CONCILIATION RESOURCES

A PEACE FOR ALL WOMEN: LESSONS FROM PEACEBUILDERS ON INTERSECTIONALITY

Practice paper

A PEACE FOR ALL WOMEN
LESSONS FROM PEACEBUILDERS ON INTERSECTIONALITY

FEBRUARY 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER

This practice paper was written by Wen Hoe, Laura Aumeer and Amy Dwyer. It builds on lessons from Conciliation Resources' partnerships with civil society organisations under the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) from 2023 to 2024. It draws on findings from a series of participatory workshops carried out with peacebuilders working to increase women's participation in peace processes from April to June 2025 and a session with peacebuilders from nine contexts in Nairobi in October 2025.

The authors would like to thank all participants who contributed their time and expertise. We specifically want to thank the following organisations: Coordination des Organisations Non Gouvernementale et Associations Féminines Nigériennes (CONGAFEN), Integrity Watch Liberia (IWL), Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA), Sawa Shabab, Teduray Lambangian Women's Organization (TLWOI), Ugaaso Women's Dialogue Space, University Youth Foundation, Women's NGO Secretariat (WONGOSOL), Women for Afghanistan, Wyam Youth Foundation and Youth Network for Positive Change in Liberia (YOUNETPO).

The paper was produced with inputs and guidance from Janet Adama Mohammed, Salic Sharief Jr., Smita Nagi, Teresa Dumasy, Sally Holt, Alastair Carr, Sara Khaliq and Robert Morris. It also draws on experience from wider Conciliation Resources contexts and partnerships.

Conciliation Resources is grateful for the financial support to undertake this work from the WPHF. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the WPHF.

Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund
A United Nations & Civil Society Partnership

Published by:

Conciliation Resources, Unit 1.1, First Floor
Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT, UK

Copy editor: Asha Pond

Illustrations: Rose Kibara. The cover illustration brings together two women – one weaving a tapestry, and another writing code, which translates to "A peace for all women". This is a visual celebration of women's contributions across disciplines, working together towards a more peaceful and inclusive future.

Design & layout: www.causeffectdesign.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

Following the 25th anniversary of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is at an urgent crossroads.

The number of violent conflicts has doubled globally in the last five years, and support for inclusive political agreements – and for women's participation in ensuing peace and mediation processes – has gone into reverse. Several states that have been champions of WPS to date have reduced support and funding for the agenda.

WPS has also become the focus of the political right: a rising anti-gender movement has gained momentum, particularly in the Global North/Minority. WPS and wider gender 'ideologies', diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and intersectionality principles are being portrayed as 'radical', 'Western' and 'left-wing'. This narrative ignores and undermines the origins of the WPS agenda itself, which was conceived by Global South/Majority feminists and has long been rooted in their knowledge, experiences and values. Such backlash is making the operational environment for peacebuilders working on WPS more challenging.

Meanwhile, the nature of conflict and therefore peacebuilding has also shifted. Conflicts are becoming more fragmented and multi-layered, while negotiated settlements or peace agreements – including consultations with women – are no longer the prerequisite they once were for peacebuilding. New challenges, like digital threats and climate change, are emerging that affect people differently based on a variety of factors, such as their gender, sexuality, where they live, their age, education level and others. Responses to these shifts require tapping into expertise and leadership across a wide range of groups.

As such, the need to reassert the importance of women's meaningful participation in all levels of peace and security processes is urgent, as is the need to expand 'participation' to encompass the full diversity of women and their different contributions in order to effectively respond to conflicts. This paper therefore aims to understand how to facilitate the meaningful participation of women in all their diversity in peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements, including through greater engagement with people in positions of power and influence. It recognises that a WPS agenda that treats women and men as uniform groups is tokenistic and often misses out on other critical experiences and identities, limiting sustainability and effectiveness.

To do this, the paper explores the concept and practice of intersectionality – the interaction of different forms of identity which can shape a person's experiences, opportunities, agency, power and privilege – examining examples of how to go beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to women's participation in peacebuilding.

Intersectionality is also critical to taking a more decolonised approach to gender and peacebuilding work, moving beyond assumptions, metrics and definitions shaped in the Global North/Minority and centring the lived experiences and perspectives of historically excluded groups. Yet, it has received relatively little attention among international donors and in the WPS architecture and broader peacebuilding practice to date.[1]

The paper also aims to strengthen Conciliation Resources' own learning and practice on intersectionality by grappling with some of the challenges and sensitivities around the term, demystifying what it means in practice, and understanding how to take a contextualised approach. It provides recommendations for donors and peacebuilders who remain committed to inclusive and sustainable processes at a time of increased resistance to the WPS agenda. While an intersectional lens may sometimes appear to add complexity to the task of inclusive peacebuilding, the findings from the report show that applying an intersectional lens can often be achieved in relatively simple and practical ways, through choices on practices and priorities.

Recommendations for policymakers

- Vocalise support through clear statements and guidance on WPS, amidst backlash.
- Maintain, and where feasible strengthen, language that recognises historically excluded groups within national policy frameworks
- Ensure funding mechanisms recognise different identities and needs and what this means for peacebuilders in practice.
- Support the protection and security of historically excluded peacebuilders.

Recommendations for peacebuilding organisations and WPS practitioners

- Follow local practitioners' lead when framing intersectionality, while drawing on existing rights frameworks.
- Broaden usage of existing tools that uncover differences in identity and power, such as gender-sensitive conflict analysis.
- Use digital spaces to promote the inclusion of diverse women.
- Identify and implement practices to tackle the practical barriers to women's inclusion.
- Be intentional in efforts to ensure diverse perspectives are represented in programmes.
- Elevate voices and lessons from grassroots women peacebuilders.
- Promote cross-generational dialogue.

APPROACH AND LIMITATIONS

This paper draws on lessons from Conciliation Resources' support to ten initiatives funded by the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) Rapid Response Window (RRW) between December 2023 and July 2025.

The RRW is a targeted global funding window that finances initiatives increasing women's meaningful influence and participation in Track I and II peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements. It serves as a demand-driven multi-partner funding mechanism for rapid, flexible and short-term support to civil society organisations (CSOs). Conciliation Resources has been an international non-government organisation (INGO) partner to the RRW since 2021, providing practical support and technical assistance to local partners to access formal peace spaces and address specific barriers to women's participation. Our 2024 report 'Enabling change: lessons from grant-making to increase women's participation in peace processes'[2] documents learning from the first stage of the RRW.

