

Promoting women in peace mediation across the island of Ireland

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ACADEMIC



CULTURAL



EDUCATIONAL



POLITICAL



SOCIAL

SUMMARY

Women play an important role in peace mediation, but their experiences are often overlooked. Dr Heidi Riley's research shed light on the diversity of experience among women working in mediation and peacebuilding from across the island of Ireland, including migrant and refugee women.

The project had a notable impact on the grassroots women peacebuilders who participated in the project. It provided a space for them to share their experiences and achievements, and influenced discussions on how they perceive and value their roles as 'peace mediators' and the challenges they face. Through this work, Dr Riley and colleagues also influenced the development of several mediation and peacebuilding networks.

The project has wider social and academic impact through the development of a short film, as well as an article that contributes to the 'Women, Peace and Security' literature.

"A real opportunity to connect, reflect, and share with other women our collective knowledge and experiences of peace building and mediation."

Focus group participant

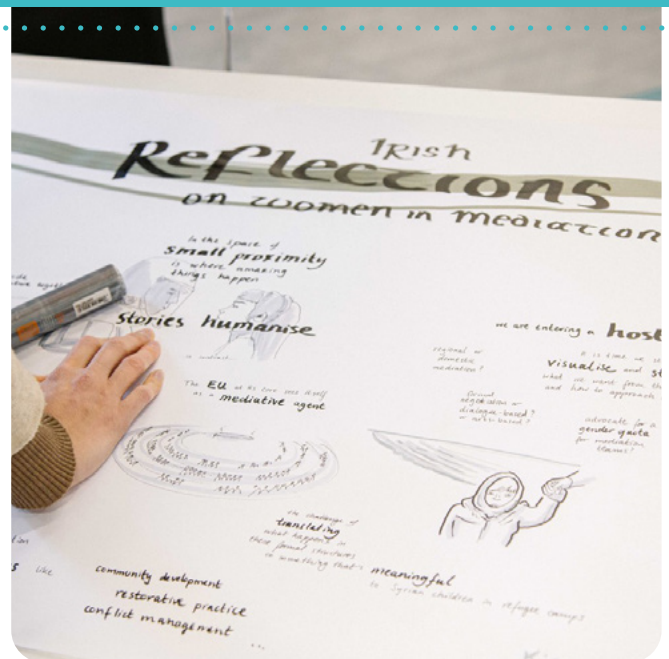
RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

Statistics on peace mediation show high levels of gender inequality. For instance, studies on peace negotiations show that women only make up 4% of mediators. However, statistics like this focus almost exclusively on high-level peace talks while excluding peace mediation at the grassroots level. This is an area where women are more highly populated, yet their experiences are frequently ignored.

On the island of Ireland women have played vital roles in all areas of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. There are also women now living on the island who come from areas of conflict, and who have important peacebuilding and mediation experience, such as mediating between contentious groups at the local level. Yet findings demonstrated that this is frequently overlooked.

Dr Riley's research therefore mapped the diversity of women's experiences in peace mediation across the island of Ireland and exposed the multitude of challenges women face in this area.

Her research was carried out between May 2019 and March 2020. She held four focus groups with women in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Dundalk and Dublin.



Stephanie Heckman's visualisation of reflections of the discussions at the public seminar.

Through these events, Dr Riley and colleagues engaged with 46 women peacebuilders who use or have used peace mediation skills in their peacebuilding work. The events provided a space to reflect on the value of their work and share their insights and experiences.

As a way of more directly representing the voices of women in this field, and to make the findings more accessible to a wider audience, a short film titled ‘Women’s Voices: Building Networks’ was produced. The film provides insight into the key findings of the research, explained from the perspectives of the research participants. It identifies what women bring to mediation processes, the challenges women face in the field of mediation, and the diversity of methods they use.

A public seminar was also held on the 11 March 2020, attended by roughly 80 people, including women practitioners, NGOs, academics, and representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The seminar included a screening of the short film and panel discussions with participants and experts in the field of mediation.



Mary Montague (*Mediators Beyond Borders*) and Liza Wilkinson (*Tides Training and Consultancy*) discussing their experiences as mediators.

RESEARCH TEAM, COLLABORATORS AND FUNDING

Research team and collaborators

- Heidi Riley (lead researcher)
- TIDES Training and Consultancy, Belfast (partnering organization)
- Mary Montague, *Mediators Beyond Borders* (key consultant)
- Emma Murphy (research assistant)
- Laura Sheeran (film maker)

Funding

This project was co-funded by the Irish Research Council and The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. The Institute for British-Irish Studies provided additional funding for the ‘visualiser’, which was important for the short film and for creating visuals of the public seminar.

