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IN HER WORDS

# Women at the Peace Table Yields Better Results. Why Is It Still So Rare?

Female peace builders and female-led organizations are often the ones running toward the problem while everyone else is running away, says the author Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini.

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## "There's this triple whammy of sexism, racism and systemic flaws in how peace processes are designed."

*— Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, the author of "Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters"*

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Study after study after study has shown that having women at the peace table results in better outcomes. But it's still a rare sight.

According to the U.N., in 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, women made up only 9 percent of negotiators. A 2018 study published in the journal of International Interactions found that of the 82 peace agreements it looked at between 1989 and 2011, women made up less than 20 percent of the signatories across six peace processes in Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Guatemala, Northern Ireland, Papua New Guinea and Liberia.

Why is it so uncommon? What's holding women back? How do we change precedent?

As the Afghan peace talks opened last month in Doha, with just four women (up from three, but still down from the original five) on the 21-person Afghan delegation and no women on the Taliban side, In Her Words spoke with Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, the

author of “Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters.”

For more than two decades, Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini has been working at the intersection of women, security and peace. She is a founder and the executive director of the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), a nonprofit that supports and promotes women in peacemaking and peace processes in war-torn countries. For Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini, the work is personal, too: She left her native Iran as a 10-year-old in December 1978, just before the revolution, unable to return for the next seven years.

Female peace builders and female-led organizations committed to nonviolence and pro-peace talks are often the ones running toward the problem while everyone else is running away, she noted, so getting them to the table is essential.

Our conversation is condensed and edited for clarity.

**What motivates women to take part in peace processes?**

If the women aren’t at the table themselves, their issues are negotiated away. And it’s not only women’s issues around what women’s safety and security means, but also women’s perspective on what matters. Are we going to talk about police reform? Are we going to talk about the future of education in our country? Or are we just going to talk about which guy will have the Ministry of Finance and which guy should have the Ministry of Defense? There are different nuances in the perspectives that women peace builders bring.

**What risks do women peace builders — who are among the first to push for peace talks but are still marginalized within the process — face that are unique to their gender?**

With women, in particular, there’s a lot of misogyny and maligning. As a peace builder, some of your biggest assets are your integrity, ethics and morality. People attack that, and very often with women it’s sexualized, with different parties saying things like “She’s a whore” or calling women “prostitutes.” The threat of sexual violence is very high, and the actual perpetration of sexual violence can be high. Also, the threats against their families are huge.

**You were a leading advocate of a historic U.N. resolution that called to get more women involved in peacemaking processes. Why did this have to be written into a formal resolution?**

In the 1990s, we saw that when you brought women together from different places where there were wars and they started talking, there was a similarity of experience around inclusion, around agency, and around how women's bodies were being used or attacked.

The reality on the ground was that women were being affected, but they were absent from the discussions at a global level.

The U.N. Security Council is ultimately the most important global body that we have where issues of peace and security are discussed, so women wanted recognition in that space. When women are involved in a substantive way, the outcomes are not only good for women, but they're also good for society.



But at the moment, there is no punitive measure for not implementing these commitments. There's no incentive. Those involved very often will say, "Culturally, the parties to the negotiations won't have women there."

Our argument is "Why isn't the U.N. standing by its values?" Or, if the international donors and others are saying they care about this, then what are they specifically doing to make sure that these voices are there?

**You've discussed how "substantively" including women tends to result in a more durable peace. What does substantial inclusion mean to you?**

Very often, even if there's pressure, the parties involved in peace talks will shove one woman here and one woman there. For example, with the Afghan talks, the government delegation was named with five women on it and ended up having only three women. [Editor's Note: It is now four women.] That is not sufficient. In general, it becomes this question of quality: Are the women political party hacks, or are they genuinely connected to wider movements?

Two women sat among those with Abdullah Abdullah, center, chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, during talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in September. Hussein Sayed/Associated Press

**Global foreign policy and other world leaders co-signed an open letter calling for women's meaningful participation in the Afghan peace talks currently underway in Doha. Within reason, how would you set up the peace talks differently?**

These talks are just the beginning. As the process goes on, there should be more pressure and a willingness on the government side to have more women present, not only the women who are there now.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

It's also necessary to bring in voices from the ground up — from across Afghanistan's different provinces — to speak to the Taliban, the government and the international facilitators. Bring in the voices of Taliban widows. Bring the voices of young women and men. What's the future they want?

People think about these types of negotiations as very rational and intellectual. No. They're existential. They are psychosocial and emotional as well. Everybody's traumatized. You've had 40 years of war. Bringing that human face and that vision of what a future could look like for everybody is important.

**Tell us some success stories of women being part of peace negotiations.**

In the late '90s, Northern Ireland had a separate women's delegation, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, at the table, negotiating on equal footing. In Liberia in 2003, it was women who mobilized, pressed for the peace talks to take place and challenged the warring parties. The peace agreement was finally signed, and women kept up the pressure for Liberia finally having a period of some stability. We know from the Philippines, if we have women-led groups monitoring the cease-fires, they are much more successful because they can see the problems, they can be preventive and people can trust them. More recently, we saw the importance of women's participation in Colombia's peace agreement, the text of which is one of the most inclusive and comprehensive agreements. The challenge there now is implementation.

We have examples of successes, but the issue is that from an international community standpoint, we're not building on the good practices.

**Despite the progress, why does women's exclusion from peace processes remain the norm?**

Traditionally, peace processes tend to be like a football game where there are just two sides taking part. It's a flawed model, because so much of society is affected but not represented. The U.N. system and our diplomatic structures are still constrained in how they recognize civil society, and peace builders, who are majority women, are still not widely recognized. You can get individual bureaucrats or envoys in these processes who, despite all the research showing that women have a positive impact, think their involvement is of secondary importance or say things like, "Women will rock the boat." They question and dismiss what the women in these societies know, and prefer to go down a traditional path, even though the exclusive peace processes don't work. So

there's this triple whammy of sexism, racism and systemic flaws in how peace processes are designed, how mediation teams play politics and how they are pressured by states and armed groups.

**Central to your work is bringing women to the table as full and equal partners, but it's not easy. What empowers you to keep pushing forward?**

The women I work with. Peace builders are creative, and they're optimistic — they're driven by hope. I'm always in awe of how they carry on despite everything that they face.

When I started this work 25 years ago, there were women stepping up in Rwanda, Guatemala, Israel, Palestine, and one could have argued those were special cases. But over the years as I've done this, I've always been struck that when conflict or violence erupts — every society has these women in them that emerge on the front lines. It's very lonely work. It's very dangerous work. Not everybody runs to the problem. On the one hand, what these women are saying and doing is extraordinary and unique in their setting. On the other hand, there's something incredibly universal about it. Introducing them to a global community of women doing this work — a place where they can feel at home; that's what keeps me going.

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