

The Intersection of Gender and Mediation: A Quiet Revolution

Prabha Sankaranarayan and Archana Medhekar

Abstract

This paper explores the transformative role of women-led peace processes, challenging traditional hierarchical power models of mediation. Over the past two decades, peacebuilding has moved beyond the “powerful nations” model towards multi-track, community-centered approaches. The authors argue that the “quiet revolution” led by women in peacebuilding offers critical insights into inclusive leadership and mediation. By examining the work of Mediators Beyond Borders International (MBBI) and their colleagues, the paper highlights the adaptive, pluralistic, and context-sensitive methods used by women mediators working at the intersection of health, education, climate, natural resource management, and violence prevention. These women navigate complex, borderless systems with flexible, inclusive leadership styles that respond to today’s global challenges.

Author Profiles

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Introduction: A Quiet Revolution

We are living in extraordinary times where local and global crises interconnect and amplify each other, creating what is now increasingly being described as a poly-crisis (World Economic Forum 2023). Badhken's (2016) intriguing question captures the resulting power conundrum "*Is this a century of dislocated people or dislocated compassions?*"

Amidst this poly-crisis, the intersection of gender and mediation has garnered increasing attention within the field of peacebuilding. Understanding how gender dynamics influence mediation processes, particularly in contexts marked by multiple conflict sites and cultural complexities, is crucial for developing effective strategies for sustainable peace. This paper is based on the insights shared by women peacebuilders from various parts of the world in transforming conflicts through their lived experiences of working in communities impacted by violent conflicts, wars, civil unrest or communal violence. Based on projects undertaken by the network of Mediation Beyond Borders International (MBBI), an international peacebuilding organization, the authors trace the patterns of design and interventions that reveal in some instances paradigmatic shifts in the society, incremental changes over time in others, all of which contribute to a revolutionary global trend away from the 'big man mediation' (Leslie et al. 2022) towards a people centered approach that is inclusive, systemic, creative, non-linear and keeps people at the heart of the conflict and at the centre of the process. Through these stories they underscore the power of intergenerational trauma and the critical importance of trauma informed interventions and make a compelling case for placing compassion at the heart of mediation processes.

This is a story of people with a passion for peacebuilding, who created the force that is MBBI today. MBBI began as a small group of peacebuilders with a vision that mediators volunteering globally could foster a more peaceful world. Sixteen years and hundreds of projects later, MBBI has become a critical force in peacebuilding, learning valuable lessons from communities across the world. The organization has applied various conflict prevention processes, in settings across the world, preventing, mitigating and recovering from violence while supporting the peaceful integration of populations locally and thereby promoting social cohesion globally. It learned to build bridges between mediation, peacebuilding and international relations, utilizing elicitive practices, trauma-informed principles, appreciative inquiry, and mediative techniques to transform local capacities for peace across different contexts. While this work includes companies, governments, academic institutions, indigenous/tribal leadership, and civil society organizations, it is deeply respectful of the lived experiences of warriors who have become peacebuilders and of

the recognition that the power sharing model is inherently more feminist. MBBI works in this emerging space alongside models such as “spiraling for peace”, with an affinity for “building peace from the inside out” (Leslie et al. 2022) recognizing however that in some contexts systemic shifts will entail parallel processes of peacebuilding (Burgess and Burgess 2020).

In this moment of what is described as poly-crisis –a systemic view of the intersection of multiple crises (Morin and Kern 1999), what does it mean to be a mediator and peace builder? A global pandemic (World Health Organization 2019), protracted conflicts (Azar 1990), the rise in authoritarianism (Ekiert 2023), white supremacy (Freedom House 2022), the global decline of democracy (Freedom House 2022), reportedly the historically largest migration of human populations across the continents and the climate emergency are the major trends within which we examine the lessons from women mediators across the world (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021).

Another major shift, tracked over the last twenty years, confirms the pattern of shifting away from the “powerful nations” model. In the peacebuilding field, MBBI has tested “multi-track models” and seen the limited value in purely hierarchical power-based models of mediation. As it reconsiders what we call “mediative practices”- our models of negotiation, dialogue and facilitation in these complex times, as we challenge the ways in which we have understood old models of peacebuilding, it is the premise of the authors that the ‘quiet revolution’ of women led peace processes in communities, companies and countries across the world has many lessons in leadership and peacebuilding that warrant our attention.

As we explore these stories of the women mediators of Mediators Beyond Borders International and their colleagues, who are working at the intersection of health, education, climate, natural resources and violence prevention, we recognize that the complex, complicated systems they navigate are not restricted by geography and borders. The leadership they demonstrate is inclusive, flexible, adaptive and recognizes the critical importance of our inter-connectedness. The processes they facilitate are complex enough to resolve complex issues and are layered, inclusive, adaptive and pluralistic, despite the differences in the political systems within which they operate. At the same time, their approach to the conflict invites diverse community members to connect and feel empowered to participate in these complex processes.

