

# WOMEN IN PEACE MEDIATION ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE DEFINITION

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## Abstract

This paper argues that narrow understandings of 'peace mediation' that tend to orientate around formal peace negotiations play a role in perpetuating a lack of recognition of the extensive and crucial role that grassroots women play in peace mediation.

Global statistics on women's inclusion in high-level peace talks demonstrate high levels of gender inequality. A 2016 study shows that between 1992 and 2011 women only made up 2 percent of mediators, 4 percent of signatories and 9 percent of negotiators. However, at the grassroots level, women tend to play vital, yet often unrecognised, roles in peacebuilding, which also utilises meditative practice. In the Irish context, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition played a crucial role in the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement and are included in global statistics on women in mediation. Yet those at the grassroots level, who negotiated between, and continue to negotiate between, contentious groups are rarely recognised as mediators.

This paper begins with a review of the theoretical literature on women in peacebuilding and mediation, including critiques of the narrow definitions of these fields employed in official documentation and policy. The second part examines empirical evidence from the voices of a diversity of women working in peace mediation from the island of Ireland. Findings show that women working in this area engage in meditative practice in their everyday peacebuilding work, but do not tend to define their work in terms of peace mediation. The paper therefore argues that the way that peace mediation is currently defined and what types of mediation are valued perpetuates the lack of both institutional and self-recognition of women's work in the field of peace mediation.

KEYWORDS: *Peace and conflict, gender, mediation, negotiations, UNSCR 1325*

## Introduction

Twenty years on from the adoption of United National Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, there still remains a major shortfall in women's participation in peace mediation. Global statistics on women's inclusion in high-level peace talks demonstrate that between 1992 and 2018, women have only made up 3 percent of mediators and 13 percent of negotiators (Bell et al. 2019). While there have been some significant improvements in selected high-profile peace negotiations, such

as the recent peace negotiations in Colombia, women's participation has tended to have its roots in advocacy for inclusion rather than through natural selection. However, while these figures are particularly worrying, they tend to refer to high-level peace talks, or 'Track 1' negotiations, as they are normally known. Yet what these figures overlook is the fact that at the grassroots level, women play vital, yet often unrecognised, roles in peacebuilding, which also utilises 'meditative practice'. This, we take to refer to the negotiatory and diplomacy skills required to mediate between contentious groups or individuals.

This paper argues that narrow definitions of peace mediation and its general association with Track 1 negotiations contribute to overshadowing the realities of women's diverse and extensive experience in mediation practice, much of which is located at the grassroots level. This pattern, we argue, actually perpetuates gender inequality at Track 1 level by assuming women lack qualifications in this field. As a qualitative analysis, the paper takes its empirical findings from the voices of women peacebuilders from across the island of Ireland, who use mediative practice in their peacebuilding work.

### **Gender, peacebuilding and peace negotiations**

Peacebuilding is not just a simple process of shifting from war to peace but involves a multitude of often interlinked processes of negotiations between warring parties: transforming intergroup relations, negotiating new forms of governance, addressing issues around wartime harms and negotiating the rebuilding of a broken economy (Ramsbottom et al.; Hudson 2009). The voices heard and prioritised through these processes have been shown to be inherently gendered (Cohn 2013; de Alwis et al. 2013; Hudson 2016). While there is extensive scholarship that exposes the multitude of roles that women play in conflict, including prominent roles in armed groups (Henshaw 2016; Thomas and Bond 2015), when it comes to negotiating the high-politics of peace in all its forms, essentialist assumptions around women's natural roles and way of being tend to be pushed to the fore, frequently leading to the exclusion or limiting of women's voices. Assumptions around war as a 'man's game' leads to the closing of spaces in negotiations between male political leaders or male leaders of warring parties (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002). This restricted understanding of what peace negotiations are overlooks the fact that negotiating peace affects the whole of society, not just those who lead militaries or governments. Similarly, in contexts where women have been traditionally excluded from politics, a common argument is that women do not have the experience to participate (de Alwis et al. 2013).

