

Special Edition of the Interviews of the Observatory of Multilateralism and International Organisations - Women Mediators: From Local to Multilateral

Charles Tenenbaum

Hello everyone, and welcome to a special edition of the Interviews of the Observatory of Multilateralism and International Organisations, a podcast brought to you today by GRAM, the research group on multilateral action, in partnership with Conciliation Resources EU, one of the leading organisations dedicated to mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. My name is Charles Tenenbaum, Associate Professor of political science and co-head of the Observatory. Together with Olivia Caeymaex, director of the Brussels office of the NGO Conciliation Resources EU, we are pleased to welcome to the studio today a panel of women mediators, following a conference held earlier today at Sciences Po on the theme "Transmitting and renewing: how to support the new generation of women peace mediators?"

Olivia Caeymaex

Thank you very much, Charles, and hello. Today, nine women mediators with varied backgrounds and experiences officially launched an international network of French-speaking women mediators, or RIMEF, with the support of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. This network aims in particular to ensure that the voice of French-speaking women mediators is heard in peace processes and to support the next generation of young French-speaking women mediators. Beyond simply creating the network, its members want it to contribute to a change in conflict management and in governance more broadly. The creation of this network is a strong message today about the importance of mediation as the first response to crisis situations and about the involvement of women in peace processes. We are joined today by three of the network's mediators to discuss its objectives and their motivations for contributing to it so that it supports them in their work. Fatima Maiga, you are the founder of the coalition of women leaders of northern, southern and central Mali. You are a former chief of staff to the Minister of Reconciliation and you served as director of the UN Women office in Côte d'Ivoire. Esther Oman, you are the executive director of Reach Out Cameroon, a civil society organisation working with communities living in conflict situations. You are a humanitarian, a peacebuilder and a development leader who has worked in Cameroon, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. You have also received several awards for your work in mediation and women's leadership. Marguerite Kone Yoli-Bi Klintio, you are a former commissioner of the Independent Electoral Commission and president emerita of the West African Network for Peacebuilding, WANEP Côte d'Ivoire. You have also been recognised with several national and international awards in women's leadership and human rights. This week marks the first United Nations peacebuilding week and today is the International Day of Women in Diplomacy. I would like to know, Fatima, what mediation, dialogue and peacebuilding mean to you and why they matter.

Fatima Maiga

Thank you to our listeners. Mediation is, I believe, a course of action that is not only preferred but mandatory. And it is not I who say so, it is international law, since it is Chapter VI of the UN Charter that states that when a conflict threatens international peace, one must turn first to mediation and other forms of negotiation. But this does not translate into practice, for instance in terms of funding allocations. If I speak of Niger or Mali, where I come from, we know that over the past decade or so there have been increases of more than 500% in military budgets, for military approaches, while those of us, particularly women mediators, generally find ourselves with nothing to fund responses, sometimes financing them out of our own means. Because I would also like people to understand what we mean by mediation for us, women in Mali. When you have a conflict rooted in causes as deep as, for example, the

question of justice, particularly for women who were raped by armed groups but who were also raped before, can there be any response other than mediation to convey the scale of these problems and their solutions? What do you say to people searching for missing relatives, who want reparation for abuses and atrocities committed 60 years ago, 30 years ago, and who demand transitional justice, because unfortunately conventional justice does not address it? We turn to mediation. So for us, it is an obligation, it is a course preferred by international law, but it is also what communities, and women in particular, are asking for, and they try to mobilise people, decision-makers and resources so that it translates into deep changes for a peace that truly lasts.

Charles Tenenbaum

The launch of the international network of French-speaking women mediators today offers opportunities: to train, but also to fund and to strengthen the capacities of a new generation of women mediators in the international arena and particularly in the French-speaking sphere. And here is my question: what prompted you to join this network? And how, in your view, Marguerite, can it help support women mediators?

Marguerite Kone Yoli-Bi Klintio

Hello to all of you. The international network of French-speaking women mediators was born today. I have been involved in several networks, but this network has a particularity that made joining it entirely natural. I had three motivations. The first is that unity is always strength. We are mediators with diverse experiences, and uniting makes us stronger because we want to fill a gap. The second motivation, for me, is that it is important to share diverse experiences in a crucial field such as building lasting peace — to learn from one another. And the third motivation is to be able to enter formal mediation processes as well. Because we, the nine mediators, work at every level of mediation: level 1, level 2, level 3. Unfortunately we realise that at level 1 there is an absence, an almost total absence of women, and no link between levels 2 and 3 and level 1. So for me, joining this network means aiming to fill a gap between local mediation, often informal, and formal mediation. How can we ensure that, at the level of formal mediation, the fundamental needs of populations are taken into account in the agreements, since we work at all these levels? Because when we look at all the agreements we have seen, that we have known in our countries — all these agreements — we ask ourselves: are these agreements for this country, for this conflict, for what is actually happening? So we want to fill this gap because we aspire to a lasting peace. We aspire to peace and security for our populations at the grassroots.