This paper draws insights on intersectionality from the shared experiences of CSOs working in contexts with different conflict and peacebuilding challenges. This includes post-conflict contexts such as the **Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the Philippines, Somali Regional State (SRS) in Ethiopia** and **Liberia**, and contexts where there is limited space for peacebuilders – and particularly women – to engage formally, such as **Afghanistan, Niger** and **Yemen**.

Around 30 participants from partner CSOs took part in a series of virtual learning workshops which aimed to assess how those in positions of power either support or oppose diverse women's participation in peacebuilding, and how peacebuilders navigate this and advance more intersectional approaches in their work (i.e. recognising that people may have different experiences, perspectives, needs and agency). An additional workshop held in Nairobi in October 2025 brought together partners from nine additional contexts to further explore the concept and practice of intersectionality.

The paper aims to capture some initial lessons on the unique experiences and strategies used by peacebuilders to inform wider practice. It does not claim, nor intend, to provide an exhaustive analysis of intersectionality in peace processes nor an in-depth analysis of the role of power systems such as militarism and colonialism in driving and perpetuating inequalities. Due to the nature of initiatives studied, the paper focuses on intersectionality within approaches to women's meaningful participation, exploring how multiple identities affect women (and non-binary) peacebuilders. It does not consider the role of multiple identities in understanding masculinities and the engagement of men, which is acknowledged as equally critical to an effective WPS agenda.

Given the highly sensitive environments in which the peacebuilders whose work informed this analysis are operating, the paper is deliberate in not always explicitly referencing contexts, organisations and/or the specific groups of people they are working with. While this has allowed us to draw out important lessons that are applicable to a wider audience, we acknowledge it also limits recognition of the important work that specific organisations have done.

BOX 1: KEY TERMS

This paper sometimes uses general terms such as 'diverse women' and 'historically excluded groups' rather than referring to the specific groups that partners work with, which include **young and at-risk/ disenfranchised women, women with disabilities, women from religious minorities, Indigenous women, gender and sexual minorities, women from different clans** and **women from different political parties**, among other identity characteristics. This is done not to generalise the experiences of women but, on the advice of partners, so as not to expose their work or place the people they work with at risk.

Throughout the paper, the following terms are also used:

- **Gender:** Rather than being determined by biological sex, we understand gender as being shaped by social, cultural and interpersonal norms unique to different contexts. These can influence what is expected of women and men, their experiences, behaviour and levels of power. See more in our organisational gender strategy.[3]
- **Gender and sexual minorities**: A term referring to people whose gender identity and sexual orientation may not fit within 'conventional' societal norms. This is used in recognition that Western terms such as 'LGBTIQA+' may not always resonate in the contexts featured in this report.
- **Intersectionality:** The interaction of different forms of identity characteristics, such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation, which can shape a person's experiences, opportunities, agency, power and privilege. The term emerged in 1989 from critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, based on critiques from the 1970s to 80s that feminism was centred on middle-class women from the Global North/Minority. It has been driven by women's rights movements led by Global South/Majority feminists and Black feminists in the US.
- **Intersectional approach in peacebuilding:** Actively recognising, analysing and responding to the different needs, experiences, perspectives and agency of different people – which emerge from the different forms of identity characteristics – in WPS and broader peacebuilding programming.
- **People or women with disabilities:** This is based on the principle of using people-first language, drawn from the UN's disability-inclusive language guidelines.[4]
- **Global Majority:** Global Majority refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, of dual heritage or Indigenous to the Global South. It affirms non-white people's inherent power as the majority of the world's population and aims to shift focus away from a Eurocentric perspective.
- **Global Minority:** Global Minority refers to the smaller population of the world that live in wealthier nations, often described as 'the West' or 'the Global North'.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. **Women are not a homogenous group. Recognising this provides the foundation for their meaningful participation and helps to address broader inequalities that undermine sustainable peace.**
   - Women experience conflict in different ways and have different levels of power when it comes to shaping peace. Too often this fails to be considered.
   - By treating women as a homogenous group, peace processes fail to address the unique needs and experiences that diverse women face.
   - The absence of historically excluded women in peace processes can replicate structural inequalities in the post-conflict period.
   - Conflict can redefine women's identities and vulnerabilities, which compounds their exclusion if these are not then recognised in peace processes.
   - 'Blanket' approaches to women's inclusion can deepen feelings of erasure, particularly among young women and women from rural areas.

2. **People in positions of authority often limit WPS to a narrow set of participants and interests, though can be allies through continued advocacy and awareness raising.**
   - Those in positions of authority can actively contribute to silencing the experiences of many historically excluded groups of women, even if willing to support them behind the scenes.
   - Religious and traditional leaders are influential in excluding (or conversely including) certain groups of women from peace processes and can create divisions between women's organisations.
   - Formal decision-makers may offer endorsements of women's participation but can resist taking more complex approaches to broaden inclusion.
   - The security sector can pose a security threat to women peacebuilders, but in some cases they have provided a degree of safety for diverse women's public engagement.
   - While institutional donors can be vocal allies of intersectionality, this does not always translate into concrete practices.
   - Some applications of intersectionality can be alienating and counterproductive.

3. **Carving out inclusive spaces, strengthening solidarity, and broadening understanding can advance an intersectional approach in peacebuilding.**
   - Supporting diverse women to tell their own stories helps to build their confidence to claim, defend and assert their experiences in formal spaces.
   - Opening up spaces for historically excluded women to gain knowledge and networks can help them identify entry points for influence.
   - Framing different forms of identity as a rights and inclusion issue, rather than as a welfare issue, has enabled stronger engagement with governments.
   - Convening women who risk exclusion from government-led processes to formulate their positions in advance can increase their influence.
   - Creating parallel spaces can connect diverse women to formal processes, particularly in more constrained contexts.
   - Greater solidarity among women peacebuilders can help support an intersectional approach in peacebuilding.
   - Encouraging effective intergenerational dialogue – one that shapes and inspires, but does not dictate, the actions of younger women – can help to foster diverse women's leadership.
   - Addressing knowledge gaps on the differing experiences that women face can help to build support from decision-makers.
   - Shifting public discourse and stigmas that perpetuate the exclusion of diverse women is possible but is not without risk and persistent effort.
   - Explaining the term 'intersectionality' and illustrating what it looks like in practice can increase understanding of what it is and challenge resistance to it.

