

# “I Wouldn’t Want to Be a Gender Expert:” Gender Experts in Peace Mediation

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## Abstract

Peace mediation is a professional practice that is increasingly reliant on thematic technical experts, including gender experts. The strategy of including gender expertise in peace mediation reflects the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the call to include dedicated gender expertise in all peacemaking efforts. Based on interviews with peace mediation practitioners, the article analyzes the role of gender experts in peace mediation. We argue that there is a tension between the art of mediation and the art of gender expertise that reflects the gendered power dynamics of peace mediation. We conclude that the strategy of appointing gender experts to peace mediation teams will not “dismantle the master’s house.” However, we acknowledge that without a gender expert very little will be accomplished on this issue. For peace mediation to address the gendered foundations of conflict we argue for the development of an alternate feminist peace mediation practice.

## Keywords

gender experts – gender expertise – peace mediation – peace processes – feminist peace mediation

The quotation in the article’s title is from an interview with a well-regarded mediation expert. She told us: “I wouldn’t want to be a gender expert ... [because] I don’t want to be typecast as just, you know, ‘doing gender’” (Interview participant 01). In this article, we adopt an approach that views gender power dynamics within peace mediation institutions and structures. Such an approach reveals a tension between the art of mediation and gender expertise. The same interview participant noted the tension between knowledge of mediation and gender expertise: “There are people who have been doing gender and now need the mediation training. So, you do need to develop a core of gender advisors that have that kind of mediation training” (Interview participant 01). In peace mediation processes, there is a potential clash between the mediator and gender experts with two specialist forms of knowledge as they encounter each other in a space designed with only one in mind. The article investigates the tension between mediation and thematic gender expertise, noting the masculine peace mediation structures and institutions that make the participation of gender experts particularly challenging. More broadly, tension has been identified as existing between normative and policy guidelines on inclusion and peace mediation. In practice, mediations

are limited to suggesting designs for more inclusive processes and making normative or pragmatic arguments for inclusion, and cannot impose inclusive arrangements on parties (Hirblinger & Landau 2021: 128).

However, in this study, we are specifically interested in the logic of gender expertise in peace mediation and the disempowerment of gender experts, but also how their presence may still be (incrementally) transformative. Gender experts may be unable to transform entrenched political frameworks and institutions to address prevailing gendered (and other) power structures and inequalities; nevertheless, they advance an important normative position on gender equality within peace mediation.

Peace mediation is a broad and varying practice that can occur at different times in the conflict cycle (for example, informal pre-negotiation, ceasefires, humanitarian mediation) (Turner 2020). There tends to be disproportionate attention paid to high-level mediation processes rather than mediation that takes place “outside” the formal processes at the community or grassroots level. We emphasize that mediation is skilled work undertaken across a spectrum of processes and includes “a wide range of activities ranging from high-level diplomacy to grassroots peacebuilding” (Turner & Wählich 2021: 20). Scholars and practitioners broadly agree on three types of mediation processes, delineating the spaces and actors involved. Track I processes are high-level and elite-based, involving political and military leaders. Track II processes include non-governmental actors, often designed to build trust among elite actors and parties. Finally, Track III processes are grassroots-driven processes to facilitate conflict resolution among communities. The trend has been to move towards multi-track mediation; so, in addition to high-level peace processes, mediation is simultaneously taking place in various spaces and levels and is supported by a range of external actors. Parties to the conflict may also negotiate peace settlements, with third-party states acting as facilitators or hosts. The 2012–2016 Havana Peace Talks, for example, were negotiated between the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and facilitated by Cuba and Norway.

In this article, we draw on empirical data from interviews with peace mediators and negotiators, gender experts, mediation experts, and civil society actors to examine the interplay between mediation efforts and gender expert work within peace processes. Specifically, we analyze a series of paradoxes and contradictions that emerge from the inclusion of gender experts in peace mediation. These paradoxes and contradictions ultimately limit the contribution of gender experts, who may also be frustrated by the assumptions and constraints on their role. This is especially true for female gender experts operating in male-dominated and homosocial peace mediation spaces. The gendered

power dynamics of the mediation space presents a significant restraint on the role of gender experts in peace mediation processes. Therefore, we ultimately argue for the development of feminist peace mediation as a practice built through transformative methodologies that include both the art of mediation and the art of gender expertise.

The push to move mediation away from the personalized and ad hoc “good offices” of the UN Secretary General that defined early post-Cold War peacemaking towards more professionalized, norms-based and multi-level interventions has resulted in an increased reliance on thematic technical expertise to support mediation teams and activities (Turner & Wählisch 2021). In 2008, the United Nations Mediation Standby Unit (MSU) set up a dedicated team of thematic technical experts to deploy on request. Since 2011, the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisors has included a dedicated gender (and inclusion) expert on its roster.<sup>5</sup> Deploying gender advisors is a technical and expert-led approach that assumes a depoliticized understanding of the feminist agenda (Kunz & Prügl 2019: 5). The strategy of employing specialized and technocratic experts may move mediation away from being an “art” towards a depoliticized “science” (Standfield 2020). While several of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) call for the appointment of a dedicated gender expert in all peacemaking efforts (United Nations 2017), as does the 2012 UN Secretary-General Report on “Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution” (A/66/811), there is no data on where, when, and at what point gender experts are assigned to peace mediation processes. As a result, the direct impact of gender experts on mediation processes and outcomes is difficult to measure.

