



Briefing Paper: Mechanisms for Inclusive Dialogue in Peacebuilding

Introduction

The field of peace mediation has expanded considerably with increasing professionalisation, standardisation, and greater engagement with innovative approaches.¹ Yet problematically, the number of peace agreements that have been successfully negotiated has, in fact, declined in recent years.² However, if we define successes in peace mediation only in terms of high-level political negotiations, we overlook the role that mediation plays within peacemaking more broadly. For example, peace mediation and facilitated dialogue contribute significantly to the delivery of humanitarian aid, negotiating access to resources, dealing with community insecurities and conflict prevention, or negotiating the return of internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees.³

With a growing need to counter the rise in military responses to global insecurity and the backlash against gender provisions, exploring diverse and inclusive approaches in peace mediation remains crucial. Moreover, responding to the precariousness of peace requires sustained commitment, informed by an ethos of conflict transformation.⁴ Engaging with these themes, this briefing paper presents findings from the [Talk4Peace](#) project across the following two dimensions:

1. Inclusion and diversity: focusing on the practical challenges of ensuring meaningful participation of women and minoritized groups.
2. Linearity and long-term commitments: focusing on moving beyond linear and timebound approaches.

Methodology

The findings are drawn from interviews with fifteen mediation experts and practitioners and were focused on the changing nature of mediation policies and practices in a transnational perspective. Each semi-structured interview lasted for approximately one hour. All except for one were conducted online. Interviewees were based across a variety of different international contexts (Cambodia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Northern Ireland, Spain, Kenya, Uganda, and the United States), and had worked across diverse peace processes, either as mediators or in mediation support roles. Thirteen out of fifteen interviewees were women. This gender imbalance reflects the reality that more women are engaged in issues related to inclusion and critique of the current system of peace mediation. Also from a practical perspective, more positive responses were received from women in requests for research interviews. All interviewees are anonymised.

Additionally, three focus groups were carried out in Northern Ireland as part of the broader Talk4Peace project. These were aimed at collating perspectives of community mediators with extensive local and international experience. Participants included peacebuilders who use mediative practice in their work, and activists working on issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion. These perspectives spotlight a specific context with an established tradition of community mediation, and situates findings within the complexities of conflict transformation, 25 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The brief also draws on current peace mediation literature and practice papers. This includes key policy and practice documents from the United Nations, the European Union, and the African Union.



Graphics by Stephanie Heackman (This work received support from the Engaged Research Seed Fund at Queen's University Belfast)

Defining Peace Mediation

The United Nations defines mediation as a process in which “a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage, or resolve a conflict by helping them develop mutually acceptable agreements.”⁵ The focus on a third party as mediator is key to this definition, but who or what is the third party may differ depending on context. While traditionally, peace mediators were international diplomats, the field has broadened, with processes now led by a combination of international and regional organisations, diverse States, or international and local NGOs.⁶

The international peace mediation apparatus since the end of the Cold War has been guided from within the liberal peace paradigm.⁷ This is design-led and hierarchical, generally driven by neoliberal ideologies of the Global North.⁸ The hierarchical nature of the system is explicit in the way that it is based on a three-track system. Track one refers to high-level political negotiations. Track two focuses on dialogue between unofficial representatives such as community or religious leaders, business representatives, or NGOs. Track three encompasses mediation held in local or community spaces. However, more recently, and in recognition of the problems associated with disconnected and parallel processes, greater emphasis is placed the facilitation of multi-track dialogue; processes that include avenues for channelling dialogue between tracks.⁹ This development in the design of mediated negotiations is also reflected in the proliferation of mediation support teams. In recent years, and in response to the complexity of contemporary intrastate and internationalised conflict, there is a move away from what was previously understood as ‘classical mediation’. This is where a single process was mediated by one facilitator.¹⁰ Instead, mediated dialogue in dispute resolution often involves multiple facilitators with large technical and support teams.¹¹

Taking this into account, this brief adopts a wider notion of mediation that also encompasses mediation support activities, formal and informal community mediation, and the use of mediative practice in peacebuilding settings. This choice is based on an analytical concern with inclusion and diversity. This perspective starts from the premise shared by our respondents, that realising a more inclusive approach to mediation requires rethinking who counts as a mediator. While, conventional assumptions place peace mediators as high-level diplomats (typically men), this narrow definition overlooks women’s diverse experiences as mediators, particularly those working on local conflicts. In such cases women are often described in other ways, such as ‘peacebuilders who engage in community work’, even when their work involves facilitating dialogue processes or leading negotiations.¹² For example, previous research carried out in Northern Ireland found that many women working in peacebuilding settings would use mediative practice, but are not recognised as mediators because of the community orientation of their work.¹³

