

# “That’s Beyond You”: Barriers to Women in Mediation.



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## Introduction

These graphics have been developed as part of a research project examining the experiences of women working as peace mediators. Since 2000 the Women Peace and Security Agenda has promoted a greater role for women in the field of peace and security. Yet women's participation remains persistently low. This project looks at one specific category of women in peace and security- women mediators. It aims to understand the experience of women who work as peace mediators, to explore the skills they bring to the job, and highlight the barriers that they have faced in undertaking their roles.

These graphics present the findings of a series of interviews with women who acted as peace mediators in Northern Ireland in the period 1994-2004. This was a narrative research project in which women's testimonies were recorded as a way of exploring and understanding their experiences of working as mediators and their agency in those processes. These are the experiences of the women in their own words. While the quotes are taken from data from Northern Ireland, they speak to universal experiences of women when they participate in the field of peace and security.

They graphics are intended to provide a resource for academics, policy makers and practitioners engaging with the promotion of women in mediation. They are presented not only as the findings of the research project on women's experiences, but also as a means of stimulating debate about the reasons why women experience these barriers and what can be done to address them.

The graphics were funded by the ESRC IAA at Durham University and developed by Roots and Wings Design in Newcastle, UK. They are made freely available online to be used in research and training where they will be useful for advancing thinking and advocacy in relation to women in mediation or peacebuilding. They should be cited as Turner, C (2019) "That's Beyond You": Barriers to Women in Mediation. Durham University.





The main graphic represents the barriers identified by women when working as mediators. Each figure represents a barrier. The following pages give more information, in the form of direct quotations from the research participants, on how women experienced these barriers. The graphic represents the structure of multi-party mediation, where there are significantly more women working as mediators at the grass roots (or Track III) level, and the numbers reduce across the tracks. Implicit in this representation is the idea of a hierarchy across the tracks, whereby Track I mediation is considered higher level- and more prestigious- than work at Track II and Track III. Women are seen struggling to achieve 'high-level' access in mediation.

The graphics and the quotes can be used with groups of women mediators and peacebuilders to explore their own experiences, to highlight these experiences to other parties, and ultimately to address what needs to be done to begin to break these barriers down.

## Just a little girl

"They thought of me as that wee girl down the community centre."

"At times it was hard not to feel like the little girl in the room even though I was a 40 year old woman."



These quotes demonstrate the ways in which women felt belittled by men when they engaged in mediation work.

They can be used to explore why men view women as less equal, but also why women often lack confidence in their work and in their professional status.

## Gendered Stereotypes

"One senior male had a conversation with my cleavage, and it made me feel so uncomfortable in my femaleness because that seems to be what they are reacting to."

"I remember one time being referred to as 'the wee woman'. Now these guys are all ... liberal modern people, but I remember in jest it was like 'leave it to the wee woman' or something like that. I just remember that feeling of misogyny is alive and well."



"There are male colleagues in the field who I find misogynistic and I don't like it."

These quotes demonstrate clearly the ways in which women experience men's behaviour. They reveal how women are made to feel self-conscious and aware of their being different to men. They also demonstrate the extent to which these stereotypes are embedded culturally- where an implicit bias emerges among even apparently 'liberal' men.

How can these biases and assumptions be challenged in the mediation field?

