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Women in Peace Talks: Lessons Learned from Mali

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The integration of women leaders into Mali's high level peace process was superficial, belated, and steeped in controversy. Nonetheless, it represents a rare case in which women war-makers and mediators were granted the ability to influence high-level peace talks, which a growing body of literature suggests increases the likelihood of an effective agreement being reached and implemented. In this case, the pre-existing weaknesses of the agreement gave way to collapse soon after women gained access. Still, the Malian experience yields important lessons for mediators and policymakers. Advocates for the UN's Women, Peace, and Security agenda should be better prepared for the risks that their support may have unintended consequences or be abruptly withdrawn. Mediators should temper their expectations of how women civil society leaders and representatives of conflict parties will represent their priorities and constituencies. Additionally, more thought is needed as to how women who lack the same leverage as leaders of armed groups can truly assume the status of top-tier negotiators.

From 2020 to 2022, a short-lived yet significant experiment in feminist foreign policy played out in Mali. Malian women went from having marginal, ad hoc representation within the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APR) peace process, an Algiers-brokered deal signed by rebels, pro-government militias, and the state in 2015, to comprising roughly third of the paid positions on its senior-most body.¹ This was significant because it represented a rare case in which women joined a Track I process, whereby they engaged directly alongside conflict parties' top leadership (women's participation in peacebuilding is usually limited to the Track II and Track III processes – unofficial mid-range and local civil society and community peace initiatives). It was short-lived because they were only brought on board when the peace process was already on its last legs.

This paper aims to draw lessons from this experiment in Mali that can then be used by policymakers, women participants, and mediators to make peace processes more inclusive and thereby strengthen their chances of success. It draws on extensive interviews undertaken between 2021 and 2023 with women representatives and male leaders of the three signatory parties to the APR accord, civil society, and the international Mediation Team; it also aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature and policy analysis on women's participation in peace processes in the wake of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security.

¹ For more on Malian women's participation in (and exclusion from) the Algiers negotiations, see Lorentzen, Jenny (2021) *Malian Women's Participation in the Algiers Negotiations*. FAIR Case Brief: 1. Oslo: PRIO.

The APR Process and Women's Participation

In 2015, the secessionist Coordination of Azawad Movements, the pro-government *Plateforme* grouping of northern militias, and the government of Mali signed the Algiers Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APR) under international mediation. While the peace deal failed to address meaningful conflict drivers like extremist insurgencies and trafficking, it nevertheless froze fighting between the signatories and produced a political roadmap.² However, violence continued to rise and the APR became the relatively neglected political axis of an overtly militarist stabilisation strategy that emphasised French-led counter-terrorism and capacity building of the Malian security forces.³ In October 2020, when the three signatory parties appointed a total of nine women as delegates to the Agreement Monitoring Committee, the peace process was hobbling into its sixth year with little to show for it. In the end of 2021, the talks collapsed due to a lack of political will and incentive for the three signatory parties to seek peace. Amid spreading insecurity, an increasingly sovereignist, junta-led Malian government accepted support from Russian 'instructors' in December 2021 and terminated its security cooperation with France in April 2022 and the UN in June 2023. In November 2023, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA, was forced to hasten its retreat from the country as state and rebel forces gathered in anticipation of the planned withdrawal. Shortly thereafter, new fighting erupted between them over control of MINUSMA's strategic bases.

With most attention fixated on the shifting geopolitics of the conflict in Mali, the brief yet dynamic experience of including sizeable numbers of women in a Track I mediation process has been largely overlooked. More than two decades after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 calling for an urgent increase in women's participation at all levels of decision-making in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, women still remain largely excluded from high-level processes.⁴ There are persuasive norm-based and process-based arguments for including more women in mediation processes. Women are as qualified as men, and deserve an equal role in determining outcomes.⁵ Women may bring fresh perspectives and approaches to stale processes.⁶ Perhaps most convincingly, women's participation has been shown to increase the likelihood of reaching and implementing an agreement.⁷

Inserting women into an ongoing peace process opened doors for Malian women mediators who had struggled to be recognised as relevant and were excluded from decision-making opportunities. However, the perception among male party leaders that women participants were Western-backed "window dressing" betrayed a rising domestic desire to increase women's participation, casting it as a foreign value. Once in talks, women defied expectations of both the international Mediation Team and male party leaders, forming their own agenda and working together as a group. Ultimately, however, their inclusion was limited as they were still barred from accessing the most strategic negotiating spaces.

² Mathieu Pellerin 2020. *Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm*. Brussels: ICG.

³ International Crisis Group (ICG). 2021. *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*. Dakar/Brussels: ICG.

⁴ Globally, between 1992 and 2019, women comprised only 6 percent of mediators, 6 percent of signatories, and 13 percent of negotiators. UN Women, 'Strengthening Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace Processes', 20 August 2021.