This article is a collection of these stories of the women peacebuilders. The MBBI stories are grouped into two categories. In the first set of examples from Columbia, Pittsburgh, and Kenya, the mediation interventions took place to either prevent the violent manifestation of conflict (conflict prevention) or to contain the violence once it had started (conflict mitigation) and in the second set of examples from Liberia and Lesotho, the MBBI mediation interventions were made during the phase of transitional justice and post conflict recovery. It was found that that in the second category gender concerns could be addressed more purposefully and systemically.

Across the spectrum however the stories illustrate how women are actively confronting local and global conflicts, highlighting the intersection of conflict, gender, socio-economic factors, migration, and climate change. They demonstrate how women, despite facing hindering norms and challenges, are leading mediation and peacebuilding efforts to transform conflicts. The intersectional impacts are further compounded, especially for indigenous and marginalized women, due to factors like culture, class, race, and ethnicity. Structural inequalities not only make women disproportionately vulnerable to risks but also exclude them from peacebuilding processes. Despite their frontline roles, women face forced marginalization in conflict resolution, compounded by the fragmented approach of practitioners, which create additional barriers.

Understanding and Adapting Diverse Gendered Contexts

Mediation is often perceived as a neutral, structured process aimed at resolving disputes and fostering dialogue between conflicting parties. However, practitioners, especially women, bring unique perspectives and definitions to mediative processes, shaped by their experiences and cultural backgrounds. In the contexts of countries where multiple conflict sites and cultural constituencies intersect across national borders, mediation takes on nuanced meanings. We will explore practical omnipartial approaches to peacebuilding (Cloke 2022).

Women mediators, drawing from their roles as caretakers and community nurturers, often approach mediation with a focus on inclusivity and empathy. They may frame mediation not just as a negotiation mechanism but as a holistic process that seeks to address the root causes of conflict and promote long-term peace. For instance, women mediators might integrate traditional conflict resolution practices with modern mediation techniques, blending local cultural knowledge with international peacebuilding frameworks. This approach reflects a recognition that mediation is not merely about resolving disputes but also about building relationships, fostering understanding, and creating a shared vision for the future.

MBBI has adapted major shifts in its approach to a more people-centered peacebuilding, working with regional and sub regional organizations, increasing engagement of civil society actors, building local capacity of people for participation in peace processes and emphasising the value of multinational, multidisciplinary teams. Most importantly following the gender and inclusive mediation practices that give importance to including women and diverse societal perspectives in mediation processes to build sustainable peace, it has included the recognition of the critical role of women in peacebuilding and the need for gender-sensitive approaches.

Opportunities and Challenges for Women Dialogue Facilitators and Mediators

Women dialogue facilitators and mediators face a unique set of opportunities and challenges in peacebuilding contexts. On the one hand, women are often seen as neutral parties who can bridge

divides and bring new perspectives to conflict transformation processes. Their presence can challenge traditional gender roles and offer alternative approaches to mediation that emphasize collaboration and inclusiveness.

For instance, in some communities, women's roles in households and community settings can position them as effective mediators because they are often seen as peacemakers and caretakers. Their involvement can disrupt entrenched power dynamics and offer fresh insights into resolving conflicts, particularly those related to resource management and inter-ethnic tensions. Women mediators can facilitate dialogues that address not only the immediate issues of conflict but also the broader social and economic inequalities that contribute to tensions in contexts such as those between farming and pastoralist communities. Alice Nduritu's work in Nigeria offers brilliant examples of these layered processes for sustained dialogue and peace (Afolabi 2019).

However, women mediators also encounter significant challenges. Cultural norms and entrenched gender biases can limit their ability to participate fully in mediation processes. In many societies, women are excluded from formal decision-making arenas, which can hinder their effectiveness as mediators. As a result, despite the inclusion of women in peacebuilding initiatives, cultural barriers may still prevent them from being seen as legitimate leaders or equal participants in peace dialogues.

Additionally, women mediators may face opposition from both male counterparts and community members who resist changes to traditional gender roles. This resistance can undermine their efforts and limit their impact in mediation processes. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to create supportive environments for women mediators, provide them with adequate training and resources, and actively challenge gender biases within communities. The following stories of mediation from Columbia, USA and Kenya highlight creative mediation approaches taken at different times in the midst of an ongoing conflict.

Colombia: Dialogues Toward a Technology Facilitated Security Alert System

The MBBI Women in Mediation Initiative and the International Peace Training Institutes (IPTI) are dedicated to preparing women to accept new roles and to thrive as leaders in peacebuilding. We recognize that some cultures currently limit women's participation to informal means or to certain sectors. However, experience has shown that when provided culturally-insightful context-specific training and support, the influence of women trained in advanced conflict transformation and leadership skills can be significant. The IPTI training, subsequent consultative support, and peer networking help women to strategize to achieve the greatest influence and impacts within the cultural and social limits of their communities.

The MBBI peacebuilder, PM, a teacher in Chigorodó, co-founded a platform to protect social leaders in the Urabá region. PM's work in Colombia, in the rural areas of the FARC

(Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), in the context of the disarmament of former guerrillas, the emergence of dissidents in Guaviare, events such as the murder of six peasants in Tumaco, and the massacre of 13 people in Magüí Payán, prompted an exploration in peace mediation that was courageous, and an intervention that was innovative and effective.