Essentialist assumptions tend to associate women in conflict with 'victimhood' and the 'community' and men with the hard politics of war (Charlesworth 2008; Cohn 2013). Assumption around women's inherent 'peaceful' nature therefore leads to a normally 'uncritical' acknowledgement of women's involvement at the community level, but

at the same time tends to de-professionalise community-level peacebuilding as 'just something that women do'. This is contrasted with the value placed on participation in what is traditionally viewed as the masculine realm of high politics.

Although UNSCR 1325 has provided a platform for advocacy around increasing women's participation, this inclusion is based on the perspective that women should be included due to their naturally 'peaceful' nature (Shepherd 2016). This essentialising logic has led to an 'add women and stir' approach to women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes, which 'fails to capture the complexities of women's situated political positions in violent societies' and assumes that women are one homogenous group (Ní Aoláin 2016, 158).

Work on women in peace mediation tends to focus either on the challenges that women face in seeking to gain a seat at the negotiating table, or the benefits of women's participation in peace negotiations.<sup>1</sup> (Turner 2019; Hudson 2016; O'Reilly 2013). On the latter point, UN Women (2015) shows that where women are included at the negotiating table, there is a 35 percent greater likelihood of sustaining peace for more than fifteen years; others have demonstrated that where women participate meaningfully in peace processes, there is an increased possibility of reaching an agreement or creating a more inclusive document (Paffenholtz et al. 2016). However, many of these findings are politicised to invoke ideas around women's natural ability to engage in 'soft skills' or women's effectiveness due to their closeness to the community. Problematically, this further essentialises or instrumentalises women's inclusion, rather than normalising the fact that women are qualified to be there.

One of the problems with this literature is that it tends to take its starting point from a definition of 'mediation' that refers to high-level peace negotiations. This starting point is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it overlooks the value of Track 2 and 3 mediation processes. These are negotiations that take place at the mid-level such as between business or religious figures (Track 2) or the community level (Track 3). Such processes are vital for the healing of the community and for the success of the agreement (Ramsbottom et al. 2011). However, while grassroots initiatives are vital in bringing people and groups together to address conflict, they are seen as an 'unofficial process,' occurring remotely from Track 1 processes, and thus are less respected (Turner 2018). Contrary to Track 1 negotiations, women's representation is much higher at the Track 3 level but given its 'unofficial status,' it is often overlooked or unpaid. This perpetuates the perception of women's lack of professionalisation in mediation work or the false notion that there is a lack of qualified women.

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1. Selection criteria are often skewed towards excluding women due to assumptions around a lack of qualifications. Domestic pressures such as childcare, gender expectations in the home, or societal gender norms that perpetuate the risks that women face when they put their head above the parapet also impedes women's participation (Turner 2019; Hudson 2016).

## Mediation and mediative practice

In its 'Guidance for Effective Mediation,' the United Nations 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' (United Nations 2012). However, when we use this definition it tends to refer to specific warring parties rather than the contentious groups at the grassroots level, as this is normally incorporated into practices of peacebuilding, despite using the same 'mediative practice'. While Bagshaw (2009, 18) notes that mediation and peacebuilding are linked, as they 'empower people to be active participants in transforming conflict and making decisions that affect their lives,' what is more important to point out is that the practices used in Track 1 and Track 3 negotiations are largely the same. Thus, by broadening the definition of mediator to include those that use mediative practice across all levels of peace negotiations this reveals, firstly, that women are much more heavily represented at Track 3 than at Track 1 but secondly, and more importantly, that there is a much greater number of women who are skilled in mediative practice than is portrayed in current statistics.

Some scholarship on women's inclusion in peace processes has gone beyond the mediation dimension of the process and sought to highlight women's inclusion in peace processes in terms of other forms of action, such as, observers, mass action or advocacy (Paffenholz et al. 2016). However, while this does provide a more comprehensive picture of women's contribution and agency within peace processes, recognising the myriad ways in which women engage, it is too broad a definition to gain a more meaningful picture of women's experiences of mediation. Instead, if we look at mediation in terms of the use of 'mediative practice,' then we get a more accurate picture of the realities of women's experience in mediation practice that also takes into account what is normally termed as peacebuilding.

