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AT AND AROUND THE TABLE:

Uncovering the diversity of roles played by women from resistance and liberation movements in peace processes

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Uncovering the diversity of roles played by women from resistance and liberation movements in peace processes

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1 Introduction

> *"No one can narrate our experiences as women combatants better than us. The story must be told by us, the women"* [1]
>
> Woman ex-combatant from Colombia

This paper, the fourth in the Berghof Foundation Policy Insight Series on gender-inclusive conflict transformation, examines the formal and informal roles played by women in and associated with Resistance and Liberation Movements (RLMs)[2] during peace processes. In light of this objective, two key terms need to be contextualised/defined: "women in and associated with RLMs" and "peace processes". So which women are we referring to? All too often, efforts to include women in peace processes focus on ensuring that there are women sitting at the conventional negotiating table. As a result, there is a tendency to include women who are seen as political leaders at the highest level and those who are visible as (potential) negotiators. When referring to women in and associated with RLMs, however, we include a wide range of profiles: women members of RLMs, but also the broader composition of their networks, i.e. women from civil society organisations, community and political leaders, and youth and social activists closely associated with the RLMs. Likewise, there is a tendency to apply a "narrow definition of peace processes and predominantly [focus] on formal and informal peace negotiations while putting less emphasis on the post-negotiation phase" (Schädel and Dudouet 2020b: 13). But peace processes do not end with the signing of the peace agreement; they also include its implementation. Both definitions are therefore reflected in the scope of the testimonies collected for this paper. Throughout 2022 and 2023, we conducted focus group discussions, interviews and peer-learning workshops with women from South Africa, Northern Ireland, Colombia, the Philippines, Kosovo and other contexts in Latin America, Europe and Southeast Asia who contributed to peace processes either as formal negotiators or informal peace leaders. We are deeply grateful to these women for sharing their experiences with us and for their determination to make their stories heard and raise awareness about the important roles they have played.

1 The Berghof Foundation has developed several projects that center on women in resistance movements sharing their own stories ("Asking My Sisters" Film and Booklet: Asking my sisters: Film and booklet released - Berghof Foundation ; "I Have to Speak" Film and Booklet: I Have To Speak - Berghof Foundation; Sandino Simanca Herrera, Victoria (2024). From the Mountains to the Public Arena: The struggle of women ex-combatants of FARC-EP to make their voices heard.) Many women in resistance and liberation movements face security risks, social stigma, and political marginalization that limit their ability to share their stories openly. By documenting and analyzing these experiences, Berghof ensures that these perspectives are not only heard but also integrated into broader policy and academic discussions.

2 While the most common generic term used to describe armed state challengers is "non-state armed groups", at Berghof Foundation, we prefer to use the term "resistance/liberation movement", which reflects these actors' self-image and primary objectives. This label also highlights our focus on movements that pursue primarily political goals (e.g. Dudouet 2009). For this series, we use the terminology "in or associated with resistance and liberation movements" (RLMs) to also account for women from civil society close to these groups.

2 Formal Roles: Women as peace negotiators

The experiences of women members of RLMs are still not sufficiently valued during peace processes.[3] The inclusion of women at the negotiating table has increased somewhat in recent years. However, the experiences of those who have managed to secure a place at the table remain under-researched. Preliminary data shows that women averaged only 9.6 per cent of negotiators in 2023 (UN-Women and DESA 2024), which represents a significant deterioration from 2022 (16 per cent) and 2021 (19 per cent).[4] While the gender gap is steadily closing in public decision-making roles in government or civil society organisations, and despite two decades having passed since UNSC Resolution 1325, the under-representation of women and other diverse identities in peace negotiations persists.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of scholarship on women's participation in peace processes, but it tends to focus solely on women from civil society organisations. Similarly, studies on the role of women negotiators often fail to distinguish between those representing governmental bodies and those from resistance and liberation movements, despite the unique experiences of the latter (Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Cochrane-Buchmüller 2022; Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Hülzer 2024). In fact, their experiences as negotiators do not receive the same level of attention as those of women negotiators acting on behalf of governments or those of male negotiators in or associated with RLMs.

Additionally, although there is a burgeoning field of research[5] on women in or associated with RLMs, it tends to emphasise their roles during wartime or after their demobilisation, while overlooking the transitional stage of peace negotiations. It is thus imperative to underscore their experiences and tactics for surmounting obstacles related to securing representation at the negotiating table. The following section includes the testimonies of women RLM members from Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America and Europe in their roles as formal negotiators in peace processes.

Why and how do women in RLMs get appointed as negotiators?

