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‘Soft ways of doing hard things’: women mediators and the question of gender in mediation

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ABSTRACT

Arguments in favour of increasing the number of women mediators rest on existing research in the field of Women Peace and Security that suggests that where women are included in peace processes that they create more sustainable agreements. It is often suggested that women mediators will bring different- ‘soft’- skills to mediation and that they will be catalysts to women’s empowerment. Drawing on a series of interviews with women mediators in Northern Ireland the article does two things. First, it explores the skills that women felt they brought to their work, and second, it draws out the relationship between mediation and gender as perceived by the participants. What the results demonstrate is that while participants did not consider it the role of a mediator to advance a particular normative agenda through their work, this did not translate into a gender blind approach in practice.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, international attention has turned to the promotion of women as peace mediators. This is a new development in the field of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which until recently neglected the study of mediation,¹ and women mediators more specifically.² This is notwithstanding the inclusion of commitments to increase the number of women in high-level mediation roles in WPS resolutions dating back to UNSCR 1325 in 2000.³ While a clear normative framework underpins policy in this area it is less clear, beyond strategic commitments to gender parity, why we need more women mediators.⁴ Arguments in favour of women mediators tend to be extrapolated from existing research in the WPS field that suggests that where women are included in peace processes that

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¹Toni Hastrup, ‘Creating Cinderella? The Unintended Consequences of the Women Peace and Security Agenda for the EU’s Mediation Architecture’ *International Negotiation* 23, no. 2 (2018): 218–237.

²Karin Aggestam and Isaak Svensson, ‘Where Are the Women in Peace Mediation?’ in *Gendering Diplomacy and International Relations*, ed. Karin Aggestam and Ann E. Towns (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Catherine Turner, ‘Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations’ *Global Policy* 9, no. 2 (2018); and T. Paffenholz, N. Ross, S. Dixon, A.-L. Schluchter and J. True, ‘Making Women Count- Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women’s Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations’. Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative and UN Women, 2016.

³1325 (2000); 1820 (2009); 1888 (2009); 1889 (2010); 1960 (2011); 2106 (2013); 2122 (2013) and 2242 (2015).

⁴Turner, ‘Absent or Invisible’.

they create more sustainable agreements.⁵ It is suggested that women mediators will bring different ('soft') skills to mediation, that they will be more focused on inclusivity, and that they will be catalysts to women's empowerment in mediation.⁶ Indeed the connection between participation and effectiveness has become central to advocacy efforts aimed at increasing the representation of women.⁷ This article seeks to contribute to this debate by addressing specifically the experiences of women as mediators. The question of what skills women bring to mediation intersects two separate fields of inquiry. On one hand it fits a general inquiry into the skills necessary to be a good mediator. On the other, it speaks more specifically to the question of why include women as mediators in peace negotiations? Addressing both these questions is essential when arguing in favour of increasing the representation of women mediators. The article is based on an empirical study with women who worked as peace mediators in Northern Ireland in the period from 1994–2004. Rather than mapping the presence or absence of women in mediation roles,⁸ it takes a qualitative approach to exploring the skills and motivations of women mediators. It does not claim to present statistical evidence of the contribution of women mediators to the outcome of processes, but rather presents the subjective experience of women in that role, engaging with their own narratives as a way of exploring their agency in the mediation process. The aim is to present the women in their own words and in so doing, contribute to the growing literature on the need to increase the number and visibility of women involved in mediation.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section outlines the current academic debate on gender and mediation, highlighting the connection between women's participation and gender sensitive peace agreements that dominates thinking in this field. Section two explains the context of mediation in Northern Ireland, noting in particular the distinction between the well known activism of the women's movement and the work of non-aligned women mediators. Section 3 then explores the relationship between mediation and feminism, as viewed by the women. Section 4 presents a detailed discussion of the skills that women brought to mediation practice, and links this to the findings in Section 5 that outline the ways in which the women in the study negotiated questions of inclusion and gender in their mediation practice. The article presents a number of significant findings that speak directly to the perceived tension between mediation and gender, and the ways in which mediators engage with gender in conflict. By presenting empirical data on women's experiences of mediation the article draws on feminist theory and narrative research to highlight the distinct place of women mediators within broader debates on mediation.

⁵UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

⁶Antonia Potter, *We the Women: Why Peace Mediation is Not Just a Job for Men* (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2005); Teresa De Langis, *Across Conflict Lines: Women Mediating for Peace* (Washington DC: Institute for Inclusive Security, 2015).

⁷UN Women, *Global Study*.

⁸Aggestam, 'Where are the Women in Peace Mediation'.

2. Gender and mediation

2.1. Connecting presence and influence

In 2010 UN Women produced a report in which they highlighted the underrepresentation of women in peace processes. The report highlighted not only women's physical absence from the process, but the lack of representation of women's substantive interests as a result.⁹ This connection between presence and influence is one that has come to be hugely influential in scholarship and policy on gender and mediation. The linking of women's representation in mediation with the advancement of women's interests has developed into a functionalist argument for including women in mediation. There are two strands to this. The first is that the participation of women leads to greater recognition of gendered aspects of conflict in a peace process.¹⁰ The second, following on from the first, is that gender sensitive peace agreements are more likely to be sustainable.¹¹ This connection between inclusion and sustainability is encapsulated in the current orthodoxy that including women is not only the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do. With this approach, advocacy on women in mediation has brought together two seemingly distinct aspects of the under-representation of women in mediation – namely women's physical representation on one hand, and the substantive inclusion of women's interests in talks on the other. This connection relies in turn on a series of assumptions about women's role in mediation. First, to justify their inclusion in talks, women are portrayed as being inherently more peaceful, as more willing to be bridge builders and to seek consensus.¹² These characteristics lead to women being valued for their ability to create transformative change through their participation.¹³ As Charlesworth notes, 'although an argument for women's participation could be based on equality, it is typically made on the basis of women's utility to peace.'¹⁴ Second, it is expected that when women are invited to participate they will advocate on behalf of all women. A connection is routinely made between women's participation and the inclusion of women's interests in the negotiation process and resulting agreement.¹⁵ This approach places the burden of gender sensitivity on the individual women who participate in mediation. Although a prevalent approach, it is not without its critics, with some highlighting the inherently limiting effect of conflating women with gender when it comes to mediation.¹⁶

A second strategy, and one which seeks to avoid this conflation of women with gender, is the move towards the provision of technical gender expertise to mediators

⁹UN Women, *Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Connections Between Presence and Influence* (UN Women, 2010).

¹⁰UN Women, *Women's Participation in Peace Processes*.