We reflect on interview responses to examine what role gender experts have in peace mediation and the effect of gender expertise on mediation practice. First, this article advances a framework for analyzing gendered power relations in peace mediation processes. Second, we scrutinize the professionalization

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5 The current (2022) gender and inclusion expert on the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisors is Florence Mpaayei (Kenya). She also held this role on the 2021 team. Previous gender experts were: 2020 & 2019 – Miriam Coronel-Ferrer (Philippines); 2018 – Cate Buchanan (South Africa/Australia); 2017 & 2016 – Sakuntala Kadirgamar-Rajasingham (United States) and Elisabeth Scheper (The Netherlands); 2015 – Sakuntala Kadirgamar-Rajasingham (United States) and Brendan McAllister (Ireland); 2014 & 2013 – Rina Amiri (Afghanistan/United States); 2012 – Gerard Nduwayo (Burundi); and 2011 – Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini (Iran/UK) (see Herrberg 2015 and UN Peacemaker (<https://peacemaker.un.org/mediation-support/stand-by-team>) for more on the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisors and their activities and role).

of mediation and the role of technocratic expertise as part of this professionalization. Third, we provide an overview of the literature on gender expertise, focusing on its application to peace mediation. Fourth, based on interviews, we highlight that the strategy of including gender experts in mediation processes is an additive rather than a transformative approach to peace mediation. Finally, we conclude that a series of paradoxes and contradictions constrain the capacity of gender experts to change the structure and dynamics of the mediation process that focus too much on ending direct violence. Ultimately, we suggest that feminist peace mediation – a concept still in development in this article – may be an alternative set of practices toward which peace mediation should aspire.

### Methodology

For our analysis, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with elite actors via Zoom between April and December 2021. Twenty-three of these participants were actors involved in mediation beyond the national context (see Annex). Our interview participants include representatives of international non-governmental and private mediation organizations, former UN Mediations Standby Team members, women mediation network members, academics, and civil society actors. The initial interview participants were selected for having existing relationships with the research team and organized regions where they have worked or participated in peace processes. For those participants who have worked across several regions or do not have a regional specialization, we have labeled them “international.” All of these participants have worked in multiple settings.

We adopted a snowball method, where some participants suggested other potential interview subjects. The objective in selecting interview participants was to gain a diversity of perspectives that included both mediation and gender experts, experience across regions and conflict, international, regional and private mediation organizations, and gender.

We categorized subjects by five criteria. Many participants were identified as having more than one category in each set of criteria. The five criteria are: 1) position or role (for example, gender expert/consultant; mediation expert/consultant; member of current or past mediation team; member of current or past negotiation team – one side in a mediation process; civil society actor; and other thematic technical experts); 2) geographic perspective/location (that is, Asia Pacific; Africa; Middle East; Europe; international); 3) Track I, Track II or Track III; 4) employment or membership (at time of interview) (that is, a

member of a women's mediation network; international or regional organization; international non-governmental organization or private mediation organization; civil society organization; academic; government); and 5) gender (male or female). We have not, however, listed type of conflict as a category, as we take a comprehensive view of conflict to capture the often non-linear dynamics of violence and war. The researchers determined these categories for each interview subject based on knowledge of their work and interview responses. While we have set out these criteria to ensure a diversity of perspectives, such categories are not, in reality, clear cut. The mediation field is small, so we deliberately provide only a few details of each participant, assigning them a number to ensure their anonymity.

The majority of our interview participants identify as women. This is, in part, a result of our selection criteria – gender experts are frequently women – and the subject matter of our research question so that we were often referred to speak with women. On at least two occasions, when we contacted private mediation organizations, we were directed to speak to women (although they were not always the gender expert in the organization). However, we did interview some men. Regardless of the gender identity of the participant, we asked about their experience with gender within the space of mediation, as well as their understanding of the place of gender knowledge within the context of peace mediation.

We had a semi-structured interview schedule organized by thematic areas: conception and practices of mediation; international norms and structures; international law and institutions; gender advisors; and professionalization of mediation. Questions probed how the research participant understands mediation, what practices they have adopted in mediation, what tensions and power dynamics they observe in mediation, the value of the WPS agenda, their experience working as a gender expert or if they think gender expertise is a helpful strategy, and how useful international law, mediation guidelines and women's mediation networks are in mediation processes and/or at challenging structural barriers to them. Other questions included general capture of each actor's experience, understanding of mediation practice, and the potential for feminist mediation practice. All participants were asked seven primary questions and each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted based on the promise of anonymity.

We manually coded the transcribed interview recordings to locate common threads and observations. The recurrent themes across the 29 interviews inform our conclusions. The quotations provided in the article are not exhaustive but representative of the general ideas expressed by many of the participants. Whether or not prompted by a direct question, all of our interview subjects spoke about gender experts and their role in mediation processes.

More than one participant argued that there was a need to reflect on the nature and capacity of gender experts, and all discussed the ways knowledge within mediation was itself coded through gender norms informed by the broader understandings of mediators about gender, power, and norms of behavior.

### Gender in Peace Mediation Practice and Theory

However necessary peace mediation may be to the successful and peaceful resolution of conflict – which is very far from always being the case – it is not an endpoint, but a part of longer-term processes in war-to-peace transitions. As one interview participant said, “mediation is a snapshot, and we need to be extremely careful that we don’t read too much transformational potential into peace agreements and think the peace agreements themselves are some sort of an endpoint” (Interview participant 14). Similarly, while empirical research demonstrates that women’s direct participation in peace processes increases the durability and quality of peace (Krause et al. 2018) and the number of gender-inclusive commitments in peace agreements (True and Riveros-Morales 2019), change in gender relations and gendered power occurs incrementally. Therefore, we must track, applaud, and reinforce small victories in reframing peace and mediation processes, what is substantively included in them, and who is involved in leading them. However, even when women substantively participate, peace mediation cannot alone disrupt gendered power relations. Rather, efforts to promote women’s participation in peace processes and include gender equality and women’s rights provisions in peace agreements must be supported and coincide with women’s and civil society movements in the public realm. This would include challenges to social norms regarding gender roles, recognizing the value of women’s contributions in public life and participation in decision-making.

