



POLICY BRIEF

Psychosocial support for women mediators: A missing tool to support women's participation in peace processes.

Despite being a pillar of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, a significant barrier to women's participation in peace processes is the lack of effective protection and response mechanisms for gender-based impact. Responding to a gap in analysis on how gender interacts with the psychological impacts of peacebuilding on peacebuilders and mediators, recent research by the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth network (WMC) explores the psychosocial impacts of peacebuilding and mediation work on women practitioners and identifies a number of support structures to prevent, minimise and respond to this impact.

Psychosocial support, inclusive of both the psychological and social support needs of individuals, can be preventative and curative and includes education, counselling, wellness skills, family and community support, and other forms of care that address emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs.

Mediators experience high levels of negative personal impact from their work, which is compounded by gender and other intersecting identities. Working in a highly male-dominated field, women mediators often experience being the only woman in the spaces where they are working. Many women mediators must overcome cultural barriers to their work, including ingrained norms that conflict resolution is "men's work". Negative personal impacts included a range of mental, emotional and physical signs of stress, including poor health and worry about personal safety.

Personal risks facing women mediators are substantial and wide-ranging. Women mediators from the WMC highlighted physical threats related to gender-related pushback associated with their work, as well as the inherent dangers of working in conflict zones. The physical impacts of these threats-- including physical assaults, sexual harassment, kidnapping, and threats to their families and staff-- are immense and the related psychosocial impact cannot be underestimated. Women are often under more pressure than male counterparts to consider these impacts on their families, and women mediators highlighted the impact this had on their personal wellbeing. The time required to respond to or recover from some of these threats can take women away from their mediation and peacebuilding roles, creating a barrier to full and active participation.

However, the experience of women mediators from the WMC demonstrates that women maintain significant professional resilience in their mediation and peacebuilding work despite the negative personal impact they often experience. This resilience is often not recognised, yet understanding how women mediators employ their resilience is critical to understanding how best to support them and enabling productive environments for their work. The following recommendations for governments, regional women mediator networks, INGOs, and UN Departments have been identified

by the women mediators and peacebuilders who contributed to this research. Integrating these psychosocial support recommendations into mediation and peacebuilding will allow women's participation to be more robust and sustained, creating a meaningful mechanism to achieve WPS goals.

Recommendation 1: Mainstreaming psychosocial support

- **Mainstream self-care and psychosocial support for women mediators and peacebuilders by prioritising it within the WPS agenda.** Governments, regional women mediator networks, the Global Alliance, INGOs and UN departments should lead on creating a culture of self-care and psychosocial support by integrating it into programmes, as part of standard operating procedures and formal budget structures.
- **Mainstream trauma response into both formal academic programmes and informal training programs for mediators and peacebuilders.** This will allow practitioners to begin learning about and practising the trauma response skills needed early in their careers, thereby preventing long-term personal impact and more effective professional practice.

Recommendation 2: Safe spaces and peer support

- **Create structured and resourced peer support spaces for women mediators and peacebuilders that offer healing, learning and support.** These may include formal peer support groups with regular check-in sessions, expert-led sessions, formal and informational opportunities for paired peer support, and access to a resource bank. These spaces should be created within regional women mediator networks and through INGOs that support mediation and peacebuilding.
- **Offer practitioner-centred retreats led by experts and focused on healing, reflection, recovery, skill building and rejuvenation for women mediators and peacebuilders.** Retreats could provide facilitated storytelling sessions, formal therapeutic support, group psychosocial support sessions, wellness skills, complementary therapies and recreational opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Psychoeducation and training

- **Embed trauma-informed and resilience-focused training within the WPS agenda, operationalised for and by leadership.** Training would provide leadership with a deeper understanding of the impact that women practitioners experience, and influence the implementation of policies, programming and support through a trauma-informed lens. Trainings for women mediators and practitioners could take place within regional women mediator networks and INGOs.
- **Offer women mediators and peacebuilders trauma-informed and resilience-focused training through a train-the-trainer model.** Many women within the field of WPS have backgrounds in social work, psychology and/or counselling and have an in-depth understanding of how trauma is impacting women practitioners. A train-the-trainer model would allow practitioners to share practical skills with conflict parties and conflict-affected communities for broader reach and positive impact.
- **Create a databank of resources on trauma, self-care and resilience for women mediators and peacebuilders.** This could include academic publications, journals, videos, presentation recordings and papers, and wellbeing tools, and should be freely accessible and available through the regional women mediator networks and INGOs.

