



Centre for
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Dialogue

Mediation for peace

Experts Meeting: Women at the Peace Table – Asia Pacific Summary Report

Organised by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
in collaboration with
Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace
& the Alliance for Social Dialogue

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At the end of September, forty women from across Asia and the Pacific gathered in Kathmandu, to reflect on the contribution of women to peace processes. The participants specifically considered how to significantly improve women's representation in peace negotiations and realise meaningful gender content in peace agreements. This was part of the HD Centre's 'Women at the Peace Table – Asia Pacific' project supported by the Australian Agency for International Development and the Open Society Institute.

The context for the roundtable was set by Irene Khan, Board member at the HD Centre and former Secretary General of Amnesty International. Irene noted that in the ten years since the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which called for more women to be involved in preventing and resolving conflict, little progress has actually been made. To date there has not been a peace process where gender parity, or anything approximating it, has been observed. She suggested four reasons why this might be the case:

1. Peace processes often focus on bringing together those in positions of political and military power, who are predominantly men. Bringing women to the negotiating table is often a lower priority than keeping a tight focus on the most belligerent parties, even if this is short-sighted.
2. Formal mediators are drawn from limited pools of senior officials, often with a diplomatic or senior political background, most of whom are men.
3. Gender-related issues in peace processes are not considered a priority both because of benign ignorance about what a gender perspective actually entails as well as a wilful disregard of the views and needs of women in such processes.
4. There is a persistent view that the focus should be on improving the 'capacity' of women before including them in negotiations but the same standards of 'capacity' are rarely applied to men.

These challenges framed the in-depth discussions which followed during the subsequent three days. Discussion subjects included thematic issues and particular conflict situations including Afghanistan and Pakistan, northeast India, Sri Lanka, southern Thailand, Indonesia and Mindanao. Several themes emerged which, although they do not capture the full richness of the discussion, do point to some of the critical ideas and suggestions raised. Quotes are included, though they are largely unattributed as the meeting was convened under the Chatham House Rule. These themes include:

1. Formal and informal peacemaking

Few women have been signatories to formal peace agreements, yet many have been involved in conflict resolution at a local level, as well as conflict prevention work and peacebuilding more broadly. While the importance and value of having women at the negotiating table was understood, the argument was also made that "we need to have a broad perspective since women's contribution outside the peace table has been very substantive". Women's exclusion from formal peacemaking sees them working in multifaceted ways – working between the 'tracks' - to pressure and influence formal processes. Given the multiple levels and layers of peace processes, it was felt that women need to be constantly organising and considering ways to link informal processes to formal talks. It was also posited that this was a responsibility of mediators and third parties who are inconsistent in their interactions with informal peacemaking

actors. It was also stated that there is particular need post-war for international agencies involved in peacebuilding and reconstruction to support women, including with resources.

2. Many visions of peace processes, no one size fits all

There was also discussion about definitions and conceptions of peace processes from the women's varying standpoints. This led into a conversation about changing the organisation of the peace table and peace processes with many arguing that the current (traditional) approach to peacemaking is limited, and in urgent need of transformation. As observed by one participant: "If the process appears to the population as fundamentally flawed or narrowly conceived and women choose to partake, they must recognise they are in effect legitimising a problematic process. Some women therefore choose to not be involved, leaving the process male-dominated." There was also a related exchange on how women assume masculine tactics on the rare occasion they make it to the peace table. This was exemplified in the comment: "We had to fit into the process as men not as women."

3. Challenge the conflation of gender issues as "women's issues"

Participants in the roundtable were sharply critical of the limited areas in which women were perceived to be able to contribute. They stressed "hard" security issues demand gendered perspectives and one example of this was the issue of reintegrating combatants into local communities. Yet too often in peace talks, the perspectives of women "become a euphemism for 'society' or 'welfare issues'". Similarly, gender concerns and women's rights are often conflated, as described by one Indonesian participant: "There is a perception across government in Indonesia that gender issues are only women's issues and hence, not always important ... It is difficult to change the mindset and few are receptive to gender mainstreaming". An example of a strategy to overcome this challenge was the approach assumed by the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues in the Sri Lankan peace talks, which insisted that it would advise on all issues and not just those perceived to be "women's issues".

4. Make allies across political lines

Participants noted both the practice and potential of women to work across political divides to ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into peacemaking and peacebuilding. A participant shared her experience of using support from political parties she normally opposed to shame her own party into agreeing to use language that accurately described the constraints of "patriarchal values" into a draft constitution. It was felt that the potential for women to forge common ground across conflict and party lines is typically underestimated by mediators, and is an asset to sustainable conflict resolution.

5. Ensure strong links with the women's movement outside the formal peace process

As one participant put it, "Women on the inside of peace talks need to have allies on the outside to bring up issues that sometimes you can't push". Without this, the involvement of women in a peace process may not have significant impact because of the constraints already discussed. Shadia Marhaban cast doubt on the impact of her own presence as the only female representative to the Aceh peace talks. In some countries, institutions set up by the state to advance the position of women in society may be helpful: "One structure to think about apart from peace advisor's offices is the national machinery on women which played a big role in the Philippines ... the Filipino Commission on Women has helped women into positions everywhere".

