

NEGOTIATING AT THE INVISIBLE PEACE TABLE: *Inclusion of Women in Informal Peacebuilding Processes*

“ *The stakes at the invisible peace negotiation table are just as high as they are at the formal table.*”
— Mariam Yazdani, 2018 Women PeaceMakers Fellow

This month, the Yemen peace talks are scheduled to reconvene in Stockholm, and one glaring issue mediators continue to ignore is the inclusion of women. [Recently, international organizations, women peacebuilders and media](#) have mobilized to bring attention to this critical issue and push for women’s inclusion in peace processes both within Yemen and worldwide.



Rosa-Emilia Salamanca, 2018 Women PeaceMakers Fellow from Colombia.

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While significant attention continues to be paid to women’s inclusion, or lack thereof, in formal peace negotiations, insufficient attention has been paid to the question of whether and how women are participating in the informal side of these processes. [Research](#) is beginning to acknowledge the critical role these informal processes—what we call the “invisible table”—play in building durable peace, but this space is often ignored in discussions promoting women’s presence. As we see increasing levels of [violence](#), high civil war [recidivism](#) rates

and [the failure of various peace agreements](#), it is important to focus on the invisible table and how to make this space inclusive as well. Research has shown that when women are included on the formal side of peace processes, [peace agreements are 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years](#). Is it possible to make peace agreements even more successful and sustainable by ensuring greater inclusion of women at the invisible table as well?

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The negotiations at the invisible peace table, although they cannot be commemorated by a photo, still play a crucial role in building peace. Invisible tables are in hallways, coffee shops, airport terminals, hotel lobbies and social media platforms—spaces where peace is *also* often negotiated. Occurring alongside and around formal negotiations, informal negotiations make formal negotiations possible and compensate for some of their shortcomings. How, in particular, does the invisible table facilitate and shape more effective formal negotiations? Three main functions stand out.

First, the invisible table provides space for relationships and trust to be built. The informal side of negotiations is fluid in nature and therefore creates opportunities for more and different kinds of exchanges between negotiating parties. These

informal relationship-building opportunities would otherwise be quite challenging to achieve in formal meetings given the constraints created by a particular agenda, chain of command and room lay-out. Taking the time to build these relationships away from the rigid structure of formal talks ensures that when the formal negotiations occur there is a deeper level of empathy and understanding between the people at the table. This can result in more efficient processes because, with a deeper understanding of what motivates the other side, actors are less likely to misinterpret one another.¹

Second, the invisible table provides a space away from the spotlight for key issues to be freely discussed. During the formal process, negotiators and mediators need to adhere to a particular stance publicly in order to maintain the support of their key constituents. This leaves little room to brainstorm alternative solutions, plans, options and ideas. The invisible table, however, provides a safe place for contradictory ideas to be explored, knowledge to be shared, previous grievances to be aired, barriers to be navigated and a framework for the broader agreement to be established.



Radha Paudel, 2012 Women PeaceMakers Fellow, in Nepal.

¹For example, [we saw this](#) in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Third, the invisible table has the potential to be more democratic. At the invisible peace table, there is no fixed number of chairs. This space, therefore, can be more inclusive and diverse, bringing in a larger swath of people affected by and invested in resolving the conflict. It can include people who hold a range of positions in society, and a range of perspectives, beyond the elite who participate in formal negotiations.



Mariam Yazdani, 2018 Women PeaceMakers Fellow, in Pakistan for community mediation meetings in 2006.

Although the invisible table has this potential for greater inclusivity, it is crucial to ensure that it actually lives up to its potential in this respect. We know that when the stakeholders who will be responsible for adopting, implementing and living with the final peace agreement—especially women—are included in the *formal* peace process, [lasting peace has a stronger chance](#). Given the importance of the invisible table in shaping formal negotiations, it is crucial that these diverse voices participate meaningfully in informal spaces as well, lest they lose out on the chance to

fundamentally influence the direction of formal peace negotiations. To ensure that women’s vital perspectives and knowledge have the chance to inform and strengthen peace processes, we must first understand how to increase their substantive presence at the invisible table. And while there are persistent barriers to women’s inclusion in these informal spaces, women are also deploying creative strategies to overcome many of these barriers.