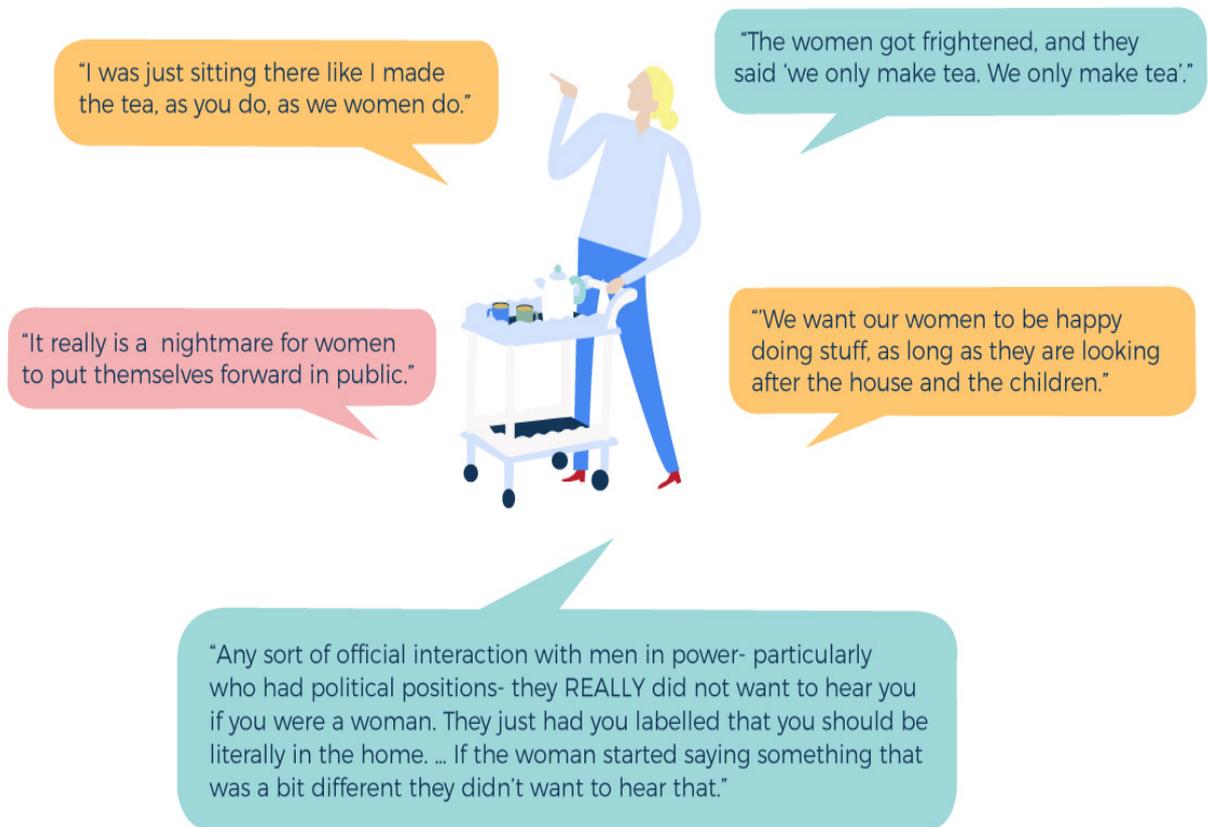
## Lacking Authority



These quotes demonstrate the ways in which women mediators encountered assumptions about power and authority in mediation. They speak to entrenched understandings about the nature of authority, and the way in which this is used against women. In some cases this is explicit – in that women mediators are not taken seriously as professional actors. In others, the quotes speak to the pervasive ways in which cultural expectations about authority impact on their ability to be taken seriously as mediators.

It is useful to explore the existence of these understandings and the ways in which they are accepted. This also includes examining whether women themselves internalise these understanding of where power and authority lie in mediation.

## A woman's place is in the home



These quotes demonstrate the influence of gendered stereotypes about women's roles in the private sphere on mediation. They demonstrate the limited way in which men were willing to accept women's political work, and the ways in which women often felt they had to retreat into a 'domestic' space when challenged about their work.

## Invisibility

"It could be very convenient being seen as non-threatening. However, at times when you needed to be assertive it could work against you."

"I was virtually invisible in any sort of official interaction with men in power - they really did not want to hear you if you were a woman."

"There were official situations where you knew that you were virtually invisible to some of these men."

"A lot of that work has gone on quietly, behind the scenes. It seems to be the men that get the recognition more."

"This work is undervalued... You do it behind the scenes, you keep quiet about it. We don't talk about it, we don't ask for money."