Further, the state must address the impunity for sexual and gender-based violence and harmful, discriminatory attitudes towards different groups of women in law and practice. However, a powerful norm in peace processes is that negotiations prioritize the cessation of violence – or at least certain forms of violence wielded by armed parties – rather than addressing broader societal grievances and demands for justice (True 2020). We identify this as a significant challenge that complicates the apertures through which gender enters the process. The incremental changes we note and celebrate in this research are always contained within this structural constraint.

One of the findings of this research is that while institutional frameworks, such as the Women, Peace and Security resolutions, subsume the work of mediation into a larger discourse on peace processes, reflections from practitioners

evidence a series of specific practices that, we argue, require understanding to incorporate gender-responsive strategies. When asked to describe their understanding of mediation, many interview participants emphasized that mediation requires a team and that the emphasis placed on the senior or chief mediator does not consider the team working to support the mediator and the process. The chief mediator may be the most visible actor third-party actor, engaging political parties and contacts and representing the mediation effort; however, the mediator's success is contingent on the will of the parties.

Mediation is one type of conflict resolution process that takes place in many spaces – in the home, workplace, and community. Mediation is not a coercive process. While it is always political, and so can never be neutral, mediation requires impartiality and consent of the parties. Consent is a central requirement of mediation. The UN defines mediation as “a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements” (UN 2012a, 4), and includes consent as one of the eight fundamental principles in its *Guidance for Effective Mediation*.<sup>6</sup> Consent, however, is rarely given in full by the parties, being a matter of graduation rather than zero-sum (Hellmüller 2021: 5). Like consent, impartiality is also considered to be a core component of mediation, however, some scholars argue that biased mediation has certain advantages (Höglund & Svensson 2008: 345). Gender norms, as they are understood by the mediators, will influence behaviors with respect to who is invited to speak, how speech is understood, and even which speech is recorded. This interplay between impartiality and the impossibility of objectivity, however, is rarely understood as holding gendered knowledge or being performed in gender ways.

Conventional mediation theory rarely integrates a feminist perspective. Early studies on gender and mediation reinforced essentialist assumptions that women favor problem-solving where men use power-oriented strategies (Florea et al. 2003; Boyer 2009). More recent literature has complicated the relationship between gender and mediation, and the role of women in peace mediation processes (Palmiano & Gasser 2016; Sapiano 2021). In the field of peace mediation, the prevailing approach is that women's participation results in the inclusion of women's interests in the process and agreement; however, this approach tends to collapse gender into women's rights and places the burden of inclusion on women present at the mediation (Turner 2020: 385).

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6 These are (i) preparedness, (ii) consent, (iii) impartiality, (iv) inclusivity, (v) national ownership, (vi) international law and normative frameworks, (vii) coherence, coordination and complementarity, and (viii) quality peace agreements.



This approach assumes that women are more naturally peacemakers, and that when present in mediation, women advocate on behalf of all women. This assumption, problematically, places a burden on women who are present at the negotiations which, our female interview participants explained creates a tension between their commitment to mediation processes and expectations, and the politics of representation. Furthermore, this approach risks collapsing into a strategy of counting the number of women who are present as the gender project, rather than gender providing a means for deconstructing and challenging the norms and structures of the system that rely on old models of peace mediation and hold to masculinized and militarized approaches.

Furthermore, the masculine state-based international system determines the priority of actors so that state-based political and armed actors are recognized and given a legitimacy not extended to other actors, such as women, civil society, or other marginalized groups. One interview participant emphasized that women are prevented from participating in peace mediation “due to the way that we have structured our imaginings of politics as a state game and structured our international organizations basically to frame and manage the state” (Interview participant 04). Nonetheless, normative frameworks advocate for inclusion and women’s participation in peace mediation even within the state-based international system. One such normative framework is the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, made up of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and nine subsequent UN Security Council resolutions, promoting women’s meaningful participation in peace and security processes. UNSCR 1325 calls for the integration of gender across peace and security policy and practice, including the need for better representation and participation of women in conflict resolution processes.

Still, globally, women make up a small minority of the actors in high-level or Track II peace mediation processes. Peace mediation processes tend to be organized in secret (Aharoni 2018) and, by their nature, are highly securitized, which create homosocial environments where male mediators and political and military actors establish informal networks. Bringing women into these spaces challenges “such a homosocial negotiation environment, which partly explains why women negotiators are still so contested” (Aggestam 2019: 821). In contrast, more women participate in conflict resolution in grassroots or Track III level processes (Onyesoh 2019). Community-based mediation is undervalued compared with high-level processes:

The higher up the tracks you get ... the less a feminist approach is possible because we get into this geopolitical posturing and the idea that even if you have women, even if you have feminists, in those environments,

that they can in any way counter the power at play, I think is an illusion. I don't think it is possible ... I don't see how you can be a feminist in that environment because you're talking about operating within and reinforcing a structure which is anti-feminist.

