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# opinion

We the Women

Why conflict  
mediation is not just  
a job for men

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## We the Women Why conflict mediation is not just a job for men

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is an independent and impartial organisation, based in Geneva, Switzerland, dedicated to the promotion of humanitarian principles, the prevention of conflict and the alleviation of its effects through dialogue.

It publishes this 'Opinion', for the purpose of contributing to ongoing debates on key humanitarian issues, and in the hope that it will stimulate reflection and discussion. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the organisation.

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# 1

## Introduction: Time for change

Of the senior conflict mediators involved in today's peace processes, hardly any are women. This is a problem for peace, and one which UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which is five years old on 31 October 2005, has so far failed to fix. This opinion paper explores why and how this is a problem for peace.

### Box 1.

SCR 1325 reaffirms 'women's central role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building', and stresses 'the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution'. Its three first recommendations are:

1. that Member States increase representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict
2. that the SG does the same, and specifically
3. that the SG should appoint more women as special representatives and envoys to pursue good offices on his behalf, calling Member States to provide candidates for inclusion in a regularly updated centralised roster.

Source: UN Security Council Resolution 1325

First, the paper seeks out where the few women mediators are, and how they and their male counterparts got there, analysing the predominantly political and diplomatic path that leads to a career as a senior conflict mediator. Then, it reviews the arguments most commonly used to explain this dearth – structural discrimination, the family factor and the choices women make, and the masculine nature of violent conflict and its protagonists. Most of the obstacles or impediments cited in these arguments are found to be either surmountable or largely irrelevant. These conclusions are also tested against analogies from the corporate sector.

Through this process, the paper reveals that there are women who will and can make the choice to be senior mediators if they are given the chance to do so. It also suggests that women's perspective on conflict causes and solutions, their approaches to communication and problem solving, and their very presence as women both symbolically and literally all have significant benefits in the complex arena of conflict mediation.

Finally, the paper gives options for action to counter the institutional inertia and indifference, and the conscious and unconscious prejudice, which it exposes. These options include leadership from the UN Secretary General (SG) to establish why UN rosters have failed and to redress that failure, techniques such as role-modelling, mentoring and master classes, and mechanisms such as quotas and affirmative action. The argument that women should mediate conflicts alongside men, the paper contends, has already been well made. It's past due. Let's just do it.

## 2

# Who are the Track One conflict mediators?

Anniversaries of resolutions and declarations have a tendency to focus the mind. The fifth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) on women, peace and security on 31 October 2005 should be no exception. Positive stories will be told and achievements celebrated; but the spotlight will also shine on failures to progress, and the contentious issues these raise.

One such failure relates to a small but crucial segment of the peacemaking business – the conflict mediators, specifically those who seek to engage directly with the leadership of warring parties in an effort to open negotiations and broker a peace agreement. These Track One mediators are rare creatures – there are probably fewer than a hundred worldwide who are currently or have recently been active.

In the light of SCR 1325's fifth birthday, the contentious issue in this paper relates to the identity of those Track One mediators. This is not unimportant. If the effects of globalisation, the war on terror and the growth of violent insurgency have convinced us to agree with the UN Secretary General's (SG) argument that we live in an increasingly interconnected world,<sup>1</sup> then the ability of these individual mediators to achieve sustainable peace, and to promote dialogue as the most effective way to resolve violent disputes, is of vital importance to us all.

1. United Nations (2005) *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*, Report of the UN Secretary-General, New York, UN.

**“A violent, increasingly interconnected world urgently needs conflict mediators**

The best-known institutions which nurture and field the Track One mediators are the United Nations and individual governments like the United States or Norway; other sources include the European Union, the African Union, other regional organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Organisation of American States (OAS), and now a small but growing collection of non-governmental organisations, institutions and private foundations like the Carter Centre, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Crisis Management Initiative, or the Community of Sant'Egidio. Looking at the decision-makers and leaders of the negotiating teams of all these various organisations, one fact becomes starkly obvious: there is barely a woman to be seen.

“Almost no women head these various mediation teams and organisations

## At the UN?

We will start with the United Nations, since it is the resolution of the UN Security Council to which this paper refers, and the UN is the symbol of the global commitment to transcend traditional adversarial diplomacy and advance collective security and international cooperation.

The UN's intensity of direct involvement in making peace has varied, with a zenith during the 1990s immediately following the stasis of the Cold War. A new peak is evident today, with 18 missions in operation and a boost at the recent September 2005 World Summit with the endorsement of a dedicated UN Peace Building Commission together with a strengthened call for commitment to the UN's mediation function, both actual and potential. Increasing competition from other organisations on the peacemaking scene might be a driving factor too.

While very few of the Secretary General's top staff deployed from his secretariat are literally negotiating peace agreements today, he nonetheless has 38 senior individuals running peacemaking, peacebuilding or peacekeeping missions of one kind or another or acting as envoys<sup>2</sup> in situations of conflict and post conflict; the additional 26 Deputies brings the total to 61 individuals, each with critical roles in making and building peace, which includes ensuring appropriate response in terms of humanitarian provision and attention to human rights.