Some scholars caution against broadening the definition of mediator, raising concerns over blurring the boundaries to an extent that the definition becomes unwieldy. However, as a way of ensuring conceptual consistency, Clayton et al (2023) suggest that “the key is for everyone to define the term they use and be explicit about the choices made, and the logic for doing so.”¹⁴ The position in this brief is that broadening the definition to include how mediation is used as a tool in diverse contexts, including at the local level, has important political implications for valuing local mediators and recognising their expertise. As expressed by a respondent from an established international mediation support organisation, “all peace mediators are peacebuilders first but take on the role of mediator when using the tool of mediation to build peace.”¹⁵ Understanding mediation in this sense enables us to expand who should be recognised within mediation practice, generate opportunities to conceptualise and operationalise inclusion in the broadest sense, capture mediative practices that take place in a longer temporal frame, and better recognise diverse methods, knowledges and practices that count in mediation.

Norms and Standardisation in Peace Mediation

Greater attention paid to peace mediation in policy and research has led, in recent years, to increased professionalisation of the field. This is, in part, driven by the introduction of guidelines in mediation practice that enshrine international norms and standards.¹⁶ The most significant is the 2012 [United Nations Guidelines on Effective Mediation](#) that details key standards of mediation such as consent, inclusivity and impartiality. More recently, the European Union adopted the updated [Concept on Peace Mediation 2020](#), which led to the Guidelines on Peace Mediation developed by the [European External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#). The African Union adopted their [Mediation Support Handbook](#) in 2014. These documents articulate a commitment to inclusion and diversity that recognises the importance of gender diversity in negotiating teams but also engages with and recognises the vital role of connecting political negotiations with local peacebuilders.

However, while norms and guidelines may provide a more standardised framework, innovations in mediation research also demonstrate a need for more adaptable approaches that embrace “complexity, unpredictability, and uncertainty,” and connect diverse voices in long-term processes.¹⁷ Findings in this brief indicate a gap between recognition of the need for long-term transformative engagement and openness to move beyond standard, design-led interventions. Moreover, while normative commitments on inclusivity represent a positive shift, findings in this brief demonstrate limits in the transformative impact of these norms.



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Part 1: Inclusivity

A key development in the field of mediation concerns the now widespread international legal obligations for more equal participation in peacemaking. Feminist scholars and practitioners have been among the primary advocates of this shift that emerged in parallel with [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) (2000) and the development of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Most notably, the principle of inclusivity was foregrounded in relation to the continued underrepresentation of women in high-level mediation and national peace talks.¹⁸ More broadly, attention to inclusivity responds to the need to better include civil society in mediation practices. On this basis the inclusion of other underrepresented groups beside women has gained articulation for example in [the Youth Peace and Security agenda](#) and the [United Nations Guidance Note on Engaging with Insider Mediators](#).

Despite the now established normative landscape, structural constraints continue to hamper the meaningful participation of actors historically excluded, such as women and other minoritized groups.¹⁹ Furthermore, evidence indicates that existing gendered hierarchies in the architecture of peace mediation are resilient, despite the emphasis on inclusion of a variety of actors and multi-track interventions.²⁰

Finding 1.1: Beyond Representation

A key finding emerging from interviews indicates that while certain policy documents have a more expansive and relational approach to inclusion,²¹ this is often equated with group representation, where it becomes about ‘adding’ excluded or underrepresented groups ‘to the room’, without addressing the problems of the room itself. As feminist scholars have argued, while inclusion in this sense can create a window of opportunity for the participation of certain women and excluded groups, this framing is insufficient to transform a process shaped by gendered hierarchies.²² This study confirms a tension between gender inclusive approaches and more transformative practices.