Interview participant 16

Gender power relations structure the institutions of peace mediation affecting women's access to and influence in Track I and II processes. An analysis of peace mediation needs to consider these obscured power relations because masculine domination is pervasive and taken for granted in these spaces. Patriarchal relations, wherein men have authority and power over women, have contributed to shaping the international order through the institutions of diplomacy, security and trade that have facilitated consensus among states. Gender divisions of labor wherein there is an expectation that men take up arms and that women raise future citizens and soldiers have produced and reproduced states' identities and war-making capacities. These gendered norms have further cemented the sovereign prerogative of individual states to determine the domestic distribution of power and resources among groups, maintaining unjust and unequal gendered relations of domination. There is limited possibility for non-state actors to challenge such gender norms in this state-based order. Since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) treaty, the UN has sought to promote normative change to achieve greater gender equality within and across states. These efforts have redistributed the *sources of power* – enabling greater access for women to education, employment, business and even political representation – while not *shifting power* per se (Arat 2015). However, structural barriers, hierarchies and discrimination in practice prevent the meaningful participation of women in all forms of decision-making, including peace and security.

Power is wielded formally and informally through economic, legal, and religious structures. Feminist institutional theorists note that the informal rules of the game created by men constitute mechanisms of continuity (Waylen 2014). These informal rules shape peace processes and limit change to their structure and process design (Aggestam 2019). Women have limited ability to shape and frame them precisely because they are denied access to the often secret, closed door settings where the discussions about the peace process agenda first take place.

Contemporary structures and institutions of international law and politics, including those that support peace mediation, continue to hold a conservative understanding of gender, where “gender” is a synonym for “women,” and where

there are expectations, observable in the WPS agenda, that women are victims or peacemakers. Consequently, there is skepticism that simply by including more women, there will be more gender-sensitive or inclusive outcomes:

I just don't believe that adding more women in is going to generate gendered outcomes. It will deal with representation problems and potentially a parity problem, but it is not going to deliver gender-inclusive outcomes in these processes. That brings us back to having dedicated gender expertise. So, you end up in the Kafkaesque world where no matter which way you turn, you still need some dedicated gender expertise, but, you know, it's not quite where these processes are at ... I don't see a lot of stand-alone gender experts flourishing in mediation, despite the rhetoric.

Interview participant 02

This participant identifies not just the difficulty of defining mediation but the collapsing of the terms women and gender, and we would add feminism. We argue that the gender expert's role is first fraught by the use of women and gender as coterminous, and second, the silence around feminist values, methodologies and peace that might play an essential role in "seeing" the gendered dynamics of mediation spaces and processes. Mediation policy documents and reports, such as the UNSG Report "Strengthening the Role of Mediation" (A/66/811) often refer to "women" and "gender expertise" jointly, supporting the assumption that it is women who must address the gendered foundations of conflict (Hirblinger & Landau 2021, 124). As Hirblinger and Landau (2021: 124) argue, this essentialism is not "strategic in its effort to empower women as a social group," as it can sometimes be, but is rather connecting gender expertise to women as a fixed category (Spivak 1988). Moreover, peace mediation prioritizes an end to violence and a formal agreement rather the structural causes of conflict, including gender power inequalities and systems of oppression. There is, nonetheless, an art to being a gender advisor in mediation, as there is an art of mediation. The art balances the specialized technical feminist knowledge with an understanding of the conflict, parties, and the art of mediation.

The principles of impartiality and consent are foundational to peace mediation practice. In theory, these core features are what, in the words of one of our participants, "separate mediation from other intervention possibilities ... [and] protects mediation from the kinds of politicization that comes with more securitized interventions" (Interview participant 14). Peace mediation processes are always political, but mediation rests on the belief that the mediator is impartial, that they reflect symmetry in dealing with the parties. Impartiality does not mean neutrality. Mediators can and do advocate for certain norms and

hold parties to certain standards. Peace processes and agreements must also conform to international standards of practice. For example, peace agreements cannot include amnesties for perpetrators of atrocity crimes (Jeffery 2021).

One of the points that was drawn out in the interviews is that WPS and gender inclusion are not norms generally pushed by mediators even with increased advocacy from high-level actors and international institutions. As expressed by one participant:

Even at the UN, I don't think that everyone is equally sold on issues of promotion of women's rights, women's inclusion, or even, more broadly gender perspectives on conflict resolution ... I would say there are still a lot of mediators out there who consider [adopting a gender perspective – which is about how different identities, different perspectives need to be included as you're thinking about various ways of resolving conflict] – more of a hindrance to their work than a role that they have to play.

Interview participant 04

The same respondent describes one of the ways that mediators “tend to go through the motions [of adopting a mandated gender perspective] is by accepting to have a gender advisor on their team” (Interview participant 04). Some mediators, again despite the push by international and private institutions to take gender more seriously, still show this as work distinct from what they understand mediation to be. This draws us back to our paradox between the art of mediation and the need for an in-depth understanding of gender, which are rendered in competition rather than being made compatible.

One interview participant provided fictional scenarios to highlight the spectrum along which gender advisors can work successfully within the mediation team:

On the one hand, there are gender advisors that the mediation team and the chief mediator feel are being imposed. It's UN Women making a fuss with the result that a gender advisor is being added to a mediation team. That person is then left out of the decision-making process, not really taken seriously, doesn't really have much exposure to the conflict parties ... at least initially, [they] are not seen as being all that relevant to the mediation ... Then on the other side of the spectrum, you have gender advisers who are fully part of the mediation team, are involved in the decision-making, have political acumen and sensibilities. They don't blindly push a normative [agenda], but they propose

things that further the inclusion of women that actually makes sense in the process that the mediator will say, I do this because it helps me and it makes the process stronger.

Interview participant 14

These realities seem to point to a further tension about how gender operates in all spaces, including the mediation space. Part of the subtext here seems to reside in the normative expectations understood within mediation spaces yet not visible to outsiders. Our participants talked about how gender norms were understood and enacted within the mediation space themselves.

