

Legitimacy, diversity, identity, and gender in frontline humanitarian negotiations

Interview series

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November 2022



Over the course of 2021, the [Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation \(CCHN\)](#) conducted a series of interviews with frontline humanitarian practitioners to better understand how their identity and the identity of their counterpart affects the negotiation process.

What follows is a recollection of the most interesting and relevant points derived from the interviews, as well as some common topics identified across contexts.

Introduction

The CCHN has been working intensely on the subject of legitimacy, identity, and gender in frontline negotiations since 2018, when it first carried out [a study on the role of diversity in frontline humanitarian negotiations](#) through an external consultant.

Seeing how the topic was at the core of the CCHN community's interests, with many members advocating for further reflection on how the CCHN could better support women in frontline negotiations, the Centre carried out a [series of interviews](#) with female frontline negotiators and explored their career paths, with the challenges and opportunities they had faced.

In this context, with the objective of broadening the perspective and focusing not only on gender but also on all the other traits that make up the negotiator's and the counterpart's identity, the thematic group on diversity, legitimacy, and gender (renamed as the "thematic group on diversity, legitimacy and narratives" in March 2022) was established in

May 2021 to allow community members to continue reflecting on these issues. On its first meeting, it was agreed that the CCHN would [collect field stories](#) that illustrated how the identity and personality of both the negotiator and the counterpart could influence the negotiation process and outcome.

To do this, the CCHN conducted semi-structured online interviews with 22 frontline practitioners, most of them part of the CCHN community of practice. Two thirds of them were women, which reflects the mostly female presence in the thematic group. Likewise, a big number of them came from or had working experience in the Middle East, which is something that permeates throughout the report.

The negotiator's identity

One of the main findings of this analysis was the realisation that **humanitarian negotiators are significantly more aware of how their identity affects or might affect their counterpart**, as opposed to how the identity of their counterpart influences them. When asked about what potential fears or prejudices they could have regarding their interlocutor, very few interviewees could think of something specific.

A person's identity is a complex mix of different traits: age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, personality, religion, etc. In the pages below, we will reflect on how some of these aspects can influence the negotiation process.

Nationality, ethnicity, and power dynamics

The national–international power dynamics play a different role depending on the context and situation. Some international staff complained that their counterparts would not take them seriously; being an expatriate, they were accused of not understanding the history of the country nor what it was like to live through armed conflict. Similarly, another practitioner explained that their counterpart had explicitly told them how their physical appearance and Asian traits, shared with the counterpart, worked to their advantage: “White people don't know that they have this natural bias towards other white people. In Asia it's basically the same thing.”

On the contrary, some other national and international staff argued that, when an expatriate was present in the room, counterparts would automatically look at them. An African counterpart explicitly said: “I don't want Africans [as interlocutors]; I want Westerners.”

However, frontline negotiators also use these international-national power dynamics to gain leverage. An interviewee shared that:

“Some local colleagues come to me and say: ‘It would be better if you said this to him [the counterpart]. We can't have this conversation but, because you're international, you can.’”

- International staff from New Zealand

Practitioners coming from countries with a colonialist background also shared different perspectives. For instance, for a former British soldier, having a military background was a huge disadvantage when establishing a relationship with his military counterpart, originally from a former British colony. On the contrary, for a female British negotiator without a military past working in Palestine, reacting in an apologetic way for how the UK had proceeded there in the past would help diminish the tension considerably. Likewise, for a former female soldier working in Mozambique, being Portuguese was not an obstacle once she started empathising with her interlocutor: “When you create rapport, you acknowledge this part of his suffering. Personally, I was Portuguese, but I was not Portugal. I was not there to agree or disagree with past facts. I wanted him to give me the opportunity to see me as myself; not representing Portugal, but my humanitarian organisation.”

Negotiators from “neutral” countries (or countries without strong geopolitical impact or without armies seen as aggressive, such as Portugal and New Zealand) argued that this would help in how they were perceived by counterparts.

Finally, what many interviewees agreed on was the importance of knowing the local negotiation culture. For instance, it is essential to know that, generally, people in Asia tend to follow lengthy and formatted

negotiation procedures and rarely stray from them, while people from Africa tend to be more flexible and open to bargaining.

Gender, physical appearance, and marital status

Gender, like nationality, was also identified as an identity trait that could be an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the circumstances.

On the one hand, some interviewees complained that, as women, they were not taken seriously. Or even worse, their counterparts would believe that, by sending a woman to negotiate, their organisations were not taking the issue seriously.

On the other hand, practitioners argued that being a woman had never affected their negotiations, not even in conservative settings. On the contrary, it would appear as though women, being perceived as vulnerable and less confrontational by their interlocutors, could easily earn trust, make things more palatable and de-escalate existing tensions. Particularly, being a married woman would be seen by counterparts as being a “good woman” in certain contexts and provide them with increased legitimacy. On the other hand, a female practitioner with children would often get the remark: “What are you doing here if you have kids?”