Some participants highlighted the importance of dedicated spaces and convening mechanisms through which women with diverse backgrounds and affiliations can work together to develop gender-sensitive recommendations; recommendations that can inform processes at the national and international level. Likewise, these mechanisms can support the visibility and capacity of women mediators across the track system. Since 2015, initiatives of this kind have been championed through the establishment of women mediators networks, which represent an

explicit initiative linking the WPS agenda with mediation.²³ While an assessment of women’s mediator networks is beyond the remit of this study, a project that exemplifies the convening capacity of networks is the Syria initiative facilitated by the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) and Search for Common Ground. Detailed further in Box 1, this initiative provided an important platform for Syrian women activists and network members to discuss solutions and recommendations to the ongoing crisis 10 years after the start of war. As a respondent who was involved in this project explained,

It was a chance for these women to speak to other women activists from different countries and also to hear (other) experiences. It was very important because it came at a time where the space for Syrian women was shrinking anyway.²⁴

BOX 1: The role of women in the elaboration of durable solutions to the Syrian crisis
(An initiative of the Meditarianian Women Mediators Neetork in collaboration with Search for Common Ground, 2021)

This project was initiated in response to the exclusion of women in the Syrian process beyond the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB). The latter was an initiative launched in 2016 by the UN Special Envoy, but received significant criticism due to the elite composition of membership. The MWMN initiative involved four webinars with participation from 25 Syrian women activists and network members. As stated in the MWMN website, it aimed to:

- Promote and support dialogue among Syrian women, MWMN members and experts in the field, to better understand their needs and pave the way for lasting solutions to the Syrian crisis, including in the context of the official peace process.
- Amplify the voices of Syrian women through transparent and inclusive engagement led by participants.
- Identify key areas of future focus on which to build new initiatives inside and outside Syria

A participant involved in this project noted how efforts were made to include a diversity of perspectives in the group, she explained,

We brought representatives from WAB, but we also brought women from other groups. You know, inside and outside Syria, from rural and from urban areas. So they all had the chance to reflect on what they believe should be included in the recommendations.

Amongst others, the group included a young woman activist who emphasised the importance of connecting Women, Peace and Security with the Youth Peace and Security agenda, and another from Northern Syria who advocated for the rights of women who remain in limbo in camps within former ISIS-controlled territories. The project was designed to be participatory, enabling Syrian women to lead the conversation,

It was done in a, let's say, in a democratic way. So they [Syrian women] were asked to select the issues and topics they wanted to highlight - that they think are most important for Syrian women.

A series of [recommendations](#) were drafted as an outcome of the initiative, but in the interviewee also highlighted how the project was particularly significant for the participants at a time of declining interest in Syria and shrinking space for women.

Other participants were more critical, suggesting that just focusing on representation can actually reinforce existing structures and practices and, implicitly, reproduce deep-seated inequalities. As a participant pointed out,

It's really about the difference between talking about women as representation, versus talking about the power dynamics that exist and how we want to change those. And then our answer to everything is, well, there obviously aren't women there because of their capacity. And so let's just continue to throw training, throw workshops, have gender advisors, because if we do this long enough it'll change. [This is] rather than saying, "well, let's just have this process in a completely different way and validate that as the process."²⁵

As critical scholars have noted in the related

context of WPS implementation, the implications of this approach to inclusion are complex.²⁶ For example, the emphasis on training and capacity building to support women as agents in mediation can reproduce problematic ideas of women lacking the necessary skills to operate effectively in what is a hierarchical, male-dominated process. While this might create opportunities for professional development and participation, it can implicitly work to leave established mediation structures and practices intact. As another participant echoes, we should be moving towards an understanding of mediation,

...which is transformative, which does engage lots of different voices, which understands that it is not simply about

adding elite women to a table in which a certain set of interests are discussed, but is actually about ensuring that the interests beyond [the table] - in communities - and which are very complex and often changing - are taken seriously.²⁷

This suggests that decoupling women's inclusion from a commitment to analyse and transform gendered and other power relations that shape conflict and mediation practices limits the transformative potential of mediation and peacebuilding efforts. Recent policy documents demonstrate the acknowledgement of gender analysis as an important component of mediation practices.²⁸ However, insights from participants suggest that in practice this is still seen as optional,²⁹ or a technical exercise,³⁰ rather than integral to linking inclusion to the broader aim of transforming the complex web of relations at the core of a conflict.

The appointment of gender advisors is a common strategy to integrate gender expertise in formal mediation processes. Research indicates that gender advisors can be effective in focusing attention on the inclusion of women and to gendered dynamics in mediation, even though they might operate in a constrained space. However, there is also evidence of a reluctance to see gender expertise as integral to mediation.³¹ The Talk4Peace research resonates with such findings. As one participant notes, the impact that gender advisors can have in a national mediation process is context sensitive. For example, it depends on the dynamics of the mediation process itself, such as the space afforded to a gendered perspective by lead mediators. It is also "contingent on the presence and strength of a wider women's movement and on the opportunities for linkages between the work of gender advisors and local women's demands."³² Echoing existing research on the implementation of WPS within peacebuilding and security practices,³³ this testifies to the complexities encountered by gender experts in translating normative advances on inclusion into the practice of mediation.