Olivia Caeymaex

Esther, could you share a mediation experience that was transformative for you, and why?

Esther Oman

Hello everyone, I am glad to be here today and to carry the voices of grassroots women through your programme. My experience with community women mediators in Cameroon was particularly transformative, especially the one with the Women Peace Mediators community, with whom we worked a great deal in the communities to try to turn discourses of violence into discourses of peace. I saw women build bridges between communities, reduce tensions and positively influence young people exposed to violence. This confirmed to me that women are essential actors for peace. How did they go about it? Their fields had been occupied by armed non-state youth, and the classrooms too. And we could not access the fields, which were the women's last resort to feed themselves. So we had to come up with strategies. And these women said: we will do as mothers usually do in our villages. And I said, well, I am here to support you, I fully agree. And we held sessions with them. Then they invited the young men. They did not invite them for empty speeches. They invited them around pots of food. They prepared beans, fritters, risotto. Well prepared, they set it on the table. They invited them. They came and sat down, and then the women said: we are your

mothers, we are your sisters, we are your wives. We would like to talk to you. And they said, go ahead. And that is how dialogue began. While they ate, they talked with the mothers. There were moments of high tension. There were moments of disagreement. There were also moments of acceptance. And in the end, we saw young men come out of the fields. They gave the fields back to the mothers. They gave up the classrooms so that the children could go to school. And they laid their weapons at their mothers' feet and said: from today, we will no longer commit violence, we will no longer carry weapons. And these women were happy, and it became a whole story that follows me today wherever I go. Thank you.

Charles Tenenbaum

Thank you. Your network demonstrates it today: bringing mediation to the international level is always the culmination of a collective journey, but also an individual one. And I would like once again to put a question to Marguerite, asking to what extent your personal path led you towards mediation, and whether a personality or someone helped you along the way, someone who particularly marked you during this journey that has made you a woman mediator today?

Marguerite Kone Yoli-Bi Klintio

Thank you. I should say that, through my life experience, I am naturally drawn to humanitarian work and the defence of human rights. And that is the field in which I worked. But I did not work in the field of peacebuilding and so on. I met someone — he has now passed away — who was the CEO of a large mining company in Côte d'Ivoire, and who told me: I see that you do a great deal, and I would like to be able to help you in that way, to help the population, but I would like you to join a network that I fund, called WANEP. I said, oh really? Okay — I was a little sceptical. And then I asked him: but what does WANEP do? It does peacebuilding. I said: but why do you invest so much money in peacebuilding? He told me: listen, madam, without peace my company would not exist. Without peace, it would have been necessary to invest in security and protection measures that are far too costly, and my company would have disappeared. It costs me less to invest in peace. Which also brings me to say: when I became involved in WANEP, and we wanted to — I am now involved in peacebuilding, we talk about what is called the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and we decided to popularise this convention that was signed in 2000 by the United Nations Security Council. And we had a colleague, a man again, who was our spokesperson on community radio stations and among communities of men. And that opened a great many doors for us. Today, whether we like it or not, men hold the keys to almost every door of decision-making. We must make them allies, partners, if we want to succeed in our peacebuilding mission — positive peace. And I experienced it myself: it was men who helped us. And this world today is far too disrupted by conflicts. Unfortunately, the means used to resolve them tend to be peace-enforcement missions. And I think mediation costs less — a hundred times, a thousand times less — than imposing peace with weapons. That is not a lasting solution. We can see it: if it worked... All this time, there are countries that have known war for 30 years, 40 years. In the end people sit down to talk, whatever weapons were used. I experienced it in Côte d'Ivoire. It was not really a war, but the weapons thundered. Yet we had to go through dialogue. So why not start with dialogue, to save lives, to save destruction? That is a little of it.

Charles Tenenbaum

Thank you, Marguerite Kone Yoli-Bi Klintio. You have just recalled all this engaged reflection on the roles of men and women in peacebuilding, particularly in international negotiation and mediation processes, which overlaps with a dynamic set in motion, in fact, since the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000 by the United Nations, which precisely implemented a whole programme around the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Later came the creation of an international organisation within the United Nations system, UN Women, to strengthen and support the role of women in international negotiations, and particularly in peace processes and mediation processes. Turning to Fatima Maiga — Fatima, on this question,

the latest report of the UN Secretary-General in 2025 on women, peace and security underlines that despite efforts, despite stronger normative commitments, in practice women remain largely excluded from formal peace processes. The data show that in 2024 they made up only 7% of negotiators and 14% of mediators worldwide, and that nearly 9 out of 10 negotiation processes include no women at all. Does this mean that women's voices today do not count in international bodies, whether at the United Nations or the African Union?

