

Women in Peacemaking - A Practitioner's Perspective

Transcript

Nita Yawananrajah

Hello, everybody. My name is Nita Yawananrajah, and for those who find my last name challenging, it's a typical Tamil name. You may refer to me as Dr. Y. I've always wanted to replace Dr. Who. So there you go. Good afternoon to everybody, and thank you, Liz and team, for putting together this conference. It's wonderful for me to be here in Oxford again. I always take the opportunity whenever I'm invited. You guys have the most beautiful university ever. I'm honored to really be part of this conference on peace, security and women's rights in challenging times. We are indeed living in very challenging times. The world has returned to great power rivalries. Conflicts have become more violent, more complex. And the heyday of international cooperation, respect for international law and human rights, and UN leadership in peacemaking seems to have disappeared, or a distant memory at least. I've spent most of my career in the business of peace and security. A better part of that has been where conflict has already taken root, where belligerence in the society at large, are filled with suspicion and fear and have become very, very entrenched in their positions. I've been involved in peacemaking, peacebuilding negotiations in Rwanda, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Darfur, Western Sahara, and most recently behind the scenes in the Ukraine-Russia war. In most of these rooms, I've been a political officer, a mediation advisor, a facilitator, or a strategic advisor to one or both of the parties. All too often, I've found that men in dark suits explain away why peace is impossible just yet. And yet in all that noise, what I've learned is this. Real peace, more often than not, is not made at the negotiating table. It's made in the corridors, It's made over coffee or a drink. It's in whispered phone calls in the middle of the night. In the after-meeting chit-chat, whether it's on Zoom or in real in life. It's in the quiet, patient, and profoundly human work of building relationships. This is where women have always excelled. Women bring three particular strengths to mediation that I've seen change outcomes again and again. First, I think women build networks, especially informal ones, very well. When official channels freeze, it's often the invisible webs of trust, mostly maintained by women, that keep communications alive. These aren't in the meeting notes. They are not the reason why people come all dressed up to negotiating tables. These are the things that happen behind the scenes. And I think women do well in these spaces. Second, I do think that women lead with empathy-based credibility. Now, I'm not talking about a soft skill here because I do think that empathy can be a big tactical advantage. I mean the kind of credibility that disarms defensiveness. Earlier we had a

peace psychology speak, and I think she would agree with this, that empathy does bring down defensiveness. This is the kind of credibility that makes people tell you what they really need and not just tell you what their positions are. in what they're supposed to say because their governments told them what to say or the rebel leaders forced them what to say, et cetera. This is where I think that empathy is a tactical advantage in peace negotiations because you get to the underlying issues that actually why the war happened, what is their psychological fears, what prevents them from making peace, et cetera. And the third, Women can be natural third-siders. What do I mean by that? I do think that women see the conflict when they are peacemakers and peacebuilders in terms of the ecosystem of the entire conflict. how it affects society, how it affects mothers, how it affects their kids, etc. How the daily life is disrupted because they are the ones who have to go to the market, they are the ones who have to feed the children. So they do see it in a larger ecosystem of the conflict. So women can bring the community's voice to the negotiating table that might otherwise only speak for the elites of the belligerents. When women mediate, they bring society to the table. And that's where sustainable peace begins. Let's be honest, though. Despite these strengths, women are quite invisible at the peace negotiations as mediators and peacemakers. They remain an exception all too often. Too often, women are brought in as tokens. One woman in a sea of suits expected to soften the entire scene for the optics, not to shape the outcome. We are judged twice as hard for authority and rewarded half as much for results. And institutions that speak of inclusion often don't support it in the structure or in practice. This has to change. I defend informality because I believe that it's the lifeblood of peacemaking. It's where humanity survives the machinery of politics. Informality, I believe, is the cauldron in which one can actually cook the deals that taste and feel right. And I think women have the ability to actually practice that informality naturally. And so they bring a skill that's too often neglected in peacemaking when one appoints an envoy or a peacemaker, etc. However, informality alone and these skills of informality and empathy alone are not enough. Women, especially in peacemaking and peacebuilding space, have to get comfortable with power, with using it and not apologizing for using it. So this is my message to women in the field. Don't let soft power be your only language. Learn to wield formal power and do it in your own voice. The world doesn't need us to imitate old power hierarchies and structures. It needs us to redefine what leadership actually is. Empathy is vital, but empathy without authority changes nothing. But power without a moral compass is just abuse. Women must accept that in war and peace mediation, power matters and the positions of big powers matter A lot. Yes, there's actually a space where size matters. And that is geopolitics. Whether we like it or not, power and geopolitics impact what is possible to achieve a deal. So my message here is very clear. We may know the world we want to achieve, We may know what peace should look like, but we must also acknowledge reality. That in order to get the guns to stop and the violence to stop, we need to match the parties ask with their leverage. We need to

