



# Negotiating Disarmament – The Gender Dimension

## *Barriers to the inclusion of women in disarmament negotiations*

Disarmament is seen as a key means of preventing conflict recurrence. Women are disproportionately affected by weapons: small arms and light weapons used during conflict are often used post-conflict to commit gender-based violence, and explosive weapons in populated areas can severely limit women's access to public spaces. Women are involved both as part of armed groups, and as the leaders of campaigns against weapons. Despite these experiences, women are routinely excluded from disarmament negotiations. In this brief, we examine three sets of barriers to women's meaningful participation in disarmament negotiations across five peace processes: Colombia, Nepal, the Philippines, South Sudan and Sri Lanka.

### Brief Points

- Women and women's groups are generally excluded from disarmament negotiations because of the highly masculinized nature of peace talks and talks on weapons specifically.
- The exclusion of women can result from barriers that are *conceptual* (beliefs and norms related to the participation of women in negotiations), *technical* (portrayal of women as lacking expertise in issues related to arms) or *political* (the lack of women holding political positions in the specific country).
- To be inclusive, disarmament negotiations should involve not just those who use weapons, but the broadest possible coalition of conflict-affected parties.
- Third parties can play an important role in the capacity building of women's groups and in putting pressure on conflict parties to include women in disarmament negotiations.

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## Introduction

Women and women's groups<sup>1</sup> are often excluded from disarmament<sup>2</sup> negotiations<sup>3</sup> due to conflict parties' reluctance to include them, and because of the masculinized nature of peace talks in general and weapons in particular. This is the case despite existing research showing that peace agreements signed by women are associated with a higher number of agreement provisions, higher implementation rates and longer lasting peace.<sup>4</sup> The international community also actively promotes the inclusion of women. Both UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (2000), and the UN Secretary-General's Agenda for Disarmament (2018) call for, respectively, the equal, full and effective participation of women in all stages of peace processes, and in disarmament talks specifically.

We argue that conceptual, technical and political barriers lead to the exclusion of women and women's groups from negotiations on disarmament.

## Varieties of Inclusion and Exclusion in Disarmament Negotiations

Before elaborating on the three sets of barriers, this section provides contextual information on the forms of inclusion and exclusion found in negotiations on disarmament. There is a *continuum* ranging from exclusion, through partial inclusion, to meaningful inclusion. There is also a directional aspect to inclusion, which can be both vertical (including lower-ranking officials) and horizontal (including a wide variety of groups affected by the use of weapons). Addressing these facets of inclusion (both the continuum and the direction) is important because different barriers might influence different versions of inclusion. Negotiations on disarmament are usually between members of male-dominated governments and military elites. Like peace processes in general, negotiations on disarmament can be inclusive processes, or they can exclude significant actors or constituencies, such as other armed groups, women's organizations or civil society actors. An inclusive disarmament process includes communities that are impacted by weapons and addresses the needs of those constituencies. In our five cases, women from both sides of the negotiations were excluded in Nepal, South Sudan and Sri Lanka, but included (at different levels) in the Philippines and Colombia.

In the peace process following the 1996–2006 conflict between the government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Samyukta Jana Morcha, Maoist, CPN-M), women were excluded and neither visible nor influential during the negotiations. Notably, this **absence of inclusion** was the case even though more than 20% of Maoist combatants were women and the Maoists promised gender equality when recruiting their fighters.

There are also examples of cases where women to a certain degree were involved, **but without the capacity to substantially influence the process**. This was the case in Sri Lanka where, in 2002, the peace talks between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) created a formal space for women's engagement through a Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SGI). Although the peace process broke down in 2003, meaning the SGI had only a limited time to influence the process, the initiative received international support and included women from both sides of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> Reviews of the peace process indicate that the influence of the SGI was questionable, in part due to members' limited interaction with the other aspects of the peace process, as well as challenges with the ethnic and class composition of the committee, which did not include any women representatives from the actual conflict zone.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there are some examples of **meaningful inclusion**. For instance, in the case of Mindanao in the Philippines, the government negotiating panel was led by Miriam Colonel Ferrer, making her the first female chief negotiator in the world to sign a final peace accord with a rebel group. The government's inclusion of women encouraged the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to follow suit. Notably, the MILF's inclusion of women provided it with much valued experience, technical knowledge and assistance, ultimately contributing to the sustainability of the peace process.

