

A portrait of Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, a woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a black traditional garment with sheer sleeves and a floral skirt. She is seated in a wooden chair, with her hands clasped. The background features a colorful abstract painting and a wooden cabinet with decorative items.

**OSLO**  
FORUM  
Interview

# Talking peace

with **Miriam Coronel-Ferrer**

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Centre for  
Humanitarian  
Dialogue

*Mediation for peace*

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## **Oslo Forum**

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

Co-hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and HD, the Oslo Forum is a discreet and informal annual retreat which convenes conflict mediators, peacemakers, high-level decision-makers and key peace process actors.

The following interview was conducted in the Philippines, in early-March 2020. This interview does not represent the positions of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

## **Photo credits**

Manila, Philippines, 12 March 2020 © Joser C. Dumbrique

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*In March 2020, HD's Senior Programme Manager for the Philippines, Iona Jaljali, interviewed Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, former chief negotiator in the Philippine peace process and member of the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers at the United Nations. Among other things, Ms Coronel Ferrer discussed the impact of COVID-19 on peace-making efforts, her shift from negotiating on behalf of a government to providing mediation support, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.*

**How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected peacemaking efforts around the world?**

The near-global lockdown has stalled efforts to get processes going. It has also not stopped opportunistic attacks from happening. But it has forced groups and states to rethink their priorities, given the scale of the human tragedy and the disruption in the world order. We saw this rethinking in some conflict-affected countries, where governments and/or armed groups responded to the call by the UN Secretary-General for a global ceasefire.

Any humanitarian pause occasions relief and generates some public support for an end to wars – mind shifts that are so essential to generating momentum. Ceasefires and lockdowns do not, however, lock in the antagonists to a peaceful, political track. When this pandemic is over, peacemaking work remains to be done.

Hopefully injustices resulting from state ineptitude in dealing with the pandemic will be channelled into powerful democratic reform movements, and not into armed mobilisations.

**You went from being the chief government negotiator in the Philippine peace process to becoming an expert on the UN Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers. What struck you most regarding the change in your role?**

One advantage I gained from having been a negotiator, and now providing a third-party support role, is knowing the sensitivities of negotiators – because negotiators can be very possessive about the pro-

cess. Whether you are from the government or an armed group, you have a mandate and you have the interests of your party that you need to protect. Even if you had in mind to be flexible in reaching a compromise, you have to protect certain interests, and part of that protection is to ensure that you own the process. A mediator who is insensi-

tive to that as a starting point will probably not get the support, or the trust even, of the negotiating parties.

The negotiator also has more power than the mediator and support team. In the Standby Team, we are not the mediators but we provide support to mediation processes. That can be to any one of the conflict parties, but also to civil society, which is certainly a part of the equation, or to UN political missions with a mandate from the Security Council.

We also contribute to the process by providing comparative knowledge, which is what the third parties in the Philippine peace process did when we were negotiators.

At the same time, the skills of a negotiator and those providing the mediation support can be very similar. First, both need to have a good grasp of the context and the problem. This requires substantial conflict analysis that grounds the work, including knowledge of the parties and personalities involved, as well as the ties that bind them or disagreements that create tension among them. Second, it is important to be creative. Whether you are a negotiator or a mediator, you need to come up with a lot of options and alternatives at the spur of the moment. If you are in a dogmatic frame of mind, or have very set ways of thinking, then you will not be creative.

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**If you were to talk to another chief negotiator, what lessons, whether positive or negative, would you offer from our experience in the Philippines?**

Timelines, for instance, have never been followed. Usually, implementation takes much longer than envisioned. The best strategy is probably to ensure that parties are very invested in the process so that they resist going back to violence and are willing to make all the necessary adjustments.

Delays in implementation can be expected. So, while it is useful to draft a timeline, it is even more important to ensure that the parties are flexible and committed, so that they can keep adjusting the timeline. Nobody has full control of the situation, and it is important to build resilience to weather the delays and challenges.

**During the time you were negotiating for the Government of the Philippines, you faced some criticism regarding how the conflict was being internationalised. There may be other governments afraid of engaging actors in sub-national conflicts for the same reason. What advice do you have for such governments?**

You still see some examples of that resistance here in Southeast Asia. Unlike in the African Union, the ASEAN community has yet to move away from the principle of non-interference and the premise of the ultimate sovereignty of states. There is, in any case, a grudging acknowledgment that no domestic conflict is entirely domestic.

There will always be international dimensions to consider. Whether it is a question of arms flow, or refugees flow or internal displacement – in land-

locked countries, island countries or archipelagic countries like the Philippines – there will always be movements of people, goods and arms that are exacerbated in conflict. As a result, international actors will get involved, for better or for worse.

So, it is up to countries to really make it for the better: to use it to their advantage or to the advantage of the process, if it is something that they have committed to. Because, in any peace endeavour, you need all the help that you can get.

**One of the challenges governments faced recently was the wave of mass protests around the world. What do you think is the role, if any, for third-party mediators in preventing an escalation into armed conflict?**

Conflict is not necessarily bad. Protests may be good for the country in a situation where social and economic injustices prevail. You need protests to upset the status quo and precipitate reforms that can lead to a more equitable society.

It is also important to be acutely sensitive to what political negotiations may or may not be able to achieve, or what some societal processes probably need to undergo before de-escalation and negotiation can settle the conflict and create a new dynamic.

