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The need for enhanced gender equality in ADR or how to get more women around a mediation table

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This blog was written by [Petra Dragoșová](#) (Lawyer & International Accredited Mediator) and [Constantin Adi Gavrilă](#).

Gender equality, the state of men and women having equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities, represents a vital prerequisite for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. The relevance of gender equality has been recognized by major societal actors across numerous areas of life, such as in governance, where, for example, women's presence shifts more attention to legal protection, social welfare, and the transparency of government and business, but also in conflict resolution.

Mediation, as a peaceful method of alternative conflict resolution (ADR), involves various parties and diverse stakeholders working collaboratively, dealing with various complexities and perspectives that must be considered, often completely opposite from each other. An increasing body of research shows that the involvement of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, whether in mediating and negotiating roles or through grassroots efforts (related to minor disputes arising in the daily life of communities), is essential for attaining lasting agreements.

Why is that? One reason is that women's involvement in conflict resolution processes promotes the more effective engagement of different community members in collaborative efforts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the deep-rooted causes of conflict that informs the best options for possible actions. Furthermore, higher gender equality and more effective gender representation in mediation inform more sustainable dispute resolution processes and outcomes, leading to a lower propensity for the emergence of conflict in the first place. For example, women can describe how conflicts impact the households, families, children, and vulnerable members of the community with language and perspectives that are often fundamentally different from others brought into dialogue processes.

The extent of benefits linked to women's participation in mediation within all phases has been acknowledged by several international organizations, notably the United Nations, which recognized the necessary role of women in peacemaking in the **Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security**, adopted in 2000. Since then, the UN has called for greater involvement of women in conflict mediation processes and all peacemaking activities.

For instance, a lot of work in this respect has also been done by UN Women who puts a lot of effort into supporting more effective participation of women at all levels of conflict resolution, especially by working closely with civil society organizations, other UN agencies and Member States. Via this cooperation, it aims to enhance gender equality in peace processes through different activities, such as by gathering know-how and documenting good practices, strengthening women's civil society organizations to help them advocate for women's rights in peace processes, and encouraging the development of regional networks of women mediators. The **OSCE** (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) has also actively promoted gender equality. In this regard, it is important to note its **Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality**, adopted back in 2004, which highlighted the relevance of women's participation in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction.

Despite many efforts made over the last two decades, gender equality in ADR, mediation and formal peace processes has still not been achieved, and women remain either underrepresented in conflict resolution or excluded from decision-making altogether. For instance, between 1992 and 2019, women constituted only about 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major peace processes globally. Despite some progress made, on average, seven out of ten peace processes did not include women mediators or women signatories at all. In 2021, the involvement of women in UN-led peace processes (either as negotiators or delegates) represented 19 percent, while only 8 out of 25 globally reached peace agreements that year (32 percent) included provisions referencing women.

Some of the causes of women's low participation in mediation and peacebuilding

The following factors can be considered as the common challenges impeding the attainment of adequate participation of women in conflict resolution procedures:

- cultural stereotypes and patriarchal justifications – they are often used by the parties who argue for women's exclusion from peace talks, which subsequently leads to the marginalization of women in community dialogues and minimization of the overall acknowledgment of their needs in the conflict,
- a lack of trained women mediators with local availability to take part in dispute resolution processes,
- a lack of mediators' capacity to ensure meaningful participation by women in the mediation process.

A deeper effort to understand cultural frameworks as opposed to changing them

Let's look at the cultural stereotypes for a moment and try to get a better understanding. One important point that must be made is that women play various roles within families and societies across cultures. However, in some cultures, in the context of dispute resolution, while only men speak up publicly and represent their families and communities in ADR and peace processes, women play a similarly important role, if not more important, within their families and communities working behind the scenes as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters or partners. Values like honor and face-saving may be mentioned here as standing at the foundation of the cultural patterns.

So, while it is relevant to note that promoting the inclusion of women in peace processes and

community mediation efforts is a widely supported goal that is seen as essential for gender equality and sustainable peace worldwide, one needs to understand some of the thinking behind the cultural resistance, particularly in non-Western communities, without necessarily endorsing these viewpoints:

- Some argue that women’s participation in dispute resolution processes, particularly ones with public dimensions, could potentially lead to the dilution or erosion of traditional cultural values and practices within certain communities. They fear that increased interaction with Western ideas and values might result in a loss of distinct local identity.
- Certain societies may have deeply entrenched conservative views regarding gender roles and women’s participation in public affairs. Opponents might contend that pushing for women’s involvement could provoke backlash or resistance from these elements, potentially exacerbating conflict rather than facilitating peace.
- Some might also argue that women’s active engagement in ADR, mediation and peace processes could disrupt traditional family structures and dynamics. This disruption could be seen as destabilizing, challenging the established hierarchy and roles within the family unit.
- Critics may suggest that in some cases, efforts to include women in community mediation and peace processes may be tokenistic, where women are included merely to fulfill international expectations rather than because they possess the necessary qualifications or experience. This could lead to the perception that women are being used as pawns in a larger geopolitical game.
- Skeptics might also argue that external pressure to include women in peace processes could be counterproductive. In some cases, allowing local communities to make these decisions themselves might be more effective without external interference.