6. Women's interests and institutions, bureaucracy and mechanisms

Peace processes increasingly establish a variety of mechanisms and institutions; post-agreement committees morph into government departments; working groups into permanent committees; ministries of peace are formed; and, as is the case in the Philippines, an Office of the Presidential Advisor to the Peace Process is established. There was exchange on how women have been marginalized in such entities, often relegated as the gender focal point or token woman. One participant recalled of the protagonists: "At first, once the parties had been pressed, they picked women just to 'warm the chairs' then they started recognising over time their value." There was an equally frank discussion about the pitfalls and promise of dedicated gender positions and mechanisms (focal points, ministries, committees etc), with powerful insights from processes in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands that have left women frustrated with formal structures. Caution and a case-by-case approach was agreed to be the most strategic approach to ensure women can expand on whatever space they can occupy given the patchy history of women's involvement in such mechanisms. Carefully establishing such positions and prioritising strategic goals is all the more important in contexts where political will is low.

7. Target political decision-making structures

The need for intense focus on where political power lies was a frequent theme in discussions. Even in Nepal, where a third of the Constituent Assembly are women, "our negotiating power is weak because we are not in the political decision-making process". In the post-war phase, when the euphoric 'peace consensus' gets increasingly weakened by the imperatives of power-sharing, political party divisions intensify and, in the process, concerns of gender justice are sacrificed. The importance of women gaining senior positions within political parties was seen as critical in this respect: "When we talk about representation we often forget about internal party democracy".

8. Build up specific technical expertise

According to many participants, the idea that women "lack capacity" has been a frequent excuse for excluding women from peacemaking (and women excluding themselves) while the capacity of men often remains unquestioned. With gender issues typically so poorly considered, the few women in such processes are often rapidly sidelined as solely being concerned with, and called on to articulate, 'women's issues' or 'social welfare' issues (see point 3). One strategy put forward to change this perception was for women negotiators and mediators to build up specific expertise in other areas as well: "Having been a negotiator in a peace process, I recall being reluctant to bring out gender issues to avoid being marginalised. I thought, "I am going to get known as 'that gender person' and no one will listen to me." So I developed expertise in other areas of peace processes and established my credibility in ceasefires which then enabled me to bring gender issues up across the board".

9. Be proactive

One participant reflected that while "women wait to be asked to be a part of peace processes, men insert themselves". To address this, it was suggested that women with more experience in peace negotiations could mentor those with less experience. Equally it was felt that mediators and their advisors need to be more proactive, increasing their networks and knowledge around women's rights and gender. They can also ensure that women are involved in peace processes from the start, not grafted on in final rounds of peace talks (as has often occurred).

10. Increase diversity and knowledge among mediators

The meeting highlighted the responsibility mediators have to include women in peace negotiations and ensure gender perspectives are integrated in them. Much more needs to be done to appoint women as mediators and negotiators as these roles, whether in large institutions like the UN or private actors such as the HD Centre, remain male-dominated. Women can and should be drawn from a range of sectors, including civil society. Much more also needs to be done to ensure that male mediators are more heterogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, class and status. Additionally, male mediators also need to be far more knowledgeable about women's rights and gender issues and far more systematic in their consultations with women's movements, bringing relevant issues to the parties at the table.

11. Improve accountability and communication between women peacemakers and mediators

Participants stressed the need for an in-depth conversation between mediators and women peacemakers so there is a greater appreciation for each other's perspectives. It was suggested one way to advance a greater degree of gender accountability amongst mediation actors was to set up dedicated meetings between mediators, peace process advisors and women involved in peacemaking. This is one area that the HD Centre will be focussing on in more detail in 2011, in scrutinising its own work, as well as providing a bridge between mediators and women peacemakers to engage on these issues.

12. Tackle logistical and safety impediments

A number of participants had faced, or were facing, threats to their safety because of their involvement in peacemaking. The responsibility of mediators to tackle this issue was noted: "When I was negotiating in Aceh my safety was under threat. This needs to be better addressed by mediators and third parties. If I had been living in Aceh at the time I would have thought twice about joining the talks because of my family's safety". Negotiators from rebel groups or armed movements are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Furthermore, taking part in a peace process can be practically impossible for many women, given they are often the primary caregivers in families and often have limited funds. The location of peace talks may be too far away for the women to travel to every day for a prolonged period of time. In order to ensure women's participation, practical obstructions need to be identified and removed before the peace negotiations commence, including by offering alternative child and family care, ensuring safe and free travel, and safety for family members left behind.

Next steps

Participants were keen that a network be maintained and targeted activities undertaken. A number of suggestions were put forward including: action-oriented research which would evaluate the impact of women at the peace table; engagement with selected peace processes - with Afghanistan highlighted as a particularly pressing case; and developing a gender accountability mechanism for mediators.

Additional information

For more information about the next steps in this project, contact Cate Buchanan – cateb@hdcentre.org

For participant biographies and agenda visit:

<http://www.hdcentre.org/projects/gender-amp-mediation/issues/women-peace-table---asia-pacific>

Opinion pieces and blog posts related to women, gender and peacemaking are also available on the HD Centre's website, as well as a short film (9 minutes - <http://vimeo.com/16426911>) of the meeting.

To read the speech at the meeting by Karin Landgren, Representative of the UN Secretary General to Nepal see:

http://www.unmin.org.np/downloads/speeches/RSG_Speech_Women%20and%20Peacemaking_27Sep10_ENG.pdf

In late 2010, the HD Centre will release a publication on women and peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific. To register for a copy write to cateb@hdcentre.org

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