

Interview – Daria Nashat

Written by E-International Relations

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Daria Nashat is a speaker and trainer on inclusive leadership and resilience strategies, as well as co-founder of the 'Women in Politics' network. She is a mother with a vision, a community builder and a circle process facilitator. She is a certified Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) trainer, co-founder of the Women's Sanctuary Circle resilience game, and co-author of the German Center for International Peace Operations' (ZIF) Stress Management Handbook for civilian experts in peace missions. Prior to founding her own business, she worked in the field of peacebuilding, refugee return and post-conflict development. Daria is also a WIIS Brussels Steering Committee member.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Much is happening in the field of women's leadership, gender equity and inclusion. Given the gendered impact of the Covid-19 crisis, I have noticed an increase in research articles and debates on the topic of gender equity. On the other hand, this global crisis has also highlighted women as successful and collaborative political leaders and crisis managers at the international level.

For me, Caroline Criado Perez' *Invisible Women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men* is one of the most exciting and thought-provoking recent works. Based on new research and many case studies, her book illustrates the gender data gap that leads to invisible systemic discrimination against women. From medical research and technology, to workplaces and urban planning, Caroline Criado Perez succeeds in showing the hidden ways in which women are excluded in our societies, and the impact that this has on their health and wellbeing.

Another insightful research piece is the recent '*Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy*' report by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London. This report is based on the analysis of more than 500 pieces of research into the impact of women leaders in politics and public life. It shows that women's political leadership is key to more equal and caring societies – a win-win for us all. In addition, the report finds that women bring more collaborative and inclusive leadership styles into political environments.

With regards to innovation and new approaches, I find the use of reality-TV and social media very promising. A great example is the popular and successful 'Ms. President' program in Kenya. 'Ms. President' is an entertaining and educational 26-episode Reality TV show that seeks to portray the ability of women to lead effectively to a national audience. Female contestants, many of them with backgrounds in peace and community building, display their leadership abilities through live debates and the completion of tasks and challenges. I was fortunate enough to meet the five 'Ms. President' finalists during their visit to Brussels, and was deeply impressed by their vision, drive and leadership. Due to its great success, the program is now running in Uganda as well. I wonder what it would take to bring this program to Western Europe.

Overall, I believe that we need more debate and action in the field of women's political leadership. Some of the questions that I would be curious to explore further are:

1. Where are the mothers in politics?
2. What are effective pathways into politics for members of marginalised communities?
3. How can we foster a more collaborative and inclusive leadership culture in politics?

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How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The most profound shift was the experience of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a 14-year-old teenager. I was born and raised in West-Berlin, which was then surrounded by a wall, a death-strip with landmines and barbed wire, and soldiers with machine guns. For me, this was normal. But then, on a cold November day in 1989, the world changed seemingly overnight. What I saw in the following days took my breath away. Tens of thousands of people were coming over to 'my' side of the city. People were laughing, crying, and dancing in the streets. There was so much energy and pure joy. There was a deep sense of freedom and human interconnectedness. The wall was still standing, but it had lost all of its power. It was magical. What I learned was that old systems can crumble overnight. Anything is possible when the time is ripe. I have the feeling that the current global crisis is another historic moment that will lead to the profound transformation of systems that have outlived their time. As Arundhati Roy put it so beautifully, *'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.'*

What is the importance of International Women's Day and what does it represent to you?

International Women's Day is a moment to celebrate the achievements of gender equity in our society, as well as an opportunity for reflection and stocktaking. Much has been achieved since the day was introduced some 100 years ago by women who demanded equal rights and fair treatment. At the same time, much remains to be done. Persistent and widespread violence against women especially needs more attention, resources and effective action. With regards to the women's movement itself, we need to address the lack of diversity and continue to work on making this movement more inclusive.

Over the past 20 years, what challenges did you face as a woman working in peace-building, and how did you overcome these barriers?