### **Mediation is a Profession**

Mediators require a specific skill set, and mediation should be understood as a specialized activity rather than an act of diplomacy. This has caused some to argue that “international mediation has suffered from an acute lack of professionalism, expertise and rigour” (Nathan 2010: 1). Mediation has become a more professional field over the past decade, especially as mediation has been more integrated into the international peace and conflict arena. International and regional organizations, such as the UN, African Union, OSCE and European Union, have developed mediation units and amassed reports and handbooks on mediation practice. The UN Guidance for Effective Mediation identifies eight fundamentals of mediation: preparedness; consent; impartiality; inclusivity; national ownership; international law and normative frameworks; coherence, coordination and complementarity of the mediation effort; and quality peace agreements. In an international system where the UN is no longer the only actor engaged in the mediation of conflicts, the UN has produced knowledge and best practice to maintain its legitimacy and authority in the peaceful resolution of conflict (Convergne 2016).

The UN Mediation Standby Unit (MSU) was established in 2006 as an outcome of the 2005 World Summit, representing what Martin Griffiths has called “the coming-of-age of UN mediation as it emerges from the gentlemanly and frequently last-minute practice of the Secretary-General’s ‘good offices’” (Griffiths 2005: 3, quoted in Convergne 2016: 181). In September 2008, the United Nations Security Council convened a high-level meeting on mediation, followed by a report by the Secretary-General (S/2009/189) a year later on enhancing mediation and its support activities. In 2011, the General Debate of the 66th Session of the General Assembly was on the role of mediation,

in which the General Assembly adopted its first resolution on mediation (A/Res/65/283). The following year, the United Nations issued its Guidance for Effective Mediation (UN 2012a).

In the same year, the UN also published its Guidance for Mediators Addressing Conflict-related Sexual Violence in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements (UN 2012b). The UN Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies (UN 2017) was published in March 2017. The Women, Peace and Security agenda and CEDAW provide the normative framework underpinning the Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies. The Guidance on Gender also identifies the WPS agenda, CEDAW, and other international humanitarian and human rights law treaties as legal and normative frameworks for mediation. The Guidance on Gender calls for the inclusion of gender expertise in all mediation processes from the outset.

These activities signal the professionalization of mediation that incorporate gender expertise as a specialist skill within the profession. In theory, professionalization moves peace mediation away from an ad hoc practice, primarily relied on by the Secretary-General's good office mandate in the 1990s, toward a practice set by standards and codes of conduct. There has also been a recognition that the complexity of mediated conflicts requires more specialized and thematic knowledge. However, as Convergne (2016: 183) argues, the reliance on specialized knowledge "leads to an increasingly technocratic and depoliticized approach to peace, in which international expertise is preferred to the input of local actors, and political issues are cast as technical problems." Despite these developments, the faith placed in the mediator's personality and diplomatic skill tends to privilege the (often male) epistemic community of mediators who gain access because of their prestige and international standing (Kastner 2017). Mediators dispute the value of technocratic and generic guidelines (Convergne 2016); however, when asked, many of our interview participants expressed satisfaction with the guidelines produced by the UN but warned against a template approach to mediation. One interview participant likened it to agreeing to a harmony but with everyone having their own song sheet (Interview participant 04).

The professionalization of mediation and the ways in which mediators navigate their professional networks impacts the apertures for gender expertise to enter the mediation space. At the same time, gender expertise develops its own practices and networks such that research shows there are "significant tensions regarding the types of knowledge that qualify as expertise, regarding feminist methods in expert practices and regarding the politics of the field itself" (Kunz & Prügl 2019: 11). Consequently, attention to the success, or failure,

of gender expertise in peace mediation seems to focus on the wrong question.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on the commentaries of our respondents, the tensions between the two different yet interlocking practices and networks hints that mediation as art is insufficiently understood and continues to operate within its own set of gender norms. Female mediators and gender experts are asked to work within this space. In the following section on gender expertise and gender experts, we focus on this knowledge while discussing our empirical findings on the role of gender experts in peace mediation.

### Gender Expertise and Gender Experts

Feminist discourse and movements seeking to alter the patriarchal status quo are crucial ingredients for “just debates” during political transitions that aim to redress unequal outcomes (Walsh 2010; True & Wiener 2019). One of the strategies of the feminist movement has been to advocate for the development and packaging of gender knowledge as specialized expertise to ensure its inclusion in policy outcomes (Prügl 2012: 57). Gender experts are, according to Kunz and Prügl (2019: 5), “the Trojan Horses of the feminist movement that have battled patriarchal structures from the inside, learned the master’s tools in the hope of dismantling the master’s house, faced co-optation into state agendas, but also achieved small victories against considerable odds.” The claims that gender experts are particularly vulnerable to co-option and unable to resist becoming part of the institutional frameworks they are charged with combating “fail[s] to grapple with the feminist politics involved in the daily practice of being a gender expert” (Ferguson 2015: 382). We grapple with these tensions as we look to analyze the transformative role of gender experts in peace mediation processes. As many of our interview participants discussed, gender experts, for

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7 Success, or failure, of gender expertise is difficult to assess. For example, as a member of the mediation team for the 2004–2006 Abuja peace talks for Darfur, the gender expert helped to establish a common gender platform involving women delegates and pushed for gender responsive provisions on wealth sharing and land rights, physical security, affirmative action, and women’s participation in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs in the final Darfur Peace Agreement (European Union External Action Service 2012; see the University of Edinburgh’s Peace Agreements Database (Women, Girls and Gender), available at: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/wsearch>, for a list of gender provisions in the Darfur Peace Agreement 2006). However, the peace process for Darfur was, by many accounts a complete failure (see Moman 2020; Lanz 2008; Nathan 2007). The “success” of the gender expert’s contribution, is difficult to quantify in the context of the “failed” process and agreement.

various structural and institutional reasons we highlight in this section, are often accorded limited resources and tend to be marginalized in peace mediation processes. However, as noted by several of our interview participants, the skill and capacity of the gender experts can be the only reason that gender is raised and addressed in a peace process.

