

Monica McWilliams

Professor Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University, N Ireland

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Good Morning Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee. I thank you for the invitation to address this distinguished Committee.

My testimony today is informed by my experience as a negotiator and signatory to the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement; as the cofounder and leader of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, a political party that was elected to participate in the peace talks; and as a former member of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland. I also served as Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission from 2005 until 2011, drafting the advice on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. I am currently tasked by the Northern Ireland government to develop a strategy for the disbandment of paramilitary groups by May 2016, the first woman to be appointed to a high-level monitoring panel in the post-conflict phase.

Northern Ireland's experience exemplifies the importance of having women involved at all stages of a peace process. At the commencement of the peace talks in 1996, women in civil society were concerned that scant attention would be paid to the role that women had played during the previous 25 years of the conflict. Women in Northern Ireland had been credited with holding the line between warring factions and had created hundreds of active local groups as part of a bottom up women's social movement, which crossed the political/sectarian divide. At times of crisis, it was women on either side of the peace walls who introduced a system of cell phones and opened up communication lines to break down the lies and rumours that often led to riots. They worked as early warning systems and ascertained the facts of who was doing what so that the trouble could be nipped in the bud at an early stage.

Following the ceasefires in the mid-1990's, we became aware that government parties, ex-combatants, and constitutional parties were being invited to participate in formal peace talks. Despite the tremendous role women had played throughout the conflict in pushing for the parties to make peace, women were largely excluded from the previous negotiations because they were underrepresented in these parties. Realizing that the 1996 process would otherwise exclude us, a group of civic activists—including myself—decided to form a Women's Coalition that would include Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist women, as well as women who did not wish to be categorised using these binary identities. In order to enter the peace talks, declared by the British and Irish governments in April 1996, groups had to form themselves into political parties. The Women's Coalition became an official party, and had six weeks to get elected to the negotiations. We went around the country to all of our pre-existing networks, convincing the electorate that women deserved to have a seat at the table. We earned enough votes to become one of the ten parties at the peace table. On the day we entered the room, I looked around at the delegates present and realised we were the only women. We joined the three percent of women globally who have negotiated and signed a peace agreement.

To become part of the formal peace talks, the Women's Coalition adopted the UN Beijing Platform for Action, using its principles of inclusion, equality, and human rights to ground our work. We wanted to close the gap between community-based organizations and the more formal, official negotiation parties. Because we challenged the process at the pre-negotiations stage, the peace talks opened up to allow "outsiders," such as the Women's Coalition, to become official "insiders."

And that is the first lesson that we learned. Peace negotiations need to be designed to create an effective, inclusive process so that women's voices from civil society have an opportunity to be heard. Recently, I have been involved in capacity-building workshops with women from Syria who are participating in the talks in Geneva. After tremendous advocacy led by women in civil society and commitment from the UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, these talks have been opened up, which is a sign of progress. The precedent has now been set at the Syrian talks for a civil society forum and a women's advisory group to be present. They will sit in a parallel forum to the main delegations, of which there are several women on each side, and will act as advisors throughout the process in Geneva. Drawing on my experience with the Women's Coalition, I now prepare these Syrian women for the "pushback" that often accompanies women coming forward in this way.

In Northern Ireland, for instance, we had prepared for the various negotiating positions, but were less prepared for the open hostility from other parties at the table, veering at different times between misogyny and sectarianism. We had to find new tools to deal with this initial hostility, using "name and shame" notice boards outside our offices to expose those who insisted on insulting us. We also used our good humor when they told us to go home and stand by our men or that the only women who should be at the table should be there to polish it. We attracted a great deal of media attention as a result, and slowly the bad behaviour and male posturing began to change. In his book on the peace process, former US Senator George Mitchell, who chaired the talks, recognized the Women's Coalition as effective negotiators and among the most credible actors at the table. Senator Mitchell frequently relied on us to bring accurate information on what was happening outside the room, and drew on our ability to disseminate a solution-focused approach at every stage of the negotiation—which helped to keep the media as well as the wider community on board.

Finding ways to create an inclusive process is key. Bringing groups such as ex-combatants into the process is not an easy task, especially when they have not disarmed, but the Women's Coalition recognized at an early stage that we should reach out to them. We knew that, once the ex-combatants agreed to abide by the principles of non-violence set for the talks, they too could be part of a different future. As a party to the problem, they needed to become a party to the solution. President Nelson Mandela had told us when he brought us to South Africa: "There is not much point in negotiating with your friends, you need to talk to your enemies." The Women's Coalition established back channels and found ways to reassure those who remained nervous about the process that it could and would work. When violence is the norm and peace is the mystery, the progress of the talks depended on efforts of women inspiring and sustaining all of the actors.

The second issue that I want to focus on is the substance of peace talks—what gets put on the table and what is agreed. If the process is to become genuinely transformative and democratic, women also have interests that need to be recognized. Having women at the peace table in Northern Ireland contributed to an improved negotiating process and a more comprehensive agreement. We believed that there should be "nothing about us, without us" in the final agreement, and we worked hard to make this happen. In prioritizing the interests of the warring factions, conflicting parties may fail to address the wider concerns of civic society. As a member of the Women's Coalition, and its principal negotiator, I was aware of the importance of creating a more comprehensive agreement. Not only did we negotiate demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of former combatants; we also ensured that integrated education, the needs of victims, and reconciliation would be included. Many of the proposals that we inserted into the agreement changed how we viewed the sustainability of the peace process in the longer term. Had women negotiators been absent, issues related to victims, children, and young people; mixed housing; integrated education and community development; and the establishment of a civic forum would not have been included, making long-term sustainability of the

agreement less likely. These issues are part of the “normalisation” process and, in my experience, where they are not delivered, the potential for a return to conflict remains high.