Finding 1.2: Revisiting Inclusion

An important finding from this research is that inclusion is often understood as static and fixed in time. Our research indicates that the inclusion of certain groups, while well-meaning and necessary, can over time reproduce other hierarchies and exclusions. For example, this was visible in the context of Northern Ireland as a community mediator explained,

[In the early stages of the peace process] inclusion was about the armed groups... having that [the armed group] voice in the room. Now I'm talking about at earlier times, not more recently, because actually more recently it's nearly gone the other way, where the ex-prisoners or the ex-combatants are nearly putting themselves so much forward for their community that the ordinary community voices get lost.³⁴

This suggests that inclusion should be re-assessed over time in light of changing dynamics within a peace process. In other words, adopting a dynamic and relational understanding of inclusion can better support mediators to identify shifting barriers for meaningful participation as challenges persist or emerge anew at different stages of a peace process. This perspective is adopted by some mediation organisations who were interviewed for this research. For example, one representative noted that their approach to inclusion is based on "continued analysis of what are the missing pieces of inclusion," which means, "revisiting whether the assumptions we make about inclusion are relevant."³⁵ Another respondent highlighted the need for creative and transformative approaches that require constant reassessment and reflectivity on "what's going wrong, what's working and who is missing from the process."³⁶

Reassessing inclusion also involves an awareness of the role of gatekeepers who may dictate who can gain access to mediated processes. In reference to community processes in Northern Ireland, focus group discussions revealed how in some communities newer gatekeepers have emerged who are aligned

to criminal gangs and can create a security risk for individuals engaged in peacebuilding processes.³⁷ Furthermore, although mediators can act as gatekeepers to negotiations, one of our participants explained how she faced resistance towards her involvement in peace mediation in the community from those working in the peacebuilding sector. She explained,

*There is a huge amount of gatekeeping involved, and I don't think we name that very often, so it's very hard to actually get into mediation here, because unless you are connected to the mediation organisations, or that you are already existing as a mediator, it's very, very hard to get into those very closed loops.*³⁸

These testimonies illustrate the importance of continuous assessment of shifting power relations and hierarchies that can be reconstituted at different stages of a peace process. This includes during the implementation stage, and at the hands of different gatekeepers, including mediators. The approaches taken by some of our respondents indicate positive moves towards a more dynamic understanding of inclusion, informed by context sensitivity and critical self-reflection.

Finding 1.3: Unintended Consequences of Professionalisation

Broadly, our findings showed positive benefits from the professionalisation of mediation, such as more access to funding for capacity building and training courses for women and minority groups. The professionalisation of mediation has brought with it multiple training programmes for women. For example, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund has targeted local women in countries such as Burundi to become trained as mediators,³⁹ the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Dialogue Academy for Young Women (LDA) is another example.⁴⁰ Moreover, the increasing focus on insider mediation as discussed in Finding 1.1 broadens the scope of access to mediation training.

However, interviewees also note some unintended drawbacks from professionalisation. A key theme was that professionalisation can create hierarchies and lead to other forms of exclusion.⁴¹ This is particularly problematic when those who have expertise or context specific knowledge “are left outside the room”, because they are not recognised as a professional or have not been accredited as a mediator.⁴² One interviewee also raised concerns about how too much focus on young women could result in exclusions for older women. However, this highlights the importance of intergenerational mentoring and training programmes as a method in countering this.⁴³ Moreover, where there are positive initiatives to encourage younger women into peace mediation, this needs to be accompanied by psychological and physical security, given that in certain contexts, young, unmarried women may face multiple security risks.⁴⁴

Relatedly, another respondent raised the issue of how professionalisation and the introduction of practice standards can cause side-lining of local interest groups that may use their position in society to mediate positively between antagonistic groups. Research from the Berghof Foundation shows that faith leaders often play a crucial role in community mediation.⁴⁵ However, secular norms of practice can disregard them given the international community's reluctance to engage with groups perceived as touting a specific agenda.⁴⁶ Moreover, where resources are directed towards faith-based mediators, it tends to be primarily received by men, given that donors “favour supporting actors in institutionalised, often male-dominated setting, and especially those in leadership roles.”⁴⁷

Finding 1.4: Generative Strategies for Inclusion and Transformation

An important argument emerging from interviews is that progressing beyond merely the logic of representation, requires challenging essentialist and homogenous understandings of women and other under-represented groups. This involves accounting for both commonalities and diversity of experiences within groups. As one respondent points out, “there has to be this ability to manage and include diverse women, diverse men and of all these different backgrounds.”⁴⁸

The concept of intersectionality is useful to capture this complexity. The concept illustrates how characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity and class intersect to determine individuals’ positions in society, while also creating overlapping inequalities shaped by these traits. A transformative approach to inclusion in mediation, thus, involves employing a gender analysis informed by attention to context-specific, intersecting inequalities, that complicate homogenous understandings of women, while also including a focus on masculinities.