When asked about the process of being appointed as negotiators, most of the interviewed women emphasised that before assuming their formal role as negotiators, they already had a record of leadership and political power within the movement. This speaks to the importance of enhancing women in RLMs' empowerment and building their leadership skills prior to the peace talks, even in moments of frozen negotiations or active conflict. They also emphasised that they were chosen on merit, not on the basis of their gender. Prominent women found themselves having to justify their presence at the table and having to stress their merits and leadership, which suggests that women continue to experience a sense of tokenism when assuming

3 For more information on the reality of women (former) combatants in peace negotiations and post-war transitions, see Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Cochrane-Buchmüller (2022).

4 For further information, see United Nations (2023): Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security and United Nations (2024): Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security.

5 Wood, Reed M. (2019). Female Fighters: Why Rebel Groups Recruit Women for War. Columbia University Press; Mehrl, Marius (2023). Female Combatants and Rebel Group Behaviour: Evidence from Nepal. Conflict Management and Peace Science, 40(3), 260-280; Steenbergen, Michanne (2021). Rethinking Female Ex-combatants, Reintegration, and DDR: Towards Political Reintegration? Conflict, Security & Development, 21(5), 641-672.

such roles. They were either founders or leaders of their movement or had specific skills that were required, such as experience in journalism, strong relationships with the conflict-affected communities, an international education or a track record in prior political engagement.

The former negotiators stressed that they were not appointed as negotiators because they were women. They also warned against appointing negotiators without the appropriate capacities or political legitimacy just to fulfil a gender checklist. These findings emphasise the need to design programmes beyond a seat at the table. Research has shown that leadership roles usually continue to be assigned to men (both by women and men), so even if women are in the room, this is not enough to guarantee meaningful participation and change the perception of women as leaders. Women in and associated with RLMs need continuous support to acquire the tools and resources necessary to build their confidence and capacity to lead (Nagel, Allen and Baekgaard 2023: 30).

> *"I became a negotiator not because of being a woman but because I had political power. […] Political empowerment is a precondition for women to be part of the Track 1 peace processes. That's the only way to bring women to the table."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from Europe

> *"It is about knowledge. Empower us with knowledge on peace processes. In Berghof's workshops, I started to learn about peace processes for the first time. The role of women in the formal realm is new knowledge for us. Knowledge will help women to be political agents, moving from victims to activists."*
>
> Woman peace activist from Southeast Asia

What's the difference? From RLMs to government

RLMs are often labelled as "terrorist organisations" (Dudouet 2009: 5), with the consequent legal implications related to national and international sanctions. Many RLM members live covertly and are hesitant to extend trust easily. Furthermore, they encounter substantial political, legal and security risks when participating in peace negotiations (Berghof Foundation 2022: 156). This creates situations of isolation and exclusion of RLMs. Social exclusion based on gender and patriarchy is a global phenomenon and is also reflected in RLMs' structures, which often have a hierarchical internal chain of command that leads to exclusionary power structures (Lundström and Marhaban 2016). All these layers make it difficult to access and identify women members in RLMs, creating barriers that hinder them from taking on active and visible roles as negotiators.

> *"Women have capacity and confidence. It is the system that needs to be changed."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from Europe

Women members of RLMs also face different forms of violence because of their intersectional identity as members of RLMs and as women, which causes double stigmatisation and additional security concerns. They are often the target of attacks that are directly linked to their identity as women combatants. One interviewee shared the experiences of one of her peers who was particularly affected by constant attacks on her as a woman negotiator. Her role at the table was not recognised and her position and achievements were attributed solely to her alleged romantic relationship with one of the male commanders, undermining her own agency as a formal negotiator. Additionally, she had to endure daily insults and threats to her family. Along the same lines, another interviewed negotiator described the amount of antagonism, abuse and even physical aggression that she was exposed to during peace talks. She felt very unsafe during the peace negotiations. Attacks on male members of RLMs can also occur during peace processes, but women negotiators face a different form of abuse, particularly gendered and often sexual violence. Overall security concerns of women involved in peace processes are consistent with research on gendered attacks on women in the political sphere (Daniele, Dipoppa and Pulejo 2023: 34-36). This is especially true for women in or associated with RLMs due to their double stigmatisation (Sandino 2024: 10).

> *"Women from resistance and liberation movements have the hardest path."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from Europe

One aspect that is often overlooked is the psychosocial and mental health toll inflicted on negotiators, which again appears to be exacerbated when this role is held by a woman from an RLM. Many of the negotiators we interviewed shared a sense of loneliness as a result of being the only or one of the few women in her position, and as a result of the attacks. This speaks to the need for safety nets for women in RLMs who are involved in peace processes, to ensure that their well-being is not compromised because of the role they play. This will also ensure that there are progressively more women active as formal negotiators, rather than fewer because of the difficult experiences their peers have had in the past.

> *"[The negotiating table] was a lonely place to be."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from Europe

Untapped opportunities for women in RLMs to participate in negotiation processes

It would be essentialist to assume that women will be advocates for gender-inclusive peace agreements just because of their gender. However, their lived experience and role within communities give them unique perspectives on the root causes of conflict and the multiple dimensions of peace beyond a cessation of hostilities and mere power-sharing agreements. During the interviews, the participants stressed the different perspectives women from RLMs bring to the table, such as a perspective on care and community.