Fatima Maiga

First, we must welcome the creation of Security Council Resolution 1325. It is now 26 years old, and I speak of it with a certain authority. I was a country director of UN Women in Côte d'Ivoire. It was the first time, right during the post-electoral crisis, that I faced the reality — the translation of an instrument that I defended and which member states are in principle bound by, because they say it is important. We must tell the truth: the framework is very solid; what is lacking is political will. It was lacking, it failed, and in fact it betrayed — because it is an African woman, notably the current president of Namibia, who championed this text, and she showed that when there is will, when there is political will... Her cabinet, for example, is gender-balanced; I think there are even more women since she became president. She has always been exemplary. What we lack is the exemplarity of those who voted for this resolution in actually putting it into practice. In particular, we must also be practical by giving us the means. Women are asked to work with an instrument that is supposed to be practically mandatory under the Charter, that is preferred, but we are in fact asked to perform miracles — since not only are we excluded, because of the political will of those at the negotiating table. We are not there in numbers. But our concerns are generally the ones most decisive in ensuring that crises do not recur. Once again, the question of conflicts over natural resources. The question of the kind of society that is imposed on us, and which is often imposed on women. For example, the question of the terrorist project, the Islamist political project. These are questions we faced well before, well before the open crisis erupted, and for which, unfortunately, states defended us very little, despite the whole arsenal. So, when we are at the negotiating table — and even before the negotiation, I must say, because for me mediation precedes dialogue and negotiation. Pakistan is a concrete example. It is because there is mediation that a framework is set within which dialogue can take place, often leading to ceasefires — which we distinguish, moreover, from peace. I do not want to be in a posture of grievance, but when women are at the table throughout the upstream process, we talk about things no one talks about. I experienced this when I was in the cabinet of the Minister of Reconciliation. I was quite stunned to see that the issues prioritised by the armed movements, and sometimes by the state as well, are issues that have nothing to do with what actually concerns the population. And moreover, to conclude, we have the figures in the Algiers peace agreement, which is considered key. It must also be recalled that the two pillars that were most important for the population, the two pillars that were placed last — number 3 and number 4, number 4 concerning reparation and justice for abuses dating back to the 1960s, just after independence, and the third concerning development questions. You know, the very things armed groups invoke to justify taking up arms — saying that there are no roads in certain areas, that their women give birth in the desert, that there are no basic social services — these are, I can tell you from experience, the least debated things in the dialogues. And yet, when we come and when we assert ourselves, for example in the CSA — that is another adventure, I worked on it and it took us more than six years after the signing of the peace agreement for there to be the first women. And it is because we were there, ready, lying in wait. We pushed, notably with Norway. We managed to get women in. When we come, we come prepared with an agenda, because the resistance forces you precisely to prepare, and we generally bring platforms of demands that echo the priority needs of the population. So it is important that women are there, and that we go beyond the instruments to provide the means for the concrete implementation of these instruments, including by women, of course.

Olivia Caeymaex

Thank you very much, Fatima, for bringing some concreteness to these normative frameworks. In the era of transactional mediation, of interests that are more openly pursued by governments presenting themselves as mediators, I think it is important to return to processes that truly tackle the root causes and the demands of women, and the way they are also affected by conflict. I turn to Esther for a final question, but one that is far from unimportant. The network sincerely has at heart the training, coaching and support of the new generation of young French-speaking women mediators, knowing that support for French-speaking women mediators has historically been very limited. Esther, if you had to give a few pieces of advice to the next generation of women mediators, which would you give them?

Esther Oman

I would say that the succession is already assured, since we thought of the new generation in the texts that will govern the running of our newborn network. And the young people can rest easy, because they will have their place and their voice. What I will say is that I will first tell them that those of us who are here are growing old — we are already old, we will soon depart, and it is they who will take over. They must know that peace often begins where someone simply decides to listen to the other. They must first learn to listen to others — their friends, their parents, those they meet in the streets, people who have problems. And I will tell them to believe in their voice. But you, very young ones, our youth who are our assured succession: believe in your voice and in your capacity to make a difference. Get trained. I know you are what is called Gen Z. Get trained. You have the energy, you have the tools, the new technologies of today. Seek out mentors — you will truly need them. Build solid networks and stay true to your values. Because mediation is above all a matter of listening, courage and humanity. If you put together everything I have just said into one package and put it into practice, we will be proud to say that the succession is truly assured. Thank you.

Olivia Caeymaex

Thank you very much for those truly, truly beautiful words of inspiration, Esther. I wanted to give particular thanks to you — Fatima, Marguerite, Esther — for finding the courage to come here to Paris, to share these few words of inspiration for the new generation of women mediators. You come from, you work in, contexts of extreme brutality. You see, you witness human rights violations, conflicts that are beyond words. The world is in a bad way. Conflicts are on the rise. Multilateralism, good governance and the rule of law are in retreat. Normative frameworks are not implemented, and yet you are here. You are creating a network of women mediators. Thank you very much for your trust and your presence.

Charles Tenenbaum

Thank you. So here we are at the end of this podcast. This special edition of the Interviews of the Observatory, co-organised with Conciliation Resources EU, which I had the pleasure of co-hosting with Olivia Caeymaex, director of the Brussels office of Conciliation Resources. Dear listeners, thank you for listening. Visit the Observatory's website to listen to other podcasts and to learn more about multilateralism and international organisations. Thank you, and see you very soon.