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# CONSENT AND COERCION IN MEDIATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VOLUNTARINESS IN HIGH-STAKES DISPUTES

**K. Ramya Srinithi[1], A. Varshini[2]**
[1]*BCom LLB (Hons), Chettinad School of Law, Chettinad Academy of Research and Education, Kelambakkam, Chennai – 603103*
[2]*BA LLB (Hons), Chettinad School of Law, Chettinad Academy of Research and Education, Kelambakkam, Chennai – 603103*

**ABSTRACT**
*Mediation is intended to be a voluntary process that allows parties to settle disputes through a mutually acceptable resolution achieved through open dialogue. Yet in high-stakes matters – such as family disputes, workplace matters, or human rights matters – the true voluntary nature of mediation is often absent from the process. This paper discusses how consent to mediation is often built on pressure and structural or systemic power imbalances, resulting in an outcome that is more mandated or coerced than a truly voluntary choice. This paper also explores the difference between actual consent and one made under duress, exploring legal theorists and psychological spaces to understand what occurs in decision-making for parties when they are under duress. The research applies case studies comparing mediation from India, the United States, and South Africa to explore the varieties of ways in which each system can address the worthiness of consent. The paper also explores international principles of practice from UNCITRAL and the European Union to assess efforts at the global level to safeguard the autonomy of parties. The paper concludes with recommendations for advancing mediation practice: conducting consent screening for coercion and/or systemic trauma, providing mediator training with trauma perspectives, and improving opt-out provisions to clarify that consent was given. By focusing on issues of consent and coercion, this research built on the social justice goal of making mediation fairer and empowering for all participating parties.*
**KEYWORDS:** *Mediation, Voluntariness, High-stakes, India*

## INTRODUCTION

Mediation has emerged, and continues to be, a principal form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to resolve disputes in a collaborative, non-adversarial manner. The increasing popularity and success of mediation is due to its inherent flexibility, confidentiality, and autonomy of the parties. The legitimacy of mediation is, in part, conditional on its being voluntary and the parties' participation in it: it follows that if the parties choose to participate in mediation, they decide whether to accept a result, and they can influence the outcome of the resolution process. With litigation, the outcome is dictated by a judge; Mediation, however, is about helping the parties to develop a resolution that tracks their own interests and values. However, at other times, and with higher-stakes cases, the line between consent and coercion may be particularly nebulous in practice.

Disputes of high stakes—such as those involving families, employment or human rights—come with significant emotion, uneven power dynamics and institutional pressure. In such contexts, it can be difficult to presume freedom or voluntary participation. The parties in conflict may feel forced into mediation because they are court-ordered to mediate, are too expensive to litigate, or do not want to bear to share their reputational damage with the community. Even when it seems to be voluntary, many subtle forms of coercion can impede actual consent, such as biases of the mediator, emotional pressure, and different levels of cultural respect. This leads to the question: when does mediation participation become voluntary? How do legal systems protect against coercion? And what reforms need to be accomplished to ensure mediation is a fair and empowering process?

The conflict between consent and coercion in the mediation process isn't hypothetical - it has important impacts on justice, ethics, and human dignity. Law frequently views consent as a binary issue, failing to account for the pressures involved with making decisions. Ethical principles emphasise the respect and autonomy afforded to others - but also fail to capture the structural and psychological limitations faced by vulnerable members. Psychology also complicates the issue by considering how trauma, stress, and power dynamics can alter judgment and block individuals from making informed choices.

The paper takes a thorough look at voluntariness in mediation by examining how it is tested and negotiated in cases that have high-stakes implications. It incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives from law, ethics and psychology to unpack the mechanisms of coercion and the processes of safeguarding party autonomy. Through comparative case studies that are drawn from jurisdictional perspectives in India, the United States and South Africa, the paper addresses how the different contexts regulate the interaction of efficiency and fairness in mediation. Then, international frameworks, namely the UNCITRAL Model Law and the EU Mediation Directive, are analysed, to assess international efforts to ensure parties are informed and voluntarily participate in the mediation process.
In the end, this study advocates for a rights-based, trauma-informed model of mediation that acknowledges the complexity of consent and is actively attempting to safeguard against coercion. It puts forward both changes to procedural

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rules, like pre-mediation screening, to enhance the role of voluntary participation, mediator training in power-sensitive approaches, and opt-out in mandatory programs. In doing so, this paper interrogates the assumptions underpinning the notion of voluntariness and offers tangible safeguards. It contributes to the overall discussion about access to justice, legal pluralism, and ethically mediated conflict.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Whether mediation in high-stakes disputes truly reflects voluntary participation, or if structural and interpersonal pressures undermine genuine consent?
2. Whether comparative approaches from jurisdictions like India, the United States, and South Africa reveal consistent patterns or divergent strategies in protecting voluntariness?
3. What procedural safeguards can effectively prevent coercion and ensure genuine consent in mediation?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the legal, ethical, and psychological foundations of voluntariness in mediation processes.
2. To identify the structural, institutional, and interpersonal factors that may lead to coercion in high-stakes mediation contexts
3. To compare how different jurisdictions address the tension between consent and coercion in mediation, including the role of mandatory mediation schemes.
4. To propose practical reforms and safeguards to ensure that mediation remains a fair, rights-based, and empowering process for all parties.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