> *"... [W]e think differently. We bring in a different angle. Because if the panel is to discuss peace, the future of a country, it is good to bring women in: they bring the angle of home, children and our own experiences. It will be a harder society if women do not speak out."*
>
> Woman negotiator from a Southeast Asian RLM

Peace negotiations are important decision-making spaces, where the future of a country is decided upon. As long as we observe an over-representation of one particular group (i.e. men) that takes

decisions on behalf of everyone else, we will not see inclusive and sustainable peace agreements. New research suggests that women from RLMs advocate for more inclusive peace agreements and DDR provisions because they themselves often come from marginalised groups within society or have intersectional identities as fighters, women and members of marginalised groups (Thomas 2023: 844).

On top of that, it is not only about the topics and perspectives that can be broadened when women participate; their inclusion can also have an impact on the personal relations in peace processes. One of the interviewed negotiators emphasised that the presence of women meant a possibility of breaking away from norms that were geared towards an environment where toxic masculinity is predominant.

> *"The participation of women in the peace negotiations resulted in a greater richness in how people got to know each other as human beings. This contributes to better prospects for negotiations."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from an African RLM

Successful peace negotiations require collaboration and the building of constructive relationships among parties. Negotiators with strong interpersonal skills can foster positive relationships, cultivate cooperation and work towards mutually beneficial outcomes. Trust is fundamental in peace negotiations, as parties must believe in each other's sincerity and commitment to the process. Interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy and honesty are vital for establishing trust among negotiators. Often, women take up roles as bridge-builders between or within different factions.

> *"I became the uninvited mediator. I was the one in charge of reminding the whole group that if we didn't work together, we were not going to be able to make proposals."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from Europe

What are the main challenges for women negotiators from RLMs?

Before advancing towards greater involvement of women from RLMs in peace negotiations, there are still challenges and barriers to be addressed. Traditional gendered roles tend to exclude women from decision-making positions. These gendered structures also permeate RLMs and consequently the appointed negotiating delegations. Many of the interviewees were the only women at the negotiating table and, in addition, a significant number had doubts about their role and expectations.

> *"It is still a male-dominated world. In the beginning, I was not sure if I could speak up and that my ideas were correct. In addition, if you do not know how to be on a peace panel, you learn. Therefore, in the beginning, I was very timid. Then my voice got stronger. So now, they cannot silence me anymore."*
>
> Woman negotiator from a Southeast Asian RLM

> *"Since I was the only woman elected, I was afraid that they would give me a role as a secretary."*
>
> Woman former negotiator from a Latin American RLM

The interviewees also shared how the initiatives led by women negotiators were greeted with guarded suspicion and caution. If the women started to engage with other women across conflict party lines and formed coalitions, sub-groups and sub-commissions, they were seen as damaging the unity of the movement.

"When I participated in initiatives led by the women negotiators, I was accused of doing groupism and factionalism."

Woman former negotiator from a Latin American RLM

Additionally, core issues and deadlocks in peace negotiations are often discussed in informal settings and extraordinary meetings. The testimonies of the women negotiators revealed that these side meetings mostly involved the leaders of the negotiations – predominantly men – and other men chosen by them, which meant the exclusion of the women members of the negotiating teams in key decision-making spaces. The interviewees shared that the systematic exclusion of women in Track 1 processes leads to inherently unsustainable peace agreements, which undermines all the efforts, both human and resource-related, that are invested in these forms of engagement.

"When there were difficulties at the table, a few people [got] together for lunch or supper and usually they were men. And they chose each other."

Woman negotiator from a Southeast Asian RLM

"One of the problems is enabling or placing a lot of confidence in negotiation processes that do not have a significant presence of women. There is a tendency to believe that you will have sustainability inherently. This is completely incorrect."

Woman former negotiator from an African RLM

The women negotiators also pointed to the importance of individual character within the delegations. According to the interviewees, personality-wise, militarised masculinities lead to self-serving discussions and a lack of focus on transformative and inclusive peace.

"[There was] too much competition among men instead of reframing and moving towards the goal of peace. My role at that time was to mediate between the men, to tell them in a harsh voice 'stop there'. We are not here for ourselves; we are here for the people who are being killed."

"I have negotiated with a lot of male egos. There are some situations in which men think about peace for their own personal gains instead of trying to achieve peace for the people."

Woman former negotiator from Europe

On the other hand, there is often the assumption that if women are present, they will automatically advocate for a gender-sensitive peace agreement. This is not true for several reasons: the women might not have: 1) political will; 2) political leverage within the delegation; and 3) knowledge of and capacity for mainstreaming gender within peace agreements.

