

Gendered diplomacy, human rights and the role of women in making the Iran Deal

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The first 16 years of the 21st century have brought a host of new challenges and opportunities in relation to the presence of women at the negotiation tables & diplomatic talks. From civil war in Syria to war in South Sudan, the wars against Islamic State/ISIS and in Yemen, to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the refugee crisis in European countries, conflicts are worsening and wars and violence are eroding the rights and dignity of people at an alarming pace. As a result, peace and specifically sustainable peace as a basic human right is moving from the margin to the core of the global agenda. Defining and redefining the role of women in diplomacy will present new opportunities for what women can contribute in this arena. However, the existing power structure within many diplomatic infrastructures reinforce gender inequalities and sometimes overt discriminatory practice.

Although female diplomats like their male counterparts will represent their constituencies at talks and negotiations, women must be given a greater space within the sphere of diplomacy as equality in diplomatic and political participation plays a significant role in the overall advancement of women. Conflict negotiations, peace agreements and post-conflict reconstruction efforts are more sustainable and effective when women have a significant presence at the table.^[1] Due to the diverse skill sets and range of experiences women encounter, ensuring women are present at the conflict negotiation table is often seen to improve the quality of agreements reached and enhance the likelihood of meaningful implementation.^[2]

Women are disproportionately impacted by not only war, but also pre-war tensions and in post-war reconstruction. The experiences and challenges women and girls face are distinct from those of men;^[3] and often their experiences, views, and skills are dismissed, under-valued and under-utilized in the context of conflict resolution.^[4]

Studies on gender and armed conflict show that while men are more likely to die during conflicts, women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over.^[5] In a 2012 report on women's participation in peace negotiations, UN Women observed that a 'limited but reasonably representative sample of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011 reveals that only four percent of signatories, 2.4 percent of chief mediators, 3.7 percent of witnesses and 9 per cent of negotiators are women.'^[6] Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions globally. Given this, it is critical that governments and organizations meaningfully consider gender when planning for conflict negotiation and peace talks.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) is a landmark international legal framework that addresses not only the inordinate impact of war and conflict on women, but also the pivotal role of women in the consolidation of peace. UNSCR 1325 thus focused on the integration of gender perspectives in conflict resolution efforts, while also calling for the equal participation of women in 'all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security'.^[7]

Since 2000, the Security Council passed six additional resolutions on women, peace, and security. In 2015 the Security Council convened a high-level review to push for more meaningful implementation of UNSCR 1325 around the world. However, despite this landmark resolution, the Beijing Platform for Action signed by governments in 1995 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), women are still marginalized in peace and conflict talks and negotiations. Women particularly in conflict zones in the Global South want to have both a seat at the table and political agency, ensuring that women's rights and wellbeing are not being traded away by male negotiators.

In the case of Afghanistan, gender equality activists have consistently demanded that they be included in the negotiations. Their legitimate fear is that the Afghan Government compromises women's rights in efforts to reach agreement with Taliban. A 2014 study by Oxfam found that in 23 rounds of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban since 2005, one woman from the government was present on two occasions. No women were included in discussions between international negotiators and the Taliban.^[8]

Mouna Ghanem, the founder of the Syrian Women's Forum and member of the Women's Advisory Board, the first of its kind, established by UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura stated "This is not what we are aspiring for (referring to Women's Advisory Board). What we are aspiring for is not only participation...we are aspiring to be the decision makers, and we have a long way to go."

The Civil Society Organizations Affairs Unit in the Yemeni Prime Minister's Office, painted an almost identical picture, noting that the Yemeni peace talks also did not include women. She disclosed that women were excluded from talks in order to bring the two reluctant parties together to negotiate.

On the lack of representation of women at the talks, Director of the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace Zahra Langhi noted that mediation must go beyond just the representation of women, adding that the UN-led mission failed to do this. She stressed that "They can bring some women in a segregated track, tick the box and say 'we have women', but women were not respectively engaged in the process," she told Inter Press Service News Agency.^[9] She also noted the systematic violence against women representatives of civil society, including the assassination of prominent human rights lawyer and politician Salwa Bugaighis in June 2014, the gunning down of Fariha al-Barkawy a month later and the case of Intisar Al-Hassairy who was found dead in the trunk of her car.^[10]

Despite the dominant discourse on women's presence at the conflict negotiation talks, the team of women diplomats from the US and EU involved in the 'Iran Deal' - or as it was also called 'the Deal of the Century' - was an exception to the prevailing norm.^[11]

The history of this conflict goes back to 1984, during the Iran Iraq war. According to The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Iran's current supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was president at the time, endorsed a nuclear weapon program and said "a nuclear arsenal would serve Iran as a deterrent in the hands of God's soldiers".^[12]

The talks to resolve this conflict date back to 2006, though given the foreign policies of Presidents Bush and Ahmadinejad there was no hope that they might be fruitful. However, while the new waves of sanctions weakened Iran's economy, and the heavy economic burden of the war of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan deterred the US from the option of war, both parties were more open to sit at the negotiation table. Once Iran and the US agreed to proceed with talks, US and EU allies put together a 'winning team of negotiators' with three powerful negotiators-an American and two European women. The three western women were key to the comprehensive accord reached between Iran and the P5+1 on July 14 2015.