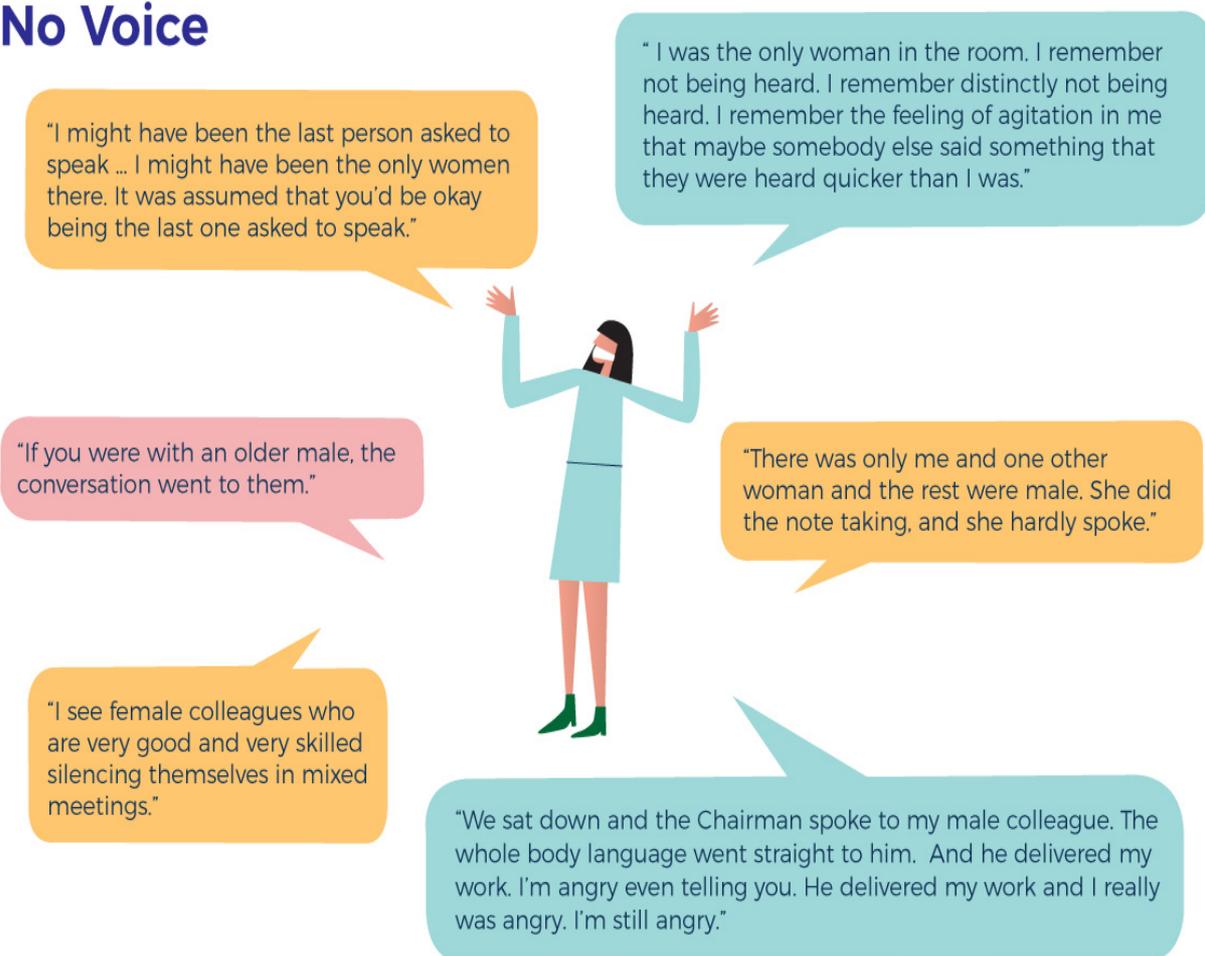
"my observation was even in the way men talked to each other, they talked to each other but they didn't make eye contact with us women as part of the team. There are lots of little messages that you get like that without being told explicitly that you're being excluded."



These quotes speak to the ways in which women were made to feel invisible in their work. From very subtle ways of not including women in conversations, to the exclusion of women's work from the way in which the stories of mediation were told, women experienced a profound sense of invisibility.

For some women this invisibility could be used as an advantage- as a way of gaining access and trust. For others it caused disillusionment and frustration at the lack of recognition of value attached to women's work.

## No Voice



From these quotes we see a further layer of invisibility for women- the experience of feeling that they were not heard. They tell of the ways in which conversations were automatically directed towards the men, and how women were often the last to be allowed to speak. Women's voices were not solicited and not heard or valued in the same way as men's were. From some women this led to anger. For others it led to self-censorship and withdrawal from key spaces.

## Skills not valued

"I wouldn't have wanted to be central."

"The work behind the scenes is not counted the same as more high profile track one. And yet that work couldn't succeed without the foundational work going on at the bottom level."



"I didn't want to be another loud voice. I aimed to be a quiet influence"

These quotes speak to a significant finding of the research, namely that women adopted a particular type of approach to mediation practice. They valued skills such as being a 'quiet presence' and rejected the idea of being central to the process. For women these skills enabled them to be effective mediators. But as the quotes demonstrate, these techniques contribute to the invisibility of women, and to their contributions being overlooked. These types of skills are not recognised or valued equally in high-profile or power-based mediation. And yet they are valuable in creating the conditions for talks.