Of these 61, just four (6.5 per cent) are women – two in top jobs and two deputies (see Box 2). Perhaps the only positive thing an SCR 1325 advocate could say about this is that it is a big improvement on the situation as it stood in 2000 when the resolution was passed. Then, there were no women at all in these positions, and to date had only ever been a total of four.<sup>3</sup>

2. The current list can be found on <http://www.un.org/News/ossg/srsg/table.htm>.

3. A useful resource for such facts and figures is <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/pkwatch/facts.html#Balance>.

4. Readers will note that none of these women have come from Africa or, barring Otunbayeva, from Asia; but that is a story for a different paper.

### Box 2. Women in senior UN peace-related positions

- In 2005, the four women holding senior posts are: Swiss Heidi Tagliavini (SRSG Georgia, since July 2002), Canadian Carolyn McAskie (SRSG Burundi, since June 2004) Bangladeshi Ameerah Haq (DSRSG Afghanistan, since June 2004) and Canadian Patricia Waring-Ripley (DSRSG Kosovo, since August 2005).
- Between 2000 and 2004, there were three DSRSGs: Swedish Margareta Wahlstrom (Afghanistan, 2002–2004), Swedish Lena Sundh (DRC, 2002–2004) and Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva (Georgia, 2002–2004).
- Before 2000, there were four SRSGs: British Margaret Anstee, (blazing the trail in Angola, 1992–1993), Jamaican Angela King (South Africa, 1992–1994), Finnish Elizabeth Rehn (Bosnia, 1997–1999) and New Zealander Ann Hercus (Cyprus 1998–1999).<sup>4</sup>

(contd.)

*(Box 2. contd.)*

The various UN job titles are as follows (numbers in brackets show the number of women/ total persons holding such a title, in October 2005):

- Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) (2/19)
- Personal Representative (0/3)
- High Representative (0/1)
- Representative (0/3)
- Deputies to the above positions (2/26)
- Special Envoy (0/5)
- Personal Envoy (0/2)
- Special Coordinator (0/1; NB this individual has two titles and is also one of the Personal Representatives)
- High Level Coordinator (0/1).

## **At other organisations?**

The European Union, the envoys of which are increasingly involved in peace-related work, has 9 current and 11 former Special Representatives. There is not a single woman among them, nor has there ever been. Despite Africa's deserved reputation for strong women role models, including the likes of Graça Machel and Wangari Muta Maathai, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union is also empty of women in the driving seats. There is no comparable peace organ of a regional institution in Asia in which to analyse the distribution of positions. Nevertheless, Asia and Asia Pacific continue to produce women whose political position and experience makes them eligible for work at the Track One level.

## **In recently concluded peace processes?**

Outside the institutions, peace agreements recently concluded tell a similar story – for example between North and South Sudan, or between the Acehese rebels and the Government of Indonesia. Both were mediated by men, of very high (or former) official standing: Kenyan General Lazaro K. Sumbeiywo, representing the seven-member East African regional organisation IGAD; and former Finnish President and leader of his own peacemaking institute the Crisis Management Initiative, Martti Ahtisaari, following the earlier work of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue under the direction of former British diplomat and UN Assistant Secretary General, Martin Griffiths.

## **In current peace processes?**

Looking around the globe to places where pre-agreement peace processes are ongoing, stalled or potential and where the UN or EU are not taking a lead role, such as Colombia, Darfur, Nepal, the Philippines, Southern Thailand or

5. Norway usually ranks third in the world, behind Rwanda and Sweden, for the proportion of women in its parliament, which stood at 38 per cent after the September 2005 elections. Norway has legislation decreeing that by the end of 2006 all companies must have at least two women on their boards.

Uganda, the latter stands out for the lone female presence of Ugandan mediator Betty Bigombe – of whom more later. Even the progressive Scandinavians, in this case the Norwegians, who have cast themselves alongside the Canadians and the Swiss as constructive ‘middle powers’, are not leading by action,<sup>5</sup> and have not had a woman heading their often precarious and challenging peace efforts in Sri Lanka. (Although the then Development Minister, Hilde Frafjord Johnson did play an active role in the Sudan process in which Norway was a keen observer.)

Perhaps contrary to the progressive NGO stereotype, the front-running ‘Track One-and-a-half’ NGOs do no better. None of them currently have women leading their mediation teams – although it should be noted that most of them, much like their institutional counterparts, have reasonable proportions of women working in and supporting those teams. If those women are being groomed for an equal shot at mediating positions, this could be fertile ground; if they are to remain as handmaidens to male-run peace processes, SCR 1325 advocates are still left wringing their hands.