> *"Women in or associated with resistance and liberation movements have to dig deep to find the inner strength that they already have. International actors should support them in this process!"*
>
> Woman negotiator from a Latin American RLM

As previously mentioned, women from RLMs face additional challenges when it comes to their participation in peace processes. There are issues of recognition and legitimacy, power dynamics within the group, heightened security risks, and limited resources and support. However, during our discussions, some of the interviewees also shared that in their movement they felt a lot more empowered than before they joined the movement. They emphasised that they were not treated differently because of their gender. Some confirmed that they had experienced no differential treatment than the men during wartime. In fact, many women join RLMs to escape from oppressive systems and seek transformative agendas (Giri 2021: 4). This speaks to the importance of proper gendered analysis before engaging with the delegations and the need to avoid preconceptions or biases relating to how women negotiators who are members of RMLs may feel or what their needs may be.

3 Informal Roles: Women driving and shaping peace processes

Importance of informal roles for inclusive sustainable peace

While in recent peace processes, there has been a clear push to involve women from all negotiating parties at the table, including women in RLMs, there is a detrimental trend towards focusing on the promotion of women's participation and inclusion solely at Track 1, disregarding women's engagement at other levels, including the informal roles that women play during peace processes. The informality of those roles sometimes also translates to unseen, unrecognised and undocumented contributions to conflict transformation (Dayal and Christien 2020: 2).

In highly patriarchal structures, sitting at the negotiating table is extremely challenging, and yet some women in RLMs manage to resiliently overcome barriers to their participation. However, many other women perceive formal roles in peace processes as unachievable or do not see it as a goal to be achieved at all. In some cases, sitting at the table is not only too complex; it is also just not enough. As pointed out in the OSCE Toolkit on Inclusion of Women, a peace agreement cannot be reached at the highest political level alone: "Settlements require looking beyond the negotiation table to the peace process at large, where agents for peace – including women's groups – formally or informally work on different levels towards sustainable peace" (Avonius et al. 2019: IV). The reality is that conflict transformation processes permeate different societal spheres and therefore, negotiations need to take place at multiple levels. This is particularly true when RLMs are involved in the peace process. The complex and heterogeneous nature of RLMs reinforces the need to have broad negotiations that go beyond the security and military aspects and include societal issues and the reintegration of former combatants (Hottinger 2005: 57). Esther Meininghaus raises the point that drawing all the attention to the Track 1 roles leads to a missed opportunity for "critical self-reflection on the quality and modalities of peace processes" (Meininghaus 2021: 351). She also argues that focusing on Track 1 whilst ignoring local initiatives could potentially result in a do-harm approach rooted in a Global North perspective on peace, which reinforces power imbalances (Meininghaus 2021: 353). The following section illustrates three main reasons for the importance of considering both formal and informal roles in peace processes: a) scope of peace negotiations; b) inclusion; and c) implementation of peace agreements. These arguments have been put forward by women in and associated with RLMs who have been actively involved in peace negotiations, in the implementation of peace agreements or in ongoing efforts to achieve peace agreements.

Scope of peace negotiations

In many cases, peace negotiations merely become security arrangements for the disarmament of insurgent movements and/or power-sharing agreements. However, this neglects the political reasons why combatants decided to mobilise in the first place. Many women ex-combatants join the armed resistance to seek political change, which is often not fully achieved through peace agreements (Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Hülzer 2024). The peace agreement is then just the beginning of a longer multi-level peace process.

Woman associated with a Southeast Asian RLM

"The peace process is an instrument to stop violence and to take the first steps to address the root causes of the conflict, correct historical injustices and strengthen the identity of our people."

"The negotiation process solves the problem of the use of violence, but we need to link Track 1 and Track 3 if we really want to address the root causes of the conflict and structural problems."

Women ex-combatants from Latin America

"Many people thought that after the disarmament, the conflict was over, but for us, that was never the case. The ownership of peace needs to go beyond the table. Many times, the signing of the peace agreement does not fulfil all political objectives; it is not the end of the process."

"We had a political vision when we joined [the insurgency], and that is not going to be fulfilled directly at the negotiation table."

"They thought that after signing the peace agreement there was going to be a big party, and everyone was going to return to their homes. In fact, the very opposite occurred. We maintained our political spaces; we continued our political struggle to demand change by peaceful means."

In addition, focusing only on the negotiating table may diminish the prospects for sustainable peace. Women associated with resistance and liberation movements have shared that when peace negotiations collapse at Track 1 level, multiple efforts still continue at the grassroots level. Women-led informal initiatives promote dialogue across conflict lines even in the absence of a process at Track 1. By diversifying peace efforts, it is more likely that a peaceful solution to conflict will be found, as there is more than one way to secure peace, whether led by formal or informal initiatives.