While mediation is supposed to be a voluntary process, these types of high-stakes dispute often include blatant or more subtle, coercive elements that negate authentic consent. Various forms of mandatory referral, relative power imbalances, emotional fragility, and an uneven playing field of legal knowledge can all put pressure on parties to the table, even if they do not want to participate or settle. In legal contexts, the consent is often regarded by legal actors as pro forma. A lack of attention to the psychological and the structural constraints around voluntariness can leave room for costly, unanticipated outcomes to undue coercion, which is especially concerning for marginalized parties. The crux of the problem is, how coercion operates within mediation, and whether we are doing enough to ensure safeguards to protect against coercion and promote respect for voluntariness, autonomy, and justice in sensitive, high-stakes dispute settings.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative legal research approach to examine the voluntariness of mediation. All relevant statutes, cases, and international instruments and soft law frameworks—such as UNCITRAL and the EU Mediation Directive—are analyzed in conjunction with contemporary legal academic literature relating to consent and coercion. The comparative jurisdictions of India, the United States, and South Africa are selected for the study because they engage with innovative and different models of mediation. The study utilizes thematic analysis to detect patterns of coercion and to assess safeguards. The study does not apply fieldwork, but uses the findings from previous empirical research, which helps build normative recognition, review existing reports, and suggest developments that strengthen fairness and autonomy in mediation, particularly when individuals have substantial stakes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Mediation: A Comparative Study among India, USA and UK, Kiran Dhaiya and Dr Seema Yadav, Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research, Volume 4, Issue 4, ISSN: 2582-8878**

This article examines mediation practices in India, the US, and the UK, emphasizing differences in legal structure, institutional backing, and cultural acceptance. The authors note that all three jurisdictions view mediation as voluntary and confidential, although the court-referred model in India often raises issues of risk of coercion without sufficient safeguards under their rubric of Section 89 CPC- Civil Procedure Code, 1908 (As amended in 2002). In the UK and the US, there are important distinctions: USA and UK prioritize autonomy, accreditation of the mediator, and enforceable settlement agreements. In the UK and USA systems, there are minimal if any, rights of the parties alleged to be coerced. The article makes case for India to adopt rights-based reforms including clear protocols for obtaining informed consent and training for mediators. The authors note that looking at international practices and drawing on the best practices in the world will enrich the conversations about improving voluntariness and fairness in high-stakes mediation.

**Voluntary Mediation as a Tenable Resolution Mechanism for Construction Disputes, By Nan Cao and Sai On Cheung, Journal of Construction Engineering and Management Volume 150, Issue 6**

This research presents a structured framework for conflict management in construction projects that focuses on early detection, stakeholder engagement, and proactive resolution methods. The authors argue that construction-related conflict predominantly arises from miscommunication, contract uncertainty, and diverging stakeholder preferences. Based on empirical data and systems theory, the framework incorporates conflict typologies, escalation trajectories, and methods for resolution, including mediation. The research also highlights the necessity of voluntary participation and trust-building in non-adversarial dispute resolution. The authors advance mediation as a flexible, low-cost resource for resolving conflict while preserving relationships and allowing projects to progress. However, the research warns that mediation without appropriate procedures and training experiences will not address power imbalances or pre-existing conflict. While the framework presents guidance on further developing mediation in construction that aligns with best practices internationally (for collaborative problem solving and informed consent), this research adds to a relatively small body of literature advocating for mediated, structured and rights-sensitive approaches to managing conflict in complex, high-stakes, multi-party environments like construction.

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**Mediation: Its Future Perspective in India, Ayush from Law College at Dehradun, Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research, Volume 2, Issue 1, ISSN: 2582-8878**

The article, by Ayush, examines the changing world of mediation in India's dispute resolution ecosystem, as it may have the potential to alter some elements of that ecosystem, especially given how slow the judicial system is becoming, as well as increased court costs and litigation. The author points out that, because of the pandemic, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are being considered by clients and courts with increased interest. He positions mediation as a process that is collaborative, swift, and less combative than other options. The paper focuses intently on Section 89 CPC and critiques its presentation, asserting that there is little consistency and a lack of clarity in its usage. It argues for institutional reform around mediator training and educating the general public and the surrounding community to strengthen and be more informed volunteers. The author's final vision is to consider mediation (rather than mediation as merely an alternative to litigation) as a truly viable option for justice, which promotes rights awareness and equal access. It situates mediation within ongoing conversations by demonstrating a connection between mediation and constitutional values.

