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## **Good offices for others, bad offices for us?**

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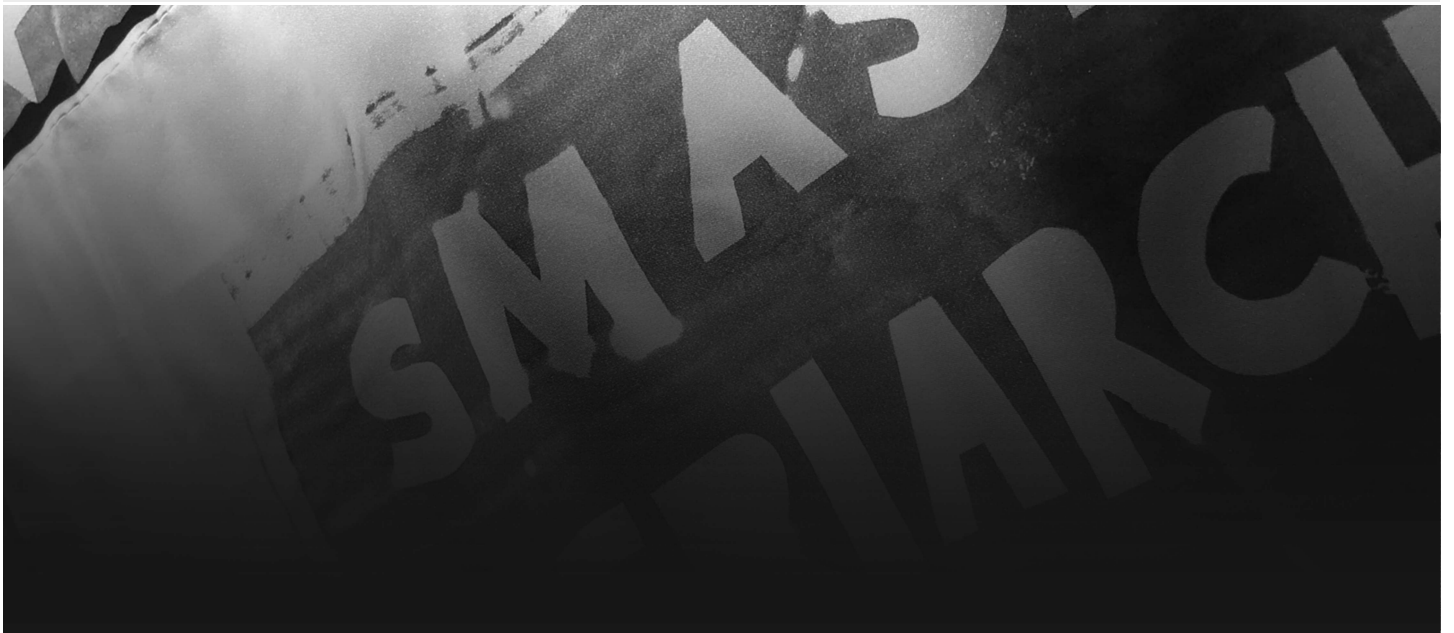
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Miriam Bensky

May 5th, 2020

## 'Good offices' for others, bad offices for us?

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*How can we fix the patriarchal organisational culture that still dominates the peace and security field? Miriam Bensky looks at how we can first dismantle and then re-build a field to create a sector where women want to join, stay, and lead.*

As women leaders are being venerated by pundits across the world for their '*attractive alternative way of wielding power*' in these crisis times, women in the peace and security field are letting out a collective sigh. The case for [making women count](#), rather than just counting women, has been [made](#) convincingly for at least [two decades](#) now. Yet the peacemakers themselves – who from proud moral high ground advise

parties in conflict on how to make peace processes and post-conflict societies inclusive – are still astonishingly bad at making their own organisations inclusive.

## Why it is time to dismantle the patriarchal grasp on peace and security culture

Women entering the peace and security field often face a stark dilemma: adjust to a chauvinist organisational culture (the United Nations Secretary-General recently called the male domination in the UN a [straitjacket](#)) and accept the patriarchal masculinity inherent in frontline conflict work – or change careers. Those who stay, exhaust all their efforts explaining why we should not accept [peace at any cost](#).