Inclusion in peace processes

There is empirical evidence to support the view that inclusivity makes peace processes more sustainable, legitimate and accountable (Schädel and Dudouet 2020 a). As pointed out by Helen Kezie-Nwoha and Juliet Were (2018), women's informal peace work is valuable and ensures effective formal talks. In research conducted by Dayal and Christien (2020: 2), it was found that 60 per cent of the formal peace processes surveyed had parallel informal peace processes, of which 71 per cent showed clear evidence of involvement from identifiable women's groups. The women in the Network consulted for this study also have a common view of the lack of inclusivity that results from a focus on the negotiating table alone.

Woman negotiator from a Southeast Asian RLM

"What is happening at the table is just the tip of the iceberg. What can the negotiating team say if they are not connected to what is happening on the ground?"

Even though public consultations have acquired an important role in the most recent peace negotiations, women associated with RLMs still consider that these efforts are often instrumentalised and used to subordinate people's needs to the will of those sitting at the table. They therefore advocate for processes of "meaningful consultation with different sectors that reflect the needs of the people", as well as thinking beyond the table and looking at "the whole universe" that surrounds peace efforts, including the informal roles of the youth and women, while also ensuring the safety and security of all people involved in these consultation/participation/inclusion efforts.

Implementation of peace agreements

Often, "once the guns are silent [...] international and [...] national attention moves away" (Pauls 2022: 3). However, the women in the RLM Network have insisted on the need to extend the focus of peace processes beyond the negotiating table and the signing of peace agreements. They have emphasised the need to look at the implementation of peace agreements and the roles women play at that stage in order to guarantee long-term sustainable results of a peace process. Women signatories of the Havana Peace Agreement (2016) shared that the Peace Agreement was signed by the main leaders who were at the negotiating table, but it was at a matter for the movement's grass-roots to implement and ensure follow-up on the agreed compromises. Additionally, they emphasise that with the disarmament of the movement and the start of the reintegration process, new leaderships emerged. This means that those who were leaders at the table might not continue their leadership throughout the implementation process; some of them withdraw, others hand over their leadership to new generations, and others even join dissident groups, which speaks to the importance of identifying and supporting those leaders who are connected to the grass-roots and who will be driving the reintegration and implementation process.

Women ex-combatants from Latin America

"The peace agreement was signed by a few comrades, but it was up to the movement's grass-roots to take on leadership roles and guarantee joint efforts to implement the agreement."

"The international community focused on supporting the negotiation process, but many of them left once it had been signed. There is a lot of need to provide support for the implementation of the peace agreement."

Case studies: The informal role of women in and associated with RLMs during peace processes

From the literature review, we can draw various examples of the diverse peace roles women play beyond the negotiating table, such as negotiating the distribution of humanitarian aid, negotiating local ceasefires, searching for missing persons, supporting victims of the conflict (Avonius et al. 2019), advocating for inclusion, legitimising negotiations and the peace process through pro-peace public protests, resolving conflicts at the local level, and providing information and expert advice to the negotiating table (Dayal and Christien 2020). As we can observe, women engage informally

at all the different stages of a peace process, from conflict management (ceasefire, humanitarian aid) to negotiations (support for negotiators, advocacy, agenda-setting) and implementation of peace agreements, consolidation and post-agreement transition (support for victims, informing and raising awareness about the peace agreement).

Despite the contributions of informal peace work to all stages of peace processes, it often goes unseen, particularly if it is done by women. Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2005) point out that "when such work is seen as an extension of women's 'natural' role in society, it is taken for granted [...]. When this work is taken for granted, it goes unrecognized, is stripped of its political meaning, and is rendered invisible" (Bouta, Frerks and Bannon 2005: 68). Women are often portrayed as victims in conflicts, depriving them of their agency as peacebuilders. Women (former) combatants face the loss of their agency twice. They are de-securitised by DDR programmes, which follow a narrow simplistic definition of combatants, and are thus excluded as (former) combatants; at the same time, they are also portrayed as victims, making their role as peace agents invisible (Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Cochrane-Buchmüller 2022: 6-7). They are therefore made invisible in two ways: they are recognised neither as (former) combatants, nor as (informal) peace agents.

Patty Chang et al. (2015) argue that there is still no solid research on the general trends and patterns of the informal work women do in peace processes beyond anecdotal evidence. While the development of an analytical framework is beyond the scope of this report, the following section helps to shed light on the informal roles women in and associated with RLMs play in peace processes, based on experiences and testimonies shared by the Network members. These roles include: CSO leaders, women associated with RLMs, (ex-)combatants and advisors to negotiators.

Case 1

Woman ex-combatant from Latin America

"In the guerrillas, you could learn to read and write and complete your high school diploma, but most of us barely knew how to read and write. We were not in equal conditions, and we did not have the capacity for dialogue with the government. That probably also hindered our participation at the negotiating table.

