

# How Women Mediators Overcome Resistance: Innovative Strategies from the Field

by Ç. Esra Çuhadar



A “second-class woman [...] who aspires to be like a man”. As Miriam Coronel-Ferrer recalls, this is just one example of the antagonistic behaviours received by the women who were part of the panel of the Bangsamoro peace talks, which resulted in a peace agreement in 2014 ending the decades-long war between the Philippines government and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the majority-Muslim south.<sup>1</sup> Ferrer, who was the chief negotiator for the Philippines government (GoP),

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, “WOMAN at the Talks”, in *Kababaihan at Kapayapaan*, No. 1 (March 2014), p. 3-7 at p. 5, <https://peace.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Kababaihan-at-Kapayapaan-Issue-No-1.pdf>.

remembers that she was personally called a “traitor” and insulted on social media, with threats of physical and sexual violence and including demeaning comments such as calling her a “weak negotiator”.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this is only one instance of the difficulties women negotiators and mediators face across various conflict contexts.<sup>3</sup> Ferrer and her

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, Washington DC, June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> This article is based on in-depth interviews with 30 women negotiators and mediators around the world. Informed consent was obtained for the interviews. The project was supported by the Jennings Randolph Senior

*Ç. Esra Çuhadar is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at Bilkent University and Head of Research of the Ottawa Dialogue, University of Ottawa. Çuhadar is a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) and former UN standby team mediation adviser on process design and inclusion.*

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colleagues succeeded despite all the impediments and she became one of the few women signatories of a negotiated agreement. Like her, many other women develop strategies to deal with such barriers. Women who serve as negotiators and mediators (either at official talks or mediating local conflicts) constantly innovate ways to overcome various types of resistance to their inclusion in the talks. In previous research, I defined resistance to the inclusion of women as the behaviours of a particular person (or people) or group(s) that undermine women's inclusion in the peace or transition process, which can be categorised into three types of behaviour: implicit resistance, explicit resistance and coercive resistance.<sup>4</sup>

The non-violent strategies used by women to react to these kinds of resistance can instead be grouped into two categories: contentious and non-contentious.<sup>5</sup> Contentious includes confrontational responses that do not refrain from escalating the verbal conflict with those who resist their participation; non-contentious include responses that address the resistance behaviour through dialogue and problem-solving approaches without

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 4-5, for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Conflict transformation strategies were first categorised as contentious and non-contentious by Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts. From Escalation to Resolution*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

escalating a conflict with the resisting actor.

### *Contentious strategies*

Women negotiators use non-violent action to support their negotiating power vis-à-vis their opponents or competitors and to lobby for including accountability for conflict-related sexual violence as an action item in the negotiations. For example, in the negotiations over Kosovo with Serbia, Edita Tahiri, one of the Kosovar negotiators, organised the first Kosovar rally with more than 5,000 women against the occupation of Kosovo. This helped her to be nominated as a delegate for the convention to elect the presidency of the Democratic League of Kosovo (DLK) and secured her place as a member of the presidency, thus becoming the only woman in the leadership of the movement. Having a decision-making position enabled her to become the only woman negotiator at the Rambouillet Peace Conference in 1999. She also used non-violent action strategies like petitions to champion women's demands for justice concerning conflict-related sexual violence committed against Kosovar women during the conflict. Petitions and rallies were used by women in Sudan, too, to push the government actors to act in areas where they had promised to deliver on women's inclusion during the political transition talks and to hold them responsible for delaying implementation in this area.

The second non-violent contentious strategy is creating alternative channels for information gathering in the negotiations. Women negotiators from

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different contexts have mentioned a lack of access to critical information in the negotiation process, especially if these women participate independently as part of civil society rather than as representatives of one of the central conflict parties. To overcome this problem, women across different contexts set up alternative channels to receive information about talks. In some cases, like the talks in Northern Ireland resulting in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) relied on an influential woman politician who was informed about the process. In Sudan, women activists relied on social media networks to get more information. In these and other cases, women created their own information systems to ensure they were informed of what was happening in the negotiations. Thus, it is crucial for assigned mediators to hold special information sessions for women negotiators in the talks to make sure they are fully informed and have up-to-date information.