Recommendation 4: Counselling and therapeutic support

- **Operationalise a counselling infrastructure for women practitioners, by women practitioners, within the WPS agenda.** Counselling services could be funded by governments and others managing peace processes and offered through INGOs.
- **Offer specialised training and counselling certification to women mediators and peacebuilders who are interested in providing clinical support to their peers.**

Pursuing specialised training also provides women practitioners with an opportunity to pause from frontline work while continuing to support peace processes by providing clinical support to peacebuilders. Funding for the creation of a cadre of women practitioners with clinical skills should be provided by governments and WPS funders.

Recommendation 5: Advocacy and research

- **Integrate advocacy for the psychosocial support of women mediators and peacebuilders into the WPS agenda in order to normalise the discussion.** Advocacy should be utilised to change policies and agendas, increase budgets and funding, and create new structures for support. Governments, INGOs and regional women mediator networks need to collaborate to amplify the discussion, source funding and create practical structures of support.
- **Promote recognition of the role of women mediators and peacebuilders at local regional, national and international levels.** This recognition should come with practical commitments to the safety and security of women practitioners, as well as an acknowledgment of personal impact and professional resilience. Though governments are in a key position to offer recognition, INGOs and regional women mediator networks need to continue to promote the work and needs of women practitioners.
- **Fund continued research into themes related to the personal impact and professional resilience of women mediators.** Research themes may include: intersectional aspects of the psychosocial impact of peacebuilding on women peacebuilders; support mechanisms; sources of professional resilience; removing barriers to participation; intergenerational support; the role of family responsibilities; and the application of clinical versus non-clinical support structures.

Recommendation 6: Prevention

- **Develop conflict analysis and risk assessment frameworks that can be applied by women mediators and peacebuilders to evaluate the potential threats, risks and negative impacts associated with specific contexts.** The frameworks should provide tools, guidance and resources to enable women practitioners to respond to the risks and enhance their safety and wellbeing pre-, during and post-process.
- **Offer pre- and post-deployment briefings that take into account psychosocial needs and impact to every woman mediator and peacebuilder.** Pre-deployment briefings should be conducted by other women mediators and peacebuilders for the purpose of preventative planning and support. Post-deployment debriefings could range from formal counselling to informal peer support. Briefings should be funded by those sponsoring processes.
- **Establish sexual harassment awareness, response and reporting frameworks within organisations working with and deploying women mediators and peacebuilders.** Women should know exactly what support mechanisms are in place and how to access those supports immediately upon experiencing harm. Governments, INGOs and regional women mediator networks should employ these frameworks and require related organisations to do so.

Recommendation 7: Financial Support

- **Implement funding structures that will effectively support the deployment and compensation of women mediators and peacebuilders working at the local, national, regional and international levels.** Advocacy for governments and INGOs to provide appropriate levels of funding for the deployment of women practitioners should continue to be a key aim within the WPS agenda.
- **Fund new self-care and psychosocial support structures for women mediators and peacebuilders.** Funding through a gendered lens means recognising the need to fund co-mediators and peacebuilding teams to lessen the impact of security concerns and to embed psychosocial support into processes. This funding should come from governments and WPS funders and allocated throughout WPS structures and organisations, including the regional women mediator networks.

This policy brief summarises the key findings and recommendations from the full report, [Personal Impact, Professional Resilience: The Psychosocial Implications of Peacebuilding for Women Mediators](#). This report is the result of research which explored the psychosocial impacts of conflict transformation work on 28 experienced women mediators and peacebuilders from the WMC. Through research methodologies that drew on participants' professional experiences, the report provides an overview of the personal impact of their work, their professional resilience in the face of challenging factors, and the support mechanisms that would benefit women mediators and peacebuilders working with conflict-affected populations.

The WMC is a diverse network of expert women mediators, from all Commonwealth regions, with experience across community, national and international spaces of conflict mediation. The network seeks to increase the participation of women mediators in all spaces of mediation. Launched in July 2018, the WMC has provided expertise globally and regionally and supports' members peacebuilding and peer learning. The WMC is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and supported by Conciliation Resources. Other WMC's research on the barriers and enabling factors for women's participation includes: [Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap](#) and [Beyond the vertical: What enables women mediators to mediate](#).

For more information on the WMC, its members and these reports, please visit www.womenmediators.org

This policy brief was developed by the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth network, with support from Conciliation Resources and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