A community mediator from Northern Ireland highlighted using an approach to inclusion aimed at ensuring all parties have the ability to represent themselves and their views where there might be power differentials in the room. She states,

*for me it’s about ensuring that the intervention and the way we facilitate the mediation leaves space for the quiet and the less articulate... and making sure there’s no power imbalance, because again, that’s about equity.*⁴⁹

While not using the language of intersectionality, the reference to equity provides a potential entry point. It denotes an understanding of the differentiated positions that individuals and communities inhabit in a conflict environment and how this might shape their ability to participate fully in a mediation process, rather than simply a concern with

having more voices at the table. In this case, the respondent discussed dedicating additional time to do preparatory work aimed at coaching and building the confidence of certain parties. In another example a respondent spoke of how they sought additional funding to support members of certain communities who felt less confident compared to other parties involved in the mediation.

Respondents detailed a variety of strategies based on their own work that could have transformative impact. One participant described a strategy of rotating participation in the Philippines process, where representatives of different groups were invited to the negotiating room on a rotating basis. Participants were not selected through an essentialist understanding of who they are, but in terms of the interests they could represent (e.g. governors of an area). The interviewee explained how this opened up the space for actors who rarely have the opportunity to contribute to peace talks. At the same time, this approach challenged existing practices of secrecy around the negotiations as different groups could see and contribute to the dialogue. In turn, she explained, this built ownership and legitimacy around the process,

*And so they had this greater sense of ownership of the final result because they knew where it came from. And for me, that’s the difference with the sort of multi-track where you have the secret power room where the negotiations happen.*⁵⁰

Using more generative facilitation styles also emerged as an important theme in our interviews. For example, one participant explained the importance of egoless facilitation, which is about having the ability to give up power. She states that,

*It’s really dependent then on facilitators who have emotional intelligence, who are egoless, who can collaborate, understand complementarity, understand that change happens both through the key people and the synergies with others.*⁵¹

The same respondent advocates for what she terms “creative facilitation”, noting how such a style can better support political actors that might be more used to a debating style of communication rather than a dialogical approach. She explains that,

...facilitation is, I think connecting the dots and bringing in things and bringing in people and ideas and changing the dynamics. But I think there is a role for what John Paul Lederach talks about in the moral imagination, which is about a generative creative process that you can facilitate with national actors, but you must shift them out of a negotiation style energy - have to move them into a more dialogue space.⁵²

BOX 2: The role of art in promoting inclusive dialogue

A key aim of this study was to explore innovative tools that can contribute to inclusive dialogue. While not traditionally associated with classical mediation techniques, this research indicates that art-based methods have a dialogic and participatory potential that can foster wider engagement and participation. For example, a respondent highlighted how in community spaces, important tools for facilitating dialogue can be found within the arts. Yet, as another interviewee noted, support for creative methods and transformative approaches often gets lost in dominant ideas of transactional diplomacy focused primarily on securing ceasefires.

Part of the Talk4Peace research involved interviewing artists, practitioners and researchers who use alternative methods based on the arts and culture in a peacebuilding and conflict transformational context. These interviews are part of the [Talk4Peace podcast series](#). Topics include the role of the Theatre of Witness in Northern Ireland in creating opportunities for dialogue, visualisation or dance in dialogue facilitation, and the use of textiles, stitching and embroidery as a method of participatory research and reconciliation in Colombia.

What emerges from the interviews is that creative methods can stimulate different forms of communication based on empathy and human connection. They can offer avenues to discuss and visualise difficult stories, truths and contrasting perspectives

Part 2. Peace Mediation as a Tool in a Long-term Process

Research shows how short-term approaches to peacemaking remain key factors in the breakdown of peace agreements or return to situations of violence and insecurity.⁵³ While there is growing international recognition of the need for long-term, inclusive and adaptive processes, findings in this research show that long-term political and financial support remains insufficient and selective.⁵⁴ The position taken in this brief is that long-term commitment refers to both pre-talks dialogical engagement, regardless of whether or not political negotiations are insight, as well as a sustained commitment to post-agreement processes such as support for mediated dialogue across multiple tracks, and investment in trauma informed approaches.

