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Towards gender-equal peace

From 'counting women' to meaningful participation

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Two women in Ayacucho, Huamanga Province, Peru

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Towards gender-equal peace

Women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations and implementing peace agreements is a key tenet of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2020. Beyond being a right – enshrined in the WPS agenda and other international laws – women's participation has been shown to positively impact the likelihood of achieving a peace agreement between the parties,[1] the durability of the agreement,[2] and the quality of the provisions – in particular, the inclusion of gender-responsive provisions.[3]

Still, women remain largely excluded from official peace negotiations. Between 1991 and 2011, they constituted only 2% of chief mediators, 4% of witnesses and signatories, and 9% of negotiators.[4] Women are routinely excluded from pre-negotiation stages of peace processes,[5] where parameters and agendas for future negotiations are set. Similarly, even in contexts which boast high levels of women's participation during peace negotiations – such as Colombia – women are often marginalised during implementation, which contributes to delays in the implementation, especially of those provisions designed to ensure a gender-equal peace.[6]

A range of challenges contributes to women's exclusion from peace processes. In 2018–2019, I led a global research project, coordinated by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) with support from UN Women, on the meaning of 'sustaining peace' to local women. The research, which consisted of focus group discussions, targeted key informant interviews and a global, multi-lingual survey, reached over 1,600 women and men from civil society organisations and community groups working on peacebuilding in nearly 50 countries. When asked about barriers to women's meaningful participation in peace processes, research participants identified the uneven share of unpaid domestic and care labour, mobility restrictions (e.g. not being able to leave home without a male guardian), insecurity and targeted attacks on women. Moreover, women pointed to the lack of access to information about peace processes (fuelled by their secret nature and lack of reliable coverage in the media) as a key constraint. This was aggravated by the digital divide and lack of access to the internet and traditional media, which is often gendered.[7] Women who took part in the research also emphasised that persisting patriarchal norms underlie most of these challenges. A research participant from the Philippines stressed that women are 'regarded as non-political beings', and thus denied access to the peace process.[8]

A UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security, October 2019 (UN Women / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Increasingly, researchers, activists and policymakers have also recognised that, even when women do participate in peace negotiations, they might not be able to exert influence. In 2018, the UN Secretary-General recognised both the 'poor level of representation' of women in peace negotiations and 'corresponding challenges in measuring how women contribute their experience and ideas and assert influence amid consistently male-dominated processes'.[9] For example, in Nepal, although women constituted over 33% of the Constituent Assembly, they had little influence over the content of the Constitution due to entrenched patriarchal norms and resistance to discussing 'women's issues' and gender equality among the male political elites.[10]

These findings paint the exclusion of women as a structural problem, which requires a structural solution – 'redesigning' the table, rather than merely having women at it. Building on ongoing policy discussions, existing research on women's meaningful participation, and my own experience of working with women peacebuilders, mediators and activists from around the world, I discern three critical components of women's meaningful participation:

1. Participation at all stages of a peace processes, beginning with the agenda-setting and ceasefire and other security arrangements negotiations, and ending with the implementation and monitoring of a peace agreement.
2. Participation at all levels and in various modalities. Direct participation of women at the peace table – as negotiators, mediators and signatories – cannot be replaced by consultations with women or the establishment of women's advisory boards. The examples of Syria[11] and Yemen[12] demonstrate that, while such solutions may offer an improvement on previously completely exclusionary processes, they ultimately fail to ensure women's meaningful participation.
3. Participation of women in all their diversity. In order to ensure meaningful participation, it is necessary to recognise that women are not a homogenous group of 'non-political beings', but rather 'political actors influenced by political agendas, group interests, as well as the trauma and hardship of civil war'.[13] Thus, meaningful inclusion of women requires applying an intersectional lens to identify and understand the often overlapping layers of exclusion, and make sure that diverse women – including women civil society activists, women refugees and internally displaced persons, women veterans and ex-combatants, war widows, young women, women with disabilities, women of various ethnicities, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, among others – can participate.