¹¹J. Kraus, et al., 'Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace', *International Interventions* 44, no. 6 (2018):985–1016.

¹²J. El Bushra, 'Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism', *Development and Change* 38, no. 1(2007): 131, 142; and S. Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What they do and why it matters* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 2007).

¹³Shepherd notes the rhetorical shift in the Security Council resolutions from *representation* to *participation*. As she notes, '[i]mplicit in UNSCR 1820 is the assumption that participation of women will lead to transformation of political environment; and L. Shepherd, 'Sex, Security and Superhero(in)es: From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (2011): 504, 508.

¹⁴H. Charlesworth, 'Are Women Peaceful? Reflections on the Role of Women in Peacebuilding', *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, (2008): 347, 350.

¹⁵Paffenholz et al., 'Making Women Count'; and UN Women, *Global Study*.

¹⁶Charlesworth, 'Are Women Peaceful?'; El-Bushra, 'Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism'; Kraus et al., 'Women's Participation'; and Haastруп, 'Creating Cinderella'.

and mediation teams. Also known as applying a ‘gender lens’ to mediation, gender sensitivity is a means of addressing the risk of tokenism in women’s participation, and the difficulties of connecting participation in the process with influence on its substance.¹⁷ Gender sensitive process design, and gender sensitive peace agreements, move beyond the simple inclusion of women or their participation in peace processes towards a more substantive engagement with women’s needs and interests as defined normatively in the WPS resolutions.¹⁸

2.2. Gender and the normative turn in mediation

The need to ensure gender sensitivity in mediation is now widely recognised in international policy frameworks, with the United Nations, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, some of the largest mediation providers, having made explicit commitments to gender sensitive mediation.¹⁹ This in turn has shaped mediation through the adoption of frameworks such as gender sensitive conflict analysis and process design that can be translated into technical detailed guidance for the *implementation* of these norms.²⁰ Gender sensitivity as a construct now frames the way in which gender and mediation is understood, applying not only to process design but also to the negotiation of thematic areas such as security sector reform, constitution drafting and transitional justice that will guide post-conflict recovery.²¹ The existence of these normative frameworks enables the development of a professionalised approach to mediation support that both requires implementation of those norms and ostensibly depoliticises their content. In addition to the guidance notes on substance produced on gender sensitivity, mediators and gender advisors can now also draw on a number of ‘toolkits’ to help with the technical aspects of advising on the gender sensitivity of a process.²² The focus of toolkits is on the translation of international gender norms into practice through the development of the skills of the mediator and/or their advisors.

This dynamic mirrors broader trends towards the professionalisation of peace mediation by the international community. Mediation is increasingly framed with reference to role of norms, and supported by thematic experts in normative areas.²³ This trend towards authority deriving from thematic expertise raises questions about the extent to which normative frameworks can or should constrain the role of the mediator.²⁴ Increasingly normative frameworks of international law, including norms on gender, are presented as universals,

¹⁷See note 7 above.

¹⁸See C. Bell and C. O’Rourke, ‘Peace Agreements or Pieces of Paper? The Impact of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Peace Processes and their Agreements’, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2010): 941–980.

¹⁹UNSCR 2122 (2013) § 7(c); UN Women, *Global Study*; European Union, *Concept on Mediation and Dialogue* (2009) § 4 (e); and OSCE, *Enhancing Gender Responsive Mediation: A Guidance Note* (2013).

²⁰United Nations, *Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies* (New York: Department of Political Affairs, 2017); Buchanan Cate et al., *From Clause to Effect: Including women’s rights and gender in peace agreements* (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2012).

²¹United Nations, *Gender and Inclusive Mediation*.

²²Simon Mason, et al., *Gender in Mediation: An exercise handbook for trainers* (Zurich: Centre for Security Studies, 2015); and Conciliation Resources, ‘Gender and Conflict Analysis Toolkit for Peacebuilders’ (2015).

²³E. Convergne, ‘Learning to Mediate? The Mediation Support Unit and the Production of Expertise by the UN’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2016): 181–199.

²⁴C. Von Burg, *On Inclusivity: The Role of Norms in International Peace Mediation* (Basel: Swisspeace, 2015); and M. Waehlich, ‘Normative Limits of Peace Negotiations: Questions, Guidance, Prospects’, *Global Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 261–266.

as forms of ‘invariable’ knowledge that exists to be implemented.²⁵ And yet, as Palmiano-Federer highlights, the exact role of gender norms in mediation processes is subject to intense debate.²⁶ The ongoing contestation of the importance of gender norms in mediation is reflected in the at-times-difficult relationship between WPS and mediation practice. Often gender is regarded as something non-essential in mediation process design – a distraction that is excluded until such times as the core business of stopping violence has been attended to.²⁷ As a result, the priority afforded to the participation of women in the process depends largely on the discretion of the mediator and their openness to gendered analysis. This observation leads nicely to the question of whether women mediators would bring a different attitude or approach to questions of gender sensitivity in process design. Where mediation processes designed by men and delivered by men are criticised for failure to take gender norms seriously, would a process designed or run by women look any different?

3. Women mediators in Northern Ireland

Despite the significant body of work that has emerged in the past two decades to highlight the absence of women in mediation there is relatively little that looks at women specifically in the role of mediator. Recent work has sought to address this gap, and to draw distinctions between the roles of *negotiator* and *mediator* that are often conflated in the literature.²⁸ In particular the distinction between gender advocates and experts on one hand, and impartial mediators on the other has been highlighted as one that bears further scrutiny.²⁹ From this perspective Northern Ireland presents a useful case study because of the existence of these two separate groups of women. There were high profile women who participated in the peace talks on a ‘women’s’ platform, as issue focused negotiators in the process. The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition grew out of ‘transversal’ or cross community women’s political organisation which allowed women from different political communities to work together to advance issues of concern to women as a group.³⁰ This group of women’s advocates can be distinguished from the mediators who were working behind the scenes and who were not ‘issue’ focused in the same way as the women’s movement. The existence of these two groups allows us to disaggregate somewhat the claims of the WPS literature in relation to women’s participation in peace processes by looking specifically at women whose mediation work was not approached from a ‘women’s’ platform.

3.1. Mediation (and women) in Northern Ireland

From 1994 there was an official ‘Track 1’ mediation process in Northern Ireland, led by the US senator George Mitchell. These talks culminated in the Belfast ‘Good

²⁵Emily Stanton, ‘Theorising the Practical Wisdom of Grassroots and Civil Society Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (1965–2015)’, PhD Diss., Ulster University, 2018.

²⁶Julia Palmiano Federer, ‘On Gender: The Role of Norms in International Peace Mediation’, *Swisspeace*, 2016: 4.

