Gender-Related Risk in Peace Mediation

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**Background**

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is both about advocating for the rights of women and girls during conflict and adopting gender perspectives in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. Included in the latter are challenges that may arise over women’s participation in peace mediation. Security provisions in peace agreements tend to view security in relation to male armed actors\(^1\) and assessments of security relating to these,\(^2\) while often failing to account for the multiple and diverse forms of insecurity and risk that disproportionately affect women in conflict and mediation contexts. Where security provisions that address such considerations are included, unprecedented attention has been given to women’s status as targets of sexualised violence.\(^3\) Yet the security of women (and men) in conflict situations is affected in a myriad of ways that go beyond both the threat of violence from armed conflict and the use of sexual violence as a tool of war.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) The groups that are traditionally included in the preliminary stages of peace processes, armed actors and national elites, tend to consist predominantly or exclusively of men. See e.g., O’Reilly et al., ‘Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes’, 2015.

\(^2\) Namely ‘hard security’, that is, ‘security concerns [including] movement of troops or armed combatants, ceasefire lines, territorial control, weapons control or processes of demobilisation and disarmament of combatants, and more structural security sector reform (SSR) (such as reforming army, police, and their lines of democratic accountability)’. See Pospisil and Bell, ‘Securing’ Peace: Women and Security Arrangements in Peace Processes’, 2018.


In order to accommodate for the meaningful participation of women in peace processes, it is essential that the latter incorporate gender sensitive security provisions that safeguard women mediators, negotiators, peacebuilders, and peacekeepers. Such enabling environments can only emerge by addressing inclusion in a manner that allows women peacebuilders greater agency in forming the provisions of their own protection. Gender-related risks connected to participation in peace processes and mediation span from structural risks directly linked to the way peace processes are designed and organised, to sociocultural risks specific to the contexts under which conflicts have arisen. This backgrounder presents a non-exhaustive selection of risk factors that may confront women in peace mediation contexts and that challenge women’s capacity and motivation to approach, access, and meaningfully participate in peace processes. It concludes with recommendations for addressing these issues.

Types of Risk

Exclusion from pre-negotiations: Women are more likely to be excluded from the initial negotiation stage of the peace process than men are. Pre-negotiations have an important agenda-setting function, marking a critical point for establishing the key issues for formal talks. Ending political violence is the focus of most peace processes, however, there are other forms of violence experienced by women and minorities that go unrecognised if women are not included in pre-negotiations. Women’s exclusion from this preparatory stage leads to the risk of exclusion from subsequent stages of the peace process. Groups who perceive their presence at the negotiating table as an opportunity to renegotiate their power, such as armed actors (often with limited qualifications), have a vested interest in restricting further access to the peace talks. A natural consequence of the power dynamics established at the onset of negotiations is that the bar for later entry to the peace process is set unreasonably high. This entails that traditionally excluded groups such as women are expected to bring a higher level of expertise and experience to the table in order to warrant their inclusion, have their voices heard, and indeed be taken seriously. In the context of risk in particular, exclusion at the preparatory stage additionally means that any risks related to women’s later inclusion in mediation processes remain unaddressed.

Disproportional losses: Participation in peace processes often entails greater risk for women than it does for men as women must often break with traditional and restrictive gender norms in order to partake, leading to increased reputational and physical risk (see

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6 O’Reilly et al., 2015, op. cit.
8 This is because women are less likely to be members of armed groups or representatives in government, the groups typically brought together for pre-negotiation, than men. See e.g., Lund and Mitchell, 2017, op. cit.
10 O’Reilly et al., 2015, op. cit.
11 Some women have felt that they were expected to have ‘PhDs in negotiation [and be] both prominent leaders with technical experience and activists with large grassroots constituencies.’ See O’Reilly et al., ibid.
below). Correspondingly, women often have a lot invested in the outcome of peace processes, and risk losing any gains they may have made in the peace agreement’s text if the agreement collapses.\(^\text{12}\)

**Visibility and recognition:** Women already play a vital mediation role across diplomatic tracks, not least by bridging communities, armed groups, and conflict parties through tireless involvement at the informal level.\(^\text{13}\) Yet due to narrow and outdated definitions of what constitutes mediation, this work often goes unrecognised or undervalued,\(^\text{14}\) and the risks associated with it go undocumented. Furthermore, women often do not have access to resources that allow them to document their work, amplify their contributions or replicate their successes.\(^\text{15}\) Consequentially, women risk seeing their hard work go ignored or become co-opted by more powerful actors in the peace process, which may in turn negatively impact women’s opportunities for future work and recognition,\(^\text{16}\) as well as experienced women’s willingness to engage in future mediation.