## 3

# What do conflict mediators do?

Could there be something in the nature of the work that suggests its restriction to a single-sex activity? Conflict mediation tends to be presented as something of a shadowy art, something difficult, enigmatic and perhaps rather glamorous, which remains beyond the grasp of the uninitiated. Its aim is to establish a negotiated, lasting peace out of armed conflict. The mediator’s challenge is to work with all parties to the conflict to find a practicable solution to their differences, and, if possible, to prepare them for putting that solution into practice. It is thus an essentially political and diplomatic job, which involves being at home with power and the ability to access and use that power to achieve difficult objectives like building coalitions of pro-peace states to support a process, getting and keeping the right players involved, and handling the media.

The power and influence that mediators wield depends on a slightly mysterious blend of the moral and legal authority of the institution they represent and their own personal history and charisma. Richard Holbrooke negotiated the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia with the weight of America’s stars and stripes behind him. Nelson Mandela brokered the Arusha Agreement for Burundi with his heroic CV as his ballast.

It is rare, though not impossible, to find a mediator lacking in personality, charm or considerable ego. It is principally for this reason that team-led mediation, a concept more common in other forms of dispute mediation, is relatively uncommon. Conflict mediators have often been leaders before, and there is a tendency to behave, as one mediator puts it, as ‘leader-mediators rather than mediator-mediators’. This is something that mediators from other professional worlds, like family arbitration or corporate dispute resolution, may find surprising.



“**Conflict mediation: difficult, demanding - but why just a job for men?**”

Mediators run series of talks designed to culminate in an agreement that all parties are willing to sign, and for the implementation of which sufficient political will and resources have been committed. Getting to the stage where talks are even possible is a breakthrough in itself. Talks about the main issue may be preceded by months or even years of talks about those talks. Business mediators, for whom a 12-hour mediation is considered a marathon, might well shudder at the prospect. Talks may be formal or secret, or both in parallel. They involve wrangling over matters like who is represented and at what level, what is on and off the agenda, where and when the meeting will be, and how participation will be guaranteed – and a disagreement on any of these has the potential to stop a fledgling process dead in its tracks.

The mediators must therefore hold a large number of technical, political and historical issues in their minds, together with the personal facts and insights which will enable them to make and maintain relationships with what may often be difficult and dangerous interlocutors – in some cases, listed terrorists. To add to the pressure, the outside world is beadyly observing, often criticising the slow pace and the exclusivity of the process. Conflict mediation is thus a difficult job, and certainly not a job for just anybody. But why just a job for men?

## 4 Impediments (or are they?)

The reasons for the imbalance in representation would appear to be so familiar as to be banal. Unfairly, the banality stems not from the reasons themselves but from the fact that the problem and possible solutions are repeatedly stated, while noticeable progress is rarely achieved. Let us consider the factors most consistently cited as explaining the lack of progress, to see if they stand up to scrutiny in the context of conflict mediation.

### **Persistent discrimination**

Track One mediators are drawn from limited pools of senior officials, most often with a diplomatic or senior political background: former ministers, prime ministers and presidents, generals or diplomats. This has been as true of the few women who have made the mediating grade as of their far more numerous male colleagues. It is notable though that many women still make it to high political office through a specific technical expertise – as doctors, lawyers or economists – suggesting that women still need to prove that they have an excellent ‘hard’ skill before they can be trusted with high political office. It is also true that women’s family connections have sometimes eased their way to power (e.g. Aquino, Ghandi, Kumuratunga).

How women reach (or do not reach) these prior positions in government or other official institutions has been well explored, by Equal Opportunity Commissions, Glass Ceiling Commissions, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the like. Discrimination still incontrovertibly exists. Extensive research by the UK’s Fawcett Society into female participation in UK

6. Fawcett Society, 'Fawcett Briefing: The Four C's', [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/The\\_four-Cs\(1\).pdf](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/The_four-Cs(1).pdf).
7. Wirth, Linda (2001) *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management*, ILO, Geneva.
8. International Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

politics identifies four factors – ‘culture, childcare, cash and confidence’ – as the key problems. It also notes a prevailing environment of discrimination, which affects selection, including the facts that women disproportionately fight for unwinnable seats, and that selection committees continue to demonstrate direct and indirect prejudice.<sup>6</sup> The ILO’s global research shows that these findings can be broadly extrapolated, although within the context of political and cultural settings that explain stark differences. For example, the percentage of women representatives in parliaments ranges from Finland (38), USA (15), France (12), Japan (9), Nigeria (6) to Kyrgyzstan (3).<sup>7</sup> The world average for women representatives in parliaments is 16 per cent, according to the International Parliamentary Union.<sup>8</sup>

**Box 3.** An exceptional example: The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition

The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition was formed in 1996 as a unique cross-community and all-female political initiative. It was successful in getting two delegates, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, elected to participate as delegates in the overwhelmingly male-dominated multi-party talks that led to the Good Friday agreement of 1998.