Several recent social protests generated a broader national dialogue process. You might not want to formally call them national dialogues, but the idea is to create some kind of forum where parties think about how to address grievances and launch a process of reform. Some initiatives opened up spaces to ease the tension or even institute some basic reforms. Others have failed to stem the downward slide into chaos because those in power want to stay that way, or their antagonists failed to compromise and see the potential of the moment.

It is fundamentally about understanding the political dynamics at play. But even when the momentum for a political process has dissipated, or a political negotiation has dissipated as a result of protests, this doesn't have to be the end of peace efforts.

I would say: harness the energy from the protest movement, and incorporate the ideas brought forward into the agenda. These just might propel real social and political reform.

**As the first woman to be a chief negotiator signing a comprehensive peace agreement, what would you say are the main barriers that remain for women in peacemaking?**

The biggest barriers are still the biases, prejudices and restrictions that continue to be imposed on women in a lot of societies. These biases are everywhere. The first fight must take place in the minds of men and women before the transformation manifests as real structural change, real relational change among the genders, and between society and politics. As a mediator, the challenge is to find your way around these barriers to overcome the scepticism and resistance to gender inclusion.

We know that there are limited spaces inside the room, so not everybody is granted a seat at the table. It is very important that women outside the room support the women inside the room. Also, they should not focus on putting pressure on only the women,

because a single or a few women cannot carry the gender agenda on their own. They should put pressure on all the men and women inside the room.

Mediators, negotiators and civil society should provide strategies and help to create space for meaningful, inclusive discussions. We need to continue to innovate on the mechanisms and tools available to see what will work in any given situation. Sometimes it takes time. But to give up in the beginning – that is a problem.

**You have been very active in pushing for the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which marks its 20th anniversary this year. What do you think is the greatest achievement so far under the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda?**

UNSCR 1325 has made the WPS agenda very visible. It has put pressure on conflict parties to be

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more inclusive. Parties in negotiation are now being pushed to address matters they would have simply dismissed in the past. These matters include the meaningful participation of women, and putting in provisions that highlight the visibility of the needs and welfare of women and their perspectives about the conflict. The gender-norm-building that has happened in the last 20 years has made it very difficult to just dismiss that kind of pressure.

This is also true for mediators and negotiators who do not always have the necessary gender responsiveness or gender sensitivity. They might be skilled in diplomatic ways but blind on the matter of gender, which can no longer be tolerated.

What we are seeing now is a convergence of the women's agenda, the gender agenda and the broader peace movement, which has notable advan-

tages. Combined, these social movements can generate significant power. They might not necessarily carry the same priorities. There might be ideological differences, particularly on how to deal with conflict or how to approach peacebuilding, but there is certainly a significant amount of overlap. If the peace movement and the women's movement are able to generate significant force, then that can propel the matter of conflict resolution and women's rights significantly forward.

**Do you find that the mediation world, especially at the higher level, is very male dominated?**

That is a starting point under the current Secretary-General of the UN, whose goal is to fast-track transformation within mediation by pushing for a system-wide gender-parity agenda. You can see



that gender reform has been very much institutionalised in the system. Special Envoys and Special Representatives have gender advisers, and all units have gender focal points. That is very important. The question remains, of course, about the extent to which these gender advisers are being listened to.

In a recent training we held with gender advisers from several Special Missions, unevenness was very apparent. In some missions, we found that the gender adviser is integrated into the political work of the mission, and supported to be able to carry out his or her programmes. But in some cases, we saw that gender advisers are somewhat in the periphery of the political mainstream of the mission. And these are the dynamics that the UN system now wishes to correct.

This is the 21st century. It has been a long time since UNSCR 1325, and we need to take radical action in order to fast-track the transformation of gender relations, especially if the goal is to see the change in our lifetimes.

**How should mediators manage inclusion and how can they deal with questions of effectiveness?**

There are at least two aspects of inclusion. The first is the participation of women, whether directly through representatives in peace processes or through consultative mechanisms. There is no excuse why both forms of participation cannot be achieved in any one process. After all, if you want to consult about important societal issues, how can you not consult with 50% of the population?

There are many capable women experts who would have something to say and contribute to the process. If you are putting up the negotiation team, or choosing the mediator, how can you not take a look at the roster of such powerful women who have proven themselves, or have yet to prove themselves and never had the chance precisely because they have never been given the opportunity in the past?

The second aspect of inclusion has to do with the agenda. We know that sexual violence has been a significant part of all conflicts, and it is time that we take a firm stand against it. International humanitarian law provides the legal framework, but it has to be fully engrained, acknowledged and committed to in all agreements. It is also about what kind of peace you want or envision. Here, a lot of the women's agenda has to be pushed to the forefront. The poverty and disparities in distribution of wealth and political power that fuelled the conflict must be addressed. It is important to consider how these disparities have affected women in particular, and how best to mitigate their negative impact.

Now the other half of your question would be, 'Has inclusion been effective?' I will not go into details regarding the recent studies that are producing the much-needed empirical evidence to show that: yes, women's participation and the inclusion of the women's agenda have actually made for more sustainable peace processes. If we want more proof, then let's give more women the chance to be able to affirm that. After all, they have been denied the opportunity to do so for centuries.

*Women's participation and the inclusion of the women's agenda have actually made for more sustainable peace processes.*

**With all your experiences and given your current role, seeing the world as it is now, what gives you hope?**

There are many peace advocates around the world – it is a big community – and we draw strength from each other. There are peace advocates outside governments, inside governments and within armed groups. We share interests and may even be kindred spirits. If we can tap into this, and bring advocates together, despite the difficulties of any given conflict, we can create a critical mass of those who say 'yes' to a political settlement and 'yes' to a sustainable future for everyone.

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