Starting with an analysis of the safety needs in this context, PM facilitated a process of identifying different stakeholders and convening them to hear their fears and concerns. Given the known and hidden allegiances of the population, these convenings needed to be conflict sensitive and afford the confidentiality people sought. What emerged as a key factor to which the community wished to respond, was the rise in attacks of leaders who stepped forward in this context fraught with the high risk for violence. The community recognized the remoteness of the location and poor communication networks placed the leaders in an extremely vulnerable position. PM learned about the risk and resilience factors by first listening to the members of her community and asking questions they had never before been asked.

Recognizing the lack of information, support networks, and security for the leaders, PM and her team turned to technology. They collaborated with Movilizadorio and used the Circle of 6 app, developed by The Guardian Project, to create a security alert system. After a successful pilot with 60 leaders, they began expanding the initiative. Challenges included limited cell coverage in remote areas and adapting the technology for older leaders. They were working with fifty leaders, and expanded further in subsequent years.

This seemingly elegantly simple innovation that a PM, a woman peace mediator was able to achieve is a great example of one of qualities (Vaish et al. 2018) that peacebuilders around the world identified as critical skills for mediators.

The Pittsburgh Somali Refugee Project –Resolution of Ethnic Tensions Among Immigrant and Established Communities within Neighbourhoods

The case study from the Somali refugee project illustrates the challenges of forced migration and violent extremism in contemporary peacebuilding and mediation efforts. Mediation processes must adapt to address the complexities introduced by these phenomena, which often exacerbate existing conflicts and create new ones. Understanding how mediation can work in contexts of forced migration and what is now described as violent extremism is crucial for building sustainable peace.

Forced migration, driven by factors such as drought, conflict, and resource scarcity, can lead to tensions between displaced populations and host communities. Mediators must navigate these tensions by addressing the needs and grievances of both groups, fostering dialogue, and seeking solutions that promote coexistence and mutual benefit. For example, mediators might facilitate discussions between displaced settled communities to address resource competition and promote equitable access to natural resources.

Violent extremism, which can be fueled by economic disenfranchisement, social marginalization, and political instability, requires mediators to address underlying causes and work towards deradicalization and reconciliation. Mediators might engage with extremist groups to understand their motivations, challenge extremist ideologies, and promote alternative narratives of peace and cooperation.

Human migration is not new. However, civil conflicts, interstate wars and extreme natural disasters gripping countries across the world, has led to the largest migration of populations and internally displaced people globally. This resultant creation of large groups of refugees who are then accepted by governments (or not) and resettled in the countries, is a major challenge and opportunity for mediators working in communities across the world. In countries across the globe, we are experiencing the largest migration of population which means “we all have new neighbors” as they say at MBBI. This makes the work of building social cohesion and safety at the community level, an important part of a mediator’s challenge.¹

“The current United Nations estimate is that there are about 281 million international migrants in the world, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population. But increasing numbers of people are being displaced, within and out of their country of origin, because of conflict, violence, political or economic instability as well as climate change and other disasters. In 2022, there were 117 million displaced people in the world, and 71.2 million internally displaced people. The number of asylum-seekers has risen from 4.1 million in 2020 to 5.4 million in 2022, an increase of more than 30 per cent.” (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024)

Notwithstanding the current hyper polarized conversations in the USA, it has had one of the most generous refugee resettlement policies in the world. Refugee resettlement in American cities, including Pittsburgh, proceeds with varying degrees of ease. The MBBI project of resettlement of Somali refugees in Pittsburgh included both successes and experiences that made the resettlement process vulnerable to conflict. It calls for careful mediation and skilled mediators to ease the process of resettlement and integration.

The goal of the Pittsburgh Somali Refugee Project was to support one community (Lawrenceville) impacted by the resettlement of one refugee group (Somali Bantu) and through the process of mediation develop a model that communities may develop and implement to facilitate a more welcoming, dignified and seamless process of acculturation and integration, both for future refugees and immigrants, as well as for the established residents. Through mediation it is possible to develop models that promote economic, social and educational opportunities for both groups. What we have learned from our experiences is that sustained peace is enhanced by multi pronged efforts that include training, livelihoods and psychosocial supports. “You cannot eat peace” as the

¹ See MBBI’s co-convening of the TRUST Network for an example of the role of mediators in creating an infrastructure of social cohesion in the USA. <https://www.thetrustnetwork.net/>

brave women in Liberia reminded us. The tools of the mediator in such cases must include analysis, co-creation capacity, facilitation of dialogues, joint problem solving and more.