Along with the focus on mediation skills from many of our participants, most acknowledged that the appointment of gender experts might also protect the structural and institutional practices that reify existing notions of femininity and women's agency/victimhood from change. If we conceptualize gender as a "fluid social structure," which we do, "the very idea of gender as something able to be deployed in the context of expertise in an institutional setting" becomes problematic (Heathcote 2019: 45). The mandate for gender experts is often collapsed into a mandate to redress women's exclusion, making their role about strategies for women's inclusion rather than using "gender as analytical expertise that raises different, important questions about the work of institutions, states, and law" (Heathcote 2019: 41). For our respondents, this further entrenched a gap between their understanding of feminist understandings of gender (as performative, as a power structure, as intersectional) and their confidence in bringing that knowledge directly and overtly into the mediation space.

Gender experts are a function of feminist strategies to disrupt and challenge homosocial and masculine processes and settings, even as they are subject to the existing legal, political and institutional structures that protect these same processes. It, therefore, becomes a tightrope where gender experts are both required to work within the operating system while challenging many of its core functions and thinking. Gender expertise and experts are vulnerable to co-optation, in the same way, many feminist strategies and reforms, including the Women, Peace and Security agenda, are "co-opted into civilising and/or neoliberal governance models" (Heathcote 2019: 32).

Creating gender advisor positions in peace mediation teams has been part of the institutional response to demands for more gender-responsive and inclusive peace processes. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2212, adopted in 2013 as the seventh WPS resolution, explicitly calls on the UN Secretary-General:

... to strengthen the knowledge of negotiating delegations to peace talks, and members of mediation support teams, on the gender dimensions of peacebuilding, by making gender expertise and gender experts available to all United Nations mediation teams.

S/Res/2122 (2013)



In peace mediation, where there are significant knowledge gaps on gender conflict analysis and gaps in representation, gender expertise and gender experts are seen as a way of mitigating unequal gender power relations and of providing technical skills necessary to incorporate a gender perspective into the process. Our research suggests that the mediator, as an actor within a professional network and increasingly guided by codes of practice and guidelines, remains a crucial actor for introducing and placing the gender expert within the process. However, for many female mediators who are feminists, gender gains are more easily won from their placement as mediators rather than as gender experts.

### Gender Experts and Peace Mediation

The interplay between feminist knowledge, gender expertise, and mediation practice has received minimal analysis. There is a tendency to evaluate as coterminous or assume that there is no difference between feminist practice and peace, and the participation of women in peace mediation. However, “women’s participation is about the participation of women from an inclusivity perspective, regardless of whether or not they bring about feminist agenda” (Interview participant 20). Yet some of our interview participants indicated that they move between these three frames while (perhaps) only identifying publicly with one. This may be because of a desire to be publicly recognized as a mediation expert rather than a gender expert, although they may be qualified as both, even as they demonstrated significant personal commitments to feminist knowledge and a distancing from the narrow frame of gender expertise. One interview participant observed that it is impossible to be a “feminist in that environment [of peace mediation] because you are talking about operating within and reinforcing a structure which is anti-feminist” (Interview participant 16).

In a space where women are excluded, women often gain entry to peace processes as technical experts (Aggestam 2019: 823). This is especially the case for gender experts, who are often women. Consequently, there may be a hesitancy for female mediators, in particular, to highlight their gender expertise to avoid being pigeonholed as the “gender person.” In many of our interviews, participants discussed the tensions between gender expertise and mediation expertise as skill and knowledge sets, and as professional labels. Gender experts trained in mediation, according to several interview participants, may be able to propose more accepted and pragmatic strategies. There is a specific skill set and knowledge of relevant terminology and process design that comes

with mediation training. For example, where “people, let’s say trained first and foremost as gender experts, their starting point is gender equality. Whereas mediation professionals, their starting point has always been the resolution of conflict” (Interview participant 25). However, “these two are [not] incompatible in any way – that is the whole point of a gender-sensitive, inclusive peace. But I think it’s the way that framing is done and to make sure that the ultimate objective is shared (Interview participant 25). Another participant noted that you need someone who has been both a mediator and a gender expert, “somebody who actually embodies all of those pieces, and that can be hard to find, and then that person needs to be listened to” (Interview participant 19). The participant’s second point, that the gender expert must be listened to, is complicated because gender experts are often younger than other members of the mediation team and “the vast majority of gender advisors are women” (Interview participant 25). This view circles back to the underlying tension between the understanding of peace mediation from the parties and the mediators’ points of view and the pursuit of peace that might align with the gender experts’ understanding of their role.

As one interview participant pointed out “the gender advisor role that they’re there to do is a deeply political role and political task, and I think putting the separate label doesn’t always help the integration effort but rather isolates it” (Interview participant 25). However, the problem may be as another interview participant argued: that gender experts might not be trained to be politically astute. For her, “gender advisors are also part of the problem, very much part of the problem, and we do not have enough astute politically thinking gender advisors in the system. We have an abundance of gender technocrats that literally go through a document and insert (after the word “women”) ‘men, boys and girls’ and think that is gender analysis. And it’s just not good enough” (Interview participant 02). The gender advisor role often collapses gender into women, and, according to one participant, “having a gender expert is often a way of bracketing women’s issues” (Interview participant 04). Gender is often used synonymously with women, an understanding that limits the capacity of the gender expert to deal with the more complex gendered foundations of conflict. This leaves gender experts often only able to advocate for the inclusion of (some) women. This seems less a fault or weakness of specific gender experts, as reading through the research, the constraints that the mediation space places on the non-mediator in that space is driven by a combination of professional expectations, unspoken gender norms and networked understandings of how the process unfolds which may not be available to the gender expert who enters as an outsider to the conflict and the mediation space.