²⁷Palmiano-Federer, ‘On Gender’; Turner, ‘Absent or Invisible?’; and Ellerby, ‘A Seat At the Table is Not Enough’.

²⁸Turner, ‘Absent or Invisible’; and Aggestam and Svensson, ‘Where are the Women in Peace Mediation?’.

²⁹See note 4 above.

³⁰Siobhan Byrne, ‘Troubled Engagement in Ethnicized Conflict’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16, no. 1 (2014): 106; The term ‘transversal’ was developed by Nira Yuval-Davis and refers to dialogue that crosses ethicised conflict lines; and See N. Yuval-Davis, ‘What is ‘Transversal Politics?’’ *Soundings* 12, (1999): 94.

Friday' Agreement in 1998 and are well known in WPS circles because of the success of the Women's Coalition in securing seats at the negotiating table. However from the early 1990's there were significant moves to develop mediation capacity at the civic (Track II) and local (Track III) levels to support the work of the Track I process. The women interviewed for this research all worked as mediators in Northern Ireland in the years between 1994 and 2004. This time period was chosen as it spans the years immediately preceding the Good Friday Agreement, from the first ceasefire agreement until the initial implementation period of the Agreement when peace was to be embedded. These were women working as mediators behind the scenes, often in high profile political conflict, to facilitate dialogue and bring about resolutions to conflict that had the potential to de-stabilise the peace. Their work was part of a broader expansion of peacebuilding work in Northern Ireland in the 1990s and early 2000s, consisting of 'small scale efforts to build a constituency for peace'.³¹ This work was heavily influenced by the work of John Paul Lederach and his *Integrated Framework for Peacebuilding*,³² which emphasises the need for a multi-level approach to conflict resolution. Of particular note was the development of a model of 'mediative practice' in Northern Ireland in which dialogue and mediation was used to open up communication and build trust between republican and loyalist communities to support high-level efforts to deliver a ceasefire.³³ This work was conducted within the paradigms of both conflict resolution and community relations, with mediation and conflict resolution techniques being used to help develop of the capacity of individuals and groups to deal with conflict. It was not specifically gender focused. This work can therefore be distinguished from the significant women's political organisation that had developed in Northern Ireland during the conflict.³⁴ Emerging predominantly from working class communities, feminist activism had become a key feature of grass roots politics in Northern Ireland by the time the first ceasefire was announced in 1994. There was exemplified at the high level by the work of the Women's Coalition, but with much deeper and wider roots in local communities.³⁵ While there were some interlinkages between feminist initiatives and mediation, they remained largely separate spheres of activity.

It is generally acknowledged that women are active mediators at the grass roots community level, and that they are over-represented as a category at the track III level.³⁶ The research therefore draws a distinction between 'mediation' (which includes facilitation and dialogue activities) and the broader activities of peacebuilding, community development or grass roots activism, which may at times have

³¹Stanton, Emily and Grainne Kelly, 'Exploring Barriers to Constructing Locally Based Peacebuilding Theory' *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution* 3, no. 1 (2015): 33–54, 34.

³²Jean Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); and Lederach himself spent 3 years living and working in Northern Ireland helping to build up this capacity.

³³Colin Knox, 'Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: A Role for Civil Society', *Social Policy & Society* 10, no. 1 (2010): 13–28; and Mari Fitzduff, *Beyond Violence: Conflict resolution processes in Northern Ireland* (New York: United Nations University Press, 2002).

³⁴Avila Kilmurray, *Community Action in a Contested Society: The case of Northern Ireland* (Peter Lang Ag., 2016); Amanda Donahoe, *Peacebuilding Through Women's Community Development: Wee Women's Work in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Monica McWilliams, 'Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland' *Journal of Women's History* 6, (1995): 13.

³⁵Byrne. 'Troubled Engagement'.

³⁶See note 7 above.

included grass roots mediation activities.³⁷ This article does not address grass roots peacebuilding and mediation. Rather it seeks to highlight the mediation undertaken by women at Track II and Track 1.5 where they may have been bridging between grass roots organisations and official bodies, or working strategically within statutory or governmental bodies to deliver change. It does not include Track 1, because no indigenous women mediators were given access to formal mediation roles at that level.³⁸ Track II for the purposes of the research refers to unofficial processes which engage civic leaders in processes of dialogue and conflict resolution. In the case of Northern Ireland Track II initiatives acted as a link between localised (or track III) initiatives and the official track I process. Typically the processes provided support for community actors by creating channels of structured communication between them and statutory agencies to address contentious issues.³⁹ They also provided a mechanism for communication and negotiation with elected representatives where their support was necessary to advance efforts to improve community relations. Examples of these types of processes included the Authorised Officers who engaged in mediation between Loyal Orders and residents groups on behalf of the Parades Commission,⁴⁰ or the work between communities in interface areas where opposing communities were, and remain, physically separated by so-called ‘peace lines’.⁴¹ Sporadic violence that can escalate to serious rioting are a feature of life in these communities. All of the women interviewed had extensive experience working with armed actors, including paramilitaries. This was the type of work that takes place in the shadows, a ‘kind of shady work in the underworld’,⁴² that couldn’t ever be publicised, because ‘the deal only worked if nobody knew it happened’.⁴³ These were spaces that remain largely hidden or ignored in official discourse. With the passage of time it becomes easier to speak about the work that was done and to highlight the particular contribution of women to these processes.

3.2. Method

The method employed for the research was semi-structured interviews. The interviews were structured around four thematic questions, with follow up questions based on the participant responses. Interviews were conducted with 13 women who were invited to participate on the basis of their involvement in mediation and dialogue work in the relevant period. Some were invited through professional connection to the researcher. Others were invited on the recommendation of other participants, in a form of snowball sampling. This form of sampling that rested on personal introduction was particularly important in a context where women were sometimes reluctant to talk about what had

³⁷Fitzduff, *Beyond Violence*.

³⁸This refers to women being given a formal ‘mediator’ role in the talks process that led to the Agreement. It is acknowledged that members of the Women’s Coalition played informal mediation and facilitation roles in their capacity as parties to the talks.

³⁹Stanton, ‘*Theorising Practical Wisdom*’.

⁴⁰Northern Ireland Office, *Framework Document for Governance of the Parades Commission* (Belfast: HMSO, 2009); and Parades Commission, *Public Processions and Parades: Procedural Rules* (Belfast: HMSO, 1998).

⁴¹Marie Conway and Johnnie Byrne, *Interface Issues: An Annotated Bibliography* Belfast (Institute for Conflict Research, 2005).

⁴²Interview with mediator NI010, 6 June 2018.