Federica Mogherini had previously served as Italy's Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation between February and October 2014 in the centre-left Cabinet of Matteo Renzi. She is a member of the Italian Democratic Party and the Party of European Socialists. Upon taking over as the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy in November 2014 she was the EU's chief diplomat in the P5+1 negotiations. A month before the accord was signed by Iran and the US, on 24 June 2015, in a speech in Brussels she said: "Islam holds a place in our Western societies. Islam belongs in Europe. It holds a place in Europe's history, in our culture, in our food and-what matters most-in Europe's present and future. Like it or not, this is the reality."^[13] During difficult points in the negotiation, the media both in the EU and US identified her as a tough negotiator and fellow negotiator Helga Schmid even called her 'The ringleader'.

Helga Schmid, brought her vast technical knowledge and years of experience, particularly in Iran negotiations, to the negotiation table. She believes "Women are better negotiators" and had experience of working with US partners going back to an early career stint as press officer at the German Embassy in Washington DC in 1991.

The third key player was Wendy R. Sherman, who served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the fourth-ranking official in the US Department of State, from September 2011 to October 2015 (four months after the Iran deal). She is now Senior Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. She brought much experience as one of the chief architects of the Clinton administration's North Korea nuclear policy and had taken the lead on the US nuclear talks with Iran since 2011.

Mogherini's predecessor Baroness Catherine Ashton, a British Labour politician who held the post from 2009 to 2014, was also a key player who had years of on and off negotiations with the Iranian government. She played a critical role in the P5+1 talks with Iran which led to the November 2013 Geneva interim agreement on Iranian nuclear program.^[14] Ashton is a seasoned mediator and was quoted in her approach to the Iranian negotiations as saying "You can achieve all sorts of things if you let others take the credit."^[15] Mogherini told the BBC in an interview that when the men veered off course and went on historical tangents or started to get tangled in debates about who gave more, the women walked them back to the present and reaffirmed that "having women at the table in key positions helped us [the negotiators] be concrete and pragmatic the whole way."^[16]

The selection of these experienced and seasoned female diplomats was a well thought out and purposeful choice that helped to make the negotiations a success.

between three women diplomats - former Ambassadors Kristie Kenney, Wendy Sherman and Swanee Hunt - and students at the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School in April 2016, when asked how gender affected their interactions, particularly with leaders from countries where women did not hold positions of power or were not as visible in the public sphere, all three women said there are certainly some challenges to being treated as an equal or in overcoming stereotypes.^[17] But, the gender of negotiators could also offer a favorable edge to the negotiators, in the same conversation they also said they had "greater freedom to say things that would be received far differently if uttered by a male colleague or to use traditional social conventions of dinners and galas to gain better access to world leaders."^[18]

In the 2012 UN Women report states that 'Our review of a sample of 31 major peace processes since 1992 shows that women represent a strikingly low number of negotiators, and that there has been little appreciable increase since the passage of UNSCR 1325 (in 2000). Women's participation in negotiating delegations averaged nine per cent in the 17 cases for which such information was available.' At the negotiation table, where crucial decisions about post-conflict recovery and governance are made, women are conspicuously underrepresented. Four per cent of signatories in the peace processes included in this sample were women, and women were absent from chief mediating roles in UN-brokered talks.^[19]

The lack of representation of women at the negotiating table was also expressed as a concern by Mogherini as she said “Parts of the Western or European public have been reacting and doubting that women were able or could be respected for playing a bigger role.” Sherman said that “despite increased female leadership, not all teams had a female presence...some of the teams were all men and I hope that will change.”^[20]

Miles away from the negotiation table, the Iranian state media published censored images of the early stages of negotiations. In those images, the neck of Catherine Ashton was covered by the Iranian press, which she objected to. But in response, she did change the way she dressed at the negotiating table. There were no women representing Iran, China and Russia.

However, the encounter of Iranian diplomats with women from the US and EU at the negotiations had some unintended consequences in Iran.