Despite the skepticism of the capacity of gender experts, many interview participants also acknowledged that gender experts who held certain skill sets and acumen were able to influence the process. For example, one respondent agreed that “having a sort of blanket gender advisor who can try and help a mediation team ... take a gendered approach to a peace agreement, I think, can have traction in terms of altering language” (Interview participant 15). Still, that same respondent also accepted that “in terms of influencing behavior and influencing the acceptance of women when it comes to implementing a peace agreement into powerful decision fora, that obviously takes a lot more, [but that] in theory some gender advisors should be able to do so” (Interview participant 15). It is unclear whether the assumption is that many gender experts are ill-equipped for entering the space of mediation, or if the space of mediation is ill-equipped for accommodating a gender advisor; or – more likely – the interplay between these two reduces the capacity for significant gender agendas within peace mediation.

One of our interview participants noted: “You have to have [a gender advisor] who’s experienced enough ... you also need somebody who’s been both [a mediator and gender advisor]. You need somebody who actually embodies all of those pieces, and that can be hard to find, and then that person needs to be listened to” (Interview participant 19). What then becomes critical is the personality and skill set of the gender advisor, in much the same ways as the personality and experience of mediators was considered to matter most in early mediation practice. The professionalization of the field of mediation – evidenced through the move to rigorous processes and the adoption of guidelines and procedures – has begun to change mediation practice. Nevertheless, the fact that many of our interview participants noted that the individual skill set and capacity of the gender expert was paramount to their success shows that there is a still a problem with the structures of mediation that silo gender experts, and with the way that the gendered foundations of conflict are often dismissed. One of our respondents indicated that although there is “a mechanism for gender advisors being more and more integrated into the [organization], not only in the UN, but also in most of the regional organizations ... [gender experts are] not necessarily inside the room, inside the inner circle of the lead mediator” (Interview participant 01). The institutional response to the demands for greater gender inclusion and integration has been to adopt a strategy of deploying gender experts. This strategy, however, is limited and places the burden of change onto the gender expert without making similar demands of the lead mediators or codes of practice of mediation.

There is an art of being a gender expert and an art of being a mediator, and there is a third art of being a gender expert in mediation. However, even this

approach seems to collapse back into making demands of women who are mediators or gender experts to address structural barriers to their participation. At no point does this address the presence of gender dynamics in the room or the conflict. Consequently, our research demonstrates that including a gender expert in the process will always be limited as it brings in gender as a technical skill set and ignores gender as a power relation. Furthermore, mediation still operates on the assumption that gender is not foundational to conflict, so the gender expert is often viewed at odds with the demands of mediation. As a result, the gender expert, unless they are politically astute and knowledgeable about the art of mediation, is sidelined in the mediation process.

Somewhat paradoxically and despite the skepticism of the effectiveness of the strategy of including a gender expert, our respondents commonly expressed that without a gender expert on the mediation team, very little would be done on this issue. The way that experts, including gender experts, frame issues and provide information can shape arguments, outcomes and processes. As noted by an interview participant, a gender expert is necessary to make any progress: a “gender advisor is a must ... a gender advisor is paramount, extremely important to any peace process” since they raise certain issues that mediators and mediation teams would otherwise not think about (Interview participant 21). Importantly, however, there was also a consensus among the interview participants that gender experts needed to be experienced in mediation and have a strong knowledge of the conflict dynamics and parties. Without both, the gender experts’ input may seem “artificially imposed” (Interview participant 11). Adding a technocratic expert does little to alter existing structures and norms and may reinforce those very structures that see gender as a separate issue, one not foundational to the peace process.

Some of the interview participants were wary of being labeled a gender expert. This was true of our first interview participant, whom we quote in the title. Another participant, a gender expert who also delivers advice and programming across a range of thematic areas, suggested that being able to be more than a gender expert “increases the credibility of women in a still very male-dominated sector.” Her advice to younger women coming into this sector is to:

... avoid being a generalist, instead become a decentralization expert, understand macro-economic reform, specialize in water and other resource politics – build these areas of expertise as these are some of the perennial issues in peace negotiations. It could help people to see and hear you differently and take you more seriously.

Interview participant 02

Although understandable and good advice, it reveals the fact that the onus is put on women involved in peace mediation to be more than a gender expert, an expectation not necessarily made of experts in other thematic areas. The collapsing of gender and women places the burden on women to be knowledgeable about gender issues when it may not be the case that women are gender experts or feminists.