⁵ Marie O'Reilly, 'Women in Conflict Mediation: Why it Matters', *International Peace Institute*, September 2013, 9.

⁶ Heidi Riley and Emma Murphy, 'Building Networks: Voices of Women in Peace Mediation on the Island of Ireland', (UCD Dublin, 2020).

⁷ Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Security the Peace: Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325' (*UN Women*, 2015); Tania Paffenholz, Nick Ross, Steven Dixon, Anna-Lena Schluchter and Jacqui True, 'Making Women Count – Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations' (*UN Women*, 2016).

Domestic vs External Interests

Over the past decade, women's participation in legal and political processes has made decisive strides in Mali, thanks in large part to domestic mobilisation. In 2013, when the government and rebels held their initial peace talks in Ouagadougou, several women leaders showed up despite being uninvited and having to foot the bill themselves for the journey. The following year, when Algiers hosted the talks, the signatory parties – of their own volition – included a few women as party representatives. In 2015, facing significant pressure from civil society and political actors, the Malian parliament passed a gender quota bill with little opposition, thus normalising and even mandating women's participation in politics.

External backing, guided by UNSC Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security – including Scandinavian feminist foreign policy activists and donors – played an assertive role in furnishing crucial operational support and incentives to formalise women's inclusion in the Malian peace process. In 2019, Norway made funding available for 20 women to join the peace process. The funds would be disbursed by MINUSMA. The same year, UNSC Resolution 2480, which extended MINUSMA's mandate, included a paragraph on women's inclusion for the first time.⁸ These bilateral and multilateral initiatives were in harmony with the domestic push – spearheaded by Malian women across the political spectrum – to include women in politics and the peace talks.

The idea for a quota of women in the APR process emerged in 2020, when hundreds of women leaders from across the country, including representatives of the signatory parties and prominent members of civil society, gathered in Bamako to discuss the Agreement and ways to integrate women into its mechanisms. The ensuing debate produced a list of targeted recommendations, including one that proposed increasing the number of women in the Peace Agreement mechanisms from just 3 members to 30 percent. Norway agreed to fund the salaries of these new entrants, while Sweden's Folke Bernadotte Academy offered to provide them with mentoring and equipment.

Domestic consensus to involve more women in the process was firm. Yet, at the time of inclusion, one of the biggest hurdles the women who joined said they faced was the charge that they were only there to appease Western donors.⁹ This made it easier for various actors to dismiss the women, and minimize their potential contributions. Publicly, the three signatory parties to the APR expressed full support for augmenting women's inclusion. But privately, male party leaders, especially within the signatory movements, often treated the women like they were a “decoration” that Western meddling had imposed on the process. Some participants viewed the men's treatment of women in this way as a symptom of their anxiety that the women's presence added pressure and accountability to a formal process which they had grown accustomed to dismissing while working out informal ad hoc deals elsewhere.

In this case, the association between women peace deal participants and external Western supporters backfired: it raised the hopes of women mediators, only to leave them hanging. Western backing proved more brittle than anyone expected: the peace deal collapsed, France left, taking European partners like Norway and Sweden along with it, and MINUSMA closed its bases. Some of the women representatives continue to play active roles in war-making and informal mediation, while the collapse of the peace talks relegated others to the side-lines.¹⁰

⁸ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2480 (2019) - *The Situation in Mali*.

⁹ Author interviews, Bamako and Kidal, 2021.

¹⁰ Author phone interview, 2023.

In the short-term, the elevated status, experience, and connections that women participants gained from their brief tenure as formal representatives will likely translate into political advantages and may help some of them advance into elected roles. Yet overall, the experience suggests that women mediators and well-intentioned donors should emphasise the leading roles played by domestic initiatives aiming to promote women to top leadership positions.

Going Against Type

Beyond the challenges posed by frictions between domestic and external perspectives and approaches, a second lesson relates to how the women who did join the process, in the short-term at least, defied expectations of the positions they would promote in the APR process. The agendas of the international Mediation Team and male party leaders influenced how they approached the process of vetting and appointing women nominees. In general, prominent women from civil society were assumed to be more focused on the normative need to recognise women and protect their rights and thereby be able to more meaningfully broaden inclusion by offering more independent perspectives. Women party representatives, by contrast, were expected to be more likely to echo their male counterparts and merely add to the number of discordant voices.

Once it was agreed that each party would include three women at the senior level, tensions developed between the international Mediation Team and the signatory parties over which women would participate.¹¹ While the international Mediation Team favoured appointing civil society women, the three signatory parties pushed to include party representatives. In the end, a compromise was struck: the entrants would be party representatives who would undergo a vetting process overseen by the Mediation Team. The vetting process gave the Mediation Team a way to ensure that women participants met certain criteria, thus preventing male party leaders from filling these roles with their relatives and proxies. It also opened up the space for the formal integration of at least one woman who had direct experience mobilising fighting forces.