⁴³Interview with mediator NI008, 4 June 2018.

been sensitive political work.⁴⁴ Personal introductions helped to overcome trust barriers. Snowball sampling also helped to diversify the study by introducing women who had not been part of specifically identifiable mediation networks at the time, and whose mediation work may have arisen in a different context. The sample includes women who were at different stages of career and experience during the period sampled. It ranges from those who were experienced practitioners who were designing and leading interventions, to those who were young and inexperienced and who learned their trade in these years.⁴⁵ The sample also includes a balance of women from different community backgrounds. Women were not specifically asked about their community background as part of the research, but this emerged in most cases in conversation about motivations and approaches to mediation. The data from these interviews is presented as the subjective experiential knowledge of the women involved. It provides a set of narratives from which we can seek to better understand the ways in which women experienced working as a mediator.⁴⁶ While the period in question largely pre-dates the normative turn in mediation, the experience of these women is useful in exploring the motivations and experiences of women as mediators in ways that illuminate current debates about the role of expert versus experiential knowledge. During the interviews women were asked about three core themes. The first was what skills they felt they brought to mediation. The second was how they viewed the relationship between mediation and gender equality. The third was what barriers, if any, they felt they had faced being a woman mediator. The study yielded a number of significant findings.

4. No 'one way of being a woman' – considering mediation and gender advocacy

Women mediators face a difficult task. Within the WPS agenda, arguments in favour of the increased representation of women in mediation tend to hinge on the ability of women to play the role of peacemaker.⁴⁷ This leads to an almost *a priori* assumption that women mediators will be gender focused, making the implicit claim that women mediators will be (more) concerned with issues that concern women and will be more willing to push these issues as part of the mediation process.⁴⁸ This tendency to equate the presence of women with gender advocacy pushes women mediators into a seemingly adversarial role. When the issue of the under-representation of women mediators is raised, it is common to hear 'problems' such as the fact that conflict parties will not accept a woman in that role, or that there are fewer entry points for women mediators.⁴⁹ These concerns hint at a tension between the function of mediation *per se* and that of advancing gender equality that lies at the heart of the under-representation of women mediators. Interviews with the women in Northern

⁴⁴Nissim Cohen, and Tamar Ariele, 'Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling', *Journal of Peace Research* 24, (2011): 423.

⁴⁵In this regard Northern Ireland provided an extremely rich terrain for the development of a field of mediation practitioners emerging from practice-based learning that is not necessarily available in non-conflicted societies.

⁴⁶Rachel Julian, et al., 'From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: exploring the inclusion of local experiences in understanding violence in conflict', *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2019): 210.

⁴⁷Charlesworth, 'Are Women Peaceful?'; and El-Bushra, 'Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism'.

⁴⁸Potter, *We the Women*.

⁴⁹Isaak Svensson, 'Peace Diplomacy: Finding Entry Points for Women Mediators' PRIO Blog, April 2017 <https://blogs.prio.org/2017/04/peace-diplomacy-finding-entry-points-for-female-mediators/>.

Ireland (NI) strongly confirmed the tension between norms and process, and the difficulty of approaching mediation with a normative agenda. The findings broadly align with the proposition that mediators consider their role to be to facilitate dialogue between parties and not to impose norms on them.⁵⁰

During the interviews women were asked about their motivations in acting as a mediator, and how they viewed the relationship between mediation and women's rights. The language of 'inclusion' and 'gender sensitivity' was not used in the interviews as the period in question largely pre-dates the WPS agenda. While UNSCR was adopted in 2000, just after the mid-point of the study, its effects did not trickle down to common parlance or civil society use in Northern Ireland during the period of the study. There was, however, significant women's activism in NI which had been a feature of civil society during the conflict.⁵¹ The majority of the women had some experience of working with groups of women, usually from a community development and empowerment perspective. Only two had had any involvement with the women's movement.⁵² All of the women therefore had a frame of reference for talking about mediation with reference to women's political organisation and activism.

The findings were interesting. None of the women considered that their role as a mediator included a responsibility to advance women's equality or women's rights. From this perspective they explicitly rejected a role that required they bring an agenda.⁵³ Interestingly, this finding also included the participants who had been more closely involved in the women's sector. There were two broad reasons given for why this was. The first was that women's activism was not an agenda that was shared by the individual woman herself. For example, one participant commented that 'I'm not an advocate ... I would feel I would be searing the integrity of my work if I was using it to advance women's equality'.⁵⁴ Another commented specifically on how she perceived the women's sector to be issue driven in a way that she did not identify with. She commented, 'I think the women's sector seems to be quite defined by some other issues ... for me its about providing programmes that are open to everyone, including groups of women'.⁵⁵ This finding mirrors a recurrent difficulty for WPS whereby women distance themselves from the women's movement because they are viewed as too radical in their agenda.⁵⁶

While some women sought to distance themselves from women's activism, others did self-identify as feminist in their own attitudes and views. But all were clear that being feminist in ones personal political beliefs did not entail bringing those beliefs to the table as a mediators, demonstrating a clear separation between the two in the minds of the participants. Another participant commented 'I see myself as a feminist but not because I think my work needs to promote women ... I would be very strongly against trying to promote that particular agenda through my mediation'.⁵⁷ The same

⁵⁰Palmiano-Federer, 'On Gender' 19.

⁵¹Kilmurray, *Community Action in a Contested Society*.

⁵²A clear distinction was evident in the minds of the women between working with 'groups of women' and working with 'women's groups' with the latter being considered political activists and bringing a different agenda. This dynamic was also documented by El-Bushra, who notes the difficulty of women's groups in engaging with other civil society organisations. El Bushra, 'Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism', 139.

⁵³See Ellerby, 'A Seat At the Table is Not Enough'.

⁵⁴Interview with mediator NI004, 25 October 2017.

⁵⁵Interview with mediator NI005, 26 October 2017.

⁵⁶Ellerby, 'A Seat at the Table is Not Enough', 137; and Krause, et al., 'Women's Participation'.

⁵⁷Mediator NI008.

participant noted the need for caution about using mediation as a campaigning tool, something she did not believe it should be used for. This view was echoed by a number of participants, with a clear view emerging that to bring an ‘agenda’ – such as the advancement of women’s rights- to the role of mediator would be contrary to the values of mediation. One participant commented directly that it would undermine the integrity of the process if the mediator goes in with an agenda.⁵⁸ Similarly, for others the integrity of the process was tied up with broader concerns such as the need to protect the ‘purity’ of mediation. For them this meant that there was no enhanced duty of care to women as a separate category of participant.⁵⁹ The reason cited for separating one’s own beliefs and motivations from the role of mediator was linked to the need to establish an impartial process and secure the trust of the parties. It was felt that approaching mediation with a particular agenda would undermine the trust of other participants, by communicating to them that they were viewed as having the ‘wrong belief’ for example.⁶⁰ The approach was that mediation should start from where people are, not from an ideal place (of norms). This meant being sensitive to context, and to the beliefs and sensitivities of parties.