In this paper, I propose three solutions, which – if implemented – could help close the gap in women's meaningful participation across the three above-mentioned components:

1. Institutionalising the requirement for women's participation at all stages and levels of a peace process.
2. Resourcing women's networks to create accessible and flexible platforms for diverse participation.
3. Strengthening coordination and cohesion between formal and informal peace processes.

Institutionalising women's participation

Institutionalisation is a process that 'make[s] certain forms of behaviour and their outcomes predictable and routine'.[14] Institutions provide the 'rules of the game', guiding different spheres of social and public life. The institution of peace negotiations has historically been gender-blind and exclusionary. The fact that women have often been perceived as 'non-political beings' has meant that they have traditionally been excluded from decision-making and political leadership. Since early stages of peace processes often take place behind closed doors among political and military leadership and elites, women's exclusion from these spaces has translated into their exclusion from the critical, initial phases of peace negotiations, where modalities and priorities for the future process

are often defined. In most instances, women's inclusion in a peace process has been the result of sustained advocacy by women's groups and civil society – and thus has come only at later stages, when the process has become public. Moreover, because they are not institutionalised, demands for women's inclusion are often met with questioning women's capacity to act as negotiators, or requiring that they represent the entire spectrum and full diversity of women in the concerned country – neither of which is typically asked of other constituencies. As a result, the 'predictable and routine' outcome is the absence of women from the negotiating table, or – at best – their marginal and tokenistic inclusion.

Making women's presence at the peace table a requirement is one way to institutionalise their inclusion. During the peace process in South Sudan, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – the regional body that facilitated it – urged delegations to ensure that 'at least one of the delegates is a woman'.[15] The guidance was adhered to by several of the parties, and provided an advocacy tool for women to demand greater inclusion. When the women's coalition noted that the number of women in delegations remained low despite the letter (which constituted an encouragement, rather than a formal requirement), they pressed the parties to 'heed IGAD's call for inclusion'. This resulted in the increase in the number of women from 11 out of 90 delegates (12%) in December 2017, to 39 out of 120 delegates (32%) in May 2018.[16]

A woman holds a sign at a peace rally in Colombia, June 2016 (Agencia Prensa Rural / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

> **“The fact that women have often been perceived as ‘non-political beings’ has meant that they have traditionally been excluded from decision-making and political leadership”**

Institutionalisation can also be used to facilitate participation of diverse women in a peace process. In the peace negotiation between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), in addition to including women in the delegations, a gender subcommittee was established to integrate the perspectives and priorities of diverse women in the peace agreement. Women's advocacy and the work of the gender subcommittee are credited with the inclusion of over 100 gender provisions in the peace agreement, as well as the reflection of the priorities of other marginalised groups – such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community.[17]

Officially requiring women's participation in a peace process, and creating dedicated, institutional platforms to facilitate broad-based inclusion, are thus good practices that should be systematised to ensure women's meaningful participation. The NGO Working Group on WPS – a coalition of 19 non-governmental organisations working to advance the implementation of WPS, and the main civil society actor that advances and coordinates advocacy on WPS directed at the UN Security Council[18] – has been spearheading calls to 'make direct participation of diverse women a requirement in all UN-led or co-led peace processes'.[19] In the past, similar demands gained little traction within the UN.[20] However, the recent Arria Formula on 'Ensuring the Full, Equal and Meaningful Participation of Women in UN-led Peace Processes', co-hosted by 12 out of the 15 UN Security Council members, with a stated purpose to 'give concrete political impetus to the UN in making [women's full and meaningful participation] a requirement',[21] could offer a welcome change in this trend.

