2020; Parafina 2020). While this offers some unique opportunities to circumvent gendered barriers, including making it easier for women to access male-dominated mediation spaces, removing physical gendered performances of power (such as body language and positions in the room), removing private 'backchanneling' and 'intermoments' between men, and allowing women to engage more safely and cost-effectively in conflict zones, the internet and requisite skills are generally still much more accessible to elite women and men (Bramsen and Hagemann 2021).

A study in Yemen found that online mediation allowed for more frequent, accelerated collaboration with Track II and III women mediators by removing political boundaries and offering political elites a more time-efficient solution to face-to-face meetings (Bruggeman 2023). On the other hand, it found that it can be harder for women mediators to build relationships and trust with conflict parties online, especially in cultures which attach great value to the ceremonial elements of negotiations, and online mediation heightened the risk of defamation to women engaging in visible political behavior (Hirblinger 2020).

New Actors and Agendas in Mediation: Reducing Buy-In for Gender Equality?

The increasing number of actors involved in mediation, combined with a less prominent role for the UN, has seen a reduction in 'unity of purpose' among those seeking peace, which can make it difficult to prioritize women's participation in gender-sensitive processes (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain

and Paffenholz 2015). Studies highlight that many negotiators remain skeptical of liberal normative frameworks which push for inclusivity 'irrespective' of specific contexts, emphasizing the need for this to be driven by local actors rather than donors or third parties (Sargsyan and Moller-Loswick 2021). At the same time, women mediators have noted willingness of national governments and multilateral organizations to sacrifice values around women's participation in host contexts, fearing a loss of political capital with negotiating parties if they insist on more inclusive processes that could 'overload' the table and 'derail' the process (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015; Eriksmoen 2021).

Promising Practice for Strengthening Women's Participation in Mediation

While the barriers to women's participation are widespread and deeply-ingrained, areas of best practice have emerged in recent years which offer potential to shift some of the prevailing dynamics in mediation spaces.

Challenging Traditional Mediation Models

Multi-track Approaches

Poutanen and Turner (2021) emphasize the importance of providing opportunities for Track I and Track II parties to exchange on key conflict drivers and possible solutions, both in the margins of established processes and independently. Such efforts should not focus on establishing a neat consensus or overriding political diversity, but rather strive to generate new ideas that parties can talk to when stuck. Research has shown that combining expertise across tracks increases the likelihood of peace agreements and their sustainability, with such approaches increasingly highlighted as a priority in the WPS NAPs of Nordic countries, Canada and Japan (UN Women 2021; Turner 2019). Turner and Bell (2020) emphasize the importance of multi-track approaches accounting for potential risks, such as being used to create appearances of consultations without offering significant input into decision-making. Transfer mechanisms, whereby 'insider' tactics of submitting position papers directly to negotiators and meeting with mediators are combined with 'outsider' tactics such as lobbying international actors and conducting media outreach, as effective tools for ensuring women's inputs are reflected in formal agreements (Paffenholz et al 2016).

There are some emerging examples of multi-track approaches strengthening women's participation in practice. In the Central African Republic, UN Peacekeeping forces cooperated with women mediators to facilitate local peace agreements between rebels and self-defense militia through establishing mediation cells comprised of women. The African Union's Special Envoy on WPS has further championed 'solidarity missions' designed to support local women's more formal involvement in the country's National Reconciliation Forum. The Philippines used its WPS NAP (2010-16) to connect local indigenous and Moro minority women leaders to its female, lead negotiator of the Moro peace process, while its newest NAP (2017-22) reaffirms commitment to providing grassroots civil society support to connect women in informal spaces to Track I position.

Co-mediation

Turner and Bell (2021) advocate the appointment of one woman and one man on an equal basis as a Temporary Special Measure to ensure gender equality in mediation leadership roles. This responds to several barriers explored earlier, including narrow understandings of what counts as relevant experience privileging those who are already in the system, while increasing the chances of parties establishing trust with one or more of the mediators by seeing themselves represented, and strengthening mediation capacity through bringing together different sets of skills which are not always easily combined in the same person. While potential risks include women being given 'soft' portfolios, the model can be tested by male co-mediators challenging such exclusion and emphasizing women's equal authority. Co-mediation by a panel of mediators can further help to diversify mediation appointments. For example, the Panel of Eminent African Personalities, which mediated the post-election conflict in Kenya in 2007, moved away from co-mediation as a gender binary and brought together geographical proximity and cross-cultural insights from across the region.

Alternative Models

Turner and Bell (2020) explore the advantages and risks of a range of models for increasing women's substantive participation in mediation. For example, while women's required representation as members of political or combatant delegations can help to ensure they are given a clear place at the table without having to justify their relevance and sets a precedent for future nominations in post-agreement structures, disadvantages include women being placed in delegations based on family ties or political affiliations, resentment among small delegations having to bypass their leadership structures for women, and a risk of individual women being challenged on who they speak for.