BOX 2: DEMYSTIFYING 'INTERSECTIONALITY'

How do we reframe how intersectionality is talked about and understood? The following captures discussions with peacebuilders about what can be useful, but also confusing or misunderstood, about the term.

- **Intersectionality describes a lived reality of interacting identity characteristics.** As the word 'intersect' suggests, every individual has different identity characteristics that overlap and interact; for example, their gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability status and sexual orientation. Some of these characteristics may come to the fore at different times and in different circumstances, based on the specific situation. These characteristics, and the way they intersect, can affect how people are treated, often resulting in advantages or disadvantages.
- **Identity characteristics can be both advantageous and disadvantageous.** Where more than one identity characteristic intersects, this can compound a person's disadvantages, particularly if that identity characteristic is normally associated with discrimination. For instance, a rural woman from a historically excluded ethnic group may face additional challenges in accessing peace processes. At the same time, certain identity characteristics can support women in peacebuilding roles; for instance, a woman from a political elite may have easier access to peace processes. It is important to understand both impacts in order to amplify the advantages that arise from certain identity characteristics, while also addressing barriers that arise from others.
- **People can be simultaneously advantaged in some ways and disadvantaged in others.** It is possible to hold influence or power in one area of life (e.g. economically) but lack power in others (e.g. political participation). It is therefore important to disaggregate power and identify where someone may be vulnerable or non-dominant in different spheres.
- **Advantages and disadvantages can come from different sources, including both inside and outside a group.** For example, in the Bangsamoro, Non-Moro Indigenous women can often face unique challenges and multiple forms of discrimination as a result of their gender and minority status. They can face discrimination from both outside and within their communities, and their voices are even less likely to be heard than those of Indigenous men who may also be excluded from peace processes. Even among women's rights defenders, some women – due to identity characteristics like age, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, for instance – may be excluded from participating fully in women's groups because of customs and traditions.
- **The advantages and disadvantages associated with identity characteristics can change.** Cultures – which can be a big part of identity – and dynamics of power distribution are not static. For example, groups in a dominant position may become non-dominant when a regime changes. It is important to not only engage with the situation and context as it currently is, but to understand changing dynamics and respond accordingly.
- **People can also make choices about how they deploy their identity characteristics.** People enjoy multiple, fluid, complementary and overlapping identities, and may choose to emphasise different aspects of their identity according to a context. For instance, the wife of a traditional leader may emphasise her influence her role in family decision-making to make the case for women's participation.
- **Understanding and applying what intersectionality *means* is critical to an inclusive approach, rather than use of the term itself.** Peacebuilders may prefer not to use the term intersectionality, depending on sensitivities in their context. Taking an intersectional approach is about recognising the different dimensions of one's identity, and taking them into account in roles as peacebuilders, peacebuilding organisations, decision-makers and other stakeholders.

KEY LESSONS

1. WOMEN ARE NOT A HOMOGENOUS GROUP. RECOGNISING THIS PROVIDES THE FOUNDATION FOR THEIR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND HELPS TO ADDRESS BROADER INEQUALITIES THAT UNDERMINE SUSTAINABLE PEACE.

Women experience conflict in different ways and have different levels of power when it comes to shaping peace. Too often this fails to be considered.

True, meaningful participation should recognise that women experience conflict in different ways, and have different perspectives and levels of authority when it comes to shaping peace. Too often, women involved in peace and political dialogue processes tend to represent a small and elite group – yet are expected to represent the needs and concerns of all women in a society. This undermines the range of women's unique experiences, can create tensions when competing agendas and interests inevitably emerge, and contributes to frustration that those chosen to 'represent' women do not have the authority to do so and are often far removed from where conflict is happening.[5]

Discussions and research on women's meaningful participation often treat women as one group with a shared agenda.[6] None of the ten UN Security Council resolutions on WPS mention gender and sexual minorities, and there is often a lack of acknowledgement of how women are affected by conflict differently.[7] A one-size-fits-all approach can have unintended consequences, undermining the sustainability of peace processes and agreements and further marginalising already excluded communities.

By treating women as a homogenous group, peace processes fail to address the unique needs and experiences that diverse women face.

In Liberia, for example, processes documenting the impacts of the conflict treated women in a largely uniform way. While the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) process and 2009 report acknowledged gendered impacts of the conflict, there was little to no mention of women with disabilities and of gender and sexual minorities, some of whom were deliberately targeted with sexual violence due to pre-existing social stigmas.

> **"I was raped because they thought I was an abomination. No one protects people like me."**
>
> **Participant, Liberia Survivor Storytelling Initiative**

As a result, many women have experienced harm that has remained untold or gone unaddressed. In some cases, there has been little recognition of the shame, fear of stigma and even criminalisation facing (particularly women from) ethnic and religious minorities and gender and sexual minorities. Partners explained that women often come under pressure to remain silent due to societal expectations that they should be modest and private, or because their identities are perceived to conflict with dominant religious and cultural norms. For gender and sexual minorities in particular, these pressures are compounded by the criminalisation of same-sex relations in many contexts; disclosure of their experiences can expose them to societal ostracisation and potential legal consequences. In Liberia's transitional justice process, many experiences remain untold out of fear of emasculation and a lack of tailored support services (with most focused solely on female survivors).

The absence of historically excluded women in peace processes can replicate structural inequalities in the post-conflict period.

The Bangsamoro is sometimes cited as a strong example of women's participation in the peace process alongside the post-conflict and political transition process, with women representing a fifth of the interim parliament.[8] Yet a closer look reveals a gap in the engagement of Non-Moro Indigenous women. Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (NMIP), who make up 2% of the Bangsamoro population, are one of the most economically, politically and socio-culturally disenfranchised groups in the Philippines.[9] After the peace agreement was signed, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission – the government body in charge of drafting the BARMM's new legal framework – reserved only one seat for Indigenous Peoples, including both Moro and Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples. This had a marginalising impact in subsequent legal and political frameworks: for example, the leadership of a newly-created Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs was drawn from Moro Indigenous Peoples with little decision-making representation from Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples.