Many men – and some women – still find it hard simply to picture a woman in certain roles, leading often to unconscious preferences and choices of men over women for leadership positions. Role models, such as female heads of state or government and foreign ministers, certainly exist, but in most countries are still more the exception than the rule. If the political arena is indeed the most important natural breeding ground for mediators, then the deck is still stacked against women.

## Hardy perennials: family, age and experience

Responsibilities of care for the younger and older generations of families remain disproportionately borne by women. Some (male) mediators have argued that being parents has made them better mediators – more sensitive and patient, and simply better at negotiating through practice – but that, ironically, it has also made them less keen to mediate given the toll it takes on family life, mainly through erratic and often prolonged or repeated travel or absence, often to dangerous places.

The suggestion is that even if a woman was keen to mediate, the unpredictable, demanding and sometimes dangerous nature of the job might put her off accepting such a position if she had a family of an age that required intensive parental or filial input. Of the women mediators named above, most have not included marriage and/or children in their lives. Some, like Margaret Anstee, or Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (see Box 3) founder member May Blood, are unequivocal that they could never have achieved what they did had they chosen to include those factors in their lives. Other younger, potential mediators say they have deliberately chosen a career route that allowed for family life and hence got off the path to senior-level mediation during their childbearing years.

## “Women’s private and local power means their political buy-in matters

9. McLaughlin, Abraham (2005) ‘Africa’s peace seekers: Betty Bigombe’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 13 September.

Even though male mediators do note the strain their chosen profession places on family life, examples are few and far between of those who have deliberately withdrawn from it for family reasons. It is still the case that a man is more likely than a woman to have a partner and/or supportive primary child care arrangements that allow him to pursue this profession. Male primary carers, while a growing group, are still far from being the norm.

Another critical aspect of the family-factor argument is age and experience, universally emphasised as important considerations in conflict mediation. A white beard may not be a requirement, but similar indicators of age and experience bring respect, and are helpful in many cultures. Track One mediators are typically aged between about 55 and 75 years. It is unlikely therefore that many mothers are likely to have intensive child-care responsibilities at this age (although the under-researched area of responsibility for care of the older generation could still remain a real problem). Betty Bigombe, mediating with the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, has described the difficulty of leaving a college-age daughter behind to study in the US while she pursues her task;<sup>9</sup> but, crucially, this did not stop her choosing to do it.

All this would suggest that the family factor does not present an insurmountable obstacle, but that more attention should be paid to grooming women currently in their thirties and forties to choose and assume leading roles at the appropriate time in their careers.

## Behind every great man...

10. For two among many examples, see: (i) the initiative ‘1000 Peace Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005’ at <http://www.1000peacewomen.org/> which named 1000 active and effective peacemaking women from around the globe in an attempt to draw attention to women’s under-recognised role in peacemaking – the initiative was not successful in winning the prize, but has drawn a good amount of public notice; (ii) the UNIFEM publication, *Women, War and Peace* (Progress of the World’s Women 2002, Volume 1), Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Another strand of argument would have it that women are in fact the *eminences grises* of peace processes, and that if this was better recognised, the agony of thwarted participation might be eased. This is based on the intensity of female involvement in community-based peacebuilding work,<sup>10</sup> and that in many outwardly patriarchal societies women retain great power within the home and are often consulted on matters of importance which are decided, by men, outside the home, where women rarely venture. This argument confuses the roles of Track Two and Track One in peacemaking. SCR 1325 cares about recognition of all kinds of contributions, but would not countenance the suggestion that private, informal contributions are sufficient for equality of representation and inclusion at all levels of peacemaking.

And the mediators’ position is perhaps the most public of all. This is one of the aspects which make it such an important and challenging job – and so very appealing to some people. The positive spin of the *eminences grises* argument, in terms of women’s involvement at Track One level, is that there must be some mileage in the idea that if women are powerful in private life, and in local civil society, then their buy-in to any political process will have enormous power to root that process and make it sustainable. Furthermore, there are many societies where men, foreign or otherwise, may not converse with women who are not related to them. A woman whom the local women of a conflict-affected country can relate to has the potential, either directly or indirectly, to access a vital (and large) constituency. However, frustratingly, the scarcity of Track One examples to draw on means that empirical evidence of this is not available.

## “If conflict parties accept an outsider, why not a female outsider?”

11. *Economist* (2005) ‘The conundrum of the glass ceiling’, *The Economist* 21 July.

12. Wirth, Linda (2001) *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management*, ILO, Geneva.

13. *Economist* (2005) ‘The conundrum of the glass ceiling’, *The Economist* 21 July.

14. <http://www.womensmedia.com/business-glass-ceiling-panel.htm>.