What the results demonstrate is that participants were aware of a specific normative approach to women’s rights that could have been advanced through mediation, but that they did not consider it the role of a mediator to introduce or seek to advance this agenda as part of their work. Rather the participants viewed gender equality as bound up more centrally with a ‘whole-of-society’ or transformative approach to addressing conflict. This was part of a broader theme whereby the importance of inclusion was confirmed through the interviews, even as the idea of introducing a normative agenda of women’s rights was rejected. One participant commented that ‘[my goal] is equality full stop. No matter where it is. I personally don’t see it just as a gender thing’.⁶¹ Another echoed these sentiments with her comment that ‘I would hold up a mirror against sectarian comments and racists jokes and things like that equally, so its not a standalone issue necessarily.’⁶² For the participants, women were seen not as a separate group with separate issues, but as located within society and gendered (and sectarian) structures that were feeding violence and conflict. This was highlighted by another participant who commented that ‘Even when I was working with [groups of women] I would have been thinking of the broader community and the issues that were coming up to do with the community as a whole.’⁶³ This included awareness of where social and community structures actively silenced or excluded women. It also reflected a concern that to start from a position of advancing women’s rights would be to be seen to be advancing one particular way of being a woman. One participant commented that ‘It’s important to be context sensitive and not necessarily trying to put forward one way of being a feminist or one way of being a woman.’⁶⁴ This was a nuanced observation in a social context where the interpretation of women’s roles varied across religious

⁵⁸Mediator NI004.

⁵⁹Mediator NI005.

⁶⁰Interview with mediator NI009, 5 June 2018; Mediator NI004.

⁶¹Interview with mediator NI013, 18 September 2018.

⁶²Interview with mediator NI001, 24 October 2017.

⁶³Interview with mediator NI003, 25 October 2017.

⁶⁴Interview with mediator NI011, 8 June 2018.

and political divides and where women did not uniformly identify with women's political activism.⁶⁵

As discussed in [Section 4](#) this reflects a different approach to engagement with issues of gender and conflict that relied less on normative frameworks or expert knowledge and more on subjective knowledge and experience. It was clear from the interviews that the women were bringing significant gender sensitivity to their mediation work and that much of this derived from their own experience of being women and 'seeing' gendered inequalities. Their commitment to the impartiality of their role did not translate into a gender blind process. Clear evidence emerged on the need to ensure women's voices were heard. The ways in which women approached the mediator role reflects a much greater reliance on experience and context sensitive knowledge that enabled them to navigate conflict and exclusion.

5. 'Soft ways of doing hard things' -strategies for engagement

In her recent work on peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, Stanton has developed a framework for understanding the type of knowledge used by indigenous peacebuilders in their practice.⁶⁶ Drawing on the work of Aristotle, she seeks to understand the relationship and the hierarchies that exist between academic (or epistemic) knowledge and the production of practice based (or phronetic) knowledge in conflict contexts. Noting the tendency to universalise epistemic knowledge (or normative frameworks) with a view to applying it in diverse local contexts, Stanton highlights how this drive towards professionalisation elides practice-based knowledge.⁶⁷ Yet phronetic knowledge is important when working with conflict. It is a form of experience based knowledge about 'how to make judgements in a "particular" situation', a flexible approach that is 'necessary in shifting, complex and unstable contexts.'⁶⁸ The emphasis with this form of knowledge is on the ability to **listen** and to respond to others.⁶⁹ The use of this type of phronetic knowledge was evident in the way in which the participants described the skills and the tactics they used in their mediation practice. Listening was frequently identified as an important skill that women felt they brought to mediation. One participant commented very directly on that particular strength, noting 'I'm patient, I have good listening skills, I ask good questions.'⁷⁰ This emphasis on listening also translated into a self-perception of being empathetic, and being able to create connections with parties in a particular way. One participant commented 'I definitely do think women can connect with parties in a slightly different way. Sometimes we might be a bit more in tune with emotions and some of the unspoken words.'⁷¹ Similarly another participant commented 'its been my experience that women generally are much more relational, able to prioritise listening, ... prioritise those kinds of soft skills that are necessary to develop rapport with people, to make them feel they are understood.'⁷²

⁶⁵McWilliams, 'Struggling for Peace and Justice'.

⁶⁶See note 39 above.

⁶⁷Stanton, *Theorising Practical Wisdom*, 57; and Kuhn and Prügl, 'Gender Experts and Gender Expertise', 6.

⁶⁸Stanton, *Theorising Practical Wisdom*, 23.

⁶⁹Ibid., 64.

⁷⁰Mediator NI010.

⁷¹Mediator NI001.

⁷²Mediator NI011.

Some women believed that these skills were more naturally found in women.⁷³ Others attributed the greater prevalence of these skills in women to socialisation and constructed gender roles that encouraged women to behave in a certain, caring, way.⁷⁴ These observations align with research on leadership and negotiation that suggests that women demonstrate higher levels of interpersonal skills including emotional intelligence and empathy that are important for mediators,⁷⁵ as well as feminist theory that has highlighted the tendency towards empathy demonstrated by women.⁷⁶

The findings of the interviews also largely confirm existing assertions in the policy literature that women mediators are effective in finding entry points as community mediators because they are seen as non-threatening.⁷⁷ The most prevalent answer to the question of what were the advantages of being a woman mediator was that women were viewed as non-threatening. This gave women significant access and leverage they believed men would not have had in tense situations, which in turn allows them to begin to build trust with conflict parties. This view came out repeatedly in the interviews. In the view of a number of women male participants responded better to a woman mediator because there was no element of competition between them and the men. One woman commented being a woman in that situation definitely gives you an advantage because they look at you differently. They are not thinking ‘you’re competitor, you’re another man’, that you’re out to do one-upmanship on them. . . . sometimes they open up to you in a way that you just know they wouldn’t be doing with a man.⁷⁸

Similarly, another noted that being female particularly helped in hierarchical male environments, such as paramilitary groups, because they were not expected to fit in to the ‘pecking order.’⁷⁹ The women noted these dynamics and reflected on the ways in which they used this absence of threat to their advantage. For example one commented on the ‘patriarchal way of relating to women’ whereby men were more willing to help women,⁸⁰ and the women were able to use this to advance conversation.⁸¹ For example one participant commented ‘as a woman it is much easier to manage how you are responded to . . . They’d [the men] say ‘there’s a woman coming, and they’d be quieter . . . They’d behave better, like it was their mother or something.’⁸²

For some participants the emphasis on building trust meant leaning on their identity as a woman and playing on gendered roles.⁸³ For them this was a way of engaging parties. It was also closely linked the both the qualities they felt they brought the mediator role and to their goals in the process. The ‘less threatening’ view of woman may derive in part from the skills they emphasised they brought to the process, including empathy and listening. The term that best encapsulates the approach of the women interviewed is ‘quietness’. The women

⁷³Mediator NI004; Mediator NI001; Mediator NI011; and Interview with mediator NI012, 18 September 2018.

