

WOMEN AT THE PEACE TABLE

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By Robert Serry

The 10th anniversary of a landmark UN resolution linking women, peace and security is a reminder of the importance of having women at the top table of peace, including in the Middle East. If you review peace processes in the last two decades throughout the world, you discover that only one in 50 signatories to peace treaties is a woman, and only one in every 13 members of negotiating delegations has been a woman. By one count, during the nearly 20 years of Israeli-Palestinian negotiation efforts, there have been just five Palestinian women and two Israeli women in senior negotiating teams, among the many leaders and senior officials involved.

Why does this matter? Not because the presence of women at the peace table guarantees that peace will be achieved. But their absence usually means that certain issues are not taken into account in peace negotiations, important constituencies are not heard, and valuable tools for peace-building are not used. Women (and children) often bear the costs of conflict in disproportionate ways, but their contributions to conflict resolution, peacekeeping and peace-building are grossly unrecognized and underutilized.

Ten years ago this week, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 called for the full participation of women at all levels of decision-making in conflict resolution and peace-building. The resolution marked a new stage in global efforts to involve women in the search for peace. In this regard, the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian-Israeli Peace was established - a group bringing together 20 Israeli, 20 Palestinian and 20 international women leaders. I strongly support this initiative. They have impressed upon me how important it is that women are at the Middle East peace table.

This is not about tokenism or identity politics. Bring women to the table and you discover that certain issues will present themselves in a different light. In July this year I participated in a roundtable with women leaders in Gaza. I have many discussions on the challenges caused by Palestinian disunity, but in this meeting I saw the issue through a new lens. The women stressed that the divide sets back women's empowerment. Without a functioning legislature, legislative review processes and other institutional channels are frozen, and formal lobbying and advocacy of women's organizations and political leaders has become extremely difficult. Women have also been almost totally absent from the efforts to achieve Palestinian reconciliation. This is a loss for women, men and children - indeed, for society as a whole.

The lack of women in political negotiations reflects the underrepresentation of women in the political elite from which negotiators are drawn. The economic and social setbacks caused by prolonged conflict drive women to focus on survival, undercutting political participation at all levels. It is tempting to set such inconvenient truths aside given the urgency of many issues in the conflict. But it is shortsighted to do so. The more we enable women across the board and aim for an inclusive society in which women play their full role, the more we create societies in which peace is likely to flourish. Whether we are discussing sustainable development, public health, or peace itself, women must be at the core. Let me give you two examples that point the way forward.

On the Israeli side, a 2005 amendment to the Women's Equal Rights Law mandated the representation of women on public committees and "national policy shaping teams" including "in any group appointed to

peace-building negotiations." Civil society groups have an important role to play in supporting these kinds of initiatives and ensuring that they are implemented, from grassroots political participation to full involvement at the peace table. The Palestinian Authority is also developing this year the first national gender strategy in the Arab world - a strategy that needs to address a range of issues from promoting women's leadership to breaking taboos relating to sexual and household violence to tapping the ingenuity of women in the private sector.

We at the UN have plenty of work to do too. As mandated by resolution 1325, the organization is working to identify and nurture qualified female mediators in our own ranks, and to ensure availability of gender expertise in mediation processes. Envoys like me throughout the world are instructed to do everything we can to enhance the participation of women in peace processes. The former president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, recently took up her role as the first head of a new UN entity - UN Women - to bring together disparate parts of the UN system to focus exclusively on gender equality and women's empowerment. Here in the Middle East, all UN agencies working on the ground are committed to mainstreaming gender in their programming.

For my part, I will continue to engage women leaders and civil society organizations and urge the leaderships on both sides to include women in their inner circles of advisers on the peace process. Right now, by my reckoning, there are no women on either side in such positions. I think this should change. I have no doubt that plenty of articulate and committed women think so too. Indeed, I just may have an issue on which at least half the populations on both sides will instantly agree.