As mentioned, this strategy was sometimes combined with women using leverage through powerful "friends" or allies in the negotiation process. These powerful friends can be women in high positions or men in influential positions who are friendly to the women's demands. In addition to alliances and leveraging with influential men, women reported other alliance-building strategies during the peace process in multiple contexts to leverage their influence. These include galvanising the support of international actors or countries supporting women's inclusion, coalition-building with other societal actors, and women

supporting other women through women networks. Coalition- and alliance-building has been a strategy that women's groups have employed in various settings to overcome barriers, such as in Liberia: here, women allied with religious actors when their initial efforts to get through to the president and the leader of the armed group became unsuccessful.<sup>6</sup>

The third non-violent contentious strategy is direct verbal confrontation and assertive pushback. Such confrontation sometimes occurs as a "friendly reminder" but other times can be quite antagonistic. Verbal confrontation results in escalation when the type of resistance is more direct and intentional, as in the case of Afghan women negotiators during various talks they were involved with. In one case, in negotiations with an Islamic armed group operating in parts of Afghanistan, the resistance of the representatives of the armed group to the Afghan woman negotiator from the Afghan government who was meant to read the final statement to the press was only overcome after her male colleagues in the delegation took a solid position in her support. Her team insisted that either she read it, or no one did; only then did the resisters back down.

<sup>6</sup> Leymah Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers. How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War. A Memoir*, New York, Beast Books, 2011; Julie Xuan Ouellet, "Women and Religion in Liberia's Peace and Reconciliation", in *Critical Intersections in Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 2013), p. 12-20, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cie/article/view/17063>.

### *Non-contentious strategies*

The most frequently mentioned strategy, cited by more than two-thirds of the women interviewed, alludes to the importance of “being an expert” or “gaining expertise” as a key leverage for meaningful inclusion in a high-level official negotiation or a local mediation process. Expertise in multiple contexts helped women enter the negotiations and sustain their presence on the teams when they met with suspicion and resistance. Some women suggested that they purposefully introduce themselves, emphasising the “Ph.D.” in their title, after they realised that this prompted more respect and acceptance from others in the talks and enhanced their legitimacy. Other women initially involved in the talks in an administrative or support capacity, such as legal assistant, managed to climb up in the negotiation team and took a central position when their specialised lawyer skills were needed, and they became indispensable in drafting documents and agreements. In another context, a high-level mediator reported how the request for her involvement always started with “support” or “help” and later became a significant mediation role for her but only after her performance was seen or, in her words, “expertise is proven”. Others mentioned that they purposefully educated themselves on issues women were excluded from, such as economic and security topics. In the Northern Ireland context, women were prepared for all the issues in the peace talks, like the release of prisoners, addressing the grievances of conflict victims, economic measures, etc., in the working groups the NIWC had formed. This was instrumental in

empowering them in the talks, not just on women’s issues but also building alliances on specific topics with other political parties and increasing their leverage. Similarly, in the Libyan context, preparation helped empower women to achieve parity and act more confidently around powerful men.

The second most frequently mentioned non-contentious strategy is using various dialogue and negotiation skills to overcome resistance behaviour. Almost all the women interviewed highlighted good listening skills in overcoming unsympathetic behaviours toward women or in overcoming tensions in their communication with some traditional authorities, like religious figures or tribal leaders. Many women interviewed thought they had better listening skills than their male colleagues, and listening to marginalised groups or armed groups without any judgment was something these people experienced only with them. Some women gave examples of how specific mediation skills, like reframing, were used effectively to address challenging behaviours, especially objections to gender-specific text in the agreements.<sup>7</sup> Women used reframing to move from an adversarial and zero-sum understanding to a non-zero-sum and consensual frame. For example, in the Bangsamoro negotiations, the Liberation Front