Many people have told me that I am a peace leader, but I would not introduce myself as such. I have been working mainly on advocating for women's rights and stopping violence against women. And at the same time, my advocacy also calls for the improvement of all people's conditions, regardless of their gender.

I have also focused on care work, which was mostly done by women. We take care of each other and that allows some of us to work in politics.

Additionally, I have worked on social cohesion. I think beyond the basics, thinking about the future and the sustainability of life. In our case, we [the women] think long-term because the role of leader forces you to think beyond the signing of the peace agreement. We analyse the needs with a projection of the future: What am I going to live on? How am I going to take care of my children? How am I going to give my children an education?"

Case 2

Woman ex-combatant from Latin America
"I think the women took on most of the responsibility for maintaining social cohesion. We supported the whole process at the community level. I felt that if I failed, if I was not there, everything would have broken down. After the signing of the peace agreement, I became the leader of one of the Territorial Spaces for Reincorporation and Capacity-Building.

I oversaw the gender committees within the Space. I also took care of the internal training and education around the peace agreement. I took on so many issues, related to economic development, projects and many others. Women take on everything, because we think about the collective well-being and then we end up burdening ourselves a lot. I know of women ex-combatants who took on roles as nurses, doctors, women who went into politics to make sure that the women were represented.

I suffered a lot while being a leader. They shared photos of me with an ex-combatant and I almost had to leave my position at the town hall. We cannot mention that we are ex-combatants; many people hide it. We lost so many potential leaders because of stigmatisation."

Case 3

Woman associated with a Southeast Asian RLM
"The women did a lot for the peace process: advocacy, grass-roots education about the peace process. They also work on bridging the gap between the roots and the policymakers. We also had women lobbying in Congress or the Senate, advocating for the peace process and political change."

Case 4

Woman CSO leader from Southeast Asia
"Many people had to stand up against injustices committed by the State and several armed groups were involved in armed struggle. There were many victims, killed, injured, imprisoned and damaged. Women and children were directly affected. Women had to fend for themselves to sustain their families and the children were lacking education opportunities. We, the women, together with CSOs, are trying to raise international awareness about our conflict and situation. We want the visions of women to be reflected in the peace process. Men cannot see things like women do. For example, there are specific problems for women in the region, but they are invisible to the men. Women can play a role by conducting fieldwork, gathering information, identifying problems faced by women. This can be brought to the negotiating table. Additionally, the monitoring of the talks is an important role, as is bringing information from the negotiations to the people. [However], women have limited knowledge of politics. We need to conduct empowerment for women. There should be a two-way communication process [between the table and the CSOs]. The agenda of women and children should be brought to the table and women should gather information on those needs."

Case 5

Women peace negotiator from a Southeast Asian RLM

"Women have always had a role [in the peace process]; even if it was not the leading role, they were in supporting ones. When we created sub-committees during the peace negotiations, there were hardly any women, but when we started discussions around social and agrarian reforms, women were leading the discussions, because they had a lot of knowledge about the economy, but were really the unseen figures. Father is the pillar of the house, but mother is the light of the house. This is also reflected in our movement. In intellectual fields especially, women are taking on leadership positions; they are more advanced in terms of intellectual capacity. For example, 70 per cent of our lawyers are women. Most of the leaders in the health sector in the movement are women.

Women are also pushing for peace. Many peace forums are being organised, and women and the youth are the primary drivers here. Women have set up their own campaigns and peace constituencies, even though they are not really part of the talks or involved in any way, but they realise that the peace talks are an important avenue for them and their concerns."

"I had a direct role supporting the negotiating team (admin, logistical support, advice). Before the talks, I took care of all the logistics needed for the talks. I also supported the process of prepping and finalising materials and organised discussions and consultations for the negotiating teams. I was also responsible for getting people home safely after talks. It takes a certain type of personality to support people in this way. These are some of the tasks that the negotiating team may or may not know about."

The above cases show the diverse and important, yet often unseen, roles that women in and associated with RLMs play in peace processes beyond the table. There are many common elements in these roles. For example, most of them have a **long-term vision and perspective**. Like women from RLMs with official negotiating roles, they focus on what it means to build peace with a long-term perspective and a community vision. Therefore, for them, it is not only about signing a peace agreement at a specific moment in time but finding a lasting and sustainable solution to structural problems.

We also see that they play a very important role in **social cohesion and reconciliation**, which is essential in preventing future escalation of violence. In addition, the **pedagogical role** of educating the public about the peace process also stands out. Women work on informing and consulting the local communities about the peace process, which is essential for the ownership of the process and the subsequent implementation of the peace agreement.

The different experiences also reveal a shared desire to **give visibility to marginalised voices**, be it women's agendas, those of the children and young people, or those of rural and peasant populations. Therefore, the role they play in this informal arena, as mentioned above, is essential to guarantee inclusivity in a peace process, which at the same time ensures that it is sustainable over time (Dudouet and Schädel 2020b).

