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› Women Negotiators' Strategies to Overcome Gender Inequality at the Table*

- › Barriers women negotiators face affect the strategies they develop.
- › Selection type affects resistance, not qualification. Women who are selected because of their personal ties can get higher acceptance at the table, while those selected by quota or third parties face harsher resistance and use advocacy and alliance-building strategies to reduce that resistance.
- › Support for women negotiators cannot be one-size-fits-all. It should not be a generic package but designed according to the barrier a woman is likely to face given how she was selected.



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“After a while, the bantering on WOMAN became incessant”, wrote Miriam Corronel-Ferrer,¹ the Filipino peace negotiator who chaired the government peace panel and signed the Bangsamoro Comprehensive Agreement between the Filipino government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which ended decades of violence in the Philippines’ region of Mindanao. Her note captures the gendered dynamics women encounter at peace negotiation tables, and the subtle ways their presence is contested, undermined or underestimated.

Gender-blind analyses of peace tables tell us little about the difficulties women encounter because of their gender, and how they overcome them through the strategies they develop as they construct and perform their roles as peacemakers. Despite studies showing that women’s inclusion makes peace agreements more durable and effective, the number of women at the peace table remains low: their participation rose moderately from around 10-13 per cent in the early 2000s to about 14 per cent in the mid-2010s, before declining

¹ Corronel-Ferrer, Miriam, “WOMAN at the Talks”, in *Kababaihan at Kapayapaan*, No. 1 (March 2014), p. 3-7 at p. 4, <https://peace.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Kababaihan-at-Kapayapaan-Issue-No-1.pdf>.

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to just 9.6 per cent in 2023.² Yet the stakes are high: when women's groups influence the design of a peace agreement, it is 20 per cent more likely to last at least two years, and 35 per cent more likely to last at least fifteen.³ Women's inclusion, however, is not simply a matter of numbers. While descriptive representation matters, the way women enact their roles is highly context-dependent, shaped by how they were selected and by the intersection of their gender with other identities.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 21 women negotiators from fifteen conflict cases in fourteen countries, conducted between 2018 and 2024,⁴ this brief identifies the strategies they employ to advocate for their inclusion and examines the factors shaping these strategies, including the intersection of gender with political ideology, race, class and age, and the reasons they were selected to negotiate.

Challenges at the table

Women negotiators reported belittlement, scepticism about their abilities and being perceived as mere ornaments at the table, even though all held advanced educational qualifications, including master's degrees and PhDs. Male colleagues said to them that they would not know how to bargain with a woman, or, once they accepted their presence, told them they "talk like a man", as though this were a compliment. Structural inequalities within political and armed organisations also limit women's progress to leadership positions, which in turn restricts their eligibility for formal negotiations. Rebel groups with more women fighters and leaders had a higher capacity to send women to the table, while government representatives tended to be academics and officials with "proven skills".

Selection shapes legitimacy

Women negotiators are selected through different routes: personal ties or family prestige, ideological reliability, qualifications or pressure from third parties such as the United Nations. Of the 21 negotiators interviewed, seven were selected for their ideological reliability, seven for their qualifications and two through personal connections to elites, with the remainder selected under third-party pressure. Those chosen through personal connections generally experienced fewer barriers. Those selected by third parties, despite high qualifications, encountered the broadest and harshest barriers, including neglect and clientelism favouring men, and were sometimes seen as "token representatives" rather than legitimate actors, even losing their seats to men once their initial purpose had been served.

² UN Security Council, *Women and Peace and Security. Report of the Secretary-General* (S/2024/671), September 2024, point 22, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4064287>.

³ O'Reilly, Marie et al., *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes*, New York, International Peace Institute, June 2015, p. 12, <https://www.ipinst.org/?p=6884>.

⁴ Çelik, Ayşe Betül, "The Role of Gender in Inclusive Peacemaking: Women Negotiators' Strategies to Overcome Gender Inequality at the Table", in *Peacebuilding*, 17 March 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2026.2644692>.



»» **Three main strategies emerged from the interviews with women negotiators in this study**

This suggests that the challenges women negotiators face may stem not from doubts about their qualifications but from how they were selected. These selection effects intersect with other identities, such as age, race, class and ideology, which further shape the resistance women face at the table. A young negotiator recalled that male colleagues doubted her experience “because of the age issue”, while an indigenous negotiator identified the intersection of race and gender as the source of the resistance she faced. Age, race, class and political identity thus compound the barriers created by the route through which a woman was selected, rather than acting as separate obstacles.