## Motherhood



These quotes speak specifically to the experience of motherhood for women mediators. They demonstrate the ways in which being a mother created both internal and external dilemmas about balancing family life with mediation work. We see here the role of gendered social expectations about women's roles in looking after families, for example that women can do mediation work so long as it doesn't interfere with family responsibilities. This also speaks to the practical barriers faced by women who have to balance these responsibilities in a way that men often do not.

We also see the internal struggles for women who wanted to work as mediators but ultimately decided that the impact on their family life was too much.

Can mediation better accommodate the competing pressures for women trying to balance motherhood with a career in peace and security? What changes would be needed?

## Security is a man's business

"You're alright to deal with the messy stuff, people dying on pavements and sons coming home with their knees blown open, but please don't come and think that you can sit up here and actually talk about it to the politicians. That's beyond you".

"The exclusion was that we were still starting from such a domain of sectarianized politics. It was virtually exclusively male. So many of us who wanted to become part of the body politic were excluded from that. The actual framework is so structured that you couldn't get in."

"The women? That was actually queued at the very end a bit like a spare rib".



These quotes speak to the implicit assumptions that divide the 'hard' business of security and negotiation from the 'soft' concerns of women. The division between the public and private spheres, and the ways in which this was used to exclude women from the political realm is clear. Women's experience, and women's views, were considered to be something outside of and irrelevant to the core business of security.

## Only concerned with women's issues

"When you start to put yourself up there ... the men perhaps then wrestle against you and then you lose some of the power that you had before - the soft power."

"There is an onus on us to recognise women in those roles as professional, rather than it being something homey or something natural to women."



These quotes speak to the persistent problem for women in mediation that it is assumed that they are concerned only with 'women's issues'. The associate of 'women' with 'gender' allows for the marginalisation of women when they attempt to step outside of the 'permitted' issues. While women were able to exert influence in the 'soft' spaces this did not translate into serious roles in the political sphere. This is the double-edged aspect of women being associated with more caring or peaceful approaches to mediation. Treating women as naturally caring or 'homey' undermines for some the professional nature of their work.

## Male Gatekeepers

"With some organisations I would have been more comfortable if I had a male colleague with me. Because I knew they wouldn't have taken me very seriously being a mere woman."

"I had zero credibility walking into the room when I was working with some of the older [male organisations]. I couldn't have done that work if I didn't have a male colleague because it would have been impossible for me to get started."



"I think it helped me to be taken seriously that I arrived with a male colleague."

"Whenever I used to go to present to the Board with my male colleague we noticed that they often asked him first to give his findings. ... We noticed this pattern."

These quotes demonstrate the ways in which women depended on male colleagues to gain access to parties to mediation. Linked to the problems of invisibility and gendered stereotypes, women felt they were not taken seriously as mediators in their own right, and relied for their credentials on a male partner.

## Further Reading:

Turner, C. (2019) "Soft Ways of Doing Hard Things": Women Mediators and the Question of Gender in Mediation.' *Peacebuilding* DOI:10.1080/21647259.2019.1664369

Turner C (2018) 'Absent or Invisible? Women Mediators and the United Nations.' 9:2 *Global Policy* 244-253

Turner C & F Heyworth, (2019) 'Advancing Inclusive Mediation Through the Lens of Leadership.' *Strategic Security Analysis* 4 (Geneva Centre for Security Policy)

Turner, C (2017) 'Women in Mediation: Connecting the Local and the Global.' *Strategic Security Analysis* 5 (Geneva Centre for Security Policy)

Fellin I & C Turner, (2020) 'Women's Mediator Networks: Critical Reflections on an Emerging Global Trend.' in C Turner & M Wählisch (eds) *Re-thinking Peace Mediation: Critical Perspectives on International Peacemaking* (Bristol University Press) (forthcoming)

Turner C (2019) 'Women's Leadership for Peace: Towards a Model of Multi-Track Leadership' IPI Global Observatory, October 18 2019.

## About the Author:

Dr Catherine Turner is Associate Professor of International Law at Durham University, UK. She is the Deputy Director of the Durham Global Security Institute, where her areas of research and teaching expertise include international law, peace mediation, transitional justice and women in mediation. In addition to her academic work Catherine has extensive experience and a practitioner and trainer in mediation in Northern Ireland. She now specialises in training and facilitation in mediation and transitional justice to support women's participation in peace processes.