In addition, it is useful to reflect on the **vertical and horizontal aspects of inclusion**. In **vertical inclusion**, members of the non-state group, including lower-ranking officials, can influence the negotiations. This was the case in Colombia, where the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) sent different members of the group to the peace talks in a rotating system. This set-up ensured that information flowed

relatively freely among members and thus potentially lowered the chances of the disarmament process breaking down due to problems with command and control within the FARC. In contrast, **horizontal inclusion** entails the involvement of other constituencies, such as women's groups, in the negotiations. These actors often experience the consequences of weapons usage.

Importantly, increasing the number of women involved in disarmament talks is one thing; another is to decide *which* women to include. Women who are close to government and military elites might be able to participate but they are not necessarily the best suited to representing the many different women affected by the conflict, for instance female fighters.

## Three Barriers to the Inclusion of Women

The exclusion of women, both as individuals and as organized groups, happens for a number of reasons. In this brief, we identify three potential sets of barriers to women's participation in disarmament negotiations. These are *conceptual*, *technical* and *political* barriers.<sup>7</sup> Different factors might contribute to mitigating these challenges. For example, the involvement of third parties has the potential to encourage the inclusion of women through capacity-building and applying pressure to negotiating parties.

### 1. Conceptual barriers

The conceptual barrier to the participation of women stems from the idea that women *should not or do not need to participate* in negotiations on disarmament. This idea is sometimes expressed as women being irrelevant or even a hinderance to desirable negotiation outcomes, something we found in the Nepal and South Sudan cases.

Relatedly, weapons, as well as motives and opportunities surrounding disarmament, are profoundly gendered. The people to be disarmed in the wake of conflict are usually members of (sometimes informal) armed forces, which are the most direct site in which masculinities are constructed, deployed and reproduced – something that has not been found to be significantly changed by the recruitment of women.<sup>8</sup> The weapons held by individuals are often an important component of masculine identities and the use of those arms have gendered impacts.<sup>9</sup> Warring parties are male-dominated,

and women can therefore be perceived to be on the sideline of both the conflict and its resolution. For instance, in the Philippines, although the female members of the MILF negotiating panel were recognized as valuable, it was also argued that men in the same panel ‘had to manage cultural traditions that suggested that men and women shouldn’t argue with each other’.<sup>10</sup> This reflects an idea that women are inherently different from men, a fundamental assumption that underpins the exclusion of women. In the case of Nepal, one interviewee who asked the Maoist leadership about the reasons for the absence of women recalled that the rebel group member argued that:

*‘War is normally fought by men, so war issues are negotiated between men.’<sup>11</sup>*

Importantly, when women are armed combatants or otherwise actors in a conflict this does not mean that they cannot simultaneously be victims.<sup>12</sup> We posit that male-led armed groups are aware of the many different roles women play in their organizations. Exclusion thus may be due to leaders deliberately keeping women out of decision-making roles in order to perpetuate, create or recreate post-conflict gender roles in which women have a subordinate position in society.

## 2. Technical barriers

The second type of barrier to women’s participation is technical barriers – the question of whether women have the necessary skills, knowledge or experience to be able to play a meaningful part in negotiations. In talks on disarmament parties may value skills like legal drafting or, more specifically, knowledge of military terminology, technical aspects of the weapons themselves, and the means by which arms can be safely stored and disposed. Here, it is important to note that it might be in some parties’ interest to portray women as lacking the necessary technical knowledge regarding weapons, thereby legitimizing their exclusion from negotiations. However, there are examples of disarmament negotiation processes where women have participated and provided necessary technical input. The government of the Philippines included women in technical working groups, which as mentioned also pressured the MILF to draw their own much-needed technical expertise from women.

In the case of Colombia, the negotiators met

with ex-combatants from other conflicts who brought valuable knowledge and insight through their experiences. A specific Gender Sub-Commission was established, which was led by and composed of women and included female members from both the government and FARC. Some of these women also participated in the Technical Sub-Commission on the End of the Conflict. This commission collected testimonies and proposals from representatives of women’s organizations and the LGBTQ+ community, discussed aspects of the laying down of arms and other related issues. While they did not play an important role in the Commission’s work on disarmament, women involved in the peace process generally possessed key skills and provided technical support and new perspectives. As an interviewee argued:

*‘In general, women involved in the [Colombian] peace process possessed key skills (such as being a lawyer) and provided technical support and new ideas.’<sup>13</sup>*

## 3. Political barriers

Finally, a major barrier to participation by women is of a political nature. This concerns whether and to what extent there are women serving in leadership positions in the society. In some cases, women may well partake in politics or political movements, and still be excluded from negotiations. In Sri Lanka, women’s groups had a long history of political engagement and campaigning for peace before being largely excluded from the formal peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE. There were reportedly as many as 20% female fighters in the LTTE, and some of the roles filled by these women were political, such as the LTTE women’s wing political division leader, Colonel Subramaniam Sivakamy. However, the leadership remained patriarchal, and women remained excluded from the formal peace process.