## Women and mediative practice on the island of Ireland

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition played a crucial role in the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. While key figures from the Coalition are recognised internationally for their work, although sometimes insufficiently, there are other women who participated in, and continue to use mediative practice in extensive and diverse grassroots peacebuilding, but who remain overlooked professionally. Similarly, there are numerous women across the island of Ireland who work internationally in peacebuilding and mediation practice as well as those from newer communities who are now living on the island of Ireland. In order to explore how mediative practice is used in peacebuilding practice on the island of Ireland and gain a more accurate picture of women who are skilled in this area, four focus groups were carried out with a diversity of women across the island of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This included women from both

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2. Focus groups were held in: Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Dundalk and Dublin, between September and December 2019.

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and those who work both domestically and internationally. Also included in the focus groups were migrant women, some of whom have come to Ireland as refugees and have vital experience in mediative practice from their country of origin. Findings show that if we take a broader understanding of what we mean by mediation to take into account women peacebuilders that use mediative practice, this paints a very different picture to the one that only examines high-level negotiations. What is also shown is that the narrow definition of 'mediator' in the formal sense of the term not only perpetuates a lack of external recognition but also contributes to women peacebuilders questioning their own identity as peace mediators (Riley and Murphy 2020).<sup>3</sup> This, in turn, is part of the problem in fully recognising the diversity and level of experience of women working in mediation across the island of Ireland.

### **Diversity of experience**

Within the Northern Irish context, participants exhibited a wide range of expertise. Some participants had worked directly in prisons during and after the Troubles; others worked on arts projects designed to bring different communities together in a shared space. One woman began her mediation journey as a child, when she accompanied her mother to peacebuilding meetings and strategy sessions. These women have been involved in every facet and stage of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. However, while the immediate connotation of peacebuilding and mediation across the island might be mediative practice related to the Troubles, the expertise held by participants was not limited to a single context. Many women had also worked in peacebuilding and mediation internationally and the focus groups also included women from newer communities who spoke of using mediative practice in peacebuilding in a diverse range of countries such as Burundi, Guatemala, Pakistan, Myanmar, Colombia and Tanzania and Somalia. The diversity of backgrounds and experiences also drew attention to new issues within familiar contexts. Several participants touched on the importance of considering intersectional identity concerns within Northern Ireland, for example. One participant worked closely with the Roma and traveller community, while another worked with ethnic minorities in Derry/Londonderry; both noted that peace in Northern Ireland required incorporating the full range of Northern Irish society and that dialogue and mediative practice at the community level is vital in order for peace to be sustainable.

### **Lack of self-recognition as a mediator**

Despite the wealth of knowledge and expertise found across the focus groups, the second key theme emerging from the focus groups was a lack self-recognition as peace mediators. In all four of the focus groups, participants often began their statements

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3. This research was undertaken as part of the project Irish Consortium on the Promotion of Women in Peace Mediation and Negotiations' funded by the Irish Research Council and the Irish Human Rights Commission.

with disclaimers such as, 'I'm not a mediator, but...' Even when describing work that is clearly located in the field of mediation practice, many women seemed reluctant to label themselves as mediators. Part of this reluctance may stem from a dissonance between job titles or descriptions and the concept of 'mediation': many roles that employ mediation practice, for example, do not fall under the umbrella of formal mediation positions or are perceived more in terms of community dialogue. However, despite a reluctance to define themselves explicitly as mediators, discussions around the meaning of 'mediative practice' increasingly led women to feel more comfortable to describe themselves in these terms. One participant, for example, described an experience of talking to a peer who worked with Orange Order members to help them soften and change their outlooks; when the participant told her peer that this work was a form of mediation and peacebuilding, the woman was initially reluctant to call herself a mediator. After discussing, however, the woman began to recognise her role within the fields of peacebuilding and mediation. Other participants echoed these feelings, stating that while they had initially not thought of themselves as mediators or peacebuilders, through these discussions they had changed their self-perception.

A more prevalent pattern, however, centred on the tendency of participants to downplay their achievements in the mediation and peacebuilding arenas. Many of the participants noted that they often struggled with 'imposter syndrome' or similar difficulties in accepting their own legitimacy as mediators. Some participants shared that while they were aware of their own tendency to discount the work they had done in the field of mediation and peacebuilding, they still had trouble reframing their self-perception. This lack of self-identification as mediators made it difficult for women to pursue careers in the field and thus would prevent them from seeking to 'climb the ladder' into the political mediation.