**Post-process violence:** Women who take on visible roles during the peace process risk being targeted by violence as a result of their participation.\(^\text{17}\) Not only does this represent a direct risk to the security of those women who are both able and willing to work for peace but, importantly, fear of violence may lead qualified women to opt out of participation for reasons of self-preservation, or in order to protect dependants and loved ones.

**Gender roles and stereotypes:** Women engaged in peace and mediation efforts are often at greater general risk than their male counterparts due to general and context-specific gender roles and norms that control women and limit access to the peace process.\(^\text{18}\) Gender norms may also influence the type of work that is designated to women in peacebuilding and mediation contexts, potentially limiting their contributions, enforcing or perpetuating outdated gendered divisions of labour. In addition, women often have responsibilities as mothers, spouses, employees and community members that limit their opportunities to participate in talks that are not adapted to their specific needs.\(^\text{19}\)

**Structural challenges post-process:** Women’s responsibilities as mothers, spouses, workers and community members create additional risk to their capacities to participate in post-

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12 Bell, 2013, op. cit.
13 Kakar, ‘Why are women mediators still not recognised?’, 2018
15 UN Women et al., ‘Building Peace from the Grassroots: Learning from Women Peacebuilders to Advance the WPS Agenda’, 2020.
16 ‘Being part of the Afghan peace process, I experienced how women in Afghanistan mediated community conflict on a daily basis. At the same time, women with formal seats were engaged in highly political and dangerous processes, where they negotiated terms of peace with armed insurgents, including the Taliban. However, these examples are not cited, and the credit for their successes was often taken by male politicians.’ Kakar, 2018, op. cit.
18 Helleland et al., 2019, op.cit.
process peacebuilding efforts. The multiple challenges that may arise post-process, relating to factors such as large-scale reform, social and economic reconstruction, returning partners and sons, and efforts to relocate displaced persons, are likely to place additional demands on women mediators who wish to participate in the implementation stage.\textsuperscript{20}

**Reputational risk:** Socially embedded gender norms that condone the policing of women’s actions and behaviour can leave women particularly vulnerable to verbal attacks and reputational risks.\textsuperscript{21} Gender-based attacks circulated on traditional and social media platforms with the goal of bringing shame on individuals, their families and their communities can expose women to physical harm and social ostracisation, and may ultimately discourage or prevent women from participating in peacebuilding and mediation in a meaningful way.\textsuperscript{22}

**Physical violence:** Alongside verbal attacks and reputational risks, women who participate in peace processes may be constrained by physical intimidation and threats of violence, including death threats.\textsuperscript{23} As women’s engagement in peace processes often entails breaking with gendered norms and expectations, the response to such breakages takes on a gendered dimension.\textsuperscript{24} In order to counter this, physical protection should be made available to mediators, as well as to other women and men – engaged in different stages of the peace process.

**Financial insecurity and economic vulnerability:** Financial dependency exposes women to greater risk from domestic violence, increases insecurity, and hinders access to justice and decision-making.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, financial losses incurred from taking time off work may contribute towards increasing risks to women who participate in mediation. Provisions addressing women’s vulnerability to financial insecurity need to be considered at the pre-negotiation stage, including for example compensation for time taken off work or even renumeration of costs for women to travel to and from the location set for the peace negotiations.

**Digital technology risks:** Increased dependency on technology may negatively impact the scope of women’s mediatory role. The ‘digital divide’ impacts both low-income women, through limited access to e.g., smartphones, computers, and broadband, and women who

\textsuperscript{20} Bell, 2013, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{21} In some Ugandan communities, the shame associated with a woman being an activist or human rights defender causes them to be characterised as ‘men’, ‘impossible women’, or ‘home-breakers’, and may expose women to abuse or violence and even lead them to be shunned by their families. See UN Women et al., 2020, op cit.

\textsuperscript{22} Civil Society Dialogue Network, 2019 op. cit.


\textsuperscript{24} For example, women who break with traditional feminine roles may be perceived as more masculine, ‘justifying’ the use of violence against them as a disciplinary measure.

\textsuperscript{25} UN Women et al., 2020, op. cit.
live in remote areas with insufficient tech infrastructure. Low technological literacy may also limit some participants’ opportunities to participate in talks, impact negotiations, and access information where these are moved online. Social media and digital technologies simultaneously make individuals more accessible, in turn leaving them more vulnerable to intimidation and threats through e.g., direct messaging, public ridicule, unconsented distribution of personal information, and exposure to malicious content. While digital technologies may provide exciting new solutions to peace mediation, both exclusion and access-related risks associated with the use of digital tools should be carefully assessed before they are adopted.