As a workplace, the peace and security field fails to deliver on its own [guidance](#) for inclusivity and equality. Having a few more women in charge is a good start, and the efforts of the United Nations Secretary-General to achieve [gender parity](#) in his senior leadership team are commendable. Yet women still remain [severely underrepresented](#) in international peace operations.

This data is not baffling. Every woman working in peace and security is familiar with the unsettling feeling of being the only woman in a meeting room, either overlooked or ogled as new prey. #Metoo has not reached the peace and security field yet, but the absence of publicly reported harassment cases should be read as a sign of feared retaliation rather than vindication. Male leaders in this field are known to recommend to each other female employees with praise such as “cast-iron ability to keep her mouth shut”. Some speak of their staff as ‘hunters’ and ‘gatherers,’ as a way of distinguishing between those who do frontline fieldwork (men) and those who better focus on administering projects in headquarters (women). The replication of a

traditional 1950s household is the model for many peace and security projects in 2020.

Because the interlocutors in conflict parties often are armed men, most peacemaking organisations opt to send male mediators, male advisers, male facilitators, and male technical experts to meet them. The view that women cannot access, handle, or influence powerful and violent men remains dominant, despite [research](#) demonstrating that peace negotiations where women have a strong influence have a higher tendency to lead to an agreement than those where women have less influence. Organisations can then, conveniently, blame their lack of inclusion on the tone set by interlocutors.

### **An honest house clean-up**

A sincere reform of organisational culture in peace and security has to start with acknowledgement of *who sets the tone, what the tone is*, and that *the tone has consequences*. An organisation's tone can be discerned by identifying who its most celebrated heroes are – in this case predominantly still men who undertake recklessly dangerous missions to remote corners of a warzone and enjoy [drinking whiskey with the rebels](#). Even behind the more polite tones of some often lie several [unspoken beliefs](#), for example about women being less ambitious and more likely to have issues with work/life balance. Words quickly become actions, and it is a slippery slope from idolising the war stories of 'hunters' and sidelining women who have been absent on maternity leave, to an environment permissive of harassment and abuse of authority. An organisational culture that celebrates toxic masculine traits – emulating the thrill-seeking, rule-bending, and competitiveness of a James Bond – unsurprisingly also often rewards excessive risk-taking, [overlooks](#) sexual abuse and bullying, and [lacks mechanisms or the necessary trust](#) to report

misconduct without [fear of retaliation](#). As a result, [trust in the leadership](#), and the organisation as a whole, eventually dissipates.

Most peace and security organisations have a code of conduct, and all strive to 'do no harm'. Yet few have acknowledged or deliberately examined their in-house organisational culture and its possible built-in biases. As recent [research](#) on resistance to inclusive peace has showed, unless the dominant norms and narratives in a group support inclusive values, training at the individual level will not lead to systemic change.

### **How to become the kind of field where women not just survive, but thrive**

In order to develop into the kind of sector that women want to join, stay in, and lead, peace and security organisations must enact five radical reforms:

1. Redefine [leadership attributes](#) towards: visible commitment to challenging the status quo, humility, awareness of bias, curiosity about others, cultural intelligence, effective collaboration; then make sure to reward and promote staff accordingly;
2. Appoint a more diverse and inclusive new generation of leaders for every vacancy in the organisation; retire those unwilling to adapt;
3. Enforce zero-tolerance of not just sexual harassment, but also bullying, locker-room talk, and abuse of authority; no free-passes for your star employees;
4. Radically simplify complaint procedures and whistleblowing channels;
5. Systematically seek dissenting views in all internal decision-making processes.

For real cultural change to take place, it will not be enough to commission ethical conduct trainings and staff wellbeing surveys or facilitate [critical reflection](#) workshops. Without radical reforms enacted according to the findings of these exercises, they remain mere window-dressing. A healthy organisational culture requires trust in the system's ability and willingness to adapt. That can only come from [intersectional diversity](#) and new role models – women and men – who show the field how inclusive leadership works in practice. Anything less than a diversification of power and update of leadership culture will be insufficient and insincere. Peace and security organisations must decide now if they want to emerge from this global crisis radically reformed, or arrogantly complacent.

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## About the author



**Miriam Bensky**

Miriam Bensky is an independent writer and consultant based in Turkey. She has previously worked for the United Nations in Kabul and New York, and for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva. @miriambensky

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