PERSISTENT BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN ACCESSING THE INVISIBLE PEACE TABLE

The first barrier stems from traditional power structures where “big men” still dominate. In such societies, women are viewed as second-class citizens and excluded from any areas of influence and power—and, even if they manage to enter these areas, views or concerns marked as “feminine” are less likely to be taken seriously. As the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women notes, [these patriarchal power structures also create many obstacles](#) for women who wish to access peace processes, both formally and informally. For instance, in our experience in contexts as diverse as Syria, women have had difficulty being present at peace talks, due to insufficient resources for travel and visas, as well as a lack of transparency about the time and location of meetings. Both challenges demonstrate the disregard most powerful (male) actors have for the importance of women’s presence and participation in—and around—formal negotiations.

Second, international organizations and donors act as gatekeepers for local women’s groups, limiting the acceptable range of voices and perspectives that

may gain access to peace processes. This has become a zero-sum game for local women's groups: they either collapse the diversity of their issues under a single, unified banner or lose the opportunity to participate, whether formally or informally, in peace negotiations.

Third, women's inclusion in peace processes is also hindered, somewhat counterintuitively, by other women. [This trend has been studied in other sectors of society](#) and is also relevant to peacebuilding. Women's civil society organizations that have been around for decades and are holding onto dated agendas can often use their seniority in the local context to decide which women to let in and which not to let in, thereby preventing the emergence of new approaches to building inclusive peace processes.

For these reasons, women are struggling with how to bring their vital, relevant perspectives and agendas to the invisible peace table. However, despite these barriers, women are finding ways to access this space using a range of online and offline tactics.

HOW WOMEN ARE ACCESSING THE INVISIBLE PEACE TABLE

First, for women to participate in these informal conversations and negotiations, they must of course be present at the invisible table where these occur. For example, by being present in hotel lobbies, restaurants or cafes near peace talks, one has the opportunity to catch people in between sessions and lobby them informally. [It is an effective tactic that is widely used by corporations](#) to access political spaces. While this tactic is simple, it is still

often overlooked by peacebuilders. However, more and more women are leveraging it to access and influence peace talks.



Mariam Yazdani, 2018 Women PeaceMakers Fellow, in Pakistan.

Second, young women constitute a new league of peacebuilders who are pushing boundaries to ensure inclusivity in peace talks. Less inhibited about mobilizing and more prepared to risk their reputations, young women are more willing to fight for their equality than previous generations. Their fervor, their fearlessness, their methods of mobilization, and their proficiency in leveraging existing platforms all help to ensure that women's issues are present at the invisible peace table. For instance, in Sudan in 2003, while the conflict in Darfur was ongoing, we witnessed young women in the universities form networks on their campuses that were strong enough in numbers to successfully lobby decision-makers around the peace talks. These networks were some of the first of their kind in Sudan, and their advocacy was one of the factors that brought women's issues and presence into the Abuja peace talks. Of the 132 delegates

who participated in the Abuja talks that led to the Darfur Peace Agreement, 11 were women—not a huge number, to be sure, but better than zero. Furthermore, the Darfur Peace Agreement included [gender-responsive provisions on a range of human rights and security concerns](#). Evidence of young women’s peacebuilding acumen [has also been seen recently in Myanmar’s peace talks](#), where young women can only operate in informal spaces and therefore have developed creative strategies for ensuring that their agendas are being considered. Lastly, social media continues to democratize the flow of information and, through online campaigns, force archaic institutions to progress. We saw this with the recent #MeToo movement, which, [according to *The Economist*](#), may be the “most powerful force for equality since women’s suffrage.” Platforms like Twitter and Facebook allow women to mobilize in an informal space and target key decision-makers in formal peace negotiations. A recent example that gained worldwide attention was [#Women4Yemen](#), which highlighted Yemeni women demanding inclusion at the peace talks in Sweden. Furthermore, social media is itself an invisible table where conversations, the exchange of knowledge, relationship-building and lobbying also occur.

CONCLUSION

The invisible table plays a powerful role in shaping the outcomes of peace talks, therefore it is vital that women be present at it and contribute meaningfully to the discussions that happen around it.

“ Additionally, the international peacebuilding community must continue to lobby and advocate for full participation and inclusion of women in informal spaces just as they have for formal ones.

While women are in many cases successfully accessing and engaging in negotiations at the invisible table, barriers to inclusion persist—which means our work is far from done. The burden to break down these barriers still falls too heavily on women. Instead, the gatekeepers to peace talks, especially mediators, need to ensure that support and resources are allocated for women to be present at the invisible table. Additionally, the international peacebuilding community must continue to lobby and advocate for full participation and inclusion of women in informal spaces just as they have for formal ones. Taking such steps will provide conflict-affected communities with more of the tools they need to end cycles of violence, making it more likely that peace will have the opportunity to flourish.



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ABOUT

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