In contrast, in the Mindanao peace process in the Philippines, this barrier was successfully overcome by women. While the MILF leadership remained male, women were able to influence the negotiations via women’s organizations and, importantly, through the appointment of some women to the negotiations. It is likely that the mere presence and visibility of women in these talks was important. This in turn had a transformative effect: an increased sense that women

can participate directly in political processes – also for women themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Further, even when present, women may have a limited role if they have had little time to prepare and are expected to follow the party line. It is also important to note that women are not a homogenous group. They might not form a bloc, or women from different sides of the conflict might have acrimonious relationships, all of which can hinder their participation in negotiations. These issues were present in South Sudan. As one individual who was involved in the negotiations observed:

*‘The acrimony [in South Sudan] was due to women in the region being at the heart of identity-based conflicts, but these women had lacked the prior opportunities afforded to the men to meet with their counterparts from other parties to the conflict.’<sup>15</sup>*

## Concluding Remarks

We reiterate some long-held recommendations. First, women should be included at all stages of a peace negotiation process. This inclusion should entail attention to particular needs that women have in war contexts and, based on that, provide the necessary tools. Second, not only women fighters should be included. It is also important to take into account and support the inclusion of representatives of women’s organizations. Many of the challenges in peace processes apply to society in general, not only to those carrying arms. Third, and in the long-term, it is crucial to actively campaign for changing the conceptualization of women and recognize their relevance to and agency in building peace. It is all about making women count, not just counting women. Inclusion is not meaningful unless it also is diverse, encompassing both vertical and horizontal inclusion. Caution should be exercised to avoid defining women as one homogenic group, with one set of needs, or needs and interests only relevant to the gendered aspects of a conflict.

Going forward, third parties supporting disarmament processes need to do more: mapping existing women’s organizations and their activities, identifying (together with the women involved) their needs for training, being open to learn from them, and pushing for compulsory

quotas for women in peace negotiations. Third parties themselves need to include more women in their delegations and appoint more women as negotiators (so as to set an example to the conflict parties). These are just among the few concrete steps that could be taken.

The DISARM project (2021–2025) will collect data on all disarmament processes around the world and data specifically on the gender element of disarmament provisions in peace agreement. Such systematic data collection is the first step in gaining a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women's inclusion in disarmament negotiations. ■

## Notes

1. While we recognize that talks on disarmament in most cases exclude multiple constituencies, such as conflict-affected populations, women, ethnic and religious minorities and local business owners, in this brief we focus specifically on women.
2. According to the UN Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Standards, disarmament is the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants and often also of the civilian population.
3. Except where stated, this policy brief is drawn from: Marsh, Nicholas & Júlia Palik (2021) *Negotiating Disarmament: Lessons Learnt from Colombia, Nepal, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sri Lanka*. *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. Interviews referred to in this publication were undertaken as part of the Negotiating Disarmament project.
4. Krause; Krause & Bränfors (2018).
5. The SGI had two formal meetings and other informal ones after the 2003 breakdown of the peace process.
6. Shneiderman, Sarah (2009) 'Where Are the

Women in the Sri Lankan Peace?'. *Himal Southasian*. 23 October. As referenced in Marsh & Palik (2021): 86.

7. These categories are drawn from: Santiago, Irene (2015) *The Participation of Women in The Mindanao Peace Process*. New York: UN Women: 14.
8. Morgan, David (1994) 'Theatre of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities'. In: Harry Brod & Michael Kaufman (eds) *Theorizing Masculinities*. London: Sage: 165–182; Wilén, Nina & Lindy Heineken (2018). 'Regendering the South African army: Inclusion, reversal and displacement'. *Gender Work and Organization* 25(6): 670–68, as referenced in Marsh & Palik (2021), p. 18.
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11. Interview 30.10.20.
12. Skjelsbæk (2001), as referenced by Hauge (2019): 209.
13. Interview 22.06.20; 02.10.20.
14. Interview 22.06.20; 02.10.20.
15. Interview 23.10.20.

## Further Reading

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'DISARM: How post-accord disarmament affects peace and conflict dynamics' (2021–2025) is led by Senior Researcher Júlia Palik and funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project explores the effects of disarmament on conflict recurrence. The PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security is a resource hub at PRIO.

## PRIO

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