



Women in Mediation

March 16th 2021



Only [6 percent](#) of the mediators in peacekeeping processes are female. In celebration of International Women's Day, we had the pleasure to talk to some of the female mediators who are active in peace keeping processes as well as private mediation. Aparna Mukerjee, Tabitha van den Berg and Mari Vanhanen shared their experiences with students and answered questions of the Q&A. [The event](#) showcased how gender affects the work of female mediators in an intercultural context. The main question of the event was if gender has played a role in their experience in mediation, and if so, how?

A recent worldwide increase in women empowerment movements has opened up the discussion on gender-dynamics in mediation. The field of mediation is still dominated by men, but women are becoming more prominent as networks such as Women Mediators across the Commonwealth Network and Fem-Wise Africa have emerged. Luckily our panelist argued they didn't experience discrimination and believe women aren't significantly treated differently. However, there are simply more men in mediation, as there are more male lawyers. The panelists argue that female mediators are first and foremost seen as their profession and official position and the latter their gender.

The panelists noted that the parties are most important in mediation, and not you as a mediator. "We are there to help the parties, it's not about us the mediators", as argued by **Aparna Mukerjee**. The trust between the parties and the mediator is of the most significance. Trust in the process, trust in the mediator and trust between the parties. Building this trust is the job of the mediator. If parties feel uncomfortable with you as a mediator, because of your gender or other reasons, then you as a mediator can't be the instrument of fruitful dialogue as trust is absent. The mediator is there to help the parties find a solution. For this, the root causes of the problem have to be addressed, which becomes impossible if there is no trust. All the mediator can do is have a conversation why the parties are uncomfortable. In relation to this, **Mari Vanhanen** says that the most important quality for a mediator is supporting others and a genuine intention to help. As she says, "If you treat the party with respect, they will understand you are there to help them". There aren't specifically different styles in mediation among the different genders. The difference between the latter are merely perceived gender differences. "It shouldn't be an issue, but if parties have a sense that it's an issue, then it becomes an issue", states Tabitha van den Berg. For instance, the panelists state that sometimes a female as well as a male mediator have to be present in mediation, especially in family mediation in which the parents are a man and a woman.

Should mediators encourage empowerment of women then? Gender as well as mediation is personal. Female mediators bring their own gender into the mediation, and thus a part of their identity is incorporated in the mediation. Neutrality is a golden rule in mediation. However, being completely blind in regard to gender is impossible. Aparna Mukerjee suggests empowering all genders. "If there are certain emotions women have in the conflict, these need to be addressed". There are several strategies to highlight to increase the representation of women. Inclusion of all parties involved is crucial for fruitful dialogue. For instance, Aparna Mukerjee suggests setting up informal meetings with women or other minorities in spaces they feel comfortable.

The panelists do argue that they wouldn't change their approach according to someone's gender. Although, the panelists say a mediator has to change its approach to cultural sensitivity and be sensitive to the communal way of organization. Again, the comfort of the parties is of the highest importance. Crucial for this cultural sensitivity is language and communication. Mari Vanhanen illustrates that cultural difference in communication can lead to conflicted perception of one another through an example of different approaches of Finish and Spanish mediators. There may also be cultural differences in gender perceptions and communication for which a mediation has to be aware and adjust their approach.

Alongside gender, intergenerational problems are prominent in mediation. People are more prone to trusting individuals based on their seniority. **Tabitha van den Berg** shared that she was discouraged to become a female mediator, because the field is tough and seniors argue the job is impossible to do without experience. Young women are scared to enter the job market because they believe their age might be problematic. Our panelists agree that there are significant barriers in entering the field. "Young mediators don't have to un-learn as much as older mediators". Gender doesn't seem to be a significant issue for parties, but more so for the peers of the mediator.

What would the panelist say to future mediators? A good role model or mentor can be influential. As women, we have to support one another. However, it seems as though young women are underestimated not primarily by the parties involved but by their own peers. Barriers created by gender differences are thus most evident on the road towards becoming a mediator rather than the practice of mediation itself.

The event was organised by The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Centre of Expertise Global Governance and the Trust Mediators group and can be watched via [this YouTube link](#).