Some interviewees acknowledged having used their gender to their advantage, playing on misogyny and flirting, and allowing their male colleagues to use them as an icebreaker, for example, by joking about “how many goats” they are worth. One practitioner reflected: “If wearing lipstick can get you a meeting, why not use this? However, if you cross that line, where do you stop?”

Moreover, many respondents in the Middle East pointed out to a certain “third sex” or “third gender” category, that of international women. As such, female international negotiators were allowed to transgress local gender roles and do things that local woman couldn’t, as well as things that local men couldn’t do. For instance, a foreign woman could have a discussion with a conservative sheikh while also being able to talk to female beneficiaries thanks to her gender. This “third sex” category would be most useful for female negotiators when engaging with male interlocutors, since “the group of local

women is more exclusive.” For instance, “with male counterparts I have been invited to eat with their families, to hours of tea drinking and khat chewing, something that has never happened with a female interlocutor.”

However, since there are still instances when being a female negotiator could be perceived as a disadvantage for different reasons, most interviewees thus pointed at **the importance of having gender-diverse negotiation teams and choosing the lead negotiator depending on the circumstances.**

Finally, attention was drawn to the fact that discrimination and inequality on gender identity and sexual orientation grounds need to be addressed first at the humanitarian organisations’ level, even before reaching the counterpart.



“We are looking at the last picture— negotiation—but are your staff from minority groups feeling safe and comfortable in your organisation? No, honestly. We are far behind. My partner is not recognized as such by my organization: for you to fill in the papers, you need to have your house or your bill under the name of both. This is ridiculous because 80% of your staff don’t have this privilege. In certain countries, even male and female that are living together but not married won’t be able to have their names on a same official document. It’s all very white, Western-oriented. Our organisation is regulated by laws that don’t apply to 80% of the world.”

- International humanitarian staff

Military background

Practitioners with a former military background would choose to mention this very selectively, and only if they could see that it would help them gain some leverage with their counterparts.

For instance, this factor could be an advantage when dealing with rebel groups, but only if the negotiator comes from a country without a strong geopolitical influence. However, when dealing with fellow humanitarians, this would be a distinct disadvantage.

Religion and lack thereof

Religion often plays an important role in establishing a relationship, particularly in places like the Middle East or other countries with a strong Muslim community.

In these contexts, being Christian would not have much impact, but, on the contrary, being a Muslim is very relevant and, most importantly, from which affiliation. This can play an essential role in building trust: “In certain non-Arabic-speaking Muslim countries, counterparts would tell me: ‘We wish we could read the Qur’an in the Arabic language like you do.’”

Additionally, in strongly religious countries, religion is such an important element that, as one of the humanitarian negotiators argued, being an atheist can be “worse than being a drug dealer.”

Adapting their personality

Personality has a strong impact on negotiations and is a trait that practitioners can—and, according to some interviewees, should—adapt depending on the circumstances, if not change completely.

“It’s so much about personality and soft skills and competences. How you present yourself, how you engage with the counterpart. The identity probably comes in at an unconscious level, but I believe it is more about experience and personality.”

- British female negotiator

The need to be all embracing, open to making compromises and to bringing added value, acknowledging that counterparts also have their own agenda, was highlighted as essential. Nevertheless, **negotiators must also be**

straightforward and confident, because otherwise “you will be eaten.”

Sources of legitimacy

The CCHN proposes a framework for negotiators to increase their legitimacy by identifying their personal sources of legitimacy and learning how to leverage them in order to establish trust with their counterpart. These sources of legitimacy arise from different elements, such as:

- Institutional mission and reputation
- Competence on a specific context or topic
- Personal features (age, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc)
- Capacity to adapt
- Connection with networks of influence

When asked to reflect about these sources of legitimacy, interviewees agreed that some of the most important ones related to:

- Speaking the local language (and/or properly prepping the interpreter)
- The organisation’s reputation
- Knowing the context and, particularly, its negotiation culture
- Being able to adapt
- Being humble and respectful

“In Bangladesh, there is this unspoken cultural protocol. You go meet your counterpart and you get turned away at first. So you leave, but then you come back, because it’s what it’s expected.”

- International female staff

The counterpart’s identity

No female counterparts

Almost all interviewees agreed that there was a lack of female counterparts in the field, which is mostly dominated by men.

Some of them argued that, when present, female counterparts were even tougher than male ones, possibly as a way of “compensating” for their

gender, perceived as weaker, or more vulnerable. However, a practitioner argued that “if they weren’t like this, they wouldn’t have risen to this position. It’s the snake that bites its tail.”