> **"Indigenous women continue to face multiple layers of inequality and exclusion – through their Bangsamoro identity, through their Indigenous identity, through their Non-Moro Indigenous identity, and as women."**
>
> **Partners from Bangsamoro**

The exclusion of NMIP from decision-making in post-conflict BARMM replicates inequalities that they face in broader Philippine society, and leaves little political space to raise and address the ongoing concerns that Indigenous women face, such as continued displacement from ancestral lands and violent attacks.[10]

Conflict can redefine women's identities and vulnerabilities, which compounds their exclusion if these are not then recognised in peace processes.

Research shows that in conflict, many women become survivors of sexual violence, widows, or acquire disabilities as a result of ongoing violence, which can exacerbate existing discrimination and stigmatise them in their communities. Partner research in Liberia highlighted that women with war-acquired disabilities were not recognised in transitional justice programmes and their demands for inclusive reparations and livelihood support therefore went unaddressed.

In Yemen, the 2015 outbreak of conflict heightened exclusion that women with disabilities were already facing. Prior to the conflict, only 5% of girls with disabilities had access to formal education due to cultural, physical, economic and other challenges. The conflict curtailed key public institutions such as the Handicap Care and Rehabilitation Fund, the government's main funding mechanism supporting vocational training and employment. Many women with disabilities are consequently dependent on humanitarian aid or informal begging. No women with disabilities were represented in the formal peace negotiation process in Yemen, and their specific experiences were overlooked, further entrenching their vulnerabilities. The ensuing WPS National Action Plan 2020-2022 only includes one mention of disabilities and excludes any practical provisions on disability inclusion.[11]

> **"They broke my legs, then called me 'useless.' The war took my body; peace took my dignity."**
>
> **Participant with disabilities, Liberia Survivor Storytelling Initiative**

'Blanket' approaches to women's inclusion can deepen feelings of erasure, particularly among young women and women from rural areas.

Partners shared that failing to cater to the needs of diverse women has contributed to "entire groups of survivors feeling erased". In Liberia, for example, even when the urban-centric transitional justice process conducted consultations in rural areas, they were often inaccessible to women outside of provincial centres who still had to travel for miles to take part. Radio broadcasts sharing information from the war crimes court are often not available in Indigenous languages like Bassa and Kpelle. Partners also explained the often-forgotten burden of inherited trauma on young people, even if they did not experience war directly. For example, some young people born of rape committed through conflict, or raised by parents traumatised by the war, continue to face marginalisation, exacerbated by their continued absence in transitional justice processes.

> **"Rural survivors described themselves as victims of "double abandonment" – first by war actors, and now by post-war justice processes."**
>
> **Participant, Liberia Survivor Storytelling Initiative**

2. PEOPLE IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY OFTEN LIMIT WPS TO A NARROW SET OF PARTICIPANTS AND INTERESTS, THOUGH CAN BE ALLIES THROUGH CONTINUED ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS RAISING.

Those in positions of authority can actively contribute to silencing the experiences of many historically excluded groups of women, even if willing to support them behind the scenes.

Cultural taboos and social stigmas place certain groups of women at a higher risk during conflict and restrict their access to protection and justice. In the Bangsamoro, partners shared that government stakeholders were reluctant to discuss cases of sexual violence against women with disabilities in relation to a proposed gender-based violence bill, citing embarrassment and shame. In Yemen, sexual violence perpetrated by armed or military groups against women with disabilities often goes unreported, and in Liberia, women survivors of wartime rape are often labelled as 'spoiled' or 'unmarriageable', with many fearing that reporting cases could expose them to criminal sanctions or public condemnation by religious leaders. In some contexts, societal views were so influential that government decision-makers worked with partners behind closed doors on these issues but were less willing to publicly communicate their support for them, citing a lack of acceptance or backlash from society.

Where efforts to include women with disabilities in peace processes have been made, these often position them as people with needs rather than active participants**.** In Yemen, for example, government stakeholders acknowledged women with disabilities as recipients of aid rather than active peacebuilders and leaders in the WPS National Action Plan.

Religious and traditional leaders are influential in excluding (or conversely including) certain groups of women from peace processes and can create divisions between women's organisations.

Religious, cultural and traditional leaders – such as in the National Council of Chiefs in Liberia, which brings together elders and chiefs as part of the transitional justice process – often play a direct leadership role in peace and political processes. Social and cultural norms can influence their willingness to include diverse women in these processes. In Niger, participants emphasised that engaging a committee of traditional leaders was crucial to challenging stigmas and strengthening the role of women with disabilities and young people in community peace committees. In the Somali Regional State, clan structures heavily shape power dynamics. Partners referred to clan leaders blocking women who have married outside their clan from running for elections, while officials are often selected based on clan affiliation rather than inclusivity.

Religious and traditional leaders' views on the role of diverse women can also indirectly influence – and in some cases, constrain – the willingness of governments and civil society actors to include them. In Yemen, some religious leaders have warned broader feminist civil society groups to be wary of those advocating for gender and sexual minorities, actively creating division within broader women's rights movements. Partners across contexts referenced instances where religious leaders reaffirmed the importance of traditional cultural norms and prohibitions on same-sex marriage, which led to a reluctance from government stakeholders to publicly support the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in peace processes.

> **"A local saying, 'Ganbo geed ma tagto' – meaning 'a woman does not go to the tree (where peace negotiations are held)' – reflects the deeply rooted belief that women should not engage in peacebuilding."**
>
> **Member, Ugaaso Women's Dialogue Space**

Yet, religious, cultural and traditional leaders can equally be shifted by public opinion. For example, through continuous advocacy, the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, which brings together Christian and Muslim leaders, has become an ally to CSOs in applying pressure on the legislature for diverse women's engagement in the transitional justice process. In Niger, sharing learning on diverse women's expertise with traditional male chiefs and religious leaders, such as the Islamic Council, has made some more receptive to involving women with disabilities and young women in community peacebuilding committees.

Formal decision-makers may offer endorsements of women's participation but can resist taking more complex approaches to broaden inclusion.

