

For Mideast peace, talks must be opened to women

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U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaks with Palestinian students of the English Access Microscholarship Program in the West Bank city of Ramallah, March 2009. REUTERS/David Furst/Pool

By Carla Koppell and Rebecca Miller, Institute for Inclusive Security

As the US relaunches Israeli-Palestinian talks, it sorely needs to reassess the negotiation process. Previous talks have suffered from lack of both transparency and inclusiveness. For most of the past 20 years, an extremely small group of high-level political leaders has met behind closed doors, rarely sharing information with or seeking input from their stakeholders. If negotiators are serious about lasting peace, they need to take the time to engage those who matter most - their people, who feel little ownership of talks specifically because they are rarely consulted.

We recently returned from a trip to Ramallah, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, where we worked with exceptional women leaders to create recommendations for improving Israeli-Palestinian talks. At that time, President Obama was about to secure commitments to a new round of negotiations. Yet rooms full of smart, educated leaders who want peace knew nothing about their representatives' positions or plans. Because of this secrecy, a fog of pessimism encircled the meetings. That pessimism persists as the formal dialogue has begun. At best, everyone expects the same old inconclusive process; at worst, they fear the talks will end on September 26, when the settlement freeze deadline passes.

The best way to give affected populations more ownership of the process is to open the talks to women - and not just because women are half the population. Research shows that when women are included in negotiations, they regularly raise key issues otherwise ignored by male negotiators. Women often facilitate cross-conflict talks on the margins of formal negotiations that cultivate public investment in negotiations. When formally involved, women often help talks gain traction.

George Mitchell, U.S. special envoy for Middle East peace, saw the value a critical mass of women adds when he mediated an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland. There, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, a Protestant-Catholic women's party, ensured talks promoted reconciliation, recognised the needs of victims and youth, and secured human rights for prisoners. Additionally, they created a structure for continued consultation with civil society and built bridges among negotiating parties.

In other peace talks, too, women's inclusion has paid dividends. In Guatemala's negotiations, women ensured a balance of police and civilian power and preserved labour and indigenous rights while promoting dialogue and tolerance. In Darfur's negotiations, women focused attention on civilian protection and women's rights.

'SO-CALLED WOMEN'S ISSUES'

Women civil society leaders in Israel and Palestine have pointed out that had they been consulted when areas A, B, and C were being delineated as the Oslo Accords specified, they would have suggested slight changes that could have greatly improved access to land and water and better maintained the integrity of communities. Wisely, President Netanyahu recently announced that, consistent with Israeli law mandating women's inclusion, one woman will be part of the Israeli delegation. This is a step toward more inclusive processes, but only a first step.

Proponents of secret negotiations argue that sharing information can give spoilers opportunities or decrease trust between negotiating parties. Ironically, the opposite more often proves true: transparency can fuel the forces for peaceful resolution of conflict and help push warring parties toward resolution. Research by Darren Kew and Anthony Wanis-St. John shows a direct correlation between the degree of inclusiveness of peace processes and the likelihood that agreements endure.

The host of this fresh round of negotiations, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, clearly understands the need for more inclusive peace building. In August 2009, she argued that "so-called women's issues are stability issues, security issues, equity issues." Building on their personal experience, she and Special Envoy Mitchell should lead the push to involve women and civil society in the Mideast process by:

- Soliciting topics for the negotiating agenda from civil society and women;
- Organising public consultations with women and civil society organisations to hear their perspectives on the core issues;

- Creating a formal consultative mechanism for civil society groups to feed input indirectly into negotiations;
- Appointing gender advisers or civil society liaisons to assist official delegations; and
- Offering negotiating teams additional seats at talks if women are added.

Polls show that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians are tired of war and want peace. It's time to use negotiations to leverage and strengthen that will. It's time to re-envision the process so that the talks are transformative. That way, when we next travel to the Middle East, we will see infectious optimism instead of pessimism, and women in both countries fostering broad public support for successful, inclusive negotiations.

Carla Koppell directs the Institute for Inclusive Security and the Washington office of Hunt Alternatives Fund (see biography at top right of page). Rebecca Miller is senior programme specialist at the Institute for Inclusive Security, where she focuses on enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

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1 response to “For Mideast peace, talks must be opened to women”

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1. *aura* says:
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reading this article i had a lovely strong urge to suggest that at the same time the talks take place to have a parallel set of talks by women, and then compare and bring the two processes together...when women are together with men from the start of process often one of two things happens - either they take a back role or they slip into a masculine role, ignoring their feminine strengths. i am going to a women's interfaith consultation next week and plan on suggesting this!