Critically, institutionalisation is also necessary during peace agreement implementation. Despite their contributions during the negotiation phases, women are frequently absent from transitional institutions and formal monitoring mechanisms. As a result, the progressive provisions they fought for and secured in peace agreements often remain unimplemented, or severely delayed. This can be seen, for example, in Colombia – where the gender provisions lag behind the implementation of other aspects of the peace agreement,[22] and in South Sudan, where the provision of a minimum of 35% of women's representation in all elected and appointed positions has not been implemented, despite women's ongoing advocacy.[23] Quotas can be a useful tool of institutionalisation, but – as the cases of Colombia[24] and South Sudan[25] demonstrate – they are unlikely to produce the desired results unless they extend to pre-transitional bodies and mechanisms, and are accompanied by adequate budget and protection measures for women.

Institutionalising women's participation can guarantee that women are represented at all stages and levels of a peace process – including the formal talks. Beyond the direct effect of having more women in UN-led processes, the requirement of women's meaningful participation in the negotiations facilitated by the UN would also demonstrate leadership towards normalisation of women's participation at all stages of a peace process, thus making it a 'predictable and routine' outcome. Moreover, it would provide civil society with a tool for holding the parties accountable for ensuring women's participation, and legitimise their advocacy for greater inclusion, thereby opening the door for more diverse groups of women to effectively demand their seat at the table.

Resourcing women's networks

Engaging in peace negotiations requires time, and financial and material resources. Funds are required not only to cover travel to the location of peace negotiations (often taking place abroad) and childcare expenses, but also to support collective organising and action of diverse women. In many contexts – including Colombia, the Philippines and South Sudan – women who participated in the peace process as negotiators and signatories also engaged in extensive consultations with other women activists, civil society and local communities across each country. Rita Lopidia, one of the women signatories of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS) insisted on being recognised as a representative of the Women's Coalition, rather than her own organisation.[26]

While such efforts must not be treated as a pre-condition for women's participation, they should be recognised for what they are: an 'important act of reconciliation and good will', which requires repeated engagement and long-term investment – especially when peace processes are themselves non-linear and iterative.[27] However, such work remains chronically underfunded – with only 0.2% of Official Development Aid to conflict-affected countries going directly to women-led organisations.[28]

Underfunding of women activists is also an obstacle to effective and inclusive implementation of peace agreements. When asked about her recommendations for donors to support the implementation of the R-ARCISS, a South Sudanese activist once told me that greater accountability for how the funds provided to the government are used is essential. Indeed, lack of accountability for budget allocations post-conflict can contribute to underfunding of women's participation and of the gender provisions they fought to include in a peace agreement, as defence and security spending is prioritised over expenditure related to education, social services and gender equality.[29] In this context, the UN Secretary-General's call to 'reverse the upward trajectory in global

military spending' and bolster investment in social infrastructure and services, and in women's organisations, takes on particular importance as a means of building a gender-equal peace.[30]

> "Rapidly accessible funding is necessary to ensure women's participation at all stages and levels of a peace process"

To be fit for purpose, financing for women's meaningful participation in peace processes should include both rapidly accessible and long-term, flexible funding streams allowing women to adapt to new circumstances and opportunities as they emerge. An innovative solution – and one that could be replicated – is the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, a UN, civil society and Member State partnership that channels 100% of its funds to local women's groups and includes civil society in decision-making on financial allocations. In 2020, the Fund began to provide 'institutional support' – flexible funds to help women's organisations sustain themselves and their work during COVID-19. It also opened a Rapid Response Window to provide quickly accessible funds to support women's access and influence in formal and informal peace processes.

Rapidly accessible funding is necessary to ensure women's participation at all stages and levels of a peace process – allowing them to react quickly when new rounds of talks are announced, or when opportunities emerge to advocate for inclusion. Additionally, providing women's networks with sustainable and flexible funds, and resourcing a diverse range of women's organisations, is critical to overcoming structural power dynamics that marginalise certain groups of women, and ensuring participation of women in all their diversity.

Strengthening coordination and cohesion between formal and informal peace processes

Women's participation and influence in informal peace processes – so-called Track 2 or Track 3 processes – is well documented. It has contributed to mobilising political will for formal negotiations (in Liberia), inclusion of gender provisions in peace agreements (in Guatemala and South Sudan), building broad-based support for the peace process (in the Philippines),[31] and securing quotas for women's participation in governance and leadership (in Libya and South Sudan).