**Informed Consent in Mediation: A Guiding Principle for Truly Educated Decision-making, Jacqueline M. Nolan-Haley, 74 Notre Dame L. Rev. 775 (1998-1999)**

In her article, Jacqueline M. Nolan-Haley argues that informed consent is a necessary component of ethical mediation. She pushes back against the common assumption that consent is valid solely because the parties have agreed, emphasizing instead that genuine voluntariness entails knowledge, mental capacity, and free choice. The article discusses the inherent risks in court-ordered mediation where parties may not have fully developed legal literacy or may be coerced into settlement. As a remedy, Nolan-Haley proposes a rights-based framework of mediation, in which mediators can actively facilitate informed decision-making and consent through negotiating to educate parties, creating transparency, and facilitating ethically. Her suggestion would recast consent from a project to a process. It would also involve introducing rights-based safeguards from outside mediation in order to protect individuals' autonomy and diminish bias or inequity in mediation.

**Principle Of Mediation Equality İn Legal Disputes, Independent Researcher Merve Hilal Cirkan, Posted: 25 Mar 2024**

Merve Hilal Çırkan's paper analyses the principle of equality in mediation and defines it as a fundamental quality that must exist in order to achieve fairness in a legal dispute. While Çırkan states mediation should be collaborative and voluntary, she insists that true equality must be assured through structural safeguards to prevent parties with more power from dominating negotiations or decision-making. This essay analyzes the influence of mediator conduct and access to legal counsel and/or litigation on the mediation process. Çırkan suggests a rights-based approach to mediation that incorporates provisions to protect vulnerable parties and/ or stakeholders and focuses on informed consent. Çırkan adds to the discussion about voluntariness by constructing equality into a dynamic and enforceable ethical standard.

## CHAPTERIZATION

## 1. MEDIATION AND ITS CORE PRINCIPLES

### 1.1 EVOLUTION AND DEFINITION OF MEDIATION

Mediation is an established means of resolving disagreements through discussion, understanding, and organised negotiation. Although contemporary legal systems frequently characterise mediation as a formal substitute for litigation, mediation has a long history and is present in most cultures. Societies in the ancient past—such as in hereditary India, China, African countries, and in Indigenous societies—particularly employed informal mediation based on respected community members, including elders and spiritual leaders, to resolve disagreements amicably and reestablish harmony. Mediation among these ancient societies relied almost exclusively on consensus and relational restoration and balance, as opposed to adjudication and punishment in a contested process.

In India, for instance, the panchayat system and Lok Adalats represent longstanding customs of settling disputes based in the community. Likewise, Confucian philosophy has supported harmony and compromise, rather than conflict, for centuries of mediation in China. Additionally, restorative justice and communal dialogue in Africa have been used for many generations as a means for healing and reconciliation.

The establishment of mediation within the legal system in Western nations became more viable in the 20th century, especially because of the complexities presented by limited resources for overloaded courts and increasing litigation costs. The 1970s saw the United States develop the first mediation program focused on the court system, with most other nations developing similar mediation programs in the subsequent years. The common law principles of neutrality, voluntariness, and confidentiality were adapted to mediation's informal processes, embodied in international instruments like the UNCITRAL Model Law and the EU Mediation Directive.

Mediation is now known around the world as a flexible, culturally adaptable, and ethically principled process. It has come a long way from informal practices in the community to formal legal processes with the same underlying principles, i.e., self-determination and talking to each other. All the while, mediation is now finding its way into the more serious contexts of practice like family law, employment law, and human rights, raising concerns about fairness, consent, and coercion in mediation process reform and legitimacy.

### 1.2 CORE PRINCIPLES OF MEDIATION

**Voluntariness**

Voluntariness is fundamental to mediation practice. It provides that parties engage voluntarily and free of coercion and undue pressure. Whether the mediation is a court-referral or a privately-arranged mediation, the parties always have the right to decide to participate and to decide whether to settle. Voluntariness maintains the legitimacy of the process as well as the authenticity of the idea that the resolution is a choice, not a mandate.

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**Confidentiality**
Confidentiality is crucial to foster an environment that is both safe and conducive to dialogue. As such, mediation discussions will be confidential and won't be allowed to be shared in any future legal action or outside of the mediation process at all. It is these ideas of confidentiality that promote honest and candid communication, minimize worries of reputational injury, and also serve to protect sensitive personal or commercial information. There are very limited exceptions to confidentiality, which are generally related to legal obligations of reporting a dire situation, creating a risk of harm

**Impartiality and Neutrality**
Impartiality and neutrality mean the mediator is objective and has an equal distance toward all parties. The mediator must never be biased for one party or suggest outcomes and must not let personal interest influence the mediation process. Any conflict of interest must be disclosed. Impartiality and neutrality support trust and ensure that all parties are heard and respected, regardless of position and power.