MBBI identified “heterogeneous” groups within the established community e.g. those who resided in the community their entire lives and those who moved there within the last 10 years as part of the changing demographic profile of Lawrenceville to facilitate the dialogue across groups with shared interests. The intention was to offer an opportunity to educate group members about one another and to articulate common concerns. For example, the established families learned about the refugee families “histories, why they left their country and the resettlement process”. People were able to hear directly from the Somalis regarding the violence they experienced in their country and why they left. The established community members were able to hear the stories of their lives in a refugee camp in Kenya, the challenges they faced every day in a new country and the pain of being so far away from home. The refugee families in turn learned about the history of the Lawrenceville community, the economic challenges it already faced with the decline of the steel industry, social practices within the community, the legal requirements with implications for child rearing practices in the USA and more.

The major challenge the mediators experienced was in relation to obtaining access to the Somali population, specifically the adults and elders. One key lesson learned through this mediation project is the amount of time it can take to access a refugee group, particularly one with language barriers and an acknowledgment that at the early stage of resettlement that necessitates a focus on developing economic independence. The process was many-layered, and trust had to be developed through an established intermediary before MBBI could speak to the group as a whole.

This project underscored the critical role of language in social integration. This is not new to those in the field of refugee re-settlement; relevant here however is the barrier it placed on the Somali Bantus “ability to become involved in the community activities” in which they had great interest.

As trust was built and the engagement improved, it was clear that the difficulties encountered in the resettling of refugees in a host country arise from multiple sources. The first source of difficulty involves so-called personal factors which stem from the character and experience of the individual refugee. For example, these include past experiences or experiences encountered during flight from the home country, family-background, religion, age, sex, educational level, occupation, etc. The second source pertains to the circumstances surrounding the process of resettlement (e.g. level of assistance offered by the host community, cultural differences between the home and host country, etc.). The third source of differences arises from the level of communication between the refugee and the new social environment (for example, the possibility of establishing social contacts, access to various kinds of information, etc.).

This mediation project brought together various community organizations (business community, arts, education, sports, police, and elected officials) that had been working independently to address different aspects of the issues raised by those working within the community. A holistic, systemic approach to building social cohesion through mediative practices clearly improved the traditional refugee resettlement efforts. It is MBBI's hope that these mediative practices inform refugee settlement efforts globally.

Finally, one of the most important learning from the project was that the resettlement of refugees who are racial minorities *with* histories of individual and collective trauma necessitate a more trauma informed approach to mediation. The integration of lessons from the fields of trauma and peace building made it clear that addressing trauma is a critical component of conflict transformation, social cohesion and peacebuilding and that all mediation efforts must take this into account.

Warriors to Peace Guardians: Building Inter-ethnic Collaboration for Positive Peace

A case from Kenya illustrates the challenges of applying a climate lens to mediative practice which is increasingly relevant in the face of global climate change. Climate change exacerbates conflicts by intensifying resource scarcity, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, and creating new pressures on communities. In areas where droughts and resource competition are significant conflict drivers, integrating a climate perspective into mediation practices is essential for addressing both immediate and long-term issues.

A climate lens involves recognizing the ways in which environmental changes impact conflict dynamics and developing mediation strategies that address these environmental factors. For instance, mediators might work with communities to develop sustainable resource management practices, promote climate adaptation strategies, and address the environmental impacts of conflict. By incorporating climate considerations into mediation processes, practitioners can help communities adapt to environmental changes and reduce the risk of future conflicts.

In the Laikipia West area of Kenya, four pastoralist ethnic communities relied on the livestock economy, including Pokot, Samburu, Tugen and Turkana (PSTT). Additionally non-pastoralist Kikuyu community members were tending livestock among them, which was significant as the PSTT people were all from the Nilotic ethnic groups and the Kikuyu were from the Bantu tribes, largely into farming. Great tensions traditionally exist between the farming and pastoralist communities when herds invade croplands for fodder during times of drought, which were occurring with greater frequency.

Pastoralist (nomadic livestock herder) communities in this region were plagued by severe droughts, resource scarcity, cattle rustling, marginalization, illiteracy, and cycles of revenge

killings between ethnic communities. Inbreeding of herds weakens livestock, and losses led to traditional raiding (with new practices of violence) to replenish herds, while young men without adequate herds for bride price or basic survival were enticed into violent activities by commercial rustlers and political manipulations.

Where is the role of mediation in this scenario? The first task of the mediator in these situations is to analyse the root causes of the conflict. The MBBI's team's community assessment identified that traditional ethnic divisions, prejudice, and political marginalization that have led to poverty, competition, and cycles of violent conflict. Civic involvement and cross-community engagements were lacking, hindering the ability to secure government services, promote community healing, and cross-ethnic bonding. Communities shared critical needs for water, schools, and healthcare, while striving to maintain pastoralist traditions. Small, inbred herds faced poor health due to limited pastures, forcing migrations that strained families and escalated conflicts over scarce resources. Competition for these resources, coupled with easy access to weapons, drove tribes to engage in cattle rustling as a survival strategy.