⁷⁴Mediator NI009.

⁷⁵Turner, Catherine and Fleur Heyworth, *Advancing Inclusive Mediation Through the Lens of Leadership* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2019).

⁷⁶C. Sylvester, ‘Empathetic Co-operation: A Feminist Method for IR’, *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 23, no. 2 (1994): 315–334.

⁷⁷See eg El-Bushra, ‘Feminism, Gender and Women’s Peace Activism’.

⁷⁸Mediator NI009.

⁷⁹Mediator NI008.

⁸⁰Mediator NI011.

⁸¹This was also a tactic identified by Charlesworth as having been used by women in the Bougainville peace process. Charlesworth, ‘Are Women Peaceful?’ 353.

⁸²Interview with mediator NI002, 24 October 2017.

⁸³Mediator NI011; Mediator NI012.

valued their role as a quiet presence, as a confidante and a support to parties in conflict. One commented 'I always heard two or three war stories, quietly in the corners.'⁸⁴ In emphasising these particular qualities the women demonstrate a clear preference for a facilitative style of mediation.⁸⁵ The same woman commented 'I don't believe in the ... hard talk. I've learned how to sidle up to those difficult conversations in a gentler way because that hard, face on thing is just a show of strength and very little meeting of minds ...'⁸⁶ This quieter approach that values a meeting or changing of minds can be contrasted with mediation defined by power relations where the mediator themselves is viewed as bringing their own agenda to the process, particularly where there is ego or reputation at stake. It also presents interesting parallels with global debates surrounding the need to re-conceptualise mediation as a tool of foreign policy. Highlighting the value of empathetic listening,⁸⁷ and the ethics of care,⁸⁸ feminist scholars have advocated a vision of mediation that is less about power relations and hierarchy and more about the relational aspects of conflict and the ability to listen and negotiate with empathy with those with whom one does not agree. An ethic of 'care' in particular, can be contrasted with the justice – oriented approach to conflict in which recourse to rights can unhelpfully define the parameters of a mediation process.⁸⁹ In the Northern Ireland context, women clearly felt that they were able to create conditions conducive to transformation through the removal of ego from the process.

The perception of women as being non-threatening was a particular strength when seeking to gain access to traditionally masculine environments. It was a way of establishing a professional relationship with men who may have been resistant to women's participation. However the ability to engage men was not the only finding of the interviews. What emerged was the ways in which the women mediators used this relational approach to then call-out gendered conflict dynamics and exclusions when they emerged as part of a mediation process. As one participant noted, this was the 'soft way of doing hard things.'⁹⁰ It was the process of building up trust and forming relationships with both male and female conflict parties that allowed for mediation to proceed and succeed in the views of the participants.⁹¹ One woman reflected on how, when faced with hostility from male conflict parties, she decided against overtly pushing an agenda (namely insisting that the parties accept her as the mediator) but rather focused on building up a relationship that would eventually allow her to challenge their attitudes. She commented 'so I made all the cups of tea and hung the coats and these sorts of things.'⁹² While this may seem like a strategy that runs contrary to challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and inequalities, she reflected how her

⁸⁴Mediator NI002. Another woman also commented how her aim was to be a quiet presence, not a big presene. Mediator NI003.

⁸⁵Lederach, *Building Peace*.

⁸⁶Mediator NI002.

⁸⁷Sylvester, 'Empathetic Cooperation'; and Aggestam, K. et al., 'Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy', *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (2019): 23–39.

⁸⁸F. Robertson, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Human Security* (Temple University Press, 2011).

⁸⁹Aggestam et al. 'Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy', 31.

⁹⁰Mediator NI005.

⁹¹This may have been because of the removal of 'challenge' that relying on norms creates. Mediator NI009 commented that it is important not to start from a position that one or more of the parties has the 'wrong belief' and that your job is to make sure they go our with the 'right belief'.

⁹²Mediator NI001.

presence, even in that capacity, ‘was a big deal ... it really challenged them on their stereotypes.’⁹³ In working within stereotypes to begin the women were able to create a space for more difficult conversations to take place.⁹⁴ There was clear evidence from the interviews that women placed a strong emphasis on the relational aspects of mediation. They prioritised relationship building as a means of creating a context within which difficult work could be done. One participant emphasised how the use of so-called ‘soft’ skills did not mean that women were not playing difficult roles.

But what I would say about that role would be – and this is slightly contrary to just creating a comfortable scenario- is that you have to be prepared to then open up the difficult and dangerous parts of the conversation. ... because women can do that and have been trained to do that.⁹⁵

However, while the results do appear to support the suggestion that women bring ‘soft’ skills and a more caring approach to the role of mediator, a number of participants were less comfortable with attributing their skills to their gender. Many queried whether they had these skills because they were a woman, or whether they could more usefully be attributed to a personality type – one that could be found equally in a man as in a woman. This observation was part of a broader trend where women reflected on the intersections of their identities and the ways in which they were able to draw on different characteristics at different times to build up trust and confidence with parties. All of the women reflected on the intersections of their identities and how at times they drew on their experience of being a woman, but at other times they drew more heavily on identity such as community background, age, or insider/outsider status. For them, the skills they demonstrated were those of a good mediator, not necessarily those of a good ‘woman’. As one of the participant mused,

I would very much hope that as gender identity loosens up that [these skills] can be much more something you can just attribute to anyone, with any sex. But the reality is at the minute these skills tend to be exhibited more by women, and in a more natural and immediate way. ... They should be part of a core curriculum for mediators.⁹⁶

6. ‘Women only spaces, not women only issues’ – engaging with gender dynamics in mediation

In addition to being seen as bringing ‘soft’ skills to mediation, claims in support of increasing the number of women mediators also rest on an implicit assumption that women mediators will be good for the substantive outcome of peace negotiations.⁹⁷ While this particular research project did not examine any correlation between the role of women mediators and the outcomes of the processes they were involved in, it did reveal a clear pattern of gender sensitivity. The ability to read silences and observe exclusion was an important finding of the research. It was particularly evident that

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴This broadly confirms Robinson’s assertion that a female ethic of care maintains an emphasis on dialogue and relationships.