Finding 2.1: Preparatory Commitments

The United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation, specifically identifies preparedness as a key principle. This is defined in terms of combining “the individual knowledge and skills of a mediator with a cohesive team of specialists as well as the necessary political, financial and administrative support from the mediating entity.”⁵⁵ What is apparent here is that the focus is primarily on the preparedness of the mediator and support team and less so on the parties. While preparedness of the parties is primarily understood as stemming from shuttle diplomacy, two interviewees emphasised the crucial role of preparatory work in equipping the parties in negotiating skills, even if the possibility for talks are not yet in sight.

One organisation interviewed is involved in delivering negotiating skills training to conflict parties, including armed groups. However, the respondent explained that it can be difficult to secure funding for this programme.⁵⁶ Donors tend to be reluctant to support preparatory work where there is not yet commitment to talks in place. Also, geopolitical factors that determine which conflicts or warring parties are prioritised, or considered ‘worth investing in’, act as an obstacle to this type of preparatory work. This is further exacerbated by the shrinking number of groups that the international community will talk to. Inevitably, this excludes groups listed as ‘terrorists’,⁵⁷ or defined as ‘proscribed groups’, of which there are many active in current conflicts.⁵⁸

Another respondent emphasised the importance of taking a nuanced and context-specific approach to training of the parties. Skills lacking in one group may not be the same in another. She explained how in the context of the national process in Myanmar,

*They realised halfway through, that the civil society and ethnic armed organization members had been so trained over the last 10 years in dialogue that they were really good at listening. But that the politicians and the members of parliament in the room were really good at debating because that’s what they do in parliament. Therefore, the intervention that had to be made, [was focused on] ensuring that everybody [parliamentarians] were able to step back and understand what dialogue is.*⁵⁹

Hence, the preparatory skills training required for the parties to “hear each other more deeply” needed to be directed more towards one group than another. As she added, ensuring the right skills are initiated with the right people requires taking a step back and reflecting on the skills already held by some, but not by others.

Relatedly, other respondents argued for greater emphasis on training and capacity building in trauma informed approaches. This is a method that is based on trauma awareness in mediation and should not be conflated with taking on the role of a councillor or psychologist for the parties. A respondent who is involved in trauma-informed trainings explained how, where dialogue is not managed within a trauma

informed framework, its presence at the table “risks derailing the process.” The mediator must be able to recognise when “trauma and stress reactions show up” and individuals go into “fight or flight” mode. As she explained,

I think there’s a huge onus of responsibility at the moment, where we find ourselves globally in terms of this openness to trauma informed practice, of applying that to the practice of mediation or peacebuilding.⁶⁰

Such an approach requires dedicating more time to mediation activities given that a trauma related reaction may be triggered if mediators place too much pressure on participants for quick responses. As noted by an interviewee based in Kenya,

...when the intention now becomes more about re-establishing connections using trauma informed practices [...] we’re trying to focus more on that connectivity, which means negotiations may also end up taking

a different time rather than when we try to just attack the problem without any trauma informed intentions.⁶¹

Transformative mediation focuses on the building of relationships or shifting human relations in a way that better facilitates co-existence in a non-violent way. However, the holding of trauma can impede the better development of such relationships. It is therefore vital that mediators are aware of the trauma that participants may have experienced. The focus on wellbeing within trauma informed approaches (discussed further in Box 3) should also extend to mediators themselves, who can be psychologically affected by a variety of factors such as, local insecurities, secondary trauma, or overwork and exhaustion.

Box 3: Women Mediators and Well-being

A report produced by Conciliation Resources and Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth network (WMC) found that many women mediators experience challenges to their well-being through balancing work commitments with family and insecurity.⁶² As noted by a respondent who has also carried out research in this area, women often experience additional stresses to their male counterparts due to gendered insecurities, caring responsibilities or a sense of having to prove themselves in a male dominated environment. As she further noted, if well-being is not addressed this can lead to the loss of “good women mediators and peacebuilders because they become incapacitated by what they have experienced.”⁶³ Methods to counter this were discussed, such as investing in relief and respite programmes for mediators and peacebuilders. One notable programme is **Unyoke Foundation**,⁶⁴ based in South Sudan, where they run respite retreats for mediators, peacebuilders and peace leaders, allowing space to reflect on their practice and connect with others working in the field.