## Insights from the corporate world

If we turn to look at reasons for and responses to such perceived or actual blockages to women in achieving these positions, the corporate sector may provide some insights. A recent *Economist Opinion* noted that the glass ceiling had yet to be convincingly broken in the corporate world, and that, where progress is noted – which it certainly has been – it has been ‘of a glacially slow sort’.<sup>11</sup> This is despite concerted efforts including diversity programmes, sponsoring conferences on women in leadership, initiatives to make working life more family-friendly in terms of hours and flexibility, and the use of mentoring. None of the organisations mentioned in this paper have invested in such efforts to support diversification in the profession of conflict mediation.

The ILO also argues<sup>12</sup> that big companies such as those scrutinised by the *Economist* (e.g. IBM, GE and BP) have been persuaded of the business case for diversity, agreeing that balanced mixes lead to better problem-solving, and better responsiveness to markets. If the analogy can be made, one would imagine that mixed groups might solve the problems of armed conflict better, and certainly that women are in the market for peace. Their well-documented and prolific efforts at Track Two level (for which, to give one example, Guatemala’s Rigoberta Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993) surely demonstrate this, quite apart from their equally well-documented role as the principal victims in a myriad of manifestations of violence and conflict. The problem must remain that women’s access to power, and hence representation, in many conflict-affected places is still chronically limited.

## The Boys’ Club

The *Economist*’s description of what the nub of the problem might be in the business world is easily applicable to mediation: ‘working long hours and wearing air miles like a battle medal’.<sup>13</sup> Other reasons provided by researchers and advocates like the Catalyst group<sup>14</sup> in the US include that it is still unusual for men to include women in their informal networks, perhaps expressed through group socialising, drinking or sports activity. Such activities are certainly an important part of conflict mediation, given the need to build relationships with and between the belligerent parties, the leaders of which will almost always be men, and may come from cultures where women’s participation in public life is not routinely accepted. In addition, negative stereotyping of women’s capacity for leadership (the unconscious bias referred to above) and lack of role models remain a problem, with flattened organisational hierarchies with correspondingly steeper steps being an exacerbating factor.

## A niche profession

These arguments point to the question of whether conflict mediation as a business has a particular culture. Will men with guns deal only with other men with guns? After all, the vast majority of combatants are male. If conflict parties are prepared to accept an outsider as a mediator, can they go a step beyond the ‘otherness’ of the foreigner to accept that this outsider might also be a woman? Perhaps there are some cultures, in particular strictly patriarchal ones, where the

**“Women can counter harassment and change unacceptable behaviour**

involvement of women in a formal process remains completely unthinkable – but they may not be as numerous as we currently imagine.

The case may be made that, sometimes, a representative’s power or institutional backing overrides their gender. To some Afghans, for example, a foreign woman with some recognisable power can be dealt with as a man. She is not the same as an Afghan woman. So while the race and gender of Condoleezza Rice is never far from some people’s minds, she is first and foremost the US Secretary of State, and will be accepted and respected as that throughout the world. If in future retirement from government, she chose to pursue a role in peacemaking, she might be able to carry some of that conferred power with her. A less powerful country might have more difficulty putting a woman at the head of its team in the more aggressive, male-dominated or explicitly anti-feminist environments – or less guts to try it.

Male mediators and policy-makers also often express, indirectly, a concern that women will dwell disproportionately on ‘women’s issues’ in mediation. While many women refer to more equitable sharing of power and resources among men and women, evidence does not exist that their interests are solely limited to that. A more common problem, some might claim, is that some women in senior public life have not been concerned enough with advancing gender equality. In addition, and to compound the perceived unfairness, the corresponding concern that men in senior public life might be disproportionately preoccupied with issues that affect only men is rarely used against them, despite the fact that it is proven that they have a tendency to ignore ‘women’s issues’, as the examples in this paper show.

## **Sugaring the pill: charm in conflict mediation**

Both male and female mediators suggest that the presence of a woman can seem less threatening to conflict parties, and thus promotes a less aggressive atmosphere. One (male) negotiations specialist describes how ‘female archetypes can bypass the tango of male egos’, helping to bring down the temperature without anyone losing face.

A more delicate area of discussion is the use of their sexuality by mediators. That mediators need a certain charisma is uncontroversial, but how they trade off that charisma is more difficult to describe, certainly in terms of theory. One (female) observer who works closely with an active (male) conflict mediator cuts to the chase: ‘Flirting helps a lot, regardless of gender’. ‘Flirting’ is used here in its broadest and least sexual sense. Perhaps more importantly, charm and the ability to woo people are frequently mentioned as crucial components of the mediation toolkit.

Several interlocutors described how they had seen how women involved at various levels in negotiation processes were able to make people comfortable, promoting good relationships and an atmosphere of warmth and humour. But given the presently tiny number of women mediators, and the strong consensus that charm is an almost indispensable attribute in any mediator, one can only conclude that if a distinction is made between how men and women deploy

“Any initial reaction to the mediator’s gender quickly wears off

charm in terms of mediation, it is a distinction motivated by a prejudiced attitude which teaches us nothing about effective mediation. As an argument that it would be inappropriate to include women as conflict mediators, it seems to have no legs at all.