### Conclusion

One of the consistent themes of UNSCR 1325 and the subsequent Women, Peace and Security Resolutions has been an emphasis on women's participation and inclusion in decision-making bodies, including peace processes. After the high-level panel in 2015, resolutions explicitly included reference to women as mediators. The WPS resolutions also urged member states to "provide training in mediation, advocacy, and technical areas of negotiation as well as providing support and training to mediators and technical teams on the impact of women's participation and strategies for women's effective inclusion" (S/Res/2242 (2015), para 1). However, not only is this more comprehensive approach not pursued, but gender experts are expected to fill the gap in the knowledge of other participants within mediation spaces. Some female mediators demonstrate a significant understanding of the art of mediation and the capacity to reflect with sophistication the ways gender operates within mediation and in the conflict. Nevertheless, even when mediators demonstrate this capacity, the art of mediation is more likely to dominate their decision making. This is not surprising as women in mediation face a burden of, on the one hand, entering a predominately male field, and on the other hand, being expected to be more gender-responsive than their male colleagues. This is also in tension with the traditional face of post-conflict negotiations that military and political actors dominate. Tensions between the gender expert and the women mediators, and between the art of mediation and the demands of strategies for improved gender justice are interspersed into a space with its own gender dynamics – that is the gender dynamics of the mediation process itself and the gendered dynamics of the state and military-dominated fields that mediators and conflict parties are traditionally drawn from. As one of the participants argued, "gender expertise is not a function or a role that is attributed to a person but a way of thinking" (Interview participant 04). The current strategy that is adopted by the UN and other mediation organizations that focus on employing a gender advisor is neither fully taking up the approach required under UNSCR 2242 nor challenging the underpinning assumptions of peace mediation, drawn from

military mindsets, that ending violence is paramount and everything else can be left to later. Another participant framed this in the following way:

One of the problems with it [having a gender advisor], again, is that it's this additional person that's getting asked to do the "women's" work. Where I think we kind of miss the point is if you place this in the core of the mandate for a mediator, that not only the gender advisor but the entire team is responsible for and will be held accountable for gender being reflected in the various pieces of the process and the outcomes ... Instead of it being sort of ghettoized into a single space.

Interview participant 19

When asked to reflect on the possibility of a feminist peace mediation practice and theory, one of our participants provided a possibility requiring a fundamentally different approach to gender expertise. To achieve a feminist peace mediation, she argued that,

... the analysis of the conflict, and the context itself, would be specifically geared to try to understand the gendered and other diverse nature of interaction – social and cultural interactions – that led to the conflict. [The] analysis would look at the intersectional identities of both women and men within the context of the conflict and how they would be interacting potentially with its resolutions. Similarly, with agreements, understanding how you would build in language or structure within the agreements to lead to outcomes that would potentially unpack some of the negative impacts or outcomes from some of the gendered structures that had potentially led to the conflict.

Interview participant 19

Ultimately, the contribution of this research is to raise questions about the contradictions of current approaches that do nothing to alter the gender power dynamics of the conflict or peace or the contours within which mediation is expected to occur. In this article, we have specifically drawn attention to the tension between existing assumptions about the purpose of mediation space and the mandate of the gender advisor. This tension underscores the nuanced space of mediation that demonstrates the need for gender experts that understand mediation as an art as much as they understand gender. However, ultimately a praxis for feminist mediation practice requires all participants facilitating the mediation to understand the art of mediation and the art of challenging gender inequalities at multiple levels.

### Annex: Interview Participants (Only Those Who Engaged in Inter-nation Conflicts)

N	Participant's role	Region (regional organizations/ conflict)	Track – experience of working in a peace process	Employment or membership (at time of interview)	Gender
01	– member of a current or past mediation team – member of a negotiation team	– Asia Pacific – International	– Track I – Track II	– member of women mediator network (WMN) – academic	F
02	– gender expert – member of a current or past mediation team	– International	– Track I	– member of WMN – civil society organization	F
04	– mediation expert – other thematic technical expert	– International	– Track I	– academic	F
05	– gender expert – civil society actor	– Asia Pacific	– Track I – Track II	– member of WMN – civil society organization	F
07	– gender expert	– International	– Track I – Track II	– member of WMN – INGO/private mediation organization	F
08	– mediation expert	– International	– Track I – Track II	– INGO/private mediation organization	F
10	– gender expert – mediation expert – member of negotiation team – civil society actor	– Asia Pacific – International	– Track I	– member of WMN – civil society organization	F
11	– mediation expert	– International	– Track I	– INGO/private mediation organization	M

(cont.)

N	Participant's role	Region (regional organizations/ conflict)	Track – experience of working in a peace process	Employment or membership (at time of interview)	Gender
12	– mediation expert	– International	– Track I – Track II	– INGO/private mediation organization – academic	F
13	– gender expert – mediation expert – member of a current or past mediation team	– International	– Track I	– member of WMN – civil society organization	F
14	– mediation expert	– International	– Track I – Track II	– INGO/private mediation organization	M
15	– gender expert – mediation expert	– Africa	– Track II	– academic	F
16	– other thematic technical expert	– Africa – Middle East	– Track I – Track II	– INGO/private mediation organization – academic	F
17	– civil society actor	– Africa	– Track III	– civil society organization	F
19	– mediation expert – member of current or past mediation team – civil society actor	– International	– Track I – Track III	– member of WMN – INGO/private mediation organization	F
20	– gender expert – civil society actor – other thematic technical expert	– Middle East – Europe	– Track I – Track II – Track III	– civil society organization	F
21	– gender expert – mediation expert	– Africa	– Track II	– member of WMN	F



(cont.)

N	Participant's role	Region (regional organizations/ conflict)	Track – experience of working in a peace process	Employment or membership (at time of interview)	Gender
22	– gender expert – mediation expert	– Africa	– Track III	– member of WMN – civil society organization – academic	F
23	– gender expert – mediation expert	– Africa	– Track III	– member of WMN – civil society organization	F
25	– gender expert	– International	– Track II	– member of WMN – INGO/private mediation organization	F
27	– gender expert	– Africa	– Track III	– INGO/private mediation organization	F
28	– gender expert – mediation expert	– Middle East	– Track I – Track III	– international or regional organization	F
29	– mediation expert	– International	– Track I	– government	F

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