The importance of preparatory work was also discussed in terms of ‘mediation advocacy’. A respondent working on ‘insider mediation’, explained how a key component of their approach is focused on mediation advocacy. She noted how,

Within these communities we’ve found that making sure people know mediation is an option available to them is a key piece. In some places mediation is a thing that is

known, and the fact that there are specific individuals that naturally play that role is a known fact. In other communities, this is not so popular, or, let’s say, known about, that there are other means of solving conflict that aren’t necessarily through a court or taking action by yourself.⁶⁵

A Ugandan respondent spoke of the positive role of peace media in promoting the use of mediated dialogue in dispute resolution and

peacebuilding. While social media plays an important role here, it is also open to dangers of negative or obstructive messaging. On the other hand, as she explained, radio messaging is a crucial tool in mediation advocacy and is more accessible to rural populations. Peace media, not only contributes to amplifying civil society pressure on parties to enter dialogue, but is also a positive way of engaging civil society in post-agreement dialogue processes.⁶⁶

A recent UN Women report on women's participation in local mediation that takes lessons from Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, shows how women mediators with diverse profiles operate as 'insider mediators.' On the issue of preparatory work in peace mediation, research shows the importance of supporting 'insider' women in convening cross-community processes that advocate for peace talks or can produce recommendations to be fed into the process. The diversity of voices within these spaces ensures that participation is not only drawn from women within the political elite.⁶⁷ A respondent working in Myanmar explained how, despite a lack of official process in place, women's groups continue to work on designing a vision for the future. She also explained that the first step in this preparatory stage has been defining key principles within this vision, even if the details cannot yet be determined. A similar principle-based approach was adopted by the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, where their stance within in the talks was guided by their pre-agreed key principles of human rights, equality and inclusion.⁶⁸

Finding 2.2 Post-agreement peace mediation

Advocates of perpetual peacebuilding continue to challenge the traditional, short-term approach to mediation interventions.⁶⁹ That is, an approach that assumes peace mediation ends with the signing of a peace agreement. Implementation then becomes a technical process. This position overlooks the vital role of mediation and dialogue processes in a post-agreement context. Post-agreement mediation

may find support in the context of renegotiating political commitments,⁷⁰ or in national dialogues that are important mechanisms through which to broaden participation and legitimise a process.⁷¹ Yet the same support is not always replicated in mediation and local dialogue processes aimed at rebuilding societal relations.

A mediator working across multiple tracks and in mediation support noted,

*what I have observed and what has been said by some of my other colleagues is that oftentimes, peace processes, or official processes, tend to be very transactional and very time bound.*⁷²

As Laurie Nathan's (2017) research has found, this is often determined by the mediation mandates. What is often overlooked is that, beyond constitutional, political or normative mandates determined by the leading organisations (i.e. UN or AU), there is also the possibility of a donor mandate, where guidelines defined by the donor also shape the process.⁷³ Such a mandate may include parameters that create an urgency to reach an agreement within the shortest timeframe possible, therefore compromising principles and provisions for a longer-term vision. As argued by one interview participant,

*I think what happens at the track one level is that oftentimes, the problem is a time-bound issue. I think that it's a little bit of an old school thing to think of success in terms of a transaction. Okay we've moved the boundary of this country and everybody has agreed. We've stopped the violence, or if we haven't stopped the violence, we reached a temporary ceasefire. And, you know, of course saving lives isn't a bad thing, but it's not what's going to get us to the finish line, right?*⁷⁴

The assumption that she identifies here is that the process is complete once the parties have agreed to lay down their weapons. This unfortunately overlooks the fact that insecurities at the local level tend to rise in

the immediate aftermath of parties signing an agreement. Another interviewee also expressed frustration at what she sees as a reluctance in certain circles to move beyond the “laying down of weapons”. She explained that,

*because we're linear and short term, we sort of have to get to the removing of weapons almost immediately, because that will prove that, you know, there's no more violence. But that's such a fundamental missing of the point that we then get shocked when violence happens again.*⁷⁵

She argues for more constructive engagement with a longer-term vision that involves chipping away at existing power hierarchies and continued mediating for conflict prevention. For her, this involves a shift away from pre-designed and linear processes towards a more dynamic and ‘centrifugal’ model that becomes more inclusive through the creation of ‘webs of relations.’ As detailed further in Box 4, this model involves the facilitation of dialogue between a broad web of diverse stakeholders over the longer term.