## Sexual abuse and personal security: a killer argument?

The darker side of the sexuality issues relates to the sexism, sexual abuse and personal- security issues which women mediators are more likely to face than are their male counterparts. Margaret Anstee tells how she was referred to on alternate days in Angola as either ‘mother’ or ‘prostitute’ by Savimbi, and was even accused by the local press of becoming pregnant by him. ‘My secretary rolled her eyes in mock admiration: “Miss Anstee, we are all wondering, how *do* you find the time?”’<sup>15</sup> The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition faced similar abuse and slander – ‘Who’s looking after your kids?’, ‘We know who you’re sleeping with’ – until their bulletin-board naming and shaming campaign put a stop to it. No one denies that this is unacceptable, or, sadly, unsurprising. But these examples show how women have learned not just to ignore such sexual abuse, but to counter it, get past it and change unacceptable behaviour. That is surely no reason to exclude them; although it remains a reason why an individual woman may choose, regrettably and perhaps regretfully, to exclude herself.

15. Anstee, Margaret Joan (2003) *Never Learn to Type: a Woman at the United Nations*, John Wiley and Sons Ltd., London, page 489.

## Consumer choice

One might reasonably be asking at this point ‘wait a second, what do the actual parties to the conflict want?’ In truth, conflict parties rarely get an unfettered, fully informed shot at choosing a mediator. There is no ‘Who’s Who’ of mediators that combatants can comb in a criteria-driven search for those most suitable to their contexts. So the question of whether conflict parties would ever choose a woman over a man is somewhat moot. The power, in this instance, lies with those who put the mediating teams together, and how clever they are at trailing the hook, baited with power, connections, displays of appropriate strength or weakness, past conflict parties and their most important strategic patrons or friends.

This process of putting a mediator in place does of course involve consultation, at least with the government side. But thus far, it would seem, those who put the teams together have not wanted to risk the prize by throwing a complicating female factor into the mix. In the few cases where they have, the women mediators say that if there is any kind of reaction to their gender at the very beginning, it quickly wears off, leaving as the more important factors their personality, skills, experience and institutional backing. That might suggest that it is ‘us’ rather than ‘them’, the conflict parties, who worry about how the woman question will play in this regard.

## 5

# Failures of imagination – the UN process

So far, few of the traditionally identified impediments, apart from systemic discrimination itself, seem to stand up in terms of ruling out women's participation in senior conflict mediation. What we are left with seems less a concrete set of obstacles than a simple lack of imagination – or to put it in more 'male' terminology, a lack of will.

This seems to be the only kind interpretation for the dismal record of the United Nations (which includes, of course, its Member States) in this regard. A less kind interpretation would suggest that the power of the mediators' position is what drives them to keep competitors out of the game: the chance to be puppet-master on the public stage and take home at least some glory for a vaunted prize is not to be sniffed at. The same argument could be made about the other mediating organisations.

Whatever the reason, the call for more women in the post of SRSG – regarded as the pinnacle position in UN field work – has been made for over a decade, well before the (mostly female) architects of SCR 1325 got Namibia, then presiding over the Security Council, to scrawl the issue indelibly on the Security Council's agenda. The current process of appointment to these positions inside the UN essentially involves the call going out to one of the two departments who run the field missions, Peace Keeping Operations or Political Affairs, from the office of the Secretary General (SG). The departments put together a list of names which is sent to him. Some discreet checking may be done (for example with governments), and the decision is made between the relevant Under Secretary General, the SG's Chef de Cabinet and, with the final say, the SG himself. The process for putting the lists together is described by most, apologetically, as 'ad hoc', and usually involves brainstorming to produce a list of 'people we know'.

As with all UN appointments, sensitive issues of nationality and other political factors must always be weighed up. With diversity at the heart of its charter, the UN has always taken the question of appropriate regional distribution of positions extremely seriously.<sup>16</sup> This might lead one to question why it has such difficulty in putting action behind its rhetoric on the distribution of positions on the basis of gender.

The particular requirements of the job, such as language skills, may significantly narrow the field. But essentially, as one observer noted, this system perfectly suits the needs of senior management: they have maximum choice, minimum accountability for it, and the intricate requirements of politics and the old boys' network (another term for personal politics or plain old cronyism) can be traded off against each other.

There have been several efforts, spearheaded by powerful women (men tend not to launch such initiatives, though they may be very supportive of them, just as

“UN – serious about regional diversity, so why not about gender?”