During their brief time as participants, the women delegates tended to defy expectations, transcending party lines and forming their own group. Mediators said they brought ‘soft’ skills to proceedings that were theretofore lacking, such as inclusivity, empathy, communication, and compromise. Whereas in previous years male delegates had focused on the needs of armed men and state commitments to absorb combatants, the women’s messaging tended to emphasise the needs of conflict-impacted communities. Noting that men had focused on security and institutional reforms, women lobbied to advance the neglected development and reconciliation pillars of the Agreement. Several women identified as mediators, and as women, before identifying with any political affiliation, and most met regularly while also maintaining an active WhatsApp group. At the time, the Mediation Team noted that the women’s prioritisation of communities’ needs set the discussions on a new trajectory.¹²

In other words, women were able to redirect the focus of conversations without explicitly invoking gender, at least in the short-term. They defied the expectations of the Mediation Team, who thought they would lack autonomy, and of the male party leaders, who thought they would toe the party line and bicker with one another.

¹¹ Author interviews, Bamako and Kidal, 2021.

¹² Author interviews, Bamako and Kidal, 2021.

Challenge to Full Inclusion

A third lesson relates to the challenges of comprehensive inclusion on an uneven playing field. In the case of the Mali peace talks, women's rapid formal inclusion, ambitious though it was, remained incomplete. The 'soft' skills women brought to the table may have added value to stagnating talks, and with a bit more time and practice, might have served as the basis for something greater.¹³ But women were still excluded from strategic spaces and 'hard' conversations, thus limiting their overall impact and relevance.

The women were up against what they described as a gendered division of labour, in which men handled political and security files while women attended to development and humanitarian needs. Key mechanisms like the Technical Security Committee, a space in which delegates hashed out the Agreement's most sensitive issues such as the integration of ex-combatants, creation of mixed patrols, and redeployment of armed forces, proceeded without the women, thus creating knowledge gaps.

The view shared by male party leaders, external partners, and members of the international Mediation Team who were candid enough to admit it was that the women were less engaged with political and security issues than their male counterparts. This prejudice served to implicitly justify the women's ongoing exclusion from key mechanisms like the Technical Security Committee and meetings with foreign parties. Perceptions that women were less qualified and less legitimate than their male counterparts, or less vital to political and security issues, minimised their influence over the overall process. These barriers reinforced the women's status as second-tier negotiators. Ultimately, it remains unclear whether it is realistic to expect women leaders to bring the same weight to bear on high-level negotiations as their male counterparts when they lack the same degree of leverage.

Conclusion

On the whole, the Malian experiment in including women in an ongoing peace process yielded rapid results in terms of advancing women's representation and participation in peacebuilding. Nonetheless, the results were more cosmetic than substantive – a fact the women were immediately made aware of by their male counterparts. This was made even clearer when talks collapsed and foreign backers withdrew their support for various reasons, "abandoning" the women.¹⁴

The Malian experience affords a few valuable lessons on how peace processes can be made more inclusive, and thus more successful. Domestic mobilisation and political inclusion are necessarily the main drivers of women's active participation in peacebuilding; external allies must be very cautious when encouraging these initiatives so as not to co-opt or discredit them. Second, mediators should not assume women's allegiances or priorities in advance; they should expect surprises. Civil society or movement affiliations do not wholly determine the agendas that women participants bring to the table; indeed, their perspectives may be more fluid than presumed. Third, women are no different from men insofar as their status as peace-makers is inexorably bound to their status as war-makers. Efforts to increase women's participation must tackle the question of how to ensure that inclusion is substantial rather than merely formal or ornamental.

¹³ Catherine Turner, 'Soft Ways of Doing Hard Things': Women Mediators and the Question of Gender in Mediation', *Peacebuilding*, 8:4 (2020): 383-401.

¹⁴ Author phone interview, 2023.

Following the collapse of the Malian peace talks, does the country's turn from the West – which pushed the UN's Women, Peace, and Security agenda – spell an end for women's participation in high-level talks? Not necessarily. In reality, while external support, particularly from the UN and Scandinavian activists and donors, afforded key operational assistance and incentives for women to participate in the APR process, domestic momentum was crucial in getting these women their seats at the table. Currently, these once-assertive activist donors are on the retreat: Sweden scrapped feminist foreign policy in October 2022 after pioneering it; Norway is closing its embassy in Bamako, citing Mali's termination of security cooperation with France and the UN. The onus of advancing women's participation will therefore once again fall to domestic initiatives. Over the past decade, domestic mobilisation and legal reform have advanced the participation of women in politics and peace-building in Mali, therefore, it is reasonable to expect these trends to continue, perhaps at a slower yet steadier pace.

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