**Party Autonomy**
Autonomy means that the parties, not the mediator or court, are in control of both the process and outcome of mediation. They make all decisions about what they will settle and the terms they will agree to, and how they will structure their agreement. Relying on autonomy and on the self-determination available to the parties through the process, parties can create solutions based on their own needs, values, and circumstances rather than settle based on fixed legal prescriptions.

**Informed Consent**
Informed consent also helps ensure that parties understand the nature of mediation, their rights, and what an agreement entails. Consent must be ongoing and freely given, and can be revoked at any time. Legal literacy and access to counsel are particularly crucial in high-stakes disputes where emotional distress or power differentials may inhibit informed consent.

**Fairness and Equity**
Fairness and equity direct the responsibility of the mediator, ensuring the process is dignified and no one is taken advantage of. Although mediators do not enforce a legal standard, they must be attuned to power imbalances, emotional vulnerability, and integrity in the process.

## 2. VOLUNTARINESS IN MEDIATION

### 2.1 CONCEPT OF VOLUNTARINESS

Voluntariness means the ability of people to make decisions without being forced, manipulated, or unduly influenced. It is often analysed in the legal and ethical literature closely allied with autonomy, informed consent, and the ability to act in accordance with one's own beliefs and interests. Voluntariness is more than just being free from force; it requires that decisions are made with informed understanding, real alternatives, and mental readiness to act.

The principle of voluntariness is fundamental within mediation. Mediation's defining feature when compared to adjudication is the emphasis on party autonomy: parties must voluntarily decide to engage in the mediation process and retain the ultimate decision-making authority over the outcome of the mediation process. This principle legitimises mediation as a fair and empowering manner in which to resolve disputes. It guarantees that parties leave with an agreement that is not imposed on them, rather one that they have reached based on informed and uncoerced consent.

Nonetheless, as disputes advance into high-stakes matters, the relationship between voluntariness and mediation becomes increasingly complex. Court-referred or required mediation programs, emotional vulnerability, power imbalances, and limited legal literacy can all impact the genuineness of voluntariness. Parties may choose to participate or settle not because they truly desire to, but as a result of pressure due to consequences, lack of resources, or misunderstanding of rights. In these situations, voluntariness becomes a fraught question and questionable ideal
To preserve the integrity of mediation, it is essential to critically examine how voluntariness is understood, protected, and practised. This includes assessing legal safeguards, mediator conduct, and procedural design

### 2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF VOLUNATARINESS

Voluntariness in mediation is best understood through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that integrate legal, psychological, ethical, and sociological perspectives. These frameworks help unpack how consent operates and how coercion may be embedded in mediation structures.

**Autonomy Theory (Legal and Ethical)**
His hypothesis emphasizes the individual's privilege of making their own choices and determining their own level of interest. In the context of mediation, autonomy theory supports the principle of voluntariness, which stipulates that all parties should be free to elect to mediate according to their level of interest and ultimately be free to settle the mediation. The theory also critiques mandatory mediation initiatives that may diminish authentic consent through institutionalizing participation.

**Procedural Justice Theory**
Procedural justice emphasizes fairness in the processes, not just fairness in outcomes. They suggest that parties are more likely to view mediation as legitimate when they see that they have been heard, respected, and empowered. Central to this idea is voluntariness—if a party feels coerced or sidelined from the process, procedural fairness is undermined.

**Power Imbalance and Coercion Theory (Sociological)**
This framework looks at how power imbalances of a social, economic or relational nature influence consent. It shows how a relatively powerless party may be covertly coerced into mediation or to settle a dispute, especially in high-risk disputes - mediation can occur as a result of power imbalances. Mediators have an obligation to try to counteract these imbalances to help maintain voluntariness.

**Transformative Mediation Theory**
Transformative mediation emphasizes empowerment and recognition. Mediation is viewed not only as a way to solve the

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problem but as a relational process, enhancing the agency of the parties. Voluntariness is viewed as a kind of capacity that can grow and develop through respectful engagement and facilitation by the mediator.

**Trauma-Informed Practice Framework**
This new framework brings together psychology and mediation, actually understanding how trauma influences our decision-making process, trust, and feelings of safety. It states that being voluntary means being emotionally ready, and mediators should create an atmosphere conducive to being informed and pressure-free about participating.

**Critical Legal Theory**
Critical legal scholars dispute the notion that legal processes—including mediation—are neutral. They would claim that voluntariness may be a legal fiction when systemically entrenched inequalities determine who participates, how negotiations unfold, and what outcomes are socially permissible. The framework calls for attention to structural reform and situational context.