match what the parties give with the resistance they face. And this means understanding what power they have and what power the other side has. So fortunately, with informality and empathy, we can drill down to those core asks and also creatively find a way to actually match the ask with the leverage they have with the options that we can develop that can actually match and give a solution to a problem that might otherwise not seem possible and otherwise seem stuck. I make a distinction here. My message is to peacemaking and peace-building women, not necessarily women political leaders or ambassadors who sit in the UN Security Council and such. These women, like our previous colleague has mentioned, I think it was Dr. Matar who mentioned it, these women, like their male counterparts in the political and diplomatic space, normally represent their government or political parties, and they are comfortable with power. but they are also in pursuit of national interests and political and personal interests, not necessarily acting in the interest of peace or acting as a third side. So my message is very much for those of us who are in this peacemaking, peacebuilding space who want to be the third side to a conflict. Which brings me to now to the issue of what about the institutions? What can they do? My message to institutions is clear. To the UN, to regional bodies, governments, I say this. Inclusion cannot be an afterthought or a side event or a tokenism. Structural reform is long overdue. Most of the brilliant mediators that I know, President Mattia Tessari, the late President Mattia Tessari, Jean Arnault, Martin Griffiths, Alvaro de Soto, they were all UN insiders. at one time, before they were appointed as envoys. They were staff before they were appointed as envoys. They understood the world of politics, understood how the UN worked, the institutional relationship between the UN Security Council, the Secretary General and the envoy. They understood clearly what the UN can and cannot do, what resources it can call upon, and how much they could stretch a mandate, or how limited the mandate had to be. Appointing women who have achieved amazing heights in their own countries and throwing them in the deep end in a violent conflict as a mediator with a mandate and a title, without, for the sake of quotas, for the sake of an image, Is really detrimental to their success and a disservice to these women, while neglecting the women who have risen through the ranks of the staff and... Having the knowledge of how the organizations themselves work and the relationships between powers, the power-wielding legislative bodies and the secretariat, et cetera, these women are neglected because they didn't have the stature and the titles, et cetera. This is really a limited view of leadership and very short-sighted by organizations because there's a lot of talent in there that should be recognized and really cultivated within organizations to take over. like they did with the previous generation of men, who are all leading peacemaking activities today. Institutions need to redefine leadership. They need to value the relational aspects of peacemaking just as much as the hierarchical. They need to create real pathways for women mediators, not symbolic appointments, and to hold themselves accountable for quality, not quantity. I think that if we look at the peacemakers out there today, the names that are often we find going from one

conflict to another, the names that I've mentioned before, there's one thing that strikes us. It's not just the levels that they have reached and the successes that they have reached. They also have the empathy that they bring to the table and understand power. So there are two sides of the team coin in terms of mediation and peacemaking skills. And I think that's really something that speaks to the heart of peacemaking, is we cannot just say women are great at empathy and soft skills. And if they are not comfortable with power, they're not going to succeed. By the same token, men who are great with power but do not have the empathy and the soft relational skills, they're not going to succeed either. So I agree with Dr. Matar earlier, it's not whether women should enter into peacemaking and can be successful, or men should do it and are successful. It is what type of women and men make good peacemakers. And for me, they are the men and women who are comfortable with power, but also have exceptional relational skills to bring to the table. With that, I shall conclude my talk today. And thank you very much.