The biggest challenge for me as a woman in the peacebuilding field was probably the decision to start a family. As a mother of young children, I did not want to travel as much anymore or go on mission assignments to (post)-conflict countries. There were few interesting jobs in the sector that did not involve travel or mission assignments abroad. This eventually led me to found my own consulting and training business based on leadership and resilience strategies. I am surprised and disheartened to see that the peacebuilding sector is still struggling to retain mothers (and fathers) in the workforce.

I hope that the current global pandemic will help to bring about new, innovative working arrangements that will enable parents (and other less mobile persons) to stay involved in this field. In the future, multiple careers during a lifetime will probably be the norm and workplaces will need to adapt to this reality in order to retain the brightest minds in their workforce. Let us shift the focus from fixing women and other minoritised groups, to now transforming systems and organisations. At the same time, I think we also need to ask ourselves whether the current design of the peacebuilding field as a travel-intense and deployment-based sector is actually sustainable, effective and future-oriented.

How has women's involvement in peace-building and transitional justice evolved?

The number of women in the peacebuilding and transitional justice field is growing, which is great news. In addition to increasing the number of women in the field, it is important to look at structural barriers, organisational culture, inclusive leadership and social justice in peacebuilding. We not only need quantitative, but also qualitative change, in order to ensure that everyone can thrive. I am afraid that unless we succeed in creating a culture of belonging, diversity and inclusion, our efforts will not be sustainable.

While women's involvement has positively evolved, the voices and ideas of minoritised groups are often still not heard. I believe that the creation of safe dialogue spaces for the exchange of innovative ideas, deep reflection and creative thinking, will help us address this problem. In my experience, circle dialogue is a simple, but powerful tool that allows all voices to be heard.

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An exciting example of such a creative process is taking place in the context of Women in International Security (WIIS) Brussels. We recently embarked on a collective reflection process on the concept of security, which has the objective to move beyond conventional understandings of security in defence and military terms. The consultation process offers an opportunity to sharpen our collective thinking, share insights on how security has evolved for us personally, and reflect on the breadth of the meaning of 'security' in a post-Covid-19 world.

As a steering committee member for Women in International Security (WIIS), what strategies are you pursuing to ensure that events and professional development programs most effectively support women in Brussels?

The most important strategy to find out how we can best support our members, is to stay in conversation and to listen to their interests and needs. Over the past year, we organised numerous interactive online events, including trainings, a mentoring program, conversations, and informal virtual coffee/tea check-ins with our community. From time to time, we also use online surveys to ask our members for their specific interests and needs. In times like these, we are there for our members and offer a supportive community to come together, connect, and just be there for each other.

What inspired you to co-found 'Women in Politics' and 'Women's Sanctuary Circle', and what do these initiatives seek to achieve?

I've always been interested in women and leadership questions. Women are still missing in so many places of power, especially in public leadership positions. The *'Women in politics: connecting and acting across parties'* platform was founded last year during the lockdown and aims to offer an informal (currently virtual) space for women interested and active in politics, to learn from and support each other and to explore collaborative ways of how politics can be done. The initiative is hosted under the umbrella of the Brussels-based German Marshall Fund of the United States, and is guided by the principles of fellowship, kindness, generosity and peer-learning. By using a community-building networking approach, I hope that this initiative will inspire more women to enter politics. Any woman interested and/or active in politics is welcome to join our conversations.

The 'Women's Sanctuary Circle' game grew from the observation that we need more spaces for women to connect, support each other and find community. The Women's Sanctuary Circle is a resilience-building game experience that is guided by inspirational input and builds on empathic listening, personal storytelling, and circle principles. An introductory version of the self-guiding game is freely available on our Women's Sanctuary Circle homepage.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars and those seeking leadership positions, particularly women?

Surround yourself with people who inspire you, who uplift you, and who want to see you shine. Spend your time with those people who truly see you for all of your potential. Networks are important for both women and men, but research indicates that women actually need two kinds of networks: one that is wide and diverse (similar to the one that men have), and a second network that consists of a close inner circle of female contacts. Think of the women in your life who truly see your brilliance; nurture these relationships and include them in your inner circle.