**Informed consent vs. Contractual consent**
Informed consent and contractual consent are two separate legal paradigms that have important ramifications for mediation. Contractual consent stems from traditional contract law, and the contract is considered valid where parties demonstrate capacity, intention, and mutual agreement. It is a question of enforceability: once terms have been accepted, it is presumed to be a binding agreement unless there is some fraud, duress, or incapacity. This provokes the risk of missing out on more nuanced pressures if we view consent mainly as a procedural formality

In contrast, informed consent is derived from medical law and human rights discourse. Individuals must appreciate the character, risks, and consequences of their decisions, and consent is voluntary and free from coercion. Within mediation, informed consent requires participants to understand the mediation process, their rights and the consequences of the settlement. Informed consent is consistent with theories of autonomy and procedural justice, emphasizing ethical validity over simple formal agreement

In high-stakes disputes—such as family, employment, or human rights cases—contractual consent may validate outcomes that lack true voluntariness. Informed consent offers a richer framework for assessing whether parties genuinely agreed, especially when emotional vulnerability or power imbalances are present. Legal systems must move beyond formalism to ensure that mediation protects autonomy, dignity, and fairness through robust, context-sensitive consent standards

## 3. HIGH-STAKE MEDIATION
High-stakes mediation means mediations that are causing important emotions, legal issues, financial issues, or social impacts. In contrast to disputes in retail settings or plea bargaining in criminal cases, where parties are typically affected by monetary resolving disputes, in high-stakes mediation with disputants can include family relationships, impacts to employment, injury to dignity, or violations of rights. High-stakes mediation is more than procedural in nature; it is intensely personal, ethically difficult, and often highly charged.

**Family law mediation**
Family disputes—such as divorce and child custody proceedings, domestic violence issues, and estate issues—are often emotionally challenging personal matters. Mediation in these contexts is intended to protect relationships and help avoid harm caused by adversarial proceedings, particularly for children. However, situations that create power imbalances (financial imbalances, manipulation, etc.) and trauma may compromise voluntariness. In family mediation, abuse may not be appropriate unless protections are instituted that are trauma-informed. A family mediator has to personally check in with both parties to ascertain that, to the extent possible, both parties fully understand and appreciate their rights and that one party is not being forced into an unsafe or unfair agreement.

**Employment and workplace mediation**
Workplace conflict frequently involves allegations of discrimination, harassment, wrongful discharge or retaliation. All of these have reputational, financial and psychological consequences. Employees may feel pressured to resolve because the alternative is a loss of employment or attorneys' fees. Voluntariness is threatened when an employer possesses more power or when mediation is a condition of employment. Transparency, legal advice, and neutral mediation will help ensure informed consent

**Human rights and public interest mediation**
Land disputes, environmental justice issues, indigenous claims, and refugee protection cases often place excluded communities in opposition to elite institutions. They are asymmetrical structurally and politically sensitive, as issues on both sides of the dispute can be about loss of land and its resulting legacies. Mediation can help foster a dialogue; however, voluntariness is precarious when legal literacy is lacking, a community has trauma from colonisers, or is being pressured to find a compromise. Mediators must be culturally competent and ethically cautious to ensure consent is informed and that outcomes are just.

**Medical and professional negligence mediation**
Medical errors, malpractice and ethical violations can have a significant impact on victims. Often, the victim wants to hold the health care institution responsible and receive compensation, while the institution wants to minimise liability. Mediation is typically a private process for resolution, but parties may feel emotionally overwhelmed and feel at a legal disadvantage. Voluntariness may be compromised if a party is pressured into a settlement or if one party doesn't have an advisor with relevant subject matter or legal knowledge. Notably, mediators must balance empathy with clarity about the process, while ensuring that agreements are both voluntary and informed decisions by each party

## 4. COMPARATIVE STUDIES
### 4.1 INDIA
**Court-Referred Mediation and Voluntariness under Section 89 CPC**

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The mediation model in India is primarily court-referred pursuant to Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC). Courts regularly refer parties to mediation in an effort to reduce backlog in cases, especially in family, labour, and civil disputes. These referrals provide parties access to justice, but also create concern regarding voluntariness. Parties may feel a sense of obligation to mediate because of judicial pressure, a lack of legal literacy, or fear of unfavourable outcomes. In Lok Adalat's and other informal forums, parties may end up prioritising settlement over autonomy and even face pressure to settle or act expeditiously in the settlement process to the detriment of fairness. The Supreme Court *in Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. v. Cherian Varkey Construction Co*. held that referrals to mediation do not obligate parties to resolve a claim; however, the differentiation between encouragement and coercion is blurred in practice. When there are no pre-screening practices in place, trauma-informed practices, or using an opt-out option, voluntariness may not exist. Although there have been recent changes to the mediation model in the form of the Mediation Bill 2023, which anticipates instituting safeguards and respect for party autonomy, the implementation has not always been uniform. The mediation model in India typifies a tension between institutional efficiency and individual consent, making voluntariness an aspirational but tenuous concept