We also see a fundamental role in **mobilising for peace**, not necessarily in negotiating it, whether it is mobilising to start or restart a negotiation, but also to make it successful, from logistical support to pedagogy, and to implement it in the future. We can observe, then, that the informal roles played by women in and associated with RLMs are crucial to peace processes, but why are they still unseen and do not receive the support they deserve? Women in the Network have also shared with us their experiences of the challenges they face and the setbacks they encounter in these roles. In the following section, we present their testimonies.

Challenges of informal roles during peace processes

Recognition, framing and naming

Women ex-combatants from Latin America
"When we become leaders, we do not present ourselves as such; but we do expect from the relevant stakeholders will recognise me as having such status [due to all the work that I am doing on it]. The men do not wait to be recognised; they introduce themselves directly as leaders."

"If something is not named, it does not exist. So it is also a language battle. We, all women, have a tendency not to give the right recognition to all the work that we do."

"It is difficult for us to name who we are, to describe and give a specific role to what we are doing. We do a lot; we are in politics, also in economics, in reconciliation. You won't find a name for such a transversal role and it comes with fewer guarantees compared to those contributing in formal roles. How can I introduce myself to the peacebuilding community with this multi-faceted role?"

Woman advisor to the negotiating team of a Southeast Asian RLM
"During the peace process, I tried to bring up issues relevant to the peace process and raise awareness among peacebuilding stakeholders, but because I was not officially part of the peace negotiating team, they did not listen to me."

Educational and cultural barriers

Woman ex-combatant from Latin America
"We know we need to be more visible, but if we do not get the support we need, it becomes really difficult. It is hard for us to access education."

Women advisors to a negotiating team from a Southeast Asian RLM
"Some women have the knowledge, but they don't think they should be involved. Our society has strong religious beliefs and in the past women did not have a chance to study. There are internal and cultural barriers [for women]. In our country we are experiencing a late adoption of gender empowerment."

"Women's political opportunities in our region are hampered by structures, mainly education, which prevent them from gaining knowledge of politics. The prospects of taking on [formal] peacebuilding [roles] are difficult."

Triple burden (productive, reproductive and community-related)

Women ex-combatants from Latin America
"It is sometimes also the different conditions [in comparison to men] that even make you question the relevance of your role. I am in a leadership position, but I have way fewer resources and worse conditions for participation."

"The feminisation of poverty is a real issue for women in our country. We need to have a paid job and that raises the question: can I involve and commit myself to a formal peacebuilding role? Because if I do, I may not find a job in the future [because of stigmatisation]."

Women peace activists from Southeast Asia
"Women in our country carry out many roles at the same time and we also take care of children, so our time and opportunities are limited. Women who are affected by the conflict (i.e. husbands in jail or killed) must fend for themselves and don't find the time to think about their political role. The chances of taking part in [formal] peacebuilding roles are slim."

Woman advisor to the negotiating team of a Southeast Asian RLM
"In terms of negotiations and conflict transformation, you need to have an eye for detail, multi-tasking skills and motivation. These are often inherently traits of women, but then eventually women leave because they have to take care of their families."

Security and stigmatisation

Women ex-combatants from Latin America
"We are survivors of such a level of stigmatisation that sometimes we just think it is better not to openly recognise that we are peace leaders. We question ourselves all the time: is the stigmatisation going to let me get to where I want to be?"

"The security issue has been a huge problem for us. Men in the exact same position as women receive more security guarantees. In our community, there were three men and one woman who were ex-combatants. I was the only one with a political leadership position and I was the only one who did not receive any security guarantees (e.g. bodyguards). That has been decisive for us to really ask ourselves if we truly are leaders or not because we don't get the same conditions, so we assumed we are not leaders."

Women peace activists from Southeast Asia
"All the CSOs that want to support the process can be persecuted and sued. The only ones protected by the peace process are the ones in the negotiating team. That's why we don't make our work visible."

"Due to the criminalisation of some movements, there is no office or email to establish communications; it is clandestine. Some CSOs can connect through liaison persons, but it is difficult to identify who is or is not clandestine."

"If women were eventually to get access to the table, it would be really challenging. You will have to choose a side and there are consequences of doing that. Women wonder in what capacity can we take part at the negotiating table [beyond formal delegations of the two conflicting parties]?"

"The designation of women in different roles is really dictated by security concerns. The women may not be able to be named for their roles due to security issues. Some women even take the names of men to protect themselves. I am nominated for my position but don't have a designated role, for my own safety."

Woman peace activist from the Middle East
"All our efforts for peace are being criminalised; we are being arrested for being pro-peace, which prevents us from being more visible in what we contribute to the peace process."

Lack of coordination between formal and informal roles in peace processes

Women ex-combatants from Latin America
"The local communities [advocating for peace] are not aware of the peace process; they do not know what has been agreed."