### **Lack of external recognition**

Part of what lies beneath this problem relates to a third theme of the focus groups: the lack of external recognition for women's mediation work. Some of the common reasons for participants' lack of self-identification as mediators were that they are frequently not paid for their work or that their titles did not include any mention of mediation or mediative practice. While there was an abundance of women engaged in mediative practice on the island, opportunities for advancement to Track 1 positions, for example, were limited or non-existent. Although many participants had no desire to be involved in Track 1 mediation, the frustration associated with finding opportunities for professional development in the field was common to nearly all participants. Some participants noted that part of the issue was being allowed at the table at all; often, participants had heard of forums for mediators, but were not themselves asked to participate. In other cases, even when women were present, they struggled to make their voices heard in an environment dominated by men. For many women, participation itself was a lose-lose situation; they were either seen as too 'soft' to

make an impact or portrayed as domineering and overbearing. In either case, their behaviour was often used as an excuse to make future participation more difficult. The women in the focus groups also noted that their participation was often expected to be administrative or logistical in nature; in some cases, they felt that their inclusion was merely lip service to gender equality norms. One woman with years of mediation expertise described her experience once she was appointed to reconciliation and awareness-raising task forces in Somalia, where her role was often to fetch tea. Truly inclusive involvement and recognition was a rare experience for most participants.

## **Analysis**

Empirical evidence from the Irish case highlights some of the most problematic aspects of the narrow definition of mediation. Across four focus groups with participants from a wide variety of professional and personal backgrounds, one of the most universal patterns was the difficulty women had in identifying as mediators. This pattern has clear connections to the way in which mediation is defined: when women are conditioned to believe that the only 'real' or 'serious' mediation is Track 1 mediation, they become uncomfortable identifying their own work as mediative practice. In turn, because this work often does not fall under the official umbrella of mediation, women's work at the grassroots level is constructed as separate from the realm of career development. The constant undermining of their experience by male colleagues, moreover, reinforces the misconception that the work these women do is something of a hobby rather than invaluable professional experience. Essentialised understandings of women's location in the community or that they are 'by nature' more peaceful leads to the perpetuation of ideas that this is just something women do. These processes are thus not seen in professional terms and as a result, women are often unpaid, overworked and unrecognised for their 'professional' skills.

The lack of self-identification as mediators couples with the deficiency of institutional recognition of women's mediative practice to create a vicious cycle, in which public officials and organisations decry the shortage of women in mediation while reinforcing barriers to their entry into the field. The focus groups also illustrated the additional difficulties facing migrant women: the broad lack of recognition of grassroots work often translates to a near erasure of years (or even decades) of work undertaken in a different global context. Part of the difficulty for migrant women comes from the struggle to locate outlets in which to keep utilising their experience with mediative practice. Narratives from the focus groups indicate that in any case, for both domestic and migrant women, opportunities for working in mediation are limited by narrow conceptualisations of what constitutes mediation.

## Conclusion

This short paper has shown how the narrow definition of 'mediator' associated with Track 1 diplomacy has implications for the recognition of the realities of women's roles in mediative practice across all tracks of negotiations. This is evidenced through the Irish context, which shows that, although when pressed on the topic there was a clear recognition of skills in mediative practice, the lack of external and internal recognition of the individual as a professional 'mediator' was prevalent. Thus, this lack of inclusion of Track 2 and 3 negotiations within figures on women in mediation clearly skews the reality that there are many more women skilled in mediative practice that is officially recognised. Of course, the figures for women in high-level mediation is still unacceptable, but by broadening the scope of how we understand peace mediators there is a greater knowledge of who has the experience and how that experience can be recognised and professionalised in order to elevate women to high-level negotiations. As noted by Turner (2019, 249) if the mediation skills demonstrated by women at the Track 2 and Track 3 are not understood to be mediation it seems that the first 'barrier to women's visibility is definitional'. This short analysis of the Irish case supports this claim.

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