### 4.2 UNITED STATES

**Voluntary Mediation and Judicial Safeguards**

The United States holds voluntary participation as a fundamental principle of mediation. Courts frequently suggest or mandate mediation before proceeding with litigation, but actual resolution cannot occur without some form of agreement. The U.S. Court stated that mediation cannot be compelled against a person's will. High-stakes disputes—such as employment discrimination, family law, and medical malpractice—are mediated with strong procedural safeguards. The parties may have attorneys, disclosure requirements before the mediation, and the ability to exit the mediation at any time, although this can be avoided in the mediation clause of employment or insurance contracts if mandatory arbitration is required. Mediators have been trained to recognise coercive dynamics and secure informed consent from both parties, but that does not diminish the undermining effect of an unequal power dynamic, emotional distress, and economic pressure on an individual's decisions. U.S. case law, like the ethics codes, including the Model Standards of Conduct for Mediators, emphasises party autonomy, mediator neutrality, and voluntary informed participation. The voluntary nature of mediation is legally supported in the United States for the most part, but it takes continuous vigilance to protect high-stakes participants, such as consumers entering into consumer contracts or medical malpractice victims.

### 4.3 SOUTH AFRICA

**Restorative Mediation and Cultural Sensitivity**

South Africa's mediation system originates from its commitment to establishing restorative justice and reconciliation since its transition from apartheid. The use of mediation is wide-ranging in instances of land restitution, family disputes, and community conflicts, and often involves groups which were negatively impacted by apartheid. A key principle of mediation is that participating in it is voluntary; however, this can be difficult to rely upon. It is sometimes the case that participants of mediation have trauma, are subjected to systemic disadvantage or do not have legal representation. For example, indigenous communities are often involved in land rights negotiations with the state or corporation (one or more of those organizations), which means parties may be in a disadvantaged position in terms of genuine consent. Initiatives of the South African Law Reform Commission along with the Department of Justice colourful practices promoting culturally and trauma-informed approaches to mediation. Mediators are trained to assess the historical didactic context, the emotional vulnerability, and the differential power of the parties' positions. Community-based mediation practices often employ more traditional models of dispute resolution based on dialogue, empathy, and healing. Although voluntary, it is often the case that economic hardship or institutional fatigue continues to imply the pressure to settle. South Africa's model, therefore, assumes a hybrid approach that is both legally defensible and adaptable to the cultural perspective of the parties. Regardless, it offers valuable implications of how mediation can allow individuals, involved in deeply unequal positions in emotionally fraught disputes, the ability to maintain their dignity and autonomy

## 5. LEGAL AND POLICY ANALYSIS

### 5.1 INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

**United Nations Guidance on Effective Mediation (2012)**

Developed in response to UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/65/283, this framework outlines important fundamentals for ethical and effective mediation. Volunteers are at the centre of this, requiring parties to freely consent to participating, while mediators ensure the consent is informed, ongoing and revocable. The framework also emphasises impartiality, inclusivity as well as respect for international law, particularly in contexts of peacebuilding and human rights.

**European Union Mediation Directive**

The EU Mediation Directive was created to enhance the availability of mediation for civil and commercial disputes among EU member states. It provides a legal framework that increases the likelihood of participation in mediation voluntarily, provides a basis to enforce mediated agreements, and supports the quality of the mediation process. Voluntariness is a key principle: the parties must enter the mediation process willingly, and cannot be forced to make decisions. Similarly, any mediated settlement must reflect the parties' independent decision-making. The Directive expressly prohibits coercion and requires parties to control the process and the outcome.

These provisions involve that proceedings usually must be kept secret, arrangements made must be enforceable by court order, and mediation training or education to become volunteer mediators is encouraged. While the directive does not involve family or labour disputes, you can see instructive and practice overlap, and principles underlying the directive are used in mediation in those domains. The directive does allow courts to invite parties to consider mediation, but does not require it, consistent with the principle of voluntariness.

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The idea behind the directive is to strike a balance between the legal structure and party autonomy. Mediation is not merely a process. Mediation is a relational process that requires trust, neutrality, and informed consent from the parties involved. Creating some form of common standards for mediation across the European Union benefits cross-border dispute resolution while promoting ethics in participation.

**UNCITRAL Model**

The UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Mediation (2018) provides a unified legal framework for international commercial mediation. It is based on the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Conciliation (2002) and reflects updated terminology and mediation practices. The Model Law aims to assist in promoting the use of mediation as a form of dispute resolution through legal certainty, enforceability of mediated settlement agreements and respect for party autonomy.

The concept of voluntariness is a core principle reflected in the Model Law. These principles define mediation as a process where parties seek to achieve a conciliatory outcome "voluntarily," with the assistance of a neutral third person. The law clearly asserts that parties can ultimately withdraw from mediation at any time and that any settlement agreement must be arrived at through a genuine and informed consent process. This helps protect against coercive, manipulative, or undue pressures, which enjoys particular importance in serious commercial disputes involving strong financial or reputational stakes.