Women negotiators' strategies

Three main strategies emerged from the interviews with women negotiators in this study.

Bridge-building, the most utilised strategy, involves direct engagement with those who oppose women's participation, using dialogue, persuasion, storytelling and relationship-building to reduce resistance gradually. This strategy was used mostly by women selected for ideological reliability or personal connections, who could draw on insider legitimacy.

External advocacy and alliance-building, the second most utilised strategy, involves building alliances with women's groups and drawing on international actors and normative frameworks, such as UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security of October 2000, to legitimise inclusion. Yet only three of the fifteen women negotiating after UNSCR 1325's adoption identified it as a direct, significant tool. More often, international frameworks worked indirectly, through informal networks that pressured opposing parties to save face. International gender advisors can act as catalysts for short-term gains, but their record is mixed: several negotiators described their presence as “good but not effective, although without them it could be worse”.

Direct and indirect assertive resistance involves demonstrating competence, confronting sexism openly or turning gender stereotypes to tactical advantage, for instance, taking “foolish” bathroom breaks that male counterparts, constrained by ego, could not take. Many women reported needing to continuously prove their competence, a pressure their male counterparts did not face, reflecting the implicit bias that persists even where formal exclusion has been overcome.

Barriers shape strategies

The strategies women negotiators employ are not chosen randomly and are not mutually exclusive. Women negotiators combine them depending on the audience, the form of resistance they encounter and the support available to them. Across negotiation contexts, women primarily advance participation through relational and alliance-based strategies, supplementing them with assertive resistance when their legitimacy is more secure.



»» *Women peacemakers are frequently criticised by civil society for being “elitist”*

Women dealing with structural barriers, such as being one of few women within a hierarchical political or armed organisation, tend to prioritise bridge-building, since it preserves the insider legitimacy their selection already grants while limiting backlash. Women facing direct, coercive and hostile barriers, such as explicit exclusion or having their seat handed to a man, more often tend towards advocacy or assertive strategies, since bridge-building offers little protection once resistance turns overt.

This pattern also tracks the selection route itself. Women selected for their ideological reliability or through personal connections relied mostly on indirect assertive strategies or bridge-building, since their insider status already secured a degree of acceptance that made confrontation less necessary. Women selected for their qualifications or by third parties, who faced the broadest and harshest barriers precisely because their legitimacy was more easily questioned, relied more heavily on advocacy, alliance-building with women's groups and direct assertiveness to compensate for the legitimacy they were denied. In other words, the barrier reveals how contested a woman's presence is, and the strategy she reaches for reflects how much legitimacy she has left to draw on when she meets it.

Women peacemakers are also frequently criticised by civil society for being “elitist” or “disconnected from the communities they represent”. Most of the negotiators interviewed here were connected to respected families or influential positions within their organisations and were highly educated. Such backgrounds can lend weight to this critique, but they also help explain how these women overcame many of the barriers described above. Privilege affords a measure of protection that women from less advantaged positions do not have. This suggests that broadening who counts as a legitimate woman negotiator, beyond elite and well-connected circles, remains an unresolved challenge for the field.

Recommendations for the international community

Twenty-five years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, it may be time to critically reassess the “add women and stir” approach and the way international actors select and support women negotiators.

- Move beyond counting women toward assessing the legitimacy of their selection. Third-party or quota-based selection, while necessary to raise numbers, should be paired with sustained support, since it currently produces the harshest resistance and the greatest risk of women being seen as token representatives.
- Support women's civil society networks, not only individual appointees. Moral, strategic and normative support from women's groups was consistently more valuable to negotiators than symbolic international pressure alone.
- Avoid using “impartiality” as an excuse for silence. International actors and mediators should act as guarantors of gender-equality norms rather than avoiding gender issues to appear neutral.



- › Make women's strategies, not only their presence, visible. Publicising the substantive skills women bring to the table – bridge-building, advocacy, assertive resistance – helps counter the perception that their role is merely symbolic and increases their leverage at the table.
- › Invest in women's leadership pipelines before negotiations begin. Since women's presence at the table depends on their presence in leadership positions within governments, rebel groups and civil society, the international community should strengthen these pathways well ahead of peace talks, not only once a table is set.
- › Training and support for women negotiators should be tailored to the barrier(s) they are most likely to face given their selection route, rather than offered as a one-size-fits-all package.

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