⁹⁵Mediator NI009.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ellerby, ‘A Seat at the Table is Not Enough’.

women saw gendered dynamics and exclusions emerging through the mediation process. The ability to see these exclusions and to make connections with women in a way that allowed their voices to be brought in to the process was a strong finding of the research.⁹⁸ In relation to her own mediation work one participant commented ‘I was looking for groups that were invisible ... Where were the young women? They were invisible.’⁹⁹ Similarly, another participant noted that ‘In assessing the conflict I am noticing who is impacted by what is happening and whose voices are missing – which often were women.’¹⁰⁰ In addition to noting silences, participants also reflected on the ways in which they were able to interpret conflict dynamics in different ways – for example excavating issues beyond those that were deemed to be core to the conflict,¹⁰¹ or spotting opportunities to engage marginal voices earlier.¹⁰² This was attributed by the women as being the result of being able to ‘see’ gendered inequalities.¹⁰³ One participant commented on how she felt that empowerment was a key part of her role. She commented ‘if I’m working with a group and I feel that the women don’t have a say ... then my emphasis definitely at that point would be to bring that out and push that forward.’¹⁰⁴ What emerged as a key finding, therefore, was that while the participants in the study all initially rejected the idea that they would bring an ‘agenda’ of women’s rights to their mediation practice, there was strong evidence that once gendered inequalities had become visible that most felt they had a duty to address that and to make sure women’s voices were heard.¹⁰⁵ This is an interesting finding in a context whereby the inclusion or exclusion of gendered considerations from process design remains largely at the discretion of the mediator.¹⁰⁶ These interviews offer some reason to tentatively suggest that women mediators may be more open to gendered analysis of conflict dynamics and more willing to recognise the need to include women in process design. They highlight the possibility that even where women mediators do not bring an ‘agenda’ of feminist advocacy to their work as mediators they may nevertheless bring the possibility of enhancing the access of women to the mediation process.¹⁰⁷

What also emerged as a cross-cutting theme was the women using their ‘deep context knowledge’ to engage women in the process.¹⁰⁸ In addition to noticing the silences, the participants demonstrated a range of different tactics to engage women and other marginal groups in the process. For example one participant recounted working with young women in the community centre toilets ‘because that was their

⁹⁸In this way it supports the findings of Krause et al. that having women in negotiator roles improved the connection between formal and informal processes, giving civil society women a channel of communication in to the talks.

⁹⁹Interview with mediator NI007, 20 November 2017.

¹⁰⁰Mediator NI008.

¹⁰¹Mediator NI003; and Mediator NI007.

¹⁰²Mediator NI009.

¹⁰³Mediator NI007.

¹⁰⁴Mediator NI012.

¹⁰⁵eg Mediator NI006; Mediator NI009; Mediator NI012; and One interviewee did not expressly make this claim and it could not be implied from her responses.

¹⁰⁶Turner, ‘Absent or Invisible’.

¹⁰⁷Ellerby defines ‘access’ – the second of her three requirements for women to influence the substance of mediation – as the degree to which women are able to present their agenda and be heard. p 143. The findings also mirror those of Krause et al. that women negotiators were able to establish links with women’s civil society groups, acting as brokers between local and global actors p991.

¹⁰⁸Stanton, *Theorising Practical Wisdom*, 186.

space. It was the only space they had.¹⁰⁹ While many participants talked of the importance of ‘domestic’ tasks, such as the provision of food and doing the dishes, one noted specifically how she stayed after the formal meetings had concluded to help do the dishes. This was a tactic on her part to engage women in their own space. She noted ‘at the end of the meeting I helped the women do the dishes, because that was the way I got to be with them on their own.’¹¹⁰ This is not a strategy that emerges from the body of expert knowledge on women’s rights, but from the ability to use other forms of knowledge or experience. What can be generalised from this account is not a rule that washing dishes should be included in the mediators’ toolkit’, but that sensitivity to local mores and customs (whereby the women did the dishes after a meeting) allowed the mediator to navigate the conflict dynamics and engage marginalised groups in the process. This idea of engaging culturally sensitive and context specific knowledge in relation to gender roles can be translated across cultures precisely because it does not rely on universal or expert knowledge for its success.

The techniques used by participants also demonstrate a particular way of responding to social and group dynamics whereby not only were women marginalised not only by male parties,¹¹¹ but that women self-censored in mixed groups.¹¹² In these cases women also highlighted the importance of women only spaces where women were able to engage openly with the mediators in a way that did not initially happen in mixed groups. The participants further attributed the success of these tactics to the willingness of women to engage with a woman mediator in a way that would not necessarily have done with a male mediator.¹¹³ It was clear from the interviews that although the women did not tend to treat ‘women’ or ‘gender’ as a separate category, in taking a holistic and relational approach to mediation they recognised the inherent significance of women’s exclusion from political conversations and committed to redressing this absence as an integral part of the mediation process.¹¹⁴

There was also a strong caveat to these findings. Participants highlighted how their role was not exclusively to work on ‘soft’ issues with women. One commented how ‘although we were working in women only spaces we were not working on women only issues.’¹¹⁵ The women were regularly engaged in negotiating about physical violence and paramilitary control of communities, amongst other political tensions. There was a frustration that their role could be diminished into something naturally caring, or ‘homey’.¹¹⁶ Women regularly walked a very fine line between using ‘soft’ skills to engage parties in hard conversations, and being diminished in the eyes of male figures of authority to playing *only* the role of making the tea.¹¹⁷ This experience of feeling marginalised or belittled came up time and time again in the interviews, and highlights

¹⁰⁹Mediator NI007.

¹¹⁰Mediator NI008.

¹¹¹Mediator NI009.

¹¹²Mediator NI012.

¹¹³Mediator NI009; and Mediator NI013.

¹¹⁴The ability to work with women and bring them into the process also demonstrates the potential of women mediators to satisfy Ellerby’s third joint requirement – that of ‘advocacy’. Ellerby defines advocacy as the situation whereby the mediator is aware of women’s issues and see’s them as complementary to the priorities of the mediation rather than in competition with them. Ellerby, ‘A Seat at the Table is Not Enough’ 147.

¹¹⁵Mediator NI007.

¹¹⁶Mediator NI005.