The Model Law also speaks to neutrality by discussing disclosure of any circumstances that could cause a doubt about neutrality. This helps ensure that voluntariness is preserved by positioning the parties with faith in the process and an ability to make voluntary decisions that are not being influenced by bias. It also includes confidentiality protections, which foster open conversations about potentially sensitive business information.

One of the significant innovative features of the law is the ability the enforceability settlement agreements. If the parties resolve, they can have that settlement agreement recognised and enforced by the courts so long as it meets the procedural requirements. This gives mediation some legal standing while maintaining its informal and flexible nature.

In high-stakes areas – international trade, intellectual property, or cross-border investment disputes – the Model Law offers a balanced approach toward mediation. The Model Law guarantees mediation is a voluntary, party-driven process while providing a legal infrastructure to ensure fairness and enforceability. The Law's commitment to autonomy, neutrality, and procedural safeguards makes it a global standard for ethical mediation.

The Model Law, by including voluntariness as both a legal and ethical standard, reinforces the legitimacy of mediation while safeguarding parties—particularly those confronting intricate negotiations under great stress—from abusive behaviours.

## 5.2 NATIONAL LEGISLATION

**Legal Framework**

The Code of Civil Procedure (CPC), 1908, through its Section 89, functions as India's main legal framework for mediation, allowing courts to refer matters to alternatives (including mediation). Although the provision is aimed at alleviating pressure on courts and encouraging parties to settle, debate has arisen as to whether mediation that is court-referred really respects party voluntarism.

The Mediation Bill 2023, currently in the legislative process, aims to institutionalise mediation by creating a Mediation Council of India, requiring all civil and commercial disputes to attempt mediation before commencing litigation, and putting principles in place like confidentiality, neutrality, and informed consent. However, critics suggest that mandatory pre-litigation mediation would undermine voluntariness unless the language and safeguards for vulnerable parties are clearly delineated.

**Court practices**

Mediation in India is strongly encouraged by the courts under Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC), and courts frequently refer parties to mediation in the early hearings of a case. While the Supreme Court in *Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. v. Cherian Varkey Construction Co.* indicated that a reference does not require a settlement, judges will typically urge parties to "settle" or "resolve amicably" in practice. This encouragement from the bench can be perceived as coercive, particularly when the parties are vulnerable or when one or more parties are unrepresented.

In familial and workplace disputes, cases are sometimes referred to the Lok Adalat's, or court-annexed mediation centres, for suggested resolutions. These settings tend to uphold an ethos of compromise, rather than autonomy, and the mediators can be retired judges or lawyers, who adopt some form of evaluative style. Voluntariness can be implicit when litigants feel compelled or pressured to agree to a term, instead of impending litigation or displeasure of the Court. The Mediation Bill 2023 provides a proposed procedural standardisation of the practice of mediation by mandating informed consent and neutrality of the mediator. However, the practice of mediation may continue to confuse voluntary participation with voluntary participation without a proper opt-out system and trauma-informed screening being built into court practices.

## 5.3 SAFEGUARDS AND PROTOCOLS

**Pre-Mediation Screening**

Mediation centres and courts should assess whether the case is suitable for mediation if domestic violence, trauma, or extreme power imbalance is present. Screening assesses whether the parties are psychologically and emotionally able to participate in mediation voluntarily.

**Informed Consent Protocols**

The parties must receive a clear explanation of the mediation process, their rights (including the right to withdraw), and that mediation is not binding unless an agreement is reached. This involves a written consent form and oral reaffirmation at the commencement of the mediation to confirm understanding and autonomy.

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**Mediator training and ethics code**
Mediators should be trained in power dynamics, neutrality and trauma-informed practice. - The Mediation Bill 2023 proposes a Mediation Council of India that sets standards for mediators and provides credentialing and oversight to ensure ethical conduct and accountability.

**Right to opt-out**
Parties should also retain the right to withdraw from the mediation process at any time, without prejudice to their legal rights. - Courts should not judge anyone for choosing to litigate rather than settle.

**Judicial non-coercion**
Judges referring cases to mediation must avoid language that pressures parties to settle. The Supreme Court in *Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. v. Cherian Varkey Construction Co.* emphasised that referral does not imply compulsion to agree.

**Confidentiality and safe space**
Confidentiality helps parties feel secure against outside pressure and be truthful in their discussions. - The Mediation Centre should provide a space that is neutral and not intimidating, particularly for women, workers, and marginalized groups.

**Legal aid and representation**
Access to legal representation ensures that parties have an understanding of their rights and what any settlement will mean. - Legal Services Authorities assistance can be provided in understanding Lok Adalat's and court-annexed mediation.