<sup>7</sup> Reframing in a mediation setting is changing how a situation is presented or perceived semantically by changing the language used to describe it, in order to create a new perspective on the situation and open the way for problem-solving. For more information on reframing see Brad Spangler, “Reframing”, in *Beyond Intractability*, November 2003, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/node/665>.



delegates were not comfortable with the term “non-discrimination based on sex”, as the term “sex” was found offensive by the group referencing Islamic practice. They then reframed it to “gender” in the text,<sup>8</sup> which read as “non-discrimination on the basis of religion, class, gender”, which was acceptable. The Liberation Front argued that “men and women are different biologically and cannot be the same”. This objection was overcome when Ferrer reframed the concept as “parity of esteem”, meaning “equal does not mean being the same biologically but that each sex receives the dignity it deserves equally”, which had a similar meaning but a different semantic articulation and was indeed acceptable to all parties. In another reframing example, a Yemeni local mediator faced pushback when she presented herself as a mediator; she reframed her role and presented herself as “helping to fix the road problem and assisting the community”, which allowed her to be accepted as a woman.

Women also used goodwill gestures and humour as part of effective communication skills. Sometimes, women used gestures in a tit-for-tat manner, reciprocating a behaviour they found offensive. Other times, women used gestures to break ice and initiate fun that they thought would help communication. In Northern Ireland, women used jokes to deflect humiliating comments about their presence in the negotiations. For example, one of the women negotiators in the talks in Northern Ireland was told

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, “WOMAN at the Talks”, cit., p. 4.

by a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) member to go home and have babies. She responded by singing, “Stand by Your Man”.<sup>9</sup> In the Bangsamoro talks, Ferrer and her colleagues offered a box of chocolate to the Liberation Front representatives on Valentine’s Day.<sup>10</sup>

The third most frequent and most innovative strategy concerns various trust-building methods women use. Women from different contexts mentioned taking additional risks that pushed safety limits, which their male colleagues refrained from taking. Going the extra mile at women’s own risk helped establish trust with conflict parties and facilitated their continued presence in the peace process. The idea of an “unarmed woman taking exceptional risks to her life but determined to pursue peace” had an impact in disarming or convincing the belligerent party and building trust with them. The parties later explicitly demanded these women as mediators or negotiators.

### *Changing the behaviour to change the attitude*

A final strategy that taps into many of the already-mentioned ideas is “if you can’t change the attitude, change the behaviour first, even in a minor way”. Women reported this usually creates a ripple effect for a more significant and sustained impact. For instance, when a woman enters the process, even in a minor support role or as a technical

<sup>9</sup> Esra Çuhadar, “Understanding Resistance to Inclusion in Peace Processes”, cit., p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, “WOMAN at the Talks”, cit., p. 5.

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expert, even though resistance occurs initially, it often subsides in time. It even changes the attitudes of those against her presence. It is more difficult to openly oppose someone's presence to her face, so when behaviours change, people usually adjust their attitudes accordingly. For example, because there were women negotiators on the GoP team in the Bangsamoro talks, the Liberation Front also brought a woman legal expert to reciprocate that. The same dynamic happened in the negotiations over Aceh between the armed group GAM and the Indonesian government. One woman's presence, which was opposed at the beginning of the talks, first triggered the inclusion of another woman in reciprocation and then, over time, turned into acceptance of their expertise. This dynamic has happened in many different contexts. A minor behavioural change may result in a ripple effect and snowball into an attitude change.

These are only a few examples of how innovative women mediators and negotiators have become to overcome resistance to their inclusion in the negotiation processes. Although facing resistance is a distressing challenge to their presence and meaningful participation, it presents an opportunity, too, as resistance also pushes women to carve a role for themselves and leads to the development and innovation of new and cutting-edge negotiation techniques. This results in an added value for the negotiation and mediation processes as it equips women with specific features like being more adaptable and better-skilled mediators and negotiators compared to male

mediators who hardly face such resistance while doing their work.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

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