¹¹⁷This is identified as a risk of a feminist approach that an ethic of care essentialises women’s aptness for care and nurturing, reducing their agency and actual engagement in politics. Aggestam et al. 32.

the challenge faced by women mediators in being taken seriously as mediation professionals while also being open to different techniques of working that could help to embed processes and move them along. The ability to draw on practice based and context specific knowledge of gender dynamics rather than on set rules of epistemic knowledge or expertise about how the process ‘ought’ to look allowed them to be more creative in the solutions they proposed. One participant commented that she thought women tended to be more flexible in their thinking, ‘more open to unexpected outcomes and non-assigned paths.’¹¹⁸ Another noted that in her experience women were good at ‘finding that different way, alternative way.’¹¹⁹ This also suggested a rejection of mediation as a set-piece means of achieving a pre-determined outcome but rather an openness to using context related opportunities to facilitate changes in thinking. However one woman specifically recounted the difficulties of this approach, and the push back encountered when trying to introduce questions of gendered inequalities into mixed group mediation processes; ‘It is up to us as mediators or facilitators to ensure that those women are heard. Sometimes it doesn’t go down well when you say “Listen, lets give everybody enough time here”. It can be very difficult at times to do that with mixed groups.’¹²⁰

This tension emerges from the central paradox faced by women mediators. On one hand they value the ‘soft’ or ‘quiet’ approaches that allow them to gain access or overcome barriers with conflict parties. But on the other hand using these approaches leads to a perception that they are somehow not equipped to deal with ‘hard’ political issues.¹²¹ As one participant commented, the attitude in Northern Ireland was very much that women were okay to deal with the ‘messy stuff – the people dying on pavements and sons coming home with their knees blown open.’ But when they sought access at a higher level they were dismissed. The same participant noted the response of ‘don’t think you can sit up here and actually talk to the politicians. That’s beyond you.’¹²² There was a strong feeling that once women demanded access to ‘hard’ power the men began to resist and as a result they also lost the ‘soft’ power that they had previously leveraged.¹²³ And yet for participants it was the quiet approaches that were enabling change.

7. Conclusion – lessons from women mediators

As the literature on gender and mediation has evolved it has tended towards the approach that women’s participation is necessary to ensure women’s interests are represented.¹²⁴ This approach has conflated women with gender, and placed a significant burden on women who do gain access to mediation processes to be seen to be representing ‘women’. This approach creates specific problems for women mediators, whose sense of professional self is bound up with ideals of impartiality rather than activism. What this research has demonstrated is that there is a need to reflect more

¹¹⁸Interview with mediator NI006, 31 October 2017.

¹¹⁹Mediator NI007.

¹²⁰Mediator NI013.

¹²¹See also El-Bushra, ‘Feminism, Gender and Women’s Peace Activism’, 140.

¹²²Mediator NI009.

¹²³Mediator NI011.

¹²⁴Ellerby, ‘A Seat At The Table is Not Enough’; Paffenholz et al., ‘Making Women Count’; and UN Women, ‘Global Study’.

closely on the different ways in which women are expected to influence mediation. From the findings it is suggested that there are at least three clearly discernible approaches. The first is that women should be visibly present, on the basis of equality. This is unconnected to any 'utility' they add to the process but is a matter of basic fairness in representation.¹²⁵ The second is that women can bring gendered perspectives to mediation that are necessary to address gendered structures of inequality that perpetuate violence against women. This is the classic connection between presence and influence, and the role played by coalitions of women engaging in mediation on a women's platform,¹²⁶ which is itself a necessary approach. What this paper has revealed is a third way- that of the influence of the impartial female mediator who can reach out to all parties. The views of the women interviewed reveal the problematic nature of the conflation of 'women' with 'gender' in the WPS literature. If women's inclusion is dependent on gendered advocacy, the contributions of women who do not self-identify as feminist, and are not aligned to feminist movements, are elided. And yet the interviews demonstrate that even in the absence of a feminist 'agenda', the women brought skills and approaches to their practice as mediators that challenged gendered conflict structures and increased the inclusivity of the process.¹²⁷ Despite the initial rejection of women's rights as a guiding principle of mediation, the interviews revealed a strong sensitivity to gendered conflict dynamics- often rooted in a shared lived experience. However in taking this approach the women did not treat 'gender' or indeed women, as a separate category. Rather they took a more holistic approach to conflict dynamics and exclusion that brought gender into their analysis and treated it as an integral part of the conflict. This tactic avoids the oppositional logic of gender and mediation that tends to treat women and gender as somehow 'separate' from the core business of mediation.¹²⁸ It also shifts the focus of analysis away from the substance, or 'agenda', of what the women bring to mediation and towards the approaches they use to address conflict. What this suggests is that we should be open to looking more broadly at the skills and approaches mediators- whether male or female – bring to the job. The skills the women valued most were not exclusively 'female' but 'gendered'. They favoured an approach that rejects 'hard' power in favour of a relational approach that works on trust and confidence. These findings align with existing research that highlights the different approaches taken by women to mediation broadly defined, most notably empathetic listening and the ethic of care.¹²⁹ There was a strong preference for a facilitative style of mediation, driven by a desire that mediation should be 'transformative' rather than just a deal brokered without any meaningful change in attitudes.¹³⁰ This approach is often associated with women, but can be found equally in men. There is learning in this for both the WPS community and the mediation community. The push back against women in mediation results in large part from the clash between these 'soft' approaches that can be used effectively in track II and track III mediation and as such become associated with women, and the power based approach that dominates at Track I. The

¹²⁵Charlesworth, 'Are Women Peaceful?'

¹²⁶Paffenholz, et al., 'Making Women Count'.

¹²⁷See Charlesworth, 'Are Women Peaceful?' 359 on the ways in which the elision of the term gender with women fails to capture the relational nature of gender.

¹²⁸Palmiano-Federer, 'On Gender'.

¹²⁹See Aggestam, et al, 'Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy'.

¹³⁰Mediator NI004.

research should prompt reflection on why certain characteristics that are associated with women are so routinely overlooked as key skills for international mediation. There is strategic value in the approaches adopted by the women, and the strategies they used to gain access. To really make meaningful change in mediation it is time to look at how different and complementary approaches can enhance inclusivity and re-shape our understanding of mediation at all levels.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Catherine Turner is Associate Professor of International Law at Durham University, UK. Her areas of research expertise include international law, peace mediation, transitional justice, and women in mediation. In addition to her academic work Catherine has extensive experience as a practitioner and trainer in mediation and good relations in Northern Ireland, where she worked with Mediation Northern Ireland for over 10 years. She now specialises in training and facilitation in mediation and transitional justice to support women's participation in peace processes, having worked with women from across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.