There are also gender-specific issues that need to be addressed, and which women are more likely to raise during peace negotiations. Proposals for peace must take into account the differential impact of conflict on men and women. From my own work on domestic violence, I am aware of how this can escalate during periods of conflict, and how in peacetime the police, for example, need to be reoriented to dealing with this as a serious criminal issue. The “domestic” terrorism that law enforcement focused on did not include the kind of terror that women faced from men known to them. So the criminal justice system also needs reforms within peace agreements and in their implementation to take account of such issues. As women, we also drew attention to domestic violence in advocating for the decommissioning of weapons that was also part of the peace agreement, knowing that if less guns were available then fewer women would be murdered through the use of these weapons in the future. The Women’s Coalition also succeeded in having clauses inserted into the agreement on women’s political participation. In making these proposals, we knew that more women would vote for the agreement if they could see themselves in the substance of what was being agreed.

The third issue is how to implement or enforce what has been promised. Too often, what gets agreed at the table is not delivered, which places the entire process in jeopardy. It is during the aftermath of a peace agreement that women become disadvantaged, particularly if they have no role in the governance arrangements. Although the Women’s Coalition inserted specific clauses on the role of women into the Good Friday Agreement, these were ignored. Women were told that their interests were not sufficiently serious to be prioritized and could wait to be resolved at a later stage. For example, while institutional reforms in the post-Agreement period addressed imbalances in religious representation, none were made to ensure gender parity. A quota was introduced to allow for 50 percent recruitment of Catholics to the new police service, but it was not extended to women on the grounds that such positive action for women in the new institutions would be discriminatory. Peace agreements mean new ways of doing things, a new prism for seeing things, so when it comes to elevating women in positions of decision-making and leadership, parties should not be allowed to revert to what they are most comfortable with.

Governments need to take a more active role in elevating women in the post-conflict period. The sole focus should not lie with getting an agreement on power-sharing between conflicting parties. The government officials within the Northern Ireland peace process could have exerted pressure to ensure that special temporary measures for women were put in place to bring more parity in all areas of society. Political life has suffered from having a lack of female representatives. In the process of establishing monitoring bodies on the peace process, for decommissioning, for policing reforms, for paramilitary activity, the key positions were all allocated to men. I am the first woman to be appointed to a panel to develop a strategy for the disbanding of paramilitary groups, and that is almost 20 years after the agreement. The diminution of women’s contribution to peacebuilding has meant a loss of the plurality and creativity that was so beneficial to the peace negotiations in the first place.

The Women’s Coalition paid a good deal of attention to the role of civil society and as such, it inserted a clause into the peace agreement that allowed for the establishment of a civic forum. Women recognize the importance of participatory, consultative, and deliberative forums in contested policy arenas. It is unfortunate that, in the aftermath of the agreement, the Civic Forum was abolished by the parties responsible for establishing the new governance structures. The lesson for us was that aspirational proposals in a peace agreement are not good enough. They need to be

accompanied by benchmarks and timetables, alongside champions tasked to ensure these are enforced. In the absence of a critical mass of women in the bureaucracy or legislature, finding champions to deliver what has been agreed becomes crucial. I wish to commend here the role of the US government at that time, which ensured those champions were available to us. Female US Consul staff and high-ranking US women who became involved in the Northern Ireland peace process acted as role models in the predominantly male culture at that time.

Precarious progress has been made, but we need to move more rapidly to a situation where gender perspectives are taken seriously and where policymakers see the inclusion of women as beneficial to their institutional reforms and political decision-making. Peace agreements are important because they address the past and articulate the priorities for the future. Women need to be a central part of that process.

In conclusion, my testimony reflects the following recommendations:

- From the outset of peace negotiations, mechanisms should be established to include civil society actors, particularly women, and to maintain their involvement at every stage of peace negotiations.
- Mediators should mandate that parties involved in peace negotiations should aim to have at least 30% female delegates as this figure is regarded as the 'critical mass' for women's presence within the process.
- A clear reporting and monitoring mechanism should be established at the implementation stage of a peace agreement, with clear lines of responsibility allocated to specific individuals, to ensure provisions for women's inclusion in decision making and public life become institutional guarantees.
- Parity actions and special temporary measures should be introduced to ensure increased representation of women in elected and consultative forums to the legislature at the post agreement stage. US policymakers should ensure specific champions within its missions are identified to assist women inside the conflict region with this process.
- Specific indicators, benchmarks, and targets should be established to ensure that proposals relating to women in the peace agreement are implemented.
- The US and other international actors should invest in programs that build the capacity of women and other civil society actors to address gender-specific and more human security oriented needs throughout the entire lifecycle of the peace talks and implementation.
- A civic forum should be established as a formalized part of negotiations, particularly where institutional and governance arrangements will lean towards the male-dominated status quo.
- Increasing attention should be drawn to the international human rights standards to address the needs of women in peace agreements and increasing use should be made of the UN security council resolutions aimed at advancing women's inclusion in building peace and security.

My experience and that of other women negotiators demonstrates the impact that women can have in building sustainable peace. We need to prioritize women's inclusion when a conflict breaks out as well as when the violence ends. Should this happen, mountains can move.