Political representation of women as a 'block' in their own right can be achieved through democratic selection, self-organizing or support for women's groups to access selection mechanisms. Studies of peace processes in Liberia, South Africa, Kenya and Yemen found that when women form coalitions, mobilize around common issues and appear in negotiations as one unified group, there is a much greater chance of their voices being acknowledged and it becomes more difficult for people to question their legitimacy (Paffenholz et al 2016). Risks include women not being able to organize across divides (especially where civil society infrastructure has been depleted over years of conflict). In terms of practical examples, the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace developed joint priorities for peace mediation across political, ethnic and religious divides and later became one of the signatories of the R-ARCSS, comprising the perspectives of more than 50 women's organizations (Awate, Cohen and McCallum 2023). Similarly, a problem-solving workshop at the beginning of the Democratic Republic of Congo's Inter-Congolese Political Negotiations in 2002 allowed women to organize, agree on a declaration and plan of action ahead of the peace talks and increase the number of women delegates taking part.

Finally, gender commissions can be created with agreement from parties to a negotiation, creating a consultative mechanism which combines men and women from all sides of negotiations and reviews draft peace accords from a gender perspective. While benefits include a clear mandate for the inclusion of women and gender expertise and greater opportunity for women to engage in backdoor channels to exert influence, risks can mean technical advice is disregarded where processes are perceived to be particularly fragile.

Designing More Inclusive Methodologies

Faith-based Strategies

Recent research highlights how women faith-based mediators have used a wide range of tools, including dialogue, reconciliation, trauma healing and advocacy, to negotiate access to education for young girls, facilitate humanitarian access and release hostages (Schraml and Vimalarajah 2023). While few women identify explicitly as faith-based mediators—terms which can be seen as alien to local language—their command of religious literacy affords them access and a unique positioning in communities. In Aceh, a woman faith-based mediator used practices strongly influenced by Islamic faith to demonstrate her command of the belief system, confirm the relevance of her peacemaking role in relation to traditional and ancestral beliefs and validate arguments for non-violent behavior. Other women have capitalized on indigenous and faith-based stereotypes which position them as ‘motherly’, gentle and able to negotiate between spiritual realms to advance their mediation work and build trust with hard-to-reach conflict parties.

Engaging men as allies

An evaluation of Conciliation Resources’ work in northeast Nigeria found that carrying out gender-sensitive conflict analysis with male religious leaders, police and former vigilantes allowed them to apply a new lens to conflict dynamics in their communities, uncover how people they had previously classed as one ‘marginalized’ group experience violence differently, and co-develop more nuanced, inclusive responses to conflict with women mediators. Inviting different community members to bring their full, multi-faceted selves into circles and take steps forward or back based on their experiences helped to reduce perception of threats across groups, create common ground and humanize leaders while supporting them to take more inclusive action. Over time, older male religious leaders and younger men reported a shift in gender norms, associating manhood with qualities like being a good listener over physical strength and ego. Whereas they previously considered consulting women in decision-making a weakness, they came to understand how it can make their roles easier and more effective, going onto proactively engage women and other diverse groups in the resolution of communal conflict before these escalated (Mohamed Adama 2023).

Support for Locally-led, Feminist Mediation

Women Mediator Networks

Numerous quasi-governmental women mediator networks have been established in Nordic countries, Africa, South Africa, the Commonwealth, Arab states and the Mediterranean, among others, helping to publicize qualified women available for deployment to senior positions while supporting the progression of younger women mediators into international spaces (Turner 2017). By raising the profile of women mediators, such networks have made it more challenging to justify their absence in peace processes, while providing a platform for knowledge sharing and practice across contexts and Tracks. WMC members reported the network almost doubled their self-recognition and credibility (especially in communities where respect typically comes with age, status and association) and bridged intergenerational divides by providing safe spaces for older women mediators to learn from younger women mediators while preserving respect for their own wisdom and expertise (Porter and Riley 2021). Nevertheless, networks have faced challenges in sustained funding, deployment and maintaining connections among members beyond physical meetings, with those receiving diplomatic backing and financial support generally facing a comparative advantage despite being subject to the political interests of donors. Möller-Loswick, Rieseinfeld and Olsson (2019) further highlight a risk that networks are continuously offered capacity building rather than concrete opportunities and access to where decisions are made.

Enabling Policy Frameworks

While the utility of WPS NAPs in advancing women's mediation is questionable—with only 40 out of 83 NAPs in place in 2019 including specific provisions on mediation—Feminist Foreign Policy offers a potential opportunity to circumvent existing gatekeepers and biased institutional structures, carve out more leading roles for men to promote and support gender equality and enhance the role of gender advisors beyond promoting women's participation to disrupting the underlying power imbalances and structural barriers impeding gender equality (UN Women 2021).

Concluding Thoughts

Rather than placing women into flawed mediation processes defined by power and authority, strengthening their substantive participation requires a fundamental rethink of current mediation models, building on a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which they contribute to mediation at different levels. There is a need to shift attention away from male and female approaches to mediation, to reconceptualizing mediation leadership styles that both men and women can adopt. Ultimately, these styles need to champion a more transformative, feminist approach to resolving conflict. Santiago (in Sargsyan and Moller-Loswick 2021) argues that this requires reframing who is at the table (including diverse groups of both women and men); what is on the table (redefining the type of peace being pursued, and thereby opening up more space for women to negotiate and shape this) and turning the table (introducing new formats and approaches centered on transforming the root causes of gender inequality and conflict through mediation).

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