Several partners observed that decision-makers often believe it is sufficient to achieve representation of *any* woman in a leadership position, without distinction in terms of other aspects of their identity. Quotas for women's participation are a case in point: in Ethiopia, as the number of women participating in the Somali Regional Council is almost in line with the 30% quota, state institutions are less receptive to the need to include women from different clan affiliations, socio-economic and education backgrounds, and to recognise the influence of clan and patrilineal dynamics in who gets elected. Similarly, they can be less responsive to concerns that quotas do not directly translate into real influence of women in parliament. In Liberia, participants shared

examples of leaders questioning why intersectionality and gender equality remains an advocacy issue when the country has had a female president and vice-president. Conversations with government and CSO stakeholders in Liberia and Yemen also reflected a common view that the transitional justice and peace processes respectively are already sufficiently inclusive because they involve women generally, and therefore assessing the differing experiences of historically excluded groups of women was unnecessary.

This reluctance to look beyond the general into the specifics of women's inclusion no doubt stems from a fatigue at leadership level on gender inclusion (which can sometimes be perceived as externally imposed), as well as a lack of understanding that women face differing experiences and of how to effectively cater to them. In multiple contexts, such as Liberia and Yemen, government stakeholders expressed surprise at learning about the impacts of conflict on diverse women. Some government officials also 'softly' resisted intersectional approaches, citing their reluctance to cater to women with disabilities at the risk of discriminating against or unfairly excluding others.

The security sector can pose a security threat to women peacebuilders, but in some cases they have provided a degree of safety for diverse women's public engagement.

Partners described building alliances with supportive police and security officials to mitigate risks of persecution to diverse women, as well as women peacebuilders who may be at risk due to their work. In the Bangsamoro, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippines National Police (PNP) work with the Bangsamoro Women Commission to implement the BARMM Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (bRAP-WPS), which includes prevention of violence against Non-Moro Indigenous women. In addition, following appeals from Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples leaders regarding death threats and violence, personnel from the AFP and PNP have been deployed to play a role in 'hotspot' villages of South Upi. In Yemen, dialogue with the military and security sector has led to a better understanding of forms of sexual and gender-based violence faced by women with disabilities, whereas in the past police were likely to turn away or not respond to reported cases. Across other contexts, partners shared examples of dedicated training sessions with security agencies helping them to identify and provide tailored, sensitive support to historically excluded women, such as gender and sexual minorities, who face distinct security threats.

While institutional donors can be vocal allies of intersectionality, this does not always translate into concrete practices.

Some institutional donors support – and require – their implementing partners to adopt intersectional approaches, but this does not automatically flow through to the reporting and communication requirements associated with the grant or contract, which can fail to take into account the sensitivities and risks of working with historically excluded groups. Meetings organised by donors or international civil society are often held in venues without accessible bathrooms or ramps, and fail to consider specific communication needs, such as simplified text, Braille or sign language interpretation. Likewise, many monitoring, evaluation and learning systems flatten women's participation into numbers and percentages of overall women's participation, without a breakdown of different identities or a focus on the quality and influence of participation.

> **"We need to shift from discussing intersectionality as a theory... It is something we all live. We all play different roles and have lots of identities, and it is about how we recognise that throughout the work we do and the people we work with."**
>
> **Peacebuilder from Ghana**

Some applications of intersectionality can be alienating and counterproductive.

When the term intersectionality is associated with an externally-imposed agenda which does not apply to local realities it can be alienating or even rejected. In Liberia, for example, radio presenters have publicly criticised 'Western' influence for unduly promoting issues around diversity and inclusion in the ongoing process of establishing the war crimes court. In other contexts, it was clear that for some feminist peacebuilders, intersectionality is seen as overly technical and lacking a translated term in local languages.

Partners shared that Global North/Minority applications of intersectionality can sometimes focus on predefined categories and overlook local values, practices and power dynamics as an important part of people's identities in conflict contexts. In Liberia, for instance, women faced cultural and spiritual harms such as forced cannibalism, spiritual bondage, coercion into ritual oaths and desecration of sacred Poro/Sande (men/women's secret society) sites. This inflicted deep damage on their cultural dignity and fractured community cohesion, but the Western legal frameworks guiding the establishment of the war crimes court often do not include legal space for cultural and spiritual violations. Survivors emphasise the need for traditional cleansing ceremonies and spiritual reparations, thus far lacking in the process. Similarly, in the Bangsamoro, collective ownership of land is a deeply important identity issue for Non-Moro Indigenous communities and an important part of post-conflict governance, pointing to a need for the WPS agenda to better align with existing international standards and normative frameworks pertaining to Indigenous Peoples, such as on free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).

3. CARVING OUT INCLUSIVE SPACES, STRENGTHENING SOLIDARITY, AND BROADENING UNDERSTANDING CAN ADVANCE AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH IN PEACEBUILDING.

Supporting diverse women to tell their own stories helps to build their confidence to claim, defend and assert their experiences in formal spaces.

Partners' projects encouraged women who had been historically silenced and excluded from formal narratives to share their stories in a safe setting. Many women – in one project, 90% of those interviewed – said this was the first chance they had had to do so. Partners used open-ended storytelling prompts to ensure women could tell their stories using their own phrasings and wordings, with support services and psychosocial referrals available if needed. They also ensured accessibility, with consultations held in familiar community spaces, and sign language and other interpretation and transportation assistance provided. Many women reflected that storytelling inspired them to share their experiences in more formal platforms.

Opening up spaces for historically excluded women to gain knowledge and networks can help them identify entry points for influence.

Women from historically excluded groups are used to being told that they are not competent enough to lead and many have simply not had access to training and networking. Participants cited several examples where workshops and mentoring have helped to build their confidence and identify entry points for their targeted engagement in peace processes. For example, in the Bangsamoro, less than half of Non-Moro Indigenous community participants reported a strong understanding of the electoral code prior to partner-led training. Following training on the parliamentary system, many Indigenous women now drive advocacy work on NMIP rights more broadly, such as bringing cases of violence against women to the local government and lobbying to obtain birth certificates for NMIP children. In Niger, partners' training on advocacy techniques, human rights and leadership, alongside advocacy to ensure that community-level peace committees automatically include women with disabilities, have created a platform of leadership. Across multiple communities, women with disabilities have become respected leaders – in one community, rising to the role of vice president of the peace committee.

> **"Disability does not mean incapacity, but strength if I know how to use my voice."**
>
> **Yemeni woman**

Framing different forms of identity as a rights and inclusion issue, rather than as a welfare issue, has enabled stronger engagement with governments.