Having identified the factors contributing to the conflict the mediators identified direct beneficiaries—including youth, women and elders—selected by their communities, who were trained as Peace Guardians (PG's), including women. The MBBI training was intended to create a safe environment and new approaches to working across ethnic divides and strengthening the voice of women and youth in peacebuilding. The PGs self-organized a Steering Committee with representatives from all communities, women, youth and elders to promote continued inter-ethnic communication and establish a Baringo Community Based Organization. However, it was observed that cultural norms within the communities may have led to some PGs (specifically some women and youth) being excluded from, or not feeling welcomed in local peace processes, although there was full participation during the project meetings. Continued emphasis on the importance of women and youth voices and planning to include all groups including spoilers during community peace dialogue meetings was part of adapting to emergent realities.

The objectives of this mediation project were to build local resilience against violent conflict, increase inter-ethnic collaboration and to support the community to build sustainable positive peace. In pastoralist lands, there is no separation between conflict and the livestock economy, it was identified as the primary conflict driver. Therefore, an integrated approach to enhancing livelihoods and transforming conflict was considered appropriate.

The WTPG project contributed to the following positive observations reported by the PGs: Reduced Crime, Violence, and Cattle Rustling was reported, the sound of gunshots significantly decreased, and fewer young men engaged in raids. Inter-Ethnic Cooperation enhanced as communities began working together on projects, such as the Tugen and IlChamus cultivating together. Communities addressed problems collectively, fostering a sense of unity. Improved Inter-

Ethnic Relationships were reported because of joint peace meetings that provided opportunities for different ethnic groups to interact, bond, and share ideas. This led to increased cooperation and trust among the communities. It resulted in the freedom of movement across community lines. An IlChamus youth was able to return to Mukutani after eight years, demonstrating improved security and freedom of movement across communities. Improved Community Coordination with Local Government resulted as the local government officials recognized the PGs for their role in reducing conflict and engaging with officials to combat remaining cattle theft. It motivated re-opening of Inter-Ethnic Markets, which had been closed due to conflict, allowing communities to engage in trade and social activities. The schools that were closed due to conflict reopened, teachers returned, student enrollments increased, with children from different communities attending together. The warriors agreed to reopen the roadways closed by conflict, leading to improved transportation and security. Overall, the sense of calmness and increased security fostered, and normalcy has returned to the communities, allowing people to resume their daily activities. Ultimately, it increased development and economic Security such as enabled National Youth Service (NYS) to initiate new projects, boosting confidence in the region's future. Women were particularly determined to have sustainable peace and they did not want to go back to violence again. They took several steps to entrench their newfound peace.

The project enhanced local capacity to prevent future conflicts by developing cross-ethnic community cooperation skills and demonstrating its rewards, healthier and more resilient livestock, and reducing the individual and community resource competition that is increasingly leading to violence in this area.

The next section draws on MBBI's experiences in Liberia and Lesotho in the period of transitional justice and post conflict recovery and explains how gender was purposefully integrated into these mediation efforts despite the many challenges of initiating change during this phase of peacebuilding.

Feminist Perspectives: Socio-economic Post-conflict Recovery and Peacebuilding

Before examining the mediation interventions in Liberia and Lesotho it is important to set the global context in which such efforts were located. The experience of war and violence, profoundly alters our very experience of life. No one—whether individuals, communities, or nations—emerges unchanged. The individual, communal, and structural violence that war unleashes fundamentally alters us. In nations recovering from prolonged violent conflict, there is frequently a stronger push to transform political economies and integrate into the global capitalist market rather than confront the deep and lingering consequences of war.

The international structures established in the last century, including global financial systems, are still not fully committed to exposing and dismantling the root causes of violence and war. These

entities often frame their efforts as post-war recovery, but the recovery and re-construction processes are often disconnected from the lived experiences of those affected by war and its devastating aftermath. Instead, they are shaped by frameworks and narratives that remain deeply militarized and patriarchal, failing to address the true impact of conflict on people's lives. This disconnect perpetuates the very conditions that allow violence to thrive, rather than fostering genuine healing and rebuilding (Women's International League for Peace & Freedom: Australia).

Post-war translates into increased poverty, de-politicization, disempowerment, disillusion, and more anxiety, sadness, and bitterness for most people. The recovery becomes an elusive concept available only for the privileged few, those that managed to cash in on both the destruction and the reconstruction.

There are several crucial areas where transitional justice and post-conflict recovery efforts often fall short in addressing the needs of women, particularly in economic recovery requiring concerted efforts by mediators to address these gender issues (Women's International Peace Centre 2024). Some of these areas are:

1. *Transitional Justice and Economic Recovery*: There is a critical need for transitional justice mechanisms that prioritize women's economic recovery. This often involves initiatives like land restitution, which are frequently overlooked. Securing land rights can be essential for women's economic empowerment, especially in post-conflict settings where they may have lost property or been displaced.
2. *Facilitation of Women's Cross-Border Trade*: We need to recognize the importance of creating institutions that support women in cross-border trade. This includes:
 - Streamlined customs procedures: Reducing bureaucratic barriers that can disproportionately affect women traders.
 - Access to trade finance: Ensuring that women have the financial resources needed to participate in trade.
 - Feminist trade policies: Developing policies that specifically address gender disparities in trade, helping to counteract restrictive regulations and other barriers that women face.
3. *Intersectional Approaches in Financing Institutions*: The financing institutions need to adopt intersectional approaches in post-conflict economic recovery. A one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate, particularly for women in conflict situations who may also be refugees, internally displaced persons, ethnic minorities, or facing other forms of marginalization. Intersectional approaches recognize the varied and overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage that these women may face, and tailor support accordingly.