Findings also show a discrepancy in long-term commitment between processes. For example, where there has been substantial investment in post-agreement processes in Colombia after the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, this is not replicated in all contexts. As noted by a representative of an organisation that provided mediation support in the negotiations that led to the agreement between ETA and the Spanish government in 2017,

*“we often get questioned as to why they we are still working in the region as the conflict [around Basque separatism] is assumed to be over.”*⁷⁶

As she explained, people think that once an agreement is signed then the work is completed; yet there is still much work to be done. Addressing issues such as people’s relationships with the vision of the warring parties, and the contentious relationships between groups and individuals that the conflict compounded, still

require peacebuilding interventions including facilitated dialogue.

The period following the signing of a peace agreement ‘requires dedicated attention to ensure that parties implement its terms.’⁷⁷ As research shows, it is often women who are at the forefront of both, ‘selling’ the outcome of negotiations within communities, as well as being at the forefront of implementation. Within this, “relationship building often forms an important component of women mediators’ strategy towards local mediation,” and is vital in conflict prevention. In Northern Ireland it has been women mediators and peacebuilders who have spearheaded the focus on relationship building, both across traditional sectarian divides and between newer communities. Two women mediation practitioners working in Northern Ireland explained how the work on building relationships through dialogical processes has been key in violence prevention. They noted how the rise in tensions around Brexit was a real setback in some areas of community relations, but,

*“when it came to the issue of the use of violence in the community, people that we had trained, and mediated, pulled the violence back, you know, calmed the violence down, and that was because their relationships were good enough to do that.”*⁷⁸

As exemplified in this case, and consistent with the position of Parry et al. (2023), whether local mediation remains “complementary to, integrated with, or independent from national peace processes,” local processes continue to make a vital contribution in “addressing local drivers of conflict that are frequently beyond the interest, scope and capability of national processes to address.”⁷⁹

Box 4: Spiralling for Peace

The Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies (CPCR) is based in Cambodia. In an interview with Executive Director, Emma Leslie, she explains the problem of using the linear model of peace negotiations as that often,

...all you end up doing is sitting at a table compromising, compromising, compromising until you get a document. Some voices get heard, others don't, so compromise favours a limited few.

Instead, she advocates for a more dynamic approach, which she calls “Spiralling for Peace.” This is based on the creation of “webs of relationships” that are both national and transnational and that criss-cross into all areas of society. She explains, this approach is about,

guiding all the stakeholders in the same direction, trying to get people to work towards a similar vision even if they're not together in the same peace talks room. It's about governments, armed groups, political parties, and civil society not being above the other but being interconnected towards a shared vision.

This model, she argues constantly pays attention to that system of people and the connections that are already established. This involves an awareness of the need to keep the system active. As such, facilitators need to stay conscious, and demonstrate that they remain part of the system too; remaining cognisant of the different narratives they are hearing and how these can be connected through and built into the webs of relationships that they are part of. For example, while CPCR has convening power over representatives of armed groups, they don't have the same convening power over funders. So, as she explains, when representative of warring parties are invited to talks in Cambodia, CPCR also invites a representative of the British embassy, who has convening power over other embassies that might want to fund some of the work – whether that is humanitarian work or funding for the talks. In doing this, “we are putting two webs together and saying, you all need to be connected, but you can do it in the safety of your relationship with us.”

Conclusion

This brief highlights the need to move away from short-term, linear and design-led processes toward more inclusive and transformative responses; responses that are now even more urgent in an era of rising militarization and right-wing backlash against minorities and women's hard-earned gains. Moreover, findings substantiate the complexities involved in moving beyond understanding of inclusion that privilege the politics of presence, often reproducing homogeneous understanding of women and other marginalised groups. Also showcased are some potentially productive openings towards the incorporation of gender analysis into mediation. Although challenges remain in the adoption of gender analysis as a strategic and integral component of mediation practices, the strategies outlined by our participants demonstrate a potentially more dynamic and generative way to think about power differentials and processes of inclusion/exclusion in mediation practices. To maximise their transformative potential, these strategies must be informed by a commitment to analyse gender and other intersecting axes of exclusion that characterise communities, interest groups and negotiating rooms. As Stavrevska and Smith (2020) remind us, intersectionality is not just a way of adding diversity of experiences and groups to the table, it is an analytical lens that helps us examine the structures upon which the table rests.⁸⁰

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