## SUGGESTIONS

**Codify Informed Consent in Legislation**
Amend or clarify provisions in the Mediation Bill 2023 to explicitly require informed, revocable consent at all stages of mediation. Include mandatory disclosures about rights, process, and consequences before parties agree to mediate.

**Establish Pre-Mediation Suitability Screening**
Courts and mediation centres should assess emotional readiness, trauma history, and power dynamics before referring cases. Develop screening protocols for family, labour, and human rights disputes to prevent coercive referrals.

**Mandate Trauma-Informed and Cultural Competency Training**
Require mediators to undergo training in trauma-informed practice, cultural sensitivity, and power imbalance mitigation. Include modules on psychological coercion, implicit bias, and ethical facilitation.

**Create Opt-Out Mechanisms Without Penalty**
Ensure parties can withdraw from mediation at any point without judicial or procedural disadvantage. Courts must avoid language that implies settlement is expected or preferred.

**Ensure Access to Legal Aid and Representation**
Expand legal aid schemes to cover mediation, especially for economically or socially vulnerable parties. Encourage mediator collaboration with legal advisors to support informed decision-making.

**Standardise Mediator Ethics and Accountability**
Operationalise the Mediation Council of India with clear ethical codes, grievance redressal mechanisms, and accreditation standards. Monitor mediator conduct to prevent evaluative or directive styles that compromise autonomy.

**Integrate International Best Practices**
Align national mediation frameworks with UN Guidance, UNCITRAL Model Law, and EU Directive principles. Promote cross-border learning and adapt global safeguards to local contexts.

**Judicial Sensitisation and Oversight**
Train judges to refer cases ethically, avoiding coercive language or implied pressure. Establish appellate review of mediated settlements where voluntariness is contested

## CONCLUSION

The legitimacy of mediation is derived from voluntariness. Voluntariness defines mediation from adjudication by preserving the parties' autonomy, informed consent, and self-determination. The ideal of voluntariness is more fragile and contested in high-stakes disputes, where there are significant emotional, legal, and social repercussions. This research has shown that voluntariness is much more than a procedural agent; voluntariness is a complicated and context-sensitive lived experience shaped by legal systems, institutional practices, and power dynamics.

Legal theory provides an important distinction between mere consent and informed consent; while contractual consent emphasizes agreement, informed consent encompasses understanding, capacity, and freedom from coercion. Informed consent must be the higher standard in high-stakes mediation when parties are vulnerable, under duress, and/or experiencing trauma. There are theoretical constructs, such as autonomy theory, procedural justice and trauma-informed practice, that shed light on the ethical obligations of protecting voluntariness in addition to legal obligations.

Comparative case studies in India, the United States, and South Africa present different ways of doing things. India's court-referred model is efficient but raises concerns about coercion due to a lack of safeguards. The United States stresses judicial restraint and requires ethical standards for mediators, while South Africa mixes restorative justice with cultural sensitivity to maximize dignity and consent. These case studies support the need for context-relevant, rights-based safeguards.

The international standards that prevail—from the UN Guidance on Effective Mediation, to the UNCITRAL Model Law—recognize voluntariness as a basic principle. They require informed, reversible participation, mediator neutrality, and enforceability, yet still require ethical outcomes. As such, these standards offer an international standard for consideration in the reform of national practices.

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In India, the Mediation Bill 2023 presents an opportunity to institutionalize voluntariness through pre-screening, mediator training, opt-out mechanisms and legal aid. However, legislation alone is insufficient. Courts, mediator ethics and public awareness will have to ensure mediation continues to be a space of empowerment rather than a more subtle coercion.

In the end, safeguarding voluntariness in high-stakes mediation is not simply a legal obligation, but rather a moral commitment to justice, dignity and human agency. While mediation begins to take a more central role in the process of dispute resolution, more importantly in a sensitive environment, the challenge is not just to facilitate settlement, but to ensure that all agreements are the free and informed will of all the parties involved.

**Call for Culturally Sensitive, Rights-Based Mediation**

As alternative dispute resolution, particularly mediation, is increasingly being utilised to resolve disputes—especially high-stakes disputes—it is important to move past procedural formalism and privilege culturally sensitive, rights-based approaches. The concept of voluntariness is not simply a legal precondition, but should also be understood as a lived, real experience of identity, trauma, and power. Mediation processes (and mediator function) should honour the wide range of cultural customs, emotions, and history that shape how parties interact with conflict. This requires mediators to be trained in cultural competency, trauma-informed care, and ethical facilitation. In addition, legal systems must operationalize the protection of autonomy, dignity, and informed consent—especially for marginalized and vulnerable groups. A rights-based mediation approach makes clear that justice is not simply the conclusion of a settlement of a dispute, but rather the manner in which the process promotes empowered opportunities for individuals to speak, choose, and heal. Centring cultural sensitivity and human rights agendas will allow mediation to achieve its potential as a transformative, equitable, and inclusive justice tool.

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