Other female respondents would argue that, on the contrary, it has been easier for them to build a relationship with their interlocutor when they were engaging with a woman: “We built a relationship because she liked my hair. She came to touch it because African women love straight hair.”



“You do see women and men toughening up, both taking a macho persona. It’s a masculine trait, but not only women take it. But people would comment when women do it and not when men do it.”

- British female practitioner

In most contexts, the counterparts are predominantly male and, as some interviewees observed, sexist men. The recommendation was to avoid confronting them. Instead, it would be useful for negotiators to strengthen their own ability to de-escalate the tension by anticipating potential uncomfortable situations and avoiding them, and by turning sexist comments into a joke, instead of into something that could become more serious: “You won’t turn them into not sexist by that one meeting, and you can easily get labelled as ‘that angry woman who can’t take a joke.’”

Military and civilian counterparts

It was highlighted by some respondents that, in certain situations, it can be easier to work with the military than with civilian actors. Many military counterparts have been trained by foreign actors and understand better the role and principles of humanitarian organisations. They are also at the frontlines and see what civilian populations go through, so they are sometimes more empathic.

On the contrary, it was argued that certain civilian counterparts were more bureaucratic, deep into administrative procedures, and more concerned about power struggles.

Going further, an interviewee also admitted to being more fearful of policemen than of soldiers, since they could be more corrupt due to a less strict hierarchy than the one in the military.

Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that, often, the negotiators’ worst fears regarding their counterparts do not materialise and that, sometimes, they are even positively surprised by the turning of events.

It is therefore essential to reflect and be self-aware during the planning phase and try to avoid making assumptions and value judgements: “I go in thinking: ‘This local authority is probably going to be a toughminded male—if he’s young I know he’s going to try to prove himself...’ I love it when I am surprised, and my assumptions are challenged.”

Many types of personality

It is fundamental for negotiators to observe the interlocutors’ personality, so that they can try to match their own to their counterpart’s during the negotiation process. An important element to consider is the psychology of where an actor is coming from: “Consider that they were bombed consistently over a decade. We need to understand the psychological trauma, the tribe where a group is coming from, their sense of victimhood. We need to allow them their space, allow them to perceive themselves in their way, not treating them solely as the international community perceives them.”

Frontline practitioners may find themselves negotiating with cynical interlocutors, busy and overwhelmed ones, egocentric ones, tough ones... And they need to be prepared. However, this is not always true. It would just seem that, when asked about stories on their counterparts’ personalities, interviewees would mostly remember bad experiences because of their interlocutor’s negative personality traits.

“Most of the time, our counterparts were really open to us. In a first meeting with foreigners, they will always be very respectful, even if they think you are the incarnation of evil. We thought they would have a very rough, strong personality, due to their way of living, the lack of commodities, the tough weather... They are people from the mountain. But when the discussions started, we realised that they were very calm and respectful.”

Techniques to foster legitimacy

Below are some techniques used by interviewees to help them in establishing a trustful relationship with their counterparts. It might seem as though “employing techniques” can be somewhat contradictory to establishing a “trustful” relationship. Nevertheless, the objective here is not to deceive our interlocutor, but to **build on the identity elements shared by the negotiator and the counterpart that allow them to naturally bond, while trying to downplay the more controversial elements.**

Playing with double nationality

A number of respondents enjoyed the possibility of being able to use their multiple nationalities depending on the circumstances. Therefore, in contexts where a specific nationality would negatively influence the perception their counterpart had of them, they would leverage the other one. For instance, being of Moroccan descent would help a specific practitioner in the Middle East more than being French, while being French would help more in certain areas under Kurdish control.

Reading up on the counterpart's interests

Learning more about the counterpart's interests can help in starting the conversation on a good foot; it serves as an access point, a neutral icebreaker before discussing the actual issue. It also shows our interlocutor that we have “done our homework”. Poetry seems to be the chosen topic for some interviewees in the Middle East.

“I know a lot about Yemeni poetry. Not because I like it, but I thought it was a way of breaking the ice in negotiations with tribal leaders. This was me showing I knew about their context, in ways that are not like: ‘I know you need water.’”

Considering the optics

How negotiators dress and how they portray themselves is an essential aspect in any negotiation and is something that can be used to “compensate” for other traits. For instance, if a young negotiator is worried that their age may be a disadvantage, dressing in a formal way, growing a beard, or styling their hair in a certain manner can help them overcome this perception.

“I had a boss in Sudan who had a huge desk in a huge office. I never realized why until I understood that he was the one negotiating, so he needed to show that he was in power.”

Acknowledging the history and important sites

Once again, showing interest in the counterpart's country, its history, its leading figures, and historic sites, is an easy and interesting way to build rapport. One of the interviewees shared how doing tourism with her counterpart helped not only in their relationship, but also, being quite junior, in fostering her own feeling of legitimacy.