16. Regional distribution requirements actually apply to one third of core-funded positions.

17. When she was the US Permanent Representative to the UN, before becoming Secretary of State.

18. In her last role prior to retirement as the SG's Special Advisor on Gender and the Advancement of Women.

19. The current Deputy Secretary General, a Canadian.

men tend not to write articles like this one) such as Madeleine Albright,<sup>17</sup> Angela King<sup>18</sup> and Louise Frechette<sup>19</sup> to create and push rosters of qualified women; the rosters exist, and have apparently been appealed to (though not routinely). There have been women on the rosters who have not responded at all to proactive calls from the UN. But the best description for the reaction in the Secretariat to the fact that the rosters are somehow not working, and are not at the centre of senior recruitment processes, is plain perplexity.

From all this, we have to conclude that women are not unwilling to do the job, nor incapable, especially, as one insider points out, if you look at the varied quality of the SRSGs over the years. The intention that it should happen, in the dusty paper form of the rosters, resolutions and commitments, is there. But the energy required to make the rhetoric a reality is apparently not. The situation persists in a negligent vegetative state of passive resistance to actually making it happen.

## 6

# What difference would women mediators make?

**“A broader mix of communication styles, a better chance for peace**

So far, the arguments against seem like paper tigers. If the case is not already made, there is still more to be said about the positive difference that women would make if male dominance of the peacemaking industry were really challenged. We have discussed their role in talking to, appealing to and acting as a role model for women – if you like, as tickets to greater civil-society buy-in. This is achieved not just by the mediator behaving more inclusively towards those with a stake in the process, but actually demonstrating inclusivity in terms of who is at the table and how the table is run. But there is more.

## Another perspective (the other 180°)

20. Between 1991 and 1996, Luz Méndez participated in the peace negotiations as the only female member of the delegation of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*), contributing to the incorporation of unprecedented commitments for gender equity into the accords aimed at the elimination of discrimination against women, including the promotion of women's political participation and their access to education, health, housing and other resources.

The Northern Irish and Guatemalan<sup>20</sup> experiences clearly show that women do bring different issues to the table – different visions of how to share power, important gender-related issues such as gender-based violence, a focus on the households headed by sole females which war so often leaves behind – as well as issues at the heart of achieving durable peace and stability such as the promotion of human rights, education, social service provision and security issues such as disarmament and reintegration. The inclusion of these issues can only serve to cement the chance for peace to last, concerned as they are with strengthening society and countering marginalisation.

Women may also bring issues to the table in a different way. The question of whether men and women have intrinsically different communication styles is a sensitive one – on which many people may have private opinions they might be nervous to voice. Perhaps it is safest to steer clear of popular wisdom here, and turn to theory for some help. The work of linguistics specialist Deborah Tannen, who is always careful to note that her research demonstrates



**“More women:  
probably a better  
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won’t know until  
we try**

generalisable patterns and not absolute rules or sex-attributed values, shows that women can be better at listening, showing intuition and empathy, and be less assertive while men can be more dominating, are less likely to pick up on indirect cues, and are quicker to make authoritative decisions.

But the main message of Tannen’s analysis is that talk is like a cultural ritual with implicit rules, and if the participants to talk don’t understand each other’s rituals, then communication can go awry. Just as the mediator has to have a good understanding of the culture(s) of those s/he is dealing with to try to bridge the divide between mediator and mediated and between the conflict parties, so do men and women in terms of how they talk to one another. Tannen’s work, applied to this subject, would suggest that increased sensitivity to conversational ritual in terms of both gender and culture would be extremely valuable to the mediators’ work, which is, after all, highly psychological. It involves using communication to try to control or transform a complex and volatile situation. Thus, it comes down in the end, again, to power: ‘The ability to influence others, to be listened to, to get your way rather than having to do what others want’.<sup>21</sup>

Tannen also argues that there is basis to the suggestion that women are often more process-oriented and men more outcome-oriented, a contention supported by the work of Deborah Kolb at the Harvard Programme on Negotiation. At one retreat of senior mediators run by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a (male) constitutional expert asserted to vigorous nods around the room that a bad constitution negotiated through a good process produced infinitely better outcomes long-term than a good constitution poorly negotiated.<sup>22</sup> Again, if that is true, it is hard to see why a mixture of the two approaches would not be of value to peace processes.

## Someone to look up to

The growing implication of the argument is that we have been missing opportunities for some positive role-modelling. Martti Ahtisaari<sup>23</sup>, who makes a point of stressing that most of the personnel supporting his peacemaking work are female, says that we have to bite the bullet and start getting people used to the idea of seeing women in these positions. The British Equal Opportunities Commission points out that in constituencies where a woman candidate stands, female voters are more likely to turn out with no loss of male votes.<sup>24</sup> Of course this could be culturally specific, and would be more analogous to conflict parties than to conflict mediators. But it remains strongly suggestive about the possibility of female buy-in discussed above. Also, as another NGO mediator points out, we all suspect that having more women involved in negotiations would change the dynamic, and probably for the better; but we won’t know until we try it.

21. Tannen, Deborah (1994) *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work: Language, Sex and Power*, Virago, London, page 317.

22. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2005) *Mediators’ Retreat*, Oslo, 26–27 June 2005: Report, CHD, Geneva.

