

# Claiming Women's Rightful Space at the Peace Talks Table

Irene Santiago is a rights activist from the Philippines. She is organizing a series of peace talks hosted by women around the world, challenging the traditional notion that men should be at the head of negotiating tables.



Irene Santiago heads the panel implementing the peace accord negotiated in March 2014 between the government and the country's largest Muslim rebel group . *Photo by AP Photo*

If there is one woman who knows what it takes to fight for women's rights, it's Irene Santiago. She has spent four decades organizing, teaching and advocating for women's rights in her home of the Philippines, and across the world.

She is currently the Chair of the Implementing Commission for the [Bangsamoro Peace Accord](#), which brought to an end the 40-year armed struggle of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front for their own autonomous region in the Philippines – a conflict that left tens of thousands dead.

Since 2014 she has been running a global campaign to advocate for the rights of women in peace and security, called [Women Seriously](#), whose main message is: "If we are serious about peace, we must take women seriously." This October, the campaign is



due to launch at least 85 women's peace tables around the world, with the aim of encouraging more women to host and become involved in peacemaking events.



Irene Santiago in talks with Michael Mastura, seated, a member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), before their official negotiations in Tripoli, Libya Thursday, June 21, 2001. (AP/Amr Nabil)

“We hope that by the time October rolls around we will, at least, have 100 [tables] and then next year we will have maybe 300 and then that becomes a movement,” Santiago says.

“We’re encouraging women to host their own women’s peace tables. It doesn’t have to be big; it can be in your home, in your school, in your church.”

Santiago started as a journalist but her career ended when the Philippines president, Ferdinand Marcos, declared [martial law](#) in 1972, after a series of bombings in the capital, Manila.

After that, she spent 10 years working with Muslim women in Mindanao, one of the

poorest regions in the Philippines, which, she says, was a crucial period that shaped her thinking of what it meant to fight for women’s rights.

“When I started in 1977 there was no gender analytical framework. That was a very good time in my life because it was the formulation of the questions and when you get the questions right then you can probably have a better chance of getting the answers right.”

The questions they were asking were things like, “Why is it that we do everything?” and “Why is it that we are poor?”

An image that has always haunted Santiago was that of a woman she met during this time who was in her 30s and caring for six children. The woman looked sick and was anemic. Santiago realized that her problem was that she had no control over how many children she was going to have.

“It was later that I found out what the P word was – patriarchy,” she says.

Santiago’s work with women took on a more global aspect in the mid-90s. She had

been working for the United Nations Development Fund for Women ([UNIFEM](#)) when she was asked in 1995 to organize a forum for NGOs hosted alongside the Fourth [U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing](#). It was a job she tried at first to turn down.

“I remember sitting in a hotel in Senegal. It was one o’clock in the morning, and I was telling a friend of mine that I had been asked to be the executive director of the secretariat [for the forum].”

“I said, you know, I have this [other] job and I don’t want to leave it. He said, ‘You’re gonna make history if you take that job’. That’s all I needed to hear,” says Santiago.

She took a leave of absence without pay from her job at the U.N. and started organizing what later became – and still is – the largest international conference on women in history. There were 30,000 participants and 5,000 events in the forum’s 10 days.

“Many people called it life-changing, paradigm-shifting,” she remembers.

Santiago returned to the Philippines to continue her work in peace-building and in 2001 co-founded the [Mindanao Commission on Women](#). This, she says, was at the forefront of getting women’s voices heard in the ongoing peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. That same year she was asked to participate in the negotiations by the chair of the Philippine government’s negotiating panel.

“I said, ‘No, I’m not going to help you because I’m not going to sit behind you. I want to sit beside you.’”

That earned her a place as a full member on the panel, a lesson she still tries to pass on to the women she meets today.

“You want it? Tell them you want it, don’t be coy.”

Something women always ask her is how she gets men in the negotiations to take her seriously.

“Nobody needs gender in negotiations. Nobody. It’s a soft issue. When you’re a gender expert, you’re already marginalized, especially if you keep saying ‘what about women?’ all the time. People just switch off.”

Instead, she says, she became an expert in ceasefires, which made her a valuable member of the team in her own right. It was only then that she started to raise issues

related to women.

In 2014, as the anniversary of the Beijing Conference approached, she decided it was time to “kickstart” the women’s movement again. That’s when Women Seriously was established and she started thinking about holding global round-table discussions on peace, hosted by women. The cluster of peacemaking events in October will be the first of their kind and Santiago hopes it will open up space for women at the negotiating table.

After four decades, her own experience has shown her that that the best way to achieve change is to get organized.

“It’s hard every step of the way [but] I think women coming together is the beginning of change.”