In a nutshell, a nuanced, inclusive, and supportive economic recovery strategies that acknowledge and address the specific challenges faced by women, particularly in the aftermath of conflict are crucial.

Any mediation effort if it has to be sustainable needs to take these factors into consideration in the process design.

The Nexus between Economic Recovery and Peace

Transitional justice and feminist frameworks, both address the relationship between economic recovery and peace. Effective conflict resolution is essential for economic growth, as it restores investor confidence and creates a stable environment conducive to investment. There is noted correlation between peaceful societies and higher Human Development Index (HDI) scores, which indicates that peace is often accompanied by better access to healthcare and improved education systems, but most importantly integrating peacebuilding into economic strategies.

The women mediators working with MBBI in Ukraine have shared their firsthand experience with treating peace and economic recovery in watertight compartments. One peacebuilder describes “Whereas peace negotiations (when put in place) will be left to ‘important’ men in uniforms accompanied with diplomats”, the economic interventions underway are portrayed as an “objective” course of action, devoid of financial interests and ideology of those planning for them and unrelated to peace, other than in its reconstruction element. So in between the peace negotiations reserved for the “important” men, and economic interventions reserved for “experts” there is really no room for those most affected by the war to influence how the transition from war to peace will be carried out. There is no room for the women to have a say in the political economy that will underpin the transition from war to peace, despite the fact that it is their labor, made invisible, that holds up entire communities in these countries.

The 21st century mediators and peacebuilders are increasingly using innovative processes of mediation and negotiation that decry the old “big man” (hierarchical, not just a gender reference) models and undertake complex processes in which “*people at the heart of the conflict participate in the transformation and recovery.*”

The Liberian Civil War: Turbulent History

The Liberian Civil War was an internal conflict in Liberia that lasted approximately 14 years. Liberian Women’s campaign for peace led by the women of Liberia under the banner of “*Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace*” transformed the conflict that worked to end the Second Liberian Civil War started in 1999. Their leader, Leymah Gbowee, had declared that the women were “taking the destiny of Liberia into their own hands.”

In August 2003, the fourteenth (14th) year of the bloody civil war, President Taylor resigned as a result of Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

The 2005 general election marked a turning point in the country's turbulent history electing Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president – Africa's first elected female leader. She vowed to rebuild the country –creating jobs, helping farmers to return to their land and restoring an infrastructure gutted by the war.

It was estimated that over half of the country's population was displaced internally and externally and over 200,000 lives were lost as a result of civil war. The civil administration through many areas of

Liberia was ruptured, disrupting the economic activities that resulted in considerable dependence on humanitarian assistance provided by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations.

The involvement of child soldiers in Liberian civil war haunted the national and international community as it was in complete violation of the Geneva Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Radio Liberia FM run by Liberia Broadcasting System reported that "*the small boys who were not much taller than their guns they carried around*" were recruited in the armed conflict in their formative years- by conscription or abduction, which formed their identity in culture of violence.

Liberian refugees were displaced in Ghana, living at the Buduburam refugee camp, built to host the refugees escaping the civil war in Liberia. Liberians were afforded protection by the Government of Ghana. In late 2004, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) UNHCR began repatriating Liberians approximately within a year after conflict officially ended.

After an invitation by a resident of Ghana's largest refugee camp- Buduburam refugee camp - Mediator's Beyond Borders International (MBBI), began to contribute to the rebuilding of Liberia and its people, devastated by civil war. At the time of MBBI intervention, although the civil war had ended, the country was recovering but still in a vulnerable state with most of the people living in poverty. Two of the critical factors for post-conflict peace were the employment and reintegration of former combatants.

Through a series of community consultations, the MBBI team developed the following key interdependent mediative components to respond to the Liberian peacebuilding Initiative:

1. *Creation of Community Mediation Services:* Community Mediation Services were created in Ghana and Liberia. At the Buduburam Settlement in Ghana, student peer mediation clubs were also created for conflict resolution among Liberians.