Historically excluded women do not solely see themselves as victims or people with needs but as leaders with agency. They want to take an active role in formal processes and be consulted in discussions. Partners described how reframing different forms of identity, such as disability, as a rights and inclusion issue rather than simply a welfare issue, has provided an entry point for their more active participation. In Niger, for instance, highlighting human rights and humanitarian protection in their work on engagement of diverse women has allowed partners to find common objectives with the government even as regulations around civil society have become stricter.

> **"Why are people crying for us? Give us a seat, a voice, a real role."**
>
> **Liberia Survivor Storytelling Initiative participant**

Convening women who risk exclusion from government-led processes to formulate their positions in advance can increase their influence.

In the Bangsamoro, Indigenous women have to fight for their voices within Indigenous groups that are already marginalised. Prior to the passage of the Indigenous People's Code, a pre-lobby orientation with 149 Non-Moro Indigenous women and 89 Non-Moro Indigenous men provided a space for Non-Moro Indigenous women to advocate internally on their concerns and ensure they were at the forefront when it came to presenting position papers and lobbying members of parliament (MPs). Partners also worked to ensure that Non-Moro Indigenous women were at the forefront of dialogue with the Bangsamoro Parliament, the Committee on Indigenous Peoples Affairs and the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs to recognise and enforce the rights of Indigenous communities within the new BARMM political entity. As a result, the Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples' Act (BIPA), passed in December 2024, is a critical step forward in providing a legal framework to support Indigenous Peoples, with major policy recommendations including representation of women in decision-making and conflict resolution mechanisms, and their participation in the issuance of free, prior and informed consent for development projects inside ancestral domains.

Creating parallel spaces can connect diverse women to formal processes, particularly in more constrained contexts.

Parallel dialogue spaces can provide a safe space for under-represented women to align on common ambitions, connect with wider networks, and critically, link to formal political discussions with a stronger, more representative voice. For example, there are very few opportunities for Afghan women to safely come together, either in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Afghan women who live in host countries in the region can be excluded due to bureaucratic challenges, such as the inability to exit host countries without encountering visa and residency requirements on their return. Partners reflected that creating a dedicated space for Afghan women from different backgrounds (including activists, former government officials and private sector professionals) and representing diverse experiences and perspectives (in terms of age, religious beliefs, ethnicity, political views, disability status and risk of persecution) to come together to share critical insights, debate, and agree on a roadmap and policy recommendations, makes them better prepared and ready to input into formal peace processes whenever the opportunity emerges. Such spaces have already created significant momentum and supported the engagement of Afghan women at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly.

> **"There had been some anxiety that such a diverse group of Afghan women could even come together and agree. That they did, was a moment created for all women. Women had occasion to discuss, vociferously debate, confront, clarify and mediate over several days."**
>
> **Afghan civil society leader, referring to an Afghan women-led platform held in Tirana, 2024**

Greater solidarity among women peacebuilders can help support an intersectional approach in peacebuilding.

Participants emphasised the need for a shift in mindset among peacebuilders working on WPS to see intersectionality as a core component than as an add-on. In practical terms, this could mean ensuring that intersectionality is embedded within the leadership structure of women's rights CSOs (for instance, having policies around diversity within leadership) and providing for accessibility in organisational infrastructure and in the way that meetings are held. Peacebuilders also emphasised the important role that umbrella women's rights organisations can play in overcoming silos between CSOs working on different issues and in ensuring continued rather than one-off inclusion of diverse women in their activities.

For example, in the Somali Regional State, Ugaaso (Women's Dialogue Space) was created as a platform to bring together women from different backgrounds and is helping to bridge long-standing gaps in representation. Ugaaso has sought to intentionally include and amplify the voices of women with disabilities and those from marginalised clans who are historically excluded from social and political systems. It has brought together women from different political parties. While it was initially difficult for them to even gather in the same room, engagement helped to bridge gaps, and in the last election, women from different political parties campaigned together for the participation of all women in the political process. In the Bangsamoro, given the lack of space for Non-Moro Indigenous women in formal political processes, issues affecting Indigenous women are raised through the support of a circle of women members of parliament (making up about 20% of MPs).

> **"As someone from the marginalised clans, this is the first time I feel that I have a voice, and my voice is being heard."**
>
> **Member, Ugaaso Women's Dialogue Space participant**

Encouraging effective intergenerational dialogue – one that shapes and inspires, but does not dictate, the actions of younger women – can help to foster diverse women's leadership.

In the Somali Regional State, partners held inter-generational dialogues between women in leadership roles who carry status, power and influence, and university and high school students. This helped to break down misconceptions among young women that they were unable to play a leadership role and helped them to think through what challenges they may face as leaders. In Liberia, partners similarly highlighted the role of intergenerational dialogue as a space for women of different generations to share their experiences of trauma and to ensure that young people affected by generational trauma have a space for healing. Intergenerational dialogue can also help younger women to understand the causes, impacts and resolution of conflict, and their role in continued peace processes, as well as build a culture of accountability and non-violence. In the Bangsamoro, partners facilitated the involvement of young Bajao women in the peace process through the development of a position paper in their own language, and supported intergenerational conversations between community elders and young women from one of the most discriminated ethnic groups in the region.

Addressing knowledge gaps on the differing experiences that women face can help to build support from decision-makers.

Partners emphasised that a lack of understanding and awareness among political leaders and government bodies remains a primary factor behind a one-size-fits-all

approach to WPS. Workshops in Yemen with diverse women's groups helped to build awareness of the need for accessibility measures for women with disabilities in their own meetings. Engagement of influential MPs in the Bangsamoro helped to increase their understanding of the issues facing Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples. Several MPs who played a key role in drafting the Indigenous Peoples' Act subsequently began to speak out more about the rights of Indigenous Peoples, referencing position papers brought by Non-Moro Indigenous women's groups.

Participatory research, seeking to capture stories of historically excluded communities, can be a particularly effective tool in informing and influencing formal decision-makers. In Liberia, such research amplified the testimonies of communities historically excluded from the TRC. Government stakeholders who listened to the stories about the impact of the war on women with disabilities, rural communities, young people born of rape, and gender and sexual minorities, and the enduring scars of economic warfare and spiritual harm, acknowledged the limitations of the TRC process, and the need to ensure that going forward the reconciliation process recognises these varied impacts.