Gender was not only raised as an issue at the negotiation table, it was also reported on during the negotiations. Many major news outlets such as Reuters, CNN, France 24 had women in their team covering the negotiations, the same as Iranian women journalists in IRNA, Fars and Mehr. It was reported that 40% of the reporters covering the negotiations were women.^[21]

Other than reporting the negotiation, what was the role of women in facilitating the ‘Deal of the Century’? During the 59th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, surprisingly there was a significantly greater presence of Iranian women from Iran at both official and NGO events. The head of Iran’s official delegation was Ms. Shahindokht Molaverdi, Iran’s vice president for women and family affairs. Molavardi and the representative of the Iranian Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization (GONGO) - Women Entrepreneurship - represented their constituency and the Iranian government, creating an encouraging environment for the lifting of economic sanctions. From their statements it was made to seem as though all the challenges facing Iranian women at home, in their communities and in wider society would be resolved after sanctions were lifted.^[22]

The opening statement of Molaverdi’s address was a claim that many believed to be a sharp departure from truth. She stated that “Throughout its 36 years of life, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always had the empowerment of women and improving their status in scientific, cultural, social, economic and political arenas on its agenda while observing their human dignity.”^[23]

She mentioned “unjust sanctions” in her statement three times, saying that “as long as such obstacles as conflicts, insecurity, shortage of financial resources and investment, especially those emanating from sanctions, the weakness of accountability mechanisms or lack thereof, environmental challenges, and so on exist, it will be impossible to reach a comprehensive gender balance.” She also argued that “despite eight years of imposed war on Iran and ever-increasing cruel, unjust sanctions against the Iranian nation, the Iranian women have achieved significant progress in the fields of education and research, science, entrepreneurship, economy and health, and continue to play their influential role in the society.” Furthermore she said that “politics and power relations at the international arena and adoption of unilateral, force-based measures by certain countries, including the imposition of unjust sanctions, serve as an obstacle in the path of development, particularly the empowerment of women”. She concluded that “the international community should pay special attention to this important point and take a collective measure in order to avoid politicization of legal and developmental issues and to lift the unjust sanctions.”^[24]

There was little in her speech to suggest that domestic factors—including Iran’s laws and policies—play a significant role in depriving Iranian women of real gender equality and empowerment.

Ms. Molaverdi’s speech at the UN, which was a departure from the reality of the experiences of Iranian women and the challenges they face stayed true to furthering the agenda of lifting sanctions and putting the ‘gender equality efforts’ of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a good light, was not praised or appreciated by the

hardliners in positions of power in Iran. On her return to Iran, she was met with an outcry by those hardliners.^[25]

Just two days before the UN session, one of Iran's conservative newspapers - the *Kayhandaily*, thought to be close to the Office of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei - published an article that illustrated exactly what Iran's women's rights activists are up against. The author questioned the wisdom of allowing an official delegation to attend events such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women, describing its notion of 'gender equality' as 'unacceptable to the Islamic Republic.'^[26] The article accused Molaverdi of 'negligence' for participating in events that could damage Iran's reputation and interests, and accused the 150 or so people who attended the session as representatives of Iranian groups of doing so without full and proper vetting by Iran's security and intelligence agencies.

What is striking about *Kayhan*'s attack is that Iran's powerful security and intelligence apparatus has for years acted to repress independent groups, including women's rights activists.^[27] Groups like the One Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots effort designed to operate within the law to collect signatures supporting the repeal of laws that discriminate against women, were targeted as security officials detained their members on spurious 'national security' grounds. But those hostile to women's rights in Iran remain unrelenting. Anyone who fails, willingly or unknowingly, to heed their threats may face reprisals, as has been the experience of several activists who attempted to attend similar UN events in previous years.^[28]

Yet *Kayhan*'s attack also reflects the resilience and adaptability of women's groups in Iran as they continue to challenge the state's monopoly on the women's rights narrative. While Iranian women lost some important legal rights after the 1979 revolution, their social and economic stature increased on average as they gained wider access to education, health care, and birth control.

The image of the compromised and submissive woman engendered by Iran's discriminatory legal system bears little resemblance to the private and public lives of many Iranian women today.

The lack of representation of Iranian women in public life, government and diplomacy is a fact not even denied by the Iranian government.^[29] As of June 2016, among 193 countries, Iran ranked 173rd in terms of Parliamentary representation in a study compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In the last election Iran elected 17 women to the Parliament made up of 289 seats. This represents 5.9 per cent, the highest since the revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.^[30]

It should be noted that the US and EU women behind the Nuclear Accord instigated some conversations about the role of women in public life, even in the state controlled media in Iran. Some speculate that Iran's 2016 appointment of the first woman ambassador since the creation of the Islamic Republic was a response to the issue. Marziyeh Afkham, the first foreign ministry spokeswoman, became Ambassador to Malaysia. Afkham is only the second female ambassador Iran has had since ...?. Mehrangiz Dolatshahi, a three-time Member of Parliament during the period of late Shah of Iran, was known for her advocacy of the family protection law, which gave women the rights of divorce and child custody, became Ambassador to Denmark in 1976.

At the end, having a team of seasoned, experienced women, showing perseverance and tenacity at the table and the most important factor- political will on both sides of the negotiation table enabled the parties to reach an accord in this case. Gender politics and the politics of gender in peace and conflict negotiations have a long way to go to recognize the right of women to be equally engaged. Will we see the same political will for implementation of UN Security Council 1325? It is well past the time that the gender balance and representation of women at peace negotiations and post- conflict reconstruction, should be taken seriously ensuring the male dominated field of diplomacy opens doors for equally qualified change maker women.

