Leadership in Fragile Contexts – The Role of Women in Peacebuilding

Over the last several decades, the recognition of women's crucial role in effective peacebuilding has increasingly been recognized in research, policy and practice, not least in (to date) ten United Nations Security Council resolutions specifically on women, peace and security (WPS). However, in practice, women's leadership in all aspects of peacebuilding is stymied by a number of factors: for example, by all available measures women's participation in formal peace processes remains at unacceptably low levels. It is, therefore, worth asking how we can better counteract patriarchal structures and discourses in a smart and effective way, including in the fluid, fragile, and multifaceted conflicts we face today.

Identifying patriarchal backlash as a reality
Put simply, patriarchy is generally unimpressed by norms and evidence. Despite established evidence, policy, and the fact that women comprise more than 50% of the global population, arguments are often put forward to show or 'prove' that women's inclusion in peace processes is not necessary, or is even harmful to a process: 'Right now we need to get armed parties to sign a ceasefire – women's inclusion can come later.' 'There is not sufficient evidence that women's inclusion really brings more peace'. 'Women do not know enough about the subjects discussed at the table.' 'Women are not sufficiently representative'. In response, WPS champions are instead often drawn into producing counter-arguments, rather than challenging the premise of the questions: 'We need to ask Envoys to consult with women' instead of demanding a 50% gender quota for all negotiation delegations; 'We need more evidence', instead of pointing to the bulk of existing evidence. Finally, 'We need to train the women'. i.e. the need to 'fix' the women, not patriarchy, as being the cause of the problem. We should support women to better understand how to push for peace processes to succeed, and how to push their way in rather than waiting to be invited.

Overcoming conceptual confusion: What constitutes meaningful participation of women in peace processes?
General – and thus unspecific – calls for women's inclusion often manifest as a conflated agenda that does not distinguish between different goals. In his 2018 annual report on Women, Peace and Security, the UN Secretary General differentiates between gender parity, gender mainstreaming and meaningful participation and women's influence throughout his report, a clearer framing that helps to make women's inclusion more real and understandable. For example, women's representation can be achieved with a gender or inclusion quota across all bodies in a

peace process – from negotiation delegations to consultative bodies or implementation bodies and constitutional commissions. Gender mainstreaming in all outcome documents of a ceasefire or peace deal – as the Colombian case exemplifies – can be achieved with formally mandated gender commissions or gender focal points. Women's influence over the peace process needs multiple strategies, ranging from discrete lobbying to presenting targeted proposals to mass action or campaigns.

Invited versus claimed spaces; separate women's spaces in peace negotiations
In many UN-led peace processes in recent years, women's inclusion has been characterized by prioritizing separate, women-specific tracks, advisory bodies, technical committees or consultations over the direct inclusion of women at the negotiation table or in key implementing bodies. This does not mean that women cannot be simultaneously included in multiple bodies and functions in a peace process; but this is not a replacement for direct equal participation. The Secretary General confirms as much in his 2018 report: 'In some cases, this has taken the form of parallel processes or advisory bodies that are unable to contribute to main processes and outcomes'.

Preventing reduction to "Women's Demands"
The language and strategies used to lobby for women's inclusion can contribute to the narrative that women have to justify their place at the table and at other crucial forums. This can happen through qualifying or justifying women's inclusion, exaggerating the need for training to build women's capacity, focusing on women's needs rather than strengths, or advocating for quotas that are below parity.

Change the rules of the game, not just the players
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the traditional approach of inviting key armed actors to the negotiation table and signing a peace deal no longer works. Official peace negotiations in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Cyprus are continually stalled, or essentially not working. The objective cannot be to just add more women to an evidently malfunctioning system. We as a community need to focus instead on fundamentally rethinking our approach to peace, recognizing the entire ecosystem in which these processes develop, and recognizing that these processes do not end with a signed agreement. Rethinking our approach to peace with inclusion at its core, with women's leadership fundamental at every step, will help us build more resilient communities.

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