Shifting public discourse and stigmas that perpetuate the exclusion of diverse women is possible but is not without risk and persistent effort.

Decision-makers – such as governments and religious and cultural gatekeepers – are shaped by and often respond to public opinions. Partners shared examples from across multiple contexts where media advocacy campaigns have led to helpful shifts in public narrative. For example, in Liberia, through continuous engagement with journalists, there was an observable shift in the language used by some media outlets, adopting terms such as a 'victim-centred' approach to transitional justice and pressing for testimonies of people whose stories were not included in the TRC to be heard. Drawing on recognisable customary and traditional practices can be another way to shift perceptions and stigma. In the Somali Region of Ethiopia, when male *suldaans* are coronated, their clansmen gather in a ceremony where milk is poured on their heads as a ritual of prayer for the *suldaan*'s leadership. Inspired by this tradition, Ugaaso organised a coronation ceremony to recognise Suldaamo Marwo Abdi as a female *suldaan* by other women leaders, with milk poured as a symbolic gesture of their formal recognition of her. The ceremony was circulated widely on TikTok and Facebook among Somalis worldwide. While some criticised the innovation as a distortion of Somali tradition, it also received support and a recognition of the role of women's leadership, with President Mustafa and other prominent clan elders congratulating her in person.

> **"The coronation ceremony of Suldaamo Marwo Abdi in Kebridahar helped to challenge the idea that women mediating men was taboo or iconoclastic in Somali community norms."**
>
> **Member, Ugaaso Women's Dialogue Space**

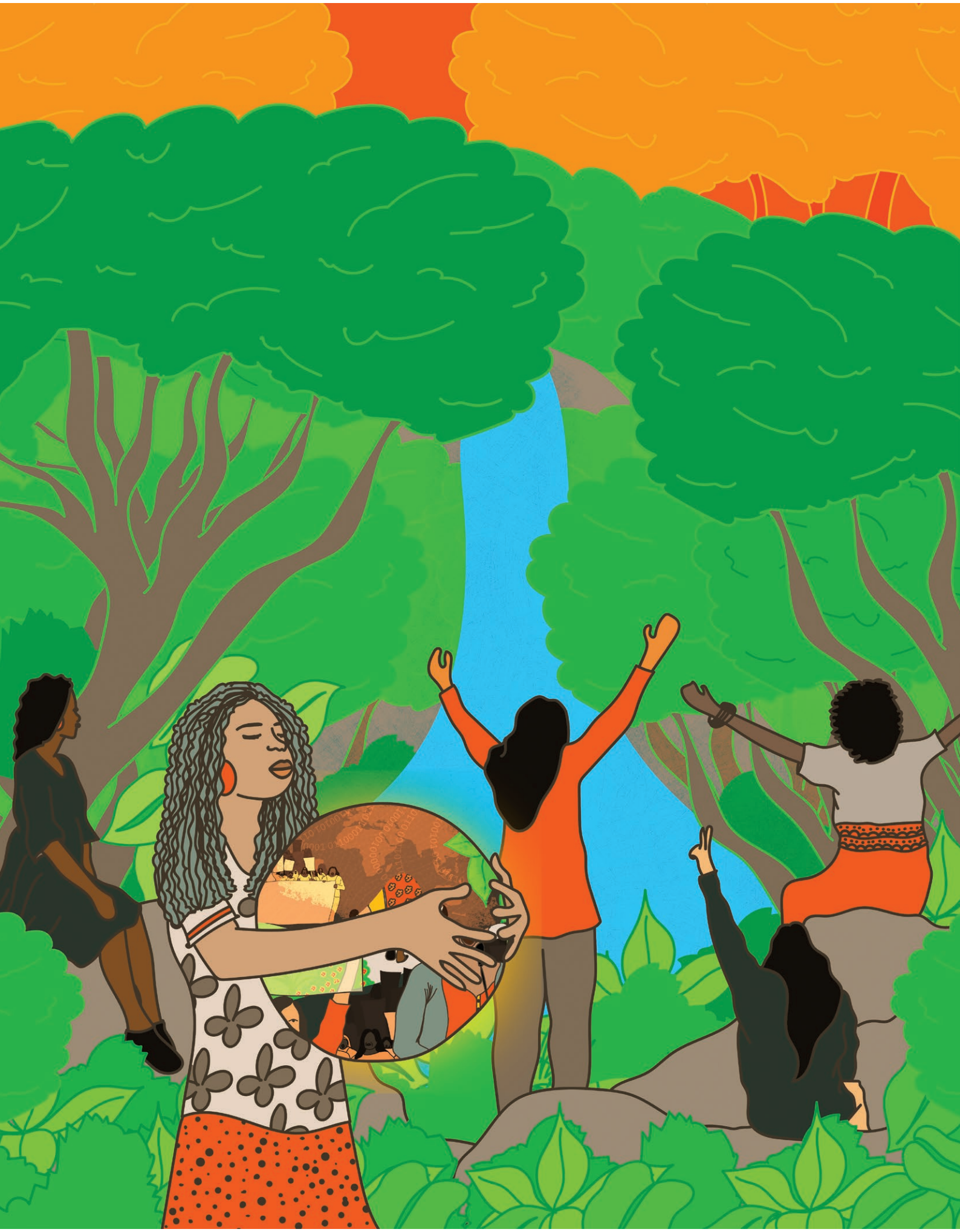
It is also important to acknowledge the risks that women peacebuilders take on in public advocacy and media: across multiple contexts, partners highlighted that exposing truths can risk retaliation, impacting their own safety and that of the communities they represent. Work to shift cultural perceptions also extends beyond short-term funding cycles. In Niger, for instance, partners' success in advocating for diverse women's inclusion in community peace committees was the result of many years of continued advocacy and relationship building with religious, traditional and government leaders.

Explaining the term 'intersectionality' and illustrating what it looks like in practice can increase understanding of what it is and challenge resistance to it.