23. Personal communication, 26th September 2005.

24. Equal Opportunities Commission (2005) *Sex and Power: Who Runs Britain?* EOC, London.

# 7 Options for action

But how will we try it? How will we overcome the inertia of years of unimplemented intention, unpick the layers of conscious and unconscious prejudice, and make it happen?

## Leading from the top: the SG's role

“Three empty DSRSG positions: an opportunity for immediate action

With the arrival of a new Chef de Cabinet, Mark Malloch Brown in January 2005, the UN senior appointments process, for positions like heads of agencies and programmes, has seen a radical and professional overhaul. The new system is designed to be more accountable, more transparent and able to draw on a wider pool of people. Can such modernising energy not also be channelled into the SG's own appointments, even given the political constraints? Perhaps the SG himself could clarify why the rosters are failing to work, and convene some visible, senior group of women and men from among his ranks to guide and push action through the system.

## Affirmative action and the quibble over quotas

Another approach institutions can try is through quotas at a range of levels. Quotas can still make grown men *and* women shudder, for a range of reasons. For example, one might set oneself up for failure – one male mediator says ‘it would be a hideous mistake to impose quotas and require women to act in these jobs if they then fail’ (as if the fact that men are routinely allowed to fail, or at least not resoundingly to succeed, in the same jobs is not hideous). Or, there may be a bone-deep commitment to a particular interpretation of equity. People fear that quotas undermine merit, or don't work when applied to different kinds of institutions.

However, quotas work in myriad settings: there are numerous public and private examples in Scandinavia but also, for example, in the Burundian and East Timorese parliaments (each with a 30 per cent quota, women hold 30.5 per cent and 25.3 per cent of the seats respectively). In the Kosovo Protection Service, the 13.75 per cent of policewomen, compared to the international CIVPOL's 5.4 per cent, is attributed directly to a mandatory quota. And quotas work in terms of more than numerical representation. For each of these examples, the quality of recruits can be defended – they are sometimes better, and certainly no worse, than their male colleagues. Is that so frightening?

Quotas can indeed be a blunt instrument that needs time and will to work. But they need only be a temporary measure: used as a battering ram to break the ramparts, letting women then flow in through the gap, they can then be cast aside. The milder approaches of affirmative action and positive discrimination

**“Our duty is to get better at ending violent conflict and building sustainable peace**

are also a possibility. These can include specifying that certain posts must be filled by women, or committing to choose women for positions where equally qualified men and women are under consideration.

The lesson would appear to be that collective, women-focused action is the first step required of women, which will enable those coming later to take their place independently of an explicit women's movement if they so choose. As a Swisspeace interlocutor points out, 'there is some evidence that women tend to care less about party politics and strategic preferences but highlight more the common experiences as women (despite all political differences) and privilege practical solutions over political egoism and individual successes'.

## **Mentoring and master classes**

Another route is through mentoring. If we accept that there are learnable skills to conflict mediation, then those can be taught, preferably on the job, or through observation or work-shadowing. If today's mediators are genuine in their claim to be concerned about who will succeed them, it would be a simple task for them to identify some younger men and women to coach, even if finding or making the time to do so would be a familiar challenge. In a world of political appointments, such mentoring is no guarantee of a future job, of course, but the recognition that these are positions which can be aimed at, with skills which can be learned, must surely be to the good of the profession as a whole.

## **The NGOs: a special role, a special responsibility**

NGOs and private foundations have the luxury of operating outside the necessarily heavier set of rules that governments and intergovernmental organisations are obliged to observe – at the very least, their senior appointments do not have to be political. If NGOs are well respected and have credibility, this makes them good testing grounds for approaches that larger organisations may then be persuaded to try, having seen that they are not only possible but also beneficial. So perhaps the conflict-resolution NGOs can lead the way in setting best practice by committing to any or all of these options for increasing female participation – and by continuing to generate and implement new and better options.

# 8 Just do it!

It seems that the days when women need to band together to achieve change, empowerment and recognition are not over; and equally that men can continue to be able to ignore or discount those efforts, whether through ignorance, lethargy, persistent prejudice or jealousy of power and position. In response, this paper has presented options for real and present action, and hopes to stimulate further suggestions for what should be done to turn rhetoric into reality.

So let those disproportionately represented, decision-making men hear these words not as a threat but as an invitation, and an appeal to their better nature: peace matters today more than ever. Our lives are more connected than ever, and some might say more at risk than ever. So don't we owe it to ourselves and future generations to do everything we can to get better at ending violent conflict and building sustainable peace? Should we not constantly be on the search for new techniques, new methodologies, and new approaches to refine the profession of conflict mediation?

A simple way to start that search would be to appoint women, who suffer so disproportionately from the scourges of war, and who have proved themselves so eager and able to participate in combating them, to join forces in equal status with men as senior conflict mediators. Just do it!

**Antonia Potter**

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