**Trauma and re-traumatisation:** As Esther Mujawayo succinctly put it, ‘Without treating trauma, the violence continues, making peacebuilding and reconstruction difficult.’ Women engaged in mediation may suffer from re-traumatisation. First-hand experience of violent conflict is traumatising, and individuals who have in part recovered from conflict-induced trauma still risk its reoccurrence when confronting or recounting the events that caused it. Traumatising experiences that disproportionately affect women, such as rape and sexual violence, are in addition often considered shameful, making discussions in mediation processes a burden that deserves due recognition.

**Mental health, burnout, and secondary trauma:** Mediation work can have a significant psychological impact. The pressure of the peace process, the content of talks, exposure to gendered attacks, and inadequate measures for addressing other challenges that disproportionately affect women may all adversely affect the mental health of women mediators and peacebuilders. Unavoidable external responsibilities may in combination with active participation as mediators cause long-term stress and burnout. Prolonged interaction with individuals and communities who have been exposed to substantial trauma may additionally cause secondary trauma. Measures to prevent or heal issues such as burnout and second-hand trauma include effective peer support systems, availability of mental health services, and recovery retreats for women mediators.

**Essentialism:** Treating women as a homogenous group with shared needs and experiences not only belittles and undervalues the role women can play as individuals with their own unique perspectives to bring to the table, but may leave women peacemakers more vulnerable to the general risks associated with participation in peacebuilding. Decision-making based on gender-based assumptions about individuals’ innate abilities or needs

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26 This has become clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic, as talks and negotiations have moved to online platforms. UN Women et al., 2020, op. cit.
29 Mujawayo, ‘You are not crazy, your situation was’, 2014.
30 UN Women et al., 2020, op. cit.
31 Bell, 2013, op. cit.
may furthermore impact the outward-facing roles they play, limiting the scope and impact of mediation and peace processes.\textsuperscript{33}

**COVID-19:** Many of the factors that endanger the security of women in peacebuilding and mediation have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{34} During the pandemic, global levels of domestic and interpersonal violence have soared\textsuperscript{35} and violence and security risks faced by women peacebuilders have risen.\textsuperscript{36} The implementation of several peace agreements has been delayed due to funding cuts and other pandemic demands,\textsuperscript{37} with some regions seeing an increase in communal violence as a result.\textsuperscript{38} The reallocation of funds by governments and international organisations to counter the pandemic has disrupted the work and reduced the capacities of organisations that work to promote and protect women’s interests,\textsuperscript{39} and policies aimed at preventing the spread of the virus have impacted the extent to which women mediators and peacebuilders are able to physically meet both each other and stakeholders.\textsuperscript{40}

**Concluding Recommendations**

- **Include women early on.** It is vital that women are included in the peace process from the pre-negotiation stage in order to allow women to inform the agenda for the process to come and to identify risks associated with their participation.

- **Create enabling environments for women’s participation.** Efforts must be made to push back against gender roles and gendered assumptions that limit women’s opportunities to meaningfully participate in peace talks, by providing support that addresses women’s responsibilities to e.g., their families, children, employees and communities.\textsuperscript{41} Factors that are conducive towards an enabling environment include providing women mediators and peacebuilders with access to trauma counselling;\textsuperscript{42} equality before the law; inclusivity as a social and cultural norm; security and protection from violence; social services (e.g., childcare); presence and

\textsuperscript{33} This is for instance true for women peacekeepers who are relegated to administrative roles despite extensive knowledge and experience from past participation in field missions, or who are excluded from potentially dangerous missions due to assumptions that they are weaker and at greater risk of physical violence than men. See e.g., Donnelly et al., ‘Women, Peace, and What is Security?’, 2021.

\textsuperscript{34} Reeves, ‘What does COVID-19 mean for women mediators?’, 2020.


\textsuperscript{37} Reeves, 2020, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{38} UN Women et al., 2020, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} For example, reintegration workshops in Mozambique which would usually involve around 100 ex-combatants at once have periodically only been able to accommodate for 20 ex-combatants because of social distancing. See Reeves, 2020, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{41} Civil Society Dialogue Network, 2019, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{42} UN Women et al., 2020, op. cit.
support for women’s movement; access to knowledge and training; financial support; and logistical support (e.g., visas and transportation).43

- **Recognise women’s informal contributions.** The pandemic has revealed the WPS agenda’s vulnerability to unforeseen change, while simultaneously uncovering the wider system’s dependency on women’s informal contributions. Crediting women for their achievements and contributions is essential in order to build trust, improve the visibility of women mediators, and enhance the role of women in mediation.44

- **Adopt Action Plans for women’s inclusion.** Actively involve local women mediator networks in the preparatory period of the mediation process and make use of the expert advice they can provide regarding their experiences with risk and the particular challenges that may be faced by women mediators in their respective social contexts.

**Bibliography**


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43 Helleland et al., 2019, op. cit.
44 Kakar, 2018, op. cit.


