

# Women and Mediation: Not afraid to do the job

By Antonia Potter<sup>1</sup>

Excluding women from the work of negotiating and mediation is selling peace processes short.

Popular psychology would have it that women have the monopoly over men on talk. Apparently, women like listening and talking more, and are often better at it. Communications – the soft side – is a woman's thing. Funny, then, that one of the most important professions in the international arena – the business of ending armed conflict through helping people talk their way to peace rather than battling bloodily to the death – is almost completely devoid of women.

There are a whole range of professional mediators, who deal with family disputes, corporate wrangles, traditional land rights issues and more, whose ranks are filled with women. The official conflict mediators are a slightly different and rarer breed. Drawn from the ranks of ex-diplomats and high level government officials, they are deployed by organisations such as the UN, the EU, peace-promoting governments such as Norway and Switzerland, or a tiny number of conflict resolution institutions such as the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue or the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari's Crisis Management Initiative.

Of all those bodies, not a single one bar the UN has a woman leading their conflict mediation teams; but the UN has nothing to be proud of. The Security Council passed a resolution in October 2000 (number 1325 on women, peace and security) which called for greater involvement of women at all levels of decision-making in peacemaking. It was one of the most widely accepted and praised resolutions in the Security Council's history. But five years later, of 61 UN senior officials in direct peacemaking roles, there are still only four women. Hardly impressive.

It's obviously a problem for equality of representation, but how is it a problem for peace? Excluding women from the negotiating process sells peace processes short. The very few women who have participated in formal peace processes show us why. Perhaps the example closest to home is that of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, whose Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar broke the mould of Northern Ireland politics by getting elected as delegates to the talks that led to the Good Friday agreement. They made sure that issues fundamental to achieving a lasting peace, but often ignored by men, such as education, social service provision, justice and human rights made it onto the agenda. They were not put off by an aggressively male political culture.

In the end, as current woman mediators Heidi Tagliavini, Carolyn McAskie (for the UN in Georgia and Burundi respectively), and Betty Bigombe (between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army) have proven, the skills, experience and personality of the individual, combined in some cases with the clout of the institution they represent, are what counts. Their gender might even be an advantage in what can be highly tense and even aggressive encounters.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was published in The Guardian on 24 January 2006. The author is Project Manager at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

The high-level, experienced women are there and they're not afraid to do the job. But resolutions have come and gone, rosters have been made and ignored, and nothing has really changed. What is the root of the problem? The systems of appointment are hardly transparent, being at best adhoc, and at worst subject to the most pernicious aspects of institutional politics and cronyism.

It's time for the UN, its member states and the exclusive ranks of their collaborators in conflict resolution to live up to their promises, set an example, and give peace the best chance not just to get made, but to stick. For everybody. That means targeted mentoring of women, more transparent selection and appointment procedures, and, for a while at least, some kind of affirmative action or positive discrimination. We share the problem. Let's share the solution too.

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