“All these countries currently in war have great histories. In Ethiopia, when you tell people about the great emperor of Habesha who was the first one to give asylum to prophet Mohammad, they love it. It's like you're saying: ‘You're in conflict now, but let's not forget your amazing history.’”

Being humble

Most interviewees, particularly international staff, emphasised the importance of humility, of being open to hearing the other party, of considering their position and of making compromises as a key element in frontline negotiations.

“My advice is to be transparent about not being an expert, show willingness to learn, and ask them to teach you. That's a big source of legitimacy, even bigger than being an expert. Acting like an expert, you can come across as arrogant, as a representative of a colonialist power. Showing respect is fundamental.”

What organisations can do

An overarching topic present in many conversations was that of **discrimination at the organisational level** on grounds of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, nationality, and race.



“When I say that I’m French, people don’t really believe me. Then when they realise that I understand the Western culture and speak French, they call me a banana. That’s what racism looks like in the humanitarian sector.”

- Male Asian negotiator

To prevent this, organisations should work on raising awareness among their staff, during the recruitment phase and including modules on diversity in their mandatory onboarding courses.

It is important to keep in mind that diversity in hiring does not only mean hiring a team that looks diverse, but also a team that thinks diversely: “It’s not only about recruiting diverse people, but it’s about people being able to embrace diverse views. You may tick the requirements by having the right number of women and men from diverse nationalities, but that doesn’t guarantee that these people will be open and be amenable to different perspectives.”

Additionally, the lead negotiator must be chosen independently of egos and hierarchy, but rather according to who is the most legitimate to achieve the best outcome in the negotiation. Once this person has been identified, it is essential to clarify roles within the team, to build on everyone’s strengths, and to make sure that the team respects the lead negotiator.

“If the team is comprised of men and women, and the team doesn’t value women and men equally, and for some reason, it’s visible to the counterpart, the other party will undermine what the woman says.”

Conclusions and recommendations

Negotiators need to pay more attention and reflect on how their counterpart’s identity influences them, so that they can find strategies to counter any potential prejudices, fears, and triggers.

Increasing the negotiator’s legitimacy in the eyes of the counterpart is sometimes more about engaging on a human level with interlocutors; it is more about personality, being able to crack jokes, break the ice and create a stable relationship, than of questions of non-changeable identity traits.

Nevertheless, these identity traits have a strong impact that needs to be acknowledged and planned for. Frontline humanitarian negotiators must make a self-assessment of their own identity traits and legitimacy sources for each specific negotiation and counterpart, considering which ones can be of use and which ones can endanger the negotiation.

For such an assessment, the legitimacy section (pg. 90-104) on the [CCHN Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiation](#) can be of great help. Additional discussions and brainstorming in the context of the thematic group on diversity, legitimacy, and narratives, might also prove useful in helping practitioners better prepare for their negotiations. CCHN community members are more than welcome to join the thematic group to engage in more self-reflection.

For further interesting, funny, and thought-provoking testimonies from this interview series, please read their recollection at <https://frontline-negotiations.org/influence-your-identity-has-on-a-negotiation/>.

Way forward

In 2022, the thematic group expanded its scope to include a narratives perspective, with the CCHN organising an expert workshop on narratives with [Professor David A. Hooker](#) that was well-received by community members.

Since then, four monthly expert sessions have taken place, where speakers from different domains have been invited to join and to tackle diverse aspects of the negotiator's and the counterpart's identities in more detail:

[Lousin Mehrabi](#), professional negotiator and trainer from [ADN Group](#), brought the perspective of business negotiations and discussed emotions, triggers, stress, and values in high-stake negotiations.

[Kirk Kinnell](#), former leader of Scotland Yard's negotiation group and negotiation expert at [ADN Group](#), brought the perspective of a hostage negotiator and reflected on how to listen for the "seven layers of listening" of our counterparts.

[Stephen Kilpatrick](#), Thematic Advisor on Military & Armed Groups at the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#), focused on access negotiations and how to better understand soldiers and arms carriers.

[Lina Srivastava](#), strategist, advocate, and founder of the [Center for Transformational Change](#), explored ways of creating ethical and effective narrative strategies when dealing with affected communities.

After each of these sessions, members of the thematic group gathered to brainstorm on how to include elements of each in a global framework that would help frontline negotiators when planning for their negotiations. This draft framework was later introduced at the [CCHN's 2022 World Summit](#) session on diversity.

Sessions to come in early 2023 include topics such as:

- the prominence of purpose and practice in the constructions of social identity, and
- LGBTQ+ experiences in frontline negotiations.




If you are interested in joining the thematic group and following these topics closely, please reach out to **Eugenia Lacalle** at elacalle@frontline-negotiations.org.





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