RESEARCH IMPACT

Social and cultural impact

The focus groups had a direct impact on the individual participants by helping them redefine the peacebuilding work that they do on a daily basis. Importantly, before the discussions, women didn’t necessarily recognise themselves as peace ‘mediators’ despite using mediative practice in their work. This led to participants reconsidering the importance of their work, since the term ‘mediator’ is often given more value than that of ‘peacebuilder’.

One participant originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who came to live in Monaghan as part of a resettlement programme, noted how she was “waiting for an opportunity to participate in something like this”. Her work on mediating between families and warring groups, while she was in refugee camps in Burundi and Tanzania, had not been recognised or valued since she came to Ireland. As a result of the project, she is now on the steering committee of Glencree’s All-Ireland women’s peacebuilding network (see Policy section below).

Narratives that highlight the experiences, expertise and challenges that women face in gaining space at a negotiating table were made more widely visible via the short film, which has had almost 600 views since it was made public online in April 2020.

Policy impact

The project has influenced strategic planning for programmes at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, an Irish-based international hub for conflict resolution and promoting sustainable peace. It helped inform the development of their All-Ireland Network of women Peacebuilders, which has now been formally established and held its first online event in September 2020.

As a result of the project, Christian Aid has recently applied for UN funding to develop a women’s peacebuilding network as part of their programmes in Burkina Faso, to address issues of discrimination and exclusion in the transition towards peace in the North and center North region.

The project also contributed to Ireland’s National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, led by the Conflict Resolution Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs. From this perspective, the project has encouraged discussions on the possible development of a more formal Irish network of women mediators, which can contribute to better connecting local and global peacemaking processes and increase Ireland’s influence in promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Academic impact

The forthcoming article in the journal *Dealing with the Legacy of Conflict in Northern Ireland through Engagement & Dialogue*, based on the findings of the research, has an impact on the Women, Peace and Security literature, by challenging the narrow focus of how 'peace mediation' is defined. It argues that to the term's current formulation – focused primarily on high-level peace negotiations – contributes to the lack of recognition of women's expertise in this field.

Educational impact

The short film has made an impact on the teaching of this subject as it has become a teaching resource for courses on gender and conflict at UCD and TCD.

TESTIMONIALS

"Participating in the research and focus groups was a real opportunity to connect, reflect, and share with other women our collective knowledge and experiences of peace building and mediation. It provided a safe and valuable space to acknowledge and recognize the value of each other's contribution and the challenges faced throughout our journeys. With this, how meditative practices had been to the fore of our peace building practice, without many of us realizing so. The focus group also provided a supportive space to give each other strength, conviction and reenergize."

Participant at focus group in Derry/Londonderry

"It was an incredible privilege for TIDES to be part of this this consultation, highlighting and celebrating the work of women involved in mediation and peace building across the island of Ireland. Stories of bravery, empathy and innovation came up time and time again in our conversations. As did the unique challenges women can face when engaging in mediation. The consultation created spaces of shared learning and support and crucially highlighted the need for more long-term and sustainable support for women involved in mediation."

Liza Wilkinson, CEO, TIDES Training and Consultancy

"Participation in the project on women in peace mediation on the island of Ireland, provided a valuable opportunity for networking and conversation leading to more collaborative working, avoiding duplication and working together more strategically. Glenree has drawn on this research to inform our own thinking around the formation of an All island network of women peacebuilders, and as part of this we have reached out to involve some of the women who participated in Dr's Riley's project."

Louise Keating, Glenree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation

"The outcome of the research work and contacts, which Dr Riley has outlined in her report, will greatly assist DFAT's work in this area. I was also pleased to be able to participate in the Dublin workshop in March along with my colleagues from CRU. We found the day invaluable in connecting with women mediators from Northern Ireland and academics and listening to their stories."

Aine Hearn, Director, Conflict Resolution Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

"As someone interested in working in the area of conflict resolution and mediation, the testimonies made me feel inspired and hopeful about entering the field, as many of the women who shared their stories have played fundamental roles—both in their communities and at the national/international level—in facilitating peace on the island of Ireland despite being excluded from high-level peace talks."

Shelby Gavigan, Masters Student, UCD SPIRe (participant at public seminar)



Visualisation of the challenges that women face in the field of peace mediation. This image shows the masculine culture in the field of mediation.

REFERENCES

Multimedia

Film: Women's Voices: Building Networks.

Academic papers and reports

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