As recognition of the legitimacy of informal peace processes has increased, growing attention has been given to the means needed to ensure the successful 'transfer' of knowledge, recommendations and agreements from informal to formal peace

processes.[32] One way of ensuring such transfers are so-called 'Track 1.5' processes – meetings or discussions bringing together official negotiators and those involved in informal processes. They have proven useful in enabling diverse groups of women to influence negotiations' outcomes.[33] For example, GNWP has utilised its broad network of national and local partners to support Track 1.5 meetings in Colombia and in the Philippines, providing a much-needed avenue for transfer of knowledge and recommendations.[34] In Georgia, in the context of a relatively closed official process, Track 1.5 processes provide an avenue for civil society to bring its priorities to the negotiating parties.[35] GNWP partners noted that, for women, Track 1.5 talks allowed them to raise issues such as access to sexual and reproductive health services for those living along the contact line.

Digital technologies have also been increasingly used to support broader inclusion of diverse actors leading Track 2 and 3 processes in official peace negotiations. Online platforms were used ahead of peace and political processes, for example in Colombia (where a website and an app, Mesa de Conversaciones, was launched in 2012, ahead of the government's negotiations with the FARC)[36] and in Libya (where the al Hiwar online platform sought to solicit perspectives on priorities for the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in 2020).[37] Such digital initiatives are often purported as means of bringing voices of those traditionally excluded from peace processes – in particular women and youth – to the table. However, challenges related to lack of access, low levels of digital literacy, increased exposure to threats and harassment online, and concerns around privacy, may limit the potential of virtual spaces to truly 'redesign' the peace table.[38] While the issue is increasingly gaining attention, there is still insufficient research into the challenges and good practices in using digital technologies to enhance women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations.

> **"There is still insufficient research into the challenges and good practices in using digital technologies to enhance women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations"**

Normalising and institutionalising Track 1.5 processes and other efforts to strengthen coordination and cohesion between formal and informal peace processes – so-called 'multi-track diplomacy' – can contribute to women's meaningful participation. It can help secure women's participation at all stages of a peace process – by creating formalised access channels to even the most exclusionary processes, and providing women activists with better vantage points from which to advocate for their inclusion at all levels. On the other hand, formalising the links between Track 2 and Track 1 processes can lead to prioritisation of some informal processes and stakeholder groups over others – especially when resources and support to strengthen lateral coordination between those are not in place. To be truly effective, such processes should be broad-based, reaching diverse

groups involved in a variety of Track 2 and Track 3 processes, accompanied by the creation of strategising spaces, where women engaged in informal processes can hone their messages and – if needed – increase their understanding of the formal process, backed by adequate and flexible funding, as discussed above. Digital technologies can be used to support and enhance the process of inclusion. However, they should complement rather than replace efforts to create physical, formalised channels for inclusion. More research is also needed to understand the risks and potential of virtual spaces in making peace negotiations more inclusive.

Participants in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, February 2021 (UN Geneva / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Conclusion

Despite the strong normative framework – beginning with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and UNSCR 1325, and now counting 10 UN Security Council resolutions and nearly 90 National Action Plans on WPS – the body of research documenting the benefits of women's participation, and the relentless advocacy by women peacebuilders, peace negotiations have largely failed to meaningfully include women. This failure can have serious impacts on post-conflict recovery – recent research has shown that women's participation in peace negotiations correlates with better economic and political outcomes for women post-conflict.[39]

Thus, it is high time for concrete, bold and innovative actions to ensure women's participation in peace negotiations. The central role of external actors in creating opportunities for women's meaningful participation has been recognised and well-documented. Three essential steps in fulfilling this role are: institutionalising women's meaningful participation by making it a requirement; resourcing women's networks; and providing formalised but flexible spaces for transfer of knowledge and recommendations between different tracks of peace processes.

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