Therefore, all viewpoints should be understood and addressed by stakeholders in ways that are perceived to be gentle, open, and honest so that the international practices would meet the traditional cultural values. This way, modern and traditional values would be harmonized for an increased understanding among people who otherwise may be trying to influence each other for the sake of external factors like set principles or international frameworks.

How to achieve a higher representation of women in conflict resolution

According to the UN Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies, it is especially relevant to:

- set up and implement legal frameworks (both on national and regional levels) to promote the effective participation of women in the peaceful settlement of disputes, especially in conflict mediation processes,
- encourage parties to increase women’s political participation through measures such as quotas where relevant,
- develop solid strategies regarding gender equality and mediation to increase the meaningful inclusion of women in formal peace negotiations, especially at the senior level, while considering the interests of all conflict parties and other relevant stakeholders (both men and women).

In developing mediation process strategies to attain gender equality, it is crucial to ensure the participation of women across all phases of the mediation procedure. The **preparatory phase** shall include a comprehensive stakeholder analysis identifying any challenges to the inclusion of women in the mediation process (such as cultural norms in a given environment), as well as developing a mediation team with an equal representation of women. The **mediation phase** shall involve **consultations with women and civil society** to take into consideration their needs and concerns, **the provision of technical support and capacity building** to parties to facilitate women’s

involvement in peace talks, as well as the **identification of constraints** that may restrict women from participating in a mediation process (such as financial or travel issues). It is also important to **ensure the use of gender-neutral language** in the mediation process and its outcome documents, thereby avoiding using masculine forms when referencing both men and women. Within the **post-agreement phase**, it is essential to **ensure women's representation in implementation processes and monitoring mechanisms and encourage dialogue** to strengthen local ownership of the issue, maintain women's engagement in the dispute, and secure adequate funding to support the abovementioned points.

Conclusion

Despite many efforts made to enhance gender equality in conflict resolution, women's participation in mediation and peacemaking processes over the last two decades has increased only gradually, and their current involvement is far from sufficient, which shows that much more needs to be done internationally, as well as at national and local level.

The ongoing lack of women's meaningful involvement in mediation and peace processes presents a critical challenge to global goals related to more effective conflict resolution. It is, therefore, necessary for relevant international organizations and countries to cooperate even more intensively to ensure an increased understanding of traditional community values and, in this context, an increased involvement of women in conflict resolution processes. This would assist the long-term sustainability of mediation agreements and consequently attain higher levels of peace and stability in the world.

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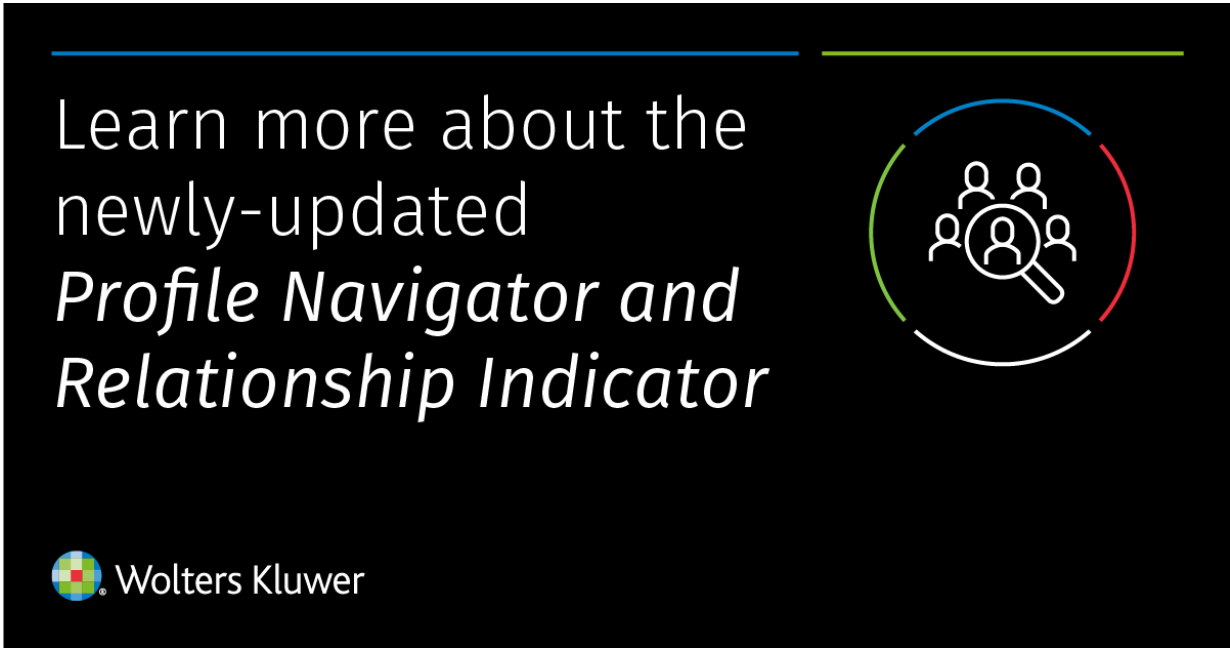
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