2. *Capacity Building in Liberia*: MBBI provided mediation and conflict resolution training, in Ghana and Liberia, to lawyers, tribal chiefs, land administrators, police and prison officials, several NGOs' staff, and university graduate students. At the heart of the approach was that trust building would enhance collaboration.
3. *Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution*: Network for Empowerment and Progressive Initiatives (NEPI) and MBBI conducted intensive trainings jointly with the returnees and community members. The trainings focus on effective communication, recovery, identity, leadership, fitting into the community, and conflict resolution.
4. *Community engagement*: MBBI and NEPI met in each repatriation location with government, tribal, refugee organization, development, civil society, and other group leaders to introduce the repatriation program and seek their permission and support to operate in the area. Community group sessions were conducted to discuss the repatriation program, to address people's concerns and to solicit their participation.
5. *Cleansing Ceremonies*: Traditional cleansing ceremonies were arranged to serve to release the harms and hurts and have leaders accept responsibility for the returnees as members of this community. They were large public events where government leaders, as well as traditional leaders, presided and were acknowledged.
6. *Psychological Assessment and Medical Assistance*: MBBI partnered with the University of Ghana-Legon to provide psychological assessment and group and individual therapeutic interventions aimed at healing trauma, reforming identity. MBBI investigated partnerships to provide medical assistance to repair wounds and other conditions, visual reminders of wartime actions that can serve to separate these youth from their communities and affect their capacity to form healthy identities.
7. *The three R's –Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Restore*: Many of the former child soldiers from Buduburam had not participated in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process (DDR) established by and under the direction of the UN High Commission on Refugees. MBBI identified the need to work in conjunction with local partners, with these former child soldiers and with the communities that will receive them.
8. *Child Soldier Reintegration Fund*: During a graduate student's field work, 140 youth, mostly former child soldiers, were screened for their interest and willingness to participate in a rehabilitation program aimed at successful reintegration into Liberian society. The work expanded to become Child Soldier Reintegration Fund (CSRF), which sought partnership with MBBI. A total of 160 men and women participated in some or all of the program.
9. *Community Preparation for Repatriation*: NEPI and MBBI met with individuals and representatives of groups, specifically to address their anger or anxiety about the returnees. Using mediation/conflict resolution techniques, they attempted to work through those feelings and concerns and prepared for civil participation in group processes.

10. *Vocational Training*: MBBI partnered with CSRF and Society Mission Africa to provide a ten-month vocational training program. Students studied one or more of: masonry, architectural drafting, plumbing, electricity, automotive repair, and tailoring.
11. *Building Capacity of Youth*: MBBI partnered with National Ex-Combatants' Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI) to provide assessment, mentoring, group practice, and individual counseling aimed at building the youth's capacity to integrate into communities.
12. *Collective Farming*: NEPI also assisted the returnees with a collective farming project, which was made possible due to the generous donation of 100 acres by a community member following the return of the students, during the course of the early re-integration activities. This countered the reality of "Civil War, Barren Fields", as armed conflict had destroyed the infrastructure, including water supply systems, roads, farmlands, crops, and public health facilities.
13. *Basic Needs—Food, Water, Sanitation*: Food security was also affecting large percent of the population. Building its agricultural markets and capacity of farmers was identified as an important aspect. Water scarcity and sanitation was a big challenge. Empowering the local community as to how to provide for themselves in a developing economy and helping its economy to recover was important.
14. *Women hold up half the sky*: The core group consisting of women participated in dialogues, psychological sessions and permaculture activities. Reportedly enhancing relationships, building trust and developing greater sense of safety and community.
15. *Partnership Building*: MBBI worked in partnership with 20 other local and international organizations on various other areas such as for Reintegration and community services, peacebuilding research and interventions, Public Conversations Project, training to install and maintain appropriate technology water pumps and toilets, trauma healing, Vocational training in construction trades and tailoring, psycho-social services, Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) –Alliances across borders and between communities and police, early warning and early response, gender-based violence reduction, and Youth Crime Watch of Liberia for Youth-oriented peacebuilding.

The mediation project highlighted the importance of inclusiveness and equality for sustainable peacebuilding. The involvement of women and youth and overall community dialogue are critical in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Respecting local cultural practices and relationship building (in this case through the reintroduction ceremonies) cement mediation efforts and make it easier for MBBI volunteers to train and mentor local peacebuilders and develop their skills to build resilience and deal with trauma.

Another important lesson was that it was community dialogue, taking into account perspectives from women and involvement of local police that together that worked for rehabilitation of child soldiers. It was the MBBI efforts to focus on vocational training, providing resources for basic needs such as water (such as providing training to install and maintain appropriate technology

water pumps and toilets) and agricultural training initiatives, which included running a collective farm using new, sustainable farming techniques to grow sale-able crops that created the eco system for sustainable development without which peace was not possible.

The MBBi Liberian Initiative established relationships in communities with a wide range of local and international partners from all sectors from governmental to grass roots levels. It coordinated activities to increase the capacity for skillful communication, cooperation, and collaboration among Liberian as well as the NGOs and government agencies serving them. Clearly the lesson learnt was that without this network of relationships and linkages mediation cannot flourish.

Mediation in Lesotho: Dagga pioneers of Bergville- Ngoba 22 Exhumation

The members of the Okhahlamba Local Municipality invited MBBi for this project known as “Ngoba 22”. Okhahlamba is made up of privately owned commercial farmland; smallholder settlements; the urban areas of Bergville, Winterton, Cathkin Park and Geluksberg; and three tribal authority areas of AMaNgwane, AMaSwazi and AMaZizi. These three Tribal Authorities have a history of ploughing Cannabis which formed the fulcrum of the economy in black communities. At the heart of the matter was a cultural and spiritual belief that if a detained person confined in prison died as a prisoner, they need to be brought home for a ritual and a proper burial, otherwise that person’s spirit wanders and does a lot of destruction and there is no stability to the community. The Ngoba people living in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa also have a cultural belief that there was nothing wrong in trading with Cannabis, as it has a lot of value besides being smoked. When they sold it, they never prescribed to their trade partners as to what purpose it was going to be used for. However, this herb was forbidden during the apartheid regime, which made it criminal to grow these plants.