The term 'intersectionality' is vulnerable to criticism from rising anti-gender discourse as 'woke' (meaning a heightened consciousness of systemic injustices, but a term co-opted by some to criticise perceived over-sensitivity or excessive political correctness). Even among feminist peacebuilders, intersectionality can be seen as an alienating, donor-imposed framework. While it is well understood by some peacebuilders and WPS practitioners, others find the concept too technical and impenetrable. Partners emphasised the importance of continuing to use the term intersectionality but also the need to demystify it by shifting conversations around it. They suggested doing this, for example, by asking people to reflect on what intersectionality means to their own multiple identities and roles – an exercise which can illustrate that intersectionality is an intrinsic part of all people.

> **"Understanding intersectionality is like wearing glasses that allow you to see the conflict more clearly."**
>
> **Woman peacebuilder from Ghana**

Partners also shared that intersectionality often tends to be interpreted negatively (for example, as a challenge or dividing factor) and that positioning it as a positive, unifying concept (for example, by drawing attention to shared identities and values) can provide a useful entry point for peacebuilding. Using culturally-relevant examples and language can also be effective; for instance, in some contexts, inviting communities to think about non-traditional examples of relationships specific to a culture can help to weave in discussions on gender and sexual minorities.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

While it can appear to add complexity to the task of inclusive peacebuilding, this paper shows that applying an intersectional lens is very doable and can be achieved in practical ways. The following recommendations are drawn from the experiences of partners working across fifteen conflict contexts.

Recommendations for policymakers

Vocalise support through clear statements and guidance on WPS, amidst backlash

In light of increasingly visible backlash to gender equality and DEI initiatives, continued political and practical support for UN level commitments on WPS from UN Member States is vital to navigate resistance. Supportive statements and guidance on the importance of diverse inclusion in core programmes and policies can provide backing to peacebuilders working with historically excluded communities at national and community levels.

Maintain, and where feasible strengthen, language that recognises historically excluded groups within national policy frameworks

Such as in WPS National Action Plans, and foreign policy and security strategies. While many governments are reviewing these approaches in light of a changing geopolitical environment, it is important these revisions do not dilute commitment to women's participation, but instead explicitly commit to working with intersecting vulnerabilities.

Ensure funding mechanisms recognise different identities and needs and what this means for peacebuilders in practice

Ensure the inclusion of women is not a tick-box exercise but part of a meaningful and considered approach to include all groups. For instance, ensure that funding applications and reporting requirements encourage lessons, insights and recommendations from a more diverse range of women's groups, going beyond easily-measurable indicators such as 'percentage of women' that can flatten their experiences. Budget categories could also cover additional costs needed around accessibility. Where possible, longer-term funding cycles are better placed to support the sustained efforts of peacebuilders working to shift deeply-ingrained power dynamics and behaviour.

Support the protection and security of historically excluded peacebuilders

Donors can provide active funding for the protection and security of peacebuilders working in sensitive contexts, recognising that safety concerns may emerge from the different identities that women peacebuilders hold. The WPHF's Window for Women Human Rights Defenders[12] is one such example. Funding opportunities should also be flexible, with quick disbursement times to meet often urgent security needs. Funding rules should not incentivise lower protection costs – for example, by categorising them within overhead costs which have a set ceiling – and should instead ensure that these costs can be included based on need.

Recommendations for peacebuilding organisations and WPS practitioners

Follow local practitioners' lead when framing intersectionality, while drawing on existing rights frameworks

Local practitioners should own the framing, interpretation and language on 'intersectionality'. For example, partners suggested that terms such as 'peace for all [women]' and 'multiple identities' can be more intuitive in their contexts and resonate in different languages. They also emphasised the importance of taking the time to practically demonstrate what intersectionality means (for example, through Power Walks and focusing on invisible as well as visible identities) and demonstrating the relationality of the concept (for example, how a person's own experiences, biases and interactions may affect others). In understanding how to take into account diverse women's different experiences and needs in peacebuilding, WPS practitioners could also look to draw on existing international standards on the rights of diverse women, such as legal frameworks pertaining to Indigenous Peoples.

Broaden usage of existing tools that uncover differences in identity and power, such as gender-sensitive conflict analysis

Existing, tried-and-tested tools to analyse the underlying vulnerabilities of diverse women and how they are affected by conflict should be more widely used to inform more inclusive peacebuilding programming. For example, participatory gender-sensitive conflict analysis provides an opportunity to build collective understanding of how diverse women experience conflict and identify leverage points for their greater influence in peace processes[13] and can be a powerful tool for strengthening commitment among powerholders.

Use digital spaces to promote the inclusion of diverse women

The use of digital spaces to widen participation is still rarely considered, though should be balanced with an assessment of whether participants can safely use online platforms without the risk of being monitored. Online workshops with partners from six contexts that informed this paper generated practical lessons for inclusion of diverse women in online spaces: reserve budget for live simultaneous translation and sign language on online meeting spaces (so participants have equal chances to speak and be heard), provide funding for partners to travel to areas with improved internet connection (including overnight costs to avoid travelling in the dark) and use visual aids such as slides or offline documents where connectivity is a challenge.

Identify and implement practices to tackle the practical barriers to women's inclusion

This includes accessibility considerations, such as the provision of support for travel, holding meetings in buildings with ramps and accessible toilets, and funding childcare to allow women with young children to fully participate. This guidance should be shared between teams and kept regularly updated to bring in new lessons – including those in response to an evolving digital landscape.

Be intentional in efforts to ensure diverse perspectives are represented in programmes

Where appropriate, identify multiple partners and/or local stakeholders to work with, recognising one organisation is unlikely to represent all diverse identities. Practitioners may consider supporting the development of and/or coordinating joint proposals across multiple women's CSOs, while balancing considerations that come with shared funding. Partners also highlighted the importance of being intentional when selecting participants of activities; for example, specifying the need to include internally displaced women or young women.

Elevate voices and lessons from grassroots women peacebuilders

Practitioners are often well-placed to establish mechanisms that bring insights and recommendations from grassroots women's groups to directly inform policy and programme design. This could include regular consultation forums, the participation of women's groups on project steering committees, and community scorecards that elevate local voices into higher-level decision-making spaces. It also requires considering how best to ensure local voices are represented in policy forums, such as through sponsorship or facilitating policy dialogues in contexts where women are based rather than donor contexts.

Promote cross-generational dialogue

Practitioners and INGOs should intentionally create platforms that bring together younger and older women leaders, recognising the value of intergenerational knowledge sharing as an entry point for wider forms of inclusion.

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