"Our leadership was negotiating the agreement, but not everything was consulted on with the grass-roots. We did not have an email where we could send requests. We were told the general points that were being discussed and we provided feedback, but we did not have any meaningful decision-making power."

"The agreement was signed to improve our social conditions and end the conflict, but the information did not actually reach the local population. We fully trusted the leaders who were negotiating, but we did not trust their counterparts at all. They should have better communicated what was going on."

The challenges faced by women in and associated with RLMs in their informal roles during peace processes are numerous and diverse. Their contributions are often undervalued and lack proper recognition, despite their significant role in fostering sustainable peace. Similarly, some women face **resource constraints**, such as lack of access to education and to the knowledge and skills needed to perform these roles effectively, as well as **cultural barriers** related to the misconception that women are incapable of playing relevant roles in peace processes. Some women also face **serious security concerns** and **ongoing stigmatisation** by society. In the same way, the fact that women often have to take on the responsibilities of **care work and family livelihoods** makes it difficult for them to combine this with high-level leadership roles. Likewise, the **lack of coordination between formal and informal roles** means that the latter are forgotten and put on the backburner. As a result, women find it difficult to channel their efforts into spheres of decision-making power.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

In our various conversations, we also asked the women in and associated with RLMs to share their recommendations for the peacebuilding community[6] on how to recognise and strengthen the role of women in peace processes. These are synthesised in this concluding section.

- From a process design point of view, it is essential to move beyond the silos between formal and informal roles and, above all, beyond the negotiating table. Today's complex conflicts involve very diverse actors and require new approaches to conflict transformation that are particularly multi-level and holistic. This requires prior **identification of actors** who are contributing to the peace process, far **beyond a negotiating delegation**. In addition, the process of identifying negotiators to receive negotiation support should be based on a thorough gender analysis. It is crucial to **pinpoint women and people with diverse identities who have political influence and potential and support them early on**. This might not be easy since these people might be in prison or living clandestinely, or they might not fit the conventional description of a negotiator. As we have seen in the testimonies above, the ways in which women peace leaders are named and framed are diverse and do not necessarily conform to the international nomenclature.

- In addition to having a multi-track approach, it is necessary to **build bridges between the different roles in peace processes**. We have seen how the formal negotiating table produces tangible solutions, leads (in most cases) to the cessation of violence, and is the first step towards transformative structural change. On the other hand, informal roles in peace processes are essential to ensure the ownership of the process, to safeguard social cohesion and to provide guarantees for the implementation of peace agreements. Therefore, **formal and informal roles should be supported in a complementary and coordinated way**, without the need to focus on one or the other or attempt to merge the interests of the two differentiated roles. The peacebuilding community should avoid giving more weight to some roles based on their level of formality or the framework in which they operate, as this is not an indicator of their relevance and sustainability. **Increased documentation on formal and informal roles** can also improve knowledge management, transparency and coordination.

- At both levels – formal and informal roles – women in RLMs agree on the need to **strengthen their capacity on strategic issues** (i.e. ceasefires, negotiating strategies, conflict resolution, peace leadership) **and on gender-inclusive peacebuilding, and to provide networking, mentoring and coaching opportunities**. Women negotiators from RLMs and women holding informal leadership roles associated with the peace process should be equally supported in advancing peace. These efforts require resources and financial commitments to women's participation in peace processes.

6 Mediation and negotiation support actors, i.e. NGOs, guarantor and facilitating states, policymakers, international organisations, private diplomacy actors and WPS stakeholders.

- In addition to strengthening women's capacities to enhance their formal and informal roles, there is a need to **increase women's meaningful participation in formal roles**. Women in and associated with RLMs working for peace should have the autonomy to decide whether they want to play a formal or informal role, and if the outcome is that they choose to continue in informal roles it should not be because of a lack of opportunities to access formal roles. The women interviewed also stressed the need for gender quotas within peace panel delegations, which will help to "bring women in RLMs to the table" (Woman peace negotiator from Europe).

- **Security guarantees** for peace processes should include specific guarantees to protect women negotiators and women peacebuilders. This includes **physical security, protection and prevention of stigmatisation** through awareness-raising and educating the broader society to correct misinformation and combat stereotypes. Stigmatisation risks can be mitigated by both collective action and individual resilience. In addition, support should therefore be provided for women in and associated with RLMs who play a visible role in the peace process so that they learn how to deal with such stigmatisation and the possible consequences of their visibility and leadership (including economic impacts and ensuring sustainable paid employment after the peace process). This should go hand in hand with measures to guarantee mental well-being and psychosocial support.

- Lastly, the peacebuilding community **should strengthen its engagement with men on issues such as WPS and gender-sensitive peacebuilding and identify male allies and champions for further inclusion of women**.

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