In 1956, there was a war between the Amangwane tribe and the apartheid police in Ngoba, over the control of the marijuana production in the area. In year 1957, following that war, several Amangwane soldiers and civilians were killed. 22 cannabis black farmers were executed in Pretoria by the apartheid government in a dagga marijuana clampdown and sentenced to death by the Pretoria High Court (hence known as “Ngoba 22”). The cultural belief was that the ancestors are connection between the living and the creator and as a result the exhumation of these people started in 2017. However it met with a challenge as the bones which were submitted to relatives did not match the DNA. This was brought to the awareness of Mrs. Lethiwe Zondo, the member of the Ngoba community and MBBi mediator. This woman mediator then took it upon herself to design a process that would be restorative and healing and paved the way for ending the violence her community was experiencing. She convened a series of gatherings that promoted dialogue between the families of the descendants, the judicial and municipal authorities, anthropologists, historians, and spiritual leaders. The commemoration ceremonies honoured the painful

experiences of the families, and served as a process to publicly recognize, for the first time in the history of South Africa, the intergenerational trauma suffered by the Ngoba people. The ceremonies included presentation of plant and animal totem for all 22 families and paved the way for them to have a voice and revive their indigenous ways of nature conservation through spiritual reverence. This creative mediative approach shines a light on the importance of constantly adapting the process rather than view mediation mechanically as a rule bound process with a premium placed on generating tangible written outcomes.

Reflections on Mediation Work: Challenges and Adaptations

The MBBI initiatives to build local capacity for peacebuilding involves diverse community members including youth, women, and elderly, who are trained to foster dialogue, mediate conflicts, and promote peace within their communities.

One of the potential challenges noted in these training projects is the gap between the intended purpose of the training and the actual outcomes. While the training aimed to create a safe environment for dialogue and strengthen the voices of women and youth, limitations in terms of data collection and the intensity of training could be challenging on the ground. This requires a clear emphasis on the practical goals of training programs and the importance of adapting training methods to meet the needs of diverse community members.

Cultural norms and biases also play a role in shaping their experiences. Despite the efforts to include all groups in peace dialogues, certain cultural barriers may lead to the exclusion of women and youth from local peace processes. Addressing these barriers requires a continued emphasis on the importance of inclusivity and the active involvement of all community members in peacebuilding efforts.

The mediation interventions by MBBI underlines the importance of feminist approaches in addressing poverty, including in strengthening institutions, and incorporating reparations for survivors. Feminist frameworks can guide the implementation of these measures globally and not only in the ones referred to as “conflict-affected”, which is simply code for excluding the global North.

“Feminist frameworks” are not just for women or women’s issues, but extend beyond women or gender-specific issues. In the context of feminist peacebuilding, they provide a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing broader societal challenges. These frameworks delve into the structural drivers of poverty and economic recovery, offering a more holistic and critical perspective. It means openness to contestation, embracing multiple and diverse viewpoints, not simply adding women or gender considerations as an afterthought.

A key focus of feminist frameworks is the transformation of structural power asymmetries, recognizing the deep-seated inequalities that shape societies. This approach requires identifying, unpacking, and transforming the complex power dynamics that influence the lives of those affected by conflict and injustice. By challenging the status quo and advocating for systemic change, feminist frameworks in peacebuilding aims to create more inclusive and equitable societies, where power is redistributed, and all voices are valued in the pursuit of lasting peace.

In simple words, this means designing and participating in peacebuilding programs that contribute to a peace that works for everyone.

Conclusion

The intersection of gender and mediation presents both opportunities and challenges in the quest for effective peacebuilding. By examining local experiences in peacebuilding in various parts of the world and exploring international approaches, this paper aims to enhance the understanding of how gender dynamics influence mediation processes and contribute to sustainable peace. Through the empowerment of local communicators, the efforts to build local resilience and foster inter-ethnic collaboration can support communities in their pursuit of building positive peace.

Peace that does not address the legacy of a deeply divided past is temporary. The evolving identities of communities impacted by deep historical divisions and population migration, in the context of life-threatening resource shortages, presents opportunities and challenges for conflict transformation professionals at every level. These are the situations that require courageous conversations and dangerous dialogues, as MBBI members often say, drawing from the words of one of its founders Ken Cloke. To grow into societies with new civic norms such as pluralism, partnership and accommodation, we must build peace“able” communities by reducing and eliminating signs of retrenchment, tribalism and parallel living.

Ultimately, this approach underscores the importance of integrating diverse perspectives, addressing cultural biases, and adapting mediation practices to the specific contexts of conflict and peacebuilding. By embracing these principles, practitioners can work towards more effective and inclusive